

Fear of Success in Dating Couples¹

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A study of 91 college-age dating couples explored the relationship between women's fear of success and characteristics of their boyfriends. No relationship was found between women's fear of success and any of seven measures of men's sex-role attitudes. Boyfriends of women with high fear of success were more advanced in school and scored higher on SAT math than other men, but did not differ in college grades or SAT verbal scores. There was a tendency for women high in fear of success to anticipate problems in their relationship due to differences in intelligence or to their own desire for independence. It is suggested that boyfriends do not affect the strength of women's underlying motive to avoid success but can arouse the motive in specific situations. There was also a lack of relationship between women's fear of success and measures of their own sex-role attitudes and achievement.

Matina Horner's (1970, 1972) concept of "fear of success" has fast become one of the most popular explanations of the achievement problems faced by women (Tresemer, 1974). Horner suggested that in America femininity and individual achievement are seen as two desirable but mutually exclusive goals. The psychological implication of this contradiction in cultural values is that women who are motivated to achieve in intellectual or professional domains may experience guilt, anxiety, or ambivalence. Such women may fear that successful attainment, especially in traditionally masculine fields, may lead to social rejection or loss of femininity.

The publication of Horner's (1970) initial research on fear of success (FOS) precipitated an avalanche of research. Yet major gaps in the research on

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FOS remain. Although Horner indicated that the "attitude of male peers toward the appropriate role of women . . . appears to be a most significant factor in arousing the motive to avoid success" (1972, p. 169), this possibility has not been systematically explored. Horner's support for this speculation comes from a small pilot study of Radcliffe College women. Women with low FOS tended to report having dating partners who supported their academic success. Women with high FOS more often reported that men in their lives discouraged their career aspirations. (No statistical tests were reported.) Anecdotes from these women suggested that in couples where the male supported the woman's achievements, there was often a tacit understanding that he was the intellectual superior in the pair.

From a social-psychological perspective, opposite-sex relationships may serve two major reference functions (cf. Kelley, 1965) relevant to women's achievement. First, the sex-role attitudes of male peers may set norms of acceptable feminine conduct. Femininity is not an objective fact, but rather a socially defined construct. A woman whose boyfriend encourages her to pursue a Ph.D. should more easily define such activities as acceptable for her and consistent with being feminine. Consequently, while men with traditional views of sex roles may limit women's achievements outside the home, men with nontraditional views may be powerful supports for new roles for women (cf. Tangri, 1972).

Second, boyfriends may serve a comparison function in defining acceptable levels of success for individual women. The fact that women may be discouraged from excelling does not mean that they are expected to be incompetents or failures. The key issue is how women perform relative to significant others, notably men. The traditional norm of male superiority (Mead, 1949, pp. 300-301) dictates that just as a man should be taller than his girlfriend, so too he should exceed her in intellectual or professional achievement. As a result, boyfriends may set limits on the intellectual attainments of women. The woman whose boyfriend is intellectually mediocre cannot perform very successfully herself without threatening his relative superiority. In contrast, the woman who has an outstanding partner has a much greater range of acceptable achievement open to her. She may be highly successful without jeopardizing her relative position. Thus a woman's fear of success may be affected by her boyfriend's ability as well as by his attitudes.

A large-scale study of opposite-sex relationships provided an opportunity to investigate FOS in dating couples. A central question concerned the relationship between a woman's FOS and such characteristics of her dating partner as his sex-role attitudes and ability. Of related interest were possible links between FOS and the level of intimacy and satisfaction in the relationship, and the extent of problems related to intelligence. Finally, links between the woman's FOS and her own sex-role attitudes and achievements were explored.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were participants in a 2-year study of dating relationships among college students.³ Couples were recruited by letters mailed to a random sample of 5,000 sophomores and juniors, half men and half women, at four colleges in the Boston area, and by advertising on campus. Both members of 231 couples took part in the project. During the summer 1972, all couples were invited to attend a series of three experimental sessions. Ninety-one couples who attended the session at which FOS was assessed constitute the sample for this study. They were paid for their participation.

The modal couple was a sophomore woman dating a junior man. The mean age was 21.2 years for men and 20.0 years for women. As a requirement of participation in the larger study, at least one member had indicated that the couple was "going" together; the mean length of going together was 14 months. About half the respondents were raised as Catholics, a quarter as Protestants, and a quarter as Jews, reflecting the religious composition of Boston-area colleges. All except one male and one female respondent were white. Approximately 65% of the women and 70% of the men planned on some graduate education (masters degree or higher).

Procedure

Fear of Success. FOS was assessed during mixed-sex testing sessions held in a small auditorium. Subjects came to the session with their dating partner, but were seated separately in the auditorium. At the beginning of the hour-long session, a female experimenter administered a set of five verbal cues. The FOS cue came third in the set. For females, the cue read, "Diane has just received word that she was one of three students in the state to get a perfect score on her LSAT (Law School Admissions Test)." For males, the same cue with the name "Tom" was used. The instructions and timing were identical to those employed by Horner (1968), and were designed to create a neutral (nonarousing) testing condition.

The law school cue was scored according to Horner's (1968) criteria with additional specifications (Peplau, 1973) about responses not discussed by Horner. Following Horner, FOS was scored "present" if any FOS imagery was present, or "absent." (The terms *high* and *low* are used as synonyms for *present* and

³Additional discussions of the Boston Couples Project are presented in Peplau (1973), Rubin and Mitchell (1976), and Hill, Rubin, and Peplau (1976).

absent.) Each story was scored independently by two trained, graduate-student raters, one male and one female. Coders were in agreement on 86% of the women's stories and 88% of the men's stories. In cases of disagreement, the stories were discussed and a joint resolution reached for the final FOS score.

Questionnaire Measures. As part of the larger study of dating relationships, both members of each couple independently completed identical versions of a 40-page questionnaire concerning their background, attitudes, and dating relationships. The questionnaire contained several measures of sex-role attitudes (Peplau, 1973). A 10-item Sex-Role Traditionalism scale asked subjects to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement with statements such as "Women could run most businesses as well as men could" and "In marriage, the husband should take the lead in decision-making." (Coefficient alpha for the scale based on responses of member of 91 couples was .83 for women and .81 for men.) Another question asked students to rank their personal preferences for four marriage options: remaining single or having a marriage in which the wife has a full-time career, works part time, or is a full-time housewife. Other questions assessed support for the goals of the women's movement.

The woman's perception of her boyfriend's attitudes was assessed by asking her to indicate his degree of support for the women's movement and his preference for the four marriage options. A projective, sentence-completion measure assessing perceptions of men's reactions to women's achievement (Pleck, 1973) was administered to both men and women. Finally, a measure of sex-role stereotyping asked respondents to indicate what percentage of men and of women have each of 10 characteristics such as "warm," "gentle," "competitive," or "ambitious."

Measures of achievement and ability included self-reports of college grade point average and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores, as well as plans for graduate study. Participants also rated themselves and their partners on adjectives including *intelligent*, *creative*, and *self-confident*.

Questions assessing intimacy in the relationship included ratings of closeness, self-disclosure, probability of marrying the partner, and actual length of dating. A 9-item Love Scale (Rubin, 1970) assessed attraction to the partner. Each partner indicated "how satisfied you are with your relationship." Finally, included in a larger set of questions about problems, participants indicated the extent to which "differences in intelligence" and "my desire for independence" are "likely to lead to difficulties in your relationship during the next year."

RESULTS

The majority of women responded positively to the cue about Diane's outstanding achievement. FOS imagery was present in the stories of only 30% of the women. FOS was found in a somewhat higher proportion (44%) of the men's

stories about Tom's achievement.⁴ These results differ from the rates of FOS reported by Horner (1972), but are consistent with Tresemer's (1974) finding that rates of FOS were higher for men than for women in 14 of 22 studies reviewed.

Boyfriend's Attitudes and Achievement

Women's FOS was not significantly related to any measure of boyfriends' sex-role attitudes or women's perceptions of men's attitudes. For instance, boyfriends of women high in FOS were no more traditional in their sex-role attitudes than boyfriends of women low in FOS (mean Traditionalism score was 29 in both groups). Boyfriends of high and low FOS women did not differ in their preferences for career wives or full-time homemakers ($\chi^2 = 2.9, p > .4$). No relationship was found between the women's perception of her partner's support for the women's movement or his marriage preference and her own FOS. Similarly, FOS was not related to men's or women's scores on a projective measure assessing the extent to which men are perceived to react to women's achievement with hostility or threat versus support or approval.

Concerning measures of the boyfriend's ability, women with high FOS were dating men who scored significantly higher on the quantitative part of the SAT (mean 650 versus 606, $t = 2.1, p < .05$). The woman's FOS was not, however, related to any of seven other measures of male ability including SAT verbal scores and college grades, nor to differences between the man's and woman's SATs or grades. Finally, there was no significant relationship between the woman's FOS and her ratings of her partner's creativity, intelligence, or self-confidence.

Although women with high FOS did not differ from other women in their own year in school, they dated men who were approximately a year ahead of the boyfriends of women with low FOS ($t = 2.5, p = .02$). As a result, the difference between the man and woman's year in school was significantly greater for high FOS women than for low FOS women ($t = 2.5, p = .02$).

Characteristics of the Dating Relationship

Fear of success was not related to either the woman's or the man's reports of intimacy in the relationship. *T* tests found no significant differences in reports of closeness, self-disclosure, likelihood of marrying this partner or length of dating between couples where the woman was high versus low in FOS. Nor did

⁴Analyses similar to those presented in this report failed to find any significant correlates of male fear of success. Nor was there any relationship between the fear of success score of the woman and that of her boyfriend ($\chi^2 < 1, p > .5$).

FOS relate to the partners' Love Scale scores or to their ratings of satisfaction with the relationship.

FOS was associated, however, with concerns about intelligence and independence in the relationship. Women with high FOS were more likely to anticipate that "differences in intelligence" might lead to difficulties in their relationship during the next year ($\chi^2 = 5.3, p = .08$). Half the women with high FOS indicated that differences in intelligence might lead to problems, compared to 29% of women with low FOS. Boyfriends of women with high FOS also tended to view intelligence as a potential source of problems ($\chi^2 = 4.9, p = .09$). Women with high FOS tended to anticipate that "my desire for independence" might lead to problems ($\chi^2 = 4.6, p = .10$). Boyfriends of these high FOS women were significantly *less* likely to view their own male "desire for independence" as problematic ($\chi^2 = 14.8, p < .001$). Only 32% of the men dating high FOS women were worried about independence, compared to 73% of men dating low FOS women. One possibility is that in a desire to establish their own independence, women with high FOS communicate greater tolerance for independence to their boyfriends.

Woman's Attitudes and Achievement

Results of *t* tests indicated that women's FOS was not significantly related to any of eight measures of their own sex-role attitudes⁵ or achievements. Women with high FOS had a mean Traditionalism score of 25 compared to 24 for women with low FOS ($t = -.11, p > .5$). Nor did the two groups differ in their support for the women's movement, or their preference for the four marriage alternatives ($\chi^2 = .80, p > .5$). Further, FOS was not related to the woman's SAT scores, college grades, or self-ratings of intelligence, creativity, and self-confidence. Women with high FOS were neither more nor less likely to plan on a graduate degree.

An interesting relationship was found, however, between FOS and women's sex-role stereotypes.⁶ Participants indicated what percentage of men and women had each of 10 traits. Half were traditionally desirable masculine traits (adventurous, acts as a leader, ambitious, aggressive, and competitive); half were traditionally desirable feminine traits (gentle, aware of feelings of others, cooperative, expresses tender feelings, warm). *T* tests found no significant differences in the ratings of men made by women with high versus low FOS. However, high FOS women gave significantly lower ratings to women on both

⁵Several checks for curvilinearity also failed to find a systematic relationship between fear of success and sex-role attitudes.

⁶No relationship was found between the woman's fear of success and her boyfriend's sex-role stereotypes.

masculine and feminine traits than did low FOS women. High FOS women indicated that fewer women were adventurous ($t = 2.9, p = .005$) and ambitious ($t = 1.9, p = .06$). In addition, high FOS women indicated that significantly fewer women possessed feminine traits of being gentle ($t = 2.9, p < .005$), cooperative ($t = 2.6, p = .01$), and expressive of tender feelings ($t = 2.0, p = .05$). Since high and low FOS women differ in their evaluations of women but not of men, these findings do not simply reflect a generalized response bias. Rather, they suggest that women with high FOS view other women as less likely to have desirable traits traditionally associated with either men or women. A final question concerned the extent to which respondents believed that sex differences were due to "learned, cultural factors" versus "inherited, biological factors." Women with high FOS rated cultural factors as less important than did women with low FOS (mean of 7.0 versus 7.8 on 9-point scale; $t = 2.0, p = .05$).

DISCUSSION

This study has found few links between FOS and characteristics of college women or of their dating partners. Before considering theoretical explanations for these results, two methodological issues deserve mention. First, all women in this sample were in a dating relationship. Specific characteristics of a boyfriend may be less important than the simple fact of whether or not a woman has a boyfriend. Comparisons of dating and nondating women might find differences in rates of FOS or in the relationship between FOS and male attitudes. Second, a serious limitation of Horner's measure is its uncertain reliability. Although intercoder agreement is typically high, little is known about the reliability of scores either across a set of cues or over time. Low reliability of the instrument is one possible explanation of our failure to find many significant relationships between FOS and other variables.

Do Boyfriends Arouse Women's Fear of Success?

Interpreting our finding that women's FOS was not related to their boyfriends' attitudes, and related to only a few measures of male ability requires a closer examination of Horner's theory. Horner (1970, 1972) makes a central distinction between the existence of an underlying motive to avoid success, and the arousal of this motive. FOS is seen as a "stable characteristic acquired early in life" (1968, p. 22); the existence of FOS is presumably fairly constant over time. Only when FOS is aroused by some aspect of the situation does it actually affect behavior. For instance, a competitive achievement situation may arouse a woman's FOS, which in turn may impair her intellectual performance. In contrast, a noncompetitive situation might not arouse FOS, in which case FOS

would not affect behavior. In Horner's view, boyfriends do not determine the presence of FOS, but rather are a major source of arousal of the assumed motive.

Unfortunately, data demonstrating a link between the woman's FOS score and characteristics of her boyfriend would *not* provide information about the arousal of FOS. Since FOS is typically measured in neutral, nonarousing settings, cue responses indicate individual differences in the presence or absence of the underlying motive. Thus the appropriate interpretation of a relationship between women's FOS and characteristics of boyfriends would be either that (a) men affect the presence of the underlying motive to avoid success or (b) women with high FOS select or attract different sorts of dating partners than do women with low FOS. In this study, the finding of no relationship between women's FOS and boyfriends' attitudes suggests that male attitudes do not affect the presence of FOS in women. Further, while it seems reasonable to speculate that women with high FOS might prefer partners with liberal sex-role attitudes, there is no evidence that they are in fact more likely to have such partners. Our finding that women's FOS was related to men's year in school and SAT math scores is consistent with the interpretation that women with high FOS seek partners with high status or ability. Since FOS does not relate to other measures of men's ability, however, it appears that high FOS women are often no more nor less successful than other women in attracting high-achieving partners. In short, we find little evidence that men's attitudes create FOS in women or that FOS plays a central role in the selection of dating partners.

Although boyfriends may not affect the presence of FOS, it is likely that they can arouse a preexisting motive. However, the impact of men on the arousal of FOS is probably situation-specific. If a college couple takes a course together, the male's presence in the classroom may arouse the woman's FOS about performing at the top of the class. At other times, when the couple collaborates on a joint project, or when the woman works alone, the male's attitudes may have no effect on the arousal of her FOS.

The possibility that women with high FOS may be particularly concerned about situations that arouse FOS is suggested by certain questionnaire data. Women with high FOS were more likely to anticipate that "differences in intelligence" and their own "desire for independence" might lead to problems in their relationship. Findings suggesting that high FOS women may select boyfriends who have an advantage in terms of education or ability might be viewed as a strategy for preventing intellectual competition. Epstein (1971) and Holmstrom (1972) report that married dual-career couples often use such means for avoiding intellectual rivalry. Further research is needed to determine if boyfriends actually do arouse women's FOS and, if so, under what circumstances.

Fear of Success and Sex-Role Attitudes

Recently Alper (1974) suggested that women with traditional versus liberal sex-role orientations do not represent dynamically homogeneous groups.

Women in both groups may be divided into those who are ambivalent or unambivalent about their femininity. Alper's four categories may help explain why no relationship was found between women's FOS and their own sex-role attitudes. Women with high FOS, who may be viewed as conflicted about femininity, can be either traditional or liberal in their beliefs about proper roles for men and women.

Alper suggests that women in these four categories will show different patterns of achievement behavior. For instance, in Horner's original study, low FOS women who performed well in intellectual competition may also have had liberal sex-role attitudes. Perhaps those women whose performance was most adversely affected by competition were both high in FOS and traditional in their beliefs. Empirical support for these speculations comes from a laboratory experiment (Peplau, 1973) using the 91 couples described in this report. When working alone on an intellectual task, women who combined high FOS with traditional attitudes were the highest scoring of the four groups of women. In contrast, when working in competition with their boyfriend on an intellectual task, traditional high FOS women were the lowest scoring of the four groups. In a time of changing attitudes about sex roles, researchers interested in FOS may do well to assess sex-role attitudes as well as motives.

Fear of Success and Sex-Role Stereotyping

A frequent element in FOS imagery is derogation of the successful woman (Horner, 1970). Subjects in the present study described Diane as a "sneaky bitch," "unconcerned about other people," and "not very attractive." Results of the stereotype task indicated that high FOS women characterized women as lower on both desirable masculine and feminine traits. These data raise the question of whether high FOS women may rate *all* women less positively, not just high-achieving women. An examination of responses to cues about less successful women would provide valuable information on this point.

How Much Difference Does Fear of Success Make?

Results of this study indicate that FOS has little impact on women's dating relationships, or on their own achievement as measured by grades or career plans. Even in those cases where FOS was significantly related to other variables, the actual size of these relationships was small. For instance, women's FOS accounted for only about 5% of the variance in boyfriends' SAT math scores.⁷ Tresemer's (1975) critique of research on sex differences is applicable to

⁷For dichotomous variables such as fear of success, the point biserial correlation coefficient (r_{pb}^2) provides a measure of the percentage of variance explained (cf. Tresemer, 1975). The relationship between women's fear of success and boyfriends' SAT math scores is $r_{pb}^2 = .05$. The strongest of all fear of success correlations is with rating women as gentle on the stereotype task ($r_{pb}^2 = .09$).

studies of FOS: More attention should be given to the magnitude of the effects of FOS.

Further research is also needed to compare the utility of FOS and other measures of sex-role orientation. In this study, the Sex-Role Traditionalism scale was often more useful than a measure of FOS. For example, FOS was unrelated to women's attitudes or achievement. In contrast, women's Traditionalism scores were significantly correlated with such measures as plans for graduate education ($r = .22, p < .05$), preference for four marriage alternatives ($r = .45, p < .001$), and self-ratings of intelligence ($r = -.24, p < .05$). The woman's sex-role attitudes were also correlated with characteristics of her boyfriend. Women with traditional attitudes were likely to date men with traditional attitudes ($r = .48, p < .001$) and with more traditional marriage preferences ($r = .36, p < .01$). Our data suggest that for many purposes, sex-role attitudes may be a more useful measure than fear of success.

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