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BRIEFING PAPER

From poverty to flourishing: Covid perspective

Introduction

The coronavirus disease, named Covid-19, was first identified in China in December 2019. By mid-January 2021 the number of Covid-19 cases had already reached 95 million globally, with two million deaths, and cases continuing to rise exponentially (de Klerk et al., 2021). On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization Director General, gave a formal international press briefing, announcing to the world that a global pandemic had struck (World Health Organization, 2020). At this time most citizens within the Western world went about their daily working lives assuming that they would not be 'affected', and a state of normality would soon prevail. As time progressed, however, it became apparent to citizens, employees, and organisations globally that the world of work was about to dramatically change. Indeed severe consequences manifested in terms of job redundancies, organisational closures and collapse of industries. Thus, whilst Covid-19 is clearly an ongoing global health crisis, it is evident that it is also an international economic and organisational ongoing threat.

Similar to the global economic crisis of 2008 (Fotinos-Ventouratos & Cooper, 2015), it is apparent that today organisational and human costs of Covid-19 will last for a long time, compounded by changes in the larger organisational and global contexts. These consequences include not only economic poverty, but also a lack of social interaction resulting in a reduced sense of social cohesiveness. Thus it may be argued that the pandemic has contributed to poverty in both economic and social senses. For example, economic impacts are felt by those who have been furloughed or laid-off, and social impacts may be felt by those working from home or affected by social distancing (Kniffin et al., 2021). These challenges have been reported across the world. It is of paramount importance, therefore, that organisational psychologists as well as economists, government officials and scientists work together to explore and provide workable solutions and policies to shift people 'from poverty to flourishing.'

Poverty is multi-faceted; in addition to lack of income and resources, poverty can also encompass limited access to education, social exclusion, and lack of participation in decision-making (United Nations, 2020). It is important to note that 'Poverty is a fundamentally economic issue, not a psychological one. Psychological approaches provide effective means of supporting economic interventions and policy change but cannot alone be expected to solve the systematic issues at the heart of poverty in the UK' (Fell & Hewstone, 2015). Consequently, while psychologists can make a contribution to addressing this challenge, multi-agency solutions are required. In contrast to poverty, flourishing can be defined as 'a state where people experience positive emotions, positive psychological functioning, and positive social functioning, most of the time' (Norriss, 2010, p.47).

BRIEFING PAPER

SOCIETAL IMPLICATIONS

It is important to consider where we are, in terms of poverty, and where we would like to be as a nation state – thus, from ‘poverty to prosperity’. According to official statistics, 11.7 million people in the UK live in relative poverty, with 9.2 million considered to be in absolute poverty (Francis-Devine, 2021). Evidence provided by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) early in the pandemic reported that 12.5 million people had experienced financial impacts from the pandemic, with those in lower paid work reporting greater impact (Office for National Statistics, 2020). The ONS further found that parents were more likely to have been furloughed, more than twice as likely to report reduced income, and less likely to be able to afford large necessary expenses. Those who worked from home and those with income less than £20,000 were more likely to feel lonely. Official statistics also show that between 13 March 2020 and 14 May 2020 there were 2.4 million new starts on Universal Credit, with the total number of people on Universal Credit peaking at 6 million in March 2021 (Department of Work and Pensions, 2021).

There are also inequalities in health. The recent update to the Marmot review (Marmot et al., 2020), noted that for many specific groups in England, overall health and life expectancy are deteriorating and there are clear systematic inequalities in the groups for whom this is happening. The effects of poverty, even in Covid-19 times, are not uniform. Broadly speaking, poorer communities, children, women, and those living in the North of England, have experienced little or no improvement since 2010. The above figures suggest that there is an urgent need to put flourishing at the core of governmental policymaking, and to ensure that action is taken to tackle poverty and support citizens, families, and communities in the UK.

In our attempt to address such pivotal issues of concern in the aftermath of Covid-19, specific vulnerable, and often isolated, groups warrant immediate attention and action, with appropriate policies put in place. For instance, economically disadvantaged households with school-aged children have been at greater risk of food insecurity (i.e. inability to purchase enough supplies to meet basic dietary needs) during school holidays, contributing also to household strain (Stretesky et al., 2020). Thus, until suitable economic policies are established to rectify this situation, the UK will continue to see large sectors of its population suffer and struggle, often disproportionately. Indeed decision makers need to understand that the social determinants of health can guide society-wide policies (Ryan et al., 2020). However, any Covid-19 management techniques will need to take different sectors of the population into account whilst addressing the most vulnerable members of UK society. Policies therefore, must align with those in most need, such as establishing support for the provision of health, social protections, and even unemployment insurance. Another possibility is further expanding the current UK National Living Wage, which has recently been extended to the age cohorts of 23 (from 25), as of 1 April 2021 (Gov.uk, 2021). More radically, some have called for the introduction of Universal Basic Income (UBI), in which all citizens receive a regular payment without means-testing nor conditions (Johnson & Roberto, 2020; Marston & Peterie, 2020). UBI has been suggested as a strategy for managing the challenges of the pandemic, and economic challenges such as automation, the growing gap between poor and rich, and the need for decarbonisation. There is evidence that routine unconditional payments are beneficial for wellbeing (Wilson & McDaid, 2021). However, there is debate regarding the implementation of UBI, including the cost implications, whether it is an efficient use of resources (e.g. by not targeting those most at need), and what forms would most alleviate poverty (Loft et al., 2020).

Certainly, then, an immediate need for broad consensus to gradually restart UK society and working with a suitable framework will provide greater stability, equality, and sustainability across the UK. Even indirect measures to reduce poverty, for example, through childcare cost reductions and reducing heating costs in winter, are worthy of thought and action. Thus, it is suggested that Government officials and local authorities should create suitable protective services to assist children and families most in need.

ORGANISATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

There are a number of organisational challenges on which psychologists can offer insight. However, in moving ‘from poverty to flourishing’ there should be consideration for the right to just and favourable conditions of work, and the right to a standard of living suitable for health, enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, n.d.) and the European Social Charter (Council of Europe, 2015). Consequently, it is important that organisations support a just transition to flourishing conditions.

For employees there are a number of factors associated with the pandemic that may produce psychological challenges. Firstly, there is anxiety related to Covid-19 itself, e.g. fear of catching the coronavirus and/or passing it to others (Hu et al., 2020; Trougakos & McCarthy, 2020). We may reasonably expect this anxiety to be greater for those who are at higher risk from Covid-19, such as older workers, people of minority ethnic backgrounds, and those who have compromised immune systems. It will therefore be vital that organisations consider the needs of a diverse workforce, who cannot be assumed to have low risk. Organisations already need to assess risks associated with Covid-19 and identify groups particularly at risk, so it is important to consider anxieties that may be experienced. These may be exacerbated for at-risk individuals in regions where Covid-19 measures are not in place or are not followed.

Secondly, the pandemic has contributed to feelings of job insecurity (Lin et al., 2021; Lippens et al., 2021). This has in part been due to the economic impact of the pandemic itself and measures used to control the spread of Covid-19, e.g. lockdowns. This has impacted some more than others, for example those who work in the hospitality sector have been at greater risk of job loss, which may particularly affect younger workers. On the other hand, many workers, e.g. in retail were labelled as ‘essential workers’ exempt from requirements to stay at home. However, these essential workers are often low paid, faced increased risks at work due to the pandemic, and often lacked alternative choices to their situation (Loustaunau et al., 2021) – thus being required did not make these workers’ existence less precarious.

There is evidence to suggest that this insecurity may over time result in emotional exhaustion and psychological ill-health, threaten individuals’ self-concept, and impair work performance (de Witte et al., 2016; Lin et al., 2021; Selenko et al., 2017). It is important for organisational leaders to be aware that employees are likely to be managing anxiety and aim to support employees through this difficult time. Evidence suggests that during turbulent times organisations should increase communications with employees, even if this may mean communicating that there is no news, or that there is bad news. In the absence of communication, individuals are likely to seek ‘clues’ about the organisation’s future and may interpret the situation as worse than it is.

This insecurity has consequences both for individual employees, teams, and the organisations in which they work. Insecurity, together with constraints on taking sick leave and high work demands, can result in employees engaging in presenteeism (Johns, 2010; Miraglia & Johns, 2016) – the act of going to work while sick. Some individuals are at greater risk – for example those living in poverty, with poorly paid work, may feel that realistically they cannot take sick leave. Those who live with chronic illness, because they experience ill health more frequently, may find themselves having to choose strategically when to take leave to avoid losing their job. The consequences for individuals are that they are likely to take longer to recover and are more likely to have sickness absenteeism in the future. From an organisational perspective, productivity is likely to be impacted by presenteeism, indeed the costs of presenteeism are estimated to be higher than those of absenteeism. The pandemic adds an additional risk to presenteeism, as individuals with ‘mild’ symptoms may feel pressure to attend work (Kinman & Grant, 2021) thus increasing the risk of spreading Covid-19 to colleagues.

Staff shortages resulting from the pandemic (e.g. increased sickness absence) are likely to increase workload pressure, and likely to encourage presenteeism as employees are reluctant to 'let down' colleagues. There are a number of ways to mitigate these risks. Firstly, it is important that organisational leaders encourage employees to take leave when sick, and that they role model these behaviours themselves. If leaders say that others should not work when sick, but then engage in presenteeism, this is likely to undermine their communications. Secondly, it is important to ensure that staffing levels are appropriate for the workload to be undertaken. When it is not possible to increase staffing levels, this may mean organisations need to prioritise (e.g. what tasks are undertaken at all) or find new ways of doing things (e.g. seeking to simplify or automate tasks). Appropriate matches in resources and demands are needed for employees to flourish.

Thirdly, while many workers encountered additional stressors in face-to-face work, many others were engaged in remote work, e.g. working from home (WFH). While WFH existed before the pandemic, it was practiced by far fewer individuals compared to the present times. Some of the challenges included working whilst also managing childcare responsibilities – including home schooling – managing technological difficulties, and the blurred boundaries between work and non-work (Allen et al., 2021; Meyer et al., 2021; Vaziri et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021). As with other challenges, these are not felt equally in the working population. Women were more likely to experience emotional exhaustion, which is likely to be at least partly due to the tendency for women to have a greater share of caregiving duties. Those who have dedicated office space are likely to have better work-life balance, but poorer individuals are less likely to have these facilities, leading to employees working in kitchens or other living areas. Furthermore, these arrangements are less likely to be ergonomically suitable, presenting greater threat of physical health problems.

Organisations can help by providing office equipment for employees, and by prioritising individuals lacking suitable resources for office space when it is safe to do so. Similarly, with more individuals engaging in internet mediated work, some workers are likely to encounter technostress, e.g. due to difficulties managing new systems (e.g. Zoom meetings) or poor bandwidth. In the latter case, people from poorer households may be more affected, which may impact their ability to contribute to meetings. Again, organisations can support employees with the provision of resources, which might include subsidising higher quality internet connections. This could also help overcome inequalities, for instance so that an employee working remotely from a low-income home is not disadvantaged compared to other colleagues, and may enhance opportunities to flourish.

Work-life balance can contribute to flourishing but this has been challenging for many, with individuals often working longer hours. This may be because workers experiencing job insecurity are seeking to prove themselves indispensable to their employer. Other factors may include making use of time that previously was spent in commuting. There are different approaches to boundary management, e.g. 'segmentation' in which work and non-work are kept distinct, e.g. focusing on work during normal hours, and then disengaging; and 'integration' in which individuals may move between work and non-work, e.g. managing personal business during work time and answering emails outside of working hours. While there is evidence to suggest that segmentation approaches are associated with less emotional exhaustion (Allen et al., 2021) it is important to remember that there is no 'one size fits all' approach. For example, integration boundary management may help individuals more flexibly manage multiple commitments. Social support, including from managers, contributes to better outcomes (Lamprinou et al., 2021; Meyer et al., 2021; Vaziri et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2021), with leaders demonstrating care and concern for employees and being protective of psychological wellbeing. Some of the steps leaders and managers can take include 'checking in' with employees regarding their wellbeing and encouraging people to take breaks and switch off from work. Employees will vary in their willingness to discuss wellbeing with managers, so it is important to signpost resources such as sources of support and occupational health provision so that employees can access these independently. Organisations should also avoid controlling behaviour; while some organisations have engaged in surveillance of employees (e.g. to monitor productivity during remote work) this is likely to contribute to

employee burnout (e.g. as a result of feeling unable to take breaks as needed) and to counterproductive work behaviours, as employees respond to a perceived lack of trust. Thus, support from leaders, managers, and organisations can make an important contribution to the flourishing of employees.

While remote work presents challenges, it can also provide benefits and arguably contribute to the conditions for flourishing. Pre-pandemic research suggests that work-life balance can enhance employees' perception of autonomy, their work-life balance, and their job satisfaction, with employees more productive and more committed to their organisations (Charalampous et al., 2019; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Martin & Macdonnell, 2012). Organisational leaders should therefore remember that while WFH has been problematic for some, it has been beneficial for others. At present various organisational representatives are hailing either, the end of the office, insisting that employees 'return to work', or declaring a hybrid future. A more nuanced approach is recommended, with employees being given freedom and support for a mode of working that suits their preferences where it is compatible with the requirements of their job. While some jobs must be completed on-site – at least at present – many jobs are compatible with flexible approaches. This may help organisations manage Covid-19 risks through reduced site occupancy, and for some organisations may enable reduced building or office rental costs. Employee choice is likely to be key to flourishing, with constrained employees (forced to work on site, or from home) at risk of poorer wellbeing. Further, forcing employees to engage in a work mode chosen by the employer may increase employee turnover amongst those with a thwarted preference and the ability to find alternative work.

In short, it will be crucial for organisations to recognise that employees have had varied work experiences during the pandemic, and these are likely to be influenced by socio-economic factors. Consequently, they have varied needs in the present and future. A flexible and nuanced approach in managing and supporting employees is recommended, with options for different ways of working where plausible. Compassionate approaches to leadership are likely to lead to better outcomes for both individual employees and organisations. There are signs of an increased turnover intention in employees worldwide (Microsoft, 2021) sometimes labelled 'the great resignation', due to factors such as employee treatment during the pandemic, re-evaluation of priorities, and finding new opportunities due to remote work. As such, there are 'business case' reasons as well as moral reasons for addressing employee wellbeing.

CONCLUSION

We acknowledge that all scientists and leaders are being faced with the biggest challenges of recent times. There is no immediate guarantee in crisis management that prosperity will be created. However, we are confident that there is opportunity for an optimistic approach, if the above strategies inform action plans and policies, and if a united and holistic approach is taken. At a societal level there is a need to be mindful about reinvesting in good quality and active labour markets, to move with caution on a road that is unfamiliar to all citizens, whilst ensuring that we do all we can to flourish and sustain a healthy nation state. Organisations, too, must invest in the wellbeing of employees. As a fundamental condition, we recommend that such changes always involve fairness and justice at the community, organisational and governmental level.

AUTHORS

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