
Why Some Men Feel the Need to Win at All Costs



By [Stefan Thau](#) , INSEAD

Male misbehaviour in negotiations is rooted in our evolutionary history.

Men are generally considered to be fiercer, more ruthless competitors than women in the workplace. These gender differences are more pronounced in the realm of negotiation, where men achieve better outcomes on the whole. Yet if men fight harder than women at the negotiation table, they perhaps also fight dirtier, more often employing unethical tactics such as outright deception.

The possible ethical risks of masculine hyper-competitiveness are serious enough to warrant attention from firms. Managing male immorality entails knowing where it comes from, how common it is and what specific circumstances trigger it. If it were to stem from social influence, then firms could try to counteract that influence so as to benefit from male competitiveness without risking the unwanted ethical side effects.

My recently published paper in [Academy of Management Journal](#) (co-authored by Margaret Lee and Madan M. Pillutla of London Business School

and Marko Pitesa of Singapore Management University) finds that sex differences in negotiations derive from a much more primal place: men's and women's respective roles in the evolution of the species.

Intrasexual competition

Drawing upon evolutionary theory, we hypothesised that male competitiveness originates from the elemental quest to find reproductive partners in humankind's early history. From a purely evolutionary point of view, in which viable offspring is all that matters, it made sense for women to be more selective in choosing partners than men were. After all, each pregnancy occupied a significant amount of time and energy, to say nothing of child-rearing. Even the most fertile woman could go through the process only so many times. Men, however, could theoretically impregnate any number of women.

With reproductive opportunities at a premium, men were forced to compete mercilessly with one another. Men who were cautious or had strong scruples were at an evolutionary disadvantage. Women not only had less need to be competitive with other women, but also had more to fear from the social repercussions of bruising intrasexual conflicts. Raising children was even more difficult without a cooperative community to call upon if needed.

Therefore, we concluded, it should be possible to manipulate men into negotiating unethically, by creating conditions that evoke buried biological instincts. Gender-mixed negotiations should see lower levels of unethical behaviour from men. Women should engage in less unethical behaviour in negotiations across the board.

The fake negotiations

We started with a simple field study. First, we gave 138 employed adults (approximately half of whom were women) a two-part survey purporting to be about work-life balance. Its actual purpose was to test our belief about the evolutionary origins of unethical negotiation behaviour. Amid a series of dummy questions, respondents were asked to rate their interest in "romantic/sexual activities", as well as how often they had used a variety of unethical negotiation tactics. As predicted, men who reported high interest in sex were the naughtiest negotiators in our sample. Men with more subdued libidos were ethically on par with women, suggesting that sex differences alone did not tell the whole story.

With our basic finding seemingly reinforced, we proceeded to test our larger hypothesis. We launched a pair of studies through two business school behavioural labs, in which hundreds of participants were asked to play the role of negotiator for a hotel group looking to buy a landmark property. The owner of the hypothetical property, we told participants, was strongly opposed to its being used for commercial purposes. They were instructed to write an initial statement to the owner defining their intent. So negotiators were confronted with an ethical dilemma: Be forthright about their commercial aims and risk losing the deal, or lie about them to gain advantage?

Before the negotiation game, some of the participants had their mating instincts heightened through a facial-memorisation exercise featuring photos of attractive people; the others memorised pictures of less attractive people. We similarly varied the attractiveness of the counterparties (property owners) with whom participants thought they were negotiating. Each participant was shown one of four computer-generated images—an attractive or unattractive man or woman—to represent the counterparty.

Liar, liar, pants on fire

When we analysed participant responses across the two studies for deception, clear-cut patterns emerged. Men lied more often than women did—and the men who lied the most were the ones who both were given attractive faces to memorise beforehand and believed they were negotiating with an attractive male. From an evolutionary perspective, a handsome man would pose stiffer competition for the favours of the female.

In other words, men behaved badly under conditions replicating an evolutionary contest with another powerful male over a desired mate. With their competitiveness and mating interest piqued through our experimental manipulations, men were more willing to do anything to win. When negotiating with a woman, neither the attractiveness of the counterparty nor the facial memorisation had any effect. This led us to believe that a greater likelihood of misbehaviour exists when men negotiate with other men.

Female competitiveness

Women are not completely immune to the ethical strain of intrasexual competition, but they tend to be more careful even so. In our second study, we allowed participants to employ a more subtle form of deception by

dodging the question of commercial intent. Women availed themselves of this not-quite-honest tactic under the same conditions as the men told blatant lies—when facing attractive same-sex counterparts, and after prolonged exposure to photos of good-looking people. We concluded that women and men are subject to the same intrasexual competitive dynamic, but men's unethical behaviour will be more brazen and therefore more risky for employers.

What companies can do

Our study suggests some ways for companies to identify the negotiations most likely to provoke unethical behaviour. One simple takeaway would be to use women rather than men for negotiations where ethical concerns are especially salient and the counterparty is male. When a team's gender composition becomes too lopsided in favour of men, it may sometimes be a good idea to tamp down the competitive dynamic by including more women into groups.

Additionally, any element that might exacerbate competitiveness among men—e.g. a macho corporate culture—should be carefully considered, lest it give rise to a general lapse in ethics.

When gender balance isn't an option, something as simple as scheduling negotiations later in the day, when testosterone levels are generally lower, could help mitigate the effect of intrasexual competition.

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About the research

"Male Immorality: An Evolutionary Account of Sex Differences in Unethical Negotiation Behavior" is published in *Academy of Management Journal*.