

Dismantling Bias Conference Series

What Does It Mean for Male Allies to Show Support? Examining Reactions to Men's Voice on Gender Equity Issues

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What Does It Mean for Male Allies to Show Support? Examining Reactions to Men's Voice on Gender Equity Issues

Although men are increasingly being encouraged to serve as allies to women (e.g., Czopp & Montieth, 2003), they often face backlash when contributing candid opinions about how to advance gender equity at work (e.g., Fischer, 2017; Rimer, 2005). To what extent are men welcomed to openly discuss and debate ways to promote women's work-related progress?

We explore the boundaries of men's roles as allies by drawing a distinction between more *radical* versus *incremental* contributions (i.e., extent to which ideas deviate from the status quo). Radical ideas often contradict popular opinion but hold potential to cultivate creative idea generation and better decision-making (Nemeth et al. 2001). At the same time, radical ideas can be met with resistance for challenging deeply-held values, presumptions, and practices in the workgroup (Graso et al., 2020).

Integrating theories on standing (Miller & Effron, 2010; Miller et al., 2011) and sacred values (Tetlock, 2003; Tetlock et al., 2000), we propose that for identity-based issues like gender equity, observers are especially less likely to view radical ways of thinking as *legitimate* when they are proposed by non-beneficiary allies (men) as compared to when those same ideas are raised by beneficiaries (women). Notably, this occurs when men communicate that they share in the broader underlying goal of advancing women's cause. Men's ideas do not, however, face similarly negative reaction when they largely echo current ways of thinking (i.e., more incremental in nature). This means that men's well-intentioned, but more challenging, contributions to gender equity discussions can be precluded from serious consideration.

We examined these ideas in two experimental studies utilizing a 2 (Voicer gender: female vs. male) x 2 (Content of voice: incremental vs. radical) between-subjects design. In Study 1 ($N = 779$), participants recruited via MTurk took on the role of a leader in a workplace simulation

about the implementation of an unconscious bias training program. In Study 2 ($N = 256$), undergraduate students at two U.S. universities read about a real gender equity initiative undertaken by the consulting firm McKinsey & Co., which included an unconscious bias training component. Participants read about the hypothetical [purportedly real] opinions of an employee [prior MTurk participant] about the initiative. In both content conditions, the voicer signaled support for the overall goals of the gender equity initiative, but critiqued current efforts and made suggestions for improvement. In the incremental voice condition, the ideas improved upon the current training, whereas in the radical voice condition, the ideas questioned the use of implicit bias training as a way to tackle diversity issues, and suggested other initiatives to meet its diversity goals. We then measured perceptions of issue legitimacy and intentions to take action on the issue. In both studies we found significant interactions between the gender of the voicer and the content of voice on issue legitimacy, such that men's (vs. women's) voice was seen as especially low on legitimacy when it was more radical (vs. incremental) in nature. Moderated mediation showed a negative downstream effect on support for men's radical ideas. We are currently conducting an intervention study that aims to reverse the tendency to dismiss men's more radical ideas on gender equity more so than when women raise the exact same ideas.

Altogether, our research highlights that men's more provocative ideas on gender equity are especially prone to being seen as less legitimate. This suggests that from a descriptive (rather than prescriptive) standpoint, men's roles as allies might be constrained to supporters, rather than contributors of, constructively challenging ideas for change. On a more practical front, we note that to the extent that negative reactions to men's challenging perspectives have a chilling effect on group debate and discussion, the gender equity movement may be at a disadvantage. We also contribute to research on employee voice that has predominantly focused on the *extent* that

employees speak up, with lesser attention paid to the *content* of the ideas put forth. More broadly, we use gender equity issues as a lens to explore the risks and consequences of speaking up at work.

Word count: 668

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FIGURE 1
Theoretical Model

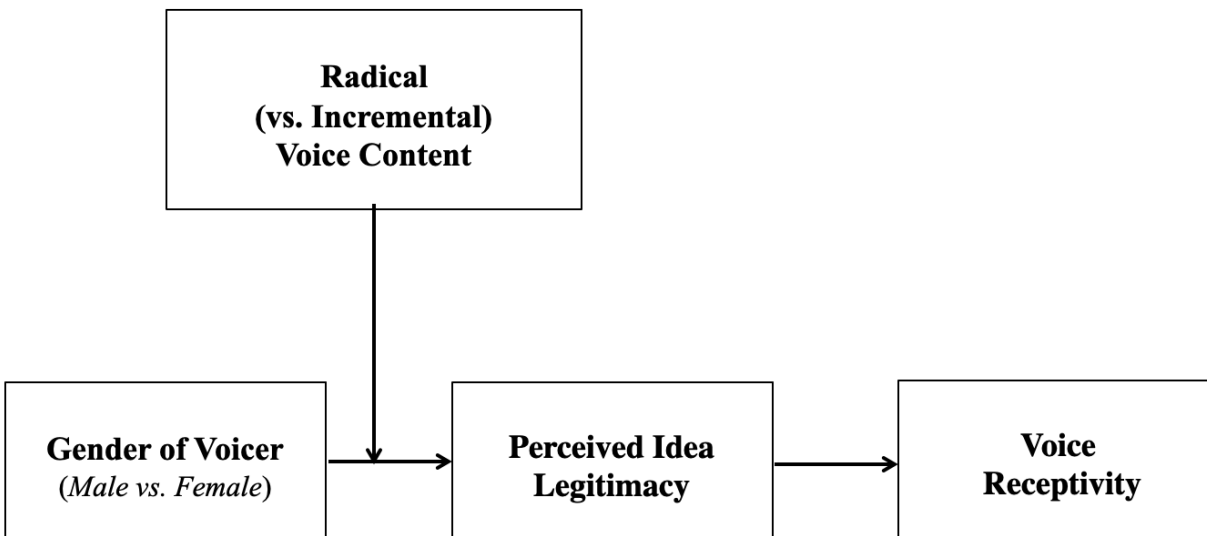
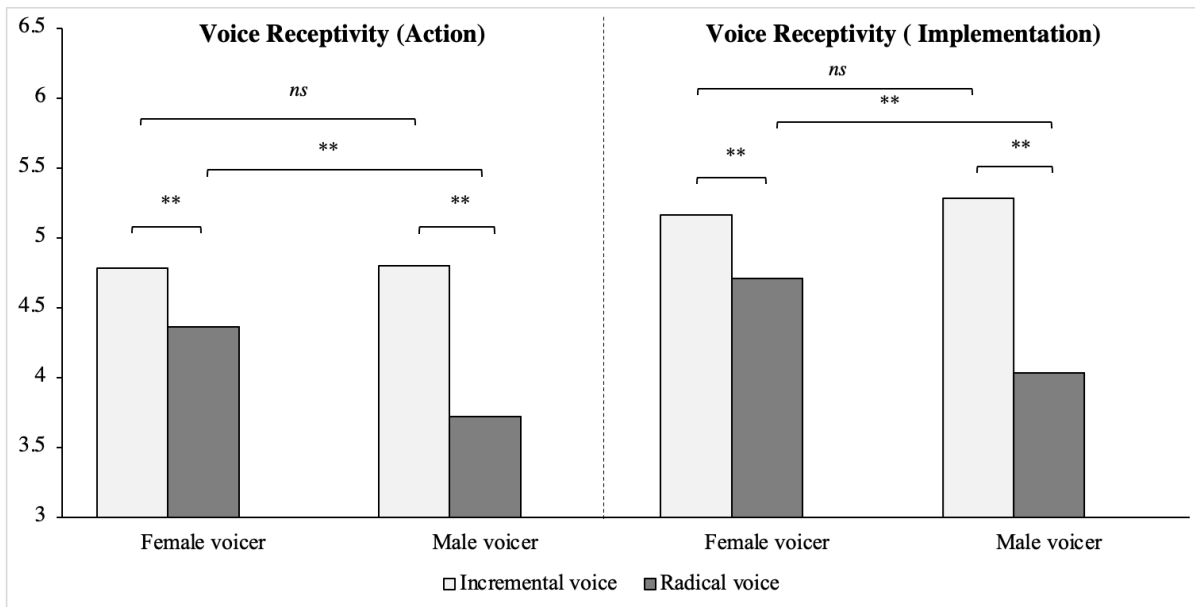


FIGURE 2
Study 1: Moderating Effect of Radical Voice Content on Receptivity to Men’s Ideas on Gender Equity Issues

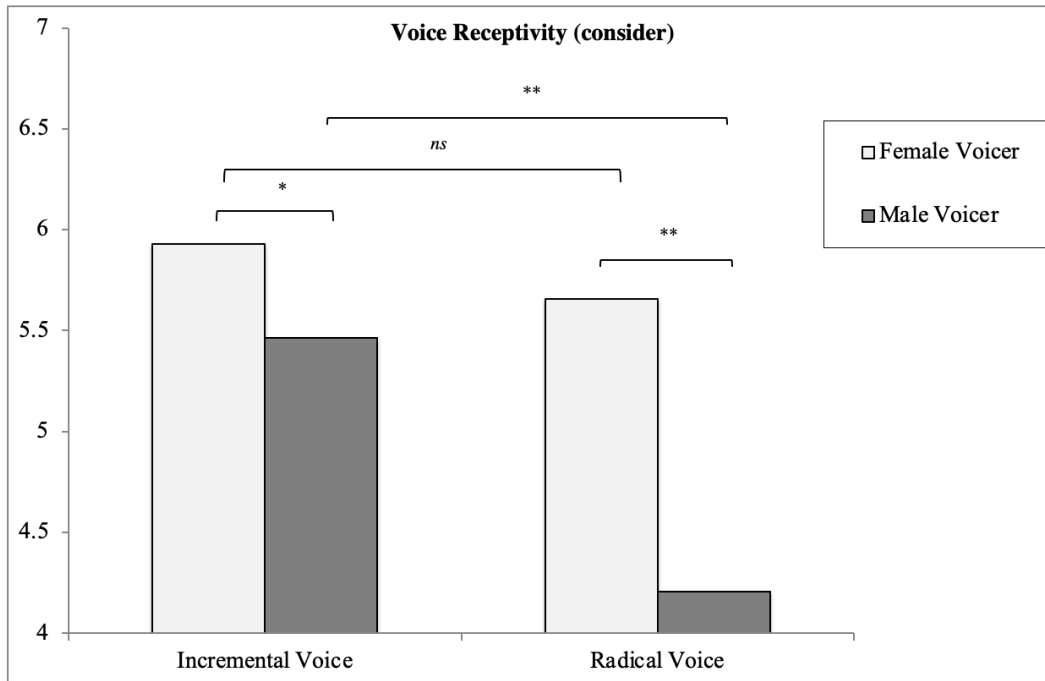


Incremental voice: Female voicer $n = 188$; Male voicer $n = 202$

Radical voice: Female voicer $n = 203$; Male voicer $n = 186$

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, ns = non-significant

FIGURE 3
Study 2: Moderating Effect of Radical Voice Content on Receptivity to Men's Ideas on Gender Equity Issues



Incremental voice: Female voicer $n = 56$; Male voicer $n = 71$

Radical voice: Female voicer $n = 76$; Male voicer $n = 53$

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, ns = non-significant