

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.

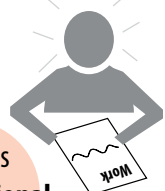
Psychological Burnout

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 Study¹



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

Findings



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:

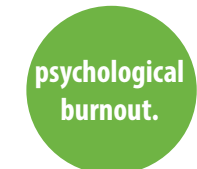
higher levels of social identity threat



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



&



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





Westcoast Women in Engineering,
Science & Technology



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Recommended Readings

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

About WWEST

Westcoast Women in Engineering, Science & Technology 2010-2015 (WWEST) is the operating name for the NSERC Chair for Women in Science and Engineering (CWSE), BC and Yukon Region. Our mission is to advance engineering and science as welcoming careers that serve our world through holistic understanding and creative, appropriate and sustainable solutions. WWEST works locally and, in conjunction with the other CWSE Chairs, nationally on policy, research, advocacy, facilitation, and pilot programs that support women in science and engineering.

About the Chairholder

The 2010-2015 Chair was held by Dr. Elizabeth Croft, P.Eng., FEC, FASME. Dr. Croft is the Associate Dean, Education and Professional Development in the Faculty of Applied Science, and a Professor of Mechanical Engineering at the University of British Columbia. She is also the Director of the Collaborative Advanced Robotics and Intelligent Systems (CARIS) Laboratory. Her research investigates how robotic systems can behave, and be perceived to behave, in a safe, predictable, and helpful manner. She is the lead investigator of "Engendering Engineering Success," a 3-year interdisciplinary research project that aims to take an evidence-based approach to increasing the retention of women in engineering by understanding and changing aspects of workplace culture that place women at a disadvantage.

Thank you to our sponsors

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