

RACE, SOCIAL CLASS AND THE MOTIVE TO AVOID SUCCESS IN WOMEN¹

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This study sought to examine race and social class differences in the expression of fear of success in women. This concept, termed the Motive to Avoid Success (M-s), was developed and utilized by Horner (1968) to explain sex differences in achievement motivation.

In our study, M-s imagery expressed in response to TAT-verbal cues was compared for black and white college women and two social class levels. The hypothesis that black women would show less M-s than white women was supported. The findings held for subjects at two schools and for two verbal cues. Social class differences were not found. Several interpretations and suggestions for follow-up studies are given.

Horner (1968) successfully reconciled some of the confusion in research on achievement motivation in women by postulating and demonstrating an avoidance motive called the motive to avoid success (M-s).³ This psychological barrier to intellectual achievement is defined as "the expectancy or anticipation of negative consequences as a result of success in competitive achievement situations." In the case of women, the specific negative consequences may be social rejection by men, loss of affection, friendship or one's datable or marriageable quality (Horner, 1968, p. 22)." According to Horner, when a girl achieves intellectually, she anticipates that she will be regarded as unfeminine. Horner's data support the existence of such a motive in fantasy productions; she also successfully predicted women's problem solving behavior in intellectually competitive situations by using M-s scores. Tangri (1969) also demonstrated that senior level college women express M-s with greater frequency than do junior level girls.

It has been observed by a number of investigators that the motivations and aspirations expressed by black women follow a different pattern than those

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³This study addresses itself to a comparison of women from several cultural subgroups within the American (U.S.) society. Cross-society or national comparisons are projected for future research by the second author.

expressed by white women (Moynihan, 1965; Frazier, 1939, 1962; Pettigrew, 1965). Forces inherent in the social system have had a deleterious effect on black family life as evidenced, for example, by the high percentage of black families headed by women (Clark, 1965; U. S. Department of Labor, 1965). It is commonly asserted that this has resulted in a sex-role identity pattern in which women are more dominant and aggressive and permitted, and indeed, encouraged to be aspiring and intellectually striving. This overt image is partially confirmed by studies of aspirations of black high school students in which girls express higher aspirations than boys (Thompson, 1965); black parents' aspirations for their daughters are higher than for their sons. This finding was not obtained by Gurin and Katz (1966) in their massive study of motivation and level of aspiration in students in Southern black colleges in which college women expressed lower aspirations than the men, seemingly following the pattern of the larger society. The aspirations of these women seemed to be a reflection of the women's realistic perceptions of the opportunities available to them. We maintain, however, that while a girl may lower and be realistic about her aspirations, she may nevertheless maintain fantasies of success and achievement and not avoid dominance and aggressive intellectual mastery. Furthermore, the dynamics involved in her achievement orientation may still be quite different from those of the white women. With this in mind, a series of studies have been undertaken with the goal of exploring the personality and motivational dynamics influencing expressed aspirations and actual career planning in black college women.

A few words must be added about the variable of social class. The possibility of social class differences among black women must be anticipated. The black middle class has been described as "out-middle classing" white middle class in terms of their values. Furthermore, since middle class life is generally more male dominated and family life more stable (Frazier, 1962), it is reasonable to expect that the black middle class college women will be less dominant and striving than her lower class counterpart.

The present study simply sought to compare black women with white women, not on aspirations, but in fantasy productions to a situation with an intrinsic theme of intellectual competition.

The following hypotheses were tested:

1. Black college women will exhibit fewer M-s responses than white college women.
2. Lower class black women will have fewer M-s responses than middle class black women.

METHOD

Subjects

The Ss were 63 undergraduate women enrolled at Bluefield State College

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and 22 enrolled at American University.⁴ The breakdown of these Ss by race and social class is given in Table 1. Social class was determined by occupation and educational level of the parents.

TABLE 1

NUMBER OF SUBJECTS FROM EACH SCHOOL BY RACE AND SOCIAL CLASS

Race	American University		Bluefield State	
	Middle class	Lower class	Middle class	Lower class
Black	10	1	22	28
White	11	0	13	0

Materials

Verbal TAT cues such as those used by Horner and a brief questionnaire requesting socio-economic information were administered to each subject. The four cues in order of presentation were as follows:

1. After first term finals, Anne finds herself at the top of her medical school class.
2. A young woman is talking about something important with an older person.
3. Jennifer has just been informed that her three-act play will be produced in New York this coming season.
4. Susan is sitting in a chair with a smile on her face.

Cues 1 and 3 were designed to elicit success imagery while cues 2 and 4 were non-arousal or neutral cues and, as such, were not scored for M-s but served as buffers in the experimental situation.⁵

⁴Bluefield State is a four year liberal arts college in West Virginia whose undergraduate population is approximately 50.8% black. (U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1967; Bluefield Registrar's Office, 1969). The undergraduate population of American University (Washington, D. C.) is 4-4.8% black (Statistical Office, American University, 1969).

⁵The use of verbal cues appear as effective in eliciting imagery as the TAT pictures and have been used by numerous investigators (Atkinson, Horner, Tangri, McClelland, 1959; Bachman et al., 1967). Of course, these are ideally suited to studies in which race comparisons are to be made, since the problem of changing the pictures of identity figures does not arise.

Procedure

The Ss were seated in a classroom and given a questionnaire containing the four verbal cues. The cues were presented in the order stated above. All Ss received the following instructions:

You are going to see a series of verbal leads or cues and I would like you to tell a story that is suggested to you by each one. Try to imagine what is going on in each. Then tell what the situation is, what led up to the situation, what the people are thinking and feeling and what they will do. In other words, write as complete a story as you can, a story with plot and characters. You will have twenty seconds to look at each verbal cue and then five minutes to write your story about it. Write your first impressions and work rapidly. I will keep time and tell you when it is time to finish your story and to get ready for the next cue. Remember there are no right or wrong answers or kinds of stories, so please feel free to write whatever story is suggested to you when you look at a cue. Spelling, punctuation, and grammar are not important. What is important is to write out as fully and as quickly as possible the story that comes into your mind as you imagine what is going on in each cue.

Thus, the Ss were required to write brief five-minute stories in response to each of the four cues which were observed for twenty seconds. The stories were written around the following four questions spaced on an answer sheet:

1. What is happening? Who are the persons?
2. What has led up to this situation? What has happened in the past?
3. What is being taught? What is wanted? By whom?
4. What will happen? What will be done?

The instructions given are standard for the TAT; their general tone is to urge the Ss to produce stories and not to think in terms of right or wrong answers.

The M-s scores were obtained from a content analysis of the fantasies. The first and third cues were scored for M-s independently by two trained raters using the coding directions described by Horner (1968). A general decision was made concerning the presence or absence of M-s imagery and only results agreed upon by both raters were considered.⁶ Any imagery (i.e., statement in the story) which suggested or anticipated negative consequences as a result of success was considered fear of success imagery. More specifically, this meant that someone in the story was being placed in an undesirable or negative situation (e.g., losing the friendship of close associates, being

⁶For the sample of 85 Ss the raters agreed upon 91.8% of the responses to cue 1; there was 81.2% agreement on responses to cue 3.

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socially rejected especially by men, feeling guilt, despair, or doubting one's normality or femininity) because of success in an intellectually competitive situation.

Thus, in scoring the stories for M-s when there was negative imagery reflecting concern about the success, the following scoring criteria were used:

- a. negative consequences because of the success
- b. anticipation of negative consequences because of the success
- c. negative affect because of the success
- d. instrumental activity away from present or future success
- e. any direct expression of conflict about success.

Also scored was any evidence of:

- f. denial of the situation described by the cue
- g. bizarre, inappropriate, unrealistic or non-adaptive responses to the situation described by the cue.

No score was given when the stories contained no indication of negative consequences, negative affect or concern about negative consequences of success. This comprised the "low M-s" category in analysis. A score of 1 indicated that the S's responses reflected mild concern about possible negative consequences of success while a score of 2 was given when there was mention of severe negative consequences of success.⁷ Scores of 1 and 2 comprised the "high M-s" category. A score of 3 was assigned to those stories of a bizarre, inappropriate or unrealistic nature. These stories were not used in the analysis of M-s.

After writing the stories, each S was asked to answer the questionnaire described above. The designation of social class level was determined on the basis of the answers to those questions.

RESULTS

The M-s data were evaluated separately for each success cue and for the two schools. These means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2.

The significance level of all group differences were evaluated by means of the Fisher Exact Probability Test (1956). Table 3 shows the findings from the Bluefield and American University samples.

The hypothesis with regard to race differences was supported for both cues and at both schools. Class differences within the Black group were not significant, in contradiction to our second hypothesis. This, of course, was

⁷There were seven such stories in the Bluefield sample: five were in response to cue 1 and two to cue 3. No such stories appeared in the American University sample.

TABLE 2

M-S MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR THE TWO SCHOOLS
AND THE TWO CUES

Race and class	Bluefield State						American University					
	Cue 1			Cue 3			Cue 1			Cue 3		
	<u>N</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>
White Middle	13	1.25	.59	13	.73	.75	11	1.13	.73	11	.44	.50
Black Middle	22	.16	.49	22	.11	.31	10	.30	.64	10	0	0
Black Lower	28	.24	.42	28	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0

TABLE 3

MOTIVE TO AVOID SUCCESS AS RELATED TO RACE AND SOCIAL CLASS

Race and class	Bluefield State sample				American University sample			
	Cue 1		Cue 3		Cue 1		Cue 3	
	High M-s	Low M-s	High M-s	Low M-s	High M-s	Low M-s	High M-s	Low M-s
White Middle	11	1	6	5	6	2	4	5
Black Middle	2	17	2	16	2	8	0	9
	$\underline{p} = .00001$		$\underline{p} = .018$		$\underline{p} = .28$		$\underline{p} = .041 (\alpha = .05)$	
Black Lower	6	19	0	19	NR ²	NR	NR	NR
Black Middle	2	17	2	16	NR	NR	NR	NR
	$\underline{p} = .170$		$\underline{p} = .23$					

Note - Fisher probability test used for all analyses.

¹ $\alpha = .05$ for all tests

²NR - no respondents

only observed at Bluefield State, but was consistent for both cues.

DISCUSSION

The race difference hypothesis was supported; social class, on the other hand, does not seem to affect M-s imagery. This held for both cues and both schools.

The stories of black Ss displayed very little M-s. The following are examples of stories written by these Ss. A response to cue 1:

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Anne is very pleased because upon completion of finals she finds herself at the top of her medical school class. Anne has studied diligently for long and hard hours. She has always wanted to be a part of the medical profession. Although she studied constantly, she never dreamed of being number one in her class. She wants to pursue a medical career and she is convinced that she can master the work. Her parents and boyfriend will be proud of her. She will continue in medical school graduate and go on to become a leader in her profession.

An example of a response to cue 3:

Jennifer has majored in drama school. Although she is only a junior, she has been writing little three-act plays, one of which has brought her much success. She is, of course, delighted because she never anticipated that any of her work would ever be produced. Jennifer had fancied herself more as an actress than a playwright. She will continue to write more plays. Eventually, Jennifer will write and star in her own productions, moving on to Hollywood, making motion pictures and receiving an Oscar.

In contrast, the display of fear of success imagery is quite clear in the stories of white Ss. Examples of such stories are the following: Typical responses to cue 1:

Anne and her fellow classmates are sitting around 'shooting the bull.' Final exams, naturally, is the topic of discussion. Two or three people seem to dominate the conversation, and Anne is sitting quietly off to one side, her facial expression is one of mixed emotions. Anne has always been a good student and medicine is her 'thing.' She has worked many long and hard hours to achieve the goal she has reached, with very little time for fun. Anne wonders whether it is really worth it, as she seems to be left out of the 'fun crowd' and ignored by the guys because she is a 'brain.' The only time she is noticed is when someone needs help with homework. Anne will let her studies go and become a party girl.

and

Anne is in George Washington Medical School. The persons involved are the ten girls and fifty guys in Anne's first year in medical class. Anne graduated at the top of her class at Jackson College for Women. She was an anthropology major. Anne's friends and parents are proud. Some of the guys in her class are jealous and there's some tension in the class. Anne will marry Jack, a second year medical student and she won't finish medical school.

A response to cue 3:

Jennifer has worked very hard to achieve this success despite lack of encouragement from Bill, her boyfriend. Bill feels that success will change her. She will go to New York and her play will be a flop. She will come back to Bill. However, Bill is engaged. Jennifer realizes her mistake and lost dream and becomes a nun.

Horner (1968) has suggested that the high M-s found in white Ss is probably due to the aggressive overtones of intellectual competition needed for success in these areas, since aggression has been socially linked to a lack of femininity and its display is seen as leading to negative consequences (i.e., social rejection). The present findings suggest that success in intellectually competitive situations does not elicit similar fear in the black college woman. This may be related to the different sex role patterns since, as noted above, the nature of American society has placed black women in more dominant roles than those assumed by black men or by white women. Accordingly, intellectual mastery is not threatening and professional achievement may in fact not lead to rejection by the male. A successful woman is an economic asset and attractive rather than threatening to a black man. Hence, success as here projected is not to be feared. It may also be argued that the aspirations depicted in these situations are so unrealistic for any black person that the girls do not actually project themselves into their stories, do not identify with the characters and therefore have nothing to fear. For the present this must stand as an alternative explanation though there is some evidence that this is not the case. It would be difficult to argue that the American University sample sees such career goals as completely unattainable. While the Bluefield women may view themselves, as well as their potential husbands, as being unlikely to achieve high status professional careers, the girls attending a white urban university may have realistic aspirations of this sort. It is interesting to note here that in a study of black upper-middle class sorority women attending the University of Michigan, M-s scores matched those of white women on that campus, indicating that at some point up the social-educational status ladder fears of such success may appear.⁸ We are now proceeding with several studies designed to illuminate the dynamics of M-s in these women as well as their actual career aspirations and the degree of their commitment to these aspirations. Problem solving performance of high and low M-s scorers in competition with men will be examined. Of course, if low M-s is simply a result of the unreality of the goals implied in the cue, and fear of being intellectually dominant over men does exist, this should be demonstrated in a face to face competitive task.

A final comment about the absence of social class differences needs to be

⁸ Personal communications from Matina S. Horner and Sandra G. Tangri.

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made. It has been suggested (Horner, personal communication) that a black woman needs to be of upper-middle or upper class status before a fear of success is generated. The Michigan findings tend to support this notion but we could not examine this in our data. Social class differences will be examined in more detail in data about to be collected at Howard University.

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