A Study of Self-Estrangement Among Fast-Food Workers

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Abstract

This study examines self-estrangement, a dimension of alienation, and its attributes among fast-food service workers, while considering participant sociodemographic characteristics. A self-administered online survey, using Amazon MTURK, deployed over two time periods (N=1,513), provides data regarding our novel 12-item self-estrangement scale by fast-food occupation type (cashier, server, cook, shift manager, and general manager) and sociodemographic covariates. Preliminary analysis shows that a salaried position and those with a postbaccalaureate education experience lower levels of self-estrangement than their colleagues. Cashiers and cooks experience higher levels of self-estrangement relative to those in other positions. This study offers unique contributions to the conceptualization and operationalization of a dimension of alienation specific to self-estrangement, facilitating greater understanding of the fast-food labor sector, its organization, and the state of its workers.

Keywords

Alienation, self-estrangement, labor, work, well-being

Introduction

During the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States witnessed astonishing changes in unemployment. The middle of March 2020, there were only 250,000 unemployment claims, but by March 28 there were 6 million (Bartik et al., 2020). Differences in unemployment were reflected by distinct industries. Of particular interest is the service sector of leisure and hospitality including restaurants and hotels, which experienced unemployment declines of nearly half their numbers between the months of February and April 2020 (Bartik et al., 2020). At the time of the study, this was the largest drop among all sectors.

Current trends in the service sector of the labor market, specifically within the U.S. food industry, are at the forefront of American concern due to the continued decline in employment rates. Anecdotal evidence suggests that fast-food workers are increasingly removing themselves from their positions within this industry and are opting to not return to this line of work. This trend has only increased as COVID-19 restrictions have decreased, and many fast-food restaurants are in dire need of more workers. Due to employee demand, workers who remain in these positions are

required to complete already monotonous and restrictive tasks under increasingly stressful conditions, while earning the same wages. With fewer employees, those who remain are increasingly overworked both in their ability to complete all necessary tasks and in their patience interacting with customers who are opposed to mandates, regulations, and generally upset about delayed services (Meisenzahl, 2021). Employees work under conditions in which they are asked to perform routinized, laborious, and restrictive tasks for wages that do not reflect the level of difficulty and perseverance necessary for the occupation. Moreover, this type of labor separates workers from their own creative potential (Braverman 1988). Understanding the conditions that fast-food employees are expected to work in may offer insights into the trends that are presently occurring within this industry and amongst the working-class more broadly. How work is organized is of significant concern for the working-class as it illuminates the conditions under which workers struggle for control and meaning within the capitalist mode of production.

Our research measures and analyzes the levels of and differences in self-estrangement, one dimension of alienation, among U.S. fast-food workers, using data collected via an online survey, completed by 1,513 individuals in this employment sector. We examine, via our 12-item scale, how self-estrangement in the quick-service restaurant industry affects distinct workers within this sector. In this, we recognize that the structure of labor and the specific working conditions influence reported scores of self-estrangement. This research has broader implications for the working-class by interrogating the social relations of production and its impact on self-estrangement. Before presenting the methods, results, and findings, we situate our study in relation to previous scholarship on alienation and estrangement, elaborating on how fast-food service work has been reorganized over the last several decades.

Alienation and Self-Estrangement

Through an analysis of how work was organized under capitalist relations, Karl Marx (1992) outlined how various forms of alienation arose, which diminished and constrained human development. He detailed how the class system, whereby capitalists own the means of production and workers must sell their labor-power to earn wages to support themselves, and the structure of capitalism, premised on the constant pursuit of capital accumulation, produced both alienation and the conditions for exploitation. Under these conditions, as Marx indicated, workers become separated from the production process and product of their labor—two particular moments of alienation; other moments include alienation from other, self, and nature as a whole. Building from Marx's analysis, scholars have further developed this concept with a particular focus on the conditions that allow workers to become alienated in modern society. In *The Sane Society*, Erich Fromm (1955) argues that alienation is nearly all encompassing in modern society as it affects the relationships that individuals have with work, consumption, the state, others, and with themselves. Fromm believed that alienation results from features of capitalism, which demand that all people and things be expressed in economic value and that human beings are viewed in an abstract manner. Most importantly, alienation was not rooted in any one individual. Rather, it was embedded in the complex relationship between the structure work and the changing relations of production (Braverman, 1974; Jonna & Foster, 2014).

Testing alienation in a more empirical context, Robert Blauner (1964) investigated how specific conditions amplified or ameliorated attributes of alienation among various factory workers. He

found that levels of alienation were highest in the textile and automobile industries. However, industries such as printing or chemical work had higher levels of freedom as opposed to alienation. As society, under capitalism, has moved from craft to machine industries, Blauner (1964) contended, worker levels of freedom have been in decline whereas feelings of alienation showed an opposite trend. The exceptions to this pattern were industries that allowed more worker autonomy. Additional studies have also shown that an array of factors influence feelings of alienation, including the hierarchical structure of work, whether there is ownership over one's own labor, insufficient wages, monotonous work and routines, and boredom (Kohn, 1976; Mills, 1956). Melvin Seeman (1959) put forward a multidimensional theoretical approach to alienation, outlining five distinct dimensions of alienation—powerlessness, meaningfulness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement. Overall, he focused on developing a general work alienation index to help empirically study alienation and the social conditions that produce it (Seeman, 1959, 1967). Through survey research, Seeman (1967) found slight correlations with higher experiences of alienation between manual-labor workers and workers with lower incomes. In an additional study, using surveys, Melvin Kohn (1976) indicated that the highest correlation was between powerlessness and self-estrangement. More recent survey research has focused on alienation among employees of the quick-service restaurant industry using a seven-item work alienation scale, based on Seeman's five dimensions of alienation (DiPietro & Pizam, 2008). Results from this research revealed that employees with higher levels of alienation were younger, male, Black, hourly paid, and more educated.

Both theoretical and empirical work have taken up additional considerations of alienation, including subjective emotional and cognitive experiences from a social-psychological perspective. For example, Warren TenHouten (2017) proposes there are seven distinct dimensions of alienation: active and passive normlessness, superiority and inferiority cultural estrangement, powerlessness, meaninglessness, and self-estrangement which are differentiated by the affective experiences they produce in individuals (TenHouten, 2017). Building from Seeman (1959), TenHouten argues that both normlessness and cultural estrangement present in different forms, thus adding active *and* passive normlessness as well as superiority *and* inferiority cultural estrangement. His primary focus is self-estrangement, which involves feeling an absence of control over the work process and a sense of purposelessness, and can be understood as lacking meaning or a sense of direction (Blauner, 1964; TenHouten, 2017). A cross-occupational study indicated that meaninglessness and powerlessness were the strongest determinants of self-estrangement (Mottaz, 1981). In contrast, when individuals can form a purposeful relationship with work, they are more likely to feel ambitious. In other words, under such conditions, they are working toward meaningful life goals (Kohn, 1976; Tenhouten, 2017). Purposeful connection with work is more easily achieved when control over the labor process is available and a sense of meaning is present. Self-estrangement can be characterized by a lack of intrinsic reward and the seeking of extrinsic reward. The inability to find work intrinsically rewarding can transform employees' perceptions and feelings. Self-estranged workers become solely motivated by earning wages in exchange for their labor and time so that they may afford extrinsically rewarding activities outside of work (Blauner, 1964; Kohn, 1976; Seeman, 1959). Further, participating in labor out of necessity instead of desire, or viewing work as a means to an end, is characteristic of those who are self-estranged (Seeman, 1959; Blauner, 1964).

The nature of work and the environments in which employees are expected to perform tasks impacts workers greatly. For example, when workers do not control their labor or the environment, they experience a greater degree of self-estrangement (Otto & Featherman, 1975). Monotonous work is not creative or stimulating. It is repetitive and fosters boredom (Blauner, 1964). Isolating work prevents strong social bonds and support. It creates isolation and exclusion. Self-estrangement from self, labor, and others is intensified under these working conditions (Blauner, 1964; TenHouten, 2017). It negatively affects the involvement and investment of workers in productive activities. In turn, it also influences perceptions of workers. For instance, a 2018 study focused on the negative effects of self-estrangement in the workplace found that self-estranged workers were perceived as untrustworthy, inaccessible, and non-reciprocal by other coworkers, and this view had a direct negative effect on the self-estranged worker's job performance (Golden & Viega, 2018). The conditions that workers labor under not only affect their social well-being and ability to perform, but they also influence their subjective cognitive and affective experiences. Those who are more self-estranged become alien to their inner selves by engaging in work that hinders self-expression and unique personalities (Seeman, 1959). This process includes losing touch with one's authentic self, feeling like a fake, or not knowing a genuine self. It leads to an inconsistency between an individual's perceived self and authentic self (Seeman, 1983; TenHouten, 2017). In addition to obliviousness and conflict regarding the self, individuals who are self-estranged have a negative outlook. This negativity can be internalized in the form of low self-esteem or externalized by negative interpretations of broader society and the world (Seeman, 1983; TenHouten, 2017). Finally, self-estrangement is also characterized by feelings of emptiness, a void of meaninglessness and nonexistence (Blauner 1964; TenHouten, 2017).

TenHouten (2017) argues that despair is the main cognitive effect of self-estrangement and that feelings of self-estrangement and despair have the potential to lead to a variety of negative consequences. Self-estranged and despairing individuals may experience an intense need to make logical sense of the world to dispel personal doubts, the inability to understand their own emotions, and a compulsion to give into emptiness. They may also feel a need to distance oneself from a meaningful social reality and may be inclined to participate in self-harm and suicidal ideation (TenHouten, 2017). The affective and cognitive consequences of feeling self-estranged can lead to negative social behaviors. In 2001, research focused on worker alienation and drinking behavior found that low occupational status workers, those making the lowest wages and those conducting manual labor, experience more alienation than high occupational status workers. Additionally, low occupational status participants with higher alcohol consumption and drinking-related problems reported higher levels of self-estrangement and powerlessness (Yang et al., 2001).

Self-estrangement studies often focus on the social-psychological aspects of alienation among individuals and their working conditions under capitalism. This dimension of alienation holds great relevance in empirical study because of its potential to provide a better understanding of what occupational and environmental factors are self-estranging. In our study, levels of self-estrangement are examined among fast-food service industry workers in the United States. This industry is of significance to studies regarding alienation because the organization of this labor sector and the highly routinized environment include many elements that previous work has identified as factors that contribute to feelings of self-estrangement.

The Organization and Labor of the Fast-Food Service Sector

In George Ritzer's (2015) *The McDonaldization of Society*, the phenomenon of McDonaldization is defined as "the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world." Over the last several decades, fast-food restaurant operations have been greatly influenced by and modeled after the assembly line, so that specific tasks may be divided into their most simple elements (Ritzer, 2015). The assembly-line model inhibits worker autonomy and diminishes the need for unique worker skillsets (Braverman, 1974). This model separates workers from the production process, diminishing the level of control that workers have over their own labor and the labor process, and constrains workers to a specialized and routinized role. This role requires little of workers beyond what is specified, such as only handling monetary exchanges as cashiers, which prevent workers from cultivating a purposeful relationship with their work. In its restrictive nature, this type of occupation not only inhibits, but also discourages self-expression and use of unique skills by individual workers. Due to the predetermined role and fixed role that workers play, finding personal fulfilment in this line of work can be difficult. Given that workers do not control the means of production, they must endure this routinized and monotonous labor to make wages that allow them to purchase what they need to reproduce themselves. Workers in the fast-food sector must by default endure a type of work that offers very little control over the labor process—work that is very standardized and not creative. This work often generates negative feelings among workers regarding how their identity compares to their occupation.

The success of the fast-food industry is attributed to its ability to offer consumers and employers alike efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control (Ritzer, 2015). Assembly line-like techniques are pervasive throughout the fast-food industry. To achieve maximum efficiency, many places even have actual conveyor belts on which food is prepared, at least in part. Calculability refers to making many aspects of the fast-food industry quantifiable. This industry is reliant on numbers in terms of measuring time to prepare food and get it to the customer, as well as having menu items measured and prepared in a precise, controlled, and speedy manner. Predictability relies on controlling workers, and this is achieved by routinizing and heavily restricting the preparation of food, the interactions between employees and consumers via an expected script, and the overall work process in which workers become quite passive actors. Further, the implementation of technology in the fast-food industry has caused a decline in the level of skill required for positions. Computers help take orders and payments, while the products that workers provide and deliver to consumers come pre-prepared and often frozen for speedy assembly. The workplace functions as a bureaucratic institution that restricts employees to its rules and hierarchies. The fast-food industry is no different in its aim to achieve maximum efficiency in generating predictable, calculated, and controlled work environments (Franco, 2019). Ritzer (2015) describes those who are at the low end of the occupational hierarchy, working jobs that pay poorly, require little skill and training, and offer little in terms of upward mobility as highly McDonaldized workers. Conditions such as these create environments that have the potential to produce alienated or self-estranged workers.

Importance of Study

The purpose of this study is to examine levels of self-estrangement among fast-food workers in the United States. Previous studies on alienation have focused on workers in a variety of

occupations, such as industrial and clerical laborers. To date, to the best of our knowledge, scholars have not investigated how self-estrangement may vary within the fast-food sector. Understanding the level to which employees of the fast-food industry are affected by self-estrangement will allow us to better understand their mental well-being and the role that their occupation, work environment, and work relationships play in that. We have designed a survey, drawing upon existing research and literature, such as Seeman (1967), with the aim of measuring levels of self-estrangement. Given previous research (i.e., DiPietro & Pizam, 2008), we expect to see higher levels of self-estrangement among those who are younger, male, Black, hourly paid, and more educated.

METHOD

Procedure

Using Seeman's self-estrangement scale to measure to alienation, we designed a survey focused solely on fast-food workers. Participants nation-wide were asked to complete a self-administered survey questionnaire, designed using Qualtrics software. The survey was administered over two time periods, in April and July of 2021. CloudResearch was used to launch this study, and the questionnaire was made available to fast-food workers through Mechanical Turk (MTURK), a crowdsourcing service that has been increasingly used to collect data among a diverse population on a wide range of topics (e.g., Aguinis et al., 2021; Tabler et al., 2022). MTURK participants have been found to be more attentive than participants from other study pools (Hauser & Schwarz 2016). Combining MTRUK with CloudResearch reduced the potential for bots participating in the survey (CloudResearch, 2023). We employed Captcha technology and attention checks to ensure data quality. Inclusion criteria included employment in the fast-food industry and being of 18 years of age or older. The questionnaire included 40-items and took approximately 5-6 minutes on average to complete; participants were compensated $1 (via their CloudResearch payment accounts) in accordance with a pay rate of approximately $9-12 per hour.

Measures

Dependent Measure.

In measuring *self-estrangement* among adult U.S. fast-food service industry workers we used literature based, concept-specific questions. This was done with the aim of operationalizing the concept of estrangement, as described by Seeman (1959), Blauner (1964), Kohn (1976), and TenHouten (2017), in a quantitative way. All 12-items were scored using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (range=12-60), and we utilized a moderate item-rest correlation of 0.30 for item inclusion (Piedmont, 2014). The Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.84, suggesting high internal consistency. Attributes of self-estrangement that were included within the scale are purposelessness, lack of intrinsic reward, experiences of boredom and monotony, desire for extrinsic reward, viewing work as a means to an end, negative coworker relations, a lacking solidified self-identity, a sense of emptiness, and a negative outlook (see Table 1 for survey items).

Key Independent Variables: Work Characteristics

We also include a measure of *occupational role*, which compares those whose role is cashier (0) (reference), server (1), cook (2), or manager (inclusive of shift or general manager) (3). We also compare those who have worked in the fast-food industry for less than 5 years, to those who have been working in the industry for 5+ years (*time in industry*), whether they identify as being *paid salary* or if they are non-salary. We also compare those who report having *more than one job*, to those with one place of employment.

Sociodemographic Covariates

We also include participant *racial identity*, which compares those who identify as white (0) (reference) to those who identify as Asian or Pacific Islander (1), Black (2), or another multiracial identity (3). We also compare those who identify as non-Hispanic/Latinx, to those who identify as Hispanic/Latinx. *Gender and sexual identity* compares those who identify as cisgender and heterosexual men (1) (reference) to cisgender and heterosexual women (2), and lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, pansexual, transgender, gender-non-binary, or another expansive gender or sexual identity (LGBTQ+) (3). *Age* is measured continuously in years. *Household income* is an ordinal categorical measure ranging from 1-15 progressing in $5,000 increments, from less than $10,000 (1) to $70,000 or more (15). We also compare those who have at least a bachelor's degree education (1) to those with less than a bachelor's degree education (0) (reference).

Analytic Approach

We provide descriptive statistics on key variables stratified by occupational role. We then utilize chi-squared, two tailed independent t-tests, and Pearson's correlation to establish basic bivariate relationships across measures. Finally, for multivariate analyses, we utilize a series of nested ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analyses with robust standard errors to model self-estrangement as a function of occupational/work features and sociodemographic covariates. Model 1 includes occupational/work characteristics to establish baseline relationships between employment features and out outcome variable. Model 2 adds sociodemographic covariates to this baseline model. Models also adjust for wave of survey (April or July of 2021). In supplementary analyses (not shown), results were not substantively different utilizing negative binomial regression (NBREG) which is often more appropriate for "count" outcomes so we chose OLS regression for easier interpretation. All analyses were conducted using Stata 15.1.

RESULTS

Sample

Our initial sample included 1,630 respondents, of which only 1,513 had complete responses on all key covariates. After listwise deletion, the analytic sample ($N = 1,513$) was comprised of 49.8% cisgender men ($n = 7\,54$), 47.7% cisgender women ($n = 722$), and 2.5% transgender or gender non-binary identifying respondents ($n = 37$). The average age of respondents was 33.0 years ($sd = 9.7$). While 83.9% of the sample identified as straight/heterosexual ($n = 1,269$), 16.1% identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or another sexual identity ($n = 244$). A majority (87%) of respondents ($n = 1,323$) did not identify as Hispanic or Latino/a/x. Our sample is also comprised of 70.9%

white (n = 1,072), 12% Black (n = 182), 7.1% Asian or Pacific Islander (n = 07), and participants with another or multiracial identity (n = 152; 10.1%). Additionally, 36% of the sample reported having a bachelor's degree or higher (n = 545).

In terms of occupation, 46.1% report being cashiers (n = 697), 5.2% report being a server (n = 78), 29.7% report being a cook (n = 450), and 19% report being a manager (n = 288). Also, 36.4% report having more than one job (n = 551) and only 17.9% report being paid salary (n = 270). Mean level of social estrangement was 35.9, with a standard deviation (sd) of 8.8. Self-estrangement was also normally distributed within the sample. Additional sample characteristics can be found in Table 2.

Bivariate and Multivariate Results

Bivariate analyses (based on independent two-tailed *t*-tests). These analyses suggest that Servers (mean = 33.4, sd = 8.6) and Managers (mean = 32.9, sd = 9.1) experience lower levels of self-estrangement relative to Cashiers (mean = 36.8, sd = 8.6) (p < 0.001, respectively) (Table 2). Those who have worked in fast-food industry for less than 5 years (mean=36.9, sd = 8.5) experience higher levels of self-estrangement compared to those who have worked in the industry for over 5 years (mean = 33.5, sd = 9.2) (p < 0.001). In addition, those who report being paid salary experience lower levels of self-estrangement (mean = 32.0, sd = 8.4) relative to those who work hourly (mean = 36.8, sd = 8.7) (p < 0.001) (not shown).

There are also potential sociodemographic differences in levels of self-estrangement. LGBTQ+ respondents report higher levels of self-estrangement (mean = 39.0, sd = 9.2) relative to cisgender/heterosexual men (mean = 35.7, sd = 8.7) or cisgender/heterosexual women (mean = 34.9, sd = 8.9) in the sample. In addition, white-identifying respondents (mean = 36.2, sd = 8.8) report higher levels of self-estrangement relative to Black-identifying participants (mean = 33.7, sd = 9.0) (p < 0.001) (not shown). Further, Pearson's correlation coefficients suggest that age in years is negatively correlated with self-estrangement (Pearson's r = -0.17, p < 0.001) as is ordinal household income (Pearson's r = -0.23, p < 0.001) (not shown).

Multivariate Analysis. Baseline OLS regression results (Table 3, Model 1) suggest that managers (OLS coefficient = -1.82 [95% Confidence Interval=-3.09 to -0.55], p = 0.006) and servers (-2.36[-4.47 to -0.29], p = 0.027) experience lower levels of self-estrangement relative to cashiers, when adjusting for other work/occupation features. Those who have worked in the fast-food industry for over 5 years have a self-estrangement score that is 2.33 points lower (95% CI = -3.28 to -1.38) than those who have been in the industry less than 5 years (p < 0.001), *ceteris peritus*. In addition, non-salaried employees experience 3.61 points higher (95% CI = 2.43 to 4.80) self-estrangement relative to hourly-wage fast-food workers (p < 0.001), holding other work characteristics constant. When sociodemographic characteristics are added to the model (Table 3, model 2), results suggest that for every increase in years of age, self-estrangement declines by -0.10 (95% CI = -0.15 to -0.05, p < 0.001), and that for a one unit increase in household income, self-estrangement declines by -0.39 (95% CI = -0.51 to -0.27, p < 0.001). In addition, Asian/Pacific Islander-identifying fast-food industry participants report self-estrangement scores that are 1.81 points higher (95% CI = 3.18 to 0.68, p = 0.011), and Black-identifying participants report self-estrangement scores that are 2.27 points lower (95% CI = -2.27 to -3.86, p = 0.011) than white-identifying participants,

holding all else constant. Relatedly, LGBTQ+ fast-food industry workers report self-estrangement scores that are 3.16 points higher (95% CI = 2.09 to 4.22, $p < 0.001$) relative to cisgender and heterosexual men-identifying participants, holding other sociodemographic and work characteristics constant.

Nested models suggest that, when considering sociodemographic covariates, working in the industry for over 5 years (-1.83[-2.81 to -0.85], $p < 0.001$) and being non-salaried (2.98[1.70 to 4.25], $p < 0.001$) are associated with self-estrangement (Table 3, model 2). While servers report 1.99 points lower self-estrangement (95% CI = -3.94 to -0.03, $p = 0.047$) relative to cashiers even when sociodemographic characteristics are considered, being a manager compared to a cashier is potentially no longer independently associated with self-estrangement when participant characteristics such as household income and age are also included.

DISCUSSION

The scores of self-estrangement found in our study were concentrated heavily around the average score of the scale, with greater concentration slightly above the exact average. Compared to our initially expected results, gender, race, and age did not show the differences in scores that we had expected. Reasons for this may be that our study focused on only one dimension of alienation rather than general alienation, like previous studies. Also, it is important to consider that trends within the fast-food industry may have simply changed since DiPietro and Pizam's (2008) study on general worker alienation in fast-food. DiPietro and Pizam's study also found that those who are more educated experience more alienation, however our study resulted in different findings. In our sample, those with a master's degree or higher experience the lowest levels of self-estrangement. Further, we found that salaried workers experience lowers levels of self-estrangement than those who are paid hourly.

In the fast-food industry and amongst the broader working-class, those with no college education who are paid hourly have an increased chance of being placed at entry level positions that offer very little autonomy. This restrictive, monotonous, stressful, and dull work routine is the type of environment that generates high self-estrangement. Contrary to hourly paid workers with no education, our findings demonstrate that those holding a master's degree or higher and those paid salary experience significantly lower levels of self-estrangement. These lower scores may be partially attributed to the potential opportunity of being hired for managerial, salaried positions for workers who have attained a higher level of education. Occupying a managerial role in a workplace that is extremely routinized and focused on specialized tasks, allows for more flexibility and control over one's own labor process. Having more control over labor would decrease levels of alienation, and therefore, levels of self-estrangement. Observing that participants within the highest brackets of education and those paid salary experience lower levels of self-estrangement, may correlate for reasons such as these.

In general, our results indicate the presence of self-estrangement as a whole for workers in the fast-food industry. Significantly, our analysis highlights that not everybody experiences self-estrangement at the same rate and in the same way, indicating variations within workers in this field, providing more context to the concept of self-estrangement.

Conclusion

The aim of this study is to better understand the concept of self-estrangement among U.S. fast-food workers, while considering sociodemographic and occupational factors. Based on previous scholarship (e.g. DiPietro & Pizam, 2008), we hypothesized that workers who were younger, male, Black, more educated, and paid hourly would experience higher levels of self-estrangement. Using a survey, we gathered nation-wide data to analyze the trends of this phenomenon in this industry. Our results demonstrated differences from our initial expectations. The demographics of race, gender, and age in our sample presented no statistically significant differences in scores of self-estrangement. Further, we found that factors such as levels of education and worker salary status impact the level of self-estrangement present within an individual. For example, those with a master's degree or higher, as well as salaried workers, experience lower levels of self-estrangement than their counterparts.

Limitations of this study include that our survey was only available online, in English, and to Mechanical Turk workers. More of the target working-class population may have been represented if the survey was available in a variety of forms, rather than only with the use of a device and accessible internet. Further, offering the survey in another language, such as Spanish may have been beneficial in reaching more fast-food workers, given stratification patterns within the United States. While the United States does not have an official language, Spanish is the second most used language. Not everyone can be expected to understand English at the level of a native speaker. Finally, making participation in this study only available to Mechanical Turk workers specifies which fast-food workers in the United States we were able to reach because they must work in fast-food while simultaneously holding a position for Mechanical Turk.

This research aims to analyze self-estrangement in the fast-food industry, which groups of people are most affected by it, and how worker well-being is impacted by occupational status. In efforts to further develop the concept of self-estrangement, this study contributes to the understanding of alienation. Using the framework of self-estrangement, this study positions the spotlight on fast-food workers in the United States and emphasizes the ways in which the organization of labor and the workplace is affecting their well-being. Examining underpaid and heavily regulated industries may reveal potential ways that labor practices and occupational roles under capitalism effect workers. Areas of study such as this will generate discussion and possibly create avenues for social, economic, or political change for the betterment of workers in this industry as well as others.

Furthermore, this study has broader implications for the working-class in general and echoes the sentiments in present efforts amongst fast-food workers to unionize. For example, Starbucks Workers United propose a number of changes to the labor process that would reduce self-estrangement amongst workers. Their wages and pay proposal recommend a base wage of at least $20 for workers, pay based on previous experience, and cost of living adjustments each year. In addition to pay concerns, Starbucks Workers United also address more consistent schedules and guarantees for minimum hours per week. Consistent schedules can foster stability, potentially reducing self-estrangement (*Our Proposals — Starbucks Workers United*, n.d.) The Starbucks Workers Union proposals note that workers across the United States experience similar conditions. Although these propositions will not lessen the lack of autonomy and control over the labor

process, they do address some of the core concerns presented in our study to reduce levels of self-estrangement.

At a time when corporations and industries are making record profits, workers are being left behind. Workers across a variety of industries are beginning to strike, noting that companies are profiting while people are struggling. In late October 2023, Detroit casino workers went on strike demanding increases in pay to a livable wage. While the Detroit casino industry raked in record-breaking revenues of $2.27 billion, workers were only given a 3% raise, despite inflation in Detroit creeping up to 20% (*300+ Striking Casino Workers Head to Michigan State Capital for Support / UAW*, 2023). Similar concerns were voiced by the United Auto Workers union during their recent strike. Central to their concerns were increases in cost of living adjustments big wage increases (*UAW Auto Bargaining Resources / UAW*, n.d.). Given our findings, increases in wages and working stability are key aspects to potentially reducing self-estrangement amongst the working-class generally.

Our work indicates that, in addition to improving the wages of the working-class, demands for fair compensation also speak to questions of self-estrangement. Future research should seek to do three things branching from this study. The first step forward is to strengthen the measures used to score levels of self-estrangement. Second, the relationship between job position and levels of self-estrangement should be explored further. Finally, studying levels of self-estrangement among fast-food workers under the age of 18 might also serve as an avenue for future research.

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Tables

Table 1. Measurement of Self-Estrangement Scale

Items	Average interitem covariance
"I have clear goals and aims in life"	0.48
"The work I do is very meaningful to me"	0.43
"Completing my daily tasks day in and out is a very boring experience" **(reverse)**	0.45
"The work I am asked to do is often repetitive and tedious" **(reverse)**	0.48
"If my financial needs and wants were suddenly taken care of, I would remain working this job" **(reverse)**	0.47
"I have good relationships with my co-workers"	0.49
"I feel somewhat close with at least some of my coworkers"	0.50
"I sometimes feel like I do not know who I truly am" **(reverse)**	0.46
"Right now, I am the version of myself that I aspire to be"	0.44
"I often experience feelings of emptiness" **(reverse)**	0.43
"I often feel isolated" **(reverse)**	0.42
"I often feel like a disappointment" **(reverse)**	0.42
Chronbach's alpha = 0.84	

Item Scoring: 1 = strongly agree, 2 = somewhat agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = somewhat disagree, 5 = strongly disagree. Possible cumulative scores range from 12 to 60.

Notes**.** We included items "While working, I often think about activities that I look forward to doing when I am not at work" and "I believe we live in a world that disregards morals" within the original survey, but we excluded these items for failing to meet an item-rest correlation of 0.30. Results are substantively similar using this expanded self-estrangement scale.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Analytic Sample Stratified by Occupational Role

	Everyone (N = 1,513)		(Reference) Cashier (n = 697)		Server (n = 78)			Cook (n = 450)			Manager (n = 153)		
	N	%	N	%	N	%	p-value	N	%	p-value	N	%	p-value
	Mean (sd)		Mean (sd)		Mean (sd)			Mean (sd)			Mean (sd)		
Self-estrangement	35.9 (8.8)		36.8 (8.6)		33.4 (7.8)		**0.001**	36.9 (8.7)		0.87	32.9 (9.1)		**<0.001**
Gender and sexuality													
Cishet men	651	43	228	32.7	27	34.6		260	57.8		136	47.2	
Cishet women	614	40.6	108	48.6	45	57.7		124	27.6		106	36.8	
LGBTQ+	248	16.4	46	18.7	6	7.7	**0.049**	66	14.7	**<0.001**	46	16	**<0.001**
Ethnicity													
Non-Hispanic	1,323	87.4	606	86.9	79	89.7		390	86.7		257	89.2	
Hispanic	190	12.5	91	13.1	8	10.3	0.482	60	13.3	0.892	31	10.8	0.321
Race													
White	1,072	70.9	468	67.1	47	60.3		327	72.7		230	79.9	
Black	182	12	82	11.8	15	19.2		16	3.5		25	8.7	
Asian/Pacific Islander	107	7.1	70	10	8	10.3		60	13.3		13	4.5	
Multiracial/Other	152	10.1	77	11.1	8	10.3	0.3	47	10.4	**0.001**	20	6.9	**0.001**
College Degree													
Less than Bachelor's	968	64	467	67	44	56.4		321	71.3		136	47.2	
Bachelor's or higher	545	36	230	33	34	43.6	0.061	129	28.7	0.122	152	52.8	**<0.001**
Age	33.0 (9.7)		31.9 (9.6)		31.6 (9.4)		0.829	33.1 (9.7)		**0.041**	36.2 (9.5)		**<0.001**
Household Income	8.7 (4.5)		8.4 (4.5)		8.4 (3.9)		0.915	7.7 (4.5)		**0.015**	10.8 (3.8)		**<0.001**
Pay Modality													
Salaried	270	17.9	72	10.3	23	29.4		53	11.8		122	42.4	
Hourly	1,243	82.1	625	89.7	55	70.5	**<0.001**	397	88.2	0.442	166	57.6	**<0.001**
Employment													
Single job	962	63.6	442	63.4	48	61.5		282	62.7		98	66	
Multiple jobs	551	36.4	255	36.6	30	38.5	0.745	168	37.3	0.798	190	34	0.446
Length of time in industry													

<5 years	1,076	71.1	570	81.8	52	66.7		334	74.2		120	41.7	
5+ years	437	28.9	127	18.2	26	33.3	**0.001**	116	25.8	**0.002**	168	58.3	**<0.001**

Notes. Data are from a fast-food industry survey administered on Amazon MTURK in April and July of 2021. Proportion differences tested using chi-squared, and differences in means tested using two-tailed independent sample t-tests by occupational role (reference=Cashier). Comparison p-values are uncorrected for repeated comparisons (e.g., Cashiers vs. Servers, Cooks, and Managers). However, only the difference in Gender and Sexuality between Cashiers and Servers, as well as difference in age between Cashiers and Cooks may actually be non-significant after correction using the Bonferroni approach.
sd=standard deviation, cishet=cisgender and heterosexual, LGBTQ+ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or another expansive gender or sexuality

Table 3. OLS Regression of Self-Estrangement among Fast Food Industry Workers

Self-Estrangement	Model 1					Model 2				
Occupation Role[a]	Coefficient	95% CI		Robust SE	p-value	Coefficient	95% CI		Robust SE	p-value
Server	-2.36	-4.44	-0.29	1.03	**0.027**	-1.99	-3.94	-0.03	0.97	**0.047**
Cook	0.35	-0.42	1.11	0.38	0.369	0.31	-0.56	1.17	0.66	0.478
Manager	-1.82	-3.09	-0.55	0.63	**0.006**	-0.84	-2.17	0.49	0.66	0.212
In industry +5 years	-2.33	-3.28	-1.38	0.47	**<0.001**	-1.83	-2.81	-0.85	0.49	**<0.001**
Non-Salaried	3.61	2.43	4.80	0.59	**<0.001**	2.98	1.70	4.25	0.63	**<0.001**
Single Job	-0.40	-1.28	0.49	0.44	0.374	-0.79	-1.63	0.06	0.42	0.068
Gender and Sexuality[b]										
Cishet woman						-0.63	-1.43	0.16	0.40	0.117
LGBTQ+						3.16	2.09	4.22	0.53	**<0.001**
Hispanic/Latino/a/x						-0.64	-1.70	0.43	0.53	0.235
Race[c]										
Asian/Pacific Islander						1.81	0.44	3.18	0.68	**0.011**
Black						-2.27	-3.86	-0.69	0.79	**0.006**
Multiracial/another identity						-0.91	-2.25	0.43	0.67	0.179
Age						-0.10	-0.15	-0.05	0.02	**<0.001**
Household income						-0.39	-0.51	-0.27	0.06	**<0.001**
Bachelor's degree or higher						0.01	-1.08	1.09	0.54	0.991
Constant	29.80	26.28	33.32	1.75	**<0.001**	38.92	33.98	43.87	2.46	**<0.001**
AIC	10782					10660				
R-Squared	0.07					0.16				
N	1,513					1,513				

Notes. Data are from a fast food industry survey administered on Amazon MTURK in April and July of 2021.
[a]Reference is Cashier, [b]Reference is cishet man, [c]Reference is white-identifying
Models are clustered by U.S. state ($N = 50$ clusters), and also adjust for wave of survey (April or July)
cishet = cisgender and heterosexual, LGBTQ+ = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or another expansive gender or sexuality