



## IS FEAR OF FAILURE A PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIER? AN EMPIRICAL STUDY ON OCCUPATIONAL CHOICES

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose-** In our age, “success” has been promoted as the ultimate aim and result in life. Failure has been underrated in our society. However, failure is important and necessary. The contradiction of success promoting mentality is that in order to be successful failure is essential. However, we do not come across failure stories as much as success stories. Success is nice and positive, but failure is unpleasant and most of the time is not welcomed by the society and our close relations. Therefore, managing failure is highly important and is not taught or mentioned anywhere. This study tries to show the possible connection between the Fear of Failure (henceforth FoF) and occupational choices by including wide range of career options (e.g. being a social entrepreneur, being an academician, being a paid employee either in a private company or public office, being self-employed/entrepreneur and being not working at all if it is possible).

**Methodology-** Survey method is used as a research instrument and 413 university students accepted to be the part of the study. Multiple regression analyses were performed to test the proposed relationships.

**Findings-** Among them only two models constructed with entrepreneurial intention and not working at all (if it is possible) was found significant.

**Conclusion-** Alongside different findings of the study, negative connotation attached to the FoF for entrepreneurial intentions are still valid.

**Keywords:** Fear, failure, fear of failure, occupational choice, entrepreneurial intention.

**JEL Codes:** M10, M12, D23

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This study is a part of an ongoing scientific effort which aims to reveal underlying reasons for occupational choices in Turkey. Although there are several studies working on occupational choices, still many more issues are waiting for enlightenment (Baum and Locke, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2007). For today, many of the efforts directed towards entrepreneurship in career literature are directed to draw a line between entrepreneurial intentions and intentions of being employed. Here, the primary objective is to understand the personal and environmental factors and suggest policy tools for supporting entrepreneurship (Shane 2009; Wennekers et al., 2005). Nonetheless, even there are still not satisfactory findings about why some people want to be self-employed and run their own businesses (Carsrud and Brannback 2011; Markman, Balkin, and Baron 2002; Sieger and Manson, 2015). This may be due to the fact that entrepreneurship is a complex, dynamic phenomenon and therefore understanding what influences entrepreneurial career choice can be quite challenging (Shane et al., 2009). Beyond that, there is a need to explore other career options on which this study is based.

For the rest of the study, firstly brief literature on Fear of Failure (FoF), the role of it shaping occupational choices are given. By briefly discussing what FoF denotes and the giving a multidimensional structure of it would be helpful to approach the FoF and its possible aversive consequences. After, the methodological orientation of the study including research objectives, research setting and participants, measurement instruments are discussed separately. Lastly, findings are presented respectively and discussed consequently.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Fear of Failure (FoF)

#### Approaching towards an understanding of Fear of Failure (FoF)

Human beings primarily evaluate the outside world, appraise the threat and risks which causes some degree of change in some of their metabolic functions and correspondingly behaviors. Therefore, they approach the threat and fight against it, escape it or paralyze in front of the threat (freeze) (Gray 1971 and Lazarus 1991 cited in Cacciotti and Hayton, 2015). The nature of it yields that it could be either a good friend to achieve something and keep going in the face of ups and downs or an enemy/foe causing high anxiety, underachievement, reduced resilience, and leading some to learned helplessness (Martin and Marsh, 2003).

As already discussed in psychology literature and attracting the attention of many people, FoF refers the “*disposition to avoid failure and/or the capacity for experiencing shame and humiliation as a consequence of failure*” and as the “*disposition to become anxious about failure under achievement stress*” (Atkinson, 1966:13; Atkinson and Litwin, 1973:146 cited in Cacciotti, Hayton, Mitchell and Giazitzoglu, 2016; Conroy, 2001). Although it is assumed as avoidance-based motive disposition in the achievement domain (Elliot and Trash,2004), it could also lead to approach behaviors (Cacciotti et al 2016).

#### Multidimensionality of Fear of Failure

In literature, multidimensional nature of fear of failure is discussed and such discussions result in five aversive consequences / cognitive beliefs about aversive consequences of failure: (a) experiencing shame and embarrassment, (b) devaluing one's self-estimate, (c) having an uncertain future, (d) important others losing interest, and (e) upsetting important others (Conroy, 2001; Conroy and Elliot, 2004; Conroy, Metzler and Hofer, 2003; Conroy, Willow, and Metzler, 2002; Conroy et al 2016). While accepting the influential capacity of environmental circumstances, fear of failure is deemed as a stable disposition along these dimensions (Cacciotti et al 2016). This also signals a dichotomy in literature approaching fear of failure either as a stable disposition or temporary emotional state. On the one hand, there are arguments concerning fear of failure as stable dispositions which are enduring for the rest of people' lives. On the other hand, the others consider fear a negative emotion just same as other emotions holding either a positive or negative tone (Li, 2011) as such as stress, loneliness, mental strain, grief (Patzelt and Shepherd, 2011), joy, anger (Welp, Spörrle, Grichnik, Michl and Audrestch, 2012; Simth and Ellsworth,1985), guilt, hope (Lazarus and Smith 1988).

While accepting the value of both approaches to understand the fear of failure, this study is particularly based on a multi-dimensional structure of FoF. The multidimensional structure of FoF is composed of five factors, encompassing both intra-personal and inter-personal vulnerabilities/evaluations. Therefore, individual beliefs in each of the aforementioned aversive consequences of failing indicate fear to a certain extent (Conroy and Elliot, 2004).

The first dimension is *fear of experiencing shame and embarrassment* which explain possibility of personal shame and public embarrassment after failure (Conroy,2001). The other aversive consequence is *fear of devaluing one's self-estimate* which is particularly related to vulnerabilities relative to ourselves such as personal diminishment, fears stemming from a lack of ability and fears arising from a lack of control. This vulnerability emerges from a belief that one cannot hold necessary skills for being successful, therefore signals loss of self-confidence to control the events in one's life to accomplish desired goals. *Fear of having an uncertain future* is another utilized concept regarding affective consequences of FoF . The other dimension *fear of upsetting important others* implies an inter-personal perspective in which vulnerability is addressed relative to perceptions of the beliefs of other key individuals. (Robert and Dean, 2011; Stuart, 2013). As considered in the fear of upsetting important others, fear of losing social influence emerge as another dimension that represents the belief that individuals lose their social influence when they fail. Involuntarily, this would also create a social distance from others and creates a feeling of useless as a social object (Conroy, 2001).

### 2.2. The Role of FoF in Shaping Occupational Choices

In literature, the link between occupational choices and the FoF is mostly constructed under the phenomena of entrepreneurship (e.g. Arenius and Minniti 2005; Langowitz and Minniti 2007; Minniti and Nardone 2007; Morales-Gualdrón and Roig, 2005 ; Wagner2007). Since, there is a general tendency to question entrepreneurial outcomes as either success or failure, FoF is often included in entrepreneurship research. Thus, entrepreneurs are motivated towards doing their best and endowed with an idea of avoiding failure in business life through effective opportunity identification, selection or development, maximum performance on entrepreneurial tasks and action (Cacciotti, and Hayton, 2015). Moreover, such a fear is regarded as a psychological barrier for entrepreneurial intent and action. However, this limited perspective to understand entrepreneurial intent and actions is supplemented with an idea of fear of failure is not only prohibiting but also with some possibility of stimulating more efforts towards being an entrepreneur. (Cacciotti, and

Hayton, 2015; Mitchell and Shepherd 2011). Therefore, FoF could produce both approach and avoidance behaviours. Despite significant efforts towards a new understanding which instills an idea of every failure is a learning opportunity, negative connotation is prevailing in the field (Cacciotti, and Hayton, 2015). Career intention literature has been shaped particularly around entrepreneurial intention and an intention of being a paid employee. Studies in the field mainly aspire to reveal the factors differentiating entrepreneurs and ones accepting to be a paid employee and to produce road maps on how to boost entrepreneurship (Shane,2009; Wennekers et al 2005) . Regarding this limitation, this study tries to extend the literature by adding other occupational choices in relation to fear of failure. In this context, being a paid employee either in a private company or public office, being a social entrepreneur, being an academician and being not working at all (if it is possible) are included as career options in the analyses.

## 2.DATA AND METHODOLOGY

In this part, research objectives, research setting, participants and measurement are explained correspondingly.

### 3.1. Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to understand whether FoF is an inhibiting or enabling factor on the way of deciding which career path is pursued. Rather than solely focusing on the entrepreneurial intention, other career options are included in analyses.

### 3.2. Research Setting and Participants

Data for this study was collected from 413 students both from Faculty of Economics, Faculty of Business Administration and Faculty of Engineering of a state university located in Istanbul. Snowball sampling was used in order to reach as much students as possible. The main aim of choosing students is to understand whether FoF is an influential factor for determining the career path and if it is, to help them to manage the fear before facing the reality of business life. The study's sample is composed of 197 females and 216 male students. Sample distribution by gender, faculty, the year is shown below:

**Table 1: Gender and Faculty Cross Tabulation**

PARTICIPANTS		Faculty			
		Economics	Business Administration	Engineering	Total
Female	Count	171	21	5	197
	% within Faculty	50,4%	38,9%	27,8%	47,7%
	% of Total	41,4%	5,1%	1,2%	47,7%
Male	Count	168	33	13	216
	% within Faculty	49,6%	61,1%	72,2%	52,3%
	% of Total	40,7%	8,0%	3,1%	52,3%
Total	Count	339	54	18	413
	% within Faculty	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
	% of Total	82,1%	13,1%	4,4%	100,0%

As shown in the table above, 171 of 197 female students are coming from Faculty of Economics, the other 21 and 5 students are from Faculty of Business Administration and Faculty of Engineering respectively. Out of 216 male students, 168 of them is coming from Faculty of Economics, 33 and 13 are from Faculty of Business Administration and Engineering respectively. As shown in the table below, 410 students responded the year in the university, 196 of them is female and 214 of them is male. Most of them are either freshman or second year student (Female: 71 freshmen and 89 second year; Male: 64 freshman and 93 second year).

**Table 2: Gender and Year Cross Tabulation**

PARTICIPANTS		Year				Total
		1	2	3	4	
Female	Count	71	89	29	7	196
	% within Year	52,6%	48,9%	44,6%	25,0%	47,8%
	% of Total	17,3%	21,7%	7,1%	1,7%	47,8%
Male	Count	64	93	36	21	214
	% within Year	47,4%	51,1%	55,4%	75,0%	52,2%
	% of Total	15,6%	22,7%	8,8%	5,1%	52,2%
Total	Count	135	182	65	28	410
	% within Year	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%
	% of Total	32,9%	44,4%	15,9%	6,8%	100,0%

### 3.3. Measurement Instruments

Survey method has been chosen to collect data. Scales used have been constructed after a deep literature review and have been adapted to the Turkish culture by using the method of translation and back translation as suggested in the literature.

FoF is measured through using the Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory (PFAI), originally developed and tested across groups and time by David E. Conroy (2003). This 25-item inventory includes five-first order beliefs (Stuart, 2013) including (a) fear of experiencing shame and embarrassment; (b) fear of devaluing one's self-estimate; (c) fear of having an uncertain future; (d) fear of important others losing interest; and (e) fear of upsetting important others. In terms of dependent variable, students were asked which career path they intend to pursue after completion of their studies. Options range from being a self-employed through to not working at all (if it is possible). Participants were asked to indicate their degree of agreement with the statements on a six-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" =1 to "strongly agree" = 6.

## 4.FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this part, firstly, results of Exploratory Principal Component and Reliability analyses are given, then the results of regression analyses are presented.

### 4.1. Data Analysis

#### 4.1.1. Exploratory Principal Component and Reliability Analyses

The data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 21.0 software. Firstly, Factor and Reliability Analyses of all measurement instruments were conducted and their factor structure was revised based on the results.

As shown in the Table 03.below, FoF index resulted in four factors differently from original first order scale of PFAI inventory. 1 item was eliminated after the first factor analysis, because it was the only one loaded on the factor 5. Then factor analysis was run again, however 1 item was excluded from further analysis due to low reliability level. Based on the results of third factor analysis, 1 item was eliminated because of both low and multiple factor loadings.

According to Factor and Reliability analyses results, there are four first order scales, all of which imply a higher order scale of fear of failure. Among the factor structure, first one is a combination of fear of devaluing one's self estimate and fear of having an uncertain future with Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ). 879 (8 items). The second one is labelled fear of important others losing interest with Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ). 875 (7 items). The third one is about fear of experiencing shame and embarrassment with Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) 784 (3 items). The last one of the first order scale which is fear of upsetting important to others has Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) 772 (4 items).

**Table 3: Factor and Reliability Analyses of Fear of Failure**

FEAR OF FAILURE	Factor Loading	Variance Explained	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
<b>Fear of devaluing one's self estimate and fear of having an uncertain future</b>		<b>19,649</b>	<b>,879</b>	<b>8</b>
When I am failing, it is often because I am not smart enough to perform successfully.	,781			
When I am failing, my future seems uncertain.	,718			
When I am failing, I blame my lack of talent.	,668			
When I am failing, I believe that my future plans will change.	,639			

**Table 3: Factor and Reliability Analyses of Fear of Failure (Cont'd)**

When I am failing, I am afraid that I might not have enough talent.	,769		
When I am failing, it upsets my "plan" for the future.	,687		
When I am not succeeding, I am less valuable than when I succeed.	,577		
When I am not succeeding, I get down on myself easily.	,541		
<b>Fear of important others losing interest</b>	<b>18,356</b>	<b>,875</b>	<b>7</b>
When I am failing, I lose the trust of people who are important to me.	,552		
When I am not succeeding, people are less interested in me.	,763		
When I am not succeeding, people seem to want to help me less.	,695		
When I am not succeeding, people tend to leave me alone	,641		
When I am failing, I believe that everybody knows I am failing.	,527		
When I am not succeeding, some people are not interested in me anymore.	,831		
When I am not succeeding, my value decreases for some people.	,750		
<b>Fear of experiencing shame and embarrassment</b>	<b>11,441</b>	<b>,784</b>	<b>3</b>
When I am failing, it is embarrassing if others are there to see it	,637		
When I am failing, I worry about what others think about me.	,749		
When I am failing, I worry that others may think I am not trying.	,745		
<b>Fear of upsetting important to others</b>	<b>11,313</b>	<b>,772</b>	<b>4</b>
When I am failing, it upsets important others.	,760		
When I am failing, I expect to be criticized by important others.	,614		
When I am failing, important others are not happy.	,826		
When I am failing, important others are disappointed.	,734		
<b>Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.</b>			<b>,916</b>
<b>Bartlett's Test of Sphericity Approx Chi-Square</b>			<b>4472,725</b>
<b>df</b>			<b>231</b>
<b>Sig.</b>			<b>,000</b>
<b>Overall Reliability Statistics: Cronbach's Alpha</b>			<b>,919</b>

#### 4.1.2. Results of Regression Analysis

Direct effects of FoF on occupational choices were tested with Multiple Regression Analysis. However, among the six models, only two of them was found statistically significant. Therefore, following two tables show the results of FoF that is regressed on being a self-employed (entrepreneur) and being not working at all (if it is possible) respectively.

Regarding the Model I which explains the ,035 variance in being a self-employed (entrepreneur), findings show that there is a statistically meaningful but negative relation between fear of devaluing one's self-estimate and fear of having an uncertain future and being a self-employed (entrepreneur) ( $\beta=-,223$ ,  $p=,000$ ).

**Table 4: Regression Analysis- Fear of Failure and Being Self Employed (Entrepreneur)**

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>					
Model I	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	4,417	,280		15,784	,000
<b>Fear of devaluing one's self estimate and fear of having an uncertain future</b>	-,328	,093	-,223	-3,518	,000
Fear of important others losing interest	,112	,100	,076	1,125	,261
Fear of experiencing shame and embarrassment	-,016	,080	-,014	-,203	,839
Fear of upsetting important to others	,124	,073	,094	1,699	,090
<b>Model 1. R=,187 R<sup>2</sup>=,035. F (3, 687) = p&lt;.05</b>					
a. Dependent Variable: Being Self Employed (Entrepreneur)					

Following Table 5. also shows the results of second regression analysis regarding the Model II in which FoF was regressed on another career option of "not working at all (if it is possible)". Results show that there is again a statistically meaningful and but positive relationship between fear of devaluing one's self-estimate and fear of having an uncertain future and being not working at all (if it is possible) ( $\beta=,134$ ,  $p=,036$ ).

**Table 5: Regression Analysis- Fear of Failure and Being not working at all (if it is possible)**

Coefficients <sup>a</sup>					
Model II.	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant)	2,580	,353		7,303	,000
<b>Fear of devaluing one's self estimate and fear of having an uncertain future</b>	,248	,118	,134	2,106	,036
Fear of important others losing interest	,078	,126	,042	,617	,538
Fear of experiencing shame and embarrassment	,048	,100	,032	,483	,630
Fear of upsetting important to others	-,164	,092	-,099	-1,781	,076
<b>Model 2: R=,166 R<sup>2</sup>=,028 F (2,905)= p&lt;.05</b>					
a. Dependent Variable: Not working at all (if it is possible)					

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study is a part of an ongoing scientific effort which aims to reveal the underlying reasons for occupational choices in Turkey. Although this study seems to replicate the previous academic initiatives conducted in university or sports settings, it differentiated itself from them in several ways: First and foremost, the study approaches FoF from an overall career perspective including other occupational choices. This study was conducted in an emerging country whose cultural patterns and norms are very different from that of Northern America and the UK. According to the results, only two of the models were found to be statistically significant. One of them shows that there is a negative but significant relationship between fear of devaluing one's self estimate and fear of having an uncertain future and entrepreneurial intention. These findings unfold several implications: Firstly, devaluing one's self estimate was loaded on the same factor with considerations of the future. Likewise, it is the only factor that is found significant along the continuum of being self-employed and of being not working at all (if it is possible). The other factors constituting the higher order of FoF are insignificant to explain the relationship between FoF and other occupational choices (e.g. paid employee in a private or public office, being a social entrepreneur, being an academician). Alongside different findings of the study, negative connotation attached to the FoF for entrepreneurial intentions are still valid. Therefore, the education in universities should be reorganized so that students would become adults upon their graduation knowing how to deal with the fear or knowing how to transpose negative feelings and to use them stimulate their efforts.

Besides the contribution of the study, it has subject to certain limitations. Firstly, this study has used the Performance Failure Appraisal Inventory (PFAI) to understand higher order factor of Fear of Failure. However, as stated in many times in literature there is a need to approach capturing a combination of cognition, affect and action regarding FoF and Occupational Choices. Most of the studies considering FoF is conducted either in universities or sports settings in literature, although this study tries to extend the career research by including other options instead of merely stating entrepreneurship, it was again conducted in the university context. Due to the complex nature of business life, it would be replicated in another study with professionals to understand the role of FoF for career choices. Furthermore, whether the level of their FoF has changed during their career paths and which situations have triggered such a change would be a valuable research avenue for future studies. This would also enable us to clarify the stable dispositions and temporary emotional states of individuals.

Particularly, considering entrepreneurs there is a need to have inductive investigation with in-depth interviews to reveal the sources of fear in their journeys. However, these interviews should be iterated covering several phases of entrepreneurial development, therefore they would signal different fear elements for entrepreneurs.

Besides the need of longitudinal studies, experimental studies could be conducted with students. Autobiographical call would be used to make them remember the incident in their lives that causes fear, then career preferences of student would be asked after controlling emotions with manipulation checks.

Fear and underlying cultural norms also deserve attention for further research. Since, if fear is perceived as a common way of life, then this would be ineffective to determine the important decisions of people.

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