Heroes from above but not (always) from within? Gig workers' reactions to the sudden public moralization of their work[☆]

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ABSTRACT

How do individuals react to the sudden public moralization of their work and with what consequences? Extant research has documented how public narratives can gradually moralize societal perceptions of select occupations. Yet, the implications of how workers *individually* respond and form self-narratives in light of—or in spite of—a sudden moralizing event remain less understood. Such an understanding is even more critical when workers are weakly socialized by their organization, a situation increasingly common today. During the COVID-19 pandemic, radically shifting public narratives suddenly transformed grocery delivery work, previously uncelebrated, into highly moralized "heroic" pursuits. Drawing on interviews (n = 75), participant artifacts (n = 85), and archival data (e.g., newspaper articles), we find that these workers (here, shoppers on the platform organization Instacart), left mainly to themselves, exhibited varying responses to this moralizing and that their perceived relations to the organization, customers, and tasks shaped these responses. Surprisingly, those who facilely adopted the hero label felt morally credentialled, and they were thus likely to minimize their extra-role helping of customers and show low commitment to the organization; in contrast, those who wrestled with the hero narrative sought to earn those moral credentials, and they were more likely to embrace extra-role helping and remain committed to moralized aspects of the work. Our study contributes to literatures on the moralization of work and narratives by explaining why some workers accept a moralized narrative and others reject or wrestle with it, documenting consequences of workers' reactions to such narratives, and suggesting how a moralized public narrative can backfire.

1. Introduction

Over extended periods of time, certain lines of work have become moralized, imbued with a positive normative consideration of the occupation's members and activities as honorable and worthy (Hughes, 1984). Such lines of work have included nursing, teaching, and social work (Banks, 2020; Bishop & Scudder, 1990; Ginzberg, 1990; Liaschenko & Peter, 2004; McClellan, 1999; Santoro, 2011; Siporin, 1983; Totterdell, 2000), and even the sale of life insurance and body products (Anteby, 2010; Almeling, 2007; Chan, 2009a, 2009b; Healy, 2006; Rest, 1994; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Zelizer, 1978). Moralized public narratives—i.e., "narratives attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual" (Somers, 1994, p. 619) that

are mobilized and institutionalized by powerful, collective actors—play a key role in driving the societal moralization of work (Fourcade, 2011; Healy, 2006; Somers & Gibson, 1994; Zelizer, 1983, 2005). Some lines of work can even be narrated as so morally worthy that they are labeled "heroic" or positively deviant from everyday behavior (Allison et al., 2016).

How, though, do *individual workers* react to the *sudden moralization* of their work and with what consequences? Extant research cannot fully account for these questions because of two key, interrelated gaps in the literature. First, extant research on moralization has focused on how organizations and nation states mobilize public narratives to shift the perception of particular types of work at broad societal levels (e.g., Honey, 1984; Michaelson & Tosti-Kharas, 2020; Zelizer, 1983). Far less

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is known at the micro-level about how *individual workers*—who do not originate or propagate the narratives—might react to a public narrative that moralizes their work. Furthermore, with the rise of nonstandard work in contemporary society, an increasing number of workers are left to make sense of these narratives in isolation from employers or co-workers. In contrast to traditional employees who are strongly socialized by their employers into a core set of moral understandings (Martin, 1992; O'Reilly, 1989; Pratt, 2000; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979), many contemporary workers, such as gig workers, experience limited socialization into their affiliated organization (Ashford, Caza, & Reid, 2018; Brawley, 2017; Cameron, 2022) and so must interpret these narratives on their own. There is thus a new urgency to understand individual workers' reactions to the moralization of their work. Second, extant research has focused on slow, gradual change of societal views of work over many years (e.g., Healy, 2006). During "unsettled" (Swidler, 1986, pg. 21) times of crisis (e.g., wars, economic recessions), however, collective actors such as organizations can *suddenly* deploy moralizing narratives to galvanize workers to sacrifice for the public good (e.g., Campbell, 1984). In contrast to gradual moralization that allows for the steady re-socialization of people's shared views of a line of work (e.g., Chan, 2012), sudden moralization may leave insufficient time to re-socialize individual workers. For many contemporary workers, this insufficient time compounded with the weak level of socialization puts even greater burden on them to make sense of this moralization and come to their own understanding of the new situation.

Under such circumstances, the self-narratives that individuals create in these instances are vital to understanding how they make meaning: they express and constitute individuals' identities (Giddens, 1991; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Somers, 1994), play a key role in people's existential and social well-being (Gill, 2015; Petriglieri et al., 2019), and can serve as "springboards" to consequential actions and behaviors (Taylor & Van Every, 1999, p. 275), such as how workers treat their customers or view their commitment to an organization. Because self-narratives are often strongly influenced by individuals' understandings of their work (Anteby, 2008; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Hughes, 1951; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017), if confronted with a sudden change in meaning, workers must make sense of themselves anew (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Maitlis, 2009; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). A sudden moralization of a line of work may open a space of ambiguity in which workers must abruptly fill in the interpretive gaps to construct their self-narratives.

We study this topic in the context of the sudden moralization of hired grocery shoppers and delivery persons during the "environmental jolt" (Meyer, 1982) of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, radically shifting public narratives transformed many lines of previously uncelebrated work into highly moralized—even "essential" and "heroic"—labor. This moralization of work was strikingly evident in grocery delivery, where hired grocery shoppers were dubbed "heroes" by media outlets, organizations, and customers alike (e.g., Chan, 2020). Drawing on a qualitative study (utilizing interviews, participant artifacts, and archival data) of pandemic-era grocery shoppers on the platform organization Instacart, we examine how individual workers form self-narratives in the face of the sudden public moralization of their work and these narratives' implications on work behavior and outcomes.

Our findings suggest that workers have varying responses to the hero narrative—accepting, rejecting, or struggling with it—and that these responses depend in part on their interpretations of their relationships with the platform organization, customers, and tasks. We show that the distinctive sets of understandings and practices that workers build around particular relationships, or what Zelizer calls "relational packages" (2012), prove key in explaining these varied reactions. We also theorize that individuals' work biographies help explain the distinct relational packages they construct and ultimately the different "heroic" trajectories they see themselves embarking on (or not). Specifically, we theorize that those who were not economically dependent on the work and who began working to help others readily accepted the hero

narrative, seeing their act of working as already morally credentialled, thus doing only minimal extra-role behavior. In contrast, those who were economically dependent on the work and who had professionalized experiences in service work saw their relationship to their work as tinged with financial need and, wrestling with the hero narrative, sought out the moral credentials of serving clients, thus doing more extra-role helping behavior. Perhaps paradoxically, then, we find that workers who facilely adopted the hero narrative felt morally credentialed and therefore exhibited what many would consider less heroic behavior. In comparison, those who wrestled with the hero narrative, worrying that it was an unearned moral credential and striving to earn those credentials, were likely to embrace heroic behavior of extra-role helping and remain committed to moralized aspects of the work.

Our study contributes to the literature on moralization of work—providing explanations for why some workers might accept a moralized narrative and others reject or wrestle with it, documenting important behavioral consequences of workers' reactions to such narratives, and suggesting how a moralized public narrative can backfire. We also contribute to literatures on narratives and the self by highlighting the complexity of individuals' reactions to "positive" public narratives and the importance of embodying such public narratives through actions at work, as opposed to merely accepting them.

1.1. Public moralization of work and individual workers' self-narratives

Past literature has focused on how public moralized narratives gradually but potently shape the societal landscape of work, occupations, and organizations (e.g., Chan, 2009a, 2009b, 2012; Heimer & Staffen, 1998; Kiviat, 2019; Lashley & Pollock, 2020; Livne, 2014; Quinn, 2008; Turco, 2012; Yue, Wang, & Yang, 2019). For instance, when life insurance salespeople started seeking buyers by knocking on doors in the early part of the nineteenth century, they initially faced strong moral pushback, with some clergy "denounc[ing] life insurance to their congregations as a… sacrilegious device that competed against God in caring for the welfare of widows and orphans" (Zelizer, 1978, p. 596). Life insurance only gained moral respectability after the 1870s, as salespeople institutionalized a public narrative that emphasized the moral act of remembrance and caring for loved ones. Other studies show similar patterns in domains where actors with an interest in promoting a line of work mobilize public narratives that gradually legitimize the work as morally worthy, so that it is accepted or even celebrated in the public sphere (Adut, 2013, Anteby, 2010; Almeling, 2007; Fourcade, 2011; Healy, 2006; Zelizer, 1983, 2005).

It remains unclear, however, how *sudden* moralization of a line of work influences *individual* workers and the consequences of these influences. On the one hand, the literature on moralization of work—which focuses on collective levels, mostly neglecting individuals, and examines gradual but not sudden moralization—might suggest that individual workers would unproblematically embrace a sudden public narrative moralizing their work and incorporate it into their self-narratives. A distinct set of literatures about meaning and work—showing that individuals typically find moralized narratives of their work attractive because they provide a means of dignifying workers' views about themselves (Hodson, 2001; Lamont, 1992; Ramarajan & Reid, 2020; Reid & Ramarajan, 2021)—supports this suggestion. In this scenario of the moralized narrative, workers may gravitate towards the opportunity to enhance their self-worth and the value of their job (Hughes, 1951), experience a sense of purpose (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009), or establish a compelling narrative about their work (Nelsen & Barley, 1997).

On the other hand, research on resistance calls into question this scenario of workers blithely accepting a moralized narrative of their work (Courpasson et al., 2012; Hodson, 1995). Such research instead suggests that workers may react adversely to narratives—moralized or not—about their work that they view as misaligned with their identities (Gill, 2019; Turco, 2012), seeing them as emotionally manipulative

(Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Kunda, 2009) or as "empty and misleading" nonsense (Spicer, 2020, p. 4). This research might expect workers to struggle with or reject moralization narratives, either withdrawing or resisting at work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). With only a few exceptions (e.g., Gill, 2019), however, even this literature tends not to account for individual variation, mostly assuming a collective, sometimes coordinated response of worker groups to resist efforts to impose a narrative.

These literatures paint an inconsistent picture of how workers might react to a suddenly moralized narrative of their work, which is further exacerbated by the trend of the burden of interpretation increasingly falling on individuals (rather than on organizations or collectives). With the rise in nonstandard work wherein individuals temporarily work for several organizations (Campion, Caza & Moss, 2020; Spreitzer et al., 2017) and the waning of many organizational socialization mechanisms (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013; Caldwell & Peters, 2018), workers are left to make sense of any sudden changes in their work sphere. Furthermore, as firms invest less in workers they view as temporary or peripheral (Bidwell et al., 2013), traditional sense-giving mechanisms offer limited guidance. Workers must thus fill the interpretive gap as they construct their own narratives and behaviors. To understand these processes, we draw upon relational work scholarship to suggest that individuals fill these gaps, and construct their self-narratives, through their meaning-making around particular work-related relationships.

1.2. The importance of relational work for individuals' self-narratives

A relational work lens considers how workplace relationships shape workers' self-narratives and their behaviors around work, suggesting that in the face of ambiguity, individuals construct distinct, grounded understandings of particular relationships that allow them to create what they view as "appropriate" bundles of meanings and practices associated with these relationships (Zelizer, 2012, p. 145). People create "relational packages" that engender a sense of congruity about the nature of those relationships and the actions associated with them (Zelizer, 2005; 2012). Nurses, for instance, might construct relational packages around certain patients whom they view as worthy of their care: the relationship affirms their self-narratives about being caretakers and they may give preferential treatment to these patients (e.g., DiBenigno, 2022). The concept of relational packages offers analytical leverage for our inquiry: amidst the sudden moralization of their work, individuals might fill in interpretive gaps by considering their relationships to others and to their work tasks and by bundling their understanding about these relationships with fitting actions into "packages" that feel internally consistent to them.

Prior literature suggests that relational packages are largely pre-formed by collectives and then handed down to individuals who are socialized into them (Bandelj, 2020). Organizations have traditionally played a strong role in pre-packaging appropriate sets of meanings and actions about workplace relations for individuals. For instance, some employers socialize workers into viewing the workplace as a place for fun and friendship, sponsoring birthday parties, out-of-office celebrations, and "buddy" programs (e.g., Dumas, Phillips, & Rothbard, 2013; Kunda, 1995; Rivera, 2016). This conditions workers to construct relational packages in which they interpret their relations with coworkers as friendships, accompanied by composite self-narratives of being an affable and productive organizational member and bundled with actions of facile code-switching between friendly banter and task-oriented collaboration. In another example, service organizations provide scripts to guide workers on how to behave with customers, particularly disrespectful ones (e.g., such as when insurance agents chant a mantra when a customer slams the door in their face; Hochschild, 1983; Leidner, 1993; Sutton & Rafaeli, 1988). Such pre-formed relational packages provide emotional and psychological protection for workers to construct reassuring self-narratives as well as practices on how to respond to challenging situations.

This literature has yet to account for the experience of workers who are exposed to weak organizational socialization, such as gig workers. In these conditions, where individuals have limited contact with their employer and co-workers, they must do much of the relational packaging themselves. To parse how these workers form self-narratives amid the sudden moralization of their work and the consequences of those processes, we examine a case of Instacart grocery shoppers and analyze workers' varying responses to such moralization, attending to the relational packages that inform those reactions.

2. Research setting, data collection, and analysis

2.1. The workplace: Instacart

Founded in 2012, Instacart is a platform organization that facilitates grocery delivery. Using a smartphone app, customers place orders at a nearby store and shoppers choose orders or "batches" to complete. Instacart's workers include both full-service shoppers (independent contractors who shop and deliver) and in-store shoppers (employees who only shop).[1] The hiring process is straightforward: workers must undergo a background check and complete short training modules about safe food handling; they can usually begin working in a week. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Instacart became the first company to make grocery delivery profitable as demand swelled by 450 % and Instacart on-boarded more than 400,000 new workers in four months (Holt, 2020).

Since Instacart's founding, batches have been allocated to shoppers in three ways: 1) scheduled shifts, during which shoppers are sent batches they can accept or decline, 2) lists displaying potential batches based on a shopper's location, and 3) algorithmically-mediated "on-demand" list view, in which shoppers with the highest ratings are shown the most lucrative batches (Labinski, 2020). During our data collection, most participants reported on the second system, due to the increased demand, although many shoppers had pre-pandemic exposure to the other systems. Shoppers described this location-based system as a "free for all" as they only had seconds to determine if the batch was worth completing.[2]

Once a shopper swipes right to accept a batch, they must arrive at the store by a designated time. When shoppers arrive, they swipe "start shopping" and a timer appears showing how long they have to complete the order. Items are shown in a list view, grouped by type (e.g., produce, meat, dry goods) and shoppers are often given a navigation route through the aisles. The timer tracks a shopper's scan rate, noting the seconds between each item scanned. While completing a batch, a shopper can chat with customers through in-app messaging, with the most frequent communications revolving around customers' preferences for out-of-stock items. Once shoppers have scanned, replaced, or refunded all items, they swipe right again to notify the customer that they are proceeding to checkout and pay using a bright green Instacart credit card or a mobile payment system. Customers receive a notification that the shopper is in route. During the pandemic, most deliveries were contactless, and shoppers left the groceries at a designated drop-off location. Although not required, shoppers frequently took a photo of the groceries to verify delivery. Once the app verifies the shopper is near the customer's home, shoppers can swipe right and the customer's chat

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[1] As of March 2020, the ratio of full-service to in-store shoppers was 10:1, with about 130,000 full-service shoppers (Redman, 2020).

[2] When deciding whether to accept a batch, shoppers could look at the following information provided by Instacart: Instacart's payout, promised tip amount (which could change up to three to ten days after delivery), number of items, number of units, delivery distance, store location, whether the order contained one or many batches, and incentive pay (offered for heavier items or during high demand times).

log disappears. Customers can then rate shoppers and leave comments.[3]

As of October 2020, Instacart's payout varied depending on order (batch) size but was a minimum of $7 plus tips. Batch payouts could be paid daily but tips were paid weekly as customers had several days to adjust the tip. During the pandemic, Instacart enacted rating forgiveness: ratings below five stars were not included in shoppers' averages to compensate for the precarious shopping conditions (e.g., more out of stock items). In early June 2020, Instacart stopped the initiative and reinstated ratings-based batch allocation. Similar to other app-based work (e.g., Cameron & Rahman, 2022), most shoppers understood that their ratings influenced their ability to be assigned more favorable batches; however, no shoppers interviewed reported (or were aware of) shoppers being deactivated based on low ratings.

2.2. Data collection and analysis

A multiple-source qualitative study was utilized to bolster validity and aid in theory development. Data sources include semi-structured interviews (n = 75), participant artifacts (n = 85), and archives including newspaper articles (n = 78), online shopper communities, and official company communication.

Semi-Structured Interviews. In the first round of data collection, 44 interviews were completed with shoppers in 28 North American cities and towns. The majority of the study's participants were recruited through social media platforms and communities, including Facebook and Reddit. We interviewed all shoppers who responded to our call for participation. We chose this sampling method because workers often use these online communities as virtual "water coolers" (Fayard & Weeks, 2007; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016) to swap tips and strategies, discuss notable customer interactions and lament (or praise) new app updates. Contacting potential participants through these venues allowed for minimal disruption to their regular workflow (as on-demand labor is not afforded regularly scheduled break periods). Also, because our analysis led us to consider theoretical dimensions that happened to have sufficient variation in our sample, we did not engage in additional theoretical sampling.

The interview protocol began with grand tour questions, such as "How did you get started shopping on Instacart?" Shoppers described daily routines for shopping on the app, customer interactions, shopper support interactions, and experiences giving feedback, as well as their perceptions of the Instacart organization and what (if anything) they would change about the work. The protocol then targeted shopper experiences during the pandemic, employing questions such as: "How has the work changed as a result of the pandemic?", "How have customers changed?", and "Do you feel safe completing the work?" This allowed for contrast in perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about the work prior to and during the pandemic. Shoppers were also asked to share artifacts of their work, such as screenshots, conversation logs, photos of themselves working, and Facebook posts where they talked about their work.

Approximately six months after our first interviews, we contacted all respondents for follow-up interviews (n = 32, 74 % response rate).[4] These interviews focused on how workers' thoughts and behaviors had changed as the pandemic continued and whether they had made adjustments in their work activities. All interviews were conducted in English, and all interviews except two were transcribed.[5] Sixty percent of shoppers interviewed identified as female, 79 % of the interviewees

identified as white, and their ages ranged from 16 to 80, with 34.5 as the average age. At the time of the first round of interviews, shopper tenure ranged from three weeks to 36 months and 45 % of shoppers interviewed were working through Instacart prior to the pandemic. Hours worked per week ranged from four to 72, with roughly 70 % of respondents working less than 30 hours per week and 31 % of respondents relying on Instacart for their main source of income, hinting at their economic dependence on the platform company (Schor et al., 2020).[6] (See Table 1 for interviewee details.).

Archival Data. For contextualization, we analyzed articles about gig work and the pandemic from the twenty largest U.S. print media sources (March 2020 to July 2021), basing our selection on keywords such as "COVID-19" and "gig work," and on the names of prominent platform organizations (e.g., Uber). We collected data from two of the largest online shopper communities (Reddit and the "Grocery Delivery" subforum on Uberpeople.net) and from Twitter Instacart's website and official Instagram page, as well as from the Apple Store where shoppers and customers can download the app.

Data Analysis. We analyzed our data using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006). Our analysis proceeded in several broad stages. In the first stage, consistent with our inductive approach, we sought to understand what was salient in our data through coding of our first-round data collection of 44 interviews and archival data. In coding our data, the topic of a "hero" label repeatedly emerged as salient—that is, archival materials showed that media, customers, and the organization prevalently hailed grocery shoppers as heroes, and shoppers frequently mentioned this "hero" notion in interviews. We thus tagged such data excerpts with the in-vivo code (Locke, 2001) of a "hero" narrative, and we modified our data collection to probe deeper, adjusting our interview protocol, for example, to inquire at the end of the exchange (if not brought up by shoppers) about this "hero" narrative. Through constant comparison between "hero"-coded excerpts, we noticed that shoppers fell into three groups, each with a particular response to the hero narrative: accept, reject, or wrestle.

We then sought to understand these three responses to the hero narrative. We engaged in constant comparison between these groups, coding for differences between the categories. Upon analyzing the participants' artifacts, we noted the striking fact that only the group that wrestled with the narrative reported a large amount of discretionary effort, partly as evidenced by descriptions of extra-role helping and screenshots of their interactions, especially compared to the other two groups. To connect these two analytical findings (workers' response to the hero narrative and their discretionary effort), we coded for and compared how workers in each of the groups understood their work, noting that workers described different relationships with their organization (Instacart), customers, and tasks.[7] We also analyzed our archival data (e.g., Instagram feeds) with these themes in mind. In accordance with qualitative practices (Charmaz, 2006), we stopped collecting data when we reached theoretical saturation, i.e., when additional interviews did not generate new codes, and "the gap in [our] theory, especially in [our] major categories [accept, reject, and wrestle]" was "completely filled" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 61, 62).

In our second stage of analysis, we analyzed the interviews collected in our second round of data collection, where we probed about

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[3] When a customer's batch is serviced by an in-store shopper and a different delivery driver, this rating becomes ambiguous as Instacart's rating system does not distinguish between the two (Wahl, 2020).

[4] The twelve respondents who were not re-interviewed did not respond to our messages and we have no further information about them.

[5] Two of the audio recordings were corrupted and coding was done based off a contact summary sheet created immediately after the interview (Huberman & Miles 1994).

[6] During the first interview, individuals reported working the following number of hours per week – under 10 h: 3 workers (8%); 10–20 h: 10 workers (26%); 20–30 h: 15 workers (39%); over 30 h: 10 workers (26%). Five people did not report the number of hours they worked each week.

[7] Consistent with Cohen (2013), we consider "work" to be the umbrella term that encompasses workers' relationships with their organization (Instacart), their customers, and their tasks. We define tasks as the discrete actions that workers undertake in the doing of their jobs (e.g., accepting batches on the app/ digital platform, shopping for groceries, driving to deliver items to customers).

Table 1
Participant Details

Name	Gender	Ethnic/Racial Group	Economically Dependent	Career Path	Response to Hero Narrative
Salina	Female	White	N	Telecommunications*	Skippers
Santana	Female	Black	N	Hospital Admin *	Skippers
Tina	Female	Black	N	Sales*	Skippers
Laurel	Female	White	N	Sales*	Skippers
Kate	Female	Black	N	Sales*	Skippers
Polly	Female	Black	N	Gig Worker	Skippers
Joshua	Male	White	Y	Entrepreneur, Gig Worker	Stallers
Anna	Female	Black	N	Bank Teller*	Stallers
Taylor	Female	White	N	Nurse*	Stallers
Dalia	Female	White	Y	Waitress	Stallers
Jessie	Female	Black	Y	Gig Worker	Stallers
Nala	Female	White	N	Gig Worker	Stallers
Randy	Male	White	N	Student	Stallers
Tania	Female	Black	N	Hospital Admin*	Stallers
Aurora	Female	White	Y	Waitress, Gig Worker	Stallers
Micah	Male	White	Y	Bar Owner, Gig Worker	Stallers
Ayla	Female	White	N	Sales	Stallers
Asher	Male	White	N	Student	Stallers
Robert	Male	Indian	N	Gig Worker	Stallers
Bethany	Female	White	Y	Graphic Designer	Strugglers
Corey	Male	White	N	Peace Corps Volunteer	Strugglers
Chloe	Female	White	N	Teacher*	Strugglers
Brent	Male	White	Y	Gig Worker	Strugglers
Eliza	Female	White	N	Student	Strugglers
Emmy	Female	White	N	Sales*	Strugglers
Esther	Female	White	N	Nonprofit	Strugglers
Barry	Male	White	N	Student	Strugglers
Peter	Male	Black	N	Military	Strugglers
Maya	Female	White	Y	Student	Strugglers
Jameson	Male	White	Y	Manufacturing	Strugglers
Amy	Female	White	N	Government*	Strugglers
Carol	Female	White	Y	Teacher	Strugglers
Tyrone	Male	White	N	Gig Worker	Strugglers
Sienna	Female	White	Y	Stay At Home Parent, Gig Worker	Strugglers
Thea	Female	Black	N	Manufacturing	Strugglers
Nash	Male	White	N	Music Producer, Gig Worker	Strugglers
Jax	Male	White	Y	Food Service	Strugglers
Barrett	Male	White	Y	Student, Tutor	Strugglers
Axel	Male	White	N	Student	Strugglers

* Workers continued in this job during the pandemic.

individuals' work experience prior to Instacart and how they understood Instacart as part of their larger work trajectory. Coding and comparing these interviews revealed potential explanations for the variations in workers' responses to the narrative. For example, we found that shoppers who were financially dependent on Instacart and had a history of short-term work were likely to reject the hero narrative and avoid giving extra-role help to customers but stayed on Instacart as it paid their bills; others, who were not financially dependent on shopping, eagerly adopted the hero narrative but left the platform organization as the narrative died down. (See Table 1 for details.).

To further characterize the different responses of shoppers, we sought to understand what may have been latently expected of "heroes" by the media, customers, and the organization in the public narrative. The literature on heroes provided insight into what may be the underlying archetypes implied by the public's hero narrative, and we considered the archetypes of the "hero" and the "hero's journey" as "sensitizing concepts" for our analysis (Blumer, 1954). Shoppers who offered extraordinary extra-role help to customers most clearly fit this "hero" archetype, while shoppers who avoided or minimized extra-role help did not.[8] Building on the archetype of the hero's journey helped give nuance to these characterizations. The *hero's journey* is a multistage process of struggle and redemption that includes a departure, a

series of challenges or trials, and a return to community (Campbell, 1949). Shoppers who embraced the "hero" narrative but minimized extra help to customers we called "Skippers" because they seemed to have "skipped" the struggles and trials typical of the journey. Those who rejected the "hero" narrative and avoided extra-role behavior we named "Stallers" because they did not begin the hero's journey. And those who wrestled with the "hero" narrative we called "Strugglers," as they described the work as challenging, similar to a trial, and often went the extra mile for customers.

In our last stage of analysis, we constructed our explanatory model. In our prior analytic stages, we iteratively coded our data in consultation with various literatures. In this stage, we solidified the connections into a theoretical story and explanatory model, finding the literature on moralization of work and on relational packages the most relevant. For instance, we connected the in-vivo code of the "hero" narrative to the conceptual notion of a public moralized narrative (e.g., Healy, 2006; Hughes, 1984; Somers, 1994), framing our theoretical story around moralization of work. In addition, we drew on understandings of "relational packages" (Zelizer, 2005) to enrich the connections between the themes that characterized each category of worker and their response to the public moralized narrative.

3. Findings

First, we describe the sources of the public moralized narrative that cast Instacart shoppers as "heroes" during the pandemic, looking at the roles of the popular media, customers, and the Instacart organization in

[8] The *hero* is a universal, idealized archetype (Carlyle, 1993; Kinsella et al., 2017; Klapp, 1954), wherein heroes are understood to positively deviate from everyday behavior, so much so that people believe that "heroism represents the pinnacle of human behavior" (Allison et al., 2016).

promoting and mobilizing this narrative. Second, we detail the explanations for how Instacart shoppers came to different reactions to the moralized narrative. Building on the notion of relational packages, we show that shoppers' views of their relationships to the Instacart organization, customers, and tasks shaped their interpretations of their overall work, and were bundled together with actions of embracing, rejecting, or wrestling with the public narrative as they came to their own self-narrative. We discuss three types of shoppers—i.e., Stallers, Skippers, and Strugglers—and, for each, the different sets of interpretations of their relationships, their ensuing reactions to the moralized narrative, and the impact on their own self-narratives. We then argue that shoppers' narratives about their work and their selves map onto divergent and important consequences for shoppers in terms of their extra-role behaviors (i.e., actions that go above and beyond employees' day-to-day role requirements; Blader & Tyler, 2009; Morrison, 1994) and their organizational commitment (i.e., whether or not shoppers were working for Instacart, a competitor, or doing another type of work six months after their initial interview).[9] Lastly, we highlight elements of individuals' work biographies—namely their economic (in) dependence and career paths—that help explain workers' variations in their relational packages. We interweave our interpretive narrative with participants' accounts, presenting additional visual evidence when relevant. We use pseudonyms for participants and indicate the source of our data with "I" for interview and "DB" for the discussion boards in online shopper communities.

3.1. Sources of the public moralized narrative casting shoppers as "heroes"

Popular media. Media coverage on gig workers and the pandemic permeated most if not all major (and local) news outlets during the time of this study, including *The New York Times, The Economist, The Washington Post, Time, CNN, NPR,* and *The Atlantic*, among others. From the outset of the pandemic, major media outlets noted the increased importance of gig workers, announcing the "rise of a new type of worker—the essential heroes" (Kelly, 2020) who were "more essential than ever" (Seylkuh and Bond, 2020) and had "never been more indispensable, both for their customers and companies" (Schwartz, 2020). Indeed, within the first three months of the pandemic nearly two hundred articles (183) referenced gig workers as heroes. Many publications ran human interest stories (e.g., *The New York Times*, "I Feel Like a Hero: A Day in the Life of a Grocery Delivery Man" (Randle, 2020) and Slate, "Gig Economy Workers are our Newest First Responders" (Quart, 2020)). *The Sacramento Bee* even ran an "Unsung Heroes Campaign" and offered posters for customers' windows (Image 1). More critical pieces noted workers' double bind—increased demand from customers and increased exposure to health risks (Rosenblat, 2020; Cameron & Rosenblat, 2020; Ravenelle et al., 2021)—and highlighted workers' precarity (Gig Workers Collective, 2020) and inadequate organizational protection (Pardes, 2020) alongside subsequent mobilization efforts (Mulvaney & Wallender, 2020).

Whether uniformly positive or more nuanced, each article reinforced the notion that workers were essential and often heroic. This coverage was not lost on workers: every participant in our study had seen the media coverage of their work. One individual hoped that the media's coverage would help customers understand the value of her services: "I think it's great that they're giving that coverage, because there are a lot of people who even though they use the service, they don't appreciate it" (Kaia - I). In sum, media coverage gave both the general public and workers broad access to the hero narrative.

Customers. Shoppers' interactions with customers often reinforced

the hero narrative. Even before the pandemic, some shoppers framed their work as an opportunity to serve those who found it difficult to shop (such as the disabled). This framing, reinforced by customers' online and real-life behavior, became even more salient during the pandemic. Despite the shift to contactless delivery limiting in-person interactions, customers were successful in finding ways to communicate their perception of shoppers as heroic. For example, interviewees noted that some customers hung signs in their windows to thank them for their work (Images 2 and 3) and others left notes with large tips on the front door (Image 4), justifying the tips with mention of the heroic nature of shoppers' labor. One customer who lived with his elderly mother wrote a note titled "You Guys are Heroes" and explained:

> We've been big tippers on our first couple Safeway orders because what you're doing is so critical for those most at risk, or those like us, who care for those at risk and want to be extra careful. Seriously $5 more per order is low considering the value you provide during this official and very epic "national emergency." Just like the grocery store checkout clerks, ya'll are front line heroes right now. (Darren - DB)

In addition, customers referenced heroes when posting on shoppers' online communities, making comments such as: "You guys are Heroes" and "THANK YOU so much to our brave shoppers from Instacart who are risking their lives out there! We sincerely appreciate you and you are all HEROES." In response to a one-day strike in May 2020 by Instacart workers fighting for safer working conditions and higher pay, customer postings on message boards criticized Instacart for boasting to the public about their "household hero" shoppers but not providing hand sanitizer or increasing hazard pay (Vincent - DB). By shaming Instacart and expressing willingness to pay more, customers expressed solidarity with workers' plight and demonstrated how much they valued their heroic labor.

Platform organization. The platform company referred to shoppers as heroes both to current and potential shoppers and to customers through in-app communications, advertisements, and social media channels. When downloading the Instacart shopper app, prospective shoppers were reminded of the opportunity to "be a household hero" and shown a picture of a white hand giving a bag of groceries filled to the brim with vegetables and milk to another outstretched white hand (Image 5). When working, shoppers received repeated reminders of their hero status with notifications titled "Be a household hero [hero emoji]." Frequent notifications encouraged shoppers to log onto the app and work, reminding them of how easy it was to "do good and make money by bringing groceries to people in need" (Image 6).

The first shopper shoutout content with the hashtag #householdheroes appeared on Instacart's Instagram feed on March 26, 2020, overlapping with the onset of the pandemic and subsequent stay-at-home orders (Image 7). In a social media marketing campaign, Instacart asked customers to employ the hashtag #householdheroes on Twitter and Instagram to "shout out" to shoppers who were going "above and beyond to deliver the essentials."[10] The company then repurposed shoutouts for their Instagram feed, placing text from customer tweets in an Instacart-themed template. Customers called a shopper "the real MVP [Most Valuable Player]" (Image 8) and highlighted shopper activity as trivial as finding all of their cheeses on the first try with the shoutout "not all heroes wear capes" (Image 9). A more substantial shoutout said, "several of us are considered high risk, and not having to risk going out FOR GROCERIES may very well have LITERALLY saved our lives!" (emphasis in original, Image 10). Instacart corporate communication staff reshared the shoutout stating, "We couldn't have said it better." Instacart further encouraged customers to share thanks in the comments or on their own feed or Instagram stories

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using the suggested hashtag. In summary, Instacart leveraged its social media reach and digital advertisements, as well as in-app communication, to propagate the image of shoppers as household heroes.

3.2. Underpinnings of shoppers' different reactions to the moralized narrative

We found that shoppers reacted differently to the moralized narrative depending in large part on how they constructed relational packages—i.e., how they coupled their interpretations of their relationships at work with fitting self-narratives and engagement behaviors. Shoppers clustered into three groups, which we call Skippers, Stallers, and Strugglers. Below, we describe each category and look in detail at shoppers' interpretations of their relationships to their organization, customers, and tasks, as well as their ensuing reactions to the public narrative in conjunction with their own self-narratives.

3.2.1. Skipping the hero's journey

Workers we label Skippers had positive interpretations of their relationships with their organization, customers, and tasks, which led them to a largely uncritical and moralized view of how they related to their work. Because of this view, they facilely embraced the public's narrative, unproblematically internalizing it and forming a self-narrative in which they saw their work as morally worthy and themselves as morally credentialed heroes.

Interpretation of the platform organization: Valuing workers. Skippers often had a positive view of the platform company, describing feeling valued by the organization and supported by the app. Describing Instacart as "a really good company" (Salina - I) and "very understanding" when it came to delays (Kate - I), these workers were generally pleased with how Instacart was taking care of shoppers during the pandemic. Noting Instacart's conscientiousness on behalf of shoppers, Laurel said, "They send cautionary things constantly. Every day you have to verify you don't have any symptoms before you can even see a cart and they're always giving you tips, sending you messages" (I). Similarly, Kate noted how Instacart outshined other companies, "Offering the vaccine and offering insurance, I think that is a huge step in the right direction because there are a lot of other jobs, even corporate jobs that may not offer those types of things…. They're getting better about respecting and listening to their shoppers" (I).

Feeling appreciated by Instacart as an organization extended to shoppers feeling supported by the organization's app. Skippers described timers, pings, and pop-up notifications as helping them stay on track; overall they characterized Instacart's app as "very user-friendly, [making] very easy" (Salina - I). Referencing how the app suggests replacement items, a shopper noted, "These apps are amazing. If you haven't looked at these apps and how they work. Whoever put these together—genius!—you cannot make a mistake" (Laurel - I). Skippers also appreciated the in-app navigation system, which mapped shopping routes through the grocery store. As one shopper explained, "I'll try to follow it because I feel that once you get everything in the order, you don't have to backtrack and keep going back and forth trying to find a certain item, versus if you start in one area and just move along down the store, then it helps you finish the order as fast as possible" (Tina - I). In sum, the shoppers who embraced the hero narrative were the ones who expressed the most positive interpretations of Instacart.

Interpretation of customers' needs: Deserving. These shoppers largely perceived that they were valued by deserving customers. Skippers described customers as "really grateful" (Salina - I), "very nice" (Santana - I), and "understanding" (Tina - I) of the challenges faced while shopping. These appreciations confirmed shoppers' beliefs that they were providing an essential and valuable service. "I do feel like I'm helping people that can't go out, because they're compromised or because they have little children" (Laurel - I). Shoppers reported that several customers called them heroes and justified large tips by emphasizing the heroic nature of their labor. On a forum, for instance, a shopper wrote, "I got tipped $30 and a hand-made mask [see Image 12]. She [the customer] did this because she was thankful for people like me. You may think that we aren't making a difference and because the corporation only cares about itself we don't matter. Not true! I get called a hero, every single day" (Katherine - DB). Several other shoppers described similar customer experiences. One interviewee noted:

> I was amazed at how many people called me their hero, the best person ever, their savior. When I would drop off the groceries at their front door with my mask on, with my gloves on, they'd say "You have no idea how much we rely on you… we are immunocompromised so your service is just amazing" and they tipped me $20. Often, I will deliver groceries to houses and there is a sign that says, "Leave groceries, very high-risk household, no-contact delivery only." (Jax - I)

When Skippers saw their customers as deserving and expressing appreciation, it reminded them of the value of their work, which, in turn, reinforced their beliefs that they were heroes.

Interpreting tasks: Easy and fun. These shoppers often talked about their tasks as fun and even described them as a game. Kate compared her work to the gameshow "Supermarket Sweep" and called shopping for Instacart "my stress reliever" (I). Laurel, too, said she enjoyed her tasks, zipping around the store trying to beat the timer: "I was pleasantly surprised that it can be fun. Sometimes I feel like I'm on a game show and I have to find all the scavenger hunt as fast as I can, do you know what I mean? To win" (I). Similarly, another shopper described, "It's like a little competition with myself, trying to meet my goal or [give] the best customer service I can to customers and things like that" (Tina - I). Describing work as a fun game they could win suggests that shoppers viewed themselves as competent and succeeding at their tasks. This narrative of ease is in direct contrast to the challenges and struggles of archetypical heroes during their journeys (Campbell, 1949). Indeed, these workers could be said to have skipped the struggles inherent to the hero's journey, despite claiming and embracing the label of hero.

Reaction to moralized narrative: Morally credentialed self-narrative and adoption of public narrative. Partly because these shoppers' interpretations of their relationships were overall positive (e.g., platform organization valued shoppers, customers were deserving, and the tasks were fun), the public's narrative that enhanced workers' status made sense, allowing them to feel that their relationship to their work was *moralized*, i.e., heavily tinged with moral justification for the work they were doing. Given this view of their relationship to work and the public narrative of how heroic their line of work was, these shoppers came to *morally credentialed self-narratives*, believing that their actions were motivated not by money but by moral concerns. Moreover, these shoppers viewed themselves as demonstrating their moral worth through their work tasks, such that they did not need to demonstrate additional morally laden behaviors like extra-role helping. Money was not a strong expressed motivation for this group; very few of the shoppers in this group were financially dependent on Instacart (i.e., relied on the app for their main source of income). Worrying about shut-ins suffering during the pandemic, Laurel turned to Instacart, "I started thinking, how can someone go a week without having food delivered, especially when you're elderly and you can't do it yourself? The whole reason I did it was I thought I would help people and it would keep me busy, get me out of bed every morning so I had something to do. It made me feel good to help people" (I). Even when mentioning the financial benefits of the work, these shoppers were quick to emphasize the service aspects. Kate explained, "The extra money [is nice], but it's also a stress reliever for me and I'm doing a service to other people" (I).

The congruence between their self-narrative and the public's narrative helped these shoppers to facilely *adopt* the narrative that they were heroes. They acknowledged that they could be seen as heroes, noting their good health and willingness to bear the risk of exposure to the COVID-19 virus—"to risk their life" (Tina - I)—on behalf of their

customers. Salina said, "I'm healthy, I'm younger. I would rather me be out there shopping than parents exposing young children, or older people with risks with the immune system exposing themselves. I feel more like I'm helping them" (I). Similarly, Laurel described the moral worthiness of her work, noting, "We were out there doing what we needed to do" (I). After taking time off, a shopper resumed work explaining that she realized how much others depended on her services.

> One day I had to go out to the grocery store and I took a batch because it popped up and it was a no-contact delivery and it said, "Drop off in the porch." When I went to drop it off, I heard a knock at the window and there was an elderly couple holding a big sign that said, "Thank you." Literally it was almost like a switch in my brain and I thought, "You know what? I have no autoimmune issues, no one in my house does. I can do this." I thought of it like a humanitarian service. Of course, I'm getting paid for it, but it became more twofold for me. (Kate - I)

Thus, these workers viewed their shopping as an opportunity to serve others, suggesting that they viewed their moral motivations as in-line with the attributes of a hero. Drawing on the beliefs that they were valued by the company, customers were deserving and at-need, and that their motives were not purely financial, these shoppers created a morally credentialed self-narrative (i.e., "I'm a hero—I'm doing this to help") seeing themselves and their shopping work as morally noteworthy.

Consequences of the morally credentialed self-narrative: Entitled engagement. This morally credentialed self-narrative led to *entitled engagement*—i.e., shoppers showed minimal extra-role behavior and exhibited low commitment to the platform organization once the public narrative of heroism dissipated. Because they already felt the moral credentials (Blanken et al., 2015; Monin & Miller, 2001) of seeing themselves as heroes, Skippers did not feel the need to exert extra effort on behalf of customers and thus *minimized their extra-role behavior*, only performing work activities considered part of their normal duties. When asked to describe when they went above and beyond for a customer, for example, one shopper mentioned bringing groceries inside the home a wheelchair-bound customer, which paled in comparison to the actions that Strugglers undertook for customers, as we will discuss. Skippers also often pointed to finding replacement items when asked about extra efforts they made while shopping; however, we do not view this as extra-role behavior because finding replacement items is not significantly outside regular duties. Replacing items was straightforward – when an item was out of stock, the app would prompt the shopper to find a replacement, either with the customer's preloaded request or the app's own suggestions. Also, there were consequences for not finding a replacement item: shoppers are paid less if there is a missing item, as pay is based on total order costs, and missing items can affect customer ratings. Thus, obtaining routine replacements of out-of-stock items seemed a fairly limited extra-role behavior.

In addition, though their work behaviors were within their regular scope of duties, these shoppers often compared themselves favorably to "newer" shoppers, stating that other shoppers did not exert as much effort as they did. Describing a scene where other shoppers were careless with produce, Salina said, "They were trying, but you could tell that they weren't putting the effort into it that I was," and she criticized these shoppers directly, saying, "I'm standing here working really hard and you guys are just kind of running around throwing stuff into carts" (I). When Kate saw a family shopping (as opposed to an individual, as Instacart only allows one shopper per account), she reported them to the company and encouraged her fellow "experienced" shoppers to report them as well (I). While these shoppers embraced the shopper-as-hero narrative, they were quick to exclude other shoppers, whose efforts they perceived as not matching their own, despite minimizing extra-role behaviors themselves.

As the public hero narrative dissipated, these workers exhibited *low commitment* to the platform organization. Compared to the first three

months of the pandemic, when there were nearly-two hundred media articles that referred to gig workers as heroes, in the three months subsequent to the beginning of mass US vaccinations there were only fifteen mentions. As the hubbub about "heroes" began to die down, these workers largely returned to their pre-pandemic lives and stopped shopping. Indeed, a year into the "new normal" of the pandemic, no Skippers were still active on the Instacart app. Salina noted that customers "were very appreciative back in April when I was really starting," but then things "kind of just dropped off. It was like, 'Oh, okay. You're shopping for our groceries.' That's it." She went on to describe a frequent and annoying customer interaction when she tried to find an out-of-stock item: "It was hot. It was a Saturday. I was like, 'Come on. I'm giving up my Saturday to try to help you. You're not responding to my messages'" (I). These shoppers' shifting interactions with customers helps to explain their decrease in commitment to the organization. They embraced the hero's narrative at the beginning of the pandemic because they felt customers were more at-need and deserving of their help, but as the pandemic progressed and work felt less morally worthy, they often left Instacart and the gig economy itself.

3.2.2. Stalling on the hero's journey

Another group of workers—whom we label Stallers—had very different interpretations of their relationships with Instacart, customers, and tasks, leading them to a largely transactional view of how they related to their work. As a result, these workers crafted an alternative, amoralized self-narrative, which rejected any sense that their work had any moral worth, instead justifying their work based on financial motivations and, thus, flatly rejecting the public's narrative.

Interpretation of the platform organization: Devaluing workers. Many Stallers had a negative view of the platform company, describing feeling devalued by the organization and manipulated by its app. Describing Instacart as "shady" (Taylor - I) and "suck[y]" (Ayla - I), these workers were suspicious of how Instacart was capitalizing on the pandemic and the corresponding surge in demand at their expense. Mocking the Household Heroes campaign, Asher said, "'Oh, you're such heroes. We love you so much. You do all these cool things.' It's just words. There's no action…. [we're treated like] disposable trash" (I). Irked, another shopper said, "I may be the only one, but it [the hero label] really irritates me because they're saying it to make themselves look good but aren't giving us any kind of hazard pay. Now they're talking about hiring 300,000 people. They don't give a shit about us. The people at the top plan to sit back and cash off of the pandemic for the rest of their lives, while some of us don't make it past this year" (Frank – DB). Feelings of being unappreciated by Instacart as a company coalesced with Stallers' feelings about Instacart's app, which many described as undermining their sense of dignity. They felt time-pressured, asked to "race against the clock" (Anna - I), and they found chimes, motivational messages, and smiley faces "manipulative" (Aurora – I). One shopper explained his feeling that the app patronized him: "As you move through the app successfully, it's like video games. They give you the thumbs up or like Vegas where you give the little happy chime. I'm immune to all that shit." He wished Instacart would "just stop it and let's get on with business" (Joshua - I). In sum, Stallers' negative view of Instacart and their cynicism of the app led them to feel in a manipulative relationship with Instacart, making it challenging to see themselves as heroes.

Interpretation of customers' need: Undeserving. These shoppers often emphasized that customers were not worthy of shoppers' supposedly heroic acts. Customers were described as "rude" (Joshua - I), "annoying" (Taylor - I), "unappreciative" (Micah - I), and "angry" (Jessie - I). Tania said the unreasonable demands of customers during the pandemic coupled with low pay nearly made her leave Instacart: "It got to be stressful. People were very demanding, and some of them didn't understand that… we couldn't just walk in the store. Sometimes, we literally had to stand in the line for almost 45 min for somebody else's groceries that nine times out of 10, the pay wasn't worth it" (I). The Household Hero campaign was based on the premise that shoppers were

servicing at-risk individuals; however, many shoppers did not believe that their customers reflected this demographic. Even though Aurora completed over 150 batches during the height of the pandemic, she described only one interaction with a person she considered at-risk: "I don't think I delivered to that many at-risk people. The lady I delivered to this morning whose husband tested COVID positive—that was the first time I've had someone like that. It's usually just families, people that can't be bothered to go out and get their own groceries" (I).

Viewing their customers as undeserving, unappreciative, and apparently healthy, it was nearly impossible for these workers to see themselves as heroes. A prototypical example of unworthy customers were people who engaged in tip-baiting—promising a high tip to lure shoppers to accept a batch and then reducing the amount after completion. Calling out such caddish behavior, one shopper posted:

> There's another wonderful thing that some customers participate in which is tip baiting. They will claim to pay you a ridiculous amount of money because we risking our health doing this, exposing ourselves in the supermarket every day. I had an order, fairly sizable, where I was expecting to get a $45 [tip] and then I delivered it, and they took $20 out. I drove up to the customers afterwards and asked if anything had been wrong. They said, "Well, the tortillas and the pickles were missing." And I said, "But the store was out of those items - it's not like I can pull them out of thin air. Was there anything else wrong?" And then the guy just blamed it on the wife and I just drove off and said, "Well, great. Thanks for nothing." (Nala - I)

Overall, these shoppers emphasized the social and economic inequities of their work, stating that they were simply working for "people [who] are renting out my lungs and my body to go grocery shopping" (Aurora - I) and that "us gig workers are out there doing the dirty work and still getting paid the same [as pre-pandemic], and I don't think it's fair" (Jessie - I). The following message posted by a shopper on his personal feed captures this sentiment of inequity and the ensuing inconceivability of seeing himself as a hero: "When the customer orders a $40 filet mignon along with $200 worth of other items and then tips $2, also says you're a hero when you deliver to the garage of their $750,000 house. Whatever! [SpongeBob emoji with 'Whatever' caption, See Image 11]" (Jack - DB). Customers' lack of appreciation coupled with their ostensibly healthy appearance suggested to shoppers that they were not actually servicing an at-need population and, hence, could not be heroes.

Interpretation of tasks: Trivial. These shoppers also often viewed their tasks as easy and straightforward, suggesting that their work context was not reflective of someone doing a hero's work, as there were no obstacles to overcome. Tasks were "simplistic" (Micah - I), "not hard" (Randy - I), and equated to "not doing anything" (Ayla - I). Indeed, the most challenging part of the job for Randy was to "just learn the location of everything in the store" (I).

Reaction to moralized narrative: Amoralized self-narrative and rejection of public narrative. Taken together, these shoppers' interpretations of the platform organization as devaluing shoppers, of customers as undeserving, and of the tasks as trivial gave shoppers an overall sense that their relationship to their work was *transactional* (Rousseau, 2004), noting their financial motivations to explain why they continued working. Their transactional view of work led these shoppers to form *amoralized self-narratives* regarding their work, in which they were unconcerned about the potential positive moral implications of the work. A shopper with a J.D./MBA noted that they were "basically shopping for groceries, it's sort of simplistic…. it's just a way to pay rent" (Micah - I). These self-narratives, which were inconsistent with the public narrative, led shoppers to flatly *reject* the hero narrative. Stressing the simplicity of the work, Joshua explained his confusion at the Heroes' Campaign: "Don't call me a hero. No. No. [The work] is not particularly glamorous. And then the next week, now I'm a household hero? That's weird." Similarly, Ayla did not see herself as a hero, arguing that earning money did not allow her hero status. "I mostly took this job to make

money and I'm glad that I can help people out, but calling us heroes would be going a little far…. There's [not] a lot of people that are heroes [and] definitely not Instacart shoppers" (I). In summary, Stallers rejected the notion that they were on any kind of heroic quest in their work as Instacart shoppers, and they narrated an amoralized self-narrative denying the moral worth of their work and describing their work purely in financial terms (i.e., "I'm not a hero – I am only doing this for the money").

Consequences of the amoralized self-narrative: Mercenary engagement. This amoralized self-narrative led to *mercenary engagement*, i.e., workers avoided extra-role behavior that did not earn them more, but they remained committed to Instacart as long as the money was right. Ridiculing the Household Heroes campaign as "empty platitudes" (Asher - I), these shoppers saw the publicity as "dirty play because they don't do anything to show that they value you" (Aurora - I). Comparing himself to a mercenary, Joshua *avoided extra-role behaviors*, refusing to do anything beyond his required duties: "That extra fluffy energy is not happening right now. There's no time…it does not add up on the bottom line… If I'm out here in the middle of all of this shit, I'm already doing you a service. So, I don't need warm, fuzzy, 'Oh, my god - essential worker!'" Joshua even avoided doing minimal extra work, such as using the in-app messaging feature to suggest replacement items to customers, saying, "you're batshit crazy if you think I'm going to take 30 min to talk about someone's fucking avocado" (I).

In accordance with a transactional view, shoppers' financial satisfaction working at Instacart generally kept them *highly committed* to it. Shoppers who felt they were making enough money on Instacart did not see additional benefits from expanding to other platform organizations. Instead, they stayed with Instacart, noting that while "it's nice knowing that, at any given time, there's an option… [this is] the path of least resistance" (Joshua - I) and that "as long as Instacart is around and as long as I can make the money I'm making, I would absolutely continue that" (Nala - I). A few Stallers who left Instacart for other work, including competitor platform companies, emphasized it was for the pay. One noted, "I've taken more of the time towards Postmates because Postmates is just making more money" (Asher – I). Thus, those who developed an amoralized self-narrative worked and stayed only for the pay.

3.2.3. Struggling with the hero's journey

The final group of workers—whom we label Strugglers—had varied interpretations of their relationships with the organization, customers, and tasks, leading them to have a view of their work as imbued with both transactionalism and moralism. For these shoppers, deciding whether or not to fully accept the hero label required grappling with tensions between their own motives and the needs of their customers—some who were at-risk and others who simply could not be bothered to shop—in the context of stressful work conditions. Struggling with the public narrative, these workers ultimately formed a self-narrative in which they sought moral credentialing.

Interpretation of the platform organization: Reprehensible. More than Stallers and Skippers, those who struggled with the notion of the hero's journey did not seem to think Instacart was doing enough to protect workers and questioned the company's morality. Their belief that Instacart failed to support workers and that it was taking advantage of people who needed a job, offering low pay, made it difficult to feel appreciated or heroic. Decrying the company's business model, these shoppers said Instacart was "garbage, literally the worst" (Carol - I) in part because it "constantly recycles" people (Bethany - I) and doesn't value the "small guys" (Esther - I). One shopper described Instacart's inattentiveness to shoppers' needs, pointing out how the so-called perks were "surface level," such as offering a Spotify playlist for shoppers (Barrett - I). Another shopper remarked on the contrast between Instacart's pandemic IPO and her own pay: "It's amazing to me that the guy who owns Instacart is now a billionaire. And in the course of him becoming a billionaire, they've lowered the pay rate for the shoppers"

(Bethany - I). In a similar vein, many shoppers pointed out that the company's priorities lie with customers and that they were unable to get the technical support that was routinely available for customers. Frustrated after losing a batch due to a technical glitch, one shopper called support:

> "I would like to get a bump because I waited." And she said, "I'm sorry we don't give bumps for technical issues." And I said, "Your app didn't work, and your people told me the wrong thing and you didn't fix the problem, and I waited here for 45 min and I just lost a lot of money in those 45 min." I thought I was going to lose my mind. And I almost quit again. (Emmy - I)

The app generally added to these workers' frustrations. Shoppers have to scan every item in Instacart before being allowed to check out, and often the app would malfunction. Esther described the experience as "super stressful. I would almost be completing an order and not being able to check out because I have to put stuff on or just scan things in" (I). Software updates and bots (automated software which instantly grabbed batches) can make it hard to accept a batch before it disappears, such that "you would have to stare at your phone and not blink continuously." (Amy - I). Further, many found the multiple push notifications encouraging shoppers to work faster "annoying" "(Eliza – I)". For Stallers, the erratic behavior of the app exacerbated the general sense of being unvalued by the platform company, again making it challenging for them to see themselves as heroes because they did not feel like they were valued by the organization that was calling them a hero.

Interpretation of customers' need: Mixed. These shoppers had mixed views of their customers and whether those customers were in need. When asked if she considered herself a hero, one shopper noted the situational complexity, "Oh, God, I don't know, it's so dependent on the situation. Sometimes I'm filling someone's order and it's clearly just someone wanted ice cream or a treat or you can't [clearly] tell, but it wasn't a necessity, right? It depends on the order and that person's motivation for placing it" (Maya – I). When the service was only a convenience for customers, shoppers struggled to think of the work as heroic, although some saw it as indirectly valuable because it lowered the risk for the general population, "There are definitely people who are immunocompromised and so being able to have that service is really important. And even to the people who are using it as a luxury service, it did keep those people out of the stores." (Carol - I). As the pandemic dragged on, however, some shoppers became frustrated as "convenience" customers outnumbered those who were at-risk, again making it hard to see themselves as providing a valuable service and, consequently, as a hero. As one shopper describes, even before the pandemic the needs of the customer made a difference in how she viewed the work:

> Before, when I would be delivering to nursing homes or to someone in a wheelchair, or to a mom with three kids—it was like there was a purpose to this. So, that's what fueled me in the beginning. Then with this, I was like, "There are scared people. There's immunocompromised people." I'm like, "I love it." Now, there's just a lot of people exploiting. (Emmy - I)

Some interactions with customers during the pandemic reconfirmed shoppers' suspicions that they were shopping for people who were healthy and simply did not want to shop. Chloe describes a delivery to a nearby college campus where she "bought stuff for their Memorial Day grill thing. They're big, strapping young guys. I'm 60, they're probably in a better position than I am. They could've gone to the store" (I). In contrast to those who outright accepted or rejected the hero narrative, these shoppers had a more nuanced view of customers, recognizing that some used the service as a necessity and others as a convenience. Whether shoppers viewed their work as hero-worthy depended on the needs of the customer, and thus hero status was re-assessed with every batch.

Interpretation of tasks: Somewhat challenging. Strugglers described their tasks as surprisingly challenging and complex, similar to

how an archetypal hero might describe their "road of trials" (Campbell, 1949). Like those who rejected the hero narrative, they found it easy enough to manage the Instacart app, but described juggling shopping demands during the pandemic as "extremely tiring" (Barry – I) and "frustrating and stressful" (Maya – I). Many reported being surprised at the challenges: one said it was "more physically demanding" than expected (Eliza – I); another that it was "a little harder than what I initially thought" (Sienna – I). Shoppers reported both verbal and physical altercations because of supply shortages: people were "grabbing stuff out of each other's carts…two people grabbed a thing of water at the same time and a fight would almost ensue" (Joshua - I). Amy noted the contrast between her affluent area and the grocery store, musing that the long check-out lines were like "being in a third world country" (I). While shopping was not a new or difficult skill to most, shopping during a pandemic was and workers had to overcome unfamiliar trials to successfully complete their work.

Reaction to moralized narrative: Moral credential seeking self-narrative and wrestling with public narrative. Interpreting the platform organization as reprehensible, customers as perhaps being deserving but often not, and tasks as somewhat challenging led these shoppers to have a *mixed* relationship to their work—laced with transactional motives and questions about the extent to which their work was morally worthy. These shoppers *wrestled* with the public's narrative that they were heroes, and they formed *moral credential seeking self-narratives*, wherein they worried that their transactional motives disqualified them from being heroes and questioned whether they were worthy of moralized accolades. That is, workers continually analyzed their own motives to determine if the work was morally worthy "enough," asking themselves "Am I really a hero if I'm doing this for money?" and, at times, scrutinizing the work even further asking, "Am I putting myself at risk enough to be called a hero?" Contrasting their work to that of doctors, nurses, and firefighters, these shoppers questioned whether they were heroes, even though they recognized the value of their work. One shopper described shopping as akin to "support staff… like calling in aircraft and helping deliver supplies" (Chloe – I). Similarly, another person said, "I felt at times I was doing more than the average person did [to help] during the pandemic, but I would never really say I was a hero… because in my mind I think of a hero being medical workers or somebody who's really on the front lines. I was just in the grocery store" (Axel - I).

Several shoppers expressed their belief that expertise was needed for "real" heroic work, such as being able to put on a respirator or control a fire, which they lacked. Nor did they view shopping as dangerous enough to qualify as heroic. Corey said, "My health is fine. I don't worry about being sick or being around other people. Working as a front-line worker in a grocery store or driving my car to pick up groceries for someone else who might not feel safe doing it, that doesn't seem dangerous. it doesn't seem like I would be a hero in that aspect" (I). Further, many shoppers felt anyone could do this work, suggesting that their replaceability undermined the potential of being a hero. "People will need the service if they're immunocompromised, they're immobile, if they're scared, or whatever. But my neighbor could do it for me. I think we're important, but I don't know that it's essential" (Amy - I). Similarly, a shopper noted, "Well anyone could've gotten you your groceries. I guess to them, it's a big deal if they're at-risk. For me when I'm doing it, I don't feel like one [a hero]. I feel like a grocery shopper" (Jax - I).

Some Strugglers reported feeling uneasy with the hero label because they were getting paid for their work. Eliza described feeling uncomfortable when she is thanked for her work.

> I think heroes implies a sense of selflessness and I know myself and I know I'm doing this because I can get some extra money and I don't think that's selfless at all. People have said that to me, "Thank you so much for coming." I feel guilty because I'm making a profit out of the

pandemic… I would say I'm not really doing it for the right reasons if I'm going to be honest then. (I)

Tyrone viewed shopping during the pandemic as dangerous, but believed the danger was undermined by shoppers' financial motives such that workers could not be heroes.

I'm kind of torn on how grocery store workers are treated - I don't think they're necessarily doing it to be a hero. I think they're doing it more out of necessity. They live paycheck-to-paycheck. I feel nurses and doctors are doing it because they're passionate and want to help people. I feel weird calling them a hero even though what they're doing is dangerous - to me that's not really heroic. (I)

Overall, Strugglers were hesitant to call themselves heroes when comparing their work to other frontline work and when the primary motive was financial, yet they were aware that their labor was essential for some people, especially at-risk customers. In summary, Strugglers, wrestled with whether or not their work has heroic elements and narrated a moral credential seeking self-narrative. With such a self-narrative, Strugglers stressed ambivalence: on the one hand, they sometimes experienced customers as at-risk and deserving, but on the other hand, they were working due to financial motivation. They thus essentially asked themselves, "Am I really a hero if I'm doing this to make money?".

Consequences of the moral credential seeking self-narrative: Questing engagement. The tension in this moral credential seeking self-narrative led Strugglers to continually question if they were really heroes and to seek moral credentials through *questing engagement*, i.e., they regularly embraced extra-role behavior to prove that their work was heroic. Seeking meaning, these workers eventually became disillusioned with Instacart as a transactional platform organization and sought platforms that allowed for more personalized relations with customers, which imbued their work with greater meaning.

Compared to other shoppers, those who wrestled with whether they were heroes reported the strongest *embrace of extreme extra-role behavior* in helping customers. They often reported going to extraordinary effort to find replacement items. Emmy would "go to three different aisles trying to find that thing for that customer, and there is satisfaction in that. I will climb shelves. I will look under. I will put my whole body in the freezer to look for something. I want to make sure they get what they want" (I). Customers left reviews about Emmy's spectacular service, with one noting that she "went out of her way to make necessary changes and keep me apprised."[11] Amy kept a running list of common out of stock items, such as yeast, flour, and Lysol, and created a custom welcome message for customers, "which says who I am and asks them, for the smoothest shopping experience, to stay near their phone during the process" (I). In reviews, customers remarked on her attention to detail, noting she was "very creative."

If under the impression that a customer really needed an item, many Strugglers went to great lengths to procure them. Esther described looking at a customer's shopping list and seeing baby food: "I struggle when I see baby food on there and there's not [any on the shelf] … and the money is there, then I'm like, 'Do I just do it [go to another store] because there's baby food and these people need it? I should do it!" (I). During the height of the pandemic's toilet paper shortage, Sienna kept a few packs in her truck, explaining to customers, "I can give you a couple rolls to tide you over until you can find some more" (I). In another instance, Sienna apologized for not being able find an item and asked if it was a Mother's Day present. It was, and so Sienna drove to Aldi's, off the clock, to get the gift. She doesn't like to disappoint people, she explained. Even the shoppers themselves were sometimes shocked by the lengths they took to fulfill customers' requests. Amy describes a two-hour side trip for toilet paper.

This is crazy. I went to my house, because I had a customer in Palm Beach, and their tip was unbelievably generous. And they desperately needed toilet paper. These people were desperate. I just felt terrible for them… They're like, "It's been weeks. We're down to our last roll." I'm like, "Let me see what I can do." So, I went to a Spanish grocery store, because I had heard online that some of them might have toilet paper. There was nothing. Then I went back to my house, and I had an extra pack. I knew I would be okay. It was Angel Soft. I took it, and I gave it to the guy…. It probably took me an hour and a half with the travel, maybe two hours. (I)

When customers were in need, these shoppers delivered, going above and beyond expected behaviors.

One reason for Strugglers' embrace of extra-role behaviors may be that they contextualized whether they were heroes based on their interactions with customers; thus, each interaction with a customer was another opportunity to perform extra-role behaviors and (re)earn the hero label, and each instance of customer appreciation seemed to represent to them a marker of moral credentials. In contrast, if they felt unappreciated in customer interactions or came to feel that customers were undeserving of their help, they struggled to feel good about their work. Esther describes the prevalence of such difficult customer interactions at Instacart: "There was an era when people weren't even opening their doors which was sad. And I was really hurt, and I wanted to see people. Can you just wave to me through the window?… Just a wave, a toot-toot, a knock, something, anything" (I). The importance of these interactions and their dissatisfaction with Instacart-specific ones led many of these workers to express disillusionment with Instacart and seek out other platform organizations that allowed them to create more personalized customer relationships, enabling them to more easily obtain the moral credentials they sought as validation.[12] In that sense, then, while some Strugglers were disillusioned with Instacart, they remained *committed to moralized aspects of the work*, continuing to want to shop and interact with deserving customers. Explaining why she left Instacart, Bethany said,

I cut back drastically on Instacart in lieu of a different platform, Dumpling. I get to know my customers better and what they like. It's more personal, I can keep an eye out. When I know customers want Clorox or Lysol… [and I] find [some] I can text, "Hey, found a stash - how many would you like, if any?" And I'll drop them off next time or make a special trip. I really feel like we're providing even more of a service because we're able to address their needs. (I)

Not all Strugglers switched to other shopping platform companies. Some returned to pre-pandemic jobs (e.g., retail work) once they re-opened, or found other jobs that were directly related to the pandemic, such as providing counseling. Regardless of their decisions, it seems that these are workers employers would most want to recruit and retain because of their high customer service ethos and willingness to go above and beyond to ensure customer satisfaction.

3.3. Explaining variation in workers' journeys within the context of sudden moralization

We argue that the relational packages workers construct—namely, their interpretations of their relationship to the organization, customers, and the work tasks themselves, coupled with their self-narratives and engagement behaviors—offer a first explanation of their distinct journeys in navigating the moralized narrative of shopping work during the pandemic. We also posit that elements of individuals' work

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[11] Out of three groups of workers described in this paper, only shoppers in the Struggler group provided screenshots of their customer reviews.

[12] In comparison to other groups, Strugglers had a higher rate of staying active on Instacart a year into the pandemic than Skippers, but lower than Stallers, and often switched to other delivery platforms.

biographies—particularly their economic (in)dependence and career paths—inform the ways individuals construct these packages.

Economic (in)dependence. Nearly all the Skippers—the workers who accepted the moralized narrative of being a hero—were not economically dependent on Instacart; indeed, many had full-time jobs that were not affected by the pandemic. Salina, for instance, who worked full-time in telecommunications, started shopping because she was bored. She put her earnings from Instacart into her savings. Similarly, Kate, a consultant, called the pandemic "a blessing in disguise financially" (I) because her full-time job met her basic financial needs and Instacart helped her save for an upcoming trip to Europe. These shoppers often took advantage of job flexibility to earn more, such as shopping for Instacart during their lunch breaks. Laurel, who worked full-time in sales, scouted out potential new shopping neighborhoods when visiting clients: "I actually went on one of my [sales visits] the other day [and checked the prices on the Instacart app]. So now I know if I'm bored someday, I can just drive to this town [to shop] and make a lot of money" (I). In addition to having concurrent full-time jobs alongside their Instacart work, all the Skippers, except one, were without young children, which means less financial strain on a household. Without the financial pressures of needing to work, Skippers embraced the idea that the only reason they were working was because they were helping for moral reasons, allowing them to view their relationships as more moralized and to see working for Instacart as morally credentialled.

In contrast, Stallers and Strugglers—shoppers who rejected or wrestled with the hero narrative, respectively—were more likely to be economically dependent on the work. Many were "pushed" to app-based work, having been laid off, furloughed, or had their hours dramatically reduced during the pandemic. They turned to Instacart because they "need[ed] to make some money" (Anna - I), "didn't have anything else" (Dalia - I) and were in "survivalist" mode (Micah - I). Joshua described how he was forced into shopping after his music gigs evaporated: "This is a gig that I am not particularly proud of and the decision got made in my life. It's like, 'Oh, fuck. I have to do this now'" (I). Instacart's pay compared poorly to prior jobs, with one shopper noting she earned "less than half" (Dalia - I) than waitressing, while another said it was "pennies" (Ayla - I) compared to her prior job in a travel agency. Shoppers chose to work for Instacart because they were financially struggling—one shopper was even living in their car (Barret - I).[13] The economic dependence of these workers on Instacart may have shaped their relations to their work as at least partially if not entirely financial, coloring their view of their relationships and guiding them to reject or wrestle with the hero's narrative.

Career paths. There was also a difference in career paths: compared to Strugglers, Stallers were more likely to report a history of short-term, temporary jobs. Aurora had held a string of jobs to "fill in the gaps" such as barmaid, waitress, transcriptionist, and, now, delivery driver (I). Likewise, Micah, who described himself as "self-employed for most of my life" (I), had held only short-term jobs such as bartender, ticket scalper, and security guard. In comparison, many Strugglers reported having had longer-term professionalized work in client service and saw working for Instacart as a circumstantial blip in their overall career trajectory. A graphic designer who owned a retail store, Bethany turned to Instacart because "my events are cancelled, so there is no work …[or] income coming from the store at all" (I). She planned to return to graphic design work as the effects of the pandemic lessened. Similarly, Emmy ran her own consulting and sales business and turned to Instacart once her client base dried up, but planned to return to her prior work. In follow-up interviews roughly a year into the pandemic, both women were balancing Instacart shopping along with their entrepreneurial

work as clients slowly returned. Other Strugglers who were laid off or furloughed had worked as professionals in organizations. Carol, a teacher, and Jameson, an inspector, both saw their job loss as a pause in their professional career and turned to shopping as a way "to pass the time" (Jameson - I), while the "kids do the distance learning thing" (Carol - I). In follow-up interviews, both had returned to their professional work.

Other Strugglers were in liminal periods of their work lives, either in school or recent graduates, and described working for Instacart as part of this liminal space. Some students had always relied on Instacart as part of a patchwork of jobs that supported them while in school. A full-time student, Barry turned to Instacart during summer and winter breaks. A graduate student with a modest stipend, Maya intermittently worked for Instacart when she "found [her]self really struggling to pay rent and all [her] expenses" (I). For those who had recently graduated and were transitioning to the labor force, the pandemic extended the liminality of school. Axel and Barret had just graduated and were completing internships when the pandemic began, and they started shopping when these internships did not turn into the full-time offers that they had anticipated. Even though he was shopping full-time, Barret described Instacart as an "in-between" job and hoped to "eventually transition to a job that I can start putting back on my resume" (I). Six months later he was working in his chosen field. Similarly, in the follow-up interviews, Axel had found "normal work" in accounting where there was "a lot more growth potential" (I). Strugglers' education and entrepreneurial or professional training may have socialized them into a discerning client service ethos (e.g., Brint, 2001; Chan & Hedden, 2021; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). These prior experiences may explain why Strugglers saw more nuance in customer relations, were more open to moralized views of their work, and enacted extra-role behaviors to help clients and earn moral credentials.

4. Discussion

Our study of grocery delivery shoppers in the gig economy, whose work was suddenly moralized amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, provides insight about how workers make sense of their work, particularly in the absence of strong organizational socialization. We show that how workers interpret their relationships with their organization, customers, and work tasks informed their view of their relationship to their work, which was then packaged with a fitting self-narrative and corresponding reaction to the public hero narrative, and ultimately with divergent and consequential engagement behaviors. Furthermore, individuals' work biographies, specifically their economic dependence on the platform organization and their career paths, helped explain the variation in the shoppers' journeys.

Fig. 1 summarizes our model elaborating the relationships between the public's narrative, work biographies, and worker journeys that we inductively derived from our findings. This model captures the workers' varying journeys, including their interpretations of different parts of their work, their reactions to the moralized narrative, and the effect on their effort and commitment to the platform organization.

4.1. Contributions to literature on moralization of work

Our study contributes to the literature on moralization of work in several ways. First, unlike existing research which focuses on how powerful actors mobilize sweeping narratives that gradually wash over society to moralize their specific line of work in the public sphere (e.g., Chan 2012; Zelizer, 1978), we shed light on how individual workers make varying sense of their work during an interpretive gap when their work is suddenly moralized. While recent studies have richly described the collective response of workers to moralization during the pandemic (e.g., Hennekam et al., 2020; Galanti, 2022), we document individual variation. We find that in the face of the moralization of their work, individuals construct relational packages—distinctive sets of meanings

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[13] For those with acute economic need, Instacart's straightforward fifteen-minute on-boarding process was a god-send – "Oh, you're not a criminal. Cool. You're a US citizen. Cool. You have a car that works. Cool" (Asher - I) – and many started working the same day they applied.
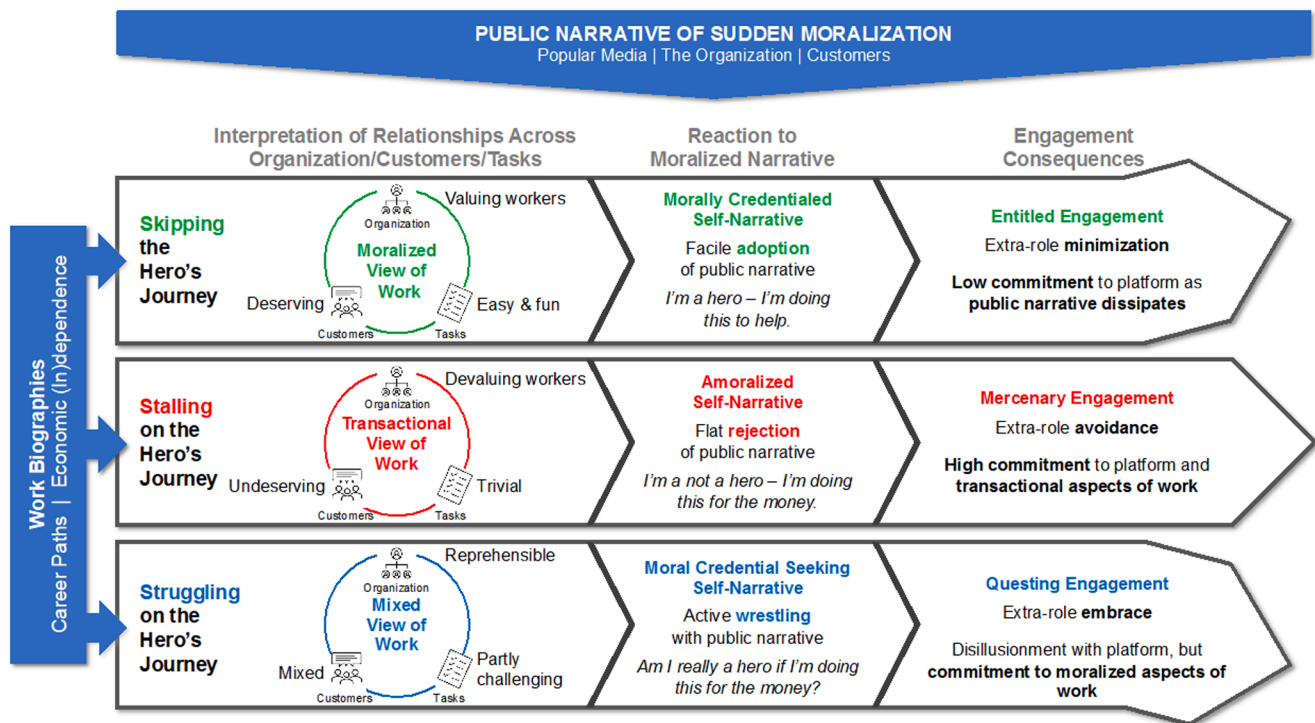
Fig. 1. Process model of workers' reactions to sudden public moralization of work.

and practices around particular relationships in ways that feel appropriate to them. Skippers and Stallers formed somewhat opposing relational packages. Building morally credentialled self-narratives, Skippers viewed their work as moralized and these understandings were associated with entitled engagement practices with minimal extra-role behaviors, as workers had already earned their moral credential, and diminishing commitment to the work as the public narrative of their heroism dissipated. Meanwhile, constructing amoralized self-narratives, Stallers viewed their work as transactional and these understandings were associated with their mercenary engagement practices with workers avoiding extra-role behavior and committing to the platform organization for purely transactional reasons. Lastly, constructing moral credential-seeking narratives, Strugglers had a mixed view of their work and these understandings were associated with questing engagement practices with workers embracing extra-role behaviors to earn moral credentials and seeking out platforms where they could engage in interactions with customers in more morally validating ways. Thus, we show how individuals at the micro-level might fill the interpretive gap of a sudden moralization of their work by creating their own "imaginaries" (Bucher, 2017) at the intersection of their relationships.

We also posit some potential determinants of why relational packages may vary even within a given line of work. We theorize that Skippers' economic independence may have enabled them to interpret their relationship with their work as moralized and unrelated to financial need, allowing them to ultimately accept the public moralized narrative. By contrast, we theorize that Strugglers' and Stallers' economic dependence meant that their relationships with their work were more tainted with financial need which they viewed as making it less moralized. Our findings thus build on studies suggesting that workers' economic contexts and understanding of money shape their accounts of work (Cameron & Meuris, 2022; Schor et al., 2020; Ticona, 2022) and moral worth (Hennekam et al., 2020; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017). A second aspect of work biography was individuals' career paths, which distinguishes Strugglers from Stallers. Strugglers had long-term professionalized work or were recently in educational institutions. In their past jobs, Strugglers were likely already at least partially socialized through education or professional training into a client service ethos, which is at

the core of many professions (e.g., Brint, 2001; Løwendahl, 2000). These prior socializations likely carried over to their Instacart work explaining why Strugglers ended up with a more nuanced assessment of their work and customers, constructed customer-centric relational packages, and continually went above and beyond for their customers. Stallers, meanwhile, typically had career paths filled with short-term jobs, so they may have lacked this socialization into a client service ethos. Overall, this suggests that when workers transition to new lines of work, they may rely on prior occupational socialization to fill in interpretive gaps and navigate their work.

Second, we extend the literature on the moralization of work by examining and explaining the important behavioral consequences of workers' reactions to public moralized narratives. Our study reveals that Instacart workers' distinct self-narratives and reactions to the public hero narrative were associated with different engagement behaviors, namely extra-role helping and organizational commitment. Stallers formed amoralized self-narratives in which they viewed their work as economic-based or transactional and accordingly showed mercenary engagement, optimizing their behaviors for maximum earnings. Skippers formed morally credentialed self-narratives, which allowed them to feel that they had already demonstrated sufficient moral worth (e.g., Blanken et al., 2015) simply by joining the platform organization; this, in turn, explained their entitled engagement at work, demonstrated in minimal extra-role behavior and low commitment to the organization. Strugglers, meanwhile, formed moral credential seeking self-narratives in which they viewed themselves as doing morally-laden work for money. Similar to how cognitive dissonance engenders commitment (Festinger, 1962), their ambivalence and questioning of their moral worth led them towards questing engagement, pushing them to embrace extraordinary extra-role behaviors and to gravitate towards platforms that reinforced the moralized aspects of their work and allowed for deeper relationships with customers. These behaviors could be consequential not only for workers, but also for customers and employers. Customers who received service from Stallers and Skippers would likely see little extra-role helping, while those who were customers of Strugglers might see extraordinary extra-role helping.

A third and related contribution of our study is that the sudden

moralizing of a line of work from above (e.g., the public, managers), often used to control workers, can easily backfire. One might expect that low-wage workers would react positively to the moralizing of their work. We find that rather than unifying low-wage workers, the public narrative might instead polarize (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2022). While some workers readily embraced the moralized narrative by virtue of association with Instacart (Skippers), others outright rejected it (Stallers) or wrestled ambivalently with it (Strugglers). One might also assume that the workers who reacted most positively to the public narrative of their work would most eagerly engage in extra-role behaviors and persist in the job. In contrast, we show that Skippers who embraced the public hero narrative actually minimized their behaviors because they already felt morally credentialed and they typically left the job when the public narrative died down.

Instead, it was those who ambivalently wrestled with the moralization of their work, the Strugglers, who embraced extraordinary extra-role behaviors and endured in the work beyond Skippers because they were seeking moral credentials. It was only the Strugglers that ended up behaving in ways that many would regard as being truly heroic. In that sense, Strugglers' actions—both the struggling and the extra-role behavior—could be understood as embodying the hero archetype. The archetypical heroes were not those who unconditionally and immediately accepted the hero narrative, but instead those who ambivalently and continuously re-assessed their relationships to their employer, customers, and tasks without reaching any conclusion about the heroic nature of their work.[14] These findings therefore suggest caution when moralizing a line of work to manage workers, especially as not all such efforts produce expected results (e.g., Yuan et al. 2021; Friedland & Balkin, 2022). Organizations may want to consider tempering the use of such moralized narratives, giving workers more interpretative space to craft their own narratives.

We posit that our findings might generalize to the sudden *de-moralization* of work as well. Just because the public de-moralizes a line of work does not mean that all its members will see themselves in the same de-moralized way. We suspect that the de-moralization of an occupation (like its moralization) might lead to unanticipated consequences both in terms of workers' reactions and engagement behaviors. Prior research has explored conflicting self-narratives among U.S. military personnel who served during the controversial Vietnam War and the subsequent effects on how soldiers thought about citizenship (Turner, 2001). Future research could continue to explore the consequences of sudden de-moralization of work, such as how public narratives spotlighting the police killings of unarmed Black individuals and calls to defund the police affect police officers' self-narratives and behaviors.

4.2. Contributions to literature on narrative and the self

This study also contributes to our understanding of narratives and the self. First, we problematize the picture of how workers form self-narratives in the face of what may be considered a "positive" and presumably self-enhancing narrative. Prior literature has focused on how individuals narrate their identities when disruptive forces—such as prevalent narratives around discontinuity (Petriglieri, Wood & Petriglieri, 2011), technological change (Rauch & Ansari, 2022), and depersonalization (Anicich, 2022)—threaten the self, yielding insights into how workers create customized holding environments (e.g., Petriglieri et al., 2019) or engage in narrative flexing (Anicich, 2022), in part, to buttress the self. This focus on threatening forces (Petriglieri, 2011) is in many ways warranted, but we argue that even supposedly self-

enhancing narratives can yield complications—ones that loom insidiously because they may hide behind the façade of a "positive" narrative. In our case, the public espoused a narrative deeming certain workers during the COVID-19 pandemic to be heroes, and this might have been expected to provide a sense of dignified meaning and purpose to these workers and positively enhance their self-narratives. Surprisingly, though, we find that even in the face of this dignifying public narrative, while some workers did accept it, many did not. Amidst the suddenness of the shift and the weak organizational socialization, there was more variation in responses than one might have been expected, with some workers struggling with and others outright rejecting such a public narrative, experiencing self-narratives that ranged from feeling morally troubled (Strugglers) to feeling cynical (Stallers).

Second, we build on literature regarding narratives and relationships by suggesting that, in an increasingly complex relational ecosystem (like app-based gig work), workers might not only need to interpret their relationships with multiple parties, but they may also do so in a way that is more selective than prior literature recognizes. Extant literature has pointed to the insight that workers, especially those in career jolts, such as what the pandemic induced, or nontraditional work settings, such as gig work, often rely on their interpretations of relationships with people, places, and purpose to construct their sense of self (e.g., Maitlis, 2022). While we do also show that workers construct their self-narratives by interpreting salient work relationships and emphasize—like Anicich (2022) and Cameron (2022)—the prevalence of multiparty relationships in app-based gig workers, we find that our informants approached their relational ecosystem in an even more complex manner.

We point to the possibility of workers either relating to this complex ecosystem as a whole or more selectively (dis)associating with particular parties in the construction of their self-narratives. For instance, Skippers and Stallers came to (opposing) relationships to their work as a whole, with Skippers viewing their work overall as positive and moralized and Stallers viewing their work overall as negative and transactional. Skippers and Stallers' unnuanced relationships with their work ecosystems were coupled with similarly unnuanced self-narratives and reactions to the public narrative, with Skippers facilely adopting the public narrative, and Stallers flatly rejecting it. In contrast, Strugglers came to a more nuanced understanding of their work, selectively disassociating from their organization—which they viewed as reprehensible—while associating more with their customers and tasks. These selective associations were important because they were coupled with more nuanced self-narratives and reactions to the public narrative in the form of wrestling with the narrative, as workers embraced extra-role behavior to help customers while simultaneously distancing themselves from the organization. This suggests that the ways workers engage with their ecosystem—selectively or as a whole—may carry different implications in terms of workers' self-narratives, satisfaction, behaviors, and commitment. Overall, our findings thus extend research about how workers construct narratives in the gig economy, as they grapple with understanding themselves in the context of multi-party relationships.

Third, we underscore the need to understand narratives as embodied in action. That is, in our study, the public narrative was viewed by many workers as merely rhetoric that was either empty (Stallers) or complicated (Strugglers). Strugglers, though, seemed to put the hero archetype implied in the public hero narrative into action—despite wrestling with that narrative they, ironically, more fully realized that archetype through their acts of unexpected extra-role behavior that were laden with moral meaning. This implies that the archetypical hero narrative was embedded and embodied in behaviors, actions, and work and *not* simply transferred from the public's opinion or organizational rhetoric to the workers. By comparison, Skippers, who facilely accepted the hero's label and did not struggle with the public's narrative, could be viewed as not fully embodying the public hero narrative in tangible ways since they showed rather minimal extra-role behaviors and low commitment to the organization. It could be said, then, that those who too easily incorporate a public narrative into their own self-

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[14] Indeed, this complex characterization of heroism extends the typically binary categorization of leaders as either heroes or villains in the organizational literature (e.g., DeCelles and Pfarrer, 2004; Meindl et al., 1985; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2015).

narratives—without embodying that narrative in their actual work and practices—might not be entirely fulfilling the archetypes implicit in a public narrative. While there may be benefits to such sudden (dis) engagement (e.g., during natural disasters when spontaneous "emergent volunteers" quickly mobilize then dissipate (Twigg & Mosel, 2017)), facile acceptance of public narratives without embodying them in action might end up diluting the actual intentions behind the public narrative.

4.3. Conclusion

Our study highlights the balancing act that people can strike to come to self-narratives that recognize both the existence of often dehumanizing technological constraints and the potential for humanizing agency within the gig economy. Even in the face of the omnipresent precarity of the gig economy, with its associated low wages, unsafe working conditions, depersonalizing technology, and the arbitrariness of having an algorithm as a manager (e.g., Griesbach et al., 2019), workers might recognize both the constrictions and emancipations afforded by gig work. With the right combination of interpretations of relationships, workers may be able to build self-narratives that simultaneously wrestle with a public narrative with skepticism while agentically seeking to realize their own selves—allowing for some degree of individual agency within broader constraints.

In summary, a suddenly moralized narrative around work—one that is engineered and propagated from above by media outlets, customers, and organizations—has significant consequences for workers' experiences, behaviors, and commitments. By examining how gig workers respond to a sudden moralized narrative and form self-narratives in the face of this shift, we have shown that not all members of a given line of work react in the same way, and that those who readily embrace the narrative might not, in fact, embody the spirit of that narrative which has important consequences for workers, customers, and the organization. So, yes, not all heroes wear capes, as Instacart officials, media, and customers claim. But telling workers they have capes does not necessarily make them heroes. Instead, workers must wrestle with moralized narratives, making them their own, to truly embody the narrative of being a hero.

Declaration of Competing Interest

Acknowledgements

Appendix

Images 1–4: Media and Customer Support of the Hero Narrative.

Image 1. Support for frontline workers during the pandemic. Date posted: 11 June 2020. Date accessed: 2 August 2020. Source: The Sacramento Bee
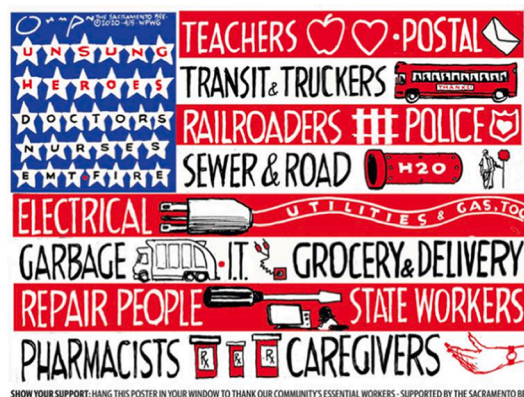
.

Image 2. Support for frontline workers during the pandemic. Date posted: 2 April 2020. Date accessed: 5 October 2020. Source: Twitter

.

Image 3. Photo of sign posted in residential window stating, "Thank you to the helpers." Date taken: 7 June 2020. Source: Authors

.

Image 4. Thank you note received from customer depicting shopper wearing a cape. Date taken: 9 April 2020. Date accessed: 29 Sept 2020. Source: Reddit

.

Images 5–10: Platform Organization Support of the Hero Narrative.

Image 5. Instacart advertisement in the Apple Store where shoppers' download the app. Date taken: 2 August 2020. Source: Apple Application Store

.

Image 6. Push notification from Instacart to shopper. Date taken: 2 August 2020. Source: Authors (Screenshot) .
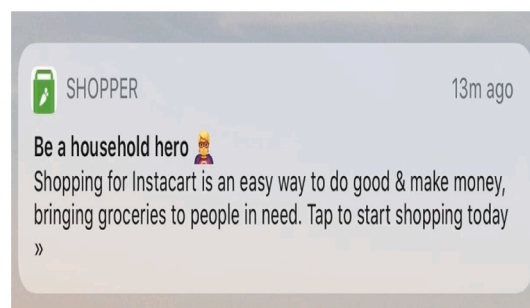

Image 7. Tweet by Instacart asking consumers to utilize #householdheroes. Date posted: 27 March 2020. Data accessed: 5 October 2020. Source: Twitter .
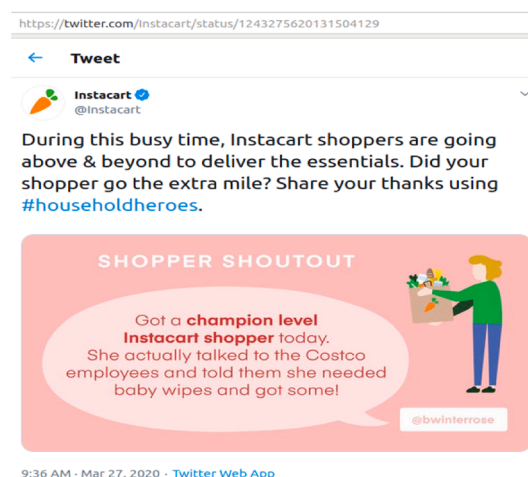
Image 8. Instagram "Shopper Shoutout" asking customers to share positive shopper experiences at #householdheroes. Date posted: 27 April 2020. Date accessed: 5 October 2020. Source: Instagram

.

Image 9. Instagram post by Instacart showcasing a "shopper shoutout." Date posted: 8 July 2020. Date accessed: 5 October 2020. Source: Instagram

.

Image 10. Instagram post by Instacart showcasing a "shopper shoutout." Data posted: 17 June 2020. Date accessed: 5 October 2020. Source: Instagram

.

Images 11–12: Shoppers' Reactions to the Hero Narrative.

Image 11. SpongeBob "Whatever" emoji in reaction to Instacart calling a shopper a hero. Date posted: 17 April 2020. Date accessed: 29 Sept 2020. Source: Reddit

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Image 12. Shopper wearing a handmade mask gifted to her by a customer. Date posted:15 April 2020. Date accessed: 29 Sept 2020. Source: Reddit

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