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## The Relationship between Success Modeling and Fear of Success in College Students

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### Abstract

This study examined fear of success (FOS) in relation to biological sex and success modeling. Students ( $N = 108$ ) from a small, liberal arts college completed self-report measures of FOS, success modeling, and demographic factors. It was hypothesized that (1) no sex differences would be found for FOS and (2) success modeling would be negatively related to FOS. Results indicated that female participants reported higher levels of FOS than male participants and that success modeling by parents but not by peers was negatively related to FOS. Thus, despite recent societal evidence of equitable achievement, women may still experience higher levels of FOS than men. Also, parental success modeling may be more influential than peer success modeling among college students.

*Keywords:* fear of success; success modeling; college students; sex differences

### The Relationship between Success Modeling and Fear of Success in College Students

Fear of success (FOS) is based on the expectation that being successful will have negative consequences. Horney (1936) proposed that FOS stems from the belief that being successful will result in dislike and resentment from others and thereby loss of affection and approval. Horner (1972) specifically conceptualized FOS as resulting from the gender role stereotype that being competitive is a positive trait in men, but a negative trait in women, resulting in a fear among women that being successful may result in true or perceived loss of femininity. This belief causes an inner conflict between the desire for success and the fear of challenging a social norm about who can achieve success or what it means to achieve success (Tomkiewicz & Bass, 1999). Horner (1972) conceptualized FOS as resulting from a stable, enduring, internalized motive. Researchers since have been divided in considering FOS a stable personality disposition of early origin, versus a situationally determined factor (Bremer & Wittig, 1980).

Ultimately, FOS may involve avoiding success and sacrificing personal goals. Those high in FOS may minimize their chances of success by avoiding competition, minimizing their efforts, belittling themselves, or trying to appear less intelligent and capable than they are. Research has linked high FOS to diminished performance, especially in competitive situations (Horner, 1972; Zuckerman & Allison, 1976). Therefore, this concept is particularly relevant to college students among whom FOS can result in avoidance of achievement in competitive academic environments. FOS could explain why some students maintain educational and career goals beneath their abilities or engage in self-sabotaging academic behavior. It is important to examine correlates of FOS, as they have the potential to influence success and achievement.

Whereas Horner (1972) proposed that gender was a main factor contributing to FOS, we find it important to reexamine FOS in light of important historical and societal changes that have occurred. For example, in recent times, the majority of associate's, bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees were earned by female students (U.S. Department of Education, 2010) and the number of businesses owned by women is increasing (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Compared to the more male-dominated society in which Horner conceptualized FOS, achievement among male and female workers and students within society has become more equitable. Thus, it may be that FOS among women has decreased in proportion to the increased numbers of women with advanced degrees and positions of power within the workforce (Santucci, Terzian, & Kayson, 1989; Tomkiewicz & Bass, 1999). One possible explanation of women's increased achievement is offered by McCrea, Hirt, and Milner (2008), who found that women value effort more than men and are therefore less likely to engage in self-handicapping behaviors. Another possible explanation is that the growing number of female graduates and employees has increased the amount of real or perceived social support available to successful women and thereby decreased the "trade-off dilemma" that characterizes FOS (Ivers & Downes, 2012, p. 385).

Many researchers have focused on sex and gender as predictors of FOS, seeking to question or confirm Horner's (1972) conceptualization of FOS as more prevalent in female participants. However, the results have been inconsistent (Levine & Crumrine, 1975). Like Horner (1972), Santucci et al. (1989) found that female students experienced more FOS than male students in the college setting. Ishiyama and Chabassol (1984) found the same pattern among high school students. Conversely, Mandal (2008) found that FOS was more prevalent among college-age male students than female students. Similarly, André and Metzler (2011) found that male elite athletes endorsed more FOS than female elite athletes. Finally, some studies

found no significant differences between male and female participants on scores of FOS in an academic setting (Levine & Crumrine, 1975; Thompson, 1990).

In order to better understand FOS and to promote success-seeking behaviors among students, it is necessary to examine factors other than sex and gender that may predict FOS more accurately and consistently. Considering the emphasis on gender roles and social stereotypes in definitions of FOS, it seems plausible that FOS is related to social modeling of success. Few studies have specifically examined the effect of success modeling on FOS. The idea that peer and parental success modeling is a predictor of FOS has been implied, but rarely examined by extant research. The present study aims to contribute to the limited knowledge base on this topic.

The concept of success modeling was inspired by three studies in which Balkin (Balkin, 1986; Balkin, 1987; Balkin & Donaruma, 1978) examined the influence of family and friends on FOS scores in female and male college students. Levels of FOS among male students were negatively correlated with college enrollment of peers and parents (Balkin, 1986; Balkin & Donaruma, 1978). Likewise, levels of FOS among female students were negatively correlated with college enrollment of peers (Balkin, 1987). To our knowledge, no other research has examined the relationship between parental and peer success modeling and FOS. However, the importance of success modeling has been implicitly acknowledged. For example, Thompson (1990) found that the surprisingly high FOS scores of a subsample of South African high school students could be accounted for by the attitudes and behaviors of their peers. Interviews with participants revealed that successful students were physically harassed by their peers, thereby establishing a negative model of success.

The present study examined sex differences and success modeling in relation to FOS in college students. We operationalized success modeling as the number of one's parents and peers

“who have gone, are going, or are expecting to go to college” and the number of one’s parents and peers believing that college is “admirable and important” (as reported by the participant). The findings of this study may be useful for creating programs to promote success-seeking behaviors because, unlike biological factors such as sex, success modeling can be modified. Interventions utilizing exposure to successful role models could help decrease FOS, and in turn promote success-seeking beliefs and behaviors. Our specific hypotheses were that (1) based on greater equity in achievement between male and female workers and students in current society, there would be no difference between male and female participants in levels of FOS, and (2) for both female and male participants, lower levels of success modeling (meaning lower levels of college enrollment and college interest of peers and parents) would predict higher levels of FOS.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The sample consisted of 108 undergraduate students from a religiously-affiliated, private liberal arts college. Participants were recruited from introductory psychology courses. Seventy-one participants were female, 36 were male, and one declined to state. The sample was 56.5% Caucasian, 10.2% African American, 10.2% Hispanic, 3.7% Native American, 13.9% Asian, and 4.6% other or multiple ethnicities (0.9% declined to state). 3.7% of participants described their family’s socioeconomic status as lower, 11.1% as lower-middle, 26.9% as middle, 45.4% as upper-middle, and 12% as upper (0.9% declined to state). The sample was 58.3% freshmen, 15.7% sophomores, 18.5% juniors, 4.6% seniors, and 1.9% other (0.9% declined to state). All participants were between 18 and 24 years of age ( $M = 18.76$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ).

### **Measures**



**Demographic factors.** Biological sex, age, major, year in school, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status were assessed using a six-item demographic questionnaire. Biological sex, year in school, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status were closed-response items. Age and major were open-response items.

**Fear of success.** Fear of success was assessed with 14 items from Zuckerman and Allison's 27-item Fear of Success Scale (1976). The original scale correlates positively with Horner's (1969) projective measure of FOS, showing good convergent validity. The original scale has also shown acceptable levels of reliability, yielding coefficient alphas of .69 among male participants and .73 among female participants (Zuckerman & Allison, 1976). In the current study, participants completed the full 27-items, which yielded a coefficient alpha of .60. Item analysis was conducted to eliminate items negatively affecting internal consistency, and only the remaining 14 items ( $\alpha = .77$ ) were used in subsequent analyses. Of the 14 items, three were keyed positively (agreement reflecting high FOS, e.g., "When competing against another person, I sometimes feel better if I lose than if I win."), while the remaining 11 were keyed negatively (agreement reflecting low FOS, e.g., "Achievement commands respect."). All items followed a 7-point Likert scale response format (1 = strong disagreement, 7 = strong agreement). Possible scores on the 14-item FOS scale range from 14 to 98, with higher scores indicating higher levels of FOS. In the present study, actual scores ranged from 30 to 77 ( $M = 52.81$ ,  $SD = 11.06$ ). The 14-item version of the FOS scale has not been examined in relation to other measures of FOS.

**Success modeling.** We assessed success modeling with items inspired by a series of studies done by Balkin (Balkin, 1986; Balkin, 1987; Balkin & Donaruma, 1978). The survey consisted of five items, four of which assessed the four types of success modeling (college enrollment of peers, college interest of peers, college enrollment of parents, and college interest

of parents), while the fifth item asked participants to clarify who they would be thinking about when answering the parent success modeling items. In the present study, 88% of participants indicated that they were thinking about their biological mother and father, 5.6% indicated they were thinking about their single mother, 1.9% indicated they were thinking about their stepmother and father, 2.8% indicated they were thinking about their mother and stepfather, and 0.9% indicated they were thinking about their two adoptive parents (0.9% declined to state). The peer college enrollment item asked “Of your peers, how many have gone, are going, or are expecting to go to college?” and the peer college interest item asked “Of your peers, how many believe that going to college is admirable and important?” Response options for the peer success modeling items were: none, few, some, about half, many, most, or all. The parent college enrollment item asked “Of your parent(s), how many have gone, are going, or are expecting to go to college?” and the parent college interest item asked “Of your parent(s), how many believe that going to college is admirable and important?” The response options for the parent success modeling items were: none, one, or both.

### **Procedures**

The following procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the university where this study was conducted. Participants were presented with an informed consent form emphasizing that participation was entirely voluntary; they indicated that they had read and agreed to this form before beginning the survey. Each participant completed the surveys online in the following order: informed consent form, demographic questionnaire, Fear of Success Scale, and success modeling survey. The entire survey took approximately 10 minutes. Course credit in undergraduate psychology courses was offered as an incentive to participate. Each participant provided her or his name, email address, and course information in order to receive

credit. Participants ( $n = 7$ ) who failed to complete all items on the Fear of Success Scale were contacted individually via email and invited to complete the survey. Participant's identifying information was removed from the data file after these email invitations were sent and course credit was awarded. Statistical analyses were conducted with de-identified data.

### Results

The first hypothesis was not supported. FOS was correlated with biological sex,  $r(105) = .34, p < .001$  and a  $t$ -test revealed a significant sex difference in FOS within the sample. Female participants had significantly higher FOS scores ( $M = 55.61, SD = 10.47$ ) than male participants ( $M = 47.58, SD = 10.38$ ),  $t(105) = -3.76, p < .001$ . Cohen's  $d$  was 0.77, representing a medium to large effect size. No other demographic variables were significantly related to FOS.

The second hypothesis was partially supported. FOS was correlated with parent college enrollment,  $r(106) = -.19, p = .05$ . A simultaneous regression analysis including all four success modeling variables indicated that parent college enrollment was the only significant predictor of FOS (see Table 1). A separate regression analysis including parent college enrollment as the only independent variable showed that parent college enrollment explained 2.7% of the variance in FOS scores,  $F(1, 106) = 3.94, p = .05$ .

### Discussion

The present study investigated FOS using 14 items from Zuckerman and Alison's Fear of Success Scale (1976). Even though past research has shown sex differences in FOS based on socialized gender roles (Horner, 1972; Santucci et al. 1989), we hypothesized that the current sample would not show significant sex differences due to more equitable achievement between women and men within society (U.S. Department of Education, 2010; U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Nevertheless, biological sex was significantly related to FOS in the current sample, with

female participants scoring significantly higher than male participants. This is consistent with some early studies (Horner, 1972; Zuckerman & Allison, 1976) but inconsistent with more recent studies (Thompson, 1990; Mandal, 2008; André & Metzler, 2008). One possible explanation for this finding involves the difference between beliefs and behaviors. That is, although women may hold more negative beliefs about success, they may engage in similar success-seeking behaviors (such as pursuing higher education or owning a business) as men. These behaviors may be influenced by other beliefs, such as the value one places on effort (McCrea, Hirt, & Milner, 2008). It is also possible that the present sex difference was found due to characteristics of the sample. Because participants were recruited from a religiously-affiliated private college, it is possible that they were more likely to endorse traditional sex role stereotypes, resulting in higher FOS scores among female participants. This possibility suggests that FOS may be more prevalent among women only in certain segments of society.

Based on Balkin's (1978, 1986, 1987) findings, our second hypothesis was that higher levels of success modeling would predict lower levels of FOS. According to the correlation and regression analyses, parent college enrollment was the only domain of success-modeling related to FOS. Parent college enrollment negatively predicted FOS, meaning that having fewer parents who had gone, were going, or were planning to go to college was associated with having higher FOS scores. Parent college enrollment accounted for a small, but significant proportion of the variance in FOS. This offers insight into one situational rather than dispositional factor related to FOS.

Peer success modeling was unrelated to FOS. This suggests that parental modeling of success may be more influential in FOS among college students than peer modeling, which was not significantly related to FOS in this study. This is a surprising finding considering that the

strength of peer influence has been well-established in other areas, such as the decision to use drugs (Allen, Donohue, Griffin, Ryan, & Turner, 2003). One possibility is that peer influence was minimized within the present sample because the majority of participants were first-year college students. Thus, these students were in a transitional peer phase, leaving old friends and making new friends, and as a result may have experienced a temporary decrease in peer influence and a temporary increase in parental influence.

### **Implications**

Though societal evidence shows that achievement inequality has decreased in recent years, the present findings suggest that female college students may still be inhibited by higher FOS than male college students. Given the nature of the current sample, it may be that FOS is particularly prevalent among women in religiously or politically conservative circles.

Interventions highlighting successful female role models might help ensure that women are performing and achieving at their full potential. Furthermore, the predictive significance of parent college enrollment suggests that FOS is influenced by parents, but not by peers.

Therefore, success-promoting interventions should recognize the important role that parents play in modeling success-seeking behaviors for their children.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Caution should be used in generalizing the results of this study to populations other than that represented by the sample. Participants were recruited from a small, religiously-affiliated private school in a suburban setting and were mainly Caucasian, first-year students from two-parent, upper-middle class homes. Although the present study suggests that biological sex and parent success modeling were related to FOS within this population, it is possible that other correlates and predictors of FOS might be found within different or more diverse populations.

Because parent college enrollment was the only domain of success modeling predictive of FOS, and only accounted for a small amount of variance, it may be that FOS is more strongly related to personality factors than to environmental factors such as success modeling. It is possible that FOS (or a personality conducive to FOS) is genetically-influenced, since FOS was predicted by success modeling behaviors of parents, but not peers. However, it is also possible that parents are simply more influential than peers in terms of the gender roles and social stereotypes that one ascribes to. An explanation of FOS incorporating other personality factors could also help explain the inconsistent findings with regard to biological factors (i.e., sex). For example, future research could examine the relationship between FOS and the personality dimension of cooperation (typically construed as feminine) versus competition (typically construed as masculine) to bring clarity to the inconsistencies. Recent research has suggested that women and men may experience different types of fears about success, and have criticized existing FOS measures, including the scale used in this study (André & Metzler, 2011; Metzler & Conroy, 2004). Overall, the results of this study suggest that FOS may still be inhibitory for some groups within an academic setting and is worthy of continued research.

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Table 1

*Simultaneous Regression of Success Modeling on Fear of Success*

Success Modeling	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
Peer college enrollment	.06	1.13	.01	.05
Peer college interest	1.75	1.38	.14	1.27
Parent college enrollment	-3.89	1.95	-.22	-2.00*
Parent college interest	-1.91	5.59	-.04	-.34

\* $p < .05$