
To Flirt or Not to Flirt? Sexual Power at the Bargaining Table

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We begin by exploring the lay belief that women can use flirtation to their advantage in professional contexts and contrast it with trained negotiators' negative views on flirtation. We then examine the impact of flirtation on negotiators' impression formation. We explore whether a flirtatious style aids women in the trade-off they often face between perceived likability and perceived competence. We discover both an upside and a downside to flirting at the bargaining table. Although flirtation appears to be positively related to women's likability, negotiators who flirted were judged to be less authentic than those who refrained from exercising their sexual power.

Key words: negotiation, gender, sex, flirtation, power, likability.

[H]urrying in pursuit of their schedules, loitering in flirty talk.
—*Christopher Isberwood, A Single Man*

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Introduction

Recently, *Harper's Bazaar* magazine surveyed five hundred professional women about their attitudes toward a variety of workplace behaviors. The finding that grabbed the headlines was that 86 percent said they would "happily flirt with a male colleague if it meant they got their own way" (Roberts 2007), prompting a United Press International (UPI) story entitled "Women prefer flirting to get ahead" (UPI 2007) that was picked up by various websites and bloggers. The idea that women can use sexual power to their advantage is not new, and the belief in it is widespread as exemplified by the above survey and advice from such public figures as celebrity businessman Donald Trump, who once advised women to "use those God-given assets" (Jones 2005). Consistent with this lay belief about women's ability to wield sexual power is the observation that even highly trained women admit to using sexuality at work. In a survey of 164 female Master of Business Administration (MBA) graduates, 49 percent admitted they had tried to advance their careers by sometimes engaging in at least one of ten sexual behaviors, including flirting or feigning attraction to a male colleague (Bradley et al. 2005).

Despite the prevalence of flirtatious behavior in the workplace, Jill Bradley and her colleagues (2005) found the use of sexual power backfired because the more likely a woman was to use such behaviors, the more likely she was to have a lower salary and worse career outcomes. Aside from this one study, however, few researchers have studied the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of flirtation at work.

In this article, we have addressed this gap by examining negotiators' beliefs about flirtation as a negotiating tactic and the impact of flirtation on impression formation at the bargaining table. To uncover whether there is any truth to the belief that women can use flirtation to their advantage, we have also explored whether flirtation might potentially benefit female negotiators by improving their perceived likability.

Flirtation is defined as behaving "amorously without serious intent; to show superficial or casual interest or liking" (Merriam-Webster 2007), a definition that suggests flirtation is not always a blatant sexual advance but can be playful and affiliative. In this latter sense, flirtation might be advantageous to negotiators if employed as a subtle way of increasing attraction and likability, or of softening a tough negotiating stance. Women in particular must manage a trade-off between assertiveness and likability. In negotiations, assertive behaviors that increase perceived competence and actual value claiming, such as holding firm to one's bargaining goals, may decrease perceived likability, particularly for women. Below, we review the research suggesting women who act in an assertive manner at the bargaining table may suffer social sanctions. We then present two studies that examine the perceived and actual effectiveness of adopting a flirtatious style on impression formation in negotiations.

Prescriptive Stereotypes: Women Are Communal; Men Are Agentic

Research on gender stereotypes has found that both sexes share widely held beliefs about the attributes that differentiate men and women. Generally, women are thought to be *communal*, that is, interpersonally oriented and concerned with the welfare of others, while men are thought to be *agentic*, that is, self-oriented, task-focused, and concerned with mastery and control (Williams and Best 1990). Thus, women are characterized as helpful, kind, and sympathetic; men are characterized as aggressive, forceful, and decisive (Heilman 2001). According to social role theory, these stereotypes emerge from the different roles women and men traditionally occupied in society, that of homemaker versus breadwinner, because perceivers infer a correspondence between people's roles and their inner dispositions (Eagly and Karau 2002).

An important aspect of gender stereotypes is that they are not only descriptive but also prescriptive, conveying how women and men *should* behave (Heilman 2001). Because the prescriptions for men and women differ, the same behaviors are judged differently when enacted by a woman versus a man. Hence, women who exhibit agentic behaviors or occupy agentic (e.g., leadership) roles receive more negative assessments than their male counterparts (Eagly, Makhijani, and Klonsky 1992). This is the "backlash" effect (Rudman 1998) whereby actors who behave counter to gender stereotypes are sanctioned. In negotiations, women are more likely to experience backlash than men because success in negotiation requires agentic (i.e., male) behaviors such as being competitive, assertive, and determined. Indeed, in a recent study, women who initiated salary negotiations were penalized by observers, who characterized them as less nice and more demanding than men who engaged in the identical behavior (Bowles, Babcock, and Lai 2007).

How then can women exert influence without harming their social outcomes? One strategy is to be less assertive overall by employing a tentative communication style (i.e., more disclaimers, hedges, and tag questions) (Carli 1990). In this study, women who used a tentative style were more influential and judged to be more likable and trustworthy than women who used an assertive style, but only with male discussion partners. Linda Carli identified two drawbacks to this strategy, however. First, other women were actually less influenced by a target woman's tentative style. Second, women employing a tentative style were judged to be less competent than assertive women, by both male and female discussion partners. Using nonagentic behaviors to increase influence is thus apparently not a tenable strategy.

Carli (2001) suggests a different strategy: using communal behaviors (e.g., smiling, acting warm and friendly) to soften agentic behaviors. When

women employed this strategy, they increased their likability and therefore their ability to influence others, especially men. At the same time, using communal behaviors did not diminish women's perceived competence (Carli, LaFleur, and Loeber 1995). This suggests a potential benefit to flirting in negotiations: the ability to increase one's likability and "sugarcoat" demands without being perceived as less competent. Of course, communality does not need to be (and is often not) flirtatious. But flirtation can involve the use of communal behaviors. Perhaps the lay belief that flirtation can be used to advance one's career comes from women's intuitive realization that they must be seen as communal and likable in order to be influential.

Research Overview

We had two goals in this research. First, because of the lay belief that women use flirtation to their advantage, we wanted to assess trained negotiators' beliefs about the effectiveness of flirtatiousness in negotiations. Second, we examined the actual impact of a flirtatious style on negotiator impression formation. We expected flirtation to enhance the female flirt's likability. Because the communal behaviors associated with flirtation are more consistent with the female rather than male stereotype, we did not expect flirtation to have as pronounced an impact on male negotiators' likability.

Study One: Negotiators' Theories about Flirtatiousness and Value-Claiming Effectiveness

In this study, we had two goals. First, we sought to determine whether trained negotiators consider a flirtatious interpersonal style to be an asset in the quest to claim value at the bargaining table. Second, we sought to better understand the flirtation construct by examining associations between flirting and negotiators' other personal characteristics.

A total of seventy-nine MBA students (fifty men and twenty-nine women) responded to our survey during the last week of a semester-long negotiations course. Respondents were asked to report their subjective perceptions regarding the effectiveness of ten negotiator characteristics on seven-point scales (1 = "not at all effective"; 7 = "very effective"). Specifically, respondents were instructed: "Consider the range of behaviors you have experienced throughout the course and indicate the extent to which you associate the following criteria with negotiators who are effective at claiming value." Because our main interest was in perceptions of flirtatiousness, the remaining characteristics were selected on the basis of whether they might plausibly be related to flirting, both its positive and negative associations.

As Table One shows, among the ten items we measured, flirtatiousness was perceived to be the least effective negotiator characteristic for claiming

Table One
Negotiator Effectiveness Criteria — Means, Standard Deviations (SDs), and Correlations
between Variables

Variable	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Flirtatiousness	2.35 (1.37)	—									
2. Physical attractiveness	2.89 (1.63)	0.68**	—								
3. Playfulness	3.75 (1.28)	0.30**	0.23*	—							
4. Ingratiation	3.77 (1.25)	0.16	0.01	0.23*	—						
5. Agreeableness	4.50 (1.24)	-0.05	-0.04	0.03	0.07	—					
6. Manipulativeness	4.56 (1.62)	0.08	0.04	0.10	-0.04	-0.30**	—				
Honesty	4.78 (1.30)	0.20	0.13	0.18	0.06	0.37**	0.21	—			
Extraversion	4.81 (1.24)	0.12	0.10	0.04	0.13	0.09	0.07	0.09	—		
Friendliness	4.94 (1.22)	-0.00	-0.10	0.02	0.10	0.40**	0.24*	0.33**	0.13	—	
Genuineness	5.14 (1.25)	0.09	0.15	-0.02	0.03	0.29*	-0.26*	0.58**	0.03	0.15	—

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. All items measured on a scale of 1 (not at all effective) to 7 (very effective).

value. To determine whether this variable was perceived as ineffective, we examined whether it was significantly below the midpoint of the scale with a one-sample *t*-test, and indeed it was.¹ The only two negotiator characteristics significantly correlated with flirtatiousness were playfulness and physical attractiveness, both of which were also perceived quite negatively. The relationship between these variables suggests flirting is perceived as superficial and exploitative of one's appearance and sexuality.

We also examined whether male and female respondents differed in their perceptions of the effectiveness of any of the ten negotiator characteristics. The only marginally significant effect to emerge was a tendency for women to perceive extraversion as a more effective negotiator characteristic than did men. Women assigned extraversion an average rating of 5.14, while men gave it an average rating of 4.62.² The results of this study suggest that trained negotiators, both men and women, explicitly reject the notion that flirting is an effective means of improving negotiation outcomes.

These results suggest flirtation is an ineffective strategy for claiming value at the bargaining table. But several factors may limit the strength of the relationship between lay theories about flirtation and its actual effectiveness. First, norms of political correctness may have affected the willingness of our participants to admit that flirtation may have a positive impact on value claiming. Second, respondents may simply be unaware of how flirtation influences outcomes. Consistent with this idea is the finding that flirtation was associated in respondents' minds with physical attractiveness, which was also judged to be a relative liability in negotiations. In contrast to our respondents' perceptions, recent research actually shows that beauty demands a premium at the bargaining table (Mobius and Rosenblat 2006). It may very well be that flirtatious behavior is received differently when it is explicitly labeled as such versus how it is likely experienced in practice as subtle and ambiguous. To determine whether impressions of actual flirtation map onto reported attitudes about flirtation, we turn to the next study in which flirtatious behavior was manipulated.

Study Two: Subjective Evaluations of Flirtation in Negotiations

The findings of the previous study suggest that trained negotiators perceive a flirtatious style to be a highly ineffective strategy for success at the bargaining table. Although the negative reaction to flirting was pronounced, we acknowledge that social norms may have prevented our sample from admitting that they expect flirting to be an effective strategy for securing resources. Another limitation of the previous experiment is that we assessed negotiators' explicit reactions to flirting, which may have provoked harsher judgments against it. In practice, flirtation is likely to operate on a very subtle level. In the current experiment, we aimed to address these shortcomings by having participants observe negotiators

acting in either a flirtatious or neutral manner. By employing the use of a research confederate, we held constant the content of what the negotiator said and simply varied the manner in which his or her requests for concessions were delivered.

We included three types of negotiator impressions. First, we assessed negotiator likability. Because women in particular incur social costs for behaving assertively, we expected flirtation's ability to take the edge off of demands to be particularly beneficial for women. Second, we included measures of negotiator competence. In many instances, behaviors that increase likability may decrease perceived competence. This may lead us to predict that flirtation would be interpreted as a substitute for ability and thereby reduce competence judgments. In the current context, however, we held constant many of the behavioral cues associated with competence by having negotiators follow a script that did not provide any concessions to their counterpart. As a result, we did not anticipate that flirtation would affect competence judgments in this context. Our final dependent measure concerned negotiator authenticity. We speculated that observers would perceive flirting negotiators to be manipulative and lacking in authenticity, regardless of their gender.

Methodology

Overview and Design

Participants viewed a videotape of a negotiator across three rounds of negotiations and then evaluated the negotiator on a number of dimensions. We employed one male negotiator and one female negotiator, both of whom were actually research confederates following a script. In each round, the negotiator spoke directly to the camera, as if speaking directly to a negotiating partner. We employed a 2 (negotiator sex: male versus female) \times 2 (flirting: yes versus no) between-subject factorial design, such that we created a flirtatious and neutral version of the video for both the male and the female actors.

Participants

Participants were seventy-seven undergraduate students (fifty-one women, twenty-six men) who participated in exchange for partial fulfillment of a course requirement. Participants were randomly assigned to each condition and each saw one of the four versions of the negotiation.

Procedure

Participants came into the laboratory in groups. They were told that we were interested in their impressions of a negotiator's effectiveness. We informed them that they would watch one-half of a negotiating dyad across three rounds of a buyer-seller negotiation, and then evaluate the negotiator. Each round of the negotiation lasted under one minute. In all

conditions, the seller was a research confederate who followed a standard script in which he or she repeatedly rejected buyers' offers. For example, in Round Two, the seller said, "That's still a disappointing offer. We invested a significant amount of time and money in this plant, and we expect to make a profit on it — otherwise, we would simply strip down the plant and sell the equipment. If we're going to sell it to you, we need a bit more."

In the flirtation condition, negotiators engaged in behaviors associated with flirtation (Abrahams 1994), such as smiling, leaning forward, touching their faces or hair, and using a playful and animated tone of voice. In the control condition, negotiators adopted a neutral style in delivering the scripted responses to buyers' offers.

After watching the seller (confederate) across three rounds, participants individually rated the negotiator along a number of dimensions. First, we included the adjectives "flirtatious" and "sexual," measured on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 7 (very), as a manipulation check and also to confirm that flirtatiousness is associated with sexuality. Because they were highly correlated, they were combined into one measure of flirtatiousness. Second, we assessed negotiator likability with the following items: likable, friendly, attractive, and warm. Third, we assessed negotiator competence with the following items: effective, experienced, skilled, and persuasive. Fourth, we assessed negotiator authenticity with the following items: genuine and manipulative. Because the reliability of these items was low, we analyzed them separately. All items were measured on seven-point scales.

Results

All items were analyzed using three-way analysis of variance measures, with the observer's sex, the actor's sex, and flirting as between-subject factors.

Manipulation Check

Our results indicate that participants perceived the research confederates' flirting behaviors: the flirting actors were indeed judged to be more flirtatious than non-flirting actors.⁵ In addition, an unanticipated main effect for actor sex emerged, with the female actor judged to be more flirtatious than the male actor.⁴

Likability

We found that participants judged the female actor to be more likable than the male actor.⁵ No other effects were significant. To determine whether this was affected by their degree of flirtatiousness, we conducted an analysis of covariance, including flirtatious ratings as a covariate. In this case, the effect for actor sex on likability was no longer significant.⁶ This finding suggests that the greater likability of the female actor was influenced by her greater perceived flirtatiousness.⁷

Competence

Negotiators were judged to be moderately competent regardless of condition. No significant effects emerged.⁸

Authenticity

Flirting actors were judged to be less genuine than nonflirting actors.⁹ Likewise, flirting actors were judged to be more manipulative than nonflirting actors.¹⁰ No other effects were significant.

Discussion

In this experiment, we assessed observers' reactions to a flirtatious negotiator. We hypothesized that women would be perceived as more likable in the flirtation condition compared with the control condition and to a larger degree than men. Instead of this expected interaction, we observed that actor sex had a significant effect on perceived likability, with our female negotiator judged more likable than our male negotiator. In addition, the female actor was judged to be more flirtatious than the male actor. To determine whether the woman negotiator's likability was related to her flirtatiousness, we conducted a follow-up analysis demonstrating that the greater likability of the female actor became nonsignificant when perceived flirtatiousness was held constant. Therefore, it appears the female actor's greater likability was indeed a result of her flirtatiousness.

Because we employed just one male and one female negotiator, we must be cautious in interpreting these preliminary findings. We cannot know whether the observed effects are actor driven or gender driven, despite our best efforts to hold constant their individual behavior and style. For now, our findings provide suggestive evidence that the same behaviors are judged differently when enacted by men and women. Because flirting is consistent with the feminine stereotype of attentiveness to others (Williams and Best 1990; Heilman 2001), perceivers may be particularly sensitive to flirtatious behaviors enacted by women. Likewise, because flirtation is consistent with the prescriptive stereotype that women be communal and warm, female actors benefited by being judged more likable overall.

Flirtation did not detract from the perceived competence of negotiators, suggesting that in practice, flirtation may help women improve their likability without harming their perceived competence or forcing them to settle for less. The greater likability of the female negotiator compared with the male negotiator in the current study was a function of her greater flirtatiousness. In contrast to the negative effect that other interpersonal style strategies have been shown to have on competence judgments (e.g., Carli 1990), the beneficial effect of women's flirting came at no cost to their perceived competence. Of course, future research in a less controlled context may reveal that flirtation is naturally associated with a softer bargaining style and lower perceived competence. Finally, the current study

sheds light on one clearly negative consequence of flirtation: specifically, flirtatious negotiators were judged to be less authentic and more manipulative than negotiators who refrained from flirting.

To fully understand the costs and benefits of flirtation, future research should examine how a flirtatious style affects negotiation outcomes and perceptions formed by an actual negotiation counterpart in addition to the neutral observers in the current study. Because participants in the current research were simply observers of flirtation directed at an unknown other, they did not likely experience the flattery that a flirt's target might feel. It may very well be that the cost that negotiators incurred for flirting in terms of their perceived authenticity would be nonexistent. In addition, further research is needed to determine which personal characteristics of both the flirt and his or her target affect flirtation's effectiveness. For example, the flirt's physical attractiveness and the target's sexual orientation are two factors that would likely affect how well flirting is received across the bargaining table.

This research is the first to our knowledge that explores the effects of flirtation on impression formation at the bargaining table. We discovered an upside to flirting — for women negotiators, it is associated with greater likability but does not seem to detract from their perceived competence — which supports the lay belief that flirting is a successful strategy for women. On the other hand, we also discovered a downside — flirts are judged to be less genuine and more manipulative — which supports the beliefs of trained negotiators that flirting is an ineffective strategy.

The fact that both likability and authenticity are critical for developing long-term relationships poses a dilemma for negotiators considering strategic flirtation. Of course, determining contexts in which likability is more relevant than authenticity to securing both long- and short-term gains is also important. For now, we know that flirtation affects impressions, and is a dynamic factor in the exploration of sexual power at the bargaining table.

NOTES

1. $t(78) = -10.69, p < 0.001$.
2. $t(77) = -1.81, p = 0.07$.
3. ($M = 4.46, SD = 1.15$) versus ($M = 2.88, SD = 1.44$); $F(1, 69) = 38.58, p < 0.001$.
4. ($M = 4.37, SD = 1.33$) versus ($M = 2.99, SD = 1.41$); $F(1, 69) = 26.14, p < 0.001$.
5. ($M = 4.29, SD = 0.88$) versus ($M = 3.61, SD = 0.93$); $F(1, 69) = 6.13, p = 0.01$.
6. $F(1, 68) = 2.56, p = 0.11$.
7. Flirtatiousness and likability were significantly correlated, $r(77) = 0.25, p < 0.05$. This effect was not moderated by sex. Using the method described in Baron and Kenny (1986), we tested whether flirtatiousness mediated the effect of gender on likability. Mediation would be indicated if, in the regression equation, with both flirtatiousness and gender as predictors, flirtatiousness was significant and gender was not. In fact, flirtatiousness was insignificant ($p = 0.34$) and gender was significant ($p = 0.02$); thus, flirtatiousness was not a mediator.
8. ($M = 3.78, SD = 1.26$); (all $p > 0.07, F < 3.44$).
9. ($M = 2.86, SD = 1.42$) versus ($M = 3.79, SD = 1.42$); $F(1, 69) = 7.76, p < 0.01$.
10. ($M = 4.35, SD = 1.61$) versus ($M = 3.36, SD = 1.39$); $F(1, 68) = 7.48, p < 0.01$.

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