A bed of thorns: Female leaders and the self-reinforcing cycle of illegitimacy

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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to explain why the gender gap in leadership positions persists, we propose a model centered on legitimacy. When women hold powerful positions, they have a harder time than men eliciting respect and admiration (i.e., status) from subordinates. As a result, female power-holders are seen as less legitimate than male power-holders. Unless they are able to legitimize their role, relative illegitimacy will prompt a variety of consequences such as more negative subordinate behavior and reduced cooperation when the leader is a woman. Subordinate rejection will likely put female leaders in a precarious mindset, and trigger negative responses toward subordinates; such behavior can confirm negative expectations of female leaders and further undermine female authority in a self-reinforcing cycle of illegitimacy. Leader or organizational features that enhance status attributions and/or lower subordinates' perceptions of power differentials may increase legitimacy for women in leadership roles.

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"The road to authority is tough for women, and once they get there it's a bed of thorns" (Tannen, 1990; p. 244).

Despite great educational advances for women in recent decades (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2014), gender bias continues to serve as an obstacle for the advancement of female candidates to leadership roles (e.g. Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004; Phelan, Moss-Racusin, & Rudman, 2008; Rudman, 1998; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012). And, as Tannen (1990) observed, the difficulties do not end once a woman obtains a position of power. Women who have assumed leadership roles are liked less than their male counterparts (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Parks-Stamm, Heilman, & Hearns, 2008) and face social and economic penalties (Rudman, 1998) when they exercise or express their authority (Brescoll, 2011; Sinclair & Kunda, 2000). It should be unsurprising, then, that women continue to be largely underrepresented among the powerful (Catalyst, 2014).

Here, we examine the experiences of women in leadership positions through the lens of research on the psychology of legitimacy. By "legitimacy", we mean the sense of obligation or duty to comply freely with the decisions and directions of authorities (Levi, Sacks, & Tyler, 2009; Tyler, 2002). We propose a theoretical model (see Fig. 1) that posits that the difficulties that female leaders face often stem from *low legitimacy perceptions*—i.e., powerful women, relative to powerful men, are less likely to be perceived as legitimate authorities. Previous models have addressed backlash against gender-norm violators more generally (e.g., Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Glick, & Phelan, 2012; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan and Nauts, 2012). This work has showed, for example, that both women and men tend to be penalized for behavior that violates

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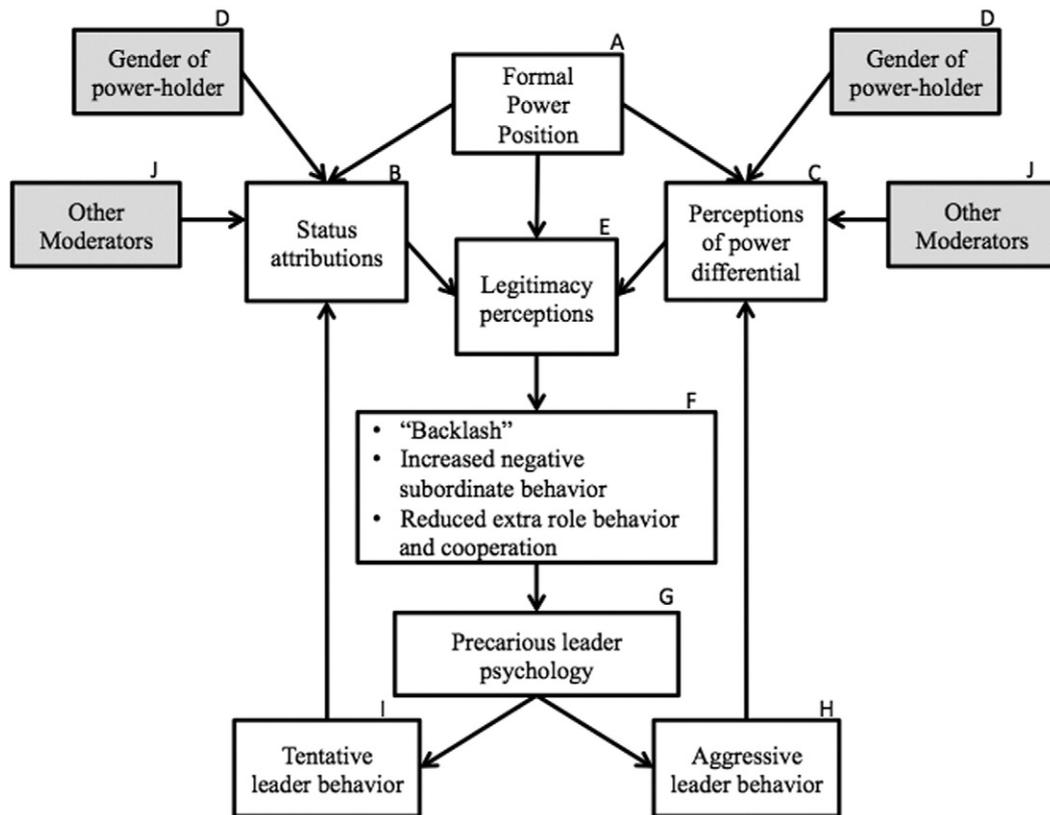 *E-mail address:* andrea.vial@yale.edu (A.C. Vial).

Fig. 1. The self-reinforcing cycle of illegitimacy. Occupying a formal position of power, i.e., a leadership role (A) leads to status attributions (B) and the perception of power differentials (C). The gender of the leader (D) moderates the extent to which subordinates attribute status to the leader (B), and the extent to which they perceive power differentials between them and the leader (C). These status attributions (B) and perceptions of power differentials (C) together determine the legitimacy of leaders (E). A series of consequences ensue from legitimacy perceptions (F), which could foster a precarious psychological state for leaders (G), resulting in behavior that is too aggressive (H) or too tentative (I). Aggressive leader behavior (H) increases the perception of power differentials between leader and subordinates (C), further lowering legitimacy (E). Tentative leader behavior (I) reduces status attributions (B) also further lowering legitimacy (E). A host of moderators (J) impact legitimacy by increasing/reducing status attributions (B) and/or by increasing/reducing the perception of power differentials.

gender stereotypes (Rudman, 1998). Thus, people tend to dislike, reject, and punish women who display agency in general (e.g., those who self-promote; Moss-Racusin & Rudman, 2010). While here we draw heavily from this prior work, we focus almost exclusively on research that has examined the specific case of bias against women in powerful positions that entail control over others, and we integrate this work with a different stream of research centered on the legitimacy of power-holders (Magee & Frasier, 2014; Tyler, 2002, 2006). We propose ways that a legitimacy lens can help advance the field further by suggesting novel predictions for consequences of bias that go well beyond the individual target woman, and thus more fully illuminate the difficulties faced by powerful women than extant models of bias against stereotype violators.

Our model places backlash against female leaders (as well as backlash-avoidance behaviors on the part of female leaders) as a result of subordinates' low legitimacy perceptions. Other theoretical models have focused on status in terms of societal standing of a target's group identification, and examined the incongruence between occupying a high-rank position while simultaneously belonging to a group that occupies a subordinate role in society (such as women and racial minorities; e.g., Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Glick and Phelan, 2012). "Status" plays an important role in our model as well. However, we define status differently: not as stemming from group membership, per se, but as the degree to which a leader is respected and admired by others—a definition we borrow from the broader literature on leadership (e.g. Magee & Frasier, 2014) and power (e.g., Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Moreover, while status occupies a prominent place in our model, we propose that it is a focus on the construct of legitimacy that can unlock new avenues of inquiry that may expand our understanding of female leaders. While status (respect and admiration) is a construct relevant to the study of bias against women in a host of contexts (for example, women who self-promote), legitimacy is more germane in particular to the study of women who occupy positions or roles that entail authority over others. As other power-holders, women in leadership roles need to garner respect and admiration (status) from subordinates in order to legitimize their authority (Magee & Frasier, 2014).

Thus, we believe there is value in adopting a legitimacy lens when it comes to understanding the specific case of bias against women who hold formal positions entailing power over others. Unlike other models, our model examines the questions that emerge when bias against female leaders is thought of as a special case of bias against illegitimate leaders, rather than as a special case of bias against norm-violators more generally (e.g.Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Rudman, Moss-Racusin,

Glick, and Phelan, 2012). Because the current focus is on leadership, the concept of legitimacy becomes relevant in a way that is less evident when considering bias against stereotype violators in general.

Most importantly, integrating these different streams of theory and focusing on legitimacy allows us to make clear predictions about a broader range of outcomes and downstream consequences beyond just those that are relevant to the individual target of backlash (e.g., lower salaries; Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008), such as reduced subordinate cooperation and fewer behaviors that go beyond minimal role requirements when the leader is a woman versus a man. Further, a theoretical model centered on legitimacy helps explain why certain features of female leaders or features of the evaluative context can mitigate backlash: If the problem is, at least in part, one of illegitimacy, then any features that legitimize women's authority should reduce bias against it. Finally, the proposed model highlights a problematic self-reinforcing cycle of illegitimacy that incorporates previous theories, which have conceptualized backlash as a force that maintains the status quo and reinforces gender bias (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Glick, and Phelan, 2012). We turn first to an examination of the constructs of power, status, and legitimacy.

Power, status, and the legitimacy of authorities

Power, status, and legitimacy are distinct but intimately related constructs. It is worth clarifying their definitions, similarities, and differences to fully understand the implications of our model. All leaders and authority figures possess *power*: An asymmetric control over resources and subordinates' activities and outcomes (Fiske, 1993; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). This power is attached to the leadership role (formal power) and it grants leaders the discretion to oversee, reward, and punish subordinates; to hire, promote, demote, and fire them; and to assign tasks and projects and grant them more or less autonomy.

Legitimacy in our model applies to the authority figure or leader. "Legitimate" in this case is a state in which a leader's power over others is seen as deserved and justified (Caddick, 1982; Tyler, 2006). Such a legitimate leader manifests his or her legitimacy when subordinates feel like they ought to obey and follow his or her rules and decisions, not out of force, per se, but rather by choice (Levi et al., 2009; Tyler, 2002). A legitimate leader does not have to wield power in a coercive way or underscore power differentials to get subordinates to cooperate or follow (Magee & Frasier, 2014; Tyler, 2002). Instead, when a leader is seen as legitimate, subordinates readily accept and comply with his or her decisions. In this way, there can be power without legitimacy (when power differentials are left unexplained or are seen as inappropriate and unfair; Tyler, 2006). But legitimacy as a construct comes into play once formal power differentials are established—speaking of legitimacy without formal power makes little conceptual sense. What determines the legitimacy of power-holders?

One answer is status attributions, which can be used to explain the allocation of power and to justify power differentials between subordinates and leaders (Magee & Galinsky, 2008), and thus are an important legitimizing force for those who occupy powerful roles. In our model, status is the degree to which a leader is respected and admired by others (Blader & Chen, 2014; Magee & Frasier, 2014; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Status resides in the eyes of subordinates, who bestow it or withhold it from the leader freely (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). A leader's expertise, superior ability, special talents, and overall competence often elicit such respect and admiration, i.e., status (Hollander, 1985; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Individuals who elicit more respect and admiration are likely to also be regarded as deserving of positions that entail resource control (i.e., power).

Thus, keeping formal power constant, the degree to which subordinates see a power-holder (e.g., a boss, manager, supervisor, etc.) as a legitimate authority will partly depend on how much they respect and admire him or her (i.e., status attribution), because this respect will determine the degree to which power differentials are seen as justified. Status is therefore an *antecedent* to the legitimacy of power-holders. At very low levels of status (e.g., when perceived to be highly incompetent or untrustworthy), leaders will be seen as illegitimate, and therefore they will need to leverage their formal power in a relatively coercive way as the only means to elicit compliance from subordinates (Magee & Frasier, 2014). Not surprisingly, research has shown that such high power/low status individuals (those who possess high resource control but elicit little respect and admiration) are judged negatively as dominant and cold, which leads people to expect more negative interactions with them (Fragale, Overbeck, & Neale, 2011).

In our model, we treat actual (i.e., formal) power as relatively fixed: even a highly illegitimate leader still has the discretion to fire a disgruntled employee (i.e., power). However, just because a leader has the prerogative to impose sanctions and force compliance this does not necessarily mean that he or she would leverage this power. The *perception* of leader power—the belief that the leader is likely (or unlikely) to leverage formal power and rely on coercion in order to elicit compliance—is not static. This belief about the likelihood that a leader will rely on coercion may vary greatly due to multiple factors. In some cases, the power differential between leaders and subordinates may be emphasized and thus perceived more strongly, whereas in other cases, such differentials may be deemphasized. For example, a leader who reminds subordinates that they could lose their jobs for not following his or her commands is invoking and leveraging formal power to elicit compliance in a coercive manner. Subordinates in this case will likely perceive power differentials to be relatively high. In addition, some subordinates more than others (or in some contexts more so than others), may expect leaders to emphasize formal power differentials and use coercion more or less openly. In other cases, subordinates may expect leaders to downplay formal power differentials. When these expectations are not met, perceptions of power differentials could be reduced or heightened. Such variability in perceptions of power differentials is important because it interacts with status attributions to determine the legitimacy of leaders.

Keeping formal power constant, high (vs. low) perceptions of power differentials between leader and subordinates will require greater levels of respect and admiration (status) to legitimize the leader. Therefore, while formal power is relatively fixed, perceptions of power differentials are *also* an antecedent to leader legitimacy, along with status attributions. Ideally, leaders would elicit as much status as possible, while at the same time keeping perceptions of power differentials as low as possible. The challenge is

keeping perceptions of power differentials low, but without going so far as to convey tentativeness, which then could impact legitimacy via reduced competence and status attributions, as we will discuss shortly. With this caveat in mind, any factor that either elevates status attributions, or that serves to downplay perceptions of power differentials, should increase the legitimacy of leaders. In contrast, any factor that either reduces leader status or emphasizes power differentials should further reduce leader legitimacy. Further, while this power legitimation process applies to all leaders in general, it poses a persistent problem for women in top positions because subordinates may be reluctant to imbue a female leader with status to the same extent as they would a male leader (e.g., Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992), making women in powerful positions more likely than men to be cast as illegitimate authorities.

The problem for women in charge

Put simply, female authorities are less accepted than their male counterparts (Brescoll, 2011; Eagly et al., 1992; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Parks-Stamm et al., 2008). As just one example, a meta-analysis of 61 different studies found lower levels of liking and acceptance for female (vs. male) leaders, even when leader performance was controlled for; this differential was particularly high in traditionally male-dominated fields such as finance and technology (Eagly et al., 1992).

Some scholars have expressed concerns that bias against hypothetical female leaders uncovered by lab studies may not generalize to real organizational settings (e.g., Elsesser, 2015). However, field studies looking at attitudes toward real female leaders have also frequently found evidence of gender bias. For instance, national polls indicate that workers tend to prefer male supervisors to female supervisors (Rifkin, 2014; Rubner, 1991). In another recent survey, while a plurality of participants (51%) had no preference, the rest preferred a male to a female boss by a 2–1 margin (Elsesser & Lever, 2011). And, a field study examining worker outcomes after a company merger or acquisition showed that male workers in particular were more likely to quit when the merger resulted in an increase in women in top management positions (Kwon & Milgrom, 2010). Similarly, a narrative analysis of adult individuals' reasons for preferring male versus female bosses (e.g., Elsesser & Lever, 2011) revealed prejudice that closely aligns with the results of highly controlled laboratory studies (e.g., Heilman et al., 2004). Finally, a meta-analysis on gender bias in leader evaluations that examined the moderating role of study setting found no significant differences between lab and field studies, suggesting that, on average, gender bias emerges across settings (Paustian-Underdahl, Walker, & Woehr, 2014). When taken together, the combined results of lab and field studies suggest that the devaluation of women in authority roles is real and a likely contributor to the persistent gender gap at the top (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Heilman & Eagly, 2008; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014).

At least two explanations have been proposed for why people are resistant to female authorities. First, there is a perceived lack of fit (Heilman, 2001; see also Geis, 1993; and Ridgeway, 2001) or incongruity (Eagly & Karau, 2002) between the traits and behaviors associated with successful leaders (e.g., agency, assertiveness, decisiveness, and confidence) and the traits seen as typical and highly descriptive of women (e.g., warm, polite, and yielding; Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Compared to feminine stereotypes, masculine stereotypes are more closely associated with successful managers (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011; Schein & Davidson, 1993) and with powerful people in general (Vial & Napier, 2014). This mismatch or lack of fit likely drives expectations that women will be less competent leaders than men with identical credentials. Indeed, women have to work harder or perform substantially better than their male counterparts to be considered similarly competent (Lyness & Heilman, 2006). For example, observers tend to assume that in successful teams composed by one woman and one man, the man is largely responsible for the team's success, unless a woman's contribution to the final product is stated unambiguously (Heilman & Haynes, 2005; see also Foschi, 1996). Ultimately, descriptive feminine stereotypes portray women as inadequate to lead relative to men, which may drive the perception of female managers as less competent than male managers, and therefore not as worthy of respect and admiration (status). Keeping formal power as well as perceptions of power differentials constant, the lower status elicited by female leaders results in relatively lower legitimacy compared to male leaders.

A second, albeit complementary, account for the resistance to female leaders is suggested by research on prescriptive and proscriptive gender stereotypes (Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Glick, 2001). In general, people tend to penalize gender deviants—i.e., men and women who act in discordance with traditional gender norms and stereotypes (Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Rudman, 2010; Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). For example, participants in an experiment derogated both men and women who were successful in gender-inconsistent positions, and were less likely to prefer them as bosses (Heilman & Wallen, 2010). More specifically, researchers have found that female leaders are penalized for failing to comply with a prescription that women be communal (i.e., a "communality deficit;" Heilman & Okimoto, 2007) and for violating gender proscriptions for women not to be dominant (i.e., a "dominance penalty;" Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, and Nauts, 2012). A recent meta-analysis of 63 studies spanning 39 years of research confirmed that women are indeed penalized more than men for explicit expressions of dominance (Williams & Tiedens, 2015). This research suggests that the same amount of formal power may be perceived as "too much" in the hands of a woman versus a man, and that powerful women are threatening (Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, and Nauts, 2012) and untrustworthy (Heilman et al., 2004). As women are not typically associated with power (Koenig et al., 2011; Schein & Davidson, 1993), when a woman (vs. a man) occupies a powerful position, this expectancy violation could make power differentials more noticeable for subordinates. If so, the same amount of respect and admiration that may be enough for a man's power to be perceived as legitimate may nevertheless be insufficient for a female leader to legitimize her role. Conversely, at equal levels of status, the perception of power differentials between leaders and subordinates may be greater when the leader is a woman, resulting in relatively lower legitimacy compared to when the leader is a man.

In this way, from a legitimacy perspective, both lack of fit perceptions and stereotype violations have detrimental effects for women in leadership roles because they lower perceptions of leader status or emphasize power differentials between female

leaders and their subordinates, rendering female authority relatively illegitimate. We believe this new insight into the underlying psychological processes at play that emerges from a focus on legitimacy allows for a parsimonious organization of the larger literature on bias against female leaders—particularly boundary conditions, as we will also discuss further in this paper. Additionally, a legitimacy perspective makes predictions for a host of outcomes that go beyond backlash against individual women: It recognizes the broader impact illegitimacy can have at the organizational level (Tyler, 2002, 2006, 2010), and thus encourages examination of downstream consequences that have been relatively unexplored to date. We turn to these next.

The consequences of illegitimacy: looking beyond backlash

The term 'backlash' was coined by Rudman (1998) to describe the social and economic penalties incurred by men and women who engaged in gender stereotype-incongruent behavior or occupied gender stereotype-incongruent roles. Research on gender bias against women in leadership roles has continued to focus on backlash as the main dependent outcome of interest. Studies in this tradition have shown that individuals report lower desire to have a woman versus an identical man as their boss (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007), and lower intentions to hire or promote a woman (vs. a man) vying for a manager position (Brescoll, 2011; Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Phelan et al., 2008; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan and Nauts, 2012, Study 3). Backlash is also evident in research showing participants' willingness to pay female (vs. male) leaders lower salaries (Brescoll, Dawson, & Uhlmann, 2010; Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Livingston, Rosette, & Washington, 2012). In addition to these individual penalties, our model predicts other potential downstream consequences stemming from female leaders' relatively low legitimacy. First, low legitimacy perceptions will likely increase negative subordinate behaviors (e.g., active undermining of leader authority) as well as reduce positive behaviors (e.g., cooperation and extra-role behaviors) in teams led by women (vs. men). Second, subordinate rejection and lack of cooperation can alter leaders' psychological state (Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008; Smith, Jost, & Vijay, 2008), which could negatively impact a woman's performance as a leader and her behavior toward subordinates. We discuss these different sets of consequences next.

Increased negative behavior

There is some evidence suggesting that subordinates might be more likely to enact negative behaviors when led by a woman (vs. a man). For example, an experiment by Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, and Nauts (2012) demonstrated that participants were more likely to sabotage a woman described to possess high leadership aptitude (relative to a man with high aptitude and to low-aptitude men and women). In addition, research in the lab (Butler & Geis, 1990; Koch, 2005, Study 1) and in the field (Koch, 2005, Study 2) has demonstrated that subordinates tended to direct more negative nonverbal behaviors (e.g., body language and facial expressions) toward female (vs. male) leaders during face-to-face interactions, even though they rated them as equally competent. Butler and Geis (1990) also showed that, whereas male leaders received a balanced mix of positive and negative responses from subordinates, female leaders received more negative than positive nonverbal feedback. Brown and Geis (1984) further showed that when a majority of group members exhibit these negative nonverbal behaviors, performance evaluations of female (vs. male) leaders suffer to a greater extent. More research is needed to expand our understanding of ways in which subordinates may behave negatively when led by a female versus a male manager, both in terms of negative work-related behaviors that may directly impact the group's bottom line (e.g., increased work withdrawal and absenteeism), as well as in terms of negative behaviors toward the leader that may undermine her authority (e.g., increased interruptions during staff meetings; challenging leader decisions, etc.).

Reduced extra role behavior and cooperation

While rewards and punishments (i.e., leveraging formal power) may be sufficient to foster basic rule following and mandated cooperation from subordinates, more voluntary or discretionary types of cooperative behavior—for instance, working late without prompting, helping coworkers, going beyond what is required, or taking ownership of projects—are typically not a result of a system that functions via the use of rewards and punishments (Tyler, 2010; Tyler & Blader, 2005). These extra role cooperative behaviors (i.e., organizational citizenship behaviors) are a matter of personal choice rather than a formalized aspect of the job that can be enforced, and are positively related to both individual- and organizational-level markers of performance such as lower employee absenteeism and turnover, increased productivity and efficiency, and reduced costs (Podsakoff, Ahearne, & MacKenzie, 1997; Podsakoff, Whiting, Podsakoff, & Blume, 2009). Of chief relevance here is the tendency for cooperative, extra role behaviors to increase in legitimate (vs. illegitimate) hierarchies (Tyler, 2010), which suggests that these behaviors will be reduced in teams led by women (vs. men), unless leaders are able to legitimize their authority.

Although the proposition that subordinates may be less likely to enact positive extra role behavior in teams led by women (vs. men) has not been tested directly, there is some indirect evidence consistent with it. For instance, when trust in authorities is low, cooperation is less likely to emerge (De Cremer & Tyler, 2007), and female leaders are often stereotyped as conniving, manipulative, and untrustworthy (Heilman et al., 2004), and as emotionally unstable "wild cards" that will make irrational decisions (e.g., Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; for a review see Shields, 2013). Similarly, research shows that the quality of leader/subordinate interactions is positively related to the emergence of organizational citizenship behaviors (Deluga, 1994; Ilies, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007). Therefore, if interactions with subordinates tend to be more negative when the leader is female (Butler & Geis, 1990; Koch, 2005), this implies that subordinates will be less likely to enact organizational citizenship behaviors in teams

led by women (vs. men). While there is evidence that female subordinates are expected to engage in these extra role behaviors to a higher extent than male subordinates (Farrell & Finkelstein, 2007; Heilman & Chen, 2005; Lovell et al., 1999), the question of whether female leaders *elicit* these types of behaviors to the same or a lesser extent as male leaders remains unexplored, most likely because there has not been a strong theoretical rationale to examine this possibility. A focus on legitimacy brings to the forefront questions about the quality of leader/subordinate interactions and subordinate cooperation in teams led by women (Tyler, 2010).

Precarious leader psychology

Women are not oblivious to the difficulties they face in legitimizing their authority. Research has shown that women are very sensitive to the possibility that subordinates may not accept them, and this anticipation leads them to expect lower levels of influence and to evaluate potential leadership positions more negatively, whereas for men there is no such link (Rink, Ryan, & Sotker, 2012). Moreover, two experiments have shown that individuals' perceptions of their status within a group tend to be highly accurate (Anderson, Srivastava, Beer, Spataro, & Chatman, 2006), which suggests that low respect and admiration for a female leader will not go unnoticed by her. When power-holders feel illegitimate, this shifts them from a promotion to a prevention regulatory focus (Willis & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2010). A promotion- (vs. prevention-) focused leader is concerned with maximizing positive outcomes, is optimistic and creative, is likely to take chances and seize opportunities, and is less likely to be discouraged by setbacks (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Kark & Van Dijk, 2007); in short, a promotion focus is highly compatible with effective leadership. In contrast, an illegitimate, prevention-focused leader is mostly concerned with avoiding losses and mistakes, and maintaining his or her powerful position which is perceived to be unstable precisely due to its illegitimacy (Willis & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2010). More generally, illegitimate power tends to inhibit goal-oriented behavior (Lammers et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2008). Consistent with this phenomenon, female leaders have been shown to reduce their assertiveness and goal-focused behavior strategically as a way to avoid or minimize backlash (Brescoll, 2011; Moss-Racusin & Rudman, 2010).

Similarly, research has shown that evaluative concerns (i.e., focusing on how one is viewed by others) can lead to cognitive resource depletion (Richeson & Trawalter, 2005). These evaluative concerns could be triggered by the same types of situations in which powerful women have been found to fear backlash for dominating workplace conversations (Brescoll, 2011) or for behaving assertively (Moss-Racusin & Rudman, 2010). Finally, Kilduff and Galinsky (2013) showed that prevention focus and behavioral inhibition lead to lower status attainment, which suggests subordinates' rejection of a female manager—even if expressed subtly—will reduce her confidence in her ability to lead (Rink et al., 2012), and could cause work–role dissatisfaction and lead women to drop out of leadership positions (see Morgan, Gilrane, McCausland, & King, 2011).

Aggressive leader behavior

Illegitimate leaders' precarious psychological mindset will likely impact their behaviors toward subordinates. A leader who is devoting significant cognitive resources to monitoring how others perceive her could miss important social cues, perhaps ironically resulting in more negative interactions with subordinates (e.g., Richeson & Trawalter, 2005). Moreover, past work suggests that when leaders doubt their own competence as a result of subordinate rejection they react aggressively and derogate subordinates in retaliation (Fast & Chen, 2009; Fast, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2012; Georgesen & Harris, 2006; Maner & Mead, 2010; Rodríguez-Bailón, Moya, & Yzerbyt, 2000; Williams, 2014). Indeed, some have proposed that women in top positions may feel compelled to downplay their femininity and gender group identity and to adopt more masculine, authoritative styles in order to be considered successful leaders (Ellemers, 1993; Ellemers, Rink, Derks, & Ryan, 2012). Similarly, research by von Hippel, Wiryakusuma, Bowden, and Shochet (2011) has demonstrated that women who experience stereotype threat in the leadership domain tend to adopt a more masculine communication style (i.e., more directive and powerful, with fewer hedges and hesitations). Concerned that subordinates may not respect them, female leaders may resort to explicitly dominant behavior and emphasize power differentials to impose their authority. And, consistent with the model proposed here, when women adopt this overly aggressive style they are actually less influential with others (von Hippel et al., 2011).

Tentative leader behavior

Alternatively, there is evidence that, under certain circumstances, power holders tend to behave in more *submissive* rather than more aggressive ways. In particular, high power individuals with a heightened need to belong can experience power as a threat because it effectively distances them from others (Magee & Smith, 2013). As a result, they may behave in more submissive ways to downplay power differentials, as recently demonstrated in a series of experiments (Rios, Fast, & Gruenfeld, 2015). Rather than lashing out aggressively against difficult subordinates, some female managers may react to negative social cues by retreating and attempting to be a less "bossy" boss. For example, Brescoll (2011) showed that women in high-power roles in a group task who feared backlash from other group members responded by reducing their talking time relative to men in the same high-power role.

However, while this retreating strategy can sometimes be effective at legitimizing women's authority (Brescoll, 2011), the evidence for this is somewhat inconsistent, and some studies suggest that tentativeness could potentially backfire. More indirect, less dominant behavior that serves to downplay power differentials may be highly beneficial for female leaders (Williams & Tiedens, 2015). But as we suggested earlier in this paper, submissive behavior that is construed as a sign of low competence

will likely exacerbate illegitimacy by reducing status attributions. Indeed, some research has found that women who behaved tentatively in leadership roles were seen as less likable and less influential than men who behaved in the same way (Bongiorno, Bain, & David, 2013; Geddes, 1992). Similarly, in another study, female leaders who enacted a less assertive, more relationship-oriented style were perceived as less effective than those who enacted a more task-oriented style (Forsyth, Heiney, & Wright, 1997). While female leaders should generally benefit from downplaying power differentials with subordinates, the challenge is doing so without conveying tentativeness, which then could impact legitimacy via reduced status attributions. For example, a boss who cannot bring herself to fire a disgruntled or low-performing employee will be seen as failing to do her job appropriately. More research is necessary to address ways in which powerful women might effectively downplay power differentials without simultaneously incurring a loss of status in order to legitimize their role, as we discuss later in this paper.

The self-reinforcing cycle of illegitimacy

Whether women in leadership roles behave too aggressively or too tentatively, their behavior will impact subordinates' respect and admiration and perceptions of power differentials between them and the leader. Theory poses that backlash against female leaders serves to maintain gender stereotypes, and therefore to bolster and reinforce unequal status relations between men and women (Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Glick, and Phelan, 2012). This process partly works through women's anticipation of backlash, which then motivates backlash-avoidance behavior (e.g. Brescoll, 2011, Moss-Racusin & Rudman, 2010) that may be incompatible with effective leadership. Illegitimacy can trigger a variety of consequences, including overly aggressive or overly tentative leader behavior. We also propose that these behaviors on the part of the leader could ultimately further damage legitimacy in a self-reinforcing cycle. Widely-held stereotypes and expectations that women are not a good fit for leadership roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001; Ridgeway, 2001) may render subordinates especially vulnerable to confirmation bias and make them receptive to any cues or behavior suggesting that a female leader may not be up to the task (e.g., Geis, 1993). In these conditions, female leaders who behave too aggressively or too tentatively may further lower their legitimacy.

Emphasizing power differentials and relying on coercive power to elicit compliance is likely to offset the legitimizing effects of subordinates' respect and admiration (i.e., status), and increase rather than reduce backlash and negative subordinate behavior. To start, research shows that expressions of dominance tend to be seen as inappropriate regardless of leader gender (Driskell & Salas, 2005). Moreover, other work has uncovered various ways in which an aggressive female leader may exacerbate her illegitimacy: Women in leadership roles are penalized more than men for being critical (Sinclair & Kunda, 2000); for expressing anger (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Lewis, 2000; but see Driskell & Salas, 2005, for contradicting findings); for being explicitly dominant, such as issuing direct demands (Elsesser & Lever, 2011; Williams & Tiedens, 2015); for delivering discipline (Atwater, Carey, & Waldman, 2001; Brett, Atwater, & Waldman, 2005); for using intimidation to accomplish goals (Bolino & Turnley, 2003); and for adopting more directive communication styles with subordinates (von Hippel et al., 2011). These findings converge to suggest that behaving aggressively emphasizes power differentials between the power holder and her subordinates, ultimately rendering female leaders even less legitimate.

Similarly, some research indicates that female leaders who behave tentatively are seen as less likable and less influential than male leaders who behave in the same way (Bongiorno et al., 2013). In general, inhibition leads to lower status (Kilduff & Galinsky, 2013). Insofar as women have to work harder than identical men to establish and maintain an image of competence (Lyness & Heilman, 2006), retreating strategies could be detrimental and further damage perceptions of leader status. As we have seen, on the one hand, leaders may downplay power differentials and be perceived as unlikely to resort to coercion, which should contribute to legitimize her authority (e.g., Brescoll, 2011). On the other hand, if she is so tentative that her competence is questioned, she will not be seen as a deserving, respectable leader (Carli, 1999). Ultimately, tentativeness could further delegitimize her authority.

Thus, our model leads to the novel proposition that, over time, status attributions will be more likely to deteriorate for female (vs. male) leaders. Over time, too, the psychological mindset of female leaders may come to highly resemble that of illegitimate authorities (e.g. Fast et al., 2012, Georgesen & Harris, 2006) and become less conducive to effective leadership, in a self-reinforcing cycle. In this way, a "bed of thorns" (Tannen, 1990) may emerge from the combination of a priori expectations from subordinates that a female leader will fall short, as well as a priori expectations from female leaders that they will not be respected (e.g., Rink et al., 2012), both of which would produce more negative leader/subordinate interactions and a precarious psychological state for women in charge. This mix could foster inappropriate leader behavior (i.e., behaving too aggressively or too tentatively), which would confirm subordinates' expectations that leadership roles are not suitable for women, and ultimately serve to further damage leader legitimacy by emphasizing power differentials, lowering subordinate's respect and admiration for the leader, or both.

Moderators of bias against female leaders: legitimizing factors

Some scholars have questioned the generality of bias against female leaders (e.g., Elsesser, 2015). Researchers have reported various moderating factors that can ameliorate or exacerbate gender bias (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014), and a relatively consistent picture is starting to emerge delineating boundary conditions. According to our model, any factors that either increase status, reduce perceptions of power differentials, or both, should make female leaders seem more deserving of their position and their authority more legitimate, therefore reducing backlash and negative behaviors, increasing cooperation, and improving leader performance. In contrast, any factors that serve to reduce leader status or emphasize power differentials between leaders and subordinates should exacerbate bias. We discuss some of these moderating factors next.

Leader competence and credentials

As individuals rely at least in part on competence cues when making status-conferral decisions (Hollander, 1985; Magee & Galinsky, 2008), any trait or attribute that signals competence or that is seen as facilitating performance should increase leader status. In the case of a woman in a leadership role, the relative lack of fit for the position suggested by her gender could be countered by knowledge that she has very strong credentials (Heilman & Haynes, 2005) or exceptionally high performance (Rosette & Tost, 2010). For example, Heilman and Haynes (2005) were able to experimentally eliminate the devaluation of women in performance contexts by providing clear evidence of prior work competence. Similarly, Rosette and Tost (2010) showed that female leaders received more positive evaluations over male leaders when success was specifically attributed to them (i.e., to their abilities, decisions, and behaviors) versus an external force (i.e., the marketplace). In this way, evidence of a female leader's competence and performance can be a strong legitimizing force by increasing status attributions and justifying the allocation of power.

Continued exposure to a specific individual can overtime result in less stereotyping of that person (Fiske, 1998); therefore, women who are well known in the organization and who have consistently shown to be highly competent are likely to be evaluated on their own merits more so than on the basis of gender stereotypes. For example, researchers find that women are more likely to be promoted to leadership roles rather than hired from outside the organization (Lyness & Judiesch, 1999). Similarly, field research in organizations tends to find less bias relative to lab studies, as raters typically know the female target very well and are more likely to have first-hand information on her ability and performance as a leader (Elsesser, 2015; Elsesser & Lever, 2011). This first-hand knowledge should elevate respect and admiration for the leader and legitimize her power. Similarly, individuals in real organizations have more to gain from perceiving their leaders' abilities accurately than individuals in laboratory studies, and such outcome dependency has been shown to reduce stereotyping in general (Neuberg & Fiske, 1987) and bias against female leaders in particular, at least among men (Rudman, 1998).

Our model suggests that any information that serves to combat stereotypes of low competence may enhance status attributions for female leaders, which would help justify and legitimize their power (Hollander, 1985; Magee & Galinsky, 2008). Conversely, any cues suggesting that a female leader is relatively incompetent should greatly lower her status in the eyes of subordinates, delegitimizing her role (e.g.Brescoll et al., 2010, Rosette, Mueller, & Lebel, 2015).

Intersectional stereotypes

There is some evidence that, at least in certain circumstances, Black women in leadership roles may be spared backlash. In an experiment, White female and Black male leaders were evaluated more negatively than White male leaders for behaving in the same dominant manner, but Black female leaders were not penalized in this way (Livingston et al., 2012; see also Biernat & Sesko, 2013). However, another experiment found contradicting results suggesting that Black women incur the same or even higher backlash relative to other leaders. Rosette and Livingston (2012) explored the interacting effects of leader gender, race (White vs. Black), and organizational success (vs. failure) on ratings of leader effectiveness. They found that, among successful leaders, typical backlash effects emerged and *both* White and Black female leaders (as well as Black male leaders) were seen as less effective than successful White male leaders. In conditions of organizational failure, Black women were penalized *the most* compared to all other leaders (White/Black males and White females). The inconsistency between these findings and those reported by Livingston et al. (2012) suggests a complex relationship between race and gender on leader evaluations that needs to be examined in more depth (see also Hall, Galinsky, & Phillips, 2015).

From a legitimacy perspective, leader race may moderate the effect of leader gender on subordinate bias because information that a female leader is Black (vs. White) may activate an alternative set of stereotypes and expectations that are less incompatible with leadership roles (e.g., "strong Black woman"). Consistent with this notion, it has been shown that an applicable stereotype may become irrelevant and be set aside when a different applicable stereotype becomes more salient (Kunda & Spencer, 2003). Further, research suggests that race and gender perceptions are strongly intertwined (Carpinella, Chen, Hamilton, & Johnson, 2015; Johnson, Freeman, & Pauker, 2012), and unique stereotypes apply to Black women (and other minority women) that are not simply the sum of gender and racial/ethnic stereotypes (Ghavami & Peplau, 2012). Black women are less likely than White women to be stereotyped as dependent and passive (Landrine, 1985), and, in contrast, Ghavami and Peplau (2012) found that "aggressive," "assertive," and "confident" were attributes applied with relative high frequency to Black women, but not to other women. These attributes are less incompatible with the stereotypically-masculine demands of leadership roles (Ghavami & Peplau, 2012; Hall et al., 2015), and could make Black (vs. White) women seem relatively more competent and a better fit for such roles, enhancing their status and therefore legitimizing their authority. A complementary possibility is that Black women may be seen as less prototypical representations of the category women, and thus rendered "invisible" (Biernat & Sesko, 2013; Sesko & Biernat, 2010). The result in both cases is that the adequacy of Black female leaders might be questioned to a lesser extent than that of White female leaders, granting Black women in authority positions higher respect and admiration, and therefore higher legitimacy, than White women.

Leader dominance and warmth

As we have seen, successful female leaders are penalized for failing to comply with a prescription that women be communal (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007) and for violating proscriptions for women not to be dominant (Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, &

Nauts, 2012). Moreover, power-holders low in status are judged negatively (dominant and cold), causing people to expect more negative interactions with them (Fragale et al., 2011). We have proposed that this aversion to high-power, low-status individuals presents a particular challenge for women in leadership roles. Cues or leader behaviors (such as dominance) that highlight power differentials between subordinates and leaders should particularly compromise legitimacy for female leaders. Conversely, cues or leader behaviors that serve to attenuate power differentials (such as warmth/communality) are likely to aid the legitimization process for female leaders.

Some researchers have been able to show that simply providing information that signals warmth can reduce backlash against female leaders. For example, Heilman and Okimoto (2007) manipulated the presence of communal information in a variety of ways (e.g., motherhood) and they found that such cues mitigated negative evaluations of female leaders. Similarly, communal female applicants for a management position were spared backlash in Phelan et al. (2008). Other researchers have shown that women can increase their influence by employing more indirect (vs. dominant) communication styles that express communality and warmth nonverbally (see Carli, 2001). Thus, relying on more implicit (rather than explicit) dominance displays may be one way for female leaders to gain legitimacy: A meta-analysis on evaluations of dominant behavior revealed that women are penalized relative to men for highly explicit and easy-to-encode dominant behaviors, such as issuing direct commands, but not for more implicit forms, such as eye contact (Williams & Tiedens, 2015). Other work shows that female authorities do not incur backlash for expressing anger when such anger could be attributed unambiguously to the situation rather than the woman (i.e., if it was seen as non-diagnostic of her communal attributes; Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008).

However, it is worth emphasizing that it could be hard for female leaders to downplay power differentials without crossing the line and being perceived as too tentative to lead effectively (Carli, 2001), which would lower subordinates' respect and therefore lower rather than enhance leader legitimacy (Bongiorno et al., 2013; Geddes, 1992). Indeed, individual differences could deem some women better able than others to walk this fine line successfully. For example, both Flynn and Ames (2006) and O'Neill and O'Reilly (2011) showed that women who are high self-monitors (i.e., those with a high ability to read social cues in the environment and adapt their behavior accordingly; Snyder & Gangestad, 1986) had an advantage over other women (e.g., they were more influential and received more promotions). Further research should examine the conditions in which softening dominance is effective, and others in which it may backfire.

Salience of leader gender

When leader gender is relatively salient, the incongruence between the leadership role and the person occupying it is brought to attention and is more easily encoded (Eagly & Karau, 2002). By making gender more or less salient as a meaningful category, certain contextual factors can activate and promote the use of group-based negative stereotypes to the detriment of female leaders, contributing to low status attributions and emphasizing power differentials. Two such factors identified in the literature are the relative gender-stereotypicality of the organizational industry or domain (i.e., more masculine, feminine, or neutral), and of the leadership style required for a specific job (e.g., more autocratic vs. more democratic).

Gender-stereotypicality of the industry or domain

Women anticipate possessing low levels of influence and power in male-dominated domains, and worry about not being respected in these environments (Chen & Moons, 2015). In an experiment, Heilman et al. (2004) found that backlash against a female executive emerged only in a male division (financial planning), but not in a gender-neutral division (training) or a feminine division (employee assistance). Similarly, meta-analyses have revealed that organizations that were male-dominated (e.g., government) showed a higher tendency for men to be perceived as more effective than women (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014; see also Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995; and Eagly et al., 1992). Masculine or male-dominated domains can make salient the mismatch or contrast between what is expected of leaders and what is expected of women, thus leading to lower competence perceptions and, therefore, lower status. Additionally, these more traditionally masculine domains can heighten the tendency to perceive women's leadership as a violation of gender proscriptions, emphasizing power differentials between female leaders and their subordinates. Both processes should compromise legitimacy perceptions, and therefore trigger backlash and other consequences. Conversely, feminine or gender-neutral domains should attenuate these consequences by making lack of fit and stereotype violations less salient for female leaders (but not for male leaders). Accordingly, male (but not female) leaders in traditionally feminine domains have been shown to incur backlash similar to women in masculine domains (Brescoll et al., 2010; Heilman et al., 2004; see also Eagly & Johnson, 1990).

Leadership style required

Closely related to the gender-stereotypical nature of the organizational domain or industry is the leadership style required for a particular position. Autocratic or directive leadership styles exacerbate negative evaluations of female leaders (Eagly et al., 1992; Williams & Tiedens, 2015). When women occupy leadership roles that require them to adopt a more autocratic style, the contrast between this behavior and what is prescribed for women is highlighted, emphasizing power differentials between female leaders and their subordinates, and lowering legitimacy. As we have seen, female leaders are highly penalized for asserting their authority in ways typical of autocratic leaders (Atwater et al., 2001; Bolino & Turnley, 2003; Brett et al., 2005; Sinclair & Kunda, 2000; von Hippel et al., 2011).

In contrast, meta-analyses have revealed a tendency for women to be seen as *more* effective than men in roles that were defined in less masculine terms (Eagly et al., 1995). While female leaders tend to receive lower evaluations than comparable

men for autocratic leadership (Eagly et al., 1992), they may be more likely to garner support and thrive in roles that are amenable to more democratic, participative styles (Eagly & Carli, 2003). Accordingly, meta-analyses on gender differences in leadership styles revealed that women compared to men tend to lead in more democratic (or participative) and less autocratic (or directive) ways (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Van Engen & Willemsen, 2004), and women more than men have been found to engage in contingent reward behaviors, such as praising good performance (Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & Van Engen, 2003). Women have also been found to be more likely than men to take a transformational approach to leadership (Eagly et al., 2003; van Engen & Willemsen, 2004). This approach involves a positive, encouraging, and inspiring style (Eagly & Carli, 2003). Compared to more autocratic leader behavior, transformational behavior is decidedly less masculine (Eagly et al., 2003), and it encompasses supportive and considerate behaviors more consistent with stereotypical gender norms for women (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Eagly et al., 2003; Yoder, 2001).

The adoption of these less masculine styles may allow female leaders to sidestep behaviors that highlight power differentials between subordinates and leaders (e.g., direct commands) and thus may increase their legitimacy and acceptance. Moreover, a transformational style may reduce the apparent mismatch between what is expected of the leader and what is expected of women (Hoyt, 2010). Indeed, there is evidence that women are expected to display more transformational behaviors such as individualized consideration (Vinkenburg, van Engen, Eagly, & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2011). Therefore, female leaders who adopt more transformational styles in line with expectations may boost perceptions of their competence, elicit more status, and gain legitimacy. Evidence has linked transformational leadership with higher levels of organizational citizenship behaviors among subordinates (Boerner, Eisenbeiss, & Griesser, 2007; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990) because it increases trust in the leader (Podsakoff et al., 1990). This increased trust should benefit all leaders, but particularly women.

Gender of perceivers

Although many studies report no perceiver gender effects on backlash against powerful women (e.g. Brescoll, 2011, Davison & Burke, 2000, Heilman et al., 2004, Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, and Nauts, 2012), other research has found that the gender of the rater, perceiver, or subordinate does have an influence on bias. In some studies, women devalue female leaders more than men (Parks-Stamm et al., 2008; Rudman, 1998; Warning & Buchanan, 2009). However, in most studies in which perceiver gender has been found to play a role, the effect goes typically in the other direction, with bias being most apparent among men compared to women (e.g. Ayman, Korabik, & Morris, 2009, Bosak & Sczesny, 2011, Eagly et al., 1992, Kwon & Milgrom, 2010, Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014). For example, Rojahn and Willemsen (1994) found that only male (but not female) undergraduates gave lower effectiveness ratings to gender-role incongruent leaders (i.e., male leaders with more feminine leading styles and female leaders with more masculine leading styles) compared to gender-role congruent leaders (i.e., male leaders with more masculine leading styles and female leaders with more feminine leading styles). Additionally, while both men and women hold negative implicit attitudes toward women in authority roles, men have been found to show higher levels of explicit prejudice compared to women (Rudman & Kilianski, 2000). In their meta-analysis of leaders' effectiveness, Eagly et al. (1995) found that women tended to receive lower effectiveness ratings as the proportion of male raters (or subordinates) increased.

Men and women may have different motivations for devaluing female leaders, which might translate into the emergence of perceiver-gender moderating effects under certain circumstances but not others. For example, women (but not men) have been shown to exhibit backlash as a way to protect their self-esteem in light of a potentially threatening upward comparison with a successful woman in a masculine domain (Parks-Stamm et al., 2008). In contrast, Brescoll, Uhlmann, Moss-Racusin, and Sarnell (2012) showed that participants allocated lower salaries to men working for gender-incongruent (but not gender-congruent) supervisors (i.e., a female supervisor in a masculine domain or a male supervisor in a feminine domain). These penalties were mediated by perceptions that a man working for a gender-incongruent boss was not masculine enough: providing "masculinity credentials" for the subordinate eliminated the effect (Brescoll et al., 2012). This research suggests that male subordinates may devalue female leaders as a way to assert their own masculinity, a process unlikely to emerge among female subordinates. Men, who show bias against female leaders more consistently than women, may be motivated to do so for qualitatively different reasons.

From a legitimacy perspective, relative to men, women may see female leaders as more legitimate because, as fellow ingroup members, women may be more likely than men to personally identify with female authority figures. Subordinate identification with the leader and the team as a whole has been found to play a role in the legitimation of authorities (Tyler, 2000, 2002). Women may identify more than men with female leaders simply because identification partly depends on findings similarities between oneself and the leader. Research has shown that undergraduate women exposed to female leaders tended to reduce their implicit self-stereotyping when the leader was said to be very similar to them (Asgari, Dasgupta, & Stout, 2012). Likewise, exposure to successful female (vs. male) leaders tended to increase women's (but not men's) own performance on leadership tasks (Latu, Mast, Lammers, & Bombari, 2013). A legitimacy lens reveals that focusing on identification with the leader may be useful to better understand the conditions in which men and women are equally or differentially likely to penalize female leaders.

Ideology and attitudes toward women

Stereotyping disadvantaged groups is a powerful way to justify the status quo and maintain hierarchical arrangements (Fiske, 2010; Glick & Fiske, 1999), and backlash against female leaders helps perpetuate negative cultural stereotypes and unequal gender

relations (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Glick, and Phelan, 2012). Accordingly, there is evidence that both leader and perceiver ideology can impact evaluations of female leaders (e.g., Hoyt, 2012). Compared to more liberal peers, conservative subordinates with more traditional attitudes toward women and female authority are more likely to derogate female leaders (Forsyth et al., 1997), and to show low commitment to goals assigned by them (McGlashan, Wright, & McCormick, 1995). Research by Hoyt (2012) has demonstrated that conservatives were less likely to recommend hiring a female (vs. male) applicant to a management position when the traditional gender role was made salient (e.g., the applicant was described as a parent who had been the primary caregiver during the previous year). In the same conditions, liberals were *more* likely to recommend hiring the female candidate over the male.

Overall, it is more difficult for female leaders to legitimize their role among subordinates with more traditional gender attitudes, because for them, powerful women represent a threat to important personal values (Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, and Nauts, 2012). But if female leaders endorse the same conservative beliefs and uphold the status quo, then they are less likely to be seen as a threat, and therefore more likely to elicit status and legitimize their power: there is some evidence that women aspiring to leadership roles who support (rather than challenge) the gender hierarchy tend to elicit higher acceptance from conservative perceivers (Garcia, 2013). Perhaps this is a reason why 'Queen Bees'—women in senior roles who deny the existence of gender bias—seem overly represented among women who have managed to make it to the top in male-dominated fields (e.g., senior policewomen; Derks, Ellemers, van Laar, & De Groot, 2011; see also Ellemers, Van Den Heuvel, Gilder, Maass, & Bonvini, 2004; and Staines, Tavris, & Jayaratne, 1974).

Summary and conclusions

The steady increase of research on gender bias and discrimination in the last three decades or so reflects the puzzlement of scholars faced with evidence that, despite continuous gains in education, the advancement of women into top positions of power and prestige seems to have stalled (Catalyst, 2014). The model outlined here centers on a legitimacy perspective, and contends that the difficulties that female leaders face often stem from low legitimacy perceptions. We argue that status attributions together with the perception of power differentials determine the legitimacy of female leaders, and we understand social and economic penalties (i.e., backlash) against them as one of a larger set of consequences stemming from low legitimacy perceptions. By focusing on legitimacy, its antecedents, and its consequences (Magee & Frasier, 2014; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Tyler, 2002), our model makes novel predictions about the challenges faced by women who attain positions of authority. For example, the model predicts that illegitimacy will trigger a precarious psychological state for female leaders, and that subordinate cooperation and extra role behaviors might be compromised when the leader is a woman, unless she is able to legitimize her role. Indeed, as we have discussed here, certain moderating features of the leader or the organizational context can boost perceptions of leader status, deemphasize power differentials, or a combination of the two, resulting in increased legitimacy for female authorities.

Finally, the proposed model highlights a troublesome self-reinforcing cycle of illegitimacy that integrates previous theory (Moss-Racusin & Rudman, 2010; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Glick, and Phelan, 2012). Illegitimacy can foster ineffective leader behavior, which serves to reinforce low status attributions and/or increase perceptions of power differentials. Ultimately, legitimacy will further deteriorate. By organizing the growing literature and extant models on backlash against female leaders and integrating them with research on the legitimacy of power holders, we believe the proposed model offers a parsimonious picture of the challenges female leaders face, and it suggests novel avenues of inquiry to further advance scholarship on gender bias in leadership.

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