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Fear of failure in the workplace among Brazilian employees

I - Introduction

Jean Paul Sartre (2010) stated, “All men are afraid. Who is not afraid is not normal; this has nothing to do with courage”. Like Sartre, reflections on fear have been a common denominator of many other social thinkers. Indeed, fear is a universal component of human emotion, essential for the survival of the species; its absence would mean failure to react to potentially life-threatening situations.

There are many phobogenic factors—causers of fear—in the contemporary workplace. Fast technological changes and constant transformations of management systems have increased the pressures to excel and achieve better productivity, intensifying the demands of professional life (Cunha, 2006). In most cases, this situation is perceived by organizational researchers as something harmful, able to compromise the psychological and even physical integrity of employees, negatively influencing organizational functioning (Suarez, 1993; Applebaum et al., 1998). However, some see a positive side to fear, identifying it as a useful management tool when properly used. Dejours (1992), for example, observed that fear may promote productivity and is often used by managers to do so.

Few studies have directly focused on the meaning of fear in Brazilian organizations. In order to contribute to fill in this gap, this research measures the fear of failure among Brazilian employees, using the Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory (Conroy, 2001), relating it to the following demographic variables: age, gender, professional status, type of employment situation, and hierarchical level. In this exploratory study, we intend to investigate how this emotion, occurring in a work environment, is perceived by different groups of each variable.

In the next section, we present the theoretical background that supports this research, followed by a description of the method and hypothesis. We then exhibit our results and conclude with a discussion section, highlighting some limitations and opportunities for future research.

II – Theoretical Background

II.1 - Fear

According to the Michaelis Dictionary, fear is defined as:

Perturbation resulting from the idea of real or apparent danger, or the presence of something strange or hazardous; fright, shock, terror. 2. Apprehension. 3. Dread of offending, causing something bad, of being disagreeable.

“Perturbation”, “fright”, “apprehension”, “dread”. These words show that “fear” is a feeling, an emotion. Emotions are complex phenomena and have been the subject of analysis by researchers in various fields of knowledge. Emotions have an individual nature because they involve an evaluation, by the individual, of a situation experienced (Frijda, 2000). However, according to Seymour (1980), emotions can be considered a socially constructed syndrome, based on the individual’s perceptions of a specific situation.

To understand how individuals react to a specific emotion, like fear, it is necessary to call on references from different fields such as psychology, social psychology, and even physiology. In order to cover all these perspectives, Mira y Lopez, with his work on human emotion (1972) is our main theoretical reference.

The author defines fear as a series of successive phenomena of paralysis or cessation of the vital course that occurs in living things—from the simplest organism to

the most complex—when subjected to sudden or disproportionate situational changes. He cites three forms of fear: instinctive, rational, and imaginary, and divides its evolution in human beings into four phases.

Instinctive fear is the most primitive kind of fear, which is characterized by the lowering of the vital metabolism in face of a direct and immediate potentially harmful situation. It is a reactive fear, perceived a posteriori, “When it reaches the cortical centres, the wave of stimulus has already determined various reflexes and inhibitions at the medullar and sub-cortical levels” (Mira y Lopéz, 1972).

Rational fear, on the other hand, is a “prophylactic” fear. The reaction to threatening situations is conditioned by prior experiences and is rationally based. It is a fear that is comprehensible, even by those who do not feel it directly. Thus, the phobogenic pattern can be transmitted, as it is logical. The individual may not fear something initially, but when he becomes aware of the damage that can be caused by the object, subject, or situation, he starts to feel afraid.

Finally, imaginary fear is considered by the author as the most torturous. The reason is that the harmful events that would be the starting point of this type of phobia, never in fact consisted a cause of organic fear itself. The individual, through a fluid and precariously structured network of associations, becomes afraid, making imaginary fear unjustified and incomprehensible.

According to Mira y López (1972), the feeling of fear in humans, evolved in four stages. From an evolutionary perspective, he states that fear has its origin as a simple cellular reaction to stimuli, which in its last phase turned into a creative process derived from random musings.

In the first stage, the author points out that environmental changes are the trigger to a progressive decrease of vital activities. These stimuli caused by fear can result in

temporary or even permanent shutdowns, only seen in extremely simple organisms, without a structured nervous system.

Such a system is precisely what distinguishes the former from the next evolutionary stage of fear. In this phase, phobic impulses inhibit the prompt response of the higher nerve centre, leaving the individual static, suspended, distressed.

The third phase is marked by a first reaction of the individual intending to escape the situation that is causing the fear. However, Mira y López affirms that it is also at this stage that the fear becomes associative, which is considered a "double-edged sword". By trying to escape from the situation of fear, the individual "suffers not only for the real and absolute event, but also for the signs from now on associated to it". As the author explains, "at every scare, a hundred new fears are created", as a result of the new references, related to the phobic agents.

The fourth phase is the one in which imaginary fear happens. Emerging from random and fantastic assumptions, relying on the imagination as an ally, the phobic impulses become diverse and somehow inconsistent. Mira y López draws attention to the paradox established in this evolutionary stage of fear. He explains that the more unrealistic and less attached to the reality a fear is, the harder it is to rationally fight against it.

II.2 - Fear in the workplace

Some theoretical studies have examined fear in the organizational environment. A dialectic perspective is delineated by Koury (2002), according to whom fear, as a social construct, is one of the main structural pieces of the group experience. Fundamental for sociability processes and working as an instrument for order and disorder, fear plays a role as a social organizer in its everyday action. In this scenario,

individuals fear for their survival, integration and adjustment to consolidated profiles, in a kind of associative imposition, with specific norms to be followed and disseminated to future generations. In sum: individuals are faced with a social reality, feel fear about their adaptation and permanence, internalize the existing rules, and perpetuate them.

Suaréz (1993), in turn, advocates the idea that when managed through constructive actions, fear can become a motivating agent. According to him, the possibility of transforming fear from something perverse to something useful is only a matter of proper organization. Although his aim was not to discuss how fear could be well managed—or even avoided—it is worthwhile mentioning some actions in this direction. Regarding the expectations of employees, for instance, an efficient action would be to have clear and objective rules. Workers should also be aware of their rights, duties and the roles in the organization. Concerning communication, it is important to establish mechanisms for constant feedback, ensuring that employees correctly understand the information received. Nevertheless, he acknowledges the negative effects of fear and the fact that its extinction in the workplace is impossible.

In general lines, Suaréz (1993) defines fear as a disagreeable feeling that is accompanied by psychological, cognitive and behavioural reactions. For Kohn (1986), fear is a stimulator of competition that generates anxiety among those who experience it. It is harmful in companies, not only individually, but socially as well, because it undermines the relations of trust and unleashes a series of inappropriate behaviours. By losing pleasure in their professional activity, employees become limited: they are content to remain in a comfort zone and avoid errors, instead of striving for the best performance possible.

According to Wilson and Edmondson (1991), in the organizational context, the majority of fears are associated with a hierarchical position, authority, power, and social and individual psychological factors.

Another approach that deserves attention about the dynamics of fear in the professional context is defended by Applebaum et al. (1998). In their article on the use of fear as an organizational strategy, they analysed the use of positive reinforcement and punishment. The more fear a punishment generates, the more efficient it will be, due to the influence on the resulting behavioural patterns. Fear is a reason for individuals to avoid certain behaviour.

II.3 - Fear of failure

Different individuals perceive fear of failure in different ways, and this has been examined in previous academic works. Over time, the construct gradually became more complex, starting as unidimensional perspectives (Murray, 1938), later becoming multidimensional approaches (Birney et al., 1969; Conroy, 2001). A major advance was achieved by Conroy (2002) in studying the theme, with the creation of an instrument to measure this emotion: the Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory (PFAI).

The first academic articles related to the fear of failure construct were behavioural theories such as those by Murray (1938). Listing 20 basic human needs, the author included the item “infaavoidance”, a term coined by him to define individuals’ need to avoid humiliation by concealing failings. According to Lewis (1992), the effects of feelings of shame are extremely painful to people, incisively impairing their perception of themselves. The sensation of negative exposure among peers causes feelings of disparagement, belittlement, and imminent abandonment (Andrews, 1995).

The unidimensional perspective of the fear of failure is still the most common nowadays, demonstrated by the academic production on the feeling of shame resulting from a frustrated attempt to do something (Elliott, 2004). However, some studies take a multidimensional approach of the fear of failure.

Birney, Burdick and Teevan (1969) started from the premise that individuals perceive consequences of failure negatively. Hence, they proposed a model that decomposes fear of failure into three dimensions: decreased self-estimates of ability, non-ego punishments, and social devaluation.

David Conroy, based on the work of Birney et al. (1969) and with the intention of postulating an instrument to measure the fear of failure, hierarchically disaggregated the concept into five dimensions (Conroy, 2002):

TABLE 1

Fear of failure, in general, is related to the negative physical and mental consequences of failure. However, it is worthwhile enumerating other “symptoms” of the fear of failure (Conroy, 2002), already observed scientifically. According to Elliot and Church (2003), the fear of failure causes the appearance of a defensive/pessimistic stance, and limits individuals’ abilities. High levels of anxiety (Elliot and McGregor, 1999) diffuse attention and discomfort, a tendency to avoid challenges (Conroy and Elliot, 2004), and stress when relating to other people (Conroy, Elliot and Pincus, 2009) are some other indicators of the occurrence of this emotion.

III – Methodology

In this exploratory study, we analysed the fear of failure in a small sample of individuals classified according to five demographic variables: age, gender, professional status, type of employment situation, and hierarchical level. According to Creswell

(2009), the formulation of hypotheses in quantitative research serves to mould and focus the objective of a study. The researcher makes predictions of the relationships between the variables—in our case, the indices of fear of failure ascertained by the PFAI and the demographic variables—and tests them against the empirical evidence gathered.

III.1 - PFAI Questionnaire

According to Conroy (2001), the instruments to measure the fear of failure were inadequate because they did not consider the multidimensionality of phenomenon targeted for measurement. The Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory (PFAI) was intended to be the first instrument to measure fear of failure, explicitly developed from a meta-theory of emotion (Lazarus, 1991). More than an attempt to fit fear of failure into a situational perspective, the phenomenon was now being considered as a function derived from the interaction of individuals in their environment. Thus, instead of just the “shame” that was still seen as the only result of failure, the instrument recognized the particularities of the perception of failure (Murray, 1938; Atkinson, 1966) in each person.

According to Conroy (2002), to be considered accurate, the measurement of the fear of failure needs to consider to what extent individuals believe, or even can predict, the negative consequences that can occur at the moment the failure takes place. Based on the responses to in-depth interviews conducted with athletes regarding the consequences of their failures, Conroy developed the first version of the construct for fear of failure, with 10 dimensions, measured through a questionnaire containing 89 items. This was the first version of the PFAI.

To validate the instrument, Conroy carried out a series of statistical analyses of the PFAI alongside other similar measurement instruments (Duda, 1989; Elliot and Church, 1997; Paulhus, 1984). In 2002, he refined the instrument further, turning it into a questionnaire with 25 items, which is the version we use in this study. According to Conroy, this new version has more relevant content and produces more accurate results.

III.2 - Demographic variables and hypotheses

The hypotheses established here are based on the literature review regarding the demographic variables that can affect peoples' attitudes toward work in general. Regarding the fear of failure construct, considering the context in which it is being analysed, we did not find any theoretical references that could serve as the basis for our hypothesis. Therefore, with respect to the majority of variables, we formulated non-directional hypotheses (Creswell, 2009), where we make predictions, but without specifying the differences that could be identified. These aspects also ratify the exploratory character of this study.

TABLE 2

IV - Results

We applied a version of the PFAI questionnaire translated into Portuguese to a sample of 77 graduate students (intentionally non-probabilistic sample, chosen by accessibility) attending a university in the city of Rio de Janeiro. To avoid biases, we instructed the respondents to answer the questions according to their own experience of the situations described, instead of what they think is the "correct way" to act.

As further evidence of its exploratory character, in our research, we used a general score for fear of failure—calculated as a mean of the questionnaire’s items responded—instead of considering all of the five dimensions postulated by Conroy (2002). We used the SPSS v.18.0 software to tabulate and treat all our data.

We treated the tabulated data with descriptive statistical techniques, to ascertain frequencies, means and standard deviations, and to trace out the profile of our sample. Among our 77 subjects, there were 44 female respondents. The average age of the sample was 31.61 years, ranging between 21 to 55 years and with a standard deviation of 6.873. Regarding cohort membership, as proposed by Motta et al. (2002), 48 individuals belonged to the “Lost Decade” group, 24 to the “Years of Iron” group, and 5 to the “Optimism” cohort.

Most of the respondents were employed at the time of the research—65 individuals—of which 86.2% worked for a private company. Among them, in hierarchical order, there were 37 analysts, 11 supervisors, 13 managers, 3 directors, and 1 president.

Two statistical tests were used to check some prerogatives related to the usage of questionnaires and hypothesis testing. In order to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire, we computed the Cronbach’s alpha. The translated version of the PFAI presented an index of 0.853, ratifying its consistency, indicating that all data collected were reliable. As we tested the hypotheses by the analysis of variance (ANOVA) method, we had to check whether the data collected was normally distributed (McClave, Benson & Sincich, 2001). A Kolmogorof-Smirnov test—measured as 0.602—confirmed this requirement.

To assess the equality of variances for the groups related to each variable, we used the Levene’s test, followed by an analysis of variance (ANOVA), both at a 95%

level of confidence. The p-values of these statistical treatments for each variable are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3

According to this data, all Levene's test p-values were higher than the level of confidence, so the null hypothesis about the equality of variances could not be rejected. That means: there are no differences in variance for the fear of failure scores among distinct groups in every demographic variable.

However, through the ANOVA method, one variable presented a p-value that was very close to the level of confidence. The null hypothesis regarding the *Type of Employment Situation* variable was the only one that could not be satisfactorily refuted. In this case, ANOVA's descriptive statistics output must be taken in consideration.

TABLE 4

According to these results, among the sample consulted, civil servants feel more fear of failure than individuals working for private companies. The table shows that the mean value of the fear of failure score between private employees was 0.09, while the mean value among civil servants was 0.44. In any case, it is important to highlight the discrepancy related to the number of subjects in each group concerning this variable. There are only 9 civil servants against 56 private employees.

V - Discussion

Despite the low fear of failure indices measured, it was possible to relate them to a number of demographic variables, enabling the observation of how fear of failure (Conroy, 2002) was distributed within each variable.

With respect to age, the generational cohorts defined by Motta et al. (2002) served to group individuals who were born in a specific period. Following the author's line of reasoning, they would have common characteristics because of similar cumulative cognitive content and shared experiences during their formative years. This approach prompted our hypothesis of a difference occurring in the fear of failure indices according to the generation to which the individual belongs. However, the results of the statistical analysis indicate statistical equality among the three cohorts.

For the gender variable, the variance of the fear of failure indices is not statistically different for men and women; a result which runs counter to our hypothesis that men and women would present distinct variances, since they perceive the organizational environment differently (Bardagi et al. 2005; Andrade et al., 2002; Abu-Saad & Isralowitz, 1997).

The same can be stated about the third variable: professional status. It is not possible to observe any statistical difference between the fear of failure scores of those who were employed and those who were unemployed. The hypothesis formulated in light of the literature review on this variable, which stressed the differences between these groups (Lima & Gomes, 2010; Giatti & Barreto, 2006), is not borne out by the results in the sample studied.

The only statistical analysis that rejected the equality of the variances between the fear of failure indices is one that is related to the type of employment situation, namely between private and public sector employees in Brazil. The descriptive statistics refute the hypothesis established for this variable, based on the specific employment conditions of Brazilian civil servants regarding job stability (Pires & Macêdo, 2006). Although the high stability related to this type of employment situation was expected to make them less fearful of failing on the job, the civil servants in our sample express

higher fear of failure scores than employees in the private sector. This phenomenon raises some questions about changes in the professional perspectives of civil servants, the reasons behind these changes and their possible consequences, which could be scientifically investigated in further research.

Finally, regarding the hierarchical level, once again the null hypothesis is not rejected, indicating that regardless of individuals' hierarchical position in the organization, the average fear of failure index is statistically the same. That result goes against the inferences from the literature review regarding this variable (Crawford and Mills, 2011; Blacker, 1992).

To sum up, for most (four out of five) of the demographic variables analysed in the sample, the variations of the fear of failure are not statistically different. The hypothesis of equality of variances was rejected only for the "type of employment situation", indicating, counter intuitively, that the civil servants in our sample are more afraid of failing than private sector employees.

V.1 – Limitations and Future Research

According to Skinner (1974), feelings are physical sensations resulting from contingencies that are inherent to human beings. However, the expression of these sensations is a learning process with social roots. In sum, there are differences between what is felt and what is expressed, which may explain what Conroy (2001) refers to as the "*false low PFAI scores*"; i.e., what happens when individuals respond the questionnaire according to what they think might be the "right answer". This provides evidence of the limitations related to studies regarding the expression of feelings, in particular of negative ones, such as fear. In our research, in general, although the respondents were shown how to correctly complete the PFAI questionnaire, "false low"

scores *may* have been observed. However, this is only a possibility, given that the results may have also been produced by an incompatibility between the fear of failure construct (Conroy, 2001) and the Brazilian organizational environment.

We believe our study made a relevant theoretical contribution by taking the concept of fear of failure (Conroy, 2001) as a variable for the analysis of employees' behaviour in the workplace. This study could be considered one of the first steps in the development of a literature exploring how this emotion can impact individual behaviour in organizations. Due to this early stage of scientific investigation, it is difficult to postulate managerial implications. To be properly used in the work environment, we concluded that the fear of failure construct needs to be adjusted.

In this way, the following steps on this path could be an attempt to adapt the concept of fear of failure (Conroy, 2001) and the PFAI questionnaire (Conroy, 2002) to the organizational context. To use it widely in the organizational context, more in-depth research will be required to look into the specific dimensions of the fear of failure in this setting by following the method used by Conroy (2001; 2002) to define the construct and its scale. In this way, the limitation of our study caused by the unidimensional treatment given to the fear of failure construct (Conroy, 2002) could be addressed in further studies, subsiding insightful managerial tools to manage this emotion.

A final suggestion, given that the sample for our exploratory research was very limited, is to perform this type of analysis with larger and more balanced samples, regarding the distributions of individuals in the different categories of demographic variables. To avoid biases in the statistical analyses, the use of more diversified samples could provide a better indicator of the relationships between perceived fear of failure and demographic variables within the organizational setting.

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TABLE 1

Table 1: Five dimensions of fear of failure (Conroy, 2002)

Dimension	Description
Shame and embarrassment	The individual feels ashamed and embarrassed after the failure.
Devaluing self-esteem	The individual's self-esteem is diminished as a consequence of the failure.
Uncertainty about the future	The future becomes more uncertain after the failure.
Loss of interest by important others	People who are important to the individual lose interest in him or her because of the failure.
Upsetting important others	People who are important to the individual suffer negative consequences of the failure and become upset.

Source: Conroy (2002)

TABLE 2

Table 2: Hypothesis

ID	Variable	Assumption	Theoretical basis
H1	Age	The fear of failure indices vary according to the age range of employees in the organizational environment.	Dwyer, 2009; Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Glenn, 2005; Martin, 2005; Jorgensen, 2003; Motta et al., 2002; Smola & Sutton, 2002.
H2	Gender	The fear of failure indices vary according to the gender of employees in the organizational environment.	Benedicto, Silva & Pereira, 2007; Tamayo, 2007; Bardagi, Arteché & Silva, 2005; Andrade et al., 2002; Tchaicovsky & Elizur, 2000; Helgesen, 1999; Abu-Saad & Isralowitz, 1997.
H3	Professional status (employed or unemployed)	The fear of failure indices vary according to the individual's professional status.	Lima & Gomes, 2010; Giatti & Barreto, 2006; Topalov, 1994.
H4	Type of employment situation	Brazilian civil servants have lower fear of failure indices than do private companies employees.	Pires & Macêdo, 2006; Pereira, 1996.
H5	Hierarchical level	The fear of failure indices vary according to the hierarchical level of employees in the organizational environment.	Crawford & Mills, 2011; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Blacker, 1992; Wilson & Edmonson, 1991; Fayol, 1990.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

TABLE 3

Table 3: Statistical Results

Variable	Levene's p-value	ANOVA's p-value
Age	.523	.406
Gender	.349	.209
Professional Status	.684	.096
Type of Employment Situation	.623	.054
Hierarchical Level	.542	.306

Source: Prepared by the authors.

TABLE 4

Table 4: ANOVA's Descriptives

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Min	Max
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Private employees	56	.09682	.497109	.066429	-.03631	.22994	-1.280	1.080
Civil servants	9	.44019	.415247	.138416	.12100	.75937	-.083	1.160
Total	65	.14436	.498201	.061794	.02091	.26781	-1.280	1.160

Source: Prepared by the authors.