



The developmental origins of fear of failure in adolescent athletes: Examining parental practices

Sam S. Sagar^{a,*}, David Lavallee^b

^a Department of Psychology, Faculty of Health, Leeds Metropolitan University, Leeds LS1 3HE, UK

^b Department of Sport and Exercise Science, Aberystwyth University, UK

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: We investigated the developmental origins of fear of failure (FF) in adolescent athletes by examining how parental sport socialization practices in daily parent–child interaction contribute to the development of FF in the child–athlete.

Method: Three intact families of adolescent athletes (ages 13–14 years) participated in the study; three athletes and six parents. Each mother, father and athlete was interviewed separately three times over a 3–4 week period. Interviews with parents ranged between 90 and 200 min and with the athletes between 60 and 106 min. Social constructionist epistemology underpinned the study.

Results: Data analyses revealed three categories of parental sport socialization practices that can contribute to young athletes' FF: punitive behavior, controlling behavior, and high expectations for achievement. These practices appear to be grounded in the parents' belief that losing competitions will lead to aversive consequences for their child's sporting progression and career. Therefore, they employed these practices in an attempt to ensure their child's success in competitions.

Conclusions: Such parental socialization practices and negative responses to their child's failure can contribute to the child's FF development; as the child appraises these practices and responses to be aversive consequences of failure and, subsequently, fears failure. The present study represents the first endeavor to examine the developmental origins of FF in young athletes and its findings enhance conceptual understanding of FF in the youth sport context, contributing to theory and practice.

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The motive to avoid failure, or fear of failure (FF) as it is more commonly known, is associated with anticipatory shame in evaluative situations and with the tendency to appraise threat in such situations (Birney, Burdick, & Teevan, 1969; Conroy, Willow, & Metzler, 2002). This avoidance motivational tendency involves cognitive, behavioral, and emotional experiences and typically prompts the adoption of avoidance-based goals and strategies (e.g., performance-avoidance goals, self-handicapping, low achievement) that, in turn, exert adverse effects (Conroy & Elliot, 2004). High FF has been associated with a prevalence of negative outcomes (e.g., anxiety, depression, eating disorders; see Conroy, 2001; Sagar, Lavallee, & Spray, 2007). In sport, FF has been associated with high levels of worry, stress, and anxiety (somatic and cognitive; Conroy et al., 2002), and has been shown to affect adolescent athletes' interpersonal behavior, schoolwork, sporting performance, and well-being (Sagar, Lavallee, & Spray, 2009). Fear of failure has been reported to be prominent in both sexes and across levels of actual and perceived

ability (Covington, 1992). Accordingly, FF can have important implications for young athletes.

Early and contemporary achievement motivation theorists (e.g., McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953; McGregor & Elliot, 2005) positioned shame at the core of FF. They suggested that this avoidance-based motive disposition orients individuals to seek to avoid failure in achievement settings because they feel shame upon failure; shame is a self-condemning reaction that is grounded in general self-devaluation and concern about relational disruption (McGregor & Elliot, 2005). Some, however, conceptualized FF as a multidimensional construct. For example, Birney et al. (1969) proposed that individuals fear and seek to avoid the aversive consequences of failure. It is the anticipation of failure and of its threatening and aversive consequences that elicits fear in individuals. Their model proposed three general consequences of failure that can be perceived aversive and feared: reduction in one's self-estimate (having to lower one's views of the self; the lower the self-estimate is, the greater the sense of failure will be); reduction in one's social-value (others view the performer as less valuable); and, receipt of a non-ego punishment (e.g., withdrawal of tangible

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 113 812 0000; fax: +44 113 812 3440.
E-mail address: S.Sagar@leedsmet.ac.uk (S.S. Sagar).

rewards, realization after failure that one has wasted time and effort). Accordingly, Birney et al. conceptualized FF as related to affiliative needs and as reflecting avoidance of either lowered self-estimate or a lowered evaluation by others. Their model was extended recently by Conroy et al.'s (2002) who suggested five beliefs about the consequences of failure that are associated with threat appraisal, and are feared. These are: (a) having an uncertain future; (b) devaluing one's self-estimate; (c) experiencing shame and embarrassment; (d) important others losing interest; and, (e) upsetting important others. The degree of one's belief that these aversive consequences will occur after failure reflects individual differences in FF levels. This conceptualization of FF guided the present study.

The developmental origins of fear of failure

Relatively little research has examined the developmental origins of FF. Achievement motivation theorists have long asserted that the motive to avoid failure is socialized during childhood (between ages 5 and 9 years; McClelland, 1958) and that a motive is "the learnt result of pairing cues with affect or the conditions which produce affect" (McClelland et al., 1953, p. 75). Parents have been implicated in the development of their children's FF because of their primary caregiver role and attachment (e.g., Krohne, 1992; Sideridis & Kafetsios, 2008; Teevan & McGhee, 1972). As such, researchers have examined socialization and early childhood experiences, learning experiences, and children's instructional environments. Three factors have been associated with the development of children's FF: parent-child communications and interactions (e.g., Conroy, 2003; Krohne, 1992; Teevan & McGhee, 1972), family climate (Singh, 1992), and parental high expectations and demands (e.g., Elliot & McGregor, 1999; Krohne, 1992). These factors, however, have not been examined in the context of children in sport and are, therefore, the focus of the present study.

Two recent studies by Elliot and colleagues in the education context examined FF among university students. The first study (Elliot & Thrash, 2004) showed that parental FF positively predicted child-student's FF and that parents (especially mothers) passed on their FF to their child through the use of love withdrawal in socialization; thereby passing this disposition intergenerationally. The authors proposed that children of parents high in FF are likely to experience, at an early age and often, parental love withdrawal as a response to their failure. Consequently, children can develop a dispositional tendency to experience shame when failing and gradually become motivated to seek to avoid failure. As such, the roots of FF are laid down early in childhood development. The second study (McGregor & Elliot, 2005) reported a positive relationship between the tendency to experience shame and FF, and between parental shaming and FF. Students high in FF (relative to those low in FF) experienced greater shame after failure, generalized failure to the global self, and had more relational concerns. The authors stated that for individuals high in FF, achievement events are judgment-oriented experiences that threaten their sense of relational security and, therefore, can be perceived by them as potentially shameful events rather than opportunities to learn, improve competence, or compete against others. To date, however, researchers have not examined the contribution of parents' sport socialization practices to their child-athlete's FF development. Moreover, the aforementioned research employed exclusively a quantitative methodology to study parental contribution to FF development and, as such, do not offer a deep insight into parental socialization practices, which can enhance understanding of the developmental origins of FF in children. Therefore, a qualitative methodology to investigate this issue can advance knowledge further.

Parental socialization practices

Parents are the primary socializing agents of their children, socializing them through daily interactions. Socialization is an interactive process whereby parents pass on their values, attitudes, skills, and traits to their children, and children, through observation, education, and experience, gradually acquire those motives, traits, and behavior (Spera, 2005). Parents can contribute to their child's FF development through their parenting styles (e.g., demandingness, responsiveness) and practices (i.e., behavior that parents use) in socialization. Parental disciplinary practices such as threat and punishment (e.g., withholding privileges or affection from the child) and reward (e.g., affection, material goods) have been associated with the transmission of parental beliefs, attitudes, and FF to their child (Putallaz, Constanzo, Grimes, & Sherman, 1998; Spera, 2005). Parents often use such practices to promote achievement in their child and to increase or decrease their child's engagement in a particular behavior by providing positive (reward) or negative (punishment) consequences that are conditional upon the child's behavior (Woolger & Power, 1993). Love withdrawal, which is a form of parental punishment, is a socialization practice whereby parents withdraw their affection or create a physical separation from their child when the child behaves in an undesirable manner (Chapman & Zahn-Waxler, 1982). This form of a disciplinary practice communicates to the child that undesirable behavior results in their parents' emotional or physical withdrawal. Love withdrawal includes subtle parental behavior (e.g., refusing to speak or look at the child, looking coldly at the child, moving away from the child) and non-subtle behavior (e.g., verbally expressing dislike of the child, sending the child to another room); hence it can be communicated to the child with a distinct gesture, facial expression or tone of voice. Parental recurrent use of love withdrawal can contribute to the development of FF in children (Elliot & Thrash, 2004).

The present research

Research on the developmental origins of FF is currently sparse despite its conceptual and applied importance. To date, researchers have examined the origins of FF in evaluative contexts such as education (e.g., Elliot & Thrash, 2004) and the home environment (e.g., Krohne, 1992; Teevan & McGhee, 1972), but not within the context of youth sport. Although FF is a motive disposition that has some characteristics of a stable trait and, as such, will manifest itself in different evaluative contexts of one's life (e.g., school, sport), it can be activated by situational factors (Hustinx, Kuyper, Van der Werf, & Dijkstra, 2009). Accordingly, parental sport socialization practices may function as situational stimuli that activate the FF disposition and, therefore, worthy an investigation. Moreover, situational factors (e.g., pressures, demands) vary in the contexts of sport and education. For example, sporting performances typically take place in the public arena and, as such, mistakes and failures expose athletes (and possibly their parents) to others' judgment and negative evaluation and to feeling shame, more so than failure in education (e.g., failing an examination, receiving poor grades), which is less overt. Such conditions can lead to different threat appraisals and, subsequently, to different parental practices in sport socialization vs education socialization. The present study, therefore, set out to examine parental practices in sport socialization that can contribute to young athletes' FF.

Sport is one of the most popular achievement domains for children and adolescents (Treasure, 2001). It is a highly competitive domain, where concerns about performance failure and negative social evaluation are the most prevalent sources of worry for young athletes (Passer, 1983). Winning and losing are aspects of competitive sport, and most youth sport participants view winning as important;

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