

Politically correct norms encourage creativity among mixed-sex work groups

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People may associate political correctness with conformity but our research finds it also correlates with creativity in work settings. Imposing a PC norm into a work environment — a norm that sets clear expectations of how women and men should interact with each other — unexpectedly encourages creativity among mixed-sex work groups by reducing uncertainty in relationships.

The study highlights a paradoxical consequence of the PC norm. While PC behaviour is generally thought to threaten the free expression of ideas, we found that positioning PC as the office standard provides a layer of safety in the workplace that fosters creativity.

Creativity is essential to organisational innovation and growth. But our research departs from the prevailing theory of group creativity by showing that creativity in mixed-sex groups emerges not by removing behavioural constraints, but by imposing them. Setting a norm that both clarifies expectations for appropriate behaviour and makes salient the social sanctions that result from using sexist language unleashes creative expression by countering the uncertainty that arises in mixed-sex work groups.

Our contention is controversial because many have argued that imposing the PC norm might not just eliminate offensive behaviour and language but will also cause people to filter out and withhold potentially valuable ideas and perspectives. We suggest that this critical view of the PC norm reflects a deeply rooted theoretical assumption that normative constraints inevitably stifle creative expression — an assumption we challenge.

We designed their experiments taking into account the different incentives men and women have for adhering to the PC norm. Men said they were motivated to adhere to a PC norm because of concerns about not being overbearing and offending women. Whereas women could perceive a PC norm as emblematic of weakness or conformity, women in the experiment became more confident about expressing their ideas out loud when the PC norm was salient or prominent. In contrast, in work groups that were homogeneous — all men or all women — a salient PC

norm had no impact on the group's creativity compared to the control group.

Study participants were randomly divided into mixed sex groups and same sex groups. Next, researchers asked the groups to describe the value of PC behaviour before being instructed to work together on a creative task. The control groups were not exposed to the PC norm before beginning their creative task. The task involved brainstorming ideas on a new business entity to be housed in a property left vacated by a mismanaged restaurant — by design, a project that has no right or wrong strategy.

Instead of stifling their ideas, mixed-sex groups exposed to the PC norm performed more creatively by generating a significantly higher number of divergent and novel ideas than the control group. As expected, same sex groups generated fewer creative outcomes. (Previous studies have found that homogenous groups are less creative because people in these groups are similar to one another with similar ideas and therefore, less divergent thinking occurs.)

What the research findings mean for the state gender relations, though, is troubling. The fact that men and women still experience a high level of uncertainty while working together and that a norm as restrictive as PC provided a safer environment for free expression means we still have a lot of work to do.



Notes:

- This post is based on the authors' paper [Creativity from Constraint? How the Political Correctness Norm Influences Creativity in Mixed-sex Work Groups](#), in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, March 2015, Vol. 60, no. 1, 1-30
- This post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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Jack A. Goncalo is an Associate Professor at the Department of Organisational Behavior at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations. He conducts research on group processes and performance, particularly group creativity and the quality of group decision making. Although most research in Organizational Behavior emphasizes the value of being a "team player," his research suggests that in order to spark creativity, organizations should emphasize individualistic norms and individual achievement.



Jennifer Chatman is the Paul J. Cortese Distinguished Professor of Management with the Haas Management of Organizations Group at the University of California, Berkeley. She teaches, researches, and consults on leveraging organizational culture, leading change, and managing complex teams. Professor Chatman runs the flagship executive education program at Haas: [The UC Berkeley Executive Leadership Program](#).



Michelle M. Duguid is an Associate Professor of Organizational Behaviour at the Olin Business School, Washington University, St Louis. She received her Ph.D. from Cornell University. She has two major research streams: (i) group demography and social status and (ii) group creativity and decision-making. The first line of work focuses on how group demography and status differences among group members shape individuals perceptions, interactions and behaviors and group relations. Her other area of research investigates group creativity and the quality of group decision-making.



Jessica A. Kennedy is an Assistant Professor in Organizational Studies at Vanderbilt University's Owen Graduate School of Management. She researches power and status hierarches. She is interested in how groups allocate power and status to individuals, and how power and status affect individuals' decisions. Her research has found that overconfidence biases the allocation of status in groups. Dr. Kennedy also examines ethics in organizations. Her research has found that women's negative reactions to ethical compromises lower their interest in business careers and that stereotypes about women's competence in negotiations lead women to be targets of deception. Prior to her academic career, she worked in investment banking.



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