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Who Believes Gender Research? How Readers' Gender Shapes the Evaluation of Gender Research

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Abstract

Prior research finds that relative to women, men are less receptive to scientific evidence of gender bias against women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, whereas the researcher's gender does not influence evaluations of gender research. Do these effects hold for research documenting workplace gender inequalities more generally? In a preregistered survey experiment fielded on Prolific, survey participants were shown tweets from a fictitious researcher—a woman or a man—that summarized recent research about workplace gender inequality, and then they were asked to rate the research. Consistent with prior work, men viewed research findings about workplace gender inequality less positively than women; researcher gender did not significantly influence evaluations. Men's higher endorsement of gender system justification beliefs and hostile sexism appear to partially explain their less positive views, suggesting that men view gender research less positively in part because it challenges the idea that men's relative advantages in the workplace are natural and earned.

Keywords

gender bias, gender research, hostile sexism, gender system justification beliefs, sociology of science

Although in the past century women have made strides toward workplace gender equality in the United States, progress has stalled. Women remain severely underrepresented at the highest ranks of corporate leadership, and women's earnings relative to men's have plateaued below parity (England, Levine, and Mishel 2020). These inequalities remain despite research demonstrating an array of mechanisms—and possible intervention points—of gender inequality in the workplace.

Recent research suggests that the very evidence documenting gender inequality in the workplace may itself be subject to a gendered bias. Handley et al. (2015)

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examined Americans' evaluations of research abstracts illustrating bias against women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Men—including men faculty in STEM—evaluated the quality of the research more negatively than women when the findings demonstrated gender bias against women in science. However, when the abstract was altered to describe no bias against women, men evaluated the quality of the research more favorably than women. The gender of the author did not significantly shape participants' perceptions of the research.

In this manuscript, we replicate and extend Handley et al.'s (2015) findings in three ways: (1) by testing whether the participant gender effect generalizes to contexts beyond STEM, (2) by exploring mechanisms that might explain the participant gender effect, and (3) by retesting whether the gender of the author shapes perceptions of gender research.

DO MEN EVALUATE GENDER RESEARCH MORE NEGATIVELY THAN WOMEN IN CONTEXTS BEYOND STEM?

Handley et al.'s (2015) research provides compelling evidence that men view research about bias toward women in STEM more skeptically than do women. Yet it is unclear whether this effect holds beyond the domain of STEM. Despite recent meta-analyses indicating no meaningful gender differences in math performance, the belief that men are better at math than women persists (Hyde et al. 2019). The idea that women lack skills needed to succeed in STEM may uniquely impact how evidence of gender inequality in STEM is perceived.

In this study, we extend Handley et al.'s (2015) research by testing whether men and women differentially appraise research about gendered barriers in workplaces beyond STEM fields. We propose that Handley and colleagues' findings are generalizable to research about workplace gender inequality broadly, hypothesizing the following:

> *Hypothesis 1:* Men will have less positive evaluations of research about gender inequality in the workplace than women.

Why Might Men Evaluate Gender Research More Negatively Than Women?

People have a drive to belong to groups that are evaluated positively relative to other groups (Tajfel and Turner 1986). Thus, men may gravitate toward explanations of the gender status quo that portray men's advantaged position as legitimate and reject evidence that their advantaged position relative to women is due to discriminatory mechanisms, like bias and harassment.

To explore this possibility, we examine the relationship between participants' evaluations of gender research and their beliefs about the gender status quo. We measure participants' agreement with *gender system justification beliefs*: their beliefs that the current gender status quo is fair and valid (e.g., that women and men equally "have a fair shot at wealth and happiness"; Jost and Kay 2005). Gender system justification beliefs cast men's advantaged position in the workplace as meritocratically earned and thereby legitimate. If men are more likely to endorse these beliefs, we posit that they may evaluate research about workplace gender inequality more negatively because it challenges such beliefs.

We also measure participants' agreement with *hostile sexism*—derogatory characterizations of women that justify men's advantaged position in society—and *benevolent sexism*—ostensibly positive beliefs about women that nonetheless

place women in different, lower-status roles in society relative to men. Hostile and benevolent sexism both present women and men as fundamentally different, thus making the current gender status quo appear natural (Glick and Fiske 1997). Men's more negative evaluations of workplace gender inequality research could thus also be explained by their greater endorsement of hostile and benevolent sexism, beliefs that regard men's advantaged position in the workplace as inevitable—again, a premise that workplace gender inequality research disputes.[1] Including these three sets of beliefs allows us to explore possible mechanisms that may explain any gender gap we find.

Does the Author's Gender Impact How Gender Research Is Perceived?

We also examine whether the gender of the author of gender research shapes perceptions of gender research. In American society, men are perceived as being of higher status than women (e.g., Ridgeway 2011). In a process termed *status belief transfer*, objects created by men—particularly in masculine-stereotyped domains—come to be perceived as more valuable than identical objects created by women because of men's higher status vis-à-vis women (Tak, Correll, and Soule 2019). Accordingly, we predict the following:

> *Hypothesis 2a:* Both women and men will have more positive evaluations of research about gender inequality in the workplace written by men than by women.

Prior empirical research presents a mixed picture. Handley et al. (2015) found no evidence that the author's gender significantly impacts perceptions of gender research. Yet, other evidence indicates that research authored by men is viewed more favorably than identical research authored by women (Knobloch-Westerwick, Glynn, and Huge 2013).

We offer a second, competing hypothesis that may account for these mixed empirical results: that readers may more favorably evaluate scientific work about gender inequality written by members of their gender ingroup. Each group's preference for research conducted by an ingroup member, then, would cancel out the other group's preference, creating an aggregate null effect. Thus, we offer the following competing hypothesis:

> *Hypothesis 2b:* Men will have more positive evaluations of research about gender inequality in the workplace written by men than by women, whereas women will have more positive evaluations of such research written by women than by men.

DATA AND METHOD

We draw on original data from a survey experiment conducted via the platform Prolific, a source of high-quality data (Palan and Schitter 2018). Prolific constructed our sample to match the U.S. population across gender, age, and race/ethnicity by creating participation quotas for study participants of specific gender, age, and race/ethnicity configurations set to match the U.S. population. Participants within these quotas were then invited to participate in the study on a first-come, first-serve basis.[2] Our sample is set to match these demographics of the U.S. population but is not probability sampled

[1] In our preregistration, we intended to register the hypothesis that the relationship between participant gender and perceptions of gender research would be mediated by people's perceptions of gender but erroneously used the term "moderated." Because we did not correctly register this hypothesis, we refrain from formally listing it as such in the manuscript.

[2] For more information, see https://researcherhelp.prolific.co/hc/en-gb/articles/360019238413.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Total
Gender	
Women	246 (49.9%)
Men	247 (50.1%)
Age	
M (*SD*)	44.9 (16.0)
Median [min., max.]	43.0 [18.0, 92.0]
Ethnicity	
White/Caucasian	347 (70.4%)
Hispanic/Latino	29 (5.9%)
Black/African American	67 (13.6%)
Native American/American Indian	6 (1.2%)
Asian/Pacific Islander	36 (7.3%)
Other	8 (1.6%)
Education	
Grade 12 or GED (high school graduate)	66 (13.4%)
College 1 year to 3 years (some college or technical school)	145 (29.4%)
College 4 years (college graduate)	155 (31.4%)
Graduate school (advanced degree)	127 (25.8%)
Outcome variables[a] (*M*)	
Perceptions of the research	63.1
Gender system justification beliefs	44.7
Hostile sexism	31.2
Benevolent sexism	42.0

Note: $N = 493$.
[a]$N = 986$ for outcome variables because there are two observations for each participant.

from the U.S. population (the gold standard for a nationally representative sample). Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of our study participants.

The survey was completed by 503 participants on October 11, 2021. Our sample contained nine nonbinary participants—too few for meaningful statistical analysis—so we removed them. We also removed data from one participant under age 18. This leaves us with 493 participants. We preregistered our methods, sample size, and analysis plan.[3]

Experimental Design

Participants were first presented with a fictitious Twitter thread about a research paper. We created the tweets and attributed them to fictitious authors, but each thread described the key findings of real research papers about gender inequality in the workplace focusing on various forms of gender bias or sexual harassment (see experimental stimuli and a list of the articles upon which they were based in the Supplemental Materials). Participants were randomly assigned to read two of seven possible Twitter threads presented in random order. For each participant, one thread was randomly assigned to be written by a man and the other by a woman; otherwise, the presentation of each tweet was identical. After reading the Twitter thread, participants indicated their opinions of the research (described in more detail later).

[3]See https://aspredicted.org/iw9g4.pdf.

Academic research is typically published behind a paywall, uses specialized terminology, and requires aptitude in logical and quantitative reasoning, factors that may prevent the general population from engaging with research articles. Presenting research via a Twitter thread has high external validity, given that today, many academics do share public versions of their research in brief, digestible summaries on social media outlets like Twitter. Indeed, an estimated one-third of research articles published in the past decade have been posted on Twitter (Fang et al. 2020).

Participants' reactions to the research may have been shaped by their familiarity with, or impressions of the credibility of, communication via Twitter. Moreover, even when described in a conversational tone on Twitter, the research findings may not have been comprehensible to participants (we did not test participants' comprehension of the research so we cannot evaluate this possibility). If these factors did shape our results, we expect that they would add noise, weakening rather than systematically biasing effects.

There are two primary independent variables in this study: author gender, which is experimentally manipulated, and participant gender, which is not. Because participant gender is not (and cannot be) randomly assigned, differences we identify across participant gender may not be causal.

Variables

After reviewing the tweets, participants were asked to assess the information they had just read with a series of questions presented in random order: "The research is credible," "The research is relevant," and "I trust the methods used in this article." The response scale ranged from 0 to 100, where higher scores indicated higher evaluations of the research. We averaged answers together to form a composite measure, perceptions of the research ($\alpha = .92$), which serves as our dependent variable.[4]

After evaluating Twitter threads summarizing two research articles, participants then completed three established scales presented in random order, and with randomly ordered scale items, that capture beliefs about gender in the contemporary United States, which we consider as possible mediators. We present these three scales next.

Gender system justification beliefs. Participants completed an eight-item scale developed by Jost and Kay (2005). Items, measured on a scale from 0 to 100, were as follows: "In general, relations between men and women are fair"; "The division of labor in families generally operates as it should"; "Gender roles need to be radically restructured" (reverse scored); "For women, the United States is the best country in the world to live in"; "Most policies relating to gender and the sexual division of labor serve the greater good"; "Everyone (male or female) has a fair shot at wealth and happiness"; "Sexism in society is getting worse every year" (reverse scored); and "Society is set up so that men and women usually get what they deserve." These items were averaged into the composite measure of gender system justification beliefs ($\alpha = .82$).

Hostile sexism. Participants completed a six-item shortened measure of hostile sexism (Glick and Fiske 1997). Items, measured on a scale from 0 to 100, were

[4]We also preregistered a fourth item in this composite: "Is the research aligned with an intuition that you had about the world?" However, as a reviewer pointed out, this item is conceptually different because a research finding need not be intuitive to be appraised positively. Our results remain substantively similar when the item is included.

as follows: "Women seek to gain power by getting control over men"; "Women exaggerate problems they have at work"; "Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she usually tries to put him on a tight leash"; "When women lose to men in a fair competition, they typically complain about being discriminated against"; "Many women get a kick out of teasing men by seeming sexually available and then refusing male advances"; and "Feminists are making unreasonable demands of men." These items were averaged into the composite measure of hostile sexism beliefs (α = .94).

Benevolent sexism. Participants completed a six-item shortened measure of benevolent sexism (Glick and Fiske 1997). Items, measured on a scale from 0 to 100, were as follows: "Many women have a quality of purity that few men possess"; "Women should be cherished and protected by men"; "Every man ought to have a woman whom he adores"; "Men are incomplete without women"; "Women, compared to men, tend to have a superior moral sensibility"; and "Men should be willing to sacrifice their own well-being in order to provide financially for the women in their lives." These items were averaged into the composite measure of hostile sexism beliefs (α = .88).

Analytic Approach

Our key variables are measured at two levels. Because participants responded to two different Twitter threads, we have two observations of perceptions of the research per participant. On demographic variables and attitudinal measures, we have one observation per participant.

When we predict models with the repeated measure perceptions of the research, we estimate linear mixed-effects models, meaning those that include a random intercept and fixed effects. Including fixed effects allows us to control for unobserved individual differences that might consistently shape a given individual's perceptions of the research. Coefficients in these models, like coefficients in simpler linear regression models, represent increases or decreases in the measure perceptions of the research. In models in our mediation analysis for which the outcome variable is measured once, we use linear regression models.

Our mediation analyses follow the causal mediation analysis framework proposed by Imai et al. (2011:773–74). Broadly, this framework fits regression models for the mediator and the outcome. It then predicts the outcome under the treatment using the mediator predicted in the treatment condition, then the outcome under the treatment using the mediator predicted in the control condition; the average causal mediation effect is the difference between the two. Bootstrap or Monte Carlo approximation is used to compute statistical uncertainty. This framework generalizes to many model forms, including linear fixed-effects models. Importantly, the framework relies on the assumptions that the treatment variable is statistically independent from the mediator and outcome variables, and that there are no unmeasured pretreatment or posttreatment covariates that confound the relationship between the mediator and outcome variables. These are strong assumptions for a treatment variable like participant gender that is observed rather than experimentally assigned, a point that we return to in the Results.

INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF AUTHOR AND AUDIENCE GENDER ON PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER RESEARCH

In the following analyses, we first test Hypothesis 1 (that women participants

Table 2. Multilevel Models of the Effect of Author Gender and Participant Gender on Perceptions of Research

Variable	Model 1: Research	Model 2: Research
Man participant (reference = woman participant)	–5.42**	–6.23**
	(1.95)	(2.22)
Man author (reference = woman author)	–1.44	–2.25
	(1.05)	(1.48)
Man Participant × Man Author		1.62
		(2.10)
Constant	66.54***	66.95***
	(1.48)	(1.57)
Number of observations	986	986
Number of participants	493	493

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

evaluate gender research more positively than men participants). We then conduct a mediation analysis to examine whether participants' perceptions of contemporary gender relations can account for the finding that men perceive gender research less favorably than women. Finally, we test Hypothesis 2a (that men authors of gender research will be viewed more positively than women authors) and Hypothesis 2b (that women and men view gender research more positively when it is authored by someone of their gender).

The Effect of Participant Gender on Perceptions of Gender Research

We begin our analysis by testing Hypothesis 1: that women participants evaluate research about gender inequality in the workplace more positively than men participants. We present these results in Table 2, Model 1. We find evidence to support this first hypothesis: the coefficient of -5.42 ($p < .01$) indicates that men participants rated the research 5.4 points lower than women on average on the 100-point scale. Thus, we find evidence that men participants perceive gender research less positively than women participants.

Having demonstrated that men participants view research about gender inequality in the workplace less favorably than women, we next use mediation analysis to explore whether this gender gap can be partially explained by differences in how women and men perceive contemporary gender relations. This allows us to test whether each of the three attitudinal measures about perceptions of contemporary gender relations explains a statistically significant portion of the gap that we identified between men and women participants' ratings of the research.

To do this, we first re-create the model that tests for a difference in how women versus men participants view gender research in Table 3. As before, men participants view gender research less favorably, on average, than women participants (Model 1). Next, we test for gender differences in the extent to which women and men endorse the three scales about contemporary gender relations. In Model 2, we find that men are more likely to endorse gender system justification beliefs ($B = 11.89$, $p < .001$). Likewise, men are more likely to express views aligning with hostile sexism (Model 3, $B = 18.23$, $p < .001$) and benevolent sexism (Model 4, $B = 9.97$, $p < .001$).

Table 3. Multilevel Models (MLMs) of the Role of Gender System Justification Beliefs, Hostile Sexism, and Benevolent Sexism in Mediating the Effect of Participant Gender on Perceptions of Research

Variable	Model 1: Research	Model 2: Gender system justification beliefs	Model 3: Hostile sexism	Model 4: Benevolent sexism	Model 5: Research	Model 6: Research	Model 7: Research
Man participant (reference = woman participant)	–5.42** (1.95)	11.89*** (1.71)	18.23*** (2.23)	9.97*** (2.31)	–3.39 (2.02)	–2.08 (2.03)	–5.20** (1.99)
Gender system justification beliefs					–0.17*** (0.05)		
Hostile sexism						–0.18*** (0.04)	
Benevolent sexism							–0.02 (0.04)
Constant	65.82*** (1.38)	38.78*** (1.21)	22.08*** (1.58)	37.03*** (1.64)	72.44*** (2.40)	69.87*** (1.60)	66.64*** (1.97)
Model	MLM	Linear	Linear	Linear	MLM	MLM	MLM
Average causal mediation effect					–2.02***	–3.36***	–0.21
Proportion of total effect mediated					0.37	0.61	0.04
Number of observations	986	493	493	493	986	986	986
Number of participants	493	493	493	493	493	493	493

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

We next utilize the mediation framework developed by Imai et al. (2011) to test whether each of the three scales significantly mediates women and men participants' views of gender research. For gender system justification beliefs, we find an average causal mediation effect of −2.02 (95 percent confidence interval [CI] [−3.52, −0.92]), indicating that 37 percent of the gender gap in views of gender research is mediated by gender system justification beliefs. The average causal mediation effect of hostile sexism is −3.36 (95 percent CI [−5.07, −1.93]), indicating that 61 percent of the gender gap in views of gender research is mediated by hostile sexism. By contrast, we find that the average causal mediation effect of benevolent sexism is −0.21 (95 percent CI [−1.03, 0.51]), indicating that benevolent sexism is not a mediator.[5] Notably, the mediating effect of hostile sexism remains statistically significant when we include gender system justification beliefs and benevolent sexism in the model as controls; however, the mediating effect of gender system justification beliefs loses statistical significance when hostile sexism and benevolent sexism are included in the model as controls (see Supplemental Materials).

Although these results are suggestive, we urge caution in interpreting the mediation analysis because participant gender

[5]In results presented in the supplemental analyses, we also find that men participants were less likely than women to report positive perceptions of the author, quality, and relevance of the research, and gender system justification beliefs and hostile sexism either both or individually mediated these relationships. There was no participant gender difference in perceived motive of the researcher, rating of the research as controversial or believable, and likelihood of retweeting the research.

is not experimentally manipulated; thus, the assumption that it is independent from the mediator and outcome variables is a strong one. Moreover, although there is no standardized way to interpret sensitivity analyses for average causal mediation effects (Imai et al. 2011), sensitivity analyses of our mediation analyses show that our analyses are somewhat less robust to the existence of unobserved confounding than is the case for mediation analyses reported by Imai and colleagues (see Supplemental Materials).

The Effect of Author Gender on Perceptions of Gender Research

Our second set of competing hypotheses takes up the effect of author gender on perceptions of research about gender inequality in the workplace. Hypothesis 2a posits that gender research authored by men will be viewed more favorably than gender research authored by women. We do not find evidence to support this hypothesis in Table 2, Model 1 ($B = -1.44$, *ns*). Alternatively, Hypothesis 2b posits that participants will view gender research more favorably when it is authored by someone who shares their gender. There is no support for Hypothesis 2b, based on the nonsignificant interaction term between participant gender and author gender in Table 2, Model 2 ($B = 1.62$, *ns*). The gender of the researcher conducting research about gender inequality does not appear to impact how favorably that research is perceived.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this article, we test whether the author's and reader's gender shape perceptions of scientific knowledge about gender inequality in the workplace. We use an innovative survey experiment with strong real-world validity—academics sharing the results of genuine research articles on Twitter—to do so. Our results indicate that on average, men have less positive opinions of research documenting gendered workplace inequalities than women. This result extends research on the selective uptake of scientific information. Where previous research has largely focused on how political orientation shapes how people interpret scientific information, we contribute to emerging research about how people interpret evidence of bias and discrimination based on their own identities. Our findings are consistent with evidence documented by Handley et al. (2015), but we extend the implications of that research illustrating that the gender gap in perceptions of gender research applies broadly to perceptions of research about gender inequality in the workplace.

We further extend Handley et al.'s (2015) findings by providing a possible mechanism for this differential evaluation of gender research. Though our mediation analysis results should be interpreted with caution, they suggest that men's greater endorsement of gender system justification beliefs—the idea that gender relations are fair and that women and men get what they deserve in society (Jost and Kay 2005)—partially explains their less positive impressions of gender research relative to women. One interpretation of this finding is that because men are more advantaged by and attached to the idea that the gender status quo is already equitable, they appraise research that provides evidence to the contrary more negatively than women.

Perceptions of the gender status quo also appear to explain men's less positive appraisal of gender research in a second way: hostile sexism, too, significantly mediated the gender gap in perceptions of gender research. Like gender system justification beliefs, hostile sexism beliefs support the gender status quo, in this case by endorsing derogatory

characterizations of women that justify men's greater power, the exploitation of women as sexual objects, and traditional gender roles (Glick and Fiske 1997). Indeed, the endorsement of hostile sexism beliefs mediated a larger portion of the gender gap in perceptions of gender research than did the endorsement of gender system justification beliefs and, unlike gender system justification beliefs, remains a significant mediator even when controlling for other sets of gender beliefs. The view that women are not simply already equal to men but rather need to be kept in their place thus seems particularly important in explaining the gender gap in perceptions of research about gender inequality in the workplace.

Although men also expressed greater endorsement of benevolent sexism beliefs than women, these beliefs did not significantly mediate the gender gap in perceptions of research. Benevolent sexism casts women in a more positive light than hostile sexism by emphasizing positive attributes thought to characterize women, such as warmth and purity. Although these beliefs encourage feelings of protectiveness and affection for women, they also maintain the gender status quo by conveying that women have attributes that are distinct from, and lower status than, those of men. It may be the case that benevolently sexist beliefs inspire concern about issues, like sexual harassment, that impact women's careers more often than men's because they invoke concern that such issues threaten women's perceived purity and goodness. Thus, benevolently sexist beliefs may elicit sympathy for some contemporary issues that, gender research shows, hold women back in the workplace but for reasons other than the desire to achieve greater gender equality.

Further, it may be the case that research about gender inequality in the workplace makes salient the idea that women and men are competing for scarce resources in the workplace, fostering conditions for intergroup bias along gender lines (Tajfel and Turner 1986). This may also explain the mediating effect of men's hostile but not benevolent attitudes toward women.

The evidence did not support our competing hypotheses about author gender: either that gender research would be perceived more positively when it was conducted by a man rather than a woman or that gender research would be perceived more positively when it was conducted by someone of the same gender as the participant. Instead, we found that participants did not perceive gender research differently when the researcher was a woman versus a man. Our null finding dovetails with that of Handley et al. (2015); there, too, participants did not express a preference for research authored by a man versus a woman.

This null effect could be due to gender research being perceived as a feminine-typed domain. Recent experimental evidence showing that men authors are favored over women authors in scientific communication indicates that this bias is most pronounced in masculine-typed domains, like computer-mediated communication (Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2013). Indeed, status belief transfer theory predicts attenuated gender bias toward objects created by women in feminine-stereotyped domains (Tak et al. 2019).

A second possibility for the null effect is that scholars whose research illuminates a prejudice faced by a group they belong to are perceived to have greater expertise on the issue but also a vested interest or personal agenda on the topic (Thai, Lizzio-Wilson, and Selvanathan 2021). If these two countervailing perceptions were both activated in our study, they may have effectively canceled one another out. Finally, it may be the case that participants did not notice the gender of the author; we did not have a manipulation

check for author gender, so we cannot directly assess this possibility.

While our experimental evidence was focused on gender inequality, we believe that such processes may apply in other identity domains as well. We encourage future work to build on these findings and further explore how social identities may shape the interpretation of research about social inequality. One extension would be to look at other identity groups; for example, how a person's racial or ethnic identities shape their perceptions of research on racial or ethnic inequality.

It is striking that gender bias seeps even into the interpretation of research that documents gender inequalities. Our results, in concert with those of Handley et al. (2015), indicate that identical research findings are interpreted differently based on the audience's identity. Thus, the production of scientific evidence demonstrating the mechanisms that promote inequality may not be enough to counteract biases and beliefs related to inequality, because those very biases and beliefs shade the uptake of scientific information on the topic.

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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Supplemental material is available with the online version of the article.

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