

Depoliticization as a Mechanism of Gender Inequality among Engineering Faculty

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Despite widespread commitment to diversity and inclusion in engineering education, gender inequality among engineering faculty endures. Most past research on gender inequality among engineering faculty has attended to interactional-level disadvantages that emerge when broader societal-level biases manifest within the engineering context. We join a new avenue of research that takes seriously the beliefs and practices in the professional culture of engineering as a site of inequality reproduction. In this paper, we attend to one particular belief within the professional culture of engineering—the *ideology of depoliticization*—as a potential mechanism of inequality reproduction. Depoliticization is the belief that cultural and social concerns like inequality can and should be stripped from engineering to maintain its objectivity. Drawing on unique survey data of over 700 engineering faculty—all members of the American Society of Engineering Education—we test whether depoliticization within engineering departments may amplify gender inequality therein. Using regressions with interaction terms, we find that women faculty experience greater levels of marginalization and devaluation than men faculty in general, and these gender inequalities are significantly amplified in departments where respondents report high levels of commitment to depoliticization among their colleagues. These findings underscore the importance of considering cultural beliefs and practices within the professional culture of engineering as mechanisms of inequality retrenchment, and the ways those cultural beliefs manifest within engineering departments. The results also have implications for helping engineering departments understand and address persistent inequality within their ranks.

Keywords

Ideology of depoliticization, culture of engineering, gender inequality, engineering faculty

Introduction

Women are persistently under-represented, marginalized, and devalued within the engineering profession and within engineering education [1-3]. These gender inequalities extend from K-12 classrooms through the highest ranks of the profession [2-4]. Even among engineers who have achieved faculty positions, women are often marginalized and devalued within their academic departments [1,5].

Most existing research on gender inequality among engineering faculty has focused on the issue of “chilly climates”—the day-to-day enactment of societal-level biases about women’s competence and excellence within engineering spaces [e.g., 1]. Such climate issues are more precisely described as interactional-level status biases that accrue around devalued status characteristics. In such status biases, women are considered less valuable colleagues than men, and are given less respect and professional opportunities as a result [6]. Such research has attended to both “bad apples,” overtly discriminatory and prejudicial departmental colleagues who cause problems for women faculty [c.f. 7], and to cognitive biases that are more subtle and widespread among most profession members [1, 5].

Yet, these overt and subtle status biases are not the only ways gender inequality among engineering faculty is perpetuated. Broader ideologies within the professional culture of

engineering also play a role in inequality. As a professional occupation, engineering has its own historically-rooted and semi-autonomous professional culture built into and around its knowledge and characteristic tasks [8-9]. This professional culture encompasses ideological beliefs about the profession's work and its perceived responsibilities to society, such as what it means to be a competent engineer, what are relevant and irrelevant considerations in engineering problem-solving, what "real" engineering entails, and what tasks and areas of expertise are most valuable [10].

The professional culture of engineering exists across the many sectors and industries in which engineers are employed, but it is particularly potent within higher education. It is here where the next generation of profession members—engineering students—are socialized into this culture and learn to "become" engineers, "think like" engineers, and to problem solve in an "engineering way" [11-12].

At first blush, abstract beliefs within the professional culture may seem a degree removed from the day-to-day processes of inequality within engineering departments. Why would abstract beliefs about technological objectivity or credibility impact how departmental colleagues treat one another? We contend that such ideologies can serve as powerful mechanisms reproducing inequalities precisely because they *seem* removed from standard considerations of gender bias.

An ideology within the professional culture of engineering that may play an important role in gender inequality is the ***ideology of depoliticization***: the belief that not only *can* cultural and social concerns like inequality be bracketed out of the "real" work engineering, but they *should be*. According to this ideology, engineering work is neutral and objective by default [11, 13-14]. To integrate concerns about access, public welfare, or unequal treatment is not only irrelevant to engineering work, it threatens the purity and integrity of the discipline itself. Of course, nearly half a century of science and technology studies scholarship has demonstrated that engineering work is always cultural and political: humans make decisions about what projects to pursue and what design factors to prioritize amid a complex set of social, political, and cultural demands [e.g., 15-17].

Prior research has speculated a possible connection between the prevalence of this ideology and inequality in engineering. Specifically, depoliticization justifies an unequal status quo in the profession by prescribing broad avoidance of engagement with concerns like inequality within "real" engineering work. This scholarship argues that depoliticization functions as a mechanism of inequality reproduction at the institutional level, impacting what arenas of consideration are legitimized within the context of powerful social spaces (e.g., engineering conferences, engineering curricula). Challenging the legitimacy of diversity and inequality conversations in these contexts perpetuates such inequality [11, 13-14].

But might depoliticization also have a more proximate impact on the day-to-day experiences of women and other historically under-represented groups in engineering? We examine here whether high levels of depoliticization in academic engineering departments is correlated with women's greater reported experiences of devaluation and marginalization.

How might depoliticization perpetuate gender bias within engineering departments? We theorize two possible processes. First, women's very physical presence may make gender salient in what is presumed to be an otherwise neutral, objective, ungendered space. In engineering, as in other masculine-dominated institutional spaces, men's gender category is "unmarked," and thus

“unremarkable”¹[18,19]. Faulkner refers to this as the (in)visibility of women in engineering, whereby women are simultaneously visible as gendered persons and invisible as engineers [18]. This visibility of women in the context of engineering suddenly brings gender into that context.² In engineering spaces where there is a high level of adherence to depoliticization, women’s very presence may seem threatening to the objectivity and neutrality of engineering work. Women in such organizational spaces are likely more frequently devalued and marginalized than women in spaces where depoliticization is less prominent.

Second, high levels of depoliticization likely have a chilling effect on the reporting of gender discrimination or exclusion in engineering departments. If there is a palpable belief in one’s department that one will be seen as less credible or objective if one raises issues of gender inequality or disadvantage, this helps perpetuate that very mistreatment because it is more likely to go unchallenged.

Related, women who speak up about their personal experiences of mistreatment – or the patterns of gender disadvantage they observe in their department more generally—are likely to be particularly stigmatized in departments with high levels of depoliticization. In such spaces, raising issues of inequality is more likely to be interpreted as an affront to the objectivity and neutrality of engineering.

Hypotheses

We use unique data on engineering faculty from a sample of American Society of Engineering Education (ASEE) members, described below, to empirically examine the connection between department-level depoliticization and women’s experiences of marginalization and devaluation. Consistent with decades of scholarship on gender inequality in engineering departments, we expect women engineering faculty will be more likely to experience marginalization and devaluation than men. Formally stated:

Hypothesis 1: Women engineering faculty experience greater levels of marginalization and professional devaluation within their departments than men engineering faculty, net of controls.

Further, consistent with our argument above, we expect that these experiences of marginalization and devaluation will be worse in departments where respondents report higher levels of depoliticization than for those who report lower levels:

Hypothesis 2: Gender inequality in experiences of marginalization and devaluation will be stronger among women in departments with high levels of depoliticization, compared to women employed in departments with lower levels of depoliticization and compared to men faculty in all departments, net of controls.

As described below, we use interaction terms between gender and perceived workplace depoliticization to test this hypothesis.

¹ In the same way that white racial identity is often the taken-for-granted unmarked category.

² Blair-Loy and Cech (in progress) similarly discusses how men STEM faculty talk about having to “walk on eggshells” around their women colleagues

Methods

Survey Data

The analyses below draw from a survey of members of the American Society for Engineering Education. The survey was conducted as part of the STEM Inclusion Study (Principal Investigators: Erin Cech and Tom Waidzunas, Professional Organization Liaison: Heidi Sherick), a national-level study of STEM-related professional organization members. In the fall of 2018, the research team partnered with ASEE membership staff to select a sample of 6,800 non-student U.S. members of ASEE and distributed a survey to this sample via an online survey link. The total response rate was 23.8%, which is typical of surveys in higher education [20]; 1,636 ASEE members began the survey. We use here the 720 respondents who were employed full-time as engineering faculty at the time of the survey. Respondents were asked a series of questions about their workplace experiences and the climate within their departments. Participation was voluntary and respondents could stop the survey at any time.

Operationalization

Departmental Depoliticization Measures

Departmental depoliticization was measured as an index variable created by averaging the outcome of three related measures. Respondents were asked to indicate their “level of agreement with the following statements, with reference to people’s views in your workplace or academic department.” They were then presented with the following statements: “People tend to believe that social issues like inequality should be separated from science and engineering work,” “Raising concerns about diversity is perceived as undermining one’s objectivity as a scientist or engineer,” and “Raising concerns about diversity is perceived to undermine one’s credibility as a scientist or engineer” (all measured on 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree scale; emphasis original). Answers on these three variables were summed and divided by three to create the index.

Experiences of Marginalization and Devaluation Measures

We include two marginalization measures as dependent variables in our analyses. Respondents were asked their level of agreement “regarding the climate in your workplace.” “Overall, I feel I ‘fit in’ with other people in my workplace” (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). This assesses their overall sense of belonging in their department. Second, we include a measure of faculty’s experiences of harassment. Experiences of harassment is an extreme form of marginalization from one’s colleagues. Respondents were asked whether the following had happened to them in their workplace or department in the last 12 months: “was harassed verbally or in writing on the job” (1=never, 2=at least once in the past year, 3=once or twice a month, 4=at least once per week, 5=every day).

We use four measures to examine the extent to which faculty experience professional devaluation in their departments. Respondents were asked to “indicate the level of agreement with the following statements regarding your workplace or department:” “I am held to the same standard as others for promotion or advancement,” “my colleagues sometimes think I am less productive than I actually am,” an “I worry that my mistakes are more noticeable than the mistakes of others.” (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). Related, respondents were asked,

with regards to “the climate in your workplace:” they extent to which they agreed that “my work is respected” (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree).

Controls

Gender was measured with the following question: “how do you currently describe yourself:” “Male,” “Female,” “Transgender Male,” “Transgender Female,” “Something else,” or “I don’t know how to answer.” Because we are interested in gender expression rather than transgender status, respondents who answered as male or transgender male were coded as “male;” and those who answered female or transgender female were coded as “female (yes=1, no=0).”

Respondents who answered “something else” or “I don’t know how to answer” were coded as gender non-binary (yes=1, no=0). We include controls for both female and gender non-binary status in our models.

We also include controls for several other important demographic characteristics. We control for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) status (1=yes, 0=no), and for respondents’ racial/ethnic minority status: respondents who identified as Hispanic, Black, Asian, Native American/Pacific Islander, white, and other nonwhite racial/ethnic category were coded as under-represented minority (URM, 1=yes, 0=no). Finally, we control for whether respondents were born outside of the US (1=yes, 0=no).

Analytic Approach

The analyses presented below use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models to predict each of the outcome variables. Table 1 below provides the means and standard errors for all respondents and separately by gender. Table 2 predicts the marginalization and devaluation measures one at a time, with gender and controls. Next, we replicate the OLS analyses in Table 2 and add an interaction term by woman x departmental depoliticization (Table 3). As is recommended, we use multiple imputation to handle missing data; specifically, we used the MI chained technique in Stata 14 with 20 imputations [21].

Results

Descriptives

Table 1 provides the means and standard errors on the dependent and independent measures for everyone and for women and men separately. For confidentiality reasons, we do not present the means separately for gender non-binary persons (approximately 0.3% of the sample). Thirty-eight percent of the engineering faculty in the sample identify as women, 18% as nonwhite, and 5% as LGBTQ.

Overall, the mean value on the workplace depoliticization measure is 2.57 on a scale between 1 and 5, between “neither agree nor disagree” and “somewhat disagree.” Average personal adherence to the ideology of depoliticization was lower (1.91), just around “somewhat disagree.” However, these averages vary significantly by gender. Women, on average, are significantly more likely than men to report workplace adherence to the ideology of depoliticization (2.75 vs. 2.46), but less likely than men to adhere to it personally (1.70 vs. 2.03).

The remaining rows of Table 1 presents means on the focal devaluation and marginalization outcomes. As expected, women are significantly more likely to report experiencing devaluation and marginalization across all of the measures. The next set of analyses will examine whether these differences remain significant net of demographic and disciplinary controls.

Gender Differences in Devaluation and Marginalization

Multivariate OLS regression models help us pinpoint whether there are significant differences by gender on key indicators of workplace experiences within academic engineering departments. Table 2 presents the regression coefficients for the gender measures as well as other controls. Looking to the first column, which measures sense of “fit,” we find that women engineering faculty are significantly less likely than men faculty to report that they “fit in” with others in their department ($B = -.268, p < .01$). Women faculty are also report experiencing harassment significantly more frequently than their male faculty peers. In other words, net of variation by other demographic and job measures in the model, women are significantly more likely than men to report these experience of marginalization.

There are similar gender differences across the devaluation measure as well. As hypothesized, women are more likely than men to report devaluation of their professional expertise: they are more likely to report that their co-workers think they are less productive than they actually are and to worry that their mistakes are more noticeable than others. Women faculty are also less likely to report that they are held to the same standard as others for promotion in their departments, and to feel that their work is respected in their departments (See Table 2).

Differential Impact of Depoliticization?

The results in Table 2 document disadvantages for women engineering faculty in the value their colleagues place on their professional work and the extent to which they are marginalized in their department.

We hypothesized above that high levels of depoliticization within one’s academic department would be related to greater levels of these experiences of devaluation and marginalization. Table 3 repeats the OLS regression models from Table 2 and adds an interaction term between female * workplace depoliticization. Significant interaction terms would indicate that the general gender differences observed in Table 2 are amplified among women faculty in departments with high levels of depoliticization.

As expected, we find that gender inequalities related to devaluation and marginalization are aggravated for women employed in departments with high levels of depoliticization, and are reduced among women employed in departments that emphasize this ideology little or not at all. We discuss the implications of these findings below. Importantly, in the models in Table 3, we included a measure of respondents *own* adherence the ideology of depoliticization as a control in these models. In other words, respondents report on the views of their departments is not just a manifestation of their own beliefs.

Discussion & Next Steps

The goal of our study was to explore whether a common cultural belief in the professional culture of engineering—the ideology of depoliticization—has implications for the experiences of historically underrepresented populations. Specifically, we used unique survey data of

engineering faculty to examine whether the quality of women's day-to-day experiences is correlated with the strength of depoliticization in their departments.

Consistent with prior research, we found that women engineering faculty were significantly more likely than men faculty to experience marginalization in their departments—to feel that they do not “fit in” with their colleagues and to experience harassment. Women faculty are also more likely to experience devaluation of their professional skills and expertise: they are more likely to report that their co-workers think they are less productive than they actually are and to worry that their mistakes are more noticeable than others, and less likely to report that their colleagues respect their work.

We argued that the strong presence of depoliticization within the culture of one's engineering department is related to these experiences. Consistent with our expectations, we found that gender inequalities related to devaluation and marginalization are aggravated for women employed in departments with high levels of depoliticization, and are reduced among women employed in departments that emphasize this ideology little or not at all.

Because this is a cross-sectional survey, these analyses are correlational rather than causal; we cannot determine whether depoliticization in a department produced higher levels of marginalization or devaluation, or women's experiences of marginalization and devaluation lead them to be more aware of depoliticization within their department. We suspect that these are co-constitutive processes. One thing is clear, however: departments where colleagues consider diversity and inclusion issues to undermine engineering objectivity and credibility are worse for women. In these departments, women are less likely to be taken seriously as professionals, less likely to feel like they “fit in,” and more likely to experience harassment.

Cultural ideologies like depoliticization are difficult to address within academic departments. This belief is part of many faculty's understanding of the core of their practice as engineers, so a multifaceted approach is likely necessary. In particular, efforts which work to short-circuit the cultural links between diversity and inclusion and threats to engineering objectivity and credibility might be most effective.

First, departments should integrate discussions of diversity efforts and social impact into everyday departmental endeavors. Faculty who express interest in diversity and inclusion efforts or integrate socio-cultural contexts into their engineering design may themselves be considered less serious scholars by their engineering colleagues. In contrast, such faculty must be rewarded or at least not penalized for promoting diversity of thought within their engineering work.

Further, departments must value faculty contributions to diversity made through teaching, research, and service—work that is often inequitably shouldered by women and underrepresented faculty. Honors and awards mechanisms should recognize faculty time and effort around diversity, rather than seeing such effort possibly signaling a faculty member's insufficient commitment to technical objectivity.

Depoliticization in promotion and tenure requirements also must be addressed. If diversity is truly part of the core academic mission, it should be included in the criteria used to promote faculty members. Linking diversity and inclusion efforts to job performance would indicate that such work can no longer be discounted as incidental, inconsequential, or irrelevant. Activities such as inclusive teaching or participating in outreach and recruitment efforts with under-

represented populations should be recognized and rewarded as enhancements to faculty's engineering work.³ Finally, departmental leaders must deliberately challenge depoliticization in departmental meetings, in their own behavior modelling, and in messaging to their constituents (students, staff, faculty, and alumni).

Engineering as a profession prides itself on problem identification, evidence-based solutions, creativity, and entrepreneurship. None of these efforts are devoid of social and cultural contexts, and all require considerations of inclusion to be done most effectively. Engineers' innovations shape the sociotechnical world in profound ways. To meet these needs, academic departments must foster a climate that supports academic success where *all* faculty feel they belong, that they can contribute, and that they have impact. As articulated by Foor, Walden, and Trytten [22, pp. 111], culture, like technological artifacts, is constructed by people: "STEM educators must take ownership of their roles in constructing and transmitting the culture of STEM. A requisite step is to examine the underlying beliefs of the dominant culture and their differential impacts on diverse faculty and students." For systemic change, institutional and departmental processes must be aligned with stated goals of diversity and inclusion and challenge the belief that such goals are tangential to "real" engineering.

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³ Many faculty also engage in diversity and inclusion-related work within professional organizations, such as work groups, conferences, and special journal issues aimed at advancing the scholarship of diversity. Even Principal Investigators through the National Science Foundation (NSF) are required in the proposal process to address broadening participation or increasing engagement of underrepresented groups within one's field. These contributions need to be acknowledged in promotion and tenure evaluations.

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Table 1: Univariate and Bivariate Statistics for All Faculty and Women and Men Separately

Variable	All (N=720)		Women (N=276)		Men (N=446)		P
	Mean	Std. Error	Mean	Std. Error	Mean	Std. Error	
Female	0.383	0.019					
Gender non-binary	~0.005	0.001					
LGBTQ	0.050	0.008	0.069	0.016	0.038	0.009	
URM	0.177	0.015	0.154	0.022	0.191	0.019	
Born Outside US	0.177	0.015	0.165	0.023	0.184	0.019	
Age	50.654	0.456	45.838	0.617	53.642	0.586	***
Workplace Depoliticization Scale	2.573	0.037	2.754	0.063	2.461	0.044	***
Marginalization: I "fit in"	3.863	0.041	3.638	0.068	4.002	0.050	***
Marginalization: Harassed	1.315	0.030	1.419	0.048	1.251	0.037	**
Devaluation: Held to Same Std	3.688	0.049	3.308	0.083	3.924	0.056	***
Devaluation: Colleagues Think Less Productive	2.355	0.043	2.481	0.076	2.277	0.050	***
Devaluation: Mistakes More Noticeable	2.839	0.049	3.258	0.078	2.580	0.059	***
Devaluation: Work is Respected	4.037	0.037	3.877	0.066	4.136	0.044	***
Personal Adherence to Depoliticization	1.906	0.032	1.704	0.043	2.031	0.043	***

Note: (+) p<.10; * p<.05; ** p<.01; *** p<.001

Table 2: OLS Regression Models Predicting Marginalization and Devaluation Measures with Gender and Controls

MARGINALIZATION						
	I feel like I "fit in"			Frequency of Harassment		
	Coeff.		Std.Err	Coeff.		Std.Err
Female	-0.268	**	0.083	0.162	*	0.064
Gender non-binary	1.708		1.042	-0.370		0.783
LGBTQ	-0.685	***	0.180	0.130		0.139
URM	-0.208	+	0.109	-0.017		0.083
Born outside US	0.248	**	0.108	0.060		0.083
Age	0.008	*	0.003	0.001		0.003
Constant	3.570	***	0.194	1.202	***	0.149

DEVALUATION												
	Held to Same Std for Promotion			Colleagues think I'm less Productive			Worry Mistakes are More Noticeable			Colleagues Respect Work		
	Coeff.		Std.Err	Coeff.		Std.Err	Coeff.		Std.Err	Coeff.		Std.Err
Female	-0.536	***	0.099	0.226	*	0.090	0.589	***	0.097	-0.213	**	0.078
Gender non-binary	-0.365		1.235	-0.627		1.121	-1.124		1.217	0.282		0.978
LGBTQ	-0.500	*	0.214	0.404	*	0.194	0.540	*	0.210	-0.395	*	0.169
URM	-0.146		0.128	0.194	(+)	0.116	0.225	(+)	0.126	-0.221	*	0.101
Born outside US	0.223	(+)	0.128	-0.155		0.116	0.081		0.126	0.212	*	0.101
Age	0.010	*	0.004	0.002		0.004	-0.012	**	0.004	0.006	(+)	0.003
Constant	3.393	***	0.230	2.128	***	0.209	3.156	***	0.227	3.819	***	0.182

Note: (+) p<.10; * p<.05; ** p<.01; *** p<.001

Table 3: OLS Regression Models Predicting Marginalization and Devaluation Measures with Female * Workplace Depoliticization Interaction Term, Gender and Controls

MARGINALIZATION						
	I feel like I “fit in”			Frequency of Harassment		
	Coeff.		Std.Err	Coeff.		Std.Err
Female * Workplace Depoliticization	-0.216	**	0.079	0.154	*	0.062
Female	0.390	(+)	0.223	-0.286		0.174
Wkplace Depol.	-0.234	***	0.055	0.092	*	0.043
Gender non-binary	1.524		0.999	-0.269		0.772
LGBTQ	-0.463	**	0.176	0.016		0.140
URM	-0.165	+	0.106	-0.047		0.083
Born outside US	0.245	*	0.105	0.075		0.083
Age	0.008	**	0.049	0.001		0.003
Personal Depol. Scale	0.015		0.049	-0.009		0.038
Constant	4.105	***	0.232	1.004	***	0.184

DEVALUATION												
	Held to Same Std for Promotion			Colleagues think I'm less Productive			Worry Mistakes are More Noticeable			Colleagues Respect Work		
	Coeff.		Std.Err	Coeff.		Std.Err	Coeff.		Std.Err	Coeff.		Std.Err
Female * Workplace Depoliticization	-0.165	(+)	0.095	0.261	**	0.086	0.210	*	0.094	-0.275	***	0.072
Female	0.025		0.067	-0.536	*	0.243	-0.042		0.265	0.624	**	0.203
Wkplace Depol.	-0.284	***	0.066	0.168	**	0.060	0.202	**	0.065	-0.245	***	0.050
Gender non-binary	-0.667		1.194	-0.593		1.087	-1.063		1.186	0.041		0.911
LGBTQ	-0.251		0.211	0.243		0.192	0.368	(+)	0.209	-0.143		0.161
URM	-0.067		0.126	0.168		0.114	0.220	(+)	0.125	-0.151		0.096
Born outside US	0.200		0.126	-0.164		0.114	0.038		0.125	0.203	*	0.096
Age	0.010	*	0.004	0.002		0.004	-0.011	**	0.004	0.006	*	0.003
Personal Depol. Scale	0.088		0.058	0.060		0.053	0.045		0.058	0.040		0.044
Constant	3.912	***	0.277	1.610	***	0.252	2.555	***	0.275	4.309	***	0.212

Note: (+) p<.10; * p<.05; ** p<.01; *** p<.001