Organizational Practices and Workplace Relationships in Precarious Work: New Survey Evidence

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Abstract Organizational practices are important dimensions of the social contexts that shape relationship formation. In workplaces, the formation of relationships among coworkers are resources for personal outcomes, and they can be channels through which workers might identify common grievances, form workplace solidarity, and engage in collective action. Using a unique dataset of retail workers across the United States, The Shift Project, this paper examines two potential pathways by which organizational practices common in precarious jobs in the retail industry in the U.S. might shape the formation of workplace relationships. I find evidence of the role of both pathways: practices that limit the opportunities for regular contact and practices that negatively impact the conditions of contact among employees are both associated with fewer workplace ties. I discuss the implications of these findings for the study of collective action, and network ecology.

Acknowledgments. I thank Kristen Harknett and Danny Schneider for the opportunity to include network measures in their Shift Project data collection, and for valuable feedback on this paper. Alix Gould-Werth, Adam Reich, and members of The Shift Lab also provided very helpful comments and suggestions.

Introduction

The contexts of social life shape the kinds and numbers of people we meet, how we relate to them, and how we are influenced by each other; these conditions are important to the formation of relationships. Social relationships, in turn, shape who has access to resources or the means of influence that matter for critical life outcomes. As Fischer (1982: 179) put it, “people can select friends only from among other people available to them and that pool is shrunk tremendously by the social contexts in which people participate.” These opportunities for interaction most often occur in the context of organizations.

A recent body of work has illustrated the ways that organizations shape the formation of networks, both through the institutional norms about interaction that govern different types of organizations (e.g., Small and Gose 2020) and through the specific practices within organizations (e.g., Small 2009). Work organizations are particularly important in this regard, as they often provide both the context of our most frequent interactions with people outside our family units, and they are accompanied by organizational practices that shape the relational aspects of jobs. Most research has focused on workplace social networks as independent variables, analyzing their impact on a range of individual and organizational outcomes. There has been much less attention to the determinants of workplace networks—to the individual and organizational characteristics that lead to the development of different types of social ties at work (though see Popielarz 1999; Srivastava 2015). Drawing on theoretical insights from Blau (1977) regarding opportunities for regular contact and from Festinger et al. (1950) regarding the importance of conditions of contact, I examine how organizational practices

shape relationship formation by examining the relational consequences of work characteristics among low-wage retail workers.

We know that social networks at work impact a wide range of organizational and individual outcomes. For instance, informal networks of trust within a firm, in addition to formal authority relations, affect organizational productivity (Krackhardt and Hanson 1993). Networks at both the individual (Seidel et al. 2000) and firm (Polodny and Baron 1997) levels provide opportunities for individual intraorganizational mobility. And scholars across fields have connected the structure and content of people's social networks at work to their job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Hurlbert 1991; Kalleberg 1977; Labianca and Brass 2006; Moynihan and Pandey 2007). Because the current literature has focused largely on social networks among employees at white-collar organizations, it has overlooked another important role of workplace networks among low-wage workers: as the channels through which workers might identify common grievances, form workplace solidarity, and engage in collective action against firm management.

In this paper, I use a unique dataset detailing the lives of retail workers in the U.S. to examine the association between organizational practices and the number of workplace relationships among individuals employed largely in precarious jobs. "Precarious" jobs, as defined by Kalleberg (2009: 2) are those jobs that are uncertain, unpredictable, and risky for workers. Common features of precarious work include non-standard employment relations, low wages, job insecurity, and a lack of predictable schedules. The Shift Project (Schneider and Harknett 2019a; 2019b) data used in this paper is unique in collecting detailed measures on routine uncertainty in work schedules as well as measures

of worker outcomes for a national sample of retail workers employed at large firms. The Shift Project included questions about workplace relationships for a period of data collection, creating a rare opportunity to examine workplace relationships in the context of precarious work.

I examine two types of organizational practices as predictors of the number of workplace relationships: those that shape opportunities for regular interaction, and those that shape the conditions of interaction. I find that both of these types of practices are strongly associated with the number of workplace relationships, both independently and net of the effect of other organizational practices. Non-pecuniary job characteristics are associated with relationship formation while wages are not. The effects of organizational practices do not vary by the type of workplace relationship. I additionally demonstrate how the effect of practices that shape opportunities for regular interaction is not mediated by well-being, suggesting a direct effect of opportunities for interaction on workplace relationships. Finally, I use a subset analysis to provide support for the assumption that these organizational practices may precede workplace relationships. These findings present new opportunities for research and may open up new avenues for workplace collective action.

Organizations and Relationship Formation

A number of features of the contexts in which we encounter others are experienced predominantly as pre-conditions to that interaction, such as the population structure of the contexts we interact in (the number and composition of people to interact with), the number and type of opportunities for contact, and formal institutional or

organizational rules governing interaction (author cite, forthcoming). For example, in high schools, academic tracking, where students are separated according to assessments of ability, is associated with more social ties between students (McFarland et al. 2014). Within a police academy, the practice of assigning recruits to squads exerts a strong effect on the friendship relationships formed among recruits (Doreian and Conti 2012). Other features of context, like the informal rules relevant to relationship formation, like expectations for the frequency and nature of talk, are dynamic and responsive to the formation of relationships in the context.

A structural feature of any social environment – the base number of individuals one comes into contact with and their characteristics – constrains tie formation. Additionally, relationships depend on having repeated opportunities for interaction with those individuals one comes into contact with (e.g., Blau 1977). Relationships are also more likely to form when contact is under favorable conditions, for example when individuals are not especially stressed, in conflict with each other, or when they work together to accomplish common goals (Festinger et al. 1950; Gaertner et al. 2000). Individuals are more likely to attribute good intentions to each other and to want to continue interacting with each other when interactions occur in a positive context, with a positive frame. As Small (2009) argues in his study of how practices in daycares can build relationships between the women who rely on the centers to care for their children, organizational practices facilitate different degrees and types of tie formation. In particular, he finds that organizations that effectively create social ties are those where there are “(a) many opportunities for (b) regular and (c) long-lasting interaction, (d) minimally competitive and (e) maximally cooperative institutional environments, and

both (f) internal and (g) external motivations to maintain those opportunities and sustain those environments...” (Small 2009: 21). In this paper, I follow the theorizing of Blau, Festinger, and others to examine how organization practices are relevant to social network formation at work through two pathways: the extent and regularity of contact (a-c in Small’s formulation), and favorable conditions of contact (d-e in Small’s formulation).¹

Some organizational practices have explicitly relational implications by, for example, defining the scope and roles of jobs, including interactions with others within and outside of the organization, or by determining the frequency of contact with coworkers due of work schedules. Other organizational practices have more impact on the conditions of contact among coworkers in a workplace, for instance, by creating more or less stress at work. I now turn to how features of retail work impact the extent and regularity of contact, and the conditions of contact among retail employees.

Precarious Work and Workplace Relationships

In addition to contributing to our theoretical knowledge about how context shapes relationship formation, this paper addresses an important substantive question. One assumption of research on precarious work is that such work conditions undermine the bases for social connection among employees in a workplace. This assumption has not been empirically examined.

Even given the decrease in the size of the retail industry during the COVID-19

¹ I consider motivations (f and g for Small 2009) to be held relatively constant given that respondents share the same type of relationship to the same type of organization since are all retail workers in the largest retail companies in the U.S.

pandemic, about 15 million people are employed in the retail industry, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data. Women, Black and Latinx workers, and young people are overrepresented in retail work compared to the rest of the labor market (Current Population Survey 2019). The retail industry is particularly susceptible to economic contractions, and job instability is a common feature of retail work as stores frequently close and staff are cut. The industry is also characterized by widespread racial inequality in wages, scheduling, and benefits in the retail industry as well, putting Black and Latinx workers at a substantial disadvantage (Ruetschlin and Asante-Muhammad 2015). In 2019, the median income of retail workers was \$25,440, well below the median of \$39,810 for all workers (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019).

While the conditions of retail work vary by employer and by workplace, retail work is characterized by a number of common features. Temporal instability is a common experience for many retail workers. A growing body of work has sought to understand the dimensions, prevalence and consequences of such temporal instability (e.g. Clawson and Gerstel 2015; Henly, Shaefer and Waxman 2006; Lambert et al. 2015; Schneider and Harknett 2019a). Scholars at the Employment Instability Network (Henly and Lambert 2014a) have perhaps gone the furthest in disaggregating its different dimensions of temporal instability including, for example, whether work schedules are regular or variable, the amount of advanced notice workers receive, the amount of volatility in the number of hours employees work from week to week, whether shifts are cancelled, and the amount of control an employee has over his or her schedule. Additionally, in an effort to cut labor costs, employers often have insufficient staff in retail stores, creating additional stress on employees managing greater workloads. Some

estimates suggest that relatively few retail workers have access to employer benefits: for example, only 29 percent of workers in retail in New York had health insurance through their employer (Fujita and Luce 2012).

We might expect that the organizational practices that give rise to these work conditions in retail have relational implications. Do the organizational practices associated with precarious work make employees more isolated at their jobs, because they do not have enough regular contact with others to form workplace ties? Indeed, recent work finds evidence that job insecurity is associated with perceiving less support from coworkers (Minnotte and Varud 2020). Or, conversely, does precarity create new opportunities for workplace relationships by introducing employees to a wider variety of coworkers and forcing them to rely on one another to respond to work uncertainty? Given the growth of jobs in which individuals are exposed to schedule instability and other forms of negative work conditions (Kalleberg 2009; Kalleberg 2018), the impact of such practices on the formation of relationships in the workplace is important to understanding well-being and possibilities for workplace collective action.

I examine four organizational practices relevant to job conditions for retail workers: the degree of temporal instability in their work schedules, having regular or variable schedules, negative workplace conditions of contact, and job remuneration and benefits. I refer to organizational practices, instead of features of the work itself such as job quality, and employment characteristics, because these other terms obscure the fact that job quality is a result of choices about practices, whether formal or informal, made by employers. These features are not inherent to retail jobs, but they are the result of organizational practices that could be otherwise.

I expect that temporal instability will likely put an employee in contact with a larger number of coworkers than a fixed schedule, but will also lessen the regularity of interaction with any particular coworker. Depending on the amount of interaction necessary for the formation and persistence of a relationship, these “flexible” scheduling practices may thus decrease the number of workplace relationships. Schedules that are predictable and put employees in contact with more of their coworkers should be associated with more workplace relationships. This is a direct pathway between schedules and workplace relationships, whereby schedules and scheduling practices determine the amount of repeated exposure to some number of coworkers.

Hypothesis 1: Organizational scheduling practices that provide individuals with a) more opportunities for regular, sustained contact with b) more of their coworkers will be associated with more workplace relationships.

A variety of organizational practices in retail workplaces—including short staffing, high workloads, and high managerial discretion— may have relational implications through a second pathway. These types of organizational practices likely degrade the conditions under which employees encounter each other, making it harder to form relationships.

Thus, I expect that,

Hypothesis 2: Organizational practices that make the conditions of contact between coworkers more negative will be associated with fewer workplace relationships.

Just as some organizational practices may degrade the conditions of interaction at work, others may improve it. We might expect that practices that contribute to global employee well-being including job benefits and higher hourly wages will be associated with the formation of relationships through improving the conditions of contact among coworkers.

Hypothesis 3: Organizational practices that improve general life conditions will be associated with more workplace relationships.

Workplace relationships vary in the extent that people feel they need to rely on one another, either at work or outside of it. Previous research suggests that affective and instrumental relationships are conceptually distinct, both in how they are experienced and in terms their effects on workplace behavior (Reich and Bearman 2018). Here, it is difficult to predict exactly how organizational practices in retail will relate to the formation and persistence of such instrumental relationships. On the one hand, features of precarious work likely increases the extent to which people feel they need to rely on one another to respond to scheduling uncertainty (swapping shifts, taking care of one another's kids, etc.), in ways that might increase workplace relationships, especially instrumental relationships. On the other hand, features of precarious work also likely make it difficult for people to make commitments to one another, in ways that might decrease instrumental workplace relationships. Given the existing evidence regarding the extent of the burdens associated with precarious work, I expect the latter will override the former.

Hypothesis 4: The association between scheduling instability and instrumental relationships will be stronger than the association between scheduling instability and affective relationships.

Given that schedule instability is associated with a variety of negative life conditions and stressors (Schneider and Harknett 2019a), we would expect that employees experiencing temporal schedule instability have higher levels of stress when they interact with one another than do employees with less temporal instability, all else equal. This suggests an indirect pathway between scheduling practices and workplace relationships, where temporal instability at work increases stress and negative experiences at work, thus decreasing the quality of exposure to coworkers.

Hypothesis 5: The experience of more temporal instability is associated with fewer workplace relationships because it causes more stress that worsens the conditions of contact with coworkers.

Data and Methods

Survey Methodology

The data for this paper comes from The Shift Project (Schneider and Harknett 2019a; Schneider and Harknett 2019b), which uses targeted advertising on the social media platform Facebook to collect web-based surveys from a large population of service-sector workers. Here, I use one wave of data from that project that included ego network measures, collected from retail and food service workers employed at 80 large companies across the country. The method samples from a specific population - hourly workers employed by large firms in the retail sector. The Shift Project uses the advertising infrastructure of Facebook to target survey recruitment messages to active users on Facebook who reside in the United States, speak English, are over the age of 18 and under the age of 64, and are employed by one of 80 large retail or food service companies (e.g., Best Buy, Costco, CVS, Home Depot, Ikea, Panera, Staples, Walmart). The companies were selected by drawing from the top 100 retailers by sales in the United States. The Shift Project purchased advertisements on the Facebook platform which then appeared in the Desktop Newsfeed, Mobile Newsfeed, and on Instagram accounts of the target sample. Each advertisement included “Berkeley Work and Family Study” with a hyperlink to the official Facebook study page, the text of the advertisement (e.g., “Working at [employer name]? Take a short survey and tell us about your job!”), a picture designed to resemble workers at the targeted employer workplace, and a headline “Chance to win an iPad!” Those who clicked on the ad were directed to an online survey

on Qualtrics. The front page of the survey contained introductory information and a consent form. Respondents provided consent by clicking to continue to the survey instrument. Respondents who completed the survey and provided contact information were entered in the iPad drawing. Survey data for the wave including network measures was collected from February-June 2018.

Schneider and Harknett (2019a) report that in previous waves of the survey, 6.7% of ad displays led to clicks through to begin the survey and 18% of those clicks led to some survey data; 1.2% of advertisement displays yielded survey data. Though these response rates are lower than obtained in many probability-sample phone surveys, Schneider and Harknett (2019a) note that this type of sample of retail workers would be difficult if not impossible to reach through traditional methods given the absence of an appropriate sampling frame. The sample used for this paper included 19,262; 8,513 of those completed the survey. I follow Schneider and Harknett (2019a) and use responses from these 8,513 individuals, though all substantive results I report are the same when I use the full dataset with listwise deletion of missing values.

The survey recruitment and data collection approach yields a strategically-targeted, non-probability sample. Schneider and Harknett (2019a) note that while using Facebook as the sampling frame is a departure from traditional survey sampling frames, there are a number of benefits to using Facebook to collect data. First, Facebook continues to be an extremely widely-used social media platform; recent estimates show that approximately 81 percent of Americans age 18-50 are active on Facebook (Greenwood et al. 2016), similar to the sample frame provided by telephone-based methods (Christian et al. 2010). Additionally, Facebook use is not especially stratified by

demographic characteristics (Greenwood et al. 2016). For a detailed discussion of the methods and data implications of using Facebook for surveying see Schneider and Harknett (2019b).

Key Measures

The Shift Project survey is divided into various modules. This paper uses the modules that collect information on job characteristics, demographics, worker health and wellbeing, and workplace relationships.

Dependent Variables

I measure workplace relationships using three different measures which I combine into one overall count of the number of work-related relationships. Respondents were first directed to think about their coworkers at their workplace (not including their managers or direct supervisors). They were then asked: “In the last two weeks, how many coworkers at your workplace did you talk to about anything related to your personal life?” (I refer to this as *personal talk ties*); “If you needed help with something personal outside of work, how many coworkers at your workplace you could ask for help?” (*personal help ties*); and “If you had a serious problem at work, how many coworkers could you trust to help you?” (*work help ties*). Respondents were instructed that they could count the same people from previous questions, allowing for overlap in the individuals represented in the counts. I examine models with the three types of relationships considered separately as well. Respondents reported a mean of 11.82 total workplace relationships (range from 0-170, standard deviation of 12.44; mean of 4.53 personal talk relationships, 3.47 personal help relationships, and 3.86 work help

relationships²). As a comparison, Podolny and Baron (1997) find a mean of 2.05 reported relationships of social support (simile to the personal help relationships) and 3.04 reported relationships for task-related advice (similar to the work help relationships) among 25,000 salaried (professional and managerial) employees in a technology manufacturing engineering company in 1994.

As an approximate measure of the baseline number of employees in a workplace in order to establish a baseline for the number of possible relationships, respondents were asked “About how many employees does your store have?” This baseline estimate is included as a control in all models reported below to account for differences in the size of workplaces, given that workplaces with more employees will provide more opportunities for relationships than will workplaces with fewer employees.

Independent Variables

I examine three types of organizational practices that bear on work conditions. First, I look at temporal instability in work schedules, which I expect to impact the number of workplace relationships through changing the amount and regularity of contact with coworkers. Second, I examine workplace conditions that might impact the number of workplace relationships by shaping the nature of interactions among coworkers. Finally, I examine job remuneration and benefits, that might impact the number of workplace relationships through general improvements in well-being, an indirect path toward improving conditions of contact among employees.

² The three measures of workplace relationships are overlapping but not identical, suggesting that they capture different conceptual aspects of relationships at work. The number of personal talk ties and personal help ties are correlated at $r=0.47$. The number of personal talk ties and work help ties are not as strongly related to each other, $r=0.40$. The number of personal help ties and the number of work help ties are strongly related to one another, $r=0.64$.

Temporal Instability in Work Schedules. Measures of the instability of respondents' schedules were developed and tested by the Employment Instability Network (Henly and Lambert, 2014b). I use two main metrics for schedules: respondents' classification of the regularity of their schedules and an index of schedule instability practices that we would expect to be relevant to forming relationships at work, which I refer to as the index of relational schedule instability. For the schedule classification measure, respondents classified their usual schedule as a regular day shift, a regular evening shift, a regular night shift, a variable schedule, a rotating shift, or some other arrangement; I collapsed this question into a dichotomous variable: variable shift (0) or regular shift (1). The results I report below are robust to several different specifications of this scheduling variable.

For the index of relational schedule instability, I use four measures: having less than two-weeks advanced notice, having had a shift cancelled, having worked on-call, and having no input into scheduling. Respondents reported the amount of advance notice they are given of their schedule, differentiating 0-2 days of notice, 3-6 days, 1-2 weeks, or 2 weeks or more. I collapse this variable into a dichotomous variable of less than 2 weeks of notice (1) or two weeks or more notice (0) based on findings from Schneider and Harknett (2019a) about the substantive importance of this distinction. Respondents reported if "in the last month, was one of your scheduled shifts cancelled with less than 24 hours notice?", a dichotomous indicator distinguishing those that had (1) from those who had not (0) experienced a cancellation. For having worked on-call, respondents reported if "in the last month, you worked on call?" and create a dichotomous indicator distinguishing those that had (1) from those who had not (0) worked on-call. Finally, a

measure of schedule control compared those who said their work schedules are (1) determined completely by the employer with no worker input (2) determined by the employer with some worker input, and (3) determined by the worker with some employer input or entirely by the worker. I created a dichotomous variable of having some input into the schedule (0) from having no input into the schedule (1). These responses on these four measures were added, to create the index of relational schedule instability, ranging from 0 to 4 (mean of 1.55, standard deviation of 1.0).³

Workplace Conditions of Contact. Other regular employer practices in retail work, such as short staffing stores, can create negative conditions for interaction with coworkers and managers, presumably reducing the possibility of forming relationships. I use a summed index of three characteristics of work that might create negative conditions for interaction: respondents' reports of whether they had too much work to do everything well at work (respondents answering "strongly agree" or "agree" were assigned a value of 1, all other respondents were assigned a 0), how frequently they felt that there were not enough staff to get the work done (respondents answering "always" or "often" were assigned a value of 1, all other respondents were assigned a 0), and that their immediate supervisor never treats them fairly (all other respondents were assigned a 0). The mean value of this index (range from 0-3, where higher values indicate worse job conditions) is 1.01, standard deviation of 0.90.

Job Remuneration and Benefits. Amount of pay and job benefits might impact workplace

³ I did not expect that two other common measures of schedule instability, a measure of hour volatility (respondent reports of the most and the fewest weekly hours they worked over the past 4 weeks and taking the difference in those estimates divided by the maximum estimated weekly hours) and of working closings then opening a store within 11 hours (often referred to as a clopening) would be related to workplace relationships as they do not, on their face, impact the amount of exposure to work colleagues. This was confirmed by examining the correlations between the individual schedule instability measures and the key outcome measures. Thus, these two measures were excluded from the index.

relationships through a more indirect path: by improving well-being and life stability which might improve the conditions under which individuals interact with one another at work. Having a higher hourly wage, a feature of jobs that bears directly on life outcomes, might create conditions for favorable interaction with others. Respondents reported their hourly wages using a screening question, “Are you paid by the hour at [EMPLOYER]?” then, if yes, “How much are you paid by the hour by [EMPLOYER]?” This self-report measure was validated by Schneider and Harkett (2019b) by comparing wages against reports for workers in the same industries and occupations who are surveyed in the Current Population Survey and the NLSY97. The mean hourly wage in this dataset is 11.63 dollars/hour, standard deviation of 4.82 dollars/hour.

I create an index of benefits that include respondent reports of whether their employer offers paid sick leave, paid vacation, paid maternity or paternity leave, and employer provided or subsidized child care. The mean value of this index (range from 0-4, where higher values indicate better job benefits) is 1.26, standard deviation of 1.15. Job benefits and hourly wage are correlated with each other at $r = 0.49$.

Work Controls

In all models reported below, I control for usual hours worked, to ensure that the effects are a product of organizational practices and work conditions specifically and not the number of hours of exposure to coworkers respondents have. I also include a number of controls for factors that may be related to workplace relationships, in order to address possible confounds with our main relationship of interest, including: job tenure as a measure of length of employment with current employer (mean 38 months, standard deviation of 25.8 months), whether the respondent reported being a manager (22.4

percent of the sample), and whether the respondent reported belonging to a union (about 9 percent of the sample).

Life Conditions Relevant to Relationship Formation at Work

Respondents provided information on a number of features of their life circumstances that were likely relevant to the extent to which they had the time and capacity to form relationships with coworkers. I use measures of being partnered (49 percent), being enrolled in school (25 percent), whether the respondent lived in a household with children (47 percent), and whether the respondent speaks a language other than English at home (13 percent) (all binary measures) to account for individuals who may have reduced opportunities to form workplace relationships.

Population Structure

Given the importance of sorting by racial identity in the formation of relationships across contexts (McPherson et al. 2001), we might expect that the racial population structure of a workplace which shapes the number of coworkers one might come into contact with of one's own race, will be related to the number of relationships formed at work. Here, because I do not have workplace level demographic data, I use a proxy for such population structure features of the mismatch between the race of one's manager and one's own race (28 percent of the sample qualifies), under the assumption that the race of the manager may provide some information about the underlying racial composition of the workplace.

Other Demographic Controls

Demographic characteristics could also confound any relationship between organizational practices and conditions and workplace relationships given that there may

be demographic variation in forming workplace relationships. Consequently, in some of the models below, I control for gender (male is the reference category), race/ethnicity (Black, non-Hispanic; Hispanic; or other/two-or-more-races, non-Hispanic; versus white, non-Hispanic as the reference category), educational attainment (high school diploma or less, some college, or BA or more; some college is the reference category).

Mediation Analysis: Well-being

Given recent evidence regarding the relationship between temporal schedule instability and declines in well-being (Schneider and Harknett 2019a), it is possible that the effect of schedule instability on relationships is not a direct one, but an indirect one through distress. That is, the declines in well-being associated with schedule instability may make relationship formation more difficult, leading individuals to have fewer workplace relationships. If this is the case, then schedule instability may affect relationship formation through changing the conditions of contact, rather than the opportunities for contact. To assess this possibility, I use a binary metric of the extent of distress reported by respondents (the measure is based on an index that includes five Kessler-6 items assessing how often in the past month a respondent felt sad, restless, nervous, hopeless, or that everything was an effort and a measure of feeling that “difficulties are piling up so high you could not overcome them”, Cronbach’s alpha of 0.91; scores under 13 on the 6-item index were to a zero, scores 13 and above were converted to a one, following the threshold convention for Kessler-6. The results below are substantively the same when using the continuous index.

Analytical Models

A total of 8,513 respondents completed the survey during the period that included the workplace relationship questions. I construct a dataset of complete values for these observations using multiple imputation (the *mice* package in R) for these 8,513 observations to address item non-response in the data. All results reported are substantively the same when using listwise deletion for missing values.

Due to overdispersion in the count of workplace relationships, I conduct a series of negative binomial regression models.⁴ I first examine a model regressing the quantity of workplace relationships on organizational practices relevant to opportunities for interaction – relational schedule instability and schedule regularity – including basic controls for workplace characteristics. I then regress the number of workplace relationships on job features that shape the conditions of interaction directly (workplace relational conditions) and indirectly (job remuneration and benefits) and the quantity of workplace relationships. I then examine models with measures of all of these features, including various sets of controls (basic workplace characteristics, life circumstances relevant to availability for relationship formation, mismatch with race of supervisor, and other demographic controls). Each of the more expansive nested models significantly improve the fit over the previous model.

Because the measures of workplace relationships are ego-centric relationships, and respondents are employed by 80 different employers and presumably in different stores, there is little concern of interdependence of observations in the data. I include employer fixed effects to account for differences between employers in the process linking organizational practices and workplace relationship formation.

⁴ An analysis confirmed the improved fit of the negative binomial regression over the Poisson regression model.

I follow these analyses with similar analyses except for each type of workplace relationship separately as the dependent variable to assess whether the conditions described above are differentially related to the formation of different types of workplace relationships.

I conduct a mediation analysis, examining whether the negative effect of relational schedule instability on the number of workplace relationships is mediated by psychological distress, suggesting that in this case, organizational practices related to opportunities for regular contact with coworkers are associated with relationships by increasing psychological distress, and thus degrading conditions for contact with coworkers. I follow the four-step procedure recommended by Baron and Kenny (1986) and use the bootstrapping test recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2004), implemented through the *mediation* package in R.

Finally, in order to address a possible concern that I have modeled the direction of the causal relationship incorrectly, and that individuals who have more workplace relationships have their schedules moved around more frequently, I conduct a subgroup analysis with individual who report 2 or more years at their current job, under the assumption that if employees have their schedules changed frequently in order to disrupt their social behavior, they are unlikely to persist at the job for two or more years, given the high rates of turnover in these types of jobs.

Results

Plots of the descriptive relationship between the key measures of organizational practices relevant to opportunities for contact and conditions of contact and the distribution of the count of workplace relationships appears in Figure 1. The plots

visually demonstrate how the distribution of the count of workplace relationships vary by values of the key measures.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Pathways: Opportunities for Contact and Conditions of Contact

Opportunities for Regular Contact

In order to assess Hypothesis 1 that more consistent exposure to coworkers is associated with more workplace relationships (a direct route), I regress a count of the total number of workplace relationships on the index of relational schedule instability, a dummy variable for whether the respondent had a regular schedule, and the respondent's estimate of the number of total employees in the store to control for the baseline number of possible relationships. I also include hourly wage, usual number of hours worked, job tenure, whether the respondent is a manager or a union member, and employer fixed effects. Results are provided in Table 1 (Model 1). Models 4-6 in Table 1 illustrate the association between these two measures when including other workplace conditions and sets of controls.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

More exposure to relational schedule instability, net of type of schedule, is associated with significantly fewer workplace relationships (an incidence rate ratio of 0.86 without full controls (Model 1); and 0.90 with the full set of controls (Model 6)—every one unit increase in the relational instability index is associated with a 0.9 percent decrease in the incidence rate of workplace relationships). Figure 2 provides the predicted values of the number of workplace relationships when other work conditions are good (upward triangle; variable schedule, no negative workplace conditions of contact,

maximum job benefits) and poor (downward triangle; regular schedule, maximum number of negative workplace conditions of contact, no job benefits).

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Having a regular schedule is associated with significantly *fewer* workplace relationships compared to individuals with variable, but predictable schedules (incidence rate ratio of 0.92 without full controls; 0.92 with the full set of controls). Both of these findings are consistent with Hypothesis 1, that organizational scheduling practices that provide employees with more regular, sustained contact with more of their coworkers yield more workplace relationships. Schedule instability decreases opportunities for regular contact with coworkers, and is thus associated with fewer workplace relationships. Variable schedules that are predictable can expose employees to more coworkers as they rotate through shifts, providing opportunities for regular contact with more coworkers, thus the association with more workplace relationships.

As a further examination of the negative relationship between having a regular schedule and the number of workplace relationships, I look to the case of regular night shift workers. I examine whether employees with a regular night shift report more workplace relationships compared to those with a regular schedule who do not work the night shift, under the assumption that night shift employees have fewer opportunities for relationships outside of work because their schedules do not align with the majority of other people, thus reducing their opportunities for non-work relationship formation. This would lead to the prediction that those individuals who have fewer opportunities for relationships outside of work would be more likely to form relationships at work. In fact, Young and Lim (2014) find that those who are unemployed are isolated because their free

time is not generally aligned with most others' free time, indicating time as a networked good. Additionally, there is often more time and flexibility during night shifts as there are fewer customers, thus providing more time for colleagues to interact with one another. I indeed find that those employees with a regular, predictable night report more workplace relationships than employees with a regular, non-night shift (incidence rate ratio of 1.07); there is no statistically significant difference in the number of reported relationships between individuals with a regular night shift and individuals with a predictable, variable schedule (incidence rate ratio of 0.98).

Conditions of Contact

The next models (Model 2, 4-6 in Table 1) examine how workplace practices and conditions that degrade conditions of contact—having too much work, not having enough staff, and being unfairly treated by a manager—are associated with the quantity of work relationships. Hypothesis 2 posits that practices that degrade conditions of interaction will be associated with fewer workplace relationships. Indeed, experiencing more of these negative workplace practices is associated with significantly fewer workplace relationships (incidence rate ratio of 0.84 without full controls; 0.85 with the full set of controls).

Another possible route from organizational practices to workplace relationships (Hypothesis 3) is through improving general life conditions, which might improve the conditions for contact at work. I find support for this hypothesis as well (Models 3-6): reporting more job benefits is associated with significantly more workplace relationships (incidence rate ratio of 1.09 without full controls; 1.07 with the full set of controls). Importantly, this general well-being effect seems limited to benefits and not to

remuneration: the effect of hourly wage on workplace relationships is either not significant or negative (Models 3 and 4).

Across the models, conditions that influence opportunities for interaction with more others, like being in a workplace with more employees, working more average hours per week, and being a manager are significantly associated with more workplace relationships. Other life circumstances that may reduce opportunities for interaction with coworkers due to time demands outside of the workplace, like having children at home, are associated with fewer workplace relationships. Another life circumstance that one might suspect would reduce opportunities for interaction with coworkers because of time demands did not appear to do so: being enrolled in school is associated with significantly more workplace relationships (incidence rate ratio of 1.14). Finally, the proxy for the racial composition of the workplace—a mismatch between the race of the respondent and the reported race of his or her supervisor, under the assumption that if there is a mismatch with the race of the supervisor, there is more likely a mismatch with the overall racial composition of the workplace—is negatively associated with workplace relationships (incidence rate ratio of 0.96). Of course, this measure may indicate something about the nature of interaction with one's supervisor instead of something about the racial composition of the workplace. Female and Black respondents report significantly fewer workplace relationships (incidence rate ratio of 0.94 and 0.77, respectively).

There are no significant effects of being in a union, being partnered, speaking a language other than English at home, or education level in this dataset.

Organizational Practices by Type of Relationship

When I examine each type of relationship separately, I find the same general pattern for the number of personal talk, personal help, and work help relationships as I find with all relationships combined: more exposure to relational schedule instability, having a regular schedule, and negative workplace conditions of contact are all associated with fewer relationships, while more job benefits are associated with more relationships. The association between having a regular schedule and fewer personal help relationships is not statistically significant. In contrast to expectations, net of other factors, reporting a higher hourly wage is associated with slightly *fewer* personal help and work help relationships. Results for these models are reported in Table 2.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Does Distress Mediate the Effect of Relational Schedule Instability on Workplace Relationships?

To provide evidence for the proposed pathway by which relational schedule instability affects the formation of workplace relationships— through shaping regular opportunities for contact— I conduct a mediation analysis. Given that schedule instability is also associated with declines in well-being (Schneider and Harknett 2019a) that can create negative conditions for interaction, I examine the proportion of the direct effect of relational schedule instability on the number of workplace relationships that is mediated by the indirect negative effect of distress on workplace relationships. I find that, while distress is indeed significantly positively associated with both relational schedule instability and negatively associated with the number of workplace relationships, it mediates only about 3-5 percent of the direct effect of relational instability, depending on

the model. This provides evidence that relational schedule instability has negative relational implications independent of its association with greater psychological distress.

Addressing Reverse-Causality Concerns

An assumption of these analyses is that organizational practices contribute to fewer relationships at work, and not that fewer relationships lead to experiencing more instability in work practices. One possibility, however, is that managers assign individuals to variable schedules based on their workplace relationships, perhaps as punishment for too much or too little socializing at work. To address this concern, I ran a subset analysis including only the 5,829 respondents who report 2 or more years at their job, under the assumption that because turnover in these jobs is so high and firing workers is very common, if individuals have made it to two years at the job, their schedule is not being moved around as a form of punishment. I find the same results reported above using this subset of workers, suggesting my assumption about the causal ordering of these relationships may be appropriate.

Discussion

In contrast to an examination of organizations and relationship formation that focuses on how different types of organizations differentially shape relationship building and thus access to key social resources for low-income individuals (e.g., Small and Gose 2020), I focus in particular on the relational implications of organizational practices that bear on job quality within work organizations in one low-wage industry. I draw on unique data from a national sample of retail workers to examine two pathways by which practices might shape relationship formation: through shaping the extent and regularity of contact with coworkers, and through shaping the conditions of interaction with

coworkers.

I find strong evidence of a direct effect of both pathways on relationship formation. Net of other work experiences, individuals who experience relational schedule instability—receiving less than two weeks of advanced notice, experiencing shift cancellation, experiencing on-call work, and lacking control over a work schedule—have fewer workplace relationships than those who do not. Additionally, individuals with a regular schedule where the hours are the same across days and weeks, net of experiencing scheduling instability, have fewer relationships at work than those with varying schedules. This suggests that being exposed to more and distinct coworkers through having a predictable, variable shift is associated with larger workplace networks. Interestingly, the effects of a regular night schedule are the same as those of a regular variable schedule. I test whether this is indeed a direct effect of practices that shape opportunities for regular contact. The negative effect of relational schedule instability on the number of workplace relationships is not mediated by psychological distress, indicating that it does not work through degrading the conditions of contact with other coworkers.

I find a strong negative association between negative relational work conditions (too much work, insufficient staff, and unfair treatment) and workplace relationships. I assume, but cannot test due to data limitations, this pathway is through degrading the conditions of contact between employees. I also find evidence of the impact of more global, less directly relational organizational practices on workplace relationships: having more workplace benefits is positively associated with more workplace relationships. Again, I assume that this effect operates at least in part through improving the conditions

of interaction among coworkers. I find no evidence that higher hourly wage increases the number of workplace relationships, and in some models, hourly wage is associated with fewer relationships. This discrepancy between the effects of conditions that should improve the global well-being of workers on relationships might provide a starting point for further inquiry into this proposed pathway. Finally, I find no evidence that these pathways work differently for different types of workplace relationships.

This project began with theoretical predictions regarding the pathways by which various organizational practices might shape relationship formation among retail workers. A lack of measures of the proposed mechanisms in this type of quantitative data suggests the need for qualitative work in retail workplaces examining the plausibility of these pathways and generating ideas for other pathways linking conditions of work in these types of workplaces to the formation of relationships.

There is extensive variation across employers in all of the key organizational practices I examine here. For example, only 3 percent of employees at one employer report having a variable schedule, while over 62 percent of employees at another employer report having a variable schedule. There is also variation by employer in how evenly distributed these organizational practices are across employees. Additional variation within and between stores (even if the employer is the same) is unobserved. We know little about the source of these practices with relational consequences, and how retail managers think about relationships among employees at work. Are workplace relationships perceived as valuable to improving employee retention and effort, or are they seen as barriers to efficiency? How do these perceptions vary by stereotypes about different types of workers, or by workplace roles? Without that type of information, I am

unable to draw any conclusions about the extent to which managers and other decision-makers in these large retail organizations recognize and respond to workplace relationships, including whether individuals might be more subject to scheduling instability explicitly to disrupt the formation of workplace relationships.

Beyond the essential role of relationships in affecting well-being, relationships among employees may be particularly important to shaping how employees think about engaging in individual or collective actions at work. Workplace relationships likely shape perceived risks of challenging certain organizational practices and the experience of solidarity with coworkers. Indeed, workplace organizing relies on identifying informal workplace leaders who often are exceptionally skilled at building relationships with coworkers. We find preliminary evidence of the relationship between workplace ties and action orientations. In this dataset, having more workplace ties is positively correlated with expressing an intention to work with coworkers to find a solution ($r = 0.19$) and negatively correlated with intentions to seek out another job ($r = -0.14$). Given the widespread use of practices that are detrimental to well-being in retail, understanding the relational conditions under which individuals work together to change those practices is an important area of inquiry.

This paper aims to make three contribution to the growing study of network ecology. First, it directs our attention to the relational implications of the specific organizational practices that govern many of the contexts in which we encounter each other. Organizations practices can reflect both exogenous features of context that bear on relationship formation and these endogenous dynamics that shape who forms relationships, and who does not. Second, it begins tracing the relationship between

organizational practices and particular mechanisms of relationship building. And finally, it contributes an empirical example from a context that receives relatively little attention to its relational characteristics, and one where relational characteristics are likely essential to improving job quality. To the extent that the study of network ecology might proceed by building cumulative knowledge about contexts and relational mechanisms, these types of empirical examples can serve as the basis of more comprehensive theorizing going forward.

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Figure 1. Count of Workplace Relationships by Experience of Organizational Practices.

a. Relational Schedule Instability Index (higher values indicate more instability)

b. Regular Schedule (1) vs. Variable Schedule (0)

c. Negative Workplace Conditions of Contact, Index (higher values indicate more negative conditions)

d. Job Benefits, Index (higher values indicate more benefits)

Figure 2. Predicted Values of Count of Workplace Relationships by Relational Schedule Stability Index at Positive (upward triangle) and Negative (downward triangle) Values of Other Organizational Practices

	<i>Dependent variable: Count of Workplace Relationships</i>					
	DV					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Relational Schedule Instability, Index	0.86*** (0.01)			0.89*** (0.01)	0.89*** (0.01)	0.90*** (0.01)
Regular Work Schedule	0.92*** (0.02)			0.91*** (0.02)	0.92*** (0.02)	0.92*** (0.02)
Negative Workplace Conditions, Index		0.84*** (0.01)		0.86*** (0.01)	0.86*** (0.01)	0.85*** (0.01)
Job Benefits, Index			1.09*** (0.01)	1.07*** (0.01)	1.07*** (0.01)	1.07*** (0.01)
Hourly Wage	1.00 (0.002)	1.00 (0.002)	0.99* (0.002)	1.00* (0.002)	1.00 (0.002)	1.00 (0.002)
No. of Employees in Workplace	1.00*** (0.0001)	1.00*** (0.0001)	1.00*** (0.0001)	1.00*** (0.0001)	1.00*** (0.0001)	1.00*** (0.0001)
Usual Work Hours	1.00*** (0.001)	1.01*** (0.001)	1.00* (0.001)	1.00*** (0.001)	1.01*** (0.001)	1.01*** (0.001)
Tenure in Job (Months)	1.00 (0.0004)	1.00*** (0.0003)	1.00 (0.0004)	1.00 (0.0004)	1.00*** (0.0004)	1.00*** (0.0004)
Manager	1.09** (0.03)	1.14*** (0.03)	1.09** (0.03)	1.09** (0.03)	1.09*** (0.03)	1.08** (0.03)
Union Member	1.05 (0.05)	1.05 (0.05)	1.02 (0.05)	1.07 (0.05)	1.07 (0.05)	1.07 (0.05)
Partnered					0.97 (0.02)	0.97 (0.02)
Enrolled in School					1.14*** (0.03)	1.14*** (0.03)
Children at Home					0.88*** (0.02)	0.89*** (0.02)
Language Other than English at Home					0.95 (0.03)	0.96 (0.03)
Mismatch with Race of Manager						0.96* (0.02)
Female						0.94** (0.02)
Black						0.77*** (0.03)
HispanicLatinx						0.96 (0.03)
Other Racial Identity						1.02 (0.03)
Education: Less than HS Degree						0.99 (0.02)
Education: BA or more						1.02 (0.07)
Constant	10.68*** (0.86)	9.92*** (0.08)	8.17*** (0.08)	11.25*** (0.08)	10.61*** (0.08)	11.69*** (0.09)
Observations	8,513	8,513	8,513	8,513	8,513	8,513
Log Likelihood	-29,005.24	-28,979.08	-29,094.21	-28,878.41	-28,821.33	-28,791.92
θ	1.79*** (0.03)	1.80*** (0.03)	1.75*** (0.03)	1.85*** (0.03)	1.88*** (0.03)	1.90*** (0.03)
Akaike Inf. Crit.	58,184.48	58,130.15	58,360.42	57,934.83	57,828.65	57,783.84
<i>Note:</i> Coefficients are incident rate ratios (exponentiated)						*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 1: Negative Binomial Regression of No. of Workplace Relationships on Organizational Practices

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		
	Count of Relationships		
	Personal Talk	Personal Help	Work Help
Relational Schedule Instability, Index	0.92*** (0.01)	0.88*** (0.01)	0.88*** (0.01)
Regular Work Schedule	0.89*** (0.02)	0.96 (0.03)	0.94** (0.02)
Negative Workplace Conditions, Index	0.93*** (0.01)	0.83*** (0.01)	0.79*** (0.01)
Job Benefits, Index	1.06*** (0.01)	1.10*** (0.02)	1.07*** (0.01)
Hourly Wage	1.00 (0.003)	0.99* (0.003)	0.99*** (0.003)
No. of Employees in Workplace	1.00*** (0.0001)	1.00*** (0.0002)	1.00*** (0.0001)
Usual Work Hours	1.01*** (0.001)	1.01*** (0.001)	1.00*** (0.001)
Tenure in Job (Months)	1.00*** (0.0004)	1.00*** (0.001)	1.00** (0.0005)
Manager	1.13*** (0.03)	1.06 (0.04)	1.03 (0.03)
Union Manager	1.05 (0.06)	1.11 (0.07)	1.08 (0.06)
Partnered	0.97 (0.02)	0.94* (0.02)	0.99 (0.02)
Enrolled in School	1.12*** (0.03)	1.17*** (0.04)	1.15*** (0.03)
Children at Home	0.88*** (0.02)	0.89*** (0.03)	0.90*** (0.02)
Language Other than English at Home	0.92* (0.03)	1.02 (0.04)	0.96 (0.03)
Mismatch with Race of Manager	0.97 (0.02)	0.94* (0.03)	0.96 (0.02)
Female	0.94** (0.02)	0.93* (0.03)	0.94* (0.02)
Black	0.73*** (0.03)	0.78*** (0.04)	0.81*** (0.04)
HispanicLatinx	0.98 (0.03)	0.95 (0.04)	0.95 (0.04)
Other Racial Identity	1.03 (0.03)	1.04 (0.04)	0.99 (0.04)
Education: Less than HS Degree	0.97 (0.02)	1.01 (0.03)	1.00 (0.03)
Education: BA or more	1.05 (0.08)	1.04 (0.09)	0.94 (0.08)
Constant	4.58*** (0.47)	2.71*** (0.12)	4.49*** (0.10)
Observations	8,513	8,513	8,513
Log Likelihood	-21,482.01	-19,729.49	-20,077.95
θ	1.91*** (0.04)	1.20*** (0.03)	1.67*** (0.04)
Akaike Inf. Crit.	43,164.03	39,658.99	40,355.89

Note: Coefficients are incident rate ratios (exponentiated)

*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 2: **Negative Binomial Regression of No. of Workplace Relationships (Type of relationship) on Organizational Practices**