

Identity Threat at Work: How Social Identity Threat and Situational Cues Contribute to Racial and Ethnic Disparities in the Workplace

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Significant disparities remain between racial and ethnic minorities' and Whites' experiences of American workplaces. Traditional prejudice and discrimination approaches explain these gaps in hiring, promotion, satisfaction, and well-being by pointing to the prejudice of people within organizations such as peers, managers, and executives. Grounded in social identity threat theory, this theoretical review instead argues that particular situational cues—often communicated by well-meaning, largely unprejudiced employees and managers—signal to stigmatized groups whether their identity is threatened and devalued or respected and affirmed. First, we provide an overview of how identity threat shapes the psychological processes of racial and ethnic minorities by heightening vigilance to certain situational cues in the workplace. Next, we outline several of these cues and their role in creating and sustaining perceptions of identity threat (or safety). Finally, we provide empirically grounded suggestions that organizations may use to increase identity safety among their employees of color. Taken together, the research demonstrates how situational cues contribute to disparate psychological experiences for racial and ethnic minorities at work, and suggests that by altering threatening cues, organizations may create more equitable, respectful, and inclusive environments where all people may thrive.

Keywords: situational cues, social identity threat, identity safety, organizations, racial and ethnic minorities

Racial and ethnic minorities experience the American workplace differently than Whites, both economically and psychologically. For example, in the last decade, Blacks at the 90th percentile of the Black household income distribution earned as much as Whites at the 75th percentile of the White income distribution; even more troubling, their average happiness was lower than that of Whites with income at the 50th percentile (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2012). Inequalities in satisfaction and well-being remain even among workers matched in status and position. Blacks who hold comparable management positions as Whites consistently report feeling less accepted by their organizations, perceive themselves as having less discretion in their jobs, and express less career satisfaction (Browne, 1999; Feagin & McKinney, 2005; Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990). In other words, significant racial gaps in people's psychological experiences at work remain, even when differences in income and education are controlled (Deitch et al., 2003; Franks, Muennig, Lubetkin, & Jia, 2006; D. R. Williams & Mohammad, 2009).

Social Identity Threat Theory

How can we understand these different psychological experiences? *Social identity threat theory* (Steele, 1997, 2010; Steele &

Aronson, 1995; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002) posits that different social groups can experience exactly the same physical setting in psychologically distinct ways because of the sociocultural and historical legacies tied to these groups (Kray & Shirako, 2012; Markus & Moya, 2010; Roberson & Kulik, 2007). Racial and ethnic minorities must contend with a legacy in which they were either segregated within or barred from American workplaces because their groups were considered intellectually and morally inferior (Pettigrew, 1975; Tomaskovic-Deve, 1993; W. J. Wilson, 1978). Stemming from this history of cultural stereotyping and exclusion, minorities are particularly sensitive to indicators of respect and inclusion in mainstream workplaces (Bergsieker, Shelton, & Richeson, 2010; Steele, 1997, 2010; Steele et al., 2002).

In general, researchers have focused on the prejudice and discrimination concerns of people of color (Kaiser & Miller, 2001; Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002). Indeed, much research suggests that both blatant and subtle racism continue to bar the success of racial and ethnic minorities (Dipboye & Colella, 2005; Dovidio, 2001; Dovidio & Hebl, 2005; Feagin, 1991; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Mays, Coleman, & Jackson, 1996). Yet, evidence also suggests that minorities contend with a host of other concerns, such as whether they will belong and be accepted by others (Murphy & Steele, 2010; Walton & Cohen, 2007), whether they can be themselves (Shelton, 2003; Shelton & Richeson, 2006), and whether they will have fair chances for advancement (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittmann, & Crosby, 2008). Moreover, they can experience *stereotype threat*, or the concern that they will confirm, or be seen to confirm, negative group stereotypes (Steele, 1997, 2010; Steele et al., 2002).

The current article applies social identity threat theory to the workplace, suggesting that the psychological concerns experienced

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by racial and ethnic minorities may be elicited by cues in organizations. Specifically, we argue that particular situational cues—often communicated by well-meaning, largely unprejudiced employees and managers—signal to stigmatized groups whether their identity is threatened and devalued or respected and affirmed. First, we provide an overview of how identity threat shapes the psychological processes of racial and ethnic minorities by heightening vigilance to certain situational cues. We then outline several illustrative workplace cues and their role in creating and sustaining perceptions of identity threat (and safety). Finally, when the research warrants it, we provide empirically grounded strategies that organizations may use to increase identity safety. Through this review, we hope to underscore the importance of considering how situational cues contribute to disparate psychological experiences for minority and majority groups in the American workplace.

Vigilance to Situational Cues

Social identity threat heightens vigilance to cues in the social environment as stigmatized individuals seek information about whether their group is accepted and valued there (Murphy, Steele, & Gross, 2007; Murphy & Taylor, 2012; Steele, 2010). Some cues signal *threat* by providing evidence that one's identity may be a liability or source of stigma, devaluation, or mistreatment. Under these identity-threatening conditions, people are particularly vigilant to other cues that signal how they will be perceived and treated in the setting (G. L. Cohen & Garcia, 2008; Murphy et al., 2007). Other situational cues signal identity *safety* by reassuring people that their treatment and outcomes in the setting are not linked to their group membership. Under identity-safe conditions, vigilance is relaxed (G. L. Cohen & Garcia, 2008; Murphy et al., 2007). Thus, people's social group memberships—and the historical legacies and cultural stereotypes associated with those groups—play a fundamental role in the likelihood and extent to which they are vigilant to situational cues about their group's value and treatment.

Importantly, perceiving cues as identity threatening leads to a host of negative psychological and behavioral outcomes, including increased concerns about belonging, fit, and acceptance (e.g., Murphy et al., 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2007); decreased trust (e.g., Emerson & Murphy, 2013a; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008); increased anxiety (e.g., Bosson, Haymovitz, & Pinel, 2004; Johns, Inzlicht, & Schmader, 2008; Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999); and impaired executive functioning (e.g., Beilock, Rydell, & McConnell, 2007; Johns et al., 2008; Schmader & Johns, 2003). Additionally, identity threat can explain disparities in job and career satisfaction and career aspirations (e.g., Correll, 2004; Davies, Spencer, & Steele, 2005; Greenhaus et al., 1990; Niemann & Dovidio, 1998). Threat is also linked to more "objective" workplace outcomes—employees' identity concerns are associated with lower performance and promotability ratings from supervisors, as well as increased turnover and absenteeism (Browne, 1999; Greenhaus et al., 1990; Ilgen & Youtz, 1986; James, 2000; Kanter, 1979; Landau, 1995).

The major goals of identity threat research have been twofold: to illuminate the situational cues and psychological processes that negatively impact stigmatized group members and to develop strategies to remove threat in local environments (Steele, 2010; Steele et al., 2002). An important implication of social identity threat theory is that by changing the situational cues in an envi-

ronment, one can attenuate people's experiences of identity threat. Whereas some settings include threatening cues, others contain identity-affirming cues suggesting to people that their social group is welcomed, respected, and will pose no barrier to advancement (Davies et al., 2005; Markus, Steele, & Steele, 2000). Thus, identity threat research has important implications for real-world organizations. Specifically, companies seeking to increase identity safety may work toward this goal by evaluating the impact of situational cues on their employees' experiences.

Situational Cues in Work Settings

Although hundreds of studies have identified situational cues that cause identity threat in academic settings, researchers have acknowledged that little work has linked these precipitating cues to the American workplace (see Kray & Shirako, 2012; Roberson & Kulik, 2007). Below, we fill this gap by illuminating the cues that are likely to modulate experiences of threat in the workplace. Organized into four types (cues that signal representation, cues that make identity and stereotypes salient, cues about an organization's beliefs and values, and organizational structure and policy cues), we discuss how these cues engender identity threat or safety for racial and ethnic minorities. Finally, for each cue, we provide empirically based recommendations for how organizations aiming to reduce identity threat in the workplace might achieve this goal.

Cues That Signal Representation

Though American society is rapidly growing more racially and ethnically diverse (Pew Hispanic Center, 2011), people of color continue to be underrepresented in the American workforce. Whereas Blacks and Latinos make up 13.1% and 16.7% percent of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), they comprise only 10.8% and 14.5% of the labor force, respectively (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011).

Research has shown that, in general, numbers matter for people's psychological experiences. Racial and ethnic minorities are vigilant to underrepresentation. As Arthur Ashe, an African American tennis star, put it, "Like many other Blacks, when I find myself in a new public situation, I will count. I always count. I count the number of black and brown faces present" (Ashe & Rampersad, 1993, p. 144). Environments are perceived as more identity threatening when they lack *critical mass*—that is, when they contain few others from one's group (e.g., Avery, 2003; L. L. Cohen & Swim, 1995; Duguid, 2011; Ely, 1995; Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000, 2003; Kanter, 1977; Niemann & Dovidio, 1998; Roberson, Deitch, Brief, & Block, 2003; Sekaquaptewa & Thompson, 2002, 2003; Stoker, Van der Velde, & Lammers, 2012). The burdens of exemplifying one's group and debunking negative group stereotypes lead to increases in blood pressure, anxiety, and depression as well as deficits in performance expectancies and performance, feedback seeking, and memory (Blascovich, Spencer, Quinn, & Steele, 2001; Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000; Jackson, Thoits, & Taylor, 1995; Lord & Saenz, 1985; Pettigrew & Martin, 1987; Roberson et al., 2003; Sekaquaptewa & Thompson, 2002; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

One of the most effective ways to reduce people's identity threat concerns that stem from underrepresentation is to employ enough minorities that individuals no longer feel discomfort due to their

group membership (Steele, 2010). Studies have found that critical mass can buffer workplace satisfaction and performance by decreasing these identity concerns (Allmendinger & Hackman, 1995; Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000, 2003; Niemann & Dovidio, 1998; Sekaquaptewa & Thompson, 2002, 2003). Therefore, companies can signal identity safety to underrepresented groups by hiring and promoting more people of color.

What might organizations do when they currently lack critical mass but still wish to ameliorate identity threat in the workplace? One opportunity is to support employees of color that are present. Research suggests that providing minorities with a broad network of role models, mentors, and sponsors helps them feel valued by their organization—and helps them advance. Same-race mentors and role models can provide less threatening attributions for otherwise identity-threatening cues—including underrepresentation—and equip mentees with strategies to overcome obstacles within the organization (Avery, McKay, & Wilson, 2008; Kirby & Jackson, 1999). Additionally, senior-level sponsors can be instrumental in advancing the careers of their mentees by coaching, enthusiastically advocating for them over a sustained period of time, and exposing them to opportunities and individuals who can help them advance (Tapia & Kvasny, 2004; D. A. Thomas & Kram, 1988). This support has been found to help alleviate feelings of anxiety and isolation and increase career satisfaction (Chao, 1997; Crosby, 1999; Reskin, McBrier & Kmec, 1999). Thus, connecting employees of color with role models, mentors, and sponsors is one way that organizations can pursue identity safety, particularly when they lack a critical mass of minorities.

Cues That Make Identity and Stereotypes Salient

Racial and ethnic minorities are particularly vigilant to situational cues that are relevant to stereotypes about their group. For example, because stereotypes exist about their intellectual inferiority, African Americans are more likely to look for threatening cues when in a stereotyped context (e.g., completing an IQ test) than when in a nonstereotyped context (e.g., a social context). When situational cues make stereotypes salient—or bring stereotypes to mind—minorities may become concerned about being viewed through the lens of those stereotypes by their peers and supervisors.

Cues in the physical environment. Members of stigmatized groups look to the physical environment for cues when assessing whether they are welcome and accepted. Studies have shown that seemingly innocuous posters on a wall or objects in a room can create an ambiance suggesting that certain groups do not belong (e.g., Cheryan, Meltzoff, & Kim, 2011; Murphy et al., 2007). For example, even after being explicitly asked to disregard the objects, women exposed to a computer science classroom containing stereotypical objects (e.g., Star Trek posters and computer parts) reported less interest in computer science compared to women exposed to a computer science classroom containing nonstereotypical objects (e.g., nature posters and coffee mugs) and men exposed to either classroom (Cheryan, Plaut, Davies, & Steele, 2009). Both men and women saw the stereotypical environments as masculine; however, this perceived masculinity led only women to view the environment as a place where they would not belong (Cheryan et al., 2009).

Perceiving threatening cues in the physical environment also begets heightened vigilance to additional cues (G. L. Cohen & Garcia, 2008). In one study, exposure to a male-dominated STEM conference video caused female undergraduates to attend to cues in their local environment (displaying better memory for STEM-related posters, magazines, and textbooks in the testing room), experience a heightened physiological stress response, and report less belonging in the conference (Murphy et al., 2007). Participants in the same room who watched a version of the video in which women were equally represented showed less vigilance to these local cues and greater identity safety (i.e., a lower stress response and more belonging) in the conference (Murphy et al., 2007). Thus, cues in the physical environment can moderate stigmatized group members' experiences of identity threat.

Cues in diversity training programs. Organizations often implement diversity training programs to create identity-safe environments and facilitate intergroup interaction. However, these programs sometimes backfire and actually increase identity threat. Often, employees are told that group membership and group differences greatly impact how people think, feel, and behave; yet, they are also instructed not to let stereotypes about groups guide how they treat others (Liff, 1997; Paluck, 2006; Von Bergen, Soper, & Foster, 2002). When diversity programs emphasize group membership and stereotypical differences, they may suggest to racial and ethnic minorities that they will be judged as group members—and not as individuals—by employees who have received this training, increasing their anxiety and feelings of isolation within organizations (D'souza, 1997; Flynn, 1998; Schneider & Northcraft, 1999). Although many researchers have theorized about this potential drawback to diversity training programs (e.g., Paluck, 2006; Schneider & Northcraft, 1999; Von Bergen et al., 2002), more empirical support is needed to test the effects of such programs on the experience of identity threat by racial and ethnic minority employees.

Positive stereotypes in the workplace. Many people—often low in prejudice—believe that it is acceptable to endorse positive group stereotypes (Devine & Elliot, 1995; Madon et al., 2001). People see no harm in drawing on stereotypes when they ask a female employee to throw the office birthday party or a Black employee to join the company's basketball team. However, data suggest that this behavior is likely to increase identity threat and intergroup tension. In one study, Black participants perceived White participants more negatively when they praised the athletic ability of African Americans compared to those who never mentioned the positive stereotype in the first place (Czopp, 2008). Moreover, research has found that racial and ethnic minorities experience higher levels of negative emotions, impaired concentration, and performance deficits when others endorse positive stereotypes about their groups (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000; Cocchiara & Quick, 2004; Siy & Cheryan, 2013).

Why are positive stereotypes harmful to racial and ethnic minorities? Because applying stereotypes to people—whether positive or negative—means that perceivers are viewing them as group members rather than as individuals (Czopp, 2008; Siy & Cheryan, 2013). In other words, positive stereotypes suggest to minorities that others consider their group membership to be diagnostic of who they are. This heightened level of depersonalization can engender concerns with having to represent one's group and dis-

prove stereotypes—hallmarks of the identity threat experience (Siy & Cheryan, 2013).

What organizations can do. It can be difficult to control whether or not stereotypes are activated in people's minds (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Macrae, Bodenhausen, Milne, Thorn, & Castelli, 1997). However, when they are motivated, people can control the extent to which an activated stereotype is applied to a particular person (Devine, 1989; Devine & Elliot, 1995; Kunda & Spencer, 2003). Therefore, organizations striving to create identity-safe environments may be particularly successful if they increase employees' motivation to avoid stereotyping in the workplace.

One way to influence people's motivation is to foster norms of nonprejudice and equality (Cox & Blake, 1991; Dovidio, Gaertner, & Bachman, 2001; T. E. Ford & Ferguson, 2004; Gelfand, Nishii, Raver, & Schneider, 2007; Gilbert & Ivancevich, 2000; Kilian, Hukai, & McCarty, 2005; Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000; Pearson & Porath, 2004). For example, censoring the use of stereotypes—including condemning racist incidents or giving non-prejudiced opinions—consistently has been found to lead others to behave in a more egalitarian manner (Blanchard, Crandall, Brigham, & Vaughn, 1994; Blanchard, Lilly, & Vaughn, 1991; Brief & Barsky, 2000; Monteith, Deneen, & Tooman, 1996; Ruggs, Martinez, & Hebl, 2011; Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992). These findings suggest that organizations seeking to combat identity threat may want to evaluate the norms that guide how people interact with each other and how physical spaces are organized. In particular, they may want to assess the extent to which these norms permit or prohibit the use of negative and positive stereotypes in the workplace. Particularly for racial and ethnic minorities, the implementation of egalitarian norms will likely increase feelings of belonging, acceptance, and respect in the workplace.

Finally, the argument that diversity training programs reduce identity threat among racial and ethnic minorities still lacks robust empirical support. Some research has found that training programs that increase employees' sensitivity to diversity and provide them with practical intergroup skill-building techniques lead to improved intergroup attitudes and provide employees, supervisors, and decision makers with ways to effectively manage interracial interactions and conflict (Cox, 1991; Kerka, 1998; Lubove, 1997; Richard & Kirby, 1999; Sue, 1991; D. A. Thomas & Ely, 1996; Zhu & Kleiner, 2000). Yet, other findings suggest that sustained use of these programs often do not result in increased representation of minorities in management positions (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006), and in some cases may lead to intergroup conflict, hostility, and backlash (Dobbin, Kalev, & Kelly, 2007; Hemphill & Haines, 1997; Kalev et al., 2006; Kidder, Lankau, Chrobot-Mason, Mollica, & Friedman, 2004; Verespej, 1997). Because of the complexity and controversy surrounding the effectiveness of diversity training programs, organizations may want to focus their efforts on situational cues for which suggestions are clearer and more empirically supported while more research is conducted on the effectiveness of these programs.

Cues About an Organization's Beliefs and Values

When deciding whether to join or stay in an organization, racial and ethnic minorities are vigilant to cues that signal whether the organization's leaders and decision makers value group differ-

ences and whether they believe that members of stigmatized groups can succeed.

Diversity philosophies. One cue to an organization's beliefs about minority groups is their diversity statement. Whereas "colorblind" and "multicultural" statements are among the most-studied diversity philosophies in organizations (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Foldy, Rivard, & Buckley, 2009; Homan, van Knippenberg, van Kleef, & de Dreu, 2007; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008; K. Y. Williams & O'Reilly, 1998; Wolsko, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2000), a new "all-inclusive multicultural" approach is emerging that speaks to the identity concerns of both majority and minority group members (Plaut, Garnett, Buffardi, & Sanchez-Burks, 2011; Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008).

A colorblind philosophy—the dominant perspective in mainstream American workplaces (Plaut, 2002; Plaut & Markus, 2007; D. A. Thomas & Ely, 1996)—typically emphasizes commonalities and similarities between employees with the goal of uniting people in the organization (Ely & Thomas, 2001). Research tends to show that Blacks and Latinos experience colorblind messages as exclusionary and as suppressing or concealing group differences in the workplace (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Markus et al., 2000; Ryan, Hunt, Weible, Peterson, & Casas, 2007). Indeed, exposure to colorblind messages has been linked to lower levels of psychological engagement and cognitive performance among minority employees (Holoien & Shelton, 2012; Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2009). Additional research suggests that a colorblind philosophy may be especially likely to contribute to minorities' experiences of identity threat when combined with other threatening cues. Specifically, Purdie-Vaughns and colleagues (2008) found that a colorblind philosophy undercuts the organizational trust and comfort of racial and ethnic minorities when representation of minorities as employees of the organization was low.

Multicultural philosophies, on the other hand, acknowledge and value employee differences, suggesting that diversity in perspectives and backgrounds enhances organizations (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Homan et al., 2007; Wolsko et al., 2000). Generally, racial and ethnic minorities perceive multicultural messages as welcoming and encouraging of group differences (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Markus et al., 2000; Plaut & Markus, 2007; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008; Ryan et al., 2007). Yet, multiculturalism initiatives often fade, fall short, or fail to improve intergroup relations because majority group members feel excluded by them (Brief et al., 2005; Kalev et al., 2006; Konrad & Linnehan, 1995; Mannix & Neale, 2005; K. M. Thomas, 2008).

A new organizational approach—the All-Inclusive Multiculturalism (AIM) approach—emphasizes that diversity includes all employees, majority and minority group members alike (Plaut et al., 2011; Stevens et al., 2008). Organizations that explicitly include majority groups in depictions of diversity and that institute initiatives that foster cross-race interactions convey to both majority- and minority-group employees that their perspectives are valued because they contribute to the organization's diversity (Stevens et al., 2008). Although more research is needed, the evidence suggests that an all-inclusive model reduces identity threat among both majority and minority groups because the approach underscores the importance of group differences without making majority group members feel excluded (Plaut et al., 2011). In sum, organizations that foster an all-inclusive, multicultural environment are likely to assuage identity threat among minorities.

Organizational lay theories of intelligence. Another cue to an organization's beliefs is its lay theory of intelligence. *Organizational lay theories of intelligence* refer to the shared beliefs of people within an organization regarding the nature of intelligence (Murphy & Dweck, 2010). In some organizations, the predominant view of intelligence may reflect an *entity theory*, in which intelligence is thought to be an innate human characteristic that is relatively fixed across the life span. In other words, some people are smart, whereas others are not. Conversely, other organizations may espouse an *incremental theory* in which intelligence is thought to be an expandable human characteristic that people can cultivate and develop with hard work and effort (Murphy & Dweck, 2010).

Though researchers have yet to discern whether entity or incremental lay theories are more dominant in American organizations, the value placed on high performance and competition makes it easy to imagine that many organizations are likely to endorse an entity theory. These fixed beliefs about intelligence are exemplified by companies like Enron, which was described as “an environment that rewarded individual intellectual achievements, believed in the ‘value of brainpower,’ and identified as a top priority—when making hires and promotions—the task of sorting out the ‘intellectual stars’ from the ‘merely superbright’” (McLean & Elkind, 2003, p. 32). Enron explicitly endorsed an entity theory of intelligence in which some employees were thought to “have it” whereas others did not.

Although not expressly referencing beliefs about different social groups, an organization's lay theory can nonetheless create disparities in the way stigmatized groups experience and perform in organizations. In one study, women—but not men—trusted an entity company less than an incremental company because they expected to be viewed as less competent by it (Emerson & Murphy, 2013a)—that is, in line with cultural stereotypes about women's ability in the domain of business (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Consistent with the underperformance effects found when people experience stereotype threat, Black and Latino participants in another study performed worse than Whites on an IQ test when they were being evaluated by an entity organization; however, they performed similarly to Whites on the same test when they were being evaluated by an incremental organization (Emerson & Murphy, 2013b).

Why are majority and minority group members affected differently by entity and incremental theories? These findings suggest that when an organization endorses an entity theory of intelligence, it signals a belief that intelligence and competence are exclusive traits that some people, but not others, innately possess. The history of race relations in America is characterized by societal beliefs in the intellectual inferiority of racial and ethnic minorities (Dovidio, 2001; Markus & Moya, 2010). This history implicitly suggests which people are likely to possess or lack innate intelligence. An entity theory is likely to signal to minorities that their prospects are limited by their membership in a group historically stereotyped as inferior. In contrast, an organization that endorses an incremental theory believes that hard work and motivation—not group membership—will determine success. This organizational lay theory makes group membership less salient and signals to stigmatized people that, as long as they work hard, they are equally likely to succeed in the organization.

What organizations can do. If an AIM diversity approach and incremental lay theory of intelligence can increase identity safety, how can organizations pursuing this goal adopt these practices? One of the most effective ways for organizations to institute new diversity-related policies is through the organization's leadership (Hitt & Keats, 1984; Marino, 1980; Rynes & Rosen, 1995). For example, when Anne Mulcahy was promoted to CEO of Xerox, she changed the company's organizational lay theory to reflect incremental beliefs. Having risen through the ranks of the company through her hard work and motivation, Mulcahy held herself as an example of Xerox's new incremental theory. She created a culture focused on investing in the development of a larger portion of the company's existing talent and making contributions that moved the company forward, rather than supporting competitive norms between divisions fighting to prove their competence and abilities (George & McLean, 2005). Notably, a leader's beliefs may be most effective when directly communicated. For example, the CEO of Manpower has been known to update employees on the company's diversity initiatives and their progress toward diversity goals directly via various social media outlets (Diversity Leader, 2011). Though more empirical studies are needed to assess the long-term effects of these approaches and the conditions under which they are more or less effective, leaders seeking to increase inclusion and diversity may serve as role models for managers and employees by endorsing all-inclusive multiculturalism or an incremental theory.

Organizations can also convey inclusive beliefs and values through their materials (e.g., mission and diversity statements and websites), policies, and, more informally, in their organizational meetings (Emerson & Murphy, 2013a, 2013b; Murphy & Dweck, 2010; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008; Rau & Hyland, 2003; M. L. Williams & Bauer, 1994; J. L. Wilson, Meyer, & McNeal, 2012). For example, to create an incremental mindset at IBM, Lou Gerstner changed compensation policies so that executives' bonuses were based more on IBM's overall performance and less on the performance of individual units (Dweck, 2006). The message was that the company needed to work as a team, rather than “crown a few princes” (Dweck, 2006, p. 130). Although not yet tested in field settings, evidence from lab studies suggests that exposing people to organizational lay theories via materials, policies, and interpersonal interactions may have longer-term, “sticky” effects. After being exposed to an entity or incremental organization, participants in one study were later more likely to hire applicants for an unrelated job that displayed the traits most valued by that organization (Murphy & Dweck, 2010). In sum, organizations can increase experiences of identity safety among racial and ethnic minorities by displaying inclusive beliefs and values—such as an incremental lay theory or all-inclusive multiculturalism—via their organizational leaders, materials, and policies.

Organizational Structure and Policy Cues

An organization's structure and promotion practices are powerful cues about who gets in and who gets ahead. To the extent that identity appears to be correlated with success, racial and ethnic minorities are likely to experience identity threat.

Workplace segmentation and segregation. In the American workforce, people of color are often disproportionately underrepresented in high-status positions. For example, in the Fortune 100,

African Americans hold only 7.6% of board seats and Latinos hold only 3% of seats (Alliance for Board Diversity, 2011). In contrast, Blacks and Latinos are overrepresented in operations, labor, and service positions (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2011), in which promotion to managerial roles is uncommon or impossible (Durr & Logan, 1997; McBrier & Wilson, 2004; Yap & Konrad, 2009; Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 1998). Minorities also face segregation in white-collar workplaces. Research has shown that minorities are more likely to be assigned to supervisors of the same ethnic group (Elliott & Smith, 2001; Lefkowitz, 1994) and that workers of color frequently report feeling pressured to leave positions traditionally held by White individuals (Collins, 1993; Maume, 1999; Reskin, 2000; G. Wilson & McBrier, 2005).

This division of the labor force leads not only to economic disparities, but also to disparities in psychological experiences. Workplace segmentation and segregation negatively predict well-being above and beyond people's perceptions of discrimination (Forman, 2003; Jackson et al., 1995). Moreover, tokenism—when minorities find themselves to be one of only a few from their group—has been found to negatively impact health, psychological functioning, and performance, both in the lab (Blascovich et al., 2001; Inzlicht & Ben-Zeev, 2000; Lord & Saenz, 1985; Sekaquaptewa & Thompson, 2002) and in the workplace (Jackson et al., 1995; Roberson et al., 2003; Smith & Calasanti, 2005). In contrast, the presence of women and people of color in leadership and authority roles reduces identity threat concerns and increases perceptions of company fairness, as well as supports high performance (Avery et al., 2008; Jeanquart-Barone, 1996; Konrad, Cannings, & Goldberg, 2010; Marx & Goff, 2005; Marx & Roman, 2002; Wout, Shih, Jackson, & Sellers, 2009). In sum, a critical mass of racial and ethnic minorities throughout an organization—especially in jobs traditionally held by Whites—suggests that race and ethnicity are unrelated to people's success and advancement.

Inconsistency in diversity cues. A provocative study of almost a half-million professionals revealed that racial and ethnic minorities are over 20% more likely to quit their jobs than Whites (Hom, Roberson, & Ellis, 2008). Although employees leave organizations for various reasons, research suggests that racial disparities in turnover may be explained in part by dissatisfaction resulting from contradictory diversity messages presented before and after joining an organization (Avery & Johnson, 2008; Linnehan & Konrad, 1999; McKay & Avery, 2005).

Some companies use diversity recruitment strategies—including hiring minority recruiters (Young, Place, Rinehart, Jury, & Baits, 1997) and featuring photographs of a diverse workforce (Avery, 2003)—to attract racial and ethnic minorities. However, these diversity cues may not match the actual organization or the attitudes and behavior of its employees (McKay & Avery, 2005). Although the effects of mismatched diversity cues on the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities has only been theorized (Avery & Johnson, 2008; Linnehan & Konrad, 1999; McKay & Avery, 2005), predictions based in research on person-organization fit suggest that a mismatch of words and actions may be an important factor in employee turnover (Cable & Judge, 1996; Hoffman & Woehr, 2006; Kristof, 1996; Saks & Ashforth, 1997; Verquer, Beehr, & Wagner, 2003). Specifically, this mismatch may lead employees of color to question the extent to which the organization genuinely values diversity. This concern, in turn, may

undermine their trust and sense of identity safety in the organization.

Informal, subjective hiring and evaluation policies. Informal and subjective company policies are likely to create a culture of identity threat and perpetuate biases in racial and ethnic minority representation. For example, companies often rely heavily on employee referrals during the hiring process (Breugh, 2013; Ioannides & Loury, 2004; Marsden & Gorman, 2001; Topa, 2011). A recent study of one U.S. corporation found that 63.5% of recommendations were for same-gender candidates and 71.5% percent were for same-race/ethnicity candidates (M. Brown, Setren, & Topa, 2012). Thus, by relying on same-gender and same-race referral systems, organizations often (unintentionally) reproduce their current demographics, limiting the extent to which members of underrepresented groups can access White, male-dominated workplaces (Bielby, 2008; Kasinitz & Rosenberg, 1996; Moss & Tilly, 2001). Furthermore, given that most minorities are underrepresented in organizations (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011), cues suggesting an organization wishes to hire employees similar to their current workforce signal that people of color may not be accepted or valued there.

Majority and minority group members also experience ambiguous, subjective evaluation policies differently. Supervisors frequently use subjective, unstructured criteria when evaluating employee performance (Bommer, Johnson, Rich, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 1995; J. K. Ford, Kraiger, & Schechtman, 1986; Hunter & Hunter, 1984; Steel & Mento, 1986). Whereas all people may worry that they will be overlooked for hire or promotion because of individual, idiosyncratic reasons, racial and ethnic minorities additionally may contend with the possibility that they might be overlooked due to their stigmatized group membership. This concern is not unfounded—evidence suggests that subjective, unstructured evaluations are more prone to the effects of implicit racial bias (Arvey & Faley, 1988; Huffcutt & Roth, 1998; Madera & Hebl, 2013).

Some organizations use more objective criteria in evaluation—but unfortunately, these criteria sometimes correlate with stereotyped traits and are likely to do more harm than good for employees of color. For example, many organizations use performance and IQ tests in their hiring and promotion decisions (Guion, 2011; Hunter, 1986; Ree, Earles, & Teachout, 1994; Schmidt & Hunter, 2004). However, hundreds of studies have demonstrated that these tests are biased because minorities consistently underperform on them due to the anxiety and cognitive load caused by stereotype threat that they (but not White individuals) experience (e.g., R. P. Brown & Day, 2006; McKay, Doverspike, Bowen-Hilton, & Martin, 2002; Steele & Aronson, 1995). In fact, stereotype threat underperformance has been documented on intelligence and personnel tests actually used by organizations (R. P. Brown & Day, 2006; Gonzales, Blanton, & Williams, 2002). Although research shows that if the test is described as nonevaluative (e.g., a “challenging puzzle”), racial performance gaps are reduced or eliminated (Gonzales et al., 2002; Ployhart, Ziegert, & McFarland, 2003; Schmader & Johns, 2003; Steele & Aronson, 1995), this solution may be impractical because employees and managers know these tools are being used to evaluate employees or distribute valuable resources like promotions. Yet, evaluations based solely on stereotyped traits will make negative stereotypes salient,

thereby disadvantaging stigmatized groups and increasing racial and ethnic disparities in hiring and promotion.

What organizations can do. There are multiple strategies that companies can employ to reduce racial segmentation in the workplace, though many require more research to ascertain their effectiveness in reducing identity threat. For example, monitoring demographic statistics across different positions would help identify whether and in which parts of the company segmentation occurs. When making new job assignments, current demographic distributions might be one criterion among many that is considered. One area that has received much empirical support is the idea that creating collaborative, racially diverse workgroups may foster the cooperation and interdependence needed to create an identity-safe environment. Grounded in the seminal “jigsaw” research (Aronson, Blaney, Stephin, Sikes, & Snapp, 1978), several factors contribute to positive interactions among members of racially diverse workgroups. By relying on the unique expertise of each group member and dividing task responsibilities so that group success is contingent upon each member contributing their particular knowledge, the jigsaw strategy ensures each person is an essential part of an interdependent team. Put together, the jigsaw pieces contributed by each individual team member create an optimal outcome (Aronson & Bridgeman, 1979; Aronson et al., 1978). IDEO, a product design firm, currently uses a variation of the jigsaw approach. Specifically, they employ “hot groups/teams” to work on clients’ projects. These teams consist of employees from different departments and backgrounds that each bring their unique expertise to the project to produce optimally innovative ideas and solutions (Kelley, 2001; Kouzes & Posner, 2012).

During hiring, promotion, and termination decisions, organizations can use various strategies to combat identity threat. Systematic, structured, and transparent procedures have been found to reduce the effects of implicit racial bias (Arvey & Faley, 1988; Huffcutt & Roth, 1998; Madera & Hebl, 2013). Thus, it is likely that such procedures would also reduce the concerns of racial and ethnic minorities that group membership may influence these decisions. Experimental findings also suggest that when mentors and supervisors hold their charges to high performance standards while assuring them that they can meet those standards, identity threat might be tempered. Namely, Black students who received critical feedback that met these criteria reported less bias in the criticism and showed greater task motivation and domain identification compared to those who received feedback without high standards and assurance (G. L. Cohen, Steele, & Ross, 1999). Research examining the effectiveness of this strategy in workplace settings is needed. Finally, companies can broaden the range of traits and performances assessed during evaluation. By evaluating employees on skills that are vital to organizational success (e.g., cooperativeness, resourcefulness, motivation, engagement) (Corporate Leadership Council, 2004; Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995; Kanter, 1983; Porter, 1985) and unrelated to group stereotypes, organizations can reduce the link between stereotyped traits and evaluation criteria.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although social identity threat research has illuminated many situational cues that comprise identity-threatening environments, more work is needed to assess the relative strength of situational

cues in workplace settings. Very little research explores how multiple—and sometimes conflicting—cues interact to affect the psychological and workplace experiences of stigmatized individuals. To date, only three empirical studies have tested the effects of multiple cues (Avery, McKay, Wilson, & Tonidandel, 2007; Emerson & Murphy, 2013a; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008). These studies suggest that cues may interact in complex ways based on the particular context in which they occur. Because organizations are likely to contain many situational cues, this next stage of research is particularly important in understanding how racial and ethnic minorities experience their workplaces.

Additional research should examine how individuals who belong to multiple stigmatized groups (e.g., Black women, gay Latinos) perceive and respond to identity-threatening cues in organizations. Although some research examines the role of intersectionality on the experience of prejudice and discrimination in the workplace (Acker, 2006; Crenshaw, 1991; Healy, Bradley, & Forson, 2011), more is needed to determine how workplace cues affect the meaning drawn by people with intersecting stigmatized identities.

Conclusion

Social identity threat theory has contributed to our understanding of how environments become perceived as places of threat, even when people in the setting hold no racial animus toward people of color. Empirical evidence is building to suggest that stigmatized group members are vigilant to cues in the environment and use them to discern whether an organization values and respects them. Threatening situational cues—like underrepresentation and informal recruiting strategies—increase vigilance and suspicion while undermining motivation and performance in the workplace. In contrast, identity-safe cues—like critical mass and an incremental theory of intelligence—allow racial and ethnic minorities to fulfill their potential without being distracted or derailed by identity-related concerns. Taken together, the research suggests that to achieve identity safety, organizations must not only address prejudiced people in their ranks, but must also attend to situational cues that create disparate psychological experiences between majority and minority groups. By considering the role of situational cues in producing identity threat, we are challenged to create and change organizations to be more equitable, respectful, and inclusive of all people.

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