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Choice or circumstance: When are women penalized for their success?

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Abstract

Past research shows that successful women in traditionally masculine roles often experience interpersonal penalties not sustained by similarly successful men. In two studies we, addressed the question of how the perceived motivation of women for counter-stereotypical positions affects whether such penalties occur. Specifically, we investigated whether women who are successful in male gender-typed roles are less likely to be penalized when their attainment of the role is due to circumstance than to focused and intentional goal pursuit. In Study 1, we compared reactions to women and men who had been successful in a leadership role on a STEM project and showed that when a woman had been arbitrarily assigned to the leadership role she incurred fewer interpersonal penalties than when she had actively pursued it. In Study 2, we replicated and extended these findings by demonstrating similar effects for a successful woman in a financial position when she had attained her position due to a series of lucky breaks rather than purposeful goal-directed efforts. The results of these studies support the idea that the perception that women have actively chosen to pursue counter-normative goals plays an important role in determining whether they are penalized for their success in traditionally male domains. It was not simply being in the role, but how she got there, that determined whether the derogation and dislike shown to be directed at successful women in past research occurred.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Women who are successful in traditionally masculine positions and roles often are derogated and disliked, even when they have behaved no differently than their male counterparts (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001, 2012; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Research indicates that they are beleaguered by claims of unlikability and accusations of hostility (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004), and current events make clear that this derogation occurs in real life settings and not only in the research laboratory (Astor, 2019; Flegenheimer & Ember, 2019). There even are terms for such women: dragon lady, ice queen, iron maiden, battle axe, etc., which vividly characterize them as unpleasant and interpersonally hostile.

These characterizations and the negativity that accompanies them are thought to be penalties for women's violation of gender norms (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). However, we believe there is an important distinction to be made between the success women attain and beliefs about their motivation to attain it. We contend that it is not the success itself that is so objectionable, but rather the perception that women have actively chosen to pursue success in an arena typically reserved for men. If we are correct, then the derogation of a successful woman should occur when her success in a nontraditional area is thought to be an outcome of focused and intentional goal pursuit. When, however, the attainment of her position is viewed not to be a result of purposeful striving, but rather to be a result of coincidence or constraint, penalties should be less

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likely. The research reported here is designed to explore this idea, addressing the question of why women are penalized for their success by exploring the conditions that regulate when such penalization does and does not occur.

1.1 | Gender norms

Cultural stereotypes about gender depict women as communal—as sensitive, caring, and relationship-oriented. Men, moreover, are depicted as agentic—assertive, forceful, and dominant. These dual tenets of gender-based social perception have come to be considered fundamental to gender stereotypes and the way in which we characterize men and women.

Gender stereotypes not only are descriptive; they also are prescriptive and proscriptive (Heilman, 2001, 2012; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Prescriptive gender stereotypes designate how men and women should behave (Heilman, 2001, 2012). For example, women should be kind and nurturing, while men should be strong and brave. Proscriptive gender stereotypes designate how men and women should *not* behave (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). They specify, for example, that women should not be aggressive or competitive, while men should not be soft or sensitive. Thus, stereotypes not only describe how men and women are, but also denote how they ought to be. Stereotypes dictate not only that women are communal, but also that women should be communal and should not be agentic. These gender-based prescriptions and proscriptions are deeply ingrained in our culture, and have grown into set expectations for behaviors. Such stereotypes are widely shared, endorsed by both men and women, and function as gender norms. Acting counter to them results in norm violation (Fiske & Stevens, 1993).

Violating norms has consequences, and gender norms are no exception. Women's violation of gender norms has been shown to produce penalties in the form of social disapproval and negativity, sometimes referred to as "backlash" in the literature (Rudman & Glick, 2001, Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012). Backlash effects have been found when women exhibit agentic behavior—whether promoting themselves (Rudman, 1998), being competitive (Rudman & Glick, 1999), speaking authoritatively (Carli, LaFleur, & Loeber, 1995), exhibiting pride (Brosi, Spörrle, Welpe, & Heilman, 2016), demonstrating an authoritative or directive leadership style (Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992), administering discipline (Brett, Atwater, & Waldman, 2005), expressing anger (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008), seeking power (Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010), or initiating salary negotiations (Bowles, Babcock, & Lai, 2007).

Interestingly, women can incur penalties for violating gender norms even when they have not explicitly engaged in norm-violating behavior. There is evidence that just being known to be successful in a traditionally male role—a role that is thought to require agentic attributes—has detrimental effects on a woman's likeability and others' perceptions of her (Heilman et al., 2004; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007). She is seen as interpersonally hostile, characterized with attributes such as cold, manipulative, selfish and pushy, and is disliked. It appears that the achievement of success in positions that are normatively "off-limits" for them prompts assumptions of women's norm violation. So, for women, success can beget negativity. Men, whose success in the same fields does not imply violation of gender norms, do not suffer these consequences; instead, they tend to be revered and celebrated for their successes.

It, therefore, is little wonder that women have been found to hide their successes on male gender-typed tasks (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). The view of the successful woman as unpleasant and unlikeable can be very costly for aspiring women. It can lessen one's influence (Carli, 2001), hinder access to social networks (Casciaro & Lobo, 2005), and decrease the likelihood of special career opportunities (Heilman et al., 2004), all of which can be disadvantageous for upward mobility in organizations. It also can have mental health consequences. In addition to having detrimental effects on career prospects, social penalties for norm violation can affect feelings of belonging and self-efficacy (Cheryan, Ziegler, Montoya, & Jiang, 2017), and women's anticipation of these penalties can cause worry and concern (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004).

1.2 | Perceived intent for norm violation

Penalties for successful women stem from inferences about what they are like based on their assumed norm violation. It is not only beliefs about engaging in counter-normative agentic behaviors but also beliefs about how and why women have attained their nontraditional roles that are likely to fuel these inferences. Making inferences about what someone is like based on their behavior requires that being in that situation is seen as intentional and freely chosen without constraint (Jones & Davis, 1965). Therefore, we propose that the perception of women as wanting to be something that they are not supposed to be plays a key role in their counter-stereotypical success resulting in backlash.

Following this reasoning, the success of a woman in a traditionally male position should be likely to lead to penalties when she is thought to have attained her position through active pursuit even when other options were available. Under these conditions the woman herself is seen as the source of her deviation from gender norms and she thereby is thought to be interpersonally hostile and unlikeable. If, however, a woman's attainment of the position is thought to have been the result of chance events, or to have been constrained by others or by elements of the situation, penalties should be less likely. Rather than being viewed as the origin of the apparent norm violation, she will be regarded as less responsible, with her behavior guided by forces external to herself. In such situations, despite her success in a counter-stereotypic role, she is likely to be excused for her apparent deviance from gender norms and the negative inferences that result. Rather than being seen as striving to break norms, she is likely to be seen as making the best of a situation that is not of her own making.

These ideas are consistent with research indicating that situations in which attributions for an action are external and

uncontrollable are least likely to result in punishment for norm violation, and situations in which attributions for an action are internal and controllable are most likely to result in such punishment (Tetlock, Self, & Singh, 2010). They also are consistent with anecdotal evidence. Women who have successfully taken over political or business leadership roles after the death of a spouse, who are seen as having had leadership thrust upon them, rarely are derogated. Nor has there been animosity directed at cultural icons such as Rosy the Riveter, whose highly nontraditional work was necessitated by the scarcity of men due to their war service. In each of these cases, the woman's counter-normative behavior is not perceived to be due to choice, thus providing alternative explanations for stepping out of line that limit inferences about personal attributes.

1.3 | The present studies

Building on these ideas, the following two studies test the proposition that social penalties for women who are successful in traditionally male roles are dependent upon beliefs about their norm-violating role attainment. We expected successful women who have chosen to pursue traditionally male roles to be more negatively viewed than their male counterparts, but for this negativity to be attenuated when their success is attributed not to their own choice, but to circumstance:

Hypothesis 1 *When they have succeeded in a male gender-typed position, women will elicit greater social negativity than men (the penalties effect) when they have attained their positions by choice but not when they have attained them by circumstance.*

We furthermore expected the mitigating of the penalties effect to be reflected in reactions to the women who have obtained their positions in different ways:

Hypothesis 2 *Women who are successful in male gender-typed positions will elicit less social negativity when believed to have attained their positions by circumstance than by choice.*

In both studies, the research participants learn of a successful individual, either male or female, who has attained a male gender-typed position through choice or through circumstances not under their control. In the first study, we sought to demonstrate the effect of choice or circumstance in position attainment on the characterizations of women and men who are successful in a leadership role in a male gender-typed environment. The second study was designed to provide a replication of the first, but with a different operationalization of choice and circumstance in position attainment, and an additional dependent variable (liking). Because the dependent variables were measured on a 7-point scale in Study 1 and a 9-point scale in Study 2, the results were standardized by z transformations in order to facilitate comparison across studies.

2 | STUDY 1

2.1 | Method

2.1.1 | Participants and design

Two hundred and forty-seven undergraduate students from a large U.S. East Coast university took part in the study. Participants were 71% female and 29% male, and of typical college age (M_{age} = 19.93, SD_{age} = 1.7). The experiment had a 2 × 2 between-subjects design, with the gender of the leader (male or female) and the means of attaining the position (choice or circumstance) the two independent variables. Subjects were randomly assigned to the four experimental conditions.

2.1.2 | Procedure

Participants were told that the study was designed to examine storytelling styles and how people describe events that have happened to them. It was explained that they would be reading a brief story written by a student in a previous study who was asked to recall an experience related to a specific topic (e.g., friendship and relationships, overcoming obstacles, etc.). The story that participants read was on the topic of leadership. Efforts were made to make it seem like it had been written by another student. Efforts also were made to make clear it involved leadership in a male gender-typed domain (a STEM field). The story began:

Last semester I was taking a class to fulfill my science requirement. After the midterms the TA announced we had to do a group project and we were divided into groups. Our group was assigned to work on FEM Simulation of Bridge Dynamics. The TA said everyone in the group would work together but the group had to have a leader. The TA explained that the perks of being a leader are being in charge and doing things like determine the focus of the project, set the meeting times, delegate the work, and help evaluate the other team members.

The story then deviated in the two position attainment conditions. In the choice attainment condition, it explained that there was a female (male) student in the class who, when the TA asked who wanted to be leader, immediately raised her (his) hand to come forward. In the circumstance condition, it explained that there was a female (male) student in the class who, after no one volunteered when the TA asked for a volunteer, was randomly picked to be leader by the TA.

The story then concluded with a description of the leader's work ("scheduling group meetings, assigning tasks and checking our work"). The last sentence indicated that the leader "had put the whole thing together" and the project received a grade of A.

2.1.3 | Measures

After participants finished reading the story, they completed a brief questionnaire containing a series of 7-point bi-polar adjective scales.

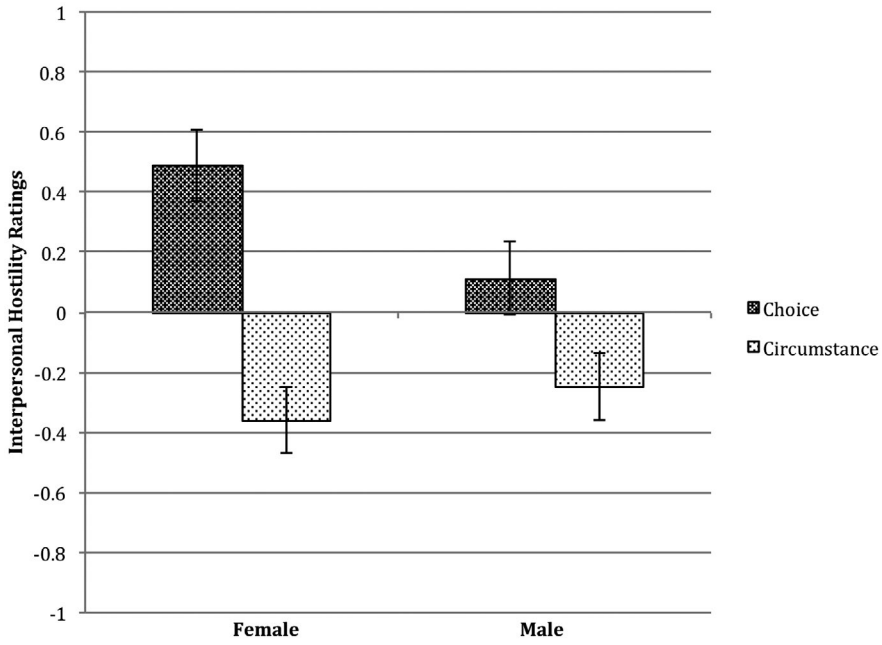

FIGURE 1 Study 1 standardized ratings of interpersonal hostility (*z*-scores) of female and male targets in the choice and the circumstance conditions

Our dependent variable of interest was interpersonal hostility, which was a composite measure of six adjective ratings: "not pushy-pushy," "cold-warm," "not selfish-selfish," "unsupportive-supportive," "not manipulative-manipulative," and "not conniving-conniving" ($\alpha = .73$). Supporting Information Appendix A contains the dependent measures for Study 1.

To check on our leadership manipulation we had participants indicate whether the leader had volunteered for or been assigned to the leadership position, and to check that the leader was viewed as successful we created a perceived competence scale: "incompetent—competent," "ineffective—effective," and "not productive—productive," ($\alpha = .727$). The questionnaire ended with several demographic questions.

2.2 | Results

2.2.1 | Preliminary analyses

About 93.8% of participants in the choice condition indicated that the leader of the group had volunteered for the position, and 95.6% of participants in the circumstance condition indicated that the leader was assigned to the position.[1] Also, ratings indicated that, as intended, leaders in all condition were thought to be highly competent (means across conditions ranged between 5.7 and 6.03 on a 1–7 scale).

ANOVA on the dependent measure was conducted including participant gender as an additional independent variable. No significant main effects or interaction effects involving participant gender were evident, so the data from male and female participants were combined in our report of the results.[2]

2.2.2 | Interpersonal hostility

We conducted a 2 × 2 analysis of variance on the interpersonal hostility scale, and conducted intercell comparisons using the Fisher's least significant difference (LSD) method to directly test our hypotheses. The ratings were standardized by *z* transformations prior to analysis.

ANOVA revealed no main effect of gender, $F(1, 243) = 1.14$, $p = .286$, $\eta_p^2 = .005$, but there was a significant main effect of position attainment condition, $F(1, 243) = 23.55$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .088$, and a significant position attainment × gender interaction, $F(1, 243) = 4.33$, $p = .038$, $\eta_p^2 = .018$. Intercell comparisons supported our first hypothesis, demonstrating that when they had sought out the leadership position women received higher ratings of interpersonal hostility ($M = .48$, $SD = .94$), than men ($M = .098$, $SD = 1.01$), $t(243) = 2.22$, $p = .028$, but that this difference was not significant when they had been assigned to the position ($M = -.36$, $SD = .98$., and $M = -.24$, $SD = .87$, for women and men, respectively), $t(243) = -.72$, $p = .472$. We furthermore found support for our second hypothesis: interpersonal hostility ratings for women were significantly less negative when they were assigned to the leadership position than when they had sought it out, $t(243) = 4.91$, $p < .001$. The difference between the ratings of men in the two conditions, while in the same direction, did not reach

[1]We performed data analyses both with and without the 10 participants who incorrectly answered the manipulation check question and the results did not differ. We, therefore, report the results for the full sample.

[2]The 2 × 2 × 2 ANOVA including participant gender revealed no significant main effect of participant gender, $F(1, 241) = .093$, $p = .911$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, and no significant participant gender interactions with position attainment, $F(1, 241) = .705$, $p = .402$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$, or target gender, $F(1, 241) = .648$, $p = .524$, $\eta_p^2 = .005$, and no significant three-way interaction, $F(1, 241) = .001$, $p = .971$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$.

significance, $t(243) = 1.96$, $p = .052$. Figure 1 depicts the standardized means for the interpersonal hostility ratings.

2.3 | Discussion

The results of study 1 demonstrate that whether a woman who is successful in a leadership position has been assigned to the role or has actively sought it makes a decided difference in reactions to her. She was derogated when she had put herself forward for the counter-normative role, but this derogation was alleviated when she had acquired the role by circumstance. Our findings, therefore, suggest that when women's gender norm violation is attributable to circumstance rather than choice, the social negativity directed toward her that has been demonstrated in past research is likely to be mitigated. In Study 2, we further tested this idea using a different operationalization of choice and circumstance.

3 | STUDY 2

Study 2 was designed to replicate and extend the findings of Study 1. We presented participants with a different scenario, involving a male-typed finance position within a manufacturing company. And, in addition to obtaining ratings of interpersonal hostility, we obtained ratings of the target's likability.

3.1 | Method

3.1.1 | Participants and design

One hundred and eighty-four undergraduate students from a large U.S. East Coast university participated in the study. The participants were 73% female and 27% male, and of typical college age ($M_{age} = 19.56$, $SD_{age} = 1.34$). The study had a 2 × 2 factorial design, with gender of the target (male or female) and means of attaining the position (choice or circumstance) as the independent variables.

3.1.2 | Procedure

Participants were informed that we were studying impression formation in the workplace. They were told that they would be reviewing an employee who is a financial analyst in an industrial manufacturing company that serves markets in industries such as aerospace, automotive, building and construction, etc. They were provided with brief descriptions of the financial analyst position, a profile of the employee that indicated her (his) success (ranked in the top 5% of employees at the company), and a personal narrative written by the employee describing her or his career path. The gender of the employee was varied by the name of the target: either Sarah Williams or Charles Keller.

The personal narrative was varied to manipulate the means of attaining the financial analyst position. In the choice condition, the statement portrayed a career path that was characterized by systematic striving and purposeful activity. The employee indicated that becoming a financial analyst was "*the result of careful planning*" and taking advantage of opportunities "*to gain more experience in my chosen field*." It culminated in the statement, "*I am so glad I had the opportunity to pursue my goals and work so hard. Now I am a Senior Financial Analyst, a position I have always wanted*."

In the circumstance condition, the statement portrayed a career path that was characterized by lucky breaks and unexpected incidents. The employee indicated that becoming a financial analyst was "*the result of a series of circumstances*" and benefiting from unexpected events, "*I was placed in what was supposed to be a temporary position of financial analyst*," and culminated in the statement: "*… sometimes circumstances lead you in another direction. Now I am a Senior Financial Analyst, a position I never expected to have*."

3.1.3 | Measures

After reading the materials, participants responded to a brief questionnaire. Nine-point scales were used for all ratings.

The interpersonal hostility scale was again composed of six items. They were the same as in the first study except for one item ("vindictive-not vindictive" replaced "conniving-not conniving") ($\alpha = .705$). The likability scale was created by combining responses to the questions: "How much do you think you would like this individual?" (not at all—very much) and "How well-liked do you think this individual is?" (not at all—very much) with ratings on a bi-polar adjective scale: "not likable—likable" ($\alpha = .679$). Supporting Information Appendix A contains the dependent measures for Study 2.

The competence check and the demographic questions were the same as in Study 1. There also was a direct check of the employee's success, and a "feminine-masculine" scale to check on the gender-typing of the financial analyst job.

3.2 | Results

3.2.1 | Preliminary analyses

Participants viewed the employees in all conditions as highly competent (means ranged from 7.68 to 8 on a 1–9 scale. Moreover, 96.7% of them indicated the employee to have been "very successful" and their ratings of the financial analyst job indicated that, as intended, the job was viewed as male in gender type ($M = 6.3$ on a 9-point scale).

ANOVAs for each dependent measure were conducted including participant gender as an additional independent variable. No significant main effects or interaction effects involving participant gender were evident, so the data from male and female participants were combined in our report of the results.[3]

3.2.2 | Dependent measures

As in Study 1, 2 × 2 ANOVAs were conducted followed up by LSD comparisons to test our hypotheses. All variables were standardized by z transformations prior to analysis.

3.2.3 | Interpersonal hostility

ANOVA of the interpersonal hostility ratings revealed no main effect of gender, $F(1, 180) = .326$, $p = .569$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$, a significant main effect of position attainment condition, $F(1, 180) = 20.68$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .103$, and a significant two-way interaction, $F(1,180) = 4.44$, $p = .046$, $\eta_p^2 = .022$. The results of the comparison between interpersonal hostility ratings for men and women who had attained their positions by choice fell somewhat short of the .05 alpha level, $t(180) = 1.85$, $p = .07$, but the pattern of the means were in line with Hypothesis 1, showing that when they had chosen to pursue the financial analyst role women tended to be rated higher in interpersonal hostility than men ($M = .49$, $SD = .94$., and $M = .14$, $SD = .84$, for women and men, respectively). As predicted, there was no significant difference between ratings of women and men when the position was attained by circumstance ($M = -.41$, $SD = .88$, and $M = -.21$, $SD = .1.08$, for women and men, respectively), $t(180) = -1.01$, $p = .31$. In addition, we found support for Hypothesis 2. Interpersonal hostility ratings for women were significantly lower when they had attained their positions by circumstance than when they had attained them by choice, $t(180) = 4.6$, $p < .001$. The difference between ratings of men in the two conditions did not reach significance, $t(180) = 1.79$, $p = .075$. The standardized means for interpersonal hostility are depicted in Figure 2.

3.2.4 | Likability

ANOVA of the likability ratings produced the same pattern of results as the interpersonal hostility characterizations. That is, there was no significant main effect for employee gender, $F(1, 180) = .542$, $p = .463$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$, a significant main effect of position attainment condition, $F(1, 180) = 4.68$, $p = .032$, $\eta_p^2 = .025$, and a significant interaction between employee gender and position attainment, $F(1,180) = 14.87$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .076$. Follow up comparisons provided support for Hypothesis 1, indicating that in choice conditions women ($M = -.37$, $SD = 1.01$) were rated as less likeable than men ($M = .06$, $SD = .84$), $t(180) = 2.2$, $p = .029$, but women were not rated as less likable than men in circumstance conditions; in fact, in the circumstance conditions, women were rated as significantly *more* likable than men ($M = .47$, $SD = .93$, and $M = -.17$, $SD = 1.02$, for women and men, respectively), $t(180) = 3.25$, $p = .001$. In addition, our results were consistent with Hypothesis 2. We found a significant difference in women's likability ratings depending on how they attained the financial analyst position, with those attaining it by circumstance disliked significantly less than those who attained it by choice, $t(180) = -4.25$, $p < .001$. Once again, the difference between ratings of men in the two conditions was not significant, $t(180) = 1.19$, $p = .233$. Figure 3 depicts the standardized means for likability ratings.

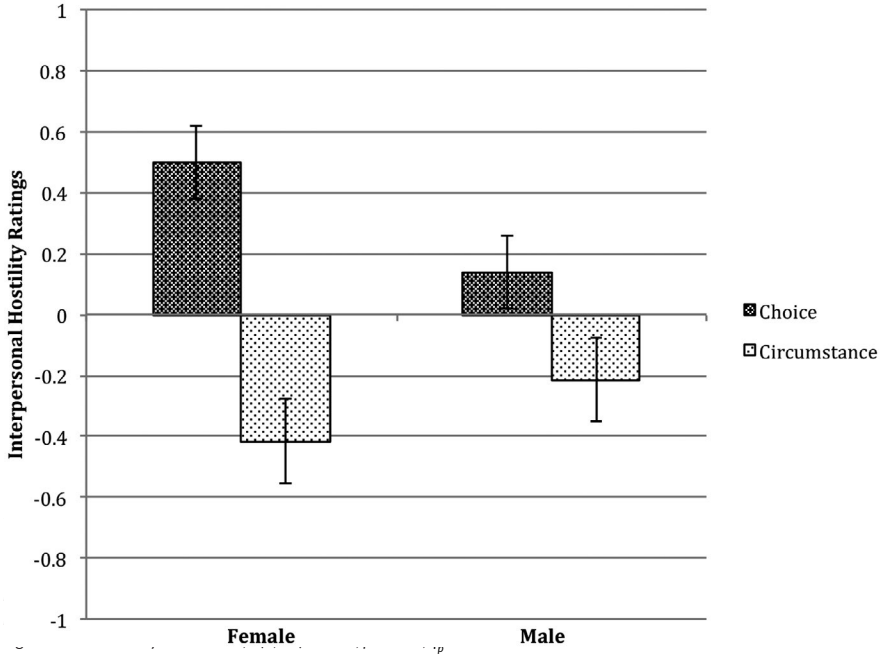

FIGURE 2 Study 2 standardized ratings of interpersonal hostility (*z*-scores) of female and male targets in the choice and circumstance conditions

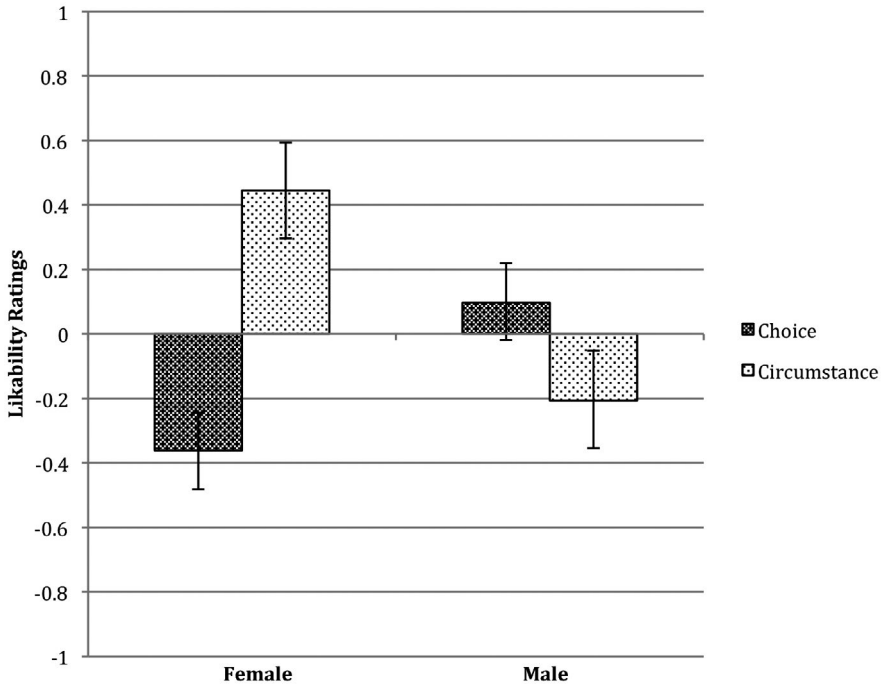

FIGURE 3 Study 2 standardized ratings of likability (*z*-scores) of female and male targets in the choice and circumstance conditions

4 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

The studies presented here support the idea that penalties for women's success in nontraditional positions are fueled by the perception that these women have made a choice to pursue counter-normative goals. Our findings indicate that when women's success is attributable to circumstance rather than choice, the social rejection that has been demonstrated in past research is less likely to occur. In our first study, attributions to circumstance were prompted by the decision of someone else (in this case—the teaching assistant) to assign the woman to a leadership role. In the second study, the circumstance attributions did not derive from the actions of a specific other, but rather from a set of coincidences that led the woman to a male gender-typed position. In each case, negative reactions were far less evident than when the woman had actively pursued the position.

This research makes an important contribution to the backlash literature. In the past, research has focused on negative reactions to successful women who are positioned in roles that are male in gender type, and considered the assumption of gender norm-violating behavior to be the source of the negativity. However, the current studies present a more nuanced picture, showing that attributions of the gender norm violation to strong personal motivation are determinative of these reactions. Simply "being there" is not sufficient to provoke negativity; there must also be a perception that being there reflects a woman's choice.

The idea that perceived motivation is important in determining reactions to striving women is consistent with findings by Okimoto and Brescoll (2010) indicating that voting preferences for female candidates were negatively influenced by perceptions of their intentions to seek power. Our results also are consistent with past work demonstrating that the negative effects of women negotiating for salary are mitigated when the negotiation is presented as having been instigated by a third party (Bowles & Babcock, 2013), thereby suggesting that the women themselves are not at the root of what is typically considered objectionable behavior. This latter finding further suggests that motivational attributions for norm violation may be critical in determining reactions not only to women successfully occupying male gender-typed positions, but also to women who simply are engaging in behaviors considered to be inconsistent with gender norms.

4.1 | Limitations and future research

There are many situations that provide an explanation for a woman's success as due to chance events or contextual constraints. Future research, both in the laboratory and in natural settings, should seek to identify these situations and test whether their effects are analogous to those found here. In addition, it would be useful to demonstrate that the positive effects of attributing women's success to circumstance occurs only for male, not female, gender-typed jobs. Demonstrating this would provide further support for the idea that volitional norm violation, not just the attainment of success, is at the core of the penalties exacted on successful women.

There also is need to investigate whether our findings are indicative of more tangible organizational outcomes. The violation of gender norms has been shown to result in lower pay (e.g., Brescoll, & Ulhmann, 2008; Brett & Stroh, 1997), less intention to hire and promote (e.g., Rudman, 1998), and fewer recommendations for organizational rewards (e.g., Heilman & Chen, 2005). It is important to determine if such detrimental effects on career-related outcomes are deterred when circumstance, not choice, is believed to be the cause of a woman's counter-normative success attainment.

Most importantly, however, it is essential to validate our results in a natural setting. Because we sought in these initial studies to test our ideas experimentally, it was crucial that we systematically control for many of the variables that are active and impactful in work settings—variables that may be important moderators of our effects. Thus, as of now we have demonstrated that our effect can occur in the laboratory, but we do not know if it would in fact occur in the workplace. It, therefore, is critical that our ideas be tested in actual work settings that are replete with the noisiness and abundance of information that may undermine, enhance, or elaborate the effects we have found here.

We have thus far have confined our discussion to women, but if we are correct in our reasoning there should be implications for men as well. Men have been shown to be penalized for their norm-incongruent success in traditionally female positions by being disrespected and viewed as wimpy (Heilman & Wallen, 2010). Thus, they too should benefit from perceptions that they are in these positions not by choice, but because of circumstance. Their penalties should be similarly alleviated by attributions to circumstance and the alternative explanations they provide. However, as our data on likability from Study 2 suggest, there may be special issues for men whose accomplishments are not thought to derive from their own efforts; the benefit of attributing success to conditions beyond their control may at times be offset by the liability of seeming weak, ineffectual, and not sufficiently agentic.

4.2 | Implications

Our findings suggest that successful women can mitigate the social rejection that is likely to come their way by contriving situations to imply that they are in these positions because of luck or constraint, not because of their own ambition or goal-striving. Indeed, some have suggested sometimes taking such measures (Bowles et al., 2007). But following this route precludes being credited for accomplishments and celebrating achievements—a hefty sacrifice to make, and one that is apt to have long-term personal and career consequences. It should not be embarked upon casually.

Our findings also have implications for organizations. They suggest that negative reactions to women can be mitigated by standardization of rules and procedures for behaviors that are required for effective management and leadership but are considered counter-normative for women. If, for example, there is a set of rules for handling disciplinary actions, a woman is more likely to be excused for being tough and strict than when such behavior appears to be discretionary. Similarly, if it is required that job candidates describe their past successes, a woman is less likely to be penalized for being self-promoting. Similar arguments can be made about codifying a process for negotiating pay. These are only a few examples of actions that can be taken by organizations to provide cover for women who would otherwise be seen as choosing to violate gender norms. The clear indication that she is "following procedures" can protect a woman from social penalties by compelling attributions for her actions to constraint rather than to choice.

4.3 | Conclusion

Together these studies lend support to the idea that penalties for women's success in traditionally male positions are predicated upon the perception that women have chosen to pursue counter-normative goals. If their presence in these positions can be explained away by circumstance, women seem to be let off the hook, and the dislike and derogation directed at them mitigated. These findings further our understanding of gender norms, and are illustrative of the corrosive effects they can have on women's experiences at work and the drag they can place on women's career progress. As such, the studies serve as a stark reminder that normative standards for men and women differ, with women in the workplace often the ones coming up short.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section.

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