

Racial Disparities in COVID-19: Implications for Policy, Practice, Research and Teaching

By Lindsey Klinck

Note. In May 2020, the Jordan Institute for Families and the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at the UNC School of Social Work hosted a virtual panel discussion addressing the racial disparities highlighted by COVID-19 and how we might use what we are learning to advance racial equity in our research, teaching, practice, and policy. Panelists included Dr. Enrique Neblett, University of Michigan, Mayor Pro Tem Jillian Johnson, City of Durham, Valerie Arendt, Executive Director, NASW-NC, Dr. Iheoma Iruka, Department of Public Policy and FPG, UNC, and JP Przewoznik, School of Social Work, UNC. You can view the recording here: <https://vimeo.com/424055342>.

Very informatively titled, this webinar discussed how racial disparities have been perpetuated during COVID-19, and various experts and professionals provided their insight on specific fields. Dr. Enrique Neblett, a professor in the school of Public Health at the University of Michigan, took the metaphorical floor and described the significant lack of data surrounding the effects of the pandemic on racial/ethnic populations. While a great deal of research has been done over the past 7 or so months, very little of it pertains to ethnicity. And, out of the limited data we do have, most of it is from New York and California, says little about Black Americans, and even less about Asian Americans. What we do know is that Black Americans and other racial/ethnic minority groups are more likely to have pre-existing health conditions, possess a higher percentage of low wage and essential jobs, and have unequal access to testing, all making them more susceptible to contracting COVID-19. At the root of these issues is a long history of structural racism, and we cannot simply put a bandage over it. Turning points in history are difficult to observe and acknowledge while they are happening, and all too often we let them pass us by. Conversations like this webinar are efforts towards not letting the potential for change get neglected.

Next up on the panel was Iheoma Iruka, the director of the Center for Early Education Research and Evaluation [now faculty at UNC]. She covered the research portion of the webinar, discussing the importance of research that extends past the micro level and deeper into socioeconomic and political contexts. This starts by first and foremost understanding racism as a system that was built to privilege those that look white or are white, and has had generational effects. She discusses how research needs to consider the assets and strengths of minoritized communities. This can be done through thoughtful considerations of how researchers are shaping their questions—whose perspective is it from and if it is actionable. An asset-based question is strengths driven, opportunity focused, internally focused, and asks what is present that can be built upon. These types of questions meet the needs of the community and lead to innovation. Research is at the foundation of education, policy, and practice, and Dr. Iruka's method for research will hopefully lead to the use of a racial equity lens in these other aspects of social work.

Jillian Johnson, Mayor Pro Tempore of the City of Durham, then took the floor to discuss policy implications. Essentially, the City of Durham does not have the power that it needs to fix a lot of problems. Two primary issues right now are evictions and water bill disconnections. During this time, people have been asked to stay home, but in order to do so people need homes, and income to pay for those homes. The state government had policy in place to halt evictions, but it has since ended and the problem has worsened. As for suspended water disconnections, when that expires, the city will be unable to forgive water bill charges. To address these limitations, the city is focusing on funding and utilizing their platform to form a race neutral response. They are putting money towards rental assistance, eviction diversion, and supporting

small businesses. They are allocating resources towards activism and getting information out into the community, especially in Spanish.

To discuss the teaching implications, JP Przewoznik, a clinical assistant professor at the UNC School of Social Work, took a more holistic approach and discussed how social work in general needs to do a better job of strengthening its use of the outside world as curricular content. They articulate that if social work educators are not honest about this country's past and present sins, then they cannot get to a place to talk about a more specific issue, like COVID. JP thinks that social work education needs to better emphasize the fact that it is a reproduction of white supremacist values. Without this understanding, there is a dichotomy between the macro and micro level of the education. They argue that one cannot work with an individual without understanding how systems affect that individual and vice versa.

The last panelist, Valerie Arendt, the executive director of the NASW-NC, closed out the webinar with a discussion of COVID's implications for practice. Similarly to what JP said, Valarie begins her portion with an overview of racism in social work practice. She emphasizes that it needs to be addressed, continuously acknowledged, and then social work interventions should be employed. She proceeded to break this down on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. In terms of micro, she discusses the importance of education and building trusting relationships. Communication about the pandemic and available resources needs to be explicit and easily accessible. Relationships between community members and social workers is essential to ensuring that people feel comfortable asking for what they need. On the mezzo level, a racial equity lens is paramount to practice. There needs to be an implementation of culturally appropriate health promotion programs, prioritization of resources for organizations that serve communities of color, reduction in cultural barriers to care, and an investment in diversity among

the social work workforce. And on the macro level, of course there needs to be policy change that addresses institutional systems, such as housing, that perpetuate inequality. In order to move in this direction, people need to vote, contact their elected officials, and push for a racial equity lens in the creation of policy.

Although Valerie's conversation on practice was referring to practice in the social work field, I think that what she said can also be understood as what the implications for research, policy, and education really mean when they are put into practice. On all three levels, education is of the utmost importance, setting a foundation for relationship building, the creation of programs, and ultimately policy change. In order to educate, research has to be done so that COVID's impact can be understood and there is evidence driving the push for change. Valerie's portion of the webinar rounded out the discussion very nicely, and left the audience with steps to take going forward. It instilled a desire to continue to get educated and to hopefully incite change.

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