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Journal of Experimental Social Psychology

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

Competitive reputation manipulation: Women strategically transmit social information about romantic rivals

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Gossip
Intrasexual competition
Indirect aggression
Competitiveness
Reputation

ABSTRACT

Researchers have suggested that women compete with same-sex peers using indirect social tactics. However, the specific predictors and mechanisms of this form of female intrasexual competition are less well understood. We propose that one mechanism by which women harm rivals' social opportunities is through selectively transmitting reputation-relevant social information. Moreover, we contend that this behavior is designed to undermine the romantic and social appeal of same-sex romantic rivals who are perceived to be threatening. Evidence from five studies suggests that women's dissemination of social information is strategic and reliably predicted by various cues of romantic rival threat: attempts at mate poaching (Study 1), physical attractiveness (Studies 2 and 3), and provocative clothing (Studies 4 and 5). Women strategically harmed and failed to enhance the reputations of other women who threatened their romantic prospects directly (by flirting with their romantic partners) and indirectly (by being attractive or provocatively dressed). Women's dispositional levels of competitiveness also predicted their information transmission: highly competitive women (both generally and in romantic domains specifically) disclosed more reputation-damaging information than did less competitive women. Furthermore, women transmitted reputation-harming information about female targets independent of how much they explicitly liked those targets, suggesting a disconnect between women's intentions and their gossip behavior. Irrespective of the gossipers' intentions, pilot data confirmed that social harm is likely to befall the women targeted by the transmission of reputation-damaging social information.

1. Competitive reputation manipulation: Women strategically transmit social information about romantic rivals

"When I was in junior high, there was this new girl that a bunch of guys liked. Two girls in the grade went around with a petition they made all the boys sign that said 'I will never go out with the Megawhore'" –Hope, 17 (p. 135; Wiseman, 2009)

"Brianna and Mackenzie gave [Jenny] a code name and started calling her Harriet the Hairy Whore. They told everyone Jenny was hooking up with the boys in the woods behind the soccer field... Brianna and Mackenzie started a club called Hate Harriet the Whore Incorporated. They got every girl to join except two who didn't care." (p. 26; Simmons, 2002)

The ethnographic excerpts above depict particularly cruel treatment among adolescent girls. Readers likely assume and probably hope that these are rare, isolated incidents limited to the heartless hallways of high schools. Perhaps, however, these are merely extreme examples of a pervasive pattern of female intrasexual competition.

Research suggests that female intrasexual competition manifests in highly social, yet indirect ways—through harming social opportunities via gossip or exclusion (Benenson, 2014; Bjorkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Campbell, 1999). However, the specific mechanisms by which women harm the social opportunities of rivals as well as the dispositional and situational predictors of these aggressive tactics have yet to be fully examined. The current investigation sought to fill this gap in the literature by testing the hypothesis that women selectively disclose reputation-damaging (versus reputation-enhancing) information about same-sex rivals. To the degree that women's competition often centered on securing romantic partners throughout history, women's competitive behaviors should be responsive to perceptions of romantic threat posed by other women. Appealing same-sex peers threaten women's own romantic prospects by decreasing the likelihood that women can attract and retain committed romantic partners. Across five studies, we tested the prediction that women's dissemination of same-sex peers' social information is strategic and reliably predicted by various cues of romantic rival threat: attempts at mate poaching (Study 1), physical attractiveness (Studies 2 and 3) and provocative clothing

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2018.03.011>

Received 13 June 2017; Received in revised form 6 March 2018; Accepted 29 March 2018
0022-1031/ Published by Elsevier Inc.

(Studies 4 and 5).

Furthermore, we tested the hypothesis that individual differences in competitiveness predict women's strategic use of these disclosures. Findings revealed that highly competitive women (both generally and in mating domains in particular) use more aggressive reputation manipulation than do less competitive women, further supporting the contention that selective transmission of social information is a form of female romantic competition.

Last, we examined whether women's competitive behaviors parallel their explicit feelings towards their information targets. This allowed us to assess whether those behaviors are motivated by explicit (versus potentially implicit) concerns about romantic rivalry. Understanding the behavioral mechanisms by which women compete, the situational and interpersonal predictors of those behaviors, as well as whether behaviors follow explicit social assessments are each critical steps in understanding women's underlying motivations, identifying perpetrators, and ultimately designing interventions that can mitigate bullying and indirect aggression among women.

1.1. Female intrasexual competition

Throughout history, women competed with one another to attract romantic partners and acquire resources to raise children. Historical analyses reveal that some women had more children than others, and this variability was largely predicted by whether those women secured a husband during their fertile years (Courtiol, Pettay, Jokela, Rotkirch, & Lummaa, 2012; Skjærø & Røskaft, 2014). Moreover, the quality of women's long-term romantic partners predicted important outcomes for both women and their children (see Geary, 2000 for a review). For example, children were more likely to survive and prosper into adulthood when their fathers were present, remained married to their mothers, and were of high social status (Hill & Hurtado, 1996; Sible-Rushton, Hobcraft, & Kiernan, 2005). These data suggest that, all else being equal, women who formed relationships with men who were generous, committed, and of high status would have produced relatively healthier and more successful children, compared to women who did not secure relationships with such men.

Given the profound importance of women's long-term romantic partners, securing the commitment and investment of high-quality men should have been a critical domain of women's intrasexual competition (Campbell, 1999). Indeed, Burbank (1987) found that women were the targets of other women's aggression in 91% of 137 cultures and this aggression was often triggered by conflict over men's attention and resources. Even in polygynous societies, in which wealthy men can marry more than one woman, conflict among co-wives about husbands' allocation of sexual, emotional, and material investment was widespread and occasionally became violent (Jankowiak, Sudakov, & Wilreker, 2005; Strassmann, 1997). Furthermore, children were more likely to die when their mothers were polygynously rather than monogamously married, suggesting that women who secured greater investment from their romantic partners could better ensure their children's survival (Omariba & Boyle, 2007; Pollet, Fawcett, Buunk, & Nettle, 2009). Taken together, this pattern suggests that female intrasexual competition for male investment has been not only widespread, but also highly consequential for both women and their children.

1.2. Tactics of competition

If there are incentives for women to compete with one another, then women should possess psychological and behavioral strategies that enhance their comparative advantage over rivals. Benenson (2013, 2014) suggested that a primary feature of women's competition involves minimizing the likelihood of detection and, thus, the risk of retaliation (see also Bjorkqvist et al., 1992). By avoiding possible retaliation, women can evade physical injury, which would impair their

ability to bear and care for children (Campbell, 1999). Thus, the strategies by which women compete with same-sex peers for romantic partnerships should be designed to avoid detection. Competition occurring through indirect or covert social tactics would help achieve this goal.

Consistent with this view, women become more competitive in economic games as interactions become increasingly indirect, such as when partners have little or no contact with each other (Archer, 2004, 2009; Walters, Stuhlmacher, & Meyer, 1998). When they do aggress, girls and women often rely on indirect aggression, whereby perpetrators attempt to harm a victim's social standing or disrupt the victim's social relationships, while making it “seem as though there has been no intention to hurt at all” (p. 118; Bjorkqvist et al., 1992). Tactics of indirect aggression often occur behind the victim's back and can include ostracism, breaking confidences, spreading rumors, and gossip (Archer & Coyne, 2005). Although boys and men are much more physically aggressive than females, with indirect forms of aggression, women and girls are equally if not more aggressive than males (Archer, 2004). To be sure, the strength of the sex difference in indirect aggression differs based on the method of assessment. Based on the reports of observers or victims, girls and women appear much more indirectly aggressive than boys and men — but girls and women self-report similar levels of indirect aggression to boys and men (Archer, 2004). This discrepancy could suggest that girls and women are either reluctant to acknowledge their own aggressive behavior (e.g., because of social desirability concerns) or are simply unaware of it (e.g., Tracy, 1991).

Gossip may function as mechanism through which women can harm the social opportunities of their same-sex rivals. That is, if reputations predict access to social partners and resources, then women who tarnished the reputations of rivals would harm their competitors' ability to form relationships with high-quality social and romantic partners, granting themselves a relative advantage (Hess & Hagen, 2002, 2006). And indeed, women compete to discover and spread social information (i.e., gossip) that influences the social and romantic appeal of rivals (Campbell, 2004; McAndrew, 2014; Reynolds, 2016; Rucas et al., 2006). Women do not face this competition alone, but instead use their same-sex friendships as both sources of social information and conduits for disseminating it (Hess & Hagen, 2002, 2006).

Gossip must produce tangible social consequences for it to be an effective competitive tactic. And indeed, people dislike and ostracize those about whom they have heard negative social information, and like and cooperate with those about whom they have learned positive information (Burt & Knez, 1995; Gawronski & Walther, 2008; Gawronski, Walther, & Blank, 2005; Sommerfeld, Krambeck, Semmann, & Milinski, 2007). However, people often treat negative information as more diagnostic of an individual's character than positive information, suggesting that relatively few pieces of negative information are sufficient to ‘tilt the scale’ against a gossip target (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; De Bruin & Van Lange, 2000; Skowronski & Carlston, 1992). The importance of reputations for forming social alliances indicates that reputation manipulation is a viable means by which women could harm rivals' social and romantic opportunities.

Women's interests and behaviors support the contention that gossip is a well-worn tool in their competitive arsenal. Compared to men, women are more interested in gossip about their same-sex peers (McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007; McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002) and better remember the details (De Backer, Nelissen, & Fisher, 2007). Women spend more time than men investigating social media accounts of their same-sex peers (McAndrew & Jeong, 2012), a modern form of social information acquisition. Across multiple cultures, women show a higher tendency to gossip than men (Nevo, Nevo, & Derech-Zehavi, 1993; Watson, 2012). Ethnographic investigations reveal that adolescent girls frequently encounter and are negatively affected by one another's gossip (Eder, 1993; Eder & Enke, 1991; Goodwin, 1980; Merten, 1997; Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000; Simmons, 2002). When asked how they would respond to a same-sex peer who lied about them, women

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