Sex-Role Orientation and Fear of Success: Clarifying an Unclear Relationship

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Inconsistencies in research concerning the relationship between fear of success (FOS) and sex-role orientation may be due to the use of sex-role inventories considering masculinity and femininity as endpoints of a bipolar continuum. The Bern Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1974), which treats masculinity and femininity as separate dimensions, was administered to 218 female undergraduates in addition to measures of FOS, achievement motivation, and performance. It was predicted that women who were androgynous (high feminine and high masculine) would evidence less FOS than women who were high masculine or high feminine. It was also predicted that women who embraced masculine characteristics (androgynous or sex-reversed) would be higher in both achievement motivation and performance than low masculine women. Both predictions were confirmed. Sex-reversed women were highest in FOS.

The concept of fear of success, defined as an expectancy that success in achievement situations will be followed by negative consequences, has been developed by Horner (Note 1) to account for inconsistencies in research on achievement-related behavior in women. Presumably, fear of success (FOS) inhibits successful competitive performance and is more common in women that in men, since successful competition is inconsistent with social norms concerning femininity.

Due to its potential for explaining achievement behavior in women, as well as its popular appeal, a number of researchers have attempted to specify characteristics which may differentiate women who are fearful of success from

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those who are not. In particular, Horner (1970, 1972, Note 1) has implied the existence of a relationship between sex-role orientation and fear of success, but the direction of this relationship seems unclear. On one hand it is asserted, "Anxiety aroused by the expectance of negative consequences of successful competition and by its aggressive overtones is assumed to be most prevalent in the most able or highly motivated women who are competing against men, particularly if they are doing so in male-dominated fields" (Horner, 1970, p. 65). This suggests that fear of success might be most likely to occur among highly achievement-motivated, masculine, nontraditionally sex-role-oriented women.

On the other hand, Horner (1972) has observed, "Most feminine women when faced with a conflict between their feminine image and expressing their competence or developing their abilities and interests adjust their behavior to their internalized sex-role stereotypes... In order to feel or appear more feminine women disguise their abilities and withdraw from the mainstream of thought, nontraditional aspirations, and achievement in our society" (p. 67). This would seem to suggest that FOS should be more common among achievement-avoiding, feminine, traditionally sex-role-oriented women.

Results of studies attempting to determine the relationship between sex-role orientation and fear of success have proved inconsistent (see Zuckerman & Wheeler, 1975; Tresemer, 1976; for a review of many of these). For example, Caballero, Giles, and Shaver (1975) argued that FOS should be more likely among ambitious, nontraditional women. They found, with a sample of women aged 24 to 40 years, that high FOS women were less traditional in their conception of appropriate behavior for males and females and held more positive attitudes toward the women's movement than did the no-FOS women. In contrast, O'Leary and Hammack (1975) hypothesized that traditional sex-role-oriented women should show greater FOS than nontraditionally oriented females, and reported results confirming their hypothesis. Nontraditionally oriented women generated fewer success-avoidant responses across cues than either moderate or traditionally oriented women. Additional investigations (e.g., Depner & O'Leary, 1976; Peplau, 1976) have either failed to find a relationship between sex-role orientation and FOS, or, as in a study by Makosky (1976) found that although high FOS women rated a home and family more important and a professional career less important than did no-FOS women, they also considered themselves less feminine than did no-FOS women.

One difficulty with past studies relating sex-role orientation to fear of success lies in the use of sex-role inventories treating masculinity and femininity as two endpoints of a single bipolar continuum. Persons have been considered as masculine or feminine, active or passive, traditional or nontraditional; operationally, an individual cannot be both. As a result of the use of such sex-role inventories, persons have been divided into sex-typed or sex-reversed categories and the existence of a group to which neither label applies has not been considered. Recently developed scales designed to measure the extent to which