The Hidden Worker: Part I

Considering Diverse Employee Needs during COVID

| By Bryan McNutt, PhD, LMFT, CEAP

While virtually everyone has been affected in some way, shape, or form by the coronavirus pandemic, diverse employees have been especially hard hit. This article will identify these workers and discuss their challenges and stressors, especially considering COVID-19. Generally speaking, a diverse-identified employee can be described as an employee who embodies diverse life circumstances, experiences, and identities that are underrepresented among their work colleagues and peers.

Since diverse employees are underrepresented within an organization, they are at risk of being overlooked, unheard, and misunderstood, as well as face negative bias within their place of work. Diverse employees are often hidden from the broader collective consciousness and sense of shared identity of an organization. This lack of awareness and consideration of the unique needs and experiences of diverse employees may be displayed through the misinformed perspectives among leadership in decision-making, among supervisors in managing, and among co-workers in daily personal interactions.

COVID-19: Diverse Employee Experiences in 2020 and 2021

Whenever a community experiences a collective crisis, such as the COVID pandemic, it is often the marginalized members who are most vulnerable to feeling the adverse impact of the crisis both first and to a greater degree. These employees include women, LGBTQ+ employees, BIPOC-identified individuals (Black, indigenous, people of color), young parents, women, and people who identify as sexual and gender minorities.

At the end of 2020, McKinsey & Co. conducted a survey with representatives from 11 countries, comprised of over 1,100 executives and 2,600 employees. Results revealed notable stressors specific to diverse-identified employees:

➢ Female employees were 1.5 times as likely as their male peers to be concerned about challenges with mental health and balancing household and work responsibilities;

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➢ LGBTQ+ employees were 1.4 times as likely as heterosexual and cisgender employees to be concerned about fairness of performance evaluations, workload increases, and social belonging and connection; and

➢ BIPOC employees were also 1.5 times as likely as White employees to be concerned about opportunities for career progression and work-life balance.

In addition, working parents were up to *five times* as likely as employees without children to be concerned about career advancement and managing the stress of their home life.

The pandemic has stalled the careers of many working parents. Millions of people, mostly mothers, have stopped working for pay due to a lack of

adequate childcare. Many others have had to work fewer hours or decide not to take a promotion, to care for their children. This systemic disruption could have long-term career costs for many employee parents.

Research conducted by Moody's Analytics and published by the *New York Times* in May 2021, surveyed five hundred working mothers. One-third of respondents revealed they had worked fewer hours during the pandemic because of childcare issues, and an additional one-fifth had decided to move to part-time work. Twenty-eight percent declined new responsibilities at work.

In addition, 23 percent did not apply for new jobs, and 16 percent did not pursue a promotion. According to the survey, single mothers not living with another working-aged adult have experienced the biggest decrease in hours worked and are least likely to have recovered economically.
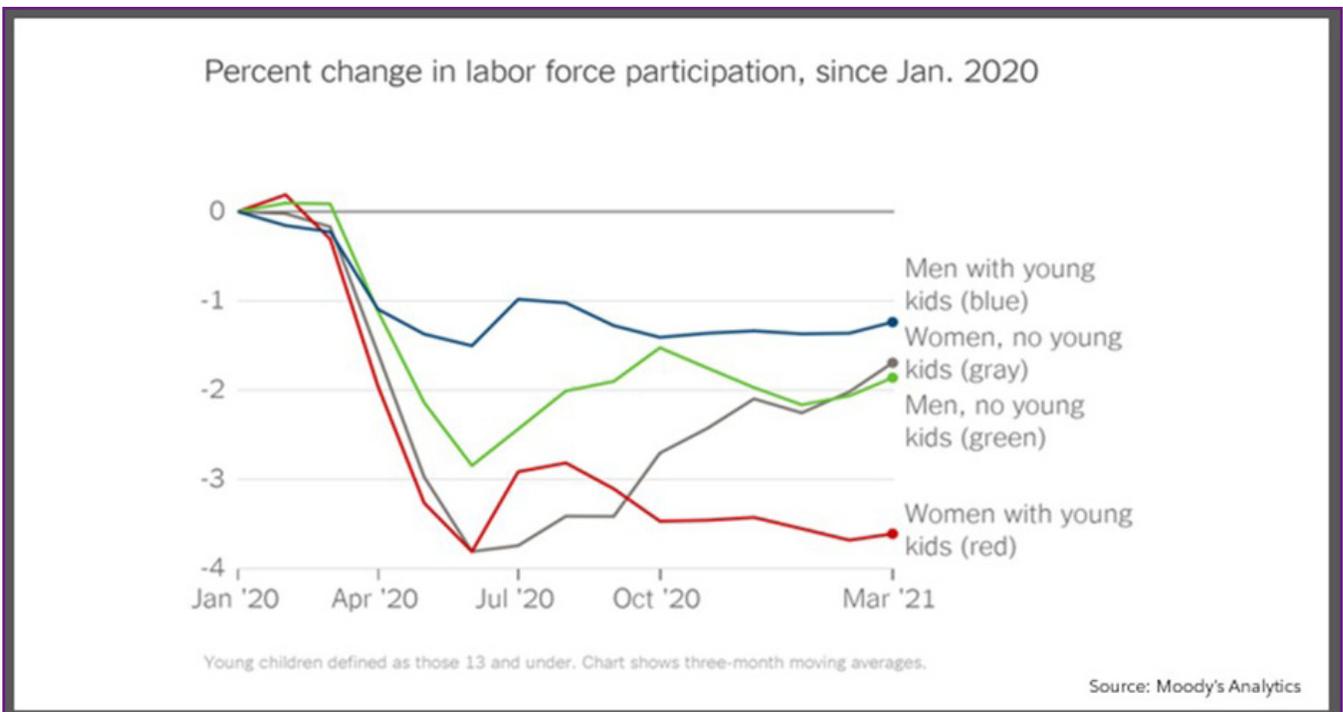
The American Psychological Association's 2021 "Psychology and the post-pandemic workplace" report revealed the disproportionate concerns of BIPOC employees and workers who identify as racial or ethnic minorities in their place of work.

The APA report revealed that Black-identified adults, as well as Hispanic/Latinx, and Asian-identified Americans had significantly more concerns about the future of their working lives than their White peers. Of those surveyed, most individuals who identified as Black, Hispanic/Latinx, or Asian, did not feel comfortable resuming in-person interactions or going back to living life like they used to before the pandemic.

Looking a bit deeper into the experiences of racially diverse employees at work, Gallup released data from a survey conducted at the end of 2020, which included more than 8,000 respondents, including more than 3,500 White workers, more than 2,000 Black workers, and more than 2,000 Hispanic/Latinx workers.

The findings revealed that one out of 4 Black-identified employees reported an experience of discrimination at work within the past 12 months. Black workers younger than 40 (31%) were twice as likely as Black workers aged 40 and older (17%) to report having experienced discrimination at work in the past year.

Younger Hispanic/Latinx employees under 40 (31%) were the only other racial or ethnic

Percent change in labor force participation, since Jan. 2020

Men with young kids (blue)
Women, no young kids (gray)
Men, no young kids (green)
Women with young kids (red)

Young children defined as those 13 and under. Chart shows three-month moving averages.

Source: Moody's Analytics

subgroup to report such a high level of discrimination at work. This figure is twice as high as the rate among Hispanic/Latinx employees aged 40 and older (17%).

The adverse impact of the pandemic in the workplace is also clear among LGBTQ+ employees. While the nation overall is seeing an improvement in employment outcomes for sexual and gender diverse individuals, LGBTQ+ people are still more likely to experience adverse employment outcomes in the reopened economy, including higher unemployment rates and more frequent reporting of having their work hours reduced.

New data and analysis recently released by the Human Rights Campaign and PSB Insights conducted a series of polls involving over 12,000 people. The results revealed that LGBTQ+ people are being left behind even as some businesses and public spaces across the country try to reopen. This data provides additional confirmation of what has long been known: *the most vulnerable communities are being hit hardest by the pandemic, even in the reopened economy*.

While many people have faced pay cuts or needed to resort to taking unpaid leave for various reasons relating to the COVID crisis, LGBTQ+ people experienced these difficulties in higher proportions than the dominant non-LGBTQ population.

Of note, LGBTQ+ individuals who are also Black-identified, or identify as a person of color, experienced a 54% increase in taking pay cuts, while also being **150%** more likely to suffer pay cuts since re-openings have begun. Transgender, non-binary, and gender diverse workers are **125%** more likely to face a reduction in work hours. While some folks within the LGBTQ+ community might be returning to work, chances are that they are making less money than before.

Minority Stress

Much of this data points to the underlying and pervasive phenomenon of minority stress that many diverse employees experience on a regular basis. Minority stress involves the experience of stigma, bias, prejudice, and discrimination that minoritized individuals experience through various aspects of daily life: these include sociocultural, systemic,
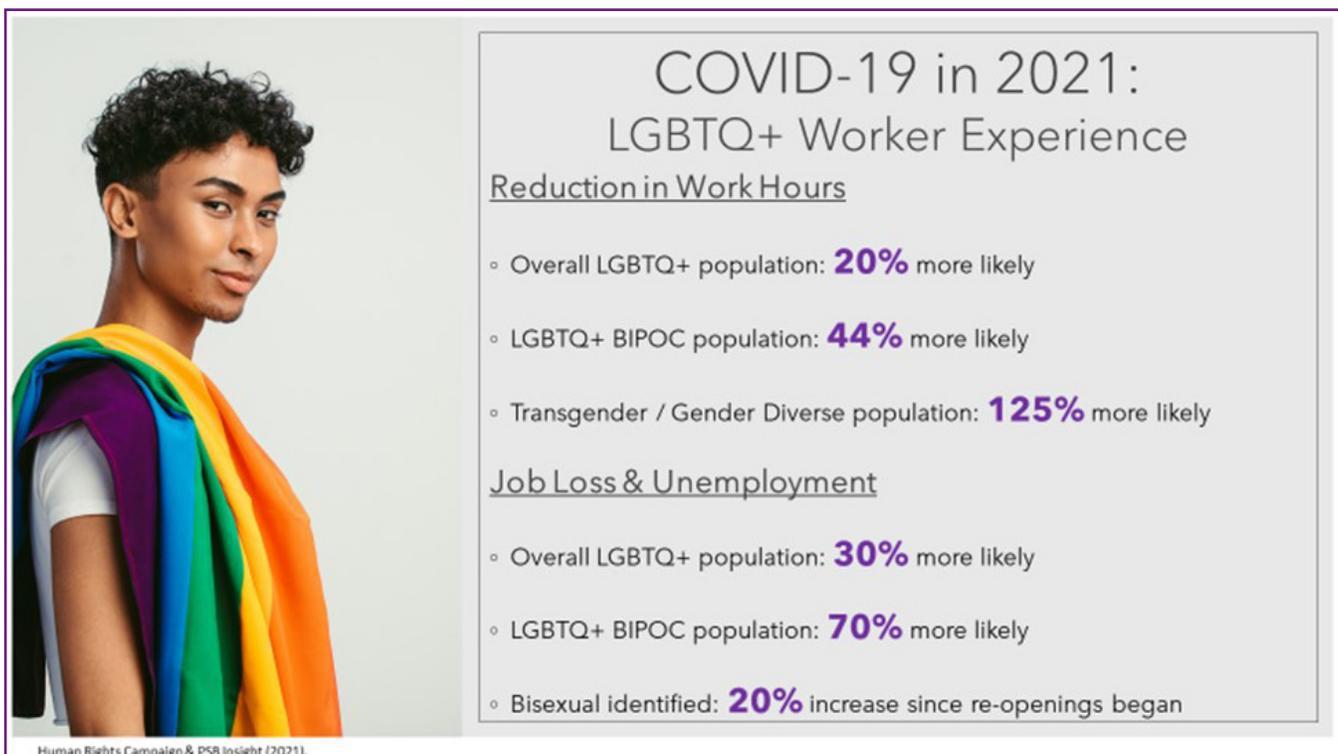
COVID-19 in 2021:
LGBTQ+ Worker Experience

Reduction in Work Hours

∘ Overall LGBTQ+ population: **20%** more likely

∘ LGBTQ+ BIPOC population: **44%** more likely

∘ Transgender / Gender Diverse population: **125%** more likely

Job Loss & Unemployment

∘ Overall LGBTQ+ population: **30%** more likely

∘ LGBTQ+ BIPOC population: **70%** more likely

∘ Bisexual identified: **20%** increase since re-openings began

Human Rights Campaign & PSB Insight (2021).

organizational, occupational, and interpersonal spheres of life.

In the workplace, examples of minority stress for diverse-identified employees may involve the experience of feeling overlooked, unheard, misunderstood, and receiving unfair bias in their performance evaluations. It may also involve feeling a lack of social belonging and inclusiveness, as well as feeling that their unique concerns and stressors are minimized by colleagues, supervisors, or managers.

This can have an incredibly isolating effect for diverse employees. At times, minority stress can lead diverse employees to become "hidden" in the workplace – whether by choice (by just trying to survive emotionally), or by circumstance (due to being overlooked or unacknowledged). In summary, workplace minority stress hurts organizations, and it hurts worker productivity.

Who are the Hidden Workers in YOUR Corporate Clients' Organization?

The intersection of diverse identities and experiences can result in a mix of social advantages and disadvantages represented throughout the life of an organization. As a result, it is important to consider how diversity can encompass many aspects of personal or cultural identity, including racial and gender identity, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, even socioeconomic status, language, ability, age, and political and regional affiliation. Diversity also involves the mixture of beliefs and life experiences.

While there may be a complex mix of diversity factors represented within many workplaces, diverse-identified employees are at higher risk of experiencing minority stress, as well as being marginalized in contrast to the dominant social identities within an organization.

Summary

Being attentive to the needs of diverse employees means, in part, how well we, as employee assistance professionals, foster sensitivity to the hidden experiences of others. Sometimes these intersecting identities and diverse experiences remain unseen because there is a lack of care to consider what they might really mean for an employee's experiences

in the workplace; other times they remain hidden because it is just not emotionally safe enough for someone to show them in the workplace, for any variety reasons.

It is critical to consider how *you* may observe the "hidden" experience of minority stress among the lives of your diverse colleagues and clients, as well as how organizational leadership addresses (or fails to address) it. In Part II of the "The Hidden Worker," we will explore ways in which EAPs can work to foster more sensitivity and advocacy for the workplace needs of diverse-identified employees – approaches that include organizational self-reflection and promoting psychological safety. ❖

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