Profit over People? Evaluating Morality on the Front Line during the COVID-19 Crisis: A Front-Line Service Manager's Confession and Regrets

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Abstract

This article gives voice to a front-line manager in food retailing, discussing her experiences during the COVID-19 outbreak which, overnight, became an 'essential service', leaving employees exposed to the virus. The article utilizes the 'moral economy' framework to understand how organizational policies, which were developed by senior management and implemented by front-line managers, denied human flourishing and well-being during a period of socio-economic crisis. The article captures the complexity of morality in organizations across managerial levels. Questioning the morality of managerial decisions during the pandemic and emphasizing how these are driven by the intense competition in the market, it reveals that front-line managers are caught between conflicting moral values and expectations. This study contributes to the 'moral economy' framework suggesting that the structural constraints of front-line managerial authority have challenged their moral values and narrowed the space for safe and meaningful work and well-being for front-line managers and employees.

Keywords

COVID-19, food retail, men in the middle, moral economy, service work

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Introduction

This 'On the Frontline' article presents Sam's testimony, a front-line manager (FLM henceforth) in a leading home-grown food retail organization in Cyprus, with 20 years of experience in the sector. The author originally met Sam as part of his PhD and got in touch again in April 2020 to ask her to keep a diary of her experiences working during the COVID-19 pandemic and to co-author this article. Sam happily agreed to this request. She kept an electronic diary for three weeks, which provided rich and important information that was used to structure her story. The article provides another level of understanding of front-line experiences. It reflects on the 'moral economy' framework to understand how organizational policies and decisions, which are developed by senior management and implemented by FLMs, support or deny human flourishing and well-being (Bolton et al., 2015; Sayer, 2007) during a socio-economic crisis.

This study focuses on food retailing, which has become an essential service during the pandemic. Food retail nonmanagerial workers, who until recently were somewhat invisible to wider society, have been declared by international governments as 'key workers' who are keeping communities fed. This was a promising development, potentially leading to the recognition of retail workers' contribution to society and the necessary reassessment of the precarious conditions of these jobs (O'Brady, 2019). The retail reality, however, remains bleak and disturbing. As Sam reports and emphasizes, retailers have put 'profit over people', an approach which is driven by the intense competition in the Cyprus food retail market. The investment of large multinational companies in the country, and the synergies between home-grown retailers, including Sam's employer, with UK retailers, has led to intense price and market share competition and, therefore, the adoption of a low-road employment strategy (Hadjisolomou et al., 2017). A particular concern, according to Sam, is that competition in the market has intensified during the pandemic, leaving workers hazardously exposed to the health and social costs of COVID-19 (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2020).

This article contributes to Sayer's (2000, 2007, 2011) moral economy framework and its central argument of the vital connection of ethics and morality to well-being in any social system; in this case employment. As Sayer (2000, 2007) reports, we are ethical social beings evaluating behaviour and developing a sense of how actions affect well-being. Sayer (2011) further highlights that: 'if we encounter someone who is disrespectful, dishonest, callous, or selfish we are likely to react strongly (p.144) . . . [as] our ethical sentiments are primarily related to our sense of harm and flourishing' (p.20). Sam's account reflects these arguments, questioning the morality of senior management's decisions during the pandemic and the impact these decisions have on her well-being, as well as her family's well-being. Crucially, Sam's story reveals another level of complexity in organizations which is related to the notion of power imbalance and its impact on morality and well-being (Sayer, 2011). Sam discusses how FLMs are constrained in a top-down decision-making process that challenges their moral values and narrows the space for safe and meaningful work and well-being for both FLMs and employees. FLMs' powerlessness to challenge the immoral, as Sam calls them, decisions of senior management is important to further understand how morality in organizations is a fluid concept which depends on market structures and dynamics. Reflecting on Sam's account, and

paraphrasing Sayer (2007), this article shows that FLMs are part of social and employment structures that are ethically problematic, especially in a period of crisis, and their powerless actions are insufficient to correct or change them.

Food retail, COVID-19 and the moral economy

Undeniably, food retail employers have adopted a low-road employment paradigm, failing to recognize the importance of the *human* in their operations (ILO, 2015; Johansson, 2007). As O'Brady (2019) argues, food retailing represents the epitome of precarity and worker insecurity. In raising this argument, similar to Bolton and Houlihan (2011), this article is not seeking to romanticize employment or hunt for a revolutionary change. We must, however, acknowledge that organizations are 'important "moral arenas" for their members . . . [and] how they are treated within them significantly matters . . . [influencing] their moral sentiments . . . and well-being' (Sayer, 2011: 22).

Bolton and Laaser (2013), reflecting on Sayer's moral economy (2000, 2007) and his focus on human flourishment, note that this framework offers a timely understanding on work and employment and captures an essential sociological inquiry under capitalism: if and how capitalism dehumanizes workers. Sayer (2011) argues that this approach allows for the examination of the moral and social implications of economic processes for individuals and communities, and for economic activities to positively affect their well-being (Bolton et al., 2012). This article agrees that this framework allows us to understand the actions of management and how employees are treated and experience work. It therefore allows us to grasp the impact on their well-being, as well as the impact on individual lives, communities, wider institutions (such as the family) and society (Bolton and Laaser, 2013; Bolton et al., 2015; Sayer, 2000).

Focusing on work and employment under capitalism, Sayer argues that human needs are not restricted to economic and physical necessities, but include more complex social and psychological needs. Individual well-being contains social elements, highlighting the importance of decent work that provides both economic and social dimensions to meet human needs and achieve human flourishing (Bolton and Laaser, 2013; Bolton et al., 2015). However, when employment is driven by short-term economic goals, this limits the availability of meaningful work and generates a disconnect between people, communities and organizations (Sayer, 2009 cited in Bolton et al., 2015: 585), as evident in Sam's testimony.

Sam reflects on the reality of food retailing during the COVID-19 pandemic and argues that the organization's short-term focus on increasing sales and profit generates a precarious and hazardous working environment for front-line staff. Evidently, the notion of managerial morality is disconnected to the changing and turbulent business and societal context. This is similar to arguments which, through the moral economy lens, recognize the 'erosion of thick relationships within the workplace and its replacement by thin relationships where work becomes instrumental' (Bolton et al., 2012: 129). This is reflected in Sam's report detailing how food retail management has treated front-line employees as merely a necessary tool for business operations to continue during the health crisis, with minimal protections in place and, therefore, failing their legal and moral obligations to protect workers, their families and society's health and well-being.

Central to the moral economy framework is the notion of lay morality, which introduces people as ethical and evaluative beings (Sayer, 2011: 142). Lay morality informs the actions and decisions of people who are engaged in economic practices and emphasizes the 'day-to-day social dilemmas' they face (Bolton and Laaser, 2013: 515). Research refers to individuals' on-going moral evaluations about how people should treat one another in ways beneficial to well-being, but also their responses to given situations (Bolton and Laaser, 2013; Sayer, 2007). In this article, Sam evaluates the actions and lay morality of managers during the pandemic outbreak, providing an understanding of the social and moral dimension of working life in a period of crisis. It remains critical for the organizational members' well-being that management has a moral responsibility for others which, worryingly, becomes more negotiated and conditional in a period of crisis. This is *evident* in Sam's account, being in constant negotiation with her subordinates, as well as with upper management to negate the potential negative consequences and risks emerging from the top-down decisions cascaded to the front-end.

As Sam's account reveals, however, FLMs' hold limited ability to act morally as this is constrained by the power imbalance embedded in their employment relationship (Bolton and Laaser, 2013) and the FLMs' conflicting role being simultaneously agents and victims of capital (Hadjisolomou, 2019). The moral economy framework challenges the liberal theory conception that each individual is responsible for himself and respecting the rights of others (Sayer, 2000). Indeed, as evident in Sam's testimony, FLM actions are restricted within an expected unitarist managerial regime which is driven by the market dynamics (Hadjisolomou, 2019). This reinforces Sayer's (2000: 91) argument that markets are generally regarded as the major force weakening the moral economy, pressurizing, encouraging and even obliging individuals to act purely in self-interest. Understandably, market pressures, especially in a period of crisis, force employers to act, 'if not immorally, then at least amorally' (Sayer, 2000: 91) and, as this article shows, this is filtered across organizational levels, leaving FLMs standing between conflicting expectations.

'FLMs in the middle': No space for moral decisions?

Industrial sociologists have long discussed the contradictory pressures for supervisors from above and below, 'trapped' as the middle strata worker between labour and management. Hirszowicz (1985) provides a useful description of the 'man in the middle' problem, arguing that supervisors are caught between two different social and organizational structures. On the one hand, they interact daily with the workers they supervise and, on the other, they are part of the management team, receiving orders from their superiors and experiencing pressures to act in favour of the capital.

A central theme in the contemporary literature remains the 'powerlessness' of FLMs, the lack of real autonomy for this role, and the competing demands emerging from senior managers, employees, as well as customers (Hadjisolomou, 2019; Lloyd and Payne, 2014). Research has shown that managers are highly constrained by the centralized control applied by head office, particularly for issues related to people management (Bolton and Houlihan, 2010; Lloyd and Payne, 2014). In the same vein, Carter et al. (2014) discuss the conflicting demands emerging from the different groups within which FLMs

interact. They have to maintain the cooperation of their subordinates, who do not necessarily identify with the organization and, at the same time, meet top management's requirements and act in the interests of the firm. Sam's story reflects these arguments, explaining the limited managerial authority and power of FLMs during an attempt from senior management to tie FLMs' roles and actions more tightly to the interests of the employer, which is to remain competitive in the market during the COVID-19 crisis. Worryingly, this ignores the social and health risks to employees' well-being.

This, unavoidably, leads to several issues for social relations at work, as Sam discusses. The powerlessness and role conflict experienced by FLMs during the COVID-19 pandemic limits and/or denies them access to decision making on actions to protect workers from the health and social risks associated with the pandemic, therefore denying them access to resources to respond morally to the changing market and societal dynamics. This, however, does not free them from being held responsible for the organization's 'immoral' actions, as Sam calls them. These managers are 'trapped' in the middle of contradictory values and expectations. On the one hand, senior management forces them to apply a system that is in contrast to their personal moral values and, on the other, employees characterize them as unethical and hold them responsible for risking their own and their families' health and well-being.

Reflecting on the moral economy framework allows us to capture the complexity of morality in organizations, especially in a period of crisis (Bolton and Laaser, 2013). The structural constraints of front-line managerial authority and power have an impact on people's well-being, as well as their families, communities and society. Arguably, in times of uncertainty, managerial lay morality may be disconnected from requirements for human flourishing in organizations. The potential moral and social implications of the COVID-19 crisis aftermath for individuals and society need to be considered and are worth further empirical and theoretical exploration.

Sam's story

Food retail, 'profit over people' and (im)moral economy

Food retail is one of the sectors of the economy that, despite the lockdown measures, has remained open to serve the public. Employees, therefore, were forced to remain in work as normal, despite the high risk of infection from the virus. Management tried to give staff a sense of protection by putting a limit on the number of customers in the store, developing policies for physical and social distancing between staff, and decongesting both the front line and back office areas by increasing the number of shifts in order to have fewer bodies on the shop floor. In this way, absence rates were kept low. When the schools closed, however, some took advantage of the fact that the government announced a special leave allowance and stayed home on the basis that they had nobody to take care of their children. This left some stores with almost no checkout staff to man the extra shifts. In one of the stores, most front-line checkout staff were absent from work on the 'pretext', as my manager called it, that they belonged to vulnerable groups. I'm aware that this had upset management and I believe that, sadly, with the first opportunity these individuals will be appraised negatively. Upsettingly, individuals who decided to stay

home have already been stigmatized. One of the senior managers has left hints that this behaviour would not go unnoticed when we return to normality. He's been mentioning to all managers how disappointed he is with staff's decision to stay home due to the disruption this has caused on the front-line operations. He, indirectly, almost threatened staff. This is a surprising and immoral message from senior management who has not realized employees' worries for getting sick and transferring the virus at home.

It is morally different to reward those who risk their health, and their families' health, to support the organization during this crisis, rather than choosing to penalize those who decided to stay home to protect their families. I empathize with the decisions of those employees. Since the beginning of the pandemic, supermarkets were receiving high numbers of visitors every day. Even before the lockdown measures were announced in Cyprus, the situation in stores was already extremely dangerous. At the time, we were bombarded with news regarding the situation in China and Italy and customers already started panic buying, without realizing that there is a risk to get infected or infect us. We had hundreds of customers in the store every hour. There were no regulations for using masks, gloves, or even antiseptics, and definitely no regulations for social distancing. All of these came later. Customers were pushing each other over toilet paper and pasta, and we had to deal with it.

Days later, the health crisis began, and we had the first cases in the country. Worryingly, management did not consider that there was any serious risk for staff. For example, there was a case of a checkout employee who was abroad and returned the day before the strict lockdown in the country was announced. According to governmental guidelines, upon her return to Cyprus she would have to stay in quarantine for 14 days and get tested for coronavirus before returning to work. I went to the store manager and I said: 'Mary is returning from Germany tomorrow, how are we dealing with this?'. The response surprised me. He said: 'Call her to come in and don't mention to anyone that she was abroad'. Because the stores were so busy and the shifts could not be covered, that girl was called in, risking her health, but also everybody else's health that came in contact with her, including myself. I was very upset at that point. It was me that had to call her and ask her to come in to work, even though I did not agree with that decision. It was not, however, on my discretion; I had to follow my store manager's orders, knowing that I was putting my health and others at risk.

My biggest worry was that I was putting my family's health at risk. I didn't care about my health; it's my husband that I was mostly worried about. He has serious health issues and I was a walking health-bomb for him. Most of the senior managers stayed at home. One of them was calling me on the front-desk, often, and was asking me: 'Is it busy?'. 'Yes, it's very busy.' 'Oh, I can't leave the house', he was saying. He's also in a vulnerable group suffering from heart disease. But my partner also suffers from the same pathology and I'm a threat to his life. I should also have stayed home. This was a very distressing period for me. I was constantly crying. I just didn't want to be in work. But I need the money, so that's not an option. I was going in to work and I was always very careful not to touch anyone or anything, not to get close to anyone. My partner and I didn't sleep in the same bed anymore; we weren't even sitting in the same room. I was sterilizing every surface and corner of the house – everywhere I touched. I was coming home from work and I was taking my clothes off before getting in. I got to the point of paranoia and germ-phobia.

The media referred to us as 'retail heroes' and we appreciate this. What people don't know, however, is that food retail staff, especially us on the front line, remained at risk, because senior management was slow to provide enough protective measures. Protective panels have been installed on the checkout desks, employees sit at a distance from each other and have to wear gloves and masks, while customers who enter the store also have to clean their hands and wear a mask. Today, these measures are compulsory by the government. At the time, however, it took 15 days from the beginning of the lockdown for any protective measures to be introduced in the organization. Sadly, these were not necessarily introduced to protect employees, but to make customers feel safe and attract them into the store. For example, the staff continued to take breaks in groups of three, as the company policy suggests. Additionally, at the end of every shift, checkout employees have to 'check-in' their drawer. This is a time-consuming process where we, FLMs, are responsible for counting the money in their drawer before letting them go. We only had available a small office to do this, where, at the end of each shift, eight to ten people were squeezed in, waiting to 'check-in', keeping no physical distance. These examples show that protective measures were merely introduced where the customer was present, neglecting staff interaction on the operational background of the business. I tried to intervene and request senior management to change the break policy and to provide us with a larger and safer space for employees to 'check-in', allowing physical distance. I was partly heard. Breaks are now for a maximum of two employees at a time and a larger office space became available for us to use. One could argue that senior management was supportive in this case and accommodated our requests for physical distance. My view is that senior management should have been more proactive in protecting staff, rather than utilizing protective measures purely as a 'marketing tool' to attract customers in the store.

Management, even today, doesn't seem to realize the seriousness of the situation, or they choose to ignore it, to secure the current increasing profits for the organization. During the last few months, mainly due to the panic buying, stores have been extremely busy, shelves were emptying in minutes and restocking has been nonstop. Obviously, the company shows extremely high sales and profits – up to four times higher than Christmas sales. It is very sad to see, however, that management actually puts profit over people.

The management's 'profit-first' approach is evident by the disturbing incident of denying disclosing that one of the owners and directors was positive for COVID-19. He was having symptoms, such as a constant cough, and without taking any precautions he was still working and visiting the stores across the island, endangering the health of hundreds of people. He decided to stay home when he was officially tested and diagnosed positive for COVID-19. By that point, however, he'd been in contact with probably every store and line manager, as well as the majority of front-line staff. The day before his test he was at my desk. We were standing there chatting and watching customers rushing in and out of the store. The next day he didn't come into work. They said he had flu and he stayed at home. Employees weren't aware of his real sickness. Only a few managers knew about his condition, including myself. When I found out that he was positive I had a panic attack and I urgently wanted to get tested. Disturbingly, I was asked to keep the fact that he was 'positive' a secret because management knew that if this received publicity, we would lose customers.

A few days later my partner had a heart attack and was transferred to the hospital. They tested him for COVID-19 and his result came out as 'unclear'. When I received the call from the hospital with those results, I panicked and accused myself that I've infected my partner. I went straight to a COVID-19 test laboratory. They refused to run the test without the employer's written confirmation, as required by the government's protocol. I was desperate to get tested so I decided to pay and get tested privately. I was a risk to my family. I never called the company to inform them I got tested, although they did find out eventually. My test was negative, as well as my partner's second test. This was a massive relief for me. The worst feeling a human can feel is that you are responsible for someone's death, and if my partner got infected at that point he would have died.

After the incident with the 'positive' manager, the company, selectively, sent 15 people, out of 1700 employees, mainly managers, to get tested. Not a single employee was sent to get tested at that point, even though many were also in daily contact with him. Alarmingly, the test took place in a laboratory chosen by the CEO, with the condition that the test results would be directed only to the company email of our Health and Safety Officer. This is illegal, violating not only our privacy and the General Data Protection Legislation, but also the government's regulations regarding COVID-19 test results. Positive results should be reported directly to the NHS, who would then take action to track a possible spread of the virus. We heard that happening in our direct competitor who had a positive case in one of their stores. The government decided on the closure of the store until it gets fully disinfected and for all employees in that store to get tested. This carried a significant financial cost for the organization as the store remained closed for 10 days. Nevertheless, possibly the highest cost was the bad publicity for the organization, with customers being scared to shop in any store of that company. In fact, after this incident, we've experienced a significant increase in customer numbers in our stores. This has driven the, in my opinion, immoral decision for management to bypass the NHS services and keep any news of positive results within the organization to avoid leaks to the media and, therefore, bad publicity. Fortunately, none of the tests came out positive.

'FLMs in the middle': Limited space for moral decisions

We live in a small community, and rumours from various sources, outside and inside the company, were spread saying that one of the owners and senior directors had contracted the virus. Unsurprisingly, members of the staff that remained in work were in a state of panic and started asking me if this is true. Many of the girls have young babies and some live with their parents. Although we knew he was positive with the virus, we were asked to lie and confirm nothing. I kept lying to them saying: 'It's just flu'.

I found myself in a morally conflicting situation. On one side, the management told us that if we let it leak, especially for that specific individual who, while he was sick, visited almost all the stores, there was a high probability that all the stores of the company would close, at least until they were disinfected, which would damage the finances of the organization. Additionally, the company would be forced to test all employees, which is also a significant cost. I understand the management's viewpoint and the financial risk this entails. I was, however, forced to hide the truth and put thousands of people's health at risk, including my family's health.

My family reacted very negatively to this decision. I tried to explain to them my position and that I had no choice but to follow the management's decision and to falsify the truth. I am not proud of myself and I understand my responsibility of putting my subordinates' and their families' lives at risk. I deeply regret this; however, I had no choice at the time. If I was confirming that our director was positive, many of our staff would go off sick and the organization would have been forced to shut down. Additionally, I was afraid I would be stigmatized by management as being responsible for this, risking my position and my job. We are entering a period of recession and increasing unemployment, and no one wants to experience again the conditions of 2013–2014 when Cyprus had one of the highest unemployment figures in Europe. Remaining in work is extremely precious now and needs to be protected in any way possible. In this case, I had to put my moral values on the side and follow management's decision, even though I disagreed with it, to protect the organization's financial stability and not put my job at risk.

Being a front-line manager during such periods of financial uncertainty, you have to make choices that are mainly in the interests of the organization, whether you agree with them or not. Unavoidably, we stand in a middle position. We are not fully part of the management, but we still represent their interests. I tried to give voice to my team, and I asked management to develop more measures to keep employees, and therefore their families, safe and healthy. However, when such measures became a hindrance to the financial stability of the organization, employees' safety was put on hold. From a philosophical point of view, this is an immoral and unethical approach to manage people, as management is indeed morally responsible for their people, their families and society. The business reality, however, is bounded with ethical and moral conundrums and choices that we, as managers, have to solve, although we, as employees, do not agree with them. Unfortunately, until organizations and senior management realize their real moral role in society and the impact this has on people's well-being, as well as on their families and society in general, morality remains an abstract concept on which philosophers, intellectuals and academics will keep debating. Managers, especially FLMs, oscillate between their personal morality and the organizational 'profit-first' approach. Unquestionably, the latter is always the winner, especially in the period of social and economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is part of Sam's story.

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