

# Achievement anxiety and gender

Psychology



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Define what Horner meant by "fear of achievement" in women. The influence of one's gender on the achievement level of an individual has been one of the vital topics of researches in relation to gender studies and the constraints of femininity have attained the focus of such discussions. Various studies focusing on sexuality, the psychology of battered women, career related issues, and the like have articulated other binds resulting from the constraints of femininity. Among them, the most influential and controversial study has been Martina Horner's study of 'achievement anxiety', popularly known as 'fear of success or achievement'. "It suggested that such anxiety, which Horner found to be prominent among the college women she interviewed, was the result of historically long-standing notions that to succeed in the public, male world is to become less of a woman, to 'lose one's femininity.'" (Tierney, 1999, p 384). According to research evidences in gender studies and psychology, gender differences have a great influence on the motivation level of individuals and Horner's (1972) discussion of women's motive to avoid success produced strong evidences to prove women's fear of achievement in competitive situations. Horner's ideas concerning 'fear of success or achievement' was supported by Gilligan's landmark work in the moral development of women. In the celebrated study "Toward an Understanding of Achievement-Related Conflicts in Women", Martina Horner identified "the motive to avoid success as an internal psychological representative of the dominant societal stereotype which views competence, independence, competition, and intellectual achievement as qualities basically inconsistent with femininity, even though positively related to masculinity and mental health." (Horner, 1972). Therefore, Horner's concept of the "fear of achievement" in women refers to the natural motive of

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women to avoid success as an internal psychological representative of the dominant societal stereotype, according to which competence, independence, competition, and intellectual achievement are qualities basically not in agreement with femininity.

Whereas the conclusions of Horner's study with regard to the "fear of achievement" in women were initially celebrated by the scholars, they drew criticisms in the late 1970s and 1980s. Thus, the ethnocentrism of Horner's study was pointed out and it was argued that, if black women had a 'fear of success', their 'double bind' involved anxiety over conflicts between the goals of feminism and the struggle against racism, rather than concern for a white ideal of femininity. "Later criticism, inspired by Carol Gilligan's influential work on gender and moral values, reinterpreted the 'fear' of achievement as a rejection of the competitive values associated with achievement in our culture. Attempts in the early 1980s to duplicate Horner's study found little, if any, success anxiety among college women." (Tierney, 1999, p 384). However, these criticisms cannot be considered to be 'refutations' Horner's findings, in view of the fact that twelve years and a good deal of cultural transformation might well account for the difference in results. There are several research evidences to prove that Horner's study with regard to "fear of achievement" in women is successful, and the findings of Camille Lloyd in the study "Sex Differences in Medical Students Requesting Psychiatric Intervention" provide supporting evidences. "Women were frequently struggling to reconcile career desires with a feminine identification and with affiliation needs. Conflict about deviating from a traditional role was exacerbated by expressed disapproval from significant others." (Lloyd, 1983). In conclusion, Horner's findings with reference to the "

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fear of achievement" in women have a vital role in determining the importance of gender differences in achievement level of individuals.

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