



Subjective anxiety and behavioral avoidance: Gender, gender role, and perceived confirmability of self-report

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ABSTRACT

Commonly reported gender effects for differential vulnerability for anxiety may relate to gender socialization processes. The present study examined the relationship between gender role and fear under experimental conditions designed to elicit accurate fear reporting. Undergraduate students ($N = 119$) completed several self-report measures and a behavioral avoidance task (BAT) with a tarantula while wearing a heart rate monitor. Gender roles were operationalized as instrumentality and expressiveness, as measured by the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1975). As expected, women reported greater subjective anxiety and were more avoidant of the tarantula than men. Regardless of gender, low levels of instrumentality were associated with greater avoidance of the tarantula. The hypothesis that men underreport fear compared to women and that gender role differences underlie this reporting bias was not supported. In spite of a ceiling effect on the BAT, results of this study confirm the relevance of gender role in understanding gender effects in fear and anxiety.

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1. Introduction

Women are substantially more likely to demonstrate and report fear and anxiety than men across the life span. Recent reviews of the gender¹ effects in anxiety suggest that risk factors are moderated by gender socialization processes that shape gender-specific expectations regarding the expression of, and the acceptable means of coping with, anxiety (e.g., McLean & Anderson, 2009). According to Bem's (1981) widely cited gender schema theory, all individuals possess some degree of masculine traits, characterized by instrumental (i.e., cognitive and task-oriented) and aggressive behaviors, and feminine traits, characterized by expressive (i.e., emotional and interpersonally oriented) and affiliative behaviors. During gender role development, boys and girls learn socially prescribed behaviors, traits, and skill interests that are consistent with their gender. For example, the expression of fear and anxiety may be considered less consistent with the masculine gender role (e.g., Bem, 1981; Spence and Helmreich, 1978), and fearful behavior may therefore

be less tolerated in boys than in girls (Stevenson-Hinde & Shouldice, 1993). Caregivers and other socialization agents (e.g., teachers, peers, media) may encourage gender-conforming behaviors by differentially reinforcing activity and assertiveness among boys and anxious behaviors among girls.

1.1. The influence of gender role in fear and anxiety

Several studies have examined how gender roles relate to scores on standard fear scales, such as the fear survey schedule (Wolpe & Lang, 1977) or the fear survey schedule for children-II (Gullone & King, 1992). Among children, greater fear reporting has been associated with higher levels of femininity (Brody, Hay, & Vandewater, 1990; Muris, Meesters, & Knoop, 2005) and lower levels of masculinity (Ginsburg & Silverman, 2000). Similar findings are seen in adults, with some studies showing that fear relates positively with femininity (Tucker & Bond, 1997), others showing a negative association with masculinity (Arrindell, 2000; Arrindell et al., 1993), and others finding that both high femininity and low masculinity are related to elevated fear (Carey, Dusek, & Spector, 1998). Studies examining group differences in gender role have found that participants classified as feminine report greater fear than those classified as masculine (Brehony, 1983; Carsrud & Carsrud, 1979; Dillon et al., 1985).

This research indicates that gender roles are clearly important to our understanding of the gender effects in fear. In fact, gender roles appear to be more closely related to fear and anxiety than biological sex (Brody et al., 1990; Moscovitch, Hofmann, & Litz,

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¹ We use the term *gender*, meaning the behaviors, attitudes, and personality traits associated with men and women within a particular context, rather than *sex*, which refers exclusively to biological processes (Deaux, 1985), except in cases where measures of gender role are included to control for the sociocultural and psychological processes inherent to the construct of gender.

2005; Palapattu, Kingery, & Ginsburg, 2006), though a subset of these studies has found that biological sex significantly predicts reported fear even after controlling for gender role (Arrindell et al., 1993; Dillon et al., 1985).

1.2. *The influence of reporting bias*

One explanation for gender effects in anxiety is that women are more willing than men to report fear and anxiety. Men may be motivated to underreport fear and anxiety because these constructs are incompatible with the traditional masculine gender role and may suggest to others that they are weak or vulnerable (Barlow, 1988). The traditional feminine gender role, in contrast, bears fewer restrictions on the expression of fear and anxiety and allows women to endorse them with less risk of negative social consequences.

To examine whether men underreport on fear surveys, Pierce and Kirkpatrick (1992) asked participants to complete a fear survey on two separate occasions. During the first assessment, women reported much greater fear than men, as expected. Participants later returned and completed the same self-report measure, but this time they were told that their responses would be “verified” by physiological measures (e.g., heart rate). When participants believed that the truthfulness of their responses would be independently assessed, men, but not women, significantly increased their fear ratings compared to their responses during the first assessment. However, women still reported greater fear than men even during the “verifiable” assessment, suggesting that a reporting bias does not fully account for the gender effect (Pierce & Kirkpatrick, 1992).

Similar results were found in a study examining gender effects in trait anxiety. Egloff and Schmukle (2004) found that women reported greater trait anxiety than men on both an explicit and implicit tests, but that the effect size for gender was approximately half as large on the implicit measures as it was on the explicit measure. In summary, men appear to underreport their true level of fear (Pierce & Kirkpatrick, 1992) and anxiety (Egloff & Schmukle, 2004). However, given the significant gender effects on the “verifiable” fear survey and on the implicit measures of anxiety, reporting biases do not seem to fully account for the observed differences.

1.3. *The relationship between reported fear and behavioral avoidance*

Studies of overt behavior during fearful conditions suggest that avoidance is partly a function of gender role expectations. For example, a study by Speltz and Bernstein (1976) examining behavioral avoidance among individuals who were fearful of snakes found that, compared to snake-fearful women, equally fearful men showed less avoidance. This suggests that gender effects in avoidance behavior emerge even when controlling for fear levels. Interestingly, the gender effect in avoidance was significantly smaller under high social-demand conditions than under low social-demand conditions, suggesting that overt fear behavior is influenced by social expectations (Speltz & Bernstein, 1976).

Surprisingly, however, only one study has directly examined the influence of gender role on behavioral avoidance. Using a similar design to that of Speltz and Bernstein (1976), Gallacher and Klieger (1995) found that gender and gender role were each correlated with fear of snakes, but not with behavioral avoidance of a snake. The authors concluded that gender role affects the willingness to report fear, but does not influence behavioral avoidance. Interpretability of these findings is limited, however, because behavioral avoidance scores in this study were uniformly low. This ceiling effect may have obscured a relationship between gender role and avoidance that would have been evident given a more challenging task.

1.4. *The role of avoidance in anxiety*

The fact that gender effects in fears and phobias increase throughout childhood may reflect differential extinction rates to developmentally appropriate fears (Fredrikson, Annas, Fischer, & Wik, 1996). Compared to girls, boys may receive greater reinforcement for confronting feared situations and for behaving in ways that provide opportunities for emotional processing of fears. According to the emotional processing theory (Foa & Kozak, 1985; Foa & Kozak, 1986; Foa, Huppert, & Cahill, 2006), pathological associations among stimuli, responses, and their meanings can be modified through exposure to the feared stimulus in the absence of anticipated harm. Exposure brings about new learning by providing corrective information about the safety of previously feared thoughts, sensations, situations, and activities (Bouton, 2000; Rescorla, 2001). Thus, socialization that encourages exposure to feared stimuli would facilitate the emotional processing of feared stimuli.

Assuming that the expression of fear and avoidance is less acceptable among men, boys may learn that they are expected to display bravery and purposeful, adaptive coping behavior when faced with anxiety-provoking situations (Bem, 1981; Golombok & Fivush, 1998). This has clear implications for how males learn to respond and cope with fear and anxiety. Research by Greif, Alvarez, and Ulman (1981) found that mothers are more likely to discuss emotional states with their daughters, and more likely to discuss the causes and consequences of the feelings with their sons. Presumably, this would encourage boys to focus on problem solving and gaining control over their emotion, rather than on the experience of the emotion itself. Learning to cope with anxiety in this problem-focused manner may help equip males with the instrumental traits and skills that prevent excessive fears or other anxiety disorders from developing. In contrast, a traditional feminine gender role that deemphasizes autonomy and mastery while promoting dependency and expectations of protection would be more compatible with avoidance behavior.

1.5. *The current investigation*

Social learning models of anxiety assign a key role to avoidance behavior in the development and maintenance of anxiety disorders. Yet, as discussed earlier, the influence of gender roles on behavioral avoidance remains largely untested. Examining fear and avoidance behavior in vivo and under experimental conditions that are likely to elicit accurate fear reporting would provide a more rigorous test of the influence of gender role on fear and anxiety than relying solely on self-report.

The present study examined fear reporting and behavioral avoidance using a post-test only, independent groups design. Participants completed self-report questionnaires and then completed a behavioral avoidance task (BAT) with a spider while wearing a heart rate monitor. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: in the “Verifiable heart rate (HR)” condition, participants were told that, because the heart rate monitor would provide an accurate measure of their true fear, it was important that they provide accurate fear ratings; in the “irrelevant HR” condition, participants were told that heart rate is not an accurate measure of fear, and that the heart rate monitor was being tested for use in another study. Based on previous research and current theories of gender socialization, we hypothesized the following:

1. Men will report greater subjective anxiety in the Verifiable HR condition than the Irrelevant HR condition, but women will report a similar level of subjective anxiety in both conditions.
2. Individuals high in the masculine trait instrumentality will report greater subjective anxiety in the verifiable HR condition

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