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*Psychological Science* 2012 23: 743 originally published online 14 June 2012

DOI: 10.1177/0956797612442393

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# Negotiation Topic as a Moderator of Gender Differences in Negotiation

Psychological Science  
23(7) 743–744  
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DOI: 10.1177/0956797612442393  
http://pss.sagepub.com



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Received 12/11/11; Revision accepted 2/21/12

Recent research on gender and negotiations suggests that women are less likely to initiate negotiations than men (Small, Gelfand, Babcock, & Gettman, 2007) and that they negotiate less well than men (Bowles, Babcock, & McGinn, 2005; Stuhlmacher & Walters, 1999). However, little attention has been paid to how the negotiation issue itself affects these gender differences (but see Bear, 2011, for how issues affect gender differences in avoiding negotiation and Miles & LaSalle, 2008, for how issues affect gender differences in self-efficacy in negotiation). Experimental research on negotiations predominantly uses prototypically masculine issues. In a meta-analysis of how gender influences negotiation performance (Stuhlmacher & Walters, 1999), 47.5% of the 21 included studies involved monetary purchases, 24.5% involved compensation, and 28.3% involved legal issues. Might gender differences be eliminated or even reversed if the negotiations were over more prototypically feminine issues?

There is reason to believe that this may be the case. Situations that do not match an individual's gender role involve behaving in a counterstereotypical way, such as when a woman occupies a masculine, agentic role (e.g., a top managerial position) or when a man occupies a feminine, communal role (e.g., staying at home to raise children). These types of gender-incongruent situations lead to anxiety and role conflict (Bosson, Prewitt-Freilino, & Taylor, 2005; Luhaorg & Zivian, 1995; Parry, 1987), and in comparison with gender-congruent situations, gender-incongruent situations are more likely to be avoided (Bem & Lenney, 1976) and tend to elicit more negative evaluations (Davison & Burke, 2000; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Hoyt, 2012).

In the current study, we examined whether the masculinity or femininity of the negotiation issue moderates gender differences in performance. We predicted an interaction between the gender of the negotiator and the nature of the negotiation topic: That is, we expected that men would outperform women when negotiating over a masculine issue, and that women would outperform men when negotiating over a feminine issue.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 116 physicians (58 men, 58 women; mean age = 48 years) enrolled in an executive-education program on negotiation.

### Design and procedure

We modified Mapletech-Yazawa, a commonly used exercise involving a negotiation over the price of halogen motorcycle headlights (obtained from Harvard Business School, Boston, MA). The case involved a negotiation between the president of an auto-parts manufacturing company (the seller) and the vice president of a large electronics manufacturing company (the buyer); the negotiation concerned the cost of purchasing motorcycle headlights. The buyer originally intended to produce the headlights, but after experiencing production difficulties, wanted to purchase the headlights from the seller instead.

We created a new version identical to the original except that the issue was changed to the price of lamp-work beads used to make jewelry and that the names of the companies were changed to reflect crafts instead of technology ("Maplecraft" and "Yazawa Crafts"). With these changes, the gender context of the case became feminine rather than masculine. We chose lamp-work beads because they are an expensive product, comparable in price to halogen headlights. They are also made from glass, which made it easy to adapt the case's description of the manufacturing process. In the two versions, the unit price range was identical, as was the buyer's best alternative to a negotiated agreement (an outside offer from another firm) and the seller's best alternative to a negotiated agreement (to remain with excess capacity in headlight or bead production). To verify that the bead negotiation was a more feminine context and a less masculine one than the headlight negotiation, we had 58 students in a negotiation class rate these issues. The headlight negotiation was rated as significantly more masculine ( $M = 4.91$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ) than the bead negotiation ( $M = 3.60$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ),  $t(52) = 5.92$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $d = 1.04$ . The bead negotiation was rated as significantly more feminine ( $M = 4.70$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ) than the headlight negotiation ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ),  $t(53) = 6.63$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $d = 1.04$ .

Fifty-eight mixed-gender pairs were randomly assigned to negotiate the price of the beads or headlights and to be the buyer or the seller. Each pair negotiated over the per-unit price of 60,000 units of the product.

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## Measures

Each participant's performance was calculated as his or her *surplus*. For buyers, the surplus was the amount by which the negotiated price was lower than the maximum price of \$35 per unit. For sellers, the surplus was the amount by which the negotiated price was higher than the minimum price of \$10 per unit. Thus, the total surplus to be divided between the negotiators was \$25 per unit.

## Results

Women's mean surplus was \$9.20 ( $SD = \$5.10$ ) for the masculine negotiation. For the feminine negotiation, it was \$12.02 ( $SD = \$5.58$ ). The men's surplus was \$25 minus the women's surplus. As predicted, gender differences in performance were moderated by the negotiation topic,  $t(56) = 2.00, p < .03, d = 0.53$ . In the masculine negotiation, women received significantly less than half of the \$25 surplus,  $t(57) = 3.72, p < .01$ ; this means that men outperformed women. In the feminine negotiation, women's surplus was not significantly different from half of the surplus,  $t(57) = 0.43, p = .67$ ; this means that there was no gender difference in performance for this negotiation.

## Discussion

This study provides initial support for our hypothesis that gender differences in negotiation performance depend on the nature of the negotiation topic. Although men outperformed women in the masculine version of our negotiation task, the gender difference was eliminated in the feminine version of the task. We had predicted that women would outperform men in the feminine version, but perhaps the masculine nature of negotiation itself (Kray, Thompson, & Galinsky, 2001) neutralized women's advantage in negotiating over a feminine issue. Nevertheless, this is just one study, and there is a need for further studies testing whether our results can be replicated with different negotiation topics, to confirm that our findings can be attributed to the gendered nature of our topics, and were not specific to beads and headlights. Future work should also test our hypothesis using negotiations that involve multiple issues and that are not purely distributive.

We interpret our results to mean that gender differences in negotiation are not absolute. The conventional wisdom about gender differences in negotiation may hold only with negotiations involving masculine issues. Furthermore, people who conduct research on negotiation and who teach courses on negotiation should pay attention to the materials they use—and in particular to whether the negotiation issues are masculine, feminine, or neutral. We had 58 negotiation students rate the masculinity and femininity of nine issues in popular negotiation exercises. (New Recruit, Texoil, Eazy's Garage, and other exercises were obtained from the Center for Dispute Resolution Research, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL. The remaining exercises were obtained from Harvard Business School, Boston, MA, and the Harvard Law School Program on Negotiation, Cambridge, MA.) Of these cases, 78% were rated as significantly more masculine than feminine ( $p < .0001$  in the

majority of cases). Because most of the exercises involve masculine topics, male and female students may receive skewed feedback on their negotiation performance, which could lead men to overestimate their negotiation skills and women to underestimate their negotiation skills.

Although we found that the topic of a negotiation can be an important moderator of gender differences in negotiation outcomes, we do not know why. Perhaps men and women have different comfort levels with masculine and feminine topics, or perhaps they anticipate more backlash from the other negotiator when negotiating over a gender-incongruent topic. We hope that our research sparks interest in these questions.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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