

When Confronting a Biased Comment Can Increase Your Sense of Belonging at Work

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People hear biased comments all too often in their everyday workplace interactions. For example, a woman might be told that women generally lack aptitude for leadership or technical fields. Racial minorities might hear statements embodying negative stereotypes of their race.

Right after hearing biased comments, people face a choice: do they confront the speaker or remain

silent? In research with Carol Dweck, I sought to understand what happens after either response. Does speaking out against a biased comment make women and minorities feel better or worse about the person who said it? And how does this affect their satisfaction and belonging at work?

We explored these questions in four studies (in press at the *Journal of Applied Psychology*) that involved a total of 464 racial minority and women participants in the U.S. Across the studies we predicted that the answers would depend upon participants' mindsets about the nature of personality. Mindsets are general beliefs, ways of seeing the world and the people in it. If you tend to believe that people can grow and improve, that they can change their personality, you hold more of a growth mindset. But if you tend to believe that personality is fixed and cannot change, you hold a more fixed mindset.

In earlier work, we found that minorities and women with a stronger growth mindset were more likely than those who held more fixed mindsets to confront a biased statement, even though both groups disagreed with the biased statement equally. In this research, we wanted to understand what happens after people with growth or fixed mindsets confront bias versus what happens after they stay silent.

We theorized that if you have a growth mindset and believe that people can change, then you would view speaking up as a way both to express your disagreement with the biased comment and to possibly catalyze change in the other person. On the other hand, we thought that if you hold more of a fixed mindset, speaking up might let you express your disagreement with bias, but you would not view the person as likely to improve.

Across our studies, we measured or experimentally induced these mindsets and found a strikingly consistent pattern - when participants both held a growth mindset and confronted the bias, they felt better about the person who made the biased comment and thus retained their belonging and satisfaction at work.

In our first two studies, we asked 139 minority and women undergraduates to complete a survey about their mindsets and then read a scenario about an intern at their summer job making a racist and sexist statement to them about "diversity hiring." We asked participants how likely they would be to confront the statement, and then we assessed whether they anticipated the intern would

improve their behavior in the future – we called this their outlook on the person who had expressed bias. We measured their outlook in two ways: first, by asking how surprised they would be if they overheard the person repeating their biased comments a few weeks later (Study 1a), and second, by asking how much they would believe the person had truly reformed if they later overheard him express how wrong his previous views on diversity were (Study 1b).

When participants held more of a growth mindset and said they would be more likely to confront the comment, they reported more surprise when they overheard the person repeating their biased comment (Study 1a) and more belief that the person had truly reformed (Study 1b).

We were interested in minorities' and women's outlook on the person who expressed bias, because we predicted that this outlook would matter for their sense of belonging and satisfaction in the workplace. Having to work with someone who has expressed bias against your group can be a particularly devaluing experience, dampening your sense of fitting in and enjoyment at work. However, if you think the person who expressed bias can change and have confronted them, your somewhat more positive outlook could help reduce how isolated and unhappy at work you might feel.

To test this, we conducted another study where we temporarily induced a fixed or growth mindset. We randomly assigned 227 women to a classic manipulation that experimentally shapes mindsets in the short term: they read an article that was crafted to support either the growth or fixed mindset, using stories and scientific findings. Then participants read a workplace scenario in which a new male co-worker makes a sexist statement about diversity hiring. We randomly assigned participants to imagine confronting the statement or remaining silent.

Women who read about a growth mindset and imagined confronting the statement reported having a relatively less negative outlook on the male co-worker, which then led them to report having a greater sense of belonging and workplace satisfaction.

In contrast, women who read about a fixed mindset and those who imagined remaining silent (regardless of which mindset article they read) reported more negative outlooks on the male co-worker, which predicted lower sense of belonging and workplace satisfaction.

In our final study, we wanted to test whether these dynamics held in the real world. We asked 98

African American employees in different U.S. companies to recount a real experience where someone made an overtly biased statement at their workplace. The majority of those surveyed (67%) were able to recall an instance of this type, most frequently involving racial slurs or stereotypes about their race (e.g., laziness or criminality). We then asked these participants to write about how they responded to the comment, and we had independent coders evaluate whether they spoke up to disagree or remained silent. Participants also completed survey measures of their outlook on the person who expressed bias and their workplace satisfaction.

We found that African American employees who reported holding growth mindsets and who confronted the comment reported a more positive outlook on the person who expressed bias and higher workplace satisfaction than employees who held fixed mindsets or stayed silent.

In summary, holding a growth mindset only predicted having a more positive outlook on a co-worker who makes a biased statement when participants imagined or actually had confronted the comment, and their outlook predicted how much they retained their belonging and satisfaction in the workplace. When minorities and women did not confront bias, mindsets did not make a difference in their outlook on the person or their belonging or satisfaction in the workplace, both of which were relatively lower.

Minorities and women should feel no obligation to speak up and confront biased statements. They can face professional and social consequences from doing so, and much past research suggests situational pressures like this are reasons why confronting biased comments is so rare, despite people's desire to speak up and disagree with bias.

Prejudiced comments in the workplace are always hurtful, offensive, and unacceptable, and the burden of addressing them belongs on those who make them and organizations, not the individuals who are subject to them. People also should not be expected or obligated to take a positive outlook on people who express bias toward them. Indeed, a mini meta-analysis of the four studies in our paper estimated that the effects of having a growth mindset and confronting bias were moderate. This moderate shift, though, had a meaningful influence on participants' belonging and satisfaction at work.

Taken together, our studies shed light on the conditions under which minorities and women may

cope with biased comments at work more effectively – a helpful tool until the problem can be fully addressed.

Aneeta Rattan is an assistant professor of organisational behaviour at London Business School. Her research focuses on mindsets and diversity (stereotyping, prejudice, and inequity), with a focus on identifying how mindsets shape people's responses to experiences with overt and subtle biases.

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