Sex-Role Orientation and Achievement Context as Determinants of the Motive to Avoid Success

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Seventy-two female high school students with cumulative GPAs of 3.0 or above were administered the Wellesley Role Orientation Scale and four verbal cues used to measure success-avoidant imagery in response to feminine competitive achievement in a variety of contexts. Results indicated that the arousal of success-avoidant imagery was partially a function of the role orientation (traditional vs. nontraditional) of the students and the context within which the success was presented. As hypothesized, nontraditionally oriented students generated fewer success-avoidant responses across cues than either moderate or traditionally oriented students. However, differences in the proportion of imagery across cues was carried by the differential responses of the nontraditional students, suggesting that the inhibition of achievement behavior among women may be differentially moderated as a function of the salience of the achievement context and their definitions of sex-role-appropriate success.

The concept of motive to avoid success (M-s), as postulated by Homer (Note 1), refers to a psychological barrier to achievement among women. Cast within the context of Atkinson's (1958) expectancy-value theory of motivation, M-s was originally conceived as an inhibitory tendency to achievement motivation stemming from concerns about the negative consequences of success. Using M-s to explain women's reluctance to engage in intellectually competitive achievement situations, Horner points out that the aggressive overtones of competition and success place these behaviors outside the realm of acceptable (and attractive) feminine activity.

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According to Homer's formulation, an individual's disposition to accept success as a reinforcing experience, enhancing self-esteem, is in part a function of how consistent this success is with his or her internalized standards and expectations, and stereotypic beliefs regarding sex-role appropriate behavior. Since the traditional American female sex-role stereotypes restrict the demonstration of leadership and competitive achievement behavior, Homer reasoned that "many achievement-oriented women, especially those high in the motive to avoid success, when faced with the conflict between their feminine image and developing their abilities and interests, compromise by disguising their ability and abdicating from competition in the outside world" (p. 64). Indeed, Horner demonstrated the existence of a motive to avoid success among able college women.

However, although M-s is defined as a relatively stable personality disposition acquired early in life, the extent to which its arousal is situationally determined has not been resolved. The results of a study by Schwenn (Note 2) indicate that women scoring high in the motive to avoid success changed their career aspirations toward more traditionally feminine occupations during their college years more frequently than women low in the motive to avoid success. It is interesting to note that those women who shifted their career aspirations in a traditionally feminine direction were either dating men who disapproved of nontraditional feminine role behavior or not dating at all. Such findings substantiate Horner's (Note 1) emphasis on fear of social rejection as a key factor in arousing M-s. Conversely, those women who maintained their nontraditional career aspirations throughout their college years were either engaged to or seriously dating men who were not opposed to or threatened by the female's success. These results suggest that when a woman's personal situation is such that negative valences are no longer attached to the success, the tendency to achieve may not be inhibited. Consistent with this interpretation are the findings of Hawley (1972), which indicate that the choice of "traditionally masculine" role orientation does not necessarily spawn fear of social rejection on the part of achieving women. These women reported that the significant men in their lives had a model of femininity not unlike the one to which they adhered. Since these nontraditionally oriented women viewed significant men as endorsing their lifestyle, it is difficult to characterize them as fearful of social rejection.

It then follows that a woman's sex-role orientation may be of critical importance in eliciting the motive to avoid success, since it would affect her perception of the appropriateness of success and its probable consequences. Success is defined by Horner (Note 1) as those outcomes which the individual herself labels as sex-role inappropriate.

The majority of research generated by the postulation of the motive to avoid success has utilized cues involving the success of a stimulus person of the same sex as the respondent in a competitive, traditionally masculine situation. In