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Neeta Kantamneni

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The impact of the COVID populations in the United States: A research agenda

Neeta Kantamneni

University of Nebraska–Lincoln, United States

Abstract

International and national crises often highlight inequalities in the labor market that disproportionately affect individuals from marginalized backgrounds. The COVID-19 pandemic, and the resulting changes in society due to social distancing measures, has showcased inequities in access to decent work and experiences of discrimination resulting in many of the vulnerable populations in the United States experiencing a much harsher impact on economic and work-related factors. The purpose of this essay is to describe how the COVID-19 pandemic may differentially affect workers of color, individuals from low-income backgrounds, and women in complex ways. First, this essay will discuss disproportionate representation of workers from low-income and racial/ethnic minority backgrounds in sectors most affected by COVID-19. Second, it will discuss the lack of decent work for low-income workers who perform “essential” tasks. Third, this essay will highlight economic and work-related implications of increased discrimination Asian Americans are experiencing in society. Finally, role conflict and stress for women who are managing additional unpaid work, including caretaking responsibilities, while needing to continue to engage in paid work will be examined. A research agenda will be set forth throughout the essay, calling for vocational psychologists to engage in research that fully examines how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting vulnerable communities.

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On March 31, 2020, during the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, Andrew Cuomo, the governor of one of the hardest hit states, New York, wrote on Twitter that the coronavirus is the “great equalizer” (Cuomo, 2020), reflecting the sentiment that the virus was capable of sickening anyone regardless of age, social status, race/ethnicity, or gender. Governor Cuomo’s tweet was well meaning in nature but did not accurately reflect the differential impact of the virus on historically marginalized groups in the United States. International and national crises, including pandemics, often highlight inequalities that may have been unseen or hidden prior to the crisis. COVID-19, and the resulting changes in society due to social distancing measures, have showcased inequities in access to decent work and in experiencing discrimination resulting in many of our most vulnerable populations in the United States (e.g., racial/ethnic minorities, individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and women) experiencing a much harsher impact on work-related and economic factors.

Racial, gender, and social class disparities have been well documented in educational and work opportunities for decades (Flores, Martinez, McGillen, & Milord, 2019). For individuals from vulnerable or marginalized backgrounds, educational systems, labor markets, and workplace environments often perpetuate systems of oppression, power, and privilege, resulting in them experiencing marginalization and discrimination within these systems and obtaining poorer educational and vocational outcomes (Flores et al., 2019). Times of crisis often reinforce and exacerbate disparities because resources are limited and people are fearful. This pattern is occurring with COVID-19, which has triggered increasing unemployment and major economic losses. The purpose of this essay is to describe how the societal changes that are currently occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic may differentially affect workers of color, individuals from low-income backgrounds, and women in multifaceted ways. This essay will discuss the ways COVID-19 has adversely affected vulnerable workers including (1) disproportionate representation of workers from low-income and racial/ethnic minority backgrounds in sectors most affected by COVID-19, (2) lack of decent work for low-income workers, many who come from LatinX backgrounds, (3) increased discrimination Asian Americans are experiencing in society and in the workplace, and (4) role conflict and stress for women when daycares, schools, and external resources are unavailable despite still needing to engage in paid

work. Due to space restrictions, this essay is not intended to be comprehensive in nature but rather a springboard for beginning a conversation on how vocational psychologists c those who are most vulnerable to the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

1. Disproportionate representation in sectors most affected by COVID-19

Some of the employment sectors most affected by the social distancing protocols set in place in the United States are restaurants/bars, travel and transportation, entertainment, personal services, and certain types of retail and manufacturing (Vavra, 2020). These sectors employ a higher percentage of women and African American/Black, LatinX, and Native American employees (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020) resulting in a disproportionate number of employees of color and women being displaced from their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering that African American/Black and LatinX employees have historically had higher unemployment rates and lower wages than White employees (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019a), social distancing measures may exacerbate unemployment and underemployment for employees of color and individuals from low socioeconomic groups in the United States. A study by Mongey, Pilossoph, and Weinberg (2020) found that workers most likely to be affected by unemployment due to COVID-19 are less educated, have lower economic resources, and lower levels of liquid assets. In a nutshell, they are the most vulnerable of the

U.S. population to be laid off without income. In contrast, many of the jobs that allow for work from home accommodations are often white-collar, professional jobs that include health benefits, paid sick leave, and decent wages. Considering that African American/ Black, Native Americans, and LatinX are underrepresented in professional occupations (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020), they may be experiencing the adverse economic consequences of COVID-19 at an increased intensity when compared to White, upper, middleclass Americans. Research is needed that fully explores the economic and psychological consequences of workers of color in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly for African American/Black and LatinX workers who already experience discrimination and limited access to opportunities. How are structural barriers impeding workers of color

in accessing employment during the COVID-19 pandemic? What are the short-term and long-term economic, vocational, and psychological consequences for these communities, particularly in regard to access to basic needs and survival, when work opportunities are disproportionately limited? Communities of color already have higher unemployment rates than White communities in the United States (Bureau of Statistics, 2019a); will these differential rates be further perpetuated after COVID-19 resulting in even greater economic disparities?

2. Decent work

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the lack of decent work for “essential” employees in the United States. Decent work is defined as fair, equitable work that affords basic rights in the workplace and safe, secure working conditions with adequate compensation and benefits (Blustein, Kenny, Di Fabio, & Guichard, 2019). Conversely, precarious work is defined as work with employment insecurity, low wages, and unsafe or limited workplace protections (Benach, Vives, Tarafa, Delclos, & Muntaner, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on important difficulties in accessing decent work for many employees in the United States, and in particular, frontline workers, many of whom are employed in low-wage or precarious positions. For example, employees who work in essential services, such as grocery stores, may not be provided with the necessary safety equipment to keep them safe from contracting the virus. A recent article in the *Washington Post* highlighted that many workers employed in grocery stores are experiencing stress and anxiety going to work, resulting in some workers staying home or quitting their jobs (Bhattarai, 2020). Some employees feel they have to choose between their health and the need to earn wages to pay for basic necessities. The precariousness of the situation is further exacerbated by the fact that many grocery store workers are employed in minimum wage jobs with little access to benefits, such as health care and paid sick leave. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), grocery store employees are amongst the lowest paid jobs, with a national median pay of \$11.37 per hour; LatinX employees are also employed at a higher percentage in grocery stores when compared their total employment in the labor force, resulting in these

unsafe and precarious work environments disproportionately affecting LatinX employees in the United States.

The precariousness of work for low-wage yet essential employees further perpetuates the inequity in employment and advancement opportunities already existing in the United States due to discrimination and restricted opportunity structures that disproportionately affect marginalized groups. Cross-disciplinary research is needed to examine both the short-term and long-term consequences of precarious work during a world-wide crisis. What are the short and long-term physical and mental health consequences of working in unsafe working environments? Vocational research needs to explore how essential employees, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, can be supported to conduct their jobs in a safe manner. More importantly, more research is needed that can advocate for decent working conditions for employees that we deem as “essential” to society. This is particularly important because many of the employees who are working essential jobs are the most vulnerable to exploitation through precarious work.

3. Asian American discrimination

The epicenter of the origin of the COVID-19 virus occurred in Wuhan, a city in China (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2020). Since the outbreak, Asians/Asian Americans have been scapegoated for the introduction of the virus. An example of this is illustrated by Donald Trump’s tweet on March 21, 2020 when he referred to the virus as the “Chinese virus” (Trump, 2020). As a result, Asian Americans have experienced increased instances of discrimination, often times profiled as disease carriers (Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council, 2020). For example, the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council launched a website for Asian Americans to report incidents of discrimination during COVID-19. In its first 8 weeks, it received 1497 reports of discrimination, including those that occurred in the workplace, with 57% of the incidents occurring in California and New York, two of the hardest hit states (Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council, 2020). Similarly, a recent poll of over 1000 adults conducted by IP-SOS on behalf of the Center for Public Integrity found approximately

30% of Americans blame China or Chinese people for COVID-19, and approximately one-third (32%) of respondents have witnessed someone blaming Asians for the pandemic (IPSOS, 2020). Combined, these findings provide evidence of the increased discrimination Asians and Asian Americans are currently experiencing in the United States. The uptick of discrimination prompted a message from Janet Dhillon, chair of the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, urging employers and employees to be attentive to instances of workplace discrimination against people of Asian descent, a reminder that these actions can result in unlawful discrimination in the workplace (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2020),

The fact that Asian Americans are experiencing workplace discrimination due to COVID-19 is concerning not only because their civil rights are being violated but also because research has indicated that Asian Americans have already experienced workplace discrimination prior to the pandemic. An experimental research study published in 2012 found that Asian Americans were perceived to be less socially skilled and were less likely to be selected and promoted in positions that involve social skills (Lai & Babcock, 2013). Another recent study found that approximately one in four Asian American adults experienced discrimination in employment, both in job applications and in equal pay/promotions (McMurtry et al., 2019). Discrimination related to equal pay was close to double for Asian American respondents (25%) when compared to White respondents (13%).

Considering the well-documented increase in overall discrimination directed at Asian Americans during COVID-19, it is plausible that workplace discrimination has also increased during the pandemic. Future research needs to explore Asian Americans' experiences with workplace discrimination both during COVID-19 and afterwards, as the nation recovers from the pandemic. How are Asian Americans navigating experiences of discrimination in their work settings and how have these experiences affected their work satisfaction and overall well-being? This is particularly important when considering that experiences of workplace discrimination lead to poor mental health outcomes for Asian Americans (de Castro, Gee, & Takeuchi, 2008). Social distancing has also universally changed the American way of life, resulting in many Asian Americans having to adapt to a new way of living and working while also coping with increased discrimination.

These compounded stressors may result in Asian Americans lacking resources to manage the increased strain, particularly in the workplace. More research needs to examine how Asian Americans are navigating workplace discrimination while also managing other discrimination-related stressors. Additionally, more research needs to examine the short-term and long-term consequences of this discrimination.

4. Multiple role conflict for women

Multiple role conflict, or conflict between multiple life roles such as work and family, is a relevant construct as it relates to the differential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for individuals who have historically been marginalized within the labor force. Multiple role management is particularly relevant for women because women continue to engage in more household and caretaking responsibilities when compared to men. The American Time Use Survey examined the division of household labor across gender and found that a greater percentage of women spent daily time on household activities when compared to men (84% compared to 69% respectively), and women also spent more hours (2.6 h) per day than men (2.0 h) on household activities (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019b). The survey also found that women spent almost double the time providing care for children in the home than men (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019b). As schools and daycares across the United States close to facilitate social distancing, dual-earner parents of children are now being asked to work full-time jobs while also educating and providing 24-hour care to their children. Since women engage in child caring and household responsibilities more than men, they are shouldering a higher amount of this burden, which has the potential to increase multiple role conflict for women in the workforce. Research has found that role conflict is related to strain and well-being in a reciprocal manner (Nohe, Meier, Sonntag, & Michel, 2015) and is also bidirectional in nature where conflict in one role can be related to the other role (Kulik, Shilo-Levin, & Liberman, 2015). Due to economic disparities in wages between men and women, workplace expectations, and social norms related to parenting and household responsibilities, women may be experiencing additional strain during COVID-19 to manage and/or balance multiple roles.

This is problematic both for women who have the privilege to work from home and even more so for women who are essential employees. For those that can work from home, the expectations on women to manage domestic family needs while also managing full-time careers and work may be unreasonable or even impossible. Dual-career families may find that women are prioritizing their increased domestic responsibilities over their professional roles and placing professional responsibilities on the backburner due to the unmanageable nature of accomplishing both. It would be short-sighted to not discuss how income inequality may play a role in women compromising their work goals in the current context; if women are making less money for equal work, they may compromise their work desires and goals when faced with the task of having to suddenly manage child care, education, and domestic responsibilities. This may be particularly heightened by an economy that has seen extreme job loss in such a short time span due to COVID-19. This may also be particularly true for women of color, who earn less than White women, and are employed in service sectors that are being hit hard by current societal changes in social distancing (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019a).

Essential employees, on the other hand, are being asked to go to work without access to either formal or informal childcare. The burden placed on women to accommodate the lack of childcare is even more striking when considering that women comprise 74.9% of hospital employees (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020) and can be single parents or the primary earners for their families. Future research could examine both the short-term and long-term consequences of how the closing of education systems and child care agencies affects women's vocational development. How are women navigating multiple roles, and what compromises are being made to accommodate to the impossible requirements of full-time work and full-time parenting at the same time? Are we seeing long-term consequences of women shouldering most of the domestic responsibilities during the COVID-19 outbreak? Are we seeing women more dissatisfied with their work and/or parenting responsibilities? And are we seeing stagnation in their advancement within, or perhaps even withdrawal from, their respective fields?

5. Conclusion

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has been described as a “great equalizer”, the individual, community, and structural impacts it has on workers in the United States is not equal in any capacity. Similar to other crises, the COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on not just income inequalities but very large inequalities in access to decent work in the United States. While there is a high percentage of the U.S. workforce that has the opportunity to work safely from home, that privilege is not accessible to all workers, many of whom are already vulnerable to economic and structural inequalities in the United States and who have historically experienced marginalization and discrimination in the workforce. I set forth several research agendas throughout this essay and I hope this is just the beginning of an important conversation on how vocational psychologists can conduct meaningful research that advocates for decent work for all workers in the United States, and in particular for individuals who do work that are deemed essential for the communal needs of our society. I also advocate for more research with individuals who are experiencing increased discrimination and/or workload due to the pandemic. Perhaps if vocational psychologists conduct meaningful research that helps serve marginalized communities more effectively and advocate for a labor market that is built on the foundation of decent work for all, we can emerge from COVID-19 with a shared goal to create a more equitable labor market that protects vulnerable workers. This is the premise that David Blustein et al. (2019) argue is needed for applied psychologists to contribute to many challenges related to access to decent work and basic human rights for workers in the United States.

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