Introduction

The employment landscape in the U.S.A. has undergone significant changes since the 1970s, driven by recessions, social policies, globalization, technology, neoliberalism, and privatization (Harvey, 2007; A. L. Kalleberg, 2009, 2011). The transformation has altered the nature of work, as "good jobs," or what the United Nations Sustainable Development goal calls "decent work" (jobs with legal protections from exploitative practices, poor pay, and social instabilities) (Chigbu & Nekhwevha, 2023). While work precarity is not new, employment classification systems and databases do not adequately address the realities of modern work paradigms. (BLS.gov, 2024).

Skilled Professionals in the Gig Economy

There is a prevailing notion that precarious work tends to affect younger workers and those with less education or lower skills, however, well-educated professionals are also experiencing contingent or gig work. Academic workers such as adjuncts, visiting assistant professors, and [i]other members of the "gig academy," (Lewis, 2025; Stewart et al., 2024; Swidler, 2022) as well as travel nurses (Yang et al., 2023) suggest a division between assumptions around getting a good education and the likelihood educations provide decent work. Despite possessing advanced educations or specialized skillsets, even these workers represent the new face of contingent labor.

What is Gig Work?

Gig work can be considered as a work arrangement based on the nature of the work or a tax or legal classification of work. Gig work is by nature considered temporary, but the range of what is 'temporary' is wide, from a single delivery or car ride to an adjunct professor with an annual contract. The temporary nature of the work is built into the contract, another element of gig work. Contracts usually define the terms of the relationship, but these contracts may range from a lengthy legal document to the terms and conditions agreed to by the click of a button (B. Collins, 2020). Another difference between gig work and standard employment is that gig work is self-employment, unlike the employee-employer relationship (IRS.gov, 2024). The individual or business establishes the work relationship through a contract or terms of conditions and the gig worker is expected to follow the terms, not entirely dissimilar from the employment relationship. In this sense, gig work tends to look more like traditional employment than the independent contractor, traditionally privately owned family businesses, however gig work is modeled on independent contracting (IRS.gov, 2024, 2025).

The Great Depression and World War II resulted in policies supportive of the USA worker such as The New Deal and The Great Society (Weir, 1988). By the 1970s, the social safety net programs that arose from the turmoil of war and stock market collapse are being dismantled in favor of neoliberalism policies and self-reliant individualism (Cooper, 2014; A. L. Kalleberg, 2009). Independent contractors lose a variety of employer supported benefits, such as workers compensation, health insurance, unemployment, overtime pay, family leave, employer contributions to Medicare and Social Security, or employer matched retirements (Harris, 2018). This shift of risk from the government and business to the individual leaves individuals concerned about their financial future, regardless of their current level of security (Cooper, 2014; Hacker, 2019).

Gigicare

Ravenelle (2019) describes three types of gig workers, the strugglers, strivers, and successes. The strugglers are those who find themselves unemployed or in a difficult situation, turning to gig work as a solution. The strivers tend to be those who want to use the gig economy in addition to their current job for a little extra cash, while the success stories if gig work are those who have chosen to forgo traditional employment altogether as their successful entrepreneurship allows them the flexibility and autonomy they want. This case study focuses on gigicare workers who do have the experience, education, or credentials to have a safety net because healthcare jobs are readily available. So, they choose gigicare work because they can, not because they must, like the strugglers. But they are aware that they choose precarity. This research is developing the concept of "gigicare," a gendered and racialized form of gig work with roots in reproductive labors. Gigicare is intended to capture the relationship between the traditional divisions of labor into racialized and gender care work roles and the encroachment of gig work beyond into the educated workforce. Building upon existing theoretical concepts we address a literature gap by

developing how precarious labor practices are becoming more common, even for those who spend considerable time and money to gain educational credentials for work. Gigicare work describes the intersection of care work + gender + race + gig work.

Care Work

Care work has been described by a variety of authors who applied gender and racial theoretical lenses to both formal and informal labors, variously called 'care work' (England et al., 2002), 'dirty work' (Duffy, 2007), 'emotional labor' (Hochschild, 2012), Marx's concept of 'reproductive labor' (Ferguson, 2020; Glenn, 1992), and 'emotion work' (Wingfield, 2021). Care work has been historically devalued and feminine-coded. England et al. (2002) describe how care work is underpaid in ways unexplainable by human capital or other job characteristics. Even men working care labor suffer this wage penalty, while women disproportionately are impacted by the wage discrepancies. Care work is devalued due to its association with what is seen as women's 'natural' desire to provide care. The gender-coding of care work represents only a fraction of the complex systems of social stratification shaping care work. Within care work, work is segregated by gender but also racially feminine-coded, there is also a racial aspect to care work. Patricia Hill Collins (1986) work on intersectionality expands knowledge on systems of oppression and how these systems operate not merely serving to double racial and gendered disadvantages but operating in unique ways when race and gender combine. Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1992) provides an analysis of care work as gendered and racialized, with middle-class white woman supervising while woman of color perform the more physically demanding and highly personal elements of care work.

Methods

The study will draw upon demographic surveys and qualitative interviews. Each potential participant is directed to a Qualtrics form, which collects demographic information and questions related to their work experiences and how they see the future of health work. We collect Qualtrics data across licensures/roles, race/ethnicity, gender, and sexualities to understand how various intersections may contribute to health worker precarity. Theory is extrapolated through a grounded theoretical process, allowing for the emergence of new concepts and ideas to emerge inductively from the data (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As we conduct interviews and review Qualtrics data, we consider applicable theoretical frameworks of precarity, gig work, and gendered and racialized labor roles within the stratified roles that exist in healthcare work. These theoretical frameworks are considered as we discuss with study participants their experiences. We use two methods of recruitment, first, social media (Bethel et al., 2021) to recruit HCWs who work in around the clock roles, who are over the age of eighteen, and who work in the United States. We are active in numerous HCW social media groups on Facebook and use these groups to post social media 'flyers' for recruitment. We also use snowball sampling, requesting the names of HCWs who might participate from participants and other contacts. We oversample for minority populations within health care, including all men and minority women. There are two phases of data collection. All participants fill out a Qualtrics survey, which requests baseline demographics and includes questions about the participants' opinions about health work. The Qualtrics survey also acts as a method of gatekeeping, where We can screen out imposters who attempt to participate for the incentive offered. The Qualtrics has no incentive for participation. From the Qualtrics sample, we request follow-up interviews which focus on HCWs experiences, using flexible filter questions to guide these questions, with each session lasting about 45 minutes to one hour. All interviews are conducted one on one via Zoom with a $30.00 incentive offered at the conclusion of the interview. Zoom interviews are recorded and uploaded to Otter for transcription purposes. Otter transcriptions are then uploaded to NVIVO for coding and qualitative data analysis. We write interview notes which we review, color code, and interact with the Zoom interviews and the NVIVO codes (Maher et al., 2018). This iterative process allows us to consider the various information points and further ground the theory as we engage with the materials. This project is under University of Oklahoma Institutional Review Board number 17127.