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Conceptualizing precarious employment through the lens of social reproduction: Potential implications for health research and action

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ABSTRACT

Research on the health and well-being impact of precarious employment (PE) commonly conceptualizes employment as a relation of power between workers and employers, a perspective informed by power relations and relational social class theories. Social reproduction theory is a less common but complementary conceptual lens that can be used to investigate PE and health, in which the *nature of work* has relevance for the *quality of employment*. Social reproduction theory points to relations between groups of workers who are valued differently based on the capacity of their work to generate profit. Attending to relations between workers based on value, in addition to the well-established power relation between workers and employers, may point to consequences for health and well-being that are worth exploring empirically, and could serve as another tool to spur collective action around PE and its health effects. We provide an illustration and discuss the potential implications of this theoretical approach using data from in-depth interviews conducted in 2022 among precariously employed food workers in New York City.

1. Background

Researchers have increasingly paid attention to poor quality, or precarious, employment (PE) as a threat to health and health equity. PE refers to contractual relationships between workers and employers characterized by a combination of the following dimensions: employment instability, low material rewards, eroded workers' rights and protections, de-standardized working time arrangements, limited training and employability opportunities, collective disempowerment, and imbalanced interpersonal power relations between employers and superiors (Julià et al., 2017).

PE is associated with poor self-rated health, frequent mental distress, and work-related injury (Koranyi et al., 2018; Peckham et al., 2019; Rönnblad et al., 2019; Van Aerden et al., 2016; Vives et al., 2020). Researchers hypothesize that PE harms health and well-being (a holistic measure of one's emotions, life satisfaction, and functioning) through three pathways: 1) hazardous physical and psychosocial working conditions; 2) social and material deprivation; and 3) the direct effects of perceived insecurity, unfairness, and powerlessness characteristic of PE (Benach et al., 2014; Bodin et al., 2020). In its different forms, poor quality employment is distributed inequitably within and across countries, with women, migrants, ethnically or racially minoritized, and young people overrepresented (ILO, 2016; Julià et al., 2017; Oddo et al., 2021), making it a likely driver of preventable health inequities.

Drawing on theories of power relations and relational social class, researchers commonly conceptualize PE as a relation in which those providing labor (workers) are disempowered with respect to those purchasing it (employers) (Fujishiro et al., 2022). Understanding employment as a power relation between workers and employers has allowed important advances in the recognition of employment as a social determinant of health, by bringing a sociological lens to the traditionally biomedical field of occupational health. This approach also suggests more concrete mechanisms to address in tackling health inequities than those implied by research on individual-level socio-economic status and health.

Social reproduction theory is a less common but complementary conceptual lens that can be used to investigate PE and health, in which the *nature of work* – how a specific type of work relates to the capitalist

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profit logic – has relevance for the *quality of employment*. Social reproduction theory explains that work that is less productive (defined in capitalist economies as less profit-generating), including work that is essential for reproducing daily life and society, tends to be valued less than work that is more productive (i.e., more profit-generating), as reflected in worse employment conditions and in categorizations such as "low skilled" (Farris & Bergfeld, 2022; Laslett & Brenner, 1989). This theoretical perspective points to another type of relationality, one based on value, that brings attention to a hierarchy between groups of workers that supports the capitalist profit logic at the root of PE and its inequitable social distribution. This different type of relationality, which complements the well-established view of PE as a relation based on power, could have consequences for health and well-being that are worth exploring empirically and could serve as another tool to spur collective action around PE and its health effects.

In the following section we provide a brief overview of power relations and relational social class theories that have been used to investigate employment-driven health inequities and we explain in more detail what social reproduction theory adds. We then illustrate the use of social reproduction theory to investigate PE and well-being by drawing on data from in-depth interviews conducted in 2022 among precariously employed food workers in New York City (NYC). We conclude with a discussion of the potential implications of this complementary perspective, one that integrates a focus on the nature of work with the quality of employment, for research and action on PE and health.

1.1. Theoretical approaches to the study of PE and health

Investigations of employment as a social determinant of health inequalities commonly draw on power relations and relational social class theories. The *power relations* approach conceptualizes PE, and its health consequences, as underpinned by an unequal power relation between employers and workers (Benach et al., 2014). This approach informs a call to investigate employment quality in specific socio-political contexts because work and workers' health are shaped by historical, socio-political, economic, and cultural forces in a given society (Fujishiro et al., 2022). A related thread engages with Link and Phelan's original call to contextualize risk factors for health (Link & Phelan, 1995) by analyzing power relations, including those between workers and supervisors, as a fundamental cause of population health inequities (Reynolds, 2021). Within a *relational social class* approach, class is operationalized relationally in terms of power and control over labor and production (Sørenson, 2000; Wright, 2009). This framework recognizes that the material welfare of some groups (capitalists) depends causally on the deprivation of others (workers), and sees this as the root cause of health inequities across social positions (Eisenberg-Guyot et al., 2022, 2023; Muntaner et al., 2015).

Less common in this literature is a focus on social reproduction, and relatedly, on the relationship not just between employers and workers, but also between different groups of workers in capitalist economies. Social reproduction is defined as "mental, manual, and emotional work aimed at providing historically, socially, and biologically defined care necessary to maintain existing life and to reproduce the next generation" (Laslett & Brenner, 1989, p. 383). According to social reproduction theory, occupations needed to reproduce daily life and society are considered "low skilled" and are characterized by poor employment conditions because of their historical identification with women's "unproductive" and "unskilled" labor in the home and with racialized populations' non-market economies, pointing to the discriminatory and socially constructed nature of the notion of skills (Bhattacharya, 2017; Farris & Bergfeld, 2022). This undervaluing is also attributed to the ambivalent relationship of socially reproductive activities with the capitalist drive for profit. Reproductive activities are often labor-intensive and have limited profit margins, though they are necessary for "productive," profit-generating work to exist. Thus, as Mignon Duffy explains, socially reproductive activities seem to "retain their invisibility as labor" even when performed by paid workers (Duffy, 2007, p. 316).

Social reproduction theory explains that social reproduction is necessary for capitalist production, but capitalists aim to pay as little as possible for it. Employers and firms have tried to get around the low productivity rates of the service sector through more intense exploitation of poorly paid racialized workers. But in the Global North, as the "low skilled," precariously employed workforce has grown with the expansion of the service sector and erosion of labor standards over the last fifty years (Farris & Bergfeld, 2022; Kalleberg, 2009), so has the "high-skilled," securely employed, professional and managerial workforce. These "high-skilled" workers, such as business analysts, management consultants, and chief marketing officers, increasingly depend on "low-skilled" workers such as domestic cleaners, nannies, beauticians, and food prep workers to maintain their consumption patterns and lifestyles (Sassen, 2008). This mirrors historical trends in labor market outcomes for different types of labor and different types of workers; however, today's labor market polarization is on a distinct order of magnitude compared to postwar decades (Piketty et al., 2018). The polarization is especially stark in "global cities" such as NYC, London, and Tokyo, where globalization drives the concentration of both highly paid professionals involved in managing and coordinating global economic processes and poorly paid workers needed to support them (Sassen, 2008). As Saskia Sassen explained in 2008, echoing earlier work on the myth of economic marginality in Latin American cities (Perlman, 1975), workers who seem to have little to do with corporate, finance-dominated economies can actually be necessary to the functioning of those economies, but can experience profound social, income, sex, and racial and ethnic segregation through their work (Sassen, 2008).

Thus, social reproduction theory emphasizes the importance of the nature of work, because the capacity of different types of work to generate profit relates to how they are valued differently, in the form of better or worse quality employment, in capitalist economies. Furthermore, the distinction between productive and socially reproductive work, between "low-skilled" and "high-skilled" work, points to the ways the welfare of workers in high-quality employment can be connected to the deprivation of workers in low-quality employment, in that the former benefit from the cheap cost of goods and services allowed by the poor employment quality of workers involved in producing or providing them. This complements power relations and relational social class perspectives by drawing attention to the capitalist profit logic that shapes production and social reproduction processes, and that is interlinked with racism, sexism, and nativism, explaining why certain social groups get pushed into different types of work more likely to be characterized by PE conditions.

2. An illustration using empirical data

To illustrate the use of social reproduction theory to investigate PE and well-being, we describe methods and findings from a qualitative study of precariously employed food workers in NYC, a place where the link – and disparity – between workers in poor- and high-quality employment is clear. In-depth interviews were conducted in 2022, when numerous workers, many of whom were precariously employed in socially reproductive occupations considered "low skilled," had been suddenly classified as essential during COVID-19 shutdowns, raising questions about the legitimacy of labor market hierarchies. In addition

Table 1
Sample description (n = 19).

		Count	%
Gender[i]	Women	8	42
	Men	11	58
Language	English	10	53
	Spanish	9	47
Occupation[ii]	Chef/cook	4	21
	Food prep worker	3	16
	Packer	3	16
	Server	2	11
	Dishwasher	2	11
	App-based delivery worker	1	5
	Other (baker, deli counter worker, cashier, brand ambassador)	4	21
Employment status at time of interview	Employed in a food job	16	84
	Unemployed	2	11
	Employed in a non-food job	1	5
Employment arrangement	Employed directly	13	68
	Employed through a temporary help/staffing agency	2	11
	Independent contractor	2	11
	Employed by contracted company (fissured employment)	1	5
	Multiple arrangements	1	5
Informal ("under the table, no social security or income taxes are paid")		4	21
Weekly hours	Full time (30 hours or more/week)	11	58
	Part time (less than 30 hours/week)	2	11
	Hours varied and could be less than 30/week	6	32
Income in previous month	Less than $1000	4	21
	$1000 to less than $2000	6	32
	$2000 to less than $2500	6	32
	$2500 to less than $4000	3	16

to an interest in food workers' experiences of PE and its influences on their well-being, social discourse at the time around essential work prompted a focus in the interviews on workers' sense of the social value of their work. Not all food jobs are considered socially reproductive, nor were they all classified as essential during pandemic shutdowns. However, drawing on Farris and Bergfeld (Farris & Bergfeld, 2022), the fact that many of them overlapped with those constructs allowed reflection on how food labor relates to the capitalist profit logic that glosses over socially reproductive work, and how this might be connected to the quality of employment and related well-being of workers who engage in it. We describe methods and findings from this study to provide an empirical example of our theoretical argument, rather than to make specific claims about the experiences of precariously employed food workers.

2.1. Setting

New York is a city characterized by a highly polarized workforce of interdependent "high-skilled" and "low-skilled" workers (Sassen, 2008). It is one of the most inequitable cities in the world, where workers in the 90th wage percentile earn seven times what those in the 10th percentile earn, and has a cost of living 80% higher than the national average (Abel & Deitz, 2019). In 2023, NYC had the highest number of resident millionaires globally (World's wealthiest cities Report 2023, 2023). Meanwhile, one in two households in NYC lives below the True Cost of Living, a geographically specific measure of income adequacy; of those, 80% include at least one working adult, indicating major issues with job quality (Kucklick & Manzer, 2023). Fortunes are primarily linked to finance, along with real estate, media, tech, and service sector firms in banking, management consultancy, law, and accountancy.

The food sector (including food production, processing, wholesale, retail, and service) contributes significantly to NYC's economy, supporting an estimated 500,000 jobs and over 40,000 businesses (Food Forward NYC, 2022). The restaurant industry alone, which accounts for the largest share of food workers in the city and across the country, contributed $27 billion dollars in taxable sales citywide in 2019 (New York State Comptroller, 2020). A minority of food workers, such as chefs and head cooks, are considered higher skilled, more socially valued, and as such are paid higher wages. However, the majority of food workers are in non-supervisory roles considered "low skilled" that pay low wages (Bureau of Labor Statistics).

2.2. Study design and methods

Findings described in this article were derived from a broader study of precariously employed food workers' experiences of their employment relationship, its influences on their well-being, their perceptions of the social value of their work, and their ideas for ways to address challenges created by their employment relationship. Eligibility was limited to those who were between the ages of 25 and 55 (considered prime working age); had worked in a food-related job for pay or profit at any time in the previous three months, or had lost a food-related job during COVID-19; performed this work in NYC; and met the criteria for PE based on a 14-item index used by the Precarious Work Research Consortium (Bosmans et al., 2023). Stratified purposive sampling was used to create a sample of food workers stratified by sex/gender and language (English, Spanish), characteristics expected to influence experiences of PE. Participants were recruited through Facebook, distribution of study advertisements at food establishments, and snowball sampling. Potential participants completed an online screening survey that collected employment and demographic information, as well as contact information for those willing to participate in an interview.

Interviews took place between February and May 2022 over videoconference (Zoom) or by telephone depending on participant preference. Oral informed consent was obtained from all study participants and conversations were audio-recorded upon participants' consent. The interview guide included open-ended questions about participants' experiences of their employment relationship, the influence of these experiences on their health and well-being, and the social value they attribute to their work in light of the "essential worker" concept.

Participants received a $40 Target gift card for taking part in the interview. Table 1 shows a description of the 19 food workers who participated in the study.

Data were analyzed using a realist approach to thematic analysis (Ritchie et al., 2013), which draws on both realist ontology (the position that at least a part of reality exists independent of our beliefs or understanding) and interpretivist epistemology (the theory that knowledge is gained by studying the meanings people give to their lived experiences in context of their material conditions, and that researchers are involved in the construction and interpretation of those meanings). Otter.ai (English) and Trint (Spanish) were used to obtain AI-generated transcriptions of the interview recordings, which were then revised and cleaned using oTranscribe. Interview data were then coded with both deductive and inductive ideas related to employment conditions and well-being; codes were adjusted iteratively as they were applied to all transcripts. Short written summaries of each code were developed and abstracted into main ideas, which were then organized into groups of connected ideas, ending with a write-up of themes that reflected patterns in participants' narratives. Further synthesis and abstraction occurred through peer debriefings between all authors during analysis and in the process of writing this article.[iii] Dedoose Version 4.12 was used for coding and analysis.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the CUNY Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy (IRB # 2020-0920).

2.3. Study findings

We describe a subset of findings from the broader study to illustrate the use of social reproduction theory in investigating PE and well-being. Focusing on the nature of work as a relevant factor for one's quality of employment allows us to highlight two types of relationality in participants' experiences and narratives, both with implications for their well-being: first, experiences of constrained power relative to their employers; and second, perceptions of being undervalued by other workers, and society more broadly, despite viewing their labor as socially and economically valuable. We emphasize the second type of relationality because the first type is more clearly conceptualized in existing literature and our findings along those lines reinforce what is already known about experiences of PE and its well-being influences.

2.3.1. Relationality based on power: workers and their employers

Interviews elicited narratives that pointed to a shared experience of constrained power in participants' relationships with their employers or managers. Constrained worker power took the form of imbalanced and highly hierarchical dynamics between supervisors and workers. Workers described changes in management structure or unilateral manager decisions, e.g., around work organization, scheduling, or pay, that drastically altered participants' working and employment conditions with no room for worker input. Participants felt and were often told they were easily replaceable, and that when it came to management decisions or employment conditions, they could either "take it or leave it."

Many participants described their pay as insufficient, especially in context of the high cost of living in NYC, and few had the power to negotiate higher wages with their employers. Other participants were satisfied with their wages; however, many expressed the idea that you get "nothing but pay" from food jobs. Where participants described access to benefits (e.g., employer-sponsored health insurance, paid time off) or entitlement to rights (e.g., paid sick leave), they often described them as things that they had to search for or navigate on their own, as employers did not take responsibility for providing or explaining them. Another example of constrained worker power in relation to their employers or managers took the form of the latter's limited or inadequate attention to workplace safety. Participants described stress, anxiety, frustration, a sense of pressure, and feeling disrespected as results of constrained power in relation to their managers or employers.

Some participants described relationships with their employers in a positive light, for instance, saying that they felt appreciated at work or that their employers gave them opportunities to learn and advance in their industry, and felt this had a positive influence on their emotional state. However, most of these examples depended on the goodwill of employers or managers, rather than on circumstances in the workers' power.

2.3.2. Relationality based on value: food workers and the rest of society

Interviews brought to light another type of relationality that existing literature on PE and health has focused less closely on: that between food workers and other workers, and between food workers and society more broadly. These ideas emerged specifically when participants were asked about the social value of their work in the food sector. Some food workers talked about their work as valuable in a life-affirming, reproductive sense ('everyone needs to eat'). Others talked about how it supported the labor of other workers in the specific context of a fast-paced, global city ('I provide fast, nutritious meals to other workers so they can keep working'). Both interpretations were reflected in this quote from a 36-year-old app-based food delivery worker:

> I feel that it's an essential job, totally essential, because we're talking about food, we're talking about the time of people who sometimes, due to the fact that they're working in offices, to try to make the most of their time, because they don't have time to go out to buy, to place an order, and they save I think more than 40 minutes, an hour, in that time, you know? In order to continue doing, making the most of their time, to continue working, to continue living daily life, and above all to have the benefit of being able to feed themselves.

Some felt the social value of their work was evident in the fact that they never stopped working during pandemic shutdowns, again because everyone needs to eat ('we risked our health to feed others'), or because they helped others feel a "semblance of normalcy" in difficult times, as a 51-year-old café server put it. Some had felt their work was socially valuable before the pandemic, while others indicated the experience of working during the crisis had shaped a new sense of value. A 50-year-old deli counter worker noted:

> I've learned to have a whole new respect for working in the grocery store. When we were going through the pandemic, we never closed, we continued to work massive hours, we stayed open late. It was at a point where there was nothing open in this area but a laundromat, a liquor store, and the grocery store. […] At the peak of the pandemic, it was so surreal to be sitting here in the store looking out the window, and you see people lining up to get in the store.

Others did not think their work in the food sector was necessarily more socially valuable than other jobs, but they felt their work contributed to the economy and the social fabric of NYC. Some measured the value of their labor in part through the creativity, effort, and skill it involved, developed on the job and in some cases also through formal training, with one participant noting there's a need for people to do food work that others don't want to do because it's difficult. In addition to signaling value, skill and creativity were linked with a strong sense of job satisfaction some participants derived from the work itself. Some specifically pointed to this satisfaction or passion as a reason workers stayed in the industry despite poor employment conditions. A

[i] Gender identity categories provided were Woman/Cisgender woman, Man/Cisgender man, Transgender woman, Transgender man, Gender variant/non-conforming, or prefer not to answer.

[ii] Total percentage exceeds 100 due to rounding.

[iii] Once the themes were written up and the choice of quotes was nearly finalized, EFV used Google translate to translate the Spanish-language quotes into English and did one round of corrections. LS then adjusted the corrected translations to ensure they stayed as close to the original meaning as possible.

38-year-old baker described his work as art:

> Emotionally or mentally I feel good because it's something that I've chosen, it's a job that I like to do, it's a job that I find fascinating, its a job that I'm passionate about. Not so much as a job for me, but rather because it's like my passion, because it's my art.

A few participants internalized "low-skilled" discourse when referring to their jobs, for example, describing their work as an occupation that is not very difficult or important, or when suggesting their hourly wage below the legal minimum wage was more than enough for the work. However, each of these participants contradicted this discourse in some way in other parts of the interview, either expressing the idea that they had underestimated how much effort the job required or saying that workers like themselves should be respected more, in recognition of both their humanity and what they contribute with their labor. A 49-year-old university food service worker initially described her work as "just washing pots." Later in the interview, she brought up a January 2022 speech (Hess, 2022) by NYC Mayor Eric Adams, in which he characterized various services workers as "low skill workers" who "don't have the academic skills to sit in a corner office" and who needed corporate workers to return to their offices to stimulate business:

> I think the food industry gotta be more respected, we should be more respected. Because, again, based on what the [mayor] said in his first speech, he really watered down the food industry's hard work. He made it sound like we just, didn't-go-to-school-past-sixth-grade type of stuff. I think that was so disrespectful, 'cause we all people, regardless of our education, one's education, we all people. We're all doing a service for others.

Participants who perceived their labor as socially valuable in some way felt this value was not recognized by employers or society, during the pandemic or generally. As examples, participants pointed to the ways COVID-19 safety was not taken very seriously in the workplace, the idea that "essential workers" was a nice talking point but had done little good for workers' conditions, and experiences of hostility from the public. Here participants expressed various ideas related to feeling invisible, in the margins, or disrespected, and sometimes these ideas were expressed with a quieter sense of pain or disappointment than the more direct and clearcut frustration some felt towards their employers or managers. Participants talked about being rarely thanked, working behind the scenes, and not having much voice. They talked about how the public takes their work for granted, including during holidays when everyone else seems to be off work. A 27-year-old food prep worker explained,

> People need to eat every day and sometimes, most of the time, people forget that we are right there. I can say, some people really care about us, but some people just want to eat and you know, 'I pay for this,' and they just, 'you just need to cook for me,' I feel [it's] like that.

This discussion led some participants to explicitly point out the contradictions between the value of their work as they perceived it and aspects of their PE, as this 46-year-old sous chef did:

> Yes, kitchen workers are essential for society, for cities. People eat, they have to eat. Do you get me? And then that they leave us with no way to survive ourselves, when we're providing something for people who have to eat, have to feed themselves?

The discussion led other participants to argue that labor in general is undervalued, and that a job should allow one to live well regardless of its value in society. In both cases, conversations with participants about the social value of their work in the food sector brought into focus the notion that PE is part of a broader hierarchy, where certain types of work and certain types of workers are valued more than others. A 54-year-old catering event chef identified explicitly the ways her labor supported the "masters of industry" who are concentrated so highly in NYC, and wondered why company successes should not extend to workers too:

> All of these fortune 500 companies, masters of industry people, who must eat breakfast at seven o'clock in the morning. Which means I have to get up at 3:30 [am]. […] All of these kinds of things that nobody– they just take for granted, that there will be somebody there to do that. And not only do they take that for granted, they also want that person to be afraid of losing their job, their low-wage paying job. Because in their minds, that's going to make that person more hungry to come to work. I don't understand why it has to be such a miserable environment. Why can't we work in an industry where you are regularly recognized for the good things that you do, you're made to take accountability for the bad things that happen, everybody has a decent work environment and quality of life? I don't understand why that's a bad thing. If my food service company is making money, why shouldn't I make money too? If you're successful, why can't I be successful, too?

3. Discussion

The view of employment as a power relation between workers and employers, guided by power relations and relational social class theories, is a well-established perspective in existing research on PE and health. We described that type of relationality briefly in the illustrative qualitative study findings above, as it was present in the data and should remain a central focus in PE research. A complementary but underutilized lens, guided by social reproduction theory, points to a relationality between workers in high- and low-quality employment based on different levels of value attributed to their work. In our empirical example, most food workers felt that their labor supported life, supported other workers, or contributed to the economy and social fabric of NYC, reflecting both socially reproductive and productive interpretations of their work. However, many expressed the idea that they felt their labor and they themselves were invisible, marginal, or undervalued, all of which are relational ideas (i.e., invisible in the eyes of others, less important than others, undervalued by others).

Awareness at being undervalued – a relational experience absent in most conceptual models of PE and health – could be part of the mechanism by which PE harms well-being, perhaps especially in highly unequal contexts similar to NYC. Existing research suggests that marginal status (Irvine & Rose, 2024), social precarity (Matilla-Santander et al., 2022), and social marginality might be experiences or consequences of PE (Macmillan & Shanahan, 2021). However, in those studies, marginality is conceptualized as an individual-level construct. In our food worker example, the sense of being undervalued, and the disappointment that made some workers feel, was clearly relational. We have encountered similar sentiments in members of our groups' research among precariously employed careworkers (Tsui et al., 2022), suggesting, as we would expect, that awareness of being undervalued compared to other (non-precariously employed) workers extends beyond the food sector.

The perception of being undervalued would echo a long history of research on occupational prestige, an indicator of social status imparted by one's occupation (MacKinnon & Langford, 1994), which has been correlated with self-rated health (Fujishiro et al., 2010). Similarly, Wilkinson and Pickett (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010) have written about how pride, dignity, and self-confidence are easier emotions to have the higher up one is on the social ladder. Importantly, however, as our empirical example suggests, some workers might question any marginality and low status attributed to their work. In our example, food workers' attitudes around the value of their labor – whether "essential" to society or not – informed a shared desire to be able to meet their basic needs from, and experience dignity in, their jobs. Most participants felt some degree of pride or self-confidence, whether as workers in general or as food workers specifically, and they wanted their value to be recognized and reflected in the quality of their jobs and in the way the

public treats them.

Focusing on the links between the nature of work and the quality of employment could allow for discussion of the ways different types of labor support society and contribute to the capitalist economic structure in specific socio-political contexts. This could create space for study participants, and researchers, to reflect on labor market hierarchies that the formers' labor upholds. Practically, this would mean asking participants about features of their employment *and* of their work, the latter of which can sometimes be more concrete and front of mind for working people than the former. In the example we provided, a social reproduction lens motivated specific questioning in the interview about participants' sense of the social value of their food labor in light of the "essential worker" concept, which evoked participant critiques of the poor quality of their employment and of their undervaluing by employers, other workers, and society more broadly, including among those participants who internalized notions of their work being "low skilled."

Attention to the type and characteristics of work being done in PE conditions could lead to more direct questioning of everyone's roles in valuing some labor more than others. Elucidating the social and economic relationships that keep PE precarious could be another way to help us see more clearly the capitalist profit logic underlying diminished health and well-being among workers in PE. A focus on this profit logic and the ways it creates hierarchies of value between types of work and workers could help protect against reverting to 'solutions' that reinforce narratives of work of more and less value. To avoid unintentionally naturalizing the existence of social threats to health equity such as PE, this perspective could also help reveal the ways contemporary organization and divisions of labor that rely on PE are political choices (Nedel & Bastos, 2020). At the same time, a continued focus on the quality of employment as a power relation can help make ties among capitalism, racism, sexism, nativism, and health inequity more concrete and obvious. The functioning of capitalism relies on racism, sexism, and nativism; highlighting the ties between these structural forces could allow researchers to explain their interdependence better and how they matter collectively for health.

In addition to potentially expanding our understanding of the drivers and effects of PE, this approach could have implications for action. Supporting workers in questioning labor market hierarchies, as participants in our example did, is a needed step towards bringing about changes in the overarching structure that researchers often advocate for at the end of our articles on PE and social class-related health inequities. This could include finding ways for PE and health research to be more useful to the labor movement generally and in specific places. For example, the concept of PE is less familiar to workers and the general public in the US than it is in parts of Europe. Researchers could make PE more concrete and recognizable to workers in the US by highlighting it in specific types of work, but then could use the PE lens to show how workers across multiple sectors are united in the ways their labor supports and is valued less than those at the top. The particular type of work that one does can also be important to acknowledge because, as we saw in our example, deriving satisfaction or a sense of meaning from specific occupations can be a reason some workers accept poor employment conditions; this same satisfaction or sense of meaning can also impel workers in PE to fight for something better.

The contributions of many types of workers to the economy and to the biological or social life in specific places where they work should be made visible and valued for what they are. As Farris and Bergfeld note, while social reproduction theory helps us understand why certain occupations are more likely to be characterized by PE conditions in a capitalist society, it should not limit our politics (Farris & Bergfeld, 2022). The reproductive/productive binary can justify other scenarios where certain types of work are valued while others are not (Farris & Bergfeld, 2022). This was recognized implicitly by some workers in our empirical example, who argued that one should be able to live comfortably from a job, regardless of what it is. Thus, rather than suggesting valuing some forms of work more than others, our point is that attention to the links between the nature of work and the quality of employment can be another useful way to draw attention to the economies, labor markets, and forms of high-quality employment that PE supports.

4. Conclusion

Viewing PE through the lens of power relations and relational social class theories has allowed important advances in the recognition of employment conditions as a social determinant of health. Social reproduction theory, less commonly used in the literature, suggests that the nature of work, i.e., the forms of production and social reproduction that PE takes, is relevant for the quality of employment in capitalist economies. Drawing on social reproduction theory could enrich our understanding of the mechanisms linking PE with health and well-being and could serve as another tool to facilitate collective questioning of labor market hierarchies that contribute to preventable health inequities in our societies.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Emilia F. Vignola: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Emily Q. Ahonen:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Luis Saavedra:** Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Investigation, Formal analysis. **Emma K. Tsui:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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