

Risky situations increase women's anxiety, hurt their performance compared to men

August 17 2014

Risky situations increase anxiety for women but not for men, leading women to perform worse under these circumstances, finds a study to be presented at the 109th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association.

"On the surface, risky situations may not appear to be particularly disadvantageous to women, but these findings suggest otherwise," said study author Susan R. Fisk, a doctoral candidate in sociology at Stanford University, who defines a risky situation as any setting with an uncertain outcome in which there can be both positive or negative results, depending on some combination of skill and chance.

According to Fisk, people often think of an extreme physical or financial risk when they think about a "risky situation." Yet, in reality, people encounter risky situations all of the time. Fisk cites raising one's hand to offer an idea at a meeting full of judgmental co-workers, giving a boss feedback on his or her performance, and volunteering for a difficult workplace assignment as examples of risky situations.

In her mixed methods study, Fisk relies on data from three sources: two experiments and test scores from an engineering course at a selective private university on the West Coast of the United States.

The goal of the first experiment, which was conducted online using U.S. adults ranging in age from 18 to 81, was to determine whether risky workplace situations increased the anxiety of women and men. In this

experiment, participants were given one of four scenarios presented in either a risky or non-risky way. For instance, participants who were asked to imagine a work-related group meeting were either told that the other members of the group understood that bad ideas were part of the brain-storming process (the non-risky framing) or that the other group members were extremely judgmental of bad ideas (the risky framing).

After reading their scenario, participants were asked to think and write about the reasoning they would use to decide what to do in the situation they received, how they believed they would act in the situation, and how the situation would make them feel. After participants finished thinking and writing about their scenario, they took an anxiety test.

Fisk found that when scenarios were framed in a risky way, women were more anxious than when the scenarios were framed in a non-risky way. Women who received risky scenarios scored 13.6 percent higher on the anxiety test than those who received non-risky scenarios. The framing of the scenarios did not have a statistically significant effect on men's anxiety.

Fisk argues that women's increased anxiety in risky situations may be due to the fact that these types of circumstances are riskier for women than men. "Prior research suggests that even if a woman has the same objective performance as a man, others are likely to judge her performance as worse and attribute her failure to incompetence instead of poor luck," Fisk explained. "Furthermore, this body of research suggests that even absent the judgment of others, failure in a risky situation is more costly to women as it may reinforce or create self-doubt about their own competence."

Increased anxiety in risky settings is problematic for women because it may depress their ability to achieve, as Fisk also found that women have worse task performance than men in risky situations, even when they

have the same ability in a non-risky setting. Fisk's data on performance came from two diverse sources: an in-person experiment that required participants to answer verbal SAT questions and test grades from a large undergraduate engineering course.

In the experiment that used the verbal SAT questions, participants were given 20 questions to complete and were told that they could bet money on each answer, making the situation risky. If they placed no bets, they were guaranteed to walk away with \$15, but, if they placed bets, they could earn as little as \$5 or as much as \$55, depending on how much they bet and the accuracy of their answers. Women correctly answered about 11 percent fewer questions than men in this [risky situation](#) involving betting, even after their general verbal SAT ability was taken into account.

A similar effect was seen when using grades data from an undergraduate engineering course. In this course, the midterm exam used an unusual grading methodology that required students to state their confidence in their answers. This created a risky setting because higher confidence in correct answers generated higher scores, while higher confidence in incorrect answers produced lower scores. On this test, a student could receive any score between -33 percent and 100 percent, and were guaranteed to earn 50 percent if they stated that they had no confidence in any of their answers. However, the final exam occurred in a setting that was much less risky, as it was impossible for students to lose points. Women's grades on the midterm were about 4 percentage points (about half a letter grade) lower than men's grades, even after their general ability in the engineering course was taken into account. On the final exam, there were no differences in the grades of women and men.

"My findings have troublesome implications for women's ability to achieve equality in the workplace," Fisk said. "People frequently encounter high-risk, high-reward situations in workplaces, and if women

avoid these situations or perform more poorly in them because they are more anxious, they will reap fewer rewards than otherwise similar men."

Fisk believes that women's anxiety and poorer performance in risky situations "may be an unexplored contributor to the dearth of women in positions of leadership and power, as success in these kinds of circumstances is often a precursor to career advancement and promotion."

In response to her findings, Fisk suggests employers work to eliminate situations that are needlessly high-stakes. "We live in an economy that demands innovation and diversity of thought," Fisk said. "If encouraging businesses to decrease the prevalence of risky environments allows employers and companies to get better ideas and enhanced performance from their employees, it is a win-win solution for both [women](#) and employers."

More information: The paper, "Risky Spaces, Gendered Places: The Effect of Risky Settings on Women's and Men's Negative Affect and Task Performance," will be presented on Monday, Aug. 18, at 10:30 a.m. PDT in San Francisco at the American Sociological Association's 109th Annual Meeting.

Provided by American Sociological Association

Citation: Risky situations increase women's anxiety, hurt their performance compared to men (2014, August 17) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-08-risky-situations-women-anxiety-men.html>

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