

Gender Differences in Achievement Motivation  
Susan Howell, Ed.D.  
Campbellsville University  
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In defending her belief that women should not be pastors, one of my students asked: “If God calls women, why aren’t there more women leaders within the church?” *Her* answer of course was that since women ministers aren’t as prevalent, God obviously isn’t calling them.

Actually another possibility lies in the research which shows that in numerous ways women are discouraged from male-dominated occupations by differences in the way they have experienced achievement from childhood on into adulthood.

In today’s presentation, I will explore findings from three bodies of research which reveal powerful ways that we socialize boys toward and girls away from achievement. I will then draw implications from that research for the differences in the way men and women find their places of service within the church.

As we examine the first body of research, I want for you to imagine that you are a child who has made an “A” on a math test. Your parents congratulate you with “That’s great! You are really smart!” or “That’s great! You worked really hard!”

Both of these responses seem to be positive, don’t they? Each communicates congratulations and pride. Yet these two comments actually differ in ways that are important for achievement motivation.

The first comment communicates that the “A” in math was earned due to a stable attribute within the child – being smart, something that is part of who the child is, and is, therefore, likely to be repeated. After all, if you are smart today, you will be smart tomorrow, next week, next month, next year, and so on.

The second comment suggests that the “A” is due to an unstable attribute – hard work, something that is situational and therefore could easily change with the next assignment or task.

Research indicates that when observing their children’s success in math, a subject traditionally considered to be in the male domain, parents are more likely to attribute success in their sons to a stable cause, such as ability, and success in their daughters to an unstable cause, such as effort or luck (Raty et al., 2002). The implication here is that the son’s success is more likely to be repeated; the daughter’s, less likely.

In another body of research, college students were asked: In terms of feeling good about yourself, how important is each of the following:

- 1) self-perceived competence, which is knowing you’ve done a good job even if no one else notices;
- 2) reflected appraisals, knowing that others think highly of you; or
- 3) social comparisons, doing a job better than someone else.

They found that men and women were alike in several ways. Self-perceived competence was equally important to men and women and reflected appraisals weighed in as the most important factor for both genders.

However they also found some gender differences. Women, more than men, found reflect appraisals to be important – in other words, women more than men found it important that someone tell them they had done a good job. And men, more so than women, relied on social comparison – that is, knowing they had done a job better than someone else (Schwalbe & Staples, 1991).

In fact, females might actually avoid the limelight when put in a social comparison situation. When asked to predict their grade point average, one study found that in a public setting females tended to estimate lower grades than did the male participants, even though their GPAs were similar. They seemed to believe that disclosing the accurate, higher GPA would make others feel badly (Heatherington et al., 1993).

About the time I started teaching some of this material, I had an experience that illustrated these research findings perfectly. I really love playing board games and had gotten really good at one in particular. Then one evening a friend came over and wanted to learn the game. I showed her and we played. But I found myself holding back from playing at my full ability. I didn't mind playing better than her. That was to be expected since I had been playing for quite a while. But I also didn't want to make her feel bad by showing her up. So I held back – not enough to lose, but enough to level the playing field, so to speak. When I shared this with a male colleague the next day, he couldn't believe I had played less well than I could have simply to spare her feelings. To him, doing something better than someone else was not a reason to hold back, it was just life and shouldn't be avoided.

Ironically, my colleague's response was actually supported by the same research in that male participants did not show the same concern about hurting another's feelings. In fact these men believed that their disclosing high scores would make themselves look good to the female participants (Daubman & Sigall, 1997).

One other aspect of social comparison for men seems relevant. A study by researchers out of the University of Florida (Ratliff & Oishi, 2013) had men take a

computerized test where they were shown positive and negative words to see how quickly they associated those words with themselves. Rather than simply asking these men “How do you feel about yourself” they were trying to tap into their “implicit” or subconscious self-esteem.

Now before the men took this test they were asked to think of a time when their partner had either succeeded at something or failed at something. What they found, was that these men felt worse about themselves when they thought about their female partner succeeding than when they thought about her failing. They did the same test with women and found that their self-esteem was unrelated to their male partners’ successes or failures (Ratliff & Oishi, 2013).

Now, let’s look at one more body of research as we pull this together – the fear of success (Horner, 1972 as reported by Helgeson, 2012). Rather than attempting to fail, the fear of success involves believing success is possible and that it will lead to negative consequences. Therefore, the person will avoid situations in which high achievement might occur.

One groundbreaking study of the fear of success involved giving participants a partial statement and asking them to complete the story. Females were given the prompt: “Anne is at the top of her class in medical school” and asked to complete the story. Males were given the prompt: “John is at the top of his class in medical school” and asked to complete the story. Ninety percent of the males responded with positive stories. However, 65% of the females responded with stories of negative consequences or conflict, (e.g., Anne is alienated from her friends and is considering dropping out) (Horner, 1972 as reported by Helgeson, 2012).

This research suggests that females might feel the need to pull back from success, at least in careers that are traditionally male, because of the negative consequences she will experience.

Now granted, that research was conducted several decades ago in the early 1970s, but the topic has been studied more recently with similar results. One study (Sijuwade, 2008) found that the fear of success was higher among those having characteristics traditionally associated with women, something the researcher referred to as “psychological femininity.” However, women who were more androgynous – that is, those who displayed both feminine and masculine traits, such as being both directive and nurturing; cooperative and assertive – didn’t tend to be as fearful of success.

By the way, these fears are not without basis. Research suggests that women who achieve in male-dominated careers are less liked and belittled more than equally successful men (Heilman et al., 2004). Also, even in families where husbands and wives both work, women still do the lion’s share of housework, cooking, and childcare, leading to what researchers refer to as the “second shift.”

An easy argument to make here is that when a woman’s success means she will be liked less, belittled more, and then come home to all the jobs traditionally completed by women, she might decide it simply isn’t worth it.

I know from personal experience as a professor and academic advisor that young women have concerns about accomplishing their educational and career goals when they are also planning to be married, have children, and have a spouse’s education and career to consider. I don’t however hear many, if any, young men asking me how they can combine family and career. Male students seem to see their careers as their primary task.

Female students tend to see theirs as something they will be doing along with caring for their families and homes. Without even realizing it consciously, they seem to be preparing for the second shift.

So let's pull all of this together before we move on: Males are given messages that their success is positive and will likely be repeated. They believe that they are somehow diminished when their female partner succeeds. They believe that doing better than others is a good thing, and will likely impress them. For males, achievement is a win-win.

Females, on the other hand are given messages that their success is situational and is therefore a bit tenuous. They believe in their own success more when it is validated by others through reflected appraisals. They believe their success might make others feel badly, and research shows that it does for their male partners. They believe that negative consequences will ensue: they won't be liked as much and they will have a second shift waiting for them at the end of the work day.

Please understand that for the most part, this is outside of our awareness. I don't believe that anyone is intentionally sabotaging women. Yet by the time we reach adulthood, we have each had a lifetime of messages which gear men toward achievement and women away from it. The fact that these messages are subtle makes them all the more powerful because they *are* outside of our awareness, making them very difficult to recognize and eradicate.

Let's look now at the implications these findings have for the man and woman who are finding their place in ministry. First of all, the man who is moving toward ministry comes in believing that he is inherently a good leader. He has reason to expect

many positive reflected appraisals and believes his success will impress others without evoking their dislike nor harming his wife's self-esteem. When he does better than others, his self-esteem is strengthened and he will likely have fewer second shift responsibilities when he finishes his workday. All of these contribute to his achievement. If he is called to a position of leadership, fewer obstacles will block his path, further confirming his call.

The woman, on the other hand comes in believing that she can be a good leader *with effort or luck*. She can expect fewer positive reflected appraisals and in fact will suffer more dislike, which is unfortunate since she puts a lot of stock in the positive feedback of others. She will be required to be better than men doing the same job just to prove she can do it period. This is also unfortunate because social comparison has been found to be aversive for some women. She is prepared to see her own success as hurtful to others which, again, is supported by research since males show a decline in self-esteem when their female partner is successful. And at the end of the day, literally, she will likely have most of the childcare and housework to do. Even for the most valiant of women, it's a lot to ask.

It isn't a leap in logic for this woman to first of all, see herself as more capable of becoming successful in ministry areas more in keeping with the female role: working with children, cooking for a church meal, or offering support to male ministers. If she then moves into those positions, she's likely to receive positive feedback for doing so. She will no longer be competing with men who might feel diminished by her success so her success is no longer seen as a liability to others. Rather than seeing herself as having

been unduly influenced by her culture, she is likely to feel that she is working within her talents and abilities, having found her true “call.”

Now, back to my student’s comment: “If God calls women, why aren’t there more women ministers?” I suggest that it has little to do with God calling men rather than women, and more to do with the messages women receive, the fear of hurting others, and the negative consequences we have put on women who succeed in male-dominated occupations.

All of these however can be changed. So let’s focus for a moment on how we can bring about that change. What can we as teachers, mentors, counselors, ministers, and parents do to empower the boys and girls, men and women in our lives to serve *and lead* based on ability rather than gender.

First, be intentional in the messages you give to others. Give both stable and unstable attributions. Because sometimes people succeed due to talent and ability, sometimes because of hard work and luck. More often than not, it’s a combination of all of the above for both men and women. Just tailor your comments to the situation, not the person’s gender.

Go out of your way to communicate to boys and men that their worth is not contingent upon being better than girls and women. One person’s success does not detract from someone else’s. And expect them to learn it. Sometimes we are quick to expect for “boys to be boys” when actually this is a learned behavior; it is not inborn.

Since females put more stock in others’ opinions, be generous with your encouragement. If they are capable and talented, would make good ministers or are graduate school material, say so in no uncertain terms. Do this for the females and the



males in your life, but it will be particularly meaningful for the females.

However, when you notice her toning it down to not hurt or inconvenience others, call her on it. Let her know of this tendency and the risk it poses to her own success so she can counter it. Let her know that acknowledging her own success is not bragging but is simply a statement of fact and not her fault if someone else feeling badly because of it.

Develop traits traditionally considered “male” and “female.” Promote androgyny in yourself and in those you mentor, teach, counsel, minister to, or raise. Remember that androgyny has been found to mediate the fear of success in women.

And finally, remember that even though you are only one voice, your one voice can make a difference.

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