

Understanding Female Careerism Fear of Success and New Directions

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Horner's fear of success construct rests on the assumption that women react negatively to achievements which violate their definition of appropriate gender-role behavior. Consistent with this assumption, the present investigation attempted to determine whether fear of success imagery expressed in response to different achievement-related cues would covary with (a) a woman's own gender-role orientation and/or (b) the perceived gender-role norms of her significant male. One hundred female honors students completed the Maferr Inventory of Feminine Values and responded to projective cues depicting competitive success characterized as (a) traditionally male, (b) traditionally female, (3) social-domestic, and (d) vicarious. Only one relationship reached significance. Women who perceived the significant male in their life as endorsing nontraditional gender-role behavior were more likely to respond negatively to vicarious success. Fear of success bore no relationship to the gender role of the subject herself. In view of these findings it is considered unwise to regard fear of success as the single, most powerful determinant of a woman's role choices. A more generalized cognitive model which incorporates additional intrapsychic as well as situational factors is proposed.

Historically, American women have been socialized to assume an "Is it worth it?" attitude toward career aspirations. For example, Frank and Frank (1954) advised:

Consider your job from every standpoint: The satisfactions it gives you and how necessary they are, the *net* income it contributes after you pay for all the services your job prevents you from doing for yourself, the effect it has on your stamina,

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your disposition, your relationship with your husband. When you become pregnant, set the time when you feel the job had best be given up. And decide, with your husband, when—and whether—you think you should resume. Perhaps an honest examination of the problem will suggest other solutions: a less taxing part-time job, or a secretarial/typing service you can conduct from your home, or the development of a latent skill, such as painting tiles or hooking rugs, which will help you keep alert and active without disrupting your entire home life or cutting off the extra income you are counting on (p. 69).

Thus, women were encouraged to imagine all *possible* negative consequences of careerism and to weigh them against *assured* positive outcomes. Obviously, in order for a career to be considered justifiable, it would have to offer sufficient benefits to cancel out all possible liabilities. During the 1970s, a wider range of roles has been defined as acceptable for women, yet at the same time, because we are in the midst of social change, the ultimate consequences of any given role choice have become more difficult to predict. Although the possible benefits of careerism have increased substantially, they are not guaranteed. If the contemporary woman weighs *possible* negative consequences of careerism against *assured* positive ones, she could still be dissuaded from deciding on a career. Probably her own gender-role ideology will profoundly affect such a weighing process because it will affect the salience of certain negative and positive expectancies.

The idea that anticipated negative consequences often discourage women from aspiring to achievement goals is the basis for Horner's (1968) notion of fear of success (FOS). Fear of success is conceived of as a psychological barrier to achievement, aroused by the expectation that success in certain contexts may result in negative consequences, including loss of femininity and social rejection. Indeed, Horner demonstrated that women who fear success perform less well than usual when competing against men. Presumably such women anticipate social censure for outperforming a man.

Viewed within the context of Atkinson's expectancy value theory of achievement motivation, the fear of success concept rests on the assumption that an individual will pursue her/his achievement-related tendencies unless she/he experiences competing motives which reduce the inclination to achieve. Horner maintains that some women's motivation to achieve is curtailed by a competing motive to avoid success.

Extending the fear of success construct to explain the failure of women to enter traditionally male dominated occupations, Horner (1972) observed: "Most feminine women when faced with a conflict between their feminine image and expressing their competencies or developing their abilities and interests adjust their behaviors to their internalized sex-role stereotypes. . . . In order to feel or appear more feminine women disguise their abilities and withdraw from the mainstream of thought, nontraditional aspirations, and achievement in our society" (p. 67).

Horner (1968) used a projective technique to measure fear of success. The philosophy underlying the instrument was based on the work of Scott (1958). He found that when a projective cue depicts a situation which the respondent finds threatening, negative imagery will be found in the protocol. Horner reasoned that negative imagery in response to a given achievement cue was indicative of a tendency to avoid the kind of achievement depicted in the cue. She found that women who generated negative themes in response to a cue concerning a woman achieving a nontraditional field were likely to perform less well than usual when competing against men.

Horner's work suggests that the responses of women to a measure of fear of success will be consistent with their gender-role orientation. Women of traditional orientation will anticipate social rejection for competing in traditionally masculine spheres. Their response to cues depicting such achievement will be negative. It is also possible that nontraditional women will associate traditionally feminine achievements with negative consequences (e.g., lack of status or recognition, lack of fulfillment). These women might be expected to respond negatively to cues depicting traditionally feminine achievement even when that achievement is derived competitively. Horner maintains that fear of success might be anticipated in any context in which a woman regards success as gender-role inappropriate. It should hold then, that nontraditional women will manifest FOS in response to achievements which they do not value, namely, traditionally feminine ones.

In the present investigation, four projective cues were used, each depicting a different kind of achievement. It was reasoned that female respondents would write negative themes in response to achievements inconsistent with their personal gender-role orientation. The fear of success score would then be considered indicative of the likelihood that the respondent would avoid or pursue success in the achievement realm depicted. Therefore it was hypothesized that subjects' gender-role orientation would covary with FOS responses to verbal cues such that (a) traditionally oriented women would score higher than nontraditionally oriented women on cues depicting career achievements, since participation in the labor force has traditionally been regarded as most appropriate for men, and (b) nontraditionally oriented women would score higher than traditionally oriented women on cues depicting social and vicarious achievement, since such endeavors have been traditionally reserved for women.

Further, because FOS is assumed to be related to negative consequences associated with social rejection it was hypothesized that the subjects' perception of the gender-role ideology of the significant man in her life would covary with FOS responses to verbal cues such that (a) subjects who perceived their significant male's ideology as traditional would score higher than those who viewed it as nontraditional on cues depicting success in the market place (i.e., traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine career success), and (b) subjects who per-

ceived their significant male's ideology as nontraditional would score higher than those who viewed it as traditional on cues depicting traditionally feminine (i.e., social-domestic and vicarious) success.

METHOD

Subjects

One hundred female students randomly selected from the 1972-1973 Academic Honors List at a moderate-sized midwestern university participated in the present study. All had achieved a cumulative grade point average of B or better and were assumed to constitute a sample of achieving women. Each was at the time of the study seriously involved with a man. Sixty-four were married, and 36 were dating seriously.

Materials

Four verbal cues representing female success in a variety of contexts were used to elicit fear of success imagery. The cues represented a female achieving in traditionally masculine competitive success, in traditionally feminine competitive success, in social-domestic competitive success, and in success achieved vicariously through the actions of a significant male. The specific cues employed were: (a) Mary's boss has recently been transferred to the California branch of the company she works for. The board of directors has chosen Mary above many of the other junior executives to take over his highly valued position (Horner, 1972); (b) Barbara has just been appointed head of nurses in a large metropolitan hospital; (c) Lisa, the wife of a prominent lawyer has been named Hostess of the Year by the newspaper in the large city where she resides; (d) Evelyn's husband, Tom, has just been promoted to vice-president of his company.

The Maferr Inventory of Feminine Values (Steinmann & Fox, 1974) was used to assess the subjects' Ideal Woman (Form B) and the subjects' perceptions of their significant men's Ideal Woman (Form C). The Inventory of Feminine Values consists of 34 statements representing a particular value or value judgment related to women's activities and satisfaction. Strength of agreement or disagreement with each statement is indicated on a 5-point Likert scale. The statements represent a continuum ranging from a traditional family-oriented concept of femininity (passive) to a nontraditional, self-achieving oriented concept (active).

Procedure

Subjects completed the materials described above in individual testing sessions. Presentation of the materials was counterbalanced such that half of the

Table I. Percent of FOS Imagery in Response to the Four Achievement Context Cues^a

Achievement context	Percent FOS imagery
Traditionally male	37
Traditionally female	38
Social-domestic	29
Vicarious	50

^a*N* = 100.

subjects responded to the verbal cues at the beginning and the other half at the end of the testing session.

The four verbal cues were presented under standard neutral arousal conditions (Atkinson, 1958). Following completion of the four cues and the two forms of the Inventory of Feminine Values, the purpose of the study was revealed to each participant. All questions were answered and they were thanked for their cooperation.

RESULTS

The FOS imagery elicited in response to each of the four cues was scored by two independent judges according to Horner's 1968 criteria. An interrater reliability coefficient of .90 was obtained.

The percentage of FOS imagery generated in response to each of the four achievement context cues is presented in Table I.

Table II. Percent and Frequency of FOS Imagery in Response to the Four Cues as a Function of the Role Orientation of Own-Ideal Woman

Achievement context	Ideal role orientation				χ^2
	Traditional		Nontraditional		
	FOS	No FOS	FOS	No FOS	
Traditionally male	22.2 (2)	77.8 (7)	38.5 (35)	61.5 (56)	.360
Traditionally female	33.3 (3)	66.7 (6)	49.5 (45)	50.5 (46)	.328
Social-domestic	33.3 (3)	66.7 (6)	28.6 (26)	71.4 (65)	.007
Vicarious	22.2 (2)	77.8 (7)	52.7 (48)	47.3 (43)	1.953

Table III. Percent and Frequency of FOS Imagery in Response to the Four Cues as a Function of the Role Orientation of Significant Men's Ideal Woman

Achievement context	Men's ideal woman's role orientation				χ^2
	Traditional		Nontraditional		
	FOS	No FOS	FOS	No FOS	
Traditionally male	31.9 (13)	69.0 (29)	41.4 (24)	58.6 (34)	.732
Traditionally female	35.7 (15)	64.3 (27)	56.9 (33)	43.1 (25)	3.571
Social-domestic	28.6 (12)	71.4 (30)	29.3 (17)	70.7 (41)	.020
Vicarious	35.7 (15)	64.3 (27)	60.3 (35)	39.7 (23)	4.967 ^a

^aSignificant at the .05 level, with 1 *df*.

Subjects were divided into two groups on the basis of their scores on Form B (Ideal Woman) of the MaFerr Inventory of Feminine Values. The scores ranged from -13 (traditional) through 53 (nontraditional). A series of 2×2 chi-square analyses yielded no significant relationships between FOS imagery in response to the verbal cues and Form B, a measure of the perceived activity-passivity of the subject's ideal woman. The percentage and frequency of FOS imagery generated in response to the four achievement context cues as a function of the perceived role orientation of the subject's ideal woman is presented in Table II.

Subjects were divided into two groups on the basis of their scores on Form C (Man's Ideal Woman) of the MaFerr Inventory of Feminine Values. The scores ranged from -45 (traditional) through 48 (nontraditional). A series of 2×2 chi-square analyses comparing FOS imagery and Form C, a measure of the perceived activity-passivity of the Ideal Woman of subject's significant male yielded one significant result. Subjects who perceived their significant men as endorsing a nontraditional role orientation for their Ideal Women generated significantly more FOS responses to the vicarious success cue than those who perceived the role orientation endorsed by their significant males' Ideal Women to be traditional, $\chi^2 (1) = 4.97, p < .05$. The percentage and frequency of FOS imagery in response to the four cues as a function of the role orientation of subjects' significant men's Ideal Woman is presented in Table III.

DISCUSSION

Of eight chi-square comparisons in the present investigation only one reached significance. In a series of eight such nonorthogonal comparisons it is not unlikely that at least one test will show spurious significance. Thus, the

finding may simply reflect a Type I error. However, the relationship is in the predicted direction. Women who perceive their significant male as nontraditionally oriented are more likely to find vicarious success unattractive. This probably reflects an expectation on the part of such men that the women in their lives should achieve success in their own right. The subject's own gender-role orientation was most strongly (although not significantly) associated with vicarious success. There does appear to be a relationship between a nontraditional gender-role orientation and the inclination to find vicarious success unattractive. Why is gender-role orientation unrelated to social-domestic success, another typical kind of feminine achievement? If it is assumed that both vicarious and social domestic success are unappealing to the nontraditional woman and/or the woman who perceives her significant male as nontraditional, the most profound distinction between the two kinds of success is that only social-domestic success offers the opportunity to actively contribute to goal attainment. The limited opportunity for striving, added to a lack of interest in such a traditionally feminine accomplishment, probably rendered vicarious success even less attractive than social-domestic success, hence the significant relationship.

Still, the general lack of significance in the data is disappointing. Horner insists that a woman's achievement behavior depends primarily on her beliefs about appropriate feminine behavior and about societal reactions to her achievement. She writes: "It [motive to avoid success] can be conceived as a disposition (a) to feel uncomfortable when successful in competitive (aggressive) achievement situations because such behavior is inconsistent with one's femininity, an internal standard, (b) to expect or become concerned about social rejection following success in such situations" (Horner, 1968, p. 22).

A review of the literature suggests that a relationship between FOS and gender-role orientation cannot be empirically documented. O'Leary and Hammack (1975) report that FOS is not manifested by women in response to cues depicting success inconsistent with their gender-role orientation (as measured by the Wellesley Role-Orientation Scale). In response to the cues depicting traditionally feminine achievements (artistic and social-domestic), traditionally oriented subjects were more likely to generate FOS imagery. Gender-role orientation did not affect FOS in response to masculine or feminine vocational success. Heilbrun, Kleemeier, and Piccola (1974) report evidence that high FOS is related to a nontraditional gender-role orientation. Zuckerman and Wheeler (1975) report seven investigations which failed to find that FOS and gender-role orientation covary. The data indicate that a woman's definition of appropriate feminine behavior bears little relationship to her motive to avoid success.

One explanation for failure to link FOS empirically to gender-role orientation is that a true relationship does exist but is attenuated by the crudeness of the measures used. Projective measures of achievement motivation have been criticized for their failure to generate reliable and, hence, convergently valid

scores (Entwisle, 1972; Klinger, 1966). Since FOS is usually measured using only one cue (cue a) the probability of obtaining significant relationships with other measures is further diminished. The FOS measure has also been criticized for picking up confounding variables orthogonal to achievement-related anxiety such as verbal ability and fluency (Sorrentino & Short, 1974) or simple reiteration of gender bias in our culture (Monahan, Kuhn, & Shaver, 1974; Katz, Note 1). The scoring procedure implemented in the present investigation (from Horner, 1968) was never empirically validated (see Tresemer, 1973) and therefore may not yield optimally powerful discriminations. All these measurement problems could obliterate existing relationships between FOS and gender-role orientation. Other measures have been developed (Pappo, Note 2; Zuckerman & Allison, Note 3) which may avert some of these obstacles. However, using the measure as it was originally conceived, a relationship between FOS and gender-role orientation cannot be established.

What is the significance of such a failure to obtain construct validity? Some would argue that it proves FOS, as Horner conceptualized it, does not exist. The literature abounds with investigations, many of them with serious theoretical and methodological flaws, which claim to have "disproven" the existence of FOS. An alternative stance should be considered. Horner brought our understanding of achievement barriers a long way by pointing out the impact of success-related expectations. However, why should it be assumed that FOS is the principal determinant of career related inhibitions? Although gender-role orientation does not appear to be the major trigger mechanism of FOS, gender-role orientation and other factors might be considered as predictors of success-avoidance behavior in their own right.

Why, for example, should *nAch* be considered the most salient variable in understanding women's reluctance to assume nontraditional roles? The American fascination with achievement motivation stems from a myth we are reluctant to relinquish: namely, the belief that an individual can accomplish any goal for which he or she strives. Such a belief is not only ludicrous in the present economic environment but it is misleading in that it diverts attention away from other personality characteristics which are just as important as achievement motivation in assuming a nontraditional role. These characteristics include the willingness to seek and exercise power, self-confidence, ambition, independence, assertiveness, internal locus of control, Machiavellianism (or at least some ability to influence others in one's own favor), ego strength, innovativeness and creativity in forging new roles, the capacity to deal with role ambiguities, and the uncertainties attendant to new and as yet fluid social roles, and what Bernard (1975) labels "general dynamism," or the inclination to seek activity and social stimulation rather than tranquillity.

The individual woman might also be studied within the social network. A woman's social interactions, the attitudes of people close to her, the availability of a peer group with similar goals, the presence of supportive individuals might

all be important determinants of a woman's decision to assume a nontraditional role.

To summarize, the idea that psychological barriers block women's entry into nontraditional roles need not be limited to the realms of achievement motivation or motivation alone. Individuals often fail to aspire to roles which they view as attractive. There are probably many reasons for this, some of them motivational or otherwise intrapsychic, others better understood at a macro level. Horner's work was a major creative contribution to the field, yet it cannot and should not be expected to yield a complete understanding of the reasons why women choose the roles that they do. Clearly, the question is much broader than "Why do women fail to strive for success?" It involves much more than achievement-related ambitions. The answers will be found in all aspects of that role, including those related to achievement. A more generalized cognitive model is therefore advocated. The model would rest on the assumption that the probability that an individual will engage in a given activity is best determined by the expectancies or future-oriented cognitions associated with the event. Such expectancies might be determined by any of the factors mentioned above. Research would then be directed toward determining the manner in which a wide range of variables combine to determine expectancies. It is conceivable that research would ultimately suggest that the salience of given factors would vary across individuals. This remains an empirical issue.

The generalized cognitive model would, therefore, suggest certain research objectives. Namely, to discover the real or imagined reinforcement contingencies in the subject's environment. That is, what consequences does the subject expect as a result of career achievement? Attempts to activate stronger career aspirations would be directed at (1) acquainting the subject with the objective contingencies of the environment, and (2) developing coping mechanisms for dealing with negative consequences. As such, the model goes beyond the realm of the psychology of women, dealing with a phenomenon which is not sex-specific. Further, the environment of the subject is considered critical, objectively in terms of the messages it sends and its responses to the subject in a given role, but also in the subjective sense, as the subject perceives it.

New methodological approaches are also needed. Principal contributors to the experimental literature are women who have assumed nontraditional roles. Their perspective on the issue is necessarily limited by their experience and orientation. Field observations and survey data which impose less structure on the investigation would probably yield refreshing new insights into our understanding of the factors which affect the career decisions of women.

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