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# A Star Is Born or Not: Understanding the Star Emergence Gender Gap

Julia B. Bear<sup>1</sup> | Len J. Treviño<sup>2</sup> | Herman Aguinis<sup>3</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>College of Business, Stony Brook University (SUNY), Stony Brook, New York, USA | <sup>2</sup>College of Business, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Florida, USA | <sup>3</sup>The George Washington University School of Business, George Washington University, Washington, District of Columbia, USA

**Correspondence:** Julia B. Bear ([julia.bear@stonybrook.edu](mailto:julia.bear@stonybrook.edu))

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## ABSTRACT

Building on research on star performance, gender, and situational constraints, we introduce a longitudinal process model explaining the gender gap in star emergence. We argue that star emergence is less likely for women than men due to stardom's association with men and masculinity. As a result, situational constraints are more likely to insulate women's performance in terms of knowledge, skills, and abilities development and evaluation (e.g., access to vicarious deliberate practice, biased standards), motivation (e.g., competition intensity, negative interpersonal behavior), and opportunity (e.g., access to high potential tasks, partner supportiveness in the extra-work environment). We theorize that these factors lead to insulation cycles that reduce the likelihood of women emerging as stars over time. We also offer propositions about mitigators (e.g., strategic diversity goals and influential sponsors) that might attenuate these insulating effects. Finally, we discuss theoretical implications of understanding gender gaps in star emergence (e.g., performance insulation as gender inequity, the importance of a longitudinal perspective, insulation cycles, and star longevity) and practical implications for organizations to create equitable environments for star emergence (e.g., focusing on performance equity and facilitating gender inclusivity). We conclude that greater insight into the role of gender in star performance can also contribute to the broader understanding of gender gaps in organizations.

A disproportionate degree of organizational outcomes (e.g., sales, profits, growth) stems from a small group of elite workers, often referred to as star performers (Aguinis and O'Boyle 2014; Cappelli and Keller 2017; Morris, Alvarez, and Barney 2021). Star performers, defined as “possessing rare, desirable qualities through which they can produce exceptional outcomes” (Asgari et al. 2021, p. 20), create value for their organizations to a degree that is disproportionately greater than others in comparable positions based on comparative evaluations (e.g., Aguinis and O'Boyle 2014; Asgari et al. 2021; Cappelli and Keller 2017; Kehoe, Call, and Bentley 2022; O'Boyle and Kroska 2017). However, women are severely underrepresented in the top performance ranges among managerial, academic, creative, and other professions as varied as scientists, Hollywood directors, and law

partners, and the gap increases at higher levels of performance (e.g., Amaral et al. 2020; Odic and Wojcik 2020; Rikleen 2015; Sá et al. 2020). For example, the underrepresentation of women in STEM and other scientific fields is increasingly disproportionate in the more elite performance ranges (e.g., the top 10%, 5%, and 1% of performers; Aguinis, Ji, and Joo 2018; Chan and Torgler 2020; Meho 2022).

Understanding this gender gap in star performance, specifically among star performers within classes (e.g., similar occupational and hierarchical organization positions), is crucial for research on star emergence and, more broadly, organizational performance and gender equity. Current theorizing (e.g., Asgari et al. 2021) and empirical research on star performers (e.g.,

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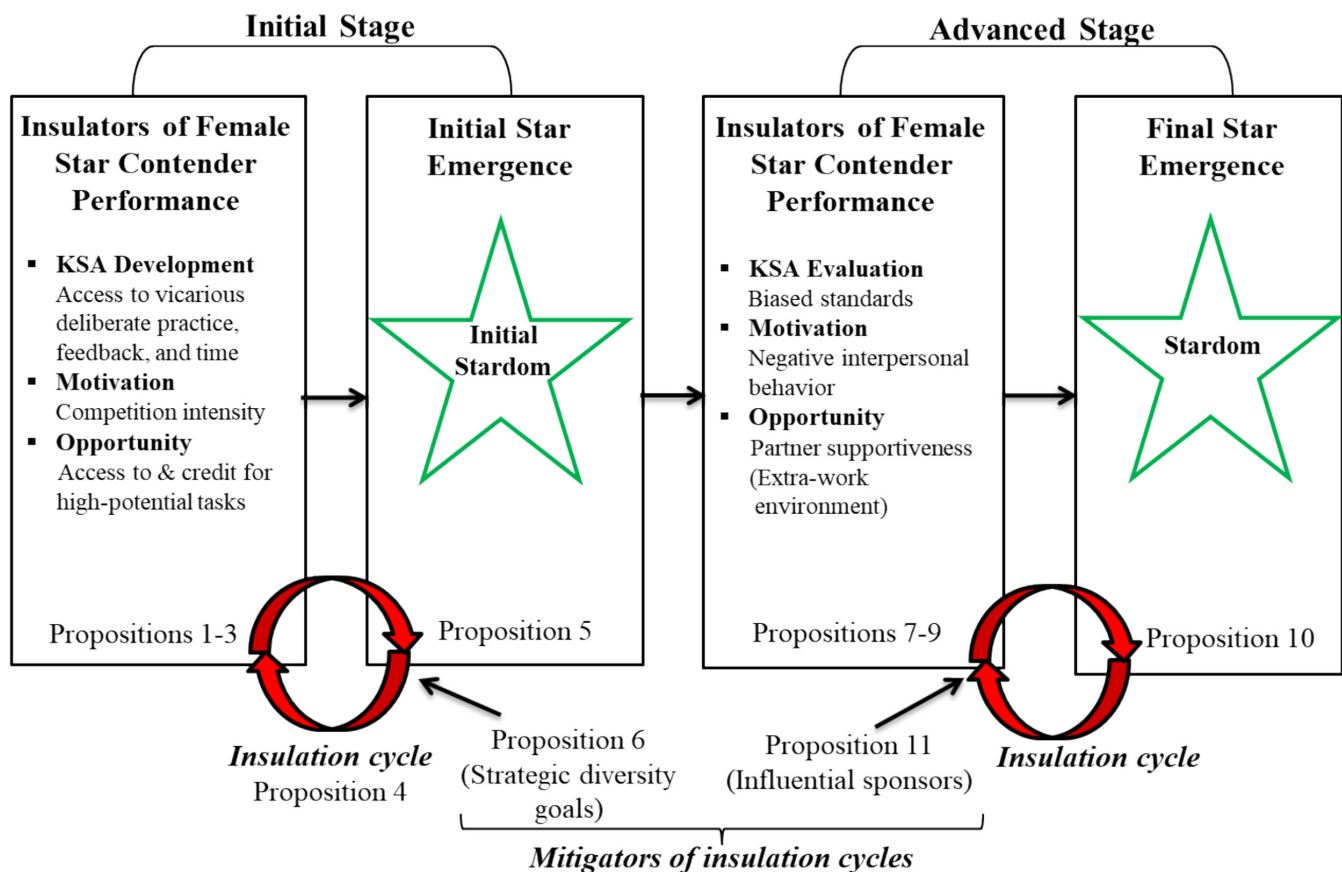
Aguinis, Ji, and Joo 2018; Villamor and Aguinis 2024) do not explain why the proportion of female stars relative to the total female population is smaller compared to the proportion of male stars, nor why this gap emerges over time. As such, there is a need to theorize this phenomenon longitudinally in terms of how star performance development unfolds over time. Moreover, the severe underrepresentation of female star performers likely contributes to organizational underperformance, given the positive relationship between gender diversity in top management teams and boards, as well as firm performance (Dezso and Ross 2012; Hoobler et al. 2018; Khan and Vieto 2013).

Thus, it behooves scholars and managers to understand what drives the underrepresentation of female star performers, as closing this gap will facilitate the removal of obstacles to gender equity in organizations in terms of performance beyond leadership and other areas that have been examined more extensively (cf., Lyness and Grotto 2018). Specifically, the extant management literature has examined processes explaining the role of gender in leadership (e.g., Eagly and Carli 2007; Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb 2011; Powell 2020), stereotyping (e.g., Ellemers 2018; Heilman 2012; Heilman, Caleo, and Manzi 2024; Koch, D'Mello, and Sackett 2015; Rudman et al. 2012a; Rudman et al. 2012b), and compensation (e.g., Blau and Kahn 2007, 2017). However, it has focused less on performance development and outcomes from a star performer perspective than performance evaluation from a perceiver perspective (e.g., Heilman 2012; Heilman, Caleo, and Manzi 2024). In fact, similar to the association of leadership with men (e.g., “Think leader, think men”; Offermann and

Coats 2018), there is a tendency to equate stardom with men—“Think star, think men” (Villamor and Aguinis 2024). Yet, the mechanisms underlying this association and its influence on star performer outcomes are unknown. In sum, a thorough understanding of gender gaps in organizations, including productivity and star performance, can contribute to the growing interest in creating diverse and inclusive organizations.

Drawing from the literature on star performance, gender, and situational constraints, we develop a model elucidating the role of gender in emergent processes related to productivity—how star performers are born or not. We contextualize our model in a theoretical framework where the emergence of star contenders unfolds over time, with relevant performance factors varying by stage. As a preview, Figure 1 offers a visual representation and summary of our model, which we discuss in detail in the remainder of our manuscript.

Our conceptualization includes the following theoretical components and contributions. First, we offer propositions based on research showing that prototypes of star performers are associated with men and masculine characteristics (Villamor and Aguinis 2024) and about factors that serve as insulators of female performance and contribute to gender gaps throughout the star emergence process as it unfolds over time. Building on research concerning situational constraints (e.g., Campbell and Pritchard 1976; Peters and O'Connor 1980; Pindek and Spector 2016; Villanova and Roman 1993), these insulators are related to the three main antecedents of star



**FIGURE 1** | The emergence of the star performance gender gap: a longitudinal process model. Note. KSA Knowledge, skills, and abilities. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

performance—knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs), motivation, and opportunity (Call, Nyberg, and Thatcher 2015)—and ultimately undergird the empirically documented star performance gender gap. Considered separately, any single insulator may not necessarily derail a person's chances of becoming a star performer. However, we theorize that, collectively and cumulatively, insulators accrue and result in fewer women emerging as stars.

Second, we theorize that female star contenders become mired in what we call *insulation cycles* that prevent them from achieving star performance levels—a process involving compounding effects. Consistent with the notion of “gendered organizations” and “masculine defaults” (i.e., the view of organizations as structured around men and masculinity; Acker 1990; Cheryan and Markus 2020), our conceptualization suggests that as female star contenders proceed through the star emergence process, the probability of becoming a star performer decreases substantially relative to men. We also explain how the initial and later star emergence phases should differ given performance development versus mastery and recognition. Finally, we theorize that two mitigating factors may attenuate performance insulation cycles for women, namely strategic diversity goals and influential sponsors, early and later in the performance competition, respectively. Although these factors have been applied to gender gaps in leadership, we extend them to understanding gender gaps in star performance emergence. In short, we offer a novel longitudinal theoretical model to explain the gender gap in star emergence.

## 1 | Theoretical Background: Star Emergence, Gender, and the Role of Context

Gender gaps in organizational outcomes are typically explained by gender role congruity theory, namely that women's communal gender role is perceived as a poorer fit for managerial and leadership roles compared to men's agentic gender role (Eagly and Karau 2002; Eagly and Wood 2012). These gender roles are reinforced via descriptive and prescriptive stereotyping processes that perpetuate biases by penalizing people – both men and women – who behave counternormatively (Heilman 2012; Heilman, Caleo, and Manzi 2024), a phenomenon often referred to as backlash (Rudman and Phelan 2008; Rudman et al. 2012a; Rudman et al. 2012b). Gender roles and stereotyping processes influence how others perceive men and women regarding leadership potential (Heilman 2001; Lawson et al. 2022) and other important outcomes in organizations. Relatedly, research has revealed that people in organizations have implicit theories about leadership, which align with masculine characteristics (Offermann and Coats 2018). Implicit theories differ from stereotypes because implicit theories consist of “... underlying cognitive schemas that create prototypes” (Villamor and Aguinis 2024, p. 3). Thus, these prototypes are influenced by stereotypes but are not equivalent to stereotypes, defined as generalized beliefs about certain groups, including characteristics and behaviors (Hilton and Von Hippel 1996).

Implicit star performer theories (Villamor and Aguinis 2024)—the “Think star, think men” (TSTM) phenomenon—reveal a prototype for star performers, namely that people associate

descriptions of stars (e.g., driven, tenacious, brilliant) with men more than women. Accordingly, the TSTM phenomenon can help to explain women's lack of recognition as star performers. However, Villamor and Aguinis (2024) emphasized that the underlying mechanisms and the link between the TSTM phenomenon and performance outcomes are unknown. Accordingly, our model addresses this theoretical gap by considering the role of situational constraints (Campbell et al. 1970; Campbell and Pritchard 1976; Peters and O'Connor 1980), which we refer to as insulators, and that we argue should have differential effects for men and women who are vying for stardom. In other words, we propose that the TSTM phenomenon influences contextual factors that serve as insulators of KSA, motivation, and opportunity—the three antecedents of star development (Call, Nyberg, and Thatcher 2015)—for female star contenders. Thus, we base our arguments on past conceptual and empirical work on situational constraints, which should play a key role in star emergence.

Researchers have identified situational constraints as factors that interact with individual characteristics, such as skills and abilities, in determining performance (Campbell et al. 1970). More specifically, Campbell and Pritchard (1976) argued that performance is a function of several factors, including skill and effort, but also “facilitating and inhibiting conditions not under the control of the individual” (p. 65). Situational constraints (i.e., inhibiting conditions) are proposed to exert the strongest effects on people with the highest levels of ability and motivation (i.e., those with the most potential for performance; Peters and O'Connor 1980). Peters and O'Connor (1980) also developed a taxonomy of what they termed “Situational Resource Variables Relevant to Performance” (p. 396), which included factors related to training, time, and interpersonal relationships, aspects of performance development that we address in our model.

Researchers subsequently built on this work in terms of stars specifically and identified performance conductors and insulators, facilitating and constraining factors that could be identified and measured across several industries (Aguinis and O'Boyle 2014; Aguinis et al. 2016). These authors found that performance conductors that facilitate star performance include factors related to high levels of multiplicity of productivity (i.e., decreasing marginal costs), monopolistic productivity (i.e., disproportionate access to resources), and job characteristics, such as autonomy and complexity (cf., Aguinis and O'Boyle 2014; Aguinis et al. 2016). Performance insulators constrain star performance and comprise ceilings related to resource and time constraints (e.g., the number of sales calls possible to make in a day; Aguinis and O'Boyle 2014). Jobs characterized by lower performance ceilings allow for lower performance variation (e.g., assembly line workers) and are less likely to result in non-normal performance distributions that include outliers (i.e., stars) in the distribution's right tail (Joo, Aguinis, and Bradley 2017).

Despite being comprehensive, research on situational constraints of performance rests on the assumption that these factors operate similarly across groups of employees. However, when considering implicit theories about stars and gender (Villamor and Aguinis 2024), which should influence perceptions and treatment of star contenders, as well as broader notions of organizational settings and how they are built

around men and masculinity (cf., “masculine defaults;” Cheryan and Markus 2020), it seems logical to surmise that situational constraints do not operate identically for everyone involved in a performance competition. For example, the taxonomy of situational constraints mentioned above (Peters and O'Connor 1980) includes factors such as “help and services from others” and “budgetary resources.” If people hold a prototype of star performers that maps onto men more than women, then that could influence how these resources are dispersed in a way that disadvantages women. Hence, we argue that situational constraints, which serve as performance insulators, will interact with the gender of the star contender to moderate the emergence of women as star performers, with these effects being more detrimental to women than men. In this way, female star contenders are more likely than their male counterparts to experience performance insulators, resulting in average or above-average performance but not achieving star status. In addition, situational constraints have been shown to cause stress, job dissatisfaction, and, ultimately, turnover (O'Connor et al. 1984). Thus, women also may be more likely than men to exit a performance competition due to experiencing demanding situational constraints more frequently than men.

In sum, we elaborate next on how crucial factors related to the core antecedents of star emergence—KSA development, motivation, and opportunity—operate differently for men and women (i.e., how gender moderates the effects of these contextual factors related to each antecedent on performance development). Moreover, we consider how and why different factors are significant depending on the performance development stage of star contenders.

## 2 | Star Emergence Gender Gap: A Longitudinal Process Model

As summarized in Figure 1, our longitudinal process model involves two distinct stages—initial and advanced—contextualized within a competitive performance environment. For these stages, we identify specific factors that serve as insulators of performance for women in each category of star emergence (KSAs, motivation, and opportunity). Moreover, we argue that some factors are more likely to be salient during the initial versus the advanced stage of the star emergence process. Thus, in the initial stage, we highlight KSA development, motivation, and opportunity embedded in the star contender's developmental experiences. In contrast, in the advanced stage, we highlight KSA evaluation, motivation, and opportunity in relation to evaluation by and interaction with others, especially powerful gatekeepers, thereby influencing whether a star contender emerges as a star.

As a precondition to the initial stage, from a human capital and educational perspective, we begin with the assumption that women and men are similarly positioned to emerge as star performers from a KSA perspective. Consistent with the gender similarity hypothesis (Hyde 2005, 2018), on average, men and women do not differ on most academic achievement indicators. Moreover, the differences that exist are typically small (Halpern et al. 2007; Hyde 2014), appear for narrow and specific

skills (Halpern et al. 2007), and have declined significantly in recent decades (Ceci, Williams, and Barnett 2009). Women earn an equal, if not greater, number of undergraduate degrees compared to men and are close to parity in earning graduate degrees (Blau and Kahn 2017). However, disparities remain in STEM fields (Cimpian, Kim, and McDermott 2020). Similarly, a meta-analysis found no significant gender differences in performance, only in rewards (Joshi, Son, and Roh 2015). Thus, extant evidence suggests initial gender-based parity among star contenders.

### 2.1 | Initial Stage

In the initial stage, which we define as the period between beginning to compete and the emergence of an individual as a visible, rising star, star contenders must develop and demonstrate the KSAs that indicate star status. Further, KSA development is buttressed by motivation and opportunities (Call, Nyberg, and Thatcher 2015). Thus, star emergence depends not only on developing KSAs and possessing the motivation to devote oneself to practice but also on having the opportunity to perform.

#### 2.1.1 | KSA Development

Deliberate practice, which involves effort, time, and thoughtful engagement in performance-related tasks that occur within the context of employee-driven development (Dachner et al. 2021), is needed to develop the KSAs necessary to become a star performer (Call, Nyberg, and Thatcher 2015; Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer 1993). To be effective, deliberate practice should include direct observation of a star mentor's practice and performance—often called vicarious deliberate practice (Call, Nyberg, and Thatcher 2015, p. 628). Given findings from related research on mentoring, we maintain that men are more likely to have access to vicarious deliberate practice than women, thereby insulating women's development as star performers.

Specifically, observing a star performer's deliberate practice will likely occur in a mentoring relationship. Gender, both of mentor and mentee, influences mentoring processes and performance outcomes (e.g., Ng et al. 2005; O'Brien et al. 2010; Ragins 1999; Ragins and Cotton 1999). Moreover, an audit study found that professors were significantly more likely to respond to mentoring inquiries from white male students than from any other category (e.g., females or members of underrepresented groups; Milkman, Akinola, and Chugh 2015). Furthermore, because star mentors are more likely to be male than female (O'Brien et al. 2010), observing a mentor's deliberate practice often means observing a male star, which may have differential effects on performance development for male and female star contenders due to homophily and similarity effects (e.g., Ibarra 1992; McDonald and Westphal 2013; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Indeed, Scheiber and Eligon (2019), based on interviews with female associates at a prestigious law firm, highlighted how homophily effects insulate women's performance development: “To make partner, an associate must be trained ... However, there are far fewer opportunities to be trained than junior lawyers at most firms, and they are doled out largely at



the discretion of existing partners, who ... are drawn to protégés who remind them of themselves.” Thus, overall, it appears that the gender of the star contender may play a role in access to and engagement in vicarious deliberate practice.

Another important component of deliberate practice is receiving frequent task performance feedback. Indeed, it is not enough to practice frequently and deliberately—evaluative feedback is necessary to enable the star contender to correct mistakes and improve performance. Concerning this point, extant research is consistent: men receive more critical task performance feedback than women (e.g., Bear et al. 2017; Biernat, Tocci, and Williams 2012). Unfortunately, although women receive critical feedback, much is unrelated to task performance. Instead, women are more likely to receive critical feedback about interpersonal and social behaviors, such as deviating from gender role expectations (e.g., being outspoken; Heilman 2012; Snyder 2014).

Furthermore, deliberate practice requires considerable time and single-minded devotion. However, considering the extra-work environment, star contenders do not necessarily have equal amounts of time to devote to deliberate practice, especially women with children. Women typically spend more time on childcare and other household duties than men (Livingston and Parker 2019; Pew Research Center 2013). Indeed, many gender gaps in economic and work indicators are related to this gender disparity in caregiving responsibilities (Blau and Kahn 2017; Catalyst 2023), thus reducing the time for deliberate practice. Although less common, men who are primary caregivers or aspire to be likely face similar challenges due to managerial expectations about men and women in breadwinning and caregiving roles (Bear and Glick 2017).

Finally, the relationships among gender, time, and deliberate practice are more complex than differences in objective time would indicate. Time comprises both objective (i.e., clock-time) and subjective (i.e., psychological) components, and the subjective experience of time is also important when theorizing about temporal issues (cf., Shipp and Cole 2015; see Bailyn 2000 for a related discussion about the gendered nature of time in organizations). Female and male star contenders may have different subjective experiences of time due to caregiving responsibilities and—among some of those without children—plans for future caregiving. Specifically, anticipating work–family conflict affects women’s career aspirations and decisions more than men’s (Bear 2021; Cinamon 2006). Thus, anticipated conflicts related to subjective time may influence gender gaps in star emergence by limiting perceived time for deliberate practice in the same way that actual conflicts related to objective time limit time available for deliberate practice. In this way, both objective and subjective time may insulate female star contenders’ performance. We posit:

**Proposition 1.** *The degree of access to vicarious deliberate practice, critical feedback about task performance, and time devoted to deliberate practice influence KSA development, but the effects depend on the gender of the star contender. Lesser access to vicarious deliberate practice, critical feedback about task performance, and time devoted to deliberate practice insulate female star contender KSA development relative to male star contenders.*

## 2.1.2 | Motivation

Call, Nyberg, and Thatcher (2015) highlighted the role of motivation in star emergence. We consider a motivational factor that may be especially relevant to gender in the context of star performance, namely *competition intensity*. The degree of competition intensity likely influences the motivation of star contenders, with the effects varying by gender. Although we argue that these differences are societally constructed, with women being socialized early on to be communal and men to be assertive (Maccoby 1999), men seem to engage in and enjoy contest competitions more than women (Benenson and Abadzi 2020). In addition, men endorse positive lay beliefs about competition more strongly than women, including that competition leads people to work harder, perform better, and set goals (Kesebir et al. 2019).

In contrast, women typically seek collaboration and equal standing in their relationships more than men (Moskowitz, Suh, and Desaulniers 1994). Women also react negatively to direct competition with other women, unlike men’s more positive reactions to competition with same-sex peers (Lee, Kesebir, and Pillutla 2016). Research has shown that women’s performance declines more than men’s after losing a round in a competition (e.g., Buser 2016) and under extreme performance pressure (Cai et al. 2019). This is not to say that women are not motivated toward achievement; instead, it appears that the nature of the competition influences their behavior more than it does for men, consistent with a meta-analysis showing that gender differences in competition vary greatly depending upon the task and environment (Markowsky and Beblo 2022). Furthermore, women tend to engage in “scramble competitions,” defined as “obtaining often widely dispersed resources on one’s own” (Benenson and Abadzi 2020, p. 62), either by more solitary means or by forming alliances. We also note that although competition intensity may interact with gender throughout the star emergence process, we posit that it will play a more salient role in weeding out female star contenders in the initial stage. In sum, we propose:

**Proposition 2.** *The degree of competition intensity influences performance development, but the effect depends on the gender of the star contender. The more intense the competition, the more demotivating the context is for female star contenders, insulating their performance development relative to male star contenders.*

## 2.1.3 | Opportunity

KSA development and motivation are necessary but insufficient to facilitate one’s emergence as a star performer—opportunities also matter (De Pater et al. 2009; DeRue and Wellman 2009; Marshall, Aguinis, and Beltran 2024; Netessine and Yakubovich 2012). A critical component of opportunities is access to high-potential tasks, such as high-profile assignments and skill development tasks. Thus, initial star emergence requires a significant quantity and quality of opportunities. These opportunities are especially important in the initial stage when star contenders are focused on performance development.

However, access to high-potential performance tasks has been shown to reflect underlying gender inequity in organizations. For example, managers report assigning significantly more

challenging tasks to male than female subordinates (De Pater, Van Vianen, and Bechtoldt 2010). Similarly, female managers report receiving fewer challenging, developmental assignments compared to male managers (De Pater, Van Vianen, and Bechtoldt 2010; King et al. 2012), which appears to stem from the belief that women should be shielded from challenging experiences (Glick and Fiske 2001). Managers also make assumptions about women's career trajectories based on their personal lives but do not make similar assumptions about men, thus influencing the opportunities they offer men versus women (Hoobler, Wayne, and Lemmon 2009). Even when women's performance is evaluated as equal to or better than men's, women are still less likely to be rated as having higher potential than men (Roth, Purvis, and Bobko 2012). Illustrations of this phenomenon are abundant. For example, female associates at an elite law firm reported that women face more obstacles than men when working toward partner status, that their contributions are recognized less than those of their male colleagues by top gatekeepers at the firm, and that their careers are not cultivated in the same way as those of their comparable male colleagues (Scheiber and Eligon 2019).

Just as access to high-potential and challenging tasks is important, the opportunity cost of performing tasks that are *not* high potential also matters. Unfortunately, non-promotable tasks, or tasks that are necessary to keep an organization functioning but do not lead to stardom, are more likely to be assigned to women than to men, thereby interfering with women's performance (Babcock et al. 2017; Babcock et al. 2022). Specifically, in a series of experiments, Babcock et al. (2017) found that both women and men were more likely to assume that women would perform non-promotable tasks than men. Thus, women are expected to perform "invisible work" in organizations (cf., Fletcher 2001), contributing to the institutionalization of masculine-gendered environments and gender disparities. Consistent with this view, a female lawyer (at the same elite law firm discussed above) reported that "Female lawyers are often expected to take on administrative tasks, such as drafting schedules ... You become the mother of the team" (Scheiber and Eligon 2019). It is important to note that the lack of access to challenging tasks and expectations for performing non-promotable tasks are detrimental to KSA development.

Finally, when given high-potential opportunities and tasks, star contenders should also receive full credit when they perform at a high level, as it begets future opportunities and facilitates star emergence. However, when working as a team, Heilman and Haynes (2005) found that women's contributions to a team task tend to be downplayed compared to those of men if there is any ambiguity about contributions. Moreover, both male and female raters judged a female team member's task performance lower than that of a male team member despite identical performance. Haynes and Heilman (2013) also found that women allocated more credit to their male teammates for group performance unless there was no ambiguity about task competence and contribution.

We conceptualize these phenomena related to performance development in terms of high-potential tasks as insulators. We propose:

**Proposition 3.** *The degree of access to and credit for high-potential tasks influences performance development, but the effects depend on the gender of the star contender. Compared to male star contenders, less access to and credit for high-potential tasks insulate female star contenders' performance development.*

## 2.2 | The Insulation Cycle and Initial Star Emergence

By the end of the initial stage, some star contenders will begin to emerge as stars. However, as summarized in Figure 1, given the various insulators of female performance, women will likely face challenging and persistent insulators of KSA development, motivation, and opportunity (as described in Propositions 1–3) that make it difficult to emerge as an initial star. We argue that any combination or a subset of these insulators can lead to a lower probability of emerging as a star performer. Notably, we argue that contenders may make some progress but are likely to be pulled back rather than emerging as star performers, which we call *insulation cycles*. Thus, the insulation cycle represents the compounding effects of insulators, what we refer to colloquially as "death by a thousand paper cuts." In addition, we argue that insulation is cyclical because the proposed insulators may repeat and influence each other. For example, less time for vicarious deliberate practice may further reinforce the lack of access to high-potential tasks, becoming a vicious cycle. As such, the insulation cycle is qualitatively different from a mere summation of insulators; rather, it represents the unique challenges female star contenders face in the star emergence process due to compounding effects. Although most of the research on star performers has focused on cumulative advantage among established stars (e.g., Kehoe and Bentley 2021), we maintain that these compounding effects throughout the development of star performers are also important, especially in explaining the gender gap among star performers. Thus, we propose:

**Proposition 4.** *Female star contenders are more likely than male star contenders to experience an insulation cycle in which they continually get pulled back rather than advancing in the star performance emergence process due to performance insulators.*

**Proposition 5.** *Given the aforementioned insulators related to KSA, motivation, opportunity, and the insulation cycle, fewer women emerge initially as stars and advance to the later stage of the star performance tournament than men.*

## 2.3 | Mitigator of Insulation Cycle: Initial Stage

We have explicated how performance insulators related to KSA development, motivation, and opportunity influence the likelihood that women will emerge as star performers. However, extant research has shown that high-performing women benefit from certain organizational goals and strategies: High-potential women, especially in firms with explicit diversity goals, experience pay premiums (Dreher, Carter, and Dworkin 2019; Leslie, Manchester, and Dahm 2017) as

opposed to the pay gaps typically seen. Perceived diversity value is the mechanism undergirding these effects, helping to explain how these strategic goals influence management practices that benefit high-potential women (Leslie, Manchester, and Dahm 2017). Likewise, high-potential women are typically in high demand, at least in early career stages, especially in STEM fields with significant gender disparities coupled with an organizational priority to hire women (Williams and Ceci 2015). Although high-potential employees are more likely to be identified as future leaders, whereas emerging stars are typically identified as exceptional individual performers (Kehoe, Collings, and Cascio 2023), there may be significant overlap in identifying high-potential employees and star contenders.

We argue that an organizational strategy promoting gender diversity may counteract the effects of insulators, potentially attenuating the insulation cycle and mitigating the negative impact of insulators on the initial emergence of female stars. However, these effects may shift during later stages when organizations with diversity goals focus on showcasing the progress of star contenders through leadership advancement, which could detract from task performance development (Kehoe, Collings, and Cascio 2023). Therefore, we emphasize this mitigator in the initial stage. Thus, despite the greater likelihood of performance insulation for female star contenders, when the performance competition occurs in an organization committed to diversity, the gender gap in initial star emergence should be mitigated.

**Proposition 6.** *The gender gap seen in initial star emergence due to insulation is mitigated when the performance competition occurs in the context of strategic diversity goals.*

## 2.4 | Advanced Stage

Evidence of star potential, recognition of being a rising star, and performing consistently at a star level are the primary factors that distinguish the initial and advanced stages of star emergence. Once contenders have established that they perform consistently at disproportionately high levels and are recognized as emerging stars, they complete the initial stage and transition to the advanced stage of star emergence. Visibility is the degree to which performance and reputation are observable and acknowledged internally and externally (Call, Nyberg, and Thatcher 2015), and it typically occurs after demonstrating star performance potential. This visibility may be formal, informal, or both. For example, although organizations often explicitly recognize “rising stars” with bonuses, rewards, and training programs (e.g., Martin and Schmidt 2010), the recognition may also be more informal (e.g., with star contenders being awarded better clients or assignments and being tacitly acknowledged as rising stars).

The advanced stage of the star emergence process differs from the initial stage in several important ways. First, we posit that competition is likely fiercer in the later stage of the star emergence process, given that the KSAs and motivation of contenders who advance to this stage should be extremely high, coupled with decreased opportunities to perform. In addition, the stakes

are higher, as greater recognition and rewards for emerging as a star performer can be anticipated. Thus, we argue that insulators at this stage are less related to KSA development of star contenders—presumably, the contenders who make it to this stage have developed effectively as initial stars—and more related to evaluative and interpersonal processes by others, especially gatekeepers, that may negatively influence star contenders’ KSA, motivation, and opportunities, as well as the extra-role environment (i.e., features of the star contenders’ personal and family lives).

### 2.4.1 | KSA Evaluation

In the previous section, we discussed the important role of frequent, critical task (as opposed to relational or social) feedback in star performance development during the early stages of the performance competition. A related issue is whether evaluation standards are unbiased and transparent. For three reasons, we highlight this insulator related to KSA evaluation in the later stage of the star emergence process. First, for most managerial jobs, performance is measured based on results and competencies, which are skills clusters (Stone, Webster, and Schoonover 2013). Competency-based evaluation is one of the most pervasive contemporary performance management systems across industries (Aguinis 2023). Second, performance standards are influenced by the gender of the person being evaluated (Biernat and Fuegen 2001; Biernat and Kobrynowicz 1997; Biernat and Manis 1994; Biernat and Vescio 2002). Third, standards serve to screen star contenders and are likely to play an important role, particularly in the later stages when the stakes are high and performance differentiation among star contenders is more difficult to ascertain.

Evidence shows that performance standards are not necessarily stable but shift depending on the target being evaluated (Biernat and Manis 1994) and the nature of the available evaluative information (Heilman, Manzi, and Caleo 2019). Women are held to lower minimum standards during initial consideration but higher standards when confirming judgments (Biernat and Fuegen 2001; Biernat and Vescio 2002), which is especially relevant to the advanced stage of the star emergence process. Relatedly, performance improvements are less beneficial for women than men in terms of perceptions of competence (Heilman, Manzi, and Caleo 2019). Finally, an investigation of funding for scientific grants revealed that when the application included a section assessing the quality of the applicant (in addition to the proposed research quality), the gender gap in funding was larger than without this section (Wittman et al. 2019). This finding supports the notion that evaluation standards, particularly when rating highly competent individuals, are less objective than a purported meritocratic approach would indicate.

Moreover, as per the “Think star, think men” (TSTM) categorization process (Villamor and Aguinis 2024) discussed earlier, men are more likely to be categorized as stars than women, which likely influences the performance evaluation process such that evaluators favor male star contenders more than female star contenders given perceptions of a lack of fit (Heilman 2012; Heilman, Caleo, and Manzi 2024). Additionally,



evaluation quality declines in a zero-sum competitive mentality (Sirola and Pitesa 2018). Altogether, given that men fit the prototype of a performance star more than women and evaluation quality is not necessarily reliable, especially in highly competitive contexts, we propose that men are more likely to be evaluated as star performers than women at the advanced stage of star development.

**Proposition 7.** *The degree of bias in performance standards influences performance evaluation, but the effect depends on the gender of the star contender. Biased standards insulate performance evaluation quality for female star contenders relative to male star contenders.*

#### 2.4.2 | Motivation

Star performers are often the targets of victimization due to envy from coworkers, including team members (Kim and Glomb 2014) and even supervisors (Tariq et al. 2021). This envy is triggered by unfavorable, upward social comparisons (for a review, see Duffy, Lee, and Adair 2021). Similarly, in educational settings, peers of star performers have been shown to bully them (Peterson and Ray 2006) and feel pleasure when star performers face setbacks (e.g., Feather 2012). However, these effects also vary by context, motives, and whether peers perceive potential benefits versus threats from high performers (Campbell et al. 2017). Star performers influence their non-star peers in various ways, with effects depending upon factors such as non-star competence and status (Kehoe and Bentley 2021) and the proportion of stars within and across workgroups (Call et al. 2021).

Relatedly, women report more workplace incivility than men (Cortina et al. 2001; Cortina et al. 2013; McCord et al. 2018), which is not surprising given extant research showing backlash or negative social penalties, especially for women who behave counterstereotypically and are perceived as violating norms (Heilman, Caleo, and Manzi 2024; Rudman et al. 2012b; Rudman and Phelan 2008). Given implicit theories of star performance (Villamor and Aguinis 2024), female star contenders who display high levels of competence and agency, i.e., who behave counter to feminine stereotypical characteristics, should indeed be vulnerable to backlash effects in the form of incivility. Indeed, the perception of brilliance has been shown to lead to social penalties for women more so than for men (Nyul et al. 2025). Not surprisingly, targets of victimization and workplace incivility have been shown to experience negative emotions, burnout, and reduced job satisfaction, among other negative outcomes (Aquino and Thau 2009; Bowling and Beehr 2006). Moreover, victimization extends well beyond interpersonal incivility. For example, female CEOs are significantly more likely to be targeted and threatened by activist investors than male CEOs (Cowen, Montgomery, and Shropshire 2022; Gupta et al. 2018). Thus, victimization is highly discouraging and damaging to the motivation antecedent of star emergence. Finally, victimization and envy, and their concomitant effects, are more likely to occur in the advanced stage when the performance of emerging stars becomes more prominent, making star contenders, especially women, more subject to envy and negative attention. Thus, we propose:

**Proposition 8.** *The degree of negative interpersonal behavior influences performance, but the effect depends on the gender of the star contender. Greater frequency of negative interpersonal behavior, such as victimization, envy, and incivility, insulates female star contender performance relative to male star contenders.*

#### 2.4.3 | Opportunity

In the first stage of our model, we considered the extra-work environment in terms of work–family conflict—anticipated and/or actual—and women’s greater extra-work demands compared to men and how these demands influence the amount of time available to devote to vicarious practice and KSA development. We believe that the extra-work environment will also play a role for women during this later stage in terms of opportunity. We argue that this stage of star development likely coincides with further opportunities for performance development involving travel and/or relocation, which often conflict directly with extra-work roles and circumstances. In this case, we focus on family structure, particularly partner type. Specifically, Dreher, Ramaswami, and Dougherty (2020) argued that extra-organizational circumstances (i.e., family roles and partners specifically) are crucial to understanding the career progression of high-potential women, especially at the mid-career stage. They introduced a typology of partner types to consider the role of life partners in men’s and women’s careers (limited to heterosexual couples), specifically contextualized during the mid-career phase and concerning advancement to top leadership positions. They differentiated among partners characterized as competitors, mentors, and resources, as well as the absence of a partner. Their typology predicts the likelihood of reaching a top leadership position depending on partner type and gender.

Based on their typology, we propose that having a supportive partner, meaning a partner who either serves as a mentor or a resource, should positively influence emergence as a star performer, with stronger effects for women than men. In contrast, having a competitor partner, meaning a partner focused on his or her own career development, potentially at the other partner’s expense, should have a negative influence, especially for women. In this case, a male competitor partner’s career will diminish the likelihood that a female star contender can take advantage of performance opportunities that influence one’s family, such as relocation. Regarding the no-partner category, for star contenders, the absence of a partner may also exert a positive effect insofar as they will have greater latitude and time to pursue stardom. Accordingly, any social penalties that are associated with being single, which have been demonstrated in past research (e.g., Park 2002), should be less relevant for star contenders as opposed to those pursuing leadership positions (for a discussion of expectations around marriage and family for leadership advancement, see Dreher, Ramaswami, and Dougherty 2020).

Thus, having a conflictual relationship between partner careers, as opposed to a collaborative or synergistic relationship between partner careers (as in the mentor or resource category), will have detrimental effects, especially for women at this later stage of



performance development, because it will require women to reject opportunities that could otherwise propel them to stardom. Relatedly, the insulation of opportunities at this stage will also influence recognition by limiting the opportunity for women to display their performance more widely. We also base this proposition on cultural expectations surrounding men's and women's family and work roles that result in prioritizing men's careers (Bertrand, Kamenica, and Pan 2015; Blair-Loy 2009; Stone 2007). Overall, men will have greater latitude in taking advantage of opportunities during this later stage. In contrast, women will be more constrained and insulated in performance when considering the extra-work environment. Although partner supportiveness likely plays a role in the initial stage as well, especially in terms of providing time for deliberate practice, we argue that it becomes more salient at the later stage, given the potential conflict between mid-career opportunities for performance development and family roles (Dreher, Ramaswami, and Dougherty 2020).

**Proposition 9.** *The degree of partner supportiveness in the extra-work environment influences performance, but the effect depends on the gender of the star contender. Lesser partner supportiveness (e.g., having a competing partner) is more likely to insulate female star contender performance relative to male star contenders.*

#### 2.4.4 | Emergence as a Star

Ultimately, star emergence results from disproportionately high and prolonged performance and recognition of that performance (Aguinis and O'Boyle 2014; Call, Nyberg, and Thatcher 2015). Star emergence is complete when star contenders demonstrate this level of performance and are recognized as star performers. However, collectively, our model predicts that, like the insulation cycle in the initial stage, female star contenders are more likely to experience an insulation cycle during the advanced stage as well, given the insulators discussed above, and thus are less likely to emerge as stars at the end of the later stage:

**Proposition 10.** *Given the aforementioned insulators related to KSA, motivation, opportunity, and the insulation cycle, fewer women will emerge as star performers than men.*

### 2.5 | Mitigator of Insulation Cycle: Later Stage

Although strategic diversity goals may mitigate gender gaps during the initial stage, we argue that they are less likely to do so during the advanced stage when the performance baseline is extremely high, the competition is fierce, and insulators relate to evaluation standards and interpersonal incivility, coupled with the demands of the extra-work environment. In addition, organizations with diversity goals may try to showcase the progress of star contenders through leadership advancement, which could potentially detract from their performance development (Kehoe, Collings, and Cascio 2023). However, access to a powerful sponsor is likely to help narrow gender gaps during this later stage. Sponsors are powerful people who advocate for and develop others' human capital and networks (Hewlett et al. 2010). As such, sponsors are important for mitigating gender gaps

(cf., Lyness and Grotto 2018), and sponsors, though primarily studied in terms of leadership roles, are also relevant to star performer emergence. Sponsors should actively develop star contenders, working informally and behind the scenes to support and advance their performance development.

We argue that sponsors will be especially influential in the advanced stage because they can influence performance evaluation by advocating for fairer and more transparent standards. Moreover, they can counteract—explicitly and implicitly—victimization and envy (Piderit and Ashford 2003). If an emerging star is known to be protected by an influential sponsor, then the negative interpersonal behaviors predicted above are less likely to occur (except envy). To be sure, sponsors likely have less influence over partner supportiveness and characteristics of the extra-work environment that influence star contenders. Thus, we posit:

**Proposition 11.** *The gender gap seen in final star emergence due to insulation is mitigated when female star contenders have access to and support from influential sponsors.*

## 3 | Implications for Theory Development and Testing

### 3.1 | Performance Insulation as Gender Inequity

Building on extant research concerning star performance, gender, and situational constraints (Aguinis et al. 2016; Heilman 2012; Peters and O'Connor 1980; Villamor and Aguinis 2024), we conceptualized a longitudinal theoretical model of the gender gap in star performers seen in empirical work (e.g., Aguinis, Ji, and Joo 2018; Chan and Torgler 2020) and across industries (e.g., Amaral et al. 2020; Odic and Wojcik 2020; Rikleen 2015). We offer a novel conceptualization of gender inequity in the form of insulators of female performance, stemming from implicit theories of star performers (Villamor and Aguinis 2024) in a competitive performance context that unfolds over time. Much of the extant research on gender gaps in organizations has focused on gender role incongruity and leadership attainment (e.g., Badura et al. 2018; Eagly and Carli 2007; Eagly and Karau 2002; Eagly and Wood 2012; Ely, Ibarra, and Kolb 2011; Heilman 2012; Heilman, Caleo, and Manzi 2024; Rudman and Phelan 2008). Our focus on gender gaps in star emergence within competitive performance contexts differs from the more commonly associated leadership context, which involves task and relational competence (e.g., Ceri-Booms, Curşeu, and Oerlemans 2017; Hannah et al. 2008). In contrast, our conceptualization of a star performance competition focuses solely on task-related performance outcomes, or what Kehoe, Call, and Bentley (2022) described as “exceptional value creation” (p. 90). Although star performers become visible and may advance within the organizational hierarchy due to their outstanding achievements (Call, Nyberg, and Thatcher 2015), they do not necessarily aspire to leadership positions (Dyer et al. 2021) or seek high-status roles that might provoke backlash (Rudman et al. 2012b). Therefore, we explore gender disparities among star performers from a task- and performance-oriented perspective. Although this approach overlaps with existing leadership research, it also presents distinct differences.

We argue that performance development processes specifically related to KSAs, motivation, and opportunity—three categories of antecedents necessary for star performers to develop and emerge (Call, Nyberg, and Thatcher 2015)—are crucial. To understand gender gaps in star performance, we posit that factors influencing and potentially insulating performance development deserve greater scrutiny, especially given the underlying prototype of men with stardom (Villamor and Aguinis 2024). In this way, we argue that insulating factors act as performance ceilings differentially for men and women and specifically disadvantage women in the context of star performer emergence. Though a single insulator may not derail the probability of emerging as a star, the combination of insulators over time certainly can—akin to “death by a thousand paper cuts.” Further, we maintain that gender research should focus more on understanding gender gaps in performance generally, which may be even more impactful (for example, see Akinola, Martin, and Phillips 2018) than gender effects in stereotyping and other organizational processes that have received greater attention (e.g., Schmader 2023). Moreover, the role of prototypes, which are influenced by, but not identical to, stereotypes, may provide a link to facilitate understanding of how stereotyping processes influence performance outcomes. As such, prototypes may underlie situational factors that insulate performance for certain groups.

### 3.2 | Improving our Understanding of Star Emergence by Using a Longitudinal Process Perspective

Our argument rests on the notion that star emergence requires intentional nurturing, as myriad factors often compound to limit any individual's likelihood of emerging as a star. Furthermore, star performer emergence consists of two stages, which we analyze regarding KSA, motivation, and opportunity (Call, Nyberg, and Thatcher 2015). First, the initial stage (during which the star contender has yet to demonstrate star potential and performance) is focused on performance development and grounded in phenomena directly related to the star contender. Second, the advanced stage (in which the star contender has demonstrated the ability to perform at the star level and has achieved some degree of visibility, both within and external to the performance context, and recognition as a rising star) is focused on performance evaluation and grounded in phenomena related to how senior stars and other gatekeepers surrounding the contender evaluate and treat them. Furthermore, in both stages, we consider the role of the extra-work environment and its effect on female versus male star contenders, especially in terms of work-family conflict (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985; Nohe et al. 2015) and caregiving responsibilities (Kossek, Su, and Wu 2017) in the initial stage, and partner supportiveness (Dreher, Ramaswami, and Dougherty 2020) in the advanced stage.

We acknowledge that other insulators not identified in our model could play an important role, such as situational constraints stemming from organizational, cultural, and structural factors. Future research should examine additional insulators that may influence gender and performance development. Likewise, future research should consider contextual variables that could exacerbate versus mitigate the insulators, such as task type and organization type. For example, Villamor and Aguinis (2024)

found that the TSTM phenomenon was more salient when the star performer was described as working in a male-dominated occupation (defined in terms of industry type and percentage of male employees, e.g., software development) compared to a more neutral occupation (e.g., biology). In sum, we suggest that future research further explore additional insulators that likely also play a role in gender star performance development.

### 3.3 | Insulation Cycles

We propose that women continually and persistently face performance insulators, leading to a discouraging sense of repeatedly coming close to achieving star performer status only to be inexorably set back. We refer to this Sisyphean-like phenomenon as *insulation cycles*. These insulation cycles, which we theorize influence both initial and advanced star emergence, help to explain the lower likelihood of women attaining star performer status, as well as the greater likelihood that women's performance trends toward a normal distribution as opposed to an exponential distribution consistent with extant research (Aguinis, Ji, and Joo 2018).

The insulation cycles could be measured and investigated using qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches. For example, using a qualitative approach, researchers could investigate the number and extent of insulators experienced by star contenders. Interviews with established stars and non-star performers could capture the phenomena proposed for initial and advanced stages. Moreover, future research could explore to what extent experiencing insulators leads to a challenging cycle, with evidence from stars and non-stars helping to triangulate the process of star emergence. In addition, a complementary, quantitative approach could also capture whether and how insulators comprise these cycles that underlie the star emergence process and to what extent the relationships are moderated by gender. Finally, an experimental method could manipulate both the demoralizing effect of insulators and whether and how a tipping point emerges such that after a certain number of insulators, women simply withdraw from the performance competition.

### 3.4 | Mitigators of Insulation Cycles

It is also important to consider mitigators of the insulation effects we described. We identified two such mitigators: strategic diversity goals and influential sponsorship. Strategic diversity goals should help mitigate gender gaps in star emergence, particularly in the initial stage. If strategic diversity goals are endorsed and actively implemented by top management rather than merely espoused symbolically (Nishii et al. 2018), the insulators are more likely to be mitigated, particularly in the initial stage. In addition, during the advanced stage, in which competition may be fierce, having an influential sponsor may effectively moderate the insulators, especially those related to biased evaluation processes and negative interpersonal behaviors. A powerful sponsor may be able to disrupt these processes and mitigate the insulation for women in a way that broader strategic goals at this later stage cannot. While there may be many possible mitigators of the processes outlined in our model—we propose these two as a starting point. Concomitantly, we encourage future research

to explore additional mitigators, especially those focused on creating more equitable performance development processes (see below for further discussion).

### 3.5 | Star Longevity

Our model implies that research on star performance should examine whether gender gaps persist over the long term and whether gender influences the longevity of stars. Scant research has examined factors that influence star longevity in general, though some research indicates that star performers' contributions change over time in terms of value creation and knowledge transfer (Call et al. 2024). Other research has shown that stars do not necessarily maintain their star status over time (e.g., Groysberg, Lee, and Nanda 2008). Relatedly, some findings indicate that stars, especially CEOs, receive excessive rewards not always matched by their performance (e.g., Aguinis et al. 2018). Moreover, the effects of stars on their colleagues and organizations are highly varied and not always positive (e.g., Asgari et al. 2021).

Despite the mixed evidence of the impact of stars, we maintain that, given women's more challenging experiences due to insulators, those who emerge as stars may demonstrate greater resilience and longevity compared to men, consistent with some extant research showing longer tenures for female compared to male CEOs (e.g., Elsaid and Ursel 2018) and related effects among innovators (Caviggioli, Colombelli, and Ravetti 2023). In addition, star performers exhibit exceptional performance over a sustained period—one is not considered a star performer due to a single achievement, no matter how significant (Asgari et al. 2021; Call, Nyberg, and Thatcher 2015). Still, we argue that women who overcome the myriad insulators may demonstrate greater longevity as stars, an area for future research.

## 4 | Implications for Practice

### 4.1 | Focus on Performance Equity: From Nominal to Equitable Meritocracies

Asgari et al. (2021, p. 42) called for research examining star performance management and equity: "Scholars may wish to investigate the extent to which star systems work in concert with or at cross-purposes against the aims of inclusiveness, diversity, and organizational equity." Consistent with this call, our model underscores the practical importance of addressing contextual factors (insulators) that impact long-term KSA development and performance, leading to gender equity. For example, managers should consider when and how they privilege men's versus women's time (KSA development), the degree to which a competitive versus collaborative culture is fostered (motivation), and the likelihood of women being assigned non-performance related work or non-promotable tasks compared to men (opportunities; Babcock et al. 2022). Relatedly, managers should ask themselves: Do male and female star contenders have comparable opportunities to observe deliberate practice by star performers? Do male and female star contenders have equal access to and time to engage in challenging tasks that lead to KSA development and the opportunity for star emergence, especially early on? Do male

and female star contenders receive comparable credit for performance? In practice, and from a holistic perspective, we suggest that organizations replace their *nominal meritocracies*, which are embedded with insulators that disadvantage women, leading to severe gender gaps among star performers, with *equitable meritocracies* (see Treviño et al. 2018 for a related discussion of meritocracies). Although the term equitable meritocracy may seem redundant, based on our model, we argue that it is not.

More specifically, we posit that a nominal meritocracy is the norm in many organizations because a meritocratic system is widely endorsed but not necessarily reflected in reality. Instead, we argue that organizational leaders often proclaim that their organizations are meritocracies while failing to recognize unconscious gender biases and rationalizing actual gender inequities as a matter of ability, chance, and choice. Indeed, when an organization explicitly presents itself as meritocratic, paradoxically, it displays larger gender discrepancies in pay (Castilla and Benard 2010).

Relatedly, organizations that do not structurally address caregiving responsibilities will remain, by definition, nominal rather than equitable meritocracies. Work–family conflict is mentally and physically draining (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985; Nohe et al. 2015). Although men also experience work–family conflict (Nohe et al. 2015; Shockley et al. 2017) and face challenges combining fatherhood and work (Gatrell, Ladge, and Powell 2022), work–family conflicts and caregiving responsibilities have been shown to exert differential effects on the career trajectories of men and women (Blair-Loy 2009; Hebl et al. 2007; King 2008; Kossek, Su, and Wu 2017). For example, women report perceiving career discouragement when expecting a child, which decreases career motivation (Paustian-Underdahl et al. 2019); broadly speaking, gender gaps in pay and career outcomes are more aptly characterized as caregiving gaps (Bear and Pittinsky 2022). The upshot is that caregiving responsibilities and work–family conflict are more likely to negatively impact female than male star contenders in terms of their ability to emerge as star performers, both in terms of early KSA development and being able to take advantage of opportunities for advanced performance development later (e.g., being able to relocate for meaningful opportunities). Unless organizations acknowledge the challenges and consequences of this issue and provide structural support (for policy examples, see Kossek, Perrigino, and Lautsch 2023), organizations will remain nominal meritocracies and will not address the aforementioned insulators.

Moreover, given the aforementioned gender differences in preferences for competition and the impact of competitive environments being either motivating or intimidating, one could argue that, by the competitive nature of performance contexts, star performance gender equity is unlikely to occur. Indeed, women report a lower sense of belonging and less interest in working in organizations perceived as prizing brilliance and characterized as having masculinity contest cultures (Berdahl et al. 2018; Vial et al. 2022). Many organizations have started to adjust performance processes and cultural norms surrounding competition to make environments more hospitable and motivating for women, thereby increasing women's engagement (Cheryan and Markus 2020; Heilman, Caleo, and Manzi 2024). Thus, another important way organizations could address insulators



and create more equitable meritocracies is by modulating the degree of competition intensity. In sum, our model implies that mitigating the gender gap in star emergence requires addressing the insulating factors that affect star contenders' performance development and creating more equitable meritocratic systems.

## 4.2 | Facilitate Gender Inclusivity

Related to creating equitable meritocracies, we highlight another practical implication of our model: the difference between star cultivation and star facilitation. Although the difference is subtle, our model provides useful, practical implications for these two phenomena. Specifically, star cultivation, an organization's talent management strategy (Cappelli and Keller 2017), rests on the assumption that the cultivation process is equitable. However, based on our process model and extant research supporting the TSTM phenomenon (Villamor and Aguinis 2024), we argue that this view is unrealistic and will likely perpetuate the star performance gender gap. Indeed, a meta-analysis of performance ratings found that, although women's ratings were slightly higher than men's, men were rated as having greater promotion potential than women (Roth, Purvis, and Bobko 2012), a revealing finding highlighting the lack of equity in talent cultivation.

In contrast, we argue that organizations should focus on *star facilitation*, which we define as creating equitable conditions for star emergence without the assumption that predictions concerning star emergence are accurate. Given the unique combination required of KSA, motivation, and opportunity, combined with performance insulation for female star contenders, organizations should focus on creating an equal playing field and facilitating star emergence widely. Indeed, the performance trajectory of stars follows exponential, not normal, distributions (Alessandri et al. 2021). Thus, performance insulators likely have outsized effects on who emerges as a star, and these insulators should be considered when determining how best to facilitate star emergence.

Our model also implies that the identification of star performers should be reconsidered. Prediction of future performance is often inaccurate (Cascio and Aguinis 2008), and men's performance tends to be judged superior to women's, all things equal (Knobloch-Westerwick, Glynn, and Huge 2013). Stories abound of female stars not achieving recognition for their achievements: a famous one is Rosalind Franklin's critical role in discovering DNA, for which James Watson and Francis Crick won the Nobel Prize (for a discussion of the "Matilda" effect for female scientists, see Rossiter 1993). Any other trend of inaccurate prediction in organizations of comparable magnitude would lead to a fundamental rethinking of organizational processes.

It is also important to note that we have focused solely on gender, given the consistent and extreme pattern of gender gaps seen among star performers and for purposes of parsimony. However, gender is only one aspect of identity, albeit an important one. Other aspects of seen and unseen identity—race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, religion, and sexual orientation, to name a few—are also likely to play a role and intersect with one another in determining outcomes regarding star emergence (cf., Hall

et al. 2019). Likewise, men's experience is not straightforward—it also depends on the extent to which they adhere to prescriptions for masculinity (e.g., Heilman and Wallen 2010), serving as the primary breadwinner versus caregiver (Bear and Glick 2017), as well as other characteristics (e.g., race, sexual orientation; Hernandez et al. 2019; Wilson, Remedios, and Rule 2017).

## 5 | Conclusions

We developed novel theory to explain the widely documented but not yet conceptually understood star performance gender gap, an important but less-studied aspect of gender gaps seen in organizations. We focused on how male prototypes of star performers (Villamor and Aguinis 2024) influence task-related processes undergirding performance and considered why women's star performance is insulated in terms of factors related to KSAs, motivation, and opportunity (Call, Nyberg, and Thatcher 2015). We theorized how insulators' multiple and persistent effects result in early and later insulation cycles in the performance competition (i.e., cumulative disadvantage). These insulation cycles ultimately advantage male star contenders, though we also consider potential mitigators of these effects (i.e., strategic diversity goals and influential sponsors). Focusing on insulators of task performance from a gendered perspective and considering the male prototype for star performance (Villamor and Aguinis 2024), we provide new insights into when, why, and how the gender gap in star performance emerges. We hope that this process model will catalyze research on gender and star performance and promote equitable meritocracies through talent management practices.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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