

THE MOTIVES TO ATTAIN SUCCESS AND TO AVOID FAILURE: HISTORICAL NOTE

PAUL McREYNOLDS

Veterans Administration Hospital, Palo Alto, California

In a recent paper McReynolds and Guevara presented evidence to indicate that schizophrenics, as compared with normals, tend, as they put it, "to be relatively more highly motivated to *avoid failure* and less strongly motivated to *attain success*" (26, p. 303). Their findings further suggested that the same relationship holds, only to a lesser degree, for patients classified as neurotic.

This study, as well as other recent ones which have found the constructs of success-attainment and failure-avoidance useful (e.g., 4, 6), raises the question of the historical background of psychological interest in these concepts. The purpose of this paper is to indicate some of the earlier considerations of the psychological import of success and failure experiences, especially as these may be related to psychopathology. No claim of comprehensiveness is made.

EARLY OBSERVATIONS

We will begin with William James. His classic discussion of self-esteem, particularly because it continues to be read, is undoubtedly one of the more important historical founts for research in this area. James, who defined self-esteem as the ratio of success to pretensions, noted that success is self-defined, that what is success for one person may not be for another. "I, who for the time have staked my all on being a psychologist," he wrote, "am mortified if others know much more psychology than I. But I am content to wallow in the grossest ignorance of Greek" (23, vol. 1, p. 310). He was also astutely observant regarding the psychology of failure, and in particular of the tendency of persons to avoid the experience of failure by withdrawing from or avoiding participation in activities or tasks in which they might fail. "With no attempt there can be no failure" (p. 310), he wrote, and also, "To give up pretensions is as blessed a relief as to get them gratified; and where disappointment is incessant and the struggle unending, this is what men will always do" (p. 311).

In 1926 A. T. Boisen, who was the chaplain at Worcester State Hospital, and who had himself several years before experienced an acute catatonic episode, published a paper in which he concluded that

"a sense of personal failure as judged by the personal standards" [of the patient] (9, p. 534) is crucial in the development of psychosis. Dr. R. G. Hoskins, who was at the same hospital and who collaborated with Boisen (22, p. 83), adopted a similar point of view, holding (1931) that "dementia praecox is a defensive reaction in a sensitive human being to a feeling of personal failure" (21, p. 1210). Boisen later elaborated his views in his well-known book, *The exploration of the inner world* (10).

The most important pioneer in developing the concepts of success and failure, as these have implications for psychopathology, was Alfred Adler. Throughout the long span of his writings there was a constant emphasis on the motivation of individuals toward the attainment of success. In 1936 he stated that "The striving for success—the successful solution of problems—is inherent in the structure of life" (3, p. 102), and that "Individual Psychology finds the striving for success inextricably embedded in the life structure" (3, p. 108). At the same time, Adler considered the criterion of success to be subjective. Thus he wrote (1937) that "What an individual considers success is always a matter of his subjective opinion" (3, p. 250), and elsewhere (1935), "In my experience I have found that each individual has a different meaning of and attitude toward, what constitutes success" (3, p. 68). In view of the similarity of these views to those of James quoted above, it is interesting to note that Adler considered James to be one of the predecessors of Individual Psychology (1, p. 121).

Adlerian theory is also intimately concerned with the significance of failure experiences. However, instead of referring to "the motivation to avoid failure," as is the current convention, Adler spoke of the "fear of failure," or the "fear of defeat." Such a fear he considered central in the development of psychopathology. The following quotation is representative: "It is the fear of defeat, real or imaginary, which occasions the outbreak of the so-called neurotic symptoms . . . My experience proves that psychoses such as schizophrenia, mania, melancholia, and paranoia, appear when the patient feels absolutely checkmated, with no hope of going on" (2, p. 13). Further, Adler also noted that individuals sometimes engage in avoidance maneuvers in order to avoid failure. For example, he reported a case in which the patient avoided work and examinations because of fear that he would not do well in these situations (2, p. 39).

Adler's most strikingly prescient observation regarding the psychology of success and failure, however, concerned the relative

strengths of the success-attainment and the failure-avoidant motives, a relationship which is at the center of much current research. In an insightful phrase, in 1927, referring to children born with defective organs, Adler described them as "lacking a social feeling, courage, and self-confidence *because they fear a defeat more than they desire a success*" (1, p. 117, italics added). This phrase, which appeared exactly 40 years before the McReynolds-Guevara paper referred to at the beginning of this paper, and in the same journal, is apparently the first indication in the literature of individual differences in the relative strengths of the success-attainment and failure-avoidant motives.

LATER RESEARCH

In 1931, Tamara Dembo (15), working in the Gestalt tradition, introduced the concept of "level of aspiration" to refer to the standard of performance for which a person is striving, and in terms of which he judges his actual performance to be either a success or a failure. In the subsequent years, and particularly in the early 1940's, a number of important studies (e.g., 17, 18), mostly in the context of the field theory of Kurt Lewin, were done on variables affecting the feelings of success and failure. In summarizing this work Lewin noted that "The experience of success or failure depends on the level of performance within a frame of reference . . . A feeling of success will prevail if a certain level, related to the dominant frame of reference, is reached . . . It has been shown that to avoid the feeling of failure after a poor performance the frame of reference is frequently shifted. Other ways to avoid failure are various forms of rationalization" (25, p. 830).

While a number of investigators in recent years have utilized the concepts of success and failure, the most concerted efforts, both experimental and theoretical, are those of John W. Atkinson and his associates (5, 6, 7). Atkinson, whose work derives largely from the Lewinian tradition, has developed an important and influential conceptualization—within the general context of achievement motivation theory—of the interactions of the success-attainment and failure-avoidant motives under various conditions. This work, however, being of contemporary rather than historical moment, need not be reviewed further here.

Turning back now to work on psychopathology (studies generated by Lewin and Atkinson have for the most part—though not entirely—been focused on normal subjects), we find that a number of investigators (4, 14, 16, 19, 27) in the early 1950's called attention to the role

of failure experiences and threats of punishment on the etiology of psychosis, and to the sensitivity of schizophrenics to fear of failure, particularly in interpersonal relationships. Then in 1951 Norman Garmezy (20), taking these ideas into the laboratory, found the performance of schizophrenics to be impaired more than that of normals under conditions of censure. Arnold Buss and his colleagues, in a series of studies reported in 1954 and 1956, (11, 12, 13) followed up the implications of Garmezy's work and concluded that telling psychiatric patients when they are *wrong* (i.e., have failed) on a concept learning task is a stronger reinforcer than telling them when they are *right* (i.e., have succeeded). Independently Rita Atkinson in 1956, and Nancy Robinson in 1957—studies reported jointly in 1961 (8)—both in the present writer's laboratory, found strong support for the hypotheses that in a serial learning paradigm normal subjects would learn faster when commended for their successes, and schizophrenics would learn better when censured for their failures. These findings can most plausibly be interpreted by assuming that the schizophrenics had a stronger need to avoid failure, which they could do only by responding correctly. Subsequently, a large literature, reviewed by Johanssen (24) and Silverman (28), which, however, is of more substantive than historical interest, and which does not significantly alter the above conclusions, has accumulated. In 1967 McReynolds and Guevara (26), as noted earlier, provided fairly direct evidence to indicate that schizophrenics, as compared with normals, are indeed relatively more oriented toward failure-avoidance, and less oriented toward success-attainment.

CONCLUSION

This brings the story up to date, even though many details have been omitted. It is evident that the pioneering views of James, Adler, and Lewin on the psychological importance of the concepts of success and failure have been strongly supported by subsequent research. In particular, Adler's observation that some individuals "fear defeat more than they desire success" has been shown to be a useful formulation in the understanding of psychopathology.

REFERENCES

1. ADLER, A. Individual Psychology. *J. abnorm. soc. psychol.*, 1927, 22, 116-122.
2. ADLER, A. *Problems of neurosis* (1929). Ed. by Philip Mairet. New York: Harper & Row, 1964.
3. ADLER, A. *Superiority and social interest*. Ed. by H. L. & Rowena R. Ansbacher. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Univer. Press, 1964.
4. ARIETI, S. *Interpretation of schizophrenia*. New York: Robert Brunner, 1955.

5. ATKINSON, J. W. Motivational determinants of risk-taking behavior. *Psychol. Rev.*, 1957, 64, 359-372.
6. ATKINSON, J. W. (Ed.) *Motives in fantasy, action and society*. New York: Van Nostrand, 1958.
7. ATKINSON, J., & LITWIN, G. H. Achievement motive and test anxiety conceived as motive to approach success and motive to avoid failure. *J. abnorm. soc. Psychol.*, 1960, 60, 52-63.
8. ATKINSON, RITA, & ROBINSON, NANCY. Paired-associate learning by schizophrenic and normal subjects under conditions of personal and impersonal reward and punishment. *J. abnorm. soc. Psychol.*, 1961, 62, 322-326.
9. BOISEN, A. T. Personality changes and upheavals arising out of the sense of personal failure. *Amer. J. Psychiat.*, 1926, 5, 531-551.
10. BOISEN, A. T. *The exploration of the inner world* (1936). New York: Harper, 1962.
11. BUSS, A. H., BRADEN, W., ORGEL, A., & BUSS, EDITH H. Acquisition and extinction with different verbal reinforcement combinations. *J. exp. Psychol.*, 1956, 52, 288-295.
12. BUSS, A. H., & BUSS, EDITH H. The effect of verbal reinforcement combinations on conceptual learning. *J. exp. Psychol.*, 1956, 52, 283-288.
13. BUSS, A. H., WEINER, M., & BUSS, EDITH H. Stimulus generalization as a function of verbal reinforcement combinations. *J. exp. Psychol.*, 1954, 48, 433-436.
14. CHOLDEN, L. Observations on psychotherapy of schizophrenia. In Frieda Fromm-Reichmann & J. L. Moreno (Eds.), *Progress in psychotherapy*, New York: Grune & Stratton, 1956.
15. DEMBO, TAMARA. Der Aerger als dynamisches Problem. *Psychol. Forsch.*, 1931, 15, 1-44.
16. DOLLARD, J., & MILLER, N. E. *Personality and psychotherapy*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1950.
17. ESCALONA, SYBILLE K. The effect of success and failure upon the level of aspiration and behavior in manic-depressive psychoses. *Univer. Iowa Stud. Child Welf.*, 1940, 16, 199-302.
18. FESTINGER, L. A theoretical interpretation of shifts in level of aspiration. *Psychol. Rev.*, 1942, 49, 235-250.
19. FROMM-REICHMANN, FRIEDA. *Principles of intensive psychotherapy*. Chicago: Univer. Chicago Press, 1950.
20. GARMEZY, N. Stimulus differentiation by schizophrenic and normal subjects under conditions of reward and punishment. *J. Pers.*, 1951, 20, 253-276.
21. HOSKINS, R. G. Dementia praecox: a simplified formulation. *J. Amer. Med. Ass.*, 1931, 96, 1209-1212.
22. HOSKINS, R. G. *The biology of schizophrenia*. New York: Norton, 1946.
23. JAMES, W. *Principles of psychology* (1890). New York: Dover Publications, 1950.
24. JOHANNSEN, W. J. Motivation in schizophrenic performance: a review. *Psychol. Rep.*, 1964, 15, 839-870.
25. LEWIN, K. Behavior and development as a function of the total situation. In L. Carmichael (Ed.), *Manual of child psychology*. New York: Wiley, 1946. Pp. 791-844.
26. McREYNOLDS, P., & GUEVARA, C. Attitudes of schizophrenics and normals toward success and failure. *J. abnorm. Psychol.*, 1967, 72, 303-310.
27. MOWRER, O. H. *Learning theory and personality dynamics*. New York: Ronald, 1950.
28. SILVERMAN, J. Psychological deficit reduction in schizophrenia through response-contingent noxious reinforcement. *Psychol. Rep.*, 1963, 13, 187-210.