


COMMENTARY

Precarious work during precarious times: Addressing the compounding effects of race, gender, and immigration status

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Among the many pressing concerns resulting from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, this crisis has demonstrated the unique fragility of the contemporary structure of work and has exacerbated existing conditions for many marginalized workers. The focal article sheds light on the pandemic's effects on an important, yet often overlooked, group of workers. Namely, the focal article suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity to examine the quality and structure of work in today's labor market, particularly its implications for precarious work (Rudolph et al., 2021).

Taking this a step further, even among low-wage roles that may not be considered definitively “precarious,” these workers typically only have access to basic benefits, may receive inadequate training, have limited opportunities for advancement, and often struggle to gain autonomy (Ellingson et al., 2016; Hodson, 2000; Macdonald & Sirianni, 1996). In addition to a disproportionate burden of illness and death among racial and ethnic minority groups resulting from COVID-19 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020a), marginalized groups tend to be disproportionately represented in precarious and low-wage work. Specifically, women of all races and minority men are most likely to hold low-wage jobs (Ross & Bateman, 2019) and industries that employ a higher percentage of women and Black, LatinX, and Native American employees (e.g., restaurants, bars, retail, manufacturing, etc.) are the most likely to be affected by the pandemic (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Finally, while some immigrant workers can access benefits such as unemployment insurance, most noncitizens cannot access federal benefits that other workers rely on in times of need, despite many holding essential roles that contribute to these benefits (Singh & Koran, 2020).

Taken together, the present commentary seeks to elaborate on the ways in which the COVID-19 crisis, and pandemics more broadly, affect precarious and low-wage workers. More specifically, we describe the ways in which the present situation may differentially affect precarious and low-wage workers of color, women, and immigrants in complex ways. The focal article provides a clear agenda for advocating for precarious workers and an elaboration on the effects of race, gender, and immigration offers an extension to this agenda.

This perspective is important for at least three reasons. To begin, despite comprising a large segment of the U.S. workforce, precarious and low-wage worker experiences are largely ignored and overlooked in the industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology literature (Bergman & Jean, 2016). When the experiences of these workers are excluded from our dialogue, research, theory, and policies, it perpetuates a pernicious notion that the work and the workers themselves are of low value. Second, well-documented disparities in education, work opportunities, and access to health care associated with race, gender, and social class present additional concerns for these

workers during the present crisis (Flores et al., 2019). Given the value of an intersectional perspective, and in line with calls to integrate this approach into I-O psychology, addressing this perspective can inform how multiple social identities interact to affect workplace experiences. In sum, considering the unique concerns for these workers can inform more robust organizational theory and practices that uplift workers of all backgrounds.

Unique risks for precarious, low-wage, and nontraditional workers

As it currently stands, we are not doing enough to understand the experiences of marginalized workers (e.g., contingent workers, immigrants, low-wage workers, etc.) and to integrate these individuals into our research, theory, and practice (Maynard & Ferdman, 2009). An analysis of the I-O psychology literature has revealed an overrepresentation of core, salaried, managerial, professional, and executive employees with a corresponding underrepresentation of hourly wage earners, contract workers, and other workers with nontraditional work arrangements (Bergman & Jean, 2016). It has been noted that worker status does not necessarily affect every psychological process and phenomenon, but unique factors associated with worker status such as economic tenuousness, a lack of flexibility, health, and safety have clear implications for understanding the effects of the pandemic (Bergman & Jean, 2016).

The pandemic has required workers such as grocery-store employees, store clerks, food service workers, farmworkers, delivery drivers, warehouse employees, and others to take on greater responsibility to help keep society operational. With that said, an examination of the trajectory of the pandemic and its subsequent economic disruptions has made it clear that workers in precarious, temporary, and low-wage jobs will experience more severe adverse effects than all others (Cubrich, 2020). On one hand, these workers may be required to take on a greater workload due to the pandemic, whereas the positions of other marginalized workers are the most vulnerable to job loss (Blustein et al., 2020). Compared with salaried jobs, many of which allow for remote work, a number of these jobs require workers to put their own health at risk while interacting with the public. Low-wage roles are often characterized by a high level of social intensity. That is to say, they require frequent contact with coworkers and customers due to high density, close proximity, and duties that require regular interaction (Ellingson et al., 2016).

Low wage rates, a lack of benefits, and job insecurity were all realities prior to the pandemic, but the pandemic has intensified the effects of these disparities. Given that the United States does not guarantee paid leave, a person's ability to stay home when they are ill and to care for children or family members depends entirely on where they work. Many low-wage workers are already in danger of not making ends meet, and the potential for job loss, or even reduced hours, can have serious economic consequences. As a result, these workers may feel increased pressure to work even when they are sick or feel unsafe. Not only does this increase the risk for personal exposure to COVID-19; it may put their coworkers or family members at risk. Clearly, the nature of this work makes these workers particularly vulnerable to the pandemic.

Examining the compounding effects of race, gender, and immigrant status

Intersectionality as a critical lens

It has been noted that marginalized populations are disproportionately represented in precarious, low-wage, and temporary jobs (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2017; Ross & Bateman, 2019). Although some research in I-O psychology has begun to adopt or advocate for an intersectional approach (e.g., Berdahl & Moore, 2006; Weaver et al., 2016), there remains a need to integrate this approach into our research. The term intersectionality references insights from critical theory indicating that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, ability, and age do not operate as unitary, mutually exclusive entities (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1989). This approach emphasizes the

importance of examining relationships among social identities as intersecting categories of oppression and inequality, and it is a useful framework for understanding the effects of pandemic (Collins, 2015). The utility of intersectionality for understanding these effects lies in its attentiveness to overlapping systems of oppression, power relations, and social inequalities (Collins, 2015). Studying the pandemic within this framework allows an understanding of the way in which multiple identities and systems (e.g., the labor market, health care, and education) create unique forms of disadvantage and harm. In addition to the unique harm for precarious and low-wage workers as a result of COVID-19, race, gender, and immigrant status uniquely contribute cumulative and independent effects to the experience of pandemic and should be considered in future research.

Race

Black, LatinX, and Native American workers are disproportionately represented in sectors that have been highly influenced by social distancing protocols such as restaurants and bars, travel and transportation, entertainment, manufacturing, and retail (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). As a result, these employees are experiencing higher rates of unemployment and job displacement than White employees, which only exacerbates historical trends for these groups (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019a). Despite the reopening of many of these sectors, the rates of infection have only increased in many places across the United States. Although reopening may be good for the economy, if only fleetingly in the short term, it will likely represent a corresponding increase in risk of exposure to COVID-19 for these marginalized groups. The effects of these disparities are already evidenced in African American communities. Millett et al. (2020) found that counties with disproportionately large Black populations experience higher rates of COVID-19 diagnoses and death resulting from infection, even after controlling for characteristics such as age, poverty, comorbidities, and epidemic duration.

In Black communities, researchers have also suggested that this pandemic will take a distinct toll on psychological and mental health as well (Novacek et al., 2020). Population-based surveys indicate 33% of African Americans are very concerned they will get COVID-19 and require hospitalization as compared with only 18% of Whites (Pew Research, 2020). However, African Americans face many barriers to receiving mental health services both historically and presently. Although African Americans experience rates of mental illness at a level similar to that of Whites, only 31% of African Americans with a mental illness receive treatment, compared with 48% of Whites (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2016). This disparity can be attributed, in part, to systemic barriers to accessing health resources as well as the historical mistreatment of African Americans in the health care system (Novacek et al., 2020). These untreated mental health concerns are likely to add to the overwhelming pressure facing African American communities during the pandemic.

Asian Americans are also facing high levels of discrimination based on race.

Given that Wuhan, China, is seen as the epicenter of COVID-19 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020b), many Asians are being scapegoated for the introduction of the virus (Kantamneni, 2020). For example, racist references to COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus” perpetuate animosity toward Asians. In fact, nearly 30% of Americans blame China or Chinese people for the emergence of COVID-19 (IPSOS, 2020). This belief, of course, translates to an increase in reports of discrimination in the workplace toward Asian Americans (Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council, 2020). Considering work status alone does not paint the full picture of the pandemic’s implications for precarious and low-wage workers of color. Racial and ethnic minority groups also face additional risks due to a variety of factors such as living conditions, underlying health conditions, labor market and workplace discrimination, and lower access to care (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020a).

Gender

In addition to wage disparities and labor market discrimination against women, workplace expectations and social norms related to parenting and household responsibilities may result in additional strain for women (Kantamneni, 2020). As schools, childcare providers, and long-term care facilities closed to protect against the spread of COVID-19, families were forced to alter their daily working lives in order to take care of their children and family members. Although this disrupts routine for all in the family, this change affects women disproportionately. As the primary caregivers for the majority of American families, women spend approximately double the amount of time caring for children in the home than men (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019b). With the increased demand for their attentional resources, women now find themselves in a multiple role conflict as they try to balance work and home life.

All of these stressors are enhanced for women who are considered “essential employees” because they now must go to work without access to either formal or informal childcare, and this is only exacerbated for single parents (Kantamneni, 2020). An individual’s ability to stay home when they are ill, or to care for children or family members, is entirely contingent upon where they work. Women must frequently navigate the seemingly irreconcilable binary choice between providing for family or showing up to work, and these concerns are even more apparent for precarious and low-wage workers.

Immigrant status

Despite experiencing significant disparities in COVID-19 infection and mortality rates, coupled with an increase in anti-immigrant policies, immigrants are an at-risk group that is often unaccounted for and excluded from our discussions (Garcini et al., 2020). As with other marginalized groups, immigrant workers are overrepresented in many of the industries hit hardest by the pandemic (Gelatt, 2020). Although approximately six million immigrant workers are deemed essential (Straut-Eppsteiner, 2020), many are left without meaningful protections. Whereas some immigrant workers (e.g., green-card holders) can access benefits such as unemployment insurance, most noncitizens cannot access safety-net programs that are essential in times of need (Singh & Koran, 2020). Moreover, despite being taxpayers and filing tax returns, these workers will not receive economic impact payments.

The material conditions for many immigrant workers puts them at increased risk, and these combined pressures often leave them with the choice between risking their health and financial ruin. Jobs that are integral in securing our nation’s access to food (e.g., farmworkers, store clerks, meat processing workers) are disproportionately held by immigrants, women, and people of color (Straut-Eppsteiner, 2020). Yet, the conditions in these roles are often among the most dangerous. For example, retailers may be inconsistent in their provision of protections, with some workers facing hundreds of customers each day. Many farmworkers and food processing workers find it difficult to maintain distance due to high density and are often disciplined for calling in sick. However, they may be hesitant to file complaints given their undocumented status (Straut-Eppsteiner, 2020). Taken together, these workers face not only the challenges associated with precarious and low-wage work but also additional challenges and barriers, many of which are structural in nature.

Conclusion

It should be noted that many of the aforementioned issues are systemic in nature and represent larger, deep-seated problems that are well-beyond the scope of I-O psychology alone. With that said, acknowledging and considering the experiences of precarious and low-wage workers is a first step to creating robust organizational theory that is representative of all worker experiences. More

specifically, the influence of pandemics on research and practice in I-O psychology cannot be considered without these workers, and especially without regard to race, gender, and immigration status. When the experiences of these workers are excluded from our dialogue, research, theory, and policies, it reinforces and perpetuates the notion that the work and the workers themselves are of low value.

We can ensure that our research is representative of the experiences of marginalized populations as well as useful for organizations to prevent, reduce, and address workplace harassment and discrimination. As I-O psychologists, we need to be aware of the compounding effects of racial discrimination on those we study as well as the systemic root of racism, which is embedded in and perpetuated by many organizations. Scholars should explore strategies for organizations to better protect and provide for their precarious and low-wage workers. Further, we can use our knowledge and expertise to advocate for larger governmental and societal protections for such workers, as they are feeling the heightened effects of historic inequities.

The pandemic has made it abundantly clear that the work performed by these individuals is essential and integral to daily life, and the compensation and support of these workers should reflect that. With that said, organizations cannot continue to value profits over the well-being of their workers. Organizations should take great measures to ensure the safety of their workers and provide essential benefits such as childcare and paid sick leave. Policies and programs to help these workers achieve greater financial stability and well-being should address both sides of the labor market. Namely, we must address discrimination and bias in the labor market, provide access to skills training, secure additional protections for immigrant workers, and promote access to well-paying jobs and benefits that allow workers to achieve economic stability.

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