

Perceived Sex Role and Fear of Success: A Study on Urban Working Women

Kamlesh Singh* and Priyanka Agrawal**

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Delhi 110 016 New Delhi, India
*E-mail: *singhk@hss.iitd.ernet.in and **itispriyanka@gmail.com*

KEY WORDS Sex role; fear of success; urban working women

ABSTRACT The present study was conducted to determine whether relationships exist between sex roles and fear of success. Bem Sex Role Inventory Short Form (BSRISF) [Bem, 1981] and Fear of Success Scale (FOSS) [Good and Good, 1973] were administered to 110 working urban women. The age range of sample was 21 to 60 years (Mean = 41.07 and SD = 10.74). The scores for the masculinity and femininity scales were derived by summing appropriate item scores of BSRISF. Correlation, a statistical method, was applied to see whether there is significant relationship between masculine and feminine characteristics. The correlation among above mentioned variables was observed positively significant (0.23, $p < 0.05$). It shows androgynous trends in urban working women. However, Fear of Success has been negatively correlated with both masculine scores (-0.25, $p < .01$) and feminine scores (-0.24 $p < 0.05$). Total sample (110 Subjects) was divided as masculine (19), feminine (29), androgynous (32) and undifferentiated (30) sex role groups by taking median values on femininity and masculinity scale. The undifferentiated sex role group (M = 12.10 and SD 4.16) had highest fear of success scores among these groups and mean differences statistically calculated were significant ($p < 0.05$), when compared with androgynous sex role group. Whereas, androgynous had lowest fear of success scores (M = 9.37 and SD = 4.94) among these groups and mean differences statistically calculated were significant ($p < 0.05$), when compared with feminine category. Other comparisons of means were observed non-significant. The present study suggests that it is psychological femininity or undifferentiated sex roles rather than actual femininity that predisposes people to fear of success.

INTRODUCTION

Matina Horner in 1972 described fear of success in women, a type of internal psychological pressure which limits ambition and achievement. The question of whether women are less ambitious than men is difficult to assess. Throughout history women have not always been able to achieve some of the ambitions they may have harbored because of the often restrictive nature of the society around them and partly due to the constraints of child bearing and subsequent parenting. In contrast, men have usually been encouraged to be successful and be a 'bread winner.' Women today, have greater dominance, self-acceptance, empathy, achievement and independence, indeed much of this change is recently attributed directly to the women's movement itself. The characteristics required for high-powered jobs are much closer to male stereotypes such as being bold, assertive, tough and aggressive. Female stereotypes of being kind, sensitive, emotional and passive put them at a competitive disadvantage. Societal values and expectations perpetuate gender role stereotypes in a culture, and mandate males to be "masculine" and females to be "feminine." Stereotypes of gender roles created by a culture govern our way

of life throughout our existence. Bem (1998) concluded that the gender discrimination that women face in society is mirrored in the traditional conceptions of wife and motherhood. Singh and Agrawal (In press) found in their study that females have gradually been adapting masculine characteristics with their own inherited feminine characteristics in recent trends.

Attitudes, behaviors, rights, and responsibilities that a society associates with each sex are known as "gender roles" (Holt and Ellis, 1998). A person may be described as "masculine," as "feminine," as "androgynous," i.e., having characteristics of both, or as "undifferentiated," that are, having neither strong masculine nor strong feminine characteristics. Masculine and feminine roles are not opposite ends of the same continuum but are instead two separate dimensions. (Bem, 1977). According to Powell and Butterfield (1989), people who are androgynous are believed to be more effective because they can perform both the "instrumental," directive, or masculine roles and the "expressive," nurturing, or feminine roles. Age, race, and social class further define individuals' roles, which influence how men and women interact and the attitudes and behaviors expected of each (Lindsey, 1994).

Traditional gender roles emphasize separate spheres of influence for women and men, with women inside the home and men outside the home (Duncan et al, 1997). A modern, or liberal, view of gender roles is that both men and women may engage in behaviors that have traditionally been ascribed to either sex (Blee and Tickamyer, 1995). According to the liberal view, women may occupy leadership positions in the workplace, be autonomous and also be nurturing. Similarly, men may provide childcare at home and still remain achievement-oriented in the workplace. Broverman et al (1970) discussed that while there is not much support for applying different standards of mental health to women and men based on biological differences, there was support that it is more socially desirable to have masculine traits. It is not small wonder that the profile for a healthy man was more desirable. Woolsey (1977) touched on social desirability when discussing how the socially valued items of competence and individual achievement were incompatible with the female sex role.

“Fear of success” is the fear that all that is set out will be accomplished, but happiness, contentment and satisfaction will not be there even after reaching the goal. It is the belief of being undeserved of all the good things and recognition that come in the way as a result of accomplishments and successes. It also means others are others who are better, who will replace or displace if performance record is not maintained. Anticipation of negative consequences and sex role has both been found to contribute to fear of success (FOS).

Fleming (1975) studies suggest that fear of success has to do with negative consequences of a person standing out in some ways or being assertive in relation to another more powerful group which may punish the individual for being assertive. Canavan-Gumpert et al (1978) appeared to postulate that the success-fearing person is in conflict over success and tends both to approach it and avoid it. Such a person adopts an intermediate distance from success rather than putting it as far away from himself or herself as possible. The concept of ‘fear of success’ has now stimulated a considerable literature. It was devised to explain conflicts over achievement experienced by women. Men turn out to be just as success-fearing as women. It is not a peculiarly feminine trait. Fear of success is not universal amongst women and is not unique to women (McClelland, 1987).

Major (1979) reported that it is psychological femininity rather than actual femininity that predisposes people to fear of success. Women also have fewer same-sex role models in high-powered jobs who they can attempt to emulate, unlike men where such role models are abundant (Baron and Byrne, 1991). Woolsey (1977) found that femininity was incompatible with the socially highly valued items of competence and individual achievement and that this lead to ambivalence, fear of success, guilt and anxiety in women.

Ever changing world due to westernization, modernization, urbanization, social change in expected gender roles specially in working women class, may cause of certain recently developed trends of social factors. There is need to explore the current trends of relationship between sex role and fear of success in Indian urban working women. Therefore, current study was designed to examine the association between sex role and fear of success in Indian urban working women.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Sample: A total sample of 110 working females was randomly drawn from the urban areas of Haryana, Rajasthan, and Delhi from India. The broad age range (21 to 60 years) of the sample was taken (Mean = 41.07 and SD = 10.74), so that the almost whole range of this population can be covered. They were personally approached and asked to fill-up below mentioned scales (FOSS and BSRISF) with their demographic information on a separate sheet. They were highly educated, i.e. Graduates or post-graduates. They all were salaried professional either in government or private jobs. They belonged to middle socio-economic strata.

TOOLS

Fear of Success Scale (FOSS): A 29 items test, “Are You Afraid to Succeed?” by (Good and Good, 1973) was used to assess individual differences in the motive to avoid success. Responses in terms of ‘true’ or ‘false’ were taken. For negative items (item no. 3, 6, 18, 20, 22, 23), 1 mark to each negative response, and for rest of the positive items, 1 mark to each positive response was given. Followed by this scoring procedure, total score as FOSS score was obtained. The test was reported to be highly reliable and valid.

Bem Sex Role Inventory Short Form (BSRISF) by Bem (1981): This test is a 30 item adaptation of Bem's original inventory designed to investigate masculinity and femininity as independent dimensions of sex role identity. Respondents are asked to rate themselves as to how well ten stereotypically masculine adjectives (e.g. assertive, has leadership abilities, dominant etc.), ten stereotypically feminine adjectives (e.g. affectionate, compassionate, warm etc.) and ten neutral adjectives describe them. Respondents indicate how well each item describes them on a 7-point scale with end points "never or almost never true" (1) and "always or almost always true" (7). Scores on the BSRISF are purported to measure the respondents' degree of masculine and feminine characteristics and by further division on the basis of median values of these scores, four sex roles (masculinity, femininity, androgynous or undifferentiated sex role identity) can be obtained. BSRISF correlates highly with the original version, with coefficients ranging from 0.87 to 0.94. Internal consistency and reliability are generally considered acceptable with estimates ranging from 0.75 to 0.87. It is generally accepted that the 30 item short form of the Bem Sex Role Inventory is psychometrically superior to the original version, and should be used when assessing sex role identity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to calculate mean scores, standard deviations and correlations to examine the relationship among different variables.

As shown by Table 1, mean scores were higher for feminine characteristics than masculine characteristics in urban working women. It indicates that feminine characteristics were shown by more number of women as compared to masculine characteristics. However, taking into account that they were female respondents, they

had considerably high scores for masculine characteristics. As shown in the Table 1 masculine characteristics were significantly positively correlated ($p < 0.05$, 0.23) with feminine characteristics in urban working women. Whereas, both masculine as well as feminine characteristics were significantly negatively correlated ($p < 0.01$, -0.25 and $p < 0.05$, -0.24 respectively) with fear of success. It leads us to the understanding that women might be moving towards androgyny i.e. possession of both feminine as well as masculine characteristics and becoming less fearful of their success also. Fear of success is not universal amongst women and also not unique to women (McClelland, 1987). Davis et al (1987) found that the FOS scale correlated 0.36 with feminine orientation, -0.28 with masculine orientation and -0.21 with androgyny. All three correlations were significant. Major (1979) reported that it is psychological femininity rather than actual femininity that predisposes people to fear of success. In other words, although men and women do differ psychologically, they do not differ very much inherently. Woolsey (1977) touched on social desirability when discussing how the socially valued items of competence and individual achievement were incompatible with the female sex role. He also found that femininity was incompatible with the socially valued items of competence and individual achievement and this led to ambivalence, fear of success, guilt and anxiety in women.

Negative Correlation between masculine characteristics and fear of success is also supported by above mentioned studies but negatively significant correlation between feminine characteristics and fear of success might not be supported by most of the studies. This could be due to the fact that feminine characteristics are negatively correlated with achievement. Therefore, females high in feminine characteristics might be less motivated to achieve success resulting in

Table 1: Mean scores with standard deviations and correlations between masculine, feminine characteristics and FOS scores.

Characteristics (N=110)	M±S.D.	Masculine characteristics	Feminine characteristics	FOS
Masculine characteristics	45.10±8.54	1.00		
Feminine characteristics	55.05±7.56	0.23*	1.00	
FOS	10.86±4.75	-0.25**	-0.24*	1.00

** Significant at 0.01 level

* Significant at 0.05 level

less fear of success. Feminine sex-role orientation rather than actual sex (physically male or female) need to study further if we want to get a more clear idea about the relationship between feminine characteristics and fear of success.

As shown in the Table 2, mean scores among three age groups were not found significant. Age factor does not have any effect on fear of success. In another research, Singh and Agrawal (2006) (in press) reported that all-feminine characteristics except one, "Sympathetic," were found non-significant among different age groups. However, masculine characteristics "Defend my own beliefs," "Independent," "Have leadership quality," "Willing to take risks" and total score of masculine characteristics were significantly higher in younger group as compare to other groups. But present research showed that fear of success varies ($F=0.51$) insignificantly in different age groups. So, it could be concluded that fear of success is not affected by age.

Dividing Masculinity and Femininity scales at the median score classified those who received above the median on both the scales as 'Androgynous' sex role group. Classified as 'Masculinity' sex role group, when they scored above the median on the Masculinity scale and below the median on the Femininity scale. Those above the median on the Femininity scale and below the median on the Masculinity scale were classified as 'Femininity' sex role group. The 'Undifferentiated' sex-role group was the group of subjects scoring below the median on both the scales. Total sample (110 Subjects) was divided as masculinity (19), femininity (29),

androgynous (32) and undifferentiated (30) sex role groups by using above mentioned method. Table 2 shows that females with 'Undifferentiated' sex role had highest mean scores for fear of success and females with 'Androgynous' sex role had lowest mean scores for fear of success. It indicates that Fear of success was highest in undifferentiated group and lowest in androgynous group.

Mean scores of fear of success among four groups were compared to see whether the mean differences were significant. As shown in Table 3 when mean scores of fear of success of 'Masculinity' sex role group were compared with other sex role groups, it was found that mean differences of fear of success of 'Masculinity' sex role group with 'Femininity', 'Androgyny' and 'Undifferentiated' sex role groups were non-significant. Comparison of mean scores of fear of success of 'Femininity' sex role group with other sex role groups led to the finding that mean differences of fear of success of 'Femininity' sex role group with 'Androgyny' sex role group were significant ($2.12, p < 0.05$). T-test values of mean scores of fear of success of two opposite extremes i. e. androgyny and undifferentiated sex role groups were again found significant ($2.25, p < 0.05$). However, mean scores of fear of success of 'Androgyny' sex role group with other sex role groups were observed non-significant. Several studies suggest that people tend to attribute the success of males to "internal factors" such as effort or ability, whereas success for females is often attributed to luck or "the task was too easy" (Baron and Byrne, 1991). Female stereotypes of being kind, sensitive, emotional and passive put them at a competitive disadvantage (Bardwick, 1971). Masculinity-Femininity framework suggests that fear of success should be higher among women than men and that the occupational success and satisfaction of women may suffer as a result of the fear of success they experience. Pfof and Fiore (1990) found that FOS is more appropriately conceptualized as reflecting

Table 2: Mean scores of FOS with standard deviations and F-values among three Age groups viz. younger, middle and older groups.

Age groups (yrs.)	N	Mean \pm SD	F-value
Younger group (20-35)	36	10.56 \pm 4.56	0.51 ^{ns}
Middle group (36-50)	44	11.05 \pm 4.75	
Older group (50-65)	30	11.73 \pm 4.81	

ns = non significant

Table 3: Mean scores, standard deviation and t-test values of FOS in masculinity, femininity, androgyny and undifferentiated sex roles.

Sex role types	N	M \pm S.D.	Masculinity	Femininity	Androgyny
Masculinity	19	10.32 \pm 4.77			
Femininity	29	11.86 \pm 4.13	1.19		
Androgyny	32	9.37 \pm 4.94	0.67	2.12*	
Undifferentiated	30	12.10 \pm 4.16	1.30	0.20	2.25*

* Significant at 0.05 level

conflict between achievement strivings and expectations of negative interpersonal reactions to culturally deviant gender behavior. Krishnan (1979) found no gender difference in FOS among several East Indian sample. On the other hand, recent researchers have reported that FOS is more contributed by the sex role of individuals and observed that traditional feminine and undifferentiated participants have more FOS as compared to traditional masculine or androgynous and this finding is supported by the present study as well.

In nutshell, The present study suggests that it is psychological femininity or undifferentiated sex roles rather than actual femininity that predisposes people to fear of success.

REFERENCES

- Bardwick, J.M. 1971. *Psychology of Women: A Study of Bio-Cultural Conflicts*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Baron, R.A. and D. Byrne. 1991. *Social Psychology*. 6th ed. Boston: Simon and Schuster.
- Bem, S. L. 1977. "On the utility of alternative procedures for assessing psychological androgyny." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 45: 196-205.
- Bem, S. L. 1981. *Bem Sex Role Inventory: Professional Manual*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- Bem, S. L. 1998. *An Unconventional Family*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Blee, K. M. and A. R. Tickamyer. 1995. "Racial differences in men's attitudes about women's gender roles." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 57: 21-30.
- Brovermann, I., D. Brovermann, P. Clarkson, P. Rosenkrantz and S. Vogel. 1970. "Sex Role Stereotypes and Clinical Judgements of Mental Health." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 34: 1- 7.
- Canavan-Gumpert, D., K. Garner and P. Gumpert. 1978. *The Success Fearing Personality*. Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath.
- Davis, M., J. J. Ray and J. S. Burt. 1987. "Sex Roles and Fear of Success: A General Population Study." *Personality and Individual Differences*, 8(3): 431-432.
- Duncan, L. E., B. E. Peterson and D. G. Winter. 1997. "Authoritarianism and gender roles: Toward a psychological analysis of hegemonic relationships." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 23: 41-49.
- Fleming J. 1975. Fear of success in black college students: Its assessment and functional significance. Manuscript (Unpublished). Radcliffe Institute.
- Good, L. R. and Good, K. C. 1973. *Fear of Success Scale*. Huntsville, AL: Psychometric Affiliates.
- Holt, C. L. and Ellis, J. B. 1998. "Assessing the current validity of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory." *Sex Roles*, 39: 929-941.
- Horner, M. S. 1972. "Toward an understanding of achievement related conflicts in women." *Journal of Social Issues*, 28: 157-175.
- Krishnan, A. 1979. Cross-cultural analysis of fear of success imagery. *Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association*.
- Lindsey, L. L. 1994. *Gender Roles: A Sociological Perspective*. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Major, B. 1979. "Sex-role orientation and fear of success: clarifying an unclear relationship." *Sex Roles*, 5: 63-70.
- McClelland, D. C. 1987. *Motivation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pfost, K. S. and M. Fiore. 1990. "Pursuit of Nontraditional Occupations: Fear of Success or Fear of not being chosen?" *Sex Roles*, 23: 15-24.
- Powell, G. and D. Butterfield. 1979. "The good manager: Masculine or androgynous." *Academy of Management Journal*, 22: 395-403.
- Singh, K. and P. Agrawal. 2006. "Masculinity and Femininity among Working Women in Indian Urban Culture." *Journal of Human Ecology*, (in press).
- Woolsey, L. 1977. "Psychology and the reconciliation of women's double bind: to be feminine or to be fully human." *Canadian Psychological Review*, 18(1): 66-78.