



# Invisible suffering: the empathy gap that affects workers' lives<sup>1</sup>

**Karen Messing**

A few years ago, a man wrote to a Montréal newspaper affirming his right to buy a veal cutlet at two in the morning. He did not put forth any special reason why he would need this service - if the owner wanted to open the store at that hour and if the customer wanted to be there, why would the government intervene? The *Fédération des travailleuses et travailleurs du Québec (FTQ)* union confederation answered by reminding the government that the store owner and client were not the only people affected by work schedules. Such a schedule should consider the families and health of checkout clerks, butchers and stockers.

Public understanding has not progressed much since then. I recently went to a neighbourhood consultation on store opening hours. The association opened the discussion by saying it had consulted 'everyone' and all - storeowners, local politicians and clients - agreed that late evening hours were desirable.

I asked whether they had consulted the store staff, but no one had, nor were they about to do so. I went home and wrote to my district representative, asking that they think again before depriving sales staff of their family dinner hour. I did not get a response. I retained from this and our other research in occupational health that an empathy gap separates service sector workers from those they serve

## **A union-university research project on work schedules**

My university context has given me an opportunity to observe the gap. The *Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM)* was created in 1969 with the mandate to serve 'communities not traditionally served by universities,' meaning, among others, unions. After some negotiations, UQAM signed an agreement for professors to do research and training, paid for by the university. UQAM hired coordinators to link professors with community needs and to make sure that their needs were met. As of this writing, the agreement with unions has lasted 41 years (see Mergler, 1987).

In 2011, a union of store employees asked a group of UQAM ergonomics and law researchers to study work at a retail chain, "Qualiprix" Stores, whose schedules were generated by a computer programme using input from sales/unit time (Messing, 2014). The ups and downs of customer desires led to a variation in personnel requirements calculated by 15 minute period. The

resulting schedules were disastrous from the point of view of workers. They worked different hours every day, different days every week. They received their schedules two to three days in advance, but they could be asked at any time to stay late or to come in off schedule if someone else could not show up (on average once per day per store). These wide variations led not only to economic insecurity but also to a situation impossible for workers with dependent children or sick relatives. Every year, 80% of employees left, so even the employer welcomed our presence so we could tell them how to improve their software.

## **Administering a questionnaire on work schedules**

After doing some preliminary observations, we devised a questionnaire and validated it with several groups of workers. Administering the final version to 550 workers in ten stores was quite an experience. We stayed for three days in each store, long enough to reach most of those who usually worked there. The stores varied: one had a big, fancy conference room where employees could fill out the questionnaire on comfortable, upholstered chairs. Others were small or just badly set up, with us and the employees filling out the questionnaire all squished in a tiny, dirty staff room getting in the way of those trying to take their breaks or get to the bathroom.

The employees were enthusiastic. Almost all those asked to respond said yes, and many thanked us warmly. I became afraid that we were creating high expectations that schedules would change, while the most we could hope for in the short term was to change owners' attitudes.

Hanging out in the stores, we got a fair idea of what those attitudes were. In one store, I shared the owner's large office with a table in the corner where the workers could fill out the questionnaire. Although I was glad that we did not have to invade the employees' break room, I was less pleased with the arrangement when he routinely greeted the workers with "Here's Bill (or Anne, or Rafael)—he's one of our grant-supported workers." This was meant as a funny joke, since the grants came from government support to hire the mentally disabled. The employees, presumably gritting their teeth, smiled and nodded at the joke, every time.

The owner offered repeatedly to fill out the questionnaire himself, since he said his work hours were unlimited. He did work Saturday. However, I did not see him leave after 6 p.m., and he took long lunches outside the store. However, he sincerely thought his schedule was as taxing as that of the employees, because control over scheduling is only visible when you do not have it.

### Schedule chaos

The answers to the questionnaire depressed us. These employees get their schedules on Thursday or even Friday, for the week that starts the following Sunday. This means they do not know until the end of the week whether they can go away for the weekend. In addition, more than 80 per cent of them cannot do much because they work at least one weekend day; half had worked both days of the previous weekend.

Sylvie is a middle-aged cashier who is the sole financial and logistical support for her two aged parents. She arranges their medical appointments, their shopping, and their banking and accompanies them on trips to the dentist or the hairdresser. Here is her response to a question about desired hours, a request for the working conditions that most middle-class people enjoy:

I would like to have always the same days [off] and that they would be two together. Have the same days and the most possible hours per day. Have my weekends [off] the most often possible. Know my schedule at least one week in advance. . . .

Sylvie wrote us long notes all over her questionnaire, and she was not the only one. Some of the notes we saw were short and to the point: 'Grrr [design of a scowling face] I hate working Fridays!' Some of them were resentful: 'The employer often doesn't like our opinions or ignores them when hours are handed out.'

### Deaf ears

We presented our study to the employer and, for the first time in my career, high-up executives were interested in my research results. They were quite impressed by the fact that workers who found the schedules hard were the ones who were thinking of quitting. Unfortunately, the executives talked a lot about the skilled workers, but not about the cashiers. They worried about the fact that students were no longer willing to work on weekends but they appeared to sleep through the data on the effects of irregular schedules on young children. In fact, the union representative advised me to leave that part out next time I made the presentation—she said the managers were looking too bored.

We had brought our legal colleagues with us and together we suggested that if the stores wanted to make the employees happier without losing out to the competition, it would be a good idea to lobby for government regulation so that opening hours would be limited for the whole retail sector. This suggestion elicited a dead silence.

After a flurry of interest that succeeded in changing the work schedules in one store, a vice president, 'Mr. Lejeune', called me. Sorry, he said, but we have just bought a new chain of retail outlets. The people at human resources have no time to go on with your study.

Is it any wonder that some questionnaire respondents were sceptical? Alain described the empathy gap very well: 'I just don't know what use it is to fill in this form since I know very well that the Université du Québec doesn't give a shit that I think I don't have enough [paid] hours in my stockroom at Qualiprix Stores Saint Jeremy Québec.'

I am not sure what use it was for him to fill in the form, either. Sometimes the empathy gap between management and labour is just too wide—it is unlikely that UQAM or any other university will succeed in changing his work schedule. All this suffering was invisible for the clients, on the other side of the empathy gap. They get their veal chop late at night in peace, without paying attention to Sylvie's exhaustion or Alain's resentment.

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### References.<sup>i</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> This article is adapted from chapter 6 of my book *Pain and Prejudice: What Science Can Learn about Work from the People Who Do It* (BTL Books, Toronto, 2014).



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