



Racism and Mental Health: A Qualitative Study with Humanitarian Workers

Project type

☐ interdisciplinary pilot project ☐ cross-sector project ☒ global health postdoc fellowship

Research areas involved (check all that apply)

☐ Biomedical sciences ☒ Public health
☒ Social sciences and humanities ☐ Engineering and other sciences

Project duration

Novmeber 2022 – December 2024

Project team¹

Name	Organization	Discipline(s)
Dr. Hannah Strohmeier	Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin	Global health, media, international relations

Case study

Introduction

The humanitarian workforce is large and diverse, encompassing staff from a wide range of nationalities, ethnicities, professional backgrounds, ages, and genders. Despite this diversity, there is limited systematically collected data on the prevalence and forms of racism experienced or witnessed within humanitarian organizations. Even less is known about racism as a determinant of mental health and wellbeing in this occupational group. This project sought to address this gap by investigating how racism manifests in humanitarian organizations, how it impacts staff mental health, and how organizations respond to these issues.

Project Activities

The project employed a three-pronged approach:

1. **Analysis of UN Staff Union Data**

Existing but unpublished quantitative and qualitative data on racism within UN offices in Geneva were analysed, providing insight into workplace dynamics and staff experiences.

2. **Thematic Analysis of Public Narratives**

Articles from *The Guardian's* "Secret Aid Worker" series (2015–2018) were analyzed. This

¹ This list may differ from your original application and will appear in the report on our website. Please include all core team members, including (if applicable) international and/or cross-sector partners.



unique archive captures humanitarian workers' candid reflections on their profession, organizational culture, and lived experiences.

3. Interviews with Humanitarian Workers and Staff Care Professionals

The largest component involved conducting online and in-person interviews with two groups:

- **In-house mental health professionals** responsible for staff care
- **Humanitarian workers** based in Amman and Nairobi, two major humanitarian hubs

The interviews focused on personal understandings of racism, its impact on mental health, coping strategies, and the role of organizational support.

The findings were disseminated through two peer-reviewed publications (*PLOS One* and *Disasters*) and a documentary film, *Colour*, which featured staff interviews from Nairobi and highlighted the link between racism and mental health. Additional publications are in preparation.

Key Findings

The project produced three central findings:

1. Racism remains a persistent and under-addressed concern

Although many organizations initiated diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs following the 2020 racial justice uprisings, explicit discussion of racism has diminished, often absorbed into broader DEI agendas.

2. Racism negatively impacts mental health and wellbeing

Many interviewees reported that experiencing or witnessing racism in the workplace harmed their mental health, contributing to chronic stress and feelings of exclusion.

3. Racism and mental health are treated in silos

At the policy level, the link between racism and mental health is rarely acknowledged. Very few staff sought in-house psychosocial support for racism-related issues, which may weaken both anti-racism initiatives and staff care efforts.

Lessons Learned

• Engagement in sensitive research requires reassurance

Some participants were hesitant to contribute, citing lack of expertise or fear of not being “entitled” to speak about racism or mental health. Emphasizing that every perspective is valid proved essential in recruitment and participation.

• Documentary filmmaking is resource-intensive but impactful

Producing *Colour* required significant time, labor, and funding. However, it was widely appreciated by practitioners (and scholars), received more attention than academic publications, and proved to be a powerful catalyst for dialogue and change.

• In-house mental health professionals are an under-researched group

Although difficult to access due to confidentiality requirements, heavy workloads, and limited availability, their insights are invaluable. Few studies have examined this group, yet their expertise and experience could substantially advance research on humanitarian staff wellbeing.



Conclusion

This project underscores that racism within humanitarian organizations is both real and consequential, with clear implications for staff mental health and organizational effectiveness. By drawing attention to the overlooked intersection of racism and mental health, the research highlights the need for more explicit discussions, integrated policies, and inclusive support systems. Furthermore, it demonstrates that creative dissemination strategies—such as documentary film—can complement academic publications and help drive change within the humanitarian sector.

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Publications:

- Dilger, H., Geeraert, J., Goronga, T., Mair, L., Mehran, N., Probst, U., Frankfurter, R., Greiwe, V.-L., Jaeger, M., Kluge, U., Pape, J., Plummer, J., Strohmeier, H., Vonk, L., & Holmes, S. M. (2025). Grounding global health in care: connecting decoloniality and migration through racialization. *Global Public Health*, 20(1), 1-16.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2025.2480646>
- Strohmeier, H., Karunakara, U., & Panter-Brick, C. (2024). Public discourse narratives: From 'Secret Aid Worker' discontent to shifting power in humanitarian systems. *Disasters*, 1-22.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12651>
- Strohmeier, H., Musizvingoza, R., & Sajnani, N. (2024). Racial discrimination within United Nations offices in Geneva: Results from an online survey. *Plos One*, 19(1), e0295715.
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0295715>

Documentary Colour: www.colour-mentalhealth.com

Contact

German Alliance for Global Health Research (GLOHRA)

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