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Motivated to Penalize: Women’s Strategic Rejection of Successful Women

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Two studies tested the hypothesis that females penalize women who succeed in male gender-typed jobs to salvage their own self-views regarding competence. The authors proposed that women are motivated to penalize successful women (i.e., characterize them as unlikable and interpersonally hostile) to minimize the self-evaluative consequences of social comparison with a highly successful female target. Results supported the hypothesis. Whereas both male and female participants penalized successful women, blocking this penalization reduced female—but not male—participants’ self-ratings of competence (Study 1). Moreover, positive feedback provided to female participants about their potential to succeed (Study 2) weakened negative reactions to successful women without costs to subsequent self-ratings of competence. These results suggest that the interpersonal derogation of successful women by other women functions as a self-protective strategy against threatening upward social comparisons.

Keywords: prescriptive gender stereotypes; penalties for success; norm violation; backlash effects; social comparison; motivated reasoning

Women who have overcome gender-related performance expectations by succeeding in the workplace face repercussions for violating prescriptive gender norms. Whereas descriptive gender stereotypes describe the way men and women are, prescriptive gender norms delineate what men and women should be like. Prescriptive gender norms therefore dictate what behaviors are appropriate for women and men (Burgess & Borgida, 1999; Eagly, 2000; Heilman, 2001; Heilman & Parks-Stamm, 2007; Rudman & Glick, 2001). Whereas men should be agentic (i.e., independent, assertive, decisive), women should be communal (unselfish, friendly, concerned with others). Individuals who violate these gender prescriptions experience negative reactions from evaluators; women who behave in ways deemed unacceptable for women are “sanctioned and disliked” (Fiske, 1998, p. 378).

The negative reactions for prescriptive gender norm violations are particularly debilitating for women in the workplace, where the very behaviors prohibited for women (e.g., agenticism) are often the ones required for success (Heilman, Block, & Martell, 1995; Martell, Parker, Emrich, & Crawford, 1998; Schein, 2001). Because hiring and advancement decisions are partially based on liking and personal qualities (Allen & Rush, 1998; Casciaro & Lobo, 2005; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004) and evaluations are biased in favor of liked individuals (Cardy & Dobbins, 1986), the penalties businesswomen experience for norm violation can be costly. For example, a woman competing against a man for a position may face a disadvantage because of what behaviors are deemed appropriate for her in the interview. Engaging in self-promotion (e.g., speaking with pride about one’s strengths and accomplishments) is a behavior that is encouraged in men but discouraged in women; women who highlight their own successes in an interview violate prescriptive gender norms and risk being derogated and disliked. Rudman (1998) found

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that women who engage in self-promotion in an interview experience a “backlash effect”—social or economic sanctions for norm-violating behavior. Acting “too macho” can result in costly penalties for career women (Fiske, Bersoff, Borgida, Deaux, & Heilman, 1991, p. 1050).

Sanctions for Implied Deficits

Heilman and colleagues (2004) have found that women, but not men, who are portrayed as highly successful in traditionally male work domains experience negative reactions in line with more direct norm violations. Interestingly, these studies demonstrate that it is not necessary for women to explicitly engage in norm-violating behavior to experience these social sanctions. When merely given information that a woman has been highly successful as a manager in an organization, participants infer not only that she possesses the agentic qualities necessary for such success but also that she lacks the communal qualities prescribed for women (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007). Indeed, they characterize her in interpersonally hostile terms (e.g., selfish, insensitive, cold, and manipulative), characteristics antithetical to the prescribed female stereotype (Heilman et al., 1995, 2004). In sum, information that women have been unambiguously successful in male gender-typed jobs consistently results in their being less liked and more personally derogated than equally successful men, what Heilman and colleagues call penalties for success.

Why do successful women experience these penalties for success? There are several possibilities. People may be motivated to penalize norm-deviant successful women in order to justify the existing social system, a “process by which existing social arrangements are legitimized, even at the expense of personal and group interest” (Jost & Banaji, 1994, p. 2). Sanctioning those who threaten the system helps protect the status quo. In addition, people may reject women who violate normative stereotypes by succeeding in traditionally male contexts in order to preserve their beliefs about women, as individuals are motivated to maintain their existing stereotypes (Kunda & Oleson, 1995), just as they are motivated to preserve other expectancies (Snyder, 1984). Indeed, Rudman and Fairchild (2004) have demonstrated that “backlash” against norm violators (i.e., sabotaging individuals who exhibited gender atypical knowledge) supports the maintenance of existing cultural stereotypes.

Although the aforementioned motives for penalizing women who are successful in traditionally male roles are shared by both men and women, men are likely to have additional motives distinct from those of women. Burgess and Borgida (1999) suggest that negative reactions to prescriptive norm violations serve “to maintain power inequities in society” (p. 666) and therefore propose that men (who maintain a superior position in the status quo) are more likely to discriminate against women for prescriptive violations than are women. Indeed, men score higher on social dominance orientation (i.e., the desire for group-based dominance and inequality; Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006) and are therefore more likely to support gender inequality and reject successful, norm-violating women. In addition, collective (group-based) motives should motivate men, but not women, to penalize women who succeed in the male-dominated workplace; whereas successful women threaten men’s superior position in the status quo, they boost the status of women as a group by disproving beliefs about women’s inferior competence. Although men would seem to benefit from rejecting these norm-violating women, one might expect that women would take pride in their shared identity with the successful ingroup member (i.e., “basking in reflected glory,” Cialdini et al., 1976).

However, research on this topic has consistently shown that women are as likely as men to engage in the personal derogation of agentic women. In fact, women sometimes react more negatively toward norm-deviant women than men (Garcia-Retamero & López-Zafra, 2006; Rudman, 1998). In the series of “penalties for success” studies conducted by Heilman and colleagues (Heilman et al., 2004; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007), no differences were ever found in the reactions of male and female participants. Why, despite apparent reasons for women to be less motivated than men to penalize successful women, are they not less harsh in their reactions to them? Why do women so strongly enforce stereotype-based norms against women who succeed in traditionally male positions?

Women’s Negative Reactions to Successful Women

We propose that a woman who succeeds in a traditionally male role instigates social comparison processes for women that can threaten their self-evaluations of competence (Festinger, 1954). Because male gender-type positions are typically higher in status than stereotypically female jobs (Lyness, 2002), a woman who is very successful in these positions would be a high standard of comparison for other aspiring women, especially for the highly motivated students at a competitive private university who participated in these studies. Indeed, a woman who has achieved success in these positions is an extreme exemplar of competence, and contrasts in self-evaluation are greater when exemplars are extreme rather than moderate (Moskowitz & Skurnik, 1999). Social comparison to an upward target (i.e., an exemplar who is superior on a critical dimension) can be very painful to the self (Brickman & Bulman, 1977).
This social comparison with a highly successful woman should be more threatening for women than for men, for whom the threat can readily be deflected. For men, disregarding the upward comparison is easy, as self-target similarity is an important precondition of social comparison processes (Festinger, 1954; Gilbert, Giesler, & Morris, 1995; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997) and gender is a key component in the determination of similarity. Brown, Novick, Lord, and Richards (1992), for example, demonstrated that negativity in self-evaluations following an upward social comparison (in the realm of attractiveness) was found only when the upward comparison target was of the same gender. Thus, men are likely to consider the upward comparison target of a successful woman irrelevant to their own self-evaluations. However, averting the threat from an upward standard provided by a successful woman is apt to be more difficult for women. Self-target similarity has been called the “constraint of reality” on defensive social comparisons (Stapel & Schwinghammer, 2004), as treating a target as irrelevant becomes impossible when the target is similar to the self. Indeed, ingroup members in general are more threatening comparison targets than are outgroup members (Major, Sciacchitano, & Crocker, 1993), who can be “dismissed as not self-relevant” (Major et al., 1993, p. 719). The unique threat the successful female target creates for women is therefore the seeming inescapability of an upward social comparison. How can women avoid this threat?

We suggest that enforcing prescriptive norms through penalization functions as a strategy for women to avoid the ego-deflating consequences of an upward social comparison. It has been found that individuals can maintain positive self-views in the presence of similar, threatening others if they are conceived of in a way that accentuates their dissimilarity, thereby excluding them as standards of comparison (for a review, see Miller & Prentice, 1996). For example, Cash, Cash, and Butters (1983) found that the characterization of an attractive female as a “professional model” (as opposed to merely another student) eliminated the threatening effect of this upward comparison for female participants’ self-ratings of attractiveness. Furthermore, there is evidence that individuals can strategically emphasize an unshared social identity in order to decrease a threatening other’s relevance for self-evaluation (Mussweiler, Gabriel, & Bodenhausen, 2000). We propose that a strategy women may use to reduce the self-evaluative threat from a successful woman would be to cast her as an interpersonally hostile and unlike norm violator, not a “real” woman, and therefore irrelevant to women’s self-evaluation.

This reasoning represents a motivated account of penalization by women in that the target is characterized as a norm violator in order to protect one’s self-evaluation. Research on motivated reasoning has demonstrated that when threatened, individuals attempt to invalidate the threat to protect the self (Kunda, 1990; Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1987). Moreover, norms and stereotypes have been shown to provide a culturally justifiable way to invalidate a potential threat to one’s self-evaluation. Sinclair and Kunda (2000), for example, have shown that the stereotyping of women who provide negative feedback can be motivated. In their study, only participants who received negative feedback from a female evaluator applied gender stereotypes to that evaluator; the female stereotype was not applied when participants were praised by the evaluator or when they witnessed the evaluator criticize someone else, situations in which their self-views were not endangered (see also Sinclair & Kunda, 1999). The current research investigates whether the tendency for women to enforce prescriptive gender norms by characterizing a successful woman as noncommunal and unlike (i.e., penalization) is similarly motivated, serving to invalidate the self-threat invoked by the successful target and thereby protecting women’s self-evaluation in the face of a threatening comparison.

We propose that the penalization of women who have been successful in traditionally male roles can serve as a self-protective strategy for women who are otherwise unable to avoid an upward comparison to a highly successful exemplar. However, penalization, because it comes as a sanction for inferred norm violations, is not always a viable option. It can be blocked by information that precludes inferences of prescriptive norm violation—information indicating that the successful woman is in fact “feminine” and normatively appropriate (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007). If penalization is a self-protective strategy that allows women to maintain a high self-evaluation of competence in the face of a threatening upward comparison as we propose, blocking this penalization by conveying communal information should result in drops in women’s (but not men’s) self-evaluations of competence. Thus, although men and women may be equally likely to penalize the successful women, only women’s self-evaluation of competence will suffer when penalization is blocked.

In sum, we propose that penalization minimizes the self-evaluative threat women experience in response to a highly successful woman, thereby protecting women’s self-views. Consequently, we expect that when blocked from penalizing a successful woman, women’s self-evaluation will suffer. The first study specifically addresses the question of whether women, but not men, who are unable to penalize a highly successful woman will hold less favorable views of themselves than those who are able to do so.
The second study further investigates the motivated component of penalization by women by examining how the tendency to penalize is influenced by the degree of threat posed by the successful woman’s success.

**STUDY 1**

We began with a direct test of our hypothesis that women (but not men) will judge themselves to be less competent when they are blocked from penalizing a successful female target than when they are able to penalize her. The experimental manipulation of participants’ ability to penalize was based on work by Heilman and Okimoto (2007), which showed that providing communal information about a successful woman (as opposed to equally favorable noncommunal information) precluded penalization in situations where it was otherwise highly likely. We predicted that both male and female participants would penalize the clearly competent woman when not blocked from doing so (the penalties-allowed condition). However, we hypothesized that only female participants’ self-ratings of competence would be affected by their ability to penalize. We predicted that females blocked from derogating the successful woman (by the inclusion of communal information) would report lower self-ratings of competence than those who could penalize the target if they wanted to.

**Method**

**Participants and Design**

Participants consisted of 40 male and 40 female New York University psychology undergraduates who participated to fulfill partial course requirements. This experiment employed a 2 (participant gender: male vs. female) × 2 (information: penalties-allowed vs. penalties-blocked) between-subjects design.

**Materials and Procedure**

The study was presented as a two-part study in a program of research investigating modes of communication in the workplace. The experimenter explained that participants would read a company letter introducing a newly appointed vice president, along with the specifications of his or her position. Participants would then be asked for their reaction to this new vice president based on this information and to evaluate the letter for its effectiveness in conveying this information. The experimenter then explained that the second part of the study would investigate the participants’ personal preferences regarding modes of communication across multiple domains. Each participant was given a packet containing the job description, letter of introduction, target-rating scale, rating scale for the communication vehicle, self-rating scales, and a communication preferences scale.

The first page of the packet included a job description summary specifying the new appointee’s position—the Vice President of Financial Affairs—along with the responsibilities of the position (e.g., managing financial department staff and allocating work tasks, conducting cost–benefit analyses, overseeing allocation of company funds, preparing tax reports and internal audits) designed to establish the male gender-typed nature of the position.

Participants then read a letter of introduction describing a female target. It included background and accomplishments, including previous positions held, degrees earned, and positive evaluations of her work (e.g., “Andreahas been described by the CEO of . . . as ‘one of the most effective finance directors that I have seen’ in his many years of working with the company”). Only the final paragraph (described in the following) differed by information condition. Participants then rated her on a one-page questionnaire. As part of the cover story, participants also rated the letter as a vehicle of communication on a 9-point bipolar scale for its clarity and appropriateness. These results were not analyzed. Participants then completed the self-rating measure, ostensibly to provide background information for the “communication preferences” questionnaire that they completed last. At the end of the study, participants were carefully debriefed and thanked for their participation.

**Experimental Manipulation: Information**

The manipulation of information allowing or blocking penalties was provided in the last paragraph of the letter and was the same as that used by Heilman and Okimoto (2007). The letter for the penalties-allowed condition contained personal information that conveyed gender-neutral positive characteristics about the target female (i.e., “someone who is evenhanded in her treatment of others,” “emphasizes the importance of having a challenging work environment,” “has been commended for her efforts to promote performance excellence”), whereas the penalties-blocked condition conveyed communal positive characteristics (i.e., “someone who is understanding and concerned about others,” “emphasizes the importance of having a supportive work environment,” “has been commended for her efforts to promote a sense of belonging within her department”). Other than these phrases, the letters were identical. This manipulation was carefully crafted to ensure equivalent favorability in each information condition; the results from Heilman and Okimoto (Study 1) made clear that the information in the penalties-blocked condition did not simply portray the
target more positively than the information in the penalties-allowed condition. In all cases the female target was said to enjoy reading and playing tennis and to love to travel. Lastly, she was said to be “very excited about joining our team.”

**Dependent Variables**

**Penalization.** Two scales were used to operationalize penalization of the target. In line with prior research, interpersonal hostility (i.e., anticommmunal characteristics) and liking were used as two complementary measures of penalization. Accordingly, a composite interpersonal hostility score (coefficient \( \alpha = .83 \)) was computed based on eight 9-point bipolar adjective scale ratings describing the target female (nonabrasive–abrasive, accommodating–pushy, sensitive–insensitive, gentle–tough, kind–unkind, not manipulative–manipulative, unselfish–selfish, and warm–cold). A composite liking score (coefficient \( \alpha = .67 \)) was computed based on one 9-point bipolar adjective scale rating (unlikable–likeable) and response to the question “How much do you think you would like this individual?” (not at all–very much).

**Competence self-rating.** Of central interest in Study 1 was the participants’ self-ratings of competence following exposure to the successful target. A composite self-rating of competence score (coefficient \( \alpha = .90 \)) was computed based on three 9-point adjective scale ratings (skillful, competent, capable) anchored from not at all to very much.

**Target competence.** To check that our manipulation did not cause the target to be viewed as differentially competent, we collected information about perceptions of target competence. A composite target competence score (coefficient \( \alpha = .86 \)) was computed based on two 9-point bipolar adjective scale ratings describing the target female (incapable–capable, incompetent–competent).

**Results**

**Preliminary Analyses**

**Target competence.** To ensure that no differences in perceived target competence existed across information conditions, we conducted an analysis of variance (ANOVA) on target competence ratings. The targets depicted in the two variations of the letter of introduction did not differ in ratings of competence, \( F(1, 76) = 0.22, \) ns, and no interaction was found between participant gender and information condition, \( F(1, 76) = 0.09, \) ns. Participants uniformly rated the target high in competence (\( M = 7.96, SD = 1.39 \)).

**Dependent Variables**

We conducted ANOVAs on the interpersonal hostility and liking scores to examine the expected main effects of information condition on target ratings. For the self-ratings of competence, we conducted an ANOVA to test for an interaction, followed up by \( t \) tests to directly test the hypothesis that differences would be found between information conditions in female but not male participants.

**Penalization.** The ratings of the target’s interpersonal hostility and likability were compared across conditions to check that our penalties-allowed and penalties-blocked information conditions effectively allowed for or blocked personal derogation as intended. A two-way ANOVA demonstrated that there was a significant main effect for information condition on target ratings of interpersonal hostility, \( F(1, 76) = 14.81, p < .001, \) with no main effect for gender, \( F(1, 76) = 0.01, \) ns, or interaction between information condition and gender, \( F(1, 76) = 0.15, \) ns. As expected, both female and male participants rated the target female higher in interpersonal hostility in the penalties-allowed condition (\( M = 5.77, SD = 0.94 \)) than in the penalties-blocked condition (\( M = 4.93, SD = 0.99 \)).

Similarly, an ANOVA demonstrated a significant main effect for information condition on target ratings of likability, \( F(1, 76) = 13.00, p = .001, \) with no main effect for gender, \( F(1, 76) = 0.80, \) ns, or interaction between information condition and gender, \( F(1, 76) = 0.15, \) ns. Both female and male participants rated the target female lower in likability in the penalties-allowed condition (\( M = 5.35, SD = 1.05 \)) than in the penalties-blocked condition (\( M = 6.28, SD = 1.22 \)).

**Self-rating of competence.** ANOVA revealed a marginal interaction between participant gender and information condition in self-ratings of competence, \( F(1, 76) = 3.48, p = .06. \) Follow-up \( t \) tests within gender showed the expected results. Female participants rated themselves higher in competence if they were able to penalize the highly successful target female (\( M = 7.72, SD = 0.77 \)) than if they were blocked from penalizing her (\( M = 6.57, SD = 1.76 \)), \( t(38) = 2.67, p = .01 \). However, men’s self-ratings did not differ between the penalties-allowed condition (\( M = 7.08, SD = 1.24 \)) and the penalties-blocked condition (\( M = 7.05, SD = 1.39 \)), \( t(38) = 0.08, ns \) (see Table 1).

The difference in the discrepancy between female participants’ competence ratings for the target versus the self (i.e., capable and competent) in the two information conditions further supported our hypothesis. Although the successful woman was rated as more competent...
Penalties blocked: 6.57 ± 1.76 vs. 7.05 ± 1.39
Penalties allowed: 7.72 ± 0.77 vs. 7.08 ± 1.24

These findings support our idea that female participants view successful women as a threat to the self; when able to characterize her as a norm violator, she was excluded as a standard of comparison, and female participants were able to salvage their self-views. Thus, Study 1 suggests penalization serves as a self-protective strategy for females faced with a threatening upward comparison to a successful female target.

Discussion

Whereas both male and female participants were more likely to penalize the successful target when no additional communal information was provided, only female participants showed a subsequent cost in their self-evaluations of competence when unable to penalize the target relative to those who could. These findings support our idea that female participants view successful women as a threat to the self; when able to characterize her as a norm violator, she was excluded as a standard of comparison, and female participants were able to salvage their self-views. Thus, Study 1 suggests penalization serves as a self-protective strategy for females faced with a threatening upward comparison to a successful female target.

But do women always consider a highly successful woman in a traditionally male role a threatening standard of comparison? As Lockwood and Kunda (1997) have demonstrated, self-deflation (i.e., negative shifts in self-evaluation in response to a successful target) is more likely to result when the other’s success is seen as unattainable. We propose that because of the male gender type of the successful target’s position, women tend to feel that they are unlikely to achieve this type of success and therefore risk self-deflation when a successful female exemplar is encountered. There exists a perceived “lack of fit” between the characteristics of women and those thought to be needed for managerial success (Heilman, 1983, 2001; Heilman & Parks-Stamm, 2007). Even today, a good manager is described in masculine terms (Powell, Butterfield, & Parent, 2002), and the attributes believed to be necessary to succeed as an executive are stereotypically male (Martell et al., 1998). This suggests that the motivation for females to penalize a successful woman in a managerial position may stem from the seeming unattainability of her success for other women; if her success is perceived to be attainable, it would not be threatening to the self.

If penalization serves as a self-protective strategy in the face of a threatening social comparison as we propose, providing participants with information that their own managerial potential is high (so that the other’s success is perceived to be personally attainable) should reduce the motivation for penalization by women. To test this idea, in Study 2 we manipulated female participants’ perceptions of their potential to achieve success in a managerial position. We hypothesized that when female participants are given feedback that their managerial potential is high, they will be less motivated to penalize successful women than when they are not given this feedback.

STUDY 2

In our second study, we manipulated female participants’ expectations about their managerial potential. Participants completed a bogus managerial potential test, received false positive or negative feedback (or no feedback at all), and were given the opportunity to evaluate a successful female target. We expected that when women felt success in traditionally male positions is unattainable (in the no-feedback control and negative feedback conditions), they would be likely to penalize the successful female target, as did women in the penalties-allowed condition in the first study. However, we predicted that participants who were given positive feedback about their managerial potential (and therefore believed this success to be attainable) would not penalize the successful target female because the success of the other would not be threatening to these participants. Specifically, we hypothesized that penalization would be greater in the control and negative feedback conditions than in the positive feedback condition. In the present study, no participant was blocked from penalization (i.e., only the penalties-allowed letter was provided) because we were interested in showing that penalization occurs only when it is necessary for maintaining a positive self-view (i.e., when expectations about one’s ability to succeed are low). Because all participants were able to penalize if motivated to do so, we did not expect differences in subsequent self-ratings of competence.
Method

Participants and Design

For Study 2, 66 female New York University undergraduates participated to fulfill partial course requirements. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three false feedback conditions: no feedback, positive feedback, or negative feedback.

Procedure

As in Study 1, participants were informed that this study was a two-part study investigating modes of communication. Before beginning the packet supplied in Study 1, participants were asked to participate in a computerized version of the fictional “Managerial Effectiveness Skills Inventory III” (MESI) designed to “isolate individuals well-suited for management positions.” After completing the MESI, participants in the positive and negative feedback conditions were presented with a score and those in the control condition were not.

Participants then completed the penalties-allowed condition packet from Study 1. It included the job description summary, the letter of introduction of the target female including the gender-neutral positive characteristics, the target evaluation form and the evaluation for the letter itself, the self-rating “background questionnaire,” and the communication preferences questionnaire. After all the materials had been collected, the experimenter provided both a written and verbal debriefing to participants, revealing the true purpose of this study and the manipulations used.

Experimental Manipulation

Competence feedback. Competence feedback was manipulated through the computerized MESI. This test was composed of 24 true/false statements regarding managerial effectiveness (e.g., “Management effectiveness depends more on the manager than the situation”). Participants read that because “the computer version of the MESI incorporates recent research on the importance of intuition and lightening-quick decision-making in effective managing,” the questions would only be presented for a few seconds each. A clock appeared on the screen for each question showing the amount of time left to respond; response windows ranged from 5 to 15 seconds (depending on the length of the question, $M = 8.5$ seconds). This was done to ensure that participants were not able to realistically evaluate their performance. Upon completion of the MESI, the computer “calculated” participants’ scores, ostensibly based on a complex formula combining response times and correct answers, and gave an estimated percentile supposedly based on the scores of “over 1,000 students” who “completed this third version of the MESI at more than 30 universities.” Participants in the positive feedback condition received false feedback that they scored in the 96th percentile; those in the negative feedback condition received feedback that they scored in the 17th percentile. Although the description of the test was identical in the no-feedback control condition, the instructions for these participants did not state that they would receive a score at the completion of the test, and they received no feedback regarding their performance.

Dependent Measures

The items included in the scales for target competence ($\alpha = .75$), interpersonal hostility ($\alpha = .82$), liking ($\alpha = .78$), and self-ratings of competence ($\alpha = .78$) were identical to those in Study 1.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Competence. A one-way ANOVA confirmed that there was no difference in ratings of target competence across the three conditions, $F (2, 63) = 2.93$, $n.s.$ The ratings clearly showed that the positive feedback condition perceived the target to be as competent ($M = 8.45$, $SD = 0.55$) as those in the control ($M = 8.07$, $SD = 0.70$) and negative feedback conditions ($M = 7.95$, $SD = 0.87$).

Dependent Variables

We conducted ANOVAs on the interpersonal hostility and liking scores to examine the effect of feedback condition on target ratings, followed by planned contrasts (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1991) to directly test the hypothesis that those in the positive feedback condition would be less likely to penalize the target than those in the control and negative feedback conditions. Next, we conducted an ANOVA on the self-ratings of competence to ensure that no differences were found in the three feedback conditions. Means and standard deviations for the dependent measures are presented in Table 2.

Penalization. The ANOVA indicated a significant effect of feedback condition on interpersonal hostility ratings, $F (2, 63) = 3.14$, $p = .05$. According to our predictions, participants in the control ($M = 5.39$, $SD = 0.87$) and negative feedback ($M = 5.34$, $SD = 1.40$) conditions rated the successful target female higher in interpersonal hostility than those in the positive feedback condition ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 0.99$). This was tested using a planned contrast, with the following weights applied to the contrast: $\lambda = 1, 1, -2$ for the control, negative, and positive groups, respectively. This contrast showed that participants in the positive condition differed significantly from
those in the negative and control conditions, $t(63) = 2.50$, $p < .02$, with participants in the positive feedback condition rating the target significantly lower in interpersonal hostility than the other conditions.

The planned contrast was also applied to the liking ratings to test our hypothesis that participants in the positive condition would rate the target female higher in likability than participants in the control and negative conditions. An overall ANOVA revealed a marginal effect, $F(2, 63) = 2.65$, $p < .08$, but the planned contrast showed that participants in the positive condition differed significantly from those in the negative and control conditions, $t(63) = 2.24$, $p < .03$. Participants in the positive feedback condition rated the target female higher in likability ($M = 6.20$, $SD = 0.88$) than participants in the control ($M = 5.55$, $SD = 1.24$) and negative feedback ($M = 5.34$, $SD = 1.66$) conditions.

**Self-ratings of competence.** As expected, an ANOVA on the three conditions revealed a nonsignificant effect of feedback on self-ratings of competence, $F(2, 63) = 0.27$, ns. Contrasting the positive feedback condition against the negative feedback and control conditions ($\lambda = \lambda = 2, 1, 1$) also demonstrated that self-ratings of competence did not differ significantly across conditions, $t(63) = 0.46$, ns. Thus, although those in the positive feedback condition did not penalize the target as did those in the negative feedback condition ($M = 7.29$, $SD = 0.82$) and control group ($M = 7.14$, $SD = 0.90$), they did not show greater negativity in their self-evaluations ($M = 7.11$, $SD = 0.92$).

**Discussion**

When given positive feedback about their managerial potential, women did not penalize the successful target although all participants were given the opportunity to do so (i.e., all read the letter without communal information). In fact, their ratings of interpersonal hostility and likability were similar to the levels of the penalties-blocked condition in the first study. This provides further support for our hypothesis that penalization by women serves to protect the self from a threatening comparison; when the threat to self-view was low, penalization was not undertaken.

Regardless of penalization, all participants evaluated themselves as equally competent. This, too, is supportive of our ideas. Participants who were motivated to penalize the target (i.e., in the control and negative feedback conditions) did so, thereby salvaging their self-views. Participants who were not motivated to penalize the target (i.e., those in the positive feedback conditions) chose not to penalize, without experiencing costs to their self-evaluation.

The results of Study 2 are suggestive about the assumptions that women make about their potential to achieve success, the assumptions that make successful women such a threatening upward comparison. When no “managerial potential” feedback was provided, women behaved no differently than those told they had scored in the 17th percentile. It was only when women were given decidedly positive feedback that they did not choose to penalize the target when provided an opportunity to do so. These findings suggest that women do indeed have low expectations about their potential to succeed in male-typed jobs (e.g., managerial positions) and that these low expectations contribute to their tendency to sanction successful women.

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

The present set of studies investigated the motivation underlying women’s penalization of successful women. Whereas theorizing concerning the purpose of sanctions for role violations focuses on reasons more intuitively applicable to men’s penalization of successful women (e.g., preserving existing gender inequities; Burgess & Borgida, 1999), the present research focuses on the possible motivations underlying penalization by women. Two
studies tested the hypothesis that “penalties for success” serve to reduce the impact of threatening social comparisons between the target and the self, thereby maintaining women’s positive self-views regarding competence.

Study 1 established a relationship for female participants between penalization and self-evaluations of competence: Women who were able to rate the target as interpersonally hostile and unlikable subsequently rated themselves higher in competence than those who could not. This suggests that sanctioning a successful female reduces the self-threat from social comparison to a highly successful target. Study 2 expanded this finding by manipulating female participants’ expectation of success in the traditionally male-typed position of manager. When success in this traditionally male position was seen as attainable (i.e., the target’s success was no longer seen as threatening; Lockwood & Kunda, 1997), women no longer penalized the target or showed subsequent negative shifts in self-evaluation from not doing so.

Taken together, this research demonstrates that exposure to a woman who has achieved success in a male-dominated work environment, an achievement generally viewed as unattainable by women, can lead to costs in self-evaluation for her fellow women. By enforcing prescriptive norms and characterizing successful women as norm violators, women can reduce the threat to the self. Penalization, therefore, can serve as a self-protective strategy utilized by women to reduce the ego-deflating consequences of an upward social comparison.

Implications

As the first set of studies aimed specifically at addressing the question of why women penalize successful women, the results indicate that short of interventions to make explicit the communality of the target, women engage in the penalization of successful women by characterizing them as interpersonally hostile and unlikable. In both studies, women who read a positive (but gender-neutral) letter of introduction about a successful woman—a letter that describes her as “evenhanded” and “excited about joining our team”—described her as uncharacteristically manipulative, selfish, cold, and unlikable. Only when the target was made less threatening to participants’ self-views of competence (by providing participants with positive feedback about their managerial potential) did this effect disappear.

A second implication of the present research is that women’s beliefs about their inability to achieve in traditionally male positions contribute to their preservation of prescriptive norms through the penalization of norm-deviant women. Indeed, the present research illustrates how damaging women’s low expectations for success in the male-dominated workplace can be to their fellow women. Ironically, individuals who disprove expectations of women’s inferior competence are marginalized and derogated by the very women who most need positive role models. Thus, the present research renews the call for reducing cultural stereotypes about “men’s work.” Interventions designed to eliminate stereotypes about women’s inadequacy to fulfill these traditionally male roles must begin early, however, as female college students already seem to have internalized these cultural biases.

Future Directions

The mechanism by which penalization buffers women from costs in self-evaluation is still unclear. As we have argued, characterizing the target as a norm violator does appear to decrease the threat of the comparison for the self. How is this achieved? Penalization may serve to increase distance between the self and the target in terms of similarity; labeling the target as unfeminine and unlikable may alternatively be a way to subtype the individual so that she is no longer relevant for self-evaluations (Brewer, Dull, & Lui, 1981; Taylor, 1981). However, it could also be argued that characterizing the individual as interpersonally hostile and unlikable protects self-evaluation by merely disparaging the threatening other (Fein & Spencer, 1997), by sabotaging her success by introducing interpersonal liabilities (e.g., Tesser & Smith, 1980), or by boosting the self through “justified” revenge against a norm violator (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). An important direction for future research would be to directly investigate the underlying mechanisms in order to distinguish among these different explanations. Regardless of the way that penalization is used to minimize the threat associated with successful targets, however, the present research demonstrates that women’s self-evaluations benefit from doing so.

Although our focus in these studies was the penalization of women by other women, we by no means suggest that these self-protective strategies are unique to one gender. We designed the current studies to investigate women’s tendency to impose “penalties for success” on women who succeed in male positions (Heilman et al., 2004) and therefore focused on successful female targets and in the second study, female participants’ reactions to these targets. However, the self-protective behavior evidenced by women here may be evidenced by men as well when they are confronted by a relevant exemplar whose success is perceived to be unattainable. Moreover, we believe these results are relevant to upward social comparison processes more generally. For example, there may be attributes other than
competence and success that prompt threatening upward social comparisons, such as popularity or attractiveness, and provoke self-protective sanctions in response. There also are likely to be dimensions other than interpersonal hostility and liking along which individuals are penalized when they are threatening to the self. Thus, our findings, which suggest that penalties may be strategically imposed to reduce the impact of threatening individuals, raise many interesting questions for future investigation.

One specific direction for future research would be to explore the motivations underlying the corresponding sanctions men experience for success in female-dominated workplaces. In general, both men and women rate communal men as likable but incompetent (i.e., a parallel sanction for male prescriptive norm violation; Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Glick, 1999, 2001) as well as weak and ineffective (Heilman & Wallen, 2007). As with reactions to female norm violators, these sanctions for male norm violators may be differently motivated for men and for women. Whereas women who have succeeded in male roles occupy a high status among women (and therefore create threat for other women through social comparison processes), men in communal roles typically occupy a low status among relatively higher status men. For this reason, the motivations associated with the black sheep effect (i.e., the harsh judgment of underperforming ingroup members to protect the positivity of the ingroup identity; Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988) may drive male reactions to male norm violators, a very different process from what we found with female norm violators. Moreover, the difference in the status of the ingroup member may lead to different predictions for the self-evaluative consequences of exposure to a norm-violating other. Studying the responses to norm-violating men would shed light on this issue.

Although this research was undertaken to investigate penalization as a specific response to gender norm violation, the ideas underlying this research may help explain reactions against norm violations more broadly, beyond gender norms. Normative prescriptions guide the behaviors of individuals categorized by many social identities in addition to gender (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, university affiliation, occupation). More research is needed to examine whether the processes described here may help explain self- and other-directed reactions to threatening ingroup members more generally.

What the present findings do suggest is that high-performing women may face derogation by other women merely because they represent a threatening upward social comparison. Unfortunately, these reactions to successful women serve to maintain the very norms that restrict individual success for all women.

REFERENCES


