An Evaluation of Fear of Success in Female and Male Athletes and Nonathletes

John M. Silva III
University of North Carolina

Since Horner's (1968, 1972) study of fear of success (FOS), considerable research has been published evaluating the potential relationship of FOS to gender and performance variables. Horner (1968) defined fear of success for women as a learned disposition resulting from social rejection and loss of femininity when successful behavior involved aggression or competition against males. This fear of succeeding was hypothesized to facilitate an avoidance of achievement and achievement-oriented activities. Using a projective measure derived from the Thematic Appreciation Test, Horner hypothesized and found that women had a higher FOS than men, and that higher FOS women perform poorer under competitive conditions than low-FOS women. Using an objective measure of FOS, Zuckerman and Allison (1976) also found that females had higher FOS scores than male respondents. The authors found that both females and males who scored high on the Fear of Success Scale (FOSS) performed more poorly than subjects scoring low on the scale in a competitive, achievement-oriented situation. Females and males scoring high on the FOSS also attributed success more to external factors and failures more to internal factors than did subjects scoring low on the FOSS. These results tend to support Horner's (1968) contention that fear of success can inhibit achievement-related performance. Additional research (e.g., Hoffman, 1974; Zuckerman, Larrance, Porac, & Blanck, 1980) has failed to confirm previous findings relating FOS differences to the gender of the respondent.

This ambiguity about the nature of a possible relationship between FOS and gender has also pervaded the literature in sport psychology. Several authors have speculated that FOS could be a significant obstacle to females who compete in sport (Casher, 1977; Del Rey, 1977; Harris, 1979; Ogilvie, 1979a, 1979b). The major focus of an early paper by Ogilvie (1968) centered on various clinical observations of factors related to FOS in elite athletes. The terminology and examples in this article tended to focus on fear of success in male athletes. More recently, Ogilvie (1979b) has indicated that FOS may be a potent obstacle to women athletes because of the sex role conflict created by a female's success in sport.

Gilbert and Williamson (1973) have published a detailed chronology of unfair and abusive treatment of women athletes. The authors maintain that suppressive acts against women athletes influence and facilitate a perception that sport behavior is inappropriate for women. Research by Snyder, Kivlin, and Spreitzer (1975) supported Gilbert and Williamson's assertions. Snyder et al. found that various sports are
FEAR OF SUCCESS

heavily stereotyped as inappropriate for women by both men and women. This stigma of unsuitability was expressed by 65% of the female nonathletes participating in their study. Harris (1979) has also noted the potential for a sex role conflict and has indicated that the choice between traditional sex role compliance or athletic achievement often places the female athlete in a position where success is realistically feared since it accentuates this socialization conflict.

Because high FOS scores had been related to poorer performance in both females and males (e.g., Zuckerman & Allison, 1976), and given that considerable speculation exists in the sport psychology literature on FOS as an inhibitor to females competing in a traditionally male-dominated social setting, the present study was designed to measure FOS in both female and male athletes and nonathletes.

Method

Subjects

Subjects for this study were 193 female \((n = 91)\) and male \((n = 102)\) undergraduate students aged 18-23 years. The nonathletic group was comprised of 64 female and 29 male students enrolled in general psychology courses. These subjects were screened to ensure that they had not been involved in any type of intercollegiate athletics. The athletic groups were comprised of 27 female and 73 male athletes from the sports of basketball \((n = 12\) women; \(n = 15\) men), field hockey \((n = 15\) women), ice hockey \((n = 30\) men), and soccer \((n = 28\) men). All subjects were informed that they were being administered an objective, standardized personality measure and that the results would be made available to them if they so desired. Participants signed an informed consent form and were tested in small groups of 12-20 subjects.

Instrument Selection

The FOSS was selected for administration because it has been used often in FOS research, and as noted by Cherry and Deaux (1978) and Zuckerman and Wheeler (1975), several inadequacies exist in projective measures of FOS. Internal reliability of the FOSS has been reported to range from .69 to .73. Concurrent validity measures of the FOSS with Mehrabian’s Achievement Motivation Measure has indicated a significant negative relationship between FOSS and achievement motivation (Zuckerman & Allison, 1976). Scores on the FOSS measure can range from 27-189; higher raw scores indicate a greater fear of success. Additional information on the construction and validation of the FOSS can be found in Zuckerman and Allison (1976).

Results

Because cell sizes in the present study were unequal and nonproportional, a regression analysis was used to orthogonalize the data. The dependent variable was a subject’s score on the FOSS measure and the independent variables were a subject’s gender and athletic/nonathletic affiliation. The results of the regression analysis in-