

No Choice but to Be Essential: Expanding Dimensions of Precarity During COVID-19

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Abstract

Under COVID-19, low-wage service sector workers found themselves as essential workers vulnerable to intensified precarity. Based on in-depth interviews with a sample of 52 low-wage service workers interviewed first in Summer 2019 and then in the last two weeks of April 2020, we argue that COVID-19 has created new and heightened dimensions of precarity for low-wage workers. They experience (1) moments of what we call *precarious stability*, in which an increase in hours and predictable schedules is accompanied by unpredictability in the tasks workers are assigned, (2) increased threats to bodily integrity, and (3) experiences of fear and anxiety as background conditions of work and intensified emotional labor. The impacts of COVID-19 on workers' lives warrant an expanded conceptualization of precarity that captures the dynamic and shifting nature of precarious stability and must incorporate workers' limited control over their bodily integrity and emotions as core components of precarious working conditions.

Keywords

COVID-19, emotions, precarious work, low-wage work, workplace hazards

Some of us don't really have a choice. And the idea that we're still showing up and putting ourselves essentially in harm's way . . . It's a lot more than the job that we signed up for.

—Retail worker

As COVID-19 spread in the early months of 2020, we saw a transformation in the world of work that resulted in the working population being divided between those privileged enough to be able to work remotely and retain their jobs, those deemed essential who continued to work outside their homes, and those regarded as nonessential who were laid off. In the early months of the pandemic, some of the lowest earning workers of the U.S. economy found themselves elevated to the status of “heroes,” recognized as an essential part of our society, while simultaneously being forced to make impossible choices between putting their and their family members' lives at risk or being unable to pay their bills. Working conditions were altered for most, with low-wage essential workers enduring the greatest precarity, and now facing new and heightened workplace hazards. We ask, how has the COVID-19 crisis shaped low-wage service sector workers' experiences of precarity?

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Based on in-depth interviews with 52 low-wage service sector workers interviewed in both Summer 2019 and in the last two weeks of April 2020, and worker testimonies on retail union social media and a public agency listening session in July 2020, we argue that the COVID-19 pandemic adds new and heightened dimensions to precarious work. Here we examine (1) new aspects of temporal precarity, including increased uncertainty around the length of unemployment resulting from governmental guidelines about who is essential and who is not, as well as moments of what we call precarious stability. With precarious stability, we call attention to the temporal component of precarity for workers whose work hours increased and schedules became more predictable during the COVID-19 pandemic, but only for a temporary and unpredictable length of time, accompanied by heightened unpredictability of daily tasks; (2) heightened dimensions of precarity in bodily integrity, particularly new threats of exposure to a potentially deadly virus; and (3) new and intensified emotions that constitute the conditions of precarious work, as well as new demands on emotional labor.

Below we build on recent literature on precarious work by bringing together literatures on temporal precarity (Schneider and Harknett 2019), contingent control (Ikeler 2019), disposability (Freshour 2020; Ribas 2016), and emotions as conditions of work (Patulny, Lazarevic, and Smith 2020; Singh and Glavin 2017). We also add to the emerging literature regarding the impacts of COVID-19 on the work experiences of essential workers, which has primarily focused on health services workers. We conclude with a summary of workers' policy recommendations.

Precarious Work

The contemporary world of work, resulting from 50 years of neoliberal capitalism leading to increased privatization, deregulation, and the dismantling of institutions that had sustained a historical accord between capital and labor (Harvey 2005), has been characterized by precarity and employment insecurity (Kalleberg and Vallas 2017). Workers in precarious jobs regularly face temporal precarity with unpredictable schedules and variable hours, as well as seasonal or short-term employment, gig work through digital platforms, layoffs to offset shifting market demands, income instability, regular violation of labor regulation, lack of benefits, and lack of worker representation (e.g., Appelbaum, Bernhardt, and Murnane 2003; Kalleberg 2009; Montgomery and Baglioni 2020; Muntaner 2018; Schneider and Harknett 2019). Employer practices in precarious jobs are not just *characteristics* of work, but are part of a regime of "contingent control" (Ikeler 2019). Contingent control is marked by the increase in employer flexibility, power, and cost savings, while workers endure greater task routinization, job instability, and low wages (Ikeler 2019). These poor labor practices are maintained by deregulation and lack of enforcement of labor law, leaving workers vulnerable to the whims of their employers (Kalleberg 2011).

Scholars widely agree that precarious work arrangements have significant negative impacts on worker well-being (e.g., Schneider and Harknett 2019). The negative impacts of precarious work in the United States are exacerbated by the erosion of social safety nets, leaving workers to pay exorbitant costs for childcare and have limited access to affordable health care, housing, and education (Harrington 2000; Sirmans and Macpherson 2003), issues that were brought to the fore as the COVID-19 crisis worsened. Furthermore, the fact that low-wage occupations are overrepresented by black, Latinx, and immigrant workers has deepened racialized socioeconomic and health disparities among workers in the United States (Blundell et al. 2020; van Dorn, Cooney, and Sabin 2020). Although research on low-wage workers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic is still emerging, studies have already begun to suggest that the COVID-19 crisis exacerbates existing issues regarding income, health, and family for low-wage workers, with workers of color disproportionately experiencing the worst impacts of the pandemic (Ananat and Gassman-Pines 2020; Blundell et al. 2020; Cubrich 2020; van Dorn et al. 2020).

In this paper, we expand on temporal precarity (Schneider and Harknett 2019) and connect it to contingent control, by analyzing new experiences of precarity during COVID-19 faced by workers who remained employed, and those who were laid off. We add uncertainty of unemployment length and the concept of precarious stability to unpredictable scheduling and hours as components of temporal precarity, showing how employers maintain access to laid-off workers without providing benefits or assurance.

Physical Hazards as a Component of Precarity

Risks to the physical safety of retail and service sector workers have been less studied than in other occupations; however, they include stress and psychological strain, sleep deprivation, repetitive work and physical injury, and exposure to environmental hazards. Researchers have considered the risk of musculoskeletal problems for supermarket and hospitality workers (Forcier et al. 2008; Madera and Chang 2011) and burns for food services workers (Halpin, Forst, and Zautke 2008), for example. One of the greatest health risks to low-wage services workers is that they often do not have either paid sick leave or health insurance benefits and are often uninsured or underinsured. Half of service sector workers lack access to paid sick leave (Schneider and Harknett 2020); less than half have employer-based health insurance and 21 percent are uninsured (Garfield et al. 2020). As a result, they are likely to work when sick or injured, increasing the severity and/or prolonging the duration of their condition, as well as possibly exposing the public to contagious illnesses. The context of the pandemic added unprecedented workplace hazards—exposure to a deadly virus, and the challenges of navigating customers who feel entitled to challenge safety requirements, like physical distancing and wearing masks.

Workers who face a potentially deadly virus, and fear the transmission of that virus to their loved ones, experience in new and powerful ways the contradiction between being essential, on one hand, and disposable and replaceable on the other. As low-wage workers living paycheck to paycheck and struggling to make ends meet, they need their jobs; their employment is essential and to them irreplaceable. As we discovered, they tolerate increased risks to their physical safety because they cannot afford the cost of losing their jobs altogether, adding another element to the impossible choices that low-wage workers face (Alvarez et al. 2019). Workers feel sacrificial and disposable, something scholars have identified as common to precarity. Disposability captures the fact that low-wage workers, particularly migrant and racialized workers, are a replaceable part of the labor process. Disposability also captures the impact of systematic threats to bodily integrity endured by precarious workers, causing “premature disability” (Freshour 2020) for some.

Emotions and The Workplace

Two lines of inquiry dominate the literature on emotions in the workplace. Scholars discuss emotions as part of job quality and job satisfaction (Fisher 2000; Judge et al. 2017; Weiss 2002; Wharton 2014), understanding job satisfaction as “people’s affective response to their job” (Weiss 2002; Wharton 2014). Herein, job satisfaction is connected to job performance (Payne and Cooper 2007), though this is contested (Brief and Weiss 2002). Understandings of how emotions are experienced while working have been limited in this area of the field, sometimes reduced to a subjective component of “job quality” (Judge et al. 2017). However, Neal M. Ashkanazy et al. (2016:5) argue that emotions are an inherent part of the workplace, and we must acknowledge how “aspects of the work environment, including environmental conditions, roles, and job design, initiate emotions in organizational settings.” The other line of inquiry derives from Arlie Hochschild’s (2012) seminal book *The Managed Heart*, in which she developed the initial conceptualization of emotional management. Here, she examines how people actively shape and

direct their feelings while working to respond to organizational demands, calling attention to the commodification of emotions in the service sector.¹

Emotional management at work entails the unequal exchange between service workers and customers, where the customer does not need to reciprocate the emotional labor required of the worker (Bolton 2005). Emotional management has also been studied as an interpersonal coping mechanism, where workers who are required to perform extensive emotional labor rely on their peers' support to work through their emotions (Lively 2000). Other researchers have examined the authority of workers to manage others' emotions "tightly" to perform their work in a given setting (Lois 2003). We discuss below how service workers struggle to perform this form of "tight" emotional management with customers who do not afford them adequate authority necessary to enforce safety guidelines.

Overall, the literature on emotions in the workplace has attended to the impacts of emotional states at work on workers' general well-being (Kalleberg 2011; Liu et al. 2011; Wharton and Erickson 1995), and spillover effects on workers' lives outside their jobs, and their families (Judge and Iles 2004). Hochschild's (2012) "emotional dissonance" paved the way for research regarding the psychological impacts of the divergence between emotions required to be "displayed" and workers' internal feelings while working. Scholars have found that workers who regularly have to display emotions that are not congruent with their "real feelings" report higher levels of psychological distress and discomfort (Grandey, Diefendorff, and Rupp 2013; Van Dijk and Brown 2006; Wang et al. 2011). Recently, research has found that emotional labor can contribute to negative occupational outcomes and strain, particularly for workers with "limited job autonomy and little access to civil interpersonal relationships with co-workers" (Singh and Glavin 2017:424).

Emotions must be understood in their signal function (Hochschild 2012); they tell us what work feels like at the micro level but also point to the macro structures that are shaping the circumstances in which those emotions are experienced (Barbalet 1998). Emotions are always present and may be understood as "background emotions" (Barbalet 1998), fundamental to any social action even if they are not always foregrounded. Moreover, in the context of a global pandemic, it is important to pay attention to the emergence of "emotional climates," sets of emotions that are "not only shared by groups of individuals implicated in common social structures and processes, but which are also significant in the formation and maintenance of political and social identities and collective behavior" (Barbalet 1998:159). To be sure, greater attention to emotions in the workplace needs to be framed within what has been dubbed the "affective turn" (Clough and Halley 2007), with scholars expanding beyond terms like emotional labor to capture a broader process of emotional commodification and extraction within emotional economies (Padios 2017; Patulny 2020). Our findings build on this literature by showing how certain emotions become heightened components of working conditions and how the requirements of emotional management increase for precarious workers under COVID-19.

In this paper based on in-depth interviews and public hearings, we contribute to the literature on precarity in our consideration of new and seemingly contradictory dimensions of temporal precarity, bodily risk and harm in service sector work, and emotions and emotional management as fundamental aspects of precarious labor for low-wage workers deemed essential in the context of a pandemic.

Data and Methods

In April 2020, our research team recontacted a sample of 75 workers whom we had interviewed in summer 2019 for a study of the impact of the first statewide Fair Scheduling law, SB828, passed in Oregon in 2018. This sample had experienced temporal precarity before the COVID-19 pandemic despite the enactment of SB828 (Loustanaunau et al. 2020), which was also suspended during the pandemic.

SB828 covers Oregon workers in retail, food services, and hospitality companies that employ 500 or more employees globally. For our original sample, we sampled workers affected by the law using confidential employment data from the Oregon Employment Department Workforce Economic Research Division. We stratified our sample by location (urban and rural), industry (retail, food services, and hospitality), price points within the industries, and unionization. We conducted cold walks at different times of day in establishments that met our criteria and described our study to available workers and/or managers in different departments. If they were interested in participating, we collected contact information and called them outside of work hours to schedule an interview.

Our original sample of 98 interviewees roughly reflected the demographics of Oregon workers in these industries and included 57 percent in retail businesses, 21 percent in food services, and 22 percent in hospitality; 45 percent were unionized, 55 percent were not; 49 percent worked in rural areas, 51 percent in urban and semi-urban areas; 60 percent self-identified as women; 79 percent of the sample self-identified as white, 8 percent as Latinx, 8 percent as mixed race, 3 percent as Native American, and 2 percent Asian and Pacific Islander. As retail comprises the majority of impacted business and skews slightly more white and male, to ensure adequate representation of food services and hospitality workers, women, and workers of color, we slightly oversampled respondents from those two industries.

Within two weeks in April 2020, we conducted 52 interviews with frontline workers from the original sample described above. This 73 percent response rate with just one contact per respondent resulted in comparable distribution by industry, rural/urban, union/nonunion, and demographics to our initial sample. We conducted the interviews by phone and compensated workers with online cash transfers of \$50. All interviews were recorded using Otter.ai, which also provided initial transcriptions.

We then cleaned the transcriptions for coding and coded the interviews using Dedoose, a qualitative software program. The in-depth interviews provide the bulk of our data for analysis here; however, we supplemented the interview data with union worker public testimony posted online in March–August 2020 on retail union social media, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, as well as testimony shared at an online state public agency listening session in July 2020. The themes we found in our analysis of interviews recurred in the data from the hearing and social media posts from 42 different workers shared publicly on the retail union accounts about workplace hazards, confirming our findings about the initial impact of the pandemic on service sector workers in Oregon.

New Dimensions of Temporal Precarity

Unstable scheduling practices, temporary employment, and seasonal employment are major components of service sector workers' contingency and precarity in the workplace (Henly, Shaefer, and Waxman 2006; Ikeler 2019). As the COVID-19 crisis escalated, low-wage service sector workers experienced new forms of uncertainty, particularly regarding their employment status, their schedules, and their job requirements. While laid-off workers experienced the worst form of temporal precarity, many of the workers in this study who remain employed experienced what we call *precarious stability*—uncertain and short-term scheduling and hours stability accompanied by increased unpredictability of daily tasks. Below we describe the new dimensions of temporal precarity faced by those who were laid off and those who continued to work.

Furloughed or Unemployed? Uncertain Employment for Low-wage Workers

Uncertain employment has long been an aspect of precarious work, where weak employment contracts can be terminated by employers with almost no notice (Kalleberg 2009). The layoffs of low-wage workers that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic, however, were somewhat unique

from traditional layoffs, as the state, rather than just employers, made decisions about who performs essential work and who does not. Our interviews show that worker *experiences* of layoffs, and especially their uncertainty regarding their financial situations or when they would return to work, resulted from interactions between the state and employer-level decisions about what to do with workers who were not allowed to physically come to work. Workers who were laid off or who left work due to health concerns expected that they would be able to return to work, just at an unknown time. Unlike workers experiencing unemployment as a result of cost savings or restructuring pre-COVID-19, workers who were laid off in the pandemic were still linked to their employers despite being technically unemployed, in a state of temporal uncertainty that discouraged them from seeking a different job, or even thinking of themselves as unemployed. We argue that in addition to hours and scheduling as components of temporal precarity (Schneider and Harknett 2019), employment status held in limbo for unpredictable amounts of time should be conceptualized as a temporal element of precarity.

The uncertainty around employment that workers faced was, at times, exacerbated by lack of employer communication and benefits. We found that workers rarely received written documentation of a guaranteed return to work, and many workers reported unclear communication from their managers. For example, one worker in food services reported being laid off, and then learned their store would be opening up for takeout orders as a result of a corporate decision. However, the worker was offered only 12 hours each week, so he decided to remain furloughed to receive unemployment benefits. Here, the employer's decisions about how to interpret shifting state guidelines led to heightened temporal precarity in terms of uncertainty around the length of time they would have inadequate work hours. Another worker in hospitality reported that management told workers suddenly that "you're not coming into work until further notice." Without initially understanding whether they had been laid off, this worker reported,

A week later, we received an email, basically saying you've been furloughed. And a good chunk of people didn't even get that email. And I don't know if it was like a technical thing, or what, but I had to tell a few coworkers like, 'We're furloughed. You're not going back.'

When asked whether they were informed about when they might return to work, or whether there was any communication from their employer, they responded, no, "nothing like that." Being furloughed in the context of a pandemic with no health insurance, little or no communication from employers, and uncertainty around access to unemployment options exacerbated the precarity that these workers already face in low-wage service sector jobs.

Workers with underlying health conditions, vulnerable family members, or care responsibilities also experienced uncertainty because employment itself became a hazard. These workers took time off in early months, waiting to hear if and when it would be safe to return to work. One worker in retail expressed doubt that if workers took time off to avoid exposure to the virus, they would still have a job. This worker explained that their coworker, who uses a wheelchair and whose wife has a compromised immune system, "was very paranoid that he's not going to have a job. And so far they've reassured him that he has a job whenever he feels ready to come back. We'll see." This particular worker had already used his paid time off (PTO), and began seeking unemployment options. This heightened contingent control (Ikeler 2019) under COVID-19 adds a new dimension to temporal precarity (Schneider and Harknett 2019), as workers did not know how long they would be "temporarily unemployed" or furloughed, while PTO and unemployment supplements had time limits.

In addition, many workers with childcare responsibilities took time off to care for their children as schools closed down and childcare was either too expensive or unavailable. Hoping that the pandemic would clear up within a few months, many used all of their allowable time off through accrued hours, sick time, and the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA). As the Fall

approached and schools did not open, workers with children panicked about being forced back to work without childcare. As one union organizer put it,

People couldn't afford to live when both parents were working and they had kids in school. Now they have to figure out how to live with no childcare or just one person working fewer hours. It's not like they were able to save up if they had to take furloughs or time off to take care of their kids.

Workers' experiences illustrate new and heightened dimensions of precarity during the pandemic, showing that existing employment instability and lack of financial security can be exacerbated by temporary furloughs and layoffs that result from employer interpretations of shifting state mandates, uncertain or unavailable childcare arrangements, unclear guidelines regarding when it is safe to return to work, insufficient and time limited PTO and unemployment supplements, and concerns regarding health.

Precarious Stability

While laid off workers reported a sense of deep uncertainty about their employment status, essential workers who remained employed during the pandemic came to experience what we call precarious stability. In the early weeks of the crisis, participants described their workplace as chaotic, as panic-purchases were beginning to peak and customer traffic was heavy. Workers indicated seeing moments of stabilization after the initial chaos, which, at times, led to increased, more consistent hours. Indeed, we found that the intense rush of work at service sector establishments during the early months of the pandemic resulted in a surplus of available hours as managers told workers to "take unlimited overtime while you can, because these hours won't be around forever," as one union representative shared.

At companies that provided limited PTO, workers who wanted to keep full-time hours worried that the extra hours they picked up would be lost as their coworkers' PTO ran out and they came back to work. One food services worker, who normally experiences unstable hours and remained working, reflected on navigating furloughed workers' return to work, and the loss of guaranteed hours: "It's been kind of nice to have a consistent schedule. And you know it's definitely going to be weird to go back everybody coming back to work." Her scheduled hours were already decreasing for the weeks when furloughed workers were returning to work. She stated,

I was a little upset when I saw it at first because you know I want to be working, and my manager said, 'Oh, well you know we're doing limited operations, and you know everybody's coming back and so there's lots of hours to, you know, divvy up between everybody.'

By July, employers had hired more workers and work had finally started to slow down so overtime and full-time hours were less available again. In the temporal precarity of the pandemic, workers experienced precarious stability in the early months when schedules and hours were abundantly available, but less so as demand subsided.

Workers, who typically experienced precarity in the context of unpredictable scheduling, experienced precarious stability in hours and scheduling during moments when more hours were available. Yet, the future of their work hours and schedules was unpredictable and out of their control, contingent on employer decisions around staffing levels and available PTO. We suggest that these moments of heightened stability show that precarity and scheduling stability are not opposites. Rather, stability, in its temporary form as analyzed above, *is* a characteristic of precarious jobs, particularly observable under COVID-19.

In addition to uncertainty over scheduling stability, essential workers who remained employed also reported increased variability and unpredictability regarding their work tasks and duties,

adding another precarious element to their newfound but short-term stability. We suggest that in addition to characterizing precarious work by temporal aspects like hours and scheduling (Schneider and Harknett 2019; Ikeler 2019) or contractually contingent or temporary work (Kalleberg 2009), we can add task unpredictability to our understanding of precarious working conditions. Heightened unpredictability regarding daily tasks was especially salient in the early stages of the pandemic, as local, state, and federal governmental agencies struggled to establish guidelines. Employers found themselves having to quickly respond to changing requirements, leaving managers and workers alike with little notice of work responsibilities. One unionized retail worker noted the unpredictability of his shift duties:

Yeah, it's crazy I don't know what's gonna be on my next schedule, I don't know if I'm working inside or not. It might be parcels, or maybe bagging groceries, cleaning carts, taking products back. It just varies, and there's a lot.

One manager in a retail store told us, "Way too many times I had a policy change, literally, they handed it down in the morning and it changed four different times by the end of the day." Workers found themselves in new stores, new departments, with new shifts, and with new requirements to clean and stock. These findings echo those of a recent national study, which found that 65 percent of service sector workers surveyed during the COVID-19 pandemic faced new requirements to clean and stock (Schneider and Harknett 2020).

New cleaning and safety requirements increased workloads, without changing managerial expectations about normal tasks. A retail worker explained,

We're constantly getting talked to about "Hey, you guys need to be cleaning like every hour," and then when we're spending time cleaning, we don't have enough manpower to get things on the shelves, [managers] are like, "Well, we need to prioritize our customers and getting stuff on the shelves." It just seems like whatever we do is the wrong thing.

New and shifting work tasks also meant that workers devoted less time to safety tasks, especially when increased workload was combined with low staffing levels. A unionized worker in food services explained,

I was in the drive thru and my hands were burning after two hours, because I'm trying to hand-sanitize between each car, and there's hundreds of cars. And it slows you down when you're taking these basic measures with fewer and fewer people at work. So I think most people are trying to minimize stress by not really changing how we do things. Which is really dangerous.

Workers' jobs were already demanding, and employers mandated additional labor while stores were packed, placing the burden for health and safety protocol largely on workers.

Bodily Integrity at Risk

In addition to the new aspects of temporal precarity, workers in our sample reported increased risks to their bodily integrity. When COVID-19 infection and mortality rates in the United States rose in March 2020, to an existing risk of bodily harm as a result of hazardous working conditions and a lack of paid sick leave or health insurance (Forcier et al. 2008; Halpin et al. 2008; Madera and Chang 2011; Schneider and Harknett 2020; Wiatrowski 2014), low-wage service sector workers added a largely unknown and terrifying new risk to their physical safety: that of contracting or transmitting COVID-19. As workers braved, and continue to brave, unsafe work conditions and difficult customers, they literally take their lives in their hands, making it feel to

them that they are not essential, but rather disposable. A grocery worker said, “We are putting our lives at risk, our families at risk. Because we have to be out there, we’re exposed.” Below we discuss slow workplace responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and how workers attempted to protect themselves from workplace hazards.

Slow Implementation

Many workers reported that initially there were no safety protocols in their workplaces. One retail worker said, “We’re not really doing anything, we don’t have any safety precautions”; another reported their company was “not doing a lot, honestly.” A few weeks into the COVID-19 pandemic, workers said that some businesses began to implement more extensive safety protocols. Practices included having fewer registers open to increase physical distance, asking customers and workers to stay six feet apart while shopping and waiting in line, allowing fewer customers in, and creating one-way aisles; the use of masks, gloves, and occasionally other personal protective equipment (PPE); installation of plexiglass barriers between cashiers and customers; shorter store hours to allow for cleaning and restocking; doing symptom and temperature checks of workers at the start of a shift; and offering takeout only and refusing personal cups for coffee.

However, according to our interviewees, businesses were slow to establish practices, and rarely were all strategies implemented in a given establishment. The slow response by businesses, counties, and the state reported in our interviews and confirmed by other scholars (Schneider and Harknett 2020) put workers at increased risk for bodily harm and contributed to their existing precarity. A food services worker told us that they were not provided face coverings, but were told that if they wanted to bring one from home and use it, they could do so. This employee expressed concern because she could not find face masks:

I think they should provide us masks because unfortunately in many places you can’t find any, not in any store or even on the internet. I do think they could help us be safer and take more measures.

Our interviews indicate that implementation was highly inconsistent across industries, companies, and stores within the same company. Some workers benefited from swift implementation of a variety of practices simultaneously, while others waited weeks for basic practices, for example the provision of PPE and policies for social distancing. Enforcement was difficult, at best, and early on, a few employers even told workers we interviewed not to wear masks because they wanted to avoid alarming customers. Interviews were filled with workers’ stories of concern about their safety, given the erratic implementation of protocol.

While many of the workers reported inconsistent and slow implementation of safety protocol, a few talked about more responsive companies or stores. A grocery store worker told us that face coverings were shipped as soon as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended them and workers began wearing them at their store. Another retail worker reported that their boss’ wife responded to the lack of availability of masks by making them for the workers. Wearing the masks was voluntary, but when made available, the workers chose to do so. Although workers mentioned that wearing masks at work was uncomfortable, this was preferable to the threat of contracting COVID-19. As one worker put it, “I don’t like the feeling of having something covering my mouth, and it fogs up my glasses working in a refrigerator. So, it’s a nuisance, but I get why we’re doing it and I’m willing to do it.”

Importantly, while employers put in place few if any safety measures in the early period of the COVID-19 pandemic, some workers reported greater encouragement to take time off if sick, which was contrary to prior experience in which workers and managers routinely worked while ill. Expecting workers to continue showing up for their shifts is reflective of contingent control

in precarious work (Ikeler 2019). COVID-19 altered this approach to contingent control, as health hazards became a more serious concern to some employers. A hotel worker said,

In all the years that I've worked there it's always kind of been like a mentality of, "Oh you're sick, well just work through it." That has changed. Those last two months I was working, they were really taking it seriously, like there were people in my department who were sick and they were sending them home.

However, in industries in which almost half the workers do not have access to paid leave (Schneider and Harknett 2020), many workers also reported that they did not qualify for sick pay and could not afford to take time off when sick. Many also felt they risked losing their jobs if they called in sick. A food services worker, for example, did not know whether they would be paid if they had to quarantine. Without that assurance, some workers were reluctant to take symptoms seriously and not come into work, or get tested for fear of having to miss work. A hotel worker shared frustration with the contradiction that workers are asked to go home while managers continued working while sick:

If [workers] were showing signs of being sick, they [managers] were asking them to go home. But the managers were still coming in to work sick, with a really terrible cough and showing signs of respiratory illness. When I brought that up to our general manager, he essentially was going to offer to lay me off.

Overall, workers' uncertainty around the availability of sick time, an issue workers often face in low-wage precarious jobs, posed a number of *new* layers of precarity, in which this uncertainty compelled workers to continue working despite heightened bodily risks. What is more, workers who could take sick time still knew they had to return to a workplace in which exposure to bodily harm, and uncertainty around contracting the virus, has become a normative aspect of precarious work.

Enforcing Your Own Bodily Integrity

In addition to slow implementation, workers and managers faced the challenges of enforcing new safety protocols with workers, managers, and customers, putting their bodies at risk. Some managers did not commit to, or sometimes could not, enforce new regulations. Workers and managers faced the problem of difficult and sometimes dangerous customers. Many workers reported that managers were not proactive in protecting workers and did not enforce the new rules. A hospital-worker told us,

I approached the general manager with a mini delegation of workers and we complained at 2:30 on the day of the shut down. We told them we didn't feel safe. They asked what would make us feel safe. I said facemask, gloves—what they say on the TV. Then they sent me home at 3:00.

Without more drastic changes from companies or manager enforcement of new protections, workers experienced the impossibility of safely passing in narrow aisles, customers getting too close when they asked for assistance, people ignoring the plexiglass or the markers indicating where they should wait to check out. When workers *do* try to enforce the rules, they found they cannot count on customers to comply.

At a public hearing, unionized grocery workers testified,

We have customers refusing to wear masks and throwing tantrums when asked to wear one. For all of us on the front lines of the pandemic and exposed to everything, it's frustrating to not even make a living wage in this hazardous era.

We are constantly harassed and verbally abused by customers who yell, scream and use profanities towards us because of masks and the fact that they can only enter one way and exit one way in the store. I've seen customers directly cough towards people wearing masks.

As these quotes indicate, workers explicitly discussed the risks to their bodily integrity and tied them to their precarious working conditions.

Furthermore, as time went by and COVID-19 cases increased in Oregon, workers testified that by July, practices were already becoming more lax. Again, although there was a new state-wide order to wear masks in public when social distancing was not feasible, this was not enforceable and workers continue to pay the price, as these grocery workers make clear:

[My grocery store] has taken some steps to ensure the safety of the staff on a daily basis. However, I believe they have become fairly lax with cleaning procedures compared to the beginning months. I also don't appreciate that we aren't being given the hazard pay, especially when we are required to wear masks but customers aren't. The store has plenty of signs informing customers about mask use, but isn't enforcing. As someone who is immune deficient, I certainly worry.

Customers ignore one-way stickers on the floor and the dedicated exits.

Customers are required to wear masks but this isn't enforced. Many do not wear masks. It is scary because I have asthma and I take care of my 93-year-old mom who is very fragile and on oxygen.

Workers felt their employers placed the burden of safety on them to take action to improve conditions.

In the absence of clear corporate and governmental guidelines, the new risks service workers take to retain much-needed employment, and provide crucial goods and services as essential workers, reveal how they are implicitly considered to be disposable. In jobs not formerly considered to be particularly dangerous, service workers are now risking their lives to perform the essential labor of providing stocked shelves and cashiers so that those of us who are obeying orders to "shelter at home" can purchase our groceries and return to the safety of home. As one grocery worker noted, "Nothing is getting better, nothing is regulated, it's getting worse and worse. We're not disposable. We have to show up for work because we're essential. We don't get to stay home and stay safe." Workers feel disposable because they find themselves at risk and lack real options to stay away from a workplace that now includes the threat of getting a highly dangerous disease as a part of the working conditions.

Emotionally Precarious

Our respondents expressed that emotions are also aspects of greater precarity for low-wage service workers in a pandemic. As we have discussed, workers reported being anxious, afraid, and worried about health risks while at work. They were confronted by customers who were also tense and afraid, requiring them to perform additional emotional management to meet the simultaneous demand of "good customer service" and the enforcement of new safety rules that were met with resistance from some customers, while also regulating the emotions they experience as a result of the heightened risk under COVID-19. This left workers "emotionally exhausted," as one worker put it, impacting their well-being and life outside work.

Fear and Anxiety as Working Conditions

In our interviews, workers discussed extensively the emotional experience of working in the context of COVID-19. While none of the respondents had mentioned these emotions as part of

their work experience when interviewed in 2019, most emphasized fear and anxiety as especially salient emotions in 2020. Undoubtedly, these emotions arise from a broad context of the global pandemic and looming economic recession that goes beyond the workplace, but we found workers also directly tied feeling afraid and anxious to their material working conditions, and to the lack of real choices to avoid work if they felt unsafe. This reveals how company policies, managerial decisions, and governmental policy all play a role in shaping these workers' emotional states. Fear and anxiety intertwine as constitutive parts of working conditions, creating an "emotional climate" (Barbalet 1998) that significantly alters workers' experiences while at work.

Eventually, the fear and anxiety became "part of the background conditions," as a retail worker explained. Many said that at the beginning of the pandemic, they were feeling anxious and scared to go to work but they had to go anyway. A retail worker who is a mother of two explained, "Sometimes it just feels cripplingly stressful, because there's not anything I can do, and I have to go to my job, in the public, which is scary."

Workers discussed experiencing increased coworker and worker-management conflict as a result of the emotional environment at work. A retail worker explained,

I feel like that's kind of getting stressful. Um, I feel I've had a couple of issues with a couple of coworkers. COVID definitely had a lot of play in all of this, and I feel like people are more sensitive and a little more tired, a little scared, and you kind of got everybody on the edge.

Another retail worker agreed,

It's stressful. I was in a situation recently where I got locked out. I was so stressed up at the front line, trying to help bag groceries, and we did not have enough help up front. We have six checkout stations and we had three girls busting their butt. And we had two managers in the office that could have come out and helped and they didn't do a damn thing to help us.

At the same time, workers expressed being afraid of becoming "contagion agents," as potentially asymptomatic carriers and posing a deadly threat to both to their family members and to elderly coworkers and customers. A food service worker explained,

A lot of times I'm kind of nervous and scared to go to work because I don't want to transfer anything like a sickness or something that I'm not experiencing any symptoms and then get them sick and that's just kind of scary.

A hospitality worker, who has a newborn and whose partner got laid off by the same company she still works at explains, "It's super stressful (. . .) I don't worry about myself, I just worry about the baby, like getting something and bringing it back to her." A retail worker explained further:

I feel anxious going in every single time. Like if I'm able to get unemployment I would because of me being high risk. I would quit probably the same day, just because it makes me nervous. Not only for me but what if I'm bringing it home and the kids get sick, because they both have had pneumonia in their lives and so they're more predisposed to it, and it's just, it's scary. It's kind of just being stuck between a rock and a hard place.

While precarious workers usually experience issues navigating family care demands and job requirements, now they also need to navigate the emotional reactions family members have to what they perceive as new work-related risks during the pandemic. Workers with dependents or underlying health conditions shared heartbreaking stories of their children asking them not to go

to work and having to do so anyway. A food service worker who is the sole income earner for her household and suffers asthma shared that her 11-year-old daughter was really scared for her:

She asked: “Mami, why do you have to go to work now?” And I say, “it has to be this way.” It definitely breaks your heart but there’s nothing we can do, we have to keep going, carry on, you get really sad but there’s nothing you can do, I have to work.

Pandemic conditions highlight that emotional states are central to the precarity experienced by low-wage essential workers. Managerial practices in the present context serve to reinforce these emotions, as workers manifest increased fear as a result of insufficient safety protocols, and anxiety as a result of increased workload without changes in expectations for pace or productivity. Fear and anxiety, while also arising from broader contexts beyond the workplace, are heightened and become part of their working conditions as “background emotions” (Barbalet 1998) impacting workers’ interactions and well-being.

The Emotional Management of Essential Workers

Experiencing fear and anxiety while working, essential workers found themselves having to perform added emotional management to provide required customer service and emotional scripts central to their jobs. This has meant regulating their emotions to remain calm and “stay positive,” while feeling “crippling anxiety” or fear. A worker in retail explained, “I try to keep a positive attitude and try to just think positive so that way you minimize the stress. Because yeah, you can’t really fix anything in the moment.” Another worker added, “We put aside our fears to serve our local community.”

Workers were forced to deal with unpredictable, harassing, and sometimes violent behavior; at the same time, they were expected to emotionally reassure customers who were anxious or lonely. A longtime grocery worker highlighted the new challenges they experienced: “I have worked for the company for about 1/3 of my life, and I have never been treated worse than I have in the past few weeks by shoppers.” Workers said that it became hard to predict how customers were going to behave in the interactions. A retail worker explained,

You kind of don’t know what you’re going to get until you connect with the customer, but there’s a lot more people on edge, snapping at you or they’re mad because you’re out of something, because everybody’s buying everything up, or people get bored and go to the store and just buy stuff.

Another retail worker told us,

One guy really freaked out the other day and told the cashier “I hope you get COVID—I hope your kids get COVID and die.” Another lady freaked out because there was a man shopping in the store without a mask. She started crying and freaking out.

Workers explicitly mentioned having to do more work to avoid being ill tempered with customers that failed to follow safety guidelines; they engage in exhausting interpersonal emotional management with the customers to be able to do their jobs properly. Being able to perform “tight interpersonal emotional management” (Lois 2003) would allow the workers to minimize the customers’ emotional reactions and get the work done. However, these precarious workers lack the authority that the rescue crew studied by Lois (2003) had, and thus find themselves lacking the necessary legitimacy to be able to manage the customers’ emotions strictly and successfully. Noting this situation, workers would try to rely on managers to help them in particularly dire situations, but this was not always possible. A retail worker told us,

There's always one person that thinks that somehow or another you're walking all over their rights by asking us to stand in a certain spot. It's gotten to the point where I joked around about actually hiring a bouncer to stand out front with one of those little ropes, and it's like maybe they won't argue then because it's something that they're familiar with.

Here, the worker recognizes their inability to perform tight emotional management and work through the customers' emotions; a clearly recognizable authority figure seemed necessary to manage successfully. In the absence of this ability and increased demands of emotional management, some workers struggle to contain their emotional reactions to customer harassment: "I've witnessed and been at the receiving end of customers verbally, emotionally, and physically abusing us. I've cried in the employee bathroom, I've screamed in the backroom freezer."

Increased conflict with customers was particularly acute for non-white and migrant workers who have experienced increased racism. A food services worker explains,

I think because I'm Latina and sometimes people look at me, I don't know if they think that I carry an illness or what, but they look at me strangely. It has happened to me several times that I am working and they ask me things like, "Why are you here? You almost don't speak the language." I don't know. It always seems to me like there is more racism now.

This amplified emotional labor constituted additional workload, causing considerable exhaustion at the end of the day, even prompting workers to call out of work just to avoid customers for a day. A worker in retail explains,

By the end of the day, you're emotionally exhausted because not only are you dealing with the high level of demand and people coming in but you're also dealing with customers and their emotion too. You get a lot of people dumping their emotions on you.

Service workers' experiences during the pandemic show the importance of including emotions in analyses of precarious work. Workers' emotions are certainly framed by the pandemic, but they become part of their working conditions when safety procedures are lacking or unevenly enforced, when they have no choice but to go to work in an environment that exposes them and their close ones to harm, when access to paid sick leave or health care is limited. Fear and anxiety are then reinforced and coproduced by concrete conditions in the workplace and become part of the "background conditions" that must be endured while working. This also means that workers must engage in extra emotional management to ensure proper customer service, to put aside their own fears and anxiety, and to be able to attend customers equally distressed. The heightened "emotional exhaustion" that results from the new emotional hazards in the workplace appears to be a new condition of precarious work.

Workers' Recommendations

At the end of each interview, we asked the respondents whether they had any recommendations for policymakers during the pandemic. The questions we asked were open-ended, and respondents were not prompted with specific options. The most common recommendations were enforced safety measures, better wages and benefits, including extended hazard pay and paid time off, universal health care, financial assistance from the government, and maintaining some kind of positivity and reassurance during these stressful and uncertain times. Workers' recommendations focus on mitigation of the heightened forms of precarity that we analyze in this study: precarious stability, bodily hazards, and intensified emotions at work.

The most common recommendation was enforced and consistent safety measures to protect respondents and customers. This included making masks mandatory in stores and other public places, limiting social interactions and the number of customers coming into the store, cleaning more often, creating special hours for at-risk populations to shop. A food services worker expressed his concerns about what types of businesses are staying open during the pandemic:

There are a lot of companies open right now that aren't essential. And yes, we all have to live but, I don't know . . . I think we need to really think about essential businesses right now and make sure that those are actually the only ones open.

Workers emphasized that essential businesses needed to take consistent safety precautions and nonessential businesses could close down, thereby diminishing the likelihood of spreading the virus through contact between customers and employees. These recommendations reflect our argument that workers are experiencing heightened hazards in the workplace, making their safety at work more precarious.

A large majority of respondents discussed how essential workers should be compensated with higher wages and better benefits for risking their own safety to work in the frontlines in face-to-face service sector work during COVID-19. Workers recommended raising minimum wage, expanding paid leave, extending the hazard pay period, and allowing employees to use their vacation hours and sick leave for financial purposes or to simply just catch a break from the physical and emotional labor. A food services worker said that workers “should be getting paid more, because I mean they're getting the stimulus check but . . . they have to risk themselves being exposed to it so I think that they should be compensated.”

Workers also mentioned the need for additional financial assistance from the state or federal government. The stimulus check provided at the beginning of the pandemic helped a number of people, but was not enough for most working families. A hospitality worker expressed how such financial assistance could “help stabilize the economy and help people live, potentially save lives, and help spread wealth.”

Workers emphasized the need for more accessible, affordable, and universal health care. One of the respondents, a hospitality worker, said that

we should all have a nationwide healthcare plan. But even if they're unwilling to do that or unable to do that, there should be something that allows for some kind of emergency like this for people to at least have healthcare. While, you know, there are these emergencies going on that are health related.

Another hospitality worker agreed that health care should be universally accessible to everyone, no matter their hours, and especially in a pandemic.

Conclusion

Precarious low-wage workers in the neoliberal capitalist economy experience limited access to affordable health care, childcare, and stable income, in addition to unpredictable hours and schedules. In these conditions, workers make impossible choices as they navigate the uncertainties of precarious work (Alvarez et al. 2019). Deemed essential during a pandemic that sent many others home to labor remotely, these workers faced increased and sometimes new conditions of precarity within work, family, and health. Our interviews conducted in the first months of the pandemic reveal the challenges faced by workers who were called “heroes” by the news media, but most of whom had no choice other than to be essential and precarious, and continue to work.

Based on our interviewees' reports, it is clear that workplaces in the retail, hospitality, and food services sectors have been slow to provide adequate health and safety measures and too few

workers have reliable access to and are able to utilize PPE. Indeed, according to surveys conducted with 8,028 hourly service workers from March 7 to April 9, 2020 (Schneider and Harknett 2020:6), “just over 18% of workers reported new requirements to wear gloves, and just 7% new requirements to wear masks.” Workers we interviewed also reported safety protocols were insufficient and slow to be implemented, echoing the findings of Daniel Schneider and Kristen Harknett (2020).

We build on the literature on precarious employment through a number of avenues. These include expanding on the physical hazards that service sector workers face under pandemic conditions, how emotions are conditions of work as service sector workers are expected to perform intensified emotional management with unpredictable customers and without consistent state guidelines or employer support, and extending Daniel Schneider and Kristen Harknett’s (2019) concept of temporal precarity from the focus on unpredictable schedules to include additional temporal dimensions of precarity. We found that workers who have been furloughed or “temporarily laid off” still expected to return to work, but at an unknown time and subject to employer interpretation of unclear and shifting state guidelines, heightening an uncertain temporal feature of unemployment. At the same time, essential workers who continued going to work temporarily received more *stable* schedules and hours, while also experiencing increased instability in job tasks and physical and emotional workplace hazards. Our findings thus reveal new dimensions of temporal precarity and contingent control that have arisen from the particular conditions of working a low-wage job in the United States during a pandemic.

Our findings also connect contingent control and disposability, as employers maintain flexibility by treating as disposable and replaceable both workers who continue to work and face heightened hazards and those temporarily laid off. We find that the lack of consistency and enforcement of employer and state health and safety protocol under COVID-19 led workers to experience heightened bodily hazards in the workplace that resulted in feelings of disposability, fear, and anxiety. These emotions constituted core working conditions for service sector employees who also had to perform increased emotional management with volatile customers. While workers felt that much of the burden of enforcing safety protocol fell on them, they had to navigate interactions with recalcitrant and at times violent customers who did not confer service workers with enough authority to perform this tight emotional management.

In this initial review of the interviews, we chose to examine the experiences of workers that proved salient across sectors and union/nonunion employment statuses. To be sure, though our sample mirrors workplace demographics in Oregon, a more thorough analysis regarding workers’ racialized and gendered experiences is beyond the scope of this paper, and should be examined in future research. We recognize that with a larger sample, future research would benefit from examining how these experiences vary, particularly by race, gender, and family structure. Furthermore, we anticipate that safety protocol and the threat of hazards will change over time, along with the emotional impacts of working with heightened threats to well-being. Future examinations of which conditions become the new normal in precarious work and which are challenged by workers or fade with the end of the pandemic will make important contributions to understanding the dynamic nature of precarity.

Author’s Note

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Note

1. Hochschild's initial conceptualization differentiated between "emotional labor," commodified for a wage and therefore having "exchange-value," and "emotional work," in which the same activity is performed in the private sphere and only has "use-value." Highly debated, scholars have pointed out that this dualism fails to take into account emotional labor performed for a wage in the home (Bolton and Boyd 2003), or emotional work performed in the workplace that does not create value (Bolton 2009; Lively 2000). Here, we use emotional management as an umbrella term to understand the management of emotions in the workplace as integral to the labor process, regardless of how directly or indirectly it contributes to the production of value.

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