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## The mental health pros and cons of minority spaces in the workplace

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Many companies and organisations appear keen to support a more diverse workforce, where minority group members are made to feel welcome. One strategy involves creating special “spaces” at work, physical or otherwise, where minority employees can connect with each other.

Take Google for instance. They have several minority-focused employee-based resource groups (ERGs) including Gayglers, the Black Googlers Network and Hispanic Googlers Network. Other companies support similar groups, including at Netflix, Merck, Novartis, Intel and Comcast.

Similarly, some universities are working to support a more diverse student body by creating minority-focused spaces on campus. In the US for instance, the University of Connecticut has the Scholastic House of Leaders who are African American Researchers & Scholars (SchOLA<sup>2</sup>RS). The University of Iowa has Young, Gifted and Black, and UCLA has the Chicax/Latinx living-learning community.

As these minority-based spaces become more common, they also evoke heated debate. While opponents see them as creating division and segregation, supporters see them as an important resource for minorities. So are they helpful? Or might they cause more harm than good?

To shed some light on this issue, we've been examining how the opportunity to connect with and feel valued among fellow minority group members can shape mental health with regard to anxiety, depression and psychological distress. In a series of studies looking at this among racial/ethnic minorities and sexual minorities, we found a consistent and rather intriguing pattern of evidence.

Our findings indicate that while there are health benefits to feeling valued among minority group members, there can also be – perhaps counter-intuitively – some costs. This is partly because of the way that feeling valued within one's minority group appears to promote vigilance to the various forms of discrimination that exist.

Specifically, we found that when minorities frequently feel valued and embraced by members of their own minority group, they maintain lower levels of anxiety and fewer symptoms of depression overall. A clear benefit.

### **The costs of feeling valued**

But at the same time the evidence shows that when people feel highly valued in their minority group they also place a special premium on that group membership. It plays a central role in how they define themselves as an individual overall.

With that membership being so central to their sense of self, these individuals are more likely to view their daily social interactions through the lens of their minority group membership. This means they are more vigilant to, and thus perceive and experience, more discrimination. And ultimately, these more frequent experiences of discrimination translate into poorer mental health.

So altogether our research shows that, in addition to the benefits of feeling valued, there can be some inadvertent costs.

Overall, does feeling valued among minority group members cause more harm than good? In short, the answer is no. In all our studies we find the benefits of being valued in one's minority group outweigh the costs. So, to be clear, this research consistently demonstrates that it is a good thing overall for minorities to feel valued and embraced by fellow minority group members.

### **Reducing costs**

Google's ERGs and universities' minority-based communities are likely to provide important opportunities to experience a sense of value and respect among fellow group members. And, as our research indicates, this will almost certainly yield benefits for the health and well-being of minority employees and students.

At the same time, these institutions should be aware that such spaces might yield some unanticipated consequences. They may heighten minorities' vigilance to the forms of bias and discrimination that exist in the workplace or on campus, which can lead to stress and anxiety.

So what's the solution? We believe additional steps can be taken to help minimise the health costs associated with these minority-focused spaces, while preserving the benefits they yield.

For example, let's say a university's living-learning communities do ultimately heighten minorities' awareness of discrimination on campus. If the university also shows a true commitment to addressing that discrimination it could change a minority individual's discrimination experience, in ways that lessen its health impact. Moreover, if an institution is actively working to address discrimination then over time it will hopefully reduce the amount that minorities encounter.

Considering that minorities often face discrimination and experience disproportionate rates of certain illnesses, the results of our work can seem rather sobering. Even something so intuitively positive – being valued by others – can sometimes be a double-edged sword.

But, double-edged or not, this sword is important to acknowledge. It provides us with a clearer understanding of the social and psychological determinants of minorities' mental health – something we need if we are going to effectively address some of these persistent health disparities.