

The Interrelationship Between Workplace Discrimination and Health

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Abstract:

Workplace discrimination has become a social issue that urgently needs attention worldwide. It not only undermines fairness and justice in the workplace but also influences the mental health and physical health of employees at a deeper level. This study takes “The Relationship between workplace discrimination and health” as its theme, aiming to systematically clarify its direct impact, mechanism of action, and coping strategies. Specifically, this study, by integrating empirical evidence and theoretical models, reveals four key pathways of action: firstly, the Psychological Stress Pathway explains how long-term stress and self-stigmatization disrupt psychological balance; secondly, the Behavioral Change Pathway reflects unhealthy coping styles and the absence of healthy behaviors caused by discrimination; thirdly, the Social Resource Deprivation Pathway highlights the negative consequences brought about by the obstruction of social support and career development; finally, Barriers to Healthcare Utilization reveals the underutilization of health services caused by stigma and economic constraints. On this basis, the research further proposed a three-level coping framework: At the individual level, it emphasizes psychological adjustment, social support and legal rights protection; At the organizational level, emphasis is placed on institutional construction, diversity training and health assistance programs; At the policy and societal level, it is required to improve anti-discrimination laws and regulations, strengthen supervision and public education. Overall, this study not only deepens the understanding of the complex relationship between workplace discrimination and health, but also provides practical inspiration and policy recommendations for promoting workplace equity and public health as a whole.

Keywords: Workplace discrimination; health inequality; psychological stress; coping strategies; social support.

1. Introduction

Workplace discrimination has become a widely concerning phenomenon in society and has a profound impact on the mental and physical Health of employees. In the context of globalization and diversity, there still exists unequal treatment based on non-professional ability factors such as gender, age, race, disability and sexual orientation in key links such as recruitment, promotion and compensation. This not only violates the principle of fair employment but also threatens the overall well-being of individuals and groups. With the growing attention to diversity and equality issues, an in-depth exploration of the relationship between workplace discrimination and health has significant academic and practical significance.

The research topic focuses on the multi-dimensional impact and mechanism of action of workplace discrimination on health. Empirical evidence has shown that employees who suffer from Discrimination have a higher risk of mental illness, with significantly increased levels of depression and anxiety [1]. On the physical health dimension, Discrimination can lead to endocrine disorders through Stress Response, causing chronic diseases such as hypertension, cardiovascular diseases and diabetes [2]. On the social health dimension, employees who have been under unequal treatment for a long time often experience isolation and resource deprivation, and their job satisfaction and quality of life decline accordingly [3]. Therefore, a comprehensive exploration of this issue from psychological, behavioral, and social perspectives helps to understand how Discrimination shapes employee Health in multiple dimensions.

In previous studies, a number of empirical studies have verified the close relationship between workplace discrimination and health. A survey conducted in 2021 among 1,567 employees of Swiss hospitals revealed that 17.4% of individuals who were discriminated against self-rated their health as "poor", and their risk was 1.97 times that of those who were not discriminated against and accompanied by a significant increase in the level of Burnout [4]. This indicates that Discrimination has a superimposed effect on mental health and job burnout. Meanwhile, qualitative research further reveals that individuals who have long been in a Discrimination environment are prone to self-stigmatization and identity crises, manifested as low self-esteem and psychological imbalance. In terms of group differences, empirical research has further revealed the direct impact of workplace discrimination on the health of different populations. Longitudinal surveys show that individuals who have suffered Discrimination have a 23% higher level of depression in middle age (33-37 years old) than those who have not been discriminated against ($p<0.01$), indicating that mental health impairment has

long-term effects [5]. For Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ+) individuals, 15% had a 40% increase in the number of days with mental health problems due to Discrimination related to sexual orientation, and a 32% decrease in self-rated health scores ($p<0.001$) [6]. In terms of physical health, employees with lower perceptual control had a 1.8 times higher incidence of chronic diseases when encountering Discrimination (95% CI: 1.2-2.7) [1]. When female groups encounter workplace discrimination such as sexual harassment, their average life expectancy will shorten as the incidence rate increases. Specifically, for every 10% increase in the incidence rate of sexual harassment, female life expectancy decreased by 0.7 years ($\beta=-0.07$, $p<0.05$) [7]. These findings collectively indicate that there is a multi-dimensional and complex causal chain between Discrimination and Health, and it has significant negative effects both psychologically and physiologically.

Furthermore, with the digital and intelligent development of the working environment, emerging management methods such as algorithmic screening and remote working may also amplify the hidden risks of Discrimination, thereby invisibly increasing the psychological burden and health inequality of employees. Thus, research on this topic not only holds academic value but also offers new challenges and opportunities for labor policies, corporate governance, and social equity practices.

This study aims to systematically explore the interacting mechanism between workplace discrimination and health based on existing data and relevant literature and further propose coping strategies. In terms of research design, the article first defines the core concepts of workplace discrimination and health, then analyzes their mechanisms of action, covering the psychological stress pathway, behavioral change pathway, social resource deprivation pathway and medical treatment obstacle pathway. Next, discuss the deep impact of Discrimination on Health Inequality in combination with group differences. Finally, targeted countermeasures are proposed from the individual, company and policy levels, with the aim of providing theoretical references and policy inspirations for academic research and social practice. In summary, this study aims to bridge the gap between academic analysis and social application, providing a systematic perspective for achieving fair employment and health promotion.

2. Conceptual Clarification

2.1 Definition and Core Features of Workplace Discrimination

Workplace discrimination refers to unfair treatment based

on non-professional ability factors such as gender, age, race, disability, sexual orientation, and educational background in key links such as recruitment, promotion, and compensation [8]. This phenomenon is different from the legitimate rewards and punishments based on performance. Its essence lies in the biased and differentiated treatment of individual identity attributes.

Its core features are mainly reflected in three aspects. First, concealment, that is, Discrimination is not always presented in a public form but often manifests itself through covert exclusion or deprivation of opportunities. Second, repeatability, that is, it is often a long-term and continuous process rather than a one-off accidental event. Third, there is an imbalance of power, which is manifested in the institutional and structural advantages of employers or superiors at the organizational level, putting employees in a disadvantaged position. From this, it can be seen that workplace discrimination has a boundary with reasonable management behavior, the latter of which rewards and punishments are based on objective performance indicators, while the former is unfair treatment based on non-ability factors.

2.2 Major Types of Workplace Discrimination

Workplace discrimination can be classified into four major categories. First, discrimination based on identity attributes, such as gender discrimination which is manifested as the prejudice that “women’s marriage and childbearing affect their work”, age discrimination as the “35-year-old career threshold”, and disability discrimination as the denial of an individual’s working ability. Second, career development discrimination, including promotion ceilings, such as the difficulty for ethnic minorities to enter management positions. Another typical case is the pay gap, with the typical phenomenon being unequal pay for equal work. Third, workplace behavior discrimination involves verbal humiliation, isolation and exclusion, as well as the allocation of excessive and unreasonable tasks to specific groups, such as high-intensity work for pregnant women. Fourth, implicit discrimination, such as “backroom operations” in recruitment, is manifested as the direct elimination of resumes from non-prestigious university graduates, as well as inequality caused by algorithmic bias in AI recruitment screening [9].

2.3 Dimensions of Health

Before understanding the relationship between workplace discrimination and Health, it is necessary to clarify the multi-dimensional connotation of Health.

First, in terms of physical health, Discrimination may lead to physical illness and functional impairment of the body, such as hypertension and digestive system diseases.

Second, in terms of mental health, individuals who have been in a discriminatory environment for a long time are more prone to anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and at the same time, their self-esteem levels decline, and their psychological balance is disrupted.

Third, in terms of social health, Discrimination may lead to the deterioration of an individual’s interpersonal relationships, a decrease in work engagement, and a decline in life satisfaction. From this, it can be seen that Health is not only the absence of physical diseases but also includes psychological stability and social adaptability.

3. Mechanisms of Influence between Workplace Discrimination and Health

3.1 Psychological Stress Pathway

Workplace discrimination has an impact on employees’ Health, which is first reflected in the Psychological Stress Pathway. When individuals experience unfair treatment for a long time, they tend to develop a persistent Stress Response. This kind of stress response not only leads to emotional imbalance, but also gradually evolves into Emotion Regulation Disorder. Employees who suffer from discrimination often show higher levels of depression and anxiety, and neurotic personality traits amplify this negative effect. Theoretically, this echoes the Stress Accumulation Theory, which states that long-term accumulated stress can transform into chronic psychological burden [10].

In this process, the individual’s Self-Stigmatization plays a crucial role. Repeated exposure to Discrimination can weaken employees’ sense of self-worth and subsequently trigger an Identity Crisis [11]. In comparison, minority groups are particularly vulnerable to this mechanism. For instance, the LGBTQ+ community experiences a significant decline in self-assessed health in the workplace due to exclusion. This phenomenon indicates that discrimination is not only a product of the external social structure but also internalized as a psychological predicament at the individual level. Moreover, psychological imbalance can further trigger Burnout, which is manifested as emotional exhaustion, cynicism and a decline in a sense of achievement. This kind of job burnout is not only a direct result of impaired mental health, but also an inevitable reaction of individuals being constantly under stress.

3.2 Behavioral Change Pathway

Secondly, workplace discrimination acts on individual health through the Behavioral Change Pathway. In the face of discrimination, some employees will adopt un-

healthy coping methods to relieve psychological pressure. That is, in a high-pressure environment, individuals are more inclined to adopt short-term negative behaviors to relieve emotions. Studies show that racial discrimination is positively correlated with smoking rates, and sexual harassment is significantly associated with the risk of alcohol abuse among women [12]. Moreover, these risky behaviors often cause long-term health damage, such as cardiovascular diseases or liver diseases.

On the other hand, Discrimination can also undermine health protection behaviors. Due to low mood and social exclusion, employees often lose motivation to maintain a healthy lifestyle, such as exercise, regular schedules and a healthy diet. At the same time, negative experiences in the workplace can also reduce employees' Work Engagement, manifested as idleness and frequent job-hopping [13]. This employment instability, in turn, weakens an individual's sense of security in life, thereby further affecting their health.

3.3 Social Resource Deprivation Pathway

In addition, another important mechanism of workplace discrimination for health is the Social Resource Deprivation Pathway. When individuals encounter discrimination, they are often isolated by colleagues or superiors, thus losing the necessary social support [3]. Generally speaking, the support from colleagues and superiors can significantly mitigate the harm of discrimination against mental health, while the lack of support will exacerbate the negative consequences. Theoretically, this is consistent with the Social Support Buffering Model, that is, social support can play a mediating role between stressful events and health.

Furthermore, Discrimination can lead to obstacles in career development. Promotion discrimination restricts an individual's career advancement path, causing them to develop Learned Helplessness in the long term [14]. This state not only reduces an individual's sense of self-efficacy but also weakens their positive expectations for the future. Consequently, long-term insufficiency of social and occupational resources can translate into mental illness and physical damage, thereby causing health inequality at the group level.

3.4 Barriers to Healthcare Utilization

Finally, Workplace discrimination further exacerbates health risks through Barriers to Healthcare Utilization. Some groups choose to avoid medical services due to a sense of stigma associated with illness. For instance, people with disabilities may conceal their health issues or postpone treatment due to concerns about discrimination during medical treatment [15]. This Healthcare Avoidance

not only delays illness but also accumulates long-term health risks for individuals.

At the same time, Discrimination is often accompanied by economic restrictions. Due to employment discrimination, minority or marginalized groups are more likely to be in a low-income state, thereby lacking the ability to access high-quality medical services [13]. Among them, part-time workers or the unemployed suffer more severe health damage when encountering Discrimination. This phenomenon is precisely the result of the superimposition of Economic Restriction and insufficient medical accessibility. Moreover, this kind of obstacle is not only reflected at the individual level, but also exacerbates Health Inequality at the social level, making it more difficult for vulnerable groups to compensate for the damage caused by discrimination through formal channels.

4. Coping Strategies to Mitigate the Health Impact of Workplace Discrimination

4.1 Individual-Level Coping Measures

At the individual level, the key for employees to deal with workplace discrimination lies in actively making psychological and behavioral adjustments. Research has found that mindfulness training and cognitive reconstruction can help employees adjust negative emotions and alleviate the erosion of long-term Stress on mental health [1]. By challenging the negative perception of "self-stigmatization", individuals can gradually restore a positive evaluation of their self-worth, thereby reducing the risk of depression and anxiety.

Moreover, the construction of social support networks plays an important role in alleviating the effect of discrimination. Joining anti-discrimination mutual aid organizations not only offers emotional comfort but also helps employees access resources through information sharing, thereby enhancing their stress resistance [14]. In addition, the support from colleagues and superiors can effectively buffer the negative impact of workplace discrimination on mental health, while external support groups play an extended role in supplementing resources and enhancing a sense of belonging.

In addition, enhancing legal awareness of rights protection is also an important strategy at the individual level. By studying laws and regulations such as the Labor Law and the Anti-Discrimination Law, employees can promptly record evidence when encountering Discrimination and file complaints through legal channels [15]. This not only helps protect one's own rights and interests but also can to a certain extent curb the occurrence of workplace discrim-

ination.

4.2 Company-Level Coping Measures

At the company level, the construction of organizational systems and culture is an important link in reducing the health impact of Discrimination. First of all, the company should establish clear anti-discrimination regulations and set up anonymous reporting channels to ensure that employees can report problems without fear of retaliation [3]. Such institutional arrangements can structurally reduce the incidence of discriminatory behavior and enhance employees' sense of security.

Furthermore, diversity training and cultural shaping are important means to promote awareness of equality. By conducting multicultural education and management training, organizations can help employees understand the value of Workplace Diversity and reduce biases based on gender, race or sexual orientation [3]. This cultural transformation not only improves the workplace atmosphere but also provides a healthier psychological environment for disadvantaged groups.

Besides, the provision of health support resources is also a key measure at the company level. The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) has a significant effect in alleviating the psychological distress caused by Discrimination [1]. By offering free psychological counseling, regular health check-ups and emergency psychological intervention services, companies can also help employees better cope with negative events, reduce psychological burdens and physical damage.

4.3 Policy and Societal-level Coping Measures

At the policy and social levels, the improvement of laws and regulations and the enhancement of their enforcement are the fundamental guarantees for addressing workplace discrimination. The definition and penalty standards of Discrimination should be clearly defined to effectively curb the spread of inequality. Meanwhile, regular inspections by labor supervision departments and the public exposure of typical cases are also important ways to enhance the enforcement of the system [16].

Meanwhile, public education is indispensable in eliminating social prejudice. Promoting the concept of anti-discrimination through documentaries, public service advertisements and media publicity can enhance the public's awareness of Workplace Equality and reduce the legalization and normalization of discriminatory behaviors from the root [3]. The improvement of the social support atmosphere is directly related to the enhancement of individuals' health perception levels, which further indicates the positive role of public education in health promotion. Finally, the response at the social level also needs to

emphasize multi-party collaboration mechanisms. The government, enterprises and social organizations should establish a linkage relationship to jointly promote the implementation of anti-discrimination policies. Social organizations have flexibility in providing psychological intervention and legal aid, enterprises play a direct regulatory role within the organization, and the government offers top-level design through laws and policies. This collaborative cooperation among multiple entities can form a synergy, thereby mitigating the negative impact of workplace discrimination on health on a larger scale.

5. Conclusion

This article takes workplace discrimination as the research core and systematically explores its multi-dimensional influence on employee Health and the mechanism of action. By reviewing previous research and empirical data, this article reveals that workplace discrimination not only directly harms individuals' mental and physical health, but also indirectly exacerbates health inequality through mechanisms such as Psychological Stress Pathway, Behavioral Change Pathway, Social Resource Deprivation Pathway and Healthcare Utilization Barriers. In particular, minority groups such as LGBTQ+, women and ethnic minorities are more likely to have an increased risk of "poor" self-rated health and Burnout levels in Discrimination situations, highlighting the importance of group differences. In terms of research methods, this paper mainly relies on the induction and comparison of literature, combined with empirical research data for summary and explanation, thereby presenting the complex causal chain between Discrimination and Health in a relatively comprehensive manner. This approach not only helps us identify the direct and indirect health effects of discrimination but also helps reveal the unique predicaments faced by different groups in the face of health inequality.

Future research should be deepened in three directions: First, further clarify the long-term health consequences of workplace discrimination through longitudinal follow-up studies; Second, expand cross-cultural and cross-industry comparisons to reveal the differences under various social systems and organizational cultures; Third, more psychological and sociological theories should be introduced into mechanism research to enhance the explanatory power for internal processes such as "self-stigmatization" and "learned helplessness".

At the practical level, this study proposes multi-level coping strategies. For individuals, it is necessary to enhance psychological adjustment, build a social support network and raise awareness of legal rights protection. For companies, a fair and healthy working environment should be created through system construction, diversity train-

ing and health support services. At the policy and social levels, it is necessary to improve laws and regulations, strengthen law enforcement and supervision, and promote public education to fundamentally weaken the legalization and socialization of workplace discrimination.

All in all, the impact of workplace discrimination is both extensive and profound, and it has significant sociological and public health significance. By integrating efforts at the individual, organizational and social levels, the adverse effects of discrimination on health can be alleviated to a certain extent, and feasible paths can be provided for achieving a higher level of workplace equity and social health.

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