

## Ethikos Volume 35, Number 2. March 25, 2021 Reflections on diversity and inclusion during COVID-19

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By Junna Ro

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Those of us who work for companies that mobilized quickly to enable employees to work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic—in industries where this is even feasible—feel fortunate. The possibly once-in-a-lifetime experience of living during a global outbreak of a highly infectious, novel virus has had such a disruptive, devastating impact on the world around us. For me, it has triggered such a range of emotions, particularly as it became apparent that this strange, new alternative universe would be our reality for the foreseeable future. After a particularly thought-provoking conversation with a friend, I've reflected on this time and its connection to another issue that matters: diversity and inclusion in the workplace.

### **Different realities**

I have such gratitude for a job that allows me to continue to work safely from home and for a company that has been so thoughtful and caring in its approach to this broadscale change to the workplace. I have also been vigilant about avoiding infection for myself and my family and have adapted day-to-day activities, like ordering groceries online and switching to contactless pickup for virtually all imaginable needs.

The workday has changed dramatically too, and I find myself overcompensating for not being physically in the office—manically replying to multiple, often simultaneous, instant message threads while taking back-to-back video call meetings. Hours pass before I remember to get up from my seat as I power through the weeks that have now bled into months, determined to demonstrate that I can make this all work successfully. I am daunted by the efforts required to try to be all things to all people during this time: productive worker; responsive, empathetic leader; insightful business partner; nurturing mother; thoughtful daughter; masterful, resourceful home chef.

Overwhelmed with the hectic frenzy of activity required to manage my pandemic life, I relish the few moments of downtime I have, like my regular virtual happy hour with my girlfriends. On a recent video call, as I looked at all of their faces, I asked how everyone was doing. I assumed we were all living this same harried, frazzled, and hopelessly exhausting life, and I looked forward to commiserating. Then one of my friends answered, “I am actually pretty lonely.” This stopped me in my tracks. How could that be, with all that we are managing? To my friend, a single woman who lives alone in a chic urban apartment, her quarantine experience clearly looked very different from mine. How could we both be experiencing the same event in such vastly different ways? Her perspective felt completely foreign to me, and I found myself pondering it repeatedly over the next several weeks.

Needless to say, the current predicament we have found ourselves in has presented incredible challenges on so many levels, underscoring for me that quarantine at home does not look the same for everyone. In fact, it looks infinitely different depending on whom you talk to. Each story, each adaptation of this surreal experience reflects our different living arrangements, family dynamics, economic situation, personal strengths and weaknesses, values, disabilities, dependencies, fears, interests, and so on—indeed, far too many dimensions to list entirely. Considering these aspects, I began to realize why reflection on diversity and inclusion is so important in my role as a legal and compliance professional.

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We often make assumptions that people understand and share our perspectives, and we make decisions—and reach conclusions—based on those assumptions. However, I am regularly reminded, especially now, that this line of thinking is often shortsighted. What has become crystal clear during this unprecedented time is that there is no one shared experience.

We hear others' stories on the news, through social media, and from our colleagues at work. Some people are primary caregivers for high-risk family members and have heightened concerns about bringing a potentially deadly virus into the home. Some have young children who need regular care and supervision, while others have new “coworkers” at home in the form of working adult children, partners, spouses, and roommates, making tough compromises and adapting their workstyles. Some are doctors who are living temporarily in hotels so as not to risk infecting their families at home. Others are struggling to manage their mental health issues, exacerbated by their inability to access meaningful interventions. And interestingly enough, many people have actually welcomed a simplified lifestyle at home, pared down to the basics for a newfound sense of quiet introspection and inner calm. For better or worse, everyone has a uniquely individual experience, from their response to the stay-at-home order to their employment situation to the set of expectations placed on them.

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