

# Mary C. Murphy

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The Mind and Identity in Context Lab at Indiana University

[www.mindandidentityincontext.com](http://www.mindandidentityincontext.com)

## **What does your research focus on?**

My research focuses on the science of diversity. My students and I develop and test theories about how people's social identities and group memberships interact with the contexts they encounter to shape their thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and motivation. I study how the contexts that surround us shape our basic psychological and physiological processes, ultimately informing us about the value of our group memberships. In particular, I study the situational cues that signal to women whether they are valued in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields with an eye toward uncovering the mechanisms by which cues shape our experiences, and how we might recreate settings to be more inclusive and welcoming to stigmatized individuals. I am also interested in understanding and uncovering barriers to positive intergroup contact. With my collaborators, I am pursuing research that examines the factors that make interracial interaction challenging, particularly as people contend with subtle and blatant racial bias, and what we might do to encourage enjoyable interactions for both majority and minority group members. I want to be part of the growing number of researchers who are studying how we can make diversity work.

## **What drew you to this line of research and why is it exciting to you?**

I was drawn to this research because I have a desire to understand the social psychological factors that produce and reproduce social inequality — whether it is the low number of women in technology jobs or

leadership positions, or the achievement and earning gaps between racial and ethnic majority and minority groups. I believe that by understanding the basic mechanisms underlying these differences, we can work to make settings and society more equitable.

### **Who were/are your mentors or scientific influences?**

In graduate school, and still today, I have been extraordinarily lucky to have two superb mentors: Claude Steele and Carol Dweck. Their ideas have shaped both what I study and the approaches I use to investigate my research questions. Claude instilled the value of asking the big, socially relevant questions and then working hard to develop clear, precise methods to investigate them. Sharing the joy he derived from crafting a good paradigm, Claude taught me how much fun research could be. His warmth, kindness, and generosity really shaped the kind of mentor I aim to be for my students. In my last year of graduate school, Carol Dweck joined the Stanford faculty. Working with Carol, I discovered my passion for an incremental mindset and learned the value of challenging myself and pushing myself out of my comfort zone to tackle questions in new ways. Also in graduate school, I collaborated with Hazel Markus, Jennifer Eberhardt, Lee Ross, and Bob Zajonc, who each, in his or her own way, shaped the scholar I have become. I would be remiss if I didn't mention my dear post doc advisor, Jennifer Richeson, who taught me both by her words and actions about how to balance it all: how to be a top scholar, deeply passionate about the research, while remaining connected to the world. Jennifer and Nicole Shelton's pioneering work on interracial interactions has set a high bar for what rigorous diversity science can be and has inspired my research on the topic — shaping the methods I use and questions I ask. At my first job at the University of Illinois at Chicago and now, at Indiana University, I have been surrounded by smart, inspiring colleagues including Linda Skitka, Dan Cervone, Bette Bottoms, Jim Sherman, Eliot Smith, Ed Hirt, Anne Krendl, and BJ Rydell. My collaborators, Julie Garcia, Sabrina Zirkel, and Daryl Wout, continue to inspire me. As someone who studies how our environments shape us, I am fortunate to have been surrounded by such excellent scholars.

### **What's your future research agenda?**

The future is open. While I will continue to examine how contexts shape our basic psychological and physiological processes, what I study is dictated, in part, by the aspects of my research program that excite my students and collaborators. I have been developing a model of identity threat aimed at explaining how and under what conditions majority group members experience threat — examining how these processes are similar to, and differ from, those of minority group members. I am sure that future work will continue to develop that model. Because I am most fulfilled by the collaborative pursuit of research questions, the particular directions I pursue will be a collaborative process.

### **What publication are you most proud of?**

Murphy M. C., Steele, C. M. & Gross, J. J. (2007). Signaling threat: How situational cues affect women in math, science, and engineering settings. *Psychological Science*, 18, 879–885.

This article stems from some of the first research I conducted in graduate school. I wanted to go beyond performance to examine the downstream consequences of social identity threat. At that time, I was particularly interested in the state of vigilance that identity threat engenders, as well as the physiological

consequences of threat. Claude Steele encouraged me to speak with James Gross about collecting physiological data and, together, the three of us worked to make this project successful. It was my first research collaboration and the beginning of my interest in situational cues and how they signal the meaning and value of our social group memberships, so it feels particularly formative to me.