Sex Role as a Mediator of Achievement in Task Performance

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Participants in a test of the influence of sex role on performance in a masculine task were 96 male and female undergraduates. Subject sex, norm (challenging or not challenging), and experimenter (male, female, or no experimenter present) were varied in a 2 × 2 × 3 design. When challenged, subjects worked more successfully in the presence of a female than before a male or with no experimenter present. Results support the hypothesis that the arousal of achieving tendencies may depend in part on the importance and conspicuousness of role cues. Implications for industrial performance and for future research are discussed.

Although 40% of American workers are women, psychologists have generally considered goal-directed (achieving) behavior the sole province of men. Research studying achieving behavior and the achievement motive usually examines only male subjects and does not attempt to generalize to women. Studies using women have often been unsuccessful in finding readily interpretable results (Karabenick & Marshall, 1974; Weiner, Frieze, Kukla, Reed, Rest, & Rosenbaum, 1971).

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While most men appear to have a readily identifiable achievement motive (the motive to approach success minus that to avoid failure), some research suggests that the achievement motive is overshadowed in women by the motive to avoid success (Horner, 1970, 1972). The motive to avoid success presumably springs from females' acquisition of the social value that success is inappropriate for themselves. Thus a woman who "might otherwise succeed" at a challenging task is led instead toward failure.

Horner (1972) suggests that rather than being present in all achievement-arousing situations, the motive to avoid success may be mediated by sex role. If success is distinctly unfeminine (and if femininity is valued), women may fear success in situations in which the norms for correct sex-role behavior are both conspicuous and important. Conversely, when such norms are neither obvious nor important, the motive to avoid success may not be strongly aroused, and a woman may meet a challenging situation with a relatively open attempt to succeed.

Horner did not extend her discussion to males directly. However, the argument may be offered that achievement is an approved masculine behavior in contemporary American society. The arousal of males toward achievement on an appropriately challenging task should be heightened by conditions in which sex-role prescriptions for success are conspicuous and important. Increased sensitivity to sex-role norms should result in male behaviors opposite to those expected from females.

Larwood, Zalkind, & Legault (1975) have attempted to define some of the conditions which intrinsically increase role awareness. They found that the check-cashing performance of both male and female bank tellers was reactive to sex-role prescriptions when the tellers faced customers of the opposite sex. Cross-sex dyads presumably served to make sex role both obvious and important to tellers, while same-sex dyads provided no such cues. In agreement with these investigators' "role salience" notion, we expected that subjects in the present study would more likely demonstrate appropriate sex-role behavior before members of the opposite sex (a condition of role salience), than before those of their own (a condition without role salience).

In consequence, we hypothesized that under challenging conditions women would more freely attempt success in the presence of a female observer. In the presence of a male, women's success would be inhibited by the salience of the societal proscription against success. Challenged men were similarly expected to be more successful before a female observer, who might arouse role prescriptions endorsing success, than before a male observer, who normally would not.

Two comparison baselines were employed in this study. In one (no challenge), subjects were given information indicating that success on the task would not be particularly valuable. It was expected that subjects who might otherwise