Underachieving to Protect Self-Worth

Theory, Research and Interventions

Ted Thompson

To Rosina and our boys,
Joseph and Luke

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1   Introduction

And the winner takes all

Everyone loves to succeed; no-one likes to fail. I daresay all of us have at least one experience of monumental failure from which we are sufficiently distanced to recount in a joking way, without loss of face. Yet the memory still haunts us. We joke about it but cringe inwardly. The memory remains crisp even after the emotion has faded. For some, the failure is so clearly etched in memory that it becomes enshrined in literature.

> *I wrote my name at the top of the page ... But thereafter I could not think of anything connected with it that was either relevant or true. Incidentally there arrived from nowhere in particular a blot and several smudges. I gazed for two whole hours at this sad spectacle; and then mercifully ushers collected up my piece of foolscap and carried it up to the Headmaster's table.*

Failure becomes all the more aversive as society requires individuals to spend more time in formal education and specialised career training and as competition for scarce places in universities and graduate programs increases. For some, failure is more distressing than for others, so much so that they do all they can to avoid it. Withdrawing from units and courses of study, not turning up for the end-of-semester examination or not appearing for one's rostered match in the tennis quarter-finals are strategies which, while extreme, allow individuals to escape the unpleasant effects of failure. Others take no action to escape in this way but are so entirely crippled by failure that they are completely immobilised, as the above vignette from Winston Churchill's writings amply illustrates.

Why then is failure so aversive? Why do people go to almost any lengths to avoid it? The answers to these questions have been examined in detail in

studies over recent decades which have investigated the effects of failure (e.g. Baumeister & Tice, 1985; Campbell & Fairy, 1985; McFarlin & Blascovich, 1981; Moorland & Sweeney, 1984; O'Brien & Pere, 1985; Richman, Brown & Clark, 1987). These studies tell us that failure, and in particular failure for which individuals assume personal responsibility, can have negative effects in a whole variety of ways.

An immediate consequence is to question one's ability. When these doubts turn to conviction, negative emotions such as shame and anxiety result. In the longer term self-estimates of ability are revised downwards, resulting in diminished expectations of success and a reduced interest in learning and discovery for its own sake. Eventually, the individual comes to internalise a belief that he or she is ineffectual in not just one, but in a whole variety of life situations (e.g., Kernis, Brochner & Frankel, 1989). In a worst-case scenario, withdrawal, resignation and underachievement are enduring legacies.

For many individuals the aversiveness of failure is exacerbated by circumstances which make failure particularly diagnostic of low ability. Imagine Ric, a mature-age student who returns to study to gain a professional degree. He sits through the entire lecture course on Introduction to Law. There are few tests or assignments. The exam approaches. It is the primary basis on which he and a whole lot of other students are to be assessed. At the same starting point as everyone else prior to semester, now, success on this single exam will determine whether or not he is admitted to the Law Faculty.

But let's personalise it. Imagine that you are approached by a young research assistant who asks you if you would be willing to take a brief intelligence test to update local norms. You are offered, presumably as a gesture of courtesy, immediate feedback on your performance having taken the test. On the spur of the moment, you can't think of a convenient excuse to refuse.

Situations like these, whether spur of the moment or known in advance, involve considerable threat to self-estimates of ability and potentially, overall feelings of self-worth. These are situations in which poor performance is immediately revealing of low ability. As such, they are fraught with evaluative threat and achievement anxiety.

I failed, so I am a failure

It is not surprising then that people invent a multitude of strategies to circumvent failure. To a greater extent these are within all of us. The headmaster of a college I taught at for a time hated losing. It didn't seem to matter what it was -- tennis, hockey, table tennis, card games -- if there was

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a winner and a loser and he found himself in the losing situation, he always found an out, treading on the last available table tennis ball, or upsetting the card table when there was evidence that someone else held the winning hand.

Of course opting out is just one strategy. There are others. One can delay effort to the last, procrastinating, or intentionally withholding effort. One can redouble one's efforts, exploiting every available opportunity to look up the latest research evidence for a laboratory report, meticulously checking for accuracy before passing in the final product. Overstriving -- working to the very limits of one's ability, energy and resources -- is a further strategy which minimises the likelihood of failure, especially when it is known that success on the task in question largely depends on putting in time, doing things thoroughly, covering every base.

But in many situations there are no guarantees that one will avoid failure whether by these or other strategies. Often, there are situational constraints that make it all too difficult to avoid failure. Sometimes choice is taken from us. We are propelled into a situation where failure is inevitable. We can't escape. Asked at the last moment to step in for a game of mixed doubles with others who have been described as Wimbledon understudies, you realise that some measure of embarrassment is inescapable, and the chances of feeling pretty bad about yourself -- or at least your tennis prowess -- are excellent!

There are nonetheless strategies by which individuals are able to avoid the negative implications of failure in terms of conclusions of low ability, shame and diminished self-worth. This book is about such strategies, strategies geared to manage the attributional implications of poor performance (how it is explained) and consequent damage to self-esteem. Not that one avoids failure, necessarily. Ironically, these avoidant strategies often propel one towards failure and to an achievement career which considerably understates one's true ability. The one thing they do achieve -- the one advantage to the person concerned -- is to effectively blur the link between poor performance and low ability, at least for the immediate future. The individual is spared from a conclusion of low ability and from the legacy of self-deprecating thoughts and negative emotions referred to above: shame, anxiety and frustration.

The strategies

There are many more strategies designed to circumvent the attributional implications of failure than are discussed in this book. However the focus here is on five particular strategies: self-worth protection, self-

handicapping, procrastination, impostor fears and defensive pessimism. While they overlap conceptually, each is distinctive in its own way.

Self-worth protection describes a strategy whereby certain students intentionally withdraw effort so that they are able to avoid the negative effects of poor performance in terms of damage to self-worth. This strategy is associated with a curious inconsistency in students' academic performances. While on some occasions they perform well, and often extremely well, they perform poorly on others. Self-worth protection is not linked with ability, nor is it specific to one sex rather than the other.

It would be reasonable to assume that the level of objective difficulty of the task in question might be responsible for these varying performance outcomes. However, it turns out not to be so. Rather, the critical factor is the extent to which poor performance is expected to indicate low ability (Craske, 1985, 1988; Thompson, 1993a; Thompson, Davidson & Barber, 1995). The current understanding is that these students choose self-protectively to withhold effort. Predictably, the result is poor performance.

On the face of it, *self-handicapping* describes a similar strategy. This term refers to the practice on the part of certain individuals to voluntarily adopt or claim a handicap when future outcomes are uncertain and when no external account for poor performance is available. Claiming emotional upset prior to an important test, or intentionally sustaining an injury in the critical weeks prior to an important golf tournament are cases in point. If sporting defeat or poor academic performance does occur, it is difficult to be sure that the outcome was due to lack of ability or to the handicap. The link is made obscure.

Self-handicapping differs from self-worth protection in an assumed *augmenting* advantage associated with self-handicapping. If poor performance results, one can blame the handicap rather than low ability. The student is able to discount his or her own ability because of the handicap. If, however, success results irrespective of the claimed handicap -- emotional distress or illness, for example -- then the student's ability is judged to be even greater because he or she has succeeded *despite* the handicap. As a consequence, all the more glory results for the protagonist. The handicap has actually *augmented* ability.

Procrastination -- a term needing little explanation -- refers to a range of behaviours used to cope with conflict and indecision and avoid a conclusion that one is ineffectual and inadequate. Essentially, procrastination, like self-worth protection, is a species of self-handicapping, and has links with self-worth protection. Each involves self-sabotaging behaviours. However in the case of procrastination, links with perfectionism are evident in students' propensity to hold high standards for self-evaluation while being intolerant of their failure to meet these standards.

A strategy of a very different character is described by *impostor fears*. Individuals who harbour these fears suffer from a persistent and intense anxiety that others will discover that they are not truly intelligent and that they will eventually be found out for their unjust receipts. They regard their successes as ill-gotten, a product of luck rather than genuine ability. In academic situations these individuals perform well, albeit at considerable cost. Once an achievement task has been assigned they are plagued by bad dreams, worry, self-doubt, and anxiety, experiences which result in procrastination and immobility in the face of possible failure.

A further strategy is described by *defensive pessimism*. This term refers to a strategy whereby certain individuals entertain unrealistically low expectations and ruminate about worst-outcome scenarios in order to overcome the interfering effects of anxiety upon performance. When circumstances require, this strategy allows them to become task-focused rather than distracted by excessive anxiety. While this allows them to perform well, there is, as for impostor fears, a cost in terms of emotional wear and tear.

While these phenomena are empirically distinct, they are conceptually related, each involving avoidant strategies motivated by the same need to protect a low or vulnerable self-esteem, each in their own way being manifestations of fear of failure, each designed to manage the attributional implications of poor performance in terms of damage to self-worth. In the case of self-worth protection, procrastination and self-handicapping, the self-protective manoeuvres at the heart of these phenomena capitalise on attributional principles of discounting. In the case of self-handicapping, there is also an assumed augmentation advantage. Each involves fear or anxiety of some form in achievement situations.

The price you pay

There are of course costs associated with each, whether these appear in the form of increased anxiety (as in the case of impostor fears), loss of intrinsic motivation and burnout (in the cases of defensive pessimism and impostor fears), and eventually, if not immediately, diminished achievement. While this is a delayed cost for impostor fears and defensive pessimism, it is an immediate outcome for self-worth protective students and students high in trait procrastination. In the case of high self-handicappers, the evidence is somewhat more equivocal, with varying performance effects noted by empirical studies.

There are also costs in other ways: in terms of negative impressions formed by other people (self-handicapping), impaired social relationships (defensive pessimism), and the maintenance of unproductive ways of

coping with situations of evaluative threat and low self-estimates of ability (self-worth protection, impostor fears, procrastination).

In addition, avoidance carries its own reinforcement, diminishing anxiety in the short term, but compounding unproductive habits of avoidance and perpetuating impoverished beliefs about one's ability to attain one's desired goals. A number of researchers who have studied the consequences of failure-avoidant strategies in some detail tell us that these strategies eventually lead to a reduced interest in achievement, emotional exhaustion and eventually, burnout (Higgins & Berglas, 1990; Hirschfield, 1982; Norem & Cantor, 1990; Thompson, 1993a; Topping & Kimmel, 1985).

Currently an estimated 10-15% of students at all educational levels from primary grade through to graduate level underachieve as a consequence of assumed low effort (Thompson, 1993a). This represents a substantial loss to the community and a loss in terms of individual student achievement. A further concern is that the costs of failure-avoidant strategies are exacerbated over time. The more avoidance becomes the preferred way of coping, the more study skills are neglected through disuse. Multiplied over occasions, whole sets of study skills essential to achievement are either lost through disuse or never developed. Absent or deficient study skills thereby act as a barrier to the individual's attempts to do better on a future occasion. To make the picture even more bleak, Topping (1983) and Topping and Kimmel (1985) state that impostor fears increase as one advances through higher levels of education, while Norem and Cantor (1990) suggest that the excessive rumination and worry of defensive pessimists register increasingly negative effects on students' emotional well-being and achievement as they progress through the undergraduate years of study. On all these grounds, these phenomena are eminently worthy of attention.

Rationale and scope

While the literature is replete with strategies for overcoming achievement anxiety, it is conspicuously silent when it comes to techniques to reduce failure-avoidant strategies and help establish more productive approaches to coping with evaluative threat, thereby reducing achievement anxiety. On this basis, this book strives to present an integrated account of how failure-avoidance may be reduced.

Discussion of ways to reduce achievement anxiety is timely given reports by many that fear of failure is rife in our educational institutions from primary grade to graduate level. In the assessment of some, achievement anxiety is on the ascendancy, with students keenly aware of the realities of competition and the costs of failing to achieve their desired goals (Fyans & Maehr, 1979; Kass & Fish, 1991). Excessive anxiety in achievement and test-

taking situations not only interferes with students' test performance and academic functioning, but produces "motivational, coping, and school task strategies that interfere with learning and performance with the result that performance suffers....[leading] to further increases over time in test anxiety" (Phillips, Pitcher, Worsham & Miller, 1980, p. 328).

Of necessity, a book about failure-avoidance is about many other things. As the phenomena discussed in this book overlap conceptually and empirically with fear of failure, it is a book about achievement anxiety and how it is manifest in different groups of students. It is about the consequences of low self-esteem in terms of low goal setting and reduced persistence. The nature of achievement anxiety is examined, and costs in terms of student achievement and well being. Implicitly, this book is also about the manner in which students attribute the cause of their success and failure outcomes, the beliefs students hold about the nature of ability, about failure and what it signifies in terms of ability, and the meaning of success when it follows high effort.

Most important, it is a book about implications for organising the context of classroom learning: how teachers may interact with students on a one-to-one basis in ways which foster positive achievement gains, strategies for enhancing self-esteem and productive attributions for achievement outcomes. This book also deals with counselling implications and strategies for enhancing student achievement. Finally, practicalities are discussed including steps which may be taken to limit evaluative threat in classrooms, thereby limiting failure-avoidance and enhancing student achievement.

The structure of the book

The book divides into three parts. In Chapter 2, the nature and logic of self-worth protection is described. This chapter begins with an overview of the self-worth theory of achievement motivation. Symptoms and strategies of self-worth protection are described as well as ways in which these strategies function to protect self-worth. This discussion indicates that while low effort allows a sense of self-worth to be protected in the short term, long-term results include perpetuation of avoidance behaviours in situations of evaluative threat, substantial underachievement and maintenance of low self-estimates of ability.

Similar consequences are identified for other failure-avoidant strategies described in Chapter 3. These consequences highlight the need to identify strategies to forestall the achievement-limiting behaviours of these students, establishing the primary rationale for this book.

Alternative explanations of deteriorated performance following failure -- the learned helpless account and the egotism hypothesis (essentially one and the same account as that provided by self-worth theory) -- are

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described in Chapter 4. Gender differences in attributions and performance differences following failure are identified. This discussion includes an examination of gender differences in behavioural versus claimed handicaps.

The last chapter in Part 1 (Chapter 5), describes self-handicapping, impostor fears, procrastination, and defensive pessimism. Similarities and points of difference are identified. This discussion guides recommendations for counselling intervention outlined in Chapters 12 and 13.

Part 2 comprises chapters which examine personality and situational variables associated with failure-avoidant strategies (Chapters 6 and 7, respectively). In Chapter 7, situations which facilitate perseverance and risk-taking are described, as well as those which give rise to avoidance behaviours and underachievement. Chapter 8 provides an account of the development of self-worth protection and its maintenance, based on a conceptualisation of self-worth protection as a form of self-handicapping behaviour. This account is tentatively extended to the development of procrastination and impostor fears.

Conclusions reached from discussions in these chapters form the bases of recommendations in Chapter 9 (beginning Part 3) whereby teachers can alter the manner in which students construe the context of learning in order to reduce perceptions of evaluative threat. This discussion continues in Chapter 10, outlining strategies which can be implemented by teachers to enhance the achievement of failure-avoidant students.

Drawing on insights offered in Chapter 8, where the development of self-worth protection is traced to a number of forms of unproductive evaluative feedback from teachers, Chapter 11 provides a basis for recommendations by which teachers can develop effective skills in evaluative feedback which preserve students' intrinsic motivation and prevent failure-avoidance. One of these is feedback which excludes students from deciphering the ingredients which have brought about their success and diagnosing the cause(s) of their failure. A second is feedback from teachers which gives rise to evaluative threat, creating performance pressure. Each of these forms of evaluative feedback is examined in terms of constituent attributional messages.

Chapters 12 and 13 provide an account of the therapeutic approach in counselling self-worth protective students, high trait procrastinators and students with impostor fears. In Chapter 12, the accent is on cognitive-behavioural approaches. The approach advised in that chapter involves modifying unproductive beliefs about *self as agency*, about *ability*, and about the *cause of achievement outcomes*. The largely common approach recommended here for self-worth protective students, impostors, self-handicappers and high trait procrastinators is sustained on the basis of discussion of personality variables shared by these phenomena offered in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

In Chapter 13, education and insight are endorsed as integral to the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioural approaches subsuming discussion in Chapter 12. The means by which avoidance behaviours can be modified and the need to address family messages about achievement are discussed. Strategies which are likely to be ineffective as stand-alone techniques for modifying self-worth protection are also identified. These include training in effective study skills and effective time planning.

Down but not out

It will become apparent as this book progresses that fear of failure and the strategies devised to avoid it are pervasive and pernicious. It will similarly become apparent that beliefs about the importance of ability as a mainstay of self-worth, and the circumstances under which ability is indicated or otherwise have an important status in promoting failure-avoidant behaviours. Based on an understanding of the dynamics of failure-avoidance and associated personality and situational variables, it is hoped that the intervention strategies recommended in this book will offer a way of changing student behaviours which too often prevent the realisation of individual potential, at a cost not only to the student, but to society in general.

2 Nature of self-worth protection

"You're hardworking, loyal and dedicated. This can mean only one thing: You have no idea how the system works."   The Ink Group

An overview

The self-worth theory of achievement motivation (Covington, 1984a, 1984b; Covington & Beery, 1976) is based on the assumption that self-worth depends largely on one's ability to achieve competitively. This emphasis is linked to a tendency in society to equate an ability to achieve competitively with human value (Gardner, 1961). Covington, Spratt and Omelich (1980) therefore observe that perceptions of inability are to be avoided due to society's tendency to equate personal worth with the ability to achieve competitively.

The assumption is that students motivated to protect self-worth place particular emphasis on achievement as a criterion of self-worth: that for these students there is, as Beery (1975) puts it, "a postulated equivalency between ability and personal worth" (p. 200). Where ability proven through achievement-related endeavour is not weighed against other sources of self-relevant feedback which have comparable status in preserving a sense of self-worth, failure which results in a conclusion of low ability is all the more likely to give rise to shame and diminished self-evaluations.

A strong sense of personal worth and ability can come from any activity or pursuit -- not just achievement-related endeavour -- which is believed, by that particular person, to have value and worth. But if that student's sense of self-worth is founded solely on academic achievement, any situation of failure which subsequently results in a conclusion of low ability is likely to give rise to shame and diminished self-evaluations.

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Students motivated to protect self-worth in achievement situations do so as a consequence of fear of failure (Beery, 1975; Birney, Burdick & Teevan, 1969; Covington & Beery, 1976). Whatever the basis of that fear of failure, whether to avoid the consequences of failure (such as failing to graduate or secure a university place in a chosen field) or to avoid censure from others, there is evidence that individuals who are either low in self-esteem or uncertain about their evaluations in the eyes of others are most inclined to strategically withdraw effort (Baumgardner & Levy, 1988). On the other hand, the performance of students who are particularly afraid of failing is improved when a task is described as very difficult (Feather, 1961, 1963; Karabenick & Youssef, 1968). With a ready-made attribution to task difficulty rather than to the person, threat to self-esteem is removed.

Competition and self-worth   While to achieve competitively is to be worthy, there are practical and social constraints on which students and how many can rise to the top. For some students success is much easier than for others, whether as a consequence of aptitude, or advantages which arise from family of origin, ethnicity, race, or some other factor. And there are practical constraints on how many students can achieve the highest grades. In our schools and universities, normative grading practices mean that only a few are able to achieve the highest honours. As a consequence, high grades are valued for their scarcity and testify to high ability.

Due to society's emphasis on ability as a mainstay of self-worth, diminished feelings of self-worth and shame are brought about following failure which suggests low ability. This is particularly the case when considerable effort has been expended and there are no circumstances one can point to (headache, emotional upset, noisy study environment, etc.) which account for poor performance. Where it is possible to point to some mitigating circumstance which might explain poor performance, the link between poor performance and low ability is blurred. Where there is *no* such ready-made alibi, the possibility of poor performance becomes all the more threatening. This conclusion of low ability therefore becomes all the more likely as failures accumulate.

A double-edged sword   As a consequence, effort becomes the "double-edged sword" of school achievement (Covington & Omelich, 1979b). As effort (study) increases, so does the likelihood that poor achievement will reveal low ability. In turn, arriving at a conclusion that one has low ability triggers shame and diminished expectancies of future success, factors which have been found to have a negative impact on subsequent achievement in its own right (Covington & Omelich, 1979a, 1981).

Covington and Omelich (1981) point out that this deterioration in feelings about ability and about future success expectations is accelerated

over successive failures by the decreasing plausibility of students' attempts to attribute responsibility to factors outside him or herself, or to factors beyond their control. When the stock of externally attributable reasons -- such as teacher capriciousness, bad luck or task difficulty -- are discredited, the individual's sources of self-protection wither and there is no recourse but to attribute failure to low ability. The tendency to do so increases with increased effort. As a consequence, a tension arises between a motive to achieve success by trying hard and a motive to avoid the ignominy of defeat by withdrawing effort.

The protective benefits of low effort Certain students respond to this tension by taking steps to avoid the negative implications of failure in terms of damage to self-worth. Withdrawing effort gives immediate protection, allowing individuals to attribute poor performance, if and when it occurs, to low effort rather than low ability.

However, withdrawing effort (along with a range of other avoidant strategies discussed later in this chapter) only occurs in situations which involve threat to self-worth. The understanding from studies by the author (Thompson, 1993a; Thompson, et al., 1995) is that self-worth protective students perform differently in situations in which poor performance is likely to be attributed to low ability compared with those situations in which poor performance can be attributed to a factor which is unrelated to ability. When poor performance is likely to reflect low ability, a situation of *high* evaluative threat is created. In such situations, these students perform poorly. On the other hand, where a mitigating excuse allows poor performance to be attributed to a factor unrelated to ability, a situation of *low* evaluative threat is created. In such situations, these same students perform well. Students who show these different performances in situations of high-versus-low evaluative threat are known as *self-worth protective* (Thompson et al., 1995) or *failure-avoiding students* (Covington & Omelich, 1991).

These are the essentials of the self-worth theory of achievement motivation. Failure-avoidance is however just one of a number of achievement orientations which describe the achievement behaviour of students. Covington and Omelich's (1991) quadripolar model of achievement motivation, outlined below, describes a number of additional orientations adopted by students in achievement situations.

A richer tapestry

Based on Atkinson's (1957, 1964) theory of achievement motivation, Covington and Omelich's (1991) typology identifies four behaviourally distinct motive groups based on students' relative standing on two