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ESSENTIALITY OF WORK

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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CHAPTER 1

ESSENTIAL WORK, INESSENTIAL WORKERS?

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we introduce the topic of essentiality of work, exploring its implications for workers, labour markets, and public policy. The essentiality of work often corresponds in a dialectical way with the precarity of work, raising pressing questions about how societies value and, more pertinently, devalue various types of labour, thereby influencing life chances and societal integration. What we see in the contributions to this volume and the wider evidence is that essential work is typically performed by workers who are treated as expendable, or inessential. We proceed to outline the various contributions from the studies compiled in this volume. These present diverse perspectives on 'essentiality' and the experiences of essential workers. Offering a range of new empirical insights, the volume underlines the vitality and lasting relevance of essentiality – both as a concept and in the experience of workers – beyond the pandemic.

Keywords: Essential work; essentiality of work; emotional labour; care work; intersectionality; precarity and precarious work settings; inessential workers

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted new reflections on the meanings of essential workers and essential work. As we compiled the call for chapters for this volume, the memory of the COVID-19 pandemic and its profound implications for work, workers, and workplaces – and yes, also for employers – was still fresh. The pandemic served as a 'critical juncture', an opportunity to examine and debate anew the poor state of work and labour markets for millions of workers, most of them in the service sector. Notably, debate about essential work extended beyond academia and into both popular media and legislative circles. Now as we compile this volume, just 18 months later, the signs and displays cherishing essential workers – in hospitals, grocery stores, and beyond – have long since vanished. Extra 'hazard pay', meant to incentivize and reward workers for working throughout the pandemic, has generally gone by the wayside. Now that the acute crisis has settled, what it means to be an 'essential' worker has been more clearly brought into relief. Society's clamour of gratitude has fallen silent; a silence that speaks volumes. It thus seems a good time to take stock and reflect further on what is meant by essentiality of work and how essential work continues to be experienced at the workplace.

As the contributions in this volume show, the 'essentiality' of work is a good entry point into a number of the most complex and profound problems of contemporary work and labour markets. However, it is difficult to pin down a singular meaning of the term. 'Essentiality' surfaces deeper considerations about the meaning and value of work in relation to the life world of workers and also in the context of what society needs and values. 'Essential work' as a term and as a phenomenon points towards hidden or forgotten realities because it does not fit squarely within the dominant beliefs about how labour markets work or should work for workers. For example, 'essential work' as a category cuts across taken-for-granted job demarcations and boundaries drawn around occupations and educational profiles often justifying pay differentials and disparate levels of recognition and reward. In short, there is an unresolved uneasiness about what has been called essential work, which is of a more general theoretical, empirical, as well as practical interest.

One of the most striking contradictions of essential work is this: On the one hand, the emphasis on essentiality indicates a rediscovery of the public value of work and the societal relevance of labour which is essential for societies to function properly (e.g. Boyer, 2022). On the other hand, looking more closely into the work and employment conditions in 'essential' jobs, essential work is often found to be precarious work (e.g. Loustaunau et al., 2021), that is, employment that is 'uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker' (Kalleberg, 2009, p. 2). One might be left with the conclusion that essential work is seen as important but those who undertake it are not and remain treated like they are 'inessential' workers.

For a short moment during the pandemic, the risks taken by 'essential' workers were visible to, and lauded by, all. As Jamie McCallum (2022) put it, 'the category of the essential worker became a synecdoche for our risk-intensive economy' (p. 5).

McCallum (2024) further notes the ambiguous status of essential workers who 'were called heroes when they left for work and treated like sacrificial lambs when they got there' (p. 5). In many countries, media reports were full of examples of mass infections in workplaces such as parcel delivery centres, meat processing and packaging plants, elderly care homes, hospitals, and schools. Indeed, worksites became what some have referred to as 'sacrifice zones' (Carrillo & Ipsen, 2021). The pandemic revealed that essential workplaces – in hospitals, janitorial services, agriculture and food-processing, construction sites, and retail, logistics, and transport – are filled with what are treated as 'inessential', or expendable, workers.

Of course, the pandemic also threw into sharp relief the inequalities in today's labour markets. In the shadow of socially constructing the category of 'essential' work also came the framing, at least implicitly, of 'inessential' work. We would not seek to deny the challenges and disruption that all experienced during the pandemic but there were clear degrees of difference in those experiences. Essential workers put their lives on the line, risking daily exposure, while others continued working remotely from the relative safety and security of their homes. For those with comparatively comfortable living conditions and at the 'higher quality' pole of the labour market, experiences were quite different and hardships were on a different scale. For many of those keeping their office jobs during the pandemic, the shift towards remote work not only offered a sense of security, albeit amidst a bewildering time, but also appears to have had a lasting effect in normalizing working from home; something many still seem to welcome. These egregious labour market disparities between those deemed 'essential' yet treated as expendable and everyone else even led a high-ranking business executive from Amazon to publicly resign. Tim Bray, vice-president at Amazon and distinguished engineer, left the company over what he saw as the mistreatment of warehouse workers during the pandemic (Bray, 2020).

This Janus-faced nature of 'essential work' reveals once more the social character of work – and the socially constructed discourses that shape and inform the economic valuation of work, the qualitative experiences of workers, and the public perception of these jobs. This rediscovery of essentiality alludes to the diverging societal relevance attached to various types of work, but also reminds us of the fact that many questions around the valuation and valorization of different activities as work are still unsettled and remain contested (e.g. Lamont, 2012). What has been exposed is the jarring disconnect between those whose roles have central significance to the functioning of society and everyday life and the 'value' that society places upon their work. Essential work is often invisible and forgotten in normal times; sometimes, essential workers are even expelled from visibility (Sassen, 2014) or subject to replacement and automation in polarized labour markets (Autor & Dorn, 2013). It takes place in locations and sites distant from sanitized office spaces. But during periods of crisis those activities come to the fore. Unfortunately, the pay, job status, and working conditions of many of those doing essential work – including care work, the work that makes all other work possible – are inferior compared to jobs and occupations implicitly recognized as 'inessential'. Indeed, and known long before COVID-19, most of this essential work is undertaken by those suffering the greatest societal and economic disadvantages, including women and immigrants (e.g. Acker, 2006; Vosko, 2010; Zanoni et al., 2010). We knew this before and a process of collective forgetting is once again well underway.

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES? FROM RECOGNITION AND DIGNITY TO PUBLIC VALUE AND REWARD

We distinguish between three levels or spheres in which debate about essential work takes place: (1) a macro-level concerning support through public policy, society, and the state in reregulating the essential segments of the labour market, (2) the (inter-) organizational level of firms and industries in which management and unions negotiate about working conditions and employment standards under which essential work is performed, and (3) the micro-level that examines how individual workers reflect on and experience being 'essential' workers.

As for the regulatory macro-environment, new crises have swiftly followed the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a state of affairs that some now call a 'polycrisis', that is, an ever more worrying co-occurrence of the climate crisis and the resurfacing of geopolitical rivalry and wars shackling post-pandemic labour markets globally (Tooze, 2022). At the same time, in the Global North, the dominant regulatory approach seems to have fallen back to pre-pandemic austerity measures. And in the Global South short-lived achievements in combating poverty, un- and underemployment as well as low-quality, precarious work have already been reverted (ILO – International Labour Office, 2023). This cumulation of crisis phenomena epitomizes more general trends that have affected the world of work in recent decades and throws their consequences for societal resilience in the face of polycrisis into sharp relief. In combination, it appears that the public and economic policy decisions shaping the development of economies in the decades before the pandemic have undermined the standing of exactly the work and workers necessary for the functioning of society, thereby jeopardizing and diminishing societies' crisis responsiveness.

Nevertheless, during the pandemic, policymakers and the media have made wide reference to 'essential work' and 'essential workers', shaping the ways in which governments have responded to the crisis. Keeping essential work running has been identified as the key to withstanding COVID-19 despite its disruptions and deadly risks. Keeping on with essential work was regarded as 'essential' for maintaining a functioning society, building up resilience, and overcoming the crisis. This widespread recognition of the value of essential work presented an opportunity to reflect on policy measures to improve the conditions essential workers (Behrens & Pekarek, 2023). The evidence, including that presented in Côté et al. (this volume, Chapter 5), is that any improvements have proven temporary at best in most cases.

The impact, or lack of it, that derives from the macro-level can be readily witnessed at the organizational and sectoral levels. For instance, the pandemic revealed the need to consider curbing subcontracting and even reversing privatization. It was not by historical coincidence that, at least in the case of Europe, many of the essential sectors were previously organized as public services provided by organizations in public ownership. Privatization now abounds in these segments and subcontracting and outsourcing have become widespread, often de facto excluding the workers in essential activities from voice and representation. Litwin et al. (2017), for example, show how subcontracted cleaning services contributed to the spread of infections in health care settings, already before the pandemic. However, it would be a false conclusion to see these things only happening in high-risk industries or in situations of crisis with high demands on security and safety. Rather, these cases pinpoint a general lack of labour inspection and a failure to maintain labour standards in what has been described as the fissured workplace (Weil, 2019), characterized by multi-employer relationships (Marchington et al., 2005). In private service industries, such as property and facility services, cleaning services, food and parcel delivery, catering or security, we find extensive subcontracting of various activities no longer considered to be in the 'core' of operations which then turned out to be essential after all. Business and government have both been slow to recognize this, failing to reverse mistaken decisions. More broadly there has been considerable reluctance to revisit ideologically driven outsourcing decisions that fail tests of efficiency and effectiveness. Indeed, the lack of positive regulatory impact from the macro-level has fueled growing concern that the frustration of essential workers may jeopardize societal integration and drive right-wing populism (Altreiter et al., 2022).

At the micro-level – in Hirschman's (1970) terms – this regulatory landscape shifts workers' responses towards exit from essential work roles and jobs. 'Quitting' this world of precarious employment in essential jobs has become a widely discussed option for workers in the last four years; 'labour shortage' has become a widely reported reality in many industries in which employment has not recovered to pre-pandemic levels. In Germany, for example, there was a lot of media talk about people quitting care work, in all its varieties from hospitals to aged care, during and after the pandemic, exactly because of the harsh experiences suffered by workers during the pandemic. But the spotlight on essential work also showed the endurance, solidarity, dignity, and work ethic of those engaged in such work, especially in some of the most affected sectors during the pandemic. We see evidence reported of employees working in the face of tremendous adversity, even beyond the point of individual exhaustion (see, e.g., Pulignano et al., this volume, Chapter 4).

Both the stagnation in crisis-ridden economic and labour policy, as well as the individual level responses, point towards the shadow of the more 'instrumental' aspects of essential work, the interests of essential workers in particular, and how these are negotiated in industrial relations. Returning to the meso-level, despite differences in the type of essential work, between say retail work in a supermarket and care work in a hospital, we observe a disproportionate share of part-time and fixed-term contracts, and various subcontracting arrangements like posted work or temporary agency work. Further, in many essential job markets, we find a predominantly female and/or migrant workforce. These jobs are low-paying and deemed 'low skilled', despite high stress levels and high physical performance requirements. In some countries, like Germany, a part of these jobs is referred to as a 'mini job'.

Frequently, and as already known before the pandemic, the protections of collective bargaining agreements, unions and shopfloor representation is often absent or ineffective in these workplaces (e.g. Behrens & Pekarek, 2023; Bosch, 2015).

All in all, one may be tempted to conclude that the more a job has been classified as being essential during the pandemic, the lower both the pay and labour standards. Unsurprisingly, such conditions are bracketed with such jobs having less scope for formal industrial relations and collective bargaining arrangements; the rare case such as the strike activity of UK doctors orchestrated by the British Medical Association proving very much the exception rather than the rule. This pinpoints the important question about whether and how workers and their allies (e.g. unions) can mobilize positive public sentiment towards essential work in campaigns for better pay and working conditions. We plan to explore such issues in an upcoming volume of Research in the Sociology of Work on worker organizing.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

This volume curates a selection of qualitative and quantitative research undertaken from various theoretical perspectives. It constitutes a rich collection that sheds light on both enduring and newly emerging questions concerning the essentiality of work. By delineating the meaning and use of 'essentiality', the contributions also reveal the processes via which work is categorized, evaluated, and valued given persistent labour market structures and institutionalized norms. Notably, three contributions foreground the experiences of essential workers in a diverse array of care work settings in the USA, the UK, Canada, and Germany, thereby revealing commonalities and differences across contexts. Employing a varied set of theories, the chapters reveal the rich reality of essential care work as involving both 'dirty' work and emotion management, but also expose profound inequalities stemming from devaluation and institutionalized segmentation in health care systems. These three contributions, along with those on custodial work and an analysis of various segments of essential work in the USA, draw upon a variety of methods: quantitative data analysis, critical discourse analysis, qualitative case studies, and ethnographic fieldwork.

The various contributions to this volume can be grouped into two broader streams or questions that examine different aspects of the essentiality of work: (1) What is it like to do essential work, that is, how is it rewarded, how is it performed, and how do workers cope with it? and (2) How is 'essential work' constructed discursively in the political and public sphere and how does this designation shape policy responses? In addressing these two questions the chapters engage to varying degrees and in a variety of ways with the three levels of essentiality of work outlined above.

The second chapter by Anna Milena Galazka and Sarah Jenkins connects to the first question by showing how essential 'dirty work' is performed, with a particular focus on the emotion management skills in gendered care work. Drawing on interviews with two types of essential care workers – wound clinicians and care workers – the chapter examines stigma management in dirty work through the lens of emotion management and gender studies. First, the chapter shows how emotion management skills emanate from the deep relational work with clients rather than through occupational communities. Second, the chapter extends the literature on dirty work by identifying how emotion management skills are central to two features of stigma management in relation to undertaking physically dirty bodywork while caring for socially stigmatized clients: how the dirty work 'is done' and the 'end purpose' of work. By comparing two occupations with different contexts and conditions of work, the authors illustrate how complex emotion management skills are gendered in care work. They argue that by focussing on the concept of emotion management, the hidden skills of dirty work in gendered care work are illuminated, contributing to contemporary debates about how stigma might be overcome by focussing on context and conditions of work.

The third chapter asks the important question 'essential for whom?', linking to the second of our questions about the regulatory constructions of essential work as laid out above. Using the case of custodial labour at a large public university in the USA, the chapter by Annie J. Murphy examines the construction of essential labour during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter also explores the impact of government policies on the differentiation between essential and non-essential work, and the consequences of that demarcation for workers. In her case study of custodial service employees, Murphy examines the federal, state, and municipal guidelines about COVID-19 safety and critical infrastructure in order to understand the policy landscape under which custodial work was formally deemed essential. The result was that these workers were sacrificed in order to reassure others of a sanitized workplace and the campus' safe reopening.

In the fourth chapter, Valeria Pulignano, Mê-Linh Riemann, Carol Stephenson, and Markieta Domecka turn their attention to the individual responses of essential workers. In their comparative examination of residential care work in the UK and Germany, they interpret the COVID-19 pandemic as an ethnomethodological 'breaching experiment' (Garfinkel, 1967) and discuss the disruptions caused by the pandemic to the 'emotion management' practices of residential care workers in these two countries. They examine the influence of professional feeling rules on workers, emphasizing the prescribed importance of displaying affective, empathetic concern for residents' health and well-being. Findings demonstrate that authenticity and adherence to professional feeling rules are not mutually exclusive in managing emotions. The authors highlight how adherence to professional feeling rules contributed to upholding authentic care by reinforcing a professional ethos. Ultimately, the study showcases how a professional ethos substantiates altruistic motivations, guiding proficient emotion management practices among care workers. In doing so, essential workers draw upon their personal understanding and experiences to determine the appropriate emotions to be expressed while providing care for residents amid the unprecedented challenges of the pandemic. Perhaps surprisingly, the UK–Germany comparison reveals substantial similarity in care workers' responses 'on the ground', shedding light on the relevance of different institutions, in this instance 'professional values'.

The fifth chapter explicitly explores the macro- and meso-level politics of essentiality, building on the widely held impression that the praise for heroic essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic quickly receded into ignorance, silence, and even scorn after the pandemic. The chapter by Nancy Côté, Jean-Louis Denis, Steven Therrien, and Flavia Sofia Ciafre looks at how the discourse surrounding the essentiality of care aides emerged and developed in Quebec during the COVID-19 pandemic, but ultimately failed to have a sustained impact on care aides' working conditions, because the underlying institutions and organizational structures working to their disadvantage remained unchanged. The authors perform a critical discourse analysis on three main types of documents: scientific-scholarly works, documents from government, various associations and unions, and popular media reports published between February 2020 and July 2022. To explain this outcome, the chapter utilizes a framework of performativity. According to this framework, Canadian pandemic politics influenced the recognition, through discourses of essentiality, of low-status workers and more specifically of care aides as an occupational group that performs society's 'dirty', but 'essential' work. However, public recognition through political discourse alone is a necessary but insufficient condition for social change. While a discourse of essentiality at the highest level of politics is associated with rapid policy responses to value the work of care aides, it is embedded in a system that restrains the establishment of substantive policies of improving care aide work. The chapter contributes to the literature on performativity by demonstrating the importance of the institutionalization of competing logics in contemporary health and social care systems and how it limits the impact of discourse in promulgating new values and norms and engineering social change.

The sixth chapter in the essential work section of the volume takes a broader and quantitative view on essential work. Caroline Hanley and Enobong Hannah Branch employ an intersectional perspective to understand the wage gap for essential workers in the USA. They start by delineating how public health measures implemented early in the COVID-19 pandemic brought the idea of essential work into the public discourse, and what types of work have been formally defined as being essential for society to function. From there, they analyse the questions of who performs that work and how the labour of these essential workers is rewarded. Employing an intersectional lens on work that was officially deemed essential in 2020, the authors highlight longstanding patterns of devaluation among essential workers, including those undergirded by systemic racism in employment and labour law. Using data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics' Current Population Survey to examine earnings differences between essential and non-essential workers, the authors find that patterns of valuation among essential workers cannot be explained by human capital or other standard labour market characteristics. Rather, intersectional wage inequalities in 2020 reflect historic patterns that are highly durable and did not abate in the first year of the global pandemic.