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Engaging in social rejection may be riskier for women

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ABSTRACT

People often worry how others will perceive them if they socially reject others, but do women have more to fear than men? Although previous research has shown that women are perceived negatively for behaving in counter-stereotypical ways, research on backlash has focused on business settings. The present research applies backlash theory to examine how women are perceived for engaging in social rejection. The findings suggest that backlash may operate differently in social rejection because only men punish women for rejecting. Across four studies, the present research found that (1) women felt they were more likely to be penalized for engaging in social rejection than men, (2) women were less willing to endorse social rejection than men, and (3) men, but not women, viewed female rejectors in a more negative manner than male rejectors.

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If your friend Jamie turned down your invitation to get coffee, how would you feel? Would it matter if Jamie were a man or a woman? Social rejection, the denial of a request for social acceptance or inclusion, is a complicated social interaction involving two parties, a target (i.e., the rejected person), and a rejector (the person committing the act of rejection). Social rejection has the potential for negative consequences for both parties (Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993; Besson, Roloff, & Paulson, 1998; Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004; Folkes, 1982; Leary, 1990; Slavich, Way, Eisenberger, & Taylor, 2010; Tom Tong & Walther, 2010; Williams, 2007; Williams & Nida, 2011), and it may be further complicated by gender dynamics, especially for women. Rejecting another person deviates from female gender norms in two ways: It violates prescriptive stereotypes of warmth for women and violates the prescriptive norm that reserves agentic behavior for men (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). When individuals deviate from the stereotypes of their group, in this case their gender, they may face social consequences, a process termed backlash (Phelan & Rudman, 2010a; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). The present set of studies is the first to examine the question of how gender impacts decisions to socially reject and the consequences of those decisions. Specifically, we hypothesize that women are seen in a more negative light than men when they engage in the same social rejection actions, and because of this, they are less likely than men to socially reject others.

Social rejection is an important interpersonal context for considering gender backlash. That is, social rejection is already fraught with the danger of being disliked. In fact, rejectors are seen in a fairly negative light: individuals view rejectors as being less attractive and having less positive personality traits (Wirth, Sacco, Hugenberg, & Williams, 2010; Zadro, Boland, & Richardson, 2006). Previous research suggests that rejectors often attempt to reject in a way that will minimize hurt feelings while still engaging in impression management. For example, rejectors avoid providing reasons for the social rejection that they think the target will find particularly upsetting (Folkes, 1982). Although individuals will reject those they find disagreeable (Hales, Kassner, Williams, & Graziano, 2016) or burdensome (Wesselmann, Williams, & Wirth, 2014; Wesselmann, Wirth, Pryor,

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Reeder, & Williams, 2013, 2015), engaging in social rejection can actually be a difficult endeavor: It is effortful (Ciarocco, Sommer, & Baumeister, 2001; Williams, Bernieri, Faulkner, Gada-Jain, & Grahe, 2000), can feel immoral (Bastian et al., 2012), and can provoke negative emotions (Legate, DeHaan, Weinstein, & Ryan, 2013). In fact, sometimes individuals will avoid rejecting even when they do not like the target (Joel, Teper, & MacDonald, 2014). Although nearly all rejectors face these impression management concerns, women likely have more to fear than men for engaging in social rejection.

When women reject others, they are behaving in a counter-stereotypical manner. Stereotypes about men and women describe the behaviors and traits that are commonly viewed in each gender, but notably, stereotypes may also serve a prescriptive role. That is, stereotypes form gender rules. For example, people not only believe that women are generally warm (e.g., kind, polite, friendly, likeable), but they *expect* them to be (Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012). Thus, warmth is both descriptive and prescriptive for women. Similarly, being agentic (e.g., self-confident, persuasive, assertive) is both descriptive and prescriptive for men.

The decision to socially reject another person is a form of behavior that is high in agency and low in warmth: the rejector is exercising his or her control in the situation by denying the social request or severing the social tie (Gooley, Zadro, Williams, Svetieva, & Gonsalkorale, 2015; Nezlek, Wesselmann, Wheeler, & Williams, 2015; Sommer, Williams, Ciarocco, & Baumeister, 2001; Zadro & Gonsalkorale, 2014; Zadro, Williams, & Richardson, 2005). Furthermore, rejectors are not perceived as warm—they are seen in a negative light and, in particular, they are seen as cold (Rudert, Reutner, Greifeneder, & Walker, 2017). Thus, when men behave with agency and without warmth by rejecting another person, they are displaying behavior that is consistent with their gender role. However, social rejection is counter-stereotypical for women: They are exercising agency and likely causing pain to another person. Moreover, women are not just deviating from warmth prescriptions when they reject, but also from the belief that women are supposed to put the concerns of others before their own. If male stereotypes are self-oriented (e.g., independent, ambitious, a self-starter), female stereotypes are other-oriented, with the expectations that women will be, among other things, helpful, supportive, cooperative, sensitive to others, and good listeners (Rudman, Moss-Racusin, et al., 2012).

When women break these gender rules by behaving in an agentic way, they often face social or economic penalties (i.e., backlash). A wealth of research has examined female agency in managerial roles, where women are required to behave in a counter-stereotypical way to meet the demands of their professional roles. Studies find that agentic women in leadership roles are viewed as equally competent as agentic men, but the women are consistently disliked (Bowles, Babcock, Lai, Kennedy, & Heinz, 2007; Koch, 2005; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). This general dislike for agentic women mediates the relationship between agency and negative employment-related outcomes (Rudman & Glick, 1999, 2001; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, et al., 2012). That is, people use their negative attitudes toward agentic women to justify rating them poorly or denying them a position or promotion (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004; Rudman & Glick, 2001). Furthermore, research on warmth and competence has shown that women are either perceived as warm or competent, but not both. For instance, homemakers are perceived as high on warmth and low on competence and feminists and career women are perceived as low on warmth and high on competence (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Thus, it is difficult for women to maintain their stereotypical warmth in the eyes of others when they behave in an assertive way.

Despite the consequences assertive women face, research suggests that they are just as capable as men are of behaving with agency. However, women limit their agentic behavior when backlash seems likely (Amanatullah & Morris, 2010; Phelan & Rudman, 2010a). For example, men and women are similarly assertive when negotiating salaries for a third party, but women are less agentic than men when they are asked to advocate for themselves because they expect to be perceived negatively for their deviance from gender norms (Amanatullah & Morris, 2010). In other words, women limit their agentic behavior in order to avoid backlash (e.g., social or economic penalties; Rudman, 1998). Rudman and Fairchild (2004) extended backlash research

by examining gender deviants outside of employment or leadership contexts. In a series of studies, they found that gender deviants (e.g., people who were given false feedback on a gendered knowledge test) were viewed negatively by others and, when given the chance, attempted to hide any evidence of their deviance. Similarly, research shows the same pattern of results for people who deviate from certain stereotypes of their racial group (Phelan & Rudman, 2010b). Taken together, this research demonstrates that when people deviate from prescriptive stereotypes, regardless of the group that they belong to, they are aware that this deviance will likely result in backlash and, if possible, will attempt to hide it. Thus, if women think that rejecting others is likely to elicit backlash, they may avoid engaging in rejection.

Studies that examine gender roles find that people generally dislike others who deviate from the stereotypes of their group, especially if that deviance leads to negative consequences for others (Phelan & Rudman, 2010a; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). However, with the exception of recent work on backlash and the sexual double standard (Conley, Ziegler, & Moors, 2012), published studies on backlash effects almost exclusively examine the consequences of women's agentic behavior in employment scenarios (Heilman, 2012; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). There is currently no research on backlash that examines (a) the impact of gender on social rejection decisions or (b) how people view women who deviate from gender stereotypes by engaging in social rejection. The current set of studies addresses these research questions by merging social rejection methodologies with research on backlash effects for gender deviance for the first time (Rudman, 1998).

An important question in this new line of study is whether male and female perceivers will rate female rejectors similarly. Notably, backlash research consistently finds that male and female perceivers are equally likely to engage in backlash (for reviews see Heilman, 2012; Rudman & Phelan, 2008). That is, men and women are equally likely to engage in backlash against both male and female targets. Implicit gender stereotypes predict backlash (Rudman & Glick, 2001), and men and women tend to hold these automatic stereotypes to the same degree (Greenwald et al., 2002; Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002). Thus, we would not expect that men and women would differ in their views of a woman who rejects others, because they implicitly endorse the same stereotypes from which the woman is deviating. However, some researchers suggest that men and women may have different reasons for engaging in the same behavior (Heilman, 2012), which might lead to a unique pattern of results in the current context. While men may feel that agentic women threaten the gender status quo, women may feel that agentic women threaten their self-esteem through upward social comparison (Parks-Stamm, Heilman, & Hearns, 2008; Rudman & Phelan, 2010). If social comparison processes drive female perceivers' backlash against agentic women, this is not likely to affect women who engage in social rejection. Although rejection is an assertive behavior that may give women power in social situations (Gooley et al., 2015; Nezlek et al., 2015; Sommer et al., 2001; Zadro & Gonsalkorale, 2014; Zadro et al., 2005), it should not threaten a female perceiver's self-esteem. The proposed set of studies will be the first to test this research question. Based on the lack of perceiver gender difference in backlash research more generally, we do not expect to find perceiver gender differences in the current set of studies.

Overview of research and hypotheses

The present set of studies investigate whether men or women believe they will experience gender-related backlash for rejecting, if there is a difference in social rejection rates based on gender, and whether men and women are judged differently for engaging in social rejection. Study 1 tests whether men and women believe that there is gender-related backlash in the context of social rejection. Study 2 then examines whether men and women predict rejecting at different rates. Study 3 examines how people perceive social rejectors based on their assumed gender. Study 4 builds on Study 3 by testing perceptions of rejectors when gender of the rejector is manipulated and explores whether female rejectors are seen more negatively because they are seen as too agentic and not warm enough, as predicted by backlash theory.

The research on backlash effects for counter-stereotypical behavior in other domains (Heilman, 2012; Rudman & Phelan, 2008) suggests several hypotheses. First, women, but not men, will be aware that female rejectors face more backlash than male rejectors (Study 1), as women are often aware of the backlash they face for engaging in counterstereotypical behavior (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004), and men tend to be less aware of sexism than women (Drury & Kaiser, 2014). Second, women (compared to men) should endorse lower rates of social rejection (Study 2): backlash theory predicts that women will be less likely to engage in behavior that deviates from stereotypical prescriptions (Rudman, 1998). Third, female rejectors should be perceived more negatively than male rejectors by both men and women (Study 3). Finally, female rejectors should be seen as too agentic and not warm enough because social rejection is counter-stereotypical for women on both warmth and agency (Study 4). We do not expect participant gender differences in perceptions of female rejectors (Study 3 and Study 4) as previous research most typically finds that male and female perceivers are equally likely to engage in backlash in other domains (Heilman, 2012; Rudman & Phelan, 2008).

Study 1

Study 1 examined how men and women think others will view them if they socially reject others. Using a within-subjects design, Study 1 asked participants to consider how much backlash men and women would each face for rejecting another person. Previous research on backlash has found that women are aware of the potential for backlash (Rudman, 1998). Therefore, women should perceive that they receive more backlash than men.

Methods

Participants

Four hundred sixty-eight participants (226 female, M_{age} = 34.24, SD_{age} = 11.49) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011) completed the experiment in exchange for twenty-five cents. Participants had to have an approval rating of 95% or greater and be in the United States to be eligible for the study. The keywords associated with the study were intentionally broad to avoid biasing the sample: psychology; survey; social; personality. Participants who failed an attention check (n = 20) were not included in analyses leaving a final sample of 448 (219 female, M_{age} = 34.39, SD_{age} = 11.60). The university's Institutional Review Board approved all procedures for Study 1, and informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Procedure

As part of a larger study on social influence and social rejection, participants answered general questions about gender and rejection. Specifically, they were asked the following two questions: (1) To what extent do you think men are penalized (e.g., disliked, called names, viewed negatively) for rejecting other people, and (2) To what extent do you think women are penalized (e.g., disliked, called names, viewed negatively) for rejecting other people? The order of presentation of these two questions was randomized. Participants responded to these questions on a 7-point Likert scale (1: *not at all* to 7: *to a very great extent*).

Results

To investigate the hypothesis that women should be aware that they are especially likely to receive backlash, a 2 (Penalties: to what extent men vs. women face penalties for rejecting) × 2 (Participant Gender) Mixed ANOVA with Penalties as the repeated measure was conducted. There was a main effect of Penalties ($F(1, 444) = 60.31$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.12$, *95% CI* [.48, .81]) such that men are seen as being penalized less (M = 2.90, SD = 1.36) than women (M = 3.55, SD = 1.53) for engaging in rejection. There was no main effect of Participant Gender ($F(1, 444) = 1.43$, $p = .23$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$, *95% CI* [-.34, .08]). As

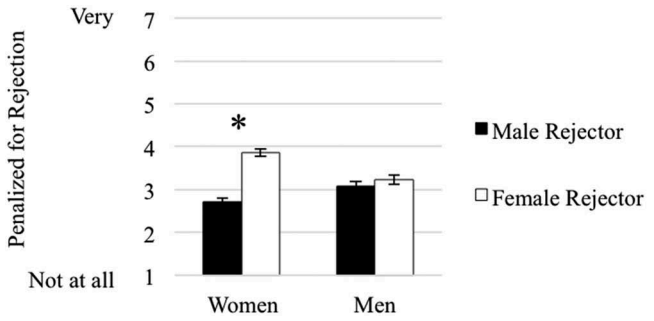

Figure 1. Perceptions of rejectors as a function of gender. In Study 1, female participants felt that female rejectors were more likely to be penalized for rejecting than male rejectors, but male participants did not perceive a difference in penalties based on gender. Error bars denote standard error.

predicted, there was a significant interaction between Penalties and Participant Gender ($F(1, 444) = 36.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$). Bonferroni adjusted simple effects tests found that male participants do not perceive a difference in penalties between male rejectors ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.40$) and female rejectors ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.44$; *Mean Difference* = .15, $p = .22$, *95% CI* [-.09, .37]), but female participants perceive male rejectors ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 1.30$) to be less penalized for rejecting than female rejectors ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.55$; *Mean Difference* = 1.15, $p < .001$, *95% CI* [.92, 1.39]; see Figure 1).

Discussion

As hypothesized, women perceived that they would receive more backlash than men for engaging in social rejection. In other words, women were more likely to agree that women, rather than men, would be penalized for engaging in social rejection. However, male participants did not perceive there to be a difference between the amount of backlash men and women face. That is, men felt that men and women were equally likely to experience penalties for engaging in social rejection. Social rejection is associated with negative outcomes for the target of rejection, as well as the rejector (Baumeister et al., 1993; Folkes, 1982). Because the behavior is generally negative, men may assume it results in negative consequences, regardless of the actor. It is likely that women are more aware of a possible difference based on the gender of the rejector because they are the group that is at a disadvantage in this context.

Study 2

Study 1 examined beliefs about how rejectors are perceived on the basis of their gender. However, attitudes and behaviors do not always align (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977), and therefore it is important to assess whether there is a gender difference in the tendency to engage in social rejection. Study 2 tested whether men and women differentially engage in social rejection. Participants read a vignette in which they were asked to decide whether to reject a friend. As women are penalized for behaving counter-stereotypically and therefore often try to avoid counter-stereotypical behavior (Amanatullah & Morris, 2010; Phelan & Rudman, 2010a), we predicted that women would be less likely to engage in social rejection than men.

Method

Participants

As part of an assignment in a psychology class and a larger study on the language of rejection,[1] 482 students (304 females, $M_{age} = 19.02$, $SD = 2.13$) participated in the study. The university's

Institutional Review Board approved all procedures for Study 2, and informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Procedure

Participants read a scenario in which their social group did not want to admit a new member, but the potential new member (Taylor) is a friend of the participant:

At your job, you go out for lunch with the same four colleagues, Pat, Emily, Michael, and Jennifer, every Friday. Friday is the only day all of you have time to go out, and all of you make it a point to attend the lunch. You really enjoy their company and your weekly lunch with them. Pat, Emily, John, and Jennifer have made it clear that they are not open to including more people at lunch. You also like your colleague Taylor. One day, you get an email from Taylor. Taylor overheard someone talking about your Friday lunches with Pat, Emily, Michael, and Jennifer, and Taylor wants to join. Taylor's email to you:

> Hey!
> I heard that you, Pat, Emily, Michael, and Jennifer all get lunch together on Fridays, and I was wondering if I could join you guys?
> Let me know!
> - Taylor

After reading the scenario, participants answered the following question: How likely would you be to say yes to Taylor? Participants responded to this question on a 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very*) scale.

Results

As predicted, women reported being more likely to say yes to Taylor ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.40$) than men ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.51$; $t(464) = 3.19$, $p = .002$, $d = .30$, 95% CI [.17, .72]). In other words, women were less willing to reject than men.

Discussion

In Study 2, participants were asked to consider a difficult social situation in which they had to choose between rejecting a friend and upsetting a social group. Therefore, participants had to choose between two unpleasant options. Results indicated that women were less likely to agree to reject the friend than men and were therefore more likely to go against the group to avoid having to engage in social rejection.

Study 3

According to backlash theory, women are likely to be perceived more negatively than men for expressing agency or failing to express warmth (Rudman & Phelan, 2008; Williams & Tiedens, 2016). Therefore, it is likely that women are perceived negatively if they reject another person, as rejection is an act of agency that is low on warmth. However, research on backlash has mainly focused on occupational agency and leadership (Heilman et al., 2004; Rudman & Phelan, 2008) where agentic women occupy powerful roles that have traditionally been reserved for men. It is unclear whether these effects are relevant for everyday social interactions such as social rejection, a situation often faced by both men and women. Therefore, Study 3 examined perceived social competence, sincerity, meanness, and hurtfulness of rejectors as a function of their assumed gender. Sincerity, meanness, and hurtfulness were assessed due to their relevance to stereotypical feminine warmth characteristics (Rudman & Glick, 2001; Williams & Best, 1990). Social competence was assessed as a general measure of how the rejector was perceived in the social interaction.

Method

Participants

As part of a larger study on social rejection, 799 participants (329 female; M_{age} = 32.06, SD = 10.16) were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk and compensated 25 cents. Participants had to have an approval rating of 95% or greater and be in the United States to be eligible for the study. As in Study 1, the keywords associated with the study were psychology, survey, social, personality. Two participants did not indicate their sex, one participant did not respond to the question about the rejector's gender, and one participant did not respond to the question about the target's gender. These four participants were not included in analyses, leaving a final sample of 795. The university's Institutional Review Board approved all procedures for Study 3, and informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Procedure

Participants read a short rejection in which Jamie (rejector) informs "Taylor" (target) that they will not be roommates again the following year because Jamie wants to live alone. Participants rated (1: *Not at all* to 7: *Very*) the extent to which Taylor would perceive Jamie to be socially competent, sincere, and mean. Similarly, participants rated hurtfulness of the rejector's actions using two items: "How hurt would Taylor feel?" and "How accepted would Taylor feel?" A composite score of how well the rejector was perceived was calculating by averaging together socially competent, sincere, mean (reverse-scored), hurt feelings (reverse-scored), and accepted feelings (α = .69). A higher score indicated that participants viewed the rejector in a more positive light. Finally, participants were asked whether they thought Jamie was male or female.

Results

There was no difference in assumptions about the rejector's gender based on participant gender (X^2 = 1.04, p = .308). Specifically, of the 467 male participants, 202 thought the rejector was male, and 265 thought the rejector was female. Similarly, of the 328 female participants, 130 thought the rejector was male, and 198 thought the rejector was female. Of the 795 participants, 75.8% of the participants assumed that the rejector and target were the same gender, while 24.2% assumed that they were different genders.

Men who perceived the rejector as female viewed her more negatively than men who perceived the rejector as male; female participants viewed all rejectors in an equally negative light. A 2 (Participant Gender) × 2 (Rejector's Perceived Gender) ANOVA predicting the composite score of how well the rejector was perceived found a main effect of Rejector's Perceived Gender (Male [M = 4.24, SD = .88]; Female [M = 4.07, SD = .88], $F(1, 791) = 4.58$, p = .033, η_p^2 = .006, *95% CI* [.01, .26]), but no main effect of Participant Gender: $F(1, 791)$ = .37, p = .61, η_p^2 = 0, 95% CI [-.09, .16]). The main effect of Perceived Gender was qualified by a significant interaction with Participant Gender ($F(1, 791)$ = 7.09, p = .008, η_p^2 = .009; see Figure 2). Bonferroni adjusted simple effects tests found that male participants viewed a male rejector in a more positive light (M = 4.32, SD = .84) than a female rejector (M = 4.01, SD = .84); *Mean Difference* = .31, $p < .001$, *95% CI* [.15 to .47], but female participants did not differentiate between a male rejector (M = 4.11, SD = .93) and a female rejector (M = 4.15, SD = .92); *Mean Difference* = .03, p = .73, 95% CI [-.16, .23].

Discussion

The results of Study 3 suggest that men are engaging in the backlash toward female rejectors, but women do not penalize female rejectors in a significantly different manner than male rejectors. In other words, men view women who reject more poorly than men who reject, but women do not differentiate based on gender. The findings raise the possibility that the interpersonal domain of social rejection may differ from the workplace in terms of backlash.

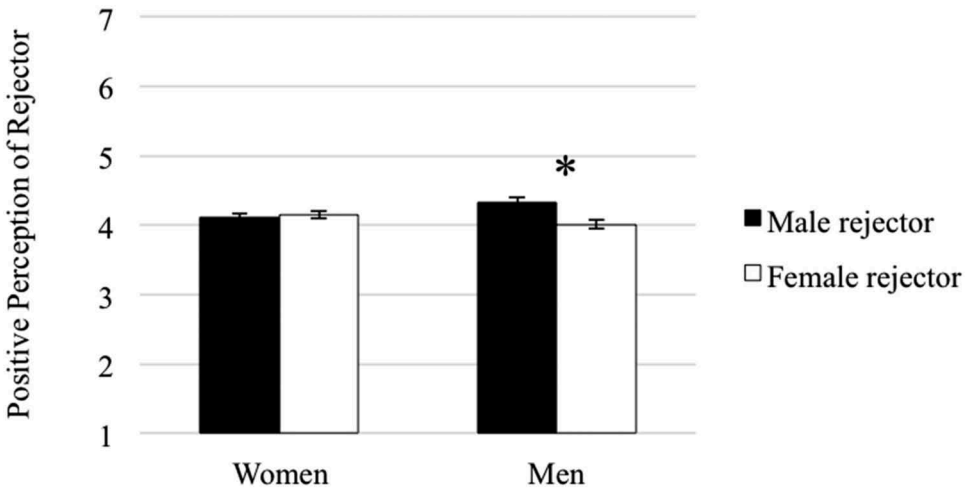

Figure 2. Perceptions of rejectors as function of gender. In Study 3, male participants perceived male rejectors more positively than female rejectors, but female participants did not differentiate based on gender. Error bars denote standard error.

Study 4

Study 3 found support for the hypothesis that when men assume a rejector is a woman, they view the rejector more negatively than when they assume a rejector is a man. However, a limitation of Study 3 was that rejector gender was measured rather than manipulated, and therefore causality could not be determined. Therefore, Study 4 was conducted as a replication of Study 3 with three important methodological differences. First, the gender of the rejector was experimentally manipulated instead of measured. Second, Study 4 measured gender stereotypes of agency and warmth—that is, indices common in other backlash research (Rudman, Moss-Racusin, et al., 2012). Women are generally expected to exhibit less agency and greater warmth (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Study 4 tested whether women rejectors are seen as too agentic or insufficiently warm. Finally, to measure participants' awareness of backlash, we asked them how they thought people would view them if they engaged in the same social rejection behavior.

Methods

Participants

Four hundred thirty-seven participants (203 female, M_{age} = 33.30, SD_{age} = 11.01) from Amazon's Mechanical Turk completed the experiment in exchange for 25 cents. Participants had to have an approval rating of 95% or greater and be in the United States to be eligible for the study. As in Studies 1 and 3, the keywords associated with the study were psychology; survey; social; personality. Participants who failed an attention check (n = 23) or did not indicate gender (n = 1) were not included in analyses leaving a final sample of 413 (194 female, M_{age} = 33.52, SD_{age} = 11.01). The university's Institutional Review Board approved all procedures for Study 4, and informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Procedure

After providing consent and demographic information, participants were randomly assigned to read a description of a rejection between two female roommates or two male roommates. In both cases, the rejector was named Jordan. The social rejection read as follows:

> Jordan has been living with his [her] roommate Mark [Mary] for a year. Jordan has decided that he [she] no longer wants to live with Mark [Mary]. One day Mark [Mary] asks Jordan to live together again the next year. Jordan says no to Mark's request and tells him [her] that he [she] does not want to live with him [her] again.

Participants then rated Jordan (the rejector) on a randomized list of traits related to agency (assertive, high self-esteem, independent, ambitious, intelligent, competitive, self-starter) and warmth (warm, sensitive to the needs of others, cheerful, enthusiastic, cooperative, friendly, polite; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, et al., 2012) on a (1: *not at all* to 7: *very*) scale. Average scores were calculated for the agency and warmth indices.

Participants were also asked how positively they would be viewed if they acted like the rejector and how negatively they would be viewed if they acted like the rejector.

Results

Warmth

Although women are typically rated as warmer than men in general (Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, et al., 2012), female rejectors may lose this "warmth advantage" in the eyes of male observers. A 2 (Participant Gender) × 2 (Rejector's Gender) ANOVA predicting warmth found no main effects of Participant Gender ($F(1, 409) = .59$, $p = .44$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$, *95% CI* [-.12, .27]) or Rejector's Gender ($F(1, 409) = .63$, $p = .43$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$, *95% CI* [-.28, .12]) As predicted, there was a significant interaction of Participant Gender and Rejector's Gender on perceived warmth ($F(1, 409) = 4.73$, $p = .03$, $\eta_p^2 = .011$; see Figure 3). Bonferroni adjusted simple effects tests found that, consistent with female stereotypes of warmth, female participants viewed the female rejector ($M = 3.34$, $SD = .99$) as warmer than the male rejector ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.03$; *Mean Difference* = .30, $p = .04$, *95% CI* [.01, .59]. However, in contrast to previous research in other domains (Heilman, 2012; Rudman & Phelan, 2008), male participants do not differentiate the warmth of the rejector as a function of gender (female rejector ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.04$); male rejector ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.02$); *Mean Difference* = .14, $p = .31$, *95% CI* [-.13, .41].

Agency

The gender of the rejector did not significantly affect perceptions of agency. A 2 (Participant Gender) × 2 (Rejector's Gender) ANOVA predicting Agency found a main effect of Participant Gender on agency ($F(1, 409) = 6.09$, $p = .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .015$, *95% CI* [.05, .41]) such that female participants saw the rejector as more agentic ($M = 4.71$, $SD = .92$) than male participants ($M = 4.47$, $SD = .96$) regardless of the rejector's gender. There was no main effect of Rejector's Gender on Agency ($F(1, 409) = 1.74$, $p = .19$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$, *95% CI* [-.30, .06]) and no interaction between Participant Gender and Rejector's Gender on Agency ($F(1, 409) = .50$, $p = .48$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$).

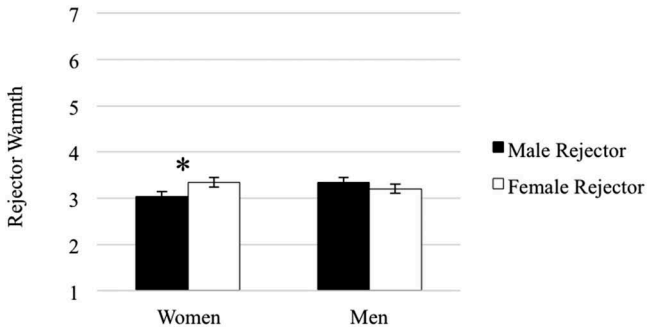

Figure 3. Perceptions of rejectors' warmth. In Study 4, female participants viewed female rejectors as warmer than male rejectors, but male participants did not differentiate based on gender.

Meta-perceptions of rejection behavior

Participants who read a scenario with a male rejector believed the rejector would experience less negative reaction than if they read a scenario with a female rejector. A 2 (Participant Gender) × 2 (Rejector's Gender) ANOVA predicting expected negative perceptions found a main effect of Rejector's Gender ($F(1, 409) = 4.94$, $p = .03$, $\eta_p^2 = .012$, *95% CI* [.03, .56]) such that people felt they would be viewed less negatively for acting like a male rejector ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 1.36$) than people who imagined themselves as a female rejector ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 1.34$). The main effect of Participant Gender ($F(1, 409) = .62$, $p = .43$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$, *95% CI* [-.37, .16]) and the interaction of Participant Gender and Rejector's Gender ($F(1, 409) = .05$, $p = .82$, $\eta_p^2 = 0$) were not significant.

A 2 (Participant Gender) × 2 (Rejector Gender) ANOVA on expected positive perceptions found no significant difference in how participants expected to be viewed based on Participant Gender ($F(1, 409) = 1.39$, $p = .24$, $\eta_p^2 = .003$, *95% CI* [-.10, .41]), Rejector's Gender ($F(1, 409) = .07$, $p = .80$, $\eta_p^2 = 0$, *95% CI* [-.22, .29]) or their interaction ($F(1, 409) = .01$, $p = .95$, $\eta_p^2 = 0$).

Discussion

Although Study 4 found a null result for men's perceptions of male versus female rejectors, it is possible that the lack of a difference in perceptions may be due to backlash. Furthermore, Study 4 found support for the idea that, in contrast to other domains where women are generally seen as warmer than men (Prentice & Carranza, 2002), women may lose that heightened warmth perception when men are evaluating them as rejectors. Finally, Study 4 found that participants expect to be perceived more negatively for behaving like the rejector when the rejector was a woman.

General discussion

The present research demonstrated that women (1) believe that they will be penalized more than men for engaging in social rejection, (2) are less willing to engage in social rejection than men, and (3) are seen in a more negative light by men when they engage in social rejection. In contrast to the wealth of research on the backlash effect (Heilman, 2012; Rudman & Phelan, 2008), backlash for engaging in social rejection seems to be driven by men rather than by both genders. It is therefore important to consider what aspects of rejection lead to differential treatment of female rejectors by men and women.

One explanation for the differential perceptions of rejections based on gender is that being viewed as socially competent, sincere, and kind is in line with warmth stereotypes for women, and when women engage in rejection and defy this stereotype, they are penalized. Previous research on gender stereotypes consistently finds that women are perceived as more warm and sincere than men (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). However, the current set of studies found that men either viewed a female rejector as less kind and sincere than men (Study 3) or not significantly different in warmth (Study 4). Interpretation of a null result (Study 4) is difficult, but it is possible that women are losing their warmth advantage because men are expected to engage in assertive and potentially hurtful acts such as rejection, whereas women are not. If that were the case, the overall perception of men may already include that assumption, and after rejection the perception may not change. However, if women engage in social rejection, they are violating multiple assumptions, and their reputations may take a larger hit.

Unlike other domains of backlash, within the context of social rejection, only men are driving the negative reactions toward women who reject. In the majority of the backlash literature, both men and women view agentic women as cold and penalize them (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). It will be important for future research to consider why social rejection elicits a different pattern of backlash. The finding that men are driving the backlash in the present research also dovetails with another interpersonal context: work on the sexual double standard. Men, but not women, support the idea that women should be penalized for engaging in sexual behavior, while men's sexual behavior should

be accepted or rewarded (Allison & Risman, 2013; Rudman, Fetterolf, & Sanchez, 2012; Sakaluk & Milhausen, 2012). Because women are supposed to be wholesome and avoid promiscuity, overtly sexual behavior is counter-stereotypical for women (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Thus, in both cases (social rejection and sexual behavior), men are penalizing women who deviate from social stereotypes in interpersonal interactions.

Another possibility is that engaging in social rejection is a weaker situation than the workplace (Mischel, 1977), and the differences between the strength of these two situations drive the difference in backlash. That is, backlash may operate differently depending on the strength of the social context. For example, the workplace is a strong situation in which there are clear rules, norms, and scripts that individuals follow and expect others to follow. In strong situations, individuals are more likely to behave in ways that are guided by the situation itself (Mischel, 1977). Whereas being on the receiving end of social rejection is a strong situation (McDonald & Donnellan, 2012), instances of engaging in social rejection represent a much weaker situation: would-be rejectors are scriptless (Baumeister et al., 1993). In other words, unlike in a workplace where there are known ways to interact and to communicate, social rejection lacks those norms and cues. A key issue with social rejection is that any potential scripts have become clichés and are therefore perceived as insincere (Baumeister et al., 1993). For example, if a rejector wants to end a romantic relationship and says that he or she just wants to be friends, the rejection will likely be perceived poorly because just wanting to be friends is a cliché. Thus, social rejections may have weaker situational influences due to a lack of agreed-upon social norms that rejectors and targets can reference.

If women are receiving backlash for engaging in social rejection, they may face an intractable interpersonal situation when rejection needs to occur. On the one hand, avoiding rejection may allow women to escape backlash, but on the other hand, avoiding rejection may cause unpleasant psychological and social consequences. In other words, women may experience stress that cannot be easily alleviated when social rejection is involved: By continuing to interact with a disliked other, they may feel stressed, but by rejecting they may be unfairly penalized by not only the target of the rejection but also onlookers. For example, if a woman wants to reject someone but is worried about the consequences, her self-regulatory abilities may be compromised. However, if the woman does engage in social rejection, she may face even more consequences than the target thinking negatively of her. For instance, if women fear and avoid rejection, the entire process may be worse for both parties: targets state that the worst rejection is the one that is never received (Baumeister et al., 1993; Brown, 1993). That is, when people ostracize others (i.e., use the silent treatment, ignore them), targets are more upset than when people engage in explicit rejection. In fact, even providing a small amount of inclusion or acknowledgment can soften the blow of ostracism for the target (Rudert, Hales, Greifeneder, & Williams, 2017). Furthermore, young women regularly face rejecting unwanted sexual advances or distancing themselves from negative relationships. The added barrier of being seen in a more negative light for rejecting may complicate social situations that are already rife with difficulty and confusion.

The present research also sheds light on an understudied aspect of social rejection: characteristics of source of rejection. Although recent research has highlighted the importance of considering sources of rejection (Grahe, 2015; Zadro & Gonsalkorale, 2014), the individual characteristics that are associated with being more willing to engage in social rejection have not been explored. Based on the present research, individuals who feel that they are less likely to be penalized for engaging in rejection may be more willing to do so. For example, beyond gender, individuals who have received positive feedback for behaving assertively may be more willing to reject than those who have been penalized for assertiveness.

Limitations and future directions

Most backlash studies examine views of agentic men and women by providing scenarios of male and female targets engaging in identical agentic behavior. The present research followed this method. As

the present research represents the first examination of backlash within the domain of social rejection, it was important to use consistent methodology. However, in the future, researchers should consider how to incorporate behavioral methods into the study of backlash within social rejection. For example, we found in the present research that women express more reluctance to reject than men (Study 2), but does this translate to gender differences in in-person rejection behavior? Based on the present research, we would expect to see women reject less than men in in-person studies if the potential rejectors know that others will be aware of their rejection, but not if there would be a way to reject such that no one would know the identity of the rejector. Prior research on ostracism also suggests that women may need more of a reason to engage in social exclusion. For example, women are more likely than men to engage in ostracism, specifically as a response to another person's negative behavior. In contrast, men are more likely than women to engage in ostracism due to an internal reason (Nezlek et al., 2015). As researchers continue to examine the role of gender in perceptions of rejectors, one paradigm that may be particularly useful for measuring behavior is the burdensome group member paradigm (Wesselmann et al., 2015). By testing willingness to ostracize a burdensome group member and others' perceptions of that decision, researchers can gain a more complete picture of how gender affects perceptions of rejectors.

Another limitation of the present research is that the measures used for backlash were fairly brief and may not fully capture the entirety of the backlash process. For example, as mentioned above, in-person rejection behavior was not included as a measure, and participants in Study 1 were asked only about their perceptions of backlash. As researchers continue to examine the phenomenon of backlash in social rejection, it will be important to develop measures that can specifically target how men and women may be differentially treated when engaging in the same acts of social rejection. In addition, an open question for future research is whether the patterns observed in the present research apply to non-social rejections (e.g., firing an employee, rejecting a job candidate, rejecting a manuscript). It is also important to note that in the present research, we used a set of studies to establish a causal chain rather than using mediational analyses within one study as per recent recommendations (Spencer, Zanna, & Fong, 2005). However, it will be important for future research to test the relationship between perceptions of women rejectors and women's willingness to reject using other mediation techniques (MacKinnon & Pirlott, 2015). In the present research, we found that (1) women expect women to receive backlash, (2) women are more reluctant to indicate they would reject, (3) men view female rejectors more negatively than male rejectors, and (4) both men and women think they would be seen in a more negative light if they behaved like a female rejector versus a male rejector. Taken together, these pieces of the causal chain suggest that women are concerned they will receive backlash and that this concern is based on the way female rejectors are perceived.

The studies in the present research were designed to approach backlash in social rejection in multiple ways to provide a fuller picture of the phenomenon, yet it is possible that the studies may show different patterns of results because of some of these differences. For example, in Study 3, only male participants thought more poorly of female rejectors than male rejectors, whereas in Study 4, both male and female participants thought they would be judged more harshly if they had behaved as female rejectors. In Study 3, participants assumed gender of the rejectors, and rejector gender was assigned in Study 4. Furthermore, in Study 3, participants were asked to judge a rejector and in Study 4, participants were asked to think about themselves as rejectors. These methodological differences may account for the different pattern of findings; however, in both cases, female rejectors are viewed more negatively than male rejectors, which is the crux of the backlash effect.

The present set of studies set the stage for a number of new questions to consider about how gender shapes rejection. For example, the current set of studies raises the question of how the backlash against female rejectors may be related to the degree of hurt experienced by the target. Study 3 found that people believe the target of the rejection would be more hurt if rejected by a woman. Future research can consider whether targets of rejection actually do feel worse if the

rejector was a woman. On the one hand, it is possible that targets of rejection feel negatively about the situation regardless of the rejector's gender because it is such an aversive experience (Leary, 1990; Williams, 2007; Williams & Nida, 2011). For example, although relational aggression is distinct from social rejection in that it is often motivated by a desire for dominance, individuals who behave in a relationally aggressive manner are seen negatively by others regardless of their gender (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). However, it is also possible that rejections by women could feel worse because female rejectors are viewed as unkind and less socially competent than male rejectors.

Furthermore, it is notable the present studies found evidence that only women perceive a difference in penalties based on gender (Study 1). Men did not perceive differences in penalties as a function of gender despite evidence from Studies 3 and 4 that men drive the increased penalties for women. It will be important for future research to examine if making men aware of gender-based penalties can decrease backlash or if knowledge about penalties is not sufficient for changing behavior.

The present research also points to the importance of examining backlash in a variety of domains. For example, romantic rejection involves the potential for backlash but also carries with it stereotypes and expectations related to sexuality. Therefore, one key line of inquiry related to backlash in romantic rejections is whether backlash will be limited to men in opposite-sex relationships or whether sexuality impacts backlash. In other words, by understanding more about backlash in the context of romantic rejection, research on backlash can be expanded from only considered gender stereotypes to also considering stereotypes based on sexuality.

Finally, the present research does not address whether there are moderators of the backlash effect in social rejection. Prior research on backlash in employment settings has found that the way a job description is phrased can moderate backlash (Rudman & Glick, 1999, 2001). For example, women presented as agentic are less likely to receive a job if that job is described in a feminine way (Rudman & Glick, 2001). Similarly, women are more likely to penalize successful women when they feel threatened in their work environment compared to when they feel confident (Parks-Stamm et al., 2008). In social rejection, context can also play a key role in gender differences. For example, although women have been shown to respond to ostracism with working harder and men with social loafing (K. D. Williams & Sommer, 1997), newer research suggests that the gender differences in responses to ostracism were based on status, not gender (Bozin & Yoder, 2008). However, research on physiological stress responses has shown that women have a larger cortisol response to being socially rejected than men, whereas men display a larger response to an achievement-oriented challenge (Stroud, Salovey, & Epel, 2002). As such, when considering backlash for social rejection, the context of the situation may be important for whether women receive backlash. For instance, some of the negative effects of social exclusion can be ameliorated by even mere acknowledgement (Rudert et al., 2017). Thus, if the rejector is able to convey some level of inclusion with the social rejection, perhaps by explicitly rejecting rather than ostracizing (Freedman, Williams, & Beer, 2016), she may be seen in a less negative light. It will therefore be important for future research on gender and social rejection to consider the language of social rejection and how linguistic choices that can encourage or diminish a sense of inclusion affect perceptions of male and female rejectors.

Conclusion

In sum, the present research examines gender-related backlash in a novel domain: social rejection. The cold nature of social rejection presents a special problem for women who are penalized for behaving in counter-stereotypical ways. Future research should continue to examine how gender may impact both sides of social rejection, how backlash may occur in everyday interpersonal interactions, and whether there are multiple domains in which backlash is perpetrated by only one gender.

Notes

1. Results from the larger study regarding language and rejection are presented in Freedman, Burgoon, Ferrell, Pennebaker, and Beer (2017).

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