

THE INFLUENCE OF 'FEAR OF SUCCESS' AND 'NEED FOR ACHIEVEMENT' ON THE VOCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS OF MALE AND FEMALE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract

Fifth year high school students responded to questionnaires measuring need for achievement and fear of success and indicated their future occupational and educational aspirations. The female students were found to aspire to less demanding occupations than the male students and both motivational constructs predicted vocational aspiration.

Résumé

Les étudiants de la cinquième année dans les écoles secondaire ont répondu aux questionnaires concernant "Le Besoin de Réussite" et "La Peur du Succès". Ils ont indiqué ce qu'ils désirent comme formation professionnelle. Il était évident que les étudiantes ont des aspirations moins élevées que les étudiants. Toutes les deux constructions du mobile ont prédit les aspirations professionnelles.

As greater numbers of women enter the Canadian workforce it has become increasingly more important that they receive vocational counselling and support as they consider their occupational future. Epstein and Bonzaft (1974) have shown that irrespective of ability level, there is a tendency for males to report higher occupational aspirations than females. In their study, women chose to do post graduate work less frequently than men and when they did choose post graduate training, they did so in the area of teaching while men chose to do so in the more prestigious professions of medicine, law and engineering.

In order to understand more fully why such differences in occupational aspiration have occurred and are still occurring, such motivational construct as Need for Achievement and Fear of Success have been studied. Within the academic-vocational field, the Need to Achieve has proven to be a useful and stable predictor of vocational aspiration for men (Atkinson & Feather, 1966). For women however, it has not been a valid predictor of vocational aspiration (French & Lesser, 1964). Horner (1972) has suggested that intellectual competency, aggressivity and independence are incompatible with societal expectations of femininity. Therefore, for women, there may be an expectancy that success in business or prestigious vocations will bring with it negative consequences in terms of femininity. Her own work (Horner, 1968, 1972) has borne out this suggestion. She has

demonstrated that considerably more women than men show 'Fear of Success' (FOS) and that this motivational construct is a predictor of what women will and will not do. In her original studies, women high in FOS did not compete aggressively with men. Later findings (Horner, 1978) showed that when wives who indicate FOS imagery find themselves at a professional choice point which could increase the success gap between themselves and their husbands, they get pregnant. This Horner refers to as 'anticipatory success pregnancy'. These are but two examples that demonstrate women's responses to the stress that can accompany success. While Horner's work has strongly suggested that the FOS phenomenon is one that affects women more than men, other studies have questioned this (Crealock, 1977). There is also some question as to whether the FOS phenomenon has the same predictive validity for persons other than college students. Gaskell (1978) found that female high school students do show ambivalence about occupational and educational aspirations and femininity. In her study attitudes towards women's liberation and power scales were consistently related to aspirations even when social class and academic achievement were controlled.

The present study is an attempt to compare the vocational and educational aspirations of male and female high school students and to discover whether 'fear of success' and 'need for achievement' scores can predict vocational aspiration.

METHOD

Subjects

Forty-one female and twenty-four males enrolled in the fifth year of their Ontario secondary school program participated in the present study. All students attended a private Catholic high school in a predominantly middle class area. The sample comprised the total number of fifth year students available for testing who remained in school for the entire academic year.

Procedure

Two questionnaires were administered to all students in one large group session during the fall term. They included the following tests designed to measure need for achievement and fear of success:

- A. The Need for Achievement subtest of the Jackson Personality Research Form (PRF). The items reflect a student's attitude towards hard work with a high score suggesting strong need for achievement motivation.
- B. Fear of Success Cues. These are similar to those used by Horner (1968). Each student was asked to write two stories based on cue statements that represented success in either traditional or non-traditional role occupations. The traditional role cues were "The results of the Christmas exams indicate that Tom has come first in his engineering class" and "The results of the Christmas exams indicate that Mary has come first in her nursing class." Non-traditional cue statements reversed the names of the protagonist which resulted in statements with Mary succeeding in engineering and Tom in nursing. Thus each student wrote one story about John and one story about Mary in either traditional or non-traditional roles. The questionnaires were distributed on a random basis to both male and female students with equal number of traditional and non-traditional cues being administered to males and females. The questionnaires were ordered so that the cue for the male protagonist was first fifty percent of the time. The stories were scored according to Horner. FOS was considered present when the response to the cue statement contained evidence of actual negative consequences to the protagonist because of his/her success, concern or anxiety about possible negative consequences, bizarre consequences, denial of the cue or a suggestion that the cue did not represent success in a really meaningful manner.

At the end of the academic year an information sheet was distributed to all students who had participated in the testing the previous fall. Information was collected on vocational or

educational plans for the following year. In addition, grades for the present year were obtained from the office of the principal.

RESULTS

The Need for Achievement subtest was scored according to the test description. Students scoring above the mean were considered high on NACH and students scoring below the mean were considered low on NACH.

Fear of Success was scored as described above. There were no significant differences shown in the frequency of FOS imagery among the subjects to traditional versus non-traditional cues nor to female versus male protagonists. So the data were grouped together. FOS imagery was present in sixty three percent (63%) of the female respondents and in forty-one percent (41%) of the male respondents.

The vocational and educational aspirations of the students were grouped into six categories ranging from going out to work (category 1) to entering the professions (categories 5 and 6). Table one indicates the categories and the percentages of males and females who chose each. Categories one through three and four through six were grouped together for later analyses. Categories were grouped in this manner because it was felt that choosing to go to university or not was one of the most important decisions a high school graduate makes in terms of his or her present attitude and future life style.

TABLE 1
Vocational Plans of Male and Female Grade 13 Students

Vocational Aspiration	Female n = 41	Male n = 24
1. Work	20%	4%
2. Repeat grade 13	3%	4%
3. Community college	10%	4%
4. B.A.	51%	58%
5. Social work, nursing (B.Sc.N.)	17%	0%
6. Engineering, law, business administration	0%	29%

In terms of percentages shown, the most obvious differences between males and females occur at the upper three and lower two categories. Females are more likely to aspire either to work or to attend a community college than are males. Males, on the other hand, more frequently aspire to a profession than do females. Approximately half of the male and female group planned to enrol in a B.A. program at university.

Final grades for males and females averaged 70.33 percent and 72.34 percent respectively. These means were not statistically significant and suggest that male and female vocational aspirations do not differ because of differences in academic achievement.

The question that now arises is whether FOS and NACH can predict differences in vocational aspirations among males and females. Table 2 shows the relationship between FOS imagery and vocational aspirations.

TABLE 2
The Relationship between FOS Imagery and Vocational Aspiration for Male and Female Students

		Male			Female		
		Vocational Choice		Total	Vocational Choice		Total
		1 - 3	4 - 6		1 - 3	4 - 6	
FOS	Present	8%	33%	41%	14%	49%	63%
	Absent	13%	46%	59%	17%	20%	37%

Chi-square analyses of these data show a significant difference in vocational choice when FOS is present in females ($X^2=2.44$; $p<.05$); but no significant difference for males ($X^2=.007$; ns). However, the difference is not the usual direction (Horner, 1972). In this study females who indicate FOS imagery are more likely to aspire to a university education than are females who do not exhibit FOS imagery. Previous work has indicated that women of high ability who also indicate a Fear of Success will handle their anxiety by choosing vocations or educational experiences that minimize the likelihood of success in a business or professional sense. In this study, women who showed FOS were more likely to choose a university career than were women who did not show FOS.

Table 3 shows the relationship between Need for Achievement and vocational aspiration.

TABLE 3
The Relationship between NACH and Vocational Aspiration for Male and Female Students

		Male		Female	
		Vocational Choice		Vocational Choice	
		1 - 3	4 - 6	1 - 3	4 - 6
NACH	High	0	50%	14%	51%
	Low	13%	37%	17%	17%

Chi-square analyses for these data show significant differences for both the female ($X^2=6.6$; $p<.01$) and male ($X^2=20.6$; $p<.001$) subjects. Students with high scores on the need for achievement test are more likely to aspire to a university education than are students low in NACH.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The present findings indicate that female students continue to aspire to less demanding and less prestigious vocational and educational alternatives than do male students regardless of academic achievement. While an equivalent

number of males and females aspire to a general university program, there are marked differences in their likelihood to aspire to professions or to non-university endeavours. Where females did choose professional training they consistently did so in areas that are culturally acceptable for women (nursing and social work). These findings may be influenced in part by the sample since the Catholic church has tended to stress a traditional service role for women. However, regardless of the sample bias, the data do suggest that female students are continuing to choose occupations that are consistent with a traditional female role. While this has often been interpreted as an avoidance of conflict about success, it may also reflect a reality approach to what is meant by success for many women. Women have enjoyed success in interpersonal activities in both the home and the work place and thus in choosing professions that focus upon these activities, they are often maximizing their opportunities to be successful in quite fulfilling occupations. In fact, society may be reaching a state where success is defined in terms of satisfaction and caring as well as in financial or power terms.

Need for Achievement measures predicted vocational aspiration for both groups. This is consistent with previously mentioned results for men (Atkinson & Feather, 1966) but not consistent with results for women. Again vocational category groupings may have influenced the results. However it may be that the seventies have allowed women to view achievement more positively and so NACH may function more directly as a motivational variable for both men and women, especially within accepted vocations.

A large number of men and women showed FOS imagery in this study. It would appear that Fear of Success is a pervasive influence in our society and though many are strongly motivated to achieve, there is an accompanying concern about the value of success. It may also be time for us to take a second look at the kinds of imagery that indicate Fear of Success motivation. Both fear of social rejection and questioning the value of success in narrow business terms may be quite realistic for today's students. Certainly the utility of the present definitions of FOS and success must be questioned in terms of their claim to predict vocational aspirations.

These data have several implications for guidance counsellors. One certainly is that we must be careful in encouraging female students into more demanding educational programs simply on the basis of academic achievement. While it is fashionable now to suggest that women who have good grades should consider medicine rather than nursing, or business administration rather than secretarial science, it is obvious that

vocational decisions are influenced by many variables. Both male and female students seem to be questioning the value of success in deciding between a seemingly prestigious professional program and other essential attributes of self concept. On the other hand it is important that counsellors be aware of the influence of such motivational variables as need for achievement and fear of success on vocational aspirations. To the extent that knowledge is strength, the more a student knows about himself or herself in terms of self-motivation, the better able he or she is to make appropriate vocational choices. Helping students understand and reconcile conflicting motives and aspirations in order to match ability, personal attitudes and aspirational level as well as possible, presents a difficult challenge to all guidance and vocational counsellors.

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