

Men are more likely to respond negatively to gender threats in the workplace than women, research finds

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When male workers believe their gender status is threatened, they are more likely than their female counterparts to engage in deviant behavior such as lying, cheating or stealing in the workplace, new research suggests.

They also become less helpful to co-workers and less willing to collaborate on organizational initiatives, said Oregon State University's Keith Leavitt, lead author of the paper just published in the journal *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*.

The findings shed light on the consequences of perceived [gender](#) threats at a time when traditional masculinity has become a heated topic of political and cultural debate, said Leavitt, a professor of management and associate dean for research in OSU's College of Business.

Gender threats occur when an individual's [status](#) as a typical member of the gender with which they

identify is called into question. Past research has consistently shown that when one's sense of manhood is in jeopardy, men quickly respond with behaviors such as out-competing others or amassing resources to reassert their status.

"The public has rightfully called out companies where frat-like cultures have created terrible places for female employees to work," said Leavitt, an expert in organizational [behavior](#) and behavioral ethics. "This research gives us a more nuanced understanding of what actually triggers some of these problematic behaviors among men."

Across time and in many cultures, manhood has been treated as a status that must be earned and maintained, while womanhood is generally viewed as stable, Leavitt said. For men, prescriptive gender behaviors tend to focus on individual power such as being assertive or striving for achievement. For women, gendered behaviors may include being sensitive or serving others.

Leavitt and his co-authors' goal was to better understand how this response, known as a social proof reflex, related to bad [workplace](#) behavior. They conducted a series of studies to explore those concepts.

For the first study, 186 male and female participants from different industries took a questionnaire measuring perceptions that their gender was threatened at work, with items such as "Others in my workplace have publicly questioned my manhood or womanhood." Those who reported having their gender threatened at work were significantly more likely to report engaging in deviant behaviors at work, though the effect was much stronger among men than women.

In the second study, 194 study participants were

randomly assigned to write about memories of ordinary activities such as eating dinner the night before or about instances when their gender status had been threatened. After the writing exercise, they participated in a negotiation activity. Compared to the people who wrote about ordinary activities, the men, but not the women, who recalled a time when their gender standing was called into question were significantly more likely to lie to gain advantage in the negotiation activity.

In the third study, researchers followed 131 employees at an industrial machine manufacturing plant for six workdays. Each morning, the employees were randomly assigned versions of the memory writing exercise from the second study. This time, the exercise included an additional condition to see if men and women reacted differently to broader types of workplace threats beyond those related to gender.

At the end of each workday, employees reported their engagement in good deeds, such as helping co-workers maintain a positive attitude, and negative deeds, such as mistreating others or deliberately slacking off.

Results showed that men, but not women, were more likely to engage in more deviance and fewer instances of helping on days they felt their gender status had been undermined. Those gender differences were not present in response to other types of threats at work.

"Research in the psychology of motivation has generally found that people have three key needs: To feel autonomous and in control, to feel competent and to relate to others. We found that for men, gender threats erode their sense of autonomy, which in turn motivates them to behave in ways that demonstrate their independence from rules and from others," said Lei "Luke" Zhu, an associate professor in the Schulich School of Business at York University, and one of the paper's coauthors.

"By contrast, because femininity is generally associated with communal behavior in organizations, women's gender standing at work does not affect their perceived ability to behave

autonomously."

Leavitt said there is evidence to suggest that some element of this gender [threat](#) response in men is innate. But men who find they need to reassert their gender identity in the workplace could consider alternate methods.

"That reflex can probably be channeled into healthier outlets, such as sporting and recreational activities, rather than just expecting it to go away," he said.

The current political and cultural debate, including the use of terms such as "[toxic masculinity](#)" or "mansplaining," may also be further fueling workplace gender divisions, to the extent to which this language inadvertently creates workplace gender threats for men. Leavitt suggests that focusing the greater conversation around specific negative behaviors and the harm they cause to others may be more constructive.

"As a society, we need to normalize a broader and healthier conceptualization of what manhood is, because behaviors that historically maintained men's status aren't conducive to collaborative workplaces," Leavitt said. "Additionally, instead of casually using labels such as 'toxic masculinity,' which imply these problems are endemic to manhood, we may be able to better address these issues by focusing on specific toxic behaviors such as sexual harassment or hyper-competition without creating gender threats among men and triggering subsequent negative reactions."

Additional coauthors of the study are Maryam Kouchaki of Northwestern University and Anthony Klotz of Texas A&M University.

More information: Keith Leavitt et al, Fragile or robust? Differential effects of gender threats in the workplace among men and women, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.obhdp.2021.104112](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2021.104112)

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