Workplace climate, not women's 'nature,' responsible for gender-based job stress

Social scientists have long known that women working in numerically male-dominated occupations like physics and firefighting report experiencing workplace stress, but men who work in numerically female-dominated occupations like nursing and child care do not.

But why? Is it something about women or something about the workplace? A study by an Indiana University sociologist suggests it's the latter.

Cate Taylor, assistant professor of sociology and gender studies at IU Bloomington, designed and carried out an experiment that subjected both men and women to the negative social conditions that many women report experiencing in male-dominated occupations. The result: Men showed the same physiological stress response to the conditions as did women.

"Women are not especially sensitive to negative workplace social conditions," Taylor said. "Rather, both women and men exhibit similar responses to the same types of stressful workplace conditions."

The article, "'Relational by Nature?' Men and Women Do Not Differ in Physiological Response to Social Stressors Faced by Token Women," appears in the July 2016 issue of the American Journal of Sociology and is now available online.

The study focuses on what Taylor calls "gendered social exclusion," behavior that would tend to make "token" women or men feel excluded from a group of mostly opposite-sex coworkers. For example, men might exclude female co-workers by talking constantly about sports or other stereotypically male interests.

It addresses the question of whether, as some observers have suggested, women are simply more sensitive to such exclusion: if they are "relational by nature" and respond more strongly than men to being shut out of social interaction in the workplace.

Taylor recruited undergraduate research assistants, called "confederates," and trained them extensively to manage peer-to-peer conversations in a laboratory setting. Study participants were also undergraduates recruited on a university campus.

To determine the effect of gendered social exclusion, Taylor placed female study participants in experimental groups with three male confederates and male study participants in groups with three female confederates. The confederates were trained to make the study participants feel excluded by talking about stereotypically masculine topics (sports, video games and a class in business statistics) or stereotypically feminine topics (shopping, yoga and Pilates, and a class in child development) and by subtly excluding the participants from the conversations. She compared the stress response of these participants with the stress response of participants in groups made up of members of the same sex that did not use conversation to make the participants feel excluded.

In order to measure stress response, at several points during the experiment, Taylor measured levels of the hormone cortisol in the participants' saliva—a known indicator of physiological stress response. Cortisol levels rose markedly in participants subjected to gendered exclusion but not in the other participants.

"The cortisol response was robust, and it was statistically significant," Taylor said. And it was just as strong in men who were subjected to gendered exclusion as in women who were subjected to gendered social exclusion.

The results suggest that conditions associated with male-dominated professions are what cause token women to report experiencing high levels of stress.
in the workplace, Taylor said. The answer isn't to "fix" the women by teaching them to be less sensitive, because when women and men are exposed to the exact same social conditions, they actually have the same stress response. A better answer might be to address the workplace social exclusion faced by minorities in their occupations.

And the findings matter, Taylor said. For one thing, exposure to chronic physiological stress response, indicated by cortisol response, has been found to be associated with negative health effects, including heart disease, digestive problems, weight gain and depression.

For another, both stress and exclusion from important workplace social networks and mentorship may be significant factors in preventing women from getting or keeping jobs in male-dominated occupations. Male-dominated occupations, on average, have higher pay and prestige and better working conditions than mixed-sex or female-dominated occupations. Taylor said the under-representation of women in male-dominated occupations is a significant factor behind the gender wage gap. On average, women earn only 78 cents for every dollar earned by men.

"If the workplace climate were less unfriendly, we might see more women in these male-dominated occupations, and we might see more parity in pay," she said. "That would be good for women and good for families."


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