

Chapter 5: Changing Social Roles and COVID-19

During the initial stages of the pandemic, the Canadian government asked most of its citizens to self-isolate and work from home to control the spread of the virus. But not everyone was asked to stay home. Some jobs were deemed necessary for the continued functioning of our society. The people who held these jobs had a new status: essential service worker.

Who is considered essential during a pandemic? Well, a lot of people we all might have guessed pre-COVID: doctors, nurses, pharmacy employees, care-home attendants, and other healthcare-related workers; police; firefighters; government officials. But other jobs that may have been less obvious to some of us—food manufacturers; truck drivers; electricians, plumbers, and many other tradespeople; bicycle repair people; bank personnel; and of course all the people who work at grocery stores—were also deemed essential. The full list can be found [here](#). What is interesting about this list is that includes jobs at both poles of the status hierarchy. The status of doctors is well-respected in society. This is reflected, for example, in how much doctors are paid. People know doctors go to school for years and have specialized skills and knowledge. Likewise, they know doctors are paid so handsomely, in part, because they are always on the front line of medical emergencies; we expect them to take risks on our behalf. Grocery store employees, on the other hand, are often paid minimum wage, which is not a living wage in most parts of Canada. This reflects their social status and how society at large values this job. It took a pandemic for many people to realize that this job is crucial to one of the fundamentals of a functioning society: accessing food. And when governments asked these workers to assume front-line positions during the pandemic, with all the risks this entailed, it became clear that their new elevated status of essential service worker was inconsistent with their previous status of “simply” grocery store worker. Companies had to [top-up wages and go on hiring sprees](#). As of July, some grocery stores had already [reverted to pre-COVID wages](#), suggesting the status of grocery store clerk had perhaps not gained more permanent prestige.

Who is considered essential during a pandemic? Well, a lot of people we all might have guessed pre-COVID: doctors, nurses, pharmacy employees, care-home attendants, and other healthcare-related workers; police; firefighters; government officials. But other jobs that may have been less obvious to some of us—food manufacturers; truck drivers; electricians, plumbers, and many other tradespeople; bicycle repair people; bank personnel; and of course all the people who work at grocery stores—were also deemed essential. The full list can be found [here](#). What is interesting about this list is that includes jobs at both poles of the status hierarchy. The status of doctors is well-respected in society. This is reflected, for example, in how much doctors are paid. People know doctors go to school for years and have specialized skills and knowledge. Likewise, they know doctors are paid so handsomely, in part, because they are always on the front line of medical emergencies; we expect them to take risks on our behalf. Grocery store employees, on the other hand, are often paid minimum wage, which is not a living wage in most parts of Canada. This reflects their social status and how society at large values this job. It took a pandemic for many people to realize that this job is crucial to one of the fundamentals of a functioning society: accessing food. And when governments asked these workers to assume front-line positions during the pandemic, with all the risks this entailed, it became clear that their new elevated status of essential service worker was inconsistent with their previous status of “simply” grocery store worker. Companies had to [top-up wages and go on hiring sprees](#). As of July, some grocery stores had already [reverted to pre-COVID wages](#), suggesting the status of grocery store clerk had perhaps not gained more permanent prestige.



Illustration by Vanessa Santos on Unsplash

And when governments asked these workers to assume front-line positions during the pandemic, with all the risks this entailed, it became clear that their new elevated status of essential service worker was inconsistent with their previous status of “simply” grocery store worker. Companies had to [top-up wages and go on hiring sprees](#). As of July, some grocery stores had already [reverted to pre-COVID wages](#), suggesting the status of grocery store clerk had perhaps not gained more permanent prestige.

As you read the chapter, consider the following questions:

- In his book *Bullshit Jobs*, David Graeber theorizes there has been a proliferation of “bullshit jobs” in Western society. These are generally white-collar jobs where workers are relatively well-paid but contribute nothing important or meaningful to the world (middle managers, corporate lawyers, investment bankers, lobbyists, and (perhaps controversially) CEOs). He argues the work that actually helps people tends to be the most underpaid by society. Thinking of pandemic and the role of essential service worker, do you agree with Graeber’s theory? Why or why not?
- For many people, the pandemic caused a shift in social roles. For example, parents found themselves de facto teachers to their children (although teachers continued to work and provide lessons, some while parenting and home-schooling themselves). Adult children [complained](#) of trying to “parent” older loved ones who were more at risk of the disease and less concerned about it. And many people found themselves unemployed. Take one of these examples and explain how role strain and role conflict might occur due to the shift in social roles.
- In Vancouver and other parts of British Columbia, people took to their balcony, yards, and other outdoors spaces to [bang pots for healthcare workers](#) each evening at 7 p.m. during the pandemic. Do you think the practice should have been extended to acknowledge other essential service workers, like grocery store employees? Why or why not?
- One of the ways the Canadian government addressed the economic effects of the pandemic was through the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). This income program, which provided weekly income to people who stopped working due to COVID-19, was designed to be as simple and straight-forward as possible, so people could apply easily and receive funds quickly, a stark contrast to other financial support programs like employment insurance. How does this relate to Max Weber’s critique of formal rationalization and bureaucracy?



Additional online resources

A letter from a grocery store worker describes the socioeconomic realities of people with this status.

- [Grocery workers want better pay, not “heroes” label](#). (2020, April 14). RankandFile.ca.

Read these two articles and consider how companies and governments could have helped ease the fears of essential service workers during the pandemic. What kind of changes would be required?

Are these small local changes, large systemic changes, or both?

- Vertuno, J. (2020, April 6). [Grocery store employees are essential during coronavirus, but they’re scared](#). *Global News*.
- Wherry, A. (2020, May 10). [The wages of fear: The pandemic and the future of low-paid 'essential' work](#). *CBC News*.