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Vigilant Victims: Identifying and Breaking the Cycle of Discrimination

Results from a diverse sample of racial minority employees

This Research Briefing summarizes the findings of research by Wu, Lyons, and Leong (2015) on how racial bullying affects minorities' proneness to reporting further racial discrimination. The study, which examines how a unique-form of racial stress explains why bullying increases discrimination sensitivity, gives suggestions for how employers can reduce the escalation of discrimination perceptions by not only managing racial bullying but also race-related stress.

Summary

Business leaders and scholars agree that bullying can negatively impact employees' health, well-being and performance. However, much less is known about how racial minorities experience and respond to bullying targeted towards their race/ethnicity. A particularly troubling concern is how racially motivated bullying can increase minorities' proneness to perceiving further discrimination in their workplace. In the study currently summarized, the authors examine how experiences of racial bullying (e.g., persistent derogatory comments about race, exclusion on the basis of race) affects minorities' sensitivity to further racial discrimination in their work environment. Moreover, the authors investigate how a unique form of race-related stress explains how racial bullying increases proneness of perceiving further discrimination.

The results, drawn from a diverse sample of employed minority adults, suggest that minorities who experience race-related stress (i.e., concern that their workplace is not supportive of minorities) in response to racial bullying are more prone to perceiving further discrimination in their workplace, which is not the case for those who do not experience race-related stress in response to bullying. However, the effects of racial bullying depend on minorities' individual differences in views about inequality.

Minorities less concerned about inequalities at work are less likely to experience racial stress and are less negatively affected by racial bullying; minorities more concerned about inequalities are more negatively affected by racial bullying and likely to be more acutely sensitive to discrimination.

The findings indicate that, when unabated, racial bullying can make organizations prone to further discrimination claims. Strategies for mitigating the negative effects of racial bullying should not only target racial bullying behaviours but also broader symbols of racial inequality in the organization. Several suggestions for how to cope with the negative impact of racial bullying on work are discussed.

Racial Bullying Defined

Participants indicated the extent to which they experienced the following behaviours from their coworkers:

- made derogatory comments about their race,
- told jokes about their race,
- used racial slurs to describe them,
- excluded them from social situations because of their race,
- failed to give them information because of their race,
- made racist comments, or
- made them feel like they had to give up their racial identity to get along at work.

Background

Bullying is severe and over-bearing and its negative effects have been well-documented (Hoel, Einarsen, & Cooper, 2003). By comparison, relatively little research has examined the effects of racial bullying. This is surprising because evidence suggests that a disproportionate amount of minority employees (some estimates are around 20%) are targeted by racial bullying which is associated with detriments to their health and work performance (Fox & Stallworth, 2005).

Although a number of studies have indicated that racial minorities victimized by discrimination are more prone to perceive further discrimination (Barrett & Swim, 1998), little research

has investigated how or why this happens. Considering its prevalence and pervasive effects, racial bullying could be a potent influence on minorities' proneness to perceiving discrimination at work.

Without addressing how or why racial bullying affects sensitivity to discrimination, organizations are not only implicated in injuring minority employees' health and performance but are also at risk for legal liability.

In the current study we examine how and why racial bullying influences proneness to discrimination perceptions. We do this by considering a unique form of stress experienced by racial minorities: race-related stress, or concerns and anxieties about racism in the work environment (Harrell, 2000).

As a result of their minority and stigmatized status, racial minorities can often be concerned about racial inequalities. We expect racial bullying to affect minorities' sensitivity to discrimination through race-related stress. This is because racial bullying will activate broader concerns and anxieties about racial inequalities in the workplace (race-related stress) that in turn heightens bullied minorities' pre-emptive and preventative cognitive strategies targeted towards avoiding discrimination; that is, they become more sensitive to discrimination (Carter, 2007) in order to guard against it.

Additionally, individual perceptions about racial inequality will influence one's reactions to unwelcomed or inappropriate behaviour. Minority employees less concerned about racial inequality are less likely to view racial bullying as indicative of broader racial inequalities and will experience less race-related stress in response to racial bullying and racial bullying will have less of an effect on sensitivity to discrimination; minorities more concerned about racial inequality are more likely to view racial bullying as a threat and racial bullying will have a stronger influence on sensitivity to discrimination (Major, Kaiser, O'Brien, & McCoy, 2007). One major implication being that those who feel inappropriate behaviour is part of a larger social fabric could be more likely to attribute blame to the organization and not simply the person perpetuating the bullying behavior.

Results

In this study 174 employees in Michigan, USA, representing diverse racial minority groups (52% Black; 35% Asian; 13% other) were asked to fill out a questionnaire in which they reported their experiences of racial bullying at work, race-related stress, sensitivity to racial discrimination, and their attitudes towards societal inequality.

The results showed that minority employees who experienced racial bullying had higher race-related stress which in turn lead to higher sensitivity to discrimination. When racial bullying did

Historical Research

Most popular in Europe, research on workplace bullying has exploded since the 1990s (for an overview, see Hoel et al., 2003). This research shows that bullying has detrimental effects on employee health, well-being, and job performance.

It is not until the 2000s that more researchers have paid attention to victimization of minority employees (Fox & Stallworth, 2005; Raver & Nishii, 2010). This research argues that race-related mistreatment, albeit with or without racist intentions, significantly contributes to the marginalization of racial minority employees (Cortina, 2008).

not activate race-related stress racial bullying did not affect proneness to perceive discrimination.

This suggests that racial bullying only increases sensitivity to discrimination when individuals react to the bullying with concern and anxiety about broader racial inequality in their organization.

In terms of individual differences, minority employees who were generally not concerned with broader racial inequality experienced less race-related stress in response to racial bullying and did not become more sensitive to further racial discrimination. Minority employees who were generally more concerned about broader racial inequality experienced more race-related stress in response to racial bullying and became more sensitive to further racial discrimination. This suggests that only when minority employees are concerned about racial inequality more broadly will racial bullying then lead them to become more prone to perceiving discrimination.

Implications for HR and Business Leaders

Although these results shed light on several practical implications for management, such recommendations are complicated by the fact that often-times managers are not present for acts of racial bullying. And, even if they are, acts of racial bullying are often subtle, unconscious, and imperceptible for those not being targeted (Fox & Stallworth, 2005). Occurrences of racial bullying may escape organizational mechanisms of redress, and even the scope of the law. It would thus behoove management to tackle racial bullying not with reactive approaches but with proactive, preventative, and educational approaches (Cortina, 2008).

HR and senior leaders must model and clearly state expectations of appropriate and respectful behaviour (in mission statements and policy manuals). New employees should receive education about appropriate conduct in their workplace and that it could differ from how they conduct themselves personally. Training about racial discrimination that is embedded in broader training about appropriate behaviours is often met with less resistance than programs targeting racial discrimination alone (Cortina, Kabat-Farr, Leskinen, Huerta, & Magley, 2014). The goal in training should be to broaden employees' understanding of what racial bullying can look like and what it means to be unbiased and professional (Brief & Barsky, 2000). Clarifying that racial bullying is more than overt racist remarks, but can encompass a variety of behaviours including subtle exclusion.

Racial bullying is targeted based on racial group membership. Thus, managerial strategies that downplay an emphasis on difference and racial identity and foster a common group identity would also be effective (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). This can include spatially integrating people, creating a common group name, and implementing group-based performance management systems.

As race-related stress was central in explaining why racial bullying affected sensitivity to discrimination and why individuals less concerned about racial inequality were less affected by racial bullying, organizations can manage racial bullying by also managing race-related stress. They can do this by addressing concerns about racial inequality within the organization, such as having managers explicitly commit to racial diversity, ensuring minorities are treated fairly in HR practices and are represented at different levels of the organization (Nishii, 2013). Third-parties can be used for confidential reporting of racial bullying instances but also as a safe space for minorities to talk about their experiences. Such practices can help reduce minorities' concerns about racial inequality within their organization that may help attenuate the negative effects of racial bullying on sensitivity to discrimination.

Final Thoughts

This study sheds light how racial bullying comes to sensitize its victims to further racial discrimination within the organization. To targeted employees, racial bullying appears to indicate that the organization does not support or value racial equality, which further compounds the problem. Acts of racial bullying are often imperceptible to those not targeted; claims of racial bullying or discrimination may say as much about the organizations' climate for diversity as it does the act itself. Outside of specifically training and managing for appropriate interpersonal behaviours, management can also reduce the consequences of racial bullying by fostering a work environment that explicitly values racial diversity.

This research is based on the following research paper:

Wu, I.A., Lyons, B.J., & Leong, F.L. (2015). How racial/ethnic bullying affects rejection sensitivity: The role of social dominance orientation. Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 21, 156-161.

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