



Reports

Male pragmatism in negotiators' ethical reasoning

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ABSTRACT

Across four studies, we explored why a gender gap emerges in negotiator ethics, such that men set lower ethical standards than women. The male pragmatism hypothesis suggests men, more than women, are motivationally biased in setting ethical standards. Experiment 1 demonstrated how negotiations' masculinity implications underlie this gender gap in ethics. Experiment 2 demonstrated that, by viewing ethics from a self-interested perspective, men were more egocentric in their ethical reasoning than women. Experiment 3 demonstrated that, by granting themselves more leniency in ethics than others, men exhibited more moral hypocrisy than women. Experiment 4 examined how implicit negotiation beliefs affect the relation between gender and ethical standards. As hypothesized, fixed beliefs predicted lower ethical standards, particularly for men. These findings suggest a robust pattern by which men are more pragmatic in their ethical reasoning at the bargaining table than women.

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Introduction

Bernie Madoff is infamous for luring myriad investors into doomed business deals under false pretenses. Yet, if Bernie had been born Bernadette, would similarly egregious ethical lapses have occurred? Since Gilligan's (1982) seminal work on moral development, differences have been noted in how men and women distinguish right from wrong. Though evidence that men and women have categorically distinct moral orientations is tenuous (Jaffey & Hyde, 2000), women appear to have higher ethical standards than men in business contexts (Franke, Crown, & Spake, 1997). In strategic interactions, men are more accepting of ethically questionable tactics (Lewicki & Robinson, 1998; Robinson, Lewicki, & Donahue, 2000) and engage in more deception than women (Dreber & Johannesson, 2008). The prevalence of economically devastating business scandals involving male protagonists raises the question of what drives men's ethical reasoning.

To understand this gender gap in ethics, we explore its cognitive-motivational underpinnings. We hypothesized that men are more pragmatic in their ethical reasoning than women. Ethical pragmatism involves judging ethicality on the basis of practical consequences and whether decision makers' goals are achieved (James, 1896), and is evidenced by responsiveness to situational cues. People are generally motivated to interpret ambiguous information beneficially and to seek information supporting self-interested conclusions (Fiske, 2004; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Kunda, 1990; Lord, Ross, & Lepper,

1979). Yet, when it comes to morality, males are more morally disengaged than females (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). In other words, males more readily justify moral misconduct by minimizing its consequences or otherwise excusing it. In addition, males adjust their moral orientation on the basis of situational characteristics, like protagonist sex, more so than females (Bussey & Maughan, 1982). Each of these findings implies men, more than women, are ethically pragmatic.

We expected male pragmatism to be particularly strong in situations with masculinity implications. In the current research, we examined male pragmatism in negotiations, a stereotypically masculine task involving competition over scarce resources (Kray & Thompson, 2005). Though some negotiations also include cooperative elements (Thompson, 1990), we expected male pragmatism to be triggered by negotiations' omnipresent competitive element. Male negotiators engage in more competitive behaviors (Walters, Stuhlmacher, & Meyer, 1998) and secure more resources (Stuhlmacher & Walters, 1999) than female negotiators, suggesting that men are acutely motivated to win, even if doing so requires compromising their ethics.

Though competition motivates unethical behavior (Shleifer, 2004; Rick & Loewenstein, 2008), it does not explain why men are expected to be more ethically pragmatic than women. To make this case, we draw on the literature illustrating men's greater responsiveness to situational threats to masculinity (in comparison to women's reaction to threats to their femininity). Arguing that manhood is precarious because it requires continuous demonstration, Vandello, Cohen, Burnaford, and Weaver (2008) found that false feedback indicating gender-atypical performance was more threatening to men compared to women. When manhood was threatened, men became more aggressive; when womanhood was threatened, no change

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occurred in women's aggressiveness. Similarly, men overcompensate in the face of masculinity threats (i.e. become more anti-gay and pro-war) in a way that women do not when their femininity is threatened (Willer, Rogalin, Conlon, & Wojnowicz, 2012). Finally, men's competitiveness in strategic interactions varies on the basis of their motivation to win (i.e. to beat intergroup rivals) in a way that women's competitiveness does not (Van Vugt, De Cremer, & Janssen, 2007). Taken together, men's competitive behavior, more so than women's, appears to be motivated by situational threats to their masculinity. When men feel like they have something to prove or defend against, they become more aggressive and competitive.

We extend this line of reasoning to suggest that negotiation performance has identity implications for men that motivates ethical pragmatism. Rather than manipulating masculinity threat, as in prior research, we reasoned that masculinity implications are chronically embedded in zero-sum (i.e. win–lose) tasks such as negotiations, which motivates unethical behavior. Whereas the work cited above examined physical aggression, attitude extremity, and competitive moves as a function of masculinity threat, the current research examined the prevalence of self-serving ethicality judgments, arguably a form of non-physical aggression against competitors.

The current work begins by examining how masculinity implications drive males' lower ethical standards in negotiations. We expected the masculinity implications inherent in negotiations to motivate lower ethical standards and male pragmatism, which we explored in three ways. First, we explored whether male negotiators are particularly prone to egocentric interpretations of ethically ambiguous situations. We expected male negotiators' ethical reasoning to depend on their identification with negotiating parties in ethical dilemmas more so than female negotiators'. Second, we explored whether male negotiators demonstrate more moral hypocrisy than female negotiators. Males were expected to judge the appropriateness of a morally ambiguous act as more favorable when committed by the self than by others. Third, we explored whether certain men are particularly vulnerable to ethical lapses. Specifically, we examined whether implicit negotiation beliefs, which speak to whether good negotiators are born versus created, influence the relationship between gender and ethical reasoning. We expected beliefs that negotiating ability is fixed, and therefore can only be demonstrated and not developed, would exacerbate the masculinity implications of the task and thereby reduce ethical standards for men.

We make several important and novel contributions to the literature. Whereas previous research has mainly documented gender main effects on ethics in negotiations, the current research develops a theoretical framework for understanding the intersection of gender and ethics. By demonstrating stronger motivational biases for men than women, we address the question of why gender differences emerge in negotiators' ethical reasoning. For the first time, we demonstrate that males' ethical compromises are driven by the masculinity implications embedded in the task. We then explore ethical reasoning through the lens of male pragmatism, a motivated responsiveness to situational cues. Finally, we identify implicit negotiation beliefs as a key element of this relationship between masculinity and ethical reasoning.

Experiment 1

The current study was designed to test whether male negotiators' relatively low ethical standards are driven by the masculinity implications embedded in the task. Though past research has shown that both males and females associate masculine gender stereotypes with negotiations (Kray, Thompson, & Galinsky, 2001), we expected that males would be particularly sensitive to the implications of this gendered context for masculinity. The current research examined for the first time whether a gender difference exists in the degree to which negotiations are perceived to have masculinity implications

and, if so, whether it accounts for men's relatively low ethical standards. We hypothesized that men's lower ethical standards would be mediated by their heightened perception that negotiations are masculine tasks.

Methods

Participants

115 undergraduate business students (55 male) earned partial course credit.

Procedure

Participants evaluated a scenario from an ethical advice column in *The New York Times Magazine* (Cohen, 2004). The scenario read:

I have an opportunity to buy the property of my dreams. The problem is that the elderly couple who have lived there for more than 40 years love the house and assume that I will maintain it. I intend to tear it down and build a more modern house on this beautiful property. If I reveal my plan, they may refuse to sell me the house and the land. Am I ethically bound to tell?

Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed that the seller was ethically bound to tell. After several filler items, participants indicated their agreement with a 4-item masculinity implications scale ($\alpha = .69$): "Negotiations are part of a man's world", "Negotiating is not very feminine", "The most effective negotiators are male", and "Negotiators require masculine strength to prevail." Response scales ranged from 1 (not at all) to 9 (extremely).

Results and discussion

We first confirmed the relationship between gender and ethical judgments. Consistent with previous research, males ($M = 5.74$, $sd = 2.37$) had more lenient ethical standards than did females ($M = 6.60$, $sd = 1.77$), $F(1, 113) = 4.86$, $p = .029$. In other words, males were more permissive than females in evaluating the act of not revealing pertinent information. We next tested our prediction that males, more than females, would perceive masculinity implications in negotiations. As expected, males ($M = 3.99$, $sd = 1.54$) perceived greater masculinity implications than did females ($M = 3.36$, $sd = 1.47$), $F(1, 113) = 5.00$, $p = .027$. Finally, we conducted analyses testing the mediating role of masculinity implications on the relationship between gender and ethical judgments (Baron & Kenny, 1986). When ethical judgments were simultaneously regressed on gender and masculinity implications, the effect of masculinity implications was significant ($b = -.31$, $SE = .13$, $t(112) = -2.45$, $p = .016$) while the effect of gender was rendered marginally significant, $b = .66$, $SE = .39$, $t(112) = 1.70$, $p = .09$ (see Fig. 1). To test the significance of this mediation, we conducted bias-corrected bootstrapping analyses with 5000 resamples (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). This analysis revealed a significant indirect effect of gender, Mediated effect = .20, $SE = .13$, 95% $CI = .01-.55$. As the confidence interval does not bridge zero, this analysis supports our conclusion that perceived masculinity implications mediated the relationship between gender and ethical judgments.

The current study demonstrated two gender differences relevant to negotiator ethics. First, males indicated lower ethical standards than females. Second, this difference was driven by the perception that negotiations have masculinity implications. Males' sensitivity to the masculinity implications of negotiations lowered their ethical standards. We expected this implicit connection between masculinity and negotiations to provide the impetus for male pragmatism, which we examined in the remaining experiments.

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