A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NEW ESSENTIAL WORKER THROUGH THE DISCURSIVE PRACTICES OF THE CANADIAN NEWS MEDIA DURING COVID-19: IMPLICATIONS FOR OCCUPATIONAL RIGHTS

by

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ABSTRACT

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent responses from Canadian governments to curb the spread of the virus to ensure public safety while simultaneously supporting the re-start and maintenance of provincial economies highlighted the important role essential workers play in achieving both public health and economic interests. The representation of who is identified as an essential worker by the public and decision makers expanded from initially comprising front-line healthcare and first responders to include low wage workers who were unaccustomed to this role.

Method

In this research study, a critical discourse analysis methodology was used (Gee, 2005; Fairclough, 2003; Wodak, 2001) on written newspaper texts to explore the shaping of the essential worker identity in the news media and its implications on the attainment of occupational rights to promote the health and well-being of essential workers. Eighteen articles from three time periods spanning March 2020 to January 2021 were analyzed.

Findings

Findings demonstrate the politicization of the essential worker by the newspaper writers to advance their various issues and agendas during COVID-19 and the revealing of the complex and shifting identity of the essential worker during the pandemic. This study offered expanded insights into the accepted and taken for granted definitions, valuations of essential workers through the pandemic response to COVID-19.

Discussion/Implications

The study elucidated the importance in the consideration of occupational rights for all workers identified as essential during a time of recognized need. Expanded definitions are offered for occupational rights and essential work to assist in guiding and informing decision makers how best to utilize and support the essential workers in our society before, during, and after a crisis while minimizing any undo hardships or restrictions.

Conclusions

Low wage essential workers did experience an elevation in the experience of social value regarding the work they performed during the pandemic which highlighted the importance of an endorsed meaningfulness in the establishment of occupational rights for workers. An advancement in the attainment of occupational rights for low wage workers was not achieved. The shift in identity of low wage workers from non-essential to essential during the pandemic also brought forth the opportunity to apply an occupational lens in the consideration of health maintenance on behalf of decision makers to this unique and important work group. Implications and challenges to wellbeing, belonging, and becoming in paid work occupations when work identities shift from non-essential to essential are considered.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

COVID-19 impacted workers around the world. In response to COVID-19 one of the significant shifts affecting workers was the way work was valued by governments and society. From a government perspective the first response from the Canadian federal public health agency in collaboration with provincial health authorities limited physical access to sectors of the economy to prevent viral spread within the population. Public health orders identified some principles such as the maintenance of specific services essential to address the pandemic (Public Safety Canada, 2021). For example, governmental mandates, such as the enforcement of border closures, stay-at-home and quarantine initiatives, and the closure of businesses deemed non-essential, (Canadian Public Health Association, 2021), impacted the nature of a worker's ability to engage in their work of choice freely and safely. Specifically, what jobs and industries were identified as essential and non-essential by governments were mandated by both federal and provincial jurisdictions, balanced against ensuring access to resources and services to maintain public health and safety (Public Safety Canada, 2021). Further to this, the political and societal response to COVID-19 emphasized language that led to shifts in the way workers were viewed as essential by the public and decision makers. From a society perspective, Canadian news media texts contributed to shaping the identity and significance of the essential worker discourse. In part the shift and disruptions experienced by those identified as essential workers before and during COVID-19 may have also contributed to a change in occupational rights of essential workers.

The researcher of this thesis posits that the shaping of the essential worker discourse during COVID-19 was framed and influenced through discursive practices found in Canadian

news media written texts. This framing resulted in the politicization of the essential worker by the news media. Politicization is defined by Kari et al (2019) as, "a social process through which the way how certain issues are governed by political institutions is contested. (p. 273). These discursive practices also revealed the complex and fluid nature of the essential worker identity beyond historical labor movement understandings. Some essential workers experienced expanded political and social access, e.g., prioritized workplace safety measures and being identified as healthcare heroes while other identified essential workers may have experienced a increased risks to their health and wellbeing via a degradation of occupational rights, e.g., having to go to work ill and not self-quarantine due to a lack of sick pay (WFP editorial board, 2020). Hammell (2008, p. 62) defined occupational rights, "as the right of all people to engage in meaningful occupations that contribute positively to their own well-being and the well-being of their communities." The degradation of occupational rights (right of choice, right to work) added increased risk to personal health and reduced the autonomy in the maintenance of their paid work occupations. The author intends to examine the discourse surrounding essential workers during COVID-19 through a critical discourse analysis (CDA), informed primarily by Gee (2005), Fairclough (2003), and Wodak (2001), of news media articles from March 2020 to January 2021 to further elucidate the construction of the new essential worker through discursive strategies utilized by the news media. This thesis is organized into 6 chapters. Beyond this introductory chapter, chapter 2 includes a literature review and sets forth the rationale for the research project. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology used for a critical discourse analysis to guide the data analysis of the 18 news articles along with the researcher's critical self-reflection. Chapter 4 summarizes the results identified through the discourse analysis. Chapter 5 offers a discussion

surrounding the essential worker and occupational rights during COVID-19 and the limitations

of this research project. Chapter 6 offers the researchers final conclusions.

Chapter 2 Literature review

Chapter 2 provides a backdrop to the questions and rationale informing a CDA approach to this research. This chapter includes a literature review that reflects the (1) history and development of the identity of the essential worker; (2) the significance of this classification established through labour movement discourse; (3) the role of legislative and structural and hegemonic power in shaping the identity and significance of the essential worker at different points in time; (4) changes to the essential worker identity and classification during COVID-19, and (5) its intersection with the occupational rights of newly identified essential workers during COVID-19. Chapter 2 will conclude with a synthesis of the literature review summarizing the historical construction of the essential worker. The summary will also highlight the gap in the literature pertaining to the impact resultant from a contextual shift of the essential worker classification during COVID-19, i.e., when workers shifted from non-essential to essential, providing the rationale for the contribution to the literature through this critical discourse analysis.

2.1 The history and development of the essential worker classification.

The primary tenets for the development of workers' rights and the need to classify some workers as essential was initially established through the labour movement fostered at the end of World War I through the creation of the International Labor Organization outlined in the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2022). The founding countries that participated in the creation of the ILO fundamentally understood the importance of ensuring fair and equitable labour practices to achieving peace through the pursuit of global social justice. This need for fair and equitable labour practice was set against the background of the time that

routinely included the exploitation of workers in industrialized nations represented through unjust labour practices that included long working hours, unsafe working conditions, and little to no time off (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2022). These primary tenets were reflected in the preamble to the ILO constitution:

> Whereas universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice. And whereas conditions of labour exist involving such injustice, hardship and privation to large numbers of people as to produce unrest so great that the peace and harmony of the world are imperiled; and an improvement of those conditions is urgently required. Whereas also the failure of any nation to adopt humane conditions of labour is an obstacle in the way of other nations which desire to improve the conditions in their own countries. (para. 7-9)

Setting this ILO preamble against the context created by COVID-19 where many workers found themselves on the front lines of the pandemic not by choice, highlights the potential creation of conditions where injustice and hardship can exist. For example, Parks et al (2020) highlighted the fact that most food system workers did not knowingly sign up to be working on the front lines of a pandemic where they found themselves often ill prepared with adequate knowledge and appropriate levels of personal protective equipment to conserve their health and well-being. Compared against the choices made by persons to become a police officer, firefighter, or a nurse where some known health risks are explicit, the choice to be a truck driver, food service worker, or construction worker were not, until recently, identified as front-line, essential workers (Benhamou and Piedra, 2020).

The ILO constitution further adds to the discourse through the articles pertaining to the Freedom of Association which highlighted workers and employers are free to form and join

organizations of their choosing (International Labor Organization [ILO], 2022). As a component

of the labour movement discourse, further examination of the Freedom of Association principles

highlighted the development of the essential worker identity and classification embedded in right

to strike guidance. This was balanced against the role of institutions and governments, to

maintain the health and safety of its citizens and the implications to workers, employers, and

society at large during collective bargaining.

2.2 Essential worker identity constructed through the labor movement discourse

The Freedom of Association Committee, under the governance of the ILO, periodically

releases an updated digest of guiding principles and labour decisions surrounding the Freedom of

Association. The overarching guidance for the committee remained the continued value of the

Freedom of Association, in that the continued focus on ensuring workers and employers have the

right to organize to defend their groups social and economic interests, which positions social

justice as a gateway to societal peace and the mitigation of conflict (ILO, 2006). Within these

principles, the social action framed as the right to strike, i.e., the withholding of labour as a part

of the collective bargaining process, is seen as a legitimate exercise. The ILO highlighted:

> The right to strike is one of the essential means through which workers and their
>
> organizations may promote and defend their economic and social interests. While the
>
> Committee has always regarded the right to strike as constituting a fundamental right of
>
> workers and their organizations, it has regarded it as such only in so far as it is utilized as
>
> a means of defending their economic interests. (p. 109)

Acknowledging this right, i.e., pursuant to the maintenance and assurance of workers'

economic and social interests, a labour stoppage may be justified, the nature and impact to

society at large because of the work stoppage needs to be considered in tandem as, "one of the main functions associated with a modern state is the provision of security, public safety, and education for its citizens" (Munoz, 2014, p. 650). To support this balance, the ILO (2006) clarifies where the right to strike may be prohibited or restricted:

> The right to strike may be restricted or prohibited: (1) in the public service only for public servants exercising authority in the name of the state; or (2) in *essential services* (italics added for emphasis) in the strict sense of the term that is, services the interruption of which would endanger the life, personal safety or health of whole or part of the population. (p. 118)

This statement by the ILO demonstrates a clear definition for the term *essential services*. The subsequent adoption and integration of this definition into governmental position statements is demonstrated by the Government of Canada which defines an essential service as, "a service, facility or activity of the Government of Canada that is or will be, at any time, necessary for the safety or security of the public or a segment of the public" (Government of Canada, 2015, para. 5). By way of this definition, the ILO delineated that some workers are considered more critical to the maintenance of safety and security compared to other workers and need to be identified as essential (Pankart, 1980 as referenced in Munoz, 2014). To further assist in the economic and social identification of essential worker groups, the ILO proposed a list of work that could be considered essential including hospital services, electrical services, water supply services, telephone services, police and armed forces, the firefighting service, public or private prison services, provision of food to pupils' that are school age, the cleaning of schools, and air traffic control (ILO, 2006).

In Canada, these industry segments together have historically represented a high number of employed individuals who are union members (Statistics Canada, 2021) contributing to the essential worker discourse by highlighting the association of essential work and union representation. In 2019, the total percentage of unionized workers for all industries in Canada was 30.1% In relation to the list of services outlined by the ILO comprising health care, educational services, utilities, and public sector employment (those who work for a local, provincial, or federal government), the percentage of unionized workers averaged 67.3% (Statistics Canada, 2021). By exerting their right to organize, these identified essential worker groups attempted to defend and promote their social and economic interests collectively against relinquishing one of the fundamental rights of workers to defend these interests through the right to strike while being defined as essential. The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), Canada's largest union representing over 700,000 workers, highlight several social and economic benefits for unionized workers including higher wages, greater equality, access to pensions and benefits, job security, health and safety, predictable hours, training and education, transparency and equitable due process, workplace democracy, and advocacy and political action (CUPE, 2021). Essential worker identities established through the ILO documents significantly contributed to the essential worker discourse. Power wielded through governments and institutions also has contributed to the essential worker discourse.

2.3 Shaping the essential worker discourse through power

The ILO has contributed significantly to the discourse surrounding the identity of essential workers through written guidelines. Combined with organized labour and collective bargaining being highly associated with identified essential worker groups, the resultant socially recognizable identity reflects a combination and integration of several factors (Gee, 2005).

However, the construction of the essential worker identity is not static and is influenced by the current historical and cultural context (Burr, 2003). The essential worker groupings mentioned above are by no means static and social institutions can exert power and influence over this identity. Exploration into this intangible entity of power and how power is exerted over groups and individuals to limit choice and maintain oppression is worth further examination as it pertains to the actions of government and the news media during COVID-19.

As an exemplar, Collins (2002) offers a thorough examination of the domains of power as they relate to the oppression of African American women in society. The power domains described are generalizable to this study and demonstrate how governmental legislation and news media contribute to the language in use reflecting the essential worker discourse through various domains of power. Collins (2002) describes four interrelated domains of power, i.e., structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. The first three domains will be discussed further. Interpersonal or social interactions and the personal response to oppression albeit important will not be elaborated on further given the focus of the research on broader institutions namely the news media.

The structural domain of power reflects interlocking social institutions such as governments, news media, banks, and educational institutions as examples and the interdependent policies that can result in the oppression, discrimination, or segregation of a specific group of people. For example, the prioritization of hospital-based health care workers for personal protective equipment by Public Health Ontario over other workers deemed essential, i.e., construction workers, shelter workers, and childcare workers (Boyle and Pagliaro, 2020) in March of 2020 resulted in an outcry from various essential worker groups about a lack of priority

but still being identified as frontline workers by the government and reported in the news media (Benzie, 2020).

The disciplinary domain of power manages power relations through bureaucracy and legislation (Collins, 2002). Through power enacted by the government of the state via legislation, worker identities can shift from non-essential to essential resulting in the creation of governmental authority surrounding the essentiality of a service. Governments do have an obligation to enact governance that maintains the safety and security of its citizens at any given time. In highlighting the shifting nature of the non-essential and essential worker population, Munoz (2014) pointed out that services not included in this list, i.e., non-essential services, may become essential services in that,

> the essentiality of a given service is determined by the relationship between the level of harm that can likely be produced when the provision of that service is interrupted and the time of stoppage. (p. 652)

Historically, this shift has been initiated in services and subsequently workers moved from being identified as essential from non-essential in response to enacted government legislation and policy when, "workers deemed essential or important enough to threaten national or provincial interests, or those who maintained the potential to disrupt important sectors of the economy..." (Smith, 2020, p. 119). Prior to the emergence of COVID-19 in Canada, this has often taken the form of enacting the disciplinary power domain of back-to-work legislation to end a legal right to strike. This type of occurrence has been evidenced many times in Canada's labour movement history but notably in 2011 and 2012 with the Canadian government legislating Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) workers and Air Canada employees back to work respectively during legal strikes deeming the railway and airline workers as providing essential

services (Smith, 2020). As previously referenced, the Government of Canada defines an essential service as, "a service, facility or activity of the Government of Canada that is or will be, at any time, necessary for the safety or security of the public or a segment of the public" (Government of Canada, 2015, para. 5). However, it is evident from the two preceding examples that the Canadian government can unilaterally expand the application of this definition beyond the public sector and apply it to the private sector when conditions are such that the impact of a withholding of labour as a form collective bargaining, would "inflict imminent and substantial harm on society" (Munoz, 2014, p. 649) or, more controversially, the economy (Mironi and Schlachter, 2018). This use of back-to-work legislation also reflects another domain of power outlined by Collins (2002), the hegemonic domain of power. Where structural and disciplinary domains of power exert power through policy and bureaucracy, hegemonic power "aims to justify practices in these domains of power" (Collins, 2002, p. 284).

The hegemonic domain of power reflects ideology and cultural practices behind policy. The back-to-work legislation used to end the legal strike actions of both Air Canada and CPR Rail in the preceding examples are legislative policy levers used to shift the social and cultural acceptance of the essential worker identity to be fluid and determined by the state to maintain the safety and security of its citizens when deemed necessary. Despite back-to-work legislation coming under numerous legal challenges to determine whether the use of this form of legislative power violates workers' constitutionally protected freedom to strike (Tucker, 2020; Smith, 2020), the news media coverage of these labour disputes can shift public opinion when back-to-work legislation is argued. For instance, a recent high-profile example (pre-COVID-19) created a focal point around the definition of essential service. The definition of essential service was applied in the context of the Ontario Teachers Union dispute with the Ontario Government in

early 2020 where back-to-work legislation was posited by news media and not the government as a resolution tool to be used by the Ontario government (CBC News, 2020). Campaign Research Inc. a full-service research and strategy consulting firm, conducted a public opinion survey of 1003 Ontarians asking them if teachers should be considered an essential service like firefighters and police officers which means they cannot go on strike (Campaign Research, 2020). Firefighters and police officers occupy positions that provide essential services for the safety or security of the public are prohibited by law from participating in a strike. Interestingly, most public respondents agreed with identifying teachers as essential workers. The news media coverage and the resultant survey by Campaign Research may have contributed to a shift in the social position of the public towards legally striking teachers, potentially limiting the teachers' ability to collectively bargain through job action in the future by emphasizing the societal opinion of the essential nature of teachers work.

This example highlights the shaping effect on discourse through the news media, in this case, surrounding public opinion on striking teachers in Ontario in 2020. The enactment of various domains of power presided over by the news media is important to review further. Media has been described as having four effects on their readers. The effect of informing, agenda-setting, framing, and persuading (Collins et al, 2006). News media can provide information surrounding issues and events to the readership. However, the quality and discursive features of the written texts can lead to the necessity to decode any associated messaging. Media can agenda-set and this effect is described as one of the most noted features of news media (Collins et al, 2006). This process works when the media raise awareness of issues and then the public assigns the importance to the issues. Further to this, the media plays a part in agenda setting by stressing and framing certain aspects in the context of the story to underpin the relative

importance of that issue. Finally, the media through these processes can persuade the public perception and understanding of the importance of the issues they are presenting (Collins et al, 2006). News media can extend these described power domains through various discursive strategies utilized in written texts. The discursive shaping of the essential worker discourse in the context of COVID-19 through the news texts is a foundational justification for the critical discourse analysis methodology proposed in this research.

2.4 Pandemics and the essential worker discourse

The use of the disciplinary domain of power through governmental legislation increases the arbitrary nature of the essential worker definition to expand beyond safety and security considerations to include financial and economic impacts on society and opens any worker to being identified as essential at any given time dependent on the state. The total percentage of unionized workers for all industries in Canada was 30.1% (Statistics Canada, 2021) and although the expanded use of essential work definition by governments may ensure the economic and social interests of the country, the low organized labour rates seen in other industries comparatively to industries seen historically as essential may disproportionally limit the maintenance of the social and economic interests of these unorganized labour groups. In early 2020, the emergence of COVID-19 in Canada introduced a significant transformative factor challenging federal and regional governments to act to protect the safety and security of its citizens while expanding the number of workers who were considered essential workers to maintain access to certain resources and services.

In the situated context of past pandemics, i.e., Severe Acute Respiratory 344 Syndrome (SARS) and H1N1, and examining the impact on essential workers, some research surrounding

essential workers was identified that focused on a subset of essential worker, i.e., front line health care workers, (Institute of Labor Economics, 2020) and their response to the pandemic (Bai et al, 2004; Matsuishi et al, 2012; Vinck et al, 2011; Wong et al, 2012). This research did not offer an expanded classification of essential workers and focused on healthcare only. Gershon et al (2010) also offered a study of essential workers, including not only hospital workers but police department personnel, emergency medical service personnel, fire department personnel, public health department workers, and prison officers as essential workers. The group's study examined factors affecting the willingness of these essential workers to report for duty during the SARS pandemic. This research aligned with the ILO's guidance around suggested essential work categorization. Again, the literature reviewed regarding the impact on essential workers in the context of a pandemic did not offer an expanded identity of the essential worker and maintained established historical classifications. The review of the literature conducted by the researcher examining essential workers in the context of a pandemic identified a gap in the literature relating to essential workers that may have included low wage and/or low skilled workers not traditionally identified as essential workers outside the context of a pandemic.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Canada's initial guidance surrounding the maintenance of critical infrastructure focused on identifying essential services under 10 key sectors that are outlined as guidance to assist communities to protect their residents and maintain critical infrastructure (Public Safety Canada, 2020). This demonstrated a shift towards identifying essential services from a public safety lens in the situated context of COVID-19 and away from the collective bargaining and labour management focus used in past labor disputes (Public Safety Canada, 2020). In addition to this political shift and in contrast to SARS

and H1NI literature reviewed, the literature examining the impact of COVID-19 on essential

workers began to include both traditional essential workers as highlighted by the Gershon et al

(2010) study along with other groups of workers. These new essential workers include food

system workers (Parks et al, 2020), postal delivery, construction, transportation (Benhamou &

Piedra, 2020), home health care, nursing homes, and community food and housing services

(Williams et al, 2020). These workers have now been identified in the literature as critical

workers in the COVID-19 pandemic response. This situation demonstrates an expanded

classification of the essential worker with the introduction of COVID-19 compared to previous

pandemic studies found in the literature.

The maintenance of essential services and the workers who deliver these services, in both

unionized and non-unionized labour environments, was established as necessary by the Canadian

government to preserving life, health, and basic societal functioning during the COVID-19

pandemic for Canadians (Public Safety Canada, 2020). Services deemed essential by

governments for the safety or security of the public have expanded to now include workers in

several types of employment beyond traditional classifications. In 2020, Parks et al completed a

study that highlighted most food system workers did not knowingly "sign up" to be working on

the front lines of a pandemic. Workers were often ill prepared with adequate knowledge and

appropriate levels of personal protective equipment to support their health and well-being.

Benhamou and Piedra (2020) highlighted in their work that the access to organized labour,

knowledge surrounding health risks, and the access to personal protective equipment to support

their paid work could not be guaranteed during COVID-19 for these workers who found

themselves on the front-line of the pandemic. Williams et al (2020) also highlighted in their

research the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on minority communities, which has been

partially attributed to the racial composition of workers in economic sectors deemed essential during COVID-19 such as community health, construction, and food services. During COVID-19, essential workers in Canada were outlined under the *National Strategy for Critical Infrastructure* (Public Safety Canada, 2020). Front-line workers were considered a sub-category of essential workers where the feasibility to work from home is limited and front-line workers face a higher level of risk of infection by providing their labour in person (Institute of Labor Economics, 2020). Based on these two points, truck drivers, grocery clerks, and construction workers could also be considered front-line workers as much as nurses, police, and firefighters.

The Government of Canada's response to COVID-19 in terms of identifying critical sectors and workers essential in maintaining *the safety and security of the public* (Government of Canada, 2015), has resulted in the identification of an extensive group of essential workers. These newly identified essential worker groups as outlined above have been classified as such due to the context created by and governments responses to COVID-19, and not willfully via the occupational choice of workers as highlighted by Parks et al (2020). The traditionally accepted designation of essential services implies a withholding of labour would result in an imminent threat to the health and safety of communities (Munoz, 2014) which is a consequence most newly classified essential workers did not knowingly acknowledge at the outset of employment. However, this expanded classification encompassing these newly anointed essential workers complicated their ability to safely perform their work of choice while assuming additional personal and economic risks during COVID-19.

2.5 Occupation and essential work

The Government of Canada's COVID-19 response in the form of governmental policies, including the expanded classification of essential workers and resultant societal practices (stay-at-home, remote work, physical distancing), has introduced potential challenges to occupational rights in the form of essential worker policy influencing individual autonomy through choice and the maintenance of health though paid work occupations. Occupation is defined by Townsend and Polatajko (2013) as:

> Groups of activities and tasks of everyday life, named, organized, and given value and meaning by individuals and a culture; occupation is everything people do to look after themselves. (p.17)

Wilcock and Hocking (2015) noted that through engagement in occupation (including paid work) people can provide for their immediate and long-term life needs. These outcomes of occupational engagement in work are further elaborated in occupational science through the concepts of occupational rights. For instance, in Enabling Occupation II (2013), occupational rights are defined as:

> (a) to experience occupation as meaningful and enriching; (b) to develop through participation in occupations for health and social inclusion; (c) to exert individual autonomy through choice in occupations; (d) to benefit from fair privileges for diverse participation in occupations. (p. 80)

Hammell (2008, p. 62) defined occupational rights, "as the right of all people to engage in meaningful occupations that contribute positively to their own well-being and the well-being of their communities." Occupational rights as defined above assume that one's ability to engage

in occupational choices, including the right to withhold labour or to work in a safe and protected work environment, or to choose work that is important or valued are always available and are primarily individually determined and protected as occupational rights. Further to this, Hammell and Iwama underscored that the ability to engage in occupations that support individual and collective well-being is an issue that concerns occupational rights and social justice (Hammell and Iwama, 2012). It is through a focus on occupational rights that potential inequities and injustices, like the injustices outlined in the ILO constitution (2021) can be better understood and addressed (Hammell and Beagan, 2017). Being identified as an essential worker and critical to preserving life and health of communities during the COVID-19 pandemic may have introduced factors influencing the change, disruption to and maintenance of occupational rights for some newly classified essential workers. Thus, the researcher posits that factors that developed during COVID-19 and framed in the news media texts impacted the extent to which occupational rights could be upheld for essential workers specifically newly identified essential workers. The concept, promotion, and use of the term occupational rights versus occupational justice developed strength through the critical examination of the latter term. Occupational justice is a term used repeatedly in occupational science literature. However, the term has received consistent criticism due to its lack of scholarly work, accepted concept clarity, and a lack of empirical evidence to advance the definition (Durocher, Gibson, and Rappolt, 2014). Most of the scholarly work published to date appears to place occupational justice as a derivative or complementary to social justice (Hocking, 2017) with occupational rights gaining more acceptance by occupational science to be utilized to frame the pursuit and promotion social justice issues within the discipline.

2.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter outlined the development of the essential worker discourse initially through ILO documents including the ILO constitution and the articles pertaining to the Freedom of Association that highlighted the importance of ensuring worker economic and social rights and freedoms as an action in addressing social justice. The establishment of a classification of workers identified as essential was significant in attempting to strike a balance between a worker's ability to ensure certain social and economic freedoms through collective bargaining practices and the role of the state to ensure safety and protections for its citizens if certain work was withheld as a form of collective bargaining. Further examination of the shaping of discourse through power was examined and underscored the domains of power, namely structural, disciplinary, and hegemonic influenced by both government through policy and bureaucracy and the role of the news media in shaping discourse by establishing and reinforcing cultural norms.

A review of literature exploring previous pandemics and the impact on essential workers revealed studies that had an exclusive focus on essential workers represented by historical ILO essential worker classifications. Essential workers represented by low wage or low skilled workers were notably absent during these previous pandemic periods in the literature unlike their inclusion within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This represented a gap in the literature pertaining to the classification of all essential workers and the impact on these workers during a pandemic. Hammell (2020) recently highlighted the contextual embeddedness of occupations and the ability to exert agency over occupational choice is inequitably distributed and impacted by institutional policies and societal practices. COVID-19 introduced a context in which the ability to exert agency over one's occupational choice regarding paid work was impacted by

institutional policies and societal views shaping the discourse surrounding essential work. Given the introduction of this expanded essential worker classification during COVID-19 and acknowledging the shaping influences the media has in constructing identities and establishing social norms through written texts, the rationale for critically examining news media written texts over a period during COVID-19 with a focus the discursive representation of essential workers is established. Examining the impact of government policy surrounding essential workers during COVID-19 and news media's framing of this through written texts and employing a critical discourse approach to news articles from March 2020 to January 2021 during the initial response to COVID-19 is important to understanding potential development of inequities experienced by this newly established essential worker group, i.e., namely low wage low skilled workers previously identified as non-essential prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This examination of discourse aims to advance the importance of the consideration of workers occupational rights as a policy consideration when attempting to ensure the safety and security of its citizens during times of national uncertainty. Thus, based on this review and the need for further examination of the contextual shifts in essential worker classification, potential injustices experienced and potential disruption of occupational rights a CDA was undertaken.

Chapter 3 Methodology and methods

This chapter provides the purpose of the research, the use of critical discourse analysis (CDA), and the research questions followed by the methodology and theoretical foundations of CDA and the relationship to approaches used in this analysis. Description of the discursive methods and use of news media text as a data source, sampling methods and the researchers' own critical reflection are added.

In this research project, a CDA approach (Fairclough, 2003; Gee, 2005; Wodak, 2001) will be applied to written texts generated in the Canadian news media from March 2020 to January 2021. The CDA approach will be used to explore how the news media shaped the discourse surrounding essential workers during the early phases of COVID-19 in Canada.

3.1 Research questions

The purpose of this research project is to critically examine the news media's discursive practices utilized during the early phases of COVID-19 specifically related to the identity of the essential worker. The need for this research project was to address the current gap in the literature surrounding the identity of and impact on the low wage, low skilled essential worker. Specifically in the context of a pandemic or national crisis and the considerations potentially unique to this group of essential workers in supporting and promoting health and social wellbeing via the maintenance of occupational rights. Addressing the following questions was the primary aim of this research:

- What discursive strategies were utilized by the Canadian news media through written texts that contributed to the discourse surrounding essential workers including low wage, low skilled workers during the early phases of COVID-19?

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- What was the impact, if any, on the attainment and/or maintenance of occupational rights for low wage, low skilled essential workers during the early phases of COVID-19 in Canada?

This section describes the theoretical basis for using CDA to analyze written news media texts, the search strategy utilized to identify relevant texts, inclusion criteria, and the data analysis process.

3.2 Critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a methodology

This research project used a critical discourse analysis (CDA) as its methodology. Broadly speaking, Burr (2003) defines discourse as:

> a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events. It refers to a particular picture that is painted of an event, person or class of persons, a particular way of representing it in a certain light. (p. 45)

Burr highlights several contributing elements that combine to construct a particular picture of a person, place, or thing. The scope of this research project aims to analyze the use of language and more specifically the use of language in written texts represented in the Canadian news media. The researcher acknowledges that language is only a component in the construction of a particular discourse. However, in the context of this research project, a critical methodology applied towards what Gee (2005) describes as the recruitment of language specifically to enact social identities is a primary element of focus.

3.2.1 Theoretical foundations of CDA methodology

Foundational to the CDA methodology being utilized in this project, Burr (2003) asserts that the interactive use of language is the cornerstone of the social constructionist process. Gergen (2015) asserts the basic proposal of social constructionism is based on the premise that our knowledge, understandings, and perceived truths about the world are reliant on the specific social relationships we are a part of. In addition to this, Fairclough (2003) emphasizes the role of written texts, for example in the genre of news media, as a way of establishing a social relationship between writer and reader linguistically. Regarding the news media, Gergen (2015) asserts that news reports are not unbiased and simply represent observations surrounding the fixed reality of the people, places, or events within the natural world. Written news reports represent a genre of social interaction (Fairclough, 2003) whereby the construction or deconstruction of people, places, or things is achieved through various linguistic and discursive practices utilized by the writer and interpreted by the reader. "Discursive practices how we talk and write about the world are then argued to be one of the main ways in which the world is socially constructed" (Wiggins, 2017, p.10).

According to Gee (2005), it is then the aim of the critical discourse analyst to apply a methodology against any piece of written text to examine how discourse is shaped through the strategic application of various discursive tools (Gee, 2005). In this research project, data analysis and specifically text analysis is informed primarily by James Paul Gee (2005), Fairclough (2003), and Wodak (2001). Gee (2005) describes a methodology of discourse analysis that requires the asking of probing questions meant to demonstrate how tools of inquiry, or discursive practices, are used to shape discourse through the development of language building tasks outlined by Gee which include building significance, activities, identities,

relationships, politics, connections, and significance for sign systems and knowledge. Some examples of tools of inquiry include social languages, conversations, intertextuality, situated meanings, discourse models, and discourses (Gee, 2005). For use in this CDA, not all seven building tasks will be the focus of the text analysis. Gee (2005) indicated that real analyses rarely consider all building tasks equally. In relation to this research project, it precipitates an examination of the discursive practices surrounding two key building tasks which include identity and politics and the interrogation of how these building tasks were established in the news media across a time period (March 2020 to January 2021) acted as the guiding analytical work. Additional contributions from Fairclough (2003) and Wodak (2001) surrounding supplementary tools for text analysis that increased the robustness of the analysis relevant to the research questions posed in this study were included. This practice is commonly accepted within CDA as the analysis is rarely guided by one theoretical or analytical viewpoint (Wodak and Meyer, 2001).

(a) Identity. Gee (2005) describes the use of language to build and support identities and roles that are developed at different points and in different contexts. In examining written texts, Gee (2005) puts forth questions to support the analysis of discourse:

> What identities (roles, positions), with their concomitant personal, social, and cultural knowledge and beliefs (cognition), feelings (affect), and values, seem to be relevant to, taken for granted in, or under construction in the situation? How are these identities stabilized or transformed in the situation? In terms of identities, what discourses are relevant (and irrelevant) in the situation? How are they made relevant (and irrelevant), and in what ways? (Gee, 2005, p. 110)

Relevant to this research project, the positioning of varying essential worker identities by the news media with respect to one another and the shifting values and feelings towards essential workers across various time periods during COVID-19 was an important building tool to examine.

(b) Politics. Gee (2005) describes politics in language as having the ability to determine what social goods are to be valued and the distribution of social goods to various roles and positions. In examining written texts, Gee (2005) puts forth questions to support the analysis of politics in discourse:

> What social goods (e.g., status, power, aspects of gender, race, and class, or more narrowly defined social networks and identities) are relevant (and irrelevant) in this situation? How are they made relevant (and irrelevant), and in what ways? How are these social goods connected to the discourse models and discourse's operative in the situation? (Gee, 2005, p.112)

Relevant to this research project, how the social good of power was distributed to certain defined essential worker groups towards the establishment of a hierarchical view of essential workers through various discursive practices fixed by the Canadian news media was important to examine.

The questions embedded in the building task descriptions above reflect questions put forth by Gee (2005) to highlight the discursive elements at play in building identity and politics in the essential worker discourse. Fairclough (2003) adds relevance and depth to establishing a data analysis methodology given the chosen textual genre of the news media. Fairclough (2003) does not ascribe to similarities with respect to the building tasks as outlined by Gee (2005).

However, Fairclough does add to the methodological work relevant to CDA being conducted for this research project. His work has been utilized in other CDA studies including the role of the new media in industrial relations reform in Australia (Bartolo and Sheahan, 2009), and the more recent analysis of hegemony and resistance in Hong Kong political discourse (Wing-Chun Ng, 2020). Fairclough (2003) highlights the importance of making text transparent through the analysis of texts in the context of social events. COVID-19 has created a significant social event in which the role of various linguistic texts in the form of news conferences, written public health orders, news stories are critical elements to developing social structures and social practices. Fairclough (2003) describes the intent of text analysis towards the discovery of meaning in the texts both through the analysis of linguistic forms (explicit) but consideration to the underlying assumptions (implicit) brought forth by the producers of the text and the social agents represented in the text. Fairclough, in the analytical process of text analysis, outlines internal and external discursive practices to support the discovery of meaning in presented texts. Intertextuality and assumptions are some discursive tools that appear relevant to this research project in the analysis of written news texts. To add further depth and to reduce bias by considering and incorporating different approaches the consideration of discourse analysis from the perspective of Ruth Wodak seems compatible.

Wodak (2001) offers a discourse-historical approach to CDA. Aspects of this approach appear congruent with the structure of this research project in several aspects. The historical context is included in the analysis of texts and discourse, the approach is problem focused and does not focus heavily on specific linguistic items, and results are to be applied with the goal of changing certain social practices (Wodak, 2001). Wodak describes the discourse-historical approach being developed out the analysis of written and oral texts surrounding antisemitism in

the Austrian presidential election in 1986. The analysis of newspapers and the news press was used heavily in this seminal research project (Wodak, 2001). The discourse-historical approach finds the focus to be one political in nature (Wodak, 2001). This adjusts well with this research project and one of the primary building tasks outlined by Gee (2005) being criticized is the building task concerning politics and the distribution of social goods. Matters of racial and ethnic discrimination have been the focal topic of much of Wodak's CDA work, and her approach has been referenced in other research surrounding the representation of refugees in the news media (KhosraviNik, 2010). Wodak proposes several analytical and discursive strategies that appear useful as part of the discursive analysis associated with this research project. These strategies include referential/nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivation, and intensification.

The list below outlines the list of discursive practices, along with definitions, that will be primarily used in this research project based on the collective consideration of the methodologies discussed [(Gee, 2005; Fairclough (2003), and Wodak (2001)] in relation to the research questions previously highlighted although this list is not exhaustive. Including both internal and external discursive practices will support the consideration of the how both explicit and implicit use of language in written news articles both simultaneously reflect the *social event* and shape the *social practice* according to Fairclough (2003).

Intertextuality refers to one spoken or written text being directly used or alluded to in another spoken or written text (Gee, 2005). In addition to the actual elements of other texts within texts, Fairclough (2003) provides the most detailed outline of analyzing reporting in four ways, i.e., direct, indirect, free indirect, and narrative reporting. For this analysis, direct and indirect reporting was used to code the news articles. Direct reporting reflects actual words with text

captured in quotation marks (e.g., Johnson stated "no changes are required"). Indirect reporting reflects a summary of what was written or said but no quotation marks are said (e.g., Johnson said this might be the case in the short term).

Referential/Nomination refers to the use of linguistic devices including membership categorization (Sacks, 1992; Bakker, 1997 as referenced in Wodak and Meyer, 2001), metaphors and metonymies and synecdoche's (figures of speech). Labelling is also a linguistic practice used in a comparable way to describe a person or group, in particular highlighting positive or negative traits (Wing-Chun Ng, 2020).

Social Languages refer to, according to Gee (2005, p. 35), the "*who-doing-whats*" which are different varieties of language that are used to allow the speaker or writer to demonstrate differing identities and perform differing meaningful activities. Social languages examine who the speaker or writer is and what they are trying to do expressed in the specific language in use. For this analysis, social languages were scrutinized more at the level of a person(s) of interest quoted by a writer within an article versus examining the social language of the writer directly.

Assumptions refer to the implicitness that accompanies written texts or what is the meaning behind the text used. Gee (2005) defines this as situated meanings. Fairclough (2003) builds out this practice further by describing three types of assumptions: Existential, propositional, and value assumptions. Assumptions assume some common ground or attempt to shape common ground when exercising social power. All three types of assumptions will be examined.

Representations refer to elements of a social event that are either included or excluded and which elements are given the most prominence in text (Fairclough, 2003). For example, the suppression of a social actor or a lack of representation in the text limits their contribution to

discourse. Wing-Chun Ng (2020) also describes the practice of topic control similarly in the exclusion of social actors in text and speech.

Argumentation refers to justification in text of either positive or negative attributions (Wodak, 2001). Wodak describes that with argumentation theory there are several content-related rules that connect the argument in the text with the claim. These rules reflect several explicit categories including justice, humanitarianism, danger and threat and responsibility as examples.

3.3 CDA methods

Critical discourse analysis allows for a wide range of spoken and written texts to be considered for analysis. This section will outline the rationale for the chosen research field applicable to this research project, sampling strategies including inclusion criteria, and the researchers' own personal reflection.

3.3.1 News media as a research field for CDA

The research question(s) will determine the nature of the documents one chooses to analyze (Phillips and Hardy, 2002 as cited in Holstein and Gubrium, 2008). The questions for this research project highlight the role of the news media in discursively shaping the essential worker discourse with a particular focus on low wage, low skilled essential workers. The resultant implications for occupational rights draw on text and written materials that have a larger social and cultural impact (Wiggins, 2017). The Canadian news media represents a significant social institution that influences current culture and has been described as an agenda setting media (Hayes et al, 2007). Media has the power to provide, modify, and edit information for a variety of reasons and is not simply a passive transmission device to inform the public (Best, 1991; Fishman, 1978; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989 as cited in Holstein and Gubrium,

2008). An outcome of this is that news media, delivered through written text, can play a significant role in establishing power relations and exerting power and influence, i.e., political, and social distribution of goods, over how society views and constructs discourses surrounding people, places, or things. In establishing the research field, the researcher concedes that written news texts are often accompanied with visual imagery as part of the story telling. In the context of COVID-19, images have been frequently used to reflect different societal opinions and views. Wang (2014) recognized this need to integrate theoretical frameworks related to CDA with multimodal studies to establish a critical multimodal discourse analysis methodology. Given that the researcher is acknowledging a novice level of abilities related to the CDA methodology, imagery will not be included in the discourse analysis. For these reasons, written news media texts found in Canadian news publications was identified as an appropriate research field for this research project.

3.3.2 Sampling and data collection

For the purposes of this research project, a targeted sampling strategy was utilized to select newspaper articles from the Factiva database. Factiva was chosen as the primary database given its comprehensiveness as a source of written newspaper articles globally. A targeted sampling strategy requires the researcher, "to draw clearly defined and conceptually meaningful boundaries around the particular documents selected" with "the aim of placing the analytic spotlight on a particular process of social construction" (Holstein and Gubrium, 2008, p. 475). News media stories were sampled from three periods of time from March 1, 2020, to January 31, 2021. The rationale for establishing three time periods of analysis was to examine any shifts or transformations surrounding the essential worker discourse between time periods. These time

periods also represent distinct shifts in the federal and provincial government's response to managing the pandemic.

Time period 1 (March 1-April 30, 2020) reflected social events surrounding the initial responses by the Canadian government and provincial health authorities to the pandemic that was declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, which included "unprecedented border closures, stay-at-home and quarantine initiatives, and closures of schools, private businesses and organizations that were deemed non-essential" (Canadian Public Health Association, 2021, para. 1).

Time period 2 (May 1-July 31, 2020) reflected social events surrounding steps taken by provincial and territorial governments to begin to re-open their economies that had been in lockdown for approximately three months. The economic re-openings were staged and varied based on jurisdiction (Canadian Public Health Association, 2021).

Time period 3 (November 1-January 31, 2021) reflected social events surrounding steps taken to address a resurgence in COVID-19 cases indicating a second wave of infections. This period also reflects steps taken by provincial and territorial governments to maintain the economic restarts that were previously initiated and ongoing attempts to control viral spread (National Post, 2021).

3.3.3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria for document selection were:

(1) paid major daily, (2) English speaking publication, and (3) top ten circulation numbers in Canada. English speaking paid major daily newspapers represent most of the daily circulated

newsprint in Canada and the broadest source of newspaper articles to sample for this research project (News Media Canada, 2020).

Initially the top ten English speaking newspapers in Canada based on circulation numbers were identified as primary document sources. This included the following publications:

National Post, Globe and Mail, Toronto Star, Hamilton Spectator, Vancouver Sun, Vancouver Province, Calgary Herald, Toronto Sun, Winnipeg Free Press, and the Edmonton Journal. However, the top ten newspapers did not yield a representation of Canada's full geography, excluding Eastern Canada, Quebec, and the Northern territories.

Three newspapers were chosen to be excluded as the region was currently represented by other newspapers. Therefore, the following major dailies were excluded: Hamilton Spectator (Ontario), Vancouver Sun (British Columbia), and Calgary Herald (Alberta). The largest publications based on circulation numbers for Quebec (English speaking), Eastern Canada, and the Northern territories were added which included: Montreal Gazette, Whitehorse Star, and The Chronicle Herald (Nova Scotia).

Using the Factiva database, a keyword search was implemented within the three defined time periods. Time period 1 (March 1-April 30, 2020), period 2 (May 1-July 31, 2020), and period 3 (November 1-January 31, 2021).

Keywords used in the search included: pandemic, essential workers, frontline workers, COVID-19. Essential workers or frontline workers had to be mentioned at least 3 times in the article. This criterion would support the assumption that essential workers were the subject of the article. The word pandemic and/or COVID-19 had to be mentioned in the article along with essential workers or frontline workers to form some affiliation between the terms.

Phase 1 article exclusion: Articles from each period were reviewed and excluded if they were (1) classified as newswire or staff wire articles. This format of news dissemination is focused on the release of several news headlines to journalists and the public with minimal effort to deepen the content surrounding any headline given the goal of releasing fast acting or late-breaking news events in a non-curated format (Dictionary, 2022). Articles were also excluded if (2) essential workers were not mentioned frequently (less than three mentions) and/or no affiliation to COVID-19 and/or pandemic or (3) were identified as a duplicate news article being represented under a different headline.

Table 1: Phased article selection

	Time period 1	Time period 2	Time period 3
# Of initial articles	24	23	40
Phase 1 articles remaining	17	17	29
Phase 2 articles remaining	11	11	12
Phase 3 articles remaining	6	6	6

Phase 2 article exclusion: Remaining articles from each period were reviewed. The full articles were read. Phase 2 articles were excluded if (1) the identification of frontline or essential workers was not the subject of the article but mentioned incidentally.

Phase 3 final article selection: The remaining 6 articles from each period were hand-selected by the researcher. Value based judgements surrounding the process of text selection are permitted in CDA (Wodak and Meyer, 2001). The primary criteria for the hand selected articles included: (1) the inclusion of articles in geographies that may have been underrepresented in the first two exclusion phases, (2) a diversity in the writers representing both employed and freelance writers with diverse educational and professional backgrounds, (3) a balance of news article and opinion formatted articles, and (4) articles that reflected a special interest of the researchers related to public policy. The final listing of the selected articles and be found in Appendices A, B, and C.

3.3.4 Enhancing the research with my own personal self-reflection

Following the initial phase of article selection and prior to the discourse analysis of the individual articles, I was invited to participate in a pre-suppositional interview with Dr. Lynn Shaw, PhD, OT Reg (NS), the supervisor of my thesis advisory committee. The purpose of the presuppositional interview was to encourage self-reflection by myself to see what influenced me to pursue this research project initially and how I was situated in the context of the current research process. This process also facilitated reflection on my own personal narrative and encouraged a level of self-transparency to be maintained and routinely re-visited throughout the research process. This formal interview along with numerous informal connections with all the members of my thesis advisory committee throughout the process strengthened the reflexive nature of the qualitative research that would influence the analysis, results, and discussion sections of my thesis. The following paragraphs are a summary of the presuppositional interview conducted.

I became interested in the representation of essential workers surrounding the initial events I experienced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, I was the manager of clinical services for a large private rehabilitation company in Kelowna, BC. The initial response by our company in response to the lockdown measures imposed was to restrict access to our physical space for patients and most staff due to a lack of access to personal protective equipment (PPE). It was my impression that PPE was being prioritized for use in public acute care or public community care and our company, which was a private healthcare company, was struggling to connect with a PPE vendor to supply our national company. As this progressed it became apparent that these delays in procuring PPE, along with provincial health officials not prioritizing public access to private community healthcare was going to result in not only a delay in care delivery to persons with injuries and illness, but the potential lay off for my employees. The task of having to lay off highly skilled rehabilitation providers such as physical therapists and occupational therapists along with critical administrative support staff did not make sense and considering these workers non-essential made even less sense. These layoffs in combination with the maintenance of services I personally considered non-essential such as cannabis and liquor stores frustrated me, and I became interested in how and where essential and non-essential workers were being defined.

I held the assumption that apart from the obvious examples of essential workers such as police, firefighters, paramedics, doctors, and nurses, highly skilled and highly educated workers would be considered essential by default and the risk to job security due to a public health crisis would be non-existent. It became obvious to me that something other than just skill level was influencing the identification of essential workers and that the identity of essential workers was much more fluid than what I had originally assumed. I was curious about how I formed this rigid

view of essential workers and had readily included my profession and industry in this categorization. I was also curious if these liquor store employees saw themselves now as essential and if they had considered themselves essential prior to the pandemic.

Given the limitations of in-person research at the time of my proposal foundation, Dr. Lynn Shaw, PhD, OT Reg (NS), my thesis supervisor, suggested I adopt a critical discourse analysis methodology as the basis for my research project. As I began the literature review, I began to see how my view of essential workers was being constructed through discourse. The images and symbols I viewed as being recognized as essential including uniforms. The affiliation between essential workers and being unionized along with various writings and guidelines issued by the International Labor Organization strengthened my opinion on what constituted an essential worker. I also recalled news media coverage of labor disputes that included teachers, railway workers, or airline employees and the use of back-to-work legislation whereby the government declared strikes and work stoppages illegal when the government labelled the workers essential. So, in these circumstances, being seen as essential was not a direct benefit to the workers themselves but in other circumstances, like COVID-19, being seen as essential provided job security. What was demonstrated in the literature review was that the essential worker that was being newly represented in response to COVID-19, i.e., grocery store workers, liquor store workers, and warehouse workers was not represented in the literature. There was a gap in the literature. What concerned me was that if no one had previously recognized these low wage low skilled workers as essential, what would be the response from governments and society alike to protect these newly appointed essential workers as they went to work to protect us? I realized I had a strong emotional response to the potential of this group of workers being

taken advantage of or not afforded the same privileges as other essential workers in society that I had previously labelled essential.

I have a strong personal bias towards defending injustice and treating someone less fortunate than myself with dignity and respect from the combination of personal and more recent professional experiences that was being ignited by the pandemic response. This research project was likely to trigger emotional responses to the written texts I would be reading, and I would need to be aware of my personal lens that I was using to analyze these articles. I was also utilizing a methodology that I was unfamiliar with reducing my self-confidence surrounding the analysis process. This increased emotionality along with an increased sense of vulnerability as a researcher was going to challenge my willingness to be open through this research thesis process and I would need to maintain an elevated awareness of this throughout the research.

As I journey through this research thesis, I expect to see an expansion of the essential worker identity. I am also expecting to gain a deeper understanding of CDA and the influence the media has in shaping important topics that impact us and to become more critical of why I view people, places, and things the way I do. I am hopeful that through a particularly challenging time we can get closer to a more egalitarian view of a person's work contributions regardless of their role. However, I am guarded in my expectations surrounding this potential finding. I am hoping these low wage workers are not taken advantage of to a greater extent than compared to what existed prior to COVID-19.

3.3.5 Reflexivity in CDA research findings

As this analysis is an iterative process, it was evident during the reading and coding of discursive practices that some tools were used, and others were less prominent or not used. The

analysis of each news article was conducted over multiple readings by the researcher. Initial reading referenced the discursive tools highlighted herein and looked for evidence of their use in the texts by the writers. Evidence of specific external discursive tool use was highlighted by underlining the piece of text. For example, the use by the writers of direct or indirect intertextuality was highlighted by underlining and coding the text for later reference. When examining the text for internal discursive tools such as assumptions, the article or section of text was read and re-read several times to try and discover the implicit meaning being established by the writer in the text. The researcher's thoughts surrounding the implicit meanings being referenced in the texts were noted in a journal which was referenced repeatedly throughout the reading and analysis of the articles. As a result of this process, other discursive tools were also observed that were not previously outlined above including interdiscursivity. Fairclough (2003) defines interdiscursivity as how different discourses are mixed and articulated together within the text. Given its prominence in usage as a discursive tool in the period analyses, interdiscursivity was added to the tools explored through this analysis.

Chapter 4 Findings

The texts analyzed over the three time periods from March 2020 to January 2021 resulted in two primary themes emerging. Firstly, the politicization of the essential worker during COVID-19 by various writers. Across the time periods, the relevance of the essential worker within the context of COVID-19 was given a political tone by both highlighted governmental and non-governmental actors and the writers themselves to advance various issues or agendas. Secondly, over the time periods, the identity of the essential worker was constructed to include a strong female identity and low wage, low skilled workers. The female identity was significant in reinforcing the paternal role of government established discursively by some writers in the texts. In support of the themes identified by the researcher, several discursive practices were utilized by the writers in the written texts to construct these two building tasks, i.e., identities and politics, as described by Gee (2005). In-text citations are presented in quotation marks and are referenced according to period numbers as per the news article tables, e.g., A1, B1, and C1 and found in the appendices A, B, and C.

4.1 The politicization of the essential worker

Several writers, within the context established by COVID-19 and the increased interest in the role of essential workers in this period, utilized both to advance various issues and agendas. Various discursive strategies were implemented by the writers to highlight and draw attention to issues and agendas that pre-dated COVID-19 but were seen as impacting essential workers currently. The politicization of the essential worker and the subsequent distribution of social goods, i.e., value, power, status, was established.

4.1.1 The politicization of female essential worker

As a basis for establishing the political prioritization of childcare for essential workers, several writers highlighted the predominant female representation of healthcare workers in their written texts across all the time frames with a stronger emphasis noted in Period 1. This will be discussed further under identity as well. The utilization of intertextuality by the writers, indirect reporting, is applied to reflect the essential worker as predominantly female in healthcare settings. While the healthcare worker was predominantly represented and likely an accurate representation of the dominant female representation in most health care settings, other workplaces were omitted and discursively underrepresented. The writers did not likely intend to politicize the female essential worker directly. However, politicization is more likely inferred from the underrepresentation of other essential workers who might also be experiencing issues related to childcare access. The writers commonly used female healthcare workers to support their indirect claims and omitted others. For example (italics added for emphasis), "...labor room nurse Marianne Ryan, 38, is needed at work. But *her* daycare is closed, and *she* is scrambling to find appropriate care for *her* sons..." (A1, para. 1). In other cases, hypothetical essential workers were used to argue for the prioritization of childcare. In this textual example a politician is offering this hypothetical essential worker and identifies this worker as a female healthcare worker, "...so *she* can go on fighting COVID-19 on behalf of Albertans" (A6, para. 8). Beyond Period 1 examples, five articles in the other time periods utilized intertextual direct reports, i.e., quoted language. Writers did highlight female voices at a slightly higher frequency than male voices. Female essential workers, mainly healthcare based, were predominantly represented over the time periods by the writers compared against the use of male voices by the writers, even when other workplace settings are referenced, i.e., warehousing, educators, etc. These practices

strengthened the discursive representations and existential assumptions establishing the accepted understanding that essential workers are seen represented predominantly as female.

The politicization of childcare from some writers was built on the high representation of female healthcare workers along with the writers' discursive use of assumptions and labelling towards government. The writers' use the linguistic practice of labelling, defined in the methodology section of this thesis (Wing-Chun Ng, 2020), to describe the government's response to the childcare needs of essential workers in negative terms. Textual examples include, "But Ontario still falls short of Quebec..." (A1, para. 6), "'But my impression is that they are all really struggling'" (A1, para. 16). Phrases such as *falling short* and *really struggling* are given as labels emphasizing traits of unresponsiveness and lack of preparedness related to the importance of maintaining childcare initially for essential workers during COVID-19 by the government. The absence of any government voices in these same articles from the writers that may allow for the highlighting of positive traits works to strengthen these negative traits through their absence. Existential assumptions are implicitly built through language that overgeneralizes the government's historical valuation of childcare, "One day soon, governments will *again* (italics added for emphasis) decide they are out of money" (A2, para. 13). The use of *again* implies a historical position to the devaluation of childcare and beyond a specific province as *governments* are represented in a plural form and not attributed to one government by the writers.

4.1.2 The politicization of nurse essential workers

Nurse unions were the only unions represented in any of the period articles through direct or indirect reports. Other unions were not mentioned by the writers. Nurses were the most mentioned essential worker group across all the period articles being explicitly mentioned in 7

out of 18 articles analyzed. The discursive practice of argumentation is utilized. Nursing unions and the direct negative impact on their members secondary to government or other institutional responses during COVID-19 is used to justify criticism against some COVID-19 responses from decision makers. Notably nurses, specifically the Manitoba Nurses Union (MNU), was used by a writer to highlight the negative attributions of a wage subsidy program focused on low-income essential workers on its nursing members introduced by government:

> The MNU noted that with the program's income thresholds, all registered nurses...will be excluded. That is particularly galling given that the MNU has been dealt an imposed wage freeze for the last three years (B6, para. 5).

Intertextuality used by the writer establishes the social actor of the MNU as being a member of an out-group being unfairly treated. The word *galling* is used to intimate further humiliation experienced by nurses by being excluded from this financial policy response to COVID-19. Assumptions continue to be made implicitly regarding the nature of nurses being taken for granted on behalf of the government highlighted through the current 3-year wage freeze and the importance of nurses as critics of government. The politicization of the relationship between nurses and government historically and in the context of COVID-19 was evident. The writers affirm the social and political influence the nurses have through their predominance in the texts and the importance of the nurses' voice in the critique of governmental policies enacted during the pandemic and prior to the pandemic as well.

4.1.3 The politicization of low wage essential workers

The ongoing politicization of the essential worker extends throughout all the time periods. The writers continue to utilize the increased awareness and visibility of the essential

worker created in response to COVID-19 to re-energize debates surrounding a variety of issues including the support of community support workers meeting the needs of the homeless and the importance of access to public transit. As the articles move into the second period, the politicization of the essential worker begins to include the low wage essential worker identity along with the healthcare essential worker identity established in the first period. Through the discursive practice of intertextuality, low wage essential workers are established as a predominant social actor elevated primarily by the writers' coverage of the federal governments wage top-up program for low wage essential workers, "' If you're risking your health to keep this country moving and you're making minimum wage, you deserve a raise'" (B1, para. 1). This intertextual statement taken from the Prime Minister of Canada establishes who was to be the intended recipients of this program through the discursive use of propositional assumptions. The use of *if you're* established a proposition in that if you meet the conditions of risking your health and you make minimum wage you deserve a raise. This assumption allows for a high degree of self-determination on behalf of the reader in determining that they may indeed be deserving of a raise. However, guidance as to whom might be represented in this group, i.e., grocery store clerks, warehouse workers, care-aides, was absent in the statement which resulted in a further degree of ambiguity. No specific worker groups are identified. The essential worker again becomes politicized by the writer highlighting the federal government discursively establishing at the national level the assumed high value and high priority of the low paid essential worker, "' We're relying on these workers now more than ever and we will be there to support them.'" (B1, para. 1). This statement discursively establishes an urgency in needing to respond now. As a result, the ambiguity left in not identifying the groups deserving, the sense of urgency to support these workers now, along with the expectancy of financial compensation that is self-determined

based on the propositions embedded sets up the potential for increased scrutiny towards provinces who choose to participate in the program and in their determination of who is deserving of this money.

The process of naming low wage essential worker groups is inherently political. Gee (2005) defines politics as the distribution of social goods which can include status and power for example. Giving a broad group of low wage workers increased status to a level that is deserving of a raise does result in several writers arguing, in Period 2, the need for consideration of an ideological shift in how we view essential work. The actual intent of the government's wage top-up program is unclear, i.e., true advocacy for low wage workers versus a risk recognition program. However, several writers utilized the government's announcement to put forth a justice argumentation by highlighting, in their opinion articles, the value and importance of these low wage essential workers. The discursive use of assumptions (existential, propositional, value) by writers who authored articles in this period does result in two challenges to traditional assumptions. Firstly, who should be valued as essential workers in a modern society. Secondly, considering the importance a broad range of workers have played in maintaining our society during the pandemic, how best for both decision makers and general society recognize them. The implicit assumptions of acknowledging existing value systems of providing, "financial returns for certain aptitudes, credentials, and skills," (B2, para. 5) are juxtaposed by the writers against the written observations of a society dependent on, "workers paid little more than Manitoba's minimum wage of $11.65 an hour" (B4, para. 2) during the pandemic. They continue to reveal the existential assumptions of a historical low value on low skilled workers, "...accorded neither the compensation nor the respect that reflects the essential nature of their services" (B4, para. 2). The writers argue that the increased status and elevation of low skilled workers to the level of

being identified as essential due to the pandemic should result in a more egalitarian view of work contribution, "...it's the pizza delivery drivers and LCBO (Liquor Control Board of Ontario) workers...who have had the most direct impact on my life during the lockdown..." (B2, para. 11) and the context created by COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of, "members of marginalized communities," (B4, para. 9). At the provincial level, the representation and wage top-up of the essential worker remain highly varied and does not reflect any greater acknowledgement of the low wage worker. "They may deserve it, but not all workers are getting it" (B1, para. 2). This ambiguity surrounding the low wage worker is reflected in the varied representation of what essential worker groups will qualify for the wage top-up. However, healthcare continues to be represented as essential even in the context of the low wage top-up program, "All provinces label health-care workers as essential..." (B1, para. 3). Despite ongoing ambiguity and lack of consensus regarding the type of work these low wage essential workers perform, what began to garner consensus and increased discursive representation in the articles as they transitioned from Period 2 to Period 3 was what Wodak (2001) describes as the strategy of nomination. This strategy refers to how to name and refer to social actors, in this case low wage essential workers, in discourse using various linguistic devices to construct *in groups* and *out groups*. The discursive practice of nomination politicizes the low wage essential worker as remaining as an *out group* despite discursive attempts by writers to broaden the representation of the essential worker and, "...for all of us to recognize that there's ultimately no non-essential work. Everyone's contribution matters..." (B2, para. 12). The following text excerpt demonstrates the practice of nomination (italics added for emphasis):

> Many of the workers who will be helped by the wage boost are *recent immigrants*, temporary foreign workers, and *people with limited education*. As *members of*

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marginalized communities-many of whom *know the poverty line* from first-hand experience-They're *unaccustomed to accolades* for their efforts, but the COVID-19 crisis has shown their importance (B4, para. 9).

This writer uses several nouns in this piece of text (italicized text) to describe and name low wage essential workers. The specific use of the noun phrase, *members of marginalized communities,* establishes these workers as members of a specific out-group despite their importance. This piece of text also sets up the plot which other writers will discursively advance, albeit not collectively but through common discursive elements, where low wage workers experience both increased social inclusion and ongoing political exclusion simultaneously during COVID-19. The phrase *has shown their importance* implies some degree of merit and is synonymous with influence and usefulness. This implicitness surrounding the importance of the low wage or low skilled workers was discursively demonstrated in previous texts through, "...free meals for truckers..." and, "overwhelming public expressions of admiration and respect for those workers who have...sustained our food supply" (B2, para. 3), and "Whether you work in a grocery store or on a construction site we're looking out for you" (A4, para. 4). The linguistic use of nouns such as admiration, importance, and respect discursively construct a low wage worker that is seen with approval and appreciation through labelling. In the case of the low wage essential worker, nomination is used discursively to construct a low wage worker that is both part of an *in group* from a social value perspective which implies inclusion (outlined above) but also part of an *out group* as far as being targeted beneficiaries of governmental policies and protections. Other direct quote text excerpts from low wage essential workers demonstrate this dualistic use of nomination:

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I work as a temporary worker and package luxury clothing. Am I or my work essential?

Not sure. But I have continued working during the lockdown. As a temporary worker, I

can lose my job at any moment so I am scared to take a day off whether sick or not.

(C4, para. 5)

These intertextual quotes used by the writers demonstrate self-identified nomination by the social actors into the *in group* of front-liners and essential workers who went to work when everyone else was locked down and performed their duty which is socially expected of essential workers. The social actors highlighted also use nomination in being part of the *out group* lacking personal protection to keep themselves safe on the job or protect their jobs if they cannot work due to illness. Several writers in Period 3 politicize this dualism in nomination and discursively apply argumentation towards increasing the government's responsibility and justice in furthering the increased social inclusion gained by low wage essential workers during COVID-19 beyond outward community expressions of gratitude to include the removal of unsafe organizational practices and/or policy barriers that low wage essential workers continue to encounter.

4.2 The identity of the essential worker

Gee (2005) describes language-in-use as building identity and identity establishing certain roles and responsibilities. These identities dictate how a person is to respond and how this person is viewed by others. Several writers utilize discursive strategies in their articles to construct the identity of the essential worker within the context of COVID-19.

4.2.1 The maternal identity of the essential worker

In the previous section, the writers use discursive linguistic practices to construct the identity of the essential worker to be represented by female workers. The writers also commonly

highlight the identity of governments to be represented by male voices. However, through intertextual reports of these government representatives, some writers discursively construct the paternalistic nomination of governance during the COVID-19 pandemic. This will be discussed further in a subsequent section. Male essential workers had limited representation in the written texts and were infrequently chosen to represent essential workers in the articles in general. In articles where intertextual direct reports are used by the writers, which represented 6 out of 18 articles, only 1 article featured a male voice with the remaining 5 articles featuring female voices. The discursive practice of excluding or omitting male essential workers from the texts reduces their contribution to the essential worker discourse. Female workers are given prominence as social actors in most texts. Several writers chose to primarily utilize female workers through intertextuality to represent nurses, social workers, oil and gas support workers, and warehouse workers. Male workers are also representative in these industries but not included. However, male voices were only represented as taxi drivers in one article and a warehouse worker in another.

The writers also use language to reinforce the cultural consensus around the stereotypical roles of women which assert that women are primarily responsible for the care of children, the care of aging parents, and tend to dominate employment within healthcare occupations. Language is used to build the existential assumptions implying the accepted notion that women are the primary caregivers within their immediate family but also generalizable to a societal level. One article highlights the response of a female social worker to being unable to maintain safe physical distance on public transit and her choice to find a car and "I'm doing this out of concern for myself, the people that I'm working with and also their families" (A5, para. 3). We are assuming she is incurring additional living expenses and demonstrating personal costs to

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protect her family and others that she does not know. Generic references are also used emphasizing the female essential worker as in the following example given to us by a government official, "a nurse with three kids may have to pay $900 for each child just so she can go to work fighting COVID-19 on behalf of Albertans" (A6, para. 8). This nurse is fictious and lends to strengthen the maternal nature of the essential worker being constructed.

These textual examples, through the discursive practice of intertextuality, strengthen the association between traditional female care giver roles and the identity of the essential worker. These assumptions reinforce the maternalism of healthcare both at a micro or immediate family level but also at a macro or institutional level. This maternalism is set against the paternalistic identity of government demonstrated through various discursive practices in constructing the nature of government during the pandemic.

4.2.2 The paternal identity of the government

The representation of government is constructed in the dominant use of male social actors. This may be incidental or reflective of the gender demographics of public office in the jurisdictions the articles reflected and cannot be seen as intentional by the writers in omitting or excluding other genders. In the 18 articles analyzed, eight articles asserted a male social actor representing a government official. Other articles did reference government officials, but gender pronouns were not used to identify the speaker. Seven out of the eight government officials were identified with male pronouns and only one was identified with female pronouns. The predominance established through strong male representation of government constructed by the writers does influence identity construction. Additional language used by the writers strengthens this paternalistic view of government using social languages. In this case, language highlighted is

fatherly including protection and guidance references. Some textual examples of this protective and guiding language include, "'That's why we are introducing new measures today to keep essential workers safe and healthy,' he said" (A4, para. 4) and "'our commitment is the same as it's ever been' he said. 'To do everything in our power to take care of those who are protecting us...'" (C2, para. 12). The language highlights protective traits, i.e., the commitment to protect and do everything in their power to ensure the safety of essential workers. Despite representing formal institutions, the social language used and highlighted by the writers is casual with a concerning tone. The use of the idiom *That's why* denotes rationale has already been given for the decision and should be accepted as such. One could also infer some use of nomination to categorize the actions of the government to be parental in nature with the use of this phrase. The language of both statements is caring and protective, i.e., *keep workers safe, take care of those,* evoking the actions of what one might identify as a protective father with the addition of the male pronouns. The interdiscursive nature of these texts also becomes evident in the analysis. The interplay between the discourse surrounding the paternalistic nature of government and the discourse surrounding the traditional roles of women inside and outside the workforce is required to construct both identities in the context of COVID-19. Arguing the responsibility of government is to take care of its citizens requires an identified group that requires care. Evoking strong male and female stereotypes around these identities through the various discursive practices examined in the analysis appears may be an indirect attempt to maintain the existing hegemony of government influence and power over workers defined as essential.

4.2.3 The expansion of the essential worker identity

Early in the analysis of Period 1 articles, a strong representation of the essential and dominant nature of healthcare was established through prominence in the texts. Healthcare is

referenced as an essential service in one hundred percent of Period 1 articles, eighty percent of Period 2 articles, and thirty percent of Period 3 articles. This discursive representation was reinforced through intertextuality, both direct and indirect reporting, and the absence of other non-healthcare essential worker groups in the texts. This predominance resulted in a strong representation surrounding essential healthcare workers as being highly valued and critically important to society, especially as the pandemic started. As the articles progressed through the time periods, the discursive use of nomination by the writers expanded to include the positive traits of both healthcare workers and some non-healthcare workers collectively. This practice may have been an attempt to implicitly increase the value assumptions surrounding low wage workers along with maintaining the dominance of healthcare essential workers, i.e., efforts to increase the societal value of low wage workers through association with established, valued healthcare workers. "...overwhelming public expressions of admiration and respect for those workers who have manned our front lines of our hospitals, sustained our food supply, delivered our packages..." (B2, para. 3). In this textual example, the writer establishes the predominance and importance of the front-line hospital workers by placing this group first in the list. There were common discursive attempts by several writers, albeit not collectively, to establish some sense of a homogeneous collective representation or broadened membership categorization of the essential worker. The establishment of a collective identity and a sense of belonging to this essential worker category for the low wage worker appears to be a critical bridge from a societal value perspective connecting what was historically identified as an essential worker, e.g., nurses and first responders, with the other essential workers required during the COVID-19 response, e.g., grocery store clerks, construction workers, and community workers.

4.2.4 A sense of belonging for the low wage essential worker identity

This sense of belonging or social acceptance has typically eluded low wage, low skilled workers including grocery store clerks, food service workers, and warehouse workers for example (Parks et al, 2020). Several writers categorized low wage workers as traditionally self-effacing. The discursive practice of nomination highlighting traits of low wage workers is utilized in some texts to establish this including, "...they're unaccustomed to accolades for their efforts..." (B4, para. 9) and "'It's our duty. We are also front-liners'" (C1, para. 12). These two textual examples, through the utilization of intertextual phrases (direct and indirect reporting), *it's our duty*, and *unaccustomed to accolades,* categorizes low wage workers as being both self-effacing and self-sacrificial despite facing financial hardships and health and safety risks. Existential assumptions surrounding the nature of their work taken for granted are reinforced through the eyes of the workers themselves and despite the financial hardships and health and safety risks they go to work to perform their duty. This self-effacement continued to be reinforced discursively through labelling as writers emphasized that many worked shifts that did not end with an orchestra, serenades, or the banging of pots to show support, contrary to public displays for health-care workers. Establishing some sense of camaraderie through a shared identity for the reader, i.e., nurses and grocery clerks sharing a common essential role, also results in the reader drawing the assumption of a form of equality distributed within the essential worker group. This reinforced identity, i.e., as being seen as important as nurses and other front-line healthcare, may have been part of the intrinsic justification required for low wage essential workers to continue to show up for work during the pandemic despite facing a disproportionate level of health risk and a substantial portion of this group earning minimum wage. Discursively engraining this value assumption of belonging by association despite a lack effective policy

representation for low wage essential workers in the government's pandemic response may have been politically successful nonetheless in motivating low wage essential workers living within their concomitant socioeconomic realities to remain working despite never signing up to be viewed as essential in the first place.

> What has been interesting though is our definition of essentiality in a crisis has differed greatly from how society normally thinks about it. So-called low skilled jobs like grocery clerks, janitors, and gas station attendants have been elevated to essential and various high skilled workers have been relegated to work-from-home status or shut down entirely. (B2, para. 2)

Here the writer discursively establishes the existential assumption that being seen as essential is conditional. One could assume if the right conditions are met, any worker could be *elevated to* essential at any given time. Thus, the conditions for low wage workers to be seen as essential is some form of crisis and because of the COVID-19 crisis these low wage workers faced, "a level of risk that was never inherent in their job descriptions" (B6, para. 9). It can be assumed that some of these low wage workers accepted their positions prior to the onset of the pandemic. It is outside the scope of this research project to infer whether any of these low wage workers viewed themselves as essential prior to COVID-19. However, one writer does provide some insight as to how society implicitly determines the value of work, "The modern economy pays significant financial returns for certain aptitudes, credentials, and skills" (B2, para. 5) and "It reflects an unhealthy tendency in modern society to value people based on their income and status" (B2, para. 6). Given these authorial statements, one might assume that even if some of these low wage workers identified themselves as essential, this perspective was not likely reflected through any form of societal acknowledgement. The other dominant taken-for-granted

assumption used by some writers was that low pay work equaled negligible risk work. The assumption that COVID-19 introduced a health risk to low wage workers that was not present prior to the pandemic is reinforced by writers and politicians, "'If you're risking your health to keep this country moving and you're making minimum wage, you deserve a raise'" (B1, para. 1). This statement by the Prime Minister does not acknowledge that making minimum wage is social determinant of health on its own and working for minimum wage is itself a health risk factor. It only emphasizes the health risks introduced by COVID-19 are deserving of a raise and downplays the concomitant socioeconomic risks faced by low wage workers. Many of them as previously stated did not sign up to work the front lines of a pandemic, but many did accept work that presented risk to themselves COVID-19 notwithstanding. Several writers build out what existed, as far as working conditions, prior to COVID-19, "Minimum wage in this country is woefully inadequate" (B6, para. 16) and "The lack of basic employment rights...has been ongoing for decades" (C5, para. 3). These statements imply that the existing governmental policies determining, for example, minimum wage and other employment rights, were open for criticism prior to COVID-19 and had already placed low wage workers at an elevated level of risk from a social determinant perspective.

4.3 Conclusion

The findings outlined represent the critical discourse analysis (CDA) of eighteen newspaper articles related to the representation of essential workers over three time periods stretching from March 2020 to January 2021. The researchers' findings in conducting the CDA demonstrated the use of several discursive practices by the article writers to develop two main themes: (a) the politicization of the essential worker and (b) the complex and fluid identity of the essential worker. Discursive practices were used to develop the maternalistic nature of the

essential worker being represented by female essential workers. Intertextuality, nomination, representation, social languages, and assumptive discursive practices were utilized by the writers to establish the female essential worker. This was politicized against a strong paternalistic view of government having established similar discursive strategies. The politicization of the nurse essential worker was noted through the CDA. This specific group was given elevated social status and social influence and often positioned as the opposition to enacted government policies resulting in a negative view towards government policy. Nurses were given predominance in the texts and strengthened the dominance of the healthcare essential worker through the essential worker discourse. The identification and naming of the low wage essential worker as a unique subcategory of the essential worker group was highly politicized. The use of nomination was a dominant strategy to categorize membership of the low wage essential worker as both a member of an in group and out group. As a member of an in-group, this resulted in elevated social value and as a member of an out group this resulted in the continuation of unsafe organizational practices and/or policy barriers that low wage essential workers experienced. The identity of the essential worker was developed discursively using several strategies: Inclusion and exclusion through representation, intertextuality, nomination, and assumptions. The identity of highly skilled essential workers with a dominant representation of healthcare workers was constructed through assumptions and representations. The construction of the low wage essential worker was developed through similar discursive strategies resulting in elevated social value being established via association with healthcare essential workers. The discursive strategy of nomination was strongly used to categorize low wage workers as assuming increased risk in their jobs prior to COVID-19 and increasingly so after the onset of the pandemic.

Chapter 5 Discussion

The discourse analysis conducted of Canadian news media texts over three time periods spanning from March 2020 to January 2021, revealed two major findings in relation to the essential worker discourse. Firstly, the politicization of the essential worker by various news article writers during the pandemic. Secondly, the societal and governmental shifts in the identity and understandings of the low wage, low skilled essential worker through the pandemic. The implications of the changing nature of essential worker identity for low wage, low skilled essential workers as it relates to essential workers themselves and for government decision makers are elaborated. In addition, the implications towards the attainment of occupational rights as they related to health and well-being for these workers will be discussed.

5.1 Implications of the politicization of the essential worker

Politicization or making an issue a political one that previously wasn't viewed as a political issue (Kari et al, 2019) can be viewed as both negative and positive. Kari et al (2019) describe politicization as a social process whereby discontent is brought forward. In the findings of this study there is evidence of discontent in the articles reviewed over the eleven-month period from March 2020 to January 2021. For instance, the discourse analysis revealed that the issues the writers raised related to the shifting identity of the essential workers were intertwined with issues such as subsidized childcare and minimum wages. Further the issues being politicized and prioritized through essential workers varied over the time periods reflecting the evolving and expanding identity of essential workers as we understand them within Canadian society.

5.1.1 Health care workers as essential workers

Early in the time period 1 (March to April 2020) the findings were analyzed and revealed that a predominant essential worker identity was discursively represented, identified, and prioritized by the writers. Findings within the texts analyzed revealed that healthcare workers were dominantly represented in the first period (March-April 2020). This finding is consistent with Catungal (2021) who also observed that COVID-19, at least in the initial phases of the pandemic, was viewed primarily as a biomedical health crisis that enabled the acclivity of health care workers as predominant essential workers over other workers. The predominant essential worker identity established was the health care worker identity and this was utilized to politicize social issues such as childcare and wages outlined by the writers.

5.1.2 Female health care workers and childcare

The health care worker politicization via worker prioritization predominantly in Periods 1 and 2 (March 2020 to July 2021) mirrored the current predominance and prioritization of public health care funding in Canada. As of 2021, provinces, on average, spent thirty eight percent of their budgets on healthcare. Seventy five percent of the overall healthcare funding was from public sources and twenty five percent from private sources (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2021). This heavy focus on public healthcare spending and the resultant government command and control systems required to oversee these expenditures may have obscured other issues and challenges faced by non-healthcare essential workers early on during COVID-19 such as lack of sick pay, low pay, and unsafe working conditions (Parks et al, 2020). The implication of this is prioritization, is that it establishes a valuation or what Gee (2005)

discusses as a political social good on differing forms of essential work from a societal perspective which can be difficult to shift.

In addition to the nature of the work being established, the gender of the health care worker was also highlighted as being largely represented by female workers. The female healthcare essential worker was politicized early in Period 1 via an association with the childcare debate and the prioritization of healthcare workers by government decision makers. This politicization by writers of a specific subgroup of essential workers, i.e., health care workers, had a potential positive consequence. One of the positive issues that was politicized for the subgroup of female healthcare workers was associated with childcare. Provision of childcare and how it disproportionally affects women in the workforce was noted in 2014 by del Mar Alonso-Almeida that when childcare is provided it positively supports women's workforce participation in all job positions. As a positive consequence of the writers politicizing the impact of closing childcare on female healthcare essential workers, who were discursively constructed by writers early in Period 1, increased interest was compiled and reflected by increased academic work being directed to the issue of childcare for healthcare workers (Robinson et al, 2021; Smith, 2022) and public responses from decision makers such as, the premier of Alberta, Jason Kenney (Johnson, 2020). This discontent raised through the writers would potentially benefit all female essential workers including low wage essential workers. Such as, the expansion of essential childcare access to a broader range of essential workers beyond initial government responses to limit access to health care workers and first responders (Johnson, 2020).

5.1.3 Wages discontent in essential worker discourse

As the pandemic progressed over Period 2 and 3 the issue related to wages was politicized by the writers, specifically who is entitled to a COVID-19 related wage subsidy and the issue of minimum wage. This issue of discontent raised by the writers cast the subgroup of the low wage essential worker into the essential worker spotlight. However, during Periods 1, 2 and 3 it was the predominance of the healthcare worker by the writers that remained in the forefront in articles and may have resulted in an inconsistent application of the federal wage subsidy program across the country impacting low wage workers (Tumilty, 2020). The issues of wages and health care workers was evidenced by writers discursively building strong representation for nurses who were the only labour group given room for commentary surrounding the Federal governments wage top up program which was initially promoted for the low wage earner. Nurses are generally not considered low wage earners. Other low wage employment groups were omitted from any of the selected articles.

In summary, the implications of the politicization of essential health care workers resulted in both positive and negative effects to this group and subgroups. It resulted in a focal point being placed on the childcare debate using a dominant female healthcare worker identity that was established by the writers. The other issue was the issue of wages, however the benefit for low wage health care workers was not evident and the benefit to low wage workers in general was not evident. The politicization of childcare for female healthcare workers through the fore fronting and prioritization of the wages for the nursing and the healthcare essential worker group, despite federal efforts to raise the issue for low wage essential workers, may have resulted in a negative effect in enhancing disparities already experienced by low wage workers by detracting the public from other issues related to low wage essential workers. The discursively established

predominance of the healthcare essential worker is posited by the researcher to have weakened the understanding of this new essential worker group in society and may have delayed acceptance to the economic and social importance of this group in Period 1 and partially into Period 2. This observation also aligns with Catungal (2021) who noted that by keeping COVID-19 as a biomedical crisis supporting the dominance of the essential healthcare worker identity and by omitting social and economic threats, it made it increasingly difficult to understand and appreciate the contribution of other perilous forms of essential work during COVID-19 faced by taxi drivers, transport drivers, warehouse workers, and grocery clerks.

5.2 Implications on the shifting identity of the essential worker

The use of the term and classification of 'essential worker' was noted by the ILO (2022). For instance, in this document by the ILO it was identified that some workers are considered more critical to the maintenance of safety and security of what or who compared to other workers and need to be identified as essential (Pankart, 1980 as referenced in Munoz, 2014). Munoz (2014) further pointed out that the nature of a worker's employment can shift from non-essential to essential if the stoppage of the service provided results in a level of harm to the public. Loustaunau et al 2021 also noted that a structural shift in identity can occur within a structural need in society such as when low wage, low skilled workers move from non-essential to essential when they are pivotal to the restart of the economy. Shifts in essential worker identity from non-essential to essential for low wage workers were found in this study during COVID in the articles analyzed in time periods 2 and 3. For instance, societal and governmental shifts in the identity and understanding associated with the nature of the essential worker were found to be influenced by the discursive strategies used by the news articles writers. The writers

utilized the discursive strategy of nomination to highlight the positive traits of both healthcare and non-health workers and to nominate both groups into the essential worker category.

The implication to this new low wage essential worker identity is that they do not align with the traditional understanding surrounding the definition or view of an essential worker. This can lead to ongoing confusion from societies and governments and frustration from essential worker groups potentially resulting in increased risks to workers' health and wellbeing. This definition needs to carry beyond simply the categorization of workers as essential or non-essential based on the service they provide and reflect a more holistic perspective of the full identity of the essential worker to support the workers' health and wellness.

Low wage workers have demonstrated a unique trait during COVID-19 of shifting from non-essential to essential and then back potentially again to non-essential. The latter of which was not seen in this research study directly. Positive self-worth from low wage earners was represented intertextually in some of the news articles (Sellar, 2020). Given some of the hardships experienced by low wage earners prior to COVID-19 referenced by Wexler et al in 2020 set against these positive reports during COVID-19 and the possible shift back to non-essential, the health and wellness impacts of these shifts is important to understand. A revised and expanded definition could contribute to highlighting potential health and wellness vulnerabilities from shifting from non-essential to essential. A revised definition could also support decision makers to identify the needs of all essential workers with a specific benefit to low wage low skilled workers.

COVID-19 highlighted the importance of traditional essential workers that included first responders and hospital-based healthcare workers but also brought to the forefront workers in low wage occupations. The ramification for low wage essential workers was the rapid adjustment

to the precarious nature to their work that did not exist prior to COVID-19. Loustaunau et al in 2021 highlighted this increase in precariousness and outlined those adjustments prior to COVID-19 did exist related low wage work but adjustments consisted of scheduling changes, hour increases or decreases. The findings from the analysis of the writers in this study denote that low wage workers experienced a shift in their occupations from non-essential to essential. This finding was consistent with Park et al (2020) who noted that low wage workers did not assume their work would put them on the front lines of a pandemic and that they would be viewed as essential workers. This change in worker identity required an atypical adjustment in their work resulting in the potential for increased positive recognition, like health care workers, and a potential negative impact of an increase in exposure to health risks in the workplace. This proximity of these two elements does highlight that the impact on a worker's health and wellness from this shift is not benign and has the potential to affect the workers' health negatively and positively. The implications of this shift on the health of for low wage workers are discussed from an occupational science perspective given that participation in occupation is associated with health outcomes (Wilcock and Hocking, 2015).

Occupation is a source to meet human unique physiological and psychological needs through engagement in valued life activities in a variety of social and cultural contexts (Wilcock and Hocking, 2015). Changes in the non-essential to essential worker identity for low wage workers may require further study of how they make sense of the work they do (being an essential worker), how they maintain their self-worth as an essential and non-essential worker in the workplace and society (in other words how belonging is impacted through shifts), and how they develop new competencies and confidence (in becoming an essential worker). For instance, *being* reflects making sense of the occupations they have chosen to engage in and why. The shift

from non-essential work to essential work has significant implications as this shift may happen very suddenly and may not allow any time for reconciliation which may result in reduced work satisfaction and a decreased sense of personal control. *Belonging* reflects the people and communities that surround us through participation in occupations. Shifts to an essential worker identity can expand the scope of the community from simply co-workers to others who value the role such as national or global groups. *Becoming* reflects the developmental and transformational nature of occupations and can lead to other occupations. Performing work that is identified as essential may require an expansion beyond one's current capacities and strengths and may increase the demands of the role beyond initial aspirations (Wilcock and Hocking, 2015). Further examination surrounding the potential workplace health risks set against positive outcomes could further the understanding regarding the health and wellbeing of the low wage worker.

The Canadian government's current definition of essential services and essential workers highlights the nature of service provision being critical and not the worker themselves, i.e., "a service, facility, or activity...that is or will be, at any time, necessary for the safety or security of the public or a segment of the public" (Government of Canada, 2015, para. 5). An observation from the research was that from a societal perspective, the identity of essential services was focused on the person versus the service, i.e., language focused on the persons delivering the service and not the service itself. For example, the importance of grocery clerks versus grocery stores and healthcare workers versus hospitals. This supports the need to re-frame the essential work definition inclusive of societies prioritization of worker over work. As such the researcher posits that the accepted definition of the essential service by the government lacks reference of the worker and that a greater focus on the worker is required to be acknowledged in times of crisis.

For instance, the research findings highlighting the shifting identity of the essential worker in this study is different than what is found in the literature where the essentiality of the service is primary. Munoz (2014) outlines that most governments have accepted definitions of what an essential service is, and a definition of an essential worker is lacking. The current definitions fail to address the role of the worker themselves in the delivery of these services and the impact on the health and wellbeing of a worker suddenly thrust into an essential role which Munoz (2014) indicates can happen if the service is determined to be critical.

Reframing the definition to focus on the essential nature of the worker delivering critical services highlights the responsibilities of both the worker and the employer. Workers, in particular, low wage workers, must account for the fluid nature of their occupations in that there is a broad range related to the responsibility of the role dependent on the needs of society at a given point in time. This reframing may also support employers in acknowledging and supporting workers in developing skills and competencies in adjusting to the essential worker role and mitigating any changes to the precarious nature of their workers' employment.

A revised definition may also lend support towards the decision makers that are making the determination regarding the societal threat to consider the needs of the workers at the forefront and move the burden off the worker to simply assume the new role with its inherent risks. For governments and institutions, it increases accountability towards addressing any new risks that have been added because of the societal threat. Supporting the maintenance of health for all essential workers needs to be the priority in times of societal threat. A revised definition also acknowledges that paid work occupations are culturally situated and can be influenced by a variety of factors including changing political contexts and environments which was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic (Wilcock and Hocking, 2015). Practically, compensation,

benefits, and workplace health and safety can also adopt a more fluid response in times of social crises that can return to a baseline after the threat has been determined to no longer exist. For example, temporary increases in compensation, sick pay, vacation time for workers who find themselves in essential roles during a time of crisis. This suggestion could have benefits for both high wage and low wage workers contingent on the nature of their employment agreements prior to the crisis.

Based on the above review of the findings of this study and the implications related to essential work, the researcher posits the following definition as a starting contribution to the ongoing development and scrutiny of an essential worker centered definition. This definition underscores the worker and accountabilities to support the worker and the service that is required in addressing social threats.

> *At shifting points in time, a worker may be determined to be essential by an authority to preserve the physical, social, and economic safety of the public. An essential worker is one who is adequately equipped and supported by a determined authority to ensure the continuity of an essential service while addressing their unique needs related to the maintenance of their health and wellbeing.*

5.3 Implications on occupational rights for essential workers

The Government of Canada's COVID-19 response in the form of governmental policies including the temporal acknowledgement of an expanded group of essential workers and resultant societal practices secondary to COVID-19 has introduced potential challenges to occupational rights. These challenges were represented in the form of essential worker policy, individual autonomy through choice, and the maintenance of health and wellbeing though paid

work occupations. Occupational rights are defined as, "the right of all people to engage in meaningful occupations that contribute positively to their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of their communities" (Hammell, 2008, p. 62). The implication being that low wage workers need to understand the meaningfulness of their non-essential and essential occupations and how these roles contribute to individual and community health and wellbeing. This increased understanding and value of low wage workers can contribute to a broadening of the accountabilities and responsibilities of workers and employers supporting the attainment of occupational rights for low wage workers.

For low wage essential workers specifically, the written texts analyzed, highlighted discursive strategies utilized in the written texts emphasizing nomination of low-wage essential workers into what Wodak (2001) described as membership in a societal out-group. This membership in a societal out-group identified a contextual factor that negatively influenced the attainment of occupational rights for low wage workers. Membership in this societal out-group may have further impacted access to government programs, i.e., structural factors, meant to recognize the contribution of this low, low skilled group, i.e., the federal wage-top up program from minimum wage workers and other broad-based programs rolled out during COVID-19 such as the Canadian Emergency Relief Benefit (CERB). CERB, an emergency relief benefit meant to provide income support to workers displaced from their workplaces secondary to COVID-19 health measures may have been inaccessible to this low wage, low worker group for several reasons. Brar et al (2020) in their opinion article for the Toronto Star highlighted that CERB required a level of English and internet literacy that may have disproportionately impacted low wage, low skilled workers secondary to their membership in racialized communities. Brar et al (2020) further added this federal application process may have only further perpetuated the

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socioeconomic inequities faced within this low wage, low skilled worker group. Further oppressive labels were discursively used to categorize membership of low-wage essential workers as being marginalized, know poverty firsthand, exploited, racialized, precariously employed, and socially excluded. In the societal context of COVID-19, the oppression experienced by the low wage essential worker was a combination of the pre-existing conditions ushered in through neoliberal governing practices that established economic inequalities specifically impacting low wage workers (Alvarez et al, 2020; James et al, 2021) and the subsequent failure of governance over several economic sectors during COVID-19 to ensure the safety and security of low wage essential workers. Hanage et al (2020) highlighted several missteps by the US government during COVID-19 that can be extrapolated to the Canadian context given our similar political structures of government that included the lack of national COVID-19 workplace standards and enforcement, and lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) for workplaces. In this case, the creation of these oppressive conditions is not viewed as deliberate but aligns more with the position that oppression can be experienced in some groups through the acceptance of societal norms and unchallenged assumptions (Northway, 1997; Loustaunau et al, 2021). These oppressive labels, however, did reflect the current state of low wage workers. This oppression leads to an injustice, that of reduced access to meaningful occupations which is foundational to occupational rights for low wage workers.

Specific to the examination of occupational rights, an implicit propositional assumption was utilized that implied being categorized as essential worker would result in an experience of elevated social value, power in the form of commentary on government actions as examples. Social goods according to Gee (2005) includes the distribution of status, power, value, and class to name a few. Analysis of the written texts did not demonstrate that low wage essential worker's

occupational rights were supported during COVID-19. However, there was one notable exception: the contribution of the writers to increasing awareness of the essential worker discourse from society at large. For instance, the writers of the articles increased the awareness and understanding of the nature of low wage essential workers to our daily lives during COVID-19. Prior to COVID-19 governments shaped the essential worker discourse independently through legislative or disciplinary power outlined in policy or back-to-work legislation (Smith, 2020). This research highlighted the addition of another contribution to the essential worker discourse, an increased value towards the opinion of citizens, that was not previously found in the literature.

The situation created by the ongoing oppression of low wage workers with the simultaneous elevation of social awareness of these same workers (Loustaunau et al, 2021) identified in the articles analyzed highlights the interdependency between an individual's right of choice and environmental determinants influencing the attainment of occupational rights. Applying Hammell's definition to this situation, one could argue that through engagement in their occupations of choice, low wage essential workers were unable to adequately support their personal well-being but did positively contribute to the well-being of their community during COVID-19 through their paid work. For low wage workers, the concept of choice needs some further elaboration and informed choice needs to be considered. Given the recognized hardships that low wage workers can face including housing instability, food instability, and health care instability secondary to racial, language, and educational inequities (Wexler et al, 2020) the choice of paid occupations may not be very expansive. However, having an understanding as to risks and potential precarious nature associated with the work of choice is important to consider

acknowledging that for many low wage workers the precariousness of their employment changed not for the better with COVID-19 (Catungal, 2021).

In further consideration, Hammell (2008) also emphasized the meaningfulness of occupations. In the case of low wage essential workers, analysis of the written texts demonstrated that discursively it was argued that low wage essential workers had significantly contributed to the well-being of our communities during COVID-19 and that society at large had recognized the meaningfulness of their paid occupations. The researcher posits that this shift in societal recognition was transitory in nature and did little to build ongoing loyalty to their employer. Findings from Sull et al in 2022, indicated that an employer's poor response to COVID-19 in protecting an employee's health and well-being was one of the top five predictors of employee turnover and contributed to the great resignation experienced in several developed nations. This outcome highlights the importance and the critical nature of the environment. In the context of this research study, the elements of environment include physical (e.g., access to PPE), social (e.g., relationship with the employer), cultural (e.g., recognition from society), and institutional (e.g., governance surrounding health and safety) (Townsend and Polatajko, 2013). The environmental contribution in supporting attainment of occupational rights through the recognition of the meaningfulness of occupations is important to consider.

The establishment of the meaningfulness of occupations through environmental acceptance is a pre-condition to the acquirement of occupational rights. The researcher argues that one cannot work towards or advocate for occupational rights without this pre-condition where environmental acceptation is defined as the establishment or promotion of the physical, social, cultural, and institutional conditions required to support the acceptance of a person's occupation(s) of choice. This viewpoint is counter cultural to western understandings and our

taken-for-granted tendencies towards neoliberal ideologies endorsing the individual and self-determination as pre-conditions to personal health and achievement (Sakellariou, 2017). The early responses to COVID-19 pandemic in Canada resulted in a decoupling of highly skilled/high achievement equaling meaningfulness. Stated more plainly, COVID-19 established conditions whereby low wage, low skilled workers now belonged to an essential worker group and their contributions to the community were recognized as meaningful. In the context of COVID-19, the social, cultural, and institutional conditions were more aligned with enabling low wage essential workers to attain occupational rights than before the pandemic despite ongoing inequities. Given these insights into the pre-conditions required, the definition of occupational rights as defined by Hammell (2008) could be expanded from, "the right of all people to engage in meaningful occupations that contribute positively to their own well-being and the well-being of their communities" (p.62) to the right of all people to contribute positively to their own well-being and the well-being of their communities through the engagement in occupations of choice that are meaningfully acknowledged and environmentally accepted.

Despite the pre-condition of increased societal meaningfulness towards the contribution of low wage essential workers experienced during COVID-19, occupational rights failed to advance beyond a momentary shift. Increased meaningfulness represents a shift in one contextual factor that contributes to the attainment of occupational rights. The attainment of occupational rights for low wage workers is multifactorial containing both structural, e.g., government policies and cultural values and contextual factors, e.g., social supports, income, ethnicity, and employment status (Townsend and Polatajko, 2013). Government policies directly aimed at low wage workers focused on temporarily increasing income support for low wage essential workers addressing some of the structural determinants to occupational rights related to

employment (Tumilty, 2020; Speer, 2020). Further knowledge to inform how to promote the outcome of occupational rights for all essential workers requires a broadening of the examination of the factors that may contribute to essential workers positively experiencing enhancements in health and wellness through occupational rights.

Several contextual factors pre-dated COVID-19 that challenged this outcome being attained for low wage workers. The context created by COVID-19 widened the gap towards rights attainment by increasing the precariousness of low wage work in several work environments coupled with the government's limited response to address these added factors beyond a temporary wage increase proposal for low wage essential workers. Further knowledge to inform how to promote the outcome of occupational rights for all essential workers requires a broadening of the examination of the factors that may contribute to essential workers positively experiencing enhancements in health and wellness through occupational rights.

5.4 Limitations

This study was focused on a critical discourse analysis of discursive representations of essential workers with a special focus on low wage, low skilled essential workers in the Canadian news media. News publications from across the country were targeted in the search criteria as potential sources of written texts. However, a substantial portion of the texts, nine out of eighteen articles, emphasizing essential workers were collected from one news source, the Toronto Star. The predominance of this Ontario publication may have limited geographical representations related to essential workers from other writers and potentially overrepresented the greater Toronto area in the news articles analyzed. The research study may have been more enriched by balancing the data collection across a wider variety of publications. The article

selection process excluded unpaid dailies. The research study may have been enhanced with the inclusion of some free daily newspapers.

The news articles reviewed were examined retrospectively and news regarding COVID-19 continued to unfold and develop. There were notable stories involving essential workers after January 31, 2021, but they were not included and absent from the research study. Several issues may have evolved beyond the timeframes of this study and may be open to criticism regarding research value.

Lastly, given that this research project is qualitative in nature, it is open to biases being introduced from the researcher. A pre-suppositional interview was conducted with myself and my thesis supervisor, Dr. Lynn Shaw, PhD, OT Reg (NS), prior to the data analysis. Please refer to the Methodology section to review my personal reflections.

Chapter 6 Conclusions

The purpose of this research study was to explore the discursive practices utilized by the Canadian news media to shape the discourse surrounding essential workers with a special focus on new low wage, low skilled workers during COVID-19. The findings indicated that several discursive practices were utilized by the authors. These practices both expanded the categorization of whom is identified as an essential worker during COVID-19 and contributed to the politicization and subsequent prioritization of this identity to further other social issues and agendas. Several implications for essential workers and decision makers were highlighted through the discussion including the impact on the attainment of occupational rights of essential workers.

The discursive strategies also resulted in a predominant representation of some essential workers, namely healthcare workers, over other non-healthcare workers. These discursive practices also resulted in the development of in-groups and out-groups of essential workers. Where in-group essential workers were the beneficiaries of community service access prioritization, wage subsidy, PPE prioritization and out-groups experienced increased feelings of oppression and exclusion. The high public funding nature of in-groups represented by healthcare in the new media texts was influential is supporting the existence of command-and-control systems which governments used to support essential workers in these work contexts. The regulatory nature of government involvement with out-groups through neoliberal shifts in the private sector led to ineffective policy implementation to industries in this sector with an overrepresentation of low wage essential workers.

Low wage essential workers did experience an elevation in the acceptance of social value of the work they performed during the pandemic which highlighted the importance of an endorsed meaningfulness in the establishment of occupational rights for workers and contributed to the consideration of an expanded definition of occupational rights with a greater emphasis on the environmental factors required as pre-conditions for the attainment of occupational rights to be possible. The shift in identity of low wage workers from non-essential to essential during the pandemic also brought forth the need to consider the health and wellbeing of the essential worker in times of societal threat and apply an occupational lens in the consideration of health maintenance to include not only physical safety elements but reflection on the implications and challenges to being, belonging, and becoming in paid work occupations when work identities shift from non-essential to essential. Informing on how best to utilize and support the essential workers in our society before, during, and after a crisis while minimizing any undo hardships or restrictions on occupational rights that may be experienced will be a necessary focus of government policies or programs aimed towards essential workers in the future.

Understanding these consequential interests that shape the societal and political view of essential workers and the context in which they are discursively emphasized is critical to informing future governments, decision makers, and advocacy groups. These results as they converged on established viewpoints which highlighted the predominant essential worker identity evidenced through the introduction and literature review. The context created by the introduction of COVID-19 facilitated the ability of news writers to expand the identification of those who are valued as essential workers in society for public health, political, and economic reasons which challenged the preponderance of the established front-line, first responder essential worker identity prior to COVID-19. This expanded essential worker identity affronted

taken for granted essential worker hierarchies or prioritizations, and accepted definitions of essential service. The challenges to the accepted and taken for granted definitions, valuations, and governance of essential workers offered through the pandemic response to COVID-19 further elucidated the importance in the consideration of the attainment and maintenance of occupational rights for all workers. These considerations need to be consistently upheld for workers identified as essential during a time of recognized societal need as well as in periods of stability where their status may return to non-essential to ensure their readiness if their work roles are required again to elevate to essential status.

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APPENDIX A: News articles analyzed in period 1 (March 1-April 30, 2020)

Ref#	Author	News Title	Publication	Date	Format
A1	Monesbraaten, L	COVID-19 policies create child-care crunch for essential workers	Toronto Star	March 16, 2020	News
A2	Lysack, A; White, M	Even as their role in fighting COVID-19 has become clear, childcare workers remain an afterthought	Toronto Star	March 26, 2020	Opinion
A3	Boyle, J; Pagliaro, T	First homeless shelter worker tests positive for COVID-19, sparking calls for increased protection	Toronto Star	March 30, 2020	News
A4	Benzie, R	Ontario to increase inspections at construction sites and grocery stores to ensure workers are safe	Toronto Star	April 8, 2020	News
A5	Saltman, J	Planned Cuts Would Hurt Essential Workers; Advocates Urge Other Translink Options	Vancouver Province	April 15, 2020	News
A6	Johnson, L	Province expands child-care eligibility to include all workers deemed essential	Edmonton Journal	April 2, 2020	News

APPENDIX B: News articles analyzed in period 2 (May 1-July 31, 2020)

Ref#	Author	News Title	Publication	Date	Format
B1	Tumilty, R	Are you essential? In Canada, it depends where one lives; Federal top-up pay	National Post	July 18, 2020	News
B2	Speer, S	Never forget the dignity of our essential workers	National Post	May 16, 2020	Opinion
B3	Ryan, D	New schools getting the 'essentials' right; Classrooms for children of front-line workers paving the way to a supportive, team-oriented future	Vancouver Province	May 14, 2020	News
B4	Winnipeg Free Press Editorial Board	No serenade, but wage hike is warranted	Winnipeg Free Press	May 13, 2020	Opinion
B5	Keller, J	Parents weigh options as Alberta daycares prepare to reopen as early as May 14	The Globe and Mail	May 12, 2020	News
B6	Lett, D	Risk payment plan sure to exclude worthy workers	Winnipeg Free Press	June 3, 2020	Opinion

APPENDIX C: News articles analyzed in period 3 (November 1-January 31, 2021)

Ref#	Author	News Title	Publication	Date	Format
C1	Sellar, C	A taxing pandemic for taxi drivers	Winnipeg Free Press	December 12, 2020	News
C2	Kennedy, B	City looks to provide emergency child-care to essential workers during post-holiday remote learning	The Toronto Star	December 30, 2020	News
C3	Dewhirst, T	Essential businesses are a blurred and contested concept	The Toronto Star	December 13, 2020	Opinion
C4	Brar, A. Dr., Daniel, M., Dr., Sra, G	'I am scared to take a day off whether sick or not.' The voiceless warehouse workers in Peel and how COVID-19 has silenced them even more	The Toronto Star	December 30, 2020	Opinion
C5	Brar, A. Dr.	Ontario continues to refuse legislation for paid sick days, says CRSB is enough. But that option is inaccessible for many. Here's the difference	The Toronto Star	January 27, 2021	Opinion
C6	Vohra-Miller, S, Dosani, N. Dr., Marwaha, S. Dr., Bulle, S	Ontario locks down on Boxing Day, but essential workers still work. Without protections like paid sick leave, it just won't work	The Toronto Star	December 23, 2020	Opinion