



Domain specificity of sex differences in competition

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ARTICLE INFO

Available online 29 June 2011

JEL classification:

C90
D03
D81

Keywords:

Gender differences
Sex differences
Competition
Risk
Decision-making

ABSTRACT

There has been much recent literature about sex differences in competition, mostly noting that women are innately less competitive than men (Croson and Gneezy, 2009). This article examines the hypothesis that sex differences in propensity to compete are domain specific. We conducted a 2 (sex) × 4 (domain) experiment with 434 participants examining competition decisions, familiarity with the domain, and performance. We find no overall sex differences in rates of competition when collapsing across all four domains, but do find sex differences in rates of competition for individual domains. Additionally we examined the importance of winning at competition on self-esteem using the Contingencies of Self-Worth, Competition subscale (Crocker et al., 2003) and find that the subscale fully mediates the effect of sex on the strength of competitive pay preferences.

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1. Introduction

Recent research in experimental economics suggests that women are innately less competitive than men (Croson and Gneezy, 2009; Gneezy et al., 2003; Niederle and Vesterlund, 2007, 2008; Vandegrift and Yavas, 2009). A consequence of this research is that women would be less likely to compete in organizational tournaments leading to high status positions. It is a well known fact that there is a shortage of women in the upper echelons of management: only 2.6 percent of Fortune 500 CEO's and 15 percent of Fortune 500 board positions are held by women, even though women make up 51 percent of the management and professional labor force (US Dept of Labor, 2010). If the prior research is accurate, and women are innately less competitive, there are few effective interventions that could systemically address the shortage of women in high status positions. In which case, an argument could be made that the status quo is inherently adaptive, and women are underrepresented in high status occupations due to their inferior fit for these occupations.

The work presented here proposes and tests a set of hypotheses suggesting that societally sanctioned gender norms influence the domains that men and women elect to compete in. We present evidence that sex differences in the propensity to compete are domain specific. Due to the gender roles of men and women and the accompanying stereotypes, different sexes are likely to feel more or less competent in different domains. In their seminal article, Heath and Tversky (1991) found that people prefer "betting on their own judgment when they feel knowledgeable and competent, but not otherwise" (Heath and Tversky, 1991; p. 9). We extend this theory to apply to competition decisions. People will prefer to compete in domains they feel relatively more familiar and knowledgeable about; and those feelings of familiarity and knowledge are influenced by gender roles. Additionally, we examine the hypothesis that gender differences in competition are influenced by how men and women in our culture derive self-esteem. Research suggests that men, in particular, seem to gain self-esteem by

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demonstrating they are better than others (Crocker et al., 2003; Josephs et al., 1992), and this psychological need may nudge men towards competition.

First, we review the literature from behavioral economics and psychology related to sex differences in decisions to compete and performance in competition. We then present an experimental study testing the relevant hypotheses drawn from the literature review. We conclude with a discussion of our findings and their theoretical significance.

2. Literature review

2.1. Decisions to compete

Recently there has been a considerable amount of research suggesting that men enter competitions at significantly higher rates than women. Niederle and Vesterlund found that men are more than twice as likely to choose to be paid under a competitive scheme (vs. piece rate) than women are, even though performance on the task did not vary by sex of the participant (Niederle and Vesterlund, 2007, 2008). Additional research has found similar results: that men entered tournaments at much higher rates than women when the experimental task was to forecast future stock prices (Vandegrift and Yavas, 2009). However the tasks chosen in these experiments involve mathematical calculations. Math is a domain where women are stereotyped to do poorly (Inzlicht and Ben-Zeev, 2000; Keller and Molix, 2008; Steele and Ambady, 2006). In fact, Vandegrift and Yavas (2009) found that after controlling for skill at the experimental task (forecasting stock prices) gender differences in opting for the competitive option disappeared. Finally, Croson and Gneezy (2009) cite an unpublished study where participants either select to compete or be paid piece rate on two tasks, supposedly favored by each gender: shooting baskets, favored by men, or solving anagrams favored by women. On the task that favored men (shooting baskets), 53 percent of men competed, and only 15 percent of women competed; on the task that supposedly favored women (solving anagrams), 25 percent of women competed and 40 percent of men competed. However, since the details of this experiment are not disclosed it is difficult to determine if there may have been other drivers of the results, such as familiarity with the task or disclosing one's competitive preferences in a public setting. In contrast to the above results, Gneezy and colleagues (2009) found that women in a matrilineal society chose to compete at a basket shooting task at similar rates as men in a patriarchal society, suggesting that competitive preferences may be shaped by societal gender norms.

The main hypothesis of this study is that sex differences in decisions to compete are influenced by the competitive domain. The competence hypothesis (Heath and Tversky, 1991) suggests the people prefer to bet in areas of knowledge rather than a matched chance gamble. Similarly, if someone is more familiar or has more knowledge about a domain he or she would be more likely to elect to compete in that domain and show a stronger preference for competitive pay in the domain. Social role theory (Eagly et al., 2000) suggests that men and women are socialized to take on different roles in society, and therefore would have different exposures to various domains and develop different competencies based on their expected societal/gender role. The authors posit that social structure or cultural norms are the root cause of sex differences in behavior. We therefore present the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a. Men's and women's decisions to compete depend on the domain of the competition.

Hypothesis 1b. Decisions to compete will be influenced by one's familiarity or knowledge with the domain of competition.

2.2. Competition and self-esteem

Recent research on gender has noted the precarious nature of manhood (Vandello et al., 2008), suggesting that manhood in our society requires continual social proof or ones' status as a man can be questioned. Additionally, the male gender role in our society requires men to be individualist, independent and autonomous, and puts men in a position to have to "prove" that they are better than others to generate self-esteem (Josephs et al., 1992). In a recent article, Crocker et al. (2003) proposed that some people's self-worth is based on being superior to others, by outdoing others in competition, and that men are especially vulnerable to generating self-esteem via competitive performance. Although, at the individual level, both men and women vary with respect to how important winning in competitive situations is to feelings of self-worth.

It is therefore possible that men and women may decide to compete for different reasons. As a group, men may choose to compete as a means of generating greater self-esteem, as well as for the economic rewards, while women may take a more rational approach to the decision to compete based on economic expectancies. The Contingencies of Self-Worth, Competition subscale (Crocker et al., 2003) was included in the experiment to examine this phenomenon. If men's decisions to compete are driven by something other than economic expectancies, we would see greater variance in men's decisions to compete: selecting to compete at high rates in domains of competence and low rates in domains where they feel less competent, to avoid the negative self-evaluation that may result from losing a competition.

Hypothesis 2a. Winning in competitive situations will be more important to men's feelings of self-worth than to women's.

Hypothesis 2b. The importance of winning in competitive situations to one's self-worth will mediate the relationship between sex and competitive pay preferences.

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