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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Life during furlough: Challenges to dignity from a changed employment status

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Abstract

In response to the COVID-19 virus, the UK government introduced the Job Retention Scheme in March 2020. The scheme, a novelty in the United Kingdom, provided income support to those furloughed from work. In this paper, we examine how individuals in several occupations and organisations experienced furlough and how they were treated during this enforced period of work absence. Beyond describing their experiences during the furlough, we examine how these experiences threatened and challenged their sense of dignity. Experientially we report on furlough as a time that elicited both delight and despair. The analysis of dignity relates to how treatment based on their employment status rendered many employees marginalised and cast adrift.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In contrast to countries such as Germany and the United States in an employment context, the term furlough was neither common parlance nor written into UK employment law (CIPD, 2020b). For example, in the US furlough schemes followed the 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre (Fraher & Gabriel, 2014), the 2008 financial crisis (Jones et al., 2014) and several government shutdowns (Baranik et al., 2016). Although furlough schemes have typically involved 'temporary leave with no pay' (Baranik et al., 2019, p. 381) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the UK Government introduced the 'Coronavirus Job Retention

Scheme' (HM Government, 2020) to safeguard jobs and avoid high unemployment (Mayhew & Anand, 2020) through a guaranteed income amounting to 80% of salary up to £2500 per month.

Studies on workplace furloughs have focused on a variety of issues including employee productivity levels (Badiru, 2016), employees' potential collective response (Green, 2010) and the impact of furlough on individual employees' exhaustion, performance and recovery vis-a-vis the restoration and replenishment of depleted resources experienced during furlough (Halbesleben et al., 2013). Here, we are interested in an issue that had not been until the pandemic surfaced in the furlough literature: the impact of furlough on workers' dignity (May & Daly, 2020). A concern with dignity has a long history (Hodgkiss, 2016). While considered conceptually elusive dignity coheres around such notions as worthiness, respect, status and treatment (Bolton, 2007; Cruddas, 2021; Hodson, 2001). As Costas (2022) puts it, 'dignity is about the state of being worthy. It entails both developing a sense of self-worth and being treated as worthy by others' (2022, p. 8). The workplace has a pivotal role in relation to this in terms of whether a worker captures, is accorded or denied dignity through the interplay between the worker and those they interact with (Sayer, 2007). While the individual worker can feel dignity through a sense of a job well done, power asymmetries inherent to employment relationships can undermine dignity since how others treat workers to shape their experiences (Cruddas, 2021). Worker agency considered a requirement for dignity can be evidently problematic when in the context of undertaking paid work (Pettinger, 2019) as workers' dignity can be threatened in various ways including through harassment, discrimination, poor pay or disdainful treatment.

As the UK furlough scheme was established to protect workers' jobs, then it might reasonably be contended that the concept of dignity has limited analytical purchase when seeking to understand workers' furlough experiences. The government set up a safety net protecting jobs and pay to an extent so furloughed workers it might be argued are being treated with dignity. Yet, there are several reasons why dignity matters when understanding the experiences of workers furloughed during COVID-19. An obvious one is the contention that work provides meaning which in turn provides a sense of dignity (Hodson, 2001). Furlough involving as it did for many a long and continuous work absence potentially undermines this source of being worthy. As employment management practices can have a considerable impact on workers' sense of dignity (Bowie, 2019) how workers perceived their treatment during furlough could also speak to potential dignity denials or threats. Ultimately while furlough may have helped maintain jobs it involved involuntary job displacement that instigated greater employment insecurity and psychological distress (Grace, 2022). These and other effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on work, employees and organisations lead Allen and Blustein to contend that it highlights 'the need for a dignity perspective' (2022, p. 10).

The UK furlough scheme lasted 19 months (March 2020 to September 2021). For many workers, it entailed long periods of continuous work absence so is a rare site to examine issues relating to dignity that potentially become magnified due to an exceptional situation. Here, we examine this changed employment status through the prism of dignity and a longitudinal interview-based study which explores the experiences and coping strategies of furloughed workers during a period of involuntary work absence. In consideration of the socioeconomic and psychological demands placed upon furloughed workers during the pandemic (Mimoun et al., 2020), these accounts are analysed to understand the experiences of these workers, both in terms of how they responded to and coped with furlough, and their considerations of how their organisations treated them during furlough. Consequently, we are interested in how this may have impacted their sense of dignity. In doing so, we provide two main contributions to

research on furlough and dignity. First, our analysis shows how workers experienced and navigated a variety of challenging uncertainties. Second, we provide a contribution on dignity relating to the analysis of a unilaterally imposed employment status that extends dignity studies beyond occupational status, material conditions, subordination or social stigma (Lucas, 2011) into changed employment status. A status that while liminal could potentially impact on workers' sense of dignity.

The remainder of this article discusses how furlough has been understood as predominantly deleterious. We then segue into consideration of how dignity might be threatened during furlough. The research design is then described before presenting our findings which show that absence from work, even with an apparent job safeguard, does not entail removal of workplace dignity threats and infringements. Instead, we argue that a newly acquired temporally restricted and involuntary employment status creates conditions that threaten dignity, particularly through forms of marginalisation.

2 | FURLOUGH: A CHALLENGE TO DIGNITY?

The UK furlough scheme was introduced to militate against a rapid rise in unemployment through acting as a buffer against the economic shock of the pandemic (Adams-Prassl et al., 2020). Announced on 20 March 2020, the scheme became operational from 20 April 2020 subsidising 80% of registered employees' pay up to £2500 per month. In comparison to furlough schemes reported in the literature, those implemented in response to COVID-19 differ significantly in their duration. While Fraher and Gabriel's (2014) study on US airline pilots focuses on an industry whose volatility means furloughs have been a long-standing feature, pre-COVID research examines furloughs of discontinuous absences that typically involve a reduction to a 4-day working week and a 20% salary loss. Furloughs examined by Badiru (2016), Lee and Sanders (2013) and Jones et al. (2014) involved a 4-day week and amounted to 6, 11 and 18 furlough days, respectively. Hence, the scale of furlough-induced work absence during the pandemic dwarfs those in the pre-COVID literature. The UK scheme peaked in May 2020 when almost nine million workers were registered as furloughed and when it ended on 30th September 2021 the cumulative number of jobs furloughed stood at 11.6 million at a cost of nearly £70 billion (House of Commons Library, 2021).

Furlough schemes are typically introduced during periods of economic difficulty so unsurprisingly studies identify several positive findings. Not unsurprisingly employees report positively on their job retention rationale (Lee & Sanders, 2013). Green (2010) also finds beyond maintaining employment levels they increase leisure time and reduce environmental damage. Work furloughs are also considered a respite akin to holidays and work sabbaticals (Halbesleben et al., 2013). However, notwithstanding these possibilities periods of furlough incur numerous losses. The most salient is pay reduction (Green, 2010). Others include loss of control over work, build-up of deadlines, job insecurity, loss of supervisor and co-worker support and loss of pride and status (Halbesleben et al., 2013). Further deleterious consequences include lowered morale, job satisfaction and career stability, decreased functional coordination, work rate levels and personal financial durability (Badiru, 2016; Lee & Sanders, 2013). An erosion of trust and sense of justice, increased stress and changed perceptions of the psychological contract through uncertainty surrounding job status and income are also identified (Bellairs et al., 2014). Mandeville et al. (2019) echo the point that psychological contracts can be breached through the unilateral implementation of furlough, the

resulting loss of pay and perceptions of reduced employer commitment to ensuring employment. Likewise, Delegach et al.'s (2022) longitudinal study during the pandemic shows that furlough is associated with psychological contract violation via psychological contract breach. Resource depletion, individuals' means to attain goals, results together with emotional exhaustion and reduced organisational commitment. Further furlough diminishes employee trust, sense of justice and perceptions of job security (Delegach et al., 2022).

Several detriments associated with furlough have been shown to threaten dignity. Studies on job precarity (Ioannides et al., 2021), stress (Cullinan et al., 2019), diminished workplace status (Yu, 2016), loss of pride (Crowley, 2012), a perceived diminution of interpersonal justice (Baker & Lucas, 2017) and breach of psychological contract (Lo & Aryee, 2003) all attest to an impact on worker dignity. This speaks to the predicate that those who experience furlough face potential threats to dignity signifiers that include an impact on pay, equality, self-esteem, self-worth, autonomy and respect (Lucas, 2015). For furloughed workers, the dignity challenge becomes apparent since although unable to realise dignity through fulfilling labour they continue to be impacted by organisational structures, processes and practices (Bolton, 2007). Hence, an interesting and important consideration is how dignity is affected by the employment status conferred through furlough and particularly how this is impacted by organisational processes and practices relating to the treatment of workers. Further, we can conjecture whether those who experience furlough may struggle to self-identify with terms 'positively related to dignity' (Sayer, 2007, p. 18) including respect, pride, recognition and status. Terms negatively related to dignity such as stigma, humiliation and being taken for granted (Sayer, 2007) may in turn resonate with those experiencing furlough.

Bolton's (2007) twin dimensions of subjective and objective forms of dignity provide a frame to understand how furloughed workers may experience dignity threats. Subjective dimensions concern meaningful and interesting work, including, social esteem, worth, respect and autonomy. For those furloughed, dignity challenges included the simple fact of potentially losing their job, and with that the concomitant income deprivation and lack of support for family (May & Daly, 2020). Related to this could be mental health problems and an impact on self-esteem and self-respect (Barreto & Ellemers, 2010). Objective dimensions, realised through structures and practices, afford equality, voice, well-being, employment security and fair rewards. Here, the most immediate dignity threat, a reduction in pay, could be accompanied by a lack of felt fairness (Laundon et al., 2019). The requirement to navigate job insecurity during furlough is also likely heightened in the context of a pandemic (Weiland, 2020). Furlough enacted unilaterally rather than through bilateral consultation may likewise threaten dignity as it undermines voice and participation both identified as central facets to experiencing workplace dignity (Hodson, 2001).

May and Daly (2020) specifically discuss several dignity challenges that accrued during COVID-19 in relation to domestic violence, criminal justice, immigration and employment. In relation to employment, they noted potentially high levels of unemployment and the concomitant effects, particularly the possibility of a discriminatory impact on females and minority ethnic groups. Threats to furloughed workers' dignity could also be adduced from evidence reported in the United Kingdom during the pandemic. Hence, a UK Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development survey (CIPD, 2020a) reporting higher levels of concern for their job for furloughed than non-furloughed respondents spoke to a dignity threat aligning with Berg and Frost's (2005) identification of economic security as a key factor to work dignity. Likewise, Mimoun et al.'s (2020) survey reporting greater feelings of distress and stigmatisation for furloughed workers compared to employed and prepandemic unemployed

workers intimates possible threats to notions of self-worth and self-esteem both of which Hodson (2001) identifies as indicators of dignity. Similar issues of self-worth and self-esteem surface in Wels et al. (2022) UK study reporting on the mental health of furloughed workers: though better than those no longer employed or in stable unemployment, they found furloughed workers mental health to be worse than those who remained in work. The possibility that being furloughed requires navigation through potential threats to dignity can also be inferred by the CIPD's comment that furloughed employees 'maybe resentful that they are classed as dispensable whilst others are working and receiving their full package' (CIPD, 2020b, p. 6). Following this, we examine whether furlough did surface notions of dispensability as well as other views and feelings that impacted dignity. Hence, this study examines furloughed workers' experiences as they navigated multiple uncertainties associated with a newly acquired employment status that potentially exposed workers to dignity threats. The study, therefore, seeks to address the following research questions: how did workers navigate the uncertainties associated with furlough during the COVID-19 pandemic? How was dignity impacted by a changed employment status?

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD

The data analysis is based on longitudinal semi-structured interviews with UK furloughed workers. During June and July 2020, interviews were conducted with individuals who were at the time furloughed from their job. A second set of interviews were conducted with 16 of these interviewees during October and November 2020. Interviewees were recruited through a two-phase convenience sampling strategy (Raaijmakers et al., 2018). During Phase 1, 10 interviewees were recruited by authors A and B through existing social contacts. Seven worked in hospitality and three in retail. After exhausting this route author A reached out to a personal contact who had previously worked at the British Museum. They posted a call for participants to a private Facebook group, 'the Museum Associations Furlough Group' consisting of furloughed workers employed in the heritage industry. The call for participants outlined the focus of the research and 16 participants responded and agreed to be interviewed. Interviews, therefore, were conducted with 26 workers employed in three industries: heritage ($n = 16$), hospitality ($n = 7$) and retail ($n = 3$). This followed institutional approval from the Research Ethics Committee at Durham University. Consent forms were also completed by participants before the interviews.

Although a convenience sample suffers from selection bias as interviewees can be different from the target population (Hair et al., 2019) it suited our purposes given all interviewees were able to provide relevant information given their common employment status. Table 1 provides details on interviewees and indicates the variation across our sample. Hence, as Table 1 shows, there is a range of job roles and occupations, geographical location, total work experience. Only two interviewees worked for the same organisation, but in different units and parts of the country. The sample also contained individuals who had experience of home working before being furloughed. There is also variation in the length of time that interviewees were furloughed for. This variation potentially provided different experiences to their shared status of being furloughed. As indicated by participants' length of service and job title, our sample mainly occupied low to mid-level positions within their organisations. The more senior roles included a Group Operations Manager, a Regional Area Manager and a Marketing Manager. The organisations were local, national and international. Across the three industries, there was

TABLE 1 Interviewees

Name	Job title	Current role (years)	Work experience (years)	Industry	Location	Furlough date	Return to work[a]
Will*	Accounts Controller	12	27	Hospitality	NW England	23/3/20	Redundant
Alan	Cinema Host	1	5	Hospitality	NE England	23/3/20	4/7/20
Jane	Cinema Host	1	1	Hospitality	NE England	23/3/20	4/7/20
Neil	Bar Supervisor	12	15	Hospitality	NE England	30/3/20	4/7/20
Keri	Bar Waitress	3	3	Hospitality	NE England	30/3/20	4/7/20
Tim*	Exhibitions Assistant	3	9	Heritage	NE England	30/3/20	6/7/20
Margaret	Operations Manager	10	18	Hospitality	NE England	30/3/20	4/7/20
Fatima*	PR/Media Manager	20	29	Heritage	SE England	30/3/20	Furloughed
Fiona*	Researcher	5	12	Heritage	London	30/3/20	28/8/20
Richard	Area Manager	10	15	Retail	NE England	1/4/20	15/6/20
Lynsey*	Curator	3	22	Heritage	NE England	1/4/20	13/7/20
Jack*	Curator	9	9	Heritage	NW England	1/4/20	Furloughed
Judith*	Curator	20	22	Heritage	SW England	1/4/20	Furloughed
Liz*	Visitor Services Supervisor	11	11	Heritage	N Ireland	1/4/20	10/8/20
Hayley	Shop Assistant	1	1	Retail	NE England	3/4/20	Redundant
Karen	Auction Pictures Specialist	5	7	Retail	Scotland	6/4/20	24/6/20
Maria*	Conservation Assistant	1.5	24	Heritage	Midlands	6/4/20	Redundant
Carol	Events Officer	1	1	Hospitality	London	6/4/20	Unknown
Emily*	Exhibitions Officer	1.5	12	Heritage	London	7/4/20	17/8/20
Diane*	Conservation Assistant	1	11	Heritage	Midlands	8/4/20	Redundant

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Name	Job title	Current role (years)	Work experience (years)	Industry	Location	Furlough date	Return to work[a]
Deborah*	Asst Manager Collections	8	10	Heritage	London	20/4/20	17/8/20
Francis	Marketing Manager	5	12	Heritage	Yorkshire	20/4/20	Unknown
Rachael*	Learning Coordinator	1.5	8	Heritage	London	27/4/20	17/8/20
Susan*	Schools Learning Officer	3	6	Heritage	London	27/4/20	17/8/20
Laura*	Collections Specialist	4	4	Heritage	London	18/5/20	17/8/20
Sarah*	Curator	3	13	Heritage	London	1/6/20	1/7/20

[a]As at end November 2020.

a range of job roles. Within retail, participants worked in a regionally based clothing store, a city-based auction house and a national jewellery distribution company. Those in hospitality worked in a multinational cinema chain, a nation-wide bar group, and a regional hotel and restaurant company. All but three participants within the heritage industry worked in internationally renowned museums. Job roles within heritage included those who dealt primarily with artefacts, those who liaised with the public and those within professional services. The three not employed in museums worked in other nationally known heritage organisations. As Table 1 also shows most participants were furloughed during March and April 2020.

As the research explored experiences of furlough and potential threats to dignity the first set of interviews focused on three broad themes: the initiation of the furlough scheme; how participants felt and coped during furlough and how their organisation treated them during furlough. Examples of questions included: Were you consulted before being furloughed? How have you felt during furlough? What have you been doing during furlough? Did you feel your organisation kept you informed during furlough? What is your assessment of how your organisation treated you during furlough?

The second data set was comprised of interviews with 16 of the interviewees, indicated by an asterisk in Table 1. Beyond this, five first-round interviewees provided information on their current situation through email and three provided a status update through informal conversation. Two participants did not respond to follow-up emails. The second unstructured interviews sought to ascertain how participants experienced the intervening months, their current employment status and their reflections on furlough. Questions were asked about returning to work but the key focus remained on their furlough experience. The two rounds of interviews, conducted through video platforms due to COVID-19 restrictions, lasted on average 70 and 40 min, respectively. Each was recorded, transcribed and coded.

4 | FINDINGS

Here, we present findings on the contours of participants' experience that involved delight and despair and required skilled navigational resources to cope with the vicissitudes arising from experiencing long periods of uncertainty associated with life during furlough.

4.1 | Relief, recreation and respite

When the furlough scheme was announced there was palpable relief from several interviewees who feared their organisation would dismiss them or provide no financial contribution during their work absence. This was particularly pronounced for those in hospitality. Hence Margaret was 'absolutely delighted because otherwise I was worried about being laid off'. Neil was equally relieved at the provisions within the furlough scheme: 'I must admit actually, I was quite relieved because to be brutally honest, I wouldn't put it past a big company [like mine] to likely just say "look sorry we have to close, we haven't got any hours to give you, we can't pay you"' (Neil).

Neil and Margaret's comments provide insights about the precarity associated with hospitality sector employment preceding the pandemic (Ioannou & Dukes, 2021). Here, the government provision of income support was a means to ensure a semblance of economic

security for those not anticipating financial support. This contrasted with many heritage sector workers whose financial worries were dispelled as their organisations committed to ensure all staff received full salary through providing salary contribution beyond the 80% income support received through the Job Retention Scheme. The 10 interviewees in receipt of full pay, all in the heritage organisations, were understandably pleased and relieved. To Susan, it was evidence her organisation 'cared about us' while Maria thought it showed there was alignment with the organisation's espoused values. Tim was pleasantly and 'genuinely shocked' that his organisation paid his full salary given their reduced income levels.

The furlough scheme provided not only financial relief. During the early reporting of the virus, Karen already begun thinking that while still geographically distant it could provide a relief from work:

> I remember in February or January when me and my friend were in the café at work and there was that thing about Wuhan and the flu and I was like wouldn't it be quite good if there was a virus that came round and closed everything just for a few weeks, nobody died but we get a few weeks off, they were like 'man you must really want a work break'. (Karen)

Karen clearly disliked where she worked. During interview, she spoke to various workplace deprivations (Weib, 2020) including top-down and inflexible management, relatively poor pay and lack of voice. Coincidentally on the day of interview, she received an email indicating a return to work. After 3 months of furlough, she would return to work on 22nd June 2020. Reading the email, her 'mood just dropped' as she would be 'back to that grind'. She would 'look back on this period and think I was so happy'. During furlough, she slept better and though her income was 20% less she had more money due to reduced travel and spending. Furlough was a release from the daily work grind. She could relax, decorate her apartment and not be 'miserable'.

Several others reported equally positive furlough experiences regarding both their personal and work life. On a personal level, they had time to engage in various activities. Lynsey took up running and baking. Carol was playing music again, started learning a language and was 'loving the time off'. To Neil, he could 'get off your arse and start running again'. Keri likewise was exercising more. This differed to normal working life: 'you finish work, and you can't be bothered so you go to the pub'. Hayley was enjoying things, so 'I don't want to go back to work now'. She was doing yoga and 'arty things'. To Margaret, it was like 'one long holiday' with her family. Others undertook genealogy, sorted their gardens and rediscovered their X-box. For others' positives included time with their children, undertaking voluntary and/or freelance work and, as reported by many, the opportunity to reflect.

The opportunity to reflect was particularly oriented to work life. Several questioned their prefurlough work-life balance. Others reflected on career, job or organisational role. Not surprisingly acknowledged benefits included the lack of early starts and commute, but also not making difficult work decisions, avoiding some colleagues and rude customers. Many also appreciated being away from workplace politics, not attending meetings and avoiding their manager. An absence of work-based pressures was exemplified in Judith's comment recounting the incessant and contradictory demands of work:

> It is absolutely the pressure of working to conflicting deadlines and getting, being told to do one thing and then being told to do another thing and then being told not

> to do the first thing and then told to do another thing and your head being so full and not having enough time to do it and knowing that you're not doing the kind of core parts of your job that are also important and may cause reputational damage and possibly actual damage to the collection. So, I don't miss any of that.

Several interviewees, predominantly from the heritage sector remained work-focused and having time undertook various work-oriented activities. These included projects and activities they previously struggled to complete. Laura extended her union role and was involved in more mentoring activities. Both Judith and Fiona reinvigorated long-buried research papers. Jack pushed on with a book he was writing. Others engaged in professional development.

These positive reports suggest furlough had a respite quality (Halbesleben et al., 2013) as interviewees undertook activities that bolstered work identity and/or boosted well-being. Work was reported as draining and furlough provided an opportunity to relax, destress and reflect: 'Yeah, it's felt like a bit of a privilege really. It's kind of getting a sabbatical in a sector where I'd never get a sabbatical, it's just like this lovely time' (Susan). Talk stressing avoidance of line managers or rude customers, the grind of daily work and the impact of work on their sensibility illustrates the recognition of the toll work can take: 'I was one of those people who was constantly on adrenaline and I've not had those surges of adrenaline for some time which I've really noticed. I lived on cortisol I think, and I have really noticed that' (Fatima).

4.2 | Navigating fears and uncertainties

The pandemic created an altered structural and relational situation. Furlough was a period that required ongoing navigation since for all the evident personal perseverance, persistence and propensity to muster a positive response to furlough, numerous losses and difficulties were reported. For all that interviewees' voiced repose and respite, this was juxtaposed with deep uncertainties that instilled potential dignity threats through evident fears and anxieties. These included concerns about returning to work, how social distancing would impact on working practices, their future organisational role as well as public health and personal safety. Fiona spoke to the most prevalent fear:

> The uncertainty surrounding my sector is horrible, I'm trying not to think about the fact that I'm now looking at very long-term unemployment potentially.

The majority shared their uncertainty about the durability of their sector and organisation echoing fears about job security. Uncertainties and fears that 'we've got redundancy hanging over our heads' (Diane) directly impacted Diane's attitudes and behaviours during furlough.

> I think there is a thing in my head that if it's possible I'm going to be made redundant, and it is possible, it has influenced my lack of personal development while I've been off. Why bother learning all this stuff if I might not even be in this sector by November?

Fiona and Diane's words clearly spoke to fears concerning job insecurity. In Diane's case, it also led to a sense of disengagement from her work-related personal development.

This uncertainty was writ large for Richard and Will for whom the prospect of redundancy was a reality when during July their organisation begun redundancy consultation. When juxtaposed with suggested respite qualities associated with furlough the expression of fear and uncertainty illustrated profound oscillation among interviewees. Illustrating this, Fiona appreciated time with her child and commended upon other aspects, yet also characterised life during furlough as 'shit'. To Judith, who enthusiastically partook in numerous activities, furlough's impact was stark: it was 'a huge existential crisis'. She and her two team members 'felt quite worthless, we felt like we'd really had kind of a lot of our self-worth just pulled out from under our feet'. Others captured the emotional turbulence of furlough through the metaphor of the 'rollercoaster' and the portmanteau of the 'coronacoaster'. Hence, Keri's refrain of 'good and bad days' characterised most interviewees. In Keri's case, good days were remembering that her job in hospitality seemed safe and she was receiving financial support, bad days involved worries about personal financial durability and public health issues when returning to work. To Tim, the metaphor of 'peaks and troughs' was deployed. Alan refracted oscillation through a 'waves' metaphor that ebbed and flowed from 'getting my life organised' to the toll emanating from being 'very social creatures' experiencing limited social contact. Susan loved the opportunity for reading but struggled to sleep due to a darkness involving 'thinking a lot about death'.

The oscillation was also evident in relation to pay. Witteveen (2020) in a study on sociodemographic inequality during COVID-19 included furloughed workers in the category of those experiencing 'economic hardship'. In our study, 16 interviewees received no top-up beyond the 80% paid through the Job Retention Scheme. The salary reduction was exacerbated for hospitality workers through the loss of income-enhancing gratuities. Regardless that many interviewees reported financial anxiety, there was a resigned acceptance that employer salary contribution was unfeasible 'because there just isn't 20% to top people's wages up' (Lynsey). For several, their anticipated treatment spoke to fissures within employment relationships as the relief of receiving 80% government income support was juxtaposed with a certainty that their organisation would not have contemplated a voluntary salary contribution. Hence, Neil's relief at receiving government income support stemmed from prefurlough experiences that his organisation would not sanction a salary contribution to employees: 'Brutally, honestly I'm not surprised in the least because I've worked for the company for so long, I'm not slightly surprised'. Alan's organisation did not even communicate their non-contribution towards salary. In relation to furlough pay, he was 'expecting them not to be honest'. Possibly indicative of prefurlough dignity challenges he was adamant that without the Job Retention Scheme he and his colleagues 'were either going to lose our jobs or not get paid anything at all'.

While those in hospitality and retail were generally resigned to not receiving an employer contribution to their pay, the situation in the heritage sector was variegated. Six interviewees who worked in this sector received no salary contribution. This was an issue of consternation. Emily recounted feelings when discovering through a social media group that others in her sector were receiving full pay: 'I basically became a bit obsessed and I actually started to, I was really upset with myself about how obsessed I was with it'. She worked for an internationally renowned heritage organisation and considered the lack of salary contribution contrary to the values that the organisation espoused: she now 'felt that the values which I really admired have become tricky'. She was particularly concerned that loss of income impacted disproportionately on the lowest-paid staff. The lack of distributive justice (Fortin, 2008) that Emily speaks to was shared by Fiona. Employed on a fixed term contract she was furloughed, but unlike permanently contracted colleagues did not receive full pay. She powerfully expressed what she considered an inequitable and hypocritical stance:

> all this kind of communications which was like everybody's equal, we're saving you all, we're throwing our arms round you, well shove off. No, you're throwing your arms around senior management. And it's so totally duplicitous, you know the rhetoric is also all about organisation unity, about treating everyone fairly but really the people it matters for are the people on six figures.

Fiona, also employed in an internationally prestigious institution, here vents against protecting her organisation's policy to protect the high earners who would lose a considerable amount given the Job Retention Scheme's income support cap of £2500 per month. Reference to senior management's obfuscating and duplicitous rhetoric was evident in other interviewees' concerns about organisational communication which led to marginalisation both from work colleagues and their organisation.

4.3 | Dignity and employment status

While interviewees supported the 'Job Retention Scheme' for maintaining employment and providing income support, being furloughed was not universally welcomed. Furlough took many away from projects they had initiated, were fully engaged in and which they expected to continue from home. Reactions on being furloughed included 'shock' (Emily; Carol), 'anger' (Laura; Francis) and 'like, kind of a grief' (Jane). Carol was assured she would not be furloughed so when her events organisation furloughed her 2 days later, she was highly critical 'about how quickly they kind of dropped us'. In a similar vein, Judith described her furloughing as 'like a punch in the stomach because there'd just been no indication of it'. The strongest response came from Francis for whom being selected for furlough was 'like I'm going through a breakup right now'. Her sense of organisational rupture was exacerbated when a staff member she managed was enabled to work from home. She questioned the degree to which she was valued and as time elapsed 'felt more and more resentful and angry actually about how it's been managed and the decisions that have been made'. Her response, lawful within the scheme, was to take on freelance work during furlough and begin searching for alternative employment. Her reflections were constructed through a transit metaphor opposing the organisation's apparent direction:

> I kind of feel like you get on the bus, the bus driver tells you where you're going and it's your responsibility to be on that and to be committed to it. And if you don't want to be on the bus anymore, you just ring the bell and you get off. And you know if you don't like the direction it's going, then that's up to you as an individual. And I think this has helped me think actually you know that it's time for me to step off this journey.

Several others spoke with similar levels of detachment towards their organisation. Whether indicative of a psychological contract breach (Delegach et al., 2022) responses spoke to and aligned with contentions that senior management was notoriously inconsistent, reinforced hierarchy, power disparities and exhibited a non-chalance towards employees' views and feelings. Fatima was particularly incensed that directors were 'looking after themselves':

> It reinforces the feelings I had before we went into furlough, we're quite a sick organisation that needs some fundamental changes at the top and I think this just demonstrates it.

The lack of voice referenced by many was not the absence of consultation mandated by the Job Retention Scheme (Mangan, 2020). The key voice concern was the process relating to staff selection for furlough. This was not an issue within hospitality organisations who had no homeworking possibilities. For those in heritage and retail, it spoke to a resentment at the lack of specificity and transparency as to why particular individuals were chosen while others were able to home-work. While the rationale for furlough selection confounded many this was compounded by anxiety vis-à-vis what this meant for their organisational status. Laura, who initially home-worked for 8 weeks, was the only member of a team of three who was furloughed. In such cases being furloughed was perceived as indicative of a lack of organisational worth: 'how you see me vis-à-vis everyone else' (Jack). To be excluded from work stripped out key facets of several interviewees' sense of self. For Richard, a successful retail Area Manager, not being one of the fourteen at his level to work from home was 'massive, it does give you a loss of identity'. It was deracinating: 'I actually want to go back to work to solve problems'. He was envious of colleagues who were able to engage in what he labelled 'meaningful activity'. As we heard earlier, Marketing Manager Francis had her centre of gravity shaken as furlough took away something that mattered deeply to her: 'I'm committed to what I'm doing, I enjoy it, it gives my life value'.

While being chosen for furlough weighed heavily on those who considered they could work from home so too did the process of selection. Fiona who earlier charged her organisation with hypocrisy reported a power disparity and procedural injustice when commenting that within her organisation there was:

> A lack of transparency, a lack of fairness, a willingness to sacrifice the easy people. You know the people that won't rise up and complain, as I said a lot of this is low hanging fruit it seems to me.

Appended was a sense of bias in the decision-making: 'you know the bias of the senior management team choosing who will be on furlough' (Liz). What was particularly evident was being chosen for furlough made people feel dispensable, the 'realisation of actually, you're not needed' (Liz), 'are not deemed to be business critical' (Judith) or 'not one of the essential ones' (Lynsey). A sense of dispensability led some to question why they had spent so long working for an organisation that viewed them and their work in such a manner. This was compounded and exacerbated through language that dichotomised staff as essential or non-essential, an oft used separation during periods of the pandemic that could trigger identity threats (van Zoonen et al., 2022). Liz described how her Chief Executive presented a written list of job titles explicitly labelled 'non-essential'. As she said, 'people took that quite personally that they've been called non-essential'. The term was considered divisive:

> this vocabulary, essential and non-essential, I think is very divisive and I've had a concern about the type of vocabulary we use as an organisation and you would expect that from me because I'm a comms person. I think essential and non-essential is very divisive. (Fatima)

The discourse of essential and non-essential staff precipitated in many a strong sense of marginalisation (Causadias & Umaña-Taylor, 2018). Carol refracted this through her contention that being on furlough was considered 'a bit taboo'. Marginalisation emanated particularly from a sense that the organisational communication excluded or differentiated people as less worthy (Dorrance Hall & Gettings, 2020). This was compounded by the frequency and focus of the organisational communication. Alan felt let down that while staff knew they were to be furloughed they discovered 'we didn't have a job to go to on Twitter before the company actually told us formally'. He contended his organisation was more concerned with informing customers than staff. Several interviewees commented that between the time of being furloughed to just before their return to work they received no communication from their organisation. A communicative limbo was reported by Laura whose trade union role opened communicative avenues for her: 'I think if I wasn't a union rep I would feel really uninformed'. Will, reflecting on his experience of the redundancy process during October's interview, said he explicitly told his manager that communication 'has been poor, very, very poor'. Even where there were regular emails in several organisations their focus further instilled a sense of marginalisation. Hence, while several reported weekly or bi-weekly email communication a common refrain was that 'there's literally nothing that pertains to us' (Diane) or as Liz put it 'the people on furlough might as well not exist because we're not mentioned'.

These communicative deficits were a continuing feature throughout the long period of furlough. It resulted in a recurring marginalisation and lack of visibility. Interviewees in hospitality and retail returned to work once the government lifted mandated shutdowns in July 2020. In heritage organisations, only some staff began returning to work from July 2020. During this gradual return to work phase, those still furloughed considered organisational communication had become dominated by discussion and information flows directed only to work returnees. They felt strongly they were simply forgotten as communication focused on workplace restrictions and the demands of working from home. Their lack of visibility as neither working in situ or from home was refracted through organisational communication they reported as silent to their on-going furlough experience. Marginalisation through their non-essential status became more apparent and was compounded by feeling forgotten through an ongoing lack of visibility within the organisational discourse throughout many months of furlough.

4.4 | Reflections, refractions and ruptures

The period of furlough had a profound impact on many. In relation to the positive, it would seem remiss not to return to Karen, she of the earlier tongue in cheek comment. Karen's wish for time-off was granted as she eventually experienced 12 weeks of furlough from the job she intensely disliked. Perhaps somewhat ironic she was one of the earliest work returnees. She did not, however, remain long, leaving her job in September to undertake a PhD. As Table 2 shows, she was one of two to return to work in June 2020. Ten interviewees returned to work in July, six during August. One (Fiona) began a new job in October, three interviewees were still on full furlough (Jack, Diane and Judith), while Fatima was on flexi-furlough, made possible in July 2020, that involved working 1 day per week. The shortest period of furlough was 1 month. Four interviewees were eventually made redundant (Maria, Diane, Will and Hayley). Two within retail and hospitality (Hayley and Will) were made redundant, the rest returned to work as much of these sectors had reopened by early July. While some heritage workers returned to

TABLE 2 Work status (November 2020)

	Heritage	Hospitality	Retail
June return	-	-	2
July return	3	5	-
August return	6	-	-
September return	-	-	-
October return (new job)	1		
Furloughed	3	-	-
Redundant	2	1	1
Unknown	1	1	-

work in July, they were the longest furloughed staff as numerous heritage sites remained closed or only partially opened.

The period of the second interviews was characterised by intensified economic difficulties so unsurprisingly many talked about economic uncertainties. Several reported colleagues experiencing redundancy and expressed continuing fears for their own job security as their organisation's financial position remained parlous. There was a general pessimism about what might happen over time: 'At some point somethings going to have to give, I can see down the line there may have to be a redundancy scheme' (Liz). While Liz's organisation was yet to undertake redundancies, several interviewees' organisation had initiated redundancy consultations. At the time of writing, four interviewees had experienced or confirmed imminent redundancy. The furlough scheme had kept these interviewees in employment for several months, but their actual or imminent redundancy occurring just before the original end date of the furlough scheme in October 2020 aligned with the notion that the scheme could be a 'waiting room for redundancy' (Partington, 2020).

While we were unable to reinterview Hayley, who we know lost her job due to her retail unit's closure, Maria, Diane and Will's perspective on their redundancy highlighted different forms of dignity threat. Maria during the first interview prophetically contended furlough was 'just giving people grace before the axe drops'. Her national heritage organisation made 39 out of 52 employees at her site redundant. Although satisfied with the organisation's redundancy process, she contended the organisation used the pandemic to initiate a preplanned reorientation of its traditional focus. She also contended that management disproportionately retained their jobs, while non-managerial staff were seemingly disposable. She felt 'worthless'. Diane, still on furlough during October's interview, spoke about the likelihood of impending redundancy, which she confirmed at a third interview in November that she initiated. While expressing discontent with limited organisational communication, her phlegmatic response was relief that ongoing uncertainty had ended: 'I realise how bad the weight had affected me, mentally, emotionally and also my energy levels'. Having a degree of financial durability, the redundancy decision 'simplified life' and lifted 'a huge weight': although the future was not bright, she could now focus since no longer was 'one foot in treacle behind me and a big sort of fog in front of me, it's nice to be let go'. Will's hospitality organisation began redundancy consultation in July. During October's interview, he confirmed that after working at his organisation for 19 years redundancy occurred during September. He challenged his

redundancy and a settlement was reached through the UK's Arbitration, Conciliation and Advisory Service. Will regarded the redundancy process as 'a bit of a stitch-up' claiming furlough was used to pay off the longer serving and higher paid staff. The redundancy process left him feeling 'sort of a pariah, cut adrift'.

The experience of furlough was variegated and immensely difficult for those who lost jobs. Furlough was such a unique experience that unsurprisingly it was constructed temporally by many as an 'event time' (Legge, 2009). Hence, after a few weeks back at work, furlough was an event in time that was considered 'a bad dream' (Liz): 'You can't even remember; all I remember doing was sitting out in the sun because the weather was decent. I don't remember very much'. Liz disliked furlough such that she 'felt a little bit traumatised by it in a way'. To others, there was a gratitude expressed about this apparent one-off event. In viewing it through the prism of an event time, for Lynsey it was a period for regrouping because 'everyone's off, nothing's happening, nobody's going to be emailing me, I'm not allowed to do any work. I can just completely forget about it and relax. That will never happen again until I retire'. Of course, this was not to be the case and a few months later she was again furloughed. As Deborah put it: 'Looking back on it, I feel grateful to have that time. When are we ever going to get that again? Maybe there will be a second lockdown?'.

5 | DISCUSSION

There was a second lockdown and a third! This study, however, presents an account of workers' furlough experience during its first extended timeframe from March to October 2020. Beyond our descriptive account was also a concern to understand whether a changed employment status could threaten dignity during this affective period. Findings on interviewees' life during furlough strongly point towards a period that provoked a gamut of experiences. Positive experiences were reflected in accounts of engagement in numerous leisure activities. A sense of respite resonated in the absence of work pressures as furlough aided wellbeing. Interviewees' relief at retaining their job aligned with studies (Costa Dias et al., 2020) consistent with our small-scale findings up to the first redundancy during September 2020 and the latter stark realisation that 15% of interviewees experienced job loss. Similarly, Wang et al. (2022) consideration that the scheme was a success in preventing widespread poverty and increased mental health problems echoed with interviewees' ability to cope financially, albeit for many with a significantly reduced income. Likewise, and without under-emphasising significant mental health problems experienced by several interviewees, there was evidence of mental health resilience. Deleterious effects included personal finances, stress and anxiety, job insecurity and threats to identity, and of course redundancy. A loss of workplace support, pride and status, breaches to psychological contracts and perceptions of decreased procedural and distributive justice were also evident. Not surprisingly job insecurity was more marked and intense than reported in the pre-COVID extant furlough literature as economic damage generated fears of scarred employment sectors.

Furlough time was unsurprisingly an oscillating experience. The experience veered through relief and worry, enjoyment and boredom, contentment and despair. It amounted to a destabilising experience. Time off allowed fulfilments and opportunities to reflect but interviewees' remained passengers on the 'coronacoaster'. The oscillation emphasised a lack of fixity, disrupted centres of gravity and exaggerated the lack of 'normal' markers that might typically guide behaviours and actions. It invoked a hysteresis effect as prior beliefs were not

aligned to a changed environment (Strand & Lizardo, 2016). The elongated temporality associated with furlough entailed absent regularities that were still at the forefront as desirable everyday markers. Furlough de-centred people. It undermined stability through an array of uncertainties and misalignments with work and non-work.

As furlough time fluctuated from a relative sense of stability to a more uncertain and less grounded mode, it generated searching critiques on the relationship to work and organisation. Such critique confirmed dignity threats emanating from discontent with the management of their organisation (Hodson, 1996) as positive accounts of furlough were predominantly premised not on a release from the job, but a release from the organisation. This partially explains notions that furlough was akin to a respite and provided opportunities to reflect. For many, particularly the heritage workers, there was an uncomfortable sense of organisational amnesia: many felt as time passed, they and their work role were being forgotten. An employment status that could be transfigured as 'non-essential' impacted on notions of worth, value and esteem.

A sense of organisational release together with unsatisfactory organisational responses during furlough indicated dignity infringement. How interviewees navigated these spoke to self-generated dignity (Lucas, 2015). Workers were able to enact dignity once removed from a set of conditions that create deprivations, pressures and stress. Hence, while furlough was an immensely uncertain period that required significant resilience this generated self-worth and self-esteem. This was perhaps most starkly seen in those who were made redundant where sanguinity and a sense of regaining control were important to how they expressed their feelings about job loss. This enabled a dignity stoically configured and defined in their terms. Likewise, self-generated dignity was an important factor for those experiencing the uncertainty of long-term furlough and associated socio-psychological and economic struggle. This aligns with the beneficial impact a sense of dignity has on people's ability to cope with difficult and complex life events and situations within studies in a range of fields including penal policy (Hu & Liu, 2020), palliative care (Guo & Jacelon, 2014), problem gambling (Klevan et al., 2019), as well as individuals enduring the impact of COVID-19 (Quental & Shymko, 2021).

Self-generated dignity may have mitigated the impact of furlough, but it did not erode ongoing dignity threats. Trust was diminished as managerial assurances failed to materialise. The handling of the redundancy process was a threat as those affected spoke of poor communication, poor treatment and a lack of respect. There was evidence for a lack of voice when selected for furlough and during furlough. As we noted earlier the CIPD (2020b) had warned that those chosen for furlough could be resentful if they felt classified as dispensable. For many being chosen for furlough impacted on self-esteem and worth through an unfavourable social comparison (Rayton et al., 2015) of being deemed 'non-essential'.

The experience of furlough instigated a key dignity threat through marginalisation. The associated employment status altered boundaries and forms of marginalisation were experienced physically, socially and emotionally (Sumner et al., 2018). Physical marginalisation involved segregation from the workplace. While this applied to those working from home, for those furloughed it was worsened through severe restrictions for engaging in any form of work for their organisation until changes introduced in July 2020. Homeworkers while remote could interact with their organisations. For several heritage workers such physical marginalisation continued over a long period. Social marginalisation principally featured through the label of being 'non-essential' and dispensable. This extended into concerns about returning to the workplace and being perceived as returning from an extended vacation. While 'non-essential' was a situational label, interviewees found it no less diminishing. It set in place a degree of

resentment juxtaposed with fears concerning employment prospects. Emotional marginalisation included a fracturing of co-worker and managerial support and engagement as the main sources of support concerning work-related matters was family, friends and social media groups rather than their employing organisation.

Furlough was a multi-layered experience. Uncertainties related to individual, organisational and sectoral concerns. Hospitality and retail workers on average had a shorter experience of furlough as these sectors fully opened from mid-June (retail) to early July 2020 (hospitality). These interviewees mostly returned to work into the context of social distancing restrictions. These interviewees' organisations closed, they were furloughed, the organisation opened and they were unfurloughed. However, evident for these workers was the amplification of prefurlough treatment in terms of consideration, pay and communication that aligned with the employment management traditions of these sectors (Williamson et al., 2017). For those in heritage, the situation differed. There were two issues that created consternation and proved to be the basis for dignity threats: whether they were chosen for furlough and whether they were in receipt of a salary top-up. Each of these were dignity threats signifying a loss of esteem, worth and respect. They caused a questioning of their organisation's espoused values and commitment to them. Each created a sense of marginalisation. In relation to pay there was a sense of sectoral marginalisation vis-à-vis others in the sector. In relation to furlough, there was a diminished sense of self and work identity as others, deemed essential, were rewarded with being able to home-work.

Organisational communication matters during a long period of work absence. Where social relations and interactions are defenestrated the form, frequency and focus of organisational communications becomes magnified. Communicative deficiencies were a root source for the marginalisation that many experienced as it went to the heart of how they perceived their treatment during furlough. Voice was for some denied at the outset to furlough through limited communication on what furlough meant and how selection for furlough was decided. The designation of individuals as 'non-essential' clearly injured the esteem of those so labelled. The lack of visibility in the heritage organisations' organisational discourse upon some returning to work further emphasised their 'non-essential' status and in turn diminished levels of respect. It confirmed the role that communicative interactions play in affirming or denying dignity as 'the tangible expression of workplace structures' (Lucas, 2015, p. 639). The unilateral imposition of furlough indicates this and shows the role of communication as a crucial facilitator for dignity.

6 | CONCLUSION

The UK Job Retention Scheme during 2020–2021 was a unique response to a seismic 'event time' phenomenon. The furlough scheme's scale, duration and cost were unprecedented. Here we have been specifically concerned with exploring aspects of its effect on workers who were beneficiaries of the scheme's income support, but who in turn were required to experience significant periods of enforced work absence. What this exploration has confirmed is that this enforced work absence induced anxiety, fear and the requirement to negotiate a variety of uncertainties. Dignity illuminates several of these experiences at the individual level of the worker who needed to navigate managerial/organisational (non)responses. Unsurprisingly, a release from workplace deprivations and strains ushered in a liberating sense of contentment despite a backdrop of significant worries and uncertainties. While dignity did remain under threat, the origins of this for some emanated from a pre-existing history of questionable organisational treatment that endured throughout furlough. For others, a new experience was a

catalyst for treatment that disrupted prior organisational orientations. The pandemic, therefore, brought things into sharp focus. In a sense, it did not cause threats to dignity but nourished concerns that preceded as well as occurred during furlough. Hence furlough is the context for several of the specific threats, but the threats need to be seen more broadly within the rubric of the employment relationship. Employment status was a clear and present danger to the dignity threats that furloughed workers experienced but perhaps the clearest lesson from life during furlough, at least in relation to employment relationships, was a paradox: for so many everything changed, but everything remained the same.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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