eng•cite

Social Identity Threat in the Workplace

Social identity threat is an anxiety or concern people experience in situations where their social group is underrepresented, devalued, or stereotyped to be inferior.[1,2]

This can be subtly triggered through conversations, or other interactions with peers and colleagues.

Social identity threat can be experienced when taking a challenging academic test, and results in poor performance on the test (known as stereotype threat[3,4]).

Why Does This Matter for STEM Professions?

STEM fields have low representation, and a high attrition rate of women.[6] For example, 11.7% of licensed engineers in Canada are women,[7] and women are leaving the profession at a higher rate than men.[8]

STEM fields, particularly engineering, often involve a lot of collaboration between coworkers. Research has shown that for female engineers, work conversations with male colleagues can be a source of social identity threat and can lead to psychological burnout.[1]

Actively addressing subtle behaviours that trigger social identity threat are critical steps in creating inclusive and safe workplaces, and retaining more women in STEM fields. This can be done through raising awareness about social identity threat, and creating spaces that welcome all identities.

Gender inclusive policies can result in all employees feeling more accepted and competent in daily conversations, and more engaged in their work.

Can Conversations Cue Social Identity Threat?

When we share ideas with others, we are **vulnerable** to a variety of responses.

Negative responses (critiques, dismissals) can trigger feelings of **incompetence** and **lack of belonging**.

When you belong to an unrepresented group, either of these feelings can cause social identity threat.

Psychological Burnout

affects individuals & organizations.

Often involves personal:[5]
- **Exhaustion**
- **Disengagement**
- **Inefficacy**

Negatively impacts **mental health**[5]

Reduces **organizational productivity**[5]

Predicts **employee turnover**[5]

The Workplace Study[1]

Pairs of engineers who work together documented **daily conversations** at work.

Findings

Anxiety "I don't belong here" Incompetence ....

On days when a conversation with a male colleague cued feelings of incompetence and a lack of acceptance...

For men: no change in social identity threat levels

For women: higher levels of social identity threat

Women reported experiencing **more daily social identity threat** than their male colleagues, predicting:

mental exhaustion & **psychological burnout.**

All employees feel more accepted and competent in daily conversations in workplaces with **gender inclusive policies.**

References

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3. Schmader, T., Johns, M., & Forbes, C. (2008). An integrated process model of stereotype threat effects on performance. *Psychological Review, 115*, 336–356.
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5. Maslach, C., Schaufeli, W. B., & Leiter, M. P. (2001). Job burnout. *Annual Review of Psychology, 52*, 397–422.
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7. Engineers Canada. (2014). *2013 Membership survey*. Retrieved from: http://www.engineerscanada.ca/national-membership-report/
8. Hunt, J. (2010). *Why do women leave science and engineering?* (NBER Working paper 15853). Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

Recommended Readings

1. http://www.reducingstereotypethreat.org/

About eng•cite

eng•cite is the working name of the Goldcorp Professorship in Women in Engineering at UBC. The Professorship – established in 2014 – is a vital aspect of the UBC Faculty of Applied Science's efforts to promote the engineering field to young women, to meet its goal to increase female enrollment in Engineering to 50% and to address a national shortage of Engineers expected by 2020.

The Goldcorp Professorship is a catalyst of change for the engineering field, with a commitment to help UBC become the national leader for gender diversity in engineering. Dr. Sheryl Staub-French, who holds the Professorship, works with teachers, counsellors, parents and high school students to promote engineering education, and provide mentorship and role models for young women who might not otherwise consider or pursue engineering education and careers.

Find out more at: engcite.ca