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Intrasexual competition among males: Competitive towards men, prosocial towards women

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ABSTRACT

In a study among 40 males and 56 females, participants engaged in a series of decomposed social games in which they had to divide resources between themselves and either a same-sex or an opposite sex other. As predicted on the basis of theorizing on sexual selection, males behaved more competitively towards another man than towards a woman, whereas women did not distinguish between men and women in their degree of competitiveness. At the same time, men behaved more prosocially towards women than women did towards men. In addition, after dividing resources between themselves and another man in the decomposed game task, men showed higher levels of intrasexual competition (assessed with a questionnaire) than after dividing resources between themselves and a woman, whereas for women the sex of the other did not affect their level of intrasexual competition.

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Intrasexual competition refers to rivalry with same-sex others that is, ultimately, driven by the motive to obtain and maintain access to mates. Darwin (1871) already recognized the importance of intrasexual competition for sexual selection, and suggested that it led to important behavioral adaptations for attracting mates and for gathering the necessary resources for reproduction and offspring care. In most species where females have to invest much more than males in producing offspring, females are as it were, generally a scarce resource over which males compete (for a review, see e.g., Wong & Candolin, 2005). Therefore, in many species males tend to engage in quite fierce competition over status and resources with other males to conquer, monopolize and impress females (e.g., Schmitt & Buss, 1996; Geary, 1998). In addition, in several species males tend to offer various types of gifts to females to secure an effective mating. Especially in many species of insects, males offer nuptial food gifts to females in the form of a prey item or synthesized material (e.g., Lang, 1996; Perry & Rowe, 2010; Thornhill & Alcock, 1983; Wedell, 1993). Moreover, e.g., Zahavi (1995) suggested that sexual selection can drive males to compete for altruism. He suggested that altruism originated as a 'handicap' that evolved because it gave a costly and therefore accurate signal of the phenotypic and genetic quality of the altruist to others.

Among humans, men also often show generous behavior to women as a mating strategy. For example, in a study by Saad

and Gill (2001) participants took part in a two-person ultimatum game, in which one was the allocator and the other the recipient and the allocator had to split a given sum of money with the recipient. The recipient could either accept or reject the offer. If accepted, both players received their respective splits, if rejected neither of them got anything. The results showed that men made more generous offers when pitted against a woman as opposed to a man. Women, on the other hand, made equal offers independently of the sex of the recipient. Furthermore, research by Iredale, Van Vugt, and Dunbar (2008) showed similar results. In their study, men and women played a series of experimental games with which they could earn money. During these games, they were either in the presence of a same-sex or an opposite-sex other, or they were alone. After completion of the games, they were asked what percentage of their earnings they would be willing to donate to charity. The results showed that when in the presence of a woman, men donated significantly more to charity than when in the presence of a man, or when there was no observer. For women, charity donations were not affected by condition. Taken together, these studies suggest that generosity may have evolved as a male mating signal (cf. Miller, 2000).

In the present research we used a series of decomposed games (e.g., Van Lange, 1999) to assess the degree to which individuals behave competitively, prosocially or individualistically towards a same-sex versus an opposite sex other by asking individuals to divide points between themselves and the other. While these games are usually employed to assess individual differences in competitiveness and prosociality (see Van Lange, Otten, De Bruin, & Joireman, 1997), they may also be used to assess how competitive

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or prosocial individuals behave towards different types of others, i.e. either same-sex or opposite-sex others. As for participants the main goal of the decomposed games is to distribute points, the mention of the sex of the other person functions as a very subtle manipulation, and one which to our knowledge has not been used before. On the basis of theorizing on intrasexual competition we expected men to behave more competitively towards a same sex other and more prosocially towards an opposite sex other, whereas we did not expect such a difference among women. This does not at all imply that we assume that women are not intrasexually competitive. In fact, there is considerable evidence that females of various primates, including humans, may compete over resources and dominance (e.g., Campbell, 2004; Isbell, 1991). Nevertheless, intrasexual competition among females tends to revolve mainly around attracting males (for example, in chacma baboons, Huchard & Colishaw, 2011), and many studies suggest that human females tend to compete relatively more in the domains of physical attractiveness (e.g., Buss, 1988; Campbell, 2004; Dijkstra & Buunk, 2002; Rucas et al., 2006). For example, when confronted with highly attractive rivals, women tend to “dislike” such a rival, particularly during periods of high estrogen (Fisher, 2004), or when intrasexual competition is made salient when the rival is conversing with a male (Baenninger, Baenninger, & Houle, 1993).

We took our research a step further than merely assessing sex differences in money allocation to same-sex and opposite sex others. As was mentioned above, we assumed that engaging in such a task may function as a *prime*. That is, by having to make a series of decisions in the decomposed game on how to divide money between oneself and another man, men will be more or less unconsciously primed with intrasexual competition. Therefore, we expected them to report a higher level of intrasexual competition on a subsequent questionnaire than when they have been making a series of decisions on how to divide money between oneself and a woman. Again, as for women competition over resources with same sex others and providing resources to opposite sex others is less important than for men, we did not expect to find a similar effect among women. To measure intrasexual competition, we used a measure developed by Buunk and Fisher (2009), which is gender neutral, and does not show differences in mean scores between men and women. The measure assesses intrasexual competition as an attitude. This attitudinal focus concerns the degree to which individuals view the confrontation with same-sex individuals in competitive terms, and implicates a number of phenomena that have been well-described in the psychological literature, albeit not in a mating context. These include the desire to outperform others rather than to perform well (Van Yperen, 2003); the desire to view oneself as better than others (cf. self-enhancement, Zuckerman & O’Loughlin, 2006); feeling envy and frustration when others are better off, and having negative feelings towards such others (Smith & Kim, 2007); and malicious pleasure or *schadenfreude* when high achievers (“tall poppies”) lose face (Feather, 1994). The latter may be seen as the result of the derogation of a rival, a frequently used strategy during intrasexual competition. While Buunk and Fisher (2009) developed the scale primarily to assess individual differences in intrasexual competition, in the current study we expected it to be situationally sensitive. Indeed, finding an effect of priming upon a measure intended to assess individual differences would be particularly strong evidence for our theoretical assumption.

To summarize, we expected that in a decomposed experimental game, males would be more competitive towards other males than to females, whereas females would not distinguish between males and females in their degree of competitiveness. We also expected that males would behave more altruistically towards females than vice versa. In addition, we expected that for males, engaging in a task in which one is primed on dividing resources between oneself

and another male will enhance their level of intrasexual competition as compared to dividing resources between themselves and a woman. Again, we did not expect a similar effect among women.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

Participants were 40 men (mean age = 21.45, SD = 2.61) and 56 women (mean age 20.14, SD = 2.91). All were first year students of the University of Groningen and participated in this online study as part of course requirements. They were randomly assigned to either the same sex condition (20 males, 27 females) or the opposite sex condition (20 males, 27 females).

1.2. Materials and procedure

Participants completed this study online and were told they were participating in a study on collaboration. In each condition, participants first provided their age, relationship status and sexual preference. Next, they answered a series of nine decomposed social games (for details, see Messick & McClintock, 1968; Van Lange & Kuhlman, 1994) which involved making choices among combinations of outcomes for oneself and for a hypothetical other. Outcomes were presented in terms of points, and subjects were asked to imagine that the points had value to themselves as well as to the other person. This other person was introduced as someone they did not know and whom they would never knowingly meet in the future. The instructions also noted that the other person would also make choices; this framed the situation as involving some sort of interdependence between the participants and the other. In the current experiment, the sex of this other person was varied, such that in each decomposed game each participant divided points either between himself or herself and a male other, or between himself or herself and a female other, i.e. either someone of their own sex, or someone of the opposite sex. The opponent’s sex was introduced to the participants in the following way: ‘In this study, you will divide points between yourself and another boy [another girl]’. Moreover, the opponent’s sex was repeated in each of the choices they could make (see below).

In each of the nine decomposed games, subjects were given a choice between three alternatives, each corresponding to one of the three social value orientations: prosocial, competitive, or individualistic. An example of a decomposed game is the choice among three options: Option A – 480 points for self and 80 for the boy [the girl], Option B – 540 points for self and 280 for the boy [the girl], Option C – 480 points for self and 480 points for the boy [the girl]. In this example, Option A represents the competitive choice, because it provides a larger difference between one’s own and the other’s outcomes than does either Option B or Option C. Option B represents the individualistic choice, because one’s own outcomes are larger than those in Option A or Option C. Finally, Option C represents the prosocial choice, because it provides a larger joint outcome than does either Option A or Option B. Also, Option C represents a smaller discrepancy between one’s own and other’s outcomes than does either Option A or Option B (for details, see also Van Lange et al., 1997). For the current study, sum scores were computed for each of the options (prosocial, competitive, and individualist), resulting in individual scores ranging from 0 to 9. For prosociality, the overall mean for women was 3.75 (SD = 3.93), for men 6.00 (SD = 3.80). For competitiveness, women’s mean score was 1.02 (SD = 2.45), for men the mean score was 0.93 (SD = 2.46). For individualism women’s mean score was 4.23 (SD = 3.78), and men’s mean score was 2.27 (SD = 3.28).

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