

## IWER: Selected Doctoral Theses

### **“Essays on Unemployment”**

**Author:** Claire McKenna (2024)

**Committee:** Paul Osterman (chair), Erin Kelly, Michael Piore

**Abstract:**

This dissertation explores the factors that shape individual labor force transitions after job loss. Using mixed methods, I explore how people navigate the aftermath of job loss in the U.S. and the variables that influence this process. In the first essay, I use in-depth interviews with a diverse group of women in Greater Boston to understand how individual trajectories after job loss take shape. These women had been separated from hourly service employment because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and I trace their responses after that separation in terms of intensity of search effort and jobs pursued. I offer a richer understanding of what women do and how they feel in the aftermath of job loss. I also propose a more multifaceted view of the factors influencing unemployed women’s decision-making with respect to their labor market positions and relationships with work. This type of qualitative analysis emphasizes that many women strive for labor market outcomes that align with politicians’ rhetoric about the importance of steady work but often encounter obstacles that set them back. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of policy changes aimed at helping women employed in low-paid work achieve greater stability. In the second essay, I explore institutional influences on individual labor force transitions after job loss in greater depth. Specifically, I explore the role of unemployment insurance (UI), a social insurance program that provides people who have lost their jobs with temporary income to meet basic needs while they job search. Combining linked Current Population Survey data with state administrative sources, I investigate the degree to which preexisting features of state UI programs affected job finding of the non-employed and job quality of the reemployed during the COVID-19 pandemic. During a period of unprecedented federal expansion, I try to understand the degree to which pre-pandemic features of state UI programs remained important. The role of interstate variation, particularly the influence of stricter states, is increasingly relevant, as more states grow emboldened to challenge established UI system norms or break with the federal partner. This essay contributes to the small but growing literature that traces disparate labor force outcomes to state UI policy differences. Further, it contributes a new dimension of insight to the vast UI literature by exploring the role of states. Read together, this dissertation contributes insight to issues and debates that are central to work and employment, a field committed to surfacing the labor market’s most pressing challenges and proposing solutions to make work more equitable and humane. Findings show that unemployment can be an upending force in people’s lives, and our public policy has a long way to go before it can adequately address the wide-ranging fallout.

### **“Closing the Voice Gap: Evidence from a Hospital System’s Empowerment Program”**

**Author:** Arrow Minster (2024)

**Committee:** Susan Silbey (co-chair), Erin L. Kelly (co-chair), Thomas Kochan

**Abstract:**

In an attempt to mitigate uncertainty stemming from volatile customer demand while keeping labor costs low, organizations in a host of industries frequently adjust when work occurs without taking employee input into account. The practices they use to do so often produce problematic schedules, or unstable and unpredictable hours that workers feel are out of their control and that negatively impact their lives, on and off the job. Drawing on a mix of quantitative and qualitative data from a multi-year study of a large U.S. retailer’s supply chain division, this dissertation shows that the consequences of problematic schedules are real but not inevitable. In Chapter 1, I use detailed time-keeping records from 20,000+ hourly workers across multiple business functions to construct a multidimensional measure of schedule quality. I find variation in workers’ exposure to problematic schedules, even after controlling for job, workplace, and worker characteristics, which I attribute to variation in the scheduling practices used by frontline managers. A crucial facet of job quality, schedules thus stratify workers in the same organization, and this is due not only to the work they perform but also to managerial discretion. In Chapter 2, I use interviews and fieldwork to document how frontline managers in the

retailer's e-commerce fulfillment centers (FCs) go about the complex task of scheduling. I find that despite pressures for conformity, management teams in each FC use distinct bundles of scheduling practices, which each have predictable consequences for FC performance. The bundles emanate from and reinforce the local organizational cultures in which managers are embedded, making some FCs better places to work than others. In Chapter 3, I combine my measure of schedule quality with workers' employment histories, finding that problematic schedules are associated with substantial increases in job exit. As a whole, I show that scheduling practices that at first appear cost-effective actually raise turnover and reduce performance. At the same time, managers are not totally constrained by industry, technology, or company policy in how they schedule work hours—even in highly uncertain environments, they can implement scheduling practices that are better for workers while remaining competitive

### **“Terrible Timing: The Causes and Consequences of Problematic Work Schedules”**

**Author:** Alexander Kowalski (2022)

**Committee:** Erin L. Kelly (chair), Thomas Kochan, Susan Silbey

**Abstract:**

In an attempt to mitigate uncertainty stemming from volatile customer demand while keeping labor costs low, organizations in a host of industries frequently adjust when work occurs without taking employee input into account. The practices they use to do so often produce problematic schedules, or unstable and unpredictable hours that workers feel are out of their control and that negatively impact their lives, on and off the job. Drawing on a mix of quantitative and qualitative data from a multi-year study of a large U.S. retailer's supply chain division, this dissertation shows that the consequences of problematic schedules are real but not inevitable. In Chapter 1, I use detailed time-keeping records from 20,000+ hourly workers across multiple business functions to construct a multidimensional measure of schedule quality. I find variation in workers' exposure to problematic schedules, even after controlling for job, workplace, and worker characteristics, which I attribute to variation in the scheduling practices used by frontline managers. A crucial facet of job quality, schedules thus stratify workers in the same organization, and this is due not only to the work they perform but also to managerial discretion. In Chapter 2, I use interviews and fieldwork to document how frontline managers in the retailer's e-commerce fulfillment centers (FCs) go about the complex task of scheduling. I find that despite pressures for conformity, management teams in each FC use distinct bundles of scheduling practices, which each have predictable consequences for FC performance. The bundles emanate from and reinforce the local organizational cultures in which managers are embedded, making some FCs better places to work than others. In Chapter 3, I combine my measure of schedule quality with workers' employment histories, finding that problematic schedules are associated with substantial increases in job exit. As a whole, I show that scheduling practices that at first appear cost-effective actually raise turnover and reduce performance. At the same time, managers are not totally constrained by industry, technology, or company policy in how they schedule work hours—even in highly uncertain environments, they can implement scheduling practices that are better for workers while remaining competitive.

### **“Essays on Workplace Practices in Different Institutional Settings”**

**Author:** Duanyi Yang (2020)

**Committee:** Thomas A. Kochan (co-chair), Erin L. Kelly (co-chair), Greg Distelhorst

**Abstract:**

This dissertation consists of three essays investigating how organizational policies operate within different institutional contexts and in the face of migration, demographic shifts, and globalization. The first essay examines why, given apparent widespread violations, some migrant workers choose not to pursue remedies. Using survey data from China, I find only one fourth of surveyed workers who experience labor law violations interpret their experiences as labor rights violations, and workers' social relationship with the employers prior to migration explains some of this gap. This essay extends worker grievance research tradition within labor relations by drawing on research from the sociology of law and immigration to understand how these subjective interpretative processes and social identities outside of the workplace influence grievance behaviors.

The second essay investigates whether flexible working time policies reduce the likelihood that individuals leave their employer. Using linked employer-employee data from Germany, I find that by addressing mothers' needs at a critical period in their lives, flexible working time policies encourage women of young children to both remain in the labor force and continue building their careers in a given establishment even in context with extensive state policies that support work-family reconciliation. Further, I find flexible working time policies reduce young workers' likelihood of turnover. It suggests the policies can play an important role in helping young workers develop their human capital and advance their careers.

The third essay studies an international self-regulatory initiative—the SA8000 social responsibility certification—focused on labor standards. Using industrial microdata from China, we find firms that self-regulated exhibited higher average wages than non-adopters even in context without effective surveillance and sanctions. To explain this puzzle, we theorize about self-regulation in pursuit of reputation-sensitive buyers. These buyers privately monitor their suppliers, making up for deficiencies in the broader institutional environment and reducing the expected returns of low-road firms bribing their way into self-regulatory institutions. Consistent with our theory, we find exports increased markedly after adopting self-regulation and domestic sales did not. This essay also provides further specification of the challenges of improving labor standards privately through supply chain standards.