


COMMENTARY

## Pandemic meets race: An added layer of complexity

Adrienne M. Kafka<sup>1</sup>, Amanda Avery<sup>1</sup>, Katherine Almendarez<sup>1</sup>, Teslin Ishee<sup>1</sup>, Leyna Hong<sup>1</sup>, Lilian Rangel<sup>1</sup>, Alicia S. Davis<sup>2</sup> , and Jennifer Feitosa<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Claremont McKenna College and <sup>2</sup>Claremont Graduate University

\*Corresponding author. Email: [jfeitosa@cmc.edu](mailto:jfeitosa@cmc.edu)

In their focal article, Rudolph et al. (2021) present a multitude of ways that industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology research and practice will be influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the authors highlight important topics, there is a major work-related challenge that is largely omitted from this discussion: race. Recent data reveal Black and Latinx U.S. residents experience roughly three times the rates of infection when compared with the racial majority due to a variety of social and economic factors (Opper et al., 2020). Thus, the effects of COVID-19 will inevitably intensify preexisting racial discrepancies that exist in the workplace.

The many negative effects of COVID-19 in the workplace include significantly increased unemployment and salary reduction rates for both Black and Latinx workers in comparison with White workers, with the highest unemployment rate increase among Hispanic women (Gould & Wilson, 2020). These disparities, among others, are rooted in inequities caused by long-established racial residential segregation and discrimination. Despite this, we expect individuals of racial minority groups who are still employed to keep our country running during the crisis as they risk exposure to the virus daily. For example, in New York City 75% of all frontline workers are people of color, including 82% in cleaning services and 77% in childcare, homeless care, food, and family services (Bureau of Policy and Research, 2020). COVID-19 has also led to a stark rise in reported anti-Asian racism and xenophobia. Between March 19 and April 3, the Stop AAPI Hate Reporting Center received over 1,100 reports of harassment and discrimination ranging from physical assault to workplace discrimination (Gurchiek, 2020). Although overt workplace racism did not begin with COVID-19, the pandemic has exacerbated its effects.

Race-specific trauma is long established and persistent in the workplace, but its implications are especially important to acknowledge in the context of COVID-19. Therefore, as I-O psychologists, we have a responsibility to be particularly aware and intentional about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work during this unique period of working during a pandemic, specifically regarding racial dynamics. This commentary delineates how we can prioritize race in research and practice while examining representation in our own field to counteract the pandemic's amplification of preexisting social injustices.

### Prioritize race in research

Today, the field of academic publication and research is largely controlled by academics of the racial majority group who institute, control, and apply “White codes” to publications. Accordingly, knowledge is constructed, reconstructed, distributed, and reproduced by Whites, shutting out voices of color (Baffoe et al., 2014). This remains true in the field of I-O psychology with Whites, who later serve as gatekeepers to acceptance in journals and schools, earning a

significantly greater number of I-O-related degrees than racial minority groups and an unrepresentativeness of I-O psychology research samples relative to the labor market.

In order to begin reversing the effects of racism within the field of I-O psychology, we must work to amplify a group of voices that is representative of the world around us. This may be achieved by debiasing the peer review process through the promotion of open-access journals as a means to prioritize knowledge over capital and weaken for-profit publishers. Another important step is to increase unconscious bias trainings and clarity of guidelines for peer reviewers, as well as committing to increased diversity of reviewer and editor pools. Additionally, we must increase sample representation through added funding to recruit non-WEIRD samples (Stolp, 2017) and to support qualitative research initiatives that do not sacrifice an understanding of participant experiences for flashier quantitative methods (Kopala & Suzuki, 1999). The Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) has been working to further race-based research with initiatives such as a new antiracism research grant. However, I-O psychologists must continue this momentum to launch comprehensive long-term approaches that last beyond media movements to remove barriers that have been inherited and perpetrated by academia.

### Prioritize race in practice

On the practice side, I-O psychologists must help organizations talk about race. Historically, discussions of race in the context of organizational theory and practice have remained scarce and have been limited to the investigation of racial diversity (Leigh & Melwani, 2019). Although research shows diversity can lead to many positive outcomes in the workplace, it must be managed properly through discussions of race and what it means to employees and the company to harness potential benefits. A 2017 study found that when employees feel that they can discuss these topics at work, there are benefits for individual, interpersonal, and organizational outcomes including employee engagement, turnover, productivity, and image (Smith et al., 2017). Yet, this study shows employees are resistant to discuss race, with over two thirds of minorities feeling uncomfortable talking about race relations at work.

To help organizations learn how to productively discuss race relations, I-O researchers and practitioners may implement Leigh and Melwani's (2019) work on mega-threats. These large-scale, diversity-related episodes that receive significant media attention have the potential to amplify social divides and may range from hate crimes against Asian Americans provoked by COVID-19 to videos of police brutality circulating as the #BlackLivesMatter movement expands. Organizations do not have to respond to every single mega-threat but, instead, must continuously support and empower employees to respond to race-related threats in a positive manner. To foster constructive dialogue, companies and leaders must be intentional about creating a psychologically safe work environment in which all employees feel comfortable bringing their authentic selves to work while simultaneously recognizing that many systems were created to be inequitable, with barriers to people of color (Singh et al., 2013). Leaders must center the lived experiences and needs of marginalized groups in order to counteract the assumptions we have learned throughout our nation's explicit and long-lasting history of racism and White supremacy and normalize calling out racism when it is seen or heard (Roberts et al., 2020). Rather than providing intermittent trainings around bias, organizations should offer ongoing spaces for learning, processing, and dialogue that are conducive to helping people continue their antiracist journey from wherever they are.

Oftentimes, companies boast a commitment to racial diversity, but the breakdown of percentages of minority employees is reflective of the barriers they face. According to 2020 censuses, *Fortune* 100 C-Suite positions consist of 84% White employees (Larcker & Tayan, 2020), and studies show that women and people of color often get less prestigious work assignments that lack potential for advancement (Williams, & Multhaup, 2018). Additionally, minority-member employees are often inadequately compensated and recognized for their work, especially now,

as many engage in extra emotional labor without consent as the value of Black lives is questioned around the world. After George Floyd's death, companies released statements committing to "action," "justice," and "conversation" around issues of "racism" (Pacheco & Stamm, 2020). However, when looking at the unemployment statistics illustrating the groups that have been most negatively affected in the workplace due to COVID-19, there appear to be stark discrepancies between commitments and action.

To successfully execute their guarantees, leadership and executives must be aligned on company-wide DEI initiatives, ensuring authentic and across-the-board investment to counter negative outcomes of diversity such as discrimination and compartmentalization (Smith *et al.*, 2012). Companies must work to unify DEI communications and images and create long-term DEI action plans. Within these, companies should make a point of providing resources to assist employees of color, counteracting their disproportionate suffering in times of crisis and the ways that implicit biases and conscious discrimination are consistently causing inequity in the workplace. Examples of tangible strategies may include cross-training employees to prepare them for changing environments (Kalev, 2020), examining hiring and promotion practices, including DEI task work in job descriptions and performance management, offering mental health resources, and encouraging anonymous feedback. History has shown that as soon as an economic crisis hits, DEI programs tend to be the first thing cut, and I-O psychologists must help companies recognize that DEI is essential.

### **Practice what we preach—look within**

As a first step to understanding the plights of racial minorities, we must increase minority representation within our own society and field. As a basic competency of students and a popular topic driving sustained research efforts in the field, I-O psychologists are uniquely equipped to help find solutions to DEI issues. However, although SIOP has many important diversity initiatives paving the way for more inclusion (Haynes, 2019), member demographics are not representative of the communities they serve, with 73% of respondents identifying as non-Hispanic, White (SIOP, 2018). A reason for this could be SIOP's requirement of a Ph.D. or master's degree to be a member or associate. Because doctorate degrees are so normalized in the field, people of color are disadvantaged due to significant racial disparities in higher education. In order to remove barriers to access, there must be a thorough examination and modification of barriers for entry and advancement in SIOP such as prerequisites and costs. It is important for SIOP to introduce new initiatives to recruit members who work in the diversity field but may not necessarily have a higher education degree and to audit all resources it is providing to scientists and practitioners for bias. As a community of I-O practitioners and researchers, SIOP must accurately represent interests of workers of all races.

### **Conclusion**

As a nation, we are at a crucial turning point for diversity in the workplace. As I-O psychologists, we have a unique opportunity to translate the knowledge gleaned from practice-oriented research to help students, colleagues, and organizations improve upon antiquated, passive actions toward enhancing diversity. With the global onslaught of COVID-19, the United States has witnessed how the virus exacerbates deep-seated racial disparities in need of immediate attention and reform, especially in the workplace. The intensification of the Black Lives Matter movement across the country, and even the world, suggests that real, institutional change at a national level is plausible with enough momentum. SIOP has already made great strides regarding DEI and must continue with this momentum to actively counteract the preexisting racial disparities being escalated by COVID-19 while encouraging other I-O psychology societies and journals to do the same.

## References

- Baffoe, M., Asimeng-Boahene, L., & Ogbuagu, B. C. (2014). Their way or no way: "Whiteness" as agent for marginalizing and silencing minority voices in academic research and publication. *European Journal of Sustainable Development*, 3(1), 13–32. <https://doi.org/10.14207/ejsd.2014.v3n1p13>
- Bureau of Policy and Research. (2020). *New York City's frontline workers*. Office of the Comptroller, City of New York. [https://comptroller.nyc.gov/wp-content/uploads/documents/Frontline\\_Workers\\_032020.pdf](https://comptroller.nyc.gov/wp-content/uploads/documents/Frontline_Workers_032020.pdf)
- Gould, E., & Wilson, V. (2020). *Black workers face two of the most lethal preexisting conditions for coronavirus-racism and economic inequality*. Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/publication/black-workers-covid/>
- Gurchiek, K. (2020, April 24). *Xenophobia on the rise during COVID-19: How employers can combat it*. SHRM. <https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/behavioral-competencies/global-and-cultural-effectiveness/pages/xenophobia-on-rise-during-covid19-how-employers-can-combat-it.aspx>
- Haynes, M. (2019, May 9). *Belongingness: SIOP President Eden King focuses on diversity and inclusion*. Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology. <https://www.siop.org/Research-Publications/Items-of-Interest/ArtMID/19366/ArticleID/1890/Belongingness>
- Kalev, A. (2020, April 20). Research: U.S. unemployment rising faster for women and people of color. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2020/04/research-u-s-unemployment-rising-faster-for-women-and-people-of-color>
- Kopala, M., & Suzuki, L. A. (1999). *Using qualitative methods in psychology*. SAGE Publications.
- Larcker, D. F., & Tayan, B. (2020). Diversity in the C-Suite: The dismal state of diversity among *Fortune* 100 senior executives (SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 3587498). *Social Science Research Network*. <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3587498>
- Leigh, A., & Melwani, S. (2019). #BlackEmployeesMatter: Mega-threats, identity fusion, and enacting positive deviance in organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 44(3), 564–591. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2017.0127>
- Oppel, R., Gebeloff, R., Rebecca, K., Wright, W., & Smith, M. (2020, July 5). The fullest look yet at the racial inequity of coronavirus. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/05/us/coronavirus-latinos-african-americans-cdc-data.html?referringSource=articleShare>
- Pacheco, I., & Stamm, S. (2020, June 5). What CEOs said about George Floyd's death. *Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/what-executives-said-about-george-floyds-death-11591364538?st=evuer0h04s4nkwj>
- Roberts, L. M., McCluney, C. L., Thomas, E. L., & Kim, M. (2020). How U.S. Companies Can Support Employees of Color Through the Pandemic. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2020/05/how-u-s-companies-can-support-employees-of-color-through-the-pandemic>
- Rudolph, C. W., Allan, B., Clark, M., Hertel, G., Hirschi, A., Kunze, F., Shockley, K., Shoss, M., Sonnentag, S., & Zacher, H. (2021). Pandemics: Implications for research and practice in industrial and organizational psychology. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, 14(1), 1–35.
- Singh, B., Winkel, D. E., & Selvarajan, T. T. (2013). Managing diversity at work: Does psychological safety hold the key to racial differences in employee performance? *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 86(2), 242–263. <https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12015>
- Smith, A. N., Morgan, W. B., King, E. B., Hebl, M. R., & Peddie, C. I. (2012). The ins and outs of diversity management: The effect of authenticity on outsider perceptions and insider behaviors. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 42(1), 21–55. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2012.01021.x>
- Smith, E. B., Hewlett, S. A., Phillips, T., Rashid, R., Marshall, M., & Wingfield, T. (2017). *Easing racial tensions at work*. Center for Talent Innovation. <https://www.talentinnovation.org/>
- Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology. (2018). *2018 SIOP Membership Survey: Summary of results*. <https://www.siop.org/Membership/Surveys>
- Stolp, M. J. (2017). *Who are we studying? Reliance on WEIRD and/or student subjects in cross-cultural, social/personality and evolutionary psychology* (1232266) [Master's thesis, Leiden University, Netherlands]. <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/60846/Stolp%2C%20Marieke-s1232266-MA%20Thesis%20SOP-2017.pdf?sequence=1>
- Williams, J. C., & Multhaup, M. (2018). *For women and minorities to get ahead, managers must assign work fairly*. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2018/03/for-women-and-minorities-to-get-ahead-managers-must-assign-work-fairly>

Cite this article: Kafka, AM., Avery, A., Almendarez, K., Ishee, T., Hong, L., Rangel, L., Davis, AS., and Feitosa, J. (2021). Pandemic meets race: An added layer of complexity. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* 14, 202–205. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2021.34>