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Masculinity as a Psychologically Permeable Barrier to Gender Equality

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Masculinity as a Psychologically Permeable Barrier to Gender Equality

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Gender inequality in the workplace is a timely issue that policymakers and organizations are eager to amend. My research examines the role that the system-justification motives play in shaping men's understanding of gender inequality. Individuals have a fundamental need to view a social system positively and will engage in a number of motivated processes to rationalize the status quo (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Jost & Kay, 2005; Kunda, 1990; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). Because men occupy a privileged position in the social hierarchy and women occupy a subordinate position (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004), it is likely that these two social groups will interpret evidence of gender inequality differently, based not only on their unique experiences but also their unique goals. This is consistent with the notion that views on inequality differ as a function of hierarchical rank, with high status group members favoring individualistic explanations that locate the source of inequality in the deficiencies of the disadvantaged and low status group members favoring structural explanations (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). From this lens, gendered outcomes reflect macro-level negotiations occurring between men and women as distinct social groups (Sidanius, Pratto, & Bobo, 1994).

Although uncovering gender differences in attribution and belief is important in its own right, my research takes the additional step of identifying contextual factors that increase or decrease these differences. Ultimately, I seek to develop interventions that can be implemented by managers and organizations as a whole to reduce men's need to defend the system as fair and just and in so doing to build consensus about the solutions to persistent gender inequality. For example, my research has shown that holding the belief that gender roles are fixed has stronger consequences for how men view themselves and their support for the broader social system than it does for women (Kray, Howland, Russell, & Jackman, 2017).

Building on Jost and Kay's (2005) research that finds women's (but not men's) support for the gender system increases after priming complementary gender stereotypes that hold feminine attributes as separate but equal in value to masculine attributes, we showed that men's (but not women's) support for the status quo increases when holding the belief that gender roles are fixed as opposed to malleable. Just as asserting gender differences as established facts triggers the system justification motive for men but not women (Morton, Postmes, Haslam, & Hornsey, 2009), exposure to the belief that gender roles are immutable strengthens masculine identification and, in turn, men's defense of gender inequality. This happens because implicit

theories about the fixedness or malleability of a given construct powerfully shape the types of goals that individuals adopt (Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

A key assumption is whether a given trait or domain is fixed (*fixed mindset*) or malleable (*growth mindset*). Applied to gender roles, individuals who subscribe to a fixed mindset believe certain attributes or tasks are intrinsically linked to gender. That is to say, the role of caretaker belongs to women and the role of breadwinner belongs to men. Individual men or women might take on gender atypical roles, but at their core gender roles will always be tied to specific social roles. Those with a growth mindset of gender roles, in contrast, see them as pliable: these roles and behaviors are linked more to specific actions and circumstances than to an immutable link to gender. While individuals with growth mindsets tend to adopt goals oriented toward learning and growth, those with fixed mindsets are particularly motivated to prove themselves and show that they possess a desirable characteristic. Applied to gender roles, fixed mindsets increase men's efforts to 'prove gender' whereas the holding of a growth mindset alleviates this pressure. This suggests that one way to reduce gender discrimination is to reduce men's strict adherence to masculine gender roles by promoting the notion that gender roles are malleable.

This work linking men's mindsets to gender system justification suggests that men's need to prove masculinity status is a critical ingredient in bringing about social change. In subsequent research, I have more directly linked psychological threat to men's gender system justification. To ensure that it is masculinity threats in particular that trigger the system justification motive, and not any generalized threat to gender identity, we included women in the sample as a point of comparison. Based on past research showing women are relatively impervious to gender identity threats (Maas et al., 2003; Vandello et al., 2008, Willer et al., 2013), we did not expect the gender system justification motive in women to be triggered by psychological threats to their gender identity.

Prior work (Willer et al., 2013) testing whether masculinity threats increase men's system justification failed to yield support for an effect on a generalized measure including items such as "Everyone has a fair shot at wealth and happiness". Instead, we expected a domain-specific measure of gender system justification (Jost & Kay, 2005) would more precisely capture reactions to masculine identity threats. The measure of gender system justification includes statements such as: "Most policies relating to gender and the sexual division of labor serve the greater good" and "Society is set up so that men and women usually get what they deserve." In this way, participants are asked to consider the fairness of relations between men and women as social groups specifically.

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We predicted the effect of a gender identity threat on men's gender system justification. To test this idea, online participants completed an abbreviated version of Bem's Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974), which was ostensibly used to categorize their gender identity but in reality was not scored. After completing the inventory, participants were randomly assigned to receive feedback indicating their responses were consistent with an average male or an average female. This manipulation was taken directly from past research (Maas et al., 2003; Willer et al., 2013). Participants who received feedback that was consistent with their self-reported gender (i.e. male participants who received feedback that their gender identity was masculine and female participants who received feedback that their gender identity was feminine) comprised the gender congruent feedback condition, whereas those receiving inconsistent feedback comprised the gender incongruent feedback condition. Immediately after receiving the feedback, participants completed gender system justification scale.

I found that men engaged in more gender system justification than women did, but this was only true when their gender identity was threatened. After receiving gender incongruent feedback, men justified the gender system more than women did. After receiving gender congruent feedback, men and women did not differ significantly in their gender system justification. This finding underscores that at least some of men's failure to acknowledge gender inequality is caused by masculinity threat. When masculine insecurity is high, men rationalize the gender system as fair. Doing so may be an attempt to compensate for the perceived loss of manhood derived from being gender-atypical (Bosson & Michniewicz, 2013; Willer et al., 2013).

Next, I aimed to neutralize men's gender system-justification motive to increase their support for a legal intervention designed to bring about pay equity. If men's system justification arises from psychological threats to masculinity, then it is important to identify ways to circumvent this process to increase support for structural change. To examine this question, I utilized a self-affirmation manipulation whereby participants were asked to rank order the personal importance of 6 values that were provided and then write a short essay about the meaning and relevance of the most important value in their life (Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000). Immediately after doing so, I manipulated gender identity feedback in an identical manner as described above. In general, people are motivated to maintain self-integrity, or the belief that one is a good person (Steele, 1988). Self-affirmations provide opportunities to realize one's integrity through behavior, thoughts, and feelings. By affirming personal values, perceptions of threat can be attenuated (Sherman & Cohen, 2002; Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Steele, 1988) and reduce defensive responses to threatening information (Sherman, Nelson, & Steele, 2000). Indeed, I found that men who had self-affirmed before receiving gender

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incongruent feedback reported more support for a structural change to level the playing field (i.e. "salary history ban" legislation) than under baseline conditions. The gender incongruent feedback that had previously been interpreted as a threat to masculinity was now evidently seen as a signal that supporting gender equality was relevant to who they are as people. This research underscores the need to examine the factors that increase men's support for change by affirming their core values and identity as humans rather than men.

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