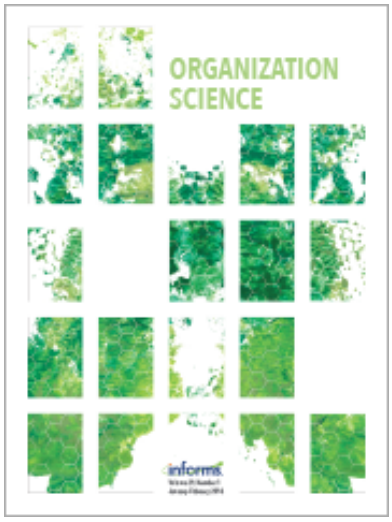

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Behind Closed Doors: The Uncommunal Feminine Stereotype

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Abstract. Theories of gender inequality in the workplace rely heavily on stereotypes that describe women as more communal (e.g., warm and kind) and less agentic (e.g., assertive and forceful) than men. In this paper, we highlight the existence of an *uncommunal* feminine stereotype wherein women are also believed to be more conniving and devious than men, pursuing their personal goals at the expense of others. To explain how this uncommunal stereotype can coexist with its communal counterpart, we posit that women are believed to behave more communally in public and more uncommunally in private. This public-private distinction can reconcile conflicting stereotypes of women's communality and better account for aspects of inequality. In particular, the uncommunal stereotype provides an alternative attribution for women's success when it occurs, explains the greater vigilance to and sanctioning of women's unethical behavior, and strengthens backlash theory by better explaining why successful women are distrusted. In these ways and others, accounting for the uncommunal feminine stereotype can enhance gender theory.

Keywords: stereotyping • women • gender • leadership • backlash

> "Who can describe women's hypocrisies! Their subtle wiles, betraying smiles, feign'd tears, inconstancies!"
>
> (Otway 1888, p. 118).

Despite decades of research on gender inequality in the workplace, women continue to face substantial barriers that hinder their advancement into positions of power (Catalyst 2020, Joshi et al. 2024). Theories that account for this gender disparity (e.g., role congruity theory, think-manager-think-male) (Schein et al. 1996, Eagly and Karau 2002, Rudman and Phelan 2008, Heilman et al. 2024) point to gender stereotypes that associate men with agentic traits (e.g., assertiveness, decisiveness) and women with communal traits (e.g., warmth, care) (Rudman et al. 2001, Heilman and Caleo 2018, Eagly et al. 2020). That is, women are seen as and expected to be compassionate, empathetic, and kind (communal), not competitive, aggressive, or self-promoting (agentic). Agentic and communal stereotypes underlie the prescriptions and proscriptions that women face—outlining how they are expected to behave. When women violate these stereotypes—by exhibiting agentic behavior or not exhibiting communal behavior—they elicit "backlash" in the form of social and economic penalties (Heilman and Okimoto 2007, Rudman and Phelan 2008, Rudman et al. 2012, Kacperczyk et al. 2023, Lawson et al. 2026).

Although women are strongly associated with communality (Eagly et al. 2020), there also exists a stereotype that runs counter to this view. That is, many people see women, especially successful women, as *uncommunal*—manipulative, vindictive, deceitful, and self-serving (Heilman et al. 1995, 2004; Ezzedeen 2013; Toneva et al. 2020; Bailey et al. 2022). They sometimes characterize women using unflattering terms, such as "gold digger" and "shrew," and popular media (e.g., literature, film, television) often depicts women as liars and schemers. These examples suggest a "dark side" to the feminine gender—that women are willing to harm interpersonal relationships and undermine others in pursuit of their goals (Coyne and Archer 2005, Coyne and Whitehead 2008). How can these communal and uncommunal stereotypes coexist? Can people believe that women are more genial, kind, and supportive than men but also more vicious, cruel, and backstabbing? We suggest they can.

Current theories of gender stereotyping, which primarily understand gender inequality through the lens of agency and communality, center on what people do in public—behaviors that are visible, monitored, and subject to social sanction. We argue that these theories fail to account for what takes place in the private sphere—behavior that cannot be seen, monitored, or sanctioned. In other words, frameworks of agency and communality stereotypes outline expectations of women's *public* behavior. They present a positive view of women who abide by these expectations—describing them as warm, kind, and caring—and a negative view of women who violate them—describing them as bossy, pushy, and domineering (Rudman and Phelan 2008, Eagly et al. 2020). However, negative stereotypes about women also apply to their unobserved actions. These negative stereotypes about women's *private* behavior do not conform to prescriptions of feminine communality and violate proscriptions of feminine agency.

In contrast to the canonical view that people believe women are communal, we argue that people also believe women are uncommunal—more likely than men to perpetrate uncommunal agentic acts (i.e., undermining others to further their personal goals). We posit that these two stereotypes can coexist because observers believe that women perpetrate uncommunal acts in clandestine ways, hidden from public view. Because their private uncommunality evades scrutiny, women cannot be punished for violating gendered expectations of communal (and not agentic) behavior. This enables people to view women as more duplicitous than men—capable of behaving one way when they are observed (communal) and another way when they are "behind closed doors" (uncommunal). This feminine uncommunal stereotype, we argue, represents a critical but underappreciated mechanism that accounts for gender bias in the workplace.

Our theorizing about the uncommunal feminine stereotype can contribute to gender research in several ways. First, current theories do not adequately explain the source of the prescriptive communal stereotype (e.g., Heilman 2001, Koenig 2018). After all, if women are already seen as highly communal, why is the expectation that they *should be* communal so strong? We argue that the uncommunal stereotype presents a clear need for a communal prescription. That is, people believe that women *should be* communal because they feel the need to guard against women's presumed uncommunality. Second, the uncommunal stereotype can be a means by which observers account for women's professional success, when it occurs, in unflattering ways (e.g., "they evaded backlash by maneuvering surreptitiously"). Backlash theory cannot explain why attributions for women's success often involve lying, manipulation, and seduction (e.g., Ezzedeen 2013, Gershtenson and Plane 2024). These attributions are better explained by stereotypes about women's private uncommunality. Third, according to backlash theory, observers require knowledge of a woman's agency to engender distrust; yet, people often view women as untrustworthy without any evidence of their agency (e.g., Glick and Fiske 2001, Bareket and Fiske 2023). Our theorizing can explain why. Finally, the uncommunal feminine stereotype sheds new light on why attempts at gender debiasing (e.g., Chang et al. 2019, Forscher et al. 2019) struggle to produce lasting change: stereotypes about women's private uncommunality are difficult to disprove.

In the pages that follow, we elaborate on how the uncommunal stereotype operates, where it fits within the existing framework of gender stereotypes, and what it adds to management theory. We begin by outlining evidence of the uncommunal stereotype and explain why there is scant attention given to it; researchers have not recognized how people view women's public and private behavior in different and apparently contradictory ways. We offer a novel theoretical account of how a single observer can hold conflicting communal and uncommunal beliefs about a single woman at the same time. We then describe how the uncommunal stereotype enhances theorizing about the obstacles that women—especially successful women—face in their careers. In sum, we highlight the presence of the uncommunal stereotype, which has been overlooked, and outline a theoretical account of its influence and impact.

The Uncommunal Stereotype

Empirical research and everyday experience suggest that women are perceived to be communal (Ellemers 2018, Eagly et al. 2020). Compared with men, women are seen as more affectionate, kind, sympathetic, nurturant, and gentle (Diekman and Eagly 2000; Eagly et al. 2020; Martin and Slepian 2021, 2025). In fact, as other stereotypes appear to fade, the belief that women are more communal than men remains strong (Eagly et al. 2020). At the same time, past research has consistently shown that women are stereotyped as having several traits that conflict with communality. This set of traits includes conniving, dishonest, manipulative (Heilman et al. 2004, Toneva et al. 2020), devious, scheming, deceitful (Heilman et al. 1995), fussy (Diekman and Eagly 2000), fickle, melodramatic, vindictive (Bailey et al. 2022), controlling, cynical, and nosy (Prentice and Carranza 2002). Further, many people believe that women engage in covert, manipulative actions aimed at harming others, such as silent treatment, social exclusion, relationship sabotage, and negative gossip (Coyne and Archer 2005). See Table 1.

These stereotypes refer to what we call "uncommunality," a specific form of agency that (1) promotes one's self-interest at the expense of others

Table 1. Example Traits and Behaviors for Agency, Communality, and Uncommunality

	Domain	Stereotypes	Behaviors
Agency	Public	Assertive	Speaking first
		Dominant	Defending ideas
		Confident	Self-promoting
		Competitive	Negotiating
		Self-assured	Taking credit
Communality	Public	Nurturing	Mentoring others
		Caring	Offering support and help
		Empathetic	Recognizing others' contributions
		Supportive	Sharing credit
		Cooperative	Advocating for others
Uncommunality	Private	Deceitful	Withholding information
		Conniving	Spreading rumors or gossiping
		Manipulative	Feigning ignorance
		Scheming	Taking a public position at odds with private intention
		Vindictive	Using flattery or flirtation for personal gain

and (2) occurs in private settings. This view of women as uncommunal is a stereotype—an assumption about what women are like and how they behave that exists in the minds of observers and is often not based in reality (Allport 1954, Ellemers 2018). These uncommunal beliefs are held about women broadly but directed at female targets individually, shaping how their behavior is evaluated and understood. We make no claims about whether women are *actually* more uncommunal. Nevertheless, this uncommunal feminine stereotype pervades cultural narratives from biblical figures (e.g., Eve) to classic literature (e.g., Lady MacBeth) and modern-day television (e.g., *Pretty Little Liars*). Recent research analyzing billions of words has found that women are more closely linked to words like "vindictive," "ruthless," "secret," "melodramatic," and "gossip" than are men (Bailey et al. 2022, Caliskan et al. 2022). Further, the majority of female leaders in film are depicted as "bitch(es)—heartless, mean … and conniving" and "self-serving to the point of betraying friends and backstabbing colleagues" (Ezzedeen 2013, pp. 251–252). These examples reify stereotypes that associate women with deceitful behavior, such as feigning ignorance, using flattery or flirtation, spreading rumors, or taking public positions misaligned with their private beliefs.

Although the evidence of a feminine uncommunal stereotype is clear, it does not appear on its own in theorizing about gender stereotypes. Instead, it has been referred to as part and parcel of a generalized negative stereotype about women, often intermixed with other unflattering traits, like servile, gullible, and anxious (Diekman and Eagly 2000, Prentice and Carranza 2002). Hints of the uncommunal stereotype can be found in the concept of "hostile sexism" (Glick and Fiske 1996, Bareket and Fiske 2023), which describes a broad antipathy toward women. Although the measure of hostile sexism (i.e., the *hostile sexism scale*) contains generalized negative beliefs about women (e.g., "women are too easily offended" and "women fail to fully appreciate all that men do for them"), it also includes items that specifically refer to uncommunality: "Many women get a kick out of teasing men by seeming sexually available and then refusing male advances" and "many women are actually seeking special favors, such as hiring policies that favor them over men, under the guise of asking for 'equality'" (Glick and Fiske 1996, Bareket and Fiske 2023). These items suggest that hostile attitudes toward women extend beyond violations of communal norms. They imply that women will lie, deceive, and undermine others to get what they want.

Finally, the uncommunal feminine stereotype can be found in research on the "queen bee syndrome" (Ellemers et al. 2004; Derks et al. 2011, 2016), which depicts successful women as "stinging" other women by withholding support and employing exclusionary tactics (Mavin 2008, Mavin et al. 2014). Although uncommunality can be directed at both men and women, discussion of queen bee behavior highlights uncommunal acts perpetrated by women toward other women. Evidence for this queen bee behavior has been debated (see Arvate et al. 2018), but the stereotype that successful women treat other women in uncommunal ways nevertheless persists (Giles and Heyman 2005, Sheppard and Aquino 2013). People expect that women are inclined to engage in relational aggression toward other women (Goldberg et al. 2011) and view conflict between two women as relatively more dysfunctional than conflict between two men or a man and a woman (Sheppard and Aquino 2013).

Taken together, this evidence presents a compelling case for the existence of an uncommunal feminine stereotype, and yet, this stereotype remains largely unaccounted for in psychological theories of gender stereotyping (e.g., role congruity, lack of fit, and backlash theories) (Eagly and Karau 2002, Rudman et al. 2012,

Wood and Eagly 2012, Heilman and Caleo 2018). Instead, these theories focus sharply on a positive stereotype about women's communality. When the uncommunal stereotype is discussed, it is dismissed as an inconsistency, referred to as one aspect of a broader form of antipathy, or explained through piecemeal arguments about context, threat, and perceiver or target differences (Eagly and Karau 2002, p. 576). We suspect that this failure to account for the uncommunal feminine stereotype in theories of gender stereotyping stems from its seeming discordance with the communal stereotype and an inability to explain how people hold these discordant views. In the next section, we reconcile this apparent discordance.

Reconciling (Un-)Communal Stereotypes: Public vs. Private

The duality of stereotypes about women's communality (i.e., they are presumed to be both communal and uncommunal) has been attributed to differences within both targets and perceivers (Eagly and Karau 2002, p. 576). Some perceivers (e.g., benevolent sexists) may see women as more communal, whereas others (e.g., hostile sexists) may see them as more uncommunal. By the same token, some female targets (e.g., mothers) may be seen as more communal, whereas others (e.g., feminists) may be seen as more uncommunal (Glick and Fiske 2001, Fiske et al. 2002, Bareket and Fiske 2023, Manzi et al. 2024). We argue for a third possibility—that a single perceiver can hold these inconsistent views about a single female target's communality. That is, people may believe that any woman is prone to both foster social connections and subvert them.

How can people hold stereotypes about women that suggest they are both communal (warm, gentle, nurturing) and uncommunal (deceitful, manipulative, backstabbing)? Simultaneously endorsing these contradictory stereotypes should engender cognitive dissonance—discomfort about holding conflicting beliefs—that individuals are motivated to resolve (Festinger 1954). To explain how people can resolve such dissonance, we highlight a critical distinction between the public domain (observed behavior) and the private domain (unobserved behavior). We posit that the descriptive communal stereotype (women tend to be more communal than men) is applied to behavior in public settings, whereas the descriptive uncommunal stereotype (women tend to be more uncommunal than men) is applied to behavior in private settings—and especially to behavior involving agency. This crucial distinction provides a theoretical means of resolution by suggesting that each stereotype is applied to a unique context that does not overlap with the other. In this sense, the two stereotypes are not contradictory but complementary.

Observers understand that one's public appearance may not match their private intentions or behavior (LaPierre 1934, Snyder 1979, Gangestad and Snyder 2000). Gift recipients mask their disappointment in front of the giver upon receiving an unwanted gift (Tobin and Graziano 2011). Couples prefer to have squabbles in private rather than in public (e.g., Esterline and Muehlenhard 2017). Customer service agents are encouraged to provide "service with a smile," even if they feel frustrated (Hochschild 1983). Observers recognize this lack of fidelity between a target's public actions and their true feelings (Kernis and Goldman 2006, Beer and Brandler 2021). They presume that the target may behave differently when others are not around (Goffman 1959). This presumption may strengthen when observers are aware of the social norms surrounding appropriate behavior (Hamilton et al. 1990, Gilbert and Malone 1995, Sedikides and Schlegel 2024).

Why would observers presume a lack of fidelity between women's public and private behavior in the workplace? Organizations value an individual's agency, which is defined as one's striving to control one's environment and to assert, protect, and expand one's personal interests (Martin and Slepian 2021). These valued behaviors conflict with strong expectations about how women should behave, particularly at work (e.g., Eagly and Karau 2002), where social norms of professionalism lead to expectations of conformity (Hewlin 2003), especially for women and racial minorities (Hennekam and Ladge 2023). Observers are aware that women are discouraged from exhibiting agency, and indeed, women *do* exhibit less agency than men in *public settings* (see Brescoll 2012), partly because they also are aware of (Amanatullah and Morris 2010) and correct about (Bowles et al. 2007) expectations of their (public) behavior.

However, women's efforts to regulate their agentic behavior pertain primarily to the public domain. Research has found that women are more likely to confront offensive remarks (Swim and Hyers 1999), provide critical feedback (Mize 2019), and express self-confidence (Daubman et al. 1992) in private settings rather than public settings. Women tend to express less confidence, in the form of self-ratings and verbal statements, when they know that their expressed confidence will be heard by others (Gould and Slone 1982, Daubman et al. 1992). In MBA programs, for example, women adapt to public agency proscriptions by contributing less often to class discussion but still exert ambition privately by putting in more effort "behind the scenes" (Wallen et al. 2017). Communal expectations are likewise dependent on public attention. Women smile more often than men (a signal of communality), but this occurs only in public when women know they are being observed (LaFrance et al. 2003).

This tension between what is valued in workplace settings (i.e., agency) and what is expected of women (i.e., communality) makes the uncommunal stereotype especially feminine. Female leaders must possess agency, but they are discouraged from exhibiting self-enhancement and goal-directed behavior (e.g., assertiveness, dominance, ambition) (Rudman et al. 2012). For men, this agency is valued and rewarded, so it can manifest publicly without fear of reprisal. Indeed, given that men are stereotyped as agentic, they are *expected* to behave in aggressive ways that advance their personal goals (Vandello et al. 2008, Ellemers 2018). When their self-promoting behavior undermines others (e.g., competitiveness), it is not seen as violating gender norms. In contrast, women are discouraged from exhibiting similar agency. Noting this, observers may presume that women perform agentic acts discreetly and stereotype this discreet agency in feminine (i.e., relationship-based) terms. That is, they presume that women are deceitful, manipulative, and willing to betray others so that they can advance their individual goals—but at the expense of others and to the detriment of social relationships.

In sum, observers may expect women to behave more communally in public settings because they believe that this is what women *have* to do, not because observers believe that this is what women *want* to do. At the same time, observers are aware that women must refrain from exhibiting agency or risk being punished (Rudman and Phelan 2008, Bowles et al. 2025). Observers may assume that women mitigate this risk by relying on indirect, furtive tactics that advance their personal interests in the workplace (e.g., Bowles and Flynn 2010). At the same time, observers recognize that men have no need for such furtive tactics because their agency is welcomed and encouraged in the public domain. Based on this reasoning, we put forth the following proposition.

Proposition 1. (a) *People see female leaders' public behavior as more communal than male leaders' public behavior and female leaders' private behavior as more uncommunal than male leaders' private behavior*. (b) *Uncommunal stereotypes are more strongly applied to women in or aspiring to leadership roles that value agency*.

Theories of Gender Stereotyping and Backlash: Reliance on Agency and Communality

To explain how the uncommunal stereotype can enhance theories of gender inequality, we first outline how current theories of gender stereotyping account for inequality (Eagly and Karau 2002, Rudman and Phelan 2008, Rudman et al. 2012, Joshi et al. 2024). Some organizational theories identify how power dynamics and structural factors can explain women's underrepresentation and discriminatory treatment. However, many psychological theories point to different forms of gender stereotypes as an equally important factor: what women and men are like (descriptive), how they should behave (proscriptive), and how they should not (proscriptive). These gender stereotypes revolve around the idea that men *are* and *are expected to be* more agentic, and thus, they are both seen as and rewarded for agency—a set of skills, qualities, and characteristics that are valued in leadership. Women, on the other hand, are seen as and are expected to be more communal—a set of skills that are valued, of course, but not as highly as agency in leadership roles (Eagly and Karau 2002).

Descriptive stereotypes about men's agency and women's communality lead to assumptions that men are better leaders than women because agency is a more desirable leadership trait (Eagly and Karau 2002). Further, proscriptive agency stereotypes prohibit women from behaving in many agentic ways (i.e., assertive, competitive). Women who come across as forceful, dominant, and assertive often elicit backlash (Eagly and Karau 2002, Heilman and Eagly 2008, Schaumberg and Flynn 2017, Sczesny et al. 2025). For example, women who self-promote during job interviews are perceived as highly qualified but also, socially deficient and unlikable, which results in worse hiring outcomes (Rudman and Glick 2001). Likewise, women who demonstrate ambition are more likely to have their performance sabotaged (Rudman and Fairchild 2004, Rudman et al. 2012). Thus, both descriptive and proscriptive agency stereotypes limit women's success, with men being more likely than women to attain high-status positions in organizations (Rudman and Phelan 2008).

Prescriptive gender stereotypes dictate that women *should* behave in communal ways (Heilman 2001, Rudman and Phelan 2008, Sczesny et al. 2025). Warm and nurturing behavior from women signals deference, which legitimizes the gender hierarchy (Delacollette et al. 2013, Rucker et al. 2018, Sczesny et al. 2025). Women are rewarded for adhering to this prescriptive communal stereotype (Eagly et al. 1994, Heilman and Okimoto 2007), which further thwarts their attempts to acquire positions of power. For example, women are expected to perform "nonpromotable" tasks (e.g., note taking at meetings, organizing social events) that are aimed at supporting the group but that do not increase their perceived suitability for leadership roles (Babcock et al. 2022). When women exhibit agentic traits (e.g., self-promoting, demanding), they suffer penalties for having a "communality deficit," which makes them less liked and less likely to be hired or promoted (Rudman and Glick 2001; Heilman and Okimoto 2007, 2008; Eareckson and Heilman 2024).

Gender theorists rely on these proscriptive agency and prescriptive communality stereotypes to explain

why women are underrepresented in management. They suggest that women may be perceived in uncommunal terms when they violate proscriptive agency stereotypes. For example, when women behave in self-promoting ways, they are then perceived as manipulative, conniving, and deceitful (Heilman et al. 1995, 2004). However, we contend that these negative stereotypes are not merely a reaction to women's agentic behavior. Rather, uncommunality represents a distinct form of agency that (1) explains why women's communality is prescribed so strongly and (2) offers an alternative attribution for people to make sense of women's success when it occurs. We elaborate on these claims in the sections that follow.

The Descriptive Uncommunality Stereotype Necessitates Prescriptive Communality

We have noted that women are *seen as* more communal than men (descriptive stereotype) and *encouraged to be* more communal than men (prescriptive stereotype), and we have noted that both forms of stereotyping limit women's opportunities. However, current gender theories do not provide a clear account for the relationship between descriptive and prescriptive communal stereotypes. If women are seen as more communal than men, then why do people believe so strongly that women must be encouraged to be communal? For many other groups, descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes are inversely related; prescriptive stereotypes are endorsed because people believe that their descriptive counterparts are *not* true. For example, people believe that older (compared with younger) individuals and Black (compared with White) men *should be* generous and submissive because people believe that they *are not* (North and Fiske 2013, Hall et al. 2014) and thus, represent a potential threat to the status quo. Thus, the existence of prescriptive communal stereotypes reflects a concern that members of the target group "must be kept in line" (Fiske et al. 1991). However, this logic does not apply to women. Although people believe that women should be communal, they also believe that women are—and will be—communal (Koenig 2018).

Another explanation for the existence of the communal prescriptive stereotype can be found in social role theory and system justification theory (Hoffman and Hurst 1990, Eagly and Karau 2002, Jost and Kay 2005), which suggest that prescriptive stereotypes arise because people believe that the way that things "are" is the way that things "should be" (Hoffman and Hurst 1990, Roberts 2022). To make sense of the current state of affairs—where women behave in communal ways and are overrepresented in communal roles—people infer that these differences are desirable, normative, and natural. Thus, they believe that men and women "do" differ and that they "ought to" as well (Glick and Fiske 1996, Eagly and Karau 2002). This implies that the descriptive communal stereotype underlies the prescriptive communal stereotype. However, this argument cannot explain why these stereotypes are only weakly correlated and often, not correlated at all (Cota et al. 1991, Gill 2004, López-Sáez and Lisbona 2009; but see Koenig 2018). In other words, if the descriptive communal stereotype underlies the prescriptive communal stereotype, the two should correlate highly, and yet, they do not (Gill 2004, López-Sáez and Lisbona 2009). Further, if the descriptive communal stereotype produces the prescriptive stereotype, then a change in the descriptive stereotype should produce a change in the prescriptive stereotype. Yet, this is also not the case; when people change their beliefs about the way women "are," their beliefs about how women "should be" remain (Gill 2004).

These two theoretical explanations for how descriptive and prescriptive communal stereotypes are related have little empirical support. One suggests that because prescriptive stereotypes are meant to protect the existing hierarchy, there should be a negative relationship between descriptive and prescriptive communal stereotypes (e.g., women ought to be communal because they need to "get in line," which implies that they are not already "in line"). The other suggests that prescriptive stereotypes reflect a descriptive reality (a positive correlation should exist between the two). These theoretical claims fail to bear out in quantitative research. We argue that these claims fall short because they overlook the private sphere. Endorsement of the descriptive uncommunal stereotype (applied to women's unobserved behavior) provides a better explanation for why the prescriptive communal stereotype exists.

We argue that the prescriptive communal stereotype not only encourages role-appropriate behaviors, which confirm descriptive stereotypes about women's communality, but that *it also suggests women's potential to be uncommunal*. Consistent with this argument, past research has found that people who endorse positive beliefs about women's communality—particularly prescriptive communal stereotypes—also endorse unflattering uncommunal beliefs about women (see Glick et al. 2000, Sibley et al. 2007, Sibley and Perry 2010, and Hammond et al. 2018). These inconsistencies have been attributed to beliefs about different "types" of women (e.g., feminists versus mothers and stereotype violators versus stereotype adherers) (Glick and Fiske 2001, Heilman 2012). However, subtyping cannot explain why a single female target is described with both communal traits—like sociability—and negative traits—like disloyalty (Ashmore et al. 1996, Brewer and Archer 2007, Sheppard and Johnson 2019). We provide an alternative explanation; these stereotypes can be held about the same woman at the same time if they are applied to different domains of behavior.

We posit that the descriptive uncommunal feminine stereotype can help explain the weak association between descriptive and prescriptive communal stereotypes. Observers who see women behave communally in public may interpret this behavior as validation of the prescriptive communal stereotype (i.e., women are adhering to an expectation to show communality). However, observers may not necessarily see this public display of communality as validation of the descriptive communal stereotype. Instead, they may believe that public communal acts are merely intended to mask private uncommunality. That is, women can show their benevolence while hiding their malevolence. This argument suggests that the prescriptive and descriptive communal stereotypes would not be strongly positively correlated but only weakly so.

In contrast, we expect a strong association between the prescriptive communal stereotype and the descriptive uncommunal stereotype. Previous empirical work indicates that the prescriptive communal stereotype and the descriptive uncommunal stereotype are tightly coupled in people's minds; an individual who endorses one stereotype (e.g., women should be warm and supportive) tends to endorse the other (e.g., women are manipulative and backstabbing). Believing that women are prone to be uncommunal (endorsing a descriptive uncommunal stereotype) would likely lead individuals to support a norm encouraging women to behave in more communal ways (endorsing a prescriptive communal stereotype). Thus, although there may be only a weak positive correlation between the prescriptive and descriptive communal stereotypes, we expect that there will be a strong positive correlation between the prescriptive communal and descriptive uncommunal stereotypes. This reasoning leads us to put forth our next proposition.

Proposition 2. *Stronger endorsement of prescriptive communal feminine stereotypes will be associated with stronger endorsement of descriptive uncommunal feminine stereotypes.*

The Uncommunality Stereotype and Sanctioning Ethical Misconduct

Our second proposition—that the descriptive uncommunal stereotype underlies the prescriptive communal stereotype—has important implications. For one, it explains why women are held to higher ethical standards (Heilman and Caleo 2018, Kennedy et al. 2022) and punished more harshly for their alleged misconduct (Montgomery and Cowen 2020). According to recent findings, when women make mistakes, they receive more severe punishment, particularly when the mistakes are moral forms of misjudgment (Kennedy et al. 2022). For example, female attorneys were more likely than male attorneys to be disbarred and fired following an ethical violation (Montgomery and Cowen 2020, Egan et al. 2022). In addition, people responded more negatively to an organization's ethical misconduct (but not competence-based failures) when the organization had a female leader versus a male leader (Montgomery and Cowen 2020). As yet another example, Bowles and Gelfand (2010) found that men rated women's misdeeds (e.g., lying about hours worked, covering up mistakes) as more "serious" and more deserving of harsh punishment.

This "gender-punishment gap" has been explained using the prescriptive communal stereotype. Unethical acts could be seen as a violation of the communal prescription, which prompts outrage and harsh punishment (Montgomery and Cowen 2020, Kennedy et al. 2022). Yet, if women are generally seen as more moral, ethical, and trustworthy, which they are (Eagly and Karau 2002), and people feel benevolent toward and protective of women, which they do (Glick and Fiske 1996, 2001), then why are people more vigilant toward their potential misconduct and harsher in sanctioning it? Why are women held to a *higher* ethical standard? At first blush, one might assume that if women were seen as more moral, people would be more likely to overlook their transgressions. Even if women were caught, they would be punished less harshly (after all, people hold the view that women are weaker, more gullible, and more naïve than men) (Diekman and Eagly 2000). However, this is not what happens.

We offer a more logical explanation for the gender-punishment gap, one that relies on both the prescriptive communal stereotype and the descriptive uncommunal stereotype. Women are more likely to be sanctioned for ethical misconduct because people are wary of women's stereotyped propensity to be deceitful, conniving, and manipulative. Whereas the prescriptive communal stereotype encourages the performance of communal behavior, the descriptive uncommunal stereotype *suggests the potential for uncommunal behavior*. Thus, it may be the descriptive uncommunal stereotype that more directly promotes vigilance toward women's potential misconduct, which along with the prescriptive stereotype, accounts for the harshness of their punishment. We argue that this greater punishment of women's ethical violations (relative to men) is driven by a deep-seated belief that women are more uncommunal, particularly when it comes to their private deeds. This argument leads to the following proposition.

Proposition 3. *The descriptive uncommunal stereotype will more strongly predict punishment for women's ethical misconduct than will the prescriptive communal stereotype.*

Thus far, we have argued that the uncommunal feminine stereotype contributes to theories of gender inequality by better explaining the presence and influence of the prescriptive communal stereotype and

strengthening arguments for the gender-punishment gap (Egan et al. 2022). Along with these theoretical contributions, we argue that the descriptive uncommunal stereotype provides an alternative attribution for women's success, which better explains why women who manage to ascend to leadership roles are nonetheless distrusted. We turn to these arguments next.

Private Uncommunality as an Alternative Path to Power

Agency represents a primary path to power for both men and women (Heilman 2001, Eagly and Karau 2002, Ma et al. 2022). However, the descriptive agency stereotype (where men are associated with agency and women are not) makes it difficult for women to ascend to leadership roles. Even if women do exhibit agency, they are often disliked and rebuked because they have violated the proscriptive agency stereotype (e.g., Heilman et al. 1995, 2004; Rudman and Phelan 2008; Rudman et al. 2012). According to backlash theory, when a woman succeeds in ascending to a leadership role, observers attribute her success to an ability to exhibit agency in public and somehow evade subsequent sanctions. This is certainly possible. However, there may be another path by which people assume that women attain power—pursuing their goals in ways that are highly agentic but also clearly lacking in communality. This path, we argue, is the uncommunal path.

Uncommunality can be seen as a unique form of agency: it is instrumental in its purpose (i.e., helping to achieve one's personal goals), albeit antisocial in its approach (i.e., undermining others' social connections and/or their reputations). To observers, uncommunality may seem like an attractive explanation for a woman's success in ascending to a leadership role because this explanation does not require any visible evidence. Enforcing gender norms that proscribe public forms of agency requires close monitoring, but if uncommunal behavior takes place in ways that escape others' scrutiny, this may operate as an apparent "loophole" that enables women to behave in agentic ways without receiving any penalty for violating the proscriptive agency stereotype. Thus, public agency and private uncommunality can be viewed as separate paths to power that people consider when attributing women's success.

We posit that people may treat women harshly (e.g., dislike, ostracism) because of their assumptions of what women are inclined to do in private. These assumptions do not require any direct observation of objectionable behavior. In contrast, backlash theories depend on the condition that others are *aware of* a proscriptive agency violation. Backlash theories can explain why women are depicted as manipulative, conniving, and deceitful *only if or when* women behave in publicly agentic ways. That is, these theories require that a woman's agentic behavior be known to an observer to elicit a penalty. However, people may also have preconceived beliefs about a woman's uncommunality without having any information about her or prior contact (Heilman et al. 1995, 2004; Prentice and Carranza 2002; Toneva et al. 2020), and these preconceived beliefs may be sufficient to engender dislike and disapproval.

This alternative view is particularly useful when theorizing about how people make sense of women's success (when it occurs). Women who occupy powerful positions in the workplace are seen as having a hierarchical status that is incongruous with their lower gender status (Rudman et al. 2012). Observers may ask themselves: "How did these women manage to succeed?" Relying on the explanation that a female target's success was driven by plainly agentic behavior is challenging for observers given that women who exhibit agency in public are disliked and receive economic and social penalties (Rudman and Phelan 2008). Women who overcome these barriers would be the exception rather than the rule. A less challenging explanation for a woman's success is that it resulted from her private uncommunal actions (e.g., being conniving and manipulative). This account is more straightforward; women in high-ranking roles avoided backlash for their agentic behavior by keeping it hidden from public view.

This argument resonates with popular tropes about high-status female politicians and the ways that they achieve power and success. For example, although she was a highly qualified candidate, Kamala Harris was seen as subtly using her race to her advantage (Bensinger 2024), benefitting from her private relationships with men (Reuters 2020), and mistreating her staff behind the scenes (Bunyan 2021). Other examples of female leaders depicted as using cunning and deceit to gain power abound. Indeed, the popular press is replete with accusations of women sleeping with men, undermining and manipulating employees, or lying and scheming to get ahead.

We argue that the uncommunal feminine stereotype represents more than a unique form of backlash toward agentic women. We propose that it provides a stronger theoretical account for negative evaluations of successful women than the prospective agency stereotype can provide alone. This leads us to put forth the following propositions.

Proposition 4. (a) *The descriptive uncommunality stereotype will account for attributions of women's career success over and above descriptive and proscriptive agency stereotypes*. (b) *The descriptive uncommunal stereotype is more likely to be associated with professionally successful women than with professionally unsuccessful women*.

How the Uncommunal Stereotype Better Explains Trust-Based Workplace Outcomes

We argue that some documented effects found in the backlash literature, particularly those involving distrust of women, are better explained as products of the uncommunal stereotype rather than penalties women face for exhibiting agency (e.g., Rudman and Glick 2001). To be clear, we do not suggest that our view undermines previous research on backlash. Women who violate the proscriptive agency stereotype do experience negative consequences, such as dislike, discrimination, and rebuke (see Rudman and Phelan 2008 and Williams and Tiedens 2016). Rather, we suggest that certain effects found previously can be *better* explained by accounting for the influence of the uncommunal stereotype than relying on agency and communality stereotypes alone. That is, the uncommunal stereotype can strengthen theorizing about the backlash effect, which will generate more compelling explanations of gender inequality in the workplace.

Accounting for Distrust

Trust has been defined as "a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another" (Rousseau et al. 1998, p. 395) or "confidence that [an agent] is dependable and can be relied on" (Grégoire and Fisher 2008; see also Sirdeshmukh et al. 2002). According to these definitions, trust would be diminished when a target individual is perceived to pose a threat to a focal actor or seen as unreliable or inconsistent. Women who are stereotyped as behaving uncommunally in private are, by definition, likely to be seen by others as more threatening and unpredictable than women who exhibit agentic behavior in public, where their behavior can be monitored and sanctioned (e.g., Heilman 2001, Heilman and Okimoto 2007). An insight that follows directly from our theorizing then is that the distrust of (agentic) women stems more directly from the influence of the uncommunal stereotype than from the agency stereotype.

Backlash theory suggests that people do not *like* agentic women, but this does not necessarily mean that people do not trust them. Trust and liking are distinct. People tend to dislike but trust individuals who are public in their oppositional views and actions (Zlatev 2019, Rosenblum et al. 2020). If agentic women publicly display agency, how then does backlash theory explain the distrust of agentic women? Backlash theory argues that women who violate agency proscriptions are seen as less trustworthy because stereotype violators are themselves less trustworthy (Manzi et al. 2024) That is, "deviants" who violate communal expectations are deemed as unpredictable, unreliable, and irresponsible (see Afifi and Metts 1998, Posten and Mussweiler 2013, and van Dijk et al. 2017). However, we argue that the uncommunal stereotype may offer a better explanation of some trust-based findings than would an account based solely on public violations of the proscriptive agency stereotype.

For example, in one (typical) backlash study, a high-achieving female manager was described as agentic (e.g., tough, demanding), but participants were also given details speaking to her consistency, dependability, and commitment, which are key components of trust (i.e., Sirdeshmukh et al. 2002). In fact, the female target was described as high-performing, receiving "*consistently* high evaluations" (Heilman et al. 2004), being "recognized for her *commitment*," and having "*others attest* to her outstanding effectiveness" (Heilman and Okimoto 2007). Nevertheless, she was seen as untrustworthy. Her agentic behavior is public, consistent, and rewarded, so it is unclear why or how being agentic, in this case, would predict distrust *if not* for some other assumption that observers are making about the target. Although the target is violating a proscriptive agency stereotype, participants are given countervailing information that should override assumptions that the target is unpredictable or irresponsible.

Using the private sphere to explain distrust of agentic women helps fill this theoretical gap. Research shows that distrust arises when observers believe that private intentions diverge from public behavior. For example, individuals whose stated beliefs contradict their actions (Rotenberg et al. 2024), who intentionally manipulate information (Birnbaum and Stegner 1979, Jodlbauer and Jonas 2011), and who strategically withhold information from others (John et al. 2016) are seen as less trustworthy. These duplicitous acts align closely with the uncommunal stereotype applied to women, particularly women in leadership roles (Heilman et al. 2004, Ezzedeen 2013, Toneva et al. 2020). Thus, the uncommunal stereotype helps explain why, even when backlash studies explicitly signal women's trustworthiness, women are still perceived as untrustworthy.

Backlash theory also cannot explain why leaders who appear more (compared with less) feminine are seen as untrustworthy (Sheppard and Johnson 2019). The "beauty is beastly" effect shows that attractive, feminine female leaders are evaluated more harshly (e.g., less capable, less hirable) (Heilman and Saruwatari 1979, Heilman and Stopeck 1985, Johnson et al. 2010). Accounts of these findings argue that femininity reinforces gender stereotypes, undermining perceptions of competence (Heilman and Saruwatari 1979, Heilman and Stopeck 1985, Johnson et al. 2010). However, this research also finds that attractive women are seen as more manipulative, more devious, and less trustworthy (Heilman and Stopeck 1985). Based on extant gender theory, it may be difficult to explain

how attractive women can be both stereotypical (feminine, less competent) and distrusted (Sheppard and Johnson 2019). However, our argument suggests that increasing gender stereotypicality should increase uncommunal stereotyping, which solves this puzzle. Consistent with our argument, research has found that attractive (i.e., "feminine") women are simultaneously associated with a variety of positive traits (i.e., warm, refined) as well as uncommunal traits (i.e., manipulative, devious) (Singh 2004, Brewer and Archer 2007).

Introducing the uncommunal feminine stereotype as an explanation for why successful women are distrusted can reconcile other disconnects in the literature. For example, research has found that when women are described as equal to men in terms of competence, they are still seen as less hirable. However, they can boost their hireability by demonstrating moral character (Moscatelli et al. 2020). This finding indirectly suggests that uncommunality and distrust may play a key role in the discounting of competent women. In addition, research has found that feminine women are less likely than men to have their success attributed to underlying ability (Heilman and Stopeck 1985). It remains unclear what their success is attributed to instead; we argue that it is attributed to uncommunality. Indeed, during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, several polls found that Donald Trump was perceived as more trustworthy than Hillary Clinton, despite evidence that he made more false statements (Cillizza 2016, Dickinson 2016). At the same time, many negative comments about Clinton relied on uncommunal traits (e.g., corrupt, liar), which was not the case for negative comments about Trump (e.g., conceited, racist) (Gershtenson and Plane 2024).

The uncommunal feminine stereotype offers a straightforward, plausible explanation for the distrust of women. Such distrust cannot be fully explained by public demonstrations of agency because many cases of distrust surrounding women involve no evidence of agency. Rather, such distrust is more likely driven by suspicion of women's private intentions, which are presumed to be uncommunal. This suspicion of women's private uncommunality will likely arise, regardless of whether they have exhibited agency and whether their public agency is threatening (although we suspect that the uncommunal stereotype may be stronger for more assertive women). In sum, the belief that women are more privately uncommunal (i.e., manipulative, deceitful, and conniving) than men offers a more compelling explanation of people's distrust of women than does the belief that women should not be agentic (assertive, competitive, and bold) in public.

Proposition 5. *Descriptive uncommunal stereotypes will more strongly predict distrust of women than will proscriptive agency stereotypes alone.*

Distrust of Women Driven by Presumed Uncommunality Has Consequences

Our previous proposition—that (dis-)trust-based outcomes are better explained by a descriptive uncommunal stereotype than by a proscriptive agency stereotype—has important implications for theorizing about gender inequality and backlash. In this section, we elaborate on how the lack of trust grounded in the uncommunal feminine stereotype may have negative consequences for women. In doing so, we use examples of gender-based inequality found in past research and describe how they may be better accounted for by the distrust associated with the uncommunal stereotype than by other possible mechanisms (e.g., homophily, backlash for public agency). We call for future empirical research to delineate more precisely what the uncommunal feminine stereotype can and cannot explain.

Mentorship. Although mentorship can help any employee, it may be especially useful for women in the workplace (Ragins 1989, Burke and McKeen 1990) who benefit from both the nuanced guidance and career advocacy that mentors provide (Noe 1988, Ibarra 1993, Ibarra et al. 2010). Unfortunately, women in organizations often encounter greater barriers to acquiring mentors than men do (Ragins and Cotton 1991; but see Turban and Dougherty 1994). To account for this disparity, researchers suggest that men, who are more likely to occupy higher-ranking roles, prefer to affiliate with male colleagues rather than female colleagues (Ibarra 1993, Anderson and Smith 2019). In addition, male mentors may see women as "tokens" who are not worthy of the time, energy, and attention needed to deliver high-quality mentorship (Kanter 1977).

The uncommunal feminine stereotype provides a different account for men's reluctance to mentor women. Mentorship relationships, which involve intimate one-on-one conversations, depend on trust. Yet, many male managers report discomfort mentoring a female subordinate because of a fear they might be wrongfully accused of inappropriate behavior (Bower 2017, LeanIn.com 2022). This fear may not stem from ignorance of what constitutes inappropriate behavior as some have suggested (see Atwater et al. 2019). Instead, it likely indicates a distrust of women: a belief that women will lie or intentionally misrepresent innocent behavior. As one example, after the #MeToo movement began, 60% of male managers said they felt uncomfortable mentoring women (a 32% increase from the year prior) (LeanIn.com 2022), and although many men support laws that protect women, those same men expressed discomfort mentoring women over fear of being falsely accused of untoward acts (Tudor et al. 2024). Perhaps the hesitation to mentor is partly because of homophily effects, but we believe that uncommunal stereotypes

and the resulting distrust of women are likely responsible as well.

Proposition 6. *Descriptive uncommunal stereotypes will be negatively related to men's willingness to mentor women.*

Sexual Harassment. Along a similar vein, the uncommunal stereotype can also explain responses to sexual harassment claims from women and in particular why these claims are discounted. More than 25% of women experience sexual harassment at work (U.S. Equal Employment Commission 2016, Lee 2017). However, the majority do not report these cases because they fear they will not be believed (Burt 1980; Lonsway and Fitzgerald 1994, 1995) and in some cases, they might be retaliated against (Cortina and Berdahl 2008). Women who do report incidents of sexual assault are frequently penalized because they are seen as lacking credibility (Marin and Guadagno 1999, Capezza and Arriaga 2008). For example, in a survey of police officers who handle such claims, over half of the officers stated that claimants lie about their experience (Schwartz 2010). Further, individuals accused of sexual harassment often receive leniency because jurors believe that female accusers are deceitful (Dinos et al. 2015).

We argue that people rely on the uncommunal feminine stereotype to justify their negative (or dismissive) reactions to women's complaints of sexual harassment. When it comes to romantic relationships, people generally believe that women are flirtatious and manipulative (Heilman et al. 1995, Kray and Locke 2008, Kennedy and Kray 2015), claiming that "women get a kick out of teasing men by seeming sexually available and then refusing male advances" (Bareket and Fiske 2023; see also Glick and Fiske 1996). Such beliefs have troubling consequences for women who are victims of harassment. When a woman reports sexual harassment, observers may harbor doubts about the report's veracity. Indeed, people who stereotype women as cunning and manipulative are unlikely to believe women when they report rape (Fakunmoju 2022). Rather, they choose to believe instead that a woman's outward self-presentation and explicit statements are intended to be misleading, which leads to their claims being discounted (Abrams et al. 2003).

Proposition 7. *Descriptive uncommunal stereotypes will be negatively related to support for and belief in sexual harassment claims.*

Thus far, we have discussed the uncommunal stereotype, its presence in management research, its coexistence with communal stereotypes, and its alignment with current gender theories on agency, communality, and inequality. Next, we explore how the uncommunal stereotype challenges popular recommendations for gender equality interventions. Stereotypes about women's private uncommunal behavior suggest that gender interventions targeting the public sphere (e.g., representation, bias awareness) may not be enough.

Rethinking Gender Interventions by Considering Uncommunality

Our theorizing about the uncommunal feminine stereotype may help explain how gender stereotypes endure and why attempts to disrupt them often fail. Much of the literature on stereotype reduction has examined ways to counter negative group stereotypes by increasing awareness—bringing unconscious stereotypes to the surface where they can be understood and addressed (Rudman et al. 2001, Devine et al. 2012, Martin 2023). These strategies aimed at heightening awareness of gender stereotypes are limited to agency and communality stereotypes and their associated social roles (see Rudman et al. 2001, Devine et al. 2012, and Moss-Racusin et al. 2018). They focus on these stereotypes about women's public and visible behavior without incorporating people's beliefs around women's private behavior. We argue that these efforts are unlikely to be effective, especially in reducing distrust.

Raising awareness is the most common method of attempting to reduce sexual harassment. From compulsory trainings to bystander interventions, efforts aimed at decreasing sexual harassment aim to boost knowledge and hone skills (Roehling and Huang 2018, Lee et al. 2019). This approach assumes that when people know what constitutes harassment or how to intervene when they witness it, they will be inclined to change their behavior in a positive way. However, as we have noted, the uncommunal stereotype may play a primary role in attributions for and justifications of sexual harassment (i.e., that women cannot be trusted or that they are deserving of harm). Without disrupting the uncommunal feminine stereotype, it is unlikely that awareness-based interventions as they currently exist will succeed in curbing harassment.

We believe that raising awareness about the uncommunal feminine stereotype (and its inaccuracy) could be an effective means of disruption (Carter et al. 2020, Onyeador et al. 2024). However, we also recognize that trying to "break" associations between women and uncommunal behavior is no small task. The uncommunal stereotype captures beliefs about women's *private* dispositions and behavior. Given that these actions are presumed but not observed, they are less susceptible to disconfirming information, which makes the stereotype especially pernicious. Simply put, it is more difficult to invalidate the uncommunal feminine stereotype than to invalidate negative stereotypes about women's public behavior (descriptive communal and proscriptive agency). Beliefs about feminine uncommunality

may require different types of intervention. For example, interventions that promote interpersonal trust (e.g., Brewer and Gaertner 2003) and psychological safety (e.g., Edmondson 2004) may be fruitful paths to explore.

Drawing attention to counterexamples is another popular form of stereotype disruption. Scholars argue that seeing women in leadership roles can change gender stereotypes by providing objective stereotype-disconfirming information (see Plant et al. 2009 and Lawson et al. 2022). This argument hinges on the belief that those who hold gender stereotypes are sensitive to information about whether women have the necessary agency to succeed as leaders. However, we believe that this information may not be effective in overcoming gender bias. If people see more female leaders, they may react by conceding that these women are indeed competent, but they may also believe that these women used uncommunal tactics to get ahead in their career. Over the last 20 years, there has been a steady increase in female representation in leadership roles and coverage of women's leadership qualifications (United Nations 2020). Yet, inequality persists. Perhaps changing representation in the leadership ranks is not enough to change stereotypes about women's uncommunality.

More empirical investigation of the feminine uncommunal stereotype—aimed at understanding what constitutes it and how it operates—is needed before we can make strong recommendations about redesigning gender stereotype interventions. However, given that the efficacy of current intervention-based efforts appears to be middling at best (Paluck and Green 2009, Paluck et al. 2021), we encourage researchers and practitioners interested in mitigating gender stereotypes to consider incorporating the uncommunal stereotype in their intervention efforts. Acknowledging the uncommunal feminine stereotype as a potential precursor to various forms of gender discrimination may be a vital means to combat inequality.

General Discussion

Our theorizing offers a direct answer to the call from gender scholars (e.g., Joshi et al. 2015, 2024; Ma et al. 2022) to address the multitude and complexity of gender stereotypes in ways that help explain how these stereotypes are interrelated. To this end, we shine a spotlight on a unique, specific stereotype that can enhance gender theorizing: the uncommunal feminine stereotype. We draw attention to how the uncommunal stereotype relates to other gender stereotypes and how it harms women in the workplace in distinct ways. We hope that drawing attention to this stereotype can help gender scholars strengthen their theoretical accounts for the backlash effect, distrust toward women, and outcomes that result from gender bias (e.g., reduced mentoring and suspicion surrounding sexual harassment claims).

Theoretical Contributions

For the past two decades, gender research has galvanized around a theoretical paradigm that prominently features the communal feminine stereotype (for women) and the agentic masculine stereotype (for men) (Eagly and Karau 2002, Martin and Slepian 2021), outlining how these two stereotypes shape workplace outcomes (Heilman 2001, Rudman and Phelan 2008, Ellemers 2018). Meanwhile, ample evidence speaks to the existence of an uncommunal feminine stereotype, and yet, no attempt has been made to integrate this stereotype into management scholarship as a means of explaining the persistence of gender inequality. This may be because the existence of the uncommunal feminine stereotype seems contradictory and therefore puzzling to many scholars. In this article, we help solve this puzzle by reconciling the relationship between the uncommunal feminine stereotype and other gender stereotypes.

Our theoretical frame hinges on the distinction between private and public domains or whether a target's behavior is observable. We propose that beliefs about women's communality may shift depending on the context—communality being associated with public behavior and uncommunality being associated with private behavior. Previous theorizing about communal gender stereotypes has overlooked this public-private distinction and assumed a fidelity (in observers' minds) between women's public and private selves. However, clear evidence exists that both communal and uncommunal images of women can be held by a single individual (e.g., Glick and Fiske 1996, 2001; Prentice and Carranza 2002; Bareket and Fiske 2023). We propose that the seemingly contradictory coexistence of communal and uncommunal stereotypes can be understood by delineating the relevance of each stereotype to one domain of judgment versus another. This crucial theoretical distinction enables researchers to predict when each stereotype is more likely to be activated and exert greater influence on women's outcomes.

Our ideas contribute to theorizing about agency and communality stereotypes by strengthening accounts for why the prescriptive communal stereotype exists, how people attribute women's success, and when the backlash effect appears. Although past research on the backlash effect has highlighted the influence of a proscriptive agency stereotype, suggesting that women who violate this stereotype will be punished (e.g., Rudman 1998), recent studies call that view into question, noting that there are many forms of agency (see Ma et al. 2022) and that some do not elicit backlash (e.g., self-reliance) (Williams and Tiedens 2016, Schaumberg and Flynn 2017). We suggest that the uncommunal stereotype may help reconcile these inconsistent findings;

when observers presume that women are privately behaving in uncommunal ways, it prompts a more severe backlash because this form of agency engenders distrust. We urge backlash scholars to account for private uncommunality to better account for inequality.

In addition, we identify outcomes (mentoring, sexual harassment) that cannot be explained by the mere presence of agentic stereotypes or a presumed absence of communality. These outcomes, which are covered extensively in the backlash literature, stem from distrust, which is better explained by the influence of an uncommunal feminine stereotype than by other stereotypes. We highlighted these two outcomes as examples, but there are others. For instance, many managers are skeptical of women who request flextime work arrangements because they believe that women will take advantage of this flexibility to complete "nonwork" tasks (Brescoll et al. 2013). If gender scholars wish to understand when, where, and why women receive backlash for agentic behavior (see Rudman et al. 2012 and Williams and Tiedens 2016), they should consider which outcomes the uncommunal stereotype can and cannot explain better than the backlash model.

Finally, our theorizing can help explain why stereotypes endure and how challenging it can be to disrupt them. Diversity training programs aimed at reducing prejudice by disconfirming negative gender stereotypes have struggled to make meaningful progress (e.g., Paluck and Green 2009, Onyeador et al. 2024). Their lack of efficacy may be rooted in a lack of appreciation for the harmful influence of the uncommunal stereotype. Although scholars and practitioners interested in reducing prejudice have sharpened their focus on negating the proscriptive agency stereotype, the uncommunal stereotype may be equally problematic and yet receives hardly any attention. As for combating the influence of the uncommunal stereotype, it may present a unique challenge because it is difficult to invalidate assumptions about behavior in private settings.

Directions for Future Research

We have outlined why the uncommunal feminine stereotype exists and how accounting for it contributes to current gender theory. However, there are several questions left unanswered and worth exploring. First, we claim that the feminine uncommunal stereotype is just that: feminine. But, why does this stereotype not apply to men? We note that men are allowed and expected to behave in ways that maximize their self-interest and advancement rather than their connection with others. Given that agency is expected of men, uncommunality for men may be associated with the public domain, where men are encouraged to "prove" their manhood by confronting and dominating competitors and are penalized when they fail to do so (Vandello et al. 2008, Vandello and Bosson 2013). Although not within the purview of our theorizing, future research should disentangle the elements of masculine uncommunality, differentiating behaviors that are rewarded (i.e., dominant and aggressive) from those that are penalized (i.e., ruthless and violent).

Second, we theorized broadly about the impact of the feminine uncommunal stereotype, but future research should explore when and where these effects are most likely to occur. In particular, will the uncommunal stereotype be more influential when the organization has fewer women? On one hand, work on the queen bee syndrome would suggest that the uncommunality stereotype is more prominent when women are underrepresented in a group (Mavin 2008). On the other hand, if there are relatively few women, they may appear to be less of a threat to acquire positions of power, which would mean that observers have less motivation to invoke the uncommunal stereotype. Along a similar vein, if group composition or organizational hierarchy is relatively stable (i.e., turnover is minimal), the presence of women may seem less concerning, which again, would suggest less reliance on the feminine uncommunal stereotype.

Third, we have made general claims about the influence of the uncommunal feminine stereotype, but there are also individual differences worth exploring. In particular, people vary in the extent to which they hold and apply stereotypes (Locke et al. 1994), experience status threats (i.e., precarious masculinity) (Vandello and Bosson 2013), and endorse societal hierarchies (i.e., social dominance orientation) (Pratto et al. 1994). All of these individual differences and likely others may play a significant role in whether and how the uncommunal feminine stereotype functions in the workplace. Future research might explore whether some of these differences can exacerbate our predicted effects or possibly mitigate them.

Fourth, we encourage future research to explore the intersectional nature of the uncommunal feminine stereotype. Descriptive, prescriptive, and proscriptive stereotypes often apply to the most salient and dominant members of a social category: in this case, White women. Research suggests that the descriptive communal stereotype and the proscriptive agentic stereotype do not apply to certain social categories, including Black and older women (Livingston et al. 2012, Galinsky et al. 2013, Martin et al. 2019, Adjei Boateng and Heilman 2024). Likewise, most depictions of uncommunal stereotypes in popular media have been of White women (e.g., Ezzedeen 2013), and there remains a stereotype within the Black community that White women cannot be trusted (Jackson 2017, Carlisle 2019). Perhaps the uncommunal feminine stereotype is applied more often to White women than to women of color.

Fifth, other groups might be subject to an uncommunal stereotype if they are associated with traits like backstabbing, manipulative, and conniving. For example, gay men are stereotyped in popular media as having uncommunal qualities and eliciting distrust. Researchers might examine whether this stereotype of gay men is rooted in the feminine uncommunal stereotype (i.e., gay men viewed as more feminine are viewed as more uncommunal). Future research might investigate a similar line of inquiry for Asians, who are sometimes stereotyped as "sneaky" and "untrustworthy" (Ho and Jackson 2001, Lin et al. 2005), and like gay men, they are often femininized (Galinsky et al. 2013). Scholars might explore the stereotyping of private, "behind closed doors" behavior for other groups that elicit distrust as well (e.g., politicians).

Finally, we suspect that the uncommunal feminine stereotype may be culturally bounded. Given our theorizing that the motivation behind the stereotype is to maintain the existing gender hierarchy, we expect that cultures restricting women's advancement socially, politically, and economically are more likely to embrace a descriptive stereotype that women have uncommunal qualities (and are more likely to embrace a prescriptive stereotype that women should be communal). Further, in cultures where communality is strongly prescribed and where men are expected to be communal (i.e., collectivistic cultures) (Cuddy et al. 2015, Shan et al. 2019), the uncommunal stereotype may apply to men as well as women. Future research might explore such crosscultural differences in the strength of the uncommunal feminine stereotype and whether these differences correspond to norms and values that support status inequity (e.g., power distance) (Hofstede 1991) and status stability (e.g., Gelfand 2018).

Conclusion

Although strong evidence of the uncommunal feminine stereotype appears in both mass media and empirical studies, its role has been largely overlooked in past theorizing about the negative influence of gender stereotypes, especially in accounting for gender inequality in the workplace. We draw due attention to the uncommunal feminine stereotype, recognizing its existence, outlining its influence, and integrating it with current gender theories to generate a set of testable propositions. We invite other researchers to test these propositions and further theorize about this important subject. By better understanding the content and consequences of the uncommunal feminine stereotype, we hope to improve gender theory and develop interventions that diminish the harmful effects of negative stereotyping.

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The authors contributed equally to this work.

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