

THE ASSESSMENT OF FEAR: SEX DIFFERENCES AND EFFECTS OF SOCIAL DESIRABILITY

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Fear survey schedule (FSS) ratings among undergraduates were found sensitive to sex differences and social desirability factors. Females rated themselves more afraid than males – a finding consistent with earlier studies. Low social desirability (S.D.) subjects scored themselves more afraid than high S.D. subjects.

The fear survey schedule (FSS) is a “paper-and-pencil inventory of common fears and phobias” developed as a research tool and clinical instrument. Studies which used FSS, irrespective of versions, consistently yielded results in which females scored themselves higher than males. Geer (1965), who developed the 51-item FSS II, reported significant differences between males and females on their mean total scores. Item analysis revealed that the average male score was higher than the female on only five of the items. Bernstein and Allen (1969), who administered FSS II to 1,814 students, found essentially the same picture. Although the mean total score of Bernstein and Allen’s male subjects was significantly higher than that of Geer’s male subjects, it was still significantly lower than the mean total score of the females in their study. Manosevitz and Lanyon (1965), using a modified FSS III developed by Wolpe and Lang (1964), reported sex differences in the same direction. The males in their study had a mean item rating of 1.92, but the females, 2.12. An unmodified FSS III yielded the same picture in a study by Grossberg and Wilson (1965) and Farley and Mealiea (1971). Daquiz (1975), in a study which used an FSS version especially developed for Filipino students, found results consistent with the earlier findings.

Geer’s explanation rests on “cultural differences”, i.e., women are permitted to show fear while men are not. Similarly, Bernstein and

Allen suggest that there is “greater cultural tolerance for fear reports by females as opposed to males.” But Manosevitz and Lanyon posit “two plausible reasons to explain this sex difference in fear: (1) females actually are more upset and disturbed by the situations assessed in the FSS; (2) alternatively, females are more honest in reporting their feelings and their fears, possibly because it is more socially undesirable for men than women to admit to their fears.”

Manosevitz and Lanyon’s second reason is significant in suggesting that differences in social desirability (in admitting fears) between males and females could account for sex differences in FSS scores. Despite Farley and Mealiea (1971) who assert that no correlation obtains between social desirability (S.D.) and FSS ratings, Manosevitz and Lanyon may well have the right explanation. Nevertheless, the effects of social desirability on FSS scores may not at all be associated with sex differences. That is, sex differences could be one genuine factor affecting FSS scores, and S.D., yet another. This study explores this possibility. Both the intuitive approach which explains sex differences in terms of differences in S.D. and the claim that no correlation holds between FSS ratings and S.D. rule out such a possibility.

How will S.D. likely affect FSS scores? Daquiz (1975) found that FSS total scores correlated negatively with S.D. ($r = -0.46$)

$p < .01$), suggesting that those with high S.D. may rate themselves less afraid than they really are, thus obtaining lower FSS scores, while those with low S.D. may rate themselves more afraid than they really are, thus obtaining higher FSS ratings.

METHOD

Subjects

Two hundred fifty-four college students (138 males, 166 females), enrolled at three different schools in Metro Manila, were randomly chosen and administered the questionnaires. Enrolled at different levels in various degree programs, they were not part of any subject pool for psychological experiments.

A total of 100 Ss from the original group was selected (on the basis of their S.D. scores) for this study: 56 females (29 classed as low S.D. and 27, high S.D.) and 44 males (20 low S.D. and 24 high S.D.).

Design

A 2 x 2 factorial design was used in this study. The first factor was sex (male-female dichotomy), the second, S.D. (either high or low).

Procedure

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Desirability (U.P. – S.D.) scale, developed by Felipe (1969), was administered together with the Fear Survey Schedule for Filipinos (FSS-Fil.). Responses to the U.P. – S.D. scale were scored first as the basis for choosing subjects (Ss) of the study.

The actual S.D. scores ranged from 10 to 31 out of a possible 32. Those who scored 10-14 were chosen to comprise the low S.D. group, while those who scored 27-31 comprised the high S.D. group.

Responses to the FSS-Fil were then scored, following the scoring system adopted by Daquiz (1975). All items rated as *not at all* were scored 1; *a little*, 2; *a fair amount*, 3; *much*, 4; and *very much*, 5. The total scores of Ss were then computed and compared.

RESULTS

A two-way analysis of variance was computed using the total FSS scores of the Ss. Table 1 shows the results.

Sex differences significantly affect FSS total scores ($p < .01$), the females rating themselves higher than the males. The females had a mean total score of 200.0, the males, 174.7. The mean item rating for females was 2.70, for males, 2.36.

TABLE 1
Analysis of Variance using total FSS scores

Source	SS	DF	MS	F
Sex	11560.4	1	11560.4	8.91*
S.S.	78376.6	1	78376.6	60.38**
Sex X S.D.	55.1	1	55.1	.04
Error	124618.4	96	1298.1	
TOTAL	215610.5	99		

* significant at $p < .01$
** significant at $p < .001$

S.D. differences also significantly affect FSS total scores ($p < .001$), with the low S.D. group scoring higher than the high S.D. group. The mean total score of the low S.D. group was 218.3 for a high item mean rating of 2.95 while for the high S.D. group, it was 160.6 and 2.17, respectively. Analysis of the mean ratings for each item revealed that the low S.D. group scored higher on all 74 items than the high S.D. group with significant differences on 64 items ($p < .05$).

No interaction effect between sex and S.D. level was found. Comparisons made on the mean, FSS scores between low and high S.D. groups within each sex revealed that, in both cases, the low S.D. scored significantly higher than the high S.D. The mean total score of males in the low S.D. group was 206.3; in the high S.D., only 148.3 (difference significant at $p < .01$). The mean total score of females in the low S.D. group was 226.6; in the high S.D., 171.5 (difference significant at $p < .01$).

DISCUSSION

The psychological "self-portraits" usually made by using self-evaluation scales or instruments are very susceptible to distortions. These distortions may not necessarily be deliberate, but the result is the same — the picture that emerges is different from the "true one." Unless we identify the sources of distortion and the directions in which these sources alter responses, it is likely that studies will focus on extraneous factors and become misleading.

One of the most studied sources of distortion is social desirability — "the readiness to present oneself to others in socially desirable ways" (Edwards, 1957). Studies indicate that high and low S.D. people respond in different ways.

This study clearly illustrates this phenomenon. Differences in S.D. resulted in differences in self-ratings on the FSS, contrary to findings by Farley and Mealiea. "Non-content aspects of

responding" (S.D. in this case) undoubtedly confound the identification of fears by the subjects. FSS ratings should not then be taken at face value. S.D. and similar scales should be used together with FSS for more reliable conclusions (based on FSS ratings).

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