

Women become aggressive around sexual rivals

December 8 2011, by Michelle Donovan

(Medical Xpress) -- New research conducted at McMaster University suggests women vying for male attention become aggressive towards other women they see as sexual rivals, a scene often played out in the media and popular reality television shows like *The Bachelor*.

The study, published in the journal [Aggressive Behaviour](#), explores female competition from an [evolutionary perspective](#), suggesting it is not only a television phenomenon, but also plays out in the workplace and schools.

The team of researchers from McMaster and the University of Ottawa videotaped how female undergraduates - between the ages of 17 and 28 - reacted to an attractive young female student entering the room dressed either conservatively or provocatively.

When dressed in a simple t-shirt and khaki jeans, the student was hardly noticed. But when she dressed in a low-cut top and mini skirt, the other [women](#) were more likely to roll their eyes or stare at her. When she left the room, many laughed and ridiculed her appearance.

A separate group of women were then asked to view the videotapes and rate each participant's reaction in terms of aggression. The results show that almost all women were hostile toward the female dressed in a provocative manner. The [attractive female](#) was subjected to verbal and non-verbal ridicule.

"This research may help explain why popular media, which often portrays [females](#) vying for the attention of males, has such a strong female audience base," explains Aanchal Sharma, a recent graduate from the Department of Psychology, Neuroscience & Behaviour, who conducted the study as part of her doctorate research. "On some level, the conflict and comments are a pull for female viewership, as they are able to identify with the situations portrayed."

Tracing the findings to evolutionary theory, the article suggests that women are hard-wired to detect any form of behaviour and appearance that signals sexual availability that could, in turn, reduce their own level of desirability. Engaging in [aggression](#) is a means of keeping competitors at bay.

These findings have wider implications for bullying, says Sharma.

"There has been a lot of pressure for education policy reform to respond to bullying as a growing issue. Our work provides support for the innate roots of female conflict," she says. "Although we may not be able to prevent negative thoughts and emotions that drive conflict among females, this research is certainly a starting point for recognizing the origins of the behaviours and informing what factors should be considered in the resolution process."

Provided by McMaster University

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