Can self-affirmation reduce backlash?

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In this paper, we explore self-affirmation as an intervention to reduce backlash (operationalized both as willingness to work and as propensity to sabotage) that women face in male-dominated work domains. We focus specifically on the negative cognitive and emotional reactions that men experience with women striving to succeed in those domains. In three studies of male-dominated work contexts, we show that men report a lower willingness to work with women than men, and this unwillingness stems from two related factors: anxiety and perceived dominance behaviors. We find that self-affirmation reduces male anxiety at the prospect of working with women and, as a consequence, makes men less likely to evaluate women as dominant and, therefore, more willing to work with them. Also, we find that under conditions of high anxiety, self-affirmed men (vs. control) are less likely to sabotage women excelling in a masculine domain. Our findings suggest that self-affirmation could be a valuable intervention to alleviate gender discrimination.