

Catfight? Workplace conflicts between women get bad rap

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A new study from the University of British Columbia's Sauder School of Business suggests troubling perceptions exist when it comes to women involved in disputes at work.

"Our research shows that when it comes to workplace conflict, women get a bad rap," says PhD candidate Leah Sheppard, who conducted the study with Prof. Karl Aquino. "We show how the negative stereotyping around so-called 'catfights' carry over into work situations."

The researchers asked experiment [participants](#) to assess one of three workplace conflict scenarios, all identical except for the names of the individuals involved: Adam and Steven, Adam and Sarah, or Sarah and Anna.

The study, published in the current edition of the journal [Academy of Management Perspectives](#), found that when the scenario depicted female-female conflict, participants perceived there to be more negative implications than the male-male or male-female conflicts.

Participants judged the likelihood of two [managers](#) repairing a frayed relationship roughly 15 per cent lower when both managers were female, versus male-male and male-female. Participants rated those involved in all-female conflicts as also being more likely to let the argument negatively influence job satisfaction than male-female or male-male quarrellers.

The study also found that female experiment participants were just as likely as males to see the all-female conflict as more negative.

"This study suggests there's still a long way to go when it comes to the [perception](#) of women in the workplace," Sheppard says. "Hopefully, our findings will help to increase managers' awareness of this bias, so they don't let [stereotypes](#) guide their decisions on how they staff teams and leverage the full talent of female employees."

For the experiment, Sheppard and Aquino randomly generated a sample of 152 individuals – 47 per cent female – who were assigned to read about a workplace conflict involving two account managers in a [consulting firm](#).

Participants were asked to make judgments on a scale of one to seven on the likelihood that the two managers would be able to repair their relationship going forward, and the extent to which the conflict would affect their job satisfaction and commitment to the company.

For the first question about whether the two managers would repair the relationship, participants judged the [likelihood](#) to be roughly 15 per cent lower when both managers were female, versus male-male and male-female.

For question two, related to [job satisfaction](#), participants rated those involved in the all-female conflict as being 25 per cent more likely than those in the male-female conflict to let the argument negatively influence the way they felt about work, and 10 per cent more likely than the male-male quarrelers.

Provided by University of British Columbia

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