

Sisters at Arms: A Theory of Female Same-Sex Conflict and Its Problematization in Organizations

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The narrative surrounding the nature of relationships and interactions between and among women at work is decidedly negative, which is evident in the coverage that female competition and the queen bee syndrome receive in the media, nonfiction books, and the management and psychology literatures. In the current article, we propose a two-stage theory that is grounded in gender stereotyping to account for this narrative. In the first stage, we draw from theories of social comparison and in-group distancing to offer plausible reasons for why women's same-sex relationships at work might be more fraught with interpersonal conflict than men's. In the second stage, we set aside consideration of possible gender differences in same-sex conflict frequency and draw from attribution theory to propose that female same-sex conflict is more problematized by third parties than male same-sex conflict, which could produce the exaggerated perception that women have more dysfunctional same-sex workplace relationships than men. Implications for future research and gender equality in organizations are discussed.

Keywords: workplace conflict; social comparison theory; attribution theory; intrasexual competition; the queen bee syndrome

When Marissa Mayer, CEO of Yahoo! and new mother, made the decision to eliminate Yahoo!'s work-from-home policy in 2013, the media was quick to criticize her decision as undermining the interests of fellow mothers in her organization. The concern was that

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Mayer's decision would deprive employees—especially female employees—of the flexibility necessary for career advancement (Bamberger, 2013; Rochman, 2013). Though Yahoo! was not the first company in recent years to scale back on telecommuting (Silverman, 2013), its CEO was the first to be widely condemned for the decision. The backlash Mayer received is not entirely surprising, however, since even a cursory survey of the popular and business press reveals that the media is quick to shed light on female behavior that is perceived as thwarting the progress of women. Consider an article appearing online on *USA TODAY*, for example, that asked “Do Women Compete in Unhealthy Ways at Work?” (Armour, 2005), or articles appearing in the *Wall Street Journal* and *TIME Business* with headlines like “The Real Reason Women Don’t Help Other Women at Work” (Tennery, 2012) and “When Women Derail Other Women in the Office” (Silverman, 2009).

Curiously, this depiction of women as conniving, unsupportive, and backstabbing contrasts sharply with research demonstrating that adult men and women do not differ significantly in their use of indirect aggression (e.g., gossip, ostracism, social undermining) in organizations (Archer, 2004; Forrest, Eatough, & Shevlin, 2005). In fact, when sex differences are found, it appears that it is *men* who use indirect aggression more than women—at least among adults (Moroschan, Hurd, & Nicoladis, 2009). The female undermining narrative is also challenged by research demonstrating that female leaders are more likely than male leaders to adopt roles as mentors and mainly direct their assistance at other women (Catalyst, 2012b).

Nevertheless, the notion that women have troublesome same-sex workplace relationships has spilled over into the management literature and underlies investigations into the *queen bee syndrome* (Staines, Tavris, & Jayaratne, 1974), which refers to the apparent tendency of women in senior organizational positions to dissociate from members of their own gender and thwart other women's career progression (Derks, Ellemers, Van Laar, & de Groot, 2011; Derks, Van Laar, Ellemers, & de Groot, 2011). Since the introduction of this concept, the queen bee syndrome has been used by various researchers to explain tensions arising between female subordinates and their female supervisors and to account for the negative evaluations and reactions that one elicits from the other (Baumgartner & Schneider, 2010; Cooper, 1997; Ellemers, van den Heuvel, de Gilder, Maass, & Bonvini, 2004; Hersby, Ryan, & Jetten, 2009; V. Johnson & Gurung, 2011; Z. Johnson & Mathur-Helm, 2011).

Notably, there has been an absence of research investigating whether processes similar to the queen bee syndrome occur among men. Although intrasexual competition and conflict among men is acknowledged, it is seldom met with concern or perceived as a symptom of dysfunction. In fact, it is the opposite behavior among men—expressions of male solidarity—that tends to incite rebuke. So-called old boys' clubs are frequently criticized because they prevent the ascension of women and ethnic minorities while maintaining White, male-centered power at the top of organizations (Ibarra, 1992; Kanter, 1977). As such, competitiveness and conflict between men is often dismissed as “boys being boys,” whereas the same behavior among women is seen as dysfunctional. The notion that people have asymmetrical perceptions about conflicts involving men versus women is supported by a study showing that the identical workplace conflict scenario was perceived as having more negative consequences when it involved two women than when it involved two men *or* a man and a woman (Sheppard & Aquino, 2013).

Why might it be that female same-sex conflict is viewed as uniquely problematic by the media, laypeople, and researchers? Is it the case that destructive conflict at work occurs more

commonly among females than among males? Alternatively, is it possible that female same-sex conflict, when it occurs, is simply more salient and negatively evaluated than male same-sex conflict, which then produces the belief that women have more dysfunctional same-sex workplace relationships than men? Perhaps both of these perspectives hold an element of truth.

The purpose of this article is to propose a two-stage theory to guide future research on the topic of female same-sex conflict and offer possible answers to the preceding questions. In the first stage of our theory, we present several defensible reasons for why female same-sex conflict may indeed occur more frequently than male same-sex conflict in the context of organizations. If so, then a bona fide difference in conflict frequency may be the ultimate source of the belief that women have dysfunctional same-sex workplace relationships. In the second stage, we explain how and why third parties' reactions to and interpretations of episodes of female same-sex conflict—regardless of their actual frequency relative to episodes of male same-sex conflict—can also produce and reproduce this belief. We refer to this second-stage process as the *problematization* of female same-sex conflict. Both pathways are possible; therefore, we treat them as complementary rather than competing explanations, although it is possible that future research will show that one pathway is more strongly supported by the data.

The theoretical contribution we make to the management literature is both important and timely. It is important because the increasing attention that the topic of female same-sex conflict/competition at work has received from pundits (Dellasega, 2007; Heim, Murphy, & Golant, 2003; Tanenbaum, 2002) and academic researchers (Duguid, 2011; Ely, 1994; Parks-Stamm, Heilman, & Hearn, 2008; Staines et al., 1974) suggests to us that this phenomenon has captured the imagination of laypeople and scholars alike. However, the notion that women have unique same-sex difficulties at work could be a dangerous one if perpetuated without critical examination. Specifically, we assert that this assumption could become part of a hierarchy-legitimizing myth (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994) that identifies the source of gender inequality in women's own behavior rather than in a broader social system that produces group-based structural disadvantages. Our theory is timely because this epoch marks a period in human history when female participation in the modern workforce is at an all-time high. Thus, it seems prudent to advance new theoretical propositions that recognize the role that gender plays in shaping workplace relationships and interactions. In the specific case of female same-sex conflict, the management literature lacks a coherent theory that organizes existing studies, identifies potential mediating and moderating mechanisms, and lays out a road map for future research. The goal of our theory is to address these gaps. Before turning to our theory, we begin by defining workplace conflict and identifying some of our boundary conditions.

Workplace conflict has been defined as emerging from a perceived incompatibility between the views, wishes, and interests held by two or more parties (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2008; Jehn, 1997). We draw from Barki and Hartwick's (2004) typology of interpersonal conflict for a more precise definition. They identified three properties that signal the presence of an interpersonal conflict, each of which can occur independently or simultaneously: disagreement, negative emotion, and interference. Disagreement occurs when two or more parties have an incompatible difference of objective. For example, two employees who have different opinions about the time line for a project would be having a disagreement

and, therefore, be involved in an interpersonal conflict. Negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, and threat, may be elicited during a disagreement or simply as a result of interpersonal animosity (Barki & Hartwick), and the presence of these emotions during interpersonal interactions is also indicative of interpersonal conflict. Last, interference occurs when one employee's interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another employee's behavior, such as when women are perceived as undermining the success of other women.

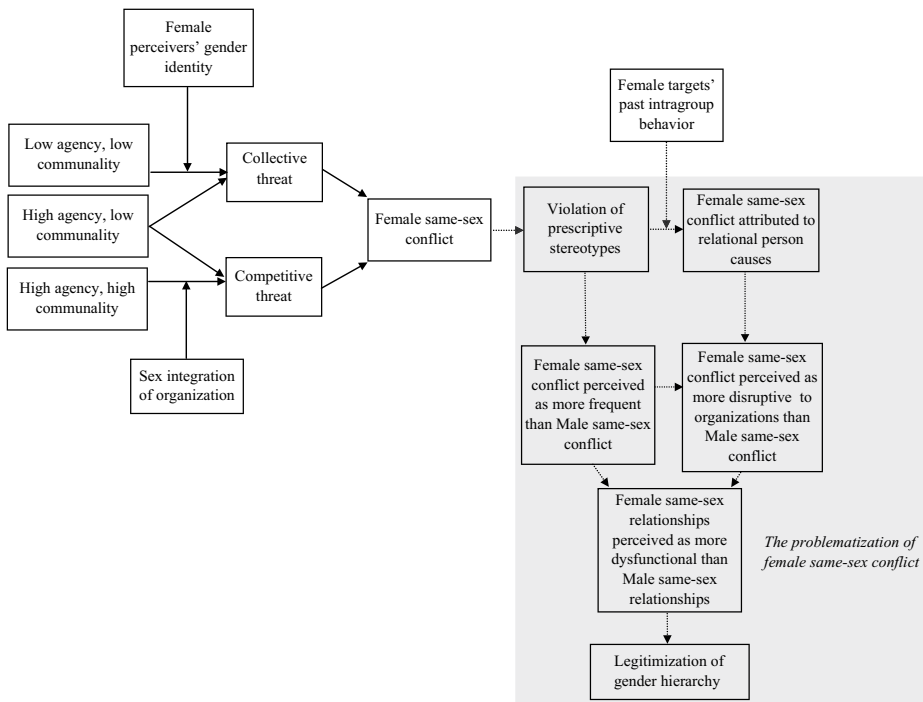
One boundary condition of our theory is that it does not attempt to explain workplace conflict that is physically threatening, verbally threatening, or violent in nature. The majority of conflict in organizations takes less severe forms because organizational norms for professionalism and civility discourage the most extreme expressions of conflict behavior (Baron & Neuman, 1996). Since it is more difficult to predict behaviors that are rare compared to those that occur more frequently, our theory emphasizes the latter to increase its explanatory power. Indeed, the propositions that follow from our theorizing should be most applicable when workplace conflict is moderate in severity. We suspect that both extremely mild and very severe workplace conflict do not elicit different reactions as a function of the gender of the actors involved. Mild conflict is not likely to captivate the interest of observers or be lengthy in duration; hence, they will pay little, if any, attention to the gender of the parties involved. In the case of very severe conflict, we expect that its meaning and consequences will be less susceptible to different interpretations as a function of the gender of those involved. That is, such conflict is obviously problematic and indicative of a dysfunctional relationship.

A second boundary condition of our theory is that we chose dyadic conflict as the interpersonal context for developing our propositions. We recognize that workplace conflict can directly involve more than two organizational members, but for the sake of illustration, parsimony, and theoretical clarity, we believe a reasonable starting point for systematically analyzing same-sex conflict is at the level of the dyad, which is the simplest form of interaction in which interpersonal conflict can emerge.

The final boundary condition of our theory is that it cannot be extended without modification to other minority, marginalized, or disempowered groups. This boundary condition will become more obvious as we introduce our propositions, which are based on prescriptive gender stereotypes and differ from those applied to racial minorities (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). This is not to say that power is entirely absent from our theory; indeed, we assume that prescriptive gender stereotypes have emerged from the separate and unequal positions that men and women occupy in society (Eagly, 1987). What this third boundary condition implies is that ours is not simply a theory about power (or the related concept of status) but is intended to be applied to explain the particular dynamics of female same-sex conflict relative to male same-sex conflict, of which power relations are only one component.

At this point, we turn to the first stage of our theory, the entirety of which is depicted in Figure 1. The propositions we make in this stage draw from past research to suggest possible reasons why women might have more frequent episodes of same-sex conflict than men. By doing so, we are not making an empirical claim but, rather, offering a theoretically and empirically justifiable account for why such differences could possibly emerge in organizational settings.

Figure 1
Female Same-Sex Conflict and Its Problematicization



Note: Solid lines represent the reactions of women to a female colleague; dotted lines represent the reactions of third parties to female same-sex conflict.

Is Female Same-Sex Conflict More Pervasive Than Male Same-Sex Conflict at Work?

Our rationale for why it is possible that women have more frequent same-sex conflict than men hinges on the concept of prescriptive stereotypes and the evaluations that occur when women violate them. Prescriptive stereotypes are beliefs about the traits that men and women *ought* to have and the behavior that they *ought* to exhibit in social situations (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Fiske & Stevens, 1993). These stereotypes have emerged as a result of social role differentiation in organizations and broader society (Eagly, 1987) and are reducible to two broad categories of traits—communion and agency—of which the former are desired for women and the latter for men (Eagly; Heilman, 2001). For example, the ideal woman has concern for the welfare of others and displays behaviors aimed at being kind, cooperative, helpful, sympathetic, gentle, and nurturing. Meanwhile, the ideal man is self-interested, competitive, independent, and dominant (Eagly & Karau; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Research has revealed that prescriptive stereotypes are very resistant to change and remain active in cognition to inform individuals' beliefs, even after they are presented with stereotype-inconsistent stimuli (Gill, 2004; Rudman

& Glick, 1999, 2001). Gender stereotyping often occurs implicitly, with individuals explicitly reporting stereotype-free attitudes while succumbing to stereotypes during implicit measures (Latu, Steward, Myers, Lisco, Estes, & Donahue, 2011; Rudman & Glick, 2001).

Studies have shown that there are consistent social penalties when women violate prescriptive stereotypes by behaving agentic (e.g., via self-promoting, dominant, or assertive behavior), a phenomenon that has come to be known as the *backlash effect* (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkin, 2004; Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004; Rudman & Glick, 1999, 2001). More specifically, agentic women are perceived as more cold and unlikeable than nonagentic women and agentic men (Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010; Rudman). Agentic women are particularly salient to observers (relative to agentic men and nonagentic women) because their counterstereotypic behavior deviates from expected norms for their gender which, in turn, elicits an automatic attribution meant to explain the violation (e.g., *She's assertive so she must be cold.*). This reasoning is consistent with research demonstrating that individuals are highly sensitive to norm violations and are compelled to attend to them (Ito, Larsen, Smith, & Cacioppo, 1998; Van Berkum, Holleman, Nieuwland, Otten, & Murre, 2009). Importantly, the backlash effect hinges on the assumption that women who engage in agentic behavior are noncommunal; when agentic women are also highly communal, they do not receive backlash in the form of social penalties (Amanatullah & Tinsley, 2013; Parks-Stamm et al., 2008). Therefore, it appears to be a perceived or actual lack of communality that is the primary mechanism producing the backlash effect.

Although experimental investigations into the backlash effect find that both male and female raters perceive agentic, noncommunal females as cold and unlikeable, we suggest that displays of agentic or noncommunal female behavior have the potential to create unique problems between and among women at work, while having relatively less of an effect on cross-sex workplace relationships. A limitation of the backlash effect literature to date is that it has primarily examined reactions to hypothetical "paper people," with a dearth of research examining reactions to female targets in real workplaces during real interactions—which might be more likely to reveal gender differences. Moreover, past research with "paper people" has primarily examined the negative traits that are ascribed to agentic women rather than assessing the threat that these women induce among raters. Last, researchers have largely failed to assess the behaviors that are elicited in response to agentic women via feelings of threat (for an exception, see Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). Accordingly, we cannot confidently conclude from existing research that agentic women elicit similar feelings of threat and behavior from male and female colleagues. Indeed, we suspect that agentic or noncommunal females elicit more negative reactions (e.g., feelings of threat) and behavior from female than male colleagues via two mechanisms: perceptions of competitive and collective threat. Competitive threat arises when one regards another individual as a formidable competitor for desired resources. Collective threat, meanwhile, emerges when one feels as though a fellow group member's characteristics or behavior reflect poorly on the group as a whole (Duguid, 2011; Duguid, Loyd, & Tolbert, 2012). We suggest that the combination of agency and communality that a woman displays will determine whether female perceivers experience competitive threat, collective threat, or both.

Competitive Threat

We propose that women who are highly agentic—regardless of their communality—will induce greater feelings of competitive threat in their female colleagues than in their male

colleagues. We make this prediction on the basis of the following rationale. First, we know that individuals perceive same-sex others as more similar to themselves relative to opposite-sex others because they tend to occupy similar positions and levels within organizations (Gibson & Lawrence, 2010). Similar others, in turn, tend to be perceived as more appropriate targets for social comparison and, therefore, elicit more envy in observers (Duffy, Scott, Shaw, Tepper, & Aquino, 2012; Festinger, 1954). Together, these patterns suggest that women will perceive themselves as competing mostly with other women, and men with other men, for access to valued organizational resources. These patterns also explain why men will experience less competitive threat than women in response to agentic females in organizations. Agentic women will pose a competitive threat primarily to their female colleagues because they will be perceived as not only more likely competitors for access to organizational resources but also more formidable ones because of their tendency to self-promote and engage in assertive and dominant behavior.

But the astute reader might ask why an agentic man would not generate similarly strong feelings of competitive threat among other men. We are not claiming that agentic men are not threatening at all to other men. Rather, we argue that they will elicit relatively *less* competitive threat in same-sex colleagues because organizational power is not evenly distributed among men and women in most organizations. Few women relative to men attain the most powerful positions in organizations (Catalyst, 2012a), and when they do, they often hold token status (Kanter, 1977), thereby creating the perception that there is limited room for women at the top (Ely, 1994). As a result, women will be competing with other women for organizational resources that appear less accessible to them than to men. A reliable finding across a variety of literatures in the social sciences is that when resources or opportunities are scarce for a certain group of individuals, competitive behaviors and interpersonal hostility increases (Duguid, 2011; Griskevicius, Tybur, Gangestad, Perea, Shapiro, & Kenrick, 2009; Hill, Rodeheffer, Griskevicius, Durante, & White, 2012) while relationship-maintaining (Booth, 1984) and altruistic behavior declines (Holland, Silva, & Mace, 2012). Thus, there is reason to suspect that when women are relegated to competing with one another for access to a smaller pie of organizational resources than men, their same-sex relations could become strained.

Support for our assertion that agentic females will elicit more competitive threat in female than male colleagues comes from a study by Parks-Stamm et al. (2008) who found that although both male and female participants rated a powerful professional woman as cold and unlikeable, doing so was not crucial for maintaining males' self-esteem in the same way that it was for female participants. That is, female participants who were "blocked" from rating the woman as cold and unlikeable later rated their own competence lower than female participants who were not blocked, but the same pattern did not emerge for blocked and non-blocked male participants. This finding suggests that the men's negative evaluations of the female target were elicited primarily by her violation of prescriptive gender stereotypes, whereas the women's stemmed mainly from social comparison and their need to distance themselves from the competitive threat she posed. When female participants were blocked from distancing themselves by derogating the female target, they were also less able to maintain a positive self-image.

We should note here that even when men do experience feelings of competitiveness in response to the behavior of either an agentic female colleague or an agentic male colleague, this need not be a threat-invoking or negative event. Competition is prescribed for men and is perceived as a normal and healthy part of the male gender role (e.g., men should and do

compete; King, Miles, & Kniska, 1991; Kray, Thompson, & Galinsky, 2001; Ruble & Ruble, 1982). Indeed, competition offers men the opportunity to display their dominance and prowess in various domains, thereby enabling them to conform to prescriptions for male behavior. This might be why research has shown that, across the life span, males react more positively to competition than females, are more likely than females to pursue opportunities to compete (Niederle & Vesterlund, 2007), and experience performance gains when they compete with same-sex others (Gneezy & Rustichini, 2004). In contrast, females shy away from opportunities to compete (Niederle & Vesterlund) and experience performance losses when competing against other females but, interestingly, not when they are competing with males (Gneezy & Rustichini)—a finding that provides particularly compelling support for our assertion that intrasexual competition is especially threatening and aversive for women. Research has also demonstrated that while competitiveness increases the quality of male same-sex relationships (Schneider, Dixon, & Udvari, 2007), it decreases the quality of female same-sex relationships (Schneider, Woodburn, del Toro, & Udvari, 2005). Collectively, then, the research cited above lends credence to our argument that women will experience higher levels of competitive threat in response to agentic female colleagues relative to men in response to either agentic men or agentic women. This is a crucial point because we later argue that it is this aversive emotion that could set the stage for increased tension and workplace conflict among women. Accordingly, we make the following proposition:

Proposition 1: Women will experience more competitive threat in response to agentic female colleagues in the workplace relative to (1) men in response to agentic females, (2) men in response to agentic males, and (3) women in response to agentic males.

Collective Threat

We next argue that perceptions of collective threat are produced in women in response to female colleagues who are low on communality, regardless of agency. Interpersonal warmth, generosity, and social skill are expected of and rewarded in women (Ridgeway & Erickson, 2000) and, as such, become part of women's self-schemas (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Research has demonstrated that stereotypes about women's communality instill pride and esteem in women (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001) and allow them to differentiate themselves favorably from men (Brewer, 1991). As a result, women might be motivated to distance themselves from female colleagues who challenge the notion that women are warm and socially skilled by straying from this schema in their behavior at work.

This type of in-group distancing has been labeled the black sheep effect (Marques & Yzerbyt, 1988). In a test of the black sheep effect, Khan and Lambert (1998) had male and female participants read a transcript of a conversation between a male and a female student that was either ambiguous (one person giving advice to the other) or negative (one person being condescending to the other) in tone. They discovered that participants rated same-sex targets who behaved negatively in conversation (e.g., implied that their conversation partner was not smart enough to succeed in his or her college major) less favorably than opposite-sex targets who behaved negatively, but this effect was stronger for female than male participants. Since condescending behavior represents a violation of female communality, we interpret this finding as providing evidence that noncommunal female behavior poses more of a collective threat than noncommunal male behavior to same-sex others. We should note here

that derogation and in-group distancing among women could also serve a competitive purpose. That is, women might anticipate that they will be treated more favorably by the dominant group (men) if they are perceived as policing other women's behavior to compel compliance with dominant group interests and the status quo.

Another way in which noncommunal women can pose a collective threat to their female colleagues is if they are perceived as violating an expectation for female solidarity or sisterhood. Noncommunal women might be regarded as being concerned only with their own success while caring little about the outcomes of their female colleagues. Moreover, women who have reached leadership positions might be perceived as aligning themselves with their more powerful colleagues—who will most often be male—while ignoring the struggles of their female subordinates. Rather than interpreting this as a competitive threat, *per se*, certain women might instead feel disheartened by their same-sex colleagues' apparent neglect. After all, if these senior women are unwilling to pave the path for their less powerful counterparts, who else can be counted on to do so? This belief is illustrated in a quote from a female lawyer interviewed by Ely; the interviewee expressed disappointment at the lack of advocacy for women in her firm and observed that she had expected "women partners to be nice to women because, gee, we're all in this together" (1994: 221). Or consider an oft-repeated statement from former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who warned, "There is a special place in hell reserved for women who don't help other women" (Tennery, 2012: para. 1). These anecdotes suggest that some women hold other women to an expectation of female solidarity and, as such, noncommunal women who fail to be helpful or kind to other women will elicit feelings of collective threat in their female colleagues who believe themselves to be negatively affected by her behavior.

Of course, our conjecture requires a direct empirical test, but indirect evidence comes from meta-analytic research demonstrating that women consistently hold their same-sex friends to higher expectations of loyalty and solidarity than men (J. A. Hall, 2011). This finding might explain why women react more negatively than men when they feel betrayed by their friends' actions (Felmlee, Sweet, & Sinclair, 2012). Although these studies investigated expectations of female friends rather than female colleagues, it is conceivable that similarly powerful expectations for female solidarity can spill over into workplace relationships. Indeed, research demonstrates that women tend to perceive their same-sex workplace relationships in a manner similar to their same-sex friendships, viewing both as important sources of social and emotional support (Ibarra, 1992; Morrison, 2009). Men, on the other hand, tend to perceive workplace relationships as providing instrumental benefit only (Morrison), which might mean they are less personally offended and collectively threatened by interpersonally cold behavior. Thus, we provide the following proposition:

Proposition 2: Women will experience more collective threat in response to noncommunal female colleagues in the workplace relative to (1) men in response to noncommunal females, (2) men in response to noncommunal males, and (3) women in response to noncommunal males.

If we are to argue that women experience competitive and/or collective threat in response to agentic and/or noncommunal female colleagues, then it stands to reason that the aversive emotions (e.g., fear, envy, resentment) associated with threat can be the impetus for periodic eruptions of conflict episodes marked by tension, distancing behavior, and/or social undermining. If future research supports these initial propositions, they could offer a plausible

explanation for the seemingly widespread belief that same-sex conflict at work is a uniquely female problem. As such, we make the following proposition:

Proposition 3: As a result of these heightened feelings of competitive and/or collective threat, female same-sex conflict will occur more frequently relative to male same-sex and cross-sex conflict.

We suggest two potential moderators of Propositions 1 and 2. First, the experience of competitive threat will be influenced by the proportion of women relative to men at senior levels of the organization. In sex-integrated organizations where there are equal (or near-equal) numbers of women and men occupying all levels, including the uppermost echelons, we anticipate that women will be less likely to perceive themselves as competing for a smaller piece of the pie. Consequently, the competitive threat that agentic women elicit in their female colleagues should be somewhat mitigated in such contexts. This argument is supported by experimental research indicating that women in high-status groups experience less competitive threat and are more likely to admit a high-performing female applicant into their group when there are already other women in the group (relative to when women hold token membership in the group; Duguid, 2011). Moreover, Rudman (1998) discovered that agentic women were less likely to be selected by female relative to male participants for jobs or tasks that valued masculine characteristics, which suggests that in organizations that outwardly value masculinity (e.g., by having all male leadership), agentic women pose a greater competitive threat to their female colleagues. Finally, this argument is consistent with the themes that emerged in Ely's (1994) work, wherein female interviewees generally reported more positive relationships with their female colleagues when they worked for firms in which female partners were not such a rarity.

Proposition 4: Feelings of competitive threat among women in response to agentic female colleagues will weaken (strengthen) as the upper echelons of the organization become more (less) sex integrated.

Second, we propose that the extent to which noncommunal women pose a collective threat to female perceivers will be moderated by the perceiver's gender identity. Gender identity is defined as an individual's "self-definition on the dimensions of masculinity and femininity" (A. Berger & Krahe, 2013: 516), which is shaped, in part, by the internalization of societal beliefs about what constitute desirable male and female traits (Wood & Eagly, 2012). We suggest that women who identify strongly with feminine characteristics and weakly with masculine characteristics should experience particularly high levels of collective threat in response to noncommunal women. Kindness, communality, and support for sisterhood should be especially valued traits for women who identify strongly with cultural expectations of the ideal woman. When interacting with women who fail to demonstrate their endorsement of these values by being interpersonally cold, women who strongly identify with their gender will perceive a greater collective threat than women who do not identify as strongly with the feminine ideal and its role-based expectations.

Proposition 5: Feelings of collective threat in response to noncommunal female colleagues will be strongest among women who identify strongly with feminine characteristics and weakly with masculine characteristics, relative to women who identify weakly with feminine characteristics.

Having provided several reasons why female same-sex conflict might occur more frequently than male same-sex conflict, thereby providing a potential explanation for why women are perceived as having more dysfunctional same-sex workplace relationships than men, we now turn to the second stage of our theory. In the sections that follow, we argue that regardless of actual gender differences in frequency, female same-sex conflict is problematized relative to male same-sex conflict by third parties—individuals who observe or are aware of workplace conflict but are not directly involved. We contend that this process of problematization could also contribute—independently or in conjunction with our first stage—to a generalized belief that women have more dysfunctional same-sex workplace relationships than men.

The Problematization of Female Same-Sex Conflict in Organizations by Third Parties

The second stage of our theory focuses on explaining why female same-sex conflict, once it has occurred, generates an interpretive process that leads third parties to conclude that it is more problematic than male same-sex conflict. We should note at the outset that we are making comparisons between perceptions of male and female same-sex conflict and refrain from contrasting these to perceptions of cross-sex conflict. We view this emphasis as appropriate because both theory and empirical research strongly suggest that constructs closely related to workplace conflict, such as workplace mistreatment and harassment, occur most often between members of the same sex (Berdahl, 2007; Berdahl, Min, & Stuart, 2010; Lee & Brotheridge, 2011). There are two plausible reasons for why this pattern occurs. First, systematic power imbalances between men and women restrict the ways in which both can respond during emotionally charged cross-sex interactions like workplace conflict. Previous research suggests that low-power individuals display greater sensitivity to potential threats and punishments, pay more attention to the behavior of high-power others, and inhibit dominant behaviors in the presence of more powerful others (Fragale, Sumanth, Tiedens, & Northcraft, 2012; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Morand, 1996). It is conceivable that because women tend to have less power than men in organizations, they adapt their language and behavior to be more submissive when it is apparent that there is tension in their relationship with a male colleague. Second, same-sex conflict might be more common than cross-sex conflict simply because many industries are sex segregated, which means that individuals are more likely to work closely with same-sex others than with opposite-sex others (Shauman, 2006). Given the relatively lower frequency of cross-sex interactions in organizations, it follows that the relative incidence of cross-sex conflict will be lower than the incidence of same-sex conflict.

Salience of Female and Male Same-Sex Conflict

We suggest that same-sex conflict at work is salient to third parties to the extent that it violates norms for appropriate behavior. Importantly, the standard for appropriate behavior that conflict participants are held to is a function of gender. Earlier we explained that agentic and competitive behavior is prescribed and normalized among men (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Gill, 2004) and that pursuing one's goals at the expense of another's or asserting dominance are means of conforming to this prescription. Indeed, researchers in the field of intrasexual

competition assume that competition among males has a biological basis and is therefore a natural imperative governing male social behavior (Archer, 2009; McAndrew, 2009). Consequently, there is reason to suspect that third parties will generally not register male same-sex conflict as a violation of typical and prescribed male behavior, and so when it occurs it will go largely overlooked. Female same-sex conflict, on the other hand, does violate prescriptive stereotypes that treat caring and cooperative behavior as natural imperatives for women and will therefore be more salient to third parties. Due to the enhanced salience of female same-sex conflict relative to male same-sex conflict, the former will be perceived as occurring more frequently than the latter.

Proposition 6: Female same-sex conflict at work will be more salient to third parties than male same-sex conflict, due to its violation of gender stereotypes, and will therefore be perceived as more frequently occurring than male same-sex conflict.

When third parties perceive female same-sex conflict as a violation of a prescriptive stereotype, we argue that it will lead them to engage in a sensemaking process that can culminate in the perception that female same-sex conflict, in addition to being more frequently occurring than male same-sex conflict, is more disruptive to organizations.

Attributions Regarding the Causes of Female and Male Same-Sex Conflict

It is widely acknowledged by management scholars that organizational events that deviate from prescribed patterns of interactions—of which we contend that female same-sex conflict is one—trigger sensemaking by third parties (P. L. Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Sonenshein, 2007; Weick, 1995). Sensemaking can be understood as the “processes that people use to impose or derive structure or meaning when they experience complex, ambiguous, or stressful situations” (Volkema, Farquhar, & Bergmann, 1996: 1441) and involves attributions about the cause of behavior and events. We consider the attribution that third parties make about the cause of female same-sex conflict—once it has been construed as a norm-violating event—as a critical precursor of its problematization.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that third parties are motivated to make internal, or dispositional, rather than external, or situational, attributions for behavior that elicits a negative response (Geddes & Callister, 2007; Kelley, 1973; Vignovic & Thompson, 2010). In other words, individuals are more susceptible to committing the fundamental attribution error when they witness negative or unexpected behavior (Jones & Harris, 1967; Ross, 1977). For example, Vignovic and Thompson demonstrated experimentally that targets who violated etiquette norms by authoring e-mails that were terse in tone and devoid of niceties were perceived as less agreeable and trustworthy. Interestingly, this effect was not mitigated when a situational explanation (that the “sender” was from a foreign country) was provided, which is suggestive of the strength of dispositional attributions invoked to explain norm-violating behavior.

One factor that can influence whether negative behavior is attributed to dispositional or situational factors is the gender of the individual who exhibits the behavior. Brescoll and Uhlmann (2008) demonstrated that when a woman displays anger in organizational contexts—an emotion that violates the prototypical schema of the ideal female—she is perceived as being “an angry woman.” Meanwhile, the same study found that third parties were more

likely to attribute men's displays of anger at work to situational factors. This finding suggests that because men's anger is not perceived as violating prescriptive male stereotypes, it does not elicit the same sensemaking process that ultimately attributes its cause to dispositional sources the way that women's anger does.

What happens, however, when third parties witness norm-violating behavior in the form of a dyadic interaction rather than individual behavior? Only recently have management scholars conceptualized the nature of dispositional and situational attributions in the context of dyadic behavior. Eberly, Holley, Johnson, and Mitchell (2011) introduced the construct of *relational attributions* to describe these types of attributions. They proposed two types of relational attributions—relational person attributions and relational task attributions—that conceptually parallel the constructs of relationship conflict and task conflict, respectively, which are widely used in the management and psychology literatures to distinguish different types of conflict (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn, 1997). According to Eberly et al., relational person attributions occur when third parties locate the source of a negative interaction (e.g., workplace conflict) in personal issues that are not directly associated with task performance concerns. An example is mutual disliking that arises from differing values or interpersonal styles of the two parties. Relational task attributions, meanwhile, occur when third parties identify the source of the negative interaction in issues related to task performance, such as exchange of information and coordination.

On the basis of the Eberly et al. (2011) definition, we treat relational person attributions as being akin to dispositional attributions because they identify the source of an event as stemming from factors that are internal to the actors involved. For example, if two individuals are perceived as experiencing tension because they have different interpersonal styles, this is ultimately a relational person attribution that isolates stable and dispositional sources for the conflict and seemingly extends from the aggregation of two dispositional attributions (e.g., *Marie is a blunt person, whereas Sarah is more passive-aggressive*). Relational task attributions, on the other hand, correspond to situational attributions because they identify the cause of an event as being external to the actors being observed. Combining the concept of relational attributions with the empirical findings of Brescoll and Uhlmann (2008), we theorize that the dispositional attributions made in response to norm-violating female behavior at the individual level are analogous to relational *person* attributions at the dyadic level. Similarly, situational attributions made in response to the same male behavior (which is not norm violating for men) at the individual level are analogous to a relational *task* attribution at the dyadic level.

To illustrate our argument concretely, consider the relational attribution that might be made by third parties who witness two women having a workplace conflict. On the basis of Brescoll and Uhlmann's (2008) findings, we expect that each woman's behavior would be perceived as originating from dispositional attributes rather than being considered uncharacteristic and attributable to frustrating situational elements of temporary duration. Next, drawing from the Eberly et al. (2011) framework, we argue that these dispositional attributions allow third parties to construct an explanatory account that locates the immediate cause of the conflict as stemming from a dispositional mismatch, which is consistent with their definition of relational person attributions. For example, third parties might conclude that *Marie is a blunt person, whereas Sarah is more passive-aggressive, and therefore they rub each other the wrong way*. This relational attribution is more intuitive than one that abruptly shifts from dispositional to situational causes, such as *Marie is a blunt person, whereas Sarah is more*

passive-aggressive, and they each received different instructions from their mutual client. Indeed, the latter half of this statement does not follow logically from the first. Consequently, we argue that dispositional (situational) attributions at the individual level lend themselves more easily to relational person (task) attributions at the dyadic level.

Proposition 7: Third parties will be more likely to make relational person (task) attributions than relational task (person) attributions when interpreting female (male) same-sex conflict.

One of the implications of Proposition 7 is that female same-sex conflict will more often be construed as stemming from interpersonal factors, such as mutual disliking, mismatched personality traits, and/or envy, than from performance-related issues, whereas male same-sex conflict will more often be attributed to performance-related issues or situational factors. Stated differently using terminology from the conflict literature, female same-sex conflict will be interpreted as relationship conflict, whereas male same-sex conflict will be interpreted as task conflict.

A potential moderator of Proposition 7 is the extent to which the women involved in conflict are known to be active supporters of other women within their organizations, perhaps through their mentorship of junior colleagues, their advocacy of women's issues, or their expressed commitment to feminist principles, for example. When both parties in the conflict have such a reputation, it could block third parties from concluding that the conflict is the result of personal disliking or feelings of threat. This possibility is supported by research on moral credentialing that shows that doing a good deed later excuses ambiguous transgressions (e.g., transgressions that are not severe or undoubtedly unethical) that occur within the same domain (Effron & Monin, 2010). Specifically, Effron and Monin discovered that participants were less likely to condemn a perpetrator in an ambiguous sexual harassment scenario when he had first been depicted as being a catalyst for the implementation of sexual harassment policies and victim support programs in his organization. Since workplace conflict can be a complex and ambiguous social event subject to interpretation, it is plausible that previous behavior (e.g., mentoring of female colleagues) can be used to construct attributions that discount interpersonal hostility as the primary cause of the conflict episode.

On the basis of our reasoning, we anticipate that third parties are most likely to make relational person attributions about female same-sex conflict when the women involved both have reputations of being unsupportive to female colleagues in the past. Indeed, one wonders whether the media's perception of Marissa Mayer as a "queen bee" is not partly attributable to the fact that she publicly distanced herself from women's interests by declaring in a *PBS* documentary that she is *not* a feminist and, in fact, conceptualizes feminism as a militant movement (Greenfield, 2013).

Proposition 8: Proposition 7 will be moderated by the extent to which the women involved in the conflict scenario are generally acknowledged by third parties as being supporters of other women, such that relational person attributions will be most likely when both women are perceived as unsupportive and least likely when both women are perceived as supportive.

Returning now to our primary pathway, we propose that once third parties have made relational person attributions about the cause of female same-sex conflict, they will draw the conclusion that female same-sex conflict is more disruptive to organizational

functioning than male same-sex conflict. Notably, third parties would have valid reason to associate relationship conflict with negative outcomes. While it has been shown that under certain conditions a moderate amount of task conflict can actually be beneficial to group performance (De Dreu, 2006), relationship conflict has been consistently found to negatively affect group effectiveness (for a meta-analysis, see de Wit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012). Moreover, whereas task conflict can often be addressed through impersonal means, like reframing the problem or increasing role clarity/coordination, relationship conflict—having its source in personal incompatibilities and ongoing animosity—requires more extreme measures to resolve, such as minimizing or preventing interaction between conflicting parties. To the extent that such interventions alter the flow of regular work activities, consume employees' time and resources, or require others to take on tasks that were once performed by the parties who are now unable to work together, then relationship conflict will indeed have an adverse effect on workgroup and organizational functioning. Hence, when female same-sex conflict is interpreted as relationship conflict—regardless of whether it actually is—it will also be perceived as having more adverse potential repercussions for the organization.

Proposition 9: Female (male) same-sex conflict, being more frequently interpreted as relationship (task) conflict than task (relationship) conflict, will be perceived by third parties as more (less) disruptive to personal and organizational functioning than male (female) same-sex conflict.

In turn, the perception of female same-sex conflict as relationship conflict that impairs functioning will lead third parties to conclude that female same-sex workplace relationships in general are more dysfunctional (e.g., characterized by hostility, undermining, and conflict spirals) than male same-sex workplace relationships.

Proposition 10: Female same-sex workplace relationships will be perceived by third parties as more dysfunctional than male same-sex workplace relationships.

The final step in the problematization of women's same-sex conflict/relationships is that it permits third parties—consciously or subconsciously—to rationalize existing gender inequalities in organizations. In this way, the notion that female same-sex workplace relationships are dysfunctional can be viewed as a hierarchy-legitimizing myth that justifies the status quo (Pratto et al., 1994). System justification theory suggests that individuals want to view the world as a fair and predictable place and so are consciously or subconsciously motivated to accept ideologies that justify the existing social hierarchy (Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003). We suggest that the problematization of female same-sex workplace conflict/relationships deflects third parties' attention *away* from the structural disadvantages that women face and *toward* women's alleged deficiencies, which ultimately provides justification for women's subordinate status relative to men. When third parties conclude that women have the tendency to "derail" each other at work (Silverman, 2009) or that they find it difficult to work together effectively, it suggests that women are somehow less capable than men of dealing with the challenges of organizational life. This belief could then sustain other beliefs that can be logically deduced from it, such as women will not be as effective in leadership roles because they will have a hard time managing and working with other women. Moreover, the notion that women are prone to episodes of same-sex conflict erroneously

identifies the source of gender inequality in women's collective behavior (e.g., *Women would get ahead if only they could support and cooperate with one another*). What follows from this assumption is that the onus is on women to engage in collective action if they want to improve their group's status. Indeed, we see the subtle influences of this belief on the media and academic attention devoted to female same-sex conflict, which has largely operated from a place of bewilderment at why women do not always go out of their way to help and support one another at work—as though they must be expected to do so for the sake of gender equality.

As a result of these processes, the problematization of female same-sex workplace conflict/relationships can ultimately lead to and reinforce the belief that it is women's own shortcomings that are responsible for their status in the gender hierarchy. This, in turn, legitimizes the traditional organizational gender hierarchy in which women are not as highly represented as men in the most prestigious roles.

Proposition 11: The perception that female same-sex workplace relationships are more prone to dysfunction than male same-sex workplace relationships will produce system-justifying beliefs about the legitimacy of the existing gender hierarchy in organizations.

This concludes our description of our theory and associated propositions. We now turn to a discussion of its theoretical and practical implications.

Discussion

Testing Our Two-Stage Theory

The main contribution of our theory is that it provides a framework for investigating (1) the social psychological dynamics that could lead to actual differences in the frequency of female and male same-sex conflict and (2) the problematization of female same-sex conflict and its consequences for gender equality. We acknowledge that empirically testing our theory is challenging and complex, since any evidence of the problematization of female same-sex conflict could ultimately result from female same-sex conflict truly being more problematic in organizations. However, research need not necessarily aim to prove that one stage of our theory is more valid than the other. As noted earlier, we view these stages as complementary to one another. Still, we have recommendations for how researchers might disentangle the two processes or discover which of them may account for more variance in the phenomenon being explained.

In terms of investigating whether frequencies and/or intensities of same-sex conflict differ across women and men (Proposition 3), traditional survey methodology will likely not suffice. Popular measures of negative acts at work ask participants to report the frequency with which they are targeted during a specific period of time, but it is impossible for these measures to determine the gender of one's coparty in conflict, the emotions preceding and proceeding the conflict, and the nature of the conflict for *each* incident. Instead, the measures provide only a rough idea of how often employees are engaged in negative interactions at work. Moreover, self-report measures that rely on recall could be tainted by the negative stereotypes surrounding the nature of women's same-sex relationships at work, such that women might erroneously recall more frequent or intense conflict with other women. For

these reasons, we suggest that research examining this question of whether female and male same-sex conflict differs meaningfully in organizations employ more precise measurement approaches, such as daily diaries that allow workers to provide detailed and in-the-moment documentation of their conflict at work. Qualitative investigations might also be used to yield greater insight into how employees subjectively experience and assign meaning to their conflicts at work and whether different themes emerge across women and men discussing their same-sex conflict. However, this latter method could again be influenced by recall biases. Ideally, studies should employ multiple methods where each can compensate for the limitations of the other.

Due to the complexity of our predictions involving collective and competitive threat and their respective moderators—gender identity and sex integration—experimental methodology might be best suited to Propositions 1, 2, 4, and 5. However, researchers could move beyond the traditional reliance on “paper people” and instead explore reactions to agentic and/or noncommunal female confederates in a laboratory setting. This methodology would also allow researchers to go beyond assessing evaluations of agentic and/or noncommunal female targets and investigate the actual treatment these women receive from men and other women during a team task. Such methods would provide insight into whether women’s negative reactions to agentic and/or noncommunal women are precursors to female same-sex conflict.

In order to test our propositions about the problematization of female same-sex conflict, future research could rely largely on experimental methodology that compares reactions to and attributions about female and male same-sex conflict. Experimental methodology will offer the greatest control and allow researchers to determine that it is third-party perceptions and not the actual content of female and male same-sex conflict that produces different evaluations of the two types of conflict. This method is also the only way to definitively establish the causal sequences in our model (Thau, Pitesa, & Pillutla, in press). Nevertheless, it would be interesting and worthwhile to survey employees about their reactions to and interpretations of workplace conflict that they have observed recently in order to determine whether these perceptions differ as a function of the gender of the individuals involved. The nature and severity of the conflict might be controlled to ensure that when all else is equal, it is the gender of the individuals embroiled in the conflict producing differences in perceptions. It would be especially fruitful if researchers were able to obtain the perceptions of both the first and third parties associated with any given workplace conflict in order to determine whether third parties have a tendency to exaggerate or underestimate the severity of conflict (relative to first-party perceptions) as a function of the gender of those involved.

Beyond testing the propositions we have developed in this article, future theory and research can go further in applying some of the concepts we have developed to related issues. We now offer some suggestions in this regard.

Future Theoretical Development and Research

Gender, stereotypes, and workplace conflict. Ours is the first theory we are aware of that considers how workplace conflict is produced, perceived, and shaped as a function of the gender of the individuals involved. As such, we open new avenues of empirical and theoretical research aimed at understanding how gender influences the emergence, progression, and interpretation of conflict in organizations. One way in which future theory and

research might extend our theory is by considering cross-sex conflict. We expect that while cross-sex conflict occurs less frequently than same-sex conflict, it may generate a qualitatively different set of problems for employees than same-sex conflict when it is perceived as emanating from sexism, for example. Consideration of this possibility was beyond the scope of our theory, but on the basis of our claim that third parties' interpretation of dyadic conflict is socially constructed, we believe there are legitimate reasons for assuming that many factors we identified (e.g., prescriptive gender stereotypes, attributions, social construction processes) will play important roles in the labeling of cross-sex workplace conflict as sexist or sex-based harassment.

In the first stage of our theory, we discussed how female behavior might threaten female onlookers by virtue of being agentic or noncommunal. However, we recognize that there is other female behavior that could pose a competitive or collective threat to women in organizational contexts that does not fit easily into the agency-communality dichotomy. For example, Kanter (1977) argued that there are several different female archetypes that emerge in organizations in which power is held and controlled by men, three of which could be particularly threatening to other women: the iron maiden, the pet, and the seductress. The iron maiden would be consistent with our conceptualization of a woman who is high on agency and low on communality; however, the pet (a woman who joins in on jokes with the men and plays the "good sport") and the seductress (a woman who aligns herself with powerful men and uses flirtation as currency) are not as easily subsumed within these categories. "The seductress" might pose a competitive threat to women if she uses flirtation as an influence strategy (Aquino, Sheppard, Watkins, O'Reilly, & Smith, in press; Watkins, Smith, & Aquino, 2013), whereas "the pet" might be seen as undermining the interests of women as a group by playing along with jokes that are at women's expense, for example. Future research should explore the variety of ways in which different forms of female behavior pose threats to other women in organizations.

Other intragroup conflicts and the role of culture. We stated in the introduction that ours was a theory restricted to explaining the dynamics of gender and workplace conflict but that portions could be adapted to explain intragroup conflict among members of other disadvantaged groups. For example, we can envision how future studies could apply our propositions with relatively little modification to explain conflict *and* its problematization among other groups for whom agency is proscribed regardless of target gender, such as Asians (Berdahl & Min, 2012). However, our theory would require somewhat more modification to be applicable to Black individuals, since research has demonstrated that agency is less prohibited for Black women than it is for Black men (E. V. Hall et al., 2012). Indeed, research has demonstrated that agentic Black women do not elicit as much backlash as agentic White women and agentic Black men do (Livingston, Rosette, & Washington, 2012), presumably because they are subject to different descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes than Black men and White women. Our point is that by comparing the nature of intragroup conflict and its problematization by third parties across different minority groups, it is possible to ascertain which specific stereotype content, when violated, produces the outcomes we have described.

It would also be fruitful for future research to assess the generalizability of our theory to cultures outside of North America, where the vast majority of management research into prescriptive stereotypes and the backlash effect has been conducted. It might be that the incidence and perceptions of same-sex workplace conflict do not differ by gender in cultures in

which men and women do not differ as greatly in terms of roles and gender-based expectations as they do in North America. This hypothesis is consistent with past research demonstrating less stereotypical thinking among individuals from countries that are gender egalitarian, such as Sweden (Andersson, Verdonk, Johansson, Lagro-Janssen, & Hamberg, 2012).

Practical Implications

Implications for women's same-sex workplace relationships. The most significant practical implication of our theory is that the problematization of female same-sex conflict/relationships could actually cause or exacerbate conflict among women, thereby producing a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1968). Specifically, we posit that third parties' interpretations of female same-sex conflict could spill over into the first parties' understandings about their own interactions. We know that third parties' interpretations of events are an integral component of actors' sensemaking processes (Louis, 1980) and that individuals rely on others to form and test their interpretations of social stimuli (Sonenshein, 2007). Indeed, research has demonstrated that social cues provided by third parties are influential in convincing terminated employees that their treatment by the organization was unjustified and that they should pursue legal proceedings (Goldman, 2001; Groth, Goldman, Gilliland, & Bies, 2002). This suggests to us that third-party interpretations of conflict scenarios can mold actors' interpretations in meaningful ways, which could include introducing doubt into actors' interpretation of their own interactions and relationships. For example, a workplace conflict that might have otherwise been interpreted by the women involved as a minor task-related disagreement could quickly become personal if third parties vocalize their relational person attributions. Each of the women involved might be left wondering what her coparty in conflict has said to colleagues in order to create the impression that the conflict is due to some underlying hostility. It is easy to see how such a process could imbue tension and suspicion into women's same-sex relationships, exacerbating conflict and reducing relationship quality over time.

Implications for organizations. Beyond personal implications, we assert that female same-sex conflict and its problematization can have significant practical implications for workgroups and organizations. First, the belief that women have unique difficulties getting along can contribute to the maintenance of gender inequality in hiring and promotion procedures, which will stymie organizations' diversity efforts. For example, if a hiring manager implicitly holds this belief, he or she might unconsciously avoid hiring women for certain roles that would require them to work closely with other females. Likewise, this belief might cause women to be overlooked for promotions that would require them to manage female subordinates. Investigation of the phenomenon we introduce is therefore critical for raising awareness in even the best-intentioned managers. If left unexamined, the problematization of women's same-sex relationships could stigmatize women in leadership roles (Mavin, 2008) who make decisions that can be construed as being inimical to the interests of women, as has arguably occurred in the case of Marissa Mayer.

Female same-sex conflict and its problematization may also facilitate the emergence of a workgroup climate that is detrimental to optimal levels of individual and group performance in a couple of ways. First, if we are correct in our assertion that women are particularly

inclined to experience competitive or collective threat in response to agentic female colleagues, these women may have difficulty working cooperatively with them. This could be particularly true in “winner-take-all” climates wherein valued rewards, such as inclusion in prestigious groups, challenging role assignments, and high pay, are allocated to only a few. Earlier we cited studies showing that females shy away from competition (Niederle & Vesterlund, 2007) and experience performance losses when competing against other females (Gneezy & Rustichini, 2004). When women experience competitive threat in response to agentic women, they might find it particularly difficult to collectively build and sustain the kind of affirming and supportive work climate in which they are most likely to thrive. Second, it is possible that the problematization of female same-sex conflict will cause women to avoid expressing legitimate reservations about certain organizational decisions, policies, or goals, the result of which is that personal and workgroup performance will suffer. Fearing the “catfight” label, women might refrain from criticizing or challenging the ideas of female coworkers. This will be particularly problematic in situations in which disagreement over substantive issues can be both constructive and necessary for improving group decision making and fostering innovation.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to propose a two-stage theory that first explained why women might have unique difficulties in their same-sex relationships and then balanced this perspective with consideration of how female same-sex conflict might come to be problematized by third parties. It is our hope that this article will contribute to the broader literature on the role of gender and stereotypes in producing and shaping workplace conflict. We also hope that our article stimulates research that aims to determine how female same-sex conflict at work *and* third parties’ problematization of such conflict might be mitigated, with the overarching goal of eliminating the negative belief that working women are often one another’s worst enemies.

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