

## **Salience of COVID-19 Pandemic: Interactive Effect with Social Class and Identity Centrality on COVID-related Workplace Anxiety, Emotional Exhaustion, and Withdrawal**

The COVID-19 pandemic is having unprecedented effects on the global population, including a profound impact on personal lives and how people work (Caputo & Hyland, 2020). People are constantly reminded of the presence of the virus when avoiding crowded areas, seeing masks worn in public, and hearing extensive news coverage. While COVID impacts the global population, some individuals may experience higher salience (i.e., awareness; Higgins, 1996) of the pandemic as a result of their immediate environment. Individuals with greater COVID salience are more likely to evaluate how the pandemic is affecting their personal well-being. Depending on personal factors such as social class and the importance of social class to an individual, individuals will differ in the level of COVID-related anxiety they experience at work.

Utilizing the cognition-motivational-relational theory of emotion (CMR), we seek to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic affects the emotions of employees and subsequently their behavior at work. According to CMR theory, individuals cognitively appraise the relationship between their environment and personal factors to determine the impact on their well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). If they determine that the environment is incongruent with their personal goals and poses an existential threat to their self-esteem, anxiety is the specific emotion that results. An environment is appraised as a threat if the situation poses potential harm or loss for the individual in the future (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Existential threats are external and introduce uncertainty or ambiguity about what will happen in the future. This uncertainty makes it difficult for individuals to develop expectations for the future and makes it unclear what individuals can do to ameliorate the threat, both of which facilitate anxious feelings. Anxiety can directly relate to individuals' nervousness or apprehension about one's ability to achieve job requirements, which is called workplace anxiety (McCarthy et al., 2016). Without clarity on how to reduce the threat, anxious individuals tend to respond by trying to avoid or escape the source of the existential threat.

The COVID pandemic is an event or environmental factor that affects individuals' personal and work lives. The COVID pandemic is likely to be perceived as a threat because there is potential for harm or loss in the future with regard to job security, re-opening of schools and the economy, and personal and family health. While the entire U.S. population is victim to the COVID pandemic, the specific environment related to COVID that each individual experiences may facilitate different levels of COVID salience or heightened awareness to COVID (Higgins, 1996). Individuals are exposed to COVID information to different degrees depending on the regulations of the city or state they live in, stay-at-home orders and business closings, the percentage of people they see wearing masks in public, and the extent to which they read news and social media (Gershman, 2020). The attention drawn to features of the COVID pandemic also differ for individuals depending on the economic impact and number of COVID cases and deaths that have occurred within the individuals' environment. These elevated levels of COVID salience would be expected to facilitate anxiety because anxiety arises when threat is symbolic rather than concrete, related to a difficult-to-interpret event, and severe such that there is danger of being traumatized (Lazarus, 1991). According to CMR theory, emotions result from individuals' cognitive appraisal of an environment relevant to personal factors. Thus, we hypothesize that two personal factors interact with COVID salience to affect COVID-related workplace anxiety: social class and social class identity centrality.

We utilize the social cognitive theory of social class (Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rhoads, & Keltner, 2012) and identity theory (Rosenberg, 1979; Stryker & Serpe, 1982) to

theorize that the personal factors of social class and social class identity centrality (i.e., the extent to which social class is important to one's self-concept) interact with COVID salience to affect COVID-related workplace anxiety. Lower class individuals are more likely to notice the threat posed by COVID and perceive they have lower levels of control amidst the pandemic (Kraus et al., 2012). In addition, individuals with higher levels of social class identity centrality are more likely to notice that their social class is implicated by COVID and are more likely to experience the threat as affecting their self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1979; Stryker & Serpe, 1982). Thus, we propose that lower class individuals with higher levels of social class identity centrality should experience higher levels of COVID-related workplace anxiety in response to higher COVID salience.

In response to anxiety, individuals would like to reduce uncertainty about the future related to the threat so they may expend effort to try to identify what is going to happen in the future (Lazarus, 1991). Conservation of resources theory (COR) states that continual depletion of resources over time can result in job burnout and specifically, emotional exhaustion (Hobfoll, 1989). As COVID cases continue to increase and governments continue to change the regulations surrounding phased business openings, the ongoing utilization of mental resources towards considering the impact of COVID on the workplace can deplete employees' resources, resulting in emotional exhaustion.

Without clear information about how to mitigate the source of a threat, anxious individuals are likely to experience helplessness and feel that the only action they can take is to try to avoid or escape their work situation (Lazarus, 1991). We expect the ongoing focus of employees' mental resources on how to remain successful at work during the COVID pandemic to lead employees to disengage from work. Psychologically distancing oneself from work, or engaging in withdrawal behaviors, may be one of the only ways employees feel they can conserve their resources.

To test our hypotheses, we recruited 284 part- or full-time U.S. employees for a two-part online experiment. In Part 1 of the study, participants reported their social class and evaluated their social class identity centrality. Two weeks later, participants were invited to participate in Part 2 of the study which included an experimental design. Participants were given an article to read in either a high or low COVID salience condition. Participants then evaluated their COVID-related workplace anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and withdrawal behaviors.

We tested our hypotheses with path analysis in Mplus 8.4. We found support for the 3-way interactive effect hypothesized, which stated that COVID salience was positively related to COVID-related workplace anxiety when social class is lower and social class identity centrality is higher ( $\gamma = -.32, p = .03$ ). Slope differences tests were conducted with t-tests (Dawson & Richter, 2006), showing the only significant slope difference was between higher social class with higher identity centrality and lower social class with higher identity centrality  $t(261) = -3.90, p < .001$ . Similarly, we found that COVID-related workplace anxiety was positively related to emotional exhaustion ( $\gamma = .53, p < .001$ ), and emotional exhaustion was positively related to withdrawal behavior ( $\gamma = .51, p < .001$ ). Supporting our moderated mediation hypothesis, the indirect positive effect of COVID salience on withdrawal behaviors serially through COVID-related workplace anxiety and emotional exhaustion was significant at lower levels of social class and higher levels of social class identity centrality (social class -1 SD, identity centrality +1SD; 95% CI [.11, .47]).

We demonstrate that COVID salience is positively related to COVID-related workplace anxiety for employees of lower social class and who perceive their social class identity as highly

central to their self-concept. In contrast, there was no effect of COVID salience on COVID-related workplace anxiety for employees who perceived their social class as not very central or who perceived their higher social class as highly central. Further, we show that COVID-related workplace anxiety is positively related to emotional exhaustion which was subsequently positively related to withdrawal behaviors. Overall, COVID-related workplace anxiety and emotional exhaustion serially mediate the 3-way interactive positive effect of higher COVID salience, lower social class, and higher social class identity centrality on withdrawal behaviors.

This work theoretically contributes to the organizational and psychology literatures and has practical implications for how organizations should help employees cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. First, we expand the utilization of CMR theory beyond psychology and related fields (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Mulilis & Duval, 1997; Nicholls, Polman, & Levy, 2012; Shankar & Jebarajakirthy, 2019) to explain within an organizational context, the emotions that result from the interplay between environment and persons, and the subsequent effect on work behaviors. In addition, the specific environment we explain with CMR theory is the highly relevant and critical COVID-19 pandemic.

Second, we apply the social cognitive theory of social class (Kraus et al., 2012) to the COVID-19 pandemic in an organizational context to support social class as a new demographic antecedent to workplace anxiety (Cheng & McCarthy, 2018) as well as how social class affects cognition in a unique context. Social class has been a critical factor impacting how individuals are affected by COVID (Mendez-Smith & Klee, 2020), and our work demonstrates that individuals of lower social class are more likely to be affected by COVID because they are more attuned to external threats and have a lower sense of control compared to higher social class individuals. Perceiving COVID as an existential threat facilitates higher levels of COVID-related workplace anxiety in lower class individuals.

Finally, we contribute to identity theory (Rosenberg, 1979; Stryker & Serpe, 1982) by highlighting the importance of considering the centrality of an identity when assessing the impact of an identity on emotions and behavior. We add to the few studies of identity centrality within the organizational literature (e.g., Farmer & Van Dyne, 2010; Murnieks, Mosakowski, & Cardon, 2012; Tripathi, Zhu, Jacob, Frese, & Gielnik, 2019) by analyzing the centrality of the social class identity in particular, and illustrating that centrality results in higher salience or awareness of the implications of COVID to one's social class and higher likelihood of perceiving COVID as a threat to one's self-esteem. We show that it is critical to consider the identity centrality of one's social class versus the identity alone in understanding how COVID affects employees. It is only when social class is lower, and the centrality of social class identity is higher that individuals experience COVID-related work anxiety in response to COVID salience.

Practically, our work suggests that organizations should not assume that each of their individuals is affected by the COVID pandemic consistently. Rather, it is critical to understand employees' personal situation including the salience of the COVID pandemic for their employees, as well as employees' social class and the extent to which employees define themselves by their social class. Organizations can help employees cope with COVID-related workplace anxiety by stating clear COVID-related policies for the future that mitigate ambiguity. COR theory also indicates that organizations can implement types of social support to help employees overcome challenges related to COVID such as providing counseling services and encouraging colleagues to share work experiences.

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