

COMMENTARY

Pandemics: Shining a spotlight on racial disparities at work

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A history of systemic racism has made racial disparities at work a reality. To address “the implications of this crisis for the future of work and for people working in organizations” (Rudolph et al., 2021, p. X.), industrial and organizational (I-O) psychologists must grapple with the ways COVID-19 has highlighted and heightened racial disparities in the American workforce. As part of identifying “various ways in which I-O psychology research and practice can address the issues that COVID-19 creates for work and organizational processes that are affecting workers now and will shape the future of work and organizations in both the short and long term” (p. X), we must include race in our context and thinking.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2020a), “Long-standing systemic health and social inequities have put some members of racial and ethnic minority groups at increased risk of getting COVID-19 or experiencing severe illness, regardless of age.” Members of the Black community are among those hit hardest. In mid-June 2020, hospitalization rates for Blacks were five times that of Whites (CDC, 2020a). As of July 1, 2020, 25% of COVID-19-related deaths were among Black Americans, although they account for only 13% of the U.S. population (CDC, 2020b). Racial disparities are arguably relevant to each of the 10 topics discussed by Rudolph et al. (2021). Below we discuss two, occupational health and job insecurity, using examples from the experiences of Black workers to illustrate the importance of considering racial disparities.

Occupational health and safety

A pandemic’s degree of threat to occupational health and safety differs largely between occupational groups (Rudolph et al., 2021). We assert that this differential effect also applies to racial groups, regardless of occupation. Compared to White workers, Black workers are living and working in conditions that become more dangerous during a pandemic. Social distancing is a critical strategy for staying safe during pandemics. However, Black workers have less ability to engage in social distancing and increased exposure to viruses due to less ability to work from home, higher tendency to live in metropolitan areas and apartments, and less access to daycare options that keep their children separated from others (Gould & Wilson, 2020; Mongey et al., 2020; Quinn et al., 2011). Increased exposure is related to a more stressful work environment and will likely negatively influence work-life quality. Similar to research that distinguishes the effects of exposure-related stress on health care workers, research should consider the effects on Black American workers who also experience a higher degree of exposure.

Access to health care is critical to occupational health and safety, and even more so during a pandemic. However, Black workers are 60% more likely to be uninsured than White workers

in America (Gould & Wilson, 2020). Black workers also have less access to benefits, such as paid sick days, which enable workers to stay home when ill (Gould & Wilson, 2020). Even when receiving medical care, Black Americans experience differential treatment. For instance, a study with the Georgia Medicaid department showed that when controlling for age, geography, and gender, Whites were 2.9 times more likely than Blacks were to be prescribed a medication when treating influenza (Leon et al., 2009). The effects of such disparities may be exacerbated during a pandemic. Future research on pandemics should study the effects of differential health care access on work-life quality and job stress. Research should also consider the influence of unconscious bias and racial stereotypes on physician decision making during health care crises.

Working during a pandemic is associated with a high level of strain (Rudolph et al., 2021). Black Americans, who work in more stressful workplace environments under typical circumstances, may suffer an even higher degree of strain during a pandemic. Outside of pandemics, research has demonstrated that Black Americans experience higher job stress, differential treatment, and greater discrimination when compared with White workers—all of which are negatively related to psychological well-being (Forman, 2003; McCluney et al., 2018; Pager & Western, 2012; Pascoe & Richman, 2009). As a result, future research into the psychological effects of pandemics on work and well-being must consider race as a contributing factor that may change or intensify outcomes for Black Americans, who are already working under higher levels of stress and strain.

Job insecurity

Racial disparities are relevant to the understanding of job insecurity in this time of pandemic. In terms of quantitative job insecurity, the unemployment rate for Black Americans has been consistently higher than the unemployment rate for Whites, often twice as high (Ajilore, 2020). Moreover, the long-term unemployment rate for Black workers in the United States is nearly double that of White workers (Bunker, 2020). In investigating implications of the pandemic for job insecurity, it matters that the objective baseline for Black workers is quantitatively different from that of White workers.

Additionally, Black workers are especially likely to experience what Rudolph et al. (2021) refer to as an “intensification of qualitative job insecurity.” They are disproportionately represented in employment contexts considered essential, such as grocery stores and drug stores, public transit, warehouses, trucking, and health care (Gould & Wilson, 2020). In the short term this type of essential service work may stave off unemployment, but the trade-off is working in conditions that increase the potential for exposure to COVID-19.

Rudolph et al. (2021) note that economic uncertainty intensifies negative reactions to job insecurity. As a starting point, Black workers experience a significant wage gap, earning 73 cents on the dollar relative to White workers in the United States (Gould & Wilson, 2020). Their average household incomes are lower, and their poverty rates are higher (Joint Economic Committee, 2020). Against this backdrop, Black workers face a confluence of financial circumstances that is more likely to make job loss catastrophic. Half of Black households have only one earner, leaving no backup in the event of job loss (Gould & Wilson, 2020). Furthermore, Black families have less of a cash reserve to fall back on than White families. Comparing liquid assets shows that White households average more than five times (\$49,529) the resources of Black households (\$8,762; Gould & Wilson, 2020). Clearly, Black workers are at a disadvantage in being able to sustain the economic hit that comes with job loss due to the pandemic.

Conclusion

Although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 made employment discrimination based on race illegal, racial disparities at work persist. The current COVID-19 pandemic shines a spotlight on the disparities experienced by Black workers surrounded by societal and organizational structures that support systemic racism. Certainly, the two pandemic-related areas highlighted in this commentary, occupational health and safety and job insecurity, are significantly characterized by racial disparities. As we have discussed, the evidence indicates that the prepandemic baseline for Black workers is worse than that of White workers on multiple dimensions. Moreover, the preponderance of disparities experienced by Black workers may exponentially compound their negative effects.

As Colella, Hebl, and King (2017) state in their major review, discrimination research has often “trailed behind the times.” Future research must not only focus on documenting and understanding differences but also prioritize identifying solutions that bring about racial equity. For too long our I-O psychology community has allowed inequity to persist by justifying it based on job criteria. Instead, let us go beyond justification to engage in research critical for identifying solutions that contribute to racial equity. Until we do, Black American workers will continue to experience inequitable treatment and outcomes, even more so during a pandemic. We are encouraged by the words of SIOP President Georgia Chao (2020), “SIOP supports the efforts of our members to research racism in organizations, to promote fair employment practices, and to create safe environments for all people. It is important to have a shared understanding of how racism affects people at work, and what we can do about it.”

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