



January 2025

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Sarah Sexton

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, ssexto12@vols.utk.edu

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Recommended Citation

Sexton, Sarah (2025) "Expendable to Essential: Conceptualizing the Rhetorical Othering of Frontline Workers," *Pursuit - The Journal of Undergraduate Research at The University of Tennessee*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/pur12atud>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/pursuit/vol12/iss1/6>

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Expendable to Essential: Conceptualizing the Rhetorical Othering of Frontline Workers

SARAH SEXTON

Correspondence: ssexto12@vols.utk.edu

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Over the course of the pandemic, there has been a social shift in the way certain workers are represented within American society. Everyday workers such as grocery store clerks, baristas, and retail managers were deemed “essential workers” as COVID-19 created a global healthcare crisis. Although these workers were declared as essential to the wellbeing of American society during the pandemic, there is evident dissent between the collective experience of frontline employees and those outside of this community. The rhetoric produced by members of the essential community, including myself, alongside statistical findings reflect an ongoing instance of socioeconomic “othering” against this community due to their racial and/or economic position within American society. This is characteristic of a capitalistic society that is simultaneously exploitative and reliant upon the services of those who are disadvantaged and marginalized upon the basis of their socioeconomic status. Analyzing the rhetorical dissent between members of the essential community and other classes of American society illustrates this concept of othering and the ongoing systematic oppression that continues to exploit workers.

Introduction

Communities can take many forms within a diverse, ever-shifting, and evolving society. In the wake of so many academic, scientific, and cultural advancements, humankind gathers at the cores of a plethora of varying identities that all experience their respective practices, beliefs, or hardships that they then synthesize within their own character or ego. A community entails the accumulation of a singular identity that is processed and interpreted by outsiders by its unique rhetorical framework maintained by the members that encompass the community. According to D.A. Masolo, the identity of an individual is shaped biologically and socially by the social worlds in which they inhabit and play various roles (Masalo, 2019). Therefore, a bidirectional relationship exists between the rhetorical framework of the community and the identity of the individual. An example of this relationship lies in the community of essential workers, individuals that persisted in working amongst the general population during the global pandemic that began in 2019 and continues to hinder any true return to societal normalcy today.

These workers were deemed essential due to the services that they provided others, causing a transformation of their societal standing in relation to their professional position. During the pandemic, essential workers transitioned from mere fast-food workers, grocery store cashiers, and teachers, to individuals of the utmost importance due to the service they provided to others. Society persisted during the pandemic upon the backs of these workers; however, the rhetorical relationship between those deemed as essential workers and those outside of this community brings forth divisiveness and dissension. Rhetorical frames such as “frontline” and “essential” arranged with the appeals of time and place create a unique and relatively new dynamic between the community and its external environment that is reflective of the consequences of rhetorical interpretation within the context of the network within a given society. In addition to these internal arrangements that produce a certain rhetoric, there is also rhetoric produced about the essential worker community that both compliments and misrepresents the community. This occurs when various rhetorical appeals that introduces the ideal of “othering” the community in question, thus introducing a degree of disparity between the community and its surrounding outsiders. These appeals and frameworks, specifically in regards to militaristic metaphors assigned to essential workers and appeals and frames of race and the physical body, encompass the general outsider perspective of essential workers and further serve to aid the construction of this community’s identity. An analysis of the rhetorical framework of the essential workforce with statistical data reveals the degree that this community has been othered in society during the pandemic due to job sectors within this community as well as the socioeconomic biases that are byproducts of America’s capitalistic framework.

As a member of management at a small grocery store chain based in Tennessee, I have personally experienced these delicate rhetorical transmissions between my community of essential workers and outsiders, be it customers or society at large. I will be integrating these personal experiences into an in-depth analysis of the rhetoric surrounding the essential worker community to not only grant a deeper understanding of the “othering” that essential workers

have experienced, but also to provide a perspective regarding the affluence and importance of rhetoric in the inner latticework of relationships between communities and outsiders.

“Frontline” Rhetorical Frame and Militaristic Metaphors

During the pandemic, many individuals entangled in the system of frontline jobs were forced to continue working due to financial obligations. An unforeseen public welfare enemy required these entangled individuals to act as the final barrier to a descent into total chaos. Those such as Iman Palm, an essential worker and full time college student, conveyed their experiences through a “frontline” frame, in which their joint experiences, albeit unique in accordance with the individual, revealed a common theme. In which, the experience of the average frontline worker was comparable to a soldier, forced into a combat zone by societal pressures, the immense risk merely a factor to be expected. This application of the rhetorical frame aligns with Jerome Bruner’s research in his *Frames for Thinking*, in which he writes that this idea of collective identity is, “sustained by a body of folk-theoretic belief...made possible by preadapted cognitive dispositions that reflect the evolution of the primate order” (1996, p. 95).

The term “frontline” came into fruition as early as 1677 in the Earl of Orrery’s *A Treatise of the Art of War*, with the term referring to the forward-most portion of an army, its usage becoming even more popular with the rise of trench warfare in World War I (*The Guardian*, 2020). Palm remembers an immensely stressful experience when her grocery store succumbed to the fear and anger fostered by the pandemic. As the only working member of her family, Palm feared not only losing her only source of income but also her chance at education. Palm’s position was reflective of the “frontline,” militaristic experience in which individuals of this community were thrust into battle against a metaphysical enemy, their workplace suddenly being the frontlines.

These experiences, conveyed through this “frontline” frame, are comparable and only further reinforced by my tribulations as a customer service manager at my local grocery store. Following the coronavirus outbreak, I had to quickly adapt not only to a completely different work environment, but also to a new attitude from our customers. Amid shortages of products and employees, customers’ frustrations were taken out on me, despite the circumstances being out of my control. As a customer service manager, I took the brunt of a certain anger that I never knew could exist within a body of people I had been supplying service to for years. The workforce at my store was treated with such malice that many low-commitment employees quit. The pay was not worth the treatment that we regularly endured.

News networks and government officials would begin to refer to my work and my position as essential, but I had never felt lesser. Abiding by my grocery store’s attempt at implementing the mask mandates for customers while also respecting the privacy of those who refused, I would be publicly ridiculed by customers for my “failures” as a leader, spat on by those that would pull their masks down just to ensure their words cut more deeply. I would quietly cry over uneaten

lunches during the thirty-minute breaks that would accompany my twelve-hour work days, wondering how or why such chaos had descended upon my store. Never had I loathed my job so much – kindness had always been one of my natural virtues, yet I had begun to feel devoid of it for one of the first times in my life.

This sort of divide between the essential worker community and the outsiders we serve is generated by the rhetoric of outsiders, thus fostering a degree of what may be interpreted as disregard towards the intramural work and rhetoric of the community. Essential workers have often been referred to as “frontline workers” and “healthcare heroes,” both of which are metaphors that are a reference to militaristic titles or personas. Such a metaphor is fitting to an extent; it logically follows that those at the forefront of a battle between the normalcy and chaos of society during the COVID-19 outbreak would be seen as warriors or militaristic heroes. However, despite how this community may seem, such comparisons or metaphors are extremely dangerous to the livelihood of those that identify with the essential worker community. According to Dr. Catiriona Cox, this language forces healthcare workers to face unfair expectations of personal sacrifice without adequate structural support, as can be seen by the community's fight for better wages through professional and personal hardship (King, 2020).

These metaphors valorize self-sacrifice, encourage anti-science discourse, and reinforce a sense of nationalism during the heights of the global pandemic. However, this is a valorization of a community that did not choose to “enlist” in such pursuits. These hardworking individuals are essential components of a developed society, but they are not warriors, they could not have predicted that they would lie at the forefront of a healthcare crisis. Other militaristic metaphors claiming that doctors are “fighting on the frontlines without sufficient ammunition” and “battling the enemy” distorts the work of healthcare workers; they are not battling an enemy, they are struggling to save lives (King, 2020). The utilization of military rhetoric and metaphors produces a heedless and chaotic approach to “defeat the enemy” or shrug off a global pandemic as quickly as possible. This approach places the lives of the patient and the provider at heightened risk during a time when lives are already at risk.

“Essential” Rhetorical Frame and its Dissension

The second rhetorical frame that the essential worker community utilizes to express its narrative of respect is “essential,” a term that has caused a great deal of controversy between this community and outsiders in America. Despite members of this community working in industries deemed essential to the survival of civilized life in a global pandemic-- such as food, transportation, and healthcare-- many of these essential workers had to fight inadequate workplace provisions at the height of the COVID-19 outbreak (*Economic Policy Institute*, 2020). While many outsiders observed an increase in social esteem held by essential workers due to their necessity, essential workers remember a vastly different experience. Despite being “essential,” these workers were required to work without protective equipment, denied premium

pay, and subjected to difficult and dangerous workplace conditions. Mary Dacquel, an administrative nurse, conveyed her frustration by constructing a public sign that reads, “We are not your sacrificial workers. We are healthcare workers” (*Economic Policy Institute*, 2020). Such rhetoric is reflective of the general attitude of the essential worker community that their own liberties are being infringed upon, with such injustices being masked by a government-appointed title of being “essential”.

I also have experienced dissent with the term “essential,” where I have felt lesser based on my position within the American workforce during the pandemic. Upon any disruption to a customer’s normal shopping experience such as a shortage of a particular product or a lack of cart wipes, I would be ridiculed. Male customers would look me up and down, laugh, and ask what a “young lady” was doing in management, going as far as to ask me if I had actually undergone professional training in customer service. Every day I had to prove to everyone, even myself, that I was essential to the store if only to set an example for my employees who looked to me for sanctuary in a workplace where we felt hated. I too shared the general attitude of an essential worker described by Mary Dacquel: being a small piece of the barrier separating the normalcy prior to the pandemic and chaos was purposeful yet incredibly degrading.

These personal experiences, while illuminative of the rhetoric generated from within the essential worker community, also exhibit the basis for some of the misrepresentative rhetoric produced by outsiders of the community. Since March 2020, over 33 million people in the US have filed jobless claims. When most states required all nonessential workers to stay home, mass furloughs and layoffs ensued, causing unemployment to surge from 4.4% to 14.7% (Neely, 2020). The unemployment rate is predicted to continue to rise, reaching the highest it has been since the Great Depression. Such economic crashes are typically labeled as “mancessions” by pundits, due to the loss of jobs traditionally belonging to fields dominated by males (Neely, 2020). However, with more women entering the workforce, especially in “essential” fields such as construction and manufacturing that are deemed “essential,” this economic crisis has proven to be more detrimental to women, a crisis that is worsening the existing social inequalities within the American workforce.

In April 2020, women’s unemployment reached 16.2%, almost three points higher than men’s, and 55% of job loss was accounted for by women (Neely, 2020). While some women have been let go in the wake of the pandemic, others have been deemed essential or referred to as “heroic,” as though merely going to work were a decision of bravery. Over half of family care doctors, nurses, health aides, pharmacists, and grocery store clerks are women (Neely, 2020). Simultaneously letting these women go at higher rates than men and at higher rates than their share of employment while also externally valorizing their labor discounts their overall work. Feminist theories and research have addressed this rhetorical disjuncture as masculinist denigration of the female experience in fields such as speech or rhetoric, work, and general action (Hawkesworth, 1988). These gender-based discrepancies in the essential worker

community are reflective of and due in part to the rhetoric of oppression embedded within society, further exemplifying how rhetorical appeals to gender have harmed this community.

Appeals of Time and Place

A final rhetorical practice that the essential worker effectively engages in to express their own narrative is the appeal of time and place. While the frames of “frontline” and “essential” are key in the patterns of rhetoric and communication produced by the essential worker community, the appeals of time and place also impact what this community is expressing to the outside world. The set of issues that essential workers are facing is exclusive to the effects of society returning to some semblance of normalcy. In an article that expresses the tribulations of boss sadism, Paul Blest describes the consequences of the shift from being recognized as “essential” to not so essential, just as they were before the pandemic (Blest, 2021). Blest gives the example of a unionized staff in Connecticut going on strike after their request for higher wages was denied, their hazard pay was taken away, and teachers were forced back to work despite concerns for the health of both the students and teachers. Nursing homes across the country are also experiencing a shortage of workers; with one’s health being at risk for minimum wage, the public is unwilling to take such a risk. This is a prime example of the effectiveness of the appeals of time and place within a rhetorical context. This article conveys the hardships of the essential worker community within specific places (certain workplaces that offer below a suitable wage that equates to the risks involved) and a specific window of time (an awkward transitional period following a global pandemic) (Blest, 2021). A synthesis of these two appeals creates a rhetorical piece that more effectively communicates to the surrounding set of communities or society at large. This synthesis of appeals paints a picture of modernity and specificity that initiates a thought-provoking conversation between the community and outsiders.

Time and place as a rhetorical appeal, as described by Blest, has greatly impacted my experiences within the grocery business. I witnessed the effects of the pandemic on the workplace firsthand. As soon as the pandemic took root in Tennessee, two-week notices began to pile onto my boss’s desk. There was a sea of empty shelves that caused panic and fear to take hold in the hearts of Tennesseans, with not enough grocery trucks to give relief to such chaos. My community’s narrative was formed by hardships that occurred specifically during this transitional period. A new, inexperienced world was formed in the face of a global health crisis, without giving the population the time to properly adjust. Without the foundational issues that were illuminated due to their severity, we would not have had the resources to rhetorically acknowledge the degradation of our workplace.

This appeal of time and place has been similarly utilized by outsiders of the essential worker community to bring awareness to the strife that essential workers are facing, specifically during the pandemic. For example, the Center for Migration Studies published an article with a focus on the statistical affiliation of minority groups with the essential worker community (*US*

foreign-born essential workers by status and state, and the global pandemic, 2020). The article first states that sixty-nine percent of immigrants in the US labor force and seventy-four percent of undocumented workers are essential workers, compared to sixty-five percent of the native-born labor force (*US foreign-born essential workers by status and state, and the global pandemic*, 2020). The article states that seventy percent of refugees are essential workers (*US foreign-born essential workers by status and state, and the global pandemic*, 2020). These numerical appeals begin to paint a picture for the reader, that many underrepresented or minority groups comprise this community of essential workers, a community being financially slandered in the wake of a crisis pertaining to both the economy and the state of healthcare in America.

The article further lists that a total of 6.2 million essential workers are not eligible for relief payments under the CARES Act, as well as many of their 3.8 million US citizen children (younger than the age of seventeen), including 1.2 million US citizen children living in households below the poverty level (“US Foreign-Born Workers in the Global Pandemic: Essential and Marginalized”, 2020). This article, albeit generally a listing of statistics pertaining to the essential worker community, reveals the racial and economic paradox of the community. Despite being deemed “essential” to society, many members of this community lack the specific status to receive compensation for their labor during the pandemic (“US Foreign-Born Workers in the Global Pandemic: Essential and Marginalized”, 2020). This community has been marginalized by immigration and US COVID-19 policies. This absence of compensation despite an excess of public praise exhibits the appeal of time and place that may serve to bring to light certain components of a community’s narrative. The specificity of the time and place, or the factors of the time period that encompassed the pandemic and the location of essential workplaces, alongside the severity of the statistics expressed in this piece emphasizes the plight of essential workers, especially minorities that are subject to deplorable workplace conditions.

How Rhetorical Frameworks Reflect Communal Identities

Humans in and of themselves are creatures of rhetoric. The basis of our existence stems from systematic judgements – the ways that we judge and interpret the people and the places around us. Communities formulate around a shared identity while formulating an independent narrative allowing a distinction from the distant outsider. The community of essential workers of America is an example of the inner complexities of such a rhetorical framework, of the inner lattices of frames, appeals, and interpretations that inhabit the spaces in between transmission from one being to another, be it a fellow member or outsider. Even in all the disparities between the rhetoric of member and outsider, the rhetoric of both parties formulates the narrative of this community; the thought of one party sparks the thought of another, producing a chain of ideas, one feeding into the next.

Alongside the rhetoric already produced by essential workers and outsiders alike, my experiences fit cohesively into the niches of these frames and appeals, lending credence to the

narrative of my community and even discrediting the judgements of outsiders upon the basis of the limitations of their own perceptions. It is my hope that because of some of my work, alongside the research, experiences, and rhetoric of others, the world may recognize the hardships experienced by grocery workers during the pandemic and lend more credit to the work of others.

Concept of Othering

As can be seen from the disparity between the rhetoric of members of the essential worker community and those that lie outside the community's membership or parameters, essential workers have become socially and economically "othered" during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath. Othering is defined as, "a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities" (*The problem of othering: Towards inclusiveness and belonging*, 2018). The disparate rhetorical framework described above, alongside my experiences, is illustrative of a consistent othering of this community or sect of the American workforce as opposed to other non-essential workers throughout the country.

Data Representing Hardship and Ethnicity among Frontline Workers

Despite the typical narrative that essential workers were rewarded for being deemed "essential" during the pandemic, they have faced inadequate workplace conditions, which were not fiscally compensated for. More than 54% of individuals within the essential workforce during the pandemic claim to have relied on unhealthy habits such as alcohol and drugs to get through this time (*Essential workers more likely to be diagnosed with a mental health disorder during pandemic*). Nearly 3 in 10, or 29% of these individuals, reported that their mental health had worsened since the pandemic, with 75% reporting that they could have used more emotional support from the community than they received (APA). Members of the essential workforce are now more than twice as likely as those who are not a part of this community to have received treatment from a mental health professional and to have been diagnosed with a mental health disorder since the coronavirus pandemic started (*Essential workers more likely to be diagnosed with a mental health disorder during pandemic*).

Studies also show that essential workers face an increased amount of societal hardship versus non-essential workers. In studies done by the Community Service Society (Torres), it is shown that essential workers had to receive food from food pantries (27%), went hungry, had gas/electricity turned off (11.6%), fell behind on rent/mortgage (11.2%), and even moved in with other people due to financial hardship (12.4%). Navara, a 40-year-old African American woman, also stepped forward during this study to express some of the hardships she faced. Navara was employed by Fresh Direct in New York City during the pandemic, and her role consisted of packing groceries for delivery across the city to ensure New Yorkers had access to food. She suffered from multiple health issues during this physical job of packaging and distributing food

in mass quantities and therefore asked for a bonus to compensate her for her labor. Fresh Direct only gave Navara a \$75 bonus, which was largely consumed by taxes and other financial obligations. Navara went on to work for Amazon despite her health issues in the hopes of full-time work, only to suffer from multiple robbery attempts. Deciding that part-time labor was not worth the risks during the pandemic, Navara once again left the company (Torres). This is just one account of the ways in which essential workers were not compensated for putting their own lives at risk during the COVID-19 crisis and were left at a financial and emotional disadvantage in comparison to their “non-essential” counterparts.

Full recognition or compensation for the difficult labor conditions and emotional and mental hardship have yet to be passed by those of political officials in the U.S. Instituting more hazard pay for essential workers such as Navara could have provided proper compensation for the increased risks during the pandemic, such as “working under immense stress and physical strain, separation from loved ones, and sporadic access to personal protective equipment” (Torres). As noted during the CSS study, essential workers are predominantly of African American, Latino, and Asian descent, altogether encompassing 69.1 percent of the essential community (Torres). The unemployment rate jumped in April 2020, and minorities took the full impact of this nationwide job loss. Black and Latino workers experienced far slower job recovery than White workers, with some 7.9 percent of Black workers and 5.9 percent of Latino workers unemployed in October 2021, compared to 4.0 percent of white workers. Black and Latino adults were more than twice as likely as White adults to report that their household did not get enough to eat: 17 percent for Black adults and 16 percent for Latino adults, compared to 6 percent of White adults. Adults who identify as American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, or as multiracial, taken together, were more than three times as likely than white adults to report that their household did not get enough to eat, at 19 percent (Torres).

Otherring of Frontline Workers: Systematic Exploitation on the Basis of Race

These statistics are reflective of the ingrained systematic racism within the U.S. Minorities encompassed the majority of the essential community and suffered much more from the pandemic than those who are predominately white in the U.S. The nation’s capitalist economy has simultaneously reinforced and exploited minorities, primarily African Americans, as they take on essential positions to uphold the economy at the expense of their health and welfare during the pandemic. Due to racial capitalism perpetuating socioeconomic (e.g., low wages, essential worker status) and race-related (e.g., residential segregation, housing discrimination) factors, the minorities that serve as the foundation for the American economy were othered and consequently suffered during the pandemic due to their role within the essential community (Brown, 2022).

Not only do studies show that African Americans, alongside other minorities within the essential workforce, suffered on a socioeconomic level, but their physical health was also at a

heightened risk during the pandemic. The COVID-19 virus disproportionately hospitalized African Americans in comparison to their white counterparts, as they were twice as likely to be hospitalized or die upon the contraction of the virus as of April 2022 according to the Center of Disease Control (CDC) (Brown, 2022). In general, Black Americans have a deep-seated distrust of COVID-19 vaccines due to centuries of being the subject of mistreatment and neglect by medical professionals and biomedical researchers. Furthermore, the proliferation of misinformation has convinced many Black individuals that getting vaccinated is more dangerous than contracting the virus itself. When combined with lower levels of education, political conservatism, historical mistrust, and a widespread dissemination of false information, Black essential workers constitute a subgroup that is particularly resistant to COVID-19 vaccination. As a result, only 57 percent of African Americans have received at least one vaccine dose as of April 2022 (Brown, 2022).

This subcommunity has thus been effectively othered within American society due to their socioeconomic position as opposed to their non-essential counterparts. Not only are they disadvantaged due to the types of jobs these individuals take on, but they are further isolated from the rest of society due to longstanding systematic racism within the United States. This group is supposedly essential because it contributes to the basis of civilization and its function during a global pandemic, but seemingly treated as nonessential, noted by rhetorical disparities and the lack of protection and healthcare received during the COVID-19 crisis.

Socioeconomic Isolation: “Us versus Them” Mentality

Even as the pandemic fostered mutual support between members of the frontline community, an “us versus them” mentality began to emerge as this community realized the discrimination they were facing because of their specific job sector, racial identity, and gender. Many essential workers in the fast-food industry faced discrimination under the longstanding pretense that individuals in this field of labor possess low intelligence and work ethic (McCallum, 2023). Thus, fast-food workers faced increasingly demeaning treatment from the individuals they served during the pandemic. Even within the same workplace, such as hospitals, it was common for workers to construct a hierarchy of essentiality, from emergency room nurses to specialized technicians who didn’t interact with as many patients (McCallum, 2023). “Guinea pigs,” “lab rats,” “crash test dummies,” “human shields,” “sacrificial lambs” — many essential workers used these terms to describe their status in the social hierarchy (McCallum, 2023). These metaphors of disposability reflect the deep bitterness and indignation that these workers experienced because of classism in a deeply capitalist economy, which surfaced because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During an April 2020 rally by teachers to oppose reopening public schools, Jillian Primiano, an emergency room nurse from Wyckoff Heights Medical Center in Brooklyn, called attention to the way nurses understood the plight of teachers being forced back into dangerous

classrooms. “As nurses, we know you will be short on supplies and staff as billionaires continue to not pay taxes, throwing us small donations here and there and patting themselves on the back,” Primiano told the crowd. “We know that you will bear the brunt of idealistic policies that only look good on paper...They’re gonna call you heroes while they don’t give you what you need to do your job” (McCallum, 2023). Even as the essential community banded together to combat unfair wages and working conditions, a divide arose between those on the frontlines and those that were unemployed during the pandemic. Studies show how the attitudes of essential workers towards the unemployed shifted and evolved drastically over the course of the pandemic as socioeconomic situations changed and became more dire.

Essential workers, understanding the plight of poverty, were at first sympathetic to those that were laid off. However, as waves of the virus continued to ripple throughout communities across the United States, essential workers began to grow angry with their own respective situations. These essential workers could not afford to stay home, even though being amongst the public became increasingly unsafe (McCallum, 2023). “No way somebody sitting at home deserves more than someone out there on the front lines,” said Francisco, a slaughterhouse worker from Colorado. “When we say we’re essential workers, we mean the people actually working” (McCallum). “We’re not all in this together,” Caroline, a nurse from Buffalo, New York, also told an interviewer. “Some of us are working our butts off and some of us are sitting on them” (McCallum, 2023).

As the pandemic unfolded, social movements emerged in response to the divisions between the essential community and others impacted by the crisis. These movements faced challenges in connecting stereotypical issues of race and unemployment due to the diverse makeup of the frontline community. The complaints regarding the unemployed were no longer that they were “lazy,” but rather they were unfairly safe or sheltered (McCallum, 2023). As the pandemic progressed, the public shifted their attention from praising the essential community to decrying that “no one wants to work anymore,” in reference to the misinformed ideology that workers leaving the frontlines or choosing to stay home rather than risk their health was an act of laziness. This ideology reveals the superficial rhetoric of labeling the frontline workers as heroes and how this temporary praise never truly conferred the benefits deserving of frontline workers that would have guaranteed their safety and financial well-being.

Post-Pandemic America: How the Essential Community is Moving Forward

Moving forward from the onslaught of the pandemic, the essential worker community has experienced several socioeconomic changes. Those such as Noah Smith and Chris C. have left the frontlines entirely. Noah and Chris worked in a bakery and an Amazon warehouse, respectively, only to pursue careers on a college campus and in business analytics. Both claimed to be unappreciated for their services and experiencing great physical pain from arduous hours (Raymond, 2021). These two Kentuckians have been a part of a national wave of people

transitioning from the essential worker community into other jobs and careers, with a record four million Americans quitting their jobs in 2020. Retail, food servicing, and warehouses were among the sectors with the most departures in 2020 (Raymond, 2021).

As well as transitioning from the frontlines, members of the essential workforce have sparked a renewed interest in labor unions. The minimum wage for most companies remained at \$7.25 dollars per hour, and the pandemic revealed that neither Federal nor State OSHA was equipped and staffed to ensure workplace safety. The combination of unsafe workplace conditions with low wages led to heightened approval ratings for labor unions. By late summer of 2020, a Gallup survey found support for labor unions growing, with 65% of people saying they approve, the highest number in two decades (How the pandemic is changing the jobs of essential workers).

Healthcare workers, or more specifically nurses, have collectively been repulsed from this job sector of the essential community because of their experiences during the pandemic. Nurses, even as the Delta variant of the virus caused hospitalization rates to once again surge towards the tail end of the pandemic, have not fully escaped from the terror of frontline work. In April 2020, a poll from Vivian Health, a job marketplace for health care workers, found that 43 percent of nurses had plans of leaving the field entirely (How the pandemic is changing the jobs of essential workers). Carolyn Tinsley, a nursing instructor at Murray State University who worked in a COVID-19 ICU last year reinforced this statistic with her own personal experiences on the frontlines during the pandemic. Tinsely claimed that the patients she treated during the pandemic were “some of the sickest” she had ever seen during her career as a nurse and that treating them proved to be a grueling experience that took a physical and emotional toll on her (How the pandemic is changing the jobs of essential workers). In addition to the gruesome experience of treating these patients, Tinsely also reported that she felt as though the expertise and needs of nurses were not properly acknowledged during the pandemic, which she hopes to change in a post-pandemic world (How the pandemic is changing the jobs of essential workers).

The experiences of essential workers during the pandemic are reflective of much more than the average lower to middle-class employee, thrust to the frontline of a battle without warning. The collective experience of the essential community is reflective of a greater socioeconomic issue that exists within the United States. It is an issue of race and the exploitative patterns of “othering” that capitalist economies create.

How Frontline Rhetoric Revealed the Exploitative Nature of American Capitalism

The U.S. has had a long history of exploitative behavior towards minorities, primarily African Americans. Minorities typically take on some of the most physically and emotionally taxing jobs within the country with little to no compensation (Brown, 2022). Since these jobs were deemed “essential” in their contribution to society, the pandemic was able to illuminate this systematic discrimination on the basis of professional occupation, race, gender, and general

socioeconomic position. The rhetoric that surrounds this community creates tension between those that feel as though they were taken advantage of during the COVID-19 outbreak and those who benefited from the labor of the essential community. Were it not for the risks these workers took as the world descended into perpetual societal lockdown, American citizens would have struggled to carry on with their daily lives.

It is through the analysis of rhetorical transmission, or the ways in which individuals interact with one another across community boundaries, that patterns of bias and stigma may be observed. Through the disparity that exists between the rhetoric of essential workers and those that exist outside of this collective socioeconomic identity, it is evident that those deemed “essential” have been consistently taken advantage of. Even before the pandemic, this class of workers has struggled to uphold a capitalist system, with such strife only being illuminated to the rest of the American population because of a global health and economic crisis. As the world propels itself forward post-pandemic, the essential community distinguishes itself as changed. This community is collectively aware of just how essential they are to the efficiency of the American economy and are willing to fight for just compensation within a historically exploitative nation.

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