Adolescents' Fear of Social Consequences of Academic Success as a Function of Age and Sex

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The Fear of Success Consequence Scale (FOSC) was used to assess adolescents' fears of potential social consequences of academic success in three dimensions, i.e., negative social reaction, positive peer reaction, and increased pressure and responsibility for continuous success. Subjects were 360 students in early adolescence (grades 7–9) and mid-adolescence (grades 10–12) in three urban British Columbia areas. Two hypotheses were supported: (1) that fear of academic success is higher among early adolescents than among mid-adolescents; (2) that girls generally have higher fear of academic success than do boys. Significant sex differences were found among early adolescents but not among mid-adolescents. While general sex differences were consistent with Horner's prediction, the findings of lower fear of success consequences among older adolescents than among younger ones, and the absence of significant sex difference among mid-adolescents, were contrary to Horner's prediction. Possible explanations for these findings are considered. Suggestions for further research are mentioned.

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INTRODUCTION

Horner (1968, 1972) postulated that the motive of avoiding success was a prevalent and stable disposition among women. According to her, females tend to avoid success in achievement situations because of their fear of social rejection and criticism and their fear of losing culturally defined femininity. Horner reported the presence of fear of success (FOS) imagery among 65% of college women compared to 8% of college men. However, Horner's TAT-type projective method has recently been criticized by many researchers (e.g., Griffore, 1977; Zuckerman and Wheeler, 1975) for its over specificity in the measured context (i.e., academic success in a medical school) and its overgeneralized implications. As Horner's critics have pointed out, many studies using the projective measure have failed to yield results consistent with her hypothesis.

The present study investigated the functions of age and sex among adolescent students in success-related fears. Both supportive and contradictory findings have been reported for Horner's (1968, 1972) hypotheses that fear of success would be more prevalent among adolescent females than among adolescent males and that fear of success among females would increase with age as they are increasingly exposed to the socialization process. These hypotheses were supported in an unpublished study by Horner and Rhoem (1968) and in studies by Dalsimer (1973) and Walton (1975). However, some studies found only limited support for Horner's findings (e.g., Banks 1979; Kimball and Leahy 1976).

Contradictory findings on the age factor have also been reported by other researchers (e.g., Jackaway, 1974; Brown et al., 1974; Romer, 1975). In a study by Monahan et al. (1974), FOS imagery decreased with age among both boys and girls between 10 and 16 years of age. It can be concluded, then, that research evidence for Horner's postulate on age differences is quite weak.

The findings on sex difference are not consistent with Horner's prediction. For example, Lewis-Beck (1979) found a significant sex difference among grades 5 and 6 students, but reported the absence of any significant sex difference when the FOS imagery score was corrected for verbal fluency. The absence of sex difference has also been reported by other researchers (e.g., Hawkins and Pingee, 1978; Levin, 1979; Romer, 1975).

Objective measures of FOS (e.g., Good and Good, 1973; Pappo, 1983; Zuckerman and Allison, 1976) have been used by an increasing number of researchers to replace the Horner measure, which has been questioned as to both validity and reliability (e.g., Condry and Dyer, 1976; Ward, 1978). It