So you say our work is essential: Essential workers and the potential for transformative learning in the wake of COVID-19 social and economic disruption

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Abstract

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, some US workers became “essential” overnight and were, therefore, ineligible to work from home. Millions of these workers put their lives at risk to keep society functioning. So, why do we undervalue those we cannot live without? This article explores the transformative potential of learning in and about essential work in the wake of social and economic disruptions of a pandemic. We ask, what potential does this current moment hold to repair the western social and economic order predicated on the precarity of essential work? We review human flourishing within a human capabilities approach and borrow feminist’s notion of repair work that evokes transformative learning in individuals and society. Finally, we consider how the perspective of “learning to repair” along the spirit of uBuntu and generative Communitas can enhance transformative learning theory and practice.

I have coworkers who stand all day serving people, and then have to go pay for their own groceries with food stamps, Lisa Harris, grocery cashier (Kinder & Stateler, 2021).

I am having to argue for my supplies. It makes me feel secondary, not equal. You are expendable in a way, David Saucedo, nursing home cook (Kinder, 2020).
Essential workers like Lisa and David have kept society running throughout the pandemic despite the risk to their personal health and well-being. What is worse is that many essential jobs are precarious or highly contingent, low wage, include few to no benefits, and are often unsafe. Society largely devalues the contribution of these workers and often renders them invisible (Klein, 2021). This is ironic because the global economy is predicated on flexible work structures and relationships that make society more, not less, reliant on precarious workers (Kalleberg, 2009).

The central organizing question for this article is: What potential does this current moment of the pandemic hold to repair the western social and economic order predicated on the precarity of essential work? First, we anchor this paper in ongoing research on essential work(ers) and the precarious working conditions that make them among the most vulnerable in society. We examine models of the moral economy (Bolton & Laaser, 2013; Keane, 2019; Sayer, 2000) that both critique and set new aspirations for the reformation of the social and economic order, a new order based on principles of human capabilities (Sen, 1992; 1999) and human flourishing (Walker, 2005). Although this work posits a transformed society, it is largely silent about how a new moral economic order can emerge and take hold. In other words, it lacks a theory of learning to facilitate the desired social transformations.

We borrow the idea of repair work (Henke, 2019) to fill this gap and delineate the transformative learning processes that simultaneously bring awareness to and engagement in the moral dimensions of our economic order. Repair work (Henke, 2019), a sociological theory that examines how people continuously repair the social order through language and sense-making, has recently been appropriated and enhanced by feminists (Cozza et al., 2020) to feature the damaging nature of the economic practices that undergird everyday life. This work advocates a feminist “mending” practice to craft a new social order based on the principles of care and flourishing. These new mending practices require new mindsets and relationships that individuals and collectives must learn. We examine this “learning to repair” and its implications for transformative learning theory and practice.

**ESSENTIAL WORK AND ESSENTIAL WORKERS**

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, some US workers became “essential” overnight. While many stayed at home, millions of workers went to work every day to keep society functioning. Thousands of essential workers have lost their lives because of “companies prioritizing profits and production over the health and safety of their employees” (U.S. H.R. Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis, 2021, p. 6). In this new reality, societies have struggled with the taxonomy of essentiality. In March 2020, the US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA, 2020) issued the “Essential Critical Infrastructure Workforce Guidance” list. The list was created in collaboration with the private sector, State, and local governments, and was aimed at assisting stakeholders in identifying critical and essential infrastructure and workers that the nation depended on during the pandemic. In addition, it provided guidance on adequate risk-management strategies to protect essential workers against COVID-19. The list was advisory in nature, allowing State officials and private partners to develop their own taxonomies and directives. As a result, of the 43 states with essential workers directives and guidelines, 21 states followed the federal guidance while 23 states (including the District of Columbia) created their own directives. The remaining seven states did not provide any guidelines. The decentralized nature of the federal government’s guidance resulted in a wide variety of essential worker definitions and categorizations.
Societal shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic provide a window into the underlying structural inequality, socio-economic insecurity, and injustice that prevail. In this pandemic, those designated as *essential workers* come disproportionately from socio-economically disadvantaged groups that are poorly paid and exposed to fatal risks while lacking access to proper health care and benefits. As a result of systematic forms of injustice, racism, and sexism, women, Blacks, and people of color make up a disproportionate share of essential workers (Bahn & Cumming, 2020; Economic Policy Institute, 2021). It is troubling that these are the same communities that have been hit most hard by COVID-19 (Obinna, 2021). Essential workers perform jobs without effective workplace protection and proper wages, making it difficult for them to survive (Nicholson, 2022; Sell, 2020). Fifty-five million workers in low wage “essential” jobs are forced to work with no adequate labor protection, no access to health care, and no rights to unionize, often living in the early hotspots of the disease (Orleck, 2021). These precarious conditions take a great toll on the physical and emotional well-being of essential workers.

History will repeat itself and collective amnesia will set in if we do not move beyond “just” being grateful for the sacrifices of essential workers and take the opportunity that the pandemic has offered to rethink the way we run societies and make amends. Likewise, a return to normal is not an option because normal is often associated with safety, natural, regularity, and good, and the conditions of essential work were and are far from normal. The emphasis on normality “obscures our attention from the lives of the vulnerable and disconnects us from those who cannot afford to fight this war alone” (Cozza et al., 2020, p. 13). Every crisis offers an opportunity for learning and transformational change. This pandemic, too, serves as a window of opportunity to change and repair our social order and social practices. As Cozza et al. (2020) argue, “we need to prevent the future from becoming the past. We are not going back to the past; our society has already changed and there is a need to cope with innovation and repairing practices that do not reproduce the past” (p. 7). One could argue that such a notion of repair requires “a change that involves the new vision of our existence in connection with others and Nature” (Cozza et al., 2020, p.14).

**MORAL ECONOMY, SOCIAL CONNECTIONS, LEARNING, AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**

*Open up. It is time to wake and recognize us.*

*We are right here on the front line, we need you too.*

Yvette Beaty, home health aide (Kinder, 2020).

Yvette’s plea to be seen and cared for during the pandemic sheds light on her vulnerability and gives rise to questions about the moral legitimacy of the working conditions she and other essential workers must endure. Indeed, the moral economy once viewed as a way to describe societies with few or weak markets (Sayer, 2000) has emerged as a deep critique of advanced capitalism and the related normative economics that seeks to understand how the system works while overlooking the moral issues that influence individual, societal, and environmental well-being (Sayer, 2000).

The avoidance of moral issues in the study of economics, according to Sayer (2000), is related to the ideology of the advanced capitalistic system it examines. In this ideology, human nature is to differentiate and become autonomous, rationalized individuals
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with the freedom to determine and pursue self-interests. Markets create a corresponding meritocracy—assuming the homo-economicus (Bolton et al., 2012)—that generates an unquestioned belief in an egalitarian society wherein all have an equal opportunity to succeed, and rewards are distributed based on the perceived value of one’s contribution (Sandel, 2020). Ethics promote individualism by instilling a value for equality and respect for the individual right to freely pursue their chosen path to success (Sayer, 2000).

Keane (2019), on the other hand, observed “everyday ethics” that go beyond individualism to promote relationally responsible decision-making in economic activities. Everyday ethics are culturally derived expectations that people bring to their daily interactions and economic activities. In the moment-by-moment interactions, people draw on these ethics to legitimize their needs and views while working to influence others’ moral sensemaking (Keane, 2019). The everyday quality of these ethics makes people largely unaware of their moral actions and decisions, and they become blind to the moral implications of their economic affairs. In other words, ethics recedes into the commonplace and are woven into the unconscious dynamics of everyday economic life. The commonplace nature of ethics in capitalist society prompts the need for greater awareness of the ethics, norms, and habits that guide our actions, especially in times of great social disruption and change.

This insight shifts the framework of the moral economy from economics and believed meritocracy to social connections, learning, and human development. Rather than study how economic systems work, the moral economy should be understood as a process of inquiry into our everyday ethics, how ethics arise in the context of our economic activities, and how socially constructed morality impacts our relationships and well-being (Bolton & Laaser, 2013; Bolton et al., 2012; Pissarides & Thomas, 2021; Sayer, 2000). The unconscious ethics guiding our economic decisions and relationships become the object of continuous critical reflection, critique, and learning (Beck et al., 1994). As awareness is raised, and we learn about the limitations and consequences of our moral understandings, we may generate a new moral imperative to address the precarious conditions of essential work.

FLOURISHING AND THE HUMAN CAPABILITIES APPROACH

An alternative view of human nature has emerged in the context of this new moral inquiry in economics. From the perspective of the moral economy, humans are vulnerable beings deeply embedded in nature and dependent on others (Pascoe & Stripling, 2020; Sayer, 2000). Additionally, Bolton et al. (2012) talk about “thick” relations and the importance of relational social connections and thus purport “a moral economy lens views employment as a relationship rooted in a web of social dependencies and considers that ‘thick’ relations produce valuable ethical surpluses that represent mutuality and human flourishing” (p. 121). This dependency and the web of relationships it creates determines whether our needs are met and provides us with the capability to either flourish or suffer (Bolton et al., 2016; Sayer, 2000). The aim of a moral economic inquiry is to address social needs and provide the resources required for human flourishing (Walker, 2005), which can only occur through a deep connection, “thick” relations, and solidarity with others.

The capacity for human flourishing is best understood in the human capability approach developed by economist Amartya Sen (1992, 1999). Sen’s approach goes beyond our current socioeconomic paradigm by calling for “…freedom and the development of an environment suitable for human flourishing” (Walker, 2005, p. 103). This includes the notion of being able to choose a life that one values with a focus on the dignity and freedom of the individual (Vizard et al., 2011; Walker, 2005). Human capability is understood as what
people can actually be and do instead of the resources they have available to them (Walker, 2003, 2005).

Sen’s (1992, 1999) focus is on individual development; however, development occurs within and is mediated by institutional, economic, and societal conditions (Walker, 2003, 2005). These conditions are influenced by several factors. First, capabilities and flourishing are socially and politically constructed as people decide together what valuable capabilities are and how they will be developed and supported (Walker, 2005). Freedom is not freedom from social control; rather, it lies in the ability to collectively decide and support each individual’s purpose in life and in the community (Dewey, 1922). Second, the conditions are grounded in a political economy with the institutional capacity to secure civil rights and meet human needs (for instance, health care, education, and others) (Walker, 2005). Finally, and most salient to the capability of essential workers to flourish, individual development is entangled within the wider social and ethical dynamics that determine how resources, opportunity, and vulnerability are distributed among individuals and communities in society. In other words, the human capability to develop is dependent on the “removal of the sources of un-freedom in society” (Walker, 2005, p. 4), including the poor working conditions that essential workers must endure.

We and others (Bolton et al., 2016; McGuire et al., 2020; Venkatapuram, 2020; Walker, 2003, 2005) argue that the moral economy and human capability approaches present a more robust view of humanity because they recognize that all people and especially essential workers have “thick” needs (Sayer, 2011, as cited in Bolton et al., 2016) that include economic and material needs, but also cultural, social, psychological, and environmental needs that must be considered and addressed. This perspective thus naturally extends the calls for distributional justice for essential workers (Pissarides & Thomas, 2021) beyond the material and economic resources (Somers, 2020) to also include justice in the distribution of opportunity and vulnerability in society. As we explore the distribution of vulnerability dimensions of distributive justice, we lay the ground to address our guiding question on the potential that the current moment holds to repair the western social and economic order predicated on the precarity of essential work.

**Distribution of vulnerability**

In a provocative article that critiques the ethical framework of disaster response, Pascoe and Stripling (2020) argue the need to reorient the everyday ethics of this practice to align with moral challenges of the pandemic. Though specific to disaster response, their perspective provides insight into how we all draw on ethics to adapt to a disaster. Their analysis includes two competing narratives that informs how we identify, make sense of, and respond to moral dilemmas of disasters. One narrative is oriented in fear: The fear of scarcity and the collapse of society. This narrative is based on zero-sum thinking that leads to hoarding, conflict, and utilitarian decisions among professionals to suspend the rules and compromise established ethical and moral codes (Pascoe & Stripling, 2020). For example, the scarcity of personal protective equipment (PPE) led hospital administrators to make a utilitarian decision to extend the use of limited N95 masks beyond the manufacturers’ use guidelines. This decision was justified by the need to serve as many as possible even though it posed a great threat to vulnerable health care workers (Pascoe & Stripling, 2020).

An alternative disaster narrative is oriented toward care as it fosters “a relational account of persons as vulnerable vectors embedded in existing networks of care” (Pascoe & Stripling, 2020, p. 419). Inspired by uBuntu, an African philosophy, consistent with
feminist's views on bioethics, the care narrative promotes two central beliefs that together create the possibility for a different pandemic response. uBuntu offers a view of community based on solidarity wherein we are continuously becoming ourselves in relationship to others. Simply, it is the belief that “a person is a person through other persons” (Pascoe & Stripling, 2020, p. 430). This view of “becoming” orients us to a future, after the disaster, in which there is great potential for us all to be transformed. The second belief, emanating from feminist's bioethics, states that in a pandemic everyone is both vector and caregiver. We are all vulnerable, yet vulnerability is unevenly distributed in a society where some are permitted to social distance while underprivileged essential workers risk their health and life to care for the sick while meeting our basic needs. Once these social inequalities are brought into sharp focus, we are all called upon to adopt a new ethic of care. We become ourselves through our engagement with and care for others.

This narrative of care stimulates our sociality and natural dispositions to approach others with empathy and cooperation (Keane, 2019). Pascoe and Stripling (2020) cite Drabek (2016) to illustrate how this narrative operates in communities felled by disasters. Instead of isolating and hoarding, Drabek (2016, as cited in Pascoe & Stripling, 2020) observes that much of the work of disaster response is performed by its survivors. Everyone, both responders and victims, work together to mobilize existing networks of care to mount a whole community response. But what can be a whole community response to the pandemic that spreads through social contact and engagement? By recognizing that we are all vulnerable vectors dependent upon one another for our future “becoming” compels us to take steps to care for the essential workers who enable us all to survive. Perhaps distributive justice of vulnerability can be achieved through the development of strong networks of care for our essential worker care providers (Pascoe & Stripling, 2020). However, the question remains about what will prompt the powerful and privileged to modify their economic and social behaviors to support this cause. We not only need to connect essential workers to the broader enterprise, but we must also include them and recognize that they are indeed central to the sustainability of our community. To make sustainable change, workers’ actions to enact their own power is not enough; we must also take steps to protect them from harm. This requires empathy for it allows us to acknowledge our interdependent and deeply vulnerable nature and prompts us to respond with care.

LEARNING TO REPAIR AS TRANSFORMATION

Feminist’s writing on repair and the pandemic focuses on how the pandemic is a breakdown in social practices and norms that we have taken for granted (Cozza et al., 2020). An expansive view sees repair practices as an ongoing process of relational negotiation that is built into the fabric of our everyday lives (Henke, 2019). This view of repair considers the connections between people, organizations, and materiality in everyday interactions as well as in response to major breakdowns (Henke, 2019). As we work through the challenges of the pandemic, we engage in the repair of our social practices knowingly or unknowingly (Cozza et al., 2020). One version of repair practices focuses on stabilization and a return to the prior order of things, while repair as transformation requires significant change to reorder our societal infrastructure (Henke, 2019). We are collectively engaged in repair and have the opportunity to consider what learning is required to facilitate repair as transformation (Cozza et al., 2020).

We can say with certainty that the pandemic has prompted a shared disjuncture (Jarvis, 2009) or disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 2000) that can trigger a transformative learning cycle. Indeed, Pascoe and Stripling (2020) note that a pandemic is significantly different
from other disasters in three ways, each potentially promoting deep learning. First, a pandemic alters perception as people break old norms and immediately create new ones to adapt. Second, a pandemic requires imagination to respond to the uncertainty of a situation. Finally, a pandemic can enhance community, “unless people are directed toward apathy by the response itself” (p. 427).

The potential for transformative learning, therefore, resides in how we respond to the pandemic. A response, oriented in fear, may lead to a general state of apathy that although it may stimulate learning; it does little to transform people and enhance community. Indeed, Jarvis (2016, as cited in Bjursell, 2020) delineates two types of learning that fear provokes. First, fear can lead to nonlearning: A closing of ranks, if you will, that narrows the mindset and frays social bonds. Unfortunately, we see this response in the increased political fragmentation currently taking hold in democratic societies. Fear can also quicken non-reflective learning aimed at the restoration of normalcy. For example, people learning to adapt to remote work—working harder and longer hours from home than they did pre-pandemic. On the other hand, a response oriented in care calls forth a spirit of uBuntu wherein solidarity creates a shared commitment to a future based on the principles of human flourishing. Learning in this response can be described as Communitas (Buechner et al., 2020), or a collective expression of transformative learning that creates a deep sense of belonging and that builds new relational capacity resulting in “a greater appreciation for life and new sense of possibilities” (p. 89). Jarvis (2009, as cited in Bjursell, 2020) states that this deep learning involves critical reflection to understand and transform the whole person, body, mind, and emotion and their relationship to the cultural context.

This view of deep learning in Communitas is consistent with critical and broader social impact perspectives on transformative learning theories. Fleming (2022) argues that transformative learning has been overly concerned with change at the individual level; instead—and in line with Honneth’s (1995) perspective—transformative learning should also work toward making connections between individual problems and broader social issues. Fleming (2022) refers to Negt’s notion that transformative learning starts with the experiences of workers and then moves toward a collective pursuit of political and emancipatory change. We certainly agree with this worker-centered focus, but question what will prompt the powerful and privileged to modify their values and behaviors to support this cause of essential workers?

We explore this question by turning to Honneth (1995) who is inspired by G. H. Mead’s theory of the moral self (Reck, 1964). Like uBuntu, Mead believed that we are continuously becoming ourselves in relationship to others. Through socialization, we learn to anticipate and respond to the perspectives and expectations of those we interact with and, over time we learn to use these second-person perspectives (Honneth, 1995; Keane, 2019) to regulate our relations to others and the community-as-a-whole (Reck, 1964). In other words, a sense of self can only be acquired to the extent we learn to perceive our own actions from the point of view of others. In this light, subjectivity is intersubjective because we experience ourselves through relationships and interaction with others (Honneth, 1995).

Honneth (1995) explains how Mead believed the self becomes a moral self. In his early work, Mead focused on the role of recognition in self-development. As we learn to perceive ourselves from the second-person perspective, we develop a self from the interacting partners who recognize us as legitimate members of the community. Through recognition, we develop a positive self-image and the cognitive ability to anticipate and respond to others’ behaviors. Mead later focused on reciprocity and how when we consider normative expectations in our interactions we can internalize the moral values of the community and use them to self-regulate our subjectivity and relationships. Through this process, we come to understand our rights and obligations as legitimate members of the community.
However, these values are in a constant state of flux and change through our daily interactions (Keane, 2019). As we take up the second-person perspective, we actively use it to account for ourselves, to justify, explain, critique, and praise the self and others to influence moral sensemaking. Through these ongoing interactions, the social partners create a shared sense of moral reality, which itself is continually challenged, and reconstructed (Keane, 2019).

This discussion of the intersubjective nature of moral development has at least three implications for our motivating question on the potential that this current moment holds to repair the western social and economic order predicated on the precarity of essential work. These implications also point to the role of adult education in learning to repair.

First, our frame of reference for the development of the practical and moral self must include an ever-widening circle of interacting partners so that we can learn to truly recognize the dignity of all others and stretch our moral horizons beyond our community of origin. Indeed, Honneth (1995) observes that change comes from increased empathy that emerges from constant interactions among different peoples who take each other's situation seriously. How can adult education develop new structures and processes that include and foster direct interacting relationships among and between essential workers and the (remote) privileged they care for and serve?

The second implication arises when we consider that the generative potential of empathy resides in individual ingenuity and agency. Yet, we develop a sense of self as we are socialized into communities of others, but creative deviations from normative expectations and behaviors originate in the individual's deep and often pre-conscious desires and moral sensibilities (Honneth, 1995). Indeed, Mead believed that a disjuncture between our inner impulses on the one hand and communal expectations on the other hand explained moral development in individuals and society. The individual while embracing the communal norms also continuously pushes back and tries to expand the expectations of others to give social expression to their unique and creative desires (Honneth, 1995). How can adult educators create space for new forms of self-expression to emerge and be recognized?

Third, as Keane (2019) reminds us, if our behavior is to count as moral, we need to be aware of the consequences of our actions. Yet, we are unconscious of the everyday morals that guide our economic decisions and activities. Mead believed that to help people surface their unconscious morals, we need to focus on the acts that disrupt the flow of everyday life (Reck, 1964). Therefore, there is great potential to surface and reconsider the role of morals in how we restore/repair the economic order in the wake of the pandemic. How can educators help people morally self-justify their economic response to the pandemic? We ask now can educators leverage attempts to self-justify to challenge the assumptions and values that source our subjectivity and we use to influence each other.

Sayer (2000) writes that the moral economy “is an attempt to...address the economic problems of humans rather than the human problems of economics” (p. 94). To achieve this, as this analysis shows, we require deep structural change that can repair our economy and relationships in ways that both honor and foster our deeply vulnerable and interdependent human nature. The implication for adult education is easy to identify, while complex to operationalize. We are called upon to stimulate our sociality by fostering uBuntu and generative Communitas as a mending practice and an attempt to repair the societal relationships with essential workers, such as Lisa, David, and Yvette.

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