Fear of failure in the workplace – an exploratory study about fear in Brazilian organizations.

Abstract

Many factors contribute to the feeling of fear in the workplace. This situation in most cases is perceived as damaging, capable of jeopardizing the psychological and even physical integrity of those who experience it and negatively effecting organizational dynamics. However, there are those who see a positive side to fear because it prompts greater effort to attain goals. The main goal of this paper is to explore how demographic variables – such as age, gender, professional status, type of employment situation and hierarchal level – effect the perception of fear of failure in the workplace of Brazilian organizations. For this purpose, we applied the Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory – PFAI (Conroy, 2002) to an intentionally non-probabilistic sample, chosen by accessibility to graduate business administration students from a university in Rio de Janeiro. The statistical treatment of the data indicated the presence of the phenomenon of "false low" scores, highlighting some limitations related to the expression of feelings, especially negative ones like fear. Despite the low scores measured for fear of failure, the descriptive statistics refuted the hypothesis of an association between fear of failure and the type of employment situation variable and indicate the need to adjust the fear of failure construct (Conroy, 2002) to the Brazilian setting.

I. Introduction

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

There are many phobogenic factors – causers of fear – in the contemporary workplace. Rapid technological changes and constant transformations of managements systems have increased the pressures to excel and achieve better productivity, intensifying the demands of professional life (Cunha, 2006). In the majority of 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, 1998). However, some see a positive side to fear as well, identifying it as a useful management tool when properly used. Dejours (1992), for example, observed that fear can promote productivity and is used in large scale by managers.

Few studies have directly focused on the meaning of fear in Brazilian organizations. To contribute to fill in this gap in this article we measure the fear of failure using the Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory (Conroy, 2001), along with the demographic variables of Brazilian organizations.

II. Review of the literature

II.1. Fear

According to the Dicionário Michaelis, 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", "idea", "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 character in that they involve an evaluation by the individual of a situation experienced (Frijda, 2000). But according to Seymor (1980), emotions can be considered a socially constructed syndrome, based on the individual's perceptions of a determined situation.

Lopéz (1972) defines fear as a series of successive phenomena of paralysis or cessation of the vital course [=curso vital?] that occurs in living things – from the simplest to the most complex – when submitted to sudden or disproportionate situational changes. He indicates three forms of fear: instinctive, rational and imaginary, and divides its evolution in human beings into four phases.

In his words, instinctive fear "is a fear that is more held than felt, than thought." It is the most primitive form, characterized by 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 centers, the wave of stimulus has already determined various reflexes and inhibitions at the medullar and sub-cortical levels" (Lopéz, 1972).

Rational fear, in turn, as 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. Therefore, for being logical, that phobigenic pattern can be transmitted. The individual may not fear something initially, but when becoming aware of the damages that can be caused by the thing or situation, he or she starts to feel fear.

Finally, imaginary fear is considered to be the "most torturous variety of the forms of action of the Dark Giant." The reason is that the harmful actions that would be the starting point of this type of phobigen never in fact consist of a cause for organic fear, properly put. The

individual, through a fluid and precariously structured network of associations, becomes afraid. Hence, imaginary fear is unjustified and incomprehensible.

The study of fear in the organizational context requires going beyond the limits of management studies *per se*. To understand the way individuals react to this feeling, it is necessary to call on references from the fields of psychology, sociology, social psychology, anthropology and political science. The study of organizational behavior (OB) involves all these areas of learning. Attention to the way the interaction between individuals and groups influences the performance of an organization dates to the start of last century. Academics in the area of business administration, with a theoretical approach based on human relations, were responsible for the basic studies in this academic niche (Miller, 2011).

II.2. Fear in the workplace

Several 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 parts of the group experience. Fundamental for assimilation of configuration conflicts and sociability processes and formation of instruments for order and disorder, fear works as a social organizer in its everyday action. In this scenario, individuals fear for their survival, integration and adjustment to consolidated profiles, in a type of associative imposition, with specific norms to be followed and disseminated to future generations. In short, individuals are faced with a social reality, feel fear about their adaptation and permanence, internalize the existing rules and perpetuate the social reality.

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 question of proper organization.

Although his aim was not to discuss how fear can be managed well, it is worthwhile mentioning some management measures in this sense. Regarding the expectations of employees, for instance, an efficient action would be to have clear and objective rules. Workers should also be made aware of their rights, duties and the roles expected of them in the organization. With respect to communication, establishing mechanisms for constant feedback and certifying that employees correctly understand the information received are important. Nevertheless, he acknowledges the negative effects of fear and the certainty 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 behavioral reactions. For Kohn (1986) fear is a stimulator of competition that generates anxiety among those who experience it. It is harmful, not only individually but socially as well, in companies because it undermines the relations of trust and unleashes a series of inappropriate behaviors. Having lost pleasure in professional activity, employees become limited: they are content to remain in a comfortable zone and avoid errors instead of striving for the best possible performance.

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

Another approach that warrants attention about the dynamic of fear in the professional context is that of Applebaum et al. (1998). In their article on the use of fear as an organizational strategy, they analyzed the use of positive reinforcements and punishments, or carrots and sticks. The more fear a punishment generates, the more efficient it will be, due to the influence on the resulting behavioral patterns. Fear is a reason for individuals to avoid a determined behavior.

II.3.Fear of failure

Different individuals perceive fear of failure in different ways, and it has been extensively examined in academic works. Over time, starting from one-dimensional perspectives (Murray, 1938), the construct gradually became more complex, with multidimensional approaches (Birney, 1969; Conroy et al., 2001). A major advance was achieved by Conroy (2002) in studying the vexing theme of fear of failure, with the creation of an instrument to measure this fear, the Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory (PFAI). To overcome this difficulty, here we rely on the multidimensional conception of fear of failure proposed by Conroy (2002) and the associated PFAI.

The first academic articles related to the construct of fear of failure were behavioral theories such as those of Murray (1938), in listing 20 basic human needs, included the item "infavoidance" – a term coined by him to define individuals' need to avoid humiliation by concealing failings.

According to Lewis (1992), the effects of the feeling 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 to arise (Andrews, 1995).

The one-dimensional perspective of the fear of failure is still the most common nowadays. That fact is demonstrated by the ample academic production on the feeling of shame resulting from a frustrated attempt to do something (Eliott, 2004). However, some studies take a multidimensional view of the fear of failure.

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

The American psychologist 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: Five dimensions of fear to failure (Conroy, 2002)

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

Source: Conroy (2002)

The fear of failure, in general, is related to the negative consequences, both physical and mental. However, it is worthwhile enumerating other results 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, besides limiting 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 in relating to other people (Conroy, Elliot and Pincus, 2009) are some indications of the action of this feeling.

III.Methodology

III.1. PFAI Questionnaire

According to Conroy (2001), the instruments to measure the fear of failure existing at the time were inadequate because they were one-dimensional while the phenomenon targeted for measurement is multidimensional. 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 condition, that phenomenon was considered a function derived from the interaction of individuals in their environment. The particularities of the perception of failure in each person were recognized, instead of just the "shame" that was until then seen as the only result of failure (Murray, 1938; Atkinson, 1966).

A measure of the fear of failure, to be considered adequate according to Conroy (2002), needs to take into consideration to what extent individuals believe, or even can predict, the negative consequences that can happen at the moment they realize their failure. 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, 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 with 25 items, which we used here. According to Conroy, this new version is more relevant regarding its content and produces more accurate results.

III.2. Demographic variables, Hypotheses and research method

In this study we analyzed the fear of failure among 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 mold and focus the objective of study. The researcher makes predictions on the relations between the variables – here the levels of fear of failure ascertained by the PFAI and the demographic variables – and tests them against the empirical evidence gathered.

The hypotheses established are based on the literature review regarding the demographic variables that can affect peoples' attitudes toward work in general. Regarding the fear of failure, considering the context in which it is analyzed, we did not find any theoretical references that could serve as the basis for a 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 can be identified. These aspects ratify the exploratory character of this study.

Table 2: Hypotheses

Hypotheses	Descripton
H1	The fear of failure indices vary according to the age range of individuals in the organizational environment.
H2	The fear of failure indices vary according to the gender of individuals in the organizational environment.
H3	The fear of failure indices vary according to the individual's professional status.
H4	Brazilian civil servants have lower fear of failure indices than do individuals with other types of professional relations.
H5	The fear of failure indices vary according to the hierarchical level of individuals in the organizational environment.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

We administered a version of the PFAI questionnaire translated into Portuguese to a sample of 77 graduate administration students (an 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 according to the "correct way" of acting in their eyes.

IV. Findings

To trace out the profile of the sample of graduate business administration students, we treated the tabulated the data with descriptive statistical techniques, to ascertain frequencies, means and standard deviations.

The average age of the 77 students was 31.61 years, with a range from 21 to 55 years and 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. Of the respondents, 33 were men (42.9%) and 44 were women (57.1%), while (84.4%) stated they were employed. Among the employed people, 56 (86.2%) stated they worked as freelance consultants or as employees in the private sector, while the other nine (13.8%) were civil servants.

We computed Cronbach's alpha to test the consistency of the version of the questionnaire used. According to Fischer (2002), this is a measure of internal consistency that enables verifying the perception of the respondents. The results indicated that all the items were understood and the data obtained were reliable. The minimum value of Cronbach's alpha that indicates satisfactory internal consistency is 0.55 and the translated version of the PFAI presented an index of 0.853.

We tested the hypotheses by analysis of variance (ANOVA), at a confidence level of 95%, and to confirm satisfaction of these conditions, we performed the nonparametric Kolmogorof-Smirnov test.

V.Conclusion

In general, although the respondents were instructed on the correct way to fill in the PFAI questionnaire, the phenomenon of "false low" scores still occurred. That fact provides evidence of the limitations related to the expression of feelings, mainly of negative ones such as fear. 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 short, there are differences between what is felt and what is expressed.

Despite the low fear of failure indices found, it was possible to relate them to the demographic variables chosen, enabling observation of the way the fear of failure (Conroy, 2002) was distributed within each of these variables.

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

Regarding gender, the variance of the fear of failure indices was also equal between men and women. That result runs counter to our hypothesis, that men and women would present distinct indices, since they perceive the organizational environment in distinct ways (Bardage et al. 2005; Abu-Saad and Isralowitz, 1997).

The same finding applies to the third variable, professional status now of answering the questionnaire. It was not possible to observe any variance in the fear of failure metric between the students who were also employed and those not working. The hypothesis formulated in light of the literature review on this variable, which stressed the differences between these groups (Lima and Gomes, 2010; Giatti and Barreto, 2010), was not borne out by the results in the sample selected.

The only statistical analysis that rejected the equality of the variance between the fear of failure indices was that related to the type of employment situation, namely between professionals in the private sector (employees or freelance consultants) and those in the public sector. The descriptive statistics refuted the hypothesis established for this variable, based on the specific employment conditions of Brazilian civil servants regarding job stability (Pires and Macêdo, 2006). Although this stability would be expected to make them

less fearful of failing on the job, the civil servants in our sample expressed higher fear of failure than their peers in the private sector.

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

To sum up, in the sample studied, in the majority (four out of five) of the demographic variables analyzed, the variations of the fear of failure in the different groups were statistically equal. Only for the "type of employment situation" was the hypothesis of equality rejected, indicating, counterintuitively, that the civil servants in our sample were more afraid of failing than their peers in the private sector.

Finally, further research is needed to adapt the concept of fear of failure and the PFAI questionnaire (Conroy, 2002) to the Brazilian organizational context. That instrument is of great value, since it has been validated and refers to a complex question, the measurement of feeling. However, to use it widely in the Brazilian organizational context will require investigating the specific dimensions of fear of failure in this context, to avoid the low adherence to the situations described in the questionnaire by the respondents in our sample.

Another suggestion is to perform this type of analysis with samples that are larger and more balances regarding the distributions of individuals in the different categories of the demographic variables. To avoid biases in the statistical analyses, the use of more diversified samples could provide a better indicator of the relationships between the fear of failure indices and the demographic variables within the organizational context.

VI.References

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