I joined the PhD program in Management & Organizations in 2019. I conduct field-based, mixed-methods, meso-level research in Organizational Behavior. I study employees’ experiences of transition at work, with a particular focus on how widespread changes in the way individuals and organizations work can, in turn, change what they pay attention to and how they pay attention to it. Currently, I investigate this in the context of the transition from co-located to virtual work arrangements.

Abstract:

Awakening to New Possibilities: Employee Responses to the COVID-Induced Transition to Remote Work
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In the spring of 2020, COVID-19 work-from-home mandates forced offices across the United States to close, sending employees home to work remotely for the foreseeable future. In this qualitative study, we set out to uncover how U.S.-based knowledge workers came to think about the substantial and abrupt transformation to their work wrought by the disappearance of the co-located office and the shift to remote work arrangements. Understanding how this transition has changed how workers think about work may, in turn, help to explain why workers would resist returning to previous ways of working. Given the absence of theory on a work transition of this nature, we adopted a discovery orientation in our research, and we used inductive, qualitative methods to develop insights. To understand workers’ experience of transition, we interviewed 46 U.S.-based, non-frontline knowledge-economy workers about their experience in the aftermath of COVID-19 work-from-home orders.

Our analysis specifically suggests that these workers experienced what we call “awakenings,” which we define as noticing and reconsidering aspects of their work as a result of comparing their present ways of working with the past. We arrived at awakening by noting, in the course of our analysis, that working remotely enabled workers to compare their current remote work arrangements with their prior, largely in-office work arrangements, and that this comparison prompted workers to pay newfound or newly intensified attention to elements of their work and lives to which they either had not paid attention or to which they had only paid scant attention. So
brought to workers' consciousness, these features then became clear, as did their previous, now-unfathomable invisibility. That is, workers not only came to notice these features, they also came to realize having previously normalized them or taken them for granted. We refer to this process as “awakening” because, like awakening from slumber, one has the opportunity to notice and reconsider aspects of one's prior state (i.e., one's prior way of working, or one's dreams), while simultaneously becoming aware of one's current state.

We outline our interviewees’ awakenings as follows. First, we specify the awakenings they experienced concerning the difficulties of co-located work. We classify these awakenings into three categories: (1) awakening to the difficulties of accomplishing tasks in the office, owing to interruptions, distractions, and a lack of privacy; (2) awakening to the difficulties of negotiating professional relationships in the office, especially with regards to the felt need to maintain facades in the office; and (3) awakening to the difficulties of balancing working in the office with non-work life. Second, we discuss the awakenings workers experienced regarding the advantages of co-located work: the opportunity for face-to-face interaction with their co-workers.

Awakenings such as these can fundamentally alter people's relationships with their work and organizations. The consequence of the COVID-catalyzed transition to remote work, then, may not just be a change in how people work; it may also be a change in how people think about work—a change in what they notice, value, and imagine. This may go part of the way towards explaining why reconvening workers in a co-located office is proving to be such a contentious proposition for many organizations: at stake isn't just where work gets done, but the normative order of work, itself.

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Abstract:

The Elephant in the Room: How Workers Infer and Disclose Political Beliefs in the Workplace

In the US, workers across industries are trying to resolve new norms for discussing national-level politics with coworkers, especially when they are in the political minority in their organization. While existing research has focused on the negative outcomes of differences in political ideology at work, it has not yet examined how workers deal with the risk of such outcomes. By conceptualizing minority political ideology status as a situationally determined form of stigma, I argue that its nature allows workers to be strategic in how they disclose their beliefs to others. Through interviews with workers in the political minority within their workplace, I demonstrate the applicability of stigma research to minority political ideology. Workers with this stigma first use a practice of “ascertaining” to infer the political beliefs of others through use of statistical stereotypes or probing questions. Ascertaining the political ideology of their coworkers enables them to use disclosure practices I term “thresholding,” which can involve mitigating the political context, establishing common ground, and acknowledging the other side of the debate to share their own position. This serves to project a roughly accurate image of their political ideology to their coworkers, while avoiding the harsher consequences of revealing more objectionable parts of their beliefs. These findings provide insights into the process behind outcomes of political
interactions at work, as well as new understandings of how concealable stigmas are managed.

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Sandra Portocarrero is a Postdoctoral Research Scholar in the Management Division at Columbia Business School. She is an organizational ethnographer and qualitative field researcher who studies the dynamics of diversity, equity, and inclusion in relation to the maintenance of exclusion and inequality.

Abstract:

The Ideal Race-Typed Worker: How Racialized Organizational Expectations to Do Equity Work Give Rise to the Split Minority Worker Identity

I examine how a race-typed ideal worker image shapes organizational expectations of workers of color at their workplaces and how these expectations affect the professional identity of these workers. Drawing from qualitative interview data gathered at the U.S. Foreign Service, an elite public university on the U.S. West Coast, and a private university on the U.S. East Coast, I demonstrate that there is a common, established ideal race-typed worker image in these three organizations that shape racialized expectations of workers of color to engage in equity work. When embracing these racialized organizational expectations, workers of color experience the split minority worker identity: they experience resentment for doing unpaid equity work assigned to them because of their non whiteness, but they also experience fulfillment for doing this type of work because it aligns with their values. Analyzing 104 interviews, I trace how and why colleagues and organizational leaders expect workers of color to engage in equity work. I also show how workers experience and are affected by these expectations. Together, these findings expand our scholarly understanding of ideal worker expectations, offer new insights regarding the race-typed ideal worker image, and enrich theories of worker's identity.

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Shona G. Smith is a fourth year Business Management Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Texas at Arlington, with concentrations in Organizational Behavior and Human Resources. Her work revolves around differences in perspectives and experiences within the workplace among marginalized groups. Specifically, her research interests center around identity, stigma, and diversity related topics.

Abstract:

The Role of Meaning in Life and Social Identities as Overlooked Key Challenges in Shaping Retirement Decisions

Shona Smith, University of Texas at Arlington  
Dr. Ariane Froidevaux, UT Arlington
In the context of the aging workforce, retirement decisions represent a major life event for individuals. Relying on the existential framework on meaning and career decision-making, and on social identity theory, this paper explores the role of older adults' social identities as retirees and as workers as critical self-concept dimensions that may mediate the impact of their search and presence of meaning in life on their decisions to pursue bridge employment and to volunteer in retirement. In a survey study using a time lagged design with a one-year interval among 204 retirees, we found that both worker and retiree social identities mediated several of the effects of presence of, and search for, meaning in life on the decision to continue working and to volunteer. Moreover, we observed that search for meaning in life was positively related to worker social identity but unrelated to retiree social identity, while presence of meaning in life was positively related to both worker and retiree social identities. While worker identity was positively associated with continuing to work after retirement and unrelated to volunteering, retiree social identity was negatively related to pursuing employment but positively related to volunteering. Overall, our results suggest that the meaning of life and social identities of workers and retirees are critical for retirement decisions.