Coping with Uncertainty: Experiences of Essential Workers During the Covid-19 Crisis

By

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Coping with Uncertainty: Experiences of Essential Workers During the Covid-19 Crisis

From its inception, the Covid-19 pandemic has been plagued by uncertainty. In order to understand how essential workers in particular have experienced these uncertainties, this research explores how organizations of employment have framed the pandemic in ways that inform its perception. During the late summer and early autumn of 2020, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted at two sites of essential employment: a package-facility and a drugstore. This fieldwork was supplemented with over 50 interviews of workers at these locations. The inconsistent organizational framing of Covid-19 at both sites functioned to deepen feelings of uncertainty amongst workers regarding the severity of the pandemic as well as the efficacy of facemasks. At the package-facility, this uncertainty resulted in increased flexibility, as workers continuously adjusted their facemask-wearing behaviors to match their immediate contexts. In contrast, the strict facemask enforcement for workers at the drugstore precluded this flexibility. When contextualized within the greater uncertainties of the pandemic, this strict enforcement caused facemasks to become decoupled from considerations of safety. This research begins to expound how organizations mediate experiences of uncertainty, offering insights into how perceptions of Covid-19 are constructed across individuals and communities.
Coping with Uncertainty: Experiences of Essential Workers During the Covid-19 Crisis

The Covid-19 pandemic has been steeped in uncertainty. As communities have struggled to define its reality, conflicts have erupted surrounding its nearly every aspect. In this way, communities have become more and more polarized in how they perceive and respond to the pandemic. In order to elucidate the reasons behind different community responses, researchers must explore the social processes producing differences in perception. The experiences of essential workers are of particular importance, as these communities have been disproportionately impacted by the crisis. To understand how workers have responded to this impact, we must first understand how they perceive it.

Initial research about essential workers has emphasized their heightened vulnerabilities (Higuera 2020; Li and Shakib 2020; Pickersgill 2020; Schneider and Harknett 2020; Lazare 2021). Because these individuals have continued to inhabit the public arena, they have found themselves at a greater risk of contracting the virus. Infection rates have shown that this vulnerable positioning has cost many of them their lives (Lancet 2020). It is important to explore the social factors informing this vulnerability as well as its implications. However, these explorations must not overshadow the actual experiences and perceptions of essential workers. Researchers must explicitly ask how workers have perceived and responded to this increased vulnerability; My research takes up this question directly.

When considering essential workers’ experiences of Covid-19, the employment organizations in which they are embedded become particularly relevant sites of investigation. These organizations frame their employees’ experiences of the pandemic in significant ways, not only through the policies they implement but also through the interactions they foster. In this
Coping with Uncertainty

way, organizations are not conceived of as external sources of regulation. Rather, they are arenas which structure the interactions of participants housed within.

It is important to recognize that workers’ perceptions of Covid-19 are not unilaterally informed by the contexts of their employment. Factors informing these perceptions are indefinite. For instance, the political, regional, and religious organizations in which individuals are simultaneously embedded also have significant influences on their understandings of the pandemic. However, because my research is exploring the experience of essential workers in particular, this exploration must begin at the site of essential employment.

By securing employment at two essential employment organizations -- a package-facility and a drugstore -- I was able to observe firsthand the ways in which these organizations frame the pandemic. In order to better understand how workers perceived this framing, I supplemented my ethnographic fieldwork with over 50 interviews of workers at these employment sites. The inconsistent policies and interactions within these organizations deepened essential workers’ feelings of uncertainty regarding the severity and reality of the pandemic. At the package-facility, this increased uncertainty resulted in flexible facemask-wearing behaviors as workers adjusted frequently to their ever-changing environments. Notably, this flexibility was not present at the drugstore as facemasks there were strictly enforced upon workers. When contextualized with the drugstore’s more general organizational inconsistencies, this rigidity became decoupled from perceptions of the pandemic at large. Thus, workers wore facemasks not out of concern for their safety, but out of obligation.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Early research on the Covid-19 pandemic has explored how communities have been differentially affected by the crisis. Many scholars have stressed the unequal allocation of public health resources as well as the unsymmetrical distribution of risk exposures (Higuera 2020; Mello 2020; Schneider and Harknett 2020). In short, these research projects have illustrated that different communities have experienced the pandemic in different ways. For some communities, Covid-19 is a concrete threat which entails immediate response; for others, it is an ambiguous rumor which requires no immediate action.

Sociologists have long recognized that how individuals and communities come to understand the risks confronting them is dependent on the social contexts through which these risks are mediated (Douglas and Wildavsky 1983; Short 1984; Cuthbertson and Nigg 1987; Stallings 1990; Wynne 1992; Freudenburg 1993; Lee and Short 1993; Beamish 2000; Beamish 2001; Zinn 2006; Wright and Schaffer 2012; Burgess, Wardman, and Mythen 2018). Uncertainty becomes relevant to risk-perception when multiple routes of social mediation are available to a community – that is, when there is more than one socially valid way to interpret a risk. Experiences of uncertainty have been particularly salient throughout the Covid-19 crisis, as, despite the ample academic writing published on the pandemic, no single risk interpretation has become hegemonic. Thus, Covid-19 has continued to be perceived through a haze of incertitude.

Auyero and Swistun (2008) have expounded the contours of uncertainty by exploring the social conditions which prevent the development of hegemonic risk perceptions. Through ethnographic fieldwork and archival research, these sociologists explored the development of risk-perceptions within an Argentine shantytown exposed to environmental pollution. Residents of this shantytown expressed high levels of uncertainty with regard to the pollution they were
facing. Auyero and Swistun identified two mechanisms informing the persistence of this uncertainty: the “relational anchoring of local residents’ perceptions” and the “labor of confusion performed by powerful actors” within the community (2008:374). In short, residents were frequently encountering contradictory interpretations of their situation. Although they were explicitly informed of the dangers associated with the environmental pollution to which they were exposed, this information was framed inconsistently by both residents and powerful actors within the community. These inconsistencies precluded the ascension of a hegemonic risk perception within the shantytown, allowing for the germination of “toxic uncertainty”. Consequently, residents remained uncertain about both the reality and the severity of the pollution they were confronting.

The crux of Auyero and Swistun’s argument is that uncertainty is relationally anchored by the social contexts in which risks are interpreted. Uncertainty results when inconsistent interactions within these contexts prevent the unanimous definition of a relevant risk. Notably, the labor of confusion which these researchers discuss is a more specific characterization of this relational anchoring:

Given that opinions and interventions are endowed with different power, what physicians have to say about health in the neighborhood (and what they silence) and what the president or other state officials affirm, do, or avoid doing, carry a different weight than what a regular neighbor asserts or does. (Auyero and Swistun 2008:374)

Thus, the relational anchors enacted by consequential institutions within a community should not be conflated with those of casual interaction, as their capacities to promote or problematize risk-interpretations are unequal. Inconsistencies within these institutions therefore have more potential to generate feelings of uncertainty.
In the context of Auyero and Swistun’s research, this uncertainty stultified efforts of community organizing. Because residents did not perceive the pollution as a determinant threat, they did not respond to it as such. However, does uncertainty always breed inaction? In what instances does uncertainty instigate rather than paralyze? Although Auyero and Swistun offer a compelling account of how uncertainty is constructed, they do not explore in detail its behavioral consequences.

Other researchers have tackled this question by investigating the behavioral strategies developed by individuals enveloped in environments of uncertainty. (Trinitapoli and Yeatman 2011; Pilnick and Zayts 2014; O’Malley 2015; Schull 2015; Wilf 2015; Zeiderman 2015). In particular, Johnson-Hanks et al. (2005) investigated the reproductive practices of Cameroonian women who were situated in social conditions characterized by extreme uncertainty. As Johnson-Hanks et al. posit, these women contoured their behavior to their uncertain terrain by engaging in “judicious opportunism”, a behavioral strategy which prioritizes flexibility over prior intention. Rather than intentionally developing plans of future action, Cameroonian women shaped their behavior to their immediate contexts, responding “effectively to the contingent, sudden, and surprising offers that life can make” (Johnson-Hanks et al. 2005:376). Consequently, these women did not actively plan their fertility practices; they adjusted their practices on the go in response to the unpredictable developments of their lives. In short, Johnson-Hanks et al. posited that in conditions of unresolvable uncertainty, the most fitting behavioral strategies are those that feature high degrees of flexibility:

Under extreme uncertainty, when all the rules are changing, what works is not the best strategy but the most flexible one—the one that takes every present in the subjective, that keeps every alternative open as
long as possible, and that permits the actor to act rapidly and flexibly to take advantage of whatever opportunities arise. (P. 377)

How these instances of ‘judicious opportunism’ are manifested, however, depends on particularities of social context. In this way, strategies of behavioral flexibility must be situated in time and place. For instance, flexibility may result in relative inaction as individuals and communities avoid commitment to any one strategy of response. This sort of inaction was observed by Auyero and Swistun: the residents of the shantytown delayed organizational efforts, as these efforts would presuppose a large degree of prior intention. However, flexibility may also instigate action. The women Johnson-Hanks et al. observed took advantage of any opportunities that came their way, whether that be a new job offer or a new marriage. Thus, these women were quick to action, responding immediately to any changes in their environment. These two case-studies illustrate how behavioral flexibility is influenced by the context in which individuals are embedded. Flexibility is not uniformly manifested; rather it evolves to afford individuals the most efficient ways to handle their particular experiences of uncertainty.

The literature described above allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how the uncertainties of Covid-19 have been constructed and managed by different communities. Auyero and Swistun (2008) identify mechanisms by which risks become uncertain and Johnson-Hanks et al. (2005) provide a framework for understanding how individuals and communities respond to these feelings of uncertainty. The following investigation builds from these theoretical foundations in order to provide an account of how essential workers have been affected by the pandemic.

In the case of essential workers, organizations of employment are especially relevant sites of investigation. Because these organizations frame the interactional realities of individuals’
work lives, they play a large role in anchoring perceptions of the Covid-19. While Auyero and Swistun only briefly mention the influential framing of powerful institutions, my research directly explores how organizations construct feelings of uncertainty in the context of the pandemic. As my research reveals, essential workers’ experiences of uncertainty are significantly mediated by the organizational contexts of their employment.

After identifying how essential workers’ risk-perceptions are organizationally mediated, I investigate the behavioral flexibilities adopted by essential workers in response to perceptions of uncertainty. In particular, I explore the development of flexible facemask-wearing strategies and how this development is organizationally restricted. Thus, the following investigation expounds not only the concrete manifestations of behavioral flexibility, but how these manifestations are organizationally modified.

ARGUMENT

Essential workers’ experiences and perceptions of the Covid-19 pandemic have been significantly shaped by the employment organizations in which they are embedded. The policies implemented by these organizations, along with the interactions they foster, frame the pandemic in ways which may deepen or reduce feelings of uncertainty.

As I posit, organizations which inconsistently and superficially implement Covid-19 safety regulations are more likely to house interactions that emphasize the pandemic’s ambiguity. Consequently, inconsistent organizational practices engender within workers feelings of uncertainty regarding the reality of Covid-19. These deepened states of uncertainty were observed in essential workers at both the package-facility and the drugstore, as both of these organizations featured salient inconsistencies in their framings of the pandemic.
I go on to show how these experiences of uncertainty shape the behavioral strategies adopted by these workers. When individuals feel uncertain about their current situation, they are more likely to respond flexibly to their immediate contexts. In this way, essential workers who feel uncertain about the reality and severity of Covid-19 are more likely to contour their behavior to their immediate social contingencies – that is, they are more likely to exhibit behavioral flexibility. This flexibility extends also to their perceptions of others reactions during the pandemic, as they are more likely to interpret the behaviors of others with tolerance; because there is not one single way of doing things, people who behave differently are less likely to be condoned. This flexibility was observed in the facemask-wearing behaviors and perceptions of workers at the package-facility.

Notably, I emphasize how this flexibility was absent in workers at the drugstore; they wore facemasks every shift and showed less tolerance for others who were not wearing them. Thus, their facemask-wearing behaviors and perceptions were characterized by rigidity. This difference in behavioral flexibility was due to the consistent regulation of facemasks for employees at the drugstore. In other words, workers at the drugstore behaved rigidly because if they did not, they would be fired. Interestingly, this increased rigidity in facemask-wearing behaviors was not correlated with increased certainty regarding the efficacy or necessity of facemasks.

In this way, facemask-wearing behaviors at the drugstore were decoupled from more general considerations of the pandemic. This decoupling resulted from the conjunction of general inconsistencies with a particular rigidity. As emphasized earlier, the organizational policies at the drugstore were marked by widespread inconsistencies, and these inconsistencies perpetuated feelings of uncertainty regarding the pandemic. The strict enforcement of facemasks did nothing to abate these broader uncertainties. Thus, the enforcement of facemasks became partially
disassociated from considerations of Covid-19; instead, facemasks just became a necessary rule to follow.

In the first section of the findings, I will illustrate how organizational inconsistencies at both the package-facility and the drugstore deepened experiences of uncertainty. These inconsistencies were not limited to the concrete policies implemented by either organization; they also included the inconstant interactions taking place among coworkers, managers, and customers housed within these organizations. In the second section of the findings, I will highlight the flexible facemask-wearing behaviors and perceptions observed at the package-facility. In the third section of the findings, I will discuss the strict enforcement of facemasks for employees at the drugstore and how strict enforcement practices resulted in a particular type of behavioral rigidity. I will highlight how this particular rigidity, when paired with general inconsistencies, resulted in a decoupling of facemask-wearing behaviors from considerations of the pandemic.
Figure 1. Schematic of Argument

A. Inconsistencies Mediate Uncertainty at Both Organizations

- Inconsistent enforcement of social distancing
- Inconsistent communication from managers
- Inconsistent interactions among coworkers

Uncertainty about Covid-19

B. Behavioral Flexibility at Package-Facility

- General Inconsistencies
- Uncertainty about Covid-19
- Flexible Facemask-Wearing Behaviors

C. Decoupling Facemasks and Covid-19 at Drugstore

- General Inconsistencies
- Uncertainty about Covid-19
- Flexible Facemask-Wearing Behaviors

Rigid Enforcement of facemasks
DATA AND METHODS

In order to explore how organizations have framed essential workers’ experiences of Covid-19, I obtained employment at two low-wage service sites over a five-month span of 2020. These two sites were a package-facility and a drugstore. When choosing where to apply for employment, I took into consideration the public visibility of each job. Initially, I had the intention of systematically comparing low-wage essential service jobs which were visible and invisible to the public eye. Although my results do not emphasize variances in visibility, this initial hypothesis lent my data collection systematicity.

I first sought a service job which operated outside the purview of public attention. Thus, I applied to a commercial package-facility. Because of recent surges in online orders, several package-facilities in Chicago were hiring with urgency. The same day I completed a ten-minute online application, I received a call from the facility scheduling my orientation. I started working less than a week after I applied.

After securing employment at the package-facility, I began looking for a second service job which was more visible to the public eye. My original goal was to obtain employment at a grocery store. However, this goal proved to be quite difficult. I filled out countless online applications, attended several walk-in interviews, and directly contacted a handful of hiring managers throughout Chicago. Each time, I received an email or call informing me that due to the large pool of applicants, there were no positions available for me to fill.

Consequently, I expanded my application pool to include any low-wage service job which involved direct interactions with the public and which had remained open throughout the pandemic. These sites included fast-food restaurants, gas stations, superstores, and drugstores. I
continued this expanded application process for several weeks, using the same techniques described above. One day on a whim, I visited a drugstore and asked to speak to the hiring manager. It just so happened that they were about to open up applications for a recently vacated cashier position. With luck, I had finally received a job offer. I immediately accepted and started working several weeks later.

Because I was employed at each location, I was able to collect extensive ethnographic fieldnotes detailing the concrete interactions and experiences of these two organizational populations. Additionally, I conducted 51 interviews with fellow employees. These interviews investigated how organizational experiences framed individuals’ understandings of the pandemic. The content of these interviews was very similar for the two employment sites; however, a number of questions were geared towards the particular organizational realities of each location.

Research Setting: Package-Facility

The package-facility at which I worked was located in a low-income, nonresidential neighborhood of Chicago, IL. From July to September of 2020, I worked as a package handler (PH). Monday through Friday, I unloaded packages from trucks arriving at the facility. On average, these shifts lasted from 2:30 AM to 8:30 AM. However, the length of shifts varied according to the number of packages the facility received each morning as well as on the number of people who showed up to work. Saturday shifts were notoriously grueling, as over half of the scheduled PHs would not attend.

Typically, PHs would unload trucks in teams of two. One worker was responsible for unloading packages onto a conveyor belt while the other was responsible for scanning their
barcodes as they moved towards the sorting machine at the heart of the facility. Almost exclusively, I unloaded the packages onto the conveyor belt. The one time I tried my hand at scanning, I failed quite miserably, having to stop the belt every couple of minutes as the packages got ahead of me.

When enough PHs showed up to work, three-person teams were common, with two PHs unloading and the third scanning. I preferred these three-person teams as they afforded me the opportunity to converse with my fellow unloader. These conversations allowed me to become better acquainted with my coworkers, eventually allowing me to build their trust and friendship. Topics of discussion ranged considerably; from TV shows and politics, to skateparks and girlfriend troubles and the calorie density of a honeybun, each day featured a new subject matter. By far the most common topic of discussion was gossip about coworkers and managers, usually in the form of complaints. In an effort to remain impartial, I would avoid gossip about fellow coworkers. However, my own grievances often motivated me to partake in some shit-talking about managers. No research, after all, is completely impartial.

When possible, I would try to work with different PHs each shift. Thus, I was able to learn the names and stories of the majority of my peers. Several serendipitous occasions allowed me the opportunity to interact with workers from different parts of the building (which were involved in different steps of the package sorting process). One of these occasions took place on my route to work, which involved two extremely fickle buses. At 2:40 AM one morning, I was still waiting for the second bus which was supposed to have arrived at 2:16 AM. Finally, I decided to just call an uber. As the uber arrived, I offered the only other person at the bus-stop a ride to the facility. He had been traveling the same route as I had been for the past several weeks, so I assumed he worked at the same facility. I was right, and he happily accepted the offer. We
became friends, and he eventually introduced me to several of his coworkers who worked with him in different sections of the building. These friendships, which were fostered outside of the walls of the facility, allowed me to expand the reach of my data. They also made my transit much more enjoyable.

*Research Setting: Drugstore*

The second site of data collection was a drugstore located in an affluent, residential neighborhood of Chicago, IL. Notably, most workers at the drugstore did not reside in this neighborhood. From September to November of 2020, I worked four days a week as a cashier at this location. Each shift lasted 6.5 hours with a 45-minute dinner break. Although the drugstore was open 24 hours a day, I technically worked the closing shift (from 4:00-10:30 PM). As a cashier, I was mostly responsible for checking out customers, cleaning and stocking the frontend of the store, and answering the phone. Notably, there was almost always a line of customers waiting to be checked out. During the months I worked at this drugstore, the two other partner drugstores in the area were closed down due to looting. Thus, the customers who normally visited these stores were funneled to the location at which I worked. Hence, the never-ending line.

Socializing with my coworkers at the drugstore proved to be slightly more difficult than at the package-facility. This difficulty was mostly due to lack of opportunity. As a cashier, I was constantly interacting with customers. Thus, conversations with coworkers were less frequent. Fortunately, towards the end of my shifts, customers would dwindle, and as long as managers were not present, I was able to interact with my fellow cashiers on a more personal level. During one of these conversations, I was passionately enlightened on what “Sweetest Day” was (and subsequently chided for not buying my boyfriend a card). On another occasion, all the cashiers
pitched in to sample an apple-pie flavored KitKat, a delicacy which had been paraded at the front
counter for several weeks. These light-hearted conversations set a foundation of friendliness
which allowed me to gain the trust of my coworkers.

Recruitment and Data Collection

The interviews I conducted lasted around 45 minutes to an hour. The individuals selected
and recruited for interviews were coworkers who worked in my surrounding areas, and thus
those to which I had immediate personal access. When asking coworkers if they would consent
to participating in the study, I explained the interview process and briefly summarized the sorts
of questions that would be asked during the interview. Additionally, I emphasized the
confidentiality of the research, assuring participants that the content of their interviews would not
be linked in any way to their personal identities. In general, interview questions focused on how
interviewees perceived, experienced, and responded to the reality of the Covid-19 pandemic.
Additionally, basic demographic questions – inquiring about age, level of education, place of
residency, and employment history – were asked. Interview questions between sites were not
identical; rather, they were constructed based on my initial experiences at each organization.

I conducted 30 interviews with employees of the package-facility. Towards the end of
each shift, after all trucks had been unloaded, PHs were expected to tape up any open or
damaged packages. Once I began collecting interviews -- about two weeks into my employment
-- I used this time as an opportunity to ask coworkers with whom I did not often interact for their
participation in my research. Only one coworker denied my request for an interview, claiming
his wife would be too jealous. During recruitment, I also reached out to five facility managers;
however, only one agreed to participate in the study. This participant was able to provide insight,
albeit limited, into the experiences and perceptions of the organization’s management team. In
addition to more general interview questions, I asked individuals how they felt about the lack of facemask regulations in the workplace. Additionally, I asked workers how they felt about the sporadic facemask enforcement occurring on the days of corporate visits.

I conducted 21 interviews with employees of the drugstore. After about three weeks of working at the drugstore, I began asking coworkers and managers to participate in interviews. Only one coworker refused, claiming adamantly that she had absolutely nothing to say about Covid-19. The employees who agreed to participate in the study included store associates, several shift-leads, and one store manager. In addition to more general interview questions, I asked workers how they felt about the enforcement of facemasks, as well as other safety regulations within the store (e.g. social distancing). Additionally, interviewees were asked about their interactions with customers as they pertained to the pandemic.

Data Analysis

This investigation’s primary strategy of data analysis involved thematic coding of interview transcripts and ethnographic field notes. Interviews were initially transcribed via Otter.ai. These transcripts were then corrected by-hand and coded for several thematic categories. This manual analysis contextualized the interactional dynamics of individual interviews, allowing for more nuanced content comprehension. By coding for contextualized themes rather than concrete strings of words, connections between and among interviews were developed without the limitations of linguistic particularities. These categories were continuously revised throughout the research process. After any categories were adjusted, previously coded transcripts were re-evaluated. This strategy of analysis accommodated the iterative quality of social science research.
Demographic information of each interviewee was collected and compiled. This information, which is presented in Table 1, included age, race, gender, and level of education. Two interviewees refused to provide this information, one at the drugstore and one at the package-facility. Additionally, two interviewees at the drugstore refused to provide their age.

**Table 1. Demographic Information of Package-Facility and Drugstore Interviewees**

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<tr>
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<th>Package-Facility</th>
<th>Drugstore</th>
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**FINDINGS**

**Mixed Signals**

Essential workers’ experiences of Covid-19 were significantly influenced by the organizational contexts in which they were embedded. For the two employment sites I investigated, these contexts featured high degrees of inconsistency, both in terms of the policies enacted by the organizations and the interactions fostered within. These mixed signals foregrounded the ambiguities of Covid-19, causing workers to frequently question the severity of...
the pandemic as well as the efficacy of safety measures implemented in response to it (e.g. facemasks, social distancing). During interviews, employees at both organizations often mentioned conspiracy theories related to the pandemic. It was not uncommon for individuals to deny the severity of Covid-19 outright, claiming that it was nothing more than the common flu. Even when employees recognized the seriousness of the pandemic, they often expressed doubts about the necessity and efficacy of facemasks and social distancing protocols. When expressing these conspiracies and doubts, many employees would discuss the inconsistencies of the organizational policies described below. Evidently, these mixed signals deepened feelings of uncertainty regarding the pandemic.

*Package-facility.*

Organizational irregularities underlining the ambiguities of the pandemic were featured in package-facility employee interactions. In late March, when the United States began publicly responding to the crisis, management at the package-facility initiated safety measures which emphasized the reality and severity of Covid-19. Facemasks were regularly worn and enforced by managers, hand-sanitizer stations were installed throughout the facility, temperature checks were mandated at security checkpoints, and PHs were assigned individual trucks to unload in order to follow social distancing protocols. Some workers even described management as being overly-paranoid about potential infections. For instance, one elderly PH detailed a time where he believed managers had followed him into the bathroom in order to determine whether or not he was ill. Although managers did not admit to this sort of surveillance, the interpretation of their behavior in this light reflects the general anxiety and hyper-vigilance present during the onset of the pandemic.
However, many workers had a difficult time remembering the details of these early experiences. This difficulty reflects the extent to which these organizational policies changed throughout the coming months. First, social distancing protocols stopped being enforced. If PHs were able to unload trucks more quickly when working in teams, they were allowed to do so. One coworker described this shift in protocol:

So, at first [managers] were singling everybody out because they say you can’t have two unloaders in the trailer anymore. Because the whole pandemic… When we started being short on workers, they were just like, ‘if you got two people paired up and they work faster then might as well just let them work together’.

By the end of the summer, it was not uncommon for over five unloaders to work shoulder-to-shoulder in a single truck. Additionally, hand-sanitizer stations were abruptly removed without explanation. For me, they only ever existed as a rumor -- by the time I started working at the facility they had been gone for several months.

Although temperature checks continued throughout the summer, many workers were unaware of this continuation. In late July, manual temperature checks were replaced by an automated temperature scanner. This replacement was not announced; thus, the majority of workers did not realize their temperatures were still being monitored. Even so, many who were aware of the replacement doubted its reality. As one PH described,

Once you get through the gate, you just walk straight through the door. I can’t really see how that thing scan you if you’re just walking straight through the door like that. I don’t think they’re actually doing it… They don’t even have a person watching the machines, so I know it ain’t working.

Gradually managers stopped wearing and enforcing facemasks. Although disposable facemasks were still provided in certain areas of the facility, I only ever witnessed one manager actually wear one. Many workers reported confusion about management’s inability to follow
their own rules. Notably, this inability made workers less inclined to follow facemask protocols themselves. As one interviewee explained, “You can’t expect somebody to do anything you ask and then you not do it yourself. So, if a manager don't wear a mask, what makes you think their employees are gonna wear a mask?”

Managers were not oblivious to this reality. They recognized that their facemask-wearing behaviors significantly influenced the facemask-wearing behaviors of their employees. The one manager I was able to interview confirmed this recognition; however, he did not seem overly concerned with its implications.

If managers wore [facemasks] every single day, COVID will be a lot more serious to everybody in this building. I believe if managers actually emphasize how serious it is. And the thing with me is that I'm also the safety manager. And I am failing to follow the safety when it comes to COVID. And I did think about that at one point, but then it just went out of my head again.

Occasionally upper management from corporate would visit the facility. Lower level managers asked workers to wear facemasks -- while their own faces remained uncovered -- on the mornings of these corporate visits, promising that the request would not extend past the day. These promises were always kept; facemasks immediately returned to being optional after corporate check-ups.

However, it is not exactly accurate to say that facemasks were regulated even on the days of these visits, as many workers simply ignored the requests to wear them. One interviewee described his experience of these check-ups, explaining how he never even wore his facemask over his face: “For the most part, I didn’t have [a facemask] on my face…I just had it around my ears, up around my chin. And ain’t nobody said nothing. Nobody said nothing. So, after a while I took it off.”
Any feedback from corporate only ever involved issues of productivity. Facemasks and other Covid-19 safety measures, meanwhile, were never mentioned. One interviewee commented on this prioritization:

I've seen [corporate] observing when we were not necessarily wearing masks, but what I see is they're paying attention more to the operation -- how much volume we're moving and things like that… I've never seen anybody look disturbed that we weren't wearing a mask when corporate visited.

During late March and early April, managers would update their teams on the development of the pandemic at the start of every shift, stressing the importance of personal hygiene and social distancing. As the summer progressed, however, these updates stopped, and Covid-19 stopped being addressed. Several workers who were interviewed expressed suspicion regarding the totality of this stoppage. These workers believed that managers intentionally stopped drawing attention to the pandemic in order to increase attendance rates.

They don't talk about it. They don't. I mean, you will never hear a manager talk about coronavirus. They don't want you to think about it or anything. They try to keep their mind off of it. That's one way they get people to come into work. I feel like not talking about covid -- its intentional. I just found out -- my mom told me that the cases in Illinois are raising again slowly after Labor Day. But you don't hear them talking about it because they don't want to worry you. They don't want you to know. Cuz most people, most of us in there do not watch the news. They can't sit there and watch the news every day because I know I don't. So, you wouldn't know what's going on, really.

In other words, if workers were less aware of the pandemic, they would be more likely to show up to their shifts. This suspicion was also informed by the organization’s lack of communication regarding infections. Management had stopped announcing when individuals in the facility contracted Covid-19. Thus, workers only found out about cases of Covid-19 through
rumors. Tellingly, one interviewee reported finding out about the death of another worker (due to Covid-19 complications) from a Facebook post.

Several workers did not even trust the communication that the company did provide. One interviewee, who had taken off of work for the first couple of months of the pandemic, described her distrust:

I always wear masks. Sometimes I wear two. Because we don't know if they’re telling the truth that nobody got the virus here. Why would they tell us? Of course, the employees are going to be scared. If someone got sick [managers are] going to go to a meeting and be like ‘don’t tell because [employees are] going to be scared’.

The intentionality of management’s limited communication was never explicitly confirmed. Nevertheless, maintaining attendance rates was evidently a high priority of management. Several times a week, managers would emphasize the importance of showing up to shifts. Sometimes this emphasis would take on aggressive undertones as managers raised their voices and threatened termination. In an interview, one manager described just how salient his concern with attendance was. During the first few weeks of the pandemic, his largest worry was not the potential for infection, but a drop in attendance.

When it started, all the management team had concerns like -- because we were told if someone tells you they have COVID they have to go get tested, and they have to be out for two weeks. So, we're just thinking to ourselves [that] we're going to lose a lot of people because there's a lot of people are [that are going to] say I have COVID, and then just be off for two weeks.

Thus, one of his biggest worries at the start of the pandemic was not about potential outbreaks, but that workers would fake being sick to get off of work.
Notably, hazard pay was also not consistently provided throughout the pandemic. Even when it was provided, details about logistics were poorly communicated by the company. When asked how they felt about the stoppage of hazard pay, many interviewees revealed that they had not known about the hazard pay raise earlier in the year. Those who had been aware of the raise, expressed confusion about its stoppage: “The pay increase went down, but the city was still not completely open. Which I don't understand if we're still not even completely out of the pandemic.”

In short, safety measures for the pandemic were reduced to memories, fossils of an earlier epoch. Within the concrete walls of the facility, it was easy to lose sight of the reality of the pandemic. Consider, for instance, this ethnographic vignette: one morning management brought in pizza as a reward for the previous day’s performance. The pizza boxes were piled haphazardly on a conveyor belt, and workers were free to grab however many slices they wanted as they arrived. No hand sanitizer, plates, napkins, or utensils were provided. Notably, no one was bothered by this absence; workers happily grabbed their slices and began their shifts. In many ways it was not surprising that workers who were interviewed frequently spoke about the pandemic in the past-tense.

**Drugstore.**

Similar to those at the package-facility, the organizational policies at the drugstore deepened feelings of uncertainty regarding the pandemic. The ambiguities of Covid-19 were most notably emphasized by the irregular enforcement of social distancing within the store. Whether or not social distancing was regulated seemed to depend entirely on the mood of the security guard on shift. On one particular day, a security guard would be barking at customers to
maintain six-feet distance. The following day, that same security guard would be asleep against a newspaper rack.

Notably, most security guards would make no attempts to regulate store capacity. Often the pharmacy line in the back of the store would wrap through the aisles, sometimes overlapping with the line for the storefront. Managers would rarely take steps to mitigate this overcrowding. Several interviewees suggested that this inaction was calculated: “When [customers] stand outside they complain. So, instead of having a customer call corporate and complain or complain on a particular manager, they'd rather let them come in because no manager wants to get a complaint.” In short, managers were less likely to limit the number of customers allowed inside the store because if they did, they would receive complaints from customers forced to wait outside.

The social distancing policies of the drugstore were more stringent towards the beginning of the pandemic. However, as the pandemic progressed, enforcement flagged. As one interviewee described,

People are getting lax, and the store I noticed, they seem to be -- it's just inconsistent to me. At first, they were only allowing some people inside, and now it's like they're just letting everybody inside at a time. And then I noticed in the line people are standing really close together. No one really pays attention to the 6 feet thing anymore.

Notably, social distancing policies were sporadically implemented. For instance, some days managers would try to enforce social distancing by only opening every other register. However, as customers accumulated, this enforcement was usually forgotten, and all the registers would be opened. On one occasion management received a warning from city officials saying
that the store was too crowded. This warning, however, did not appear to be worth heeding as no permanent policy adjustments were made in response to it.

The inconsistent enforcement of safety policies extended beyond those pertaining to social distancing protocols. For instance, managers were supposed to check the temperatures of employees daily; however, they would often forget. Notably, when managers did remember, they would use a thermometer which was clearly uncalibrated, reading off temperatures of 95 degrees or below. Additionally, managers were rarely concerned about the enforcement of facemasks in areas outside the purview of the public. In this way, workers were never reprimanded for removing their facemasks when they were not on the storefront floor (e.g. breakroom, manager’s office, storage areas). As one interviewee (named Nathan) described,

When you walk into the back room where all the boxes and stuff are, you can take off your mask for a quick second. Nobody’s [going to] be like ‘oh Nathan can you throw on your mask for me, you were just out there on the floor working’… At work, it's strictly work. [Managers are] focused on getting the task done.

For many workers, these inconsistencies showed that management was not concerned about protecting the health or wellbeing of their employees. Rather, as Nathan emphasized, managers were “focused on getting the task done”. For instance, after the store was looted and all but one register was destroyed, the district manager pushed for the immediate opening of the storefront despite the obvious complications of such a rushed process. Workers perceived this push as an indication that the manager was prioritizing revenue over their safety and sanity:

I can't believe that [the district manager] wanted us to stay open and just operate off of this one register…

Oh my god that goes to show you that they really don't even care. You already know how busy this store is.
In short, employees recognized that the drugstore was less concerned about their well-being and more focused on productivity. As one interviewee summarized, “the company's not really helping us out with the pandemic. They don't really care how we feel or if we get sick or anything…They just not being considerate. They just make sure we come to work.”

Management responded inconsistently even when workers actually contracted Covid-19. The first time an employee in the pharmacy was infected, the entire pharmacy was shut down and professionally cleaned. In contrast, when an employee in the storefront contracted Covid-19 about a month or so later, nothing was done. Many employees had not even realized that one of their coworkers had been sick, as it went unannounced. One interviewee, who had found out about this second Covid-19 case indirectly, expressed her discontent for how the drugstore handled the situation: “That really did bother me… Why didn't they close the store down again and do a deep cleaning? Especially because we interact with the person. We sit in the break room in their face and stuff like that.” When another cashier confronted management about the lack of response following this infection, she was told that she shouldn’t worry about it because she had not worked the preceding weekend (when the infection was discovered).

Although I was never explicitly informed by management whether anyone had actually contracted Covid-19, one coworker shared with me her own experience of catching it. According to this interviewee, none of her coworkers were explicitly told that she had contracted Covid-19 (although several had assumed).

Another source of organizational inconsistency was how the drugstore responded to facemask-less customers. Management never provided explicit instructions for how to handle these encounters; thus, they varied significantly. Some cashiers would absolutely refuse service to any customer who was not wearing a facemask. However, most cashiers would avoid this sort
of confrontation and instead serve the customer as they would any other. In several instances, facemask-less customers who had been refused at one register would just step to the adjacent register to be served by a different cashier. One interviewee described her experience of one such occurrence:

[The customer] didn’t have on a mask and I told them to [put a facemask on] …They could ask another employee to check them out, but it wasn’t going to be me. Another cashier took them. But I didn’t.
Walgreens give us the right to reject a customer without a mask.

In short, workers were allowed to refuse service to facemask-less customers, but this refusal remained at the discretion of the individual.

In interviews, managers emphasized how it was technically the responsibility of the contracted security guards to regulate facemask policies. However, as was mentioned earlier, the vigilance of these security guards was extremely fickle, and facemask-less customers were frequently allowed inside the store. One interviewee emphasized how this inconsistency stood in direct contrast to the messages sent out by the store intercom:

The store says aint nobody supposed to be in there without a mask. They even got the recording that come on the radio, but then they don’t enforce it. If [customers] come in here with no mask, they just let them walk in – some people say like, ‘bro, you need a mask on. Excuse me, you need a mask on’. But other people don’t. So, like as a whole we’re not on one team with that.

Indeed, in its handling of facemask-less customers, the store did not act as “one team”. This lack of cohesion caused several workers to feel unsupported by store management. For instance, one interviewee described a time where a customer had intentionally coughed on her. When she sought guidance from her manager, she was told to “blow it off”.

A final source of inconsistency involved the allocation of hazard pay. During the pandemic, workers at the drugstore received a one-time check of $300 or $150, depending on their employment status. Many workers were unhappy with the extent of this compensation as they did not feel it reflected the seriousness of the situation. However, this feeling of insult was not shared by all employees. Some workers had not even realized that the company was providing a stipend at all. One interviewee described her surprise when she first received the extra compensation: “That time I got my check I was like, ‘dang I got paid a lot.’ And that’s when they told me it was a stipend. I didn't know… No one said anything until after.” Thus, the little support the company did offer to its employees was not even properly explained; As always, employees were left wondering.

Going with the Flow: Package-Facility

The inconsistent organizational policies enumerated above framed the pandemic in ways which deepened feelings of uncertainty. Consequently, workers at both locations felt uncertain about how they should perceive and respond to the pandemic. At the package-facility, these feelings of uncertainty translated into flexibility with regard to facemask-wearing behaviors. As mentioned above, facemasks were not enforced by the organization, and therefore it was left to the discretion of the individual to decide whether or not to wear a facemask. Ethnographic fieldwork revealed that the majority of workers at the facility did not consistently wear facemasks. Figure 1 summarizes the observed facemask-wearing behaviors of coworkers who participated in interviews.
Table 2. Observed Facemask-Wearing Behaviors of Package-Facility Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facemask-Wearing Status</th>
<th>Unobserved</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>...3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>...5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>...9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>...5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>...5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unobserved</td>
<td>...3</td>
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It would be easy to assume that this behavior was a product of forgetfulness, negligence, or inattention; however, research revealed these assumptions to be untrue. Rather, irregular behavior reflects intentional efforts by workers to adapt to their immediate social surroundings.

When deciding whether or not to wear a facemask, individuals took several things into consideration. Primarily, they monitored and evaluated the facemask-wearing behaviors of those around them. If coworkers in their vicinity tended not to wear facemasks, then individuals were less likely to wear a facemask themselves. In short, the facemask-wearing tendencies of others operated as important external cues influencing behavior.

This social cueing began as soon as employees entered the facility. Because the organization had a very high employee turnover rate, orientations for new-hires were happening constantly. On the morning of these orientations, new-hires would enter the facility wearing facemasks. As these new-hires were trained, they would observe the infrequent wearing of facemasks throughout the facility; gradually they would begin removing their own facemasks. By the end of the day, most new-hires stopped wearing their facemasks entirely.

Notably, these behavioral adaptations were not uniform throughout the facility as employees in different sections of the building had different facemask-wearing tendencies. Facemasks were much more common in the “van-lines”, the area where vans were loaded for
residential delivery, than compared to the “unload”, the area where packages from semitrucks were unloaded and sorted. If workers were ever restationed to a different part of the building, they would adjust their facemask-wearing behaviors accordingly. When being interviewed, the safety operations manager -- who was theoretically in charge of facemask-enforcement -- described how he would adjust his own facemask-wearing behaviors based on the section of the building in which he was currently located: “I'll walk around the [van-lines] and wear a mask too. Everybody's wearing a mask…But thing is with the unload I did fall off on that. I should be wearing masks more around there.”

In order to make effective decisions about the necessity of facemasks, individuals continuously monitored their social terrain for any relevant changes. Thus, individuals were hypersensitive to the facemask-wearing behaviors of their coworkers and would notice any time these behaviors changed. One morning I was unloading a truck with two coworkers, John and Brandon. Most days, neither of them would wear a facemask. However, that morning John entered the truck wearing one. Evidently, this shift in behavior was perplexing to Brandon, and he quickly prodded for an explanation. John clarified his behavior, saying that he had bad allergies that day, and he did not want people glaring at him if he sneezed without a facemask on. Brandon was visibly relieved, and he continued working with his usual light-hearted banter. Thus, John adjusted his facemask-wearing behaviors according to his immediate situation (i.e. bad allergies) and Brandon paid attention to this adjustment, making sure it did not pertain to him.

Interviews with coworkers revealed similar patterns of social surveillance. Aliyah, who had not worn a facemask for the majority of the pandemic, described to me how her coworkers had reacted when she first started wearing one. Her coworker Matteo immediately approached
her, asking her why she was wearing a facemask all of the sudden. Aliyah said she was a little uncomfortable that Matteo had noticed her change in behavior, but after thinking more about it, she reasoned that Matteo probably noticed her change because he was one of the few workers who consistently wore his own facemask. In this way, she admitted that she had been monitoring Matteo’s facemask-wearing behavior just as he had been monitoring hers.

The facemask-wearing tendencies of others was not the only determinant of individual behavior. Workers would adjust their facemask-wearing behaviors according to the time of day, the number of packages that needed to be sorted, their levels of physical exhaustion, and their familiarity with people in close proximity. One interviewee described this multifaceted adjustment.

On Sundays, there's only two of us over there. So, I cut myself some slack and take [the facemask] off, but I have it handy. A day like today, we got a lot of help towards the end of the shift. But before then, I didn't have it on. And then at the same time, towards the end of the shift, I did take it off again, because they sent over Gary to help out. And Gary and I are really good friends. And so, we kind of know each other on a personal level and see he was working next to me, so I was a little more relaxed.

Because this worker was well acquainted with those around her (e.g. Gary), she felt comfortable removing her facemask. Likewise, when the workload was particularly grueling (like on Sundays), she felt it was preferable to work without wearing a facemask. In this way, individual workers continuously fluctuated their behavior according to their current social circumstances.

In other words, workers at the package-facility were navigating an ever-changing terrain, and how these workers behaved depended on particularities of time and place. One interviewee described his experience of this reality as living within a “gray area”: 
A lot of people are not wearing masks because they're in the gray area. Like me, I’m close distance with you without a mask on. But when I go inside, I wear my mask. So, it's like you're in a gray area, you have no idea what side to choose… There’s always that gray area that you cannot decide. I don't like that. I like being decisive. But in this case, sometimes you cannot be decisive. It's like, damn you're stuck.

Another interviewee employed similar language to describe her own experience of facemasks:

At first, I did think that [people should wear facemasks], but now it's just a gray area for me. I am at the point of to each its own. So, I feel like, Okay, everybody has known everybody to a certain extent. So, if you feel like you can trust this person in your area without you having a mask on, then good for you. If you feel like you can’t, also good for you.

In sum, individuals at the package-facility continuously monitored their environment so that they could adjust their behaviors in response to external social cues. These ongoing adaptations allowed individuals to recognize the social contingencies informing their behavior; sometimes it was important to wear a facemask, and sometimes it was not. In other words, individuals recognized that their behaviors, and by extension the behaviors of others, were informed by indeterminant social contexts. This recognition produced an increased tolerance for the behavior of others.

Interviews with workers from the facility underlined this increased tolerance. These workers would almost never judge the behaviors of others with any sort of severity. Rather, they would recognize that everybody is coming from a different perspective and that these differences in perspectives produce differences in behavior: “They got their own mind. Everybody got their own opinions… So, I don’t know what they think, and it may work for them but not for me.”

Nearly all interviewees reported a strong aversion to conflict regarding facemasks. If someone asked them to put on a facemask, all interviewees said they would immediately do so without complaint. This flexibility emerged because workers acknowledged that others were
coming from different circumstances than themselves. For instance, they might have weak immune systems or might live with elderly family members more at risk of contracting Covid-19. In this way, workers understood why some people responded to Covid-19 more seriously than others. As one interviewee described, “Some people are definitely uptight, but I’m not mad at them for being uptight. It’s very understandable. I’m not [going to] get upset. I’m [going to] feel how I feel, you feel how you feel.”

In short, the behavioral flexibility of these individuals allowed them to appreciate a diversity of perspectives beyond their own.

Decoupling Facemasks from Covid-19

The flexible facemask-wearing behaviors observed at the package-facility were not observed at the drugstore. However, this absence was not the result of reduced uncertainty regarding the pandemic. Rather, this lack of flexibility was the result of organizational imposition -- facemasks were rigidly enforced for workers at the drugstore. After months of research, I never observed an employee working without a facemask. This lack was unsurprising, as workers knew that if they were caught on the storefront floor without a facemask, they would be immediately reprimanded by managers and customers alike. In short, the strict regulations at the drugstore precluded the emergence of flexible facemask-wearing behaviors.

This behavioral rigidity should not be taken as an indication of how workers understood the pandemic. In other words, it would be wrong to assume that workers understood the pandemic as a real and severe risk just because they wore facemasks. Employees were wearing facemasks not because they were certain of their efficacy or because they were certain of the severity of the pandemic; they were wearing facemasks because they had to. As one interviewee explained, “just follow the rules. If they say there’s something bad out here, just follow the rules.
But me, I don’t believe it. There’s a cure for corona.” In this way, workers still expressed many uncertainties regarding the pandemic. Several interviewees explicitly rejected the necessity of facemasks, claiming they were more harmful than protective.

In an interview, the store manager underlined the organizational impositions responsible for the rigidity of facemask-wearing behaviors:

I mean, if it wasn't a requirement by the state, then no, I don't think any of us would be wearing masks around. That’s everybody. That’s why it’s a requirement, so it has to be done. But if it wasn’t a requirement, why would we do it?... It’s not about their safety. It's about doing what somebody else told them to do.

Thus, the manager of the store believed that her employees were wearing facemasks simply because they had to.

In short, facemasks were conceptualized as a rule rather than as a safety measure. The extent of this conceptualization can be visualized by looking at how workers reacted to customers who entered the store without wearing facemasks. The behaviors of these customers often frustrated workers. However, this frustration came about because customers were breaking the policies of the store, not because they were endangering the health of workers. When describing interactions with facemask-less customers, nearly no interviewees expressed a heightened sense of apprehension with regard to their own health. Frequently, workers were just annoyed that customers were disobeying the rules of the store, rules which they themselves were forced to obey. As one interviewee described,

It's annoying because everybody has to have a mask on. So, it's like, you can't just be going into stores without a mask on when it's literally damn near a law now. It’s kind of like a law now. You just cannot be
leaving and going outside and going about your day without having some type of mask on or whatever. So, when people do come in here, it’s just like seriously?

Tellingly, one interviewee emphasized that she only cared about the facemask-wearing behaviors of others when she was at work: “If I’m not at work, then I don’t care. [Because] that's the rules at work, I guess. Like I'm [going to] mind my business if I’m not at work.”

In this way, when responding to facemask-less customers, workers were concerned with the rules of the drugstore rather than their own health.

As was mentioned previously, employees varied in how they interacted with facemask-less customers. Similarly, employees varied in how they perceived these customers. Workers who were especially frustrated by these interactions often emphasized how long facemasks had been mandated:

It does make me a little bit mad because we've been in a pandemic for the last seven, eight months, I believe. And people still claim that they forget their mask, or they claimed that they don't have a mask. And it's mind boggling. Because we've been in a pandemic for the last like eight months, and you still don't have a mask?

In their minds, customers should have been accustomed to facemask requirements by that point in the pandemic, and therefore facemask-less customers must have been intentionally choosing to disobey rules.

In contrast, workers who were less bothered by the behavior of these customers often emphasized the novelty of facemasks.

I get it [because] sometimes you might walk out the house and forget your mask. And because we're not used to wearing these. Nobody's used to walking around wearing a mask all the time or every day. If they
don't have one, I'll just ask them to like pull up their sweater or shirt, or whatever they have over their nose. So, it's not like a big deal.

In their minds, facemasks were still a relatively new requirement, and therefore it was understandable when customers happened to forget to wear them.

These perceptual variations were produced by differences in how workers understood the difficulty of following facemask-wearing requirements. In this way, both perceptions were predicated on a common conceptualization of facemasks as rules rather than as safety measures. This conceptualization suggests that facemask-wearing behaviors had to some extent become decoupled from the social circumstances in which they initially took shape. That is, facemasks had become decoupled from the pandemic; they were worn not because they protected against infection, but because they were enforced.

It is important to emphasize that this decoupling was not inevitable. Rather it was informed by the larger organizational inconsistencies in effect. One interviewee, who described his experience with facemasks at a previous place of employment, underlined the possibility of an organizational world where facemasks were not decoupled from concerns about Covid-19.

One of my managers wore a mask. And I was like why are you wearing a mask. And he was like to keep everybody safe and myself. So, I was like ‘okay cool’ and he was like ‘okay cool’. So, then I started wearing one. When one person wore one, it like jump started and everybody started wearing one. It was just like we were all trying to keep each other safe. It’s like okay cool you’re [going to] wear one, I'll wear one too to make sure I’m doing my part keeping the virus down. It was kind of like that. And then by the end, before they even started with the mandatory mask, we [were] all wearing masks.
DISCUSSION

Organizations of employment frame the social realities of essential workers in significant ways. Consequently, they have profoundly informed workers’ perceptions of the Covid-19 crisis. The two organizations explored above both mediated the pandemic in ways which deepened feelings of uncertainty regarding Covid-19’s reality and severity. Neither the package-facility nor the drugstore implemented consistent or thorough safety precautions. Hazard pay was sporadically provided, temperatures were randomly monitored, social distancing protocols were lacking, and communication regarding the development of the pandemic was infrequent.

Notably, the inconsistencies observed at these organizations extended beyond the domain of policy implementation, as the interactions they fostered also underscored the pandemic’s ambiguity. When understanding how organizations mediate perceptions of Covid-19, we must consider more than just their concrete policies. Organizations are not external, rule-enforcing entities; rather, they are arenas which structure the interactions and social realities of their participants in meaningful ways. Thus, a full understanding of these organizations necessitates a holistic consideration of these arenas.

It is this consideration which allows us to understand why employees at the drugstore disassociated facemasks from concerns about contracting Covid-19. When contextualized with the general inconsistencies within the arena of the drugstore, the rigid enforcement of facemasks did not translate into experiences of conviction regarding the pandemic. Workers nevertheless felt uncertain about the reality they were confronting. In this way, they did not wear facemasks every day because they were certain of these devices’ constant efficacy or necessity; they wore facemasks every day because facemasks were enforced every day.
Moving forward, it is important to recognize that experiences of Covid-19 are not only mediated by organizations of employment. In other words, essential workers are not only workers; they are family members, voters, students, citizens, consumers, and much more. In short, individuals are housed within many organizations simultaneously, with each of these organizations mediating their experiences and perceptions of the pandemic in different ways. These organizations range in size and scope, whether they be the family, the neighborhood, the state, or the nation. Yet each plays a part in framing the experiences of their participants.

Notably, it is easy to forget individuals’ simultaneous involvement within different organizations. Throughout the pandemic, individuals and communities have been defined and characterized by their participation in the political realm. In this way, their perceptions of Covid-19 have been explained with reference to their political affiliation. However, this isolated explanation is inadequate. People cannot and should not be reduced to a single element of their social identities. They are not just democrats, and they are not just republicans. They are complex, interconnected individuals who perceive the world through a lens of intersecting and perhaps contradictory experiences.

Future research should explore how individuals’ simultaneous experiences across different organizations interact. How does the mediation of perceptions within one organization inform those of another? What, if anything, determines the precedence of these mediations? Finally, if mixed signals within one organization produce instances of decoupling, what do mixed signals across organizations produce? In other words, how would instances of intra-organizational and inter-organizational decoupling compare?
References


