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**ABSTRACT**

Challenging Horner but following Berger and Luckmann, "female motive to avoid success" is interpreted as a normative response to social deviancy. Previous studies of this "motive" have analyzed male S's response to male success at activities typified for males but female S's response to female success at activities non-typified for females. This study establishes two conditions under which activities are defined as either typified for both male and female actors or typified for male actors only; 269 male and female S's respond to a TAT-type verbal cue depicting a successful female actor under one of the two conditions. Results show that fewer subjects report "female motive to avoid success" when the activity is defined as typified for both sexes than when it is defined as non-typified for women. When the activity is defined as typified for both sexes, sex of subject does not affect response and reports of the "motive" are few. When the activity is defined as non-typified for women, more male S's report "female motive to avoid success." Few females S's in either condition report the "motive." (Author)

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FEMALE MOTIVE TO AVOID SUCCESS: A PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIER OR A RESPONSE TO DEVIANCY?

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Session: Motivation and Mobility  
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Women do not typically become professionals or executives.

In an attempt to understand why women fail to achieve, Matina Horner (1968) studied female achievement motivation, analyzing stories written by women responding to a standard cue for "success-avoidant" imagery. Horner concluded that women suffer from a psychological problem, the "motive to avoid success." She argued that:

A psychological barrier exists in otherwise achievement-motivated and able women that prevents them from exercising their rights and fulfilling their potential. Even when legal and educational barriers to achievement are removed, the motive to avoid success will continue to inhibit women from doing 'too well'--thereby risking the possibility of being socially rejected as 'unfeminine' or 'castrating.' Unless we can find ways to prevent the motive from being aroused, our society will continue to suffer a great loss in both human and economic resources. (Horner, 1970, p. 72)

A number of questions may be asked with respect to the procedure Horner used and her interpretation of the results. Other attempted replications of Horner's study have questioned her findings (Levine and Crumrine, 1973; Luce, 1973) but not her procedure. It is the purpose of this study to offer an alternative explanation of her findings and to test this explanation by a modification of her procedure.

The procedure used by Horner required achieving undergraduates to write stories based on the following cue, with the women writing about "Anne" and the men writing about "John": "After first-term finals, Anne/John finds herself/himself at the top of her/his medical school class." Horner's findings are well known and frequently cited: The high-achieving men wrote stories containing achievement imagery, but the high-achieving women wrote stories containing "success-avoidant" imagery. She reported that 65% of this sample (Horner, 1970) and between 47% and 88% of subsequent samples (Horner, 1972) of women respondents wrote stories that indicated a fear

FEMALE MOTIVE TO AVOID SUCCESS: A PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIER  
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Introduction

It is a well-known fact that women, although constituting over 50 percent of the population in the United States, do not hold a proportionate number of positions of high power and prestige. There have been no women presidents of the United States. The 92nd Congress contained only two women senators and 12 women representatives (Parker, 1973). In 1972 there were no women governors (Council of State Governments, 1973); of the 500 largest U. S. cities, only four had women mayors (Delury, 1973). As women are not powerful in government, neither are they influential in business. Although 48% of all male workers are employed as proprietors, managers, professionals, or craftsmen, only 20% of all women workers are so employed. One percent of the engineers, 3 percent of the lawyers, and 7 percent of the doctors in the country are women. This should not be taken to mean that women do not actually contribute to the economy. On the contrary, 37% of all workers are women, but they swell the ranks of clerical, sales, service, and household workers. Over 62% of all women workers are so employed, as opposed to 22% of all male workers (U. S. Department of Labor, 1969).

The facts are clear. Women do not appear to achieve high positions in American society. Although large numbers of women participate in the labor force, they tend to assume roles requiring low levels of accomplishment.

of or a rejection of success for women.

Although Horner did not examine it, the motive to avoid success is associated with only certain types of success. That is, being female is not intrinsically at odds with being successful; indeed, certain arenas of success are reserved almost exclusively for women: nursing, elementary-school teaching, keypunching. The determination of what arena is appropriate for female success and accomplishment is largely a matter of historical and social definition. Medical school attendance, however, has not been considered an appropriate arena for female success, as the figures presented above document.

An alternative hypothesis to explain the difference between male response to male success and female response to female success may be derived from Berger and Luckmann's (1967) theory of role development. Berger and Luckmann argue that roles develop from habituated human activity. Habituated actions are those that are repeated frequently and cast into a pattern. The specification of what types of acts are to be performed by what types of actors is called typification. For institutionalization to occur, both actors and actions must be typified. Habituated actions which are reciprocally typified by types of actors are roles. The formation of roles is implied by institutionalization and "as soon as actors are typified as role performers, their conduct is ipso facto susceptible to enforcement" (Berger and Luckmann, 1967:74). Furthermore "social control is inherent in institutionalization as such, prior to or apart from any mechanism of sanctions specifically set up to support an institution." (Berger and Luckmann, 1967:55).

The Horner finding of female "motive to avoid success" need not be explained by reference to the personality characteristics of the respondents but rather by reference to the medical school, a social institution which takes it for granted that medical school attendance (a certain type of action) will be undertaken principally by men (a certain actor). Women attending medical school are therefore not actors of the appropriate type, are "deviant," and are hence subject to social control.

An alternative explanation for the Horner finding is that the women writing about "Anne" merely reported the internal and external social controls which would be experienced by such a deviant woman as "Anne" for attending medical school, let alone for succeeding at it. The men writing about "John," on the other hand, wrote about an actor engaged in socially appropriate behavior.

To test this alternative explanation, it will be necessary to compare the reactions of women to female success occurring in a situation where both action (such as attending a certain school) and actors (women) are typified, with the reaction of women to female success in a situation where neither are typified. This may be accomplished in two ways:

(a) by comparing female response to a female actor successfully engaged in typified actions (such as attending nursing school) with female responses to a female actor successfully engaged in nontypified actions (such as attending medical school); or (b) by comparing female responses to a female successfully engaged in an action (such as attending medical school) when such action is typified for females (institutionalized).

and when it is not (noninstitutionalized). The latter method was used, as it more directly permitted comparison with the Horner data.

Berger and Luckmann claim that the knowledge of social institutions is shared by all members of society, both men and women. If this is the case, then both males and females should report that actors engaged in institutionalized behavior will receive fewer sanctions than will actors engaged in noninstitutionalized or deviant behavior.

If it is assumed that "success-avoidant" imagery is equivalent to "social-control" imagery, we may generate the following four hypotheses:

- Hypothesis I                      Subjects' report of female success-avoidant imagery will be significantly less under the condition that specifies attendance of medical school as typified for women than under the condition that specifies such behavior as deviant.
- Hypothesis II                      Female report of female success-avoidant imagery will be significantly less under the condition that specifies attendance at medical school as typified for women than under the condition that specifies such behavior as deviant.
- Hypothesis III                      Male report of female success-avoidant imagery will be significantly less under the condition that specifies attendance at medical school as typified for women than under the condition that specified such behavior as deviant.
- Hypothesis IV                      If the institutionalization or noninstitutionalization of the role behavior is specified, then the difference between male report of female success-avoidant imagery and female report of success-avoidant imagery will not be significant.

#### PROCEDURE

To investigate the effect of specifying the institutionalization of female medical school attendance on the probability of men and women's

using female success-avoidant imagery in story production, a modified replication of Horner's original study was conducted. The modification was to include in the story cue a statement which specified the institutionalization or noninstitutionalization of female medical school attendance by giving figures allowing the respondent to calculate whether the behavior was typified for females. Furthermore, to investigate the extent to which "motive to avoid success" is a social phenomenon, rather than a psychological one, men as well as women were asked to complete a story about a woman.

Data were collected from two small western colleges, one a private residential school and the other a public commuter school.

Seventy-seven sophomore men and women enrolled in an undergraduate sociology course at the private college and one hundred and ninety-two men and women enrolled in required undergraduate English and social problems courses at the public college served as subjects for this study. They were recruited on the basis of their instructors' willingness to have the instrument completed during class time. All students present the day of administration were requested to write a short story based on the cue provided them and were given ten minutes to complete the task; there were no refusals.

Self-report data on students' sex, year in college, and grade-point average were collected at the same time. Subjects completed stories based upon one of the following two cues, which were randomly assigned



by individual at the private college and randomly assigned by class at the public college.<sup>1</sup>

- (a) All Anne's classmates in medical school are men. After first term finals, Anne finds herself at the top of her class.
- (b) Half of Anne's classmates in medical school are women. After first term finals, Anne finds herself at the top of her class.

The first cue is consistent with present role-typifications that define female medical-school attendance as deviant and noninstitutionalized. The second cue sets the condition for the institutionalization of female medical-school attendance.

Female success-avoidant imagery was coded according to Horner's system (Horner, 1970:59) which noted either the presence or absence of serious concern about success, defined as:

- a. negative consequences because of the success;
- b. anticipation of negative consequences because of the success;
- c. negative affect because of the success;
- d. instrumental activity away from present or future success, including leaving the field for more traditional female work such as nursing, school teaching or social work;
- e. any direct expression of conflict about success;
- f. denial of effort in attaining the success (also cheating or any other attempt to deny responsibility or reject credit for the success);
- g. denial of the situation described by the cue; or
- h. bizarre, inappropriate, unrealistic, or nonadaptive responses to the situation described by the cue.

Two coders scored the stories, with each story being coded by both coders. Eighty-five per cent of the stories received like codings by the two coders scoring independently. Cases of disagreement were resolved by joint discussions between the coders.

## FINDINGS

### Success Avoidant Imagery and the Institution of Medical School

A significantly higher proportion of all respondents wrote stories containing success-avoidant imagery when "Anne" was depicted as the only female in an all-male medical school than when she was depicted as having female classmates. (Table 1) This is consistent with Horner's results and confirms the first hypothesis of this study. The manipulation of typifying "Anne's" attendance at medical school did not produce a rate of success-avoidant imagery as low as that of "John's" success story, however. On the other hand, it does suggest that the production of success-avoidant imagery is conditional upon the subject's perception of the appropriateness of the behavior for the actor in question.

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[ Table 1 about here ]  
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Table 1.

Percent of subjects writing stories containing  
success avoidant imagery under two conditions

	Success Avoidant Imagery	
	Present	Absent
<u>Medical school attendance</u>		
Typified for women (N = 142)	40%	60%
Deviant for women (N = 127)	54%	46%

$$\chi^2 = 4.41 \text{ (1df) } p < .05$$

(Public college  $\chi^2 = .79$ ; Private college  $\chi^2 = 4.63$  ( $p < .05$ ).  
This is the only case where differences occur.)

Female Respondents' Use of Success-Avoidant Imagery

Considerably fewer female subjects used success-avoidant imagery in this study than in Horner's studies. Horner (1970:65) reported that 65% of the women in her study wrote stories containing success-avoidant imagery, whereas only 38% of the women in this study wrote such stories. Contrary to expectation, there was no significant difference between female use of success-avoidant imagery when responding to the two different cues. However, a slightly higher proportion of the women writing about "Anne" as the only women in medical school used success-avoidant imagery.

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[ Table 2 about here ]  
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Table 2.

Percent of female subjects writing stories containing success-avoidant imagery under two conditions

	Success Avoidant Imagery	
	Present	Absent
<u>Medical school attendance</u>		
Typified for women (N = 66)	35%	65%
Deviant for women (N = 49)	40%	60%

$\chi^2 = .30$  (n.s.)

(Public college:  $\chi^2 =$  n.s.; Private college  $\chi^2 =$  n.s.)

The stories produced by these women suggest a possible explanation for the difference between Horner's Mid-western and Eastern data and the present study's Western data. The San Francisco Bay area, where the two colleges are located, has been a center of feminist activity for the past several years. This activity may have created a climate in which female success has become consistent with new role typifications. This interpretation is consistent with figures recently released by the American Council on Education (1973) which document a rise in women's aspiration for graduate degrees between 1967 and 1971. In 1967, 38.6% of female freshmen aspired to graduate degrees; the comparable figure for women for years later is 50.2 per cent. Nearly 65% of the stories written by the women reflected this orientation implicitly, and six per cent contained explicit references to the Women's Movement:

Implicit: "She redoubles her efforts and continues her education specializing perhaps in a field of particular interest like Gynecology, and becomes a successful doctor. She continues her career despite eventually getting married and having a family."

Explicit: She is very proud of this achievement--She becomes much more aware of the Women's Liberation Movement and the goals they are working toward. She felt she was contributing something to the movement by her very presence in Medical School, as were the other women in her class."

The stories admitted that a successful woman must overcome tremendous odds; they did not, however, report that a successful women must avoid success. Typical success stories reported that "Anne" will overcome the obstacles she encounters, confident that this is appropriate behavior for women. These stories more closely approximated those written by the

male subjects about "John" in the original Horner study.

Male Respondents' Use of Success-Avoidant Imagery

Specifying the institutionalization of female attendance at medical school had a powerful effect on male reports of female success avoidance. Table 3 shows that a significantly higher percentage of male respondents reported female success-avoidant imagery when "Anne" was depicted as the only woman in medical school than when she was depicted as having female classmates.

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[ Table 3 about here ]  
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Table 3.

Percent of male subjects writing stories containing success avoidant imagery under two conditions

	Success Avoidant Imagery	
	Present	Absent
<u>Medical school attendance</u>		
Typified for women (N = 76)	46%	54%
Deviant for women (N = 78)	72%	28%

$$\chi^2 = 15.12 (p < .01)$$

(Public college:  $\chi^2 = 2.85 (p < .10)$ ; Private college:  $\chi^2 = 3.07 (p < .10)$ )



According to Berger and Luckmann (1966:55), a society will, to a greater or lesser degree, punish those who exhibit deviant role behavior. The one woman in the all-male medical school is clearly a deviant, whereas the woman in the balanced mixed-sex medical school is not. It is interesting to note, therefore, the kinds of stories the male respondents wrote about the exceptionally bright but deviant woman. Explanations for Anne's success in the all-male environment tended to cluster around her sexuality: she is sexually distracting to her male classmates or professors, she "buys" her success with her body, she is tricky, and she received help from her classmates for sexual reasons:

"Anne is a woman of exceptional design. In mathematical terms, Anne can be described as 38-24-36, all nice and even figures. With evil eyes focused on Anne, who could watch the teacher?"

"From the beginning she was popular, especially with the boys, for she had a perfect body. This distracted most of the boys in the class."

"Since Anne was not really smart, but was a beautiful specimen of the female sex, all the men tried to win her affection by helping her cheat on the exams."

"She probably was not exceptionally bright, but quite pretty. She began to use her virtues in trying to make as many friends with the male students. With the help of her friends, she succeeded in reaching the top of her class."

Men tended to see that a successful person cannot be a woman; success and femininity are mutually incompatible:

"At first she felt pretty good about it, but one morning shortly thereafter she noticed her body was becoming muscular and unfeminine and that she was developing a five o'clock shadow. Anne realized what was happening to her--by overachieving she was denying her true feminine self."

While 17% of the males responding to the "deviant" female cue attributed Anne's success to sex, only 10% of the males responding to the "institutionalized" female cue attributed her success to sex; fifty percent of the males

responding to the "institutionalized" female cue perceived "Anne" to be competent:

"Anne is a very good student. If she continues at her present rate, she will become a fine doctor, an asset to her society, and very successful financially."

The male respondents were apparently not reporting their own fear of success; they were reporting their perception of a social construction of reality which does in fact make being female and being successful in the professions incompatible. The fact that the women did not seem to share this social construction may reflect the "consciousness-raising" activities of the Women's Liberation Movement of the past few years activities which have changed social constructions of reality for some members of society but apparently not for others.

#### Differences between the Sexes

For the "all-male-classmates" condition, the sex of the respondent was significant in determining the frequency of female success-avoidant imagery. A higher percentage of male respondents reported stories with success-avoidant imagery than did female respondents. The investigator has suggested that this difference may be explained by the Women's Liberation Movement, which characterizes the successful woman as symbolic and somewhat "heroic"; this awareness may be felt by the women respondents but not by the male respondents.

Table 4.

Percent of male and female subjects writing stories containing success avoidant imagery under two conditions

	Success Avoidant Imagery	
	Present	Absent
<u>Medical school attendance</u>		
Typified for women		
Male respondents (N = 76)	46%	54%
Female respondents (N = 66)	35%	65%

$$\chi^2 = .72 \text{ (1df) n.s.}$$

Deviant for women		
Male respondents (N = 78)	72%	28%
Female respondents (N = 49)	40%	60%

$$\chi^2 = 9.86 \text{ (1df) (p < .01)}$$

In the balanced mixed-sex condition, however, there was no difference between the sexes in reporting success avoidance. This is what would be predicted by the theory of a social construction of reality. Thus, if both male and female attendance at medical school is institutionalized, all members of society react alike to the situation, without regard to sex.

#### Subsequent Content Analysis of the Stories

In an attempt to account for the differences in the use of success-avoidant imagery by the male and female subjects, the investigator subsequently performed a content analysis of the stories. Seven categories of story type were established: pure success, pure failure, role conflict, success as a result of instrumental sex, Women's Liberation, nursing school, and neutral. The distribution of stories by type, sex of respondent and type of story cue is given in Table 5

A review of this table shows that when "Anne's" attendance at medical school was defined as deviant, twice as many men as women wrote stories containing "pure failure" themes, but twice as many women as men wrote stories containing "pure success" themes. Under the same condition more men than women attributed "Anne's" success to her use of instrumental sex whereas more women than men attributed her success to the pursuit of Women's Liberation.

On the other hand when "Anne's" attendance at medical school was defined as appropriate, the only difference between male and female respondents was that a small proportion of men attributed "Anne's" success to her

Table 5.

Percent distribution of story type by sex of respondent and story cue

Cue	Private College Sex of Respondent		Public College Sex of Respondent		Total Sex of Respondent	
	Male (N=25)	Female (N=14)	Male (N=53)	Female (N=35)	Male (N=78)	Female (N=49)
<b>I. "All Anne's classmates in medical school are men. After first term finals, Anne finds herself at the top of her class."</b>						
<b>"Success Avoidant" Imagery story types</b>						
1. Failure	40%	7%	17%	14%	24%	12%
2. Conflict	16	50	38	17	31	26
3. Instrumental Sex	32	-	9	3	17	2
4. Nursing school	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Other story types</b>						
5. Success	12	43	26	54	22	51
6. Women's liberation	-	-	2	9	1	6
7. Neutral	-	-	8	3	5	2
<b>II. "Half of Anne's classmates in medical school are women. After first term finals, Anne finds herself at the top of her class."</b>						
<b>"Success Avoidant" Imagery story types</b>						
1. Failure	18%	19%	22%	22%	21%	21%
2. Conflict	14	6	13	16	13	14
3. Instrumental sex	14	-	6	-	8	-
4. Nursing	-	-	6	-	4	-
<b>Other story types</b>						
5. Success	55	75	48	52	50	58
6. Women's liberation	-	-	2	8	1	6
7. Neutral	-	-	4	2	2	1

instrumental use of sex while a slightly smaller proportion of women related it to the Women's Movement.

The effect of the story cue in determining what type of story was written is most noticeable in the category of role conflict. Whereas the rhetoric of women's liberation demands that women be given equal access to high-prestige occupations, research shows that women presently engaged in such occupations suffer from role conflict (Poloma, 1972; Garland, 1972; Rapoport, and Rapoport, 1972; Holmstrom, 1972). Berger and Luckmann's theory would predict a reduction in role conflict once female participation in such occupations is typified. Stories of respondents were coded for role-conflict imagery, operationally defined as follows:

- (a) the presence within the story of two separately identified roles for Anne (such as student and girl friend, student and daughter)
- (b) the presence of serious concern about Anne's performance in one but not both of the roles. Such stories frequently may be identified by the writer's use of "but," "however," "on the other hand."

Table 5 shows that there was a higher probability for both men and women to write role conflict stories when "Anne" was presented as the only woman in medical school than when she was presented as having female classmates. This is consistent with Berger and Luckmann's theory. Role conflict was not perceived as an inherent liability for women with professional identities; rather it was a function of whether the activities of professional women occurred in environments where such behaviors are typical of women.

## CONCLUSION

This study suggests that the attitudes of women toward successful women are more favorable than those of men toward successful women. It further indicates that while men report punitive and unaccepting attitudes toward successful women, these attitudes are subject to influence by the environment in which the success takes place.

If female success is depicted as occurring in an environment in which female participation is as frequent as male participation, males tend to react favorably to this success; when the success is associated with "deviant" female behavior, males react punitively. The success of the woman is not the issue so much as is the deviant nature of her actions. That achieving women have in the past revealed a "motive to avoid success" may be explained by the hostile reactions of men to such achievement. That present day women do not reveal such a motive may be explained by new social definitions of appropriate behavior for women. That men reveal less antipathy for female success when the behavior is depicted as appropriate for women is a powerful argument for rapid modification of existing male institutions to permit the equal participation of actors of both sexes.

FOOTNOTE

1. The change from individual randomization to classroom randomization was necessary to keep hidden the nature of the manipulation from subjects at the public college, where data collection took place over several days in numerous classes. Internal analysis of the data revealed no difference in either the direction or the significance of the relationships tested between the two sample groups.



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