

How women compete

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Abstract: Men are more physically aggressive and more risk-prone than women, but are not necessarily more competitive. New data show the gender difference in competitiveness to be one of kind rather than degree, with women and men competing in different ways and, to some extent, over different objectives, but not differing in overall strength of competitive feeling.

Men are indisputably more physically aggressive and more risk-prone than women. But does this mean that they are also more competitive? Hitherto, evolutionary psychologists have stressed that the sex difference in aggression stems from the fact that men have more to *gain* from such behavior: because of polygyny, winning a competitive encounter can produce enormous fitness benefits for men whereas losing can result in fitness failure. Campbell, in this excellent synthesis of her earlier work, points out that women also have far more to *lose* from physical aggression and risk-prone behavior: greater parental investment by women means that their health and survival are essential for the survival of their offspring. These two arguments lead to different predictions. The former, which hinges on the greater variance in male reproductive success, suggests that men will be more competitive overall. The latter suggests only that female competition will take less dangerous forms. In my view, the latter conclusion is unassailable but the former is far from proven.

There are at least three reasons why the extent of female competition has been underestimated: (1) women often suppress their competitive ability in the presence of males (Weisfeld 1986), (2) indirect aggression, the one type of aggression in which women exceed men, is the most difficult to document (that is, after all, its aim), and (3) aggressive and nonaggressive forms of competition require different tools for measurement. Ecologists sometimes distinguish *interference competition*, where one interferes with the ability of one's competitor to gain a resource, from *exploitation competition*, where there is direct competition for resources without interaction among participants (Begon & Mortimer 1981, p. 66). Interference competition is typically expressed by aggression and dominance striving, exploitation competition by the input of time and resources into trying to gain scarce resources. Clearly, competition can be intense without involving direct aggression. My own data (Cashdan 1998), derived from diaries of competitive interactions and from self-report questionnaires, indicate that the difference in competitiveness between women and men is more one of kind than of degree. Women and men compete in different ways (men use more physical aggression), against different opponents (men's diaries contain more same-sex competition), and, to some extent, over different objectives (women compete more about looking attractive, men about athletics). But I found no difference in the strength of competitive feelings overall; nor were there differences in competitiveness about financial success, getting one's way, or many of the other areas in which people compete in their daily lives. If women are less aggressive then it seems likely that the difference stems chiefly from the greater costs of injury to women, and perhaps also from the fact that different competitive objectives require different weapons and tactics.