"You need to be able to isolate them:" Men allies leveraging mitigation as a strategy towards gender equity in STEM (Work in Progress)

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Research demonstrates that majority populations have the agency and power to create cultural change, wielding a particular type of influence among those with whom they share identities. However, literature that explores allyship does not define the term clearly, with allyship[1] often referenced as an identity as opposed to a set of practices [1-3]. This ambiguous understanding of how allies may enact their support complicates attempts to evaluate effective allyship approaches. Yet, recent scholarship has identified that proactive, ongoing approaches to allyship result in positive outcomes for minoritized individuals by facilitating feelings of inclusion and respect [4]. Reactive approaches, particularly confronting and disrupting bias and discrimination can also be an especially valuable tool for majority group members to leverage, as research demonstrates that same-group peers are less likely to perceive allies as overreacting in situations that they intervene in on behalf of minoritized individuals [5]. One reactive approach to gender equity allyship is the minimization or isolation of those who exhibit behaviors that harm underrepresented individuals, a strategy that I refer to as mitigation. An example of mitigation in the context of an engineering department could be the removal of a faculty member from an admissions committee who uses language that communicates a lack of a commitment to diversity.

Although research highlights the efficacy of majority group allyship [6-9], there is limited extant scholarship that examines mitigation of individuals' actions as a mechanism for isolating behaviors that are counter-productive towards gender equity efforts. Therefore, the focus of this study is to better understand the experience and perceptions of men faculty allies in STEM disciplines who leverage mitigation as a strategy in gender equity efforts.

Theoretical Framework

Social identities are psychological concepts that describe individuals and self-perceptions. These identities often guide personal ideals and behaviors [10-11]. Although social identities can refer to factors like race and ethnicity or gender, they can also reference roles that an individual takes on, such as faculty, researcher, or in the case of the present study, ally. While the various identities or roles influence an individual's personality, behaviors, language, and beliefs, social identity theory posits that a person's sense of self is based on their status within the groups with which they seek to identify. This desire for status within a specific group may lead to interactions and dynamics within the group that result in shifts in one's identity that conflict with individual's authentic behaviors (i.e., men in engineering who do not lean into hypermasculine ideals may do so in certain engineering contexts) [10-11].

The three elements of the theory – social identification, categorization, and comparison – provide a framework for understanding the actions, beliefs, and perceptions of individuals as they engage in unique, social spaces [11]. Because these factors tend to serve as the foundation for behaviors

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[1] The definition of allyship used in this study follows: Allies must maintain membership in a dominant group, possess an awareness of their own privilege, and actively advocate against inequity and the systemic oppression of underrepresented populations [1-3].

and exchanges within groups and their members, the result is that social identities become especially salient to those involved [12]. In the case of the present study, majority group membership can be a critical facet in efforts to increase the representation and quality of women's experiences in STEM, given research that supports the idea underscoring the importance of men allies' involvement in gender equity undertakings. This engagement is of the utmost import when considering men who may not value gender equity.

Tajfel and Turner's social identity framework [11] has been used in research on how social contexts within STEM can affect individuals' identity development [13], the consequences of science identity on academic performance [14], and identity management behaviors used in certain environments [15]. In the present study, I employed social identity theory as a lens to explore how men faculty allies make meaning of their own status as members of the gender majority while simultaneously advocating for women in their departments. Given that the focus of this paper is on mitigating behaviors (which requires some degree of identity management) that are harmful to gender equity efforts (i.e., a unique social context), social identity is a valuable and appropriate frame to leverage.

Methods

Data from this study comes from a larger project that aimed to better understand the 31 men faculty participants who identified as gender equity allies for undergraduate women in their STEM disciplines. Findings from that study resulted in a typology of allyship based on beliefs and behaviors related to the ally role [16]; however, the data used in this paper is centered on the experience of seven participants who leveraged one specific allyship strategy referred to as mitigation.

Participants were recruited based on their employment by institutions that have been awarded a National Science Foundation (NSF) ADVANCE award which is aimed at diversifying STEM [17] and needed to self-identify as an ally for undergraduate women in their discipline to be included in the study. This recruitment occurred through Principal Investigators of ADVANCE awards or directly with men who were engaged in formal advocates or allies initiatives as noted on institutional websites. I conducted semi-structured interviews that sought to understand the perceptions and behaviors of men faculty allies. Sample questions included: "Can you share some examples of how you serve as an ally?", "Is it difficult to engage in ally behaviors? If yes, how so? If not, why not?", and "What is your approach in communicating and working with men in your discipline who do not seem to value gender equity?."

As encouraged by Kellam et al. [18], I engaged in multiple passes of the data to first, become more familiar with it, second, identify themes, and third, to note events that seemed critical to allies' experiences. The use of both thematic and narrative analyses [19-20] enabled me to highlight how participants interpreted their own experiences as majority-group members and gender equity advocates and identify important events in which they employed strategies with colleagues who worked against gender equity efforts. Examples of codes included position of authority, mitigation, privilege, cognitive dissonance, tenure, and perceived effect of ally efforts.

Once data for the seven participants qualified as mitigators was analyzed and events that were coded as critical to mitigation efforts were identified, I created one document that included all relevant data. Afterwards, I organized this data into a story (i.e. composite narrative) using the events categorized as significant that highlighted how allies leveraged mitigation as an allyship strategy. These steps align with Willis' [21] process for generating accurate, anonymized representations of interview data.

The use of composite narratives is appropriate for giving voice to participants experiences through stories that explain a phenomenon; in this case, how utilizing mitigation as a gender equity strategy can be effective. The majority of this narrative is derived directly from the data (i.e., quotes that originate directly from participants), with any text added by the author for clarity or context appearing in italics [18].

Findings

The composite narrative presented in this WIP highlights "Brad's" experience, as he attempts to serve as an ally to women in his department. In Brad's case, he chooses to focus on minimizing the effects of men within his sphere of influence who exhibit language and behaviors that negatively impact women. Brad leans into "marginalizing" or "isolating" men in the discipline who actively harm women so that they no longer have opportunities to negatively influence the experience of the minority gender group that he seeks to support through his allyship (i.e. women).

> There are times when minimizing the impact of problematic colleagues is the best option, you know? Someone could be unsuitable for some role for a variety of reasons and then you certainly try to manage the person to put them in things where they can be successful *or remove them from situations where they might cause harm.*
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> *Because* there's certainly some people who you're not gonna move and so you marginalize. *For example*, I would make sure they weren't on a committee where it was gonna be important or I might minimize their role in recruiting….I think we have one case going on right now…where we have someone who doesn't have a growth mindset and is teaching a very important course, and that's not been helpful in advancing women and minorities through that course. And so the answer is, "Well, we're gonna make a change. You've taught that course for 10 years. We don't care. You're done." So sometimes you have to marginalize people. Sometimes you have to persuade, and it's just a matter of where, you know how long of a drag it is to drag them in the right direction. Sometimes it's just too, you're not gonna change them. Or if it's so, such an entrenched behavior that you can't fix it, then you make another choice.
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> *And sometimes what you do* depends on the level of power they have. You need to be able to isolate them from having real influence with the people I'm trying to provide allyship to or take care of. If you cannot work with them for whatever reason, then it's, um, then it's working around them, but also keeping lines of communication open with people who are important, right? So, I'm having another instance like this right now in my department and I'm keeping my department head up to date. I'm talking to some HR people. We're

not calling a five-alarm fire yet. We might *eventually*, but, um, we're letting people know and I'm collaborating with, in this case it is actually three women in my field, just trying to work around and mitigate *this person's behaviors* and to let people know what we see, right? Silence is the enemy and we have to sort of be open and advocate and be a voice. And I'm lucky, right? I'm a white man and I have enough pedigree to sort of, to be on the inside, and so I can use that to my advantage to help people.

While Brad is comfortable removing individuals that work against gender equity efforts from critical spaces where important decisions are made, like admissions committees or high-fail introductory courses, he also recognizes that mitigation is not the sole strategy for managing these types of individuals. Brad's references to attempts at training or coaching people in need of education demonstrates an openness to alternative approaches; however, it is clear from the several examples he shares that he often leans into mitigating harmful behaviors by removing individuals from specific spaces or contexts, working around them, and collaborating with others to successfully enact these strategies. Of note, Brad's conclusion that ultimately, leveraging his privilege as a member of several majority groups (e.g., race, gender, and sexual orientation) to protect those in minoritized groups is an important perspective for aspiring allies to consider.

Discussion & Significance

While proactive approaches to allyship – actions like acknowledging the value of diversity, fostering inclusion of those from minoritized groups, and educating same-group peers on issues affecting individuals not in the majority – have been proven to be effective, results from this study demonstrate that reactive strategies like mitigating harmful behaviors can also be beneficial in certain contexts.

These preliminary findings also suggest that mitigation can be a particularly effective reactive strategy for containing harmful behaviors, especially when those who perpetuate actions that could be damaging to minoritized members of their community have some form of permanent appointment (i.e., tenure) and cannot simply be removed from their position or the academy. This narrative provides an example of one philosophy for supporting gender equity by managing harmful individuals in formal ways, which could be a valuable tool for individuals in positions of power, like chairs and deans. However, it should be noted that participants in this study leveraged this strategy to varying degrees, with some leaning into more formal approaches (e.g., replacing instructors from teaching high impact courses or involving human resources to remove individuals from particular situations) while others simply aimed to minimize individuals' negative language or ideas in departmental environments. Future work includes additional analysis to examine how race and ethnicity, faculty rank, and institutional type may influence participants' approaches to allyship.

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