

SO YOU SAY OUR WORK IS ESSENTIAL:

**Essential Workers and the Potential for
Transformational Learning and Change in
the Wake of COVID 19 Social and Economic
Disruption**

**ELLEN SCULLY-RUSS
MARIA CSEH
LILY HAKIMI
JERRY PHILLIPS
HENRIETTE LUNDGREN
DJ RALSTON**

**Graduate School
of Education
& Human Development**

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

DECEMBER 2023

WORKING PAPER

At the George Washington University's (GW) Graduate School of Education and Human Development (GSEHD), we advance knowledge through meaningful research that improves the policy and practice of education. Together, more than 1,000 faculty, researchers and graduate students make up the GSEHD community of scholars. Founded in 1909, GSEHD continues to take on the challenges of the 21st century because we believe that education is the single greatest contributor to economic success and social progress.

AUTHORS

Ellen Scully-Russ, Associate Professor of Human and Organizational Learning, GW
Maria Cseh, Associate Professor of Human and Organizational Learning, GW
Lily Hakimi, Doctoral Candidate, Human and Organizational Learning, GW
Jerry Phillips, Doctoral Candidate, Human and Organizational Learning, GW
Henriette Lundgren, Assistant Professor of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy, University of Georgia
DJ Ralston, Doctoral Candidate, Human and Organizational Learning, GW

Questions and comments should be addressed to scullyru@gwu.edu.

ABSTRACT

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, some U.S. workers became "essential" overnight and were ineligible to work from home. Millions of these workers cared for hospital patients, stocked grocery shelves, processed meats and poultry, and transported goods and services. They put their lives at risk to keep society functioning. Thousands have lost their lives as a result of "companies prioritizing profits and production over the health and safety of their employees" (U.S. H.R. Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, 2021, p. 6). So, why do we not care about those who care for us? This white paper explores the transformative potential of learning in and about essential work in the wake of COVID-19 social and economic disruptions. Our central inquiry is, what potential does this current moment hold to repair the Western social and economic order predicated on the precarity of essential work? We borrow the feminist notion of repair work (Cozza et al., 2021; Graziano & Trogal, 2019) that evokes transformational learning in individuals and society. Finally, we consider how the perspective of "learning to repair" can enhance adult education theory and practice.

INTRODUCTION

"I have coworkers who stand all day serving people and then have to go pay for their own groceries with food stamps," said Lisa Harris, a grocery cashier (Kinder & Stateler, 2021).

"I am having to argue for my supplies. It makes me feel secondary, not equal. You are expendable in a way", David Saucedo, a nursing home cook (Kinder, 2020).

Essential workers like Lisa and David have kept society running throughout the pandemic despite the risk to their health and well-being. Worse, many essential jobs are precarious, highly contingent, low-wage, have few benefits, and are often unsafe. In other words, these jobs offer few rewards for workers. Indeed, society largely devalues the contribution of these workers and often renders them invisible (Klein, 2021). These conditions are ironic because, in a global economy predicated on flexible work structures and relationships, society is more, not less, reliant on precarious workers (Kalleberg, 2009).

The fear of COVID-19 led many to retreat to their home, and the contributions of essential workers became noticeable in society. With this visibility came newfound respect for essential workers, as evidenced by significant corporations offering a wide range of free goods and services to support these essential workers (Klein, 2021). However, these gifts could not begin to address the needs of essential workers. Furthermore, we question whether this new ethic of care for essential workers can be sustained in a capitalistic society, given that its' basic economic order is predicated on the precarity of essential workers (Cozza et al., 2021).

The central organizing question for this white paper is: *What potential does this current moment of the pandemic hold to repair the Western social and economic order predicated on the precarity of essential work?* First, we anchor this inquiry in ongoing research on essential work, how it is difficult to define, what is known about essential workers, and the precarious working conditions that make them among the most vulnerable in society. We also examine models of the moral economy (Sayer, 2000; Bolton & Laaser, 2013; Keane, 2019) that both critique and set new aspirations for the reformation of the social and economic order, a new order based on principles of human flourishing (Walker, 2005) and Human Capabilities (Sen, 1991; 1992). Although this work posits a transformed society, it is largely silent about how a new moral economic order can emerge and take hold. In other words, it lacks a theory of learning to facilitate the desired social transformations.

We borrow the idea of repair work (Hanke, 2019) to fill this gap and delineate the transformative learning processes that bring awareness to and engagement in the moral dimensions of our economic order. Repair work (Henke, 2019), a sociological theory that examines how people continuously repair the social order through language and sensemaking, has recently been appropriated and enhanced by feminists (Cozza et al.,

2021) to feature the damaging nature of the economic practices that undergird everyday life. This work advocates a feminist “mending” practice to craft a new social order based on the principles of care and flourishing. These new mending practices require new mindsets and relationships that individuals and collectives must learn. We examine this “learning to repair” and its implications for adult education and associated learning theories and practices.

ESSENTIAL WORKERS AND ESSENTIAL WORK

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, some U.S. workers became “essential” overnight. While many stayed at home, millions of workers went to work every day to keep society functioning. Thousands of essential workers have lost their lives as a result of “companies prioritizing profits and production over the health and safety of their employees” (U.S. H.R. Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, 2021, p. 6). So, why do we not protect the welfare of those who care for us in our time of great need?

In this new reality, U.S. policymakers have struggled to develop a taxonomy of essentiality. In March 2020, The U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA, 2020) issued an advisory memorandum entitled “*Guidance on the Essential Critical Infrastructure Workforce*” and updated it in August 2021 (CISA, 2021). The memorandum delineated a list of industries and workers included in the nation’s critical infrastructure and guidance on adequate risk management strategies to protect essential workers against COVID-19. The memorandum was advisory and did not require State officials or private employers to adopt specific measures, leading to a proliferation of voluntary essential worker taxonomies and safety practices across states and industries. Indeed, although 43 states have essential workers guidelines, only 21 states followed the federal guidance, and 23 states (including the District of Columbia) created their directives. The remaining seven states do not provide any guidelines. The decentralized nature of efforts to protect essential workers has resulted in wide variation in essential categories and no standard regulations for keeping them safe at work during the pandemic.

The fluid label of “essential work” and “essential worker” pre-dates the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, to maintain the nation’s industrial base in World War I, the Federal Government deemed core industries essential, such as coal mining, steel, iron, lumber, and transportation. Notably, these industries were dominated by a white male workforce, whereas other essential industries that employed women and marginalized groups, like textile, food-packing, and agriculture, were left out. A slightly different pattern of workplace injustice emerged in World War II when new moral obligations in the form of slogans like “*Take a War Job*” and “*My husband wants me to do my part*” pressured marginalized workers to take on risky, precarious jobs to fill workforce gaps in core industries. In response, workers unionized, and strikes ensued. The federal government introduced new labor relations laws to ensure the labor peace required to maintain a strong wartime industrial base. However, the new social-economic rights

secured by these workers waned once the war ended and the military-aged males returned to the civilian workforce. Employers quickly rolled back the gains achieved by marginalized essential workers during the war effort (Klein, 2020; Rossiter & Godderis, 2020). Indeed, women faced concerted efforts to push them out of industrial jobs with human resource strategies like demotions and swing shifts devised to force them to quit (Kossoudji & Dresser, 1992, p.441) and public belittlement in the press that depicted them as helpless, hopeless, unfocused, lazy, apathetic, and not quickly available to take on post-war jobs (Rupp, 1978).

The COVID-19 pandemic, like these earlier large-scale social shocks, provides a window into the structural inequality, injustice, and precarity built into the economic order (Roy, 2020). Fifty-five million workers in low-wage “essential” jobs went to work each day with no adequate labor protection, no access to health care, and no rights to unionize, often living in the early hotspots of the disease (Orleck, 2021). These precarious conditions took a tremendous toll on essential workers' physical and emotional well-being. Take, for example, Juan Carlos Rincon, a legally documented farmworker at the country's largest growers of sweet cherries, who collapsed in the summer of 2020 and died of COVID-19-related causes shortly after he complained to his employer that he was sick (Nicholson, 2021). Another worker in a meatpacking plant, Jose Tovar, also faced employer indifference when he became infected two days after his coworker standing next to him got visibly ill. His employer told him it was up to him to test for COVID-19 (Nelson, 2021).

Juan and Jose are but two of the 55 million vulnerable workers in essential jobs that are low-wage workers who reported to work at the height of the pandemic when there were no masks, no social distancing requirements, no access to sanitizing products, and no proper access to medical care (Nicholson, 2021). Moreover, Women, Blacks, people of color, and immigrants make up a disproportionate share of essential workers (Bahn & Cumming, 2020; Economic Policy Institute, 2021), and these are the very same communities that have been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic (Obinna, 2021).

History will repeat itself, and collective amnesia will set in if we do not move beyond "just" being grateful for the sacrifices of essential workers and take the opportunity of the pandemic's disruption to rethink how we structure our economy and make amends. Likewise, returning to normal is not an option because normal is often associated with safety, regularity, and sound; the working conditions of essential work are far from "normal ." Furthermore, as Cozza et al. (2021) noted, the emphasis on normality “obscures our attention from the lives of the vulnerable and disconnects us from those who cannot afford to fight this war alone” (p. 13). Every crisis offers an opportunity for learning and transformational change. Indeed, the pandemic has already changed society, but how can we ensure that the innovations do not reproduce past inequities but instead repair the social order and make work more humane (Cozza et al., 2021)?

MORAL ECONOMY, SOCIAL CONNECTIONS, LEARNING, AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Open up. It is time to wake up and recognize us. We are right here on the front line; we need you too. Yvette Beaty, home health aide (Kinder, 2020).

Yvette Beaty's plea to be seen and cared for during the pandemic sheds light on her vulnerability. It raises questions about the moral legitimacy of the working conditions she and other essential workers must endure. Indeed, the moral economy, once viewed as a way to describe societies with few or weak markets (Sayer, 2000), has emerged as a profound critique of advanced capitalism and the related normative economics that seeks to understand how the system works, while overlooking the moral issues and questions embedded in the deep structure of the economic order (Sayer, 2000).

The avoidance of moral issues in the study of economics, according to Sayer (2000), is related to the ideology of the advanced capitalistic system it examines. In this ideology, human nature is to differentiate and become autonomous, rationalized individuals with the freedom to determine and pursue self-interests. Markets create a corresponding meritocracy - assuming the homo economicus (Bolton et al., 2012) - that generates an unquestioned belief in an egalitarian society wherein all have an equal opportunity to succeed, and rewards are distributed based on the perceived value of one's contribution (Sandel, 2020). Ethics promote individualism by instilling a value for equality and respect for the individual right to pursue their chosen path to success freely (Sayer, 2000).

Keane (2019), on the other hand, observed "everyday ethics" that go beyond individualism to promote relationally responsible decision-making in economic activities. Everyday ethics are culturally derived expectations that people bring to their daily interactions and economic activities. In moment-by-moment interactions, people draw on these ethics to legitimize their needs and views while working to influence others' moral sensemaking (Keane, 2019). Because of the everyday quality of these ethics, people are largely unaware of their moral actions and decisions and become blind to the moral implications of their economic affairs. The commonplace nature of ethics in an advanced capitalist society prompts greater awareness of the ethics, norms, and habits that guide our actions, especially in times of significant social disruption and change.

Keane's insight shifts the moral economy framework from economics and believed meritocracy to social connections, learning, and human development. Rather than study how economic systems work, the moral economy provokes an inquiry into our everyday ethics, how ethics arise in the context of our economic activities, and how socially constructed morality impacts our relationships and well-being (Bolton et al., 2012; Bolton & Laaser, 2013; Sayer, 2000; Pissarides & Thomas, 2021). The unconscious ethics guiding our economic decisions and relationships become the object of continuous critical reflection, critique, consciousness-raising, and learning (Beck et al., 1994). As awareness increases and we learn about the limitations and consequences of our moral

understandings, we may generate a new moral imperative to address the precarious social and economic conditions of essential work.

FLOURISHING AND THE HUMAN CAPABILITIES APPROACH

An alternative view of human nature has emerged in the context of this new moral inquiry in economics. From the moral economy perspective, humans are vulnerable beings deeply embedded in nature and dependent on others (Sayer, 2000; Pascoe & Stripling, 2020). Bolton et al. (2012) elaborate these "thick" relations and the importance of relational social connections in the economic order. "A moral economy lens views employment as a relationship rooted in a web of social dependencies and considers that "thick" relations produce valuable ethical surpluses that represent mutuality and human flourishing" (Bolton et al., 2012, p. 121). Social dependencies and relationships provide for individual needs and determine the capability for humans to flourish or suffer (Bolton et al., 2016; Sayer, 2000). Therefore, a moral economic inquiry aims to address social needs and provide the resources required for human flourishing (Walker, 2005), which can only occur through a deep connection, "thick" relations, and solidarity with others.

Amartya Sen's (1992, 1999) Human Capability approach further explains the human flourishing philosophy. Sen's approach is concerned with creating the conditions that enable individuals to choose a life they value (Walker, 2003, 2005). Individual dignity and freedom are vital tenets because they are central to ensuring people can choose who they want to be and what they want to do with their lives (Vizard et al., 2011; Walker, 2005). This framework shifts the focus of the current economic paradigm from the meritocracy and distribution of resources to individual dignity and the distribution of opportunity in society.

Sen (1992, 1999) recognized that individual capabilities are nurtured or diminished by institutional, economic, and societal conditions (Walker, 2003, 2005). These conditions, according to Sen, are influenced by several factors. First, social and political conditions influence how society values specific capabilities and determines the means by which individuals will develop (Walker, 2005). Second, the conditions are grounded in the capacity of the political economy to secure civil rights and develop the institutional framework to equitably meet individual needs (e.g., health care and education) (Walker, 2005). Finally, and most salient to the capability of essential workers to flourish, individual development is entangled within the broader social and ethical dynamics that determine the distribution of resources, opportunity, and vulnerability among individuals and communities in society. In other words, human capability to develop is dependent on the "...removal of the sources of un-freedom in society" (Walker, 2005, p. 4), including the poor working conditions that essential workers must endure.

A MORAL ECONOMY FOR ESSENTIAL WORK AND WORKERS

We see that the Moral Economy and Human Capability approach present a robust view of humanity that recognizes all people have "thick" needs that must be considered and

addressed on a societal level (Sayer, 2011, as cited in Bolton et al., 2016). Few can argue that the pandemic lays bare the need to address essential workers' economic and material needs; however, in this expanded framework, society is also compelled to attend to their cultural, social, psychological, and environmental needs. This perspective thus naturally extends the calls for distributional justice for essential workers (Pissarides & Thomas, 2021) beyond the material and economic resources (Somers, 2020) to include equity and justice in the distribution of opportunity and vulnerability in society. By exploring these various dimensions of distributive justice, we lay the ground to address our guiding questions: "...What potential does this current moment hold to repair the Western social and economic order predicated on the precarity of essential work?

Distribution of Material and Economic Resources

The Institute on the Future of Work, a foundation working in social partnership with governments and civil society to bring about change in the fundamental nature of work, offers the idea of a virtuous cycle wherein good work transforms the economy into one that serves the common good (Pissarides & Thomas, 2021). The leaders of the Foundation believe that the pandemic and rapid social and technological change have created the conditions to reflect on the nature and purpose of the economy. In its [Good Works Charter](#), the Foundation encourages policymakers, industry, and civic leaders to consider economic policies to grow jobs and improve productivity as a means to address pressing social issues and serve the public good. Good work, which promotes fair pay and conditions of dignity, inclusion, well-being, engagement, and meaning, can set off a virtuous economic and social development cycle. If we take steps to improve work, the individual experience will improve, and income and the economy will grow. A healthy economy will continue to produce better work and redistribute opportunity through increased wages, meaningful work, and time for family, leisure, and personal development. So, while the creation of new jobs and improvements to productivity are essential to a strong economy, these achievements are means to the social ends of social and economic inclusion, human development, and flourishing (Pissarides & Thomas, 2021) and not an end unto itself.

Pissarides and Thomas (2021) claim that good work is the most effective way to redistribute societal resources and opportunities. Though inspiring, this vision requires an accompanying commitment and strategy to repair the deep structural inequalities established by and reproduced in the precarious working conditions of essential workers. For this question, we must consider the power dynamics determining the distribution of opportunity in society.

Distribution of Opportunity

Sayer (2009) and Keane (2019) adopt a view of opportunity based on an Aristotelian philosophy of human nature and well-being that promotes the belief that we become

what we do. Therefore, action, or what we do, is more important than who we are (Sayer, 2009). In this perspective, work shapes character and may be developmental depending on whether and how it challenges workers to think and respond creatively. Indeed, studies show that when work provides workers with discretion and control over the purpose and conduct of their labor, it can foster a high measure of individual learning and development (De Grip & Van Loo, 2002). On the other hand, routine, uninteresting work diminished cognitive capacity (Vance et al., 2016), sense of self, and self-esteem.

Sayer (2009) leveraged Gomberg's (2007, as cited in Sayer, 2009) concept of contributive justice to explore the link between what people do and the potential for human flourishing. The focus is on the division of labor in advanced capitalism that is structured to segregate the more satisfying and valued work tasks into a subset of jobs rather than equitably shared among all jobs. Many essential workers and others are delegated routine, uninteresting, risky tasks that deny them the opportunity for meaningful work and social recognition. While the pandemic has shed new light on the contributions of essential workers, it also revealed the inequity of the division of labor that requires certain workers to take on the burden of keeping society running in moments of crisis. The pandemic reinforced the unequal division of labor. Privileged workers, who already had great opportunities to control the content of their work, found greater discretion over the context of their work during the pandemic. Privileged workers could choose or were required to work from home, social distance, and remain safe in the pandemic. Meanwhile, the routine and risky work of essential workers has intensified.

The prevailing division of labor that separates workers who think from workers who do emanates from our ingrained belief in meritocracy (Sandel, 2020). The ability to engage in meaningful work and contribute recognized social value is distributed based on perceived merit. Those who work hard and succeed are rewarded with meaningful work, while others who hold undervalued jobs in the labor market deserve their position (Sandel, 2020). The role of power, positionality, and privilege in shaping the division of labor and distributing opportunity for human flourishing in a meritocracy is unexamined.

We see steps taken by essential workers and their allies to assert their power to make essential work good work. New coalitions have emerged to advocate for safer working conditions and protections for essential workers (e.g., the [New York Essential Workers Coalition](#)). Indeed, the so-called great resignation has placed new pressure on employers to transform work to create good jobs by offering more pay and better conditions (Luze, 2021). The [Biden Build Back Better Plan](#) aimed to create new jobs and improve work by upskilling jobs, boosting worker education and training resources, and expanding the social safety net to make work better. The question is, will society sustain the changes resulting from these efforts beyond the pandemic? Perhaps, but only if we take steps to chip away at the values and assumptions underlying the meritocracy market economy and its unjust division of labor. This question prompts an inquiry into

empathy and how we learn to care about the most vulnerable, especially essential workers, during this pandemic.

Distribution of Vulnerability

In a provocative article critiquing the ethical framework guiding disaster response, Pascoe and Stripling (2020) argue the need to reorient the everyday ethics of this practice to align it with the moral challenges of COVID-19 and perhaps future pandemics. Though specific to disaster response, their perspective provides insight into how we all draw on ethics to adapt in times of significant disruption. Their analysis included two competing narratives that can inform how we identify, make sense of, and respond to the moral dilemmas of disasters. The fear narrative promotes zero-sum thinking, creating concerns over the scarcity of resources and the collapse of society. This narrative leads to hoarding, conflict, and utilitarian decisions among professionals to suspend the rules and compromise established ethical and moral codes (Pascoe & Stripling, 2020). For example, the scarcity of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) led hospital administrators to make a utilitarian decision to extend the use of limited N95 masks beyond the manufacturers' use guidelines. Leaders justified their decision by arguing the need to serve as many as possible, even though it posed a significant threat to vulnerable healthcare workers (Pascoe & Stripling, 2020).

An alternative care narrative fosters "...a relational account of persons as vulnerable vectors embedded in existing networks of care" (Pascoe & Stripling, 2020, p. 419). Inspired by uBuntu, African philosophy and consistent with the Feminist view on bioethics, the care narrative promotes two central beliefs that create the possibility for a different pandemic response. uBuntu offers a view of community based on solidarity wherein we continuously become ourselves in relationship to others. Simply, it is the belief that "...a person is a person through other persons" (Pascoe & Stripling, 2020, p. 430). This view of "becoming" orients us to a future after the disaster, with great potential for individual and social transformation.

The second belief, emanating from Feminist bioethics, is that in a pandemic, everyone is both vector and caregiver. Although this recognizes that we are all vulnerable, there is something wrong in a society where the privileged are permitted to avoid the vector while others take on the risks of caregiving. These social inequalities call upon us to adopt a new ethic of care that honors the uBuntu philosophy of becoming ourselves through our engagement with and care for others.

The care narrative stimulates our sociality and natural dispositions to approach others with empathy and cooperation (Keane, 2019). Pascoe and Stripling (2020) cite Drabek (2016) to illustrate how the care narrative operates in communities felled by disasters. Instead of isolating and hoarding, Drabek (2016, as cited in Pascoe & Stripling, 2020) observed that the survivors perform much of the work of disaster response. Responders and victims work together to mobilize existing care networks to mount a *whole*

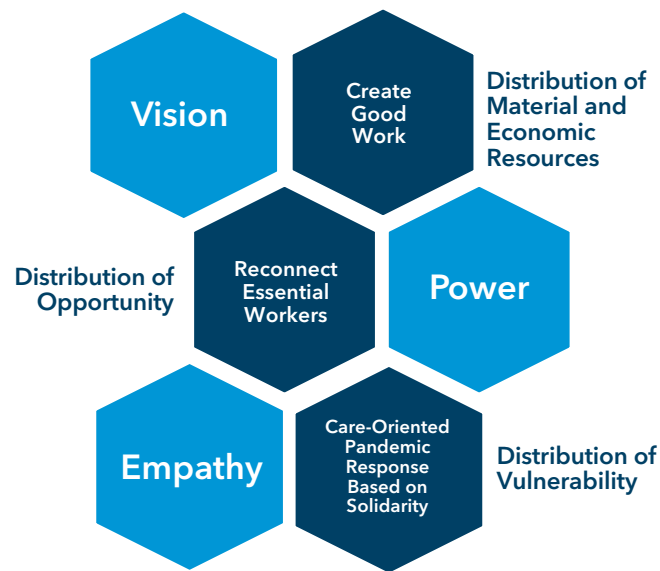
community response. However, this *whole community* response to the pandemic is risky because the virus spreads through social contact and engagement or the interactions by which we become ourselves. Suppose we recognize that we are all vulnerable vectors dependent upon one another for our future selves and society. Would this compel us to take steps to care for the essential workers who enable us all to survive? Strong networks of care for caregivers could ensure the just distribution of vulnerability in society (Pascoe & Stripling, 2020). In the early days of the vaccination, this insight was evident in the pleas from healthcare providers for all to be vaccinated so they may have relief from the stress of caring for the very sick and dying. We observed this in free meals for hospital workers delivered by restaurant owners and workers also impacted by the pandemic to show appreciation and provide some respite. Distributive justice in vulnerability prompts us to care and leverage our individual expressions of empathy to mount a concerted effort to minimize the risk essential workers face every day, especially during the pandemic.

PANDEMIC AS OPPORTUNITY TO REPAIR THE ECONOMY

Returning to our central question, *what potential does this current moment hold to repair the Western social and economic order predicated on the precarity of essential work?*

Thus far, we have highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic made visible the sacrifices of essential workers, how those sacrifices reflect the imbalances in our social and economic order, and the opportunity that focusing on the Moral Economy and Human Capabilities represents to transform our society. An expanded notion of distributive justice for essential workers during the pandemic (see Figure 1) can bring new awareness of the harmful effects of the current order and prompt us to care enough to take action to ensure human flourishing.

Figure 1. Distributive Justice for Essential Workers



While the Good Work Charter and Sen’s Human Capability approach provides a *vision* for a future of work based on equity, dignity, and inclusion, these frames provide little guidance on how to trigger the virtuous economic cycle that will eradicate structural inequalities and create a new economy aimed at addressing social issues and serving the common good. Distributive justice in opportunity, as found in Sen’s Human Capability approach (for example), fills this gap by bringing our attention to the deeply held assumptions that underlie the division of labor that creates and reinforces structural inequalities in society. It brings to light how the economic structure cuts essential workers off from the broader enterprise and makes them, their conditions, and their contribution invisible to the rest of society. The pandemic is changing this; public awareness of essential work conditions has increased mainly due to essential workers asserting *power* through union organizing and strikes to improve their essential work. However, the confounding question remains. What will prompt the powerful and privileged to modify their economic and social behaviors to support this cause? We not only need to connect essential workers to the broader enterprise, but we must also include them and recognize that they are indeed central to the sustainability of our community. To make sustainable change, workers' action to enact their power is not enough; we must also take steps to protect them from harm. This care to protect requires *empathy*, for it allows us to acknowledge our interdependent and deeply vulnerable nature and prompts us to respond with care.

Sayer (2000) wrote that the moral economy "...is an attempt to...address the economic problems of humans rather than the human problems of economics" (p. 94). As this analysis shows, achieving a moral economy will require profound structural change that can repair our economy and relationships in ways that honor and foster our deeply vulnerable and interdependent human nature.

LEARNING TO REPAIR

Feminists writing on repair and the pandemic focus on how the pandemic is a breakdown in social practices and norms that we have taken for granted (Cozza et al., 2021). An expansive view sees *repair practices* as an ongoing process of relational negotiation built into the fabric of our everyday lives (Henke, 2019). This view of repair considers the connections between people, organizations, and materiality in everyday interactions and as a response to significant breakdowns (Henke, 2019). As we work through the challenges of the pandemic, we knowingly or unknowingly engage in repairing our social practices (Cozza et al., 2021). One version of repair practices focuses on stabilization and a return to the prior order of things, while repair as transformation requires significant change to reorder our societal infrastructure (Henke, 2019). We are collectively engaged in repair and have the opportunity to consider what learning is required to facilitate repair as transformation (Cozza et al., 2021).

We can confidently say that the pandemic has prompted a shared disjuncture (Jarvis, 2009) or disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 2000) that has triggered a transformative learning cycle for some. Indeed, Pascoe and Stripling (2020) note that a pandemic significantly differs from other disasters in three ways, each potentially promoting deep learning. First, a pandemic alters perception as people break old norms and immediately create new ones to adapt. Second, a pandemic requires imagination to respond to the uncertainty of a situation. Finally, a pandemic can enhance community "unless people are directed toward apathy by the response itself" (Pascoe & Stripling, 2020, p. 427).

Therefore, the potential for transformative learning resides in how we *respond* to the pandemic. A response oriented in fear may lead to a general state of apathy that may stimulate learning; it does little to transform people and enhance community. Indeed, Jarvis (2016, as cited in Bjursell, 2020) delineates two types of learning that fear provokes. First, fear can lead to non-learning: a closing of ranks that narrows the mindset and frays social bonds. Unfortunately, we see this response in the increased political fragmentation in democratic societies. Fear can also quicken non-reflective learning aimed at the restoration of normalcy. For example, some people learn to adapt to remote work by working harder and longer hours from home than pre-pandemic.

On the other hand, a caring response calls forth a spirit of uBuntu wherein solidarity creates a shared commitment to a future based on the principles of human flourishing. Learning in this response can be described as *Communitas* (Buechner et al., 2020), or a collective expression of transformative learning that creates a deep sense of belonging and that builds new relational capacity, resulting in "a greater appreciation for life and a new sense of possibilities" (p. 89). Jarvis (2009, as cited in Bjursell, 2020) states that this deep learning involves critical reflection to understand and transform the whole person, body, mind, and emotion and their relationship to the cultural context.

This view of deep learning in *Communitas* is consistent with critical and broader social impact perspectives on transformative learning theories. Fleming (2022) argues that

transformative learning has been overly concerned with change at the individual level; instead –and in line with Honneth’s (1995) perspective – transformative learning should also work towards connecting individual problems and broader social issues. Fleming (2022) refers to Negt’s (2010 as cited in Fleming, 2020) notion that transformative learning starts with workers’ experiences and then moves towards a collective pursuit of political and emancipatory change. We certainly agree with this worker-centered focus, but we question what will prompt the powerful and privileged to modify their values and behaviors to support this cause of essential workers.

We explore this question by turning to Honneth (1995), who drew inspiration from G.H. Mead’s theory of the moral self (Reck, 1964). Like uBuntu, Mead believed that we continuously become ourselves in relationship with others. Through socialization, we learn to anticipate and respond to the perspectives and expectations of those we interact with, and over time, we learn to use these second-person perspectives (Honneth, 1995; Keane, 2019) to regulate our relations with others and the *community as a whole* (Reck, 1964). In other words, we only acquire a sense of self to the extent we learn to perceive our actions from the point of view of others. In this light, subjectivity is intersubjective because we experience ourselves through relationships and interaction with others (Honneth, 1995).

Honneth (1995) explained how Mead believed the self becomes a *moral self*. In his early work, Mead focused on the role of recognition in self-development. As we learn to perceive ourselves from the second-person perspective, we develop a self from the interacting partners who recognize us as legitimate members of the community. Through recognition, we develop a positive self-image and the cognitive ability to anticipate and respond to others’ behaviors. Mead later focused on reciprocity and how, when we consider normative expectations in our interactions, we can internalize the community’s moral values and use them to self-regulate our subjectivity and relationships. Through this process, we understand our rights and obligations as legitimate members of the community. However, these values are constantly in flux and change through our daily interactions (Keane, 2019). As we take up the *second-person perspective*, we actively use it to account for ourselves, to justify, explain, critique, and praise the self and others to influence moral sensemaking. Through these ongoing interactions, the social partners create and continually challenge and re-construct a shared sense of moral reality (Keane, 2019).

This discussion of the intersubjective nature of moral development has at least three implications for our motivating question on the *potential that this current moment holds to repair the Western social and economic order predicated on the precarity of essential work*. These implications also point to the role of adult education in learning to repair.

First, our frame of reference for developing the practical and moral self must include an ever-widening circle of interacting partners to learn to recognize the dignity of all others and stretch our moral horizons beyond our community of origin. Indeed, Honneth (1995) observed that change comes from increased empathy that emerges from constant

interactions among different people who take each other's situation seriously. How can adult education and educators develop new structures and processes that include and foster direct interactions between essential workers and the (remote) privileged they care for and serve?

The second implication arises when we consider that the generative potential of empathy resides in individual ingenuity and agency. Yes, we develop a sense of self as we socialize into communities of others, but creative deviations from normative expectations and behaviors originate in the individual's deep and often pre-conscious desires and moral sensibilities (Honneth, 1995). Indeed, Mead believed that a disjuncture between our inner impulses, on the one hand, and communal expectations, on the other hand, explained moral development in individuals and society. The individual, while embracing the communal norms, also continuously pushes back in attempts to expand the expectations of others so that they may give social expression to their unique and creative desires (Honneth, 1995). How can adult education and educators create space for new forms of self-expression to emerge and become recognized in society?

Third, as Keane (2019) reminds us, if our behavior is to count as moral, we need to be aware of the consequences of our actions. However, we must be aware of the everyday morals guiding our economic decisions and activities. Mead believed that to help people surface their unconscious morals; we must focus on the acts that disrupt the flow of everyday life (Reck, 1964). Therefore, there is potential to surface and reconsider the role of morals in how we restore/repair the economic order in the wake of the pandemic. How can adult education and educators help people morally self-justify their social and economic response to the pandemic? How can adult education and educators leverage self-justification attempts to challenge the assumptions and values that source our subjectivity and that we use to influence each other?

Sayer (2000) writes that the moral economy "is an attempt to...address the economic problems of humans rather than the human problems of economics" (p. 94). As this analysis shows, we require profound structural change that can repair our economy and relationships in ways that honor and foster our deeply vulnerable and interdependent human nature. We are called upon to stimulate our sociality by fostering uBuntu and generative *Communitas* as a mending practice and attempting to repair the societal relationships with essential workers, such as Lisa, David, and Yvette.

REFERENCES

- Bahn, K., & Cumming, C.S. (2020). *Four graphs on U.S. occupational segregation by race, ethnicity, and gender*. Washington Center for Equitable Growth. <https://equitablegrowth.org/four-graphs-on-u-s-occupational-segregation-by-race-ethnicity-and-gender/>
- Beck, U., Giddens, A., & Lash, S. (1994). *Reflexive modernization: Politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order*. Stanford University Press.
- Bjursell, C. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic as disjuncture: Lifelong learning in a context of fear. *International Review of Education*, 66(5-6), 673-689. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-020-09863-w>
- Bolton, S. C., Houlihan, M., & Laaser, K. (2012). Contingent work and its contradictions: Towards a moral economy framework. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 111(1), 121-132. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-012-1439-7>
- Bolton, S. C., & Laaser, K. (2013). Work, employment and society through the lens of moral economy. *Work, Employment and Society*, 27(3), 508-525. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017013479828>
- Bolton, S., Knut, L., & McGuire, D. (2016). Quality work and the moral economy of European employment policy. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 54(3), 583-598. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12304>
- Buechner, B., Dirx, J., Konvisser, Z. D., Myers, D., & Peleg-Baker, T. (2020). From liminality to Communitas: The collective dimensions of transformative learning. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 18(2), 87-113. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344619900881>
- Cozza, M., Gherardi, S., Graziano, V., Johansson, J., Mondon-Navazo, M., Murgia, A., & Trogal, K. (2021). COVID-19 as a breakdown in the texture of social practices. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28(1), 190-208. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12524>
- CSIA (2020). *Memorandum on identification of essential critical infrastructure workers during covid-19 response*. <https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/CISA-Guidance-on-Essential-Critical-Infrastructure-Workers-1-20-508c.pdf>
- CSIA (2021). *Advisory memorandum on ensuring essential critical infrastructure workers' ability to work during the covid-19 response*. https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/essential_critical_infrastructure_workforce-guidance_v4.1_508.pdf
- De Grip and Van Loo (2002). De Grip, A., & Van Loo, J. (2002). *The economics of skills obsolescence: a review*. Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

- Drabek, Thomas E. 2016. *The Human Side of Disaster*. Boca Raton: CRC Press.
- Economic Policy Institute. (2021). *Why the U.S. needs a \$15 minimum wage: How the Raise the Wage Act would benefit U.S. workers and their families*.
<https://www.epi.org/publication/why-america-needs-a-15-minimum-wage/>
- Fleming, T. (2022). Transformative learning and critical theory: Making connections with Habermas, Honneth, and Negt. In A. Nicolaidis, S. Eschenbacher, P. T. Buerger, Y. Gilpin-Jackson, M. Welch, & M. Misawa (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Learning for Transformation* (pp. 25-43). Springer International Publishing.
- Gomberg, P. (2007). *How to make opportunity equal*. New York: Wiley Blackwell.
- Graziano, V., & Trogal, K. (2019). Repair matters. *Ephemera*, 19(2), 203-227.
<http://proxygw.wrlc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/repair-matters/docview/2258087303/se-2>
- Henke, C. R. (2019). Negotiating repair: The infrastructural contexts of practice and power. In I. Strebel, A. Bovet & P. Sormani (Eds.), *Repair Work Ethnographies* (pp. 255-282). Palgrave Macmillan
- Honneth, A. (1995) (J. Anderson, Trans.). *The struggle for recognition: The moral grammar of social conflicts*. Polity Press. (Original work published 1994)
- Jarvis, P. (2009). Learning in everyday life. In P. Jarvis (Ed.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Lifelong Learning* (pp. 49-60). Routledge.
- Kalleberg, A. L. (2009). Precarious work, insecure workers: Employment relations in transition. *American sociological review*, 74(1), 1-22.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122409074001>
- Keane, W. (2019). How everyday ethics becomes a moral economy, and vice versa. *Economics*, 13(46), 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.5018/economics-ejournal.ja.2019-46>
- Kinder, M. (2020). *Meet the COVID-19 frontline heroes*. Brookings Institution.
<https://www.brookings.edu/interactives/meet-the-covid-19-frontline-heroes/>
- Kinder, M., & Stateler, L. (2021). *Essential workers comprise about half of all workers in low-paid occupations: They deserve a \$15 minimum wage*. Brookings Institution.
<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2021/02/05/essential-workers-deserve-minimum-wage-increase/>
- Klein, J. (Host). (2020, September 25). Essential workers: Definition, history, and importance. [Audio episode]. *The Full Story*. WSHU Connecticut.
<https://www.wshu.org/post/essential-workers-definition-history-and-importance#stream/0>
- Klein, J. (2021). Inoculations: The social politics of time, labor, and public good in COVID-America. *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 99, 30-46.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547920000265>

- Kossoudji, S.A., & Dresser, L. J. (1992). Working class Rosies: Women industrial workers during World War II. *The Journal of Economic History*, 52(2), 431-446.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050700010846>
- Luze, S. (2021, October 22). What employers learn from 'The Great Resignation'. *Forbes*.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/ellevate/2021/10/22/what-employers-can-learn-from-the-great-resignation/?sh=613fbaf67826>
- Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as transformation: Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (1st ed.). Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Negt, O. (2010). *Der politische Mensch: Demokratie als Lebensform* [The political person: democracy as a way of life]. Steidl Verlag.
- Nelson, A. (2021, November 19). The disposable US workforce: Life as an 'essential' meatpacking plant worker. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/19/the-disposable-us-workforce-life-as-an-essential-meatpacking-plant-worker>
- Nicholson. (2021). "Essential" but undervalued: Industry must do more to protect farmworkers. *Journal of Agromedicine*, 1-2.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1059924X.2022.2007655>
- Obinna, D. N. (2021). Confronting disparities: Race, ethnicity, and immigrant status as intersectional determinants in the COVID-19 era. *Health Education & Behavior*, 48(4), 397-403. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10901981211011581>
- Orleck, A. (2021). And the virus rages on: "Contingent" and "Essential" workers in the time of COVID-19. *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 99, 1-14.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547920000174>
- Pascoe, J., & Stripling, M. (2020). Surging solidarity: Reorienting ethics for pandemics. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*, 30(3-4), 419-444.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/ken.2020>.
- Pissarides, C., & Thomas, A. (2021). *The future of good work: The foundation of a modern moral economy*. Institute for the Future of Work. <https://www.ifow.org/publications/the-future-of-good-work-the-foundation-of-a-modern-moral-economy>
- Reck, A.J. (Ed.) (1964). *Selected Writings: George Herbert Mead*. University of Chicago Press.
- Rossiter, K., & Godderis, R. (2020). Essentially invisible: Risk and personal support workers in the time of COVID-19. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 42(8), 25-31.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9566.13203>
- Roy, A. (2020, April 3). The pandemic is a portal. *Financial Times*.
<https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>
- Rupp, L. J. (1978). *Mobilizing women for war: German and American propaganda, 1939-1945*. Princeton University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13x1cs7>

- Sandel, M.J. (2020). *The Tyranny of Merit: What's become of the common good?* Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Sayer, A. (2000). Moral economy and political economy. *Studies in Political Economy*, 61(1), 79-103. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19187033.2000.11675254>
- Sayer, A. (2009). Contributive justice and meaningful work. *Res Publica*, 15(1), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11158-008-9077-8>
- Sayer, A. (2011). *Why things matter to people: Social science, values and ethical life*. Cambridge University Press.
- Sell (2020). What COVID-19 reveals about twenty-first century capitalism: Adversity and opportunity. *Development (Society for International Development)*, 63, 150-156. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41301-020-00263-z>
- Sen, A. (1992) *Inequality re-examined*. Clarendon Press.
- Sen, A. (1999) *Development as freedom*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Somers, M. R. (2020). The moral economy of the capitalist crowd: Utopianism, the reality of society, and the market as a morally instituted process in Karl Polanyi's the great transformation. *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 11(2), 227-234. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hum.2020.0017>
- U.S. House of Representatives. Select Subcommittee on Coronavirus Crisis. (2021). *Coronavirus infections and deaths among meatpacking workers at top five companies were nearly three times higher than previous estimates*. https://coronavirus.house.gov/sites/democrats.coronavirus.house.gov/files/2021.10.27%20Meatpacking%20Report.Final_.pdf
- Vance, D. E., Bail, J., Enah, C., Palmer, J., & Hoenig, A. (2016). The impact of employment on cognition and cognitive reserve: Implications across diseases and aging. *Nursing: Research and Reviews*, Volume 6, 61-71. <https://doi.org/10.2147/NRR.S115625>
- Venkatapuram, S. (2020). Human Capabilities and Pandemics. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 21(3), 280-286. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2020.1786028>
- Vizard, P., Fukuda-Parr, S., & Elson, D. (2011). Introduction: The capability approach and human rights. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, 12(1), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19452829.2010.541728>
- Walker, M. (2003). Framing Social Justice In Education: What Does The 'Capabilities' Approach Offer? *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 51(2), 168-187. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8527.t01-2-00232>
- Walker, M. (2005). Amartya Sen's capability approach and education. *Educational Action Research*, 13(1), 103-110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790500200279>

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

WASHINGTON, DC

gsehd.gwu.edu