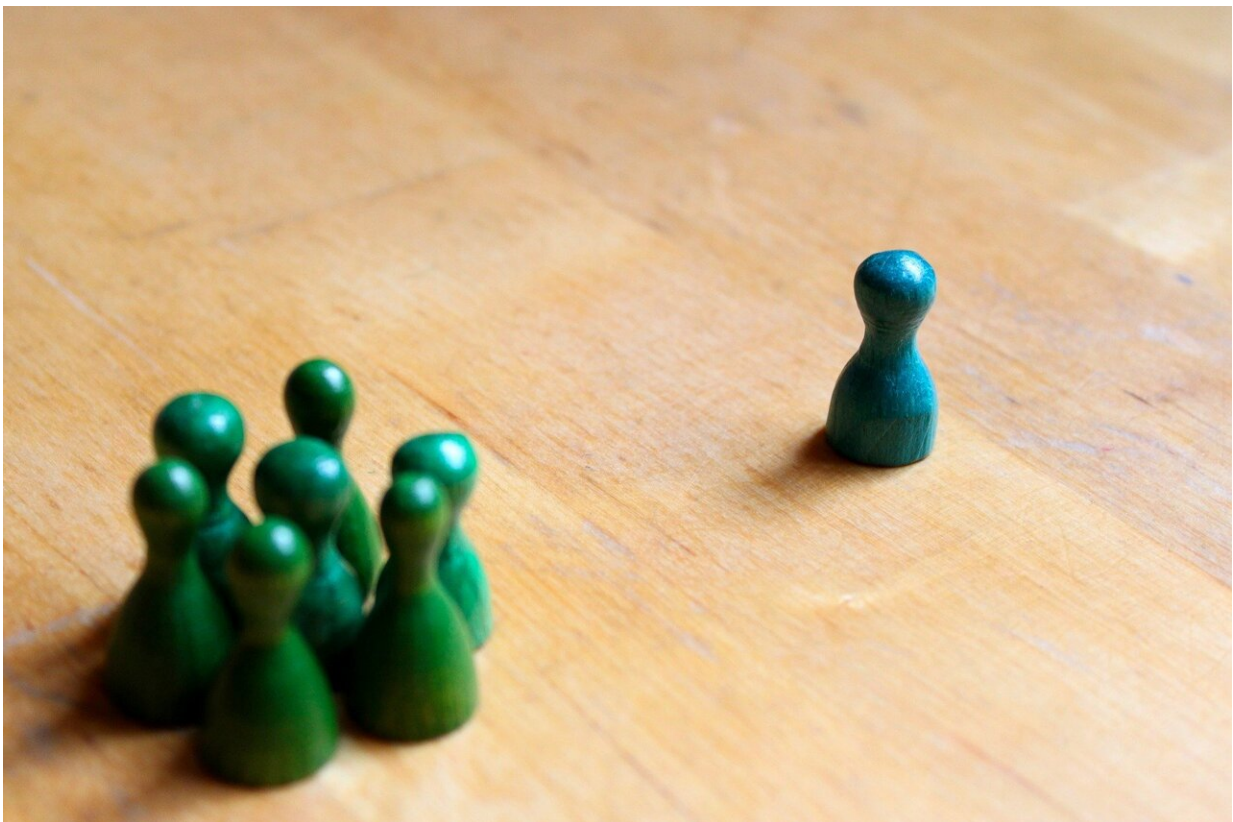


# Persistent questioning of knowledge takes a toll: New study supports theories that baseless discrediting harms

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It can be demoralizing for a person to work in a climate of repetitive skepticism and doubt about what they know, a new study shows.

"I'm not talking about healthy, well-founded skepticism. I'm talking about failures-of-exchange when a person is persistently overlooked, unheard, brushed off and explained to," said Laura Niemi, assistant professor of psychology in the College of Arts and Sciences (A&S), and co-author of the study.

"Why? Something about who the person is—their identity—suggests to their interlocutor that they couldn't possibly be right due to the interlocutor's bias. These biases take many forms: race or ethnicity, manner of speaking, weight, attractiveness, age, style and so on."

Researchers have theorized that baseless discrediting of what people with marginalized social identities know is a central driver of prejudice and discrimination. In a new study, Niemi and colleagues conducted experiments that backed up these theories, finding that people are emotionally invested in being treated as credible, even in anonymous games. Further, they found that emotional impact of discreditation varies based on gender, race and experience with [racial discrimination](#).

"The Emotional Impact of Baseless Discrediting of Knowledge: An Empirical Investigation of Epistemic Injustice" is [published](#) in the journal *Acta Psychologica*. Co-authors include doctoral student Migdalia Arcila-Valenzuela; Natalia Washington, University of Utah; Cliff Workman, University of Delaware; and Felipe De Brigard, Duke University.

The authors believe that hostility in intellectual arenas is an ethical issue, said Niemi, who specializes in moral psychology, an interdisciplinary field seeking the psychological underpinnings of ethical action.

"Discrediting of a person as a legitimate knower can be subtle, which makes it difficult to isolate, and, therefore, understudied," said Niemi, also faculty director of the Dyson Leadership Development Program in

the SC Johnson College of Business.

"But growing research shows regular exposure to even relatively subtle prejudice and discrimination degrades physical and [mental health](#), leading to outcomes like high blood pressure, chronic stress and depression."

To deepen their understanding of the impact of epistemic injustice—injustice around the domain of knowledge—the researchers focused on the emotional consequences of feedback. They modeled epistemic injustice in the lab by creating an experiment to safely simulate everyday experiences of invalidation. Participants observed a game, then shared their knowledge about the game—either how it worked or how they felt about it.

The crucial part of the experiment came next; participants received feedback, supposedly from their partner in the game, about what they shared. Some feedback was validating, some was discrediting, and some was mildly insulting.

"The participants then rated how positive or negative that feedback made them feel, the key measure of their emotional responses," Niemi said. "We combined the experiment with surveys of variables thought to factor into epistemic injustice—race, gender and experiences with race-based discrimination and trauma."

The experiment revealed an important generality about knowledge, Niemi said. People find it more emotionally taxing to have their understanding of facts questioned than to have their feelings questioned.

But more important findings came from the experiment outcomes combined with the surveys, which showed that race and gender factored into the experimental results.

The most consistent finding, replicated twice, was that Black men rated discrediting feedback as significantly less negative compared with Black women and white men and women, Niemi said. Correlations with survey responses, also replicated twice, provide some insights into why.

"Experience with race-based discrimination and trauma predicted Black men's responses to discrediting feedback, suggesting a coping strategy of avoidance or downplaying of emotion when the discrediting feedback was encountered," Niemi said.

These findings are consistent, Niemi said, with research on prejudice and discrimination showing that Black men experience more racial discrimination in areas where credibility is extremely important—such as employment, [educational settings](#) and interactions with [law enforcement](#)—but where credibility can be undermined by emotional responses.

Another consistent finding underscored the importance of individual differences. Validation—when participants were told that they were right—was significantly more positive for white women compared with white men, Niemi said, which resonates with studies showing that positive interventions boost women's academic performance.

In this study, the researchers pursued a recruitment strategy that allowed them to investigate discrimination against Black Americans. Niemi said that other groups facing systemic racism in the U.S. will benefit from focused epistemic injustice studies.

Insights from this study could benefit managers, educators and people interested in living and working in safer and more just communities, Niemi said, "For universities, we think the results highlight the world of emotional coping mechanisms spoken about too rarely, but always under the surface in intellectual spaces."

**More information:** Laura Niemi et al, The emotional impact of baseless discrediting of knowledge: An empirical investigation of epistemic injustice, *Acta Psychologica* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.actpsy.2024.104157](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2024.104157)

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