

Original Article

**A FRAMEWORK FOR EXPLORING INTRASEXUAL
COMPETITION**

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Abstract

Existing research on intrasexual competition focuses on the tactics of self-promotion and competitor derogation. In this paper we expand upon these two tactics by developing a framework in which the performers of a competitive action, and their roles, are identified. Using the framework, it is possible to identify nine variations of promotion, and similarly, nine variations of derogation, as potential competitive acts. While only a simplified framework is presented, and one that only considers a single competitor, the framework combines the previous views of promotion and derogation and elaborates upon these views. The framework provides a means by which phenomena such as social comparison and assortative mating can be described, and thus shows merit as a tool that researchers can use to elucidate and integrate the elements of intrasexual competition.

Keywords: Competition, Rivals, Assessment, Social comparison

A Framework for Exploring Intrasexual Competition

Intrasexual competition occurs when two or more members of the same sex compete against each other for a resource that one of the competitors does not wish to share. The resource is one that is limited in quantity, such that not all members of a sex have equivalent access, and to gain access, competition must occur. With regard to mating, women compete for access to a desired male, and equivalently, men compete for access to a desired female. As all men and women are not equal in terms of their physical attractiveness, personality characteristics, or abilities, and some are more desirable as mates than others, highly valued mates can thus be viewed as a resource, and are then the target of competition for mating access. Consequently, intrasexual competition has evolved as an important behavioral adaptation for attracting mates and for gathering resources necessary for reproduction (Darwin, 1871). Although other resources, which are only indirectly related to reproduction, can be the targets of intrasexual competition (e.g., competition over status-enhancing goods, occupational promotions, approval from peers), we focus on mate acquisition for the remainder of this paper.

Within the existing literature on intrasexual competition for mates, two strategies have been examined: competitor derogation and self-promotion (e.g., Schmitt & Buss, 1996). However, these strategies have been considered as mostly unrelated, and have not been integrated to provide a theoretical way to explore the nuances, particularly with respect to the intended recipient, of competitive acts. In this paper, a framework for understanding intrasexual competition is provided, and while presented using the context of mate acquisition, the framework can be used for any competitive situation. We use the term “framework” as we are not presenting a context sensitive model that has been mathematically developed for a specific situation. Instead, the framework provides a mechanism to explain intrasexual competition, and to develop models that are subject to social, cultural, and evolutionary pressures.

The layout for this paper is as follows. First, a review of intrasexual competition theory is provided, followed by an overview of our framework. We then examine specific competitive acts to expand the framework and to demonstrate how it integrates previous approaches to competition. Finally, we conclude by discussing the framework’s strengths and limitations.

A Brief Introduction to Intrasexual Competition

For the purposes of our framework, competition is conceptualized in terms of rivalry, as originally suggested by Burbank (1994). As aforementioned, when two or more individuals are in pursuit of the same resource and that resource is perceived to be insufficient in quantity, the individuals can be considered as being engaged in a competition. The individuals do not need to be conscious of the rivalry, or know the identity of their competitors, but they must be engaging in an activity that draws them closer to attaining the desired resource (Hrdy, 1999). However, any knowledge about the rivals will improve one’s ability to compete effectively.

In terms of mating, intrasexual competition is composed of two documented strategies: competitor derogation (Buss & Dedden, 1990) and self-promotion (Buss, 1988). Competitor derogation refers to any act that is used to decrease a rival’s value relative to oneself. Alternatively, self-promotion refers to any act used to enhance the positive qualities of oneself, relative to same-sex others. The traits leading to the highest

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probability of success in competition are those that are the most preferred by the opposite sex (Andersson, 1994; Darwin, 1871). Therefore, it is not surprising that competitor derogation and self-promotion have been found to focus on the characteristics that are most preferred by the opposite sex, such as attractiveness for females and the ownership of resources for males (Buss, 1988; Buss, 1994; Buss & Dedden, 1990). The ultimate goal of either strategy is to render oneself as maximally desirable to members of the opposite sex relative to others of the same sex who are striving to achieve the same goal (Buss & Dedden, 1990). However, people also tend to focus on traits that they consider important, such that they will, for example, derogate rivals on self-relevant dimensions (Schmitt, 1988). Moreover, it is extremely uncomfortable to learn that a potential rival is superior on dimensions that are central to one's self-definition (DeSteno & Salovey, 1996).

In a series of investigations on these strategies, Schmitt and Buss (1996; see also Buss, 1988; Buss & Dedden, 1990) found that both sexes actively derogated potential competitors and self-promoted when pursuing a relationship. However, the expected duration of the potential relationship influenced the use of strategies. Women pursuing a short-term relationship emphasized their sexuality and attractiveness, whereas women pursuing a long-term relationship promoted their faithfulness and sexual restrictiveness. In contrast, men pursuing a short-term relationship emphasized their immediately available resources, while men pursuing a long-term relationship promoted future resource availability. Similarly, tactics for competitor derogation were influenced by the expected duration of the relationship. For example, women pursuing a short-term relationship described other women, whom they perceived as potential competitors, as "ugly," "frigid," and "unhygienic," whereas in a long-term scenario they emphasized a competitor's promiscuity. The difference in relationship duration was not apparent for men, as men pursuing a short-term or long-term relationship said potential competitors were "promiscuous," "dangerous," and "unhygienic."

Competitor derogation may also be used to maintain relationships, as explored by Johnson and Rusbult (1989). They demonstrated that individuals who are highly committed to their relationships actively, and perhaps even consciously, derogate available, attractive opposite-sex individuals on interpersonal dimensions such as intelligence and faithfulness. This research was extended by Simpson, Gangestad and Lerma (1990) who compared the attractiveness ratings performed by individuals involved in romantic relationships against those of individuals not currently involved. They found that photographs of young, opposite-sex models were rated as less attractive by participants in committed relationships than they were by single participants, while both groups had similar ratings for same-sex models and for older models. This difference in relationship status was not due to differences in self-esteem, participant attractiveness, empathy, or similar traits. Simpson and colleagues concluded that the participants derogated the attractiveness of the young, opposite-sex models as a way of maintaining their current relationships. By not perceiving extra-dyadic individuals as attractive, thus derogating them, participants were less likely to jeopardise their current relationships. These findings were largely replicated by Lydon, Meana, Sepinwall, Richards and Mayman (1999, but see Fisher, Tran & Voracek, 2008). Using fabricated biographical information and photographs, Lydon et al. (1999) determined that commitment towards a romantic relationship decreases attractiveness ratings of opposite-sex individuals if the level of perceived threat matches their level of commitment.

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A Framework for Intrasexual Competition

In the most simplistic view of intrasexual competition for a mate, three participants are necessary: two competitors and a “target.” As we consider competition from the viewpoint of a specific competitor who is performing actions to increase her or his chances of winning the competition, we will refer to one of the competitors as the “actor” and the other as the “rival.” As a competition is occurring, it is assumed that the actor is unwilling to share mating access to the target. As well, it is assumed that the rival is interested in mating access to the target and has chosen to engage in the competition. Of course, there can be more than one rival, or even multiple targets. Such extensions to the basic framework are considered in the discussion.

Within the context of mating, all individuals have a self-perceived mate value. As well, one can assess other’s mate value to determine who is a more desirable mate, and to decide whether competition is a worthy pursuit. These values are abstract in nature and are affected by a variety of factors (Fisher, Cox, Bennett & Gavric, in press; Brase & Guy, 2004) such as one’s physical attractiveness or resources (Buss & Schmidt, 1993), the context (e.g., who is in close proximity, Strout et al., 2008), and hormonal influences (Beaulieu, 2007). While the factors are highly complex and situation dependent, and are thus the elements of a specific model, the framework only requires that participants know their own ability to compete (i.e., their own mate value), the ability of their competitors (i.e., competitor’s mate value), and the value of the targeted resource (i.e., the target’s mate value).

While one can view competition through observed actions, we use a cognitive stance and view competition with respect to a participant in the competition. That is, we view the involved participants of a competition as agents who gather information in order to make decisions about which actions to perform. Thus, we examine competition with respect to perceptions of available information. For example, while extreme, a woman could kill her rival in order to obtain a potential mate. In this article, we consider such an action not with respect to an outside observer, but from the viewpoint of a participant, which in this case is the actor performing the competitive act. Since the rival is now deceased, the actor has achieved her goal of lowering her potential mate’s value of that rival to zero. Alternatively, one can view the action from the position of the potential mate, for whom the value of the rival is now inconsequential.

In general, people should compete for someone of approximately similar value, as we do not want an inferior partner, with too low a value, and we are unlikely to attract a vastly superior partner, with a much higher value (for review, see Penke, Todd, Lenton, & Fasolo, 2007). However, mate value is relative to the type of relationship one is seeking or being considered for. For example, standards shift for various traits according to whether one is seeking a brief, sexual relationship versus marriage (Kenrick, Groth, Trost, & Sadalla, 1993). Therefore, to perform this comparison, one must know their own and the target mate’s value. Mate value however is subjective, as individuals show variation in their mate preferences (Sefcek et al., 2006), and thus differ in how they assign mate values.

However, given a choice of targets, all within the range that one expects to obtain, one is likely to choose the highest valued of those targets. That is, the framework assumes that the target, if given the choice of selecting either the actor or the rival, will select the one perceived to have the highest mate value. Thus, the actor and the rival will

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also assess each other's mate value to predict whether they will win the competition and plan their actions. Consequently, each participant forms perceptions of their own, the target's, and all rivals' mate values.

Figure 1 provides an example of a competitive situation where each participant has assigned mate values. In the figure, there are three participants, each of whom has perceptions of their own, and the other individuals' values. While both men and women intrasexually compete, to provide consistent examples for the remainder of this article, we will consider the case of two women competing for a target male. As seen, each of the three parties perceives three values, for a total of nine values. In this example, the actor is likely of the opinion that the target is more interested in the rival, as the actor perceives the rival has a higher mate value. The rival is also likely to believe that she will win the competition since she perceives herself as having a higher mate value than the actor. However, both competitors are likely to be surprised when the target shows more interest in the actor due to his perception that the actor has a higher value than rival. The framework demonstrates the importance of knowing how the target assesses mate value if one is to make accurate predictions about the results of competition. In this case, as the actor and the rival did not assign mate values similarly to the target; they mistakenly believed that the rival would win the competition and secure an opportunity to pursue a mating encounter.

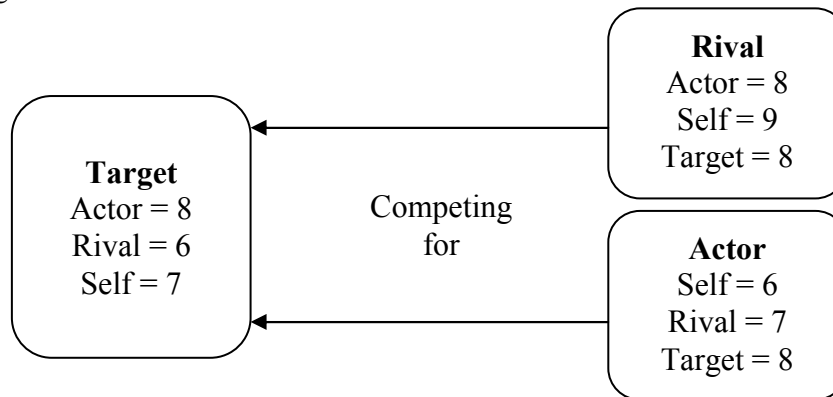


Figure 1: Simple example of competitive situation showing how each participant assigns self-perceived values to all participants.

Competitive Acts

Participants are not powerless in a competition and can perform acts to modify perceptions of their mate value. One can perform an act that causes another's perceived value to change. Derogation is used to lower values and promotion is used to increase them. For example, the actor could perform actions that make her appear more attractive, and thus cause others to value her more highly. Or, she could provide the target with information that causes him to lower his perception of her rival's value. These actions have been previously described in the literature as self-promotion and competitor derogation, respectively (e.g., Schmitt & Buss, 1996).

As mentioned, in any specific competition there are nine values that can be manipulated, as shown in Table 1. Each of these values can be increased or decreased,

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which creates a total of 18 possible competitive acts, albeit not all of equal effectiveness. This framework therefore expands our view of competitive acts from the previous two of self-promotion and competitor derogation. The names of the strategies have been formed such that the first letter identifies the person that has had his or her perception manipulated, and the second letter identifies the person for who the value is manipulated. For example the competitive act “T:R,” when performed using derogation, is an example of traditional competitor derogation, as it describes an act that lowers the target’s perception of the rival’s value. For the sake of completeness, we now examine all 18 strategies (9 for promotion, 9 for derogation).

Table 1. Possible Competitive Acts

Number	Strategy	Value Manipulated
1.	T:R	Target’s perception of the rival’s value.
2.	T:T	Target’s perception of their own value.
3.	T:A	Target’s perception of the actor’s value.
4.	R:R	Rival’s perception of their own value.
5.	R:T	Rival’s perception of the target’s value.
6.	R:A	Rival’s perception of the actor’s value.
7.	A:R	Actor’s perception of the rival’s value.
8.	A:T	Actor’s perception of the target’s value.
9.	A:A	Actor’s perception of their own value.

The strategy T:R is best captured by the idea of decreasing a rival’s worth. That is, due to the actor’s behaviors, the target perceives a decrease in the rival’s value. For example, a woman tells a target how unfaithful a rival has been to her past boyfriends after she learns that the target values loyalty in his girlfriends. The use of derogation creates a context effect in that an actor may be able to win a competition because they now seem to have a higher value than the rivals. This strategy is classically called *competitor derogation*, and is well studied in the literature (e.g., Buss & Dedden, 1990; Schmitt & Buss, 1996) It is unlikely that the actor will perform competitor promotion, and attempt to increase the target’s perception of the rival’s value. However, if the actor believes that it is possible to raise a rival’s value so that it becomes outside of the range obtainable by the target, “competitor promotion” may be a possibility. One problem with competitor promotion, though, is that it may increase the target’s value of the rival and cause the actor to be perceived as lower in value, and hence, undesirable.

Strategy T:T is potentially effective when a actor pursues a higher valued target than is normally attainable. For example, the actor point’s out the target’s character flaws, in an effort to decrease his feelings of self-worth, and his assessment of his own value. The idea would be to convince the target that he should pursue a lower valued mate than he normally pursues. However, it is difficult to get the target to lower his self-perception without it seeming like an insult. A major risk when using derogation in this strategy is that one risks the possibility that the target will consider the actor as cruel, arrogant or as possessing other undesired attributes. Thus, this strategy is unlikely to be used very much, and if used, is probably applied only in rarely occurring situations. When the actor attempts to have the target increase their self-perceived mate value, it is possibly because the actor believes the target has undervalued himself and has dismissed the actor because she is beyond attainment. Alternatively, the actor may simply wish to increase the target’s self-perceived mate value so that she is perceived as making him feel better about

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himself and is thus a positive influence. Any time the actor compliments the target, there is a possibility that this strategy is being applied using promotion.

Strategy T:A may be effective when the actor is seeking a target that considers her unattainable and the actor wishes the target to believe that she is attainable. As one rarely pursues significantly lower valued targets, presumably a derogation strategy is not used. It is more likely that an actor will try to convince a target that she is of higher value, thereby permitting the actor to pursue higher valued targets. Increasing the perception of the actor's value is known as *self-promotion* and has been studied (Buss, 1988; Schmitt & Buss, 1996). For example, the actor, was to deliberately dress more attractively than her rival or tell the target positive things about herself, she is performing an act to convince the target to increase her value. However, it is possible to perform self-derogation. That is, promiscuous female activities, such as dressing "slutty," may be considered as self-derogation if one's goal is to lower the target's perception of one's own value as a long-term mate by advertising sexual access.

Previous research, such as that performed on self-promotion (Buss, 1988) or competitor derogation (Buss & Dedden 1990) has examined the affects of altering the target's perceptions. However, there has been little exploration on the manipulation of the rival's perceptions. The framework illustrates that it is possible to manipulate the rival's perceptions, and thus, there are further avenues for performing competitive acts than have been previously considered.

Using derogation, Strategy R:R can be performed to cause competitors to believe they are now incapable of winning the competition. For example, an actor could inform a rival that she considers the rival as unattractive in an attempt to have the rival lower her value of herself. Given that one should avoid wasting time and energy on competitions that they will obviously lose, the rival should withdraw, or at least seek lower valued targets, leaving the higher valued targets available for the actor. As the actor is attempting to influence the rival's self-perceptions, there is a danger that the strategy will be viewed as aggressive. If actor wishes to avoid seeming aggressive, she might make a comment to the rival about how her swimsuit hides her stretch-marks, thus hiding a derogatory act inside an unintended "compliment." Similar to Strategy T:R, this strategy can also be considered as competitor derogation. However, with three distinct parties, each having individual perception's of value, the framework improves on previous views of competition in that the differences between strategies T:R and R:R become evident. One could also perform competitor promotion (R:R) to cause rivals to seek out higher value, but unattainable targets. However, it is unlikely that competitor promotion occurs often as one does not usually wish to empower one's competitors without it clearly providing some advantage.

When performed using derogation, Strategy R:T attempts to make rivals believe that the target is unworthy of pursuing, thereby causing her to switch to alternate targets or withdraw from the competition. For example, an actor could tell a rival that the target has a sexually transmitted disease or that he has cheated on past girlfriends, knowing that such "facts" (which may be untrue) could cause the rival to lose interest in the target. This approach is less confrontational than Strategy R:R, in that the actor does not directly attempt to persuade the rival into believing that she is unworthy of the target. However, when used, care must be taken that only the rivals, and not the target are affected by the derogation, as the target may perceive the derogation as insulting or demeaning. When performed using promotion, the opposite effect is sought, as the actor attempts to have her rivals perceive the target as beyond attainment.

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Strategy R:A concerns the competitor's value of the actor. In essence, it could be applied such that the actor attempts to distract rivals with the result that they incorrectly value the actor and perhaps do not compete as effectively as necessary to win the competition. An actor could attempt to self-derogate to the competitor, which might cause the competitor to behave in ways that remove her from the target. For example, consider that the actor is extremely intelligent, and knows that the target values intelligence. She could act highly unintelligent around her rival to cause the rival to under-value her. If used with derogation, care must be taken that only the rivals, and not the target, are affected by the self-derogation, as the actor does not want the target to lower his perception of her. When used with promotion, Strategy R:A can cause rivals to drop out of competition, or seek alternative targets, when the actor is viewed as too highly valued to effectively compete against. If the actor were to suggest to her rival that she is pregnant with the target's child, she may cause the rival to withdraw from competition since she is now valued by the target at a level that the rival may not be able to reach.

Manipulating one's rivals using strategies R:R, R:T, and R:A can be effective if each strategy is used in the correct situation. However, there is little study of these techniques, therefore suggesting that research is needed to explore the manipulation of a rival's perceptions.

The last three strategies, A:R, A:A, and A:T, can generally be viewed as ineffective in that an actor is unlikely to achieve much benefit from the manipulation of their own perceptions. That is, competitive acts are performed to get others to change their views, not to cause us to change our own views. As these strategies do not manipulate the target or rivals, they are unlikely to be considered as competitive strategies in other frameworks because they do not have easily identified external effects. However, because they may have effects during competition, they must be considered as competitive acts.

Strategies A:R, A:A, and A:T might occur to cause self-deception or rationalization (e.g., talking oneself into something) (Audi, 1988). That is, an actor might unconsciously change her perception of her worth in light of feedback she receives during the use of the other strategies. For example, an actor might talk herself into believing that the target likes her, and thus give herself the courage to invite him out on a date. Alternatively, she might try to convince herself that her rival is not as attractive as she thought, or that she is more attractive than she believed, in an attempt to increase her self-value or decrease her value of her rival. Support for these strategies has been expressed by Penke et al. (2007) who used a speed-dating paradigm to find that women tend to adjust their choice of mates, and consequent behavior, in light of their self-perceptions. In their research, women fine-tuned their views of their own mate value and adjusted their mate choices accordingly. Therefore, these strategies may permit an actor to obtain higher valued targets when she believes that she has a chance of obtaining them, because she has a higher perception of her own value, or lowered perceptions of her rival's value.

When only derogation is considered, Strategies T:R, R:R, and A:R, which are all concerned with lowering the perception of the competitor's value, are all forms of competitor derogation, as it has been traditionally defined in the existing literature (e.g., Buss & Dedden, 1990; Fisher, 2004). Strategies T:T, R:T, and A:T, which are all concerned with lowering the perception of the target's value, can be considered as forms of target derogation. Finally, strategies T:A, R:A, and A:A, which are all concerned with

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lowering the perception of the actor's value, are forms of self-derogation, when viewed from the perspective of the actor.

When promotion is considered, Strategies T:A, R:A, and A:A, are all forms of self-promotion, as they aim to increase perceptions of the actor's value. Strategies T:R, R:R, and A:R, are forms of competitor promotion and are unlikely to be used regularly for the aforementioned reasons. Strategies T:T, R:T, and A:T, are centered on target promotion, and are also unlikely to be used given that such acts could improve the value of the target and increase the number of competitors who wish to mate with him.

While it is unlikely that all 18 competitive actions are used equally, it is probable that each one will be applied when it is appropriate for the situation. As well, a single act may apply several strategies simultaneously. For example, any act by a woman to increase her attractiveness can simultaneously apply Strategies T:A, R:A, and A:A. However, it is unlikely that her intent is to do so and instead, she likely has a specific goal in mind. It falls to future research to fully understand the intentions and situations that motivate the use of each strategy.

Discussion

Researchers have proposed a link between aggression and competition, such that aggression is necessary for competition to occur (e.g., Schuster, 1983). Within the area of aggression research, one strategy, competitor derogation, has been explored as an act that represents *indirect aggression*. Within this view, aggression is defined as any form of behavior or action directed at the goal of harming or irritating another person (Barron, 1977; Eron, 1987). Indirect aggression refers to the behaviors in which a perpetrator attempts to cause harm while simultaneously attempting to avoid appearing as harmful (Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992). The view that competitor derogation is an indirect act relies exclusively upon derogation as used in Strategy R:R, whereby the actor attempts to make the rivals change their perceptions of their own worth. To be indirect, the actor uses actions that, to the rivals, cannot be easily or immediately identified as derogatory with respect to their intention. However, the use of Strategy T:R is not considered as indirect aggression since the derogatory act has a different audience (i.e., the target). It is not direct aggression (i.e., physical confrontation or a directed verbal attack), either, since the competitor is not necessarily present. However, if the competitors are also present (i.e., as actors), aggression, albeit indirect, will occur, and if the necessary opportunity arises, direct aggression may be used. The separation of audience and actors in the expression of an aggressive or derogatory act provides a more accurate portrayal of possible situations where direct and indirect aggression can occur, and therefore represents one reason for researchers to use this framework in the future.

During a competitive act, the person to whom the action is expressed may not be the person intended to see the action. That is, an actor may make a comment to the target about the unattractiveness of the rivals, with the intent that the rivals are affected (Strategy R:R) and not explicitly affect the target (Strategy T:R). Alternatively, one could make a comment that only affects the target, (Strategy T:R) and is not intended to affect the rival (Strategy R:R). Furthermore, a comment may be about a target or rival that is not present. This example again illustrates the novelty of this framework, and how it can be used to explore intentionality during competition.

In general, a competitive act has four involved parties: the actor, the subject, the audience, and the participants. The "actor" is the person who performs the competitive

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act, as previously indicated, and who provides the viewpoint from which the act is observed. The “subject” is the person for whom the associated value is being manipulated and the “audience” is those people who will change their perceived value of the subject. Finally, the “participants” are the people with whom the actor interacts when performing the competitive act. The choice of strategy and selection of audience and participants is likely dependent upon specific situations and factors, such that when a specific situation occurs, an individual can use their decision-making abilities to select the best combination for that particular instance. Future research needs to determine the underpinnings of this decision-making process, and to explore the specific types of situations and factors that result in each strategy’s use. Moreover, as evidenced by sex-specific tactics for competition (e.g., Walters & Crawford, 1994) it is possible that there are sex-specific ways of using the strategies, given the same circumstances.

Two key factors that affect the model are receptivity and multiplicity. In “*receptivity*” a member of the audience must be receptive to the competitive activity if it is to have an impact upon them. If they are unaware of the activity because they are not an actor, or did not witness the event if they were the intended audience, the derogatory activity will not have an impact upon them. We can thus further define an actor as a participant, in a competitive act, that is receptive to the act’s intended result. Of course, an actor may not comply with the performer’s intentions, and while receptive, many not respond in the desired fashion.

The term “*multiplicity*” identifies that there may be multiple targets or multiple rivals when a competitive act is performed. The role of each individual may also vary (i.e., subject, audience member, participant). Thus, some strategies may be less (or more) effective due to the number of involved individuals. The presented framework has been simplified and has only a single actor, rival, and target. When additional participants exist for each role, the framework remains effective but requires a situation-specific model for each situation. The influence of receptivity and multiplicity has not been fully examined and is a topic for future research.

Conclusion

While there has been previous research on intrasexual competition, the presented framework provides a means for unifying previous work by differentiating 18 potential competitive actions (i.e., 9 for promotion and 9 for derogation) as well as identifying whom an act is intended to affect and how they will be affected. Consequently, future research can more accurately explain the effects, both intended and unintended, of competitive actions. The framework also permits existing phenomena, such as assortative mating (for review see Penke et. al, 2007) to be explained and discussed. In summary, intrasexual competition is a complex activity that occurs when a resource cannot be shared. By developing a framework that permits intrasexual competition to be explained, discussed, and examined, future results can be more critically analyzed and accurately presented.

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