

Level of Study and Self-Esteem as Predictors of Fear of Academic Success

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Abstract

This study investigated levels of study and self-esteem as predictors of fear of academic success among undergraduate students. The study used two hundred and fifty six (256) undergraduate students. The ages of the participants ranged from 16 to 27 years with the mean age of 21.67 and standard deviation of 2.36 years. 25-item Index of Self Esteem (ISE) and 22-item Fear of Success Scale (FOSS) were used to collect information from the participants. A correlational design was adopted. The results of regression analysis revealed that level of study was positively related to fear of academic success ($r = .15, p < .01$), and self-esteem was negatively related to fear of academic success ($r = -.14, p < .03$). The outcome of the study is innovative in that, it suggests a framework for understanding the connection among the variables of self-esteem, level of study and fear of academic success. This is a pilot study that prepares avenues for a broader study that will proffer scientific and practical implications for managing the first year students' adjustment by academic professionals.

Keywords: level of study, self-esteem, fear of academic success

INTRODUCTION

Undergraduate students' approach to academic performance has long attracted researchers' interests, while fear of academic success has continued to affect students' efforts negatively, making psychologists to focus on identifying factors implicated in such behaviour. Although research efforts with respect to understanding academic approaches in general and variables that contribute to academic success has been growing, fear of academic success among undergraduate students has been grossly ignored. For example, psychologists and other scholars have expended much research energy on

identifying the factors associated with adolescents' school's performance and overall adjustment (e.g., Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2005; Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006) and impact of hope, self-esteem, and attributional style on adolescents' school grades (Ciarrochi, Heaven, & Davies, 2007). Further, Ghenghesh (2015) examines the relationship between English language proficiency and the overall academic performance. Obviously, fear of academic success plays negative role in academic achievement, yet most studies focus on factors relating to academic performance or achievement while ignoring the fear of academic success. In order to address this research gap, this study aims to examine variables predictive of fear of academic success. Specifically, the study examines how level of study and academic success relate to fear of academic success among Nigerian undergraduates. The central contribution of this paper is in providing

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evidence that level of study was a positive predictor of fear of academic success while self-esteem negatively predicted fear of academic success among undergraduate students. To the knowledge of the authors, this paper is the first to examine the relationship between level of study and fear of academic success in the Nigerian context. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The next section discusses success and fear of academic success. Subsequently, we discuss level of study and fear of academic success and present relevant hypothesis that are tested in this study. Thereafter, we discuss self-esteem and fear of academic success, and also presents relevant hypotheses that are tested in this study. Subsequently, the research method adopted in this study is presented, followed by the results of data analysis. The final section summarises the main findings and discusses the implications, contribution, limitations and some future lines of research.

Success and fear of academic success

Success is a multi-faceted concept that may be perceived in several ways, for example, academic success, financial success, emotional success or life success in respect to parenting skills, interpersonal skills and inter-relational skills. Fear of success captures the attention of this study for impacting negatively on the academic achievement of undergraduate students. Fear of success is a mental pattern by which the individual thinks of different changes that may occur afterwards and that he/she may have to cope with (Rao, 2004). Fear of success has to do with the negative consequences of a person standing out in some ways or being assertive in relation to another more powerful group which may punish the individual for being assertive (Fleming, 1975). Related concept to fear of success, that is, unwillingness in some individuals in reaching their potential abilities, is referred to as fear of one's own greatness or the running away from one's own best talent (Belss, 1998). Here, we

consider fear in relation to academic of undergraduate students. We refer to fear of academic success as anxiety which disposes one to evaluate oneself negatively and refrain from what it takes to improve in academic performance outcomes.

Undoubtedly, how to become and remain successful in life can be challenging to even inspirational and motivational persons in the world today. Even as most parents teach their children how to become successful before such children are old enough to be in school to learn (Canavan-Gumpert, Garner, & Gumpert, 1978), the challenge still persists. Fear of success arises when people claim to want success, but distance themselves from it by slacking and refraining from actions that lead to success because they feel undeserving (Bagget, 2000); and an individual's past experience may make him/her shy away from success (such as past defeats which are rooted deep inside the individual). There are times an individual has the ability to succeed, but the changes that ensue make him/her anxious (August, 2000). Success-fearing person is in conflict with success and tends both to approach and avoid it (Canavan-Gumpert, et al., 1978). Such a person adopts an intermediate distance from success rather than putting it as far away from himself or herself as possible. If the youths are to be successful in an ever-increasing competitive school environment, it is essential that their academic achievements reflect their innate ability with psychological resources such as self esteem to meet life's challenges, but this is not always the case (Elias, 2006), leading to the waste and vast erosion of human potential (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000).

Avoiding success affects an individual's quality of performance in competitive and achievement-oriented situations (Horner, 1968). If an individual thinks that he is not able to compete with others, he senses defeat and fears his own incompetence in competition (Brooks, 2005). More often than not, fear of success

is accompanied by a lack of confidence and self-respect (Motaghi, Mosapor, & Arjomand, 2004), and individuals with these characteristics often turn out to be what others expect them to be. These individuals modify their behaviour based on the needs and desires of others in order to obtain their satisfaction. Therefore, anxiousness is an indispensable part of their life and the feeling of helplessness makes them reliant on others (Motaghi, et al., 2004), a situation which may find reason in level of study and self-esteem differences.

Level of study and fear of academic success

Here, we refer to the level of study as the stage in the students' programme of study in the university. In Nigerian university system, programme spans over four (100-400 level) or five (100-500 level) years depending on the course of study. Programmes in social sciences and humanities last for four years while professional courses (engineering, law, medicine, etc.) take more than four years. We drew our sample from the social sciences. Santucci, Terzian and Kayson (1989) investigated fear of success and its association to gender, year in school, and college programme in a middle-sized eastern college. A group of 69 male students and 64 female students were requested to provide information pertaining to their age, year in school, and whether they were in the college's School of Arts and Science or in the School of Business. Each student then completed the evaluation using Zuckerman and Allison (1976) Fear of Success Scale (FOSS). Only the results from the freshmen and the seniors were analysed.

The results of the study indicated that female students exhibited more fear of academic success than male students and college freshmen scored higher than college seniors. The factor of what school the students were enrolled in had no influence on fear of academic success. Therefore, the

study demonstrates that fear of academic success is more prevalent in female students. It appears from the study that college freshmen exhibit more fear of success than college seniors. This may indicate that freshmen are having a much more difficult time adjusting to the rigours of university environment which is new to them. Santucci, Terzian and Kayson (1989) did not consider those who have spent some years in school. Final year students were included in this present study in order to address this issue, which leads us to propose:

Hypothesis 1: Level of study is positively predictive of fear of academic success.

Self-esteem and fear of academic success

Self-esteem is a person's overall self-evaluation or sense of self-worth (Myers, 2005). Research findings on the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement differed in literature (Steele, 1997; Osborne, 1997). When people hold entity theories rather than incremental theories about their abilities, self-esteem is vulnerable (i.e., when they view those abilities as fixed, rather than malleable; Dweck, 2000). For people with entity theories, failure threatens self-esteem because it indicates that they lack the ability in question and will never have it. For people with incremental theories, in contrast, failure is less devastating, because although they might currently lack the ability in question, that lack can be remedied through increased effort (Hong, Chiu, & Dweck, 1999). Ross and Broh (2000) proposed that academic achievement increased with self-esteem. But, other studies have reported moderate correlations between self-esteem and academic achievement (Bear, Minke, Griffin, & Deemer, 1998; Osborne, Walker, & Rausch, 2002; Renick & Harter, 1989). Midgett, Ryan, Adams, and Corville-Smith (2002) found a modest but significant positive

correlation between self-esteem and achievement.

Positive correlations observed between self-esteem and achievement in the past led researchers/educators to implement programmes to enhance self-esteem in order to increase achievement (Midgett, et al., 2002). The wisdom of interpreting this association in a causal manner seems questionable. The study widened the scope of the discussion by examining the relationship between self-esteem and achievement with student characteristics and parental variables in a sample of 164 fourth-grade and 152 seventh grade children and their parents (Midgett, et al., 2002). The results of the study showed that the children's academic effectiveness mediated the relationships between family processes, and child achievement. When the researchers examined child and family variables in combination, the significant association between self-esteem and achievement disappeared (Midgett, et al., 2002). While research has shown that low self-esteem is associated with low achievement (Harter, Whitesell, & Junkin, 1998; Kloomok & Cosden, 1994), some intervention researches have indicated that high self-esteem alone does not improve academic achievement (Gaskin-Butler & Tucker, 1995; Holly, 1997). The idea that people who regard themselves favourably ought to be able to learn and work more effectively seems not so much a plausible hypothesis as a matter of plain common sense (Kohn, 1994).

The link between self-esteem and students' success is that students who are not confident in their academic abilities do poorly in academic work, because they have convinced themselves that they cannot achieve much academically (Kohn, 1994; Steele, 1997). Someone with high self-esteem would presumably expect to do well (Kohn, 1994). People with a positive outlook on life tend to think positively and to react in a healthy way (Kohn, 1994). They

feel delighted to please others and to please self (Kohn, 1994). Brantley-Thomas (1988) found a positive correlation between self-esteem and achievement. The answer depends on the researchers who answered the question (Kohn, 1994). Forsyth, Lawrence, Burnette, and Baumeister (2007) studied 85 students from a psychology class and hypothesized that the students who received self-esteem bolstering emails and exhortations would improve their failing grades. These students had received a C, a D, or an F on a psychology exam. The study tracked two groups: those who received a C, and those who received a D or an F. The study concluded that D and F students did worse after receiving self-esteem bolstering emails and positive comments, and students who received a C did not change their grades. This finding suggested that self-esteem boosting activities did not improve the academic performance of these students. Even as the findings of studies that relate academic success with self-esteem produced mixed results, there is no study to the awareness of the researchers, which linked self esteem with fear of academic success. To fill this gap, this study considered how self-esteem would predict fear of academic success with a sample of undergraduate students. Consequently, the second purpose of this study is to investigate how self-esteem will predict fear of academic success among undergraduate students. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 2: Self-esteem is negatively predictive of fear of academic success.

RESEARCH METHOD

Participants

The participants consisted of two hundred and fifty six (256) undergraduate students. The participants were one hundred and twenty four (124) men and one hundred and thirty two (132) women. Their ages ranged from 16 to 27 years, with a mean age

of 21.67 years and a standard deviation of 2.36 years. One hundred and twenty-eight (128) final year students and 128 first year students were used in the study.

Instruments

Two instruments were used in the study. The first instrument used for data collection was a 25-item Index for Self Esteem (ISE) scale developed by Hudson (1982). The item responses were scored from 1 (rarely or none of the time) to 5 (most or all the time). Hudson (1982) correlated ISE with Self Esteem Scale by Rosenberg (1979) and obtained a concurrent validity coefficient of .83. Onighaiye (1996) validated SCL-90 developed by Derogatis, Lipman, and Covi in 1973 for use in Nigeria and obtained a concurrent validity coefficient of .46 with scale C (interpersonal sensitivity) and .38 with scale D (depression). Hudson (1982) reported a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of .93 and a two-hour test retest coefficient of .92 of the SCL-90. However, we found the instrument reliable for use in this study by administering it to eighty two (82) students of Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam campus, (formerly Anambra State University) who are different from the participants used in this study. The results yielded a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of .74.

The second instrument was a 22-item adopted and modified Fear of Success Scale (FOSS) developed by Zuckerman and Allison in 1976. The original FOSS was a 27-item instrument, with a 7-point rating format. Items 6 – (It is more important to play the game than to win it); 11 – (I think success has been emphasized too much in our culture); 16 – (A successful person is often considered by others to be both aloof and snobbish); 20 – (Once you are on top, everyone is your buddy and no one is your friend); and 22 – (Even when I do well on a task, I sometimes feel like a phoney or a fraud) were not scored by the participants.

To this effect, these items were discarded because they proved to be ambiguous to Nigerian sample used in this study. We also modified the scoring format which was originally 7-point option format to 5-point option format so as to be in uniform with the first instrument which was scored on 5-point rating option. Subjects indicated the degree to which they agree with statements describing the benefits of success, the costs of success, and attitudes toward success. However, Zuckerman and Allison (1976) reported an internal reliability coefficient of .69 for men and .73 for women while the data generated from our pilot study conducted using eighty two (82) students who are different from the participants, we used in the main study yielded a Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient of .68.

Procedure

Before administering the instruments (questionnaires), the researchers established good rapport relationship with the participants. They were told that the questionnaires were not for examination, but purely for research purposes. The participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymous treatment of their responses. The instrument for data collection was administered directly to the participants by the researchers with the assistance of the course representatives in each level selected. We gathered the students and checked them into the lecture rooms of their university, using simple random sampling techniques that ensured equal participation from the two groups of subjects (final year students and first year students). The students who picked the “yes” option in the pool of “yes and no” options that was folded in a nylon bag presented were administered questionnaires individually after establishing rapport with them. They were made to understand the purpose and importance of the study and the appropriate ways in which to complete the questionnaire. Out of the two hundred and eighty (280) questionnaires administered, only two hundred and seventy one (271)

questionnaires were completed and returned, representing 97% return rate. However, fifteen (15) questionnaires were later discarded for lack of complete information resulting from improper filling. And, finally, two hundred and fifty six (256) questionnaires were used for data analysis.

Design / Statistics

The current study adopted correlational design in which fear of academic success was treated as the dependent variable while level of study and

self-esteem were the independent variables. Thereafter, regression analysis was employed as the statistical tool for data analysis.

RESULTS

To test the hypotheses, intercorrelational analysis was applied. The result revealed that level of study was positively related to fear of academic success ($r = .15, p < .01$), and self-esteem was negatively related with fear of academic success ($r = -.14, p < .03$).

Table 1:
Means, standard deviation and intercorrelations of level of study, self-esteem and fear of academic success

	N	M	SD	1	2	3
Fear of success	256	80.98	7.36	-		
1. Level of study	256	1.50	.50	.15	-	
2. Self-esteem	256	85.36	9.70	-.14	.03	-

Table 2:
Summary of regression analysis of level of study and self-esteem predicting fear of academic success

	B	SEB	β	t	p
Level of study	2.26	.90	.15	2.50	.01
Self-esteem	-.11	.05	-.14	-2.39	.02

Note. $R^2 = .04$ (N = 256, $p < .05$)

The multiple regression analysis result revealed that level of study was a significant positive predictor of fear of academic success ($\beta = .15, p < .01$) and self-esteem was a significant negative predictor of fear of academic success ($\beta = -.14, p < .03$). The equation model was significant, $F(2, 253) = 5.78, p = .004, R = .21$, with 4.4% variation accounted for by the predictor variables. The results further showed that level of study ($t = 2.50, p = .01$) predicted fear of academic success slightly higher than self-esteem ($t = -2.39, p = .02$).

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study show that level of study is a positive predictor of fear of academic success while self-esteem negatively predicted fear of academic success among students used in this study. The finding of the study is in support of the first hypothesis which stated that level of study will predict fear of academic success. The implication is that fear of academic success is related to year or level of study

which students are in during their undergraduate programme. The outcome of the study provides substantial evidence to show that in the final year, students must have adjusted to aspects of academic activities and pressure that they no longer entertain fear of academic success. Therefore, this indicates that fear of success is related with level of study. Earlier, Santucci, Terzian and Kayson (1989) observed that fear of success has association with year of study in school. This suggests that freshmen have not actually adjusted to the conditions of the new university environment. This informs the idea that some of them after being admitted into the university still want to change from one programme to another one which they never thought of before admission. Some may discover courses they consider more suitable to their cognitive ability and wants to shift ground by applying for change to those ones. They do this partly for fear of academic success in their new found school environment.

Moreover, it appears that freshmen exhibit more fear of academic success than their senior counterparts. This may imply that freshmen find it more difficult adjusting to the rigours of school demands compared to their senior counterparts. The stress associated with transition from post primary institutions with tertiary institutions may have created transient fear of academic success in the students which may disappear in later years in their course of study. For such later years, students may not have fear of academic success due to the fact that they have adjusted, think more of graduating shortly in the course they have chosen and so feel less anxious.

Further, this study found that self-esteem is a negative predictor of fear of academic success. The study supported the second hypothesis which stated that self-esteem will negatively predict fear of academic success among the undergraduate students used in this study. The indication

being that fear of academic success decreases as self-esteem increases. To Harter, Whitesell, and Junkin (1998) and Kloomok, and Cosden (1994), even as self-esteem is associated with academic achievement, some of the intervention researches have indicated that high self-esteem alone does not improve academic achievement (Gaskin-Butler & Tucker, 1995; Holly, 1997). The idea that people who regard themselves favourably ought to be able to learn and work more effectively seems not so much a plausible hypothesis as a matter of plain common sense (Kohn, 1994). There is likely to be a moderating factor between self-esteem and fear of academic success.

IMPLICATION

The results of this study have scientific and practical implications for students, teachers, researchers and management of all levels of academic institutions. The study has shown that a significant difference exists between freshmen and graduating students in relation to fear of academic success. The outcome has produced a framework for understanding the connection among level of study, self-esteem and fear of academic success. The link between theory and practice as demonstrated in this study is research imperative. Practically, the findings of the study suggest a framework for understanding the connection among the variables of self-esteem, level of study and fear of academic success. This is a pilot study that prepares avenues for a broader study that will proffer scientific and practical implications for managing the first year students' adjustment by academic professionals.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

This study is limited in that it was conducted using just one university and did not cover many geographical scopes. This may affect generalization to the wider

population of undergraduate students. It is therefore suggested that future studies in this area should cover more areas and different levels of educational institutions for better generalizations. In addition, future studies should seek to establish the factors such as psychological safety and interpersonal relationship that may moderate the relationship between self-esteem and fear of academic success.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated levels of study and self-esteem as predictors of fear of academic success among undergraduate students and found that level of study was positively related and predicted fear of academic success, whereas self-esteem was negatively related to fear of academic success. Overall, this study provides empirical evidence of the link between level of study, self-esteem and fear of academic success in the Nigerian context. The outcome of the study indicates that attention should be paid to adjustment of freshmen through bolstering of their self-esteem. The study paves ways for understanding how to manage and help students adjust after admission.

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