Fighting the 400-Year Pandemic: Racism Against Black People in Organizations

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Abstract

Anti-Black racism is a pernicious problem that has plagued the USA throughout history. In 2020, we saw intense moments that highlighted the stark anti-Black racism and racial inequity in America. Namely, the murder of George Floyd coupled with the disproportionate levels of negative outcomes from the COVID-19 pandemic affecting Black people in the USA. These instances called attention to the considerable racial inequality in US society and reminded many people that racism seeps throughout all facets of life. Our first goal with this special issue was to call attention to research within in the organizational sciences that focuses on anti-Black racism. The articles in this issue call attention to some of the manifestations and consequences of anti-Black racism as well as ways to reduce its insidious effects. Our second goal was to intentionally highlight the work of Black scholars in the field of I-O psychology. As such, we engaged in targeted recruiting that allowed us to successfully curate articles from a racially diverse group of scholars, and we are able to highlight the work of Black scholars and practitioners in the field.

Throughout the history of the USA, racism has been a persistent problem. In particular, anti-Black racism in the USA is rooted in the country's dark history of chattel slavery that enslaved millions of Africans (and later African Americans). This history perpetuated severe inequities and racism against Black people that have continued to persist for centuries. Although some gains have been made across time, there is still considerable racial inequality that permeates society.

Such anti-Black racism is prominent and extends to all facets of life, including the workplace (Avery et al., 2018). Race-based discrimination occurs throughout the employment process, including in selection (Pager, 2003), negotiations (Hernandez et al., 2019), leadership (Rosette et al., 2008), and retention (Couch & Fairlie, 2010). Additionally, many organizations have adopted "color-blind" policies to conform to legal compliance issues; however, such policies often ignore the deep-rooted consequences of systemic racism that can lead to negative consequences in many organizational contexts (Plaut et al., 2018). Systemic anti-Black racism extends to the academy, with just six percent of faculty members in the USA being Black (Pew Research Center, 2019). Racism is also present in our science, as the people who are studied in organizational science (i.e., study participants) are predominately White, and many of the publications in psychological science that highlight race have been written by White authors and edited by White editors (Roberts et al., 2020).

The highly publicized racial injustice resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and police brutality during 2020 drew particular attention to the widespread anti-Black racism that exists in our country. Indeed, during a time when people were attending to the news at a high rate, there was a steady stream of information around the increasing racial inequalities caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, greater attention was paid to highly traumatic racially unjust incidents that occurred in society. Perhaps the most culminating incident was the police murder of George Floyd—an incident so egregious that it seemed to stir even the most apathetic. Many Black individuals did what they often do—felt exhausted (Avery & Ruggs, 2020; Boykin et al., 2020) and called for more anti-racism resources and actions (McCluney et al., 2020).

Like many people across the USA, we (the three Editors of this Special Issue) also felt compelled to act. We envisioned this issue as a way to focus on anti-Black racism

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in the USA with the specific goals of (1) highlighting the history and current state of anti-Black racism in general organizational settings as well as in the specific field of organizational psychology and management, (2) showcasing empirical and conceptual work that provides evidence of the manifestation and effects of anti-Black racism as well as responses and solution to anti-Black racism, and (3) and intentionally highlighting the work of Black scholars in the field of I-O psychology.

Our issue kicks off with a curated conversation between four of the five living Black Fellows of the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology—Drs. Derek Avery, Patrick McKay, Quinetta Roberson, and Kecia Thomas—who reflect on the racialized experiences that they have encountered being part of a predominantly White society (Avery et al. 2021). The Fellows describe their experiences with affirming their competence; overcoming bias; gaining access to scholarly development, mentoring, and sponsorship; the importance of institutional and location fit; and identity affirmation. This rare peek into a conversation among Black academics helps provide nuanced context around not only barriers for Black faculty but also the variance in and interpretations of such experiences.

Our issue then presents several studies that focus on reactions to issues related to the racial injustice in society that emerge from the police murder of Black civilians. At the individual level, Ruggs et al. (2022) examines the spillover effects of hearing about police lethal violence against Black civilians on employees. They found a moderating effect of race in the relationship between thinking about shootings at work and poor work focus, such that the relationship was stronger for Black (versus White) employees. They also examined the influence of talking about these events with coworkers and found that although some conversations can provide social support, conversations that signal pro-police sympathy during the midst of a racially traumatic shooting can increase negative reactions from both Black and White employees. This study highlights the consequences of indirect racial trauma from societal events on people at work and shows how organizational dynamics can mitigate or exacerbate this trauma.

Next, Wang et al. (2022) take an organizational perspective and examine the ways in which Fortune 1000 companies responded after the death of George Floyd by examining the organizational diversity statements released in the months following. These themes include (1) general diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) terms, (2) supporting Black community, (3) acknowledging Black community, (4) committing to diversifying the workforce, (5) miscellaneous words, and (6) titles and companies. Wang et al.'s (2022) follow-up study revealed that companies who did (versus did not) release a statement and those emphasizing identity-conscious topics (e.g., supporting and/or acknowledging the

Black community, committing to diversifying the workforce) were rated more positively by employees via Glassdoor.com ratings than those accentuating identity-blind topics. This study has implications for the importance of organization's messaging around racial injustice.

The next two articles in this issue highlight the manifestation of anti-Black racism within two specific organizational contexts that serve critical roles in society—police and healthcare. Rizzuto et al. (2022) examine anti-Black racism within policing by focusing on the policing decisions used by narcotic enforcement agents, particularly when they operate under different strategies (e.g., crime focus, deterrence focus) for controlling crime. They found that Black men receive more severe charges for the same gram-for-gram narcotic offense than White men. Black offenders also received more severe charges when there is crime-focus policing rather than deterrence-focus policing; however, White offenders received less severe charges under a crime-focused approach. Regarding healthcare, Williams et al. (2022) describe Black physicians' experiences with anti-Black racism in healthcare systems. Using Schneider's (1987) attraction-selection-attrition (ASA) model as an organizing framework, the authors begin by outlining how discrimination manifests in each stage. Then, they provide strategies to mitigate anti-Black bias in each of the stages, thereby providing practical implications and directions for future research. Given ongoing issues with inequality in both of these vital sectors of society, these studies serve as important work in providing evidence to both understand why issues are occurring and what can be done to mitigate them moving forward.

The next two articles in our issue focus on strategies for reducing anti-Black bias. Corrington et al. (2022) examine how perceived norms within an organization influence people's expression of bias against Black individuals. They found that when participants heard another student on campus condone anti-Black bias, they were more likely to condone bias themselves. In a follow-up study with working adults, the authors found that racial attitude norms held by closer co-workers more strongly related to bias expression than racial attitude norms held by people who are in the organization but not as close. This study reveals the important power an individual can have in swaying another persons' Black anti-racist or racist attitudes.

Wessel et al. (2022) examine what happens when perpetrators of racial discrimination are confronted. Across three studies, they examined the differential effects of confronting racism in a way that focuses on behaviors of the perpetrator (e.g., "you acted in a racist manner") vs. the internal attributes of the perpetrator themselves (e.g., "you are a racist"). They found that behavior-focused confrontations were associated with more prosocial responses (e.g., self-improvement plans, appreciation) and that person-focused confrontations

were associated with more antisocial and withdrawal/avoidant responses (e.g., hostility, avoidance). This study thus provides insight into practical strategies for engaging in the important work of confronting racism when it occurs.

The last two articles in our issue focus on the future of research and practice focused on anti-Black racism in organizations. In the article by King et al. (2022), three Black junior scholars and two doctoral students review the research to-date on anti-Black racism in organizations and suggest future areas in which research is critical. Using critical race perspective as a foundation, they present four primary areas where future research is needed including an examination of (1) the persistence of anti-Black racism in organizations, (2) the benefits and challenges to authenticity for Black employees, intersectionality within Black employees, and strategies to combat and reduce anti-Black racism in organizations. They also provide valuable methodological and ethical considerations of pursuing anti-Black racism research. This paper pushes readers to think about the state of research in ways that are inclusive and broadens the understanding of psychological consequences in organizations.

Finally, in McCleary-Gaddy et al. (2022), three Black DEI practitioners working inside large organizations discuss the anti-Black racism topics they think researchers should investigate in order to have a meaningful impact in applied settings. These topics include (1) the importance of solving anti-Black racism with long-term effective solutions rather than short-term ones, (2) maximizing the effectiveness of DEI officers, (3) meaningfully engaging White men as allies to Black employees, (4) ensuring fairer selection processes, (5) more effectively leveraging DEI data, and (6) maximizing the utility of employee resource groups. They remind us to remember and act upon our foundational guiding principle as scientist-practitioners as a means to make meaningful change in reducing anti-Black racism in organizations by (1) conducting research on relevant anti-Black racism issues occurring in organizations and by (2) encouraging the implementation of evidence-based solutions in solving practical anti-Black racism issues.

Key Takeaways

When we began thinking about editing a Special Issue in the summer of 2022, we wanted to do something tangible in reaction to the cries for greater racial justice. At the time, two of us were race and diversity scholars, and one was an Associate Editor at the *Journal of Business and Psychology*. We felt uniting our efforts would be a fruitful way to hold our field accountable for not just talking about equity but walking the talk. We set out to foster awareness in our academic community, showcase the continuous manifestation of anti-Black racism in organizations, and give voice to historically underrepresented people—namely Black scholars. Our ultimate goal was to inspire more support and research attention toward fighting anti-Black racism in the field and beyond, and to model a process that encourages and fosters the development of papers by scholars and practitioners who are Black.

Did we succeed? We think so. This issue provides a number of key takeaways. It highlights consistent themes of racism that permeate society and organizations. Namely, we see that racism within society negatively influences individuals at work. Unfortunately, racism and racial bias within organizations and institutions is not only prevalent, it is also often ignored. As noted by Avery et al. (2022) and King et al. (2022), there is much work to be done to reduce racial bias and inequity even within our own academic institution. This issue has helped clarify what Black employees often experience in organizations by relying on compelling narratives as well as empirical data, both of which span across many different organizational contexts and settings. This issue provides information about ways that anti-Black bias can be reduced at the individual level (e.g., by setting norms in which racism is condoned, by articulating effective ways to confront people's racism) as well as the organizational level (e.g., developing effective diversity statements). These behaviors are intended not only to avoid being racist but to actually be anti-racist.

We learned a great deal working on this Special Issue. We know from the literature that individuals from marginalized backgrounds often have limited access to mentorship and resources and information sharing and networking (e.g., Thomas et al., 2007). We sought to actively combat this by engaging in recruitment of Black scholars, and we committed ourselves to providing constructive, developmental feedback on manuscripts across multiple rounds of reviews. We were successful in receiving submitted manuscripts from several Black scholars and from people who may not typically get a voice in highly respected academic journals. For instance, we highlight practitioners in multiple papers. Furthermore, we were encouraged by the submissions on anti-Black racism we received from both established and junior scholars.

During this process, we noticed evidence of some junior scholars (of all racial backgrounds) seemingly lacking adequate training in the editorial process. That is, it was clear that some of these scholars had not been given adequate mentorship in the manuscript submission process (i.e., following formatting instructions and deadlines) as well as the typical process for effectively responding to reviewer and editor feedback via a response letter. This may be particularly harmful for junior scholars of color, as it may put them further behind in the publishing process, not due to a lack of skill or good ideas, but rather, because of a lack of information on what editors are looking for

in the revision process. As a field, we *must* do better and ensure that we are giving all scholars, and particularly junior scholars from marginalized groups, access to this critical type of training and experience early in their careers. Good science, which by definition includes representation, depends on it. We encourage editors to continue to look for ways to encourage the submission of work from a diverse set of voices, and to help develop the publishing skills of scholars from historically marginalized backgrounds. We also encourage editors to actively seek ways to publish work on diversity-related topics, including race and racism. One way to do this is to racially diversify the editorial board. Indeed, recent research shows that when journals have an all-White editorial board, race scholars are less likely than non-race scholars to believe their work will be valued and the journal and are also less likely to submit their research to these journals (Auelua-Toomey & Roberts, 2022). These findings suggest that journals can signal their values for racial diversity by illustrating them with who they put in leadership positions. We applaud efforts by the *Journal of Business and Psychology*, who recently started a pilot mentoring program that aims to increase representation of scholars of color in journal editorship roles, and the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, who holds selective manuscript development workshops with Associate Editors and gives priority to junior scholars from historically marginalized groups. These are some models of taking action to increase representation and inclusion in our science. There are other avenues that can be taken to continue to open gates and clear pathways to provide greater access and opportunity to diversity-related research and research from Black scholars.

Our Special Issue highlights a myriad of ways that anti-Black racism continues to infect organizations and the academic institution and provides some suggestions on ways to begin to reduce racial bias. Anti-Black racism is embedded within structures and systems, and rooting it out requires careful consideration of and systematic attention toward actions that can provide enhanced racial equity. In addition, anti-Black racism occurs at individual levels and can be addressed by individual people as well as more widespread organizational policies. We call upon researchers, practitioners, editorial board members, and others to remember that anti-Black racism and racial inequity regularly perpetuate in organizations, often operating at subtle levels. We can all play a role in reducing the effects of racism and eradicating it by taking evidence-based actions that promote racial equity.

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