

Closing the gender gap in competitiveness with a psychological trick

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Unequal career opportunities: women are often disadvantaged at work, possibly also because they often shy away from competition more often than men. With the help of priming, a psychological method, this gender difference can be offset. Credit: Fotolia

Women are still disadvantaged in society, particularly professionally.

They are frequently paid less than men and find it more difficult to have a successful career. One reason for this may be the fact that women are observed to shy away from competition more often than men. In one experiment, scientists have now demonstrated that this difference can be overcome using "priming." With this simple psychological technique, personal experiences are retrieved in the memory.

Priming is an approach used in psychology, with which people are placed in a certain situation, as a result of which their decision-making behaviour can change. If, for example, bank employees are asked how long they work at a bank, what tasks they have, and so on, then they are primed to the role of banker. If you ask the same bank employees about their hobbies, they are primed to their leisure role. More recent studies show that this [priming](#) can lead to very different decisions.

Matthias Sutter, Director at the Max Planck Institute for Research on Collective Goods, together with colleagues from the University of Innsbruck, has applied this approach in order to prepare [test subjects](#) for a competitive situation. "In our case, we used priming in order to present a portion of the test subjects with a situation in which they exerted influence," Sutter explains. "As a comparison, we arranged for the other portion to imagine a situation in which they were dependent on others." A third group of participants remained neutral, and was therefore not primed.

In a test with over 400 test subjects, the scientists compared the behaviour of the three sub-groups when it came to thinking about a competitive situation. The different priming situations did indeed lead to different decisions being taken by men and [women](#). In the neutral group, the following gender-typical pattern emerged: 40 percent of men, but only 14 percent of women, decided to enter into competition with others. When primed to a dependency situation, the test subjects largely reached the same decisions.

However, this did not apply to the participants who imagined a situation in which they exerted influence: the most significant changes were observed in relation to the behaviour of the men. Only 28 percent, in other words significantly fewer of them, chose the competitive situation. Among women, this priming had the opposite effect, albeit to a lesser degree. Somewhat more of them than in the neutral group, 20 percent, decided to enter into competition with others. The scientists explain this divergent effect by claiming that the memory of an influential situation enables all individuals to arrive at a realistic assessment of their own abilities. While in some cases, this increases self-assurance among women, it keeps men back from overestimating themselves and subjecting themselves to increased risk.

In this way, priming leads to situations in which men and women become more similar in their competitive behaviour. Former studies had shown that the way in which competitive situations are handled is a key factor when it comes to the disadvantage to women in professional life. According to the research team, the psychological method could be applied in the education system and in professional training.

More information: Loukas Balafoutas et al. Closing the gender gap in competitiveness through priming, *Nature Communications* (2018). [DOI: 10.1038/s41467-018-06896-6](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-018-06896-6)

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