December 2021

Essential Worker Heroes

Cynthia Mejia
*University of Central Florida, cynthia.mejia@ucf.edu*

---

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Rosen College of Hospitality Management at STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Rosen Research Review by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

**Recommended Citation**

Mejia, Cynthia (2021) "Essential Worker Heroes," *Rosen Research Review: Vol. 2 : Iss. 3 , Article 3.* Available at: https://stars.library.ucf.edu/rosen-research-review/vol2/iss3/3
The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it untold disruptions to the hospitality and related services industries, and it also prompted a dramatic shift in public perceptions towards line-level workers. Normally associated with unskilled and ‘dirty’ labor, these workers were embraced as ‘heroes’ by providing essential services in the face of a severe and frightening public health threat. This phenomenon provided a rare opportunity for researchers in the fields of hospitality and psychology to examine how those workers, and the society they served, made sense of this perceptive shift.

A mericans are probably most familiar with the concept of heroes in capes and costumes on the big screen. The budgets these blockbusters command, and the revenues they produce, would suggest we place high value on their exploits. The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown a light on a lesser-appreciated team of heroes, whose uniforms are more utilitarian and whose work circumstances are far less glamorous. However, the genuine threat posed by the global coronavirus pandemic demanded they step up, albeit reluctantly, to shield and serve others. Their newfound heroism demanded they, and those they served, significantly alter their perception of their work, and the society they served, made sense of this perceptive shift.

The COVID-19 pandemic shut down all but essential services, those involved in these services were thrust not only into the spotlight, but up close to the pandemic’s front lines, disproportionately exposing them to the dangers of the virus. The media and the U.S. Government were quick to champion healthcare workers and the nobility of their profession. However, the provision of food and other essential services soon made Americans realize the importance of the long supply chains and the largely vulnerable workers necessary to keep those services to their door.

Working within such services as hospitality, retail grocery, food service, consumer retail, and taxi and transportation services found themselves suddenly considered ‘heroes’ — a far cry from their usually stigmatized occupations, often tainted as ‘dirty work.’ Dr. Mejia and the TRT research team were interested in how this group dealt with their new ‘hero’ status and how those outside the group balanced this with previous perceptions of work in the services industries.

The research focused on line-level—essential, customer-facing, low-paid and low-level—workers. The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it untold disruptions to the hospitality and related services industries, and it also prompted a dramatic shift in public perceptions towards line-level workers. Normally associated with unskilled and ‘dirty’ labor, these workers were embraced as ‘heroes’ by providing essential services in the face of a severe and frightening public health threat. This phenomenon provided a rare opportunity for researchers in the fields of hospitality and psychology to examine how those workers, and the society they served, made sense of this perceptive shift.

As the COVID-19 pandemic shut down all but essential services, those involved in these services were thrust not only into the spotlight, but up close to the pandemic’s front lines, disproportionately exposing them to the dangers of the virus. The media and the U.S. Government were quick to champion healthcare workers and the nobility of their profession. However, the provision of food and other essential services soon made Americans realize the importance of the long supply chains and the largely vulnerable workers necessary to keep those services to their door.

Workers within such services as hospitality, retail grocery, food service, consumer retail, and taxi and transportation services found themselves suddenly considered ‘heroes’ — a far cry from their usually stigmatized occupations, often tainted as ‘dirty work.’ Dr. Mejia and the TRT research team were interested in how this group dealt with their new ‘hero’ status and how those outside the group balanced this with previous perceptions of work in the services industries.

Dr. Mejia and her team turned to the driving force of this perceived status shift: the news media. Newspapers and TV in the United States were vital in shaping the hero narrative, so the researchers employed a critical discourse analysis methodology to scan and code the language used to describe essential workers. They examined the language used within a range of 46 news sources, including transcripts from nationally televised news sources such as CNN, MSNBC, ABC and Fox News, university newspapers, and mainstream news outlets, for the period March 30 to May 31, 2020—the early wake of the pandemic in the U.S. Their focus was how the workers, considered the ‘In-Group’, and society in general, the ‘Out-Group’, used language to frame the character and role of essential workers.

WHAT VALUE DID A HERO STATUS HOLD IF IT CARRIED WITH IT A REAL THREAT TO THE HEALTH OF LOVED ONES?

The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it untold disruptions to the hospitality and related services industries, and it also prompted a dramatic shift in public perceptions towards line-level workers. Normally associated with unskilled and ‘dirty’ labor, these workers were embraced as ‘heroes’ by providing essential services in the face of a severe and frightening public health threat. This phenomenon provided a rare opportunity for researchers in the fields of hospitality and psychology to examine how those workers, and the society they served, made sense of this perceptive shift.

As the COVID-19 pandemic shut down all but essential services, those involved in these services were thrust not only into the spotlight, but up close to the pandemic’s front lines, disproportionately exposing them to the dangers of the virus. The media and the U.S. Government were quick to champion healthcare workers and the nobility of their profession. However, the provision of food and other essential services soon made Americans realize the importance of the long supply chains and the largely vulnerable workers necessary to keep those services to their door.

Workers within such services as hospitality, retail grocery, food service, consumer retail, and taxi and transportation services found themselves suddenly considered ‘heroes’ — a far cry from their usually stigmatized occupations, often tainted as ‘dirty work.’ Dr. Mejia and the TRT research team were interested in how this group dealt with their new ‘hero’ status and how those outside the group balanced this with previous perceptions of work in the services industries.

Dr. Mejia and her team turned to the driving force of this perceived status shift: the news media. Newspapers and TV in the United States were vital in shaping the hero narrative, so the researchers employed a critical discourse analysis methodology to scan and code the language used to describe essential workers. They examined the language used within a range of 46 news sources, including transcripts from nationally televised news sources such as CNN, MSNBC, ABC and Fox News, university newspapers, and mainstream news outlets, for the period March 30 to May 31, 2020—the early wake of the pandemic in the U.S. Their focus was how the workers, considered the ‘In-Group’, and society in general, the ‘Out-Group’, used language to frame the character and role of essential workers.

WHAT VALUE DID A HERO STATUS HOLD IF IT CARRIED WITH IT A REAL THREAT TO THE HEALTH OF LOVED ONES?

The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it untold disruptions to the hospitality and related services industries, and it also prompted a dramatic shift in public perceptions towards line-level workers. Normally associated with unskilled and ‘dirty’ labor, these workers were embraced as ‘heroes’ by providing essential services in the face of a severe and frightening public health threat. This phenomenon provided a rare opportunity for researchers in the fields of hospitality and psychology to examine how those workers, and the society they served, made sense of this perceptive shift.

As the COVID-19 pandemic shut down all but essential services, those involved in these services were thrust not only into the spotlight, but up close to the pandemic’s front lines, disproportionately exposing them to the dangers of the virus. The media and the U.S. Government were quick to champion healthcare workers and the nobility of their profession. However, the provision of food and other essential services soon made Americans realize the importance of the long supply chains and the largely vulnerable workers necessary to keep those services to their door.

Workers within such services as hospitality, retail grocery, food service, consumer retail, and taxi and transportation services found themselves suddenly considered ‘heroes’ — a far cry from their usually stigmatized occupations, often tainted as ‘dirty work.’ Dr. Mejia and the TRT research team were interested in how this group dealt with their new ‘hero’ status and how those outside the group balanced this with previous perceptions of work in the services industries.

Dr. Mejia and her team turned to the driving force of this perceived status shift: the news media. Newspapers and TV in the United States were vital in shaping the hero narrative, so the researchers employed a critical discourse analysis methodology to scan and code the language used to describe essential workers. They examined the language used within a range of 46 news sources, including transcripts from nationally televised news sources such as CNN, MSNBC, ABC and Fox News, university newspapers, and mainstream news outlets, for the period March 30 to May 31, 2020—the early wake of the pandemic in the U.S. Their focus was how the workers, considered the ‘In-Group’, and society in general, the ‘Out-Group’, used language to frame the character and role of essential workers.

WHAT VALUE DID A HERO STATUS HOLD IF IT CARRIED WITH IT A REAL THREAT TO THE HEALTH OF LOVED ONES?

As the COVID-19 pandemic shut down all but essential services, those involved in these services were thrust not only into the spotlight, but up close to the pandemic’s front lines, disproportionately exposing them to the dangers of the virus. The media and the U.S. Government were quick to champion healthcare workers and the nobility of their profession. However, the provision of food and other essential services soon made Americans realize the importance of the long supply chains and the largely vulnerable workers necessary to keep those services to their door.

Workers within such services as hospitality, retail grocery, food service, consumer retail, and taxi and transportation services found themselves suddenly considered ‘heroes’ — a far cry from their usually stigmatized occupations, often tainted as ‘dirty work.’ Dr. Mejia and the TRT research team were interested in how this group dealt with their new ‘hero’ status and how those outside the group balanced this with previous perceptions of work in the services industries.

Dr. Mejia and her team turned to the driving force of this perceived status shift: the news media. Newspapers and TV in the United States were vital in shaping the hero narrative, so the researchers employed a critical discourse analysis methodology to scan and code the language used to describe essential workers. They examined the language used within a range of 46 news sources, including transcripts from nationally televised news sources such as CNN, MSNBC, ABC and Fox News, university newspapers, and mainstream news outlets, for the period March 30 to May 31, 2020—the early wake of the pandemic in the U.S. Their focus was how the workers, considered the ‘In-Group’, and society in general, the ‘Out-Group’, used language to frame the character and role of essential workers.

WHAT VALUE DID A HERO STATUS HOLD IF IT CARRIED WITH IT A REAL THREAT TO THE HEALTH OF LOVED ONES?
on the surging death toll among line-level workers with limited access to personal protective equipment (PPE), and coping by encouraging fundraising initiatives to help secure PPE.

DEALING WITH IT

So how did essential workers grapple with their sudden thrust to the frontline? In examining In-Group discourse in the source documents, Dr. Mejia and her team identified several coping mechanisms. Firstly, looking inward, there was stronger favoritism within the group—a stronger ‘bond’, if you will. The In-Group expressed their readiness to put themselves at risk, which these individuals did, for two-plus solid months with a very modest (paycheck)?

FUNDING

This was now ‘inspiring’. What was previously purely a means to a paycheck was now ‘inspiring’, and their jobs were a source of camaraderie. The In-Group also employed outward defensive tactics as a coping mechanism, blaming customers without masks and pointing to the poor pay they received for such dangerous, essential work. For the Out-Group, coping with their perceptions of essential workers’ hero status came largely through confronting or countering previous perceptions and then broadcasting their support—for example, farmers who made plans to get products directly to consumers were championed as ‘innovative’. The new situation also encouraged the re-examination of the ethics of remuneration and the reforming of low-paid essential workers dealing with ‘dirty’ work in the face of COVID, compared with those in society who transitioned seamlessly to stay-at-home work. The Out-Group wasn’t averse to blame, either. Their focus was invariably on those who didn’t wear masks; employers for not protecting their staff; the U.S. Government for its perceived myriad inequities they face—low pay, lack of health insurance and an absence of ancillary services, such as daycare.

Because not all heroes can always help, there was now a period of alignment early days, there was a period of alignment of opinion in the discourse of line-level workers and those who usually dismiss their occupations as unskilled and non-essential. Both group members recognized the value of opinion in the discourse of line-level essential, stigmatized workers.

This is an opportunity for a dramatic change in the conditions for line-level workers within the hospitality and related services industries. It is an appropriate time to address some of the inequities they face—low pay, lack of health insurance and an absence of ancillary services, such as daycare. Because not all heroes can always help, sometimes they need help themselves.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Dr. Cynthia Mejia and team studied the change in public perceptions towards previously stigmatized service worker roles as a result of COVID-19 and representation.

REFERENCES


Dr. Cynthia Mejia is an Associate Professor and the Interim Chair of the Department of Foodservice and Lodging Management. Dr. Mejia served as a faculty member in this department at UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management since 2013. Dr. Mejia has over 20 years of industry experience in F&B and hotel operations management, primarily working for luxury brands both in the U.S. and in Singapore. Her publications and areas of research include: human resource management, cross-cultural organizational management, technology acceptance in hospitality organizations, green facilities management, empathy across the services industries, and hospitality education.

FUNDING

This study was supported by grant number 1T42OH098438, funded by the U.S. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) under the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the NIOSH or CDC or the Department of Health and Human Services.

The Sunshine ERC Targeted Research Training Program at UCF aims to train the next generation of workplace professionals to identify and address threats to health, safety, and well-being in the hospitality/tourism industry. This program focuses on the underserved population of hospitality and tourism workers who have a wide and unusual range of risks in their jobs. The primary goal of the TRT is to develop and assess interventions aimed at promoting worker health, safety, and well-being. For more information, please see: https://sciences.ucf.edu/psychology/sunshine/about-the-trt-program/

PERSONAL RESPONSE

Your research prompts a serious re-evaluation of the status of line-level workers in the hospitality sectors; where’s the best place to start?

**Evidenced in the recent challenges with line-level labor shortages in the hospitality industry, the results of this study prompt a serious re-evaluation of some of the structural issues needed to support these workers into the future. In addition to a livable wage, a good place to start would be to include healthcare, childcare, education, training, and development benefits to line-level workers who represent the silent force that fuels society.**