

# Mean Girls and Queen Bees: Females Under Threat of Social Exclusion Respond by Excluding Others First

February 24, 2011

Many studies have suggested that males tend to be more physically and verbally aggressive than females. According to a new study, to be published in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, it may not be the case that women are less competitive than men—they may just be using a different strategy to come out ahead. Specifically, women may rely more on indirect forms of aggression, such as social exclusion.

To investigate how men and women respond when faced with a social threat, psychological scientist Joyce F. Benenson of Emmanuel College and Harvard University, along with her colleagues, asked volunteers to play a game against two hypothetical partners in which they accumulated points for money. Volunteers had the option of playing by themselves (compete-alone option), forming an alliance with one of the opponents, or cooperating with both of the opponents (in this strategy, they would avoid competition but split profits three ways).

During the game, some of the volunteers were confronted with the possibility of social exclusion. When the compete-alone option was described, volunteers were told that by selecting this option, they would “run the risk of being excluded by the two others.” The description of the alliance option included the statement, “If you and your partner win, then the third player will be excluded and will not win any points.”

The results revealed that when volunteers received the standard instructions—without the social exclusion clauses—there was no difference among male and female volunteers in the number of times they chose to form an alliance with another player. However, when the exclusionary instructions were used, female participants chose the alliance option more often than did male volunteers.

“As their primary competitive strategy to combat any social threat, females may attempt to form an exclusionary alliance, whereas males may endeavor to unilaterally and directly dominate an opponent,” the authors write. Women may be more sensitive than men to social exclusion, and when they feel threatened by the prospect of being left out, a woman’s first response may be to socially exclude a third party.

Preemptive social exclusion appears to be a valuable strategy for women because it allows them to protect their relationships by keeping an outsider at bay. Benenson points out that this may require a re-evaluation of presumed sex differences in competitiveness. She comments, “The same-sex social worlds of boys and girls and men and women then differ in that females have to worry about alienating others, whereas males worry about getting beaten up.”