

# Women who see themselves as warm, supportive tend to compete less in workplace, study finds

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A new study reveals that women can face an internal identity conflict – ambitious professional versus nurturing caregiver—when it comes to competing with co-workers. As a result, those who see themselves as more caring may choose to compete less than males in the workplace.

The joint study was conducted by University of Guelph economics professor Bram Cadsby, Professor Fei Song of Ryerson University's Ted Rogers School of Management, and Professor Maroš Servátka, University of Canterbury in New Zealand.

Focusing on gender roles, the research suggests that [gender stereotypes](#) originate from the social roles that men and women have traditionally occupied in a society.

"Stereotypes are learned early in life, become part of one's [cultural understanding](#), and are internalized as [personal beliefs](#) and values," says Song. "People extend stereotypes to develop self-concepts, which are characterized by associations between the self and stereotypical [personality traits](#), abilities and roles. Such stereotypes are likely closely related to the differing levels of competitiveness exhibited on average by men and women."

The participants in the study were drawn from male and female MBA students at the Rotman School of Management at the University of

Toronto. The authors hypothesized that women who chose to follow such a professional career path would often experience conflicting role identities: a professional identity that is highly competitive, competent and ambitious and a gender/family identity that is warm, supportive and caring.

Employing a behavioral experiment, the researchers gave the participants the opportunity to perform a repetitive arithmetic task for which they would be rewarded with a substantial sum of money based on their performance. Subjects could choose whether they wanted to be compensated based solely on their own performance or based on whether or not they performed better than three of their peers. Prior to their participation, some subjects were asked to answer questions of a professional nature, while others answered questions related to gender and family issues. These questionnaires were meant to prime participants to act according to their pre-existing professional or gender/family identities respectively. A control group answered neutral questions.

The experiment demonstrated that while the priming questionnaires had no effect on performance, they did affect the willingness of female professionals to participate in the competitive pay scheme. In particular, professional priming was associated with a greater willingness to compete than gender/family priming. Priming did not have this effect on males from the same population. This contrast suggests an identity conflict for the female professionals in our study that was absent for the males.

"Although such priming effects may be short-term in nature, these results suggest that life-cycle events such as marriage, pregnancy, and parenthood could have very substantial and long-lasting effects on the activation of family identities with their consequent effects on attitudes toward competition," said Cadsby. "Thus, the decision to avoid or minimize competition made by many women in professional careers

may be driven not by lack of ability but rather by the increased salience of gender/family identity, based on stereotypical beliefs, attitudes and ideals over time."

The study, entitled "How Competitive Are Female Professionals? A Tale of Identity Conflict," was published in the August issue of the *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*.

Provided by Ryerson University

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