Does Witnessing Allyship from Male Leaders Anger or Elevate? Exploring Male Observers' Differential Reactions to Allyship

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Observers' Differential Reactions to Allyship

Women are underrepresented in leadership positions (Catalyst, 2016), underpaid (Bleiweis, 2020), and subject to higher rates of workplace mistreatment (McCord et al., 2018) compared to men. This is despite the fact that, on average, women are more effective leaders (Sergent & Stajkovic, 2020), are better educated, and work longer hours (Bleiweis, 2020) compared to men. To address workplace gender inequities, some men engage in allyship— behaviors enacted by members of advantaged groups (e.g., men) aimed at improving the status and supporting members of disadvantaged groups (e.g., women; Brown & Ostrove, 2013). Indeed, allyship has been lauded as an effective tool to advance the goals of equity, diversity, and inclusion in organizations (Sue et al., 2019). Allyship is also gaining traction among male organizational leaders, with male CEOs pledging and encouraging others to engage in allyship (Alleman & Garza, 2021).

Leaders, regardless of sex, are well-positioned to engage in allyship because they have more resources and, as a result, can make a bigger difference. A leadership role also implies a high-status group standing, suggesting that other members of the group are more likely to pay attention to leaders' actions (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). While leader allyship has the potential to improve gender equity in the workplace, we know little about how male observers (hereafter "observers") react to the leader allyship targeted towards women. Observing a member of another group receive benefits may serve as an identity-threatening experience, eliciting negative reactions towards the beneficiary (Cundiff et al., 2018; McDonald et al., 2018; Netchaeva et al., 2015). This suggests that witnessed allyship—a potential benefit to the disadvantaged group— may evoke an identity threat in the observers. Such a response would ultimately undermine the

effectiveness of allyship by eliciting observers' negative reactions toward women. At the same time, other research suggests that witnessing allyship by an ingroup member can establish norms that promote further allyship (De Souza & Schmader, 2021). Thus, the literature currently provides opposing predictions on how observers might react to leader allyship.

We reconcile these inconsistencies by theorizing witnessed allyship through two identity paths to explain how and why observers react negatively or positively to witnessed leader allyship. Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985), we propose that witnessing leader allyship serves as an identity-implicating experience. Accordingly, observers may construe witnessed allyship via two paths—as an *identity threat* (i.e., to their gender identity) or as an *identity opportunity* (i.e., to their moral identity). Construing witnessed allyship as either a threat or an opportunity will evoke corresponding emotions. Identity threat means that individuals perceive potential harm to their valued identity or self-worth (Bies, 1999), thus evoking feelings of anger (Matheson & Cole, 2004). On the contrary, identity opportunity indicates potential for individuals' growth and enhancement of their identity (Bataille & Vough, 2020), which evokes feelings of elevation (Diessner et al., 2013). Observers' emotional experiences will elicit behaviors toward women on their work team, with anger resulting in negative behaviors (i.e., negative gossip and backlash) and elevation evoking positive behaviors (i.e., positive gossip and helping). We also consider contextual cues—numerical "minority" of observers (defined by the ratio of men vs. women on the work team) and team's ethical climate—that may augment identity threat and identity opportunity paths, respectively.

This study contributes in at least three ways. First, we broaden the conceptualization of allyship to consider those who are ostensibly on the periphery of allyship actions—observers—yet important to the overall effectiveness of allyship. Second, we contribute to social identity

theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985) by advancing our understanding of why the same act of witnessed allyship may drive differential reactions in observers. Third, we examine boundary conditions and demonstrate that identity salience is contextual (Brewer, 1991); that is, contextual factors drive whether observers' gender or moral identity is activated following witnessed allyship.

We use three experiments to examine how observers react to leader allyship. Study 1 and Study 2 test each identity path separately. In Study 1, we focus on the identity threat path (as operationalized by anger) by examining the effect of leader allyship on observers' emotions under conditions of men's numerical minority, majority, or equal numerical representation. Study 2 investigates the identity opportunity path (as operationalized by elevation) by testing the role of leader allyship on observers' emotions under ethical and neutral organizational climate. Study 3 replicates and extends Studies 1 and 2 by examining both identity paths simultaneously. Moreover, we enhance the external validity by combining a recall and vignette approaches.

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