

Fear of Success Versus Fear of Gender-Inappropriate Behavior¹

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To test the prediction that both males and females would show evidence of "fear of success" when success was achieved in a nontraditional field, male and female subjects wrote five-minute stories in response to cues depicting a male's or female's success in medical school or nursing school. Results showed that both sexes wrote more fear of success stories in gender-inappropriate than in gender-appropriate conditions. The need for a broader conception of fear of success motivation is discussed.

The concept of "fear of success" was introduced into the achievement motivation literature through the doctoral research of Matina Horner (1968). She proposed this construct to explain the achievement behavior of women and argued that, unlike men, women inhibited their achievement in competitive situations. Their reasons for doing so presumably included fears of a loss of femininity and fears of social isolation from and rejection by others.

As an indication of the rapid rise in popularity of fear of success, Tresemer (1976) has summarized the results of over 150 studies dealing with this concept in the past eight years. Acceptance of the concept has not been without criticism, however (cf. Zuckerman & Wheeler, 1975). One issue of debate involves the extent to which fear of success stories reflect a motive or simply indicate a

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stereotype. Monahan, Kuhn, and Shaver (1974) have suggested that the imagery described by subjects might well reflect cultural stereotypes of appropriate behavior for men and women, rather than a personality disposition unique to women. Whereas earlier research (Horner, 1972) has asked women to respond to a cue involving Anne in medical school, while men respond to John in medical school, these latter investigators have asked both males and females to respond to both cues. Consistent with their predictions, the data showed that both men and women increased their fear imagery for Anne's accomplishments in comparison to John's accomplishments. Thus the Monahan et al. (1974) study supports the notion that fear of success imagery reflects cultural stereotypes common to both men and women, rather than a motivational disposition exclusively in women's intrapsychic domain. Feather and Raphelson (1974) have reported similar findings.

The present study attempts to further broaden the conception of fear of success. One of the crucial issues in the fear of success literature seems to be anxiety concerning gender-inappropriate behavior. *Both* men and women are likely to report anxiety when success is achieved in a situation untypical and hence inappropriate for that sex. Because previous research has concentrated on the medical school cue, however, the results only speak to the issue of female success in a traditionally male domain. If gender-inappropriate situations are critical, we should expect an equal proportion of fear of success imagery when a male character achieves success in a traditionally feminine field. Additionally, the incidence of fear of success imagery elicited by a female character achieving in a traditionally feminine field should be substantially less than that typically reported for the medical school cue. Such results would support the contention that a more generalized state of anxiety surrounding gender-inappropriate behavior and adherence to cultural norms is the central issue. The present study was designed to test these predictions.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 39 males and 57 females at Purdue University who participated in the experiment as partial fulfillment of a course requirement during the spring of 1973.

Procedure

Students reported for the experiment in mixed-sex groups varying from 10 to 15 in size. One male and one female experimenter were present at each session.

Each student was given a sheet with one of the four themes printed at the top: "After first term finals, Anne (John) finds herself (himself) at the top of her (his) nursing (medical) school class." Following earlier procedures, students were asked to write for five minutes and to specify what had happened in the past to lead up to the situation, what the individual was thinking and feeling at present, and what was likely to happen in the future. Approximately equal numbers of students received each of the four cues. After all students had completed the stories, the experimenters provided a full explanation of the purposes of the study.

Stories were scored in dichotomous fashion in accord with the categories specified by Horner (1970, p. 59). Two coders (one male and one female) rated each story, and neither was aware of the sex of the subject. The coders were in agreement on 85% of the stories. When disagreement occurred, a rating of .5 was assigned.

RESULTS

Table I reports the percentage of subjects in each condition whose stories reflect fear of success imagery. Considering first the results for the standard medical cue, it can be seen that both men and women produced stronger fear of success imagery to the Anne cue than to the John cue, $\chi^2 (1) = 4.6, p = .03$. In general, the proportions are similar to previous findings (e.g., Monahan et al., 1974).

As predicted, the reverse pattern was found when stories were generated to a cue of Anne or John in nursing school. Significantly more fear of success stories were written to the John cue than to the Anne cue, $\chi^2 (1) = 6.9, p = .008$. This pattern was true for both male and female subjects. For women, Anne's success in nursing school resulted in an exceptionally low proportion of fear of

Table I. Percentage of Stories Scored for Fear of Success Imagery^a

Name of cue	Occupation	
	Medical school	Nursing school
Male subjects		
John	40% (10)	63% (11)
Anne	70% (10)	50% (8)
Female subjects		
John	20% (15)	64% (14)
Anne	50% (14)	14% (14)

^aNumbers in parentheses represent cell size.

success stories, while men continued to describe unfortunate outcomes for the traditionally successful woman.

In further investigation of the similarity between Anne in medical school and John in nursing school, the content of the two sets of stories was examined. The stories were remarkably similar. Events surrounding John's success in nursing school included being teased and rejected by peers, having his masculinity questioned, and his social life suffer possible adverse effects. Further, John's stay in nursing school was often seen as temporary and as a result of not meeting the requirements for medical school. It should be noted that this type of response to male success is quite different from that reported when John's success is in medical school. Fear of success imagery found in that instance frequently differs in quality for that reported to the Anne cue; the focus is on questioning the value of John's traditional success and playing the game, rather than on fearing rejection (Hoffman, 1974; Zuckerman & Wheeler, 1975). Similar differences were found in the present sample.

DISCUSSION

In keeping with some of the earlier research in the fear of success literature (Feather & Raphelson, 1974; Monahan et al., 1974), the present investigation supports a cultural explanation for the imagery provided by male and female respondents. Both men and women created fear of success imagery for a woman in a nontraditional career field (i.e., medicine). Furthermore, both men and women created similar stories entailing negative consequences for a male in a nontraditional career field (i.e., nursing). The tendency for both sexes to express avoidance of nontraditional activities suggests that the construct "fear of success" is not a predominantly feminine concern. Rather, both women and men show avoidance of gender-inappropriate activities and anticipate negative consequences for individuals who violate sex-role norms.

Thus we arrive at a concept that is at once more broad and more specific. Broadness is derived from the fact that men and women both show a common pattern; both express anxiety for members of the same or opposite sex who are engaged in nontraditional behaviors. Greater specificity is implied as we question the notion that success per se is feared by men or by women.

These results do not alter the conclusion by some (Shaver, 1976; Zuckerman & Wheeler, 1975) that alternative measures are needed to measure fear of success. However, some of the new measures which have been developed to measure in more objective form a general fear of success (Zuckerman & Allison, 1976) do not speak to the specific situational characteristics which are found here. There may indeed be a general motive to avoid success, but the present results suggest that in addition to any consistent transsituational tendency to avoid success, specific situational factors must also be considered.

Avoidance of gender-inappropriate activities may show a very low correlation with a more general success-avoidance tendency. To answer this question, measures which specifically tap people's anxieties about gender-inappropriate behavior need to be developed. Such a strategy is currently being pursued by the first author. If successful, this measure should allow more accurate prediction of behavior, based on individual difference measures. Obviously, establishing a link between this type of measure and behavior patterns would also strengthen the case for a personality disposition, as opposed to stereotyped judgments, as the explanation for current findings. Indeed, previous failures to relate behavior to the fantasy-based measure (Zuckerman & Wheeler, 1975) may in part be due to the difference between a general fear of success and a more specific fear of gender-inappropriate behavior. Understanding the relationship between individual differences on the one hand, and specific contexts on the other, seems the most profitable course to follow (Deaux, 1977).

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