Mega-threats as Workplace Disruptors: How Can Organizations Respond to the Effects of Mega-threats on Employees?

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Workforce Disrupted
Seeking the Labor Market's Next Equilibrium

"How are you doing today?"

As you step onto an elevator, pass a coworker in the hallway, or arrive early to a team meeting, people often ask how you're doing. We tend to answer this question without much thought, "I'm fine, how are you?" Yet there are times and events that add extra weight to this simple question, as respondents hesitate to share their genuine thoughts and emotions with colleagues in a professional setting.

In my research, I explore instances that make it difficult to answer the mundane greeting, "How are you doing today." This work, which I have conducted in collaboration with Shimul Melwani, UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School associate professor of organizational behavior and associate dean of the undergraduate business program, examines the effects on worker psychological well-being and productivity of *highly publicized negative identity-related societal events*, such as the 2020 murder of George Floyd, mass shootings like the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting that targeted LGBTQ+ individuals, and the 2021 Atlanta area Spa shootings that targeted individuals of Asian descent. We find that these events, which we call *mega-threats*, have lasting effects on employee thoughts, emotions and behavior, making the question, "How are you doing today?" weightier and more difficult to answer.

My experience with mega-threats and the start of my research on their effects on employees at work

I began researching this topic in 2016 as a PhD student at UNC's Kenan-Flagler Business School. In summer 2016, I watched two videos of Black men being killed by police within the span of 24-hours on social media. The first showed the killing of Alton Sterling by police outside a convenience store in Baton Rouge, LA, and the second showed Philando Castile killed by

police during a routine traffic stop with his girlfriend and daughter in the car. After watching these two videos, essentially back-to-back, I was consumed by negative emotions common among people dealing with the death of a loved one – sadness, anger, despair – and also an emotional state distinctly felt after learning of these types of events: threat. This threat is related to my own identity – I am a Black woman – and the realization that *I could be* a traffic stop away from suffering the same fate as Sterling and Castile.

This feeling, that I was under threat, was all consuming and distracted me from my research. Still, when collaborators asked me cheerfully, "How are you doing?" I would answer calmly (falsely), "I'm fine." Yet I struggled internally with this response, as I was anything but "fine." Answering a question that I had responded to hundreds of times without flinching had suddenly become difficult, fraught with complex feelings of dread after I learned about the deaths of two Black men at the hands of police.

After recounting my experiences in the days after these events to my then graduate school advisor and now research collaborator, Shimul Melwani, we realized that we had stumbled upon an important research topic that had thus far been neglected. We began to conduct research that sought to answer the question: what is the influence of societal events, particularly those involving victims that are members of marginalized identity groups (e.g. racial minorities in the U.S., women, LGBTQ+ individuals, Jewish people, etc.) on employees in the workplace? And how can organizations help their employees cope with these events?

In our initial research on this topic, published in the *Academy of Management Review*, we developed a new name for these events, *mega-threats*, and we discuss the motivating effects that these societal events could have for employees. Namely, we proposed that these

events may galvanize employees to engage in behaviors aimed at advancing equity in their workplace. In our more recent work, published in the *Academy of Management Journal*, we further developed the concept of mega-threats and examined the negative consequences of these events for racial minority employees at work.

What are mega-threats?

Mega-threats are highly publicized, extremely negative societal events, where the harm that occurred in the event is viewed as being associated with or connected to the victim(s)' social identity (e.g. their race, religion, sexual orientation, immigration status, etc.). The fact that Black Americans, for example, are three times more likely than White Americans to be killed by police means that any widely publicized police killing of a Black civilian is at least partly attributed to the victims' race, which makes these events mega-threats.

We argue that mega-threats have distinct detrimental consequences for individuals that share identity group membership with an event's victims because these identity group members often make the assessment that this same type of negative event could happen to them. In other words, the idea that someone suffered a negative, sometimes fatal, consequence because of their race (or another marginalized identity) leads individuals who share that identity to wonder, *"Am I Next?"*

What are the effects of mega-threats on employees at work?

We find that the experience of worrying about whether you will be the next victim of a similar instance of identity-based violence triggers in individuals a particular experience of threat that persists even after they enter their workplace. Employees suffering these negative

reactions to a mega-threat often feel that they have to actively suppress or hide their personal experience of threat in the workplace.

In most instances, the threat experience triggered by a mega-threat is connected to a social identity – race, gender, religion, sexual orientation – that is ignored, hidden, or devalued in organizations. Indeed, research has found that racial minority employees often feel the need to adjust their appearance and behavior in order to fit in or downplay their race at work. Even in organizational spaces that celebrate diversity, employees may not feel comfortable sharing their authentic experiences of racism and other forms of discrimination. We argue that employees would suppress their experience of threat in the wake of a mega-threat event at work, and this threat suppression leads employees to withdraw from or avoid investing energy in their work tasks and to avoid connecting with their work colleagues.

We tested our predictions in two empirical studies regarding the negative effects of mega-threats on employees that identify with victims of an event. For the second study, we recruited a sample of 710 working adults in the U.S. to complete an online survey in which they reported demographic information (e.g. participants' race, gender, whether they were a recent immigrant to the U.S.) and information about their behaviors at work (e.g. typical suppression of authentic thoughts and emotions at work and typical levels of work withdrawal and social engagement with coworkers).

Then in a second survey, in the week after two mega-threats involving Black civilians being killed by police in Texas, we followed up with participants from our first survey whom would likely be distinctly affected by these mega-threats (i.e. Black participants) and a matched sample of participants that may not be as affected by the event (i.e. White participants). We

found that Black participants experienced greater threat than did White participants in the days after these events and that these more affected employees actively hid or suppressed their feelings of threat at work, leading to increased withdrawal from work tasks and work colleagues. We found that Black employees were more likely than White employees to spend time at work managing personal matters and investing less energy into their work tasks while actively avoiding discussions with their coworkers in the days after mega-threats. These differences in threat suppression and work withdrawal behaviors between Black and White employees, notably, did not exist in our first survey, supporting the notion that the differences we observed between the two groups in the second survey were triggered by the mega-threat events. We conducted a third survey with the same group of participants, including Black and White employees, in the days after the murder of George Floyd, one of the most highly publicized mega-threats of the last several years, and again found the same negative effects on Black employees' work behaviors.

Since we introduced the term mega-threats to the academic literature, other researchers have investigated the effects of these types of events on employees at work. In one such paper the authors examine the effects of COVID-19 on the interpersonal treatment of Chinese employees in the workplace. The study's authors conceptualized COVID-19 as a racial mega-threat specific to Chinese employees in the U.S. and Canada, given that the start of the pandemic was linked to China and that prominent leaders in the U.S. placed blame for the pandemic on China and Chinese people. In a three-wave survey of Asian employees, the authors found that Chinese employees experienced greater workplace incivility during the pandemic in the form of mistreatment and discrimination than did employees that belong to

other Asian subgroups (e.g. Japanese, Korean, or Indian employees). The study also found that this incivility or mistreatment led to lower job performance, greater emotional exhaustion, and higher intentions to quit or find a new job. The authors determined that these negative effects persisted even within organizations that outwardly celebrated and valued diversity, demonstrating the powerful effects that mega-threats can have on employees even in organizations that claim to or endeavor to value diversity.

In sum, a growing body of research indicates that mega-threats are important *workplace disruptors* that are particularly salient for employees who are members of marginalized identity groups (e.g. racial minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, etc.), as these events lead employee members of these groups to experience threat, leading to increased work withdrawal behaviors, and the events may also trigger workplace mistreatment and discrimination.

What can organizations do to reduce the negative effects of mega-threats?

Acknowledge the negative toll that these events have on employees

Mega-threats are societal events that generally occur outside the workplace and do not directly involve employees, yet these events can have detrimental consequences for individuals at work. The first step to reducing these negative effects is for organizations and managers to recognize and acknowledge that their employees may be experiencing high levels of trauma in the days after mega-threat events. One way that organizations have acknowledged the psychological toll of mega-threats on their employees is through releasing statements of support for marginalized communities in the wake of these events. Emerging research points to the potential benefits of organizations releasing identity-conscious statements or statements that specifically mention race. One study finds that identity-conscious statements (as compared

to identity-blind statements, which are statements that do not mention race) were associated with greater support for diversity within an organization. [Another study](#) shows that organizational statements that acknowledge mega-threats using identity-conscious language provide a strong signal to employees that they will be valued and respected within the organization. While these statements are an important step toward acknowledging the effects of mega-threats, employees may reap greater benefits from organizational polices, like flexible work arrangements, that allow them to [recover from and dispel the threat](#) that is triggered by these events.

Cultivate identity-based psychological safety with your coworkers and your subordinates

The results of our multi-phased survey, which was conducted with Black and White employees following two mega-threats, provides insight on another potential pathway for reducing the negative effects of mega-threats. In this survey we posed an open-ended question to our participants: "Have you felt comfortable discussing the event at work? Why or why not?" We received a range of responses, including participants noting that it wasn't worth "risking their job" to express their authentic reactions to the mega-threat events. Both Black and White participants generally feared that they would make their work colleagues "uncomfortable" if they discussed the event, leading employees to avoid these discussions. We found that when employees did feel comfortable having short conversations with their work colleagues about the events, it reduced the event's negative effects on employees and mitigated work withdrawal behaviors. We found that the ability to have open and honest conversations at work that specifically centered on race helped to reduce the need to actively hide or suppress

authentic emotions and reactions to mega-threats, which reduced the event's negative effects on employees and resulting workplace behaviors.

Building on decades of research demonstrating the benefits of psychological safety, or the feeling that it is safe to take risks and make mistakes at work, we refer to the ability to have open discussions centered on race at work as "identity-based" psychological safety. Although the workforce is more diverse than ever before and organizations are increasingly discussing the importance of this diversity, it is still relatively rare for work colleagues that are members of different racial groups to have open discussions that acknowledge racial differences. Yet we find that the ability to have honest conversations that acknowledge race and other forms of difference is imperative to enhancing employee psychological well-being and work habits in the wake of a mega-threat.

Imagine if back in 2016 when I was a graduate student at UNC, I had cultivated a relationship with my faculty colleagues that afforded us comfort with having discussions about race or the simple acknowledgement that we have differing experiences both within and outside the workplace that stem from our different racial backgrounds. If I had formed this relationship, I presume that when I was grappling with my own threat experience, which was triggered by mega-threat events, that I would not have felt the need to hide or suppress this threat. I likely would have responded to my coworker's inquiry genuinely by saying, "I'm actually not doing well today, have you seen the news?" Indeed, in our survey when participants described their own experiences discussing mega-threats at work, they often cited a relatively short conversation with their coworkers where there was an acknowledgement of the mega-threat and the negative psychological toll of these events.

Employees at any level in an organization can take steps toward cultivating identity-based psychological safety at work. The first step is pushing past initial thoughts that these discussions should not occur because they may make some employees feel uncomfortable. Our data suggests that both Black and White employees wish to discuss a current mega-threat, or to engage in a conversation that would highlight racial differences; yet many workplace participants have decided against forging these discussions in an effort to reduce discomfort. Recent research by Rachel Arnett from the Wharton School of Business on cultural identity expressions in the workplace and Stanford University scholars on cross-race conversations that center upon race demonstrates that conversations acknowledging racial differences have the potential to strengthen relationships and bring relationship partners closer. Beneficial discussions of race could start with acknowledging race and other social identities in a positive manner, such as discussing events tied to Historically Black institutions and celebrations of ethnic and religious holidays. Yet in order to truly cultivate an environment of identity-based psychological safety, relationship partners must also become comfortable with discussing negative aspects of social identity, including experiences of racism and discrimination. As these authentic relationships develop and multiply within and across organizations, it is our hope that employees belonging to a marginalized identity group feel more and more comfortable showing up to a work meeting the day after a mega-threat event and genuinely sharing with their work colleagues that they are in fact, "Not having the best day," given recent mega-threats that have captured the news cycle.

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