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Competitive behavior and self esteem - relevant factors that influence young couples’ life

Iuliana Costea¹ *, Ramona Palos¹, Anca Munteanu¹

¹Department of Psychology, West University of Timisoara, Timisoara, 300223, Romania

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to surprise if competitive behavior affects young couples’ life and the self esteem of partners. Objectives of this research are identifying how competitive behavior is perceived in couple relationship, if there are gender differences regarding competitiveness in couple and if there is any link between competitive behavior manifested in couple and self esteem level of partners. Sample group is represented by 30 young couples who are involved in relationships for at least 2 years and who are leaving together. Obtained results distinguished a higher level of competitiveness for women in romantic relationship. This can be a consequence of the attitude women have to adopt in social and professional life, to be integrated in modern world, set of s also reflecting on their relationship. Also, competitive behavior is influenced by self esteem level, being more frequent at the partners with a lower level of self appreciation, as a strategy to reconfirm their value, especially in couple life. Conclusively, competition in romantic life is not a healthy behavior for consolidating the relationship.

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1. Introduction

The existence of a couple implies manifesting feelings toward the partner but also fulfilling ourselves as human beings. All this represents a real challenge for self developing (social and professional). Among the attributes which assure harmony between the partners are numbered: developing emotional independence, outstanding the patterns, accepting partner’s ideas as different from ours and understanding the necessity for contrast in romance.

Sex differences in achievement orientation and competitiveness are widely cited in both everyday conversation and psychological literature. Several investigators have probed the psychological aspects of gender roles and achievement, and have provided important insights. Several authors note that females are less competitive than males (e.g., Ahlgren & Johnson, 1979; Olds & Shaver, 1980). In a comprehensive review, Lenney (1977) singled out competition as a situation likely to elicit sex differences in self-confidence, one of the most consistent predictors of success.

* Iuliana Costea. Tel.: +4-074-557-8556.
E-mail address: iuliana.costea@socio.uvt.ro.
Sex differences have been reported in the earliest achievement work when McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, and Lowell (1953) observed that women's achievement scores did not increase as men's did in response to achievement arousing instructions. Homer (1968) proposed a "fear-of-success" construct, described as fear of the negative consequences of achievement, particularly social rejection, to account for sex differences in achievement motivation.

Subsequent research (e.g., Condry & Dyer, 1976; Tresemer, 1977) raised doubts about Homer's construct and measure, but research has continued to document sex differences in achievement motivation and behaviors.

Some studies (Billie K & S. Beach, 1998) show that married people tend to be happy about their spouse's achievement and empathize at losses. Those in dating relationships, on the other hand, parse their reactions more distinctly, based on whether the competition is in an area that is personally important. In areas that don't matter, daters are full of congratulation for partners' success or sympathetic in case of failure. When the competition is in an area that matters, daters tend to gloat when they have a better performance than their partner, and even to be envious or resentful when the partner triumphs (Billie K., 1998).

Also, was proved that the presence of a socio-cultural similarity gives longevity to the couple. More than this, if the woman is the one with higher degree of education or achievement, both social or professional, the risk of divorce increases with over 40% (Munteanu, 2008).

People with low self-esteem incorrectly believe that their partner perceives relatively few qualities worth valuing in them. In contrast, people with high self-esteem correctly believe that their partner perceives many qualities worth valuing in them (Murray et al., 2000). People with high self-esteem also perceive themselves as engaging in more positive relationship behaviors, such as providing support and forgiving transgressions. Because the romantic marketplace is inherently competitive (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), being valued for one's attractiveness, wit, or athleticism may not offer complete security. Another more attractive, Wittier, or more agile alternative might always come along.

Feelings of personal worth are influenced by performance, abilities, physical appearance, and perceptions of significant others (Elder, 1968). Rosenberg (1979) defined people with high self-esteem as those who have self-respect and consider themselves to be worthy. Ellis and Davis (1982) found that self-esteem is a relatively stable dimension of the self, independent of gender.

In addition, Rosenberg (1965) found a relationship between self-esteem and various measures of adaptation such as leadership potential and self-confidence, whereas lack of self-esteem was related to incompetence in social relations.

2. Methodology

2.1. Purpose of the study

This research has as purpose identifying how competitive behavior is perceived in couple relationship, if there are gender differences regarding competitiveness in couple and if there is any link between competitive behavior manifested in couple and self esteem level of partners.

2.2. Hypothesis

According to our purpose and objective, two hypotheses were developed, to give a coherent path to the study. So, as a first hypothesis, we are supposing that there are meaningful differences between women and men involved in stable relationships, regarding their degree of competitiveness. Also, our second hypothesis is that there is a significant link between the level of self esteem and the degree of competitiveness manifested within the couple.

2.3. The participants

For the current study, a group formed from 30 young couples, who are involved in relationships for at least 2 years and who are leaving together (5 couples are already married and 25 have the intention to marry in the next year). All partners are considering their relation very serious and don’t intend to break up. So, differences between
genders regarding competitiveness were measured, by testing 30 women and 30 men and also a possible link between competitiveness and self esteem by testing all 60 subjects. Average age for tested women is 24.7 years and for men is 27.5 years old.

2.4. Instruments and procedure

The couples were first shortly interviewed about the length of time since they are together and also about if they consider the relationship stable. In order to measure all the variables linked to motivation, we used the Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), a 10 items instrument being an overall evaluation of one's worth or value and the Competitiveness Index (Houston & al, 2002) what is a structured personality instrument consisting of 20 true-false items, concerning interpersonal competitiveness in everyday contexts.

3. Results and Discussions

All variables were standardized prior analyses. Numeric data obtained were involved in a statistic analyze (T test, comparing means) and results can be seen in Table 1 and Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levene's Test</th>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.988</td>
<td>.324</td>
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Lecturing the values from the table above, there are meaningful differences between women and men involved in stabile relationships, regarding their degree of competitiveness, as we assumed from the beginning. As presented above, can be observed that the value of F (F=.988, p>.05) is not statistic meaningful. This result is indicating that the two dispersions are homogeny, and is considered for analyzing the value of first t. This value, t= -2.292, p<.05 is statistically meaningful, which confirms us, the hypothesis tested above. In order to this, we can say that there are meaningful differences between women and men involved in stabile relationships, regarding their degree of competitiveness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competition Score</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men/women</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8.40</td>
<td>4.621</td>
<td>.844</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-men</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11.03</td>
<td>4.271</td>
<td>.780</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the means obtained we can observe that women are more competitive than men, part which in contradiction with several previous studies. Even if competition is a reality for both sexes, some studies showed that, starting from even from childhood, men tend to be more competitive in their relation with women, who tend more to cooperate (Maccoby, 1990). In the same direction, the studies of Moller, Hymel and Rubin (1992), who were researching the differences between roles that children adopt during playing, showed that boys adopt more aggressive game strategies. In order to this, their games can be described more as competitive towards the games played by girls, who prefer to adopt more co-operative behavior. On the other side, more recent studies, don’t confirm these gender distinctions regarding competition and cooperation. For example, Hugh (1998) studying children during playing, shows that girls are competitive. What is different between the two genders, according to him, is the strategies adopted. Even if women behavior is different, less aggressive and obvious, the purpose is the same, competing.
towards winning. What is certain, after presenting all this results, is that competitive attitudes are found in both genders, even if manifested different.

In actual social context, our result seems extremely realistic. In a world, in which until not long ago, women had only domestic roles, now they are supposed to compete permanent with their partner, to prove that they can do more than staying at home and take care of children. The desire towards affirmation of the woman is for sure reflected in her relationship. Another aspect of this result can be that women is in permanent alert to attract whole attention of her partner, and to prove him that she is the best option, with lots of undiscovered resources.

Another possible explanation for this result can be that woman is competing to prove her partner that she is worthy of him, opposite of the competitive man, who is more oriented towards exterior world. So he is trying to obtain power and material resources to prove that he is a desirable partner, compared with the other possible partners surrounding him. The fact that women are competitive in their couple relation does not cancel man competitive behavior, only shows that in actual social context women need to impose themselves. The need for realize something in their carrier life, that women have and the race for a bigger income, compared with the partner abandoning the idea of maternity, is a bad influence in couples dynamics. Not all studies sustain this idea. Other studies have found that working couples are happier when the wife’s employment is consistent with the gender role attitudes of the husband and the wife (Brennan, Barnett & Gareis, 2001; Hoffman, 1989; Vannoy & Philliber, 1992). Partners can also develop a competitive spirit, fact that can affect efficient communication between partners. Still, on the competitive by itself can not be considered a negative factor for couples’ life, only if of course, is correlating with other undesirable.

Concluding, we were proving on our studied group, that there are differences between women and men, who are involved in stabile couple relationships, from the point of view of the competitive, fact that is totally confirming our first hypothesis and shows that, in modern couple, women tend to be more competitive than men.

Synthesizing, it results that our first hypothesis is confirmed, showing that there are meaningful differences between women and men involved in stabile relationships, regarding their degree of competitiveness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Values for correlation coefficients between motivational structure - MSPQ and school grades</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01

In order to test out last hypothesis we were interested to find out if there is any link between competitive behavior manifested in couple and self esteem level of partners.

Lecturing the statistic data, a negative significant statistic correlation was found r=.267, p<.05, between the scores from the self esteem test and the scores from the competitive behavior level test. According to this, our hypothesis is confirmed. The negative sign of the correlation is showing the direction of the connection between the two variables, in the sense that more the self esteem lever is higher, less competitive behaviors will appear between the couple partners. Persons with a high level of self esteem wont embrace competitive behaviors, in relation with their significant other, tending to cooperate for solve common tasks. In contrary, partners with a low level of self esteem will be felt like more competitive, because of the desire to prove to their significant other that they are better, compared with other potential partners. Competition is used for a continuous validation of their own qualities from their own partner and in same time, a continuous need of validation, a consequence of the low self esteem.

For instance, people in dating relationships report greater concerns about being inferior to their partner. Consequently, people with low self esteem incorrectly believe that their partner perceives relatively few qualities worth valuing in them. In contrast, people with high self-esteem correctly believe that their partner perceives many qualities worth valuing in them (Murray et al., 2000). Partners with a high degree of self esteem do not need to be in
competition with their significant other, because they are pleased with themselves, and with their position in the couple, a comparison can not bring anything new.

So, can be affirmed that between the level of self esteem and the degree of competitive behavior manifested in couple is a conversely proportionately relationship, statistically validated, fact that is confirming our last hypothesis.

4. Conclusion and Suggestions

Obtained results distinguished a higher level of competitiveness for women in romantic relationship. This can be a consequence of the attitude women have to adopt in social and professional life, to be integrated in modern world, set of behaviors also reflecting on their relationship.

We conclude by noting a couple of limitations of our study. One of these limits is the number of subjects investigated, restricted to only 60. It would be desirable to extend the research towards a bigger number of subjects, and of different ages. According to this, we can not generalize our results. In the same idea, our lot included only very young couples, being at the beginning of their way together. Is interesting to study how these characteristics will be after, for example, a decade of marriage. Despite these limitations, we believe that the current study has extended our understanding how being competitive can affect young couples’ life. Also, competitive behavior is influenced by self esteem level, being more frequent at the partners with a lower level of self appreciation, as a strategy to reconfirm their value, especially in couple life.

Based on the results, a competitive behavior manifested toward the couple partner is perceived more as being unpleasant rather than aggressive, and can lead to conflict. Unpleasant competitiveness, according to Laner (1986), includes tactics such as using sarcasm or deceit to get one’s way. Even if at declarative level partners plead for equal power regarding taking decisions, actually, imposing their own point of view is considered wining this “non-existent competition”.

References