

When majority men respect minority women, groups communicate better

June 23 2023



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Kyle Emich, a professor of management at the Alfred Lerner College of Business and Economics, along with Rachel Amey and Chad Forbes, then with UD's Psychology and Brain Sciences Department, were

searching for clues about why women's knowledge often gets ignored in the workplace and how to improve the situation.

Drawing on both a problem-solving group exercise and measurements of brain activity, their findings, now [published](#) by the journal *Small Group Research*, illustrate ways stereotypes and attitudes can stifle the benefits of diversity efforts. At the same time, the study also offers hope for solutions.

While [women](#) are often urged to fight for status, a key takeaway Emich and his colleagues highlighted from their research was that the onus should actually be placed on high-status men to respect and accept women's expertise.

At the root of their research is the concept of diversity. It's often touted not just as basic fairness, but a way to benefit companies or other organizations. People with different backgrounds and experiences, the reasoning goes, can offer fresh perspectives and a more complete view of the world that makes a team stronger.

It only works, though, if they not only share those fresh perspectives with the team, but the team listens.

Previous research shows that this is often not the case—people in minority positions, like a woman on an all-male team, are reluctant to go against the group by sharing knowledge that contradicts the narrative.

Emich and his collaborators looked for evidence of differing levels of respect for men and women, how that affects the group, and how attitudes shape respect for women.

Attitudes, diversity and their effects on a group can be hard to measure. But the researchers developed a novel way to do it, by measuring team

members' brain activity as they collaborated on solving a problem with a clear answer: a murder mystery.

How the study worked

The researchers divided student volunteers into teams of three, always with a gender minority. Some teams were made up of two men and one woman, and some had two women and one man. In each case, the minority group member had clues key to solving the case, so to be effective the group had to draw on all its members' knowledge and work together.

In a twist, the experimenters also hooked up participants to an EEG monitor so they could see how their brains were functioning as they participated in the group activity. The researchers had a theory: that men who were [approach-oriented](#) (focused on a positive goal like solving the murder), would be more inclusive than men who were avoidance-oriented (focused on a negative goal like staying away from risk).

"We just thought it would be a good application, because most (EEG) studies are either at the individual level or with only two people," Emich said. "They're not in actual interacting teams."

With this approach, they didn't have to rely on asking subjects to imagine being in the minority—they could put them in that position directly.

What they found

Even though all the groups were diverse, it turned out that the teams made up of two men and one woman were less effective.

These women faced a double burden. First, women often struggle to speak up when they are in the minority. Emich and his fellow researchers also found that the more the minority women on these teams shared their unique information, key to solving the case, the less respect they got from their team.

"They kind of liked her better if she just sat there and was quiet, as opposed to trying to get into the discussion," Emich said.

On teams with majority women, the man's input was more valued, so these teams were more effective as they shared information to solve the problem.

Assessing the EEG readings gave more insight into men's mental states. The men who did better at including women's input were, in fact, those whose brain activity indicated their mindset was more approach-oriented, set on solving the problem rather than avoiding risk.

On the flip side, whether the women in the majority on their teams were more approach- or avoidance-oriented, as measured by the EEG, "they were sort of accepting the man's information into their team," Emich said. "And then the team ended up doing better."

What does this mean?

The findings, Emich and his team said, confirm the idea that a lack of respect for minorities undermines the benefit of diversity. They also argue that while the burden is often put on women to make sure they have a voice, men in power should also bear this responsibility.

Women are told, "You need to lean in, or you need to break the glass ceiling," Emich said. "... And what we're saying here is the onus is really on the men, because they have the power, right? So it's difficult for the

women in these teams to come out and kind of take over the team conversation, because they don't have the power or status to do that."

He's not arguing that women shouldn't assert their rights or "lean in," but that to make real change, men (or people in power, generally) also have a responsibility to make space for minority perspectives.

The "approach" or "avoidance" mindsets they studied, Emich said, can be altered. That is, they aren't an unavoidable part of someone's personality. It's not a matter of finding all the avoidance-oriented men in your office and banning them from teams. Rather, these terms describe a person's motivation in a given moment, and that motivation can change.

In an avoidance mindset, Emich explained, people are worried about protecting themselves and staying away from things that might be dangerous. In business oriented, decision-making groups, unique information is seen as being risky. Adding to that, women are generally seen as lower status, he said, so men see the unique information they offer as being extra risky.

This is an outlook that can be changed with training and experience, Emich said. Responsibility falls on the group leader to "make the environment feel a little bit safer for people." That comes both through the words leaders say and the actions they model.

Overall, "I think what this [research] does is it helps to highlight why we see this broad effect that lots of people have observed about women's information not being listened to," Emich said.

More information: Rachel Amey et al, When Majority Men Respect Minority Women, Groups Communicate Better: A Neurological Exploration, *Small Group Research* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/10464964231175640](https://doi.org/10.1177/10464964231175640)

Provided by University of Delaware

Citation: When majority men respect minority women, groups communicate better (2023, June 23) retrieved 27 July 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2023-06-majority-men-respect-minority-women.html>

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