

# Confronting prejudice may be 'antidote' for workplace distress

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Sarah Gervais

(PhysOrg.com) -- Women who publicly confront instances of sexism in the workplace tend to feel more capable and competent in their jobs and about themselves in general, a new study shows.

The research from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln examined how both men and [women](#) perceive, react to and relate to everyday episodes of workplace [prejudice](#), and found that women who challenge sexist behavior experience psychological benefits such as self-esteem, empowerment and competence.

"Most everyday instances of prejudice are somewhat subtle, but things like sexist jokes can undermine workplace performance and perceptions of competence and control for women," said Sarah Gervais, assistant professor of psychology at UNL and the study's lead author.

"Importantly, directly challenging such instances of sexism can serve as an antidote for negative psychological effects -- turning a negative event into an instance that makes women feel better about themselves and their work, and even to feel empowered."

For the study, researchers set up a simulated online interaction. After participants were presented with a sexist comment that was openly directed at a woman in the group, they were given the chance to respond publicly to the statement and discuss its appropriateness.

The analysis showed that workers of both sexes most likely to confront the comment were the ones who were more "communal oriented" -- that is, they saw their workplace as a community, and were naturally more willing to help others, with no expectation of getting anything in return.

Unlike women who confronted the sexist remark, calling out the employee's sexist behavior had little relationship to men's general feelings of competence, self-esteem or empowerment at work. That suggests, Gervais said, that confronting workplace prejudice may be particularly important for those who are the traditional victims of the behavior -- in this case, women.

Gervais said the study's findings also could help employers look at confrontation of workplace prejudice in a different light, promoting a work culture that would foster greater understanding between employees.

The study is the first to examine employees' communal orientation as a factor in confronting workplace prejudice, and suggests that companies

may want to think about ways to reward workers for helping others, Gervais said.

Also according to the study:

- \* Participants who identified as "exchange oriented" -- more self-interested and likely to think about what personal gains might be made in helping others -- were far less likely to confront the sexist comment.

- \* It is possible that "communal oriented" people are perhaps not equally concerned with the needs of all others. Instead of allowing the offender in the simulation to save face, it seems communal oriented participants were more concerned about the needs of women in the group and the importance of acting in a socially responsible way.

"Challenging prejudice can be good for the [workplace](#) and can help overcome some of the negative effects victims of prejudice might experience," Gervais said. "The next time you hear a prejudiced statement, it could be an opportunity to make a difference for yourself and others."

**More information:** The study, which appeared in a recent edition of the journal *Sex Roles*, was authored by UNL's Gervais and Amy L. Hilliard, and Theresa K. Vescio of Pennsylvania State University.

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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