

# Study: Interventions help women's reluctance to discuss accomplishments

January 13 2014, by Carol Schmidt

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(Medical Xpress)—A study published by Jessi L. Smith, professor of psychology at Montana State University, and Meghan Huntoon, who was Smith's student at MSU when research was conducted, has found that gender norms about modesty help explain why women don't feel comfortable bragging about their own accomplishments. However, intervention techniques can help women to communicate more effectively about their successes.

"Women's Bragging Rights: Overcoming Modesty Norms to Facilitate Women's Self-Promotion" was published in the December 20, 2013 issue of *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. Smith said the research, which sampled nearly 80 MSU undergraduate women, confirmed that women downplay their own accomplishments but have no trouble promoting a friend. Past research had already shown that men are not affected by modesty norms like women are. However, this was among the first studies to test ways to intervene to help women write about themselves effectively.

"We also showed that we can intervene positively, and women can absolutely write about their accomplishments effectively," Smith said.

Smith said she and Huntoon, now a doctoral student in psychology at Northern Illinois University, launched the study when Smith observed an interesting response to a request for submissions to an MSU Women's Faculty Caucus newsletter.

"Nobody responded about themselves. Not one," Smith recalled. However, many women told Smith about really great things happening with their friends and colleagues.

"We wondered what was going on, so we began looking at the research," Smith said.

Smith said they found that American women are reluctant to talk about their own accomplishments because cultural norms promote modesty. And, society disapproves of women who are perceived to be bragging about themselves. However, Smith said, American men who brag about their accomplishments are perceived as confident and capable.

"We live in a society where cultural [gender norms](#) are powerful and imbedded in our history," she said. "This is no way, shape or form to be blamed on women. It's just part of our culture, and it is our job to find ways to change these cultural norms."

Smith and Huntoon wondered if this could be reversed, so they devised a study in which four groups of about 20 mostly freshmen female students at MSU each were asked to write essays for a scholarship based on merit that ranged in value up to \$5,000. The subjects were told that the essays would be used as samples to help other students improve their essay skills.

One group was asked to write essays about their own accomplishments; another group was asked to write about the accomplishments of someone else. A group of impartial judges evaluated the essays, awarding an average of \$1,500 less to those essays in which people wrote about their own accomplishments rather than about someone else's.

In order to study whether the female modesty effect could be overcome, Smith and Huntoon had another two groups write essays about

themselves and introduced a distraction. A black box of about 3x3 feet square was placed in the room where the students wrote the essays. The researchers told one of the groups of subjects that the box was a "subliminal noise generator" that produced ultra-high frequency noise that couldn't be heard, but could cause them discomfort.

"There is no such thing as a subliminal noise generator," Smith said. "It was total fiction. But, we had given them an explanation for any anxiety they felt while writing their essay."

The other control group wasn't told what the box in the room was. The group that had the black box as justification to explain their discomfort wrote essays that were awarded up to \$1,000 more than the group that had no explanation. And they enjoyed the experience of writing more, too.

"The key here is that when women had an alternative explanation for why they might be feeling uncomfortable – the supposed noise generator- the awkwardness they felt from violating the modesty norm by writing about themselves was diverted, and they did just fine," Smith said.

Smith said the research has broad practical implications.

"Basically, people in authority positions need to put in place practices that make it feel normal for women to promote their accomplishments," she said. "Cultural shifts take time, so while we wait, our results also suggest that people should be proactive and promote the accomplishments of their female friends and colleagues to their bosses. Women were very good at promoting the accomplishments of friends."

Smith said she has already used the results of the study while she talks to search groups and pay equity task forces and others in a position to

review applications from [women](#).

"This sheds light on an important issue and brings into question how we look at self-nomination for awards, cover letters for job applications and even pay raises," Smith said.

"I tell them that the woman that you are reading about on paper is likely really more outstanding than she appears."

**More information:** Jessi L. Smith and Meghan Huntoon. "Women's Bragging Rights: Overcoming Modesty Norms to Facilitate Women's Self-Promotion." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 0361684313515840, first published on December 20, 2013 [DOI: 10.1177/0361684313515840](#)

Provided by Montana State University

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