Examining Female Reaction to Male Ally Work: The Role of Perceived Divergence

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A predominant theme in research on male ally work, or instances when males act to advocate for females, has highlighted antecedents of males' motivation to engage in ally work (Radke et al., 2020). More recently, however, research has recognized that, from the perspective of the purported beneficiaries (females), males' ally work may come across as either instrumental or simply out of touch with their lived experiences (Iyer & Achia, 2021). Our research contributes to this domain by asking: from the perspective of female employees, what types of ally work are likely to signal male leaders' credibility as social change agents?

To answer this question, we integrate ally work research with the literature on organizational change agents to highlight a novel mechanism - the perceived "divergence," the degree to which the efforts break from existing archetypal, institutional templates of workplace practices (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). We apply this concept to examine whether specific modes of ally work are recognized as a more "break" from templates of leader behaviors. Specifically, we conceptualize ally work as constitutive of three distinct modalities: self-work (e.g., critique aspects of oneself such as biases), relational work (e.g., improve the quality of working relationships with females), and organizational work (e.g., change discriminatory elements of the organizational system or practices). We theorize that male leaders' organizational work (versus self and relational work) will be perceived as the most divergent by female employees because it focuses on structural changes that challenge a male-dominated status quo. We hypothesize that divergence would mediate the relationship between ally work and females' perceptions of male leaders' authenticity as social change agents who advance gender equity. We further argue that the perception of change agents will then affect females to share the responsibility for social change efforts. Figure 1 depicts this serial mediation model.

We examined our model across three experimental studies. In Study 1, we recruited female undergraduates from a large U.S. university (N=277). We provided them with a description of Michael, a Senior Vice President at a Fortune 100 company who was described as male and White. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in which we manipulated descriptions of Michael's actions: control (managerial work), self-, relational-, and organizational ally work. Results showed that those in the organizational work condition (M=4.07) perceived Michael's actions as more divergent compared to those in the relational work (M=3.39, p < .001) and the control conditions (M=2.59, p < .001), but not compared to those in the self-work condition (M=3.99, p = .19). We found significant indirect effects of the organizational versus relational (indirect effect = -.44) and control conditions (indirect effect = -.93) on perceptions of a social change agent via perceived divergence. Our serial meditation model was also significant. Study 2 replicated Study 1's findings from a sample of full-time female working adults recruited from Prolific (N=276).

In Study 3, we probed the difference between self-work and organizational work. Research suggests that when thinking about the sources of inequality, individuals may be more or less likely to associate inequality with personal attributes and characteristics (Miller et al., 2021). We predicted that when females view individual processes as associated with gender inequity, they would believe that individual attributes (e.g., biases) play a prominent role in causing gender inequality, thus perceiving self-work as more divergent than organizational work. We tested this prediction from a sample of full-time working females recruited from Prolific (N=200). While there was no difference in the perceived divergence between the organizational and self-work conditions (p = .68), we found significant interaction effects in the regression analyses ($B = .30$, p < .01). Simple slope tests revealed that when beliefs in personal

responsibility for gender-inequity was high (b = .29, p < .05) versus low (b = -.20, p = .47), females were more likely to perceive self-work (versus organization work) as divergent (see Figure 2).

Our research offers several theoretical contributions. First, diversity and ally work research has relied predominately on theories of stereotype content to explain perceptions about diversity-valuing behavior (Hekman et al., 2017). We move beyond this argument and suggest that diversity efforts are assessed based on their divergence from the status quo and their instrumentality in achieving social progress. We also contribute to research on social change agents by drawing attention to the perceptual processes through which agents come to be perceived as social reformers.

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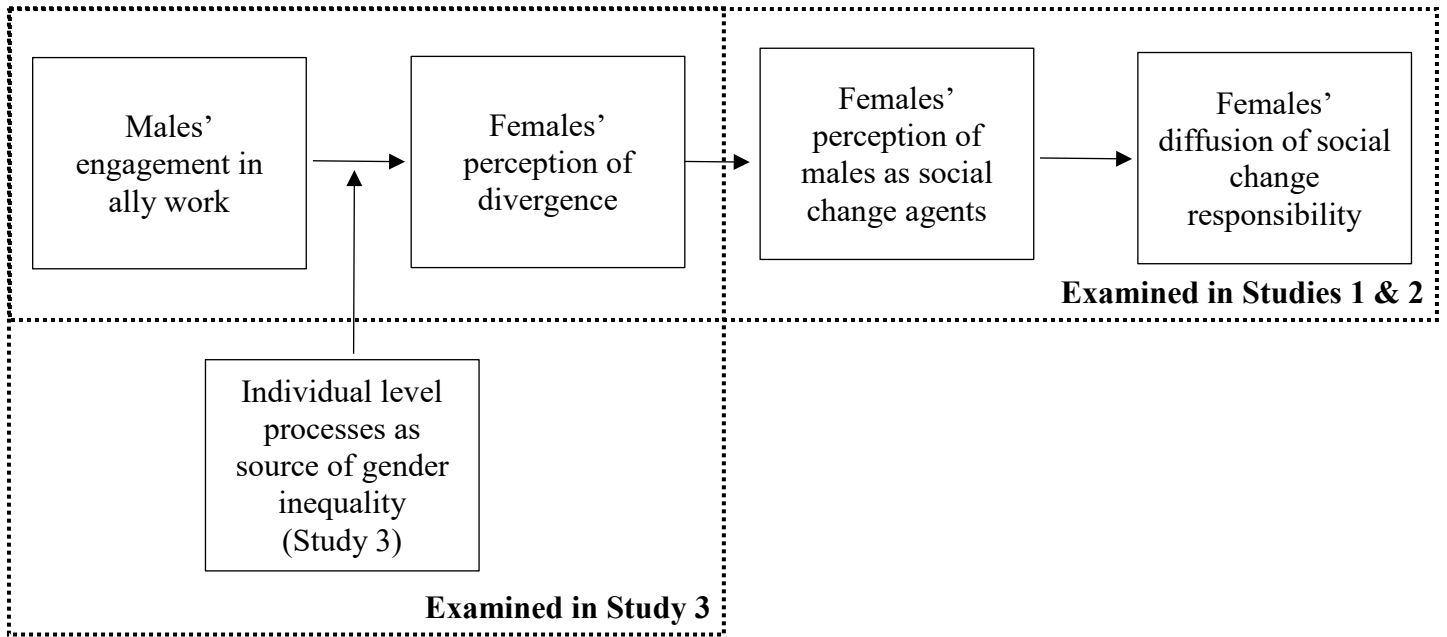
Figure 1: Theoretical model

Figure 2: Moderation results in Study 3