

COMMENTARY

Fighting two pandemics at once: When COVID-19 meets racism

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Under the pervasive COVID-19 global pandemic, Rudolph et al. (2021) offer 10 areas of implication for workplace research and practice. Meanwhile, racism has also become a salient source of tension to people around the world. Our commentary seeks to examine how racism becomes an intersecting “pandemic” in today’s society such that people from different racial/ethnic backgrounds can be differentially affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Within this context, we discuss some unique experiences of different racial/ethnic minorities, relevant directions for industrial-organizational (I-O) research, and recommendations for more equitable treatment of workers.

Why is this important?

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the experiences of racism. For example, the Pew Research Center indicates that about 40% of Asian and Black Americans, compared with 13% of the White and 27% of the Hispanic respondents, have experienced the situation where “people acted as if they were uncomfortable around them.” (Ruiz et al., 2020). When historic disparities intersect with the current disruption of the pandemic, we believe Asian and Black workers are at increased risk for negative experiences.

From late 1800s to 1900s, the United States and many other countries had various forms of Asian exclusion policies or anti-Asian violence (Lee, 2007). However, this history was replaced by the “model minority” stereotype toward Asians. A model minority is someone who the majority believes will reach an elevated level of success, which therefore creates unreasonably high and unrealistic work expectations for Asian Americans (De Leon, 2020). With the dramatic spike in COVID-19 cases, the accusation of Asians spreading COVID-19 deviates from the high expectations toward model minorities, which in turn can create negative consequences for Asians.

From the research on the 2003 SARS outbreak, individuals sharing the background with the origin of an infectious disease are more likely to experience the repercussions of fear and discrimination (Person et al., 2004). Expectedly, numerous incidents of anti-Asian sentiments have surfaced during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as “China Is the Real Sick Man of Asia” in the *Wall Street Journal* and “China Kids Stay Home” in the *Australian Herald Sun* (Ren et al., 2020; Tan, 2020). This general wave of xenophobia can spill over to the workplace, such that racial discrimination and harassment at work will increase in the forms of physical attacks, verbal assaults, and online harassment.

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Likewise, a lack of equal rights and opportunities has disproportionately affected Black individuals within and beyond the United States. Historical events such as the Tuskegee Syphilis study (Carroll, 2016) and the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Galvan et al., 2008) are examples of how the Black community suffers from health disparity compared with their White counterparts. Economically, the Black community has also been consistently subject to high rates of poverty and unemployment in the United States. Statistics reveal that for every unemployed White person, there are almost two unemployed Black people (Krieger et al., 2011; Wilson, 2019). Systemic or structural inequality is the major factor contributing to these disparities (Tourse et al., 2018).

As COVID-19 is still spreading in many countries, racial minorities, such as Black, Hispanic, and Native Americans are four to five times more likely than Asian and White Americans to be hospitalized due to infection (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). The Centers for Disease Control also suggest that racial/ethnic disparities in living and working conditions during the pandemic have led to increased health risks for these racial/ethnic minorities. The resulting, increased health risks can negatively affect racial/ethnic minorities' occupational status and well-being.

Given the coexistence of racism and the pandemic, we believe the experiences of racial/ethnic minorities are complex and worthy of attention. In particular, we suggest a specific mechanism that will make different minority members differentially vulnerable to various workplace or public practices in the current circumstances, followed by implications for practices that will make the workplace more equitable and inclusive.

What can researchers do?

Undoubtedly, racism and the pandemic can heighten workplace aggression and harm employee well-being and productivity. Looking into why these phenomena occur, we suggest autonomy/control as a central psychological factor that links these contextual threats to relevant outcomes. The following section will discuss how worker autonomy and the subsequent outcomes can be differentially influenced based on race/ethnicity under the pandemic.

Organizational research has offered extensive theories and evidence for the importance of worker autonomy. For instance, the classic job characteristics model states that autonomy, the level of individual freedom on the job, is one of the five determinants of favorable job attitudes, motivation, and performance (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). The self-determination theory includes the need for autonomy as one of the most important human needs to be fulfilled in order to ensure intrinsic motivation on the job (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Moreover, under stressful situations, lacking control can influence the likelihood of counterproductive work behavior (Tucker et al., 2009).

The current pandemic, as well as the subsequent poor economy around the globe, has undermined individual choices regarding work and health. Concerning health, as discussed above, minorities are more likely to be affected by COVID-19 and suffer from overall limited health care resources, which can reduce their control over their health and confidence in taking health-related risks.

With regard to working conditions, the focal article pointed out that people in blue collar or low-income jobs are less likely to have the autonomy to simultaneously secure their job and health (Rudolph et al., 2021). Black workers are overrepresented in these types of jobs. As 13.4% the U.S. population are Black (U. S. Census Bureau, 2019), 23.8% of warehouse workers and 30.5% of home health care specialists, which are often labeled precarious jobs, are Black (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). These jobs are less likely to be carried out remotely, thus leaving workers little choice regarding alternative work arrangements. Likewise, small business workers have been greatly affected by the pandemic due to insufficient income, funding, and customers. In the United States, because of the stigma associated with COVID-19, the two million small businesses owned

by Asians are at particular risk of losing customers (Kwon, 2020). Since the U.S. declared a national emergency on March 13, Asian-owned businesses saw a 60% decrease in revenue (JP Morgan Chase and Company, 2020). Facing the threats of extreme job insecurity, workers in these small businesses may be forced to make risky decisions about their operation and personnel.

Together, although workers from all racial/ethnic backgrounds are adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, minorities are especially vulnerable to diminished autonomy regarding work and health, which can further reduce their work motivation, performance, and overall well-being. Organizational researchers can consider empirically investigating the differential vulnerability based on race/ethnicity under the pandemic so that organizations and policy makers can have the scientific ground for making decisions and practicing initiatives.

What can organizations do?

COVID-19 also puts pressure on organizations to adjust their operation and make personnel changes. As we point out the role of race/ethnicity in affecting worker outcomes, organizations should carefully assess and ensure equity in their decisions and initiatives. We derive our suggestions from the organizational justice literature to ensure equitable treatment of workers from all backgrounds (Colquitt *et al.*, 2001). In other words, organizations should carefully balance between recognizing individual employees' unique experiences and practicing policies that are fair to all workers. These practices can not only minimize the potential legal risks encountered by organizations (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2020) but also generally promote worker productivity and well-being (Colquitt, *et al.*, 2001).

Distributive justice becomes relevant when evaluating the results of pay adjustments and personnel changes. These decisions should be performance based. Although pay cuts and layoffs are inevitable, procedural justice can alleviate the negative attitudes toward these unfavorable changes. For instance, besides using valid performance appraisal instruments, organizations should take extra steps to reduce racial/ethnic biases in the appraisal process. Given the novelty of the pandemic, it would be important for decision makers to actively take account of the wide range of experiences of workers from different racial/ethnic backgrounds. Organizations need to recognize that their workers are experiencing diminished autonomy at different levels, which can be reduced by offering flexibility in work arrangements and individualized attention from their superiors.

Unfortunately, under the unique circumstances of a pandemic, organizations may have limited resources to curate additional processes related to distributive or procedural justice. In this case, decision makers can seek to maintain positive attitudes from the employees by maximizing interactional justice (Kim, 2009). For instance, even though some workers may receive lower pay or more career interruptions, they should still be treated with dignity and respect. To address the informational justice component, organizations can benefit from articulating reasons behind different procedures and keeping communication frequent and transparent. These steps are applicable to members of all different backgrounds.

To conclude, although the COVID-19 pandemic may be contained one day, its influence on workers and organizations can be long lasting. We urge researchers and practitioners to consider the race/ethnicity factor and investigate what we can do to promote equity and inclusion inside and outside of the workplace.

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