Fear of Success in Females: A Behavioral Test

Marcia D. Stern

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FEAR OF SUCCESS IN FEMALES:
A BEHAVIORAL TEST

BY

MARCIA D. STERN
B. A., Webster College, 1972

THESIS
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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in the Graduate Studies Program of
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Acknowledgment

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I would also like to extend my appreciation to the following students, without whose help I could not have completed this study: Bernard Parker, Randi Segool, Mike Hutchinson, and Cynthia Hubbs.

Finally, I want to extend a very warm thank you to my husband Mark whose encouragement and help enabled me to complete this thesis.
Abstract

Horner has hypothesized that females who exhibit fear of success imagery on a projective test, tend to perform more poorly in competitive than in noncompetitive situations. In the present study, Horner's technique of identifying females who exhibit fear of success was employed. Groups of females exhibiting fear of success and females not exhibiting fear of success were placed in different competitive situations involving a matching task in which they were paired with a male partner, female partner or were alone. Halfway through the task, all subjects were told they were successful. The last half of the task was a measure of success avoidance. It was found that females exhibiting fear of success increased performance on the second half of the task less than those females who did not exhibit fear of success in accordance with Horner's hypothesis. However, the existence of a partner did not affect performance significantly.
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Introduction

The motive to achieve as described by Atkinson (1964) and McClelland (1958) is a motive to be competent in a situation where there are standards of excellence. A highly motivated person is one who develops an internal standard of excellence, is usually independent, performs well academically, is realistic about his goals and tasks, and is persistent (Bardwick, 1971).

The primary method used to measure need for achievement has been to score subjects' stories in response to ambiguous pictorial stimuli for evidence of achievement related themes. The procedure is a modification of the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) in which it is assumed that subjects' responses are determined by projection of their own motives and desires (Atkinson, 1966). Interestingly, experimental support for the traditional theory of achievement motivation (McClelland, Atkinson, Clark & Lowell, 1953; Atkinson & Feather, 1966) consists primarily of studies using only male subjects. When female subjects were included in some of the earlier studies the findings were neither consistent with motivation theory nor were they internally consistent (Horner, 1974). The problem of
sex differences in studies of achievement motivation origi-
nated with the finding that women failed to show an increase
in achievement imagery on the TAT as did the men when exposed
to experimental procedures designed to induce achievement
motivation (Horner, 1974). Therefore, investigators tended
to ignore the female population in their studies, relegating
them to only an occasional footnote. Recently, however,
Horner (1968, 1970) hypothesized that males and females may
behave differently in achievement oriented situations due
to culturally based, achievement related anxieties which
are found primarily in females. These anxieties, Horner
suggests, stem from the traditional role of women in American
society.

A peculiar paradox arises in the society
because we have an educational system that
ostensibly encourages and prepares men and
women identically for careers that social
and, even more importantly, internal psycho-
logical pressures really limit to men. This
paradox is reflected by the feelings of the
women who somehow overcome these pressures
and pursue a particular career. They feel
anxious, guilty, unfeminine, and selfish
(Horner, 1970, p. 45).

In order to investigate the possibility that achievement
related anxiety exists differentially in males and females,
Horner presented female college students with the following
cue: "After first term finals, Anne finds herself at the
top of her medical school class." For males, the cue was:
"After first term finals, John finds himself at the top of
his medical school class." The subjects were instructed to describe the character's feelings about the success, other people's reactions, and the events preceding and following it. Presumably, the subjects' responses to these cues reveal their own feelings and motives toward success.

The primary differences between Horner's method and the TAT is that the former involves a verbal cue while the latter is pictorial, and Horner's procedure directly focuses the subject's attention upon achievement and success while the TAT allows the subject to structure the situation more freely. By forcing the subject to consider successful achievement, Horner's procedure seems to be more appropriate for identifying potential achievement-related anxieties than the TAT since it is quite unlikely that TAT responses would discriminate between subjects who had negative feelings toward achievement and those who simply had relatively weak positive motives toward achievement. In both cases, these subjects would probably construct stories to the ambiguous pictorial cues which focused upon issues other than achievement (Atkinson & Raynor, 1974). Horner reported that over 65% of the females portrayed Anne as anxious, guilty or ultimately unsuccessful while less than 10% of the males expressed negative themes about John. Horner argued that the respondents who expressed such negative themes were revealing a motive she called "fear of success"
(FOS). Obviously, in support of her original hypothesis, this motive seems to be far more prevalent in females than in males (Horner, 1970). Horner also found that females who evidenced FOS on the projective test tended to perform more poorly in competitive situations than in noncompetitive situations. Further, males and the minority of females who did not respond with a FOS theme tended to perform better in competitive situations.

Recent studies using Horner's technique have examined the FOS motive in various ways. Breedlove and Cicirelli (1974) found that more fear of success in women is elicited toward a cue involving a nontraditional female occupation and is greater the closer women are to graduation from college. Another study (Winchel, Fenner & Shaver, 1974) suggests that whether a female had a coed or noncoed elementary school background may be a potent predictor of fear of success. It appears that FOS imagery is more common for those females who attend a coed elementary school, and that it is increased by attendance at a coed high school.

The present study was an attempt to further explore the validity of the concept of fear of success as defined by Horner by focusing on behavioral correlates of this motive. Except for Horner's (1968, 1970) findings regarding differences in behavior in noncompetitive versus competitive
settings, little else is known about the behavioral correlates of FOS.

In the present study, female subjects, who were previously identified as to whether they exhibited FOS or did not to the "Anne" cue, performed on a task which was presented to them as one involving skill. Midway through the task, positive feedback was given to the subject indicating that her performance had been superior (i.e., the subject had experienced success). It was hypothesized that respondents who exhibited FOS would perform more poorly on the latter half of the task than subjects who did not exhibit FOS. Additionally, the social situation was varied. Some of the subjects performed with another female, some with a male, and some performed alone. It was predicted that performance should be poorest for females exhibiting FOS who performed in the presence of a male since the competitive, achievement related aspects of the situation should be emphasized in these conditions. Females who exhibited FOS were anticipated to perform best when alone where such anxieties should be minimal. The opposite was predicted to hold true for those females not exhibiting FOS; that is, they were expected to perform best when in the presence of a partner and poorest when alone since competition should enhance performance in those females not exhibiting FOS.
Method

Subjects and Experimenters

Subjects were college students enrolled in an introductory psychology course at Florida Technological University. Students were administered the Anne protocols in intact classroom groups composed of both males and females by an experimenter (a female in two classes, a male in one class). All students were administered the protocol in order not to arouse suspicion. The class was told that it was not a test, that they were not to put their names on the papers and that no teachers would see the papers (subjects put their social security numbers on the papers for later coding purposes). Probes similar to Horner's appeared below the cue as follows:

(1) Describe Anne. What is she like?
(2) What is the reaction to the news?
(3) What do Anne, and possibly others involved, think after hearing the news?
(4) What does Anne want now?
(5) What has Anne's life been like up to this point?
(6) What does the future hold for Anne and those involved with her? (Monahan, Kuhn & Shaver, 1974)

When the students were finished writing their stories, they were asked to write a statement as to whether they were already familiar with this story cue and if so, in what
way. Three students (one male and two females) were excluded from the experiment on this basis.

The protocols were scored according to the criteria defined by Horner (1970):

If the protocol expresses an overall positive attitude toward the achievement and toward the actor, it is scored as positive. If the protocol expresses any negative attitudes toward the achievement or the actor or specified negative consequences of the achievement, it is scored as negative. The negative protocols are to be further scored according to the type of negative imagery expressed. The categories are as follows:

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, including leaving the field for more traditional female work such as nursing, schoolteaching or social work;
e. Any direct expression of conflict about success;
f. Denial of effort in attaining the success (also cheating or any other attempt to deny responsibility or reject credit for the success);
g. Denial of the situation described by the cue; or
h. Bizarre, inappropriate, unrealistic or nonadaptive responses to the situation described by the cue.

One half of the protocols were scored by a second rater and the interrater reliability was .97 (computed by proportion of agreement/proportion of agreement + proportion of disagreement).

Procedure

Following the administration of the Anne protocols (approximately one week later) a different female
experimenter announced to the introductory psychology classes that female volunteers were needed for an experiment. No mention of the Anne protocols were made, and subjects were unaware that the two experiments were related. Forty females volunteered to take part in the experiment. They were randomly assigned to the male partner, the female partner condition, or the alone condition. In the groups involving a partner, the partner was a confederate. Two males and two females, alternating as partners, served as confederates so as to control for the effect of individual personality on the subject's performance. The number of subjects in each condition was unequal due to difficulties in scheduling among the confederates and subjects. The number of subjects in each condition can be seen in Table 1. There were no significant differences between the FOS and no FOS groups with regards to the proportion of females who volunteered. It was found that approximately half of the number of females who exhibited FOS imagery on the Anne protocol and half of those who did not exhibit FOS imagery volunteered for the experiment. The subject was introduced to her partner, and was seated at a table next to the confederate with a screen placed between them so they could not see what the other was doing. The experimenter showed the subject and partner the task which consisted of a geometric board and explained that they were to match as
Table 1

The Number of Subjects in Each Condition of the Performance Task

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Alone Condition</th>
<th>Male Partner</th>
<th>Female Partner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Females Exhibiting FOS</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females Not Exhibiting FOS</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
many cards as possible, and there were to be twenty trials of thirty seconds each. The experimenter then explained to the subject and partner that a tape describing the task was going to be played. The tape was used in order that the instructions would be consistent for all subjects in the experiment. The tape consisted of the following:

As you can imagine, this task involves a lot of basic skills—visual-motor coordination, perceptual ability, quick reaction time, and some concept-formation ability. These are the raw elements for many different kinds of operations; actually, almost any task you can think of requires some of them whether the task is a simple motor operation or an intellectual one. Any deficits in these fundamental operations would cause severe impairment in everyday functioning and would probably be immediately apparent. People who are proficient in this task are probably also successful in most of the motor tasks and intellectual operations that they undertake. Indeed, the skills which you have built up in doing everyday activities will probably help you to be successful on this task, since it taps them directly. If you do well, it is probably because these basic skills are so highly developed (Maracek & Mettee, 1972, p. 101).

The subject was then told that there would be one practice trial so that she might familiarize herself with the movements and get used to being timed. The experimenter told the subject that there would be a rest period halfway through the test. The rationale given was that it would offset fatigue. The subjects were told that during the rest period some groups (subjects) would get feedback (actually, all did). The practice trial was given, then the first ten trials. During the rest period, the
experimenter appeared to be adding up the scores. The experimenter then told the confederate (in the partner condition) the following: "Your score is fine. It is about average compared with all the people who have taken this test." The subject was told: "Very few people do this well on a ten trial average; usually people average several points lower than your score. So, overall, I'd say your score is very good; very few people get that high an average" (Maracek & Mettee, 1972). The experimenter shuffled the cards for a few more minutes so that the subject could reflect upon the feedback they had just received. Then the subject was administered the second ten trials (trial block II).

Results

Performance Data

A 2 x 3 (with the factors of FOS, no FOS and male partner, female partner and alone) analysis of variance of trial block I task data was performed and the results are presented in Table 2. A significant main effect for FOS was obtained. Those subjects who exhibited FOS imagery performed significantly better on the first trial block than those who did not exhibit FOS. No other main effects nor interactions reached significance.

Since there was a significant effect initially on trial block I data, an analysis of covariance was performed
### Table 2

An Analysis of Variance on Trial Block I Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A (FOS)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17.33</td>
<td>4.175*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Performance Condition)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AB</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05*
on trial block II with block I as the covariate. This was done in order to adjust for the trial block I differences. The adjusted second-half scores represent the degree to which performance changed differentially following success and thus constituted the main dependent measure. The results are presented in Table 3. There was a significant main effect for FOS. As can be seen in Table 4, as predicted, subjects not exhibiting FOS improved more than subjects exhibiting FOS following success feedback. However, partner condition had no reliable influence on subjects' behavior.

Additionally, subjects' behavior immediately following success feedback was examined. Change scores for subjects' performance on Trial 10 as compared to performance on Trial 11 were analyzed by a 2 x 3 analysis of variance. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 5. Only the FOS x Partner Condition interaction approached significance (p < .10). In accordance with predictions, subjects who exhibited fear of success imagery, showed greatest performance decrement in the male partner condition following success (see Table 6). However, subjects not exhibiting FOS, did not show so great a decrement in the male condition. Contrary to predictions, however, competition did not facilitate the performance of no FOS subjects. In fact, their performance was best when alone.
Table 3

Analysis of Covariance on Trial Block II Data with Trial Block I as the Covariate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A (FOS)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.987</td>
<td>5.152*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Partner Condition)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.634</td>
<td>1.688</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AB</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.448</td>
<td>1.496</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>.968</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (N - 2)</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .03
Table 4

Adjusted Mean Performance of Subjects Exhibiting FOS and Those Not Exhibiting FOS Imagery on Trial Block II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Adjusted Means for Trial Block II</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Absence of FOS</td>
<td>17.946</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imagery</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOS Imagery</td>
<td>17.083</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5

Analysis of Variance on the Change Scores from Trial 10 to Trial 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A (FOS)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13.63</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B (Partner Condition)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13.65</td>
<td>1.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AB</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>31.47</td>
<td>2.85*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>11.035</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .10
Table 6

The Effects of Success Feedback on Performance in Females Exhibiting FOS Imagery and Those Not Exhibiting FOS Imagery

Change Scores from Trial 10 to Trial 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Alone</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FOS</td>
<td>+2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No FOS</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>+1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Graph showing the change scores from Trial 10 to Trial 11 for females exhibiting FOS imagery and those not exhibiting FOS imagery.
Responses to the Anne Protocol

Table 7 presents the number of male and female respondents who exhibited fear of success imagery in their stories about Anne. There was a significant difference between the proportion of male and female subjects' responses to the Anne cue ($x^2 = 9.01, p < .01$ with 1 df). In their stories, 45% of the males responded negatively toward Anne and 26% of the females exhibited FOS imagery in their stories. The percentage of FOS stories by females is less than the 65% obtained by Horner in her initial study (Horner, 1968).

Discussion

Results of this study are consistent with Horner's findings in that they indicate that there is a difference between the performance of those who exhibited FOS and those who did not in an achievement related situation. The performance on trial block I of those who exhibited FOS imagery was greater than those who did not. There are several explanations for the higher rate of performance by females who exhibited FOS on the Anne protocol. First, Horner states (Atkinson, 1974) that her research suggests that females who exhibit FOS are generally brighter and more achievement motivated than the females who do not exhibit FOS. Thus, if this is a mediating variable, then it is not unreasonable to expect the FOS females to perform better before the feedback. One might hypothesize
Table 7

Number of Male and Female Subjects Exhibiting Fear of Success and Absence of Fear of Success Imagery in Stories Written to the Anne Cue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex of Subject</th>
<th>Fear of Success</th>
<th>Absence of Fear of Success</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
that the higher performance scores by FOS subjects on trial block I indicate that these females are more achievement motivated. Some informal observations conducted during the task portion of the study suggested that the reactions of the FOS and no FOS subjects toward the task were different. The females who exhibited FOS seemed to approach the task in a somewhat apprehensive and nervous manner. The females who did not exhibit FOS appeared to be more relaxed and unconcerned.

Performance on the second trial block indicates that the no FOS subjects improved more than the FOS subjects. One important factor that must be considered is the possibility of a ceiling effect upon performance levels. If this were a factor limiting the FOS subjects' performance on trial block II, then their failure to increase performance significantly could not be attributed to a lack of motivation, but rather to a physical limitation. However, most subjects were able to score several points higher on individual trials than the overall averages might suggest; thus, it is felt that a ceiling effect was probably not a factor limiting performance in this study. Further research might include a control group in order to establish norms for performance on this task. If it can be assumed that a ceiling effect was not operative, then these results may be viewed as supporting Horner's hypothesis. That is, FOS
subjects performed more poorly following success than did the no FOS subjects.

An alternative explanation of these findings is based on the relationship between need for achievement and fear of failure as proposed by Weiner (1966). Atkinson and Cartwright (1964) hypothesize that "the tendency to undertake an achievement related task is determined by the magnitude of the tendencies to approach or avoid that task, plus the magnitude of the previously aroused and persisting motivation" (Weiner, 1966, p. 340). The relationship of the motive to achieve success and the motive to avoid failure determines subsequent drives following goal attainment or failure of goal attainment. Weiner (1966) postulates that following goal attainment, the magnitude of both the persisting tendency to approach success and the persisting tendency to avoid threat of failure decreases. If one has a greater motive to achieve success and then experiences success, subsequent performance will decrease due to the reduction of the magnitude of the tendency to achieve success. Conversely, if one has a greater motive to avoid failure and then experiences success, subsequent performance will not decrease since there is no reduction in the motive to avoid failure. Weiner's hypothesis may be regarded as a possible alternative explanation to Horner's FOS theory. For this study, his hypothesis cannot be directly tested since a measure of avoidance of failure and achievement
motivation have not been taken nor has the relationship between fear of success and the motive to achieve been directly established. However, the theory can be postulated as a possible explanation in hopes that future research will consider the variables involved. FOS females would, according to Weiner's hypothesis, have a greater tendency to achieve success and after the feedback of success, the drive or motive is lessened. For the no FOS females, there is a greater tendency to avoid failure and the feedback indicating success does not lessen their tendency to avoid failure. In this study, since actual performance scores did not decrease for either group in the experiment, the hypothesis has not been directly substantiated. However, the no FOS subjects increased mean performance significantly more than the FOS subjects on trial block II of the task.

The partner condition had no significant effect upon the overall performance for either FOS or no FOS subjects. According to Horner's theory, females who exhibit FOS imagery on the Anne protocol should perform more poorly when in the presence of others and should perform better when alone. The partner conditions did have some effect if change scores between trials 10 and 11 are considered. Perhaps the results might have reached significance had the N for the respondents who did not exhibit FOS been larger. Also, the fact that the partner was not visible
to the subject may have reduced the salience of his/her presence.

The scored Anne protocols indicate that significantly more males than females expressed negative reactions toward Anne's success. If one assumes that the negative responses given by males represent their feelings toward female success in society, then it would seem that the hypothesized FOS motive in females is based upon a realistic assessment of cultural expectations.

An implication of the finding that more males than females react negatively toward Anne may be that cultural pressure is not the crucial factor which underlies the motive to fear success, but rather that it is the male's rejection of the successful female. Further research should perhaps focus upon the reactions of males toward successful females since the focus for societal change may lie more in changing males' attitudes toward females rather than attempting to eliminate FOS in females.

There was a sizeable difference between the percentage of female FOS respondents in Horner's study (65%) and the percentage of female FOS respondents in the present study (26%) (Horner, 1968). One possible explanation for the difference may be the effect of the women's liberation movement upon the way females perceive their role in society since the present study was conducted some seven years after Horner's. Another explanation may be that the subject pool
from which subjects were drawn in the present study differs significantly from that of Horner's. Horner presented the Anne protocols to females in "an outstanding Eastern women's college" (Horner, 1970, p. 63), which presumably had very high admission standards. In contrast, the present study was conducted at a state-supported institution which does not have such a discriminating admission policy. Horner's subjects were drawn from a selective sample; thus, they were likely to be more intelligent than the average college student. Horner has hypothesized that the more intelligent females are more likely to exhibit FOS (Horner, 1968).

In summary, these results indicate that the motive to fear success may predict the behavior of college women in achievement oriented situations. However, it appears that the effect of other variables, such as need for achievement and fear of failure may be important as well. Future research should be designed to explore these relationships more fully.
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Maracek, J., Nette, D. R. Avoidance of continued success as a function of self-esteem, level of esteem certainty,


Vita

Marcia D. Stern was born in Chicago, Illinois, on November 12, 1948. She graduated from Webster College, St. Louis, Missouri, in 1972 with a B. A. in Liberal Arts and elementary education. In January 1973, she entered the graduate program in community psychology at Florida Technological University.