Precarity in the Nonprofit Employment Services Sector

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Drawing on interview and focus group data, this article explores research undertaken as part of a larger research project exploring precarity in the nonprofit employment services sector in a mid-sized Canadian city. We critically survey major legislative changes to Canadian employment and income security policies and programs, including the restructuring of work and labor relations, growth of performance-based contracting-out, erosion of intergovernmental transfers, worker stress, and emotional tolls. Our study's results demonstrate how employment precarity in the nonprofit employment services sector is amplified by top-down and centralized relationships with funding partners and policymaking divorced from the employment experiences of frontline staff. We make the case that it is important to work against rising workplace precarity to strengthen organizational and workplace conditions, as well as build environments more supportive of optimal employment support services.

En se fondant sur des entretiens et des données découlant de groupes témoins, cet article présente des explorations entreprises dans une recherche plus large étudiant la précarité dans le secteur des emplois de service dans une ville canadienne de taille moyenne. Nous faisons une revue critique de changements importants intervenus dans la législation portant sur l'emploi au Canada et les politiques et programmes de la sécurité du revenu, incluant la restructuration du travail et des relations de travail, l'augmentation de la privatisation se fondant sur la

performance, la diminution des transferts intergouvernementaux, le stress au travail et les conséquences émotionnelles. Les résultats de notre recherche démontrent comment la précarité de l'emploi dans les secteurs des services à but non lucratif est amplifiée par des relations allant du haut vers le bas et centralisée avec des partenaires et des politiques séparés de l'expérience des travailleurs sur le terrain. Nous démontrons qu'il est important de travailler contre la précarisation en renforçant les conditions organisationnelles et de travail, tout en construisant des environnements favorisant une offre de services de l'emploi optimaux.

THIS ARTICLE ADDS TO THE GROWING BODY of literature exploring the experiences of organizational and workplace precarity within nonprofit employment services agencies. It considers how precarity in nonprofit workplaces in a mid-sized Canadian city is connected to neoliberal reforms in funding and performance-based outcomes, and how workers seek to manage their own sense of insecurity while providing employment support services. Existing literature documents the rise of employment precarity in the nonprofit sector in Ontario and Canada, connecting this to the processes of marketization and government devolution. Drawing on original interviews and focus group data with frontline staff and managers in the employment services sector, this article addresses a pervasive sense of precarity in relation to organizational sustainability and workplace insecurity, and connects this sense of precarity to a shift away from core program to contract-based funding. Our findings also show how the parallel movement away from process measurement to outcomes-based funding has detrimentally impacted service delivery as greater resources are consumed to meet data tracking requirements.

Overall, our study's results demonstrate how employment precarity in the nonprofit employment services sector is amplified by top-down and centralized relationships with funding partners and policymaking divorced from the employment experiences of frontline staff. The resulting transfer of responsibility without additional power over funding streams to the nonprofit sector intensifies organizational and individual precarity, while state actors continue to exert considerable power while devolving responsibility. Our research also shows how workers attempt to manage their own precarity via engagement in required outcomes-based techniques while, at times, also taking risks that may make their own work more precarious in efforts to address client needs. For our study's participants, managing precarity appeared to have important implications for the emotional and mental health of workers, who must not only cope with their own sense of workplace precarity but also with their clients' difficult emotional situations. We subsequently contend that it is important to work against rising precarity among frontline staff of nonprofit employment services to ameliorate organizational and workplace conditions and create environments more supportive of optimal employment support services. Our analysis points

to the need for more holistic measures of so-called positive outcomes and worker-centered reforms that enhance and strengthen both service delivery and workplaces within nonprofit employment services organizations.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this article were drawn from a multisited, cross-national collaborative ethnographic (Lassiter 2005; Lassiter and Campbell 2010) and community-engaged (Aldrich and Marterella 2014) study of long-term unemployment. The study utilized a critical occupational science perspective (Laliberte Rudman 2010, 2015; Njelesani et al. 2013) that drew on both governmentality theory (Brady 2014; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011) and critical political economy approaches (Baines 2006; Evans, Richmond, and Shields 2005) to understand how everyday activities (or, occupations) are shaped by possibilities and boundaries embedded in discursively shaped social support services. This four-phase study generated data with organizational stakeholders, frontline service providers, and people experiencing long-term unemployment in Ontario, Canada, and Missouri, USA. These international regions were investigated because of their comparability in relation to both being mid-size cities (populated by ~300,000 residents) that have undergone economic transformations following reductions in the manufacturing industry and have comparable average durations of unemployment following the 2008 recession (Statistics Canada 2016; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016).

Our initial review of data revealed a striking difference between the two study contexts: workplace and organizational precarity came across strongly as a theme among Canadian but not U.S. frontline service providers. Accordingly, this article focuses solely on the data from London, Ontario, from the second phase of the study, which provides a vivid case study of the impacts of particular funding mechanisms and performance-based metrics at the frontline of service provision. In this second phase, 12 frontline service providers and program managers from four employment support service organizations participated in one to two semi-structured interviews, one to four workplace observation sessions, and/or up to two focus groups. Consistent with changes in nonprofit employment services sector in Ontario toward "one-stop" organizations (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities 2015), each of the four organizations was required to provide a full array of employment support services to a diversity of client groups. At the same time, some of the organizations had specifically targeted immigrant and refugee populations or those living in a particular geographical area marked by generational poverty.

As will be discussed below, these study participants reflected the gendered composition of nonprofit organizations found elsewhere. Eight women (Teresa, Natalie, Sarah, Meghan, Emily, Courtney, Hillary, and Kate) and two men (Dwight and Kevin) self-identified as frontline

employment services counselors and consultants, while the two other participants (Nicole and Kim) self-identified as management-level employment services personnel. Reflecting the highly skilled and diverse nature of their work, employment support service providers were responsible for a number of tasks, delivered in one-on-one and workshop formats, addressing various skills and knowledge areas, such as resume writing, interviewing, self-marketing, job searching, and educational and training options. They also discussed providing referrals to social services and engaging in outreach and advocacy work. Among these frontline workers, experience in the nonprofit employment support services sector ranged from 4 to over 20 years. Tasks for participants who identified as management-level personnel encompassed overseeing general operations, monitoring and managing employee performance, generating organizational reports, and outreach to employers and other nonprofit organizations. Clientele are drawn from across the labor market and range in age from the mid-teens to 70s.

Interviews focused on identifying general service provision processes, how service provision has changed since the 2008 recession, how service providers define long-term unemployment, and how service providers respond to clients who are at risk of or experiencing long-term unemployment. Observations of service provision processes—including individual meetings with clients, team case conferences, or educational workshops—augmented information gained through the interviews. Two focus groups brought service providers together to discuss the findings from Phase II interviews and observations with peers in and across study contexts. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded, and those recordings, as well as field notes associated with all forms of data collection, were transcribed verbatim for analysis. Open and focused coding using Quirkos Software (Edinbugh, UK), combined with critical discourse (Cheek 2004; Laliberte Rudman 2013) and situational (Clarke 2005; Clarke, Friese, and Washburn 2015) analyses, fostered multilayered understandings of the material, human, and nonhuman elements that shape service providers' experiences within the arena of long-term unemployment.

PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT AND THE NONPROFIT SECTOR

In recent decades, a growing body of literature has documented the erosion of the standard employment relationship amid the rise of nonstandard and precarious work—that is, forms of employment with limited social benefits and statutory entitlements, low wages, uncertainty of job tenure, and high risks of ill health (Vosko 2006). The deterioration in the quality and character of work has also been noted in the increasing flexibilization of workers, lack of control over its terms and conditions, limited access to career ladders, and predominance of temporary, contractual, and part-time labor (Fanelli 2016; Lewchuk, Clarke, and de Wolff 2011;

Thomas 2009). As summarized by the International Labour Organization (2012), precarious work encompasses:

> . . . work performed in the formal and informal economy and is characterized by variable levels and degrees of objective (legal status) and subjective (feeling) characteristics of uncertainty and insecurity. Although a precarious job can have many faces, it is usually defined by uncertainty as to the duration of employment, multiple possible employers or a disguised or ambiguous employment relationship, a lack of access to social protection and benefits usually associated with employment, low pay, and substantial legal and practical obstacles to joining a trade union and bargaining collectively. (P. 9)

While the growth and differential distribution of precarious work has been well documented across many sectors and workplaces, less attention has been devoted to rising precarity in the nonprofit social services sector (Baines 2010; Evans and Shields 2014). This sector, though, is by no means insulated from the degradation of labor and mounting pressures of neoliberalism.

Since the 1980s, nonprofit work is increasingly being reshaped by processes of neoliberalization, emphasizing performance-based funding, competitive contract mechanisms, enhanced accountability mechanisms, and downloading of responsibilities (Soss et al. 2011). Key directions that have been associated with neoliberal governance include a movement away from core funding to (often volatile) targeted and means-tested financing; budget cuts specifically targeted at social policy expenditures resulting in the off-loading and (quasi)marketization of social services; the market disciplining of labor through increases in competition and driving down of labor costs; new pressures for commercial revenue generation; performance-based contracting-out; and an augmented role for private donors, venture philanthropists, and social entrepreneurship, further blurring the distinction between nonprofit and for-profit organizations (Evans et al. 2005; Hasenfeld and Garrow 2012). Within this article, we focus particularly on how such changes have compounded and contributed to the rise of precarious employment in this sector.

Earlier neoliberally inflicted measures have been further bolstered through the adoption of New Public Management (NPM) principles and practices (Brodkin 2011; Soss et al. 2011). NPM asserts that government should function more like the private sector, imposing market discipline on the provision of goods and services and reconstituting work structures. As articulated by Evans et al. (2005), "The effects on community-based organizational structures can be dramatic as relatively egalitarian work structures are pushed to mimic the hierarchical structures found in the private and state sectors . . . NPM encourages managers to view their organizations as business units, adopting business oriented solutions within sectors that traditionally eschew such routinized and rigid methods

of work organisation" (pp. 83–89). The effect has been to recast the non-profit sector as a form of alternative service delivery, emphasizing results over process and cost-effective administration (Kelly and Caputo 2012). Such measures enhance workplace precarity as decision-making powers are divorced from frontline service workers, resources are directed away from services and toward record keeping, and the threat of defunding, and consequent loss of employment, looms ever present. The contract, rather than the state, becomes the governing regulatory mechanism reinforcing workplace insecurity in the event of the failure to meet outcomes-based performance targets.

In Ontario, the nonprofit sector employs more than one million persons working in areas such as children, youth, senior and family services, persons with physical and developmental disabilities, health, and homelessness initiatives in addition to services for immigrants and refugees, unemployed, and low-income individuals (Zizys 2011). At the same time as this sector attempts to meet a diversity of needs so as to promote economic and social justice, the sector as a whole exhibits many indications of workplace precarity and growing pressures to marketize social services. For example, research by the Social Planning Network of Ontario (Edwardh and Clutterbuck 2015), an umbrella organization of more than 20 local and regional social planning and community development councils across Ontario, shows that although nonprofit workers are on average higher educated and older than their for-profit counterparts, they are more likely to be contractually or part-time employed with fewer health benefits, lower pay, and higher caseloads. These findings build on previous research by McMullen and Schellenberg (2003:19) and Saunders (2004:25), which found that the rate of temporary versus permanent employment in the nonprofit sector (14 percent) was nearly double that in the for-profit sector (8 percent), while almost one-quarter of nonprofit employees worked on a part-time basis, twice the rate observed in the for-profit sector.

More broadly, the most recent National Survey of Non-Profit and Voluntary Organizations (NSNVO 2003), conducted more than a decade ago across some 13,000 member organizations, showed the rate of temporary employment in the nonprofit sector to be 35 versus 12.5 percent across the Canadian labor market. Similar rates were observed in Ontario with temporary nonprofit work accounting for 31 percent of all employment, nearly three times the rate in the provincial labor market as a whole (Scott et al. 2006:38). A 2013 report prepared by McIsaac, Park, and Toupin (2013) for the Ontario Nonprofit Network found that for organizations with at least one paid employee, just over half of all employees (53 percent) are in full-time, permanent positions, while 41 percent are part-time. However, the report also noted that only 28 percent of nonunionized permanent, part-time workers were eligible for benefits (life insurance, dental, pension, vision, and drug) and only 18 percent of workers were able to access some form of retirement income plan. This differed sharply

for unionized permanent part-time employees, where 59 percent were able to access both benefits and retirement plans (McIsaac et al. 2013:17). With only 14 percent of all nonprofit organizations indicating a unionized workplace, however, most workers remain excluded from nonwage benefit and retirement plans (Edwardh and Clutterbuck 2015).

Within the nonprofit sector, gender disparities intersect with increasing employment precarity. While women make up nearly half of the total Ontario labor force, they make up nearly three-quarters of all nonprofit workers and, in some regions, as much as 84 percent of the total nonprofit labor force (Zizys 2011:5). Despite women's overrepresentation in the sector, especially in frontline and nonmanagerial administrative positions, women are on average compensated less than men in comparable positions, with racialized women at an even greater disadvantage. Because nonprofit work is associated with altruism, care work, and labor market flexibility, the gendered nature of the work reinforces the feminization and undervaluation of the sector as a whole (Baines, Charlesworth, and Cunningham 2014; Fredland et al. 2007).

Attending to rising workplace precarity is significant given that higher precarity of job tenure not only produces economic hardship but also significant work-life imbalances as a result of high stress, anxiety, burnout, and overall lower quality of health and well-being (Curtis 2006; Eikenberry and Kluver 2004). Workplace precarity not only undermines nonprofit organizations' ability to attract and retain highly skilled and qualified workers, but also institutionalizes precarity through a lack of organizational continuity, high turnover, and impacts on service delivery mandates. As Clutterbuck and Howarth (2007) have noted: "Increasingly, the 'intrinsic' rewards of work in the sector are being overcome by greater job insecurity, continuing poor compensation and deteriorating working conditions" (p. 47).

As of 2012, Ontario's 46,000 nonprofit organizations employ roughly one million persons, 15 percent of the province's total workforce, with an economic impact worth nearly $50 billion annually. This represents more than 7.1 percent of Ontario's gross domestic product, more than the automobile and construction industries combined (Government of Ontario-Ontario Nonprofit Network 2012:2). In Ontario, 45 percent of nonprofit funding is derived from government, 36 percent from earned income, 15 percent from gifts and donations, and 4 percent from other sources of income (Ontario Nonprofit Network 2011:2).

Although supported by public funds, the net effect of neoliberal reforms has been to recommodify social services provisioning—along with significant cuts to public sector employment. This has occurred through transforming the state's role in society as a direct producer of public goods and services, to one that contracts out to organizations that must compete in the market to attract public and private funds. In the case of employment services, this results in the transfer of responsibility without power

over several key aspects of the organization of services, including defining measurable outcomes, to the nonprofit (and to a lesser extent for-profit) sector, while state actors continue to exert considerable power without responsibility. Of course, it is important to recognize that in the case of employment services, nonprofit actors arguably do exercise considerable power vis-à-vis those seeking employment who are themselves relatively dominated. In this regard, power is diffused unevenly across a range of social actors straddling the state, nonprofit sector, and individuals' own experiences in the labor market.

Nevertheless, nonprofit social services providers are tasked with continuously doing more for less in the absence of stable, long-term funding, while market-based competition, not the least of which is from for-profit competitors, places downward pressures on wages and working conditions (Eikenberry and Kluver 2004). Such pressures are meant to further discipline workers to market imperatives and labor rationality via relentless pressures to meet increasing service demands with lower labor (input) costs. In reality, such neoliberal restructuring may result in more bureaucracy with less effectiveness—that is to say, more time spent tracking program efficiencies for reasons of "transparency" and less time actually helping individuals find (stable, well-paying) jobs. Part of the reason for this, as David Graeber (2015) has argued, is that reforms intended to reduce "red tape" and promote private sector practices in the public sphere often have the paradoxical effect of increasing the total number of regulations, the total amount of paperwork, and the total number of workers needed to see those changes through. This is a tendency, notes Graeber (2015), that Durkheim observed at the turn of the twentieth century where he showed how the introduction of market mechanisms into public institutions actually required more rather than less state, as well as a particular kind of state suited to enforcing market-like rule.

As a result of these changes, a very competitive environment for nonprofits' access to federal, and especially provincial, funding has been created. In Canada, organizations with revenues over $1 million—10 percent of all Ontario organizations—are in receipt of 80 percent of all sector revenues (Scott 2003:15). Such a dependence on public funding places increased pressures to comply with neoliberal mandates at an organizational level in order to maintain funding and ensure survival (Evans and Shields 2014; Phillips and Rathgeb Smith 2011). As nonprofits compete with one another to attract government funding and desirable constituents, and repel less desirable ones such as immigrants with unrecognized credentials who take longer to employ, new pressures are placed on organizations to not only meet but exceed outcomes. In turn, creeping benchmarks result in reporting overload and human resources fatigue (Harrison and Weber 2015).

Like previous findings elsewhere (Reed and Howe 2000; Richmond and Shields 2004), within this study, as will be explicated below,

respondents noted how onerous evaluation and outcomes measures often have the contrarian effect of actually reducing service efficiency, imperiling the abilities of nonprofit organizations to meet their service mandates as a result of the considerable financial and personnel resources they consume. Within the context of employment services in Ontario, Employment Ontario (EO) came into being in 2007 following the transfer of employment training services and programs from the Federal government. EO emphasizes the provision of one-stop employment services, and has increasingly used a competitive contracting approach since its formation (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities 2015). Of particular significance in relation to the integration of NPM measures, since 2010, the performance of organizations funded through EO has been monitored through the use of Case Management Systems, which provides a mechanism to track organizational and service provider performance according to predetermined outcomes at preset time intervals. In turn, performance management data inform the subsequent contracting of EO services. The urgency of time-intensive service delivery that emphasizes the quickest return to work possible is also buoyed by 2012 reforms to federally funded Employment Insurance that expanded the definition of suitable employment and shortened length of eligibility, particularly for those with precarious work histories (Grundy and Laliberte Rudman 2016). Our research adds to literature identifying many of the troubling interconnected trends toward employment precarity, marketization, and deprivation of funding in the nonprofit sector. It also shows how organizational and workplace insecurity permeates the paid and unpaid work experiences of employment services providers, its significant emotional tolls, and the ways in which workers seek to resist further neoliberalization of their employment while attempting to manage their own precarity (Baines 2006; Evans et al. 2005; Ng 1990).

EXPERIENCING PRECARITY: WORKPLACE SPEED-UP AND THE FEAR OF JOB LOSS

One of the central challenges identified by nearly all participants concerns workplace speed-up in the form of narrow timelines and pressures to "positively" outcome clients within the parameters set by government funders. "The client comes in, they should be [positively] exited at the three-month mark – training, education or employment. However, that's not always the case" (Dwight). Respondents noted how rising pressures to account for positive outcomes often increased their own sense of precarity. Teresa, for instance, noted:

> I would like to have less pressure for the numbers really. I would like to see only counting whatever they want to count as a success but with the understanding that if you don't have this percentage of success, somebody

in your agency will not be fired. . . . Use the data, but don't pressure people with the data. Our mission is to give support and to produce results for the individuals not for the government.

Teresa's experience is illustrative of the workplace precarity shared by many in the sample that was framed as resulting from being caught between needing to respond to demands of outcomes-based measures on the one hand and meeting broader conceptualizations of client needs held by the frontline service providers on the other. Similar pressures were also communicated by managers of employment services organizations who voiced their concern with the ways that meeting funder-determined positive measures impacted frontline staff members' job security:

> I can ask all of the frontline workers who were here pre-Employment Ontario and post-Employment Ontario if they agree. But did you feel that your job was threatened before Employment Ontario? No. It breaks my heart to think that people are thinking 'oh my God, I've got to get my numbers'. That shouldn't be distracting them. (Nicole)

Sarah further discussed how meeting this pressure can be complicated by clients' precarious employment and the ways in which it prevents frontline service providers from accounting for "positive" outcomes:

> Sometimes, clients, they are not contacting us when they are employed because they are busy. And we can't approach them during daily hours because they are working. So we are missing a lot of opportunities . . . ticking them as employed. Then, after a few months, they will contact us when they lose that temporary job to look for another job. So for me, as a person, I don't like to put that ticking point. Why? Because I want to help them to be in a stable career not only temporary. That's most important.

The threat of defunding as a result of not meeting outcomes-based funding requirements, and the potential for consequent layoffs, reduction or outright elimination of services, loomed ever-present in the minds of employment service counselors, which created an atmosphere of insecurity across many of the diverse organizations that were interviewed. "What are the implications of this situation for the way we do the work?" asked Teresa rhetorically. "Well, at some point, even if you keep your mind on the client, you are in the stress of the organization for being targets. So that is stressful. Sometimes worrisome because you can lose your job. And that is the reality we face every day." Hillary expressed a prevailing sense of workplace insecurity, noting how "our funding is based on if we hit our targets. So, we have monthly and yearly targets that we have to hit, which would be people that are – files that are employed or close to in training . . . If we didn't – if we all just kinda didn't close the files that we had to, yeah, our funding could be not given to us. And our center could close."

In addition to the continual pressures of outcomes-based funding, and the all-pervasive sense of workplace insecurity engendered by these pressures, employment precarity was also amplified by incessant demands to obtain the highest amount of worker productivity possible. As Kevin noted: "the ministry doesn't typically care what you are doing well, they want to know how you are going to improve the things that you are not doing well. So, because we are in a continuous improvement model, you must always be continuously improving. Every quarter we have to report how we are doing well in our numbers or not." Such exercises represent a radical importation of business practices identified with lean production and Total Quality Management initially established in Japanese automotive factories in North America (Thomas 2007). Essentially, these practices entail a redesign of a firm or entire sectors' organizational structures and processes to achieve maximum output with the least amount of labor inputs. At the heart of this process are a number of employment practices that have increased worker precarity, including *kaizan* (continuous improvement), flexible employment, work teams, and zero downtime for workers. Such a reengineering of the employment services work process and new pressures to multitask in the form of administration and data collection, squeezes more work out of a smaller number of workers and places continual pressures to outperform their "competition" elsewhere.

THE PRECARIOUS DEPLOYMENT OF RESOURCES

In addition to enhanced workplace oversight and performance-based evaluation criteria, incessant pressures to do more with less were described as especially pronounced as a result of uncertainty in regard to long-term and stable funding.

> Funding is precarious in this not-for-profit area, and you know, as needs change, pendulums shift. Because we have so many different funders you can imagine what we wait through when there's an election because you don't know what that new mandate is going to be . . . So, trying to find sustained, multi-year funding so that you can actually have a vision for where you need to go next is challenging. (Kim)

The absence of sustained funding was described as having significant implications for employment services centers as they struggle to meet both service-level demands and personnel needs. These challenges are compounded in the face of electoral cycles that may usher in a change in funding formula and political ideology. Such uncertainty hampers organizations' abilities to craft long-term solutions to service-level shortfalls, places limitations on how existing funds can and cannot be used, and increases the administrative burden on frontline service workers. As Kim continued:

> We're required by this funder to have an audit every year, so that has a fee. And then we put insurance in there, and they said, no we won't pay for insurance. It's like, okay. Let me get this straight. I have people who have to do the work that you require us to do through the mandate of that particular funding. But you're leaving me with this huge gap of liability because you won't cover the insurance for them to be in this building? Nope. So, now I have to find a way to fund that, right. So, that's an in-kind contribution. It's like, that's the infrastructure. It's like if I have a person who's providing a workshop, then there's HR around that. There's payroll around that. There's liability around that. But there's no funding for those infrastructure pieces. Or very, very little. It doesn't really – and as I said, we're a lean organization. We're not for profit. Our folks don't earn astronomical salaries. They're here because they want to be here. They want to work in this sector. They want to work for a not-for-profit. So, that's a huge frustration.

Such frustrations illustrate the connections between the omnipresent fear of job loss, organizational precarity, and constant monitoring of worker performance at the crossroads of audit culture and NPM discussed below. In this sense, funders—predominantly provincial grant funding agencies—regulate the labor process by instilling an otherwise permanent sense of precarity via both coercive/passive methods, as well as through a bureaucratic hierarchy of control.

At issue is how funding partners are able to influence what the priorities of the organization are, how funding may be deployed, and the impacts that such decisions have on the experiences and autonomy of workers. Such a "passive" form of control exerts a perceptible effect upon workers who have to work harder and faster with preset limitations on how funds may be invested, and limits organizations' abilities for long-term planning and resource management. Although it is not argued that nongovernmental organization (NGO) autonomy is an ideal solution given that this can result in removing public input into economic and social directions taken through such organizations and the provision of too much power to dictate organizational and civic priorities by such organizations, short-term contracts tied to performance-based funding, compounded by changes in government, can result in unpredictable funding as well as changes in funder priorities that constrain the capacities of such organizations to carry out their main goal of helping the unemployed find secure and well-paying employment. The challenge is to provide sufficient resources and conduct audits in ways that do not detract them from the main goal of employment services organizations. There are, of course, no easy solutions to such a complex matter. While a full discussion is not possible here, it is clear that more research is necessary to illustrate best practices found elsewhere, as well as strive for more equitable terms on which NGOs and state funders can mutually determine spending and organizational priorities.

One of the organizational responses to enhanced precarity is to dedicate greater resources to meeting accountability demands. In this regard, it

is important to note the distinction between "audit culture" in the nonprofit sector and NPM. While the former is largely concerned with transparency and public accountability, the latter is aimed at bringing allegedly superior private sector practices and hierarchical structures to the supposedly inefficient (or worse, corrupt) public and nonprofit sectors (Belfiore 2004). While the two operate in distinct spheres, there is arguably a connection between the two as concerns about transparency may disproportionately reflect neoliberal skepticism around the state and nonprofit sector work. As study participants noted, the transfer of resources to accountability demands often leads to less direct services available for unemployed workers as resources are reallocated to meet new tracking and monitoring requirements. As Nicole and Kevin articulated, such measures had the contrarian effect of actually decreasing services delivery efficiency:

> Another huge challenge is that the ministry purchased an out of the box computer system and then tried to customize it to meet the needs of the program. And it's a piece of crap. I have never experienced any sort of system like this. And I worked a lot with client information management systems . . . And that is why so much human resources have been taken away from client facing activity is because of the CAM [Case Management] system. I've got a full time person and a part time person who do nothing but CAM's data entry. And I've only got five employment consultants. Tell me that makes any logical sense. (Nicole)

> Employment Ontario is getting tighter and tighter in what they require for data entry and CAM's is – I don't know why the Ministry requires as much information on people as they have, but – you can't argue with the funder. The funder is who pays us. (Kevin)

For frontline employment services staff, a consequent tendency has been to decrease the share of work going toward actual services delivery and increase both the paid and unpaid labor time devoted to data tracking. As Kim noted:

> So, she's entering, and she's doing it after hours. She's doing it on the weekends. We did hire a new 0.5 FTE [an employee that works half the full-time hours] to do data entry for us. But none of that is funded . . . That's our huge frustration is you can't provide the supports and services and the programming to the clients without having an infrastructure there that supports those things. And there's really almost no recognition of that whatsoever in terms of the dollars. That's something, you know. It's really, well, it's stupid.

The implementation of new information and workplace tracking technologies may, paradoxically, lead to less available services as a result of greater resources devoted to data collection and, potentially, labor displacement as funding is redeployed to meet accountability demands. These findings mirror earlier research, which found that "rather elaborate internal record-keeping and information retrieval systems . . . took time away

from counselling and other work with immigrant woman. The coordinator's time increasingly shifted from working with clients to administration and coordination" (Ng 1990:170). Also, as computerization, administration and data collection fills a larger portion of the working day, this increases the possibility of repetitive strain injury and other chronic health concerns, potentially increasing workplace precarity and the risks of ill-health found elsewhere (Jackson 2010).

Meghan also noted how recent changes have not only resulted in more self-direction for those seeking employment services but "less time to actually sit with an individual to do a lot of coaching. Because of our time constraints as counselors . . . the progress of the client in the file is largely through e-mails and then bringing them in when we need to, and so it's become a large part of how things have changed in our business." In a similar way, Emily notes how "a large part of our job now is paperwork, whereas somebody else used to do that before computers came on the desk. We were much more directly counselors then than we are now, and so we've had to move with the changes . . . You can imagine we have 1,770 clients come through eight people a year. There's a good portion that just needs information and regular workshops, but the amount that don't, we don't get the time to help or sporadically help." As a result of increased tracking demands and decreased human services personnel, many employment counselors noted how this has resulted in an inordinate amount of active caseloads. For instance, Dwight observed that of the seven staff at his organization each had a caseload of around 100; Sarah had 135 active cases, while Meghan had 120; Kate had around 74 open files, with about 30 percent of them returning clients; Kevin had about 80 active files, while Emily noted that at her organization each counselor carries a caseload of between 80 and 100, the implication being "there's no such thing as spare time."

In addition to heightened job stress and case overload, study participants noted how workplace precarity has risen in the absence of collaborative engagement and partnerships with grant funding agencies. Rather, respondents in management positions noted how the relationships with funders were often top-down and centralized. As executive director Kim put it: "The ministry does not partner with us on anything. There's good people working at the ministry. But in terms of how they interact with us and how it works, they do things to us. They don't do things with us. There's no partnership whatsoever with the funder. And when they say they consult with us, it's so not consultation under my definition." Assistant manager Nicole shared a similar view: "So they pretend consult with us so that they can say they consulted . . . [A]nd I've caught them a couple times in that the decision's already been made and then they have a – like they invite in select service providers to provide their thoughts and inputs into something that's already been decided. It's sad and it breaks my heart because who knows better than the people who report to me what

clients' needs are?" As Nicole and Kim elucidate, although the language of partnership has proliferated, in practice, these relationships are far from co-determinous and marked by significant power imbalances. Such partnerships also impose "complex and burdensome accountability schemes disguised as evaluation measures" (Richmond and Shields 2004:4) as contracts with the state are used to facilitate longer term strategies of services marketization, eroding professional discretion and thereby enhancing the precarity of workers in this sector. The failure of grant funding agencies to adequately engage with frontline staff detracts from a more participatory and cooperative workplace culture. It may also miss important opportunities for enhancing service-level shortcomings and improving the productivity and well-being of workers, overlooking new ideas for improving workplace practices.

WORKPLACE RESISTANCE TO NEOLIBERALIZATION

While heightened competitiveness is supposed to lead to survival of the fittest (to secure one's own organizational success), the data collected here suggest workers and organizations challenge this assumption in a number of unexpected ways. Many participants noted how they increasingly sought to pool their resources and collaborate (rather than compete) with other nonprofit employment services agencies in the interests of those utilizing the services being provided. Consider, for example, the illustrations below:

> If I have a client that I feel would be better served at another organization, I will refer the client there. Or they are coming from there, and they are kind of confused or not have a clear view of what they are doing, I say go talk to the employment counselor there. If you still feel like you want to come here. We have similar services. So we are very collaborative. We use a very collaborative model. We refer to people to other services no matter what because the client wants that, or it's beneficial for the client. It's a common practice. We need to help the client to go ahead. (Teresa)

> We're working with an agency with this client on their learning disabilities. We're also working with an agency on this client because they're receiving Ontario disability. And they're working with me for the employment perspective. So each agency has a little pot of money. Something as simple as transportation was a huge barrier. And that's ridiculous. Why? So we all pulled. We've been all picking from our pots to get him a bus pass for several months. (Dwight)

Such collaborative engagement has been a hallmark of the nonprofit sector and runs counter to the market compulsions of cutthroat competition. Rather, workers sought to resist pressures to compete to attract clientele, putting the needs of the client ahead of organizational self-interest. Such an example is illustrative in the sense that proactive resistance to neoliberalism takes many forms as workers struggle to

envision alternative forms of service delivery that are not based on the survival of the fittest, but rather collaborative engagement with a broader network of social services agencies.

Extensive interviews with frontline staff also revealed a significant undercurrent of precarious work that is often overlooked. The first concerns employment counselors' unease with the creeping language of NPM that dehumanizes clientele dealing with both job loss and, in some cases, broader life crisis situations, while the second concerns the often unseen and unheard emotional labor of frontline support workers. In regard to the first, Kevin notes how EO refers to individual clients as business units or service plan units: "So when you go to that mindset, once you call a person a unit . . . funders don't care that they're people, it's tough to argue with funders to say this isn't a unit. This is a person." As Doreen Massey (2013) has argued, such use of vocabulary reflects part of the way that neoliberalism has become part of our common sense understanding of life. The message underlying the use of "business units" reduces complex human interactions as if operating as consumers in a marketplace, and is reinforced via a remaking of institutional practices. In other words, the experiences of unemployed workers have become one of instrumental market exchange. Such change is illustrative of the political construction of language that reinforces dominant discourses and ideological practices.[1] Despite the possibility of not meeting monthly quotas, workers resisted such rationalization of the labor process preferring instead to exercise their own professional discretion and putting the needs of their clients ahead of mandated outcomes. They noted doing what they think is "right" even if this might enhance their own workplace precarity. Dwight stated, "I don't care what the statistic says, personally, I just want to get the client employed," while Kevin expressed a similar approach to putting clients before the numbers:

> If you could somehow convince like a law firm to take you on as a volunteer as a paralegal, that should be a success. My numbers can go up and down . . . but I think that should be something that's considered a success. I do what's generally best for the clients, but sometimes I'm like, yeah, it would be better for me if I registered you as a client, referred you to one training center, yay checkbox with your referral, you make the client jump through two hoops so

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1. As the quote from Kevin above illustrates, many workers sought to actively resist the neoliberalization of workplace language, culture, and practice, as it reduced human services provisioning to economic units. As employment counselors expressed to us time and again, a singular focus on quantitative data collection masks important qualitative dimensions that are often missed in official measures of positive outcomes. In reality, such data collection may obfuscate both a lack of adequate support services and overestimate the success of existing support systems failing to take into account the numerous small steps (e.g., opening a bank account, updating a resume, resolving familial conflicts) that unemployed workers take on the path to (re)employment. See Ng (1990) for a critical account of how an increase in mandatory quantitative measures created a great deal of stress on a community employment center serving primarily immigrants, "render[ing] previously egalitarian and more-or-less collective work organization inoperable . . ." (p. 170)

> I get credit for one little [checkbox] – so again, as I tell clients there are no hoops in this office.

In a related vein, it was clear that the inability to provide adequate services to clients in crisis situations—combined with the inscription of dominant neoliberal tropes on workplace practices that reduces individuals to business units—had significant emotional implications for frontline workers providing these services, thus exacerbating their own sense of workplace precarity and risks of ill health. Consider the quotes below:

> You have people who come in with high stress because be it the unemployment, be it the money, and be it the fights that come from money and you are never quite sure what could be a good day. I know I have had times where I had a client who got into gambling pretty heavily and the client sounded like he was debating, is it still worth living at this point. Which then, obviously, I had a whole other conversation instead of skills, but that is a reality and to be always looking for those signs too and those triggers of are you thinking of killing yourself? I have had that conversation a number of times and it's when people are feeling that absolute desperation and there is no other out, other than that and we obviously get them the right supports and things. So it can go from everything from, it's a little tough paying the bills this week to its just not working. I have also had marital breakdowns as well and I have a couple of clients right now that are going through messy divorces because one spouse that was making the money, isn't making any now. (Kevin)

> I had a client come in and said, "I can't stop thinking about hanging myself." That doesn't sound very good. Can we have a conversation about that? "Sure, yeah," I said, "Well, I really can't help you, but I'm willing to listen for a little. Let's figure out a solution." "Okay, okay." So he agreed to talk to a social worker, and he agreed to talk to his doctor. And then he was going to come back and get a suit the next day because we have the Suit Drive, and I gave him some canned food, and I gave him some bus tickets. And I said, "Okay, so tomorrow, we're going to meet each other at 11:00." "Yeah, man, that sounds great." So tomorrow came, 11:00, 11:30, 1:00. So I called the cops. I said, "Here's the client name. Here's a description. Here's what he said he was going to do." I don't know if he gave me the right name. I don't know if he was telling me the truth. I don't know what was there. So I went, and I talked to my other staff member across the hall who was a social worker. And almost the first thing out of her mouth when I described it, she said, "Are you okay?" And I said, "Yeah, why wouldn't I be okay? I did what I had to do." But that was my own emotional intelligence ringing through. (Dwight)

While Dwight's alleged ability to deal with such traumatic experiences is noteworthy, other respondents mentioned how they often take these pressures and stresses home with them on account of the significant emotional and physical tolls they experience. Emily, for instance, notes how they are able to manage these challenges collectively: "A lot of us are constantly taking care of ourselves and our emotional state. We're a

strong, supportive unit because we all feel this way." These sentiments point to the way frontline staff must often build trust and compassion by demonstrating professional demeanor and judgment, while at the same time develop coping strategies in order to maintain their own mental health and well-being as well as job satisfaction. As an undercurrent of precarious employment, it remains an open question to what extent the inability to do so may result in higher levels of workplace discontent, stress, and personnel turnover.

CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The data presented here suggest that the neoliberalization of the non-profit employment services sector has resulted in more precarious and emotionally tolling work arrangements for frontline staff members. Respondents also noted how the pressure to meet outcomes-based measures has increased their own sense of workplace insecurity as well as organizational insecurity, while redirecting funding away from services delivery to data collection. Participants were often adamant that there should be a broader recognition of positive outcomes not captured by existing methods of data collection, with the recognition that some groups (immigrants, refugees, youth, and former manufacturing workers) require greater in-house supports and broader social services such as being able to access better employment insurance or social assistance. Such measures could lessen workers' own precarity (by accounting for the diverse work they do) and enable them to provide services that are commensurate with their identification of client needs, as well as inform advocacy efforts to reform employment services in ways that enhance workplace security and services provisioning. Stakeholders also stressed the need to invest more financial supports into human services personnel citing that these costs are often not covered by grant-funding agencies. As a way to achieving stronger financial footing, many noted the importance of consistent funding streams, including more active engagement with the organizations and frontline staff providing the services on the ground. More meaningful consultation between the funders, users, and producers of employment services is necessary to ensure a balance between long-term funding and public policy shifts reflected in the election of new governments.

A wealth of research within care professions such as nursing, social work, mental health, and childcare has shown that emotional labor can exacerbate job dissatisfaction, have detrimental impacts on the health and well-being of individual workers, and contribute to employment burnout (Baines 2006, 2011; Erickson and Ritter 2001). This line of research has also shown that these challenges are not reflected in enhanced wages, benefits, and mental health/support systems. This layer of emotionally and physically exhausting precarious work is rarely acknowledged. While our

research did not fully unearth to what extent adequate support systems and coping mechanisms are in place, it did give an indication of the significant emotional challenges employment support workers experience both on and off the job on a daily basis. It is hard to imagine that dealing with such crisis situations on a recurring basis would have little impact on the mental well-being and job satisfaction of employment counselors. While preliminary indications suggest a significant emotional strain on frontline staff, future research will need to explore these questions deeper to get a fuller picture.

While workers expressed a range of concerns to us as researchers on an individualized basis, it was clear that many of the criticisms—from problems with how positive outcomes were defined, to lack of policy engagement with frontline staff, to limitations on how funding could be used—were consistent across workplaces. However, in the absence of a collective voice to operationalize such concerns, workers were left with few choices but to advance issues and concerns on an individualized basis. These points of resistance illustrate fractures in the neoliberalization of the employment services sector and may also open up new opportunities for collectively implementing worker-centered changes. Historically, union-ization has been one method workers have used to collectively organize and bargain effectively in terms of their compensation, workplace security, and working conditions. Unionization has also been an effective vehicle for identifying frontline-informed means for addressing services shortfalls (Jackson 2010; Kass and Costigliola 2004). In addition to exploring the possibilities and challenges of unionization, future research will also need to consider to what extent strengthened legal and regulatory frameworks could enhance the security of employment services organizations and the workplace precarity of the nonprofit sector as a whole.

Finally, in order to provide a more rounded analysis of how employ-ment services have been restructured, additional research will also need to make an effort to include the experiences of clients themselves in order to provide a deeper layer of analysis; something that will be occurring in the next phase of this research. It is clear from the data presented here that nonprofit employment services workers and organizations continue to operate in an environment of insecurity and otherwise permanent precarity. If this is to be reversed, and the quality of nonprofit sector employment is to be enhanced, policymaking will need to be much more responsive and informed by the analysis and understanding of workers, and clients, themselves.

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