CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS OF BRINGING A PARTNERSHIP LENS TO ALLYSHIP

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Abstract

Male allyship offers a key opportunity for men to serve as partners in fostering women's sense of inclusion and belonging. Yet male allyship research rarely takes on a partnership lens to study allyship from the perspectives of both men and women in allyship dyads. In recent research that took a partnership lens to study male allyship in male-dominated environments within academia, severe challenges arose in recruiting dyadic samples. In this article, I explore why women in male-dominated fields within academia may choose not to participate in dyadic research by reviewing personal communications by non-respondents. Content analysis of the personal communications (*n*=50) revealed five themes: Work Pressure and Lack of Time, Lack of Anonymity, Being Judged for Work Priorities, Absence of Collegiality, and Hostile Workplace. Of note, the work environment of women in male-dominated disciplines of academia may be more challenging than other types of organizations, precipitating low participation in dyadic research. Implications for taking a partnership lens to conduct allyship research with women in male-dominated disciplines within academia are discussed.

Keywords: Allyship; Partnership; Dyadic; Women; Male-Dominated; STEM; Recruitment; Data Collection

CHALLENGES TO STUDYING MALE ALLYSHIP AS A PARTNERSHIP

Why Women in Male-Dominated Fields Hesitate to Participate in Dyadic Research

Gender inequity represents one of the foremost arenas of domination across societies around the world (Gutiérrez-Martínez et al., 2021). In making a concerted shift away

from patriarchal norms, in recent years, gender equity is increasingly being pursued via partnerships between women and men. For instance, the United Nations HeForShe Campaign (https://www.heforshe.org/) emphasizes the role of men as allies and partners to women in the pursuit of gender equity. While such partnerships may represent alliance for equity and social justice initiatives (e.g., systematic change; Baker, 2020; Dobele et al., 2022), allyship could also represent one-on-one prosocial partnerships between colleagues who strive to collectively pursue inclusiveness, equity, and belonging for the marginalized individual (Eisler, 2018; Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019).

The empirical research on male allyship tends to focus either on the voices of women as recipients of allyship (e.g., Moser & Branscombe, 2022; Wiley & Dunne, 2019) or men as allies (e.g., Nash et al., 2021; Patton & Bondi, 2015; Yoon et al., 2023). Relatively little research empirically studies allyship as a partnership, simultaneously examining both sides of an allyship dyad. In recent research, I set out to contribute toward addressing this gap by studying male allyship from the perspectives of women and men in male-female colleague pairs in academia (Warren & Bordoloi, 2021; Warren & Bordoloi, accepted; Warren et al., 2021; Warren & Schwam, 2022). However, recruitment for this research proved to be particularly challenging. In this article, I outline the context of studying allyship as a partnership, methodological background of recruitment for dyadic research, and challenges involved in recruiting allyship dyads. Thus, the article highlights methodological implications for studying allyship as a partnership.

Context for Studying Allyship as a Partnership

To study male allyship as a partnership, I adopted a dyadic research method which allows analyses (e.g., actor-partner interdependence model; Kenny et al., 2006) of individuals within dyads (e.g., how men affect women in the dyads) as well as at the level of the dyad (e.g., how colleague-pairs differ from each other), as opposed to typical research methods that examine phenomena at individual level alone (e.g., how

individuals differ from each other; Gonzalez & Griffin, 1999). Constructing allyship as a partnership relationship, the goal was to capture not only men's (i.e., allies') own reports of their perceptions, but also women's (i.e., beneficiaries') reports on how they experienced men's allyship, and how colleague-pairs differed from each other on allyship outcomes.

Participant recruitment was carried out in 2017 using multiple avenues. The first approach was through invitations to participate on professional association listservs (e.g., Women In Engineering Division of American Society for Engineering Education, Gender and Diversity in Organizations Division of the Academy of Management) and social media platforms of professional associations. This outreach did not yield many responses. Next, a comprehensive list of male-dominated disciplines of Science, Technology, Engineering, Math, Philosophy, Religion, Business, and Law in 150 research-intensive universities in the US and Canada was developed. Participants were then recruited by contacting department chairs (total of 841) to distribute the survey to their women faculty, and also by distributing surveys to other women faculty directly (total of 3,843). To incentivize, participants were invited to enter a raffle to win a $20 gift card. However, due to an extremely low initial response rate, the incentive was changed to a $5 gift card for each individual who participated in the study. The study was advertised as focused on "collegial relationships in higher education." The burden of participation was reasonable. Women faculty in the male-dominated disciplines were invited to nominate a male colleague for the study wherein women nominators and men nominees were each asked to complete a 15- to 20-minute online survey. After directly reaching out to more than 4,700 individuals, in addition to advertising on listservs of associations with thousands of members, the final study sample resulted in 101 dyads of male-female colleagues.

Past survey recruitment studies suggest that the typical response rate for a 15-minute online survey administered to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) university faculty is about 12%, and more than 20% when offered cash incentives

(Dykema et al., 2013). Given the considerably lower response rates for my study, I explored some of the possible explanations for non-participation. As the initial point of contact were women or chairs who may have forwarded the survey invitation to women, I considered whether women in STEM disciplines in academia are a challenging population to recruit for research studies.

Women in STEM: A Hard-to-Reach Population?

Sampling from populations that are determined to be hard to reach requires special recruitment methods and strategies (e.g., Bryant, 2014; Hoppitt et al., 2012). In the absence of these strategies, sampling through popular methods leads to small sample sizes. Yet, what makes a sample hard to reach may shift based on the context. For instance, might women in academia in general be considered hard to reach? Past research suggests that they are not. For example, in Smith's (2008) study, 127 out of the 353 women invited to participate did so (i.e., the response rate for female faculty was 36%). In STEM studies (considered male-dominated disciplines), the response rates of women faculty also seem to be similar to women in academia in general (e.g., 33.5% in Blood et al., 2012; 26%-33% across 3 time points in Smith et al., 2018). However, in my study of women's experiences of collegiality in male-dominated departments, wherein the women were asked to nominate a male colleague to also take a survey, they were hard to recruit. Therefore, as an alternative explanation, I considered whether low rates of participation by women may have arisen because of employing a multi-informant research design.

Participation in Multi-Informant Research

For a long time, researchers have questioned the over-reliance of survey research on self-reported data (e.g., Podsakoff & Organ, 1986) due to concerns ranging from social desirability bias (e.g., Charles & Dattalo, 2018) to mono-method bias (Spector & Brannick, 2009) to inaccurate assessments (e.g., Kaufmann et al., 2019). As a remedy,

methodologists have called for use of multi-informant methods (Donaldson & Grant-Vallone, 2002; Miller et al., 2018). One such method involves complementing the use of self-reports with other reports of the phenomenon in question (e.g., Greulich et al., 2020; Skimina & Cieciuch, 2018). This is particularly useful when studying dyads such as leader-follower relationships (Kim et al., 2020; Markham et al., 2015).

However, it is possible that adding a layer of complexity in recruitment, namely, expecting a person to complete a survey as well as nominate someone else to complete a companion survey may reduce willingness of the nominator to participate. Yet past research shows high levels of participation by nominators (85% in Erben et al., 2019; 72% in Carter & Mossholder, 2015; 67% in Oltmanns et al., 2020). As such, in my study that received a less than 4% response rate among female nominators in male-dominated settings, I had to rule out the explanation that the multi-informant nature of the recruitment resulted in the low response rate.

Another explanation for the low response rate in my study could be that women's recruitment in a male-dominated space, combined with the multi-informant nature of the study, placed them at risk because they were studied in a context that marginalizes them. Indeed, 50 women voluntarily reached out via thoughtful and detailed emails to me sharing their reasons for seriously considering but then deciding not to participate, even though they were glad such a study was being conducted and asked to receive a copy of the published findings. I analyzed the content of the personal communications of these 50 women and identified five themes.

THEMES OF WOMEN'S REASONS FOR NON-PARTICIPATION

Work Pressure and Lack of Time

First, many women declined the invitation to participate in the survey, citing work pressure and lack of time, a reason for non-participation noted in past methodological

studies, yet to a much lesser degree (Vercruyssen et al., 2014). Other reasons, however, are more enlightening.

Lack of Anonymity

In a second theme, for many women, the most pressing concern was that although their responses would be kept confidential, the fact that they had participated in a survey on relationships would not be anonymous because they were one of the very few women, or the only woman, in the department. Therefore, if men were told that a female colleague nominated them for a study, it would be easy for them to guess the identity of the nominator. Simply revealing that they participated in the study felt risky to the women, even though the study was on a seemingly noncontroversial topic: "collegial relationships in higher education."

Being Judged for Work Priorities

The third theme revealed that some non-respondent women were concerned that they would be judged harshly by male colleagues for "prioritizing random surveys over [their] own work," even when it was the chair who had distributed the survey to the women. This points to an interesting paradox that although the culture of research universities highly values conducting research, the work ethic for faculty does not value participation in research, perhaps particularly by women. This has important implications for future research on the experiences of women faculty in male-dominated disciplines in research universities.

Absence of Collegiality

In a fourth theme, non-respondents shared that they did not have any positive relationships with men in the department, and therefore, any colleagues they nominated would be unlikely to complete a survey on collegial relationships. Further, some survey items in the study focused on how their male colleagues supported women, and the women felt that they were the ones having to "take care of" men rather than

the other way around, so questions on how a male colleague supported them was "not relevant" to their experience.

Hostile Workplace

Finally, the fifth theme revealed that some women had experienced sexual harassment from male colleagues, and (male and female) administrators were complicit; therefore, they felt unsafe taking a survey on collegial relationships. Many of these women non-respondents also revealed intentions to quit their jobs.

As a result of the above issues, many women non-respondents expressed additional concern that the results of my study could suffer from selection bias because they strongly felt that women would not feel safe to nominate any male colleague with whom they did not share a positive relationship. Although the nominations were expected to be of "typical colleagues," they believed that a multi-informant design might yield male nominees who are more inclusive and supportive of women than is truly typical in male-dominated contexts.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

My study on women's collegial relationships in male-dominated disciplines in academia that involved female faculty nominating male colleagues to participate in the study yielded uncharacteristically low response rates (less than 4%). Several insights emerged from the voluntary emails from non-respondent women. Most importantly, however, it revealed that many women may feel too psychologically unsafe to participate in a multi-informant study about their work experiences, especially if it is possible that the fact that they participated in such a study may be known to others. This suggests that the work environment of women in male-dominated disciplines of academia may be particularly hostile, given that such multi-informant studies are routinely conducted in other types of organizations and institutions without triggering such concerns. Yet this might be precisely why there is a need for more research on the experiences and

relationships of women in such spaces, which makes this an important but hard-to-study research context.

The challenges discussed in this article carry broader implications for empirically studying allyship as a partnership. To be sure, a partnership lens to allyship does not preclude research that uses self-report methodology alone. Yet, the spirit of partnership that shifts away from a domination lens is likely better captured when the voices of all parties in the partnership are heard. In environments characterized by low psychological safety such that allyship is questioned, obstructed, and even penalized (Warren & Bordoloi, accepted), typical recruitment methods may fall short. Nonetheless, taking a partnership lens to allyship is a worthwhile endeavor, and scholars are encouraged to innovate and consider novel research methods to better understand, boost, and sustain allyship.

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