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2009 GENDER IN THE WORKPLACE RESEARCH INITIATIVE

NEGOTIATION ASSERTIVENESS AND THE POTENTIAL FOR GENDERED BACKLASH

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OVERVIEW OF PROBLEM/ ISSUE

Scholars argue that women are less effective than men in negotiations because they are less assertive, and that this behavior might represent a reaction to avoid backlash. The first stage of this research explores whether this documented backlash against negotiation assertiveness is directed toward the assertiveness of the negotiator's negotiation style or the assertiveness of the outcomes the negotiator is demanding. The second stage of the research turns to the other side of the bargaining table, focusing on the likelihood of women to engage in assertive negotiating by trying to provide answers to the following questions: Under what circumstances are women less assertive than men? Are women more successful in their negotiations when adopting less assertive approaches? What characteristics are associated with successful men and women negotiators?

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research consisted of two studies: Study 1 assessed the judgments made by negotiation counterparts and measured when perceivers were more likely to engage in backlash against female negotiators. A sample of 271 participants read a salary negotiation scenario and answered questions about how they felt toward the target negotiators before, during and after the negotiation process. It was a 2x2x2 factorial design which manipulated sex of the target (male vs. female), negotiation style (assertive vs. non-assertive) and numerical offers (assertive vs. non-assertive). Study 2 sampled 450 participants of diverse experience (from undergraduates to MBA students to executives) to identify and better understand the circumstances under which men and women are likely to change their negotiation style (from assertive to non-forceful and vice versa). Additionally, this study also assessed whether both men and women are successful when changing styles, and gathered information about the perception of the participants about the characteristics associated with successful men and women negotiators.

FINDINGS

The first study revealed that women are subjected to social backlash when they negotiate assertively. Pre-negotiation impressions showed that participants punished aggressive offers made by women more than those made by men. Participants' impressions during the salary negotiation process fluctuated, but assertive women (both stylistically and monetarily) were consistently the least liked. Finally, post-negotiation impressions showed that participants had a higher positive response for non-forceful negotiation styles than for negotiation offers for both men and women.

The second study revealed that men and women adopt an assertive position with almost the same frequency when their work positions are at stake, but men adopt this position more frequently when their salary is at stake and when negotiating with subordinates. Men felt that they achieved success more frequently when adopting an assertive position while women felt that adopting a non-forceful position helped them achieve success slightly more often. Finally, the study revealed that among successful men and women negotiators, women are thought to be easier to work with, and more polite and helpful than men.

IMPLICATIONS

Men self-rate as more skilled negotiators than women; they adopt an assertive position more frequently than women; and they believe that this position helps them achieve success more often. On the other side, women recognize that they use more frequently a non-forceful position, but they believe that this position helps them achieve success slightly more often. The first study reinforces this notion given that the results confirm that women are subjected to social backlash when adopting an assertive position. Perceived success in previous negotiation experiences and social backlash mitigation can be considered two important factors in women's decision to adopt a non-forceful negotiation style.