

Andrea Kupfer Schneider

It Takes More Than a Hammer

Professor Andrea Kupfer Schneider has been a member of the Marquette University Law School faculty since 1996. She is director of the Law School's Dispute Resolution Program and, as of this past year, of the University's Institute for Women's Leadership. This excerpt is from the introduction and conclusion to Schneider's 2019 article titled "What's Sex Got to Do with It: Questioning Research on Gender & Negotiation." The full article, including footnotes, appeared in the spring 2019 issue of the *Nevada Law Journal*.



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Negotiation scholars and teachers often talk about negotiation skills through the metaphor of tools in the toolbox. Teachers want to make sure that students have a variety of tools, and we push our students to recognize the importance of each, even quoting the old cliché that “[i]f the only tool you have is a hammer, it is tempting to treat everything as if it were a nail.”

Negotiation scholarship primarily studies the hammer, the skill of assertiveness in negotiation. In fact, the majority of empirical negotiation studies take this even further—studying only the hammer and imagining only a single opportunity to hit the nail on the head. Based on those studies, we make conclusions that if one chooses not to use the hammer at all or does not hold it as well as another, one is not a good builder. And negotiation scholars' advice is also too often focused only on this hammer—how to swing it harder, how to position your hands, the angle of the swing, and so forth. If we were teaching a class on building a home, we would recognize the need to ensure that our construction crew had skills with other tools as well. Yet, the studies of negotiation skills fail to acknowledge this fact.

This gap is particularly notable when examining gender and negotiation. The vast majority of articles examining gender and negotiation focus on assertiveness—the hammer—and how women need to pick it up, swing harder, or hold it differently. Women's supposed lack of assertiveness has been used to explain the pay gap between the salaries of women and men along with a whole host of other inequities. This story falls short primarily because our research falls short. And when our research falls short—when we are only researching and emphasizing a part of the skills that are needed to be effective—this does a disservice to all negotiators.

In some of the most high-profile and high-stress negotiations, the recognition that more than assertiveness is needed was a hard-won lesson. Since the 1990s, the training of both the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the New York Police Department hostage-negotiation teams reflects the understanding that even alpha personalities in typically alpha jobs need to expand their negotiation toolbox. Their intensive negotiation trainings focus on how to read others, how to build rapport, and how to listen to others. The need to learn more than

assertiveness, of course, permeates most negotiation textbooks and popular advice books as well. Yet our empirical research—particularly on these other skills in negotiation—is lacking.

First, researchers focus on assertiveness, a typically masculine trait and only one of several important negotiation skills. Therefore, we assume that both men and women need only to master that skill, to the detriment of the mastery of any other negotiation skills. Second, assertiveness has become the only regularly tested negotiation skill as it is easily quantified. By failing to study the impact of any other skills—including skills that women might be better at than men—the practice-to-theory-to-practice cycle is hijacked by this narrow focus. Third, we tend to study negotiation in one-shot interactions with distributive outcomes. Far less often do we study the possibility of integrative outcomes. Even when we set up studies that focus on repeated interactions, they are often limited to prisoner's-dilemma or dictator-game scenarios—highly stylized and unrealistic structures. This means that women are not recognized for the skills at which they might be inherently better, and it also means that we are failing men

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by not highlighting opportunities for growth and improvement.

This article attempts to fill in the picture of the skills necessary for effective negotiation by examining the existing negotiation and gender literature discussing traits and skills related to negotiation and the gender literature of those traits outside of the negotiation context. Importantly, this article outlines what we know—and what is still missing—in terms of research on negotiation skills and research on gender differences in these skills. Understanding this gap is the first step toward recognizing what we should be studying and testing in the future.

Any article that discusses male and female traits in negotiation is likely getting it wrong, at least as it applies to some part of the population. The studies cited throughout this article refer only to men and women (or boys and girls), with little distinction of whether that was the gender at birth, with little understanding of gender fluidity, or with little attention to how each person might take on masculine or feminine traits.

In addition, as we study gender differences in negotiation, this article does not pretend to make conclusions about whether these behaviors are biological or socialized—nature or nurture. Some of the studies cited do focus on that issue—and in those cases, a parenthetical will note that when citing the study. Most of the studies, however, report on behaviors exhibited by negotiators without claiming that

this behavior is inherently biological or one stemming from socialization.

Finally, the studies this article discusses are, by and large, studies of U.S. and Western men and women and often conducted on adolescent or college-age adults. One must assume that studies of other populations, other ethnicities, and other ages might reveal other differences.

We can imagine that other factors could determine negotiation behavior more than gender—birth order, where one lives now, where one was raised, family or cultural expectations, professional training, political leanings, level of experience, and so on. Yet these other factors are rarely studied in detail the way that gender has been over the last 40 years. Why is there such a focus on negotiation differences between women and men? Perhaps we study this because gender differences are the most salient to us (think of how popular gender reveal parties have become!); perhaps it is because changing gender roles are so important to us; perhaps it is because gender is the easiest to sort; perhaps it is because it is the difference that fascinates us the most. In any case, we actually do not know if other, unstudied, factors would have far more impact among negotiators.

Furthermore, in any study of behavioral differences, people fall along a bell curve of behavior. Perhaps, for example, some negotiators from Asian cultures would view direct eye contact toward a superior as troubling, but many others—along the sides of the bell

curve—would not. And we never know in advance whether our counterpart falls in the middle or on the ends of the bell curve. Frankly, we often do not even know that about ourselves. So it is important to recognize that the negotiation studies discussed herein and the generalities that come from them might, or might not, apply to any given negotiator. They are conclusions drawn from generalizations about negotiators who fall in the middle of that bell curve of behavior, whatever the particular behavior is that is being measured.

Moreover, some of the studies often cited for examples of gender difference are more than 40 years old. That should give us pause about assuming that any or all of these conclusions still apply. These historic studies are noted, and the reader is encouraged to be aware of when and how these studies were conducted. One should question if certain assumptions might have changed about male and female behavior since these studies were conducted.

This article will examine five negotiation skills—social intuition, empathy, ethicality, flexibility, and assertiveness—each of which has been shown to make negotiators more effective and to add importantly to each negotiator's toolbox. Each section will outline how the skill is generally defined in negotiation literature, what gender-differences research has been done under each category, and then where future research might be needed. Particularly, this article will note how much more research is needed in all of

these other skills to help negotiators learn the specific behaviors that can increase effectiveness. Back to our toolbox analogy, it would be helpful to have studies on what type of wrench is most useful or how to best turn a screwdriver, in addition to the numerous studies done on hammering. In each of these sections when I review differences that have been found in studies, there is clearly the caveat that these differences are only what has been found or what has been studied and that, as with all studies, the article is limited by the limitations of the studies themselves.

There are (at least) three things that are wrong with research on women and negotiation. The first is that we study gender differences in negotiation and assume that these differences—as opposed to any other professional, cultural, age, or experiential difference—are determinative of differences in negotiation behavior.

These stereotypes may or may not apply to any one of us in particular. Our behaviors in negotiation likely fall along a range from “masculine” to “feminine” that may or may not actually match our gender. If we examined negotiation behaviors using other lenses—professional training, experience, family and culture, geography, or birth order, just to name a few—we would likely find similar ranges of behaviors. In other words, none of these studies show that gender is determinative of any single individual’s skill sets. (And this is yet another whole area calling out for more research.)

A second lesson that should resonate through this article is that assertiveness is only one negotiation skill—out of at least five—that makes one effective. We have studied one important skill, but it is only one of at least five, and there is no reason to think that results about this skill extend to the other four. Indeed, available research suggests the

opposite. Since it has been relatively easy to study in the lab and in one-shot negotiations, that is what we study. (We only study the hammer and assume one swing.) And, as women have been historically socialized against being assertive (with resulting backlash if the appropriate boundaries are crossed), it is not surprising that women are then seen as less effective in those types of studies. And more-recent studies even show the limit of assuming that women lack assertiveness. Nonetheless, if it is the only skill one studies, it appears to be the only one that counts. And this ignores the other skills—particularly social intuition, empathy, and ethicality—in which women appear to excel. Women are typically better able to decode body language, tone, and facial expressions. Women are better able to read smiles and better able to read eye contact. Women are also better able to read emotion through these nonverbal cues.

This leads to the third lesson—focusing solely on assertiveness is not only doing a disservice to women, but it also harms any negotiators who assume that modulating their level of assertiveness is the only thing it takes in order to be effective. Both business literature and negotiation literature are consistent in noting that these other skills discussed in the article are exactly the types of skills the best leaders will possess. The studies in each of these skill sets should help us determine what skills we have and what we are lacking. Since empirical work often focuses on micro-skills—ability to read emotion from the eyes, how to listen more carefully, when to make an offer—these studies can highlight exactly what we need to consider in order to change behavior to be more effective in negotiation. Further research into all of these skills in the context of negotiation is needed.

Only when we fix the research—only when we study more than the hammer—can we really trust that the lessons we draw are accurate and appropriate fixes for each of us individually. ■

