



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jebo

Gender differences in competitiveness and risk taking: Comparing children in Colombia and Sweden[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Available online 24 June 2011

JEL classification:

C91
D03
J16

Keywords:

Competitiveness
Risk preferences
Children
Gender differences
Experiment

ABSTRACT

We explore gender differences in preferences for competition and risk among children aged 9–12 in Colombia and Sweden, two countries differing in gender equality according to macro indices. We include four types of tasks that vary in gender stereotyping when looking at competitiveness: running, skipping rope, math and word search. We find that boys and girls are equally competitive in all tasks and all measures in Colombia. Unlike the consistent results in Colombia, the results in Sweden are mixed, with some indication of girls being more competitive than boys in some tasks in terms of performance change, whereas boys are more likely to choose to compete in general. Boys in both countries are more risk taking than girls, with a smaller gender gap in Sweden.

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1. Introduction

Men typically occupy the majority of top positions in most sectors in most societies, whereas women in many western countries are at least as likely as men to pursue higher education and to participate in the labor market. One possible and suggested cause of gender differences in labor market outcomes is that men and women differ in terms of economic preferences. In particular, preferences for competition and risk, where women in general are found to be less competitive and less risk taking than men (see, e.g., Croson and Gneezy, 2009 for an overview), might contribute to explaining the labor market gender gap. Competitiveness is typically measured as either the performance response to a competitive setting compared to a non-competitive setting, or as a preference for competition such as self-selecting into a competitive setting

[☆] We are grateful for comments from Johan Almenberg, Thomas Buser, Alison Cool, Bart Golsteyn, Moshe Hoffman, Magnus Johannesson, Astri Muren, David G. Rand and seminar participants at ESA Copenhagen 2010, Gruter's Squaw Valley Retreat on Law, Institutions and Human Behavior 2010, Harvard Kennedy School, MOVE Workshop on Gender Differences in Competitiveness and Risk Taking, Stockholm School of Economics, and Stockholm University. We are especially grateful to Uri Gneezy for his encouragement to initiate this study as well as continuous feedback. Anna Dreber is grateful for support from Iris Bohnet and the Women and Public Policy Program at Harvard Kennedy School. The field work in Colombia could not have been completed without the help of Adriana Molina and Gloria Rodriguez and a number of volunteer students. Financial support from the Swedish Institute of Banking Research (Bankforskningsinstitutet) (A.D.), the Jan Wallander and Tom Hedelius Foundation and the Carl Silfvén Foundation (E.R.), the Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research (FAS), and the Department of Economics at the Universidad de Los Andes is gratefully acknowledged.

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instead of a non-competitive setting. However, relatively little is known about how the gender gap in economic preferences varies with age, and to what extent cross-country differences in gender norms affect the gender gap. Studying children from different countries is one potential route to further this understanding.

In this paper we explore the gender gap in preferences for competition and risk among approximately 1200 children aged 9–12 in the two capitals Bogotá and Stockholm. Colombia and Sweden are two countries that differ in gender equality according to various macro-economic indices (e.g., Hausmann et al., 2010).¹ Our setup enables us to study to what extent there are systematic differences in the gender gap between Colombia and Sweden. We explore gender differences in competitiveness using four tasks: running, skipping rope, math and word search. These four tasks allow for the possibility that differences in gender stereotyping of the tasks influence the gender gap in competitiveness, i.e. there might be female and male areas of competition. We study competitiveness as the performance change between an individual setting and a forced competition in all four tasks, as well as the choice of whether to compete or not in math and word search. We also explore the gender gap in risk preferences by having the children choose between different incentivized lotteries.

There is some previous work on competitiveness and risk taking among children. In a field experiment on 9–10 year old children in Israel, Gneezy and Rustichini (2004a) find that boys react to competition by running faster against another child compared to an individual race, whereas girls do not change their performance. Contradictory to this finding, Dreber et al. (2011) find that 7–10 year old boys and girls in Sweden compete equally in running as well as in skipping rope and dancing.² Moreover, Booth and Nolen (2009a) explore how the gender gap in choosing to compete among 15-year-old adolescents in the UK depends on whether they go to a single sex or mixed school. Girls in single sex schools are more competitive than girls from mixed schools. Boys are found to be equally competitive in both types of schools, as well as more competitive than girls in both schools.

In parallel with this study, two other studies concerning gender differences in competitiveness among children have been conducted. Looking at running, Sutter and Rützler (2010) find that among 3- to 8-year-old children in Austria, boys are more likely than girls to choose to compete. Sutter and Rützler also look at 9- to 18-year-old children competing in math and find similar results to those on younger children, i.e. boys are more likely to choose to compete than girls. Moreover, Andersen et al. (2010) compare competitiveness, measured as the choice to compete when throwing tennis balls, among children aged 7–15 in a matrilineal society (the Khasi) and a patriarchal society (the Kharbi) in India.³ They find no significant gender difference in competitiveness in the matrilineal society, whereas in the patriarchal society a gender gap emerges in the age group 13–15, with boys being more competitive.

The type of competition task has also been shown to sometimes matter. Most of the literature focuses on math or maze tasks, tasks that are typically considered male, with a few exceptions.⁴ Two studies comparing the gender gap in competitiveness between a maze task and a word task find that the gender gap is influenced by the task (Grosse and Riener, 2010; Günther et al., 2010) whereas another study finds no difference between these tasks (Wozniak et al., 2010). Gneezy and Rustichini (2004b) find that the gender gap decreases when adult subjects can choose to compete in solving anagrams compared to shooting baskets, whereas Dreber et al. (2011) find no gender gap in performance change in running, skipping rope or dancing among children.

Previous literature on the gender gap in risk taking among children shows mixed results. Booth and Nolen (2009b) look at single sex and mixed schools and find that boys are more risk taking than girls in mixed schools but that there is no gender gap when comparing boys to girls from single sex schools. Girls are also more risk taking when assigned to all-girl groups than when assigned to mixed groups. Borghans et al. (2009) find a gender gap among 15–16 year old children in the Netherlands, with boys being more risk taking than girls.⁵ However, unlike the latter two studies, Harbaugh et al. (2002) find no gender gap in risk taking among children aged 5–13 or among adolescents aged 14–20 in the US.

Moreover, evidence suggests that the gender gap in competitiveness and risk taking is influenced by the subject pool studied. Gneezy et al. (2009), in a study on adults, find that women compete more than men in a matrilineal society in India whereas the opposite is found in a patriarchal society in Tanzania. Moreover, the results of Booth and Nolen (2009a,b), Andersen et al. (2010), and the differences between Gneezy and Rustichini (2004a), Dreber et al. (2011) and Sutter and Rützler (2010) also support the notion that the country or environment in which the study is performed matters. Since Colombia scores lower on gender equality indices than Sweden (Hausmann et al., 2010), we expect the gender gap to be bigger in Colombia in all four competition tasks as well as in risk taking compared to Sweden. We also expect the gender gap to be smaller (if there is any gap at all) in more feminine tasks such as skipping rope and word search compared to running and math in both countries.

¹ In this report, Colombia ranks 55th and Sweden 4th in terms of gender equality according to this index. As far as we know, there are no studies comparing neither adult or children behavior in competitiveness and risk taking in Colombia and Sweden.

² Dreber et al. (2011) find no impact of age on behavior. There are furthermore some differences between the setup of Gneezy and Rustichini (2004a) and that of Dreber et al. (2011).

³ Matrilineal is a technical genealogical term, meaning that people trace descent through the mother's line. Patriarchal means that men have more power in society. These terms are not necessarily opposite: a society can for example be matrilineal (trace descent through the mother) and patriarchal (men have more power).

⁴ The math task in this study is rated as being more boyish, see Section 4.6.

⁵ Borghans et al. (2009) also find that boys sometimes are more ambiguity averse than girls.

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