

WORKPLACE BACKLASH TOWARD AGENTIC WOMEN: AN INTERSECTIONAL  
APPROACH

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By

Anna Marie Schnerre

Director: Dr. Erin Myers  
Psychology Department

Committee Members: Dr. Thomas Ford, Psychology  
Dr. Winford Gordon, Psychology

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## ABSTRACT

### WORKPLACE BACKLASH TOWARD AGENTIC WOMEN: AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH

Anna Schnerre

Western Carolina University (April, 2018)

Director: Dr. Erin Myers

In order to succeed and advance as professionals in the modern workplace, women must exhibit agentic behavior (i.e., displaying confidence, dominance), due to the traditionally valued characteristics. However, because agentic behavior is a violation of female gender stereotypes, these women may be evaluated more negatively on a variety of social- and performance-related outcomes than women who conform to gender stereotypes. This process has been termed *backlash* (Rudman, 1998). The present study explored the ways in which race impacts how agentic women experience backlash in the workplace. Using a between-subjects design, participants were randomly assigned to conditions (i.e., Black, Latina, White, or Asian woman) and asked to evaluate an agentic female potential job candidate on various backlash-related measures. Based on past research (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010), it was expected that a hierarchical pattern would emerge with Latina women receiving the highest levels of general backlash, White women receiving the lowest levels of general backlash, and Black and Asian women in between. The specific type of backlash (agentic deficiency backlash, agentic penalty backlash) each candidate received was also explored. Results indicated no significant differences among the groups of women for both general backlash, as well as the specific types of backlash. Limitations and implications of these findings are discussed, as well as future directions.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*“Women in authority find themselves in a double bind. If they speak in ways expected of women, they are seen as inadequate leaders. If they speak in ways expected of leaders, they are seen as inadequate women. The road to authority is tough for women, and once they get there it’s a bed of thorns” (Tannen, 1990).*

You may approach nearly any stranger on the street and ask them how men and women are “supposed” to act and their answers will adhere to a common theme: men should be strong and tough, women should be kind and caring. These ideas about what men and women are and should be are powerful socially-constructed stereotypes that affect the ways in which men and women engage with and respond to those around them. They have an influence on how men and women make friends, learn in school, and build relationships, as well as how they perform in the context of their jobs or careers. For women in the workplace, who are essentially required to defy their designated stereotypes in order to succeed professionally, the implications of their “deviant” behavior are varied and typically negative, ranging from lower salaries to fewer promotions (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). This situation is especially salient for ambitious women who display prominently agentic behavior due to their drive to succeed and make a bold impact as a leader in their organization or company.

You may again, walk up to a stranger on the street and ask them “What are some stereotypes about Asian people or White people?”. Many people will again have similarly themed responses due to the implicitly held ideas and biases about both one’s own race as well as other racial outgroups. These racial stereotypes, which are perpetuated largely by the cultural environment, affect individuals in similar ways to gender stereotypes: people interact and

approach racial outgroup members depending on their inner beliefs about them. These racial stereotypes, like gender stereotypes, affect interactions, general communication, and behavior in many situations including the workplace (Catalyst, 2016c).

The good news is that the current workforce is changing and becoming more racially- and gender-diverse. People who hold a minority status are projected to become a *majority* in the US in the next 30 years (Wilson, 2016); however, the upper echelons of the professional world do not reflect this shift. Gender and racial minority members are not as prevalent in middle-to-upper management positions, tend to have lower salaries, are less likely to have high-status mentors (which is crucial for career advancement), and are less likely to receive promotions (Catalyst, 2014). This disparity directs investigation toward the ways in which women and racial minorities are faced with obstacles in the workplace and the potential strategies they as individuals, as well as the larger professional industry, can use to overcome them.

The present study explored the ways in which race and gender intersect to create negative experiences for women in the workplace. Women and members of racial minorities both face obstacles when working toward professional success, and minority women whose social identity is characterized by both of these factors are faced with a unique combination of obstacles derived from other's ideas about who they are. It was hypothesized within the parameters of this study that women of all racial groups face obstacles unique to their minority status, respectively, and will therefore experience different types of discrimination and negative responses from those around them.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Stereotypes of Women and Visible Minorities**

#### **Backlash and Gendered Behavior**

Backlash is defined as a negative response to individuals who violate their specified gendered behavioral norms (Rudman, 1998). In order to understand how and why this reaction occurs, one must examine the specific behavioral roles assigned to men and women, and why a violation of these preconceived norms creates such a salient response. Behavior can be viewed as a gender-specific concept, meaning that there are distinct differences between the behaviors expected of and discouraged for both men and women. These gender-specific expectations are also referred to as gender norms, or gender normative behaviors. For example, men have the encouraged behavior of aggression and are discouraged from crying. These gender norms help to form the structure and societal scripts for many different situations, ranging from individual interpersonal interactions to larger social contexts.

Gendered behavior can be divided to fall into two broad categories: agentic and communal. Examples of agentic behavior are dominance, self-promotion, and assertiveness, while communal behaviors are modesty, politeness and caring (Rosette et al., 2016). For males, agentic behavior is encouraged, and communal behavior is loosely discouraged; the opposite is true for females for whom communality is encouraged and agency is discouraged. It is from these traditional gender norms that Western stereotypes about what men and women *are*, are derived from (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). While these are generalized and simplified descriptions of the traits seen as masculine and feminine, and in certain professions and circumstances communality certainly may be valued over agency, those careers that are seen as exclusive,

highly valued, and defined by success are largely agentic in nature and will therefore remain the standard for the current study. For example, the feminine stereotype of caring for children and carrying out domestic tasks like cleaning are desirable characteristics for the role of housewife. For these roles communal behavior is most definitely seen as more important; however, workers in the childcare industry are not paid as well as those in an industry characterized by agency, such as marketing or business (which are jobs that align more closely with the stereotype of traditionally male behavior) (Seiter, 2006).

Societal change has defined the past 50 years and has been characterized by more women moving away from working solely in the household and into a new “normal” where more women have professional careers outside the home (United States Department of Labor, 2012). It would be assumed that ideas about how men and women are supposed to behave would have changed along with the shifting workplace composition. However, studies using the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) have shown that the characteristics that were desirable for women in the 1970s are nearly identical to those that are desirable for women today, indicating a disconnect between the cultural perception of women’s roles and the real-world experiences and jobs of actual women (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). This divide between the real and assumed experience of professional women creates a workplace that is largely unwelcoming if not hostile, and one that needs to be reimagined in order to move forward and grow with the changes that have been witnessed outside in the societal environment.

### **Intersectionality**

Intersectionality is a growing topic of interest in cultural and feminist research. The term “intersectionality” refers to the ways in which the multiple aspects of a person’s identity can combine in a unique way to create an individual’s social experience (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis,

2010). For example, a White woman has a very different social reality than a Black woman despite their shared female status, due to the different experiences related to each racial group they are members of. Both of these women have different experiences than a Latino man and have to deal with different stressors and privileges stemming from gender and race. All three of these mentioned individuals must deal with different stereotypes associated with each separate piece of their identity, as well as stereotypes regarding their entire identity as a whole; the sum does not necessarily equal the parts of one's identity in these situations. Other factors, such as socioeconomic status, religion, and sexuality play a part in people's identities, and are also commonly included in intersectionality research (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). In recent intersectionality research regarding race and gender, the ways in which people perceive the behavior of Black, White and Asian women based on their race has been explored (Livingston, Rosette & Washington, 2012; Rosette et al., 2016). This is a critical line of research because gender normative behavior expectations are at least partially race-specific, meaning that the behaviors that are expected for White women are different than those for Black women, and so forth. (Rosette et al., 2016). The gender stereotypes discussed previously are combined with racial stereotypes to create unique normative behavior scripts for women of different races and ethnic groups. These stereotypes function as a way for people to justify social difference and reinforce many of the negative and detrimental stereotypes present in our culture (Seiter, 2006). Therefore, the behavior norms for a person of a certain race and gender are extensions of commonly held ideas about culture-specific social structure and are used to legitimize the traditional hierarchy and the roles within. For these women, their experiences and the obstacles they face are not as simple as dealing with just racial or gender discrimination; their lives are characterized by complex social environments that they have to navigate in order to succeed.

There are many factors that have contributed to the development of these stereotypes including historical hierarchies, social discrepancies between groups, and limited education and exposure between groups (Seiter, 2006).

### **Stereotypes of Minority Women**

Research has supported the idea that there are specific stereotype differences among female racial groups. Studies have been conducted that explore the unique stereotypes typically attributed to Black, White, Latina and Asian women, and have reported significantly different behavioral perceptions (Ghavami & Peplau, 2013; Rosette et al., 2016; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). For example, White women are perceived as being more communal, caring, kind, friendly, submissive, and as having low levels of both dominance and competence; Asian women are attributed with characteristics such as positive intellect, quietness, shyness, submissiveness and reservation (Ghavami & Peplau, 2013; Rosette et al., 2016; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Latina women were seen to be “feisty”, loud, uneducated and unintelligent; Black women are seen as being more angry, loud, boisterous, strong, confident and assertive (Ghavami & Peplau, 2013; Rosette et al., 2016). These stereotypes are sustained by both the portrayals of women in the media and stereotypes passed on within racial in-groups in regards to their ideas about other racial outgroups. These different perceptions of women based on their race have led to different behavior profiles for women of different racial groups. When a woman of a specific race violates her corresponding race- and gender-specific normative behaviors, she can experience backlash that a woman from another racial group may not have received for the same behavior. However, the intersectional experiences of women are generally ignored because activists and researchers typically focus solely on either a woman’s female identity or her racial identity, instead of the

ways in which the two combine to create a unique societal position (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

## **Backlash and its Effects**

### **Backlash Theory**

As previously mentioned, when individuals violate their gender normative behavioral expectations, the people around them, whether they be family, friends, coworkers or classmates, may react in a negative way; this negative reaction can be typed as either a social or economic “punishment” for the individual’s discrepant behavior (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). In the late 1990s, Laurie A. Rudman observed this pattern of negative reactions towards “deviant” women and developed the idea of “backlash”: a way to describe the negative reactions directed toward an individual when they violate their gender normative behavior profile (Moss-Racusin, Phelan & Rudman, 2010; Rudman, 1998). For females, this violation of normative behavior typically involves a display of agentic behavior, thereby violating their expected behaviors by acting dominantly, and failing to act communally and modestly. Males may experience backlash as well when they act communally, however the negative response they receive is typically not as severe nor institutionally-based as the response women tend to experience (Moss-Racusin, Phelan & Rudman, 2010).

### **Backlash in the Workplace**

Although backlash research has been conducted within a range of contexts where women consistently have the opportunity to violate their gendered behavior such as relationships (Suh, et al., 2004) and higher education (Makarova, Aeschlimann & Herzog, 2016), women who act agentially have primarily been a focus of research within the context of the power dynamics and

social environment of the workplace (Rudman, 1998). Qualities that are seen as appropriate and necessary for successful leaders in the workplace such as managers and supervisors are typically aligned with the masculine traits of assertiveness and dominance (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). These stereotypical traits create a perceived “lack of fit” for women looking to fill leadership roles due to the assumed absence of these skills in their repertoire (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Women in these situations engage in agentic behavior in order to accomplish their goals such as attempting to advance professionally, gain leadership positions, achieve promotions, and generally build their success within their respective career field. The culture of the Western professional environment requires them to participate in the “male” behaviors of dominance and self-promotion, such as discussing how their strengths and skills are more impressive than another candidate’s, disciplining subordinates, and aggressively taking control in team situations. These agentic women are viewed as publicly challenging the gender and social hierarchy by both males and females and are often dubbed “career women” or worse, indicating a more widespread cultural issue rather than one that is specific to solely the few sexist or biased males they interact with directly (Rudman & Phelan, 2008).

It is largely the woman’s counter-stereotypic behavior that facilitates this negative reaction, not the context it occurs in. This can be attributed to the fundamental attribution error (Jones & Harris, 1967), where individuals make dispositional attributions regarding the causes of a person’s behavior and fail to take the context into consideration. This is common in the workplace, where the context demands that women act dominantly and often aggressively; instead of understanding that the job calls for this behavior, people often attribute the behavior to an inner aggression of the target woman and react negatively with backlash. It should also be noted that when men display these same traits in the workplace they are not penalized for them

in the same way their female counterparts are, due to the consistency of their behavior with their expected stereotype. The upheaval and backlash towards agentic professional women can be associated with waiting longer for promotions, lower salary, skewed perceptions of competence, likability, and leadership skills, as well as social penalties such as shunning by coworkers (Rudman & Phelan, 2008), which have ramifications for the individual performance of employees, as well as the success of the organization as a whole. These backlash effects have been reported towards agentic women who are both trainees and CEOs, illustrating that this effect is not restricted to a certain position in the workplace, but a problem for every woman regardless of her status or salary. Some variables have been found to be reliable predictors of individuals who are prone to display backlash towards agentic women, such as implicit gender stereotype beliefs (Rudman & Glick, 2001), and benevolent/hostile sexism levels (Rudman & Phelan, 2008); however, these factors tell us little about the specific reactions directed towards agentic women, and their experience of them.

### **Backlash in Hiring Decisions**

Recently there has been a shift toward a feminization of middle management, which means that communal traits are now being considered as attractive qualifications for mid-level leaders and managers alongside the typically agentic traits (Rudman & Glick, 1999). “Masculine” leadership is characterized by command and control, while “feminine” leadership is seen as more facilitative and collaborative (Eagly & Carli, 2007). The call for more feminine traits in leaders could be seen as a positive shift for women in the industry, however research has shown that women are actually discriminated against *more* for these feminized jobs (Rudman & Glick, 1999). When undergoing the interview process for these positions female candidates were either seen as too nice and not competent enough, or competent yet not nice enough to be hired

(Rudman & Glick, 1999). Evaluators appear to base their hiring decision on whichever trait the female candidate seemed “weakest” in, leading to more discrimination towards the women applicants than the men (Rudman & Glick, 1999). Eagly and Carli (2007) found that the most effective way to combat this pattern of hiring discrimination was for women to display agentic traits but temper them with communal behavior. A common problem stemming from this “solution” arises for women in the real world is the issue of knowing exactly how much agency and how much communality to display in order to avoid discrimination, as well as to wonder if this will be enough to stop backlash and hiring discrimination. Women who have adopted this strategy and attempted to integrate more communality into their behavior in order to avoid social backlash have reported feeling less authentic (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). This brings into question the emotional status of these women and the morality of recommending that they alter their outward personality for extended periods of time. Advising women to censor their agency could cause turmoil and emotional stress, a challenge that men are not required to experience for the same professional advancements. Focusing on strategies for individual women also fails to address the root of the problem, and merely puts a bandage on a flawed system.

### **Backlash in Women’s Salaries**

The wage gap is a common topic in popular culture and women’s rights groups (Catalyst, 2016). It has been reported that on average women earn \$0.79 to every \$1 earned by men (as of 2014), and females with MBAs earn \$4,600 less on average than men with the same qualifications (Catalyst, 2016; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Differences in willingness to negotiate during salary decisions contributes to this gap; in one study, it was reported that only 7% of women attempted to negotiate the original salary offered to them from a company, whereas 57% of men negotiated (Bowles, Babcock, & Lai, 2007). A potential reason for women’s

unwillingness to negotiate could be their awareness of others' perception of women who ask for higher salaries; results have shown that male evaluators were less likely to work with women who negotiated their salaries than those who accepted the original offers given to them by employers (Bowles, Babcock, & Lai, 2005). Women may avoid asking for more compensation, even if they believe they deserve more, in order to avoid hiring discrimination; after all, it is better to have a job that pays little than no job at all.

### **Subtypes of Backlash**

In order to advance the knowledge available about the types of backlash in the workplace, it is helpful to understand that agency in the context of the workplace is a dualistic concept composed of two aspects: competence and dominance (Rosette, et al., 2016). Competence is a task-based concept, meaning it refers to a person's ability to handle difficult or complicated issues related to projects or specific work assignments. Dominance is an interpersonal concept, referring to an individual's ability to handle issues with employees and personnel interactions (Rosette et al., 2016). Since both of these components of agency are important for leaders and effective employees in a competitive workplace to exhibit, it is necessary to examine the ways in which women are perceived as possessing (or lacking), both of these traits. Women of different racial groups may be perceived as having inherently more skill in either area, or their behavior expectations may be aligned with one more than the other. Following this point, there is therefore a higher propensity for certain groups of women to receive backlash stemming from these more classified areas of agency. Specifically, there are two types of backlash corresponding to each of these types of agency: agentic deficiency and agentic penalty (Rosette et al., 2016). Dividing agency and therefore backlash in this manner

(task-based and social-based), helps to add specificity and deepen our understanding of the mechanisms behind backlash and where it is originating from for different racial groups.

### **Agentic Deficiency Backlash**

Agentic deficiency corresponds to the competence component of agency and refers to the perception that a person does not have the potential or necessary skills to be an effective leader (i.e., the individual is not competent enough to deal with the problems leaders are required to deal with) (Rosette et al., 2016). This subtype of agency is task-based and reflects one's perception of the targets ability level and job-related intelligence. Because of the stereotypical behavioral characteristics attributed to women, they are typically perceived as lacking the competence that stereotypes assume men possess inherently (Allen, French & Poteet, 2016). When people think of the prototypical leader the image of a man comes to mind because they are assumed to possess the necessary skills and traits due to their associated stereotypes, which is related to the subsequent "lack of fit" paradigm women combat. When women attempt to place themselves in leadership positions they are perceived as trying to obtain power they are unqualified and perhaps not intelligent enough for, and they receive negative reactions.

### **Agentic Penalty Backlash**

Agentic penalty refers to a subtype of backlash which is incurred for behavior that clashes with an individual's expected gender role, (i.e., when women act dominantly as opposed to communally) and is more social-focused than task-focused (Rosette et al., 2016). Many people perceive women as not inhabiting a status which imbues them with authority; this is separate from agentic deficiency backlash in that it is not focused on women's lack of skills, but rather on their dominant behavior which is seen as improper and unfeminine (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). In other words, agentic penalty backlash stems from a woman's interpersonal communication style

being perceived as too dominant. This is problematic because women need to act with agency and authority in order to promote their career progression; however, doing so invokes negative reactions that inhibit their career mobility, placing them in a double-bind, “lose-lose” situation. Many of the roles that women inhabit if they are in a position of some authority within an organization require them to act dominantly, such as disciplining a subordinate (Atwater, Carey, & Waldman, 2001), providing negative feedback to employees (Sinclair & Kunda, 2000), and acting aggressively in order to motivate difficult employees to accomplish goals and projects on time (Bolino & Turnley, 2003). Researchers have reported that women may sacrifice their career development in order to avoid the negative social and professional repercussions, or agentic penalty backlash that they receive when they act agentially (Rudman, 1998). This “either-or” choice women are faced with essentially forces them to prioritize either social acceptance or a successful career, a struggle that professional men do not regularly confront (Rudman & Phelan, 2008).

### **A Changing Workplace**

In past few decades, the workplace has begun to change dramatically with women now accounting for nearly 47% of the total workforce (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). With nearly half of the workforce composed of females, one would expect the overall workplace environment to be open and accepting of female employees and leaders, however, recent statistics regarding industry composition negate this point. Within the S&P top 500 companies, only 29 have female CEOs, accounting for only 5.8% of all top 500 CEOs (Catalyst, 2017). This difference in female workers (46.8%) versus female CEOs (5.8%) is troubling and signals a need for investigation into why this discrepancy exists.

## **Experiences of Minority Women in the Workplace**

Approaching this issue through an intersectional lens, one can see that inequalities exist even in the small number of professional female leaders, not just between professional men and women. It has been reported that White men, typically the demographic in powerful positions in business, display more acceptance towards White women than Women of Color (WOC) (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). This may account for the larger number of White female CEOs in comparison to WOC in CEO positions. Perhaps another reason for this disturbing lack of WOC CEOs is the different normative behavior profiles for each group of minority women. These behavior profiles, which lead to different experiences of backlash for women in different racial groups, could have a profound effect on the careers of these minority women, both in their approach to their workplace ambitions and other's perceptions and reactions towards them.

It is important to acknowledge that there are many other barriers to WOC obtaining leadership positions, including lack of basic qualifying experience stemming from an institutionally-supported lack of available opportunities, inadequate career opportunities, prejudice based on racial differences in speech, "old boy networks", tokenism, and the stereotypes perpetuated by popular culture and the media (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). However, these multiple impediments all tie back into the intersection of race and gender and the different kinds of effects that minority women experience on a daily basis.

For example, results have shown that in a professional setting, Black women do not experience the same types of backlash as White women and Asian women (Livingston, Rosette & Washington, 2012; Rosette et al., 2016). Black women suffer more agentic deficiencies (such as being seen as lacking competence and are penalized with task-based backlash), while Asian and White women tend to suffer more agentic penalties (such as being seen as acting too

dominantly and are punished with social-based backlash) (Rosette et al., Livingston, Rosette & Washington, 2012). The explanation for this difference ties into the gender- and racial-normative behavior expectations for each group; Black women are seen as more dominant, so when they act agentically it is not viewed as such a severe violation of their expected behaviors as it is for White and Asian women, however they are perceived as less competent because of general stereotypes associated with their race. White and Asian women suffer more agentic penalties because it is a more significant break from their behavior norms to act dominantly. Even among the similar stereotypes of White and Asian women, the latter tend to experience stronger backlash when acting agentically because it is further removed from their expected behavior (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

Women of color, especially Black and Latina women, suffer from large amounts of general backlash because they are twice removed from the prototypical leader (Black female vs. White male; also referred to as “double jeopardy”), and are therefore judged as not possessing the skills necessary to effectively fill a leadership role (Livingston, Rosette & Washington, 2012). The effects of double jeopardy are made more salient when a comparison is drawn between WOC and Men of Color (MOC) in the workplace. WOC regularly experience lower promotion rates, earlier pressures to be productive at work, unfair treatment during the training process, and overall negative career experiences that MOC do not report sharing (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). This is not a singularly racial impact, nor a singularly female impact because the same occurrences would then be reported by all employees of a minority race or all female employees, respectively. This signals that the topic is an intersectional issue in need of further and more broad exploration.

## **The Present Study**

The motivation to conduct this study stemmed from the desire to understand the day-to-day experiences of professional women and gather an impression of the ways in which gender and race interact to create these experiences. Women as a group have been studied intensively in the past, but taking an intersectional approach is important as more women from diverse social and cultural backgrounds enter into and have an impact on the modern workplace.

The present research tested the hypothesis that women of different races experience different types of backlash in the workplace. Although studies have explored this topic in the past so far none had looked at the four primary female demographic groups in the workplace today in a single study, with all other factors aside from race being held constant. This led me to attempt to isolate the effect of race in a way that has not been done in the past and expose the ways in which these women are treated differently in the workplace.

In regards to general backlash, I expected to see a hierarchical pattern emerge, with White women receiving the smallest of amounts of backlash from participants, followed by Asian women, Black women, and finally Latina women, who I expected would receive the largest rates of backlash from participants. This pattern was based upon the general stereotypes of each group of women, as well as the reactions seen in past literature (Rosette et al., 2016). Expanding upon general backlash by dividing it into subtypes, I predicted that Black and Latina women would receive higher rates of agentic deficiency backlash, and White and Asian women would receive higher rates of agentic penalty backlash. These predictions were based on the behavioral norms for each racial social identity: Black and Latina women are expected to be more dominant (Ghavami & Peplau, 2013), so they would not be penalized for agentic behavior

but would be seen as lacking the competence and skills necessary for the position and would therefore receive backlash that is focused on task-related consequences; White and Asian women are expected to be more intelligent but also modest and submissive (Ghavami & Peplau, 2013), so they would be more harshly penalized for agentic behavior because it breaks with their expected communal behavior norms, and thereby seen as less likable, etc., and receive more social-related negative consequences.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

### **Participants and Design**

Participants (N = 127; 18 to 44 years old; 82.7% White, 6.3% Black, 11% Other; 71.7% female, 28.3% male) were obtained through Western Carolina University's SONA system by using a marketing advertisement from a local bank seeking help in their hiring decisions.

Participants completed the survey online from remote locations and were compensated for their participation by receiving course credit. Utilizing a between-subjects design, each participant was randomly assigned to one of four conditions (Black female,  $n = 32$ ; White female,  $n = 32$ ; Latina female,  $n = 30$ ; Asian female,  $n = 33$ ), which varied only by the race of the candidate being evaluated by the participant (Black candidate, Latoya Jones; White candidate, Kristen Sullivan; Latina candidate, Maria Hernandez; Asian candidate, Min Chang) (Appendix B). Based on a power analysis (assuming  $\alpha = .05$  and power of .80), which was run through G\*Power 3 software (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007), approximately 100 participants were needed in order to obtain appropriate power, with an estimation of 25 participants in each condition.

### **Procedure**

Following informed consent participants were given a list of qualifications for a regional bank manager position (Appendix A). This list outlined the qualities and skills that an individual would need to succeed in this role. Participants were then told they would view the contents of a file for a candidate who is applying for the position. The candidate's application materials included a name (which varied by race depending on condition), her prior work experience, and questions regarding her performance that would typically be asked during an interview (Appendix B). The candidates' names (i.e., Kristen Sullivan, Latoya Jones, Min Chang, Maria Hernandez) (Appendix A<sup>1</sup>) were pretested to ensure they were perceived as appropriately

stereotypical and identifiable names for each racial group. These materials enabled the participant to make an educated “hiring recommendation” to the organization. Importantly, the answers to the application questions enabled the candidate to respond in an agentic manner, in order to ensure the perceptions of the participants were of a behavioral violation. The question and answer portion of the file remained the same in each condition. Participants viewed each component of the application file separately. Each component page had a timing mechanism which prevented the participant from progressing through the study without remaining on each item for a sufficient amount of time to in order to fully read all of the candidate’s file materials. Participants then rated the candidate on the Likability Scale (Reysen, 2005), a Competence Index (Biernat & Sesko, 2013), the Hireability Scale (Madera, Hebl, & Martin, 2009), a Career Mobility item, a Salary Estimate item (Biernat & Sesko, 2013), the Communal and Agentic Adjective Index (Madera, Hebl, & Martin, 2009), and a question regarding what race they perceived the candidate to be. The final Race Perception element was used to ensure that participants were perceiving the candidates to be their intended race, as well as a final attention check for the study. They then filled out demographic information (Appendix J) and concluded the study. All materials viewed by the participants can be seen in the appendices.

## **Measures**

### **Likability Scale (Appendix C)**

The Likability Scale (Reysen, 2005) is an eleven-item measure which assesses the degree to which a participant thinks a target individual is likable (e.g., “This person is approachable”). Participants were asked to rate how accurately a series of statements describes a specified individual on a 7-point scale ranging from “Very Strongly Disagree” (1) to “Very Strongly Agree” (7). The scale has been found to have a high level of reliability ( $\alpha=.90$  to  $.91$ ) (Reysen,

2005; Witt, Donnellan & Blonigen, 2009). The scale also had acceptable reliability in this study ( $\alpha=.90$ ). Participants evaluated the candidate on this scale, and scores were used to assess the amount of agentic penalty backlash (social backlash) they directed towards the candidate.

#### **Competence Index (modified)** (Appendix D)

A competence index, developed by Biernat & Sesko (2013), was used to evaluate perceived competence of the candidate (e.g., ineffective – effective). This index consists of eight attributes that each lie on a continuum, which the participant rated on a seven-point scale ranging from one extreme of the attribute (1) to the other (7). The index has had acceptable reliability in the past ( $\alpha=.76$ ) (Biernat & Sesko, 2013). The scale also had acceptable reliability in this study ( $\alpha=.85$ ). Participants evaluated the candidate on this scale and scores from this were used to assess the amount of agentic deficiency backlash (task backlash) they directed towards the candidate.

#### **Hireability Scale (modified)** (Appendix E)

The Hireability Scale (Madera, Hebl & Martin, 2009) is a four-item measure evaluating the hireability potential of a target individual (e.g., “How likely would you be willing to hire this candidate”). Participants rated targets on a 9-point scale ranging from “Not at all” (1) to “Very much” (9). The original scale was formatted for an academic position, so items were altered to more appropriately apply to a bank managerial position. The scale has a high reliability score ( $\alpha=.99$ ) (Madera, Hebl & Martin, 2009). The scale also had acceptable reliability in this study ( $\alpha=.89$ ). Participants evaluated the candidate on this scale and scores were used to assess how likely this candidate is to be hired for this position by the participants, as well as a measure of general backlash.

### **Career Mobility Index** (Appendix F)

This variable was measured by a straightforward query, which asked the participant how likely it was that the participant be eligible for promotions in the course of their tenure at this particular company. Participants were asked to respond by choosing from options that ranged from “Extremely unlikely” to “Extremely likely”. This score was used to evaluate the perceived professional potential of the candidate, as well as general backlash.

### **Salary Estimation** (Appendix G)

An estimation of appropriate salary was gathered based on a similar item in Biernat and Sesko’s recent study (2013). Here participants were asked to select what they thought was an appropriate starting salary for the candidate if they were to get the job. The options ranged from \$35,000 to \$85,000, with \$10,000 increments and therefore consisted of six options for the participant to select from. Participants ratings on this scale were used to assess the monetary value they had assigned to the candidate, as well as a measure of general backlash.

### **Communal/Agentic Attributes** (Appendix H)

This index (Madera, Hebl & Martin, 2009) was administered at the end of the study. It is a 22-item index that was used to ensure that the female candidate was being perceived as agentic and to reinforce the strength of the manipulation. Participants were asked the extent to which the candidate appeared to embody each listed adjective on a 9-point scale ranging from “Not at all” (1) to “Very much” (9). The index includes twelve communal adjectives and ten agentic adjectives. The scale had acceptable reliability in this study ( $\alpha=.85$ ).

### **Race Perception** (Appendix I)

This single-item measure was used as a manipulation check to ensure that each candidate was perceived as the intended race. The name of the candidate was used as an indicator of

candidate race, and the names were pretested to ensure their accuracy as stereotypically identifiable names for each racial group. Once they had completed the evaluation portion of the study, participants were asked to choose the race of the candidate they evaluated from a list of races which contained only the four races of the candidates in the study.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

### Manipulation Checks

The Communal/Agentic Attributes index (Madera, Hebl & Martin, 2009), the Race Perception query, and directive response questions within the evaluation measures were used as manipulation checks. There was no significant difference between the communal  $F(3,123) = .772, p = .512$ , and agentic attribute ratings  $F(3,123) = .1366, p = .256$ , despite pretest data which indicated that the candidates were perceived as significantly more agentic. Results indicated that 37.0% of participants (47 participants) failed the race perception query and 15.7% of participants (20 people) failed to correctly respond to the directive response questions. Overall, 44.1% of participants (56 participants) failed one or more of the manipulation and attention checks.

### General Results

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted in order to investigate the effect of race on the multiple dependent measures (general backlash, agentic deficiency backlash, agentic penalty backlash) simultaneously.

#### General Backlash

In order to investigate the effect race had on the emergence of general backlash towards the candidates the scores from multiple measures (Likability, Competence, Hireability, Career Mobility) were standardized and aggregated. There were no significant differences seen among the candidates, indicating a lack of racial impact, (Black candidate,  $M = .08$ , White candidate,  $M = .12$ , Latina candidate,  $M = -.05$ , Asian candidate,  $M = .05$ ),  $F(3, 123) = .166, p = .919$ . The salary estimation measure was excluded from the aggregated measure of general backlash due to a lack of significant correlation with the other measures of backlash.

### **Agentic Deficiency Backlash**

In order to investigate whether Black and Latina women receive higher amounts of agentic deficiency backlash the competence scores were compared for each candidate. It was expected that these candidates would have lower competence scores than White and Asian women, but results indicated no significant effect, (Black candidate,  $M = 5.75$ , White candidate,  $M = 5.72$ , Latina candidate,  $M = 5.75$ , Asian candidate,  $M = 5.94$ ),  $F(3, 123) = .389, p = .761$ .

### **Agentic Penalty Backlash**

In order to investigate whether White and Asian women receive higher amounts of agentic penalty backlash the likability scores were compared for all four candidates. Low scores were expected for both groups of women when compared to Black and Latina candidates, but the results from the MANOVA indicated no significant differences among the candidates, (Black candidate,  $M = 4.53$ , White candidate,  $M = 4.54$ , Latina candidate,  $M = 4.75$ , Asian candidate,  $M = 4.78$ ),  $F(3, 123) = .664, p = .576$ .

Figure 1: Dependent Measure Means

<b>Race</b>	<b>General Backlash</b>	<b>Competence</b>	<b>Likability</b>
Black	0.08	5.75	4.53
White	0.12	5.72	4.54
Latina	-0.05	5.75	4.75
Asian	0.05	5.94	4.78

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the different experiences that professional women may have in the workplace due to their race and their behavior. Backlash towards women who display agency in their work environment has been previously documented multiple times by many different researchers (Rosette et al., 2016; Rudman & Phelan, 2008; Rudman, 1998; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010), and this study was designed to further this research by taking an intersectional approach to the issue. Backlash stems from expected behavioral profiles, and since these profiles are different for women of different races, it was expected that the amount and type of backlash received by each group would also differ. Specifically, it was expected that, based upon these different stereotype profiles for each group of women, a hierarchical pattern would emerge, with White women receiving the lowest amount of general backlash, then in increasing amounts Asian, Black and Latina women would follow. Also, expanding upon previous research, White and Asian women, due to their more communal stereotypes, were anticipated to receive agentic penalty backlash, whereas Black and Latina women, due to their more agentic stereotypes, would receive agentic deficiency backlash. Results did not support these predictions. However, the line of inquiry addressed within this study remains important because it directs attention to some of the underlying issues in the larger societal context many of the workplace problems of inequality stem from. Although this study failed to support the given hypotheses, it is believed that certain factors inhibited the true effect of the manipulations from being detected. The purpose and goal behind the research is still relevant despite the limitations of the current study, and ways to remedy some of present issues in order to conduct more fruitful future attempts will be discussed.

One factor that requires mentioning is that of the manipulation checks that were included in the study. The first of these was the Communal/Agentic Attributes index (Madera, Hebl & Martin, 2009). This measure was included in order to ensure that the candidates in the study were being perceived as agentic as opposed to communal. When pretested, the candidate behavior was significantly rated as agentic; however, there was no significant difference in the attribute ratings for candidates in this study, indicating that there was most likely a lack of attention to the candidate materials throughout the study. In order for backlash to occur, it is necessary that a target woman is seen as deviating from her expected behavior norm; since these women were not viewed as agentic, the likelihood that backlash would be directed at them was small, and therefore a crucial component of the manipulation was not able to be tested.

The second manipulation check was a race query, for which the participants needed to identify from a given list the race of the candidate they evaluated. Race was indicated by the candidate names, all of which were pretested and successfully identified as the correct intended race; however, 37.0% of participants also failed this manipulation check. Therefore, the effect of race, another fundamental factor of the study, was not able to be properly investigated.

These results indicate that the research questions of this study were perhaps not given a fair test: a significant amount of the participants failed one or more of the included manipulation checks which suggests that they were not paying full attention to the study. Steps were taken to ensure that participants read and absorbed the material, such as timing mechanisms on each page, as well as check questions throughout the measures (15.7% of participants also failed these). Given the null results, it is likely that the manipulation failed to have the desired effect because of the lack of participant attention, and the validity of the results and their impact on the larger theoretical basis behind the study is then called into question.

The results from this study deviate from trends in previous research, however, these results lack weight due to the participants' inability to pass many of the manipulation and attention checks. Previous findings from multiple studies have indicated that there exist different behavioral expectations for women of different racial groups (Rosette et al., 2016; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010), again supporting the rationale that participants failed to pay due attention to the conditions and manipulations of the study. As laid out previously, backlash stems from a divergence of individually enacted behavior from that of expected behavior (Rudman, 1998). Following from this, the differences in each groups' expected behavior profile should have caused different backlash reactions; however, this was not the case with the present subject pool.

Another contributing factor could be generational and cultural differences; the past few years has seen a rapid change in society and a rise of strong women. This change could perhaps have changed this predominantly young generations outlook about how a woman should act from which the current participant pool was drawn. If these young people believe that women should be acting dominantly and that this is a normal behavioral pattern then there will be a lack of a negative backlash reaction. This is an area that could be further explored in future studies in order to see if there are generational differences that emerge.

There were significant limitations to the current study that could potentially help to explain the divergence from the expected results. The failed attention checks have been described and a strong argument regarding a lack of participant attention stems from these results. Additionally, even with the time constraints put in place, many of the participant cases were just over the minimum time constraint, indicating the participants advanced through the study as fast as possible. The overall lack of impact that the manipulation had was a major limitation of the current study. There was an attempt to prevent this by adding the previously

mentioned timing mechanisms and attention checks; however, it appears that they did little to cause participants to pay more attention or succumb to the manipulations more effectively.

In the future, I believe that it would be more informative to administer the study to a group of actual hiring managers or even just employees in a professional workplace. Due to their higher skill set in the area of hiring personnel, experience in the field, and motivation to take the manipulation more seriously, it is likely that clear, significant differences would emerge among the ways in which the groups of women are treated. Results would more likely imitate those shown in previous studies where different expectations were shown for women of different racial groups (Rosette et al., 2016), and new results would follow from these expectations regarding the specifics of agentic deficiency and agential penalty backlash. This would remedy the major limitation of unmotivated participants, and hopefully address the research question more effectively with a more applicable and practical participant pool. Overall, the theoretical implications of this study are minimal; as there were no significant results it is difficult to assume any real knowledge was gained, apart from ways to administer the study more effectively.

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## Appendix A: Position Qualifications

Job Position: Corporate Bank Manager

### Responsibilities:

Meeting with and interviewing corporate and personal customers, discussing their financial requirements, and providing appropriate financial advice

Advising corporate clients about mergers, acquisitions, capital markets etc.

Planning and problem solving

Managing projects

Training and supervising junior banking staff

### Following are the minimum job requirements for this position:

5 or more years of experience

Bachelor's Degree

Experience leading, motivating, coaching, training a team to meet performance objectives

Effectively manage time and competing priorities in a professional environment

Good communication skills including speaking clearly, succinctly, and accurately while using a pleasant tone and common conversational courtesies

Strong interpersonal skills with the ability to interact with all levels of an organization

Solid understanding of operating regulations

Self-starter, dependable, flexible

## Appendix A1: Names of Candidate Women

White: Kristen Sullivan

Black: Latoya Jones

Asian: Min Chang

Latina: Maria Hernandez

## Appendix B: Candidate Application Materials

Name:

Years of experience in the banking industry: 5 years

College GPA: 3.6

Where do you see yourself in 5 years?

In five years, I would like to have been promoted and be working in the corporate branch of this bank. I would like to have significantly more responsibilities and play a larger role in this company. But, for now, I would like to learn as much as I can from this position. Being the regional manager will allow me to cultivate my professional skills, as well as learn how to manage and work with a larger number of people. I hope that what I learn in this position will help me to grow into a potential candidate for future promotional positions.

What is your expected salary?

I would like to hear the company's first offer, but I am prepared to negotiate until we come to an agreement where I am compensated fairly for my skills and abilities.

Describe how you managed a problem employee in the past.

I once had an employee who became a source of conflict in the office. He would not cooperate with other employees when they were working on a project together, or participate in any team building or morale-boosting activities that the branch had organized. His work performance was also below average, and I didn't see the point of keeping him as an employee if he wasn't effectively contributing. Despite the many times I tried to make him improve, he never did. I became extremely frustrated with this employee after many discussions with him about both his project performance and his

social interactions. I eventually let him go after a rather loud altercation. I was quite angry and stern with him, which was what I believe the situation called for.

What are some of your strengths?

I would say that biggest strength is my extensive knowledge of this company and the larger banking industry. I know how to implement programs to increase sales and smooth customer service relationships. I am very comfortable problem solving when it comes to project and personnel issues. I can use all of these skills and my knowledge to help better this company and flourish in this position.

What are some of your weaknesses?

Honestly, my biggest weakness is that I'm a perfectionist. I always want the things I do, as well as the projects my subordinates and coworkers produce, to be the absolute best they can be. Because of this, I can be a little pushy in order to make sure that everyone is doing their best work. However, I think that this helps me and those around me to fulfill our potential and represent the company well.

Appendix C: Likability Scale (Reysen, 2005)(modified)

Rate the candidate you evaluated on each following statement.

1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7

Very Strongly Disagree

Very Strongly Agree

1. This person is friendly.
2. This person is likeable.
3. This person is warm.
4. This person is approachable.
5. I would ask this person for advice.
6. I would like this person as a coworker.
7. I would like to share an office space with this person.\*\*
8. I would like to be friends with this person.
9. This person is physically attractive.
10. This person is similar to me.
11. This person is knowledgeable.

Appendix D: Competence Index (Biernat & Sesko, 2013) (modified)

Please rate the candidate on the following attributes.

1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7.....8.....9  
Not at all Very much

1. Incompetent – competent
2. Unproductive – productive
3. Ineffective – effective
4. Not influential – influential\*\*
5. Irresponsible – responsible\*\*
6. Not responsible when handling “the employee” in their example – responsible when handling  
“the employee” in their example\*\*
7. Did not display leadership – displayed leadership
8. Cannot work with other employees – can work with other employees

Appendix E: Hireability Scale (Madera, Hebl & Martin, 2009) (modified)

Please rate the candidate you evaluated on each statement.

1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7.....8.....9  
Not at all Very much

1. How likely would you be willing to hire this candidate?
2. To what extent is this a “top-notch” candidate?
3. Is it likely that this candidate will make an effective manager?
4. How “excellent” is this candidate based on this application?



## Appendix G: Salary Estimation

Please tell us what you think this candidate's starting salary should be, from \$35,000 to \$85,000.

\$35,000

\$45,000

\$55,000

\$65,000

\$75,000

\$85,000

Appendix H: Communal/Agentic Attributes (Madera, Hebl & Martin, 2009)

1.....2.....3.....4.....5.....6.....7.....8.....9  
Not at all Very much

This person appears to be:

Communal Adjectives

1. Affectionate
2. Helpful
3. Kind
4. Sympathetic
5. Sensitive
6. Nurturing
7. Agreeable
8. Tactful
9. Interpersonal
10. Warm
11. Caring
12. Tactful

Agentic adjectives

1. Assertive
2. Confident
3. Aggressive
4. Ambitious
5. Dominant

6. Forceful
7. Independent
8. Daring
9. Outspoken
10. Intellectual

## Appendix I: Race Perception

Of what race was the candidate you evaluated?

White

Black

Latina

Asian

## Appendix J: Demographics

What is your age?

What is your race?

What is your gender?

Do you have any questions/comments/responses to this application assessment?