

Fear of Negative Evaluation: Differences amongst librarians

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Introduction

The “fear of negative evaluation” (FNE), first coined in 1969,¹ is a social anxiety construct that affects many workers. The creators of the scale to measure FNE defined the construct as “apprehension about others’ evaluations, distress over their negative evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively.”² This does not necessarily mean that the subject believes they are performing badly, just that they are afraid of having performance evaluated negatively by others.

The original FNE scale has proven to be fundamental to psychologists’ understanding of social anxiety disorder. Turk, Heimberg, and Magee described it as the “core construct” of social phobia.³ The instrument contains 30 true-false questions, 13 of which are scored in reverse. A shortened version of the scale (the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation, or BFNE) was developed by Leary⁴ to alleviate the cumbersome length of the original; it contains 12 questions answered on a Likert scale. Both the original and brief versions of the scale are used widely.⁵

Socially phobic persons typically demonstrate anxiety about and avoidance of the feared situation. When applied to the workplace, this avoidance can cause stress and stunt career growth.⁶ Those that perceive FNE in themselves experience fear of disapproval, and with this comes an aversion to social situations, or misery and awkwardness in those situations. As librarians are often working in groups or with the public, this is a potential problem resulting in diminished functionality of staff.

Fear of negative evaluation, amongst other social anxiety constructs, is a concept overlooked in the library literature. Therefore, this exploratory study seeks to discover:

- To what extent do librarians perceive FNE in themselves?
- How do librarians with self-perceived FNE feel it has affected their careers?
- In what ways can librarians overcome FNE?
- What actions can be taken to reduce the impact of FNE in the workplace?

Literature Review

To our knowledge, there has been no application of FNE to librarians or to any library setting; likewise, the effect of employee psychology on library management or success has gone largely unexamined. Performance evaluations are nearly ubiquitous in academic libraries, but the literature demonstrates a dearth of research on the topic. In 1998, Edwards and Williams⁷ lamented the lack of strong research in this area; they noted the existing literature, dominated by

subjective narrative, showed both acceptance of the usefulness of performance evaluation, and skepticism of its efficacy in enabling organizations to reach strategic goals. Little has changed in the intervening years.

The library literature on employee evaluation has focused on several themes, such as bias and fairness,⁸ peer review,⁹ upward review,¹⁰ general case studies,¹¹ and essays of practical tips.¹² Study of the attitudes and psychology of librarians has touched on themes of inadequacy,¹³ work stress,¹⁴ effects of the changing environment,¹⁵ and generational differences.¹⁶

Among the psychological literature, the FNE scale itself has been used as a test to determine the relationships between FNE and other related conditions, such as intolerance of uncertainty (perceiving potential outcomes as a certainty and a threat).¹⁷ Researchers have explored correlations to behaviors and perceptions such as willingness to report threats of violence on campus;¹⁸ fear of injury and illness;¹⁹ and aggression toward domestic partners.²⁰ Many physiological effects have been studied as well, such as reactions to facial expression.²¹ FNE has been studied for its effect in non-work environments, such as problematic internet use²² and athletic performance.²³

Research of FNE's influence on work life is surprisingly minimal. Zellars²⁴ explores the fact that social anxiety and phobias (of which FNE is a component) has been overlooked by organizational science. FNE and other social aspects of work life are often categorized in the business psychology literature as "individual differences"—that is, how people differ from other people in their approaches to and reactions to similar situations. Performance goal orientation--seeking positive evaluations and avoiding negative evaluation from others--is closely related to FNE. An influential article by Dweck²⁵ juxtaposed performance goal orientation with learning goal orientation (seeking to master a challenge through effort). However, although studies of goal orientation are well-represented in the business and management literature, FNE itself has been largely ignored.²⁶

Methodology

Researchers gathered data through a survey containing quantitative and qualitative questions. The self-report survey, facilitated by Qualtrics, was dispersed through various library-related electronic listservs during May of 2014. Researchers chose a web-based survey because of the speed of data collection, while accepting that surveys can be rigid, and hazard low response rates, selection effects, and nonresponse bias.

The "Fear of Negative Evaluation" instrument created by David Watson and Ronald Friend²⁷ was used, along with three additional open-ended questions to solicit further information, advice, and suggestions for improving workplaces for those with FNE. Participants answered "True" or "False" for thirty items (e.g. "I am afraid that people will find fault with me"). A scoring key indicated whether or not to assign value for true or false answers. The final score, ranging from 0 to 30, is the sum of all values.

The data gathered by the open-ended questions at the end of the survey allowed for further consideration of FNE in librarians today. For these, researchers used inductive content analysis to group topics related to FNE for each question. Each researcher separately examined every response, copied each piece of advice or recommendation into a spreadsheet, and tallied instances of words and phrases in self-selected categories. The researchers convened after coding independently, conducting an inter-coder check to come up with final results.

Participants

From 528 original responses to the survey, researchers utilized list-wise deletion to remove those who did not complete all thirty questions of the FNE instrument, resulting in a nonprobability sample of 403 valid responses. There were 347 female respondents (86.1%), 51 male respondents (12.7%), and 5 no-responses (1.2%). Forty-six percent of respondents indicated that they are supervisors. Age distribution of the respondents is from 20 to over 70 (Table 1), they have worked in libraries from between zero to over 30 years (Table 2), and they receive between zero to over four formal reviews per year (Table 3). Most work in academic libraries, and a quarter work in public libraries (Table 4).

Table 1. Respondent age ranges

Age Range	N	Percent
20–29	35	8.7
30–39	133	33.0
40–49	100	24.8
50–59	82	20.3
60–69	46	11.4
70+	2	0.5
Prefer not to disclose	5	1.2
Total	403	100.0

Table 2. Length of service in libraries

Years of Experience	N	Percent
0-5	78	19.4
6-10	96	23.8
11-15	65	16.1
16-20	53	13.2
21-25	36	8.9
26-30	31	7.7
Over 30	39	9.7
Prefer not to disclose	5	1.2
Total	403	100.0

Table 3. Formal reviews per year

Count of Formal Reviews Per Year	N	Percent
None	40	9.93
1	324	80.40
2	27	6.70
3	3	0.74
4+	5	1.24
Prefer Not to Say	4	0.99
Total	403	100.00

Table 4. Library Type

Library Type	N	Percent
Public	97	24.1
Academic	260	64.5
School	15	3.7
Other	29	7.2
Total	403	100.0

The responses for Ethnicity, Job Type, and Position Rank were mostly unusable due to underrepresentation of non-white ethnicities in the survey, and dilution of the “job type” and “rank” data via a large number of idiosyncratic responses.

Results

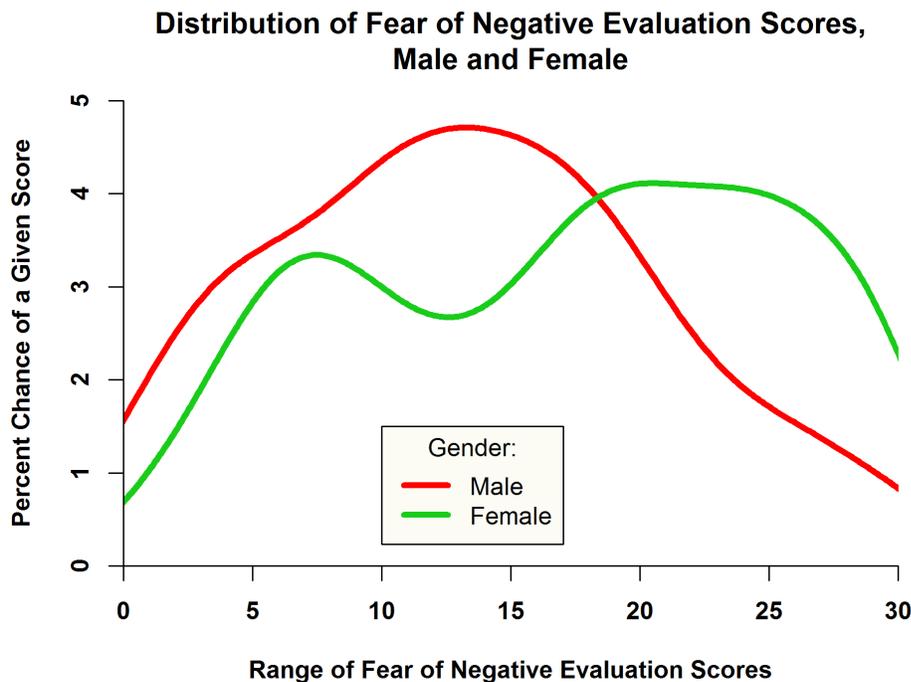
The FNE instrument results in an index score ranging from 0 to 30. A higher score means a higher level of individual fear of negative evaluation. The mean of the original construction of the FNE scale in 1969 was 15.47.²⁸

The FNE scores of our sample ranged from 0 to 30, with a mean score of 16.72. Given the relatively small sample size compared to population (N=403 observations with an FNE score), the data suggest that the top of the scale may not be sufficiently “high” – that is, scores of 30 ought

to be relatively rare, but in this sample account for over 4% of respondents. The authors note the possibility of selection effects in this result.

Considering gender in our sample (Figure 1), men have an overall lower level of FNE than women; that is, they have a lower average level, and the distribution of likely scores is fairly uniform around the average. Females have a possibly bimodal distribution of FNE scores, with a higher average and a larger distribution on the high end of the spectrum. These differences are statistically significant with a probability less than 0.01 of this difference in groups occurring randomly ($p < 0.01$), comparing the groups with an analysis of variance (ANOVA).

Figure 1. Male and Female probability likelihoods (distributions) for a given FNE score.



Differences in FNE were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$ or smaller) among age ranges (Figure 2) and experience ranges (Figure 3). There is necessarily some overlap and collinearity between the two variables (e.g. no individual under the age of 50 is likely to have more than 30 years of experience). However, the results are similar and instructive: FNE is highest early in an individual's career and/or when the person is young. The distribution of FNE becomes bimodal for some age ranges, but the progression mostly stands: later in a person's career, individuals typically suffer less from a fear of negative evaluation.

Figure 2. Probability likelihoods (distributions) for a given FNE score, by age range.

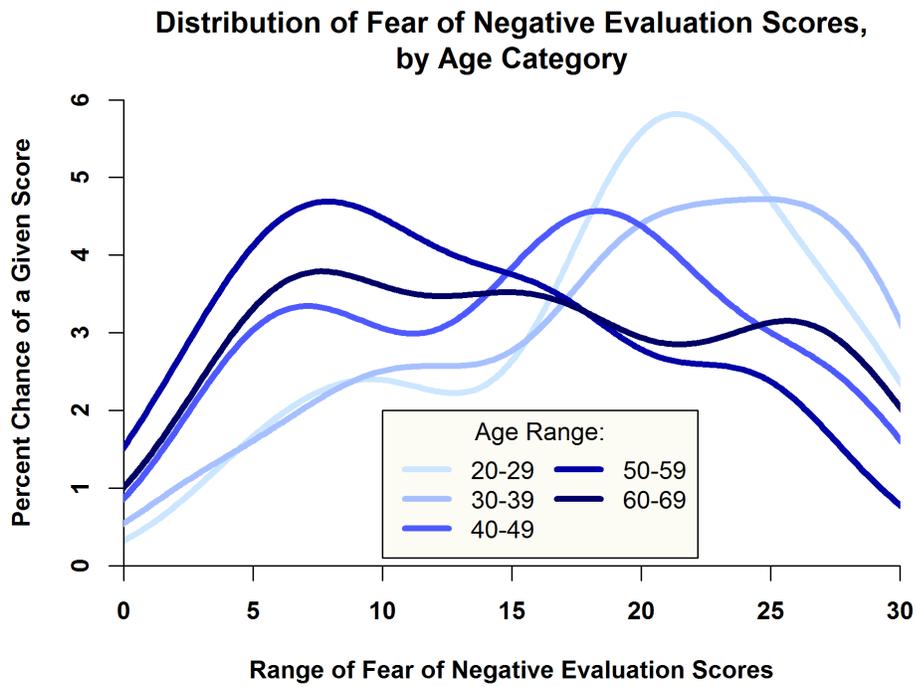
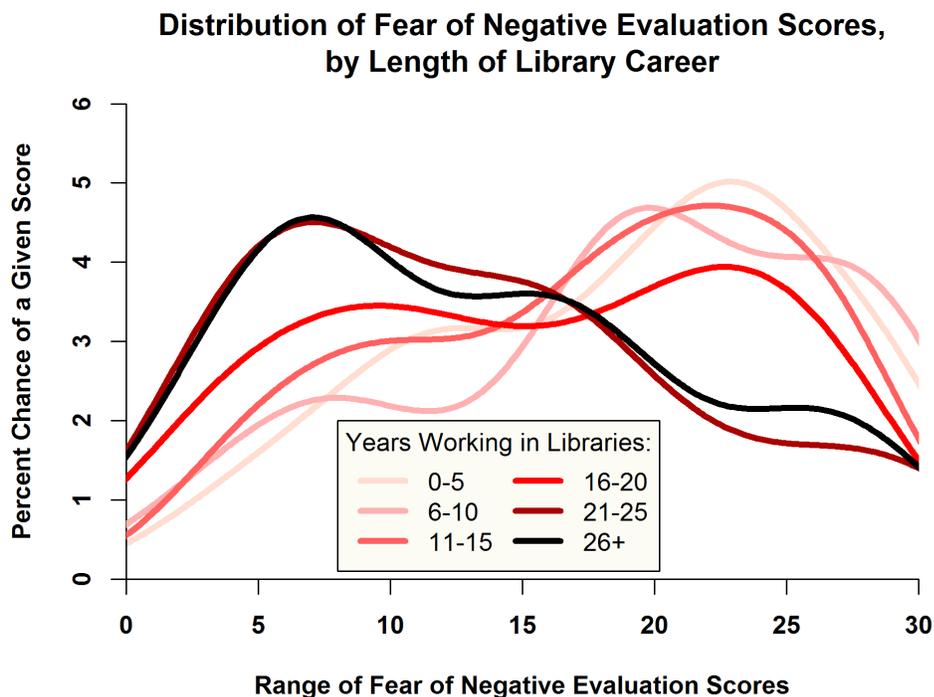


Figure 3. Probability likelihoods (distributions) for a given FNE score, by length of library career.



The type of library from which an individual is drawn is not significantly associated with any change in the FNE score of that individual. This outcome suggests that it is differences across individuals, and differences among or within individual libraries, that are stronger predictors of a given level of FNE, rather than identifying any one type of library as “more stressful” in terms of evaluation. This result is unsurprising given the more evident influences of gender, age, and experience.

Similarly, the supervisory status of any individual is not a significant predictor of their FNE score. That is, people who are supervisors have no statistically significant difference in FNE scores from their colleagues who are not supervisors. That is, the supervisory status of any person is unlikely to affect their fear of negative evaluation – the data continue to suggest that the primary impact on FNE comes from gender, age, and experience level within a library setting.

Additional Questions

In regards to whether or not having FNE has affected their careers, respondents most frequently suggested that having FNE has caused them to not take risks or be creative, thus passing up on opportunities for advancement or leadership roles. On the other hand, some respondents did indicate that FNE motivates them to work harder, and use self-reflection to try to improve. Librarians also report not being able to speak up or be assertive, being anxious, nervous, or timid, and overall low self-confidence. A few interesting career-affecting responses were lack of sleep, low energy levels, procrastination, bad attitude, and leaving jobs due to having FNE.

When asked if they had any advice for others in overcoming their FNE, overwhelmingly, the answer was ‘no.’ However, suggestions to do one’s best work and to use evaluations to change

or grow also were common. Other suggestions include increasing communication with supervisors, thus asking for more frequent feedback and clarifying expectations. There were a number of self-improvement suggestions given, such as meditation, relaxation techniques, seeking therapy, or trying a prescription medication. Singular responses were to pray, learn about introverts, or to read self-help books.

Lastly, respondents were asked if they had recommendations for improving the workplace where FNE exists. Numerous respondents advised that librarians should obtain informal but ongoing evaluations year-round, after defining expectations with their supervisors. Supervisors should also be trained in how to properly give evaluations, and that these evaluations needed to encompass peer-review and self-reflection as well. Another category of responses dealt with the institutional culture, advocating for an open, inclusive, and collegial atmosphere where bullying is not permitted. A few curious suggestions were to get rid of evaluations all-together, or have a neutral third-party, such as an ombudsman, participate in the feedback process.

Discussion

This study was crafted to answer four research questions as an exploration of the existence of the “fear of negative evaluation” amongst librarians. These research questions are taken individually in this discussion.

To what extent do librarians perceive FNE in themselves?

Respondents had a mean FNE score of 16.72, with a maximum possible score of 30. With no formal guidance from the creators of the survey besides the instruction that the sum indicates the “level” of reported FNE, we can extrapolate that librarians have a level of FNE that is higher than the original FNE article expects based on our mean. Our data suggest that, because about 7.5 percent of the total respondents are at or very close to the top of the range, it is possible that librarians “maximum” FNE is probably higher than the scale allows at present. The reported level is higher amongst females, which is not surprising, given women generally self-report higher FNE than men.²⁹ Young librarians, and new-to-career librarians also reported higher FNE. The relatively small sample of school library respondents reported the highest FNE scores compared to other types of libraries, but this was not statistically significant.

As stated above, it appears that demographic differences across individuals are stronger predictors of a higher level of FNE than type of library or supervisory status. Therefore, no one library type or employee role in the organization can be said to have a higher level of FNE in their employees.

How do librarians with self-perceived FNE feel it has affected their careers?

A large number of librarians report that having FNE causes them not to take advantage of leadership roles or try to advance in their careers. FNE can paralyze a librarian into not aspiring to present at conferences or publish. The ties between FNE and “academic risk taking” are significant and can have a notable impact on an individual’s scholarly output.³⁰ It can also suppress innovation and assertiveness. This is disappointing for the profession in that we are constantly trying to modernize through risk-taking and creativity. Various library-related professional organizations dedicate time and resources to mentoring, leadership, and career-focused initiatives. If some of those could do these activities with a focus on helping librarians

with social anxiety issues, then perhaps we could advance the field with more academic and professional studies.

Alternatively, and albeit in fewer cases, FNE could be a motivator. Watt's study on the "Frequency of Ingratiation" reveals that there is a strong correlation between an employee's FNE and ingratiating behavior.³¹ The results from this study of librarians with self-perceived FNE reinforces Watt's findings in that some of the librarians in this study claimed that their FNE has stimulated them to examine their career paths, apply themselves, expand organizational skills, and improve in planning for the future.

In what ways can librarians overcome FNE?

Most respondents had either no advice for overcoming FNE, or indicated that "they wished they knew." It appears more research is necessary in the treatment of FNE that could be reported to librarians, besides the various treatments for social anxiety disorders like FNE that include support groups, counseling, positive affirmations, and medication. Cognitive Behavioral Group Therapy has been proven to have a positive effect on individuals with FNE,³² however, over 80% of these individuals will not seek professional help³³ which means they will continue to suffer with FNE or look for other means to overcome FNE.

Formal evaluations seem to stimulate FNE. In order to stave off raised levels of anxiety due to fear, individuals are encouraged to focus on their own power,³⁴ sphere of influence, or what it is about a situation they can control. Librarians can request more frequent feedback from supervisors, peers, or mentors between formal evaluations. Clarifying expectations and getting more specific feedback will indicate how a librarian can improve if necessary, but also lessen anxiety come evaluation-time. Post-evaluation, a librarian with perceived FNE can utilize constructive criticism to remain positive, and focus on their strengths.

In cases where librarians believe feedback on their performance will be negative, they should document personal achievements, then bring in a neutral third-party, such as an ombudsman or peer, to accompany them during a review and/or interpret the evaluation afterwards. Feelings of FNE may be justified due to a toxic work environment. Librarians should be aware of their own social anxiety feelings in comparison to a truly negative workplace involving critical or judgmental colleagues. In extreme cases, after trying other suggested measures, FNE may be reduced simply by leaving those situations, and finding employment elsewhere.

Survey results show that those with FNE in many cases push themselves harder in the form of working longer hours which can lead to burn out and poor health in general;³⁵ therefore, external to work, librarians should maintain a work-life balance by leaving work behind once the work day is at an end. This will contribute to a greater overall sense of well-being and reduction of anxiety.

What actions can be taken to reduce the impact of FNE in the workplace?

Negative workplace conditions are created when librarians perceive FNE in themselves. Low energy levels and poor productivity can affect the morale of others, increase stress levels, and diminish confidence. Evaluations become a paralyzing concept, and librarians with FNE will avoid them when possible.³⁶ This leads to less interaction with supervisors, resulting in a lack of information that could lead to improved performance.

There are three general ways the survey participants suggested would reduce the impact of FNE in the workplace: atmosphere, the review system, and supervisor training. With regards to atmosphere, respondents suggest a collegial environment where creativity and risk taking are

encouraged, teamwork and communication are valued, and professional development and mentoring opportunities are offered. The review system should be clear with standards set for similar work for all employees where the purpose is for coaching, not punitive action. More frequent informal evaluations are suggested such as quarterly meetings with staff in a less formal setting. Collaborative evaluation could be useful such as 360 evaluations (supervisor to employee, employee to supervisor, self-reporting, and peer to peer), and include an impartial person in the formal evaluation. Supervisors should receive training in conducting performance evaluations so they can provide specific feedback for improvement, offering both positive and constructive guidance which focuses on the work output and not the person, provide clear expectations for the coming year, and consider work assignment that play to a staff member's strengths.

Conclusion

The original authors of the FNE scale hypothesized on the origins of FNE.³⁷ They said it could be due to a large quantity of disapproval received previously, or that mixed with a desire for approval. Librarians may perceive negative evaluation where there really is none, thus leading to more frustration, increased anxiety, low-morale, and decreased performance.

Regarding the data gathered for this exploratory study, further analysis could provide insight into other research questions, especially correlating demographic data (age, gender, length of career, supervisory status) to the answers of our open-ended questions. Do women or men offer more advice in overcoming FNE? Did those with longer careers have more substantial suggestions for overcoming it and reducing the impact in the workplace? Which respondents said it had the most impact on their careers?

The literature review mentioned other areas of potential research for FNE. More psychological explorations of librarians is warranted, especially related to management issues. The researchers desire to follow up on a recent study on Imposter Syndrome³⁸ to see if there are any connections. Another avenue of potential future research is to use the other original Social Avoidance and Distress scale (SAD) that Watson and Friend developed in 1969 alongside the FNE scale.³⁹ This would provide a better overall picture of the social anxiety in our profession. An alternative focus could be to determine if there is correlation between FNE amongst librarians and reported levels of introversion.

In summary, it is clear that the Fear of Negative Evaluation exists amongst some librarians. This affects our workplaces and our profession. Knowing that these psychological and sociological conditions affect our workers is a responsibility of leaders and managers. Learning about them will facilitate better supervisory practices and more collegial work environments.

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