Abstract

Horner's 1972 study showed fear of success (FOS) for women in high achievement motivation conditions. This study, which partially replicated Horner's, assigned 100 hundred male and female participants to a gender appropriate story completion prompt and randomly to competitive or non-competitive conditions. Results indicated that women's stories showed FOS themes significantly more than men's, women performed significantly poorer in cross-gender competition than in the noncompetitive condition, and today's men showed significantly more FOS themes than Horner's sample. The increase in FOS may be due to tension between career and family pressures for both men and women.

Horner (1972), cautioned that a glass ceiling exists for highly motivated, successful women in part because women internalize the belief that high achievement is incompatible with the feminine role. In her classic study, Horner observed the motive to avoid success significantly more often in women than in men. This motive to avoid success, which she referred to as fear of success (FOS), was evidenced by striking differences between men and women in their expectation for future success following high achievement situations. This was detected through differences in story completions between men and women in traditionally male high achievement motivation situations. Additionally, the motive to avoid success was exacerbated under competitive situations. The significant implication from Horner's study was that most highly competent and achievement motivated women in the late 1960s and early 1970s would choose to follow the traditional sex-role stereotype when faced with conflict between their feminine image and expressing their competencies and interests.

Because the motive to avoid success seemed to increase in competitive situations, attempts have been made to understand the link between women's sex-role attitudes and their performance both in the laboratory and in their daily lives. Peplau (1978) found that women with liberal attitudes have higher educational and career aspirations, rate themselves as more "intelligent," and have higher SAT verbal scores than women with traditional attitudes. Women with traditional attitudes performed better in noncompetitive situations and in team competition while those with liberal attitudes did better in individual competition. According to Peplau, FOS appears to represent sensitivity to sex-role implications of achievement setting and a concern that achievement behavior be manifested in sex-appropriate ways.

Using the five-factor model of personality, Pedrotti (1985) studied FOS, fear of failure (FOF), and test anxiety. His study suggested that women's temperaments, based on past experiences, may affect their attitudes toward succeeding. Pedrotti found that high FOS and FOF women were high in neuroticism and that women with low achievement tendencies were low in conscientiousness. However, behavior of complex interactions between personality factors and FOS, FOF, and test anxiety, more research is warranted.

In addition to relationship pressures, other researchers (Cuddy and Meade, 2004) have examined the role of negative selfbias in trait anxiety, which includes FOS and FOF. Although these self-bias tests have helped to identify trait anxiety which helps to explain the cognitive schemas people may use in performance situations. Thus, personality with high trait anxiety may be influenced by particular circumstances possibly because of motivational deficits. This may account for the high percentage of FOS in high achievement motivation situations noted by Horner (1972) and Hoffman (1977).

The present study hypothesized that (1) fewer incidences of FOS in today's women than Horner's, (2) more FOS themes in women than in men, and (3) poorer women's performance in cross-gender competition.

Participants

Participants were 100 undergraduates (55 women and 45 men, ranging in age from 17-26, with a mean age of 18.8 years) enrolled at a small, highly affiliative, liberal arts college in Northern California. All participants received credit in their lower-division psychology courses.

Materials

A questionnaire titled "Achievement Motivation Test for Women (Men)" was used in the study. The questions asked participants about their specific story prompt. Finally, the questionnaires were collected and the participants were debriefed.

Results

Although 50% of women in 2004 showed FOS in their responses compared to 35% in Horner's sample, there was no significant difference, $\chi^2(1, N = 155) = 1.851$, $p = 0.39$. As illustrated in Figure 1, female participants' story completion (M = 49.8%) showed significantly more FOS themes than male participants (M = 34.3%), $\chi^2(1, N = 150) = 5.32$, $p = 0.02$. Using a way ANOVA it was determined that female participants performed significantly poorer in cross-gender competition (M = 4.93) than in the alone condition (M = 5.86), F (4, 148) = 4.46, $p = 0.05$. See Figure 2. Lastly, Figure 3 presents the significant finding that 34.3% of male participants in this study showed FOS themes compared with only 11% of male participants in Horner, 1970, $\chi^2(1, N = 123) = 11.67$, $p < 0.01$.

Discussion

Although fewer women in today's sample displayed FOS than in Horner's study (1972), the difference was not significant. Despite the progress in women's rights over the last 30 years, a large number of women still fear success. As Milam (1997) so aptly observed, the traditional male-definition of success fails to integrate the realities of women's lives. Time constraints limit the ability for a woman to both have a successful career and a successful family. For this reason, many women may intermingle more traditional roles, which in turn would be reflected in the higher than expected rates of FOS. Few women can accept the unpalatable bargain they must make in order to work in those careers which have rules designed for men.

At the same time that women are showing increasing dissatisfaction with the corporate work world, many men are requesting "paternity" leaves and the same flex family time considerations as women. Men are demanding a life, too. So although the second hypothesis, that women's story completions would show more FOS themes than men's story completions, was supported, a surprisingly high number of men showed FOS compared to the men in Horner's (1972) sample. Are we, as California's current Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger feared, becoming "girly men?" The dual career family is forcing an increasing number of men to assume some of the traditional women-care giver roles.

Finally, female participants performed poorer than male participants in cross-gender competition, supporting our third hypothesis. The fact that women did not perform as well as men is consistent with the results of Inzlicht and Ben-Zeev (2000) in which females showed significantly poorer in high achievement motivation situations noted by Horner (1972) and Hoffman (1977).

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Reflections off the Glass Ceiling:
Women's Internalized Beliefs and Motivations

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