“Expendable to Essential: Conceptualizing the Rhetorical Othering of Frontline Workers”

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. Such is the nature of a community; it is the accumulation of an identity that is processed and interpreted by outsiders via its unique rhetorical framework crafted and expressed by the members that encompass the community. According to D.A. Masolo, the identities of persons are shaped biologically and socially by the social worlds in which they inhabit and play various roles (Masalo, 2019). An example of this community framework lies in the community of essential workers, or those individuals that persisted in working amongst the general population in the midst of the global pandemic that began roughly in the year 2019 and continues to hinder any true return to societal normalcy today.

These workers were deemed essential due to the transformation of their societal standing in relation to their professional position; these individuals had transitioned from mere fast-food workers, grocery store cashiers, 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 is one of 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 serves both to compliment and misrepresent the community. This occurs with the use of 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 in carefully constructing this community's identity. An analysis of the rhetorical framework of the essential workforce alongside statistical data illustrates how this community has been othered within society during the pandemic due to the nature of the job sectors within this community as well socioeconomic biases that accompany America's capitalist economic framework.

As a member of management at a small grocery store chain based in Tennessee, I have been subject to 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 this community to not only grant a deeper understanding of the "othering" that essential workers have experienced, but also to provide 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 felt entrapped by their financial obligations, forced to work as a sort of barrier between order and descent into total chaos as society faced an unknown enemy to public welfare. Those such as Iman Palm, an

essential worker as well as full time college student, conveyed their experiences through a "frontline" frame, in which their joint experiences, albeit unique in accordance with the individual, created 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 for the employee in question. 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 writes of undergoing immense stress as her grocery store succumbed to the fear and anger fostered by the pandemic paired with the belief that the only possible relief from such stress would be walking away from her only source of income and her education as the only working member of her immediate family. With financial struggles accompanying her fear of succumbing to the plague of the pandemic, Iman's position is reflective of the "frontline," militaristic experience in which individuals of this community are thrusted into a sort of battle against a metaphysical enemy, their workplace suddenly being the frontlines and trenches of such a war.

These joint experiences, conveyed through this "frontline" frame, are comparable and only further reinforced by my own personal tribulations during my time as a customer service manager at my local grocery store. Following the coronavirus outbreak, I had to quickly attempt in adapting not only to a completely different work environment, but also the onslaught of a

whole new attitude within our typical body of customers. Amid shortages of not only products but employees, such circumstances being completely out of my control, frustrations were taken out on me. Being specifically 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 the service of my own labor to for years. The entirety of the workforce at my store were subjected to terrible treatment, in which employees not as invested in the company would eventually run from due to the high risk and low reward; the pay wasn't worth the conditions we were subjected to, and I could never find fault in the consequent actions of my employees.

News networks and government officials would begin to refer to me and my work as essential, but I had never felt lesser. Following my grocery store's attempt at both implementing mask mandates for customers within the store and respecting the privacy of those that remained unmasked, I would be publicly ridiculed by customers for my "failures" as a disappointing leader, spat on by those that would pull their masks down to their chins just to ensure their words cut more deeply. I would quietly cry over uneaten lunches during the singular 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 very outsiders we serve is generated by the rhetoric of these outsiders, thus fostering a degree of what may be interpreted as disregard towards the intramural work and rhetoric of the community. With the rise of the community of essential workers, they've 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 placed at the

forefront of a battle between the normalcy of society before and the impending mystery of what lies after 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, when heroized, 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 in the midst of the burdens placed upon them, both professionally and personally (King, 2020).

These metaphors wield militaristic language to 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 actively "enlist" in such pursuits. They are essential components of a developed society, but they are not warriors, with no expectation of being thrusted at the forefront of a healthcare crisis. Other militaristic metaphors such as "doctors are fighting on the frontlines without sufficient ammunition" and "they are battling the enemy" completely distorts the work of healthcare workers such as doctors; they are not battling an enemy, they are struggling to save lives (King, 2020). The utilization of military rhetoric or metaphors allows for the induction of a mindset that allows shortcuts, a heedless and chaotic approach to "defeat the enemy" or shrug off a global pandemic as quickly as possible. But that is not the doctrine of those that develop and apply medicinal treatments; the realm of medicine does not allow for shortcuts, for it puts the lives of both the patient and provider at a heightened risk, something that cannot be afforded during a time where lives are already at risk on a day-to-day basis.

"Essential" Rhetorical Frame and its Dissention

A second rhetorical frame that the essential worker community utilizes in expressing its respective narrative is “essential,” a term that has caused a great deal of controversy between this community and its outsiders within American society. Despite members of this community taking on work in industries deemed essential to the survival of civilized living during a global pandemic-- such as the food, transportation, and healthcare industries-- many of these workers have had to fight vigorously against inadequate workplace provisions during the height of the COVID-19 outbreak (*Economic Policy Institute*, 2020). While many outside the community regarded these workers as increasing in social esteem due to the growing importance of their services, those inside the community had vastly different experiences. Despite being “essential,” these workers were required to work without protective equipment, while also being denied premium pay despite being subjected to difficult and dangerous workplace conditions. Mary Dacquel, one such essential worker as an administrative nurse, even went so far as to construct a public sign that reads, “We are not your sacrificial workers. We are healthcare workers.” Such rhetoric is reflective of the general attitude of members throughout the community that feel as though their own liberties are being infringed upon for the benefit of those that were able to self-isolate, with such injustices being masked by a government-appointed title of being “essential.”

I have also undergone experiences of dissent with the term “essential,” in which I have felt lesser based upon my position within the American workforce during the pandemic. Following the coronavirus outbreak, I had to quickly attempt to adapt not only to a completely different work environment, but also the onslaught of a whole new attitude within our typical body of customers. Amid shortages in not only products but employees and with such circumstances being completely out of my control, frustrations were taken out on me. Being 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 serving for years. Not only myself, but the entirety of the workforce at my store, were subjected to terrible treatment. This would cause employees not as invested in the company to eventually run due to the high risk and low reward; the pay wasn't worth the conditions we were subjected to, and I could never find fault in the consequent actions of these employees.

News networks and government officials would begin to refer to me and my work as essential, but I had never felt lesser. Upon any disruption to a customer's normal shopping experience, during a shortage of a particular product or a lack of cart wipes due to a swift and abrupt spike in demand for them, I would be ridiculed for factors not pertaining to the ongoing disorder around me. Male customers would look me up and down and laugh and continue to ask what a "young lady" was doing in management, ask me if I had actually undergone professional training in customer service, etc. 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. The attitude described by those such as Mary Dacquel are reflective of my own arduous time served within the grocery industry; being a part of what separated society from the normalcy of before and the prospect of utter chaos presented by the pandemic was one that was essential, yet incredibly degrading in a way that made the community of such workers feel lesser than ever before.

These personal experiences, while illuminative of the rhetoric generated from within the essential worker community, also serve to 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 a majority of the states required all but essential workers to stay home, mass furloughs and layoffs ensued, and unemployment surged from 4.4% to 14.7%

(Neely, 2020). The unemployment rate is predicted to reach the highest its been since the Great Depression, one of the most detrimental economic crashes in American history. Such economic crashes are typically labeled as "mancessions" by pundits, due to jobs lost traditionally belonging to fields dominated by males (Neely, 2020). However, with more women entering the workforce, especially in 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 existing social inequalities within the American workforce.

In April 2020, women's unemployment reached 16.2%, almost three points higher than men's, and women accounted for 55% of job losses (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 externally valorizing their labor is not accounting for a fair compensation for women within "essential" fields, thus discounting their overall work despite the apparent praise they garnered during the pandemic. Recent feminist theories and research have worked to address this rhetorical disjuncture because of masculinist projections that account for the denigration of the female experience in fields such as speech or rhetoric, work, and general action (Hawkesworth, 1988). These gender-based discrepancies found within the essential worker community are reflective 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 its own narrative is the appeal of time and place. While the frames of “frontline” and “essential” are key in the patterns of rhetoric and means of communication produced by the essential worker community, the appeals of time and place also correlate with these rhetorical frames to impact what this community is expressing to the outside world. The set of issues that essential workers are now facing are exclusive to the effects of society returning to some semblance of normalcy within the past year. Within an article that expresses the tribulations of boss sadism, Paul Blest writes of the consequences of those being deemed “essential” being now deemed as not so essential, just as they were before the pandemic. Blest writes of unionized staff in Connecticut going on strike after their request for higher wages were denied, the disappearance of hazard pay, and teachers being forced back to work despite their individual concerns regarding the health of not only themselves, but the children they are assigned to educate. Nursing homes across the country are also experiencing a shortage of potential workers; with one’s health being at risk for a job that is still only willing to provide 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). A synthesis of these two appeals creates a rhetorical piece that better communicates to a surrounding set of communities or society at large; the specificity generated by the synthesis of these appeals paints a picture of modernity and specificity for the reader that initiates a more thought-provoking conversation between the community and outsiders at large.

Time and place is a rhetorical appeal, as described by Blest, that has greatly impacted my own professional experiences during my time within the grocery business. I was able to witness firsthand the effects that the pandemic had upon transforming the entire energy of the workplace, how one moment we were fully staffed, shelves full, with a generally content body of regular customers. As soon as the pandemic fully took root in the state of Tennessee, time blurred as two-week notices began to form a considerable pile upon my boss's desk. There was a sea of empty shelves as panic and fear took hold in the hearts of Tennesseans, with not enough grocery trucks to sustain such chaos. The narrative of my community was formed from the hardships that came into fruition in the wake of such issues that occurred specifically during this transitional period, from all that the world knew as normal to a whole new crisis that the world as we have lived it has never truly known. Were it not for the foundational issues that were illuminated to the severity of the circumstances of the time and place that we were in, we would not have otherwise had quite the means or basis to rhetorically acknowledge and express the nature of the degradation of the workplace in which some of us were forced to carry on and cling to the normalcy we knew before.

This appeal of time and place has been similarly utilized by outsiders of the 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 upon minority groups within the community of essential workers with the goal of breaking down their affiliation within the community and displaying said affiliation numerically, or statistically. The article begins by stating how 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 then goes on to state that seventy percent of refugees are essential workers. These numerical appeals, before even the conclusion of the article, begins to paint a sort of picture for the reader. Many underrepresented or minority groups comprise this community of essential workers, a community being financially slandered in the wake of both an economic and healthcare crisis.

The article continues to tell a story with these numbers, further listing how a total of 6.2 million essential workers are not eligible for relief payments under the CARES Act, as well as large numbers 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, unfolds a story of the racial and economic paradox of the community. Despite being deemed "essential" to society, the author notes that many members of this community lack the specific status to be compensated for their labor and trials during the pandemic. They have been marginalized by immigration and US COVID-19 policies, as the author reveals with statistical evidence, thus exhibiting how most of the community, despite being publicly praised, are not being privately compensated for their efforts. This general example serves as an exhibition as to how the appeal of time and place 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 place of essential workplaces, alongside the severity of the statistics expressed in this piece serve to emphasize the plight of essential workers, especially minorities that are subject to deplorable workplace conditions.

How Rhetorical Frameworks Reflect Communal Identities

The rhetorical framework of the world in which we live is a vast one; humans in and of themselves are creatures of rhetoric. The very basis of our existence stems from systematic judgements, of the ways in which we judge and interpret the people and the places around us. Communities formulate around a shared identity like a moth to a flame, all the while formulating its own narrative distinguishable 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 their 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, both serving to lend credence the narrative of my community and perhaps even discredit the judgements of outsiders upon the basis of the limitations of their own perceptions regarding my community. It is my hope that as a result of some of my experiences put into writing, alongside the research, experiences, and overall rhetoric of others, that the world may lend credit to the work of others; the grocery store clerks of the world, the cashier that hurriedly scans your groceries in the midst of an afternoon rush, they too have suffered during the pandemic, more than the world had initially been ever willing to admit.

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, this

community of workers has become socially and economically "othered" during and following the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. 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 personal experiences I have accumulated throughout the pandemic as a member of the "essential" community, is illustrative of a consistent practice of othering this community or sect of the American workforce as opposed to other non-essential workers throughout the country that is illuminated by recent surveys and statistical data that also serves to perceive how this community is changing in an evolving world following the global pandemic.

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 is not fiscally compensated for. More than 54% of individuals within the essential workforce during the pandemic claim to have relied on unhealthy habits to get through this period of 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 has worsened since the pandemic, with 75% reporting that they could have used more emotional support from the community at large 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 in order to express some of the hardships she faced, relative to the collective essential worker experience within this workforce community. Navara was employed by Fresh Direct in New York City during the pandemic, her role being packing groceries for delivery across the city to ensure New Yorkers were stocked with food and fed. She suffered from multiple health issues during this predominantly physical job of packaging and distributing food in mass quantities and 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 for full time work, only to have suffered 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 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 affluence within the U.S. Instituting more hazard pay for essential workers such as Navara could have provided them with compensation given the increasing risks they took during the pandemic, from “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. The unemployment rate jumped in April 2020, with minorities taking 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 were 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).

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

These statistics are reflective of a deeper, systematic racism within the U.S. With minorities encompassing the majority of the essential community, as they faced the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic the most in comparison to those that are white within 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 put 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 mistreatment, neglect, and being subject to unethical practices and experimentation 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).

As seen in the statistics produced by researchers regarding the essential workforce, this community has 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 their ethnic identity because of longstanding systematic racism within the United States as a result of historic vices and a capitalist economy that takes advantage of those that are naturally disadvantaged. They are essential in the ways in which they contribute to the basis of civilization and its function during a global pandemic, but seemingly nonessential as can be seen by

rhetorical disparities and the lack of protection and healthcare that this community 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 upon the basis of their specific job sector, racial identity, and even gender. Many essential workers that were employed in the fast-food industry faced discrimination under the longstanding pretense that individuals within this field of labor hold these positions due to their intelligence and work ethic (McCallum, 2023). Thus, they 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 at one end to specialized technicians who didn't interact with as many patients at the other (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. These metaphors of disposability reflect the deep bitterness and indignation workers experienced because of classism in a deeply capitalist economy, which came to the surface as a result 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 sort of divide arose between those on the frontlines and those that were unemployed during the pandemic. Studies exhibit 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 situation; they could not afford to stay home even as 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 content of complaints regarding the unemployed was no longer that they were "lazy," but rather they were unfairly safe or sheltered (McCallum, 2034). As the pandemic progressed, the public shifted their attentions 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, revealing 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 wellbeing.

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

Moving forward from the onslaught of the pandemic, the essential community has experienced several socioeconomic changes. Those such as Noah Smith and Chris C. have left the frontlines entirely. Noah and Chris respectively worked in a bakery and an Amazon warehouse, only to pursue careers on a college campus and in business analytics. Both claimed to have worked in horrendous conditions, in which customers were unappreciated for their services and the physical pain from arduous hours became overwhelming (How the pandemic is changing the jobs of essential workers). These two Kentuckians have been a part of a national wave of people transitioning from the essential community into other jobs and careers, with a record four million Americans quitting their jobs in 2020, retail, food servicing, and warehouses being among the sectors with the most departures (How the pandemic is changing the jobs of essential workers).

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, and the pandemic revealed how neither Federal or State OSHA was equipped and staffed to ensure the safety of workplaces. 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 (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 so much more than the average lower to middle class employee, thrusted to the frontline of a battle no one was properly prepared for. 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, only to be received with little to no compensation. Since these jobs were deemed “essential” in their contribution to society, the pandemic was able to illuminate this ongoing systematic discrimination upon the basis of professional occupation, race, gender, and general socioeconomic position. The rhetoric that surrounds this community is that of a building class 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 derived. 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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