AN EMPIRICAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY
OF FAILING TO LEARN*

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Hilgard (1956, p. 276) states that: "The contrast between a 'psychological' approach to psychological problems and a 'non-psychological' approach is nowhere clearer than in the difference in treatment of reward and success." Specifically, when Hilgard speaks of a 'non-psychological' approach to psychological problems he is referring to those learning theorists who treat reward as an isolated event external to the subjective experience of the learning subject. For instance, Hilgard regards Guthrie (1946) as a representative of a non-psychological approach because Guthrie understands reward as that which terminates a situation (Hilgard, 1956). When Hilgard speaks of a truly psychological approach to psychological problems he is referring to those learning theorists who acknowledge the intrinsic relationship between the meaning of a learning situation for a human subject and the subject's experience of success or failure. Hilgard acknowledges Kurt Lewin and his followers as attempting to come to terms with "psychologically real problems" (Hilgard, 1956, p. 277) and these field theorists (Hoppe, 1930; Dembo, 1931; Fajans, 1933; Frank, 1935; Lewin & Dembo et al., 1944), through their pioneering studies of level of aspiration, have attempted to lay the foundation for a

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comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of failure in learning/ performance situations. Since it is the goal of psychology conceived of as a human science to concern itself with psychologically real problems (Giorgi, 1970), this present empirical investigation of failing to learn is situated within a long tradition beginning with the field theorists. The four foundational findings of this tradition which concern us here were established by Hoppe (1930) and Lewin (1935, 1944).

Hoppe (1930) and Lewin et al. (1944) concluded that a distinction must be drawn between goal attainment discrepancy and the subjective feeling of failure. Goal attainment discrepancy refers to a specific moment in time in which subjects aspire towards a goal and then fulfill or fall short of that goal. The subjective feeling of failure is another moment further along the temporal continuum in which subjects react to the discrepancy between their goal aspiration and the actuality of their performance. Hence, both Lewin and Hoppe implicitly agree that the subjective feeling of failure can be isolated from that moment in time in which subjects behaviorally fail to complete a task. There has been some debate within the field concerning the necessity of calling failure a purely subjective response (i.e. a nonobservable response) and many researchers have attempted to define behavioral correlates (i.e. observable correlates) of the experience of failure (Frank, 1941).

Secondly, Hoppe (1930) concluded that the experience of failure can only occur when subjects have a degree of ego involvement in the learning task. In fact, a learning situation is one in which subjects, through their ego-involvements, aspire to learn. Subsequent research has shown that subject’s ego involvement in learning situations is partly determined by past experiences of success and failure (Sears, 1941), personality factors (Frank, 1938), and degree of effort expended on the task (Yacorzynski, 1942).

The notion of ego-involvement and its relation to failure in a learning situation is complemented by Hoppe’s third finding concerning “restricted regions of difficulty” (Lewin et al. 1941). Hoppe found that subjects would not invest themselves in a task if that task appeared too easy or too difficult for them. Hoppe concluded that the experience of failure can only occur when ego-involvement is situated within a restricted region of difficulty. For example, if a third grade child were asked to solve an equation in quantum physics, that child would not experience failure upon being unable to solve the equation. The task falls outside the child’s restricted region of difficulty such that it is impossible for the child to become invested in the task thereby precluding the possibility of experiencing failure.