Buffering the Impact of a Negative Climate for Women: Individual, Interpersonal, and Organizational Factors

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Despite the large number of women who are employed in the U.S., women continue to face bias and negative treatment at work. These adverse workplace experiences create a negative climate for women, and are associated with a number of negative outcomes (e.g., Schneider, Swan, & Fitzgerald, 1997; Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007). As a result, the goal of this chapter is to identify potential buffers that may reduce the adverse outcomes that are associated with women working in an unwelcoming environment. Throughout, we draw upon stress and coping theory, as the experiences that create a negative organizational climate are conceptualized as stressors. First, we define and review the literature on the organizational climate for women and its consequences. Next, we review the literature on factors that may protect women from the harmful effects of a negative climate, including individual, interpersonal, and organizational factors. Finally, we offer conclusions and recommendations for future research on this topic.

Organizational Climate

Organizational climate refers to perceptions of an organization’s procedures, policies and practices (Seibert, Silver, & Randolph, 2004). These perceptions are held by individuals but are typically shared among organizational members (Hulin, Fitzgerald & Drasgow, 1996). Further, researchers place importance on individuals’ perceptions of the organization, even when they are not accurate reflections of the workplace, because they influence employees’ feelings about the workplace and therefore shape their behaviors at work (Seibert et al., 2004). There are many dimensions or aspects of the organizational climate. The dimensions most associated with a negative workplace climate for women are affective climate dimensions, or aspects of the
environment that are related to interpersonal relationships among workers (J. Z. Carr, Schmidt, Ford, & DeShon, 2003).

**The Climate for Women**

At times, the environment that women face in the workplace has been described as being a “chilly climate” in which they are targets of slights, exclusion, and poor treatment by others (e.g., Cortina, Swan, Fitzgerald, & Waldo, 1998). Here, we define a *negative climate for women* as one in which women systematically experience more interpersonal and organizational mistreatment in the workplace than do men. For example, several studies have found that compared to men, women report more incivility at work – rude and discourteous treatment that violates workplace norms and expectations (Cortina, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 2002; Cortina, Magley, Williams, & Langhout, 2001). Women also report higher rates of interpersonal mistreatment that targets them based on their gender. For example, Bond, Punnett, Pyle, Cazeca, and Cooperman (2004) found that women more frequently reported being treated unfairly or harassed because of their gender than men. Similarly, research comparing male and female scientists finds that women perceive their workplaces as more negative and experience more gender discrimination than men (Settles, Buchanan, Cortina, & Miner-Rubino, 2011). Studies of sexual harassment, which is defined as unwanted gender-based comments or behaviors (Fitzgerald, 1996), find similar gender differences. Studies estimate that 50% of women (Ilies, Hauserman, Schwochau, & Stibal, 2003) will experience sexual harassment during their working lives as compared to 15% of men who will do so (USMSPB, 2004).

However, not all types of workplaces are equally likely to create a negative climate for women. Research finds that a negative climate for women is more common in male-dominated and masculine environments. For example, sexual harassment rates for individuals in the U.S.
military are higher than those of the civilian population, with 65-79% of women and over 35% of men reporting that they have experienced such behaviors (Antecol & Cobb-Clark, 2001). This pattern of disparate interpersonal treatment for men and women is found in other male-dominated fields, including law (Cortina et al., 2002), law enforcement (Martin, 1994; Texeira, 2002), academic science and medicine (Wright et al., 2003; Settles et al., 2011) and the trades (Mansfield et al., 1991).

The Consequences of a Negative Climate for Women

When women work in a negative climate for women – one with interpersonal hostility, exclusion and isolation, gender discrimination, and sexual harassment – a number of negative outcomes may occur. Research has linked experiences of a negative climate to a number of adverse work-related outcomes including lower job satisfaction, lower levels of commitment to the organization, and greater withdrawal from the workplace (Cortina et al., 2001, 2002; Kath, Swody, Magley, Bunk, & Gallus, 2009; Langhout et al., 2005; Lapierre, Spector, & Leck, 2005; Munson, Hulin, & Drasgow, 2000; Schneider et al., 1997; Settles, Cortina, Stewart, & Malley, 2007). When women work in a negative climate they report feeling as if they have less power and influence than men (e.g., Wright et al., 2003), fit in less well and are valued less than men (Yoder & Aniakudo, 1995), and are more likely to be critically observed by their coworkers (Settles et al., 2011). A negative climate for women is also associated with negative mental health outcomes, such as depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder (Chan, Lam, Chow, & Cheung, 2008; Fischer & Holz, 2007; Willness et al., 2007), as well as a number of symptoms of poor physical health, including gastrointestinal problems, fatigue, headaches, sleep problems, and back pain (Bond et al., 2004; Cleary, Schmieler, Parascenzo, & Ambrosio, 1994; Dansky & Kilpatrick, 1997; Goldenhar, Swanson, Hurrell, Ruder, & Deddens, 1998; van
Roosmalen & McDaniel, 1998). These negative relationships may occur because the negative interpersonal interactions associated with a negative climate act as daily hassles, or stressors that accumulate to have a substantial detrimental impact on the targeted individual (Harrell, 2000).

**Buffers of a Negative Climate for Women**

The large number and wide range of negative consequences associated with women working in negative environments underscores the importance of identifying factors that can protect female employees. Some factors may help women by reducing the likelihood that the workplace is one with a negative climate, whereas other factors may instead help to lessen the occupational, psychological, and physical impact of working in a negative climate. Following, we review the literature on these factors. We organize our review by examining three levels at which protective factors may operate: the individual level, the interpersonal level, and the organizational level. Individual level protective factors are aspects of the individual that influence the extent to which she is impacted by working in a negative climate. Interpersonal level protective factors are resources provided by other individuals that influence either the extent to which the climate is perceived as negative or the extent to which a woman is impacted by being in a workplace with a negative climate. Finally, organizational level protective factors are policies and procedures that make workplace climates more positive for women and men.

We use the theory of stress and coping as a framework to understand protective factors. A stressful life event is one in which individuals perceive that their resources are taxed or exceeded by the demands of the situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Following the stressful event, such as working in a negative climate, individuals engage in the two-step process of cognitive appraisal (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). In the first step, primary appraisal, individuals determine the extent to which the stressful event has the potential
for harm/loss, threat, and challenge. In the second step, secondary appraisal, individuals assess the resources they have available to address the stressful event. Following the cognitive appraisal process, individuals can employ various coping mechanisms to deal with the event. We refer to these processes in the following sections where relevant.

**Individual Level Protective Factors**

A large and diverse body of literature indicates that individual level characteristics (e.g., personality traits, age, organizational status, and racial group membership) can influence primary appraisal processes, or whether the environment is viewed as stressful. Individual level characteristics may also effect whether individuals perceive they have the necessary resources to cope with the stressful environment. Although some individual characteristics work to make individuals more vulnerable to the effects of a negative environment (e.g., neuroticism; Larsen & Ketelaar, 1989, 1991), other traits and personal qualities may protect individuals from the negative effects of stressful environments, and serve to maintain individuals' personal well-being in the face of these potential life stressors.

**Personality characteristics.** Research suggests that voice, one’s sense of having input and influence in the organization (Jack & Dill, 1992), is an important protective factor that varies among individuals. In a study of academic women scientists, Settles et al. (2007) found that the relationship between a negative climate (i.e., a generally negative climate and a sexist climate) and lower job satisfaction was weaker for women who felt they had more voice compared to women who felt they had less input and influence in their departments. Other research on female undergraduate students in the sciences found that feeling surveilled (i.e., watched and monitored) and perceiving the academic climate to be more generally negative was related to poorer academic performance for women who did not place importance on their gender (i.e., lower
gender identity); however, for women who reported that being a woman was an important part of their sense of self (i.e., higher gender identity), negative perceptions of the academic climate were unrelated to their academic performance (Settles & Yap, 2011). Similarly, research has also shown that organizational commitment (i.e., identification and involvement with the organization; Leong, Furnham & Cooper, 1996) buffers individuals against negative outcomes associated with work related stress (Begley & Czajka, 1993; Kobasa, 1982).

In a study of women’s work experiences, Miner-Rubino, Settles, and Stewart (2009) found that those who were less sensitive to and aware of sexism reported their workplace climate as being more positive (i.e., those in which women had more autonomy, less isolation, and less sexual harassment). Additionally, the researchers found that sensitivity to sexism interacted with gender composition to predict women’s physical health. Specifically, when the employees above them were comprised of all or mostly women, women who were more sensitive to sexism and perceived their workplace climate to be negative reported the worse health. In contrast, women who were more sensitive to sexism and perceived their climates to be positive reported the best physical health (again when the level above them was comprised of all or mostly women). Thus, voice, and a stronger gender or organizational identity, are factors that minimize the negative impact of a negative environment on psychological and performance outcomes. Additionally, although having less awareness of sexism does not minimize the amount of sexism that occurs in the workplace, it makes women less negatively affected when it is present.

Although the link between personality traits and various psychological and well-being outcomes has been well documented (e.g., Steel, Schmidt, & Shultz, 2008), relatively little research has examined personality traits as a potential resource to help individuals cope with a negative workplace climate. In one exception, Tepper and colleagues (2001) found that the
relationship between abusive supervision and constructive resistance to these behaviors (i.e., trying to open up constructive dialogue with managers using abusive supervision tactics) was stronger among individuals who were also higher in conscientiousness, which is the tendency to strive for achievement and to be orderly, cautious, and self-disciplined. The trait of emotional stability, defined as the tendency to have low anxiety and low negative emotionality (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008), also appears to be relevant. Studies have found that individuals who are higher in emotional stability do not react as negatively to adverse events experienced in the lab (Gross, Sutton, & Ketelaar, 1998; Larsen & Ketelaar, 1989, 1991) or the hassles of day-to-day life (Suls, Martin, & David, 1998). Although the research on personality traits has not looked specifically at women’s experience at work, it suggests that emotional stability and conscientiousness may play a protective role. More research in this area is certainly warranted.

**Attitudes and values.** Other factors that influence the way women cope with a negative workplace climate are cultural values, individual beliefs, and attitudes that proscribe a certain way of behaving (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The research in this area has been focused primarily on women’s response to sexual harassment. For example, Gutek (1985) found that the more that women did not want to hurt the man involved, the less likely they were to report the sexual harassment. This study also found that a large percentage of women who did not report instances of sexual harassment believed that they would be blamed if they reported the incident and also believed that nothing would be done about the harassment. Similarly, Klass (1981) found that high guilt over assertiveness was related to less assertive behavior in women.

A study of sexual harassment in college students found that the relationship between sexual harassment and negative psychological outcomes was weaker for White women (but not Black women) with more feminist and less traditional gender role attitudes (Rederstorff,
Buchanan, & Settles, 2007). Other research has found that individuals with a more communal relationship orientation, which reflects having a concern with the needs of others without expectation of reciprocity, were more likely to confront sexism in an experimental situation (Gervais, Hillard & Vescio, 2010). Thus, certain attitudes and values influence the behavioral responses women make following experiences in negative climates, and also may affect their psychological outcomes.

**Organizational status.** Organizational status is defined as an individual's work related skill level and position in the organizational hierarchy (Malamut & Offermann, 2001). Research has found that employees with higher organizational status are less likely to report experiencing a number of negative experiences that are common in workplaces with a negative climate for women, including incivility and sexual harassment (Buchanan, Settles, & Woods, 2008; Cortina et al., 2001; Gruber, 1998, 2003). Higher organizational status individuals also report that the climate is more positive (Settles, Cortina, Malley, & Stewart, 2006). Additionally, organizational status impacts sexual harassment outcomes, such that sexual harassment involving perpetrators of higher status is viewed more negatively and associated with more psychological distress (Buchanan et al., 2008; Langhout et al., 2005). Finally, organizational status also impacts reporting such that higher status individuals were more likely to report an incident of sexual harassment because they were more likely believe that they could elicit change with their actions and less likely to fear retaliation from the perpetrator (Miceli & Near, 1988; Near & Miceli, 1995).

In sum, higher organizational status makes women less likely to be targeted with behaviors that create a negative workplace climate. Research on attitudes, values, and personality
characteristics is less exhaustive, but has highlighted some dimensions that seem to provide women with resilience in the face of negative interpersonal experiences.

**Interpersonal Level Protective Factors**

**Social support.** Researchers have suggested that social support may be particularly important for women as ways of coping with negative climates because women are thought to value interpersonal relationships with others (Cross & Madson, 1997). Yet negative climates are those that, by definition, are most cold and unwelcoming to women. Social support is information that communicates to the recipient that she is loved and cared for (Kirmeyer & Lin, 1987). Emotional social support is one type of social support in which an individual (e.g., friend, family member, coworker) offers friendship and encouragement, and listens sympathetically to issues and concerns (DiGiulio, 1995; Fenlason & Beehr, 1994); most studies looking at general social support refer to this type. Cohen and Wills (1985) suggested that social support can lessen the impact of stressful events by: 1) decreasing the extent to which individuals perceive the event to be harmful or beyond their ability to cope, or 2) decreasing the extent to which individuals are negatively affected when they perceive the event to be stressful. Thus, social support has been theorized to play an important buffering role in the presence of stressful events, such as working in a negative climate for women.

Social support has received attention in the literature on women’s coping in part because some studies find it to be more commonly used by women than men (e.g., Morganson, Jones & Major, 2010). Additionally, social support is frequently used by women. For example, a study of sexually harassed Black women in the military found that approximately 50% used social support seeking as a part of their coping strategies (Buchanan, Settles & Langhout, 2007). Cortina (2004) examined the amount of support provided by different sources (e.g., social
support from friends and family vs. social support from individuals in the organization) in her study of sexually harassed Hispanic women. She found that social support from friends and family was viewed as being more supportive, whereas support provided by organizational members was perceived as less helpful and supportive. Thus, social support, especially emotional social support, is often used by women and has unique positive effects for women as compared to other types of support.

Studies have demonstrated the positive effect of social support coping for women. For example, Gonzalez-Morales Peiró, Rodríguez, and Greenglass (2006), in a study of women in Spain in the male-dominated field of finance, found that social support (i.e., from friends, coworker, and supervisors) was associated with fewer psychosomatic complaints, controlling for workplace stressors. Similarly, research finds that individuals who perceived low social support at work were more likely to have the highest amount of burnout (Lindblom, Linton, Fedeli, & Bryngelsson, 2006), and female science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) undergraduate students who used more emotional social support coping reported greater commitment to their major and lower intentions to quit their major (Morganson et al., 2010).

Other studies of diverse samples of women (and sometimes men) have also found that social support protects individuals from negative workplace experiences. Brough and Frame (2004) studied police officers in New Zealand and found that although sexual harassment was associated with lower job satisfaction, supervisor support (controlling for sexual harassment) was associated with higher job satisfaction. Similarly, Cortina (2004) found that the relationship between sexual harassment severity and lower job satisfaction was weaker for women who reported higher levels of social support (but strongest for the least acculturated women who also perceived their support to be lower). Finally, Miner-Rubino, Settles, Brady, and Pratt-Hyatt (in
press) found that employees and students who experienced higher levels of incivility reported better outcomes when they felt emotionally supported.

**Organizational social support.** A common source of negative climate perceptions among women is a lack of perceived support, from both colleagues and management (P. L. Carr, Szalacha, Barnett, Caswell, & Inui, 2003). Organizations can offer formal structures that provide support to women at work, thereby signaling their support for women and enhancing women’s perception of the climate. Some researchers have suggested that support groups or counseling can provide a safe place for women to process and resolve stressors experienced on the job (Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007; Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Mentoring is another way in which organizations can provide formal support to employees. In particular, programs that provide junior female employees with experienced female mentors may be beneficial (P. L. Carr et al., 2003). Mentors can help navigate the organization’s system, serve as an ally if confronted with gender discrimination, and relieve feelings of isolation that many female employees experience (P. L. Carr et al., 2003; O’Neil, Hopkins, & Bilimoria, 2008; Settles et al., 2007; Trauth, Quesenberry, & Huang, 2009). Finally, Fox (2010) has suggested that given the importance of networking and social interactions for job success and promotion, leaders should institute formal programs designed to increase the involvement of women, especially in male-dominated workplaces. Relatedly, Grube-Farrell (2002) has argued that leaders need to be diligent in assuring team-building activities are inclusive and minimize informal hazing rituals that are often sexist and exclusionary. Consistent with these theories about the importance of perceived organizational support, Hershcovis, Parker, and Reich (2010) found that sexual harassment by one’s supervisor was related to greater intentions to quit only for those individuals who felt that their organization did not support creating a positive climate.
In sum, social support (enacted by the individual or facilitated by the organization) and mentoring are resources that improve outcomes for women who experience a negative climate.

Organizational Level Protective Factors

In addition to interpersonal and individual level factors, broader organizational level factors may help to make the climate for women more positive and welcoming. Organizations have tremendous power to shape the organizational climate when proactive efforts are made. Research to date has largely focused on changes organizations can make around awareness about the nature of the climate for women, hiring policies to increase the number of women, and formal policies that aim to lessen the likelihood of workplace interpersonal mistreatment as well as policies that address work-family concerns common to women.

Organizational awareness. Many researchers have argued that awareness and understanding of potential problems is the first step to avoiding or correcting them (P. L. Carr et al., 2003; Pless & Maak, 2004). Further, in organizations where women feel most welcome, leaders are not only aware of the potential for problems, but they are also honest and explicit about the reality of the climate within their own organization. Public acknowledgement of problems signals that the organization cares about women and is willing to help them improve their work experience, thereby improving perceptions of the climate (O’Neil et al., 2008). This is most effective when done proactively before problems have occurred (P. L. Carr et al., 2003).

Hiring practices. Increasing the number of women in the workplace can also contribute to creating a more positive climate for women. Skewed gender ratios, where there are more males than females, are related to reports of more sexual and gender discrimination (Gruber, 1998). In addition, increasing gender diversity and encouraging cooperative interdependence can lead to less prejudice and stereotyping among employees (Reskin, 2000). Specifically, when men
are required to work with women of equal status to reach a common goal, they are more
motivated to seek accurate information about their female colleagues and are more likely to
notice counter-stereotypic information about women. Traditional affirmative action policies have
generally been found to be effective in recruiting diverse applicants without sacrificing quality
should also be cognizant of the potential impact of new employees on the climate. Specifically,
employers should take care to learn about job candidates’ interpersonal behavior to avoid hiring
people with a history of hostile and uncivil behavior.

Gender diversity in upper-level management positions is thought to be especially
important (Armstrong, 1995). O’Neil and colleagues (2008) suggest that women in positions of
authority can also communicate to junior female employees that their work will be valued and
that there are opportunities for advancement available to them. Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly (2006)
conducted an evaluation of different types of affirmative action policies used by corporations to
increase the racial and gender diversity of their workforce. The researchers found that
corporations had larger proportions of racial minorities and women in management positions
when their affirmative action policy involved assigned organizational responsibility for change.
Such practices involved outlining formal affirmative action plans with specific goals and tasks;
and creating diversity committees, taskforces, managers, or departments that have assigned
responsibility for accomplishing the diversity goals of the company. In contrast, efforts to
increase diversity solely through education, feedback systems, networking, or mentoring
programs were less effective. Kalev et al. (2006) suggest that by assigning individuals to be
responsible for enacting diversity goals, these objectives are less likely to become lost or
forgotten among day-to-day priorities.
**Formal policies.** Whereas hiring policies are a means of increasing the number of women in the workplace, formal policies are necessary to ensure the climate is conducive to women’s retention and success. Studies have shown that explicit, proactive policies can dramatically improve the climate. For example, Gruber (1998) showed that when companies had explicit anti-sexual harassment policies, not only were men dissuaded from making sexist comments or distributing and displaying sexually denigrating materials, but women also felt more empowered to rebuke inappropriate advances. Similarly, Richman, Rospenda, Flaherty, Freels, and Zlatoper (2004) found that women’s perceptions that their organization became less tolerant of sexual harassment and general workplace aggression over time were associated with women’s reports of less sexual harassment and less general workplace aggressions over time as well. Notably, the mere existence and awareness of these policies was more important than the content of the policies in women’s perceptions of the climate, indicating the significance of the visibility of policies (Pryor, LaVite, & Stoller, 1993; Hulin et al., 1996).

Many researchers emphasize the importance of policies that specifically address informal contributions to a negative climate, like incivility and bullying (Bond, Tuckey, & Dollard, 2010; Fitzgerald, 1993; Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000). Although negative behavior and interpersonal hostility toward any employees should not be tolerated (Hertzog, Wright, & Beat, 2008), Miner-Rubino and Cortina (2007) suggest that extra vigilance should be practiced to protect vulnerable populations (e.g., women, racial minorities) from negative treatment.

Training and education can ensure that employees are aware of formal policies once they have been created. Research suggests that employees should be trained regularly on issues of gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and gender climate (Hertzog et al., 2008; Reese & Lindenberg, 2003). Mansfield and colleagues (1991) have also argued that it is necessary to train
women to recognize potential problems so that they can protect themselves and know the avenues available to remedy problems. Further, researchers stress that organizational leaders should take responsibility for establishing, modeling, and enforcing acceptable behaviors in their interactions with employees (Neuman & Baron, 1998). Consistent with this suggestion, Bond et al. (2010) found that workers’ perceptions that senior management is committed to protecting their psychological well-being was related to less workplace bullying overall and less severe psychological consequences for those that did experience bullying.

Once clear guidelines have been set, organizational leaders and management should apply policies in a consistent and just manner (Grube-Farrell, 2002; Fitzgerald, 1993; Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007). Women are less likely to report infractions when they fear retaliation or punishment (Bergman, Langhout, Palmieri, Cortina, & Fitzgerald, 2002) or when they feel their problems will be minimized or ignored (Offermann and Malamut, 2002; Pearson et al., 2000). Often, this entails providing an external, third-party person who women can contact with complaints (P. L. Carr et al., 2003). Consistent with these notions, Hershcovis et al. (2010) found that supervisor sexual harassment was only related to lower job satisfaction, greater intentions to leave the organization, and feeling one must work harder than others for employees who were not confident in the organization’s grievance procedures.

Although formal workplace policies that prevent women from being treated negatively are critical, work-family policies also work towards creating a positive climate for women (Anderson, Morgan, & Wilson, 2002; Dainty & Lingard, 2006). Organizations can relieve women’s stress by providing family-friendly policies like day care (Fox, 2010), leave, and flexible work schedules that take into account individuals’ responsibilities for caring for children and elderly parents (Shollen, Bland, Finstad, & Taylor, 2009).
Increasing women’s sense of support and value within the organization can be conveyed through formal reward systems. Often women take on roles and responsibilities that, although important and often essential, are not recognized by traditional performance evaluations. For example, Cress and Hart’s (2011) found that women in academia spend more time providing support services like informal advising and serving on committees than men; however, the time and effort women put into these activities often goes unrecognized in tenure and promotion decisions. They argue that there need to be systems for tracking these “hidden workloads” so that either these responsibilities can be equally distributed among all employees or that the work women actually do is rewarded. Additionally, making sure to include rewards for these hidden workloads can increase perceptions of equality (Fox, 2010; Grube-Farrell, 2002).

In sum, theory and research have focused on changes that can be made at the organizational level to improve the climate for women at work. Areas that offer the most potential include assigned affirmative action policies and clear policies that communicate the organization’s intolerance for the behaviors that create a negative workplace climate for women.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Many women perceive their workplace climates to be chilly and unwelcoming (e.g., Ilies, et al., 2003; Settles et al., 2011). Further, the experiences that create a negative climate for women are associated with negative work, psychological, and physical outcomes. For these reasons, it is important to identify factors that improve the climate for women, or buffer women’s outcomes from the negative effect of working in a negative climate. Factors at the individual level include personality characteristics, attitudes and values that direct women’s behavior, and higher organizational status which can make them less vulnerable to workplace mistreatment. Factors at the interpersonal level involve the social support women receive from individuals
within and from outside the organization. Factors at the organizational level involve organizational practices and policies designed to make women feel more welcomed, valued, and included in the workplace. Protective factors at each of these levels are important for improving women’s experiences at work.

Nevertheless, Wicks and Bradshaw (1999) suggest that organizational leaders cannot only address climate at the level of individual behavior, but they must seek to address the way that organizational culture may influence the organizational climate. For example, if an organization rewards and encourages aggressive behaviors in job-related duties, this pattern of aggression may carry over to interpersonal interactions between coworkers and increase the negative climate overall (Hertzog et al., 2008). Additionally, participatory, collaborative work cultures are often more amenable to a positive work climate and foster feelings of inclusion and empowerment (Pless & Maak, 2004).

It is primarily at the organizational level where large-scale, far-reaching changes can be made to improve the climate for women. Individual level factors may blunt the extent to which women are aware of a negative climate, and both individual and interpersonal factors may lessen the impact of a negative climate on women’s outcomes. However, only organizational factors can prevent negative climates and their associated forms of mistreatment. The National Science Foundation’s ADVANCE initiative, designed to improve gender climates within academia, can be generalized to serve as a model for many types of organizations (Fox, 2010). It funds programs that increase awareness of gender issues, and generate and implement creative and innovative solutions to increase the number of women in academia and to promote their success.

Our review of the literature has identified some areas where more research is needed. First, most of the existing studies focus on protective factors that are relevant to only one of the
dimensions we reviewed. However, research that examines protective factors from multiple levels (e.g., individual and interpersonal factors) would be useful. A study by Jimmieson and colleagues (2010) provides an example of such research. They examined identification with one’s workgroup (an individual factor) and social support from coworkers (an interpersonal factor). Jimmieson et al. (2010) found an interaction between coworker support and team identification such that there was a positive relationship between coworker social support and job satisfaction only for those employees with high identification with their team. We suggest that studies that examine organizational level protective factors in combination with factors from the individual or interpersonal level might be most fruitful; this research could illuminate which individuals will benefit the most (and the least) from specific organizational policies.

Second, more research is needed that examines the unique experiences of women who are members of additional marginalized social groups, such as women of color or lesbian employees. Because women in these groups belong to multiple devalued social groups, they may find their workplace climates to be especially negative. For example, gay men and lesbians experience more discrimination than heterosexual men and women (Dunbar, 2006). In addition, because individuals who belong to multiple marginalized groups experience more stressors (Beal, 1970; King, 1988), the addition of working in a negative climate may lead them to report especially poor job, psychological, and physical outcomes. As most researchers have not considered women’s race, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status in their climate analyses, additional work in this area could elucidate the ways in which these women’s experiences are similar to and different from those of middle-class, heterosexual, White women. Attention to these issues, and broadening of the research in this area, will help to ensure that interventions and policies developed to improve the climate for women apply to all women.
References


