The Myth of the Heroic Essential Worker and COVID-19

Socioeconomic status (SES) is known to affect the survival of cancer patients, likely due to Communication and discourse are powerful aspects of everyday life that constrain and organize how individuals speak, think, and act. Thus, discourse examination reveals power systems behind common rhetoric and social imagery. In the COVID-19 pandemic, critical examination of the “essential” worker discourse reveals their socio-economic reality under contemporary capitalism. I examined the narratives in long form journalism and hard news media that capture active discourses surrounding the “essential worker.” The labeling of frontline grocery workers as “essential” functions as a rhetorical proxy for just and ethical labor relations under corporate rule. Furthermore, “essential” is a discursive tool to perpetuate structural abuse facing low waged "essential" workers by framing their subjugation as indispensable to contemporary capitalism. My work underscores how popular discourses reflect and reinforce existing power structures affecting workers within the broader food system.