

# What happens when you can't be yourself at work

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Like many other essentials of life, our sense of self is something we often take for granted, until it's under threat. When our circumstances

appear at odds with who we feel ourselves to be, we are pitched headlong into a distressing state that scholars call "identity threat", which has been the subject of research from fields as disparate as marketing and political science.

But this extensive body of literature—until now—has lacked something truly fundamental: a rigorous way to measure identity threat that distinguishes it from related constructs such as [self-esteem](#) and identity suppression.

Heather Vough, an associate professor of management at the Donald G. Costello College of Business at George Mason University, recently played a major role in developing and trialing an identity threat scale. She also co-authored an academic paper about the project, which was published earlier this year in the [Journal of Applied Psychology](#).

Her collaborators were Mailys M. George of EDHEC Business School, Caroline Strauss of ESSEC Business School, and Julija N. Mell of Erasmus University.

"We wanted to put together a measure to really understand identity threat and the impact it can have on people in different scenarios," Vough says. "When we use different measures, it's hard to compare. This was created to be more comprehensive and directly about the threat, so we can build our knowledge."

The researchers designed their scale to account for the highly personal, subjective nature of identity and the wide range of threats that can come up in various environments. Following frameworks from an [influential 2011 paper](#), they divided identity threat into three main types—threats to identity value, meanings, and enactments.

"Identity value" refers to the esteem or worth placed on a given identity.

"Identity meanings" are the self-interpretations people assign to their identity. "Identity enactments" are the behaviors that go along with an identity.

After extensive vetting by a panel of 40 subject matter experts, the scale was used to generate a series of surveys adapted for different groups likely to be experiencing identity threats at work.

Participants included 447 teachers and professors presumably threatened by [technological change](#) in their industry (amplified by the COVID pandemic, which began during data collection). An additional study involved 195 [pregnant women](#) in leadership positions who potentially were experiencing threats to their professional identity because of how their pregnancy was perceived by colleagues.

Widening their scope to include non-work-related identities, the researchers surveyed 350 LGBTQ professionals, a demographic group often discriminated against because of their marginalized identity.

Across these vastly different cohorts, the surveys produced intelligible results showing how personal experiences of identity threat led to consistent emotional and behavioral outcomes. For example, it was discovered that teachers who were forced to move classes online—and not those still teaching in-person—experienced enactment-based identity threat that was correlated with emotional exhaustion.

"There's evidence that this measure is not just limited to professional identities, but also demographic and other types of identity as well," Vough summarizes.

Taken together, the studies imply identity threat contributes to not only emotional exhaustion but also intention to leave one's job and decreased job performance. However, the impact on performance was relatively

modest. As Vough explains, "You can't really let performance go" without risking your paycheck. The imperative to maintain performance levels while suffering through exhaustion and pining for escape is a likely psychological precursor to burnout.

Fortunately, managers are not powerless to combat identity threats. At the very least, they should focus on common interpersonal triggers such as workplace discrimination and incivility. Beyond that, Vough suggests, managers should get to know the meanings and enactments that are important for their employees.

That way, they can help employees handle unavoidable moments of threat, thereby forestalling a full-blown identity crisis. Managers should be especially vigilant during periods of organizational change, which have been known to precipitate waves of identity threat throughout the workforce.

At the same time, Vough stresses that no two individuals have precisely the same relationship to their identity. Conditions that might be threatening for one member of an identity grouping might be taken in stride by another. Moreover, not all identity groupings are equally well understood in their responses to threats, owing to gaps in the research literature. Vough hopes her identity threat scale will help scholars fill in those gaps.

"There's a fair amount of research about gender-related [threat](#), especially in the context of STEM, as well as race. But we need more knowledge about threats based on age, disability, etc. When we think of diversity, we think of race and gender, but diversity is so much more than that," Vough says.

**More information:** Mailys M. George et al, When "who I am" is under threat: Measures of threat to identity value, meanings, and

enactment., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2023). DOI: [10.1037/apl0001114](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0001114)

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