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Gender Backlash Against Men at Work: A Literature Review and Future Research Agenda

Payal Sharma

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, payal.sharma@unlv.edu

Rachel Sturm

Wright State University, rachel.sturm@wright.edu

Bradley Kirkman

North Carolina State University, blkirkma@ncsu.edu

Brett Neely

University of Nebraska, Lincoln, brett.neely@unl.edu

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Gender Backlash Against Men at Work:

A Literature Review and Future Research Agenda

Gender backlash refers to social and economic reprisals (e.g., not being liked or hired, see Rudman, 1998) when individuals behave counter-stereotypically to their gender. Following this, there is a growing literature that is focused on the workplace experiences of male “gender vanguards” (Bosak, Kulich, Rudman, & Kinahan, 2018, p. 156) – i.e., men who do not act in agentic ways (or being independent, self-focused, competitive, and assertive with others) in their job roles. The purpose of our manuscript is to (1) offer a synthesized understanding of this research, including how, when, and why men experience gender backlash for their counter-normative attributes and behaviors; and, (2) provide a unified framework of the impact of backlash to the employee himself, his interactions with others, and his organization. We also discuss several compelling new directions for future scholarship that lie at the intersection of masculinity and work to conceptually and empirically advance extant research. Our review broadly contributes to ongoing scholarly interest in gender and diversity dynamics in organizations, as well as continuing dialogue in society regarding role expectations for men.

In doing so, we offer several theoretical contributions. First, to help build a more holistic understanding of gender bias and work dynamics, we refocus the literature on gender backlash in organizations by turning the spotlight onto the male experience. We build on assertions that masculinity is fluid and adaptive, and that various types of masculinity ideologies and norms exist. Also, like gender, masculinity itself is socially and relationally constructed, enforced, and reproduced through interactions at work (Berdahl, Cooper, Glick, Livingston, & Williams, 2018; Brod & Kaufmann, 1994; Knights & Kerfoot, 2004; Ramon, Guthrie, & Rochester, 2020; Rademacher & Kelly, 2016). These assertions are subsumed within the broader concept of

“doing gender,” including discussions of “how men (and women) present themselves as gendered beings, how they take up or resist dominant forms of gender identities/gender roles, or how individuals may be gendered through their participation in social processes” (Stergiou-Kita et al., 2015, p. 218). Accordingly, our guiding perspective is that there is a continuum of masculinity at any given time in organizations. Building on this view, our male-focused review promotes conceptual dialogue regarding shifts in sociocultural perspectives that reflect and impact men’s workplace experiences. Importantly, no existing review has focused exclusively on understanding gender backlash directed towards men who act in anti-stereotypical ways at work, so we hope that our efforts lay the groundwork for greater inquiry of men who use a full range of gendered workplace behaviors.

Second, to organize extant work, we offer a comprehensive understanding and unified framework across studies regarding *how*, *when*, and *why* reprisals occur for MGVs. In addressing these themes, we uncover the impact of backlash for MGVs, including in their interpersonal interactions with others in their jobs, and to their organizations overall, which contributes to a broader understanding of human behavior and social relationships at work. To structure our efforts, we first discuss the types of norms violated in both non-leadership and leadership roles (i.e., how backlash occurs). To contextualize the occurrence of reprisals (i.e., when and why backlash exists), we then describe social origins of the backlash through discussing gendered role expectations, stereotypes, and childhood experiences for men; and, we identify perceiver motivations – including to explain underlying mechanisms and contingencies related to backlash experiences of men by discussing the perceptions of those working with, and around, them.

Finally, we extend the MGV backlash literature by identifying limitations of prior empirical studies and then highlight opportunities for more precision in how backlash research is

undertaken. For example, studies have often used student samples, cross-sectional designs, and self-reported experiences of MGVs (e.g., Allen & Russell, 1999, Heilman & Wallen, 2010; Moss-Racusin et al., 2010; Phelan, Moss-Racusin, & Rudman, 2008; Riggs, 1997; Rudman & Mescher, 2013). Although this research has addressed backlash against MGVs at work and findings have work-related implications, we posit that there are nevertheless empirical limitations that can provide a foundation for forthcoming work, such as to better clarify the nature of reprisals and include the perceptions of penalizers. As one possibility, future studies can more richly capture real-world organizational experiences through use of longitudinal study designs reflecting the dynamic nature of gendered work interactions (Shipp & Cole, 2015). Our review thereby offers a basis on which we build to offer empirical considerations that help set the agenda for MGV scholarship over the next decade.