

# **Snapshots of Precarity: Life Histories, Organizational Narratives, and Public Service Internships in Ontario**

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## Abstract

This paper conducts an inductive investigation of the question ‘what is precarity?’ This was done through examining work-time arrangements in the public service – a space where precarity is not presumed to exist. This approach is premised on the idea that challenges to securing employment security in the public service can provide insight into contemporary normativities of work. In particular, this project aims to critically examine the common perception that public service careers present ideal norms for the employment relationship.

This project takes a phenomenological approach to understand precarity through individual experiences and, in particular, the emotions and concerns that characterize this experience. The findings of this project are based on interviews with four former public service interns at various levels of government. Internships were mobilized in this project as an example of precarious employment. This paper argues that precarity is an experience that exists in the portion of the life history where there is a gap between organizational narratives and an individual’s professional trajectories that creates uncertainty about the future of one’s career. This gap highlights the structural component of a context in which the new spirit of capitalism often directs work arrangements. Each testimony, provided by the four participants provides a snapshot into the experiential phenomenon of living within that gap. For all four of the participants this gap was characterized by uncertainty, and feeling disposable.

This project also constituted an experimental run of this research method of unfolding the meaning of precarity through a life histories approach. Therefore, the aim was not to produce a generalizable conclusion on precarity, but rather to test out a research method that could be used for further research. This meant going beyond the material impacts of precarity, i.e. low wages, unstable hours, and providing individuals the space to provide testimony of their experience. There were a few discoveries that were made in the process of conducting this method that could be useful for further developing the protocol for future research.

## Introduction

This project aims to inductively unfold the experience of ‘precarity.’ Contemporary discussions of the world work are often centred on ‘precarity.’ The anxiety surrounding this ‘new world of work’ that is characterized by ‘precarious employment’ drives labour activism, political discourse, and self-definition as more workers begin to identify themselves as members of the ‘precarariat.’ This project comprises an inductive investigation of the question ‘what is precarity?’ This was done through examining work-time arrangements in the public service – a space where precarity is not presumed to exist. This is premised on the idea that

challenges to securing employment security in the public service can provide insight into contemporary normativities of work.

Through investigating precarity within the space of public service careers, this project aimed to critically examine the common perception that public service careers present ideal norms for the employment relationship. For the purposes of this project, the public service was conceptualized as workers in the bureaucracy at federal, provincial, and municipal levels. The findings of this project are based on interviews with four individuals who participated in internships in the public service at various levels of government. Internships will be mobilized in this project as an example of precarious employment. This paper argues that precarity is an experience that exists in the portion of the life history where there is a gap between organizational narratives and individual professional trajectories that creates uncertainty about the future of one's career.

This project takes a phenomenological approach to understand precarity through individual testimony and, in particular, the emotions and concerns that characterize this experience. In particular, a life histories approach was used to understand the interviews. The interview data was also analyzed in the context of the organizational narratives literature. The interviews that compose this project suggest that uncertainty of the next step in an individual's professional trajectory, conceived of here as precarity, lead to feelings of an affront to a worker's sense of self, exhaustion, stagnancy, and pressure to prove oneself.

## Literature Review

### Contemporary public discourse on precarity in Ontario

Precarious employment has become a key topic in public discourse on income inequality in Ontario. In particular, there has been increased media attention on issues of breaches of employment and labour law as well as the ways that these laws have failed to adapt to contemporary labour market realities. In particular, this debate has been expressed in numerous recent reports released by universities and social justice organizations, sometimes in partnership, that aim to raise awareness in the public as well as among policy makers about this perceived shift in the normativities of work.

In 2012, the Law Commission of Ontario released a report called *Vulnerable Workers and Precarious Work* which highlighted the ways in which the nature of employment in Ontario had shifted considerably. They characterize work as being more 'precarious' with less job security, few benefits, and workers having little control over their working conditions (Law Commission 2012, p.1). In this report, agency work, self-employment, part-time, casual, or temporary migrant work are all considered examples of precarious work (Law Commission 2012, p .1). They also argue that this type of work is vulnerable, referring to the scenario and not the workers, because workers in this position often face other structural disadvantages related to gender, immigration status, race, and other markers of identity (Law Commission 2012, p.1).

Another key text that has influenced recent public discourse on precarious employment in Ontario in the same period is the *Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario*

(PEPSO) research group's *It's More than Poverty: Employment Precarity and Household Wellbeing* (2013). This report's major contribution was developing an *Employment Precarity Index* (PEPSO 2013, p.27). In this measurement, precarity is measured on a continuum and the authors identify individuals' levels of precarity based on their answers to survey questions on their work arrangement on indices such as whether they are in temporary employment or in a standard employment relationship, variability in their hours and earnings, ability to advocate on their own behalf without fearing job loss; the frequency of when an individual works on-call or is paid in cash; and whether workers are compensated on days missed (PEPSO 2013, p.27). They conceptualize precarity to exist along a continuum with lowest scores on the index being described as having secure employment and higher scores demonstrating a high level of precarity (PEPSO 2013, p. 27).

Discussions on employment precarity are sometimes rooted in discussions of class. As a result, a term that has become part of the vernacular among labour scholars and activists is the 'precariat.' The first recorded use of the term 'precariat' was in the 1980s by French sociologists in their studies of temporary or seasonal workers (Standing 2011, p.9). This idea was further developed and brought into contemporary discussions of precarity through Guy Standing's (2011) text *The Precariat*. In the book, Standing argues that all the great movements in history have been centred on issues of class. Standing identifies the late 1970s, a period in which neoliberalism became a dominant ideology, as the point at which a new class system emerged (Standing 2011, p.5). This class system is composed of the 'elite,' the 'salarariat,' the 'proficians,' and the 'precariat' (Standing 2011, p. 7). The precariat are described as a class of workers that

have little confidence in or relationships with institutions such as capital or the state (Standing 2011, p.8).

### **History of the Employment Relationship in Canada**

The literature on precarity often documents and analyzes shifts in the norms that shape the employment relationship that have created this space of precarious work. In fact, the literature highlights the ways that the idea of a standard employment relationship is relative and has taken various forms over the years. The following section will outline the various ways that the employment relationship taken form in Canada.

#### *Late 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*

This conceptualization of the standard employment relationship between 1880 and 1920 was closely linked to Canada's immigration policy because it was focused on filling labour needs related to Canada's economic expansion (Vosko 2006, p.5). Due to a demand for male construction workers for infrastructure as well as female domestic labour, policies were introduced that encouraged recruiting workers through employment agents to fill labour needs (Vosko 2006, p.5). This trend was reflected in seasonal agricultural work and contract labour (Vosko 2006, p.5). As such, the standard employment relationship of this period was based on the needs of capital and nation.

#### *Post- World War II*

The origins of the contemporary conceptualization of the standard employment relationship that emerged in the post-World War II era can be found in a shift in the 19<sup>th</sup>

century towards a wage-based, industrial society. This shift was characterized by a household economy in which men were responsible for income and women focused on internal workings of the home (PEPSO 2015, p.17). This shift first occurred among the white-collar and professional middle-class families but eventually men in manufacturing and other manual trades also won a wage that was sufficient to support a family. This eventually became the norm in working-class households towards the end of the century (PEPSO 2015, p.17).

During the Second World War era, increasing numbers of Canadian workers had access to the standard employment relationship, an institution based on permanent, full-time employment that provided benefits to cover health costs and a retirement plan (PEPSO 2015: p.17). This period was characterized by full-time continuous employment where workers had one employer (often for their entire career), worked on the employers' worksite under direct supervision, were unionized, and had access to social benefits (Vosko 2006, p.6).

These changes to the employment relationship were inspired by a period of wealth accumulation, economic expansion, and productivity growth in which there were institutional changes that allowed workers to obtain associational rights, and collective bargaining (Vosko 2006, p.6). The relative improvement in workers conditions can be credited to the joint activism of trade unionists and personnel managers who were working towards introducing practices in the workplace that would promote long-term employment tenure (Befort 2003, p.155). A key dimension of the employment relationship that they targeted was the ways in which there were arbitrary practices in the workplace that gave employers a lot of power; they wanted to introduce consistency in this relationship by creating fair and standardized employment

practices (Befort 2003, p.155). These changes created a space for what is currently considered the normal model of employment the 'standard employment relationship' (Vosko 2006, p.6).

### *Post-1970*

In the 1970s, this employment norm experienced disruptions from various places. Firstly, there was a change in ideology surrounding social policy. This 'neoliberal' ideology emerged from a group of social and economic thinkers who did not experience the Great Depression and had no special attachment to the social democratic agenda that became the norm after WWII (Standing 2011, p.5). A key neoliberal claim that became more and more normalized in the 1980s was that countries needed to pursue 'labour market flexibility' (Standing 2011, p.6). It is in this environment that the 'contingent workforce,' and, perhaps the new standard employment relationship, emerged. This workforce consists of an increased reliance on workers that are categorized as independent contractors, contracted workers, and leased employees (Befort 2003, p.158). Another portion of the contingent workforce is the part-time and temporary employees who are legally considered employees but receive less than the 40 hour work week (Befort 2003, p.158).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Using literature on changes to the norms of work, the project will discuss the ways in which there have been changes to work-time structure in public services careers. In particular, the research will be grounded in Boltanski and Chiapello's *New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005) and their conceptualization of the progression of capitalism over the years; in particular, the ways that this informs the world of work. Boltanski and Chiapello's text builds on Max Weber's

discussion of the 'spirit of capitalism' which refers to the ethical motivations that inspire entrepreneurs to pursue capital accumulation (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p.8). This text builds on this discussion of the spirit of capitalism by highlighting the ways that its critiques play a role in sustaining capitalism. They argue that the driving force for different manifestations of capitalism are its critiques because "it needs enemies, people whom it outrages and who are opposed to it, to find the moral supports it lacks and to incorporate mechanisms of justice" (Boltanski & Chiapello 2005, p.27).

These different spirits of capitalism emerged through the recognition that in order to survive, capitalism has needed to incorporate its critiques. Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) identify two major critiques of capitalism: the artistic critique and the social critique (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 38). The artistic critique finds its main source of resistance from disenchantment with a system in which individuals are called to live inauthentic lives; within this framework, this is a source of oppression (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p. 38). This critique is particularly concerned with the loss of meaning as well as a commodification of beauty that affects both art and human beings (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p.38).

The second critique was inspired by socialists, and, later, Marxists that drew its resistance from a critique of private interests and the poverty of the masses in a society that had the most wealth it has ever had (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p.38). The authors propose that these critiques are fundamental to the transformation of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p. 489). This is because,

"critique makes it possible for capitalism to equip itself with a spirit which, as we have seen, is required for people to engage in the profit-making process, it indirectly serves capitalism and is one of

the instruments of its ability to endure. This poses some serious problems for critique, since it easily finds itself faced with the alternative of being either ignored (or hence useless) or recuperated” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p.490).

The authors enumerate and describe the various spirits of capitalism that have emerged over the years. The first spirit of capitalism that the authors identify emerged at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is embodied by the figure of the bourgeois entrepreneur (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p.17). This figure that inspired this spirit of capitalism is seen in “the image of the entrepreneur, the captain of industry, the conquistador, [which] encapsulates the heroic elements of the portrait, stressing gambles, speculation, risk, innovation” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p.17). Capitalist adventure that is seen as desirable in this model is seen in spatial liberation that allows the young (male) to emancipate themselves from their communities, enslavement to the land, and family to pursue their own fortune (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p.17). In other words, capitalist adventure in this framework is unlimited possibilities.

Boltanski and Chiapello posit the second spirit of capitalism as emerging between the 1930s and the 1960s (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p.17). This spirit of capitalism absorbs critiques of the previous spirit and, beginning at the end of the 1930s, finds its source of indignation in the observation of the ways that private interests thrived at the expense of exploited workers (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 201). As a result, the second spirit was the result of interaction with the social critique and it inspired the establishment of the welfare state (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p. 201).

In this iteration of the spirit of capitalism, the heroic figure is no longer the individual, adventurous entrepreneur but, in era characterized by large, centralized, bureaucratized

industrial firms, the heroic figure became the manager (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p.17).

The manager is unlike the shareholder in that his or her personal wealth is not invested in the enterprise, however, their main focus is on expanding the size of the firm through developing mass production that is based on economies of scale, product standardization, the rational organization of work, and new techniques for expanding markets (Boltanski & Chiapello 2005, p. 18).

The subsequent third and 'new spirit' is expressed in the 'globalized' capitalism that uses new technologies and incorporates the critiques of the second spirit (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p.19). The new spirit of capitalism grounded its critiques in the ways that industrial society had become mechanized (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p. 201). In particular, this critique felt that this mechanization gets in the way of the realization of full human potential that was most authentically released through creativity (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p. 201).

In order to adapt to these critiques of the mechanization of society, the new spirit of capitalism adapted profit-making techniques that gave individuals the space to realize self (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p. 201). This new spirit of capitalism responds to critiques of the state developed by the ultra-left in the 1960s and 1970s which rejected the socialist state because of the ways that the state was seen as "an apparatus of domination and oppression, in so far as it possessed a 'monopoly on the legitimate violence' (army, police, justice, etc.), and of the 'symbolic violence' practiced by 'ideological state apparatuses' – that is to say, schools in

the first instance, but also all the rapidly expanding cultural institutions” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p. 202).

This paper will engage with the idea of a ‘new spirit of capitalism’ by examining the ways it has impacted organizational narratives and the ways that this has impacted public service careers. Through examining life histories of interns at public service organizations, this project aims to capture a small snapshot of the new spirit of capitalism as expressed in the public sector, and to perhaps use these findings to inform an understanding of precarity.

### **Contemporary Literature on the New Spirit of Capitalism**

#### *Entrepreneurship & Flexibility*

In the literature on grounded on the idea of a new spirit of capitalism, also often referred to as the new economy, and the ways that this has affected work there is discussion of the ways that ‘entrepreneurship’ and ‘flexibility’ have both emerged, post-1970, as critical normativities and expectations of work. Pongratz and Voss (2003) argue that the traditional, more passive concept of the employee is now replaced by the *Arbeitskraftunternehmer* – or, the ‘entreplooyee’ (Pongratz and Voss 2003, p.240). In this new working world, the Taylorist principle of employers having the responsibility to closely monitor their employees’ activities has now largely been abandoned with more emphasis being placed the employee managing themselves and exhibiting qualities such as flexibility and self-organization (Pongratz and Voss, 2003: p. 241). Ikonen (2013) further argues that in the contemporary working world wage-work and entrepreneurship are intimately entangled (Ikonen, 2013, p. 469). As a result, ‘entrepreneurialism’ appears to be a virtue that successful workers are expected to possess.

These changes suggest a shift in the terms of the employment contract. The traditional employment contract was premised on the idea that employers in hiring workers have acquired their working potential for a fixed period of time (Pongratz and Voss, 2003, p.243). The main challenge for employers is to capture their employees' working capacity and harness it for their own ends; Braverman calls this process, 'labour control' (Pongratz and Voss 2003, p.243). In the contemporary working world, employees seem to now be responsible for regulating themselves and making sure that their own working potential is used for the ends established by their employers (Pongratz and Voss 2003, p.243).

These shifts require employees to change their approach to their work and to exercise different faculties than the previous employment relationship. These shifts are required to exert attributes such as entrepreneurialism and flexibility and reflect an enterprise culture. Within enterprise culture, it is necessary for workers to project an image of their 'enterprising self' (Rose 1992, p.141). The enterprising self helps to sustain enterprise culture through adapting 'self-steering' capacities (Rose 1992, p.146). In particular, the enterprising self "will make a venture of its life, project itself a future and seek to shape itself in order to become that which it wishes to be. The enterprising self is thus a calculating self - a self that calculates about itself and that works upon itself in order to better itself" (Rose 1992, p.146).

Some scholars aim to deconstruct this norm to understand power dynamics in the workforce and provide some fascinating insights. Ogbor (2000) argues that it is important to deconstruct management discourses in order to understand what lies behind promoting entrepreneurship as a virtue (Ogbor 2000, p. 607). He identifies the term 'entrepreneur' as

rooted in Catillon's (1755) *Essai sur la nature du commerce en general* in which the entrepreneur is compared to a farmer who conducts business (undertaking) in an uncertain environment (Ogbor 2000, p.615). Objor notes that these conceptualizations of the entrepreneur suggest a masculine enterprise and "derives from the conceptualization of entrepreneurial undertaking in terms of 'the wilderness' and this 'wilderness' is essentially feminine" (Objor 2000, p.616). As a result, this figure can be linked to the historical literature of America, for example, with "the 'first' white-male European who 'discovered' and 'conquered' the land of opportunity, symbolizing the heroic representation of the positive American male model of aggressiveness, assertiveness, and the conqueror of Mother Nature" (Objor 2000, p.617).

The literature on entrepreneurship also recognizes that there are classed dimensions to this idea. Atkinson (2010) responds to the idea that with contemporary emphasis on entrepreneurship has displaced class as a means to understanding work histories due to emphasis on flexible negotiation, consideration, and planning (Atkinson 2010, p.414). He argues that this idea is questionable because this shift can still be seen as based on class lines (Atkinson 2010, p. 414). This analysis relies on a Bourdieusian understanding of class in which class position is defined in terms of possession of different amounts of economic, cultural, and social capital (Atkinson 2010, p. 415). Possession of various amounts of these different types of capital provides a 'field of possibilities' that allow an actor to navigate in a social space (Atkinson 2010, p. 416). Within this context it appears that class still continues to play a role in employment histories because agents with plenty of capital have the freedom to exploit new

options and opportunities while the dominated are guided by material pressures, limited capital, and classed dispositions flowing from their position (Atkinson 2010, p. 427).

Linked to this emphasis on entrepreneurship is an interest in flexibility for workers. Boltanski and Chiapello argue that this norm emerged in response to a second wave of critique of capitalism. They argue that after the great strikes in France in 1936, and the corresponding social critique, the first response of employers was to concede to worker demands and negotiate with unions (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p.199). However, these concessions only lasted a short time because they were seen as expensive. In response, employers changed work organization in order meet demands and avoid negotiating with unions (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p.199).

This produced the third spirit of capitalism. In the 1960s and 1970s, capitalism was more responsive to the artistic critique that found the social capitalism that was governed by the state as constraining (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p. 201). This was seen in changes to work through flexibility and increased part-time work as a key way of facilitating this (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p. 225). This reformulation of capitalism which initially was seen as “exciting, creative, protean, innovative, and ‘liberating’” is beginning to be seen as a space that allows for the “flourishing of the self” that excludes those with less resources (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p.324).

### *The Third Spirit of Capitalism and the Public Sector in Ontario*

The literature on changes to normativities of work will be used to inform this project’s investigation of shifts in public service careers. It will also be in dialogue with other literature

that illuminates the gradual erosion of employment security across the public sector. There have been changes in the work-time structure in the public sector that is influenced by the third spirit of capitalism that is characterized by “the erosion of a standard employment relationship where full-time, full-year, long-term, or permanent jobs are eliminated and replaced by work that is part-time, temporary, and/or self-employed” (Stinson 2009, p. 93). Casualization allows employers to decrease labour costs through measures such as cutting weekly hours or hiring workers for a specific project rather than on a permanent basis (Stinson 2009, p.104). These temporary, casual, contract, and term employees are often not paid a commensurate rate to that of permanent employees, and are less likely to have health benefits or a pension plan (Stinson 2009, p.104).

Recent research provides some snapshots of precarity in the public sector. An example of this can be seen in Carson and Siemiatycki’s (2014) examination of the Justice and Dignity for Cleaners campaign. This campaign was launched in response to a policy environment in Toronto characterized by increasing austerity in which the city’s administration was committed to reducing spending and, in particular, labour costs (Carson and Siemiatycki 2014, 169). A second snapshot can be seen in Borowy’s (2006) discussion of changes to the Ontario Public Service (OPS) demonstrates that the OPS is increasingly basing its employment contracts on ideas of flexibility. She asserts that between 1995 and 2002 the Ontario state-as-employer pursued flexibility in its workforce changing its internal structure, legislative regime, and bargaining strategy with Ontario Public Service Employees’ Union (OPSEU) (Borowy 2006, p. 164).

There are also some snapshots seen in the federal public service. An example of this is increased usage of outsourcing. As a result, federal government teams are often composed both of public service employees and contractors that do the same work (Macdonald 2011, p. 6). Also, in 2004, the federal government introduced 'Service Canada' which was a 'one-stop service delivery network' (Pupo and Noack 2009, p. 111). These Service Canada sites take the form of call centres staffed by federal public servants across the country; this constitutes a major workplace change for public-service workers in Canada (Pupo and Noack 2009, p.111). As these examples suggest, at all levels of government there has been a shift in these organizations towards values that shape the new spirit of capitalism especially through changes that promote greater individual responsibility and a smaller state.

### *Internships and the public service*

This paper will focus on internships in the public sector as an example of precarious employment, and a means by which to understand the ways that the new spirit of capitalism has influenced organizational narratives. Internships have been increasingly under scrutiny since the Recession and, in particular, it was the figure of the unpaid intern that became a key rallying point within the discourse on work post-2008 (Frenette 2015, p.351). This internship experience can be seen as a window into the new spirit of capitalism and especially the ways that youth fit into this picture. Indeed, Frenette (2015) argues that "the ascent of the internship is consistent with the changing nature of work in the post industrial era" (Frenette 2015, p. 355).

In recent years in Ontario, there has been in considerable gap between adult and youth employment rates in Ontario with figures placing the measuring this gap to be as large as 13.5 percent (Goebey 2013, p. 13). In fact, since the recession Ontario's youth employment rate has begun to look like only one-in-two young people are employed (Goebey 2013, p.14) Goebey argues in his report *The Young and the Jobless* that this is not a short term trend but rather the result of economic restructuring since the early 1990s that was further driven in the early-2000s (Goebey 2013, p. 14).

Within this landscape of scarce employment opportunities, workers often begin to rely on their own personal agency and believe it to be their responsibility to improve their employability. These actions often include searching for jobs, training, information, and skills and Smith (2010) argues that all of these actions of planning for labour force participation are an undervalued component of employment (Smith 2010, p. 279). In an unstable labour market, people spend considerable amounts of time understanding structures within the labour market and strategizing ways to access employment (Smith 2010, p.280). The concept of employability is described as the work needed "to make oneself employable means to develop the personal and professional capacity to maximize one's employment potential" (Smith 2010, p. 280).

Smith argues that this rhetoric surrounding developing an entrepreneurial and self-starting attitude has permeated all levels of society (Smith 2010, p. 281). She highlights five trends towards increasing one's employability which include identity work, training and networking, and labouring in unpaid and marginal paid positions (Smith 2010, p. 281). Of

particular interest to this paper is the strategy surrounding participating in internships and participating in temporary or marginal jobs.

In both scenarios, these positions often fit into the larger structural trends of the new economy as Smith writes “We construct and manipulate ourselves, participate in job organizations, networks, unpaid and marginal paid positions because we hope that we can control our employment outcomes by controlling our behaviour and interactions. As we endeavour to do so, we normalize the terms and conditions of the flexible, unpredictable economy” (Smith 2010, p. 294). She further cautions that this normalization is dangerous in that “when we believe that our individual successes and failure are evidence of our capacity (or lack thereof) for personal growth and self-empowerment, we fail to challenge the structurally created inequalities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Smith 2010, p.294).

The internship is one means of improving an individual’s employability and thus it becomes a significant window into the spirit of capitalism because it shows what it takes to enter the world of work within this paradigm. It is important to note that increasing one’s employability through work-based learning has always been a reality for young people and as such the pedagogical philosophy of experiential learning has been seen throughout history. For years, young people have been entering occupations through a program of hands-on training. Work-based learning was seen as a key structure in capitalist societies to bridge the gap between the classroom and the world of factories and offices (Perlin 2011, p.xi).

The historical antecedent of the internship is the apprenticeship which had as its major difference being much longer through lasting a few years as opposed to a few months for

internships (Frenette 2015, p. 352). In fact, internships were part of the life cycle since the Middle Ages, and for centuries this was a means to train youth to participate in crafts and trades (Frenette 2015, p.352). These arrangements also composed a social and economic system in that apprenticeships required exchanging training for labour (Frenette 2015, p.352).

While internships emerged in Britain, they also played an important role in colonial America. However, it was organized differently in America in that the tradition of guilds did not establish itself as well in the colonies as it did in Europe (Frenette 2015, p.353). In America, there was a scarcity of skilled workers and it was a land that was characterized by continual immigration which resulted in the fact that it was mostly populated by adult labourers that were trained in the Old World (Frenette 2015, p. 353). Further, apprenticeships did not establish themselves as well because it was a rural economy where most settlers were focused on developing their personal land holdings which did not allow for building solidarity and, subsequently, guilds (Frenette 2015, p.353).

The shift from apprenticeships to internships can be seen through legislative changes but also through the shifts brought by the post-industrial economy (Frenette 2015, p.355). In a context of flexible and less permanent jobs, internships grew in relation to the market as opposed to apprenticeships which were more regulated by governments, guilds, and unions (Frenette 2015, p.355). It has shifted from a policy and program that aided in that transitional space between school and entering the workforce to an intern economy that provides and normalizes low paid or unpaid labour (Frenette 2015, p.355).

In studying the internship within the context of its contemporary manifestation it provides some clear insights into the contemporary spirit of capitalism. In *Intern Nation: How to Earn Nothing and Learn Little in the Brave New Economy (2011)*, Ross Perlin highlights the ways that internships have also become critical to career advancement and a key structure in contemporary capitalism as the “unrivalled gateway to white-collar work” (Perlin 2011, p.xii). In fact, internships have become such a key structure in the world of work that many of those at the highest places in society were former interns and as a result perpetuate this system that gave them their own start (Perlin 2011, p.xiii).

A significant idea to note in thinking about the growth of and institutionalization of internships in the world of work is the ways in which this correlates with the growth in the field of human resources. Perlin highlights the ways that internship programs are often administered through HR departments. These departments began in the 1920s and grew rapidly in number after WWII going from existing in 63% of surveyed companies by 1946 to 79% of companies by 1953 (Perlin 2011, p.40). HR departments were first developed to engage with or, at times, undermine labour unions but have developed different functions as the years have gone on (Perlin 2011, p. 40).

This is significant for the purposes of this paper because the flourishing of Human Resources departments in correlation with the growth of internships demonstrates the ways in which this job category is often used to fulfill organizational needs. Human Resources departments are often tasked with managing a company’s strategies for gaining immediate benefits from their internships as well as creating such positions to fit their immediate needs

(Perlin 2011, p. 39). In fact, the creation of these positions are often ad hoc and are developed to handle concerns from returning a favour to dealing with higher-than-normal volumes of work (Perlin 2011, p.39). The importance and role of Human Resources departments in the emergence of the intern economy is the result of changes to the new economy. As a result of these reflections, the internship can be seen as a means to understand professional trajectories and organization narratives through the challenges that youth face in entering the workforce.

## **Methodology**

### *La Misère du Monde*

The methodological approach that this project will take is grounded in the objective of understanding working people's thoughts regarding work-time arrangements. This project will focus on public service careers in Ontario and make an exploratory attempt to capture a small snapshot of the new spirit of capitalism. In order to achieve this research objective this project will encourage participants to 'testify' to their experiences with work-time structure. For this project, this means that participants will be encouraged to discuss to their career trajectories, motivations, interests, successes, frustrations, and anxieties.

This paper's methodology is based on Bourdieu's *La Misère du Monde* (1993), which is composed of a series of accounts by a cross-section of French society recorded in the early 1990s with an aim to demonstrate the ways in which politics has become technocratic and "turned inward, absorbed in its internal rivalries, its own problems, its own interests" (Bourdieu 1993, p.627). Bourdieu argues that policymakers are not sufficiently connected to realities on the ground and that "a truly democratic politics must give itself the means of getting away from

the alternative of a technocratic arrogance that claims to make people happy in spite of themselves and a demagogic resignation that accepts the verdicts of supply and demand, whether expressed in market tests, poll results or approval ratings” (Bourdieu 1993: p.628).

In a similar spirit, this research project aims to study testimony from interns at public service organizations to inductively understand ‘precarity’ in hopes that these lived realities may highlight dimensions of this condition that are not often appearing policy-level conceptualizations of the concept. In particular, this project, like Bourdieu, aims to go beyond capturing the material suffering of those in precarious positions, *la grande misère*, and instead to focus on ordinary suffering, *la petite misère* (Bourdieu 1993, p.3).

Following Bourdieu, this project will rely on data collected in interviews and will attempt a small sociological-ethnography. In *La Misère du Monde* (1993) there is an aim towards compiling the perspectives of individuals who occupy similar spaces but provide various, and often competing, points of view (Bourdieu 1993, p.3). In a similar spirit, this project aimed to capture the experience of interns who existed in different parts of the public sector and yet could testify to their experiences within the larger space.

### *Methodological Concerns*

There are some considerations that will be taken into account in carrying-out this project. For example, a key methodological question that has emerged regarding ethnography is how to create a systematic way to prevent interviewers from imposing their views (Gold 1997, p.389). Bourdieu’s answer to this is that the interviewer has a responsibility to pay close attention to self-reflexivity (Barbour and Schostak 2011, p.63). It requires that the researcher

pays close attention to power dynamics especially regarding the way that they structure the interview (Bourdieu 1993, p.609). This is especially true in scenarios where the interviewer occupies a higher place in various kinds of capital, especially regarding cultural capital (Bourdieu 1993, p.609).

In *La Misère du Monde*, the researchers addressed this concern by attempting to have a relationship that consisted of active and methodological listening that hovered in the middle ground between the non-directed interview and having too much intervention (Bourdieu 1993, p. 609). The text avoided this violence by allowing the interviewers to choose their respondents from people they knew or from their broader social networks in hopes that the close social proximity would promote 'nonviolent' communication (Bourdieu 1993, p. 610).

In this project, these concerns will be addressed through a posture of reflexivity that it is hoped this project will be written in. This will mean recognizing the primary investigator's cultural capital, more specifically approaching the topic from an academic as opposed to experiential position, may influence the ways in which the researcher engages with participants. However, it will also be noted that the principal investigator is similar in age and educational attainment to all of the participants in the project. This becomes significant when analyzing the life histories and the types of information that were revealed.

Another key methodological concern for this study is ensuring that the questions and the structure of the interview are non-violent through allowing participants to have the space to reflect and testify to their experiences in the ways in which they feel most comfortable to allow for 'nonviolent' communication. This was accomplished through establishing the

interview as semi-structured and allowing participants to direct the interview in the direction that they felt was most comfortable. This meant refraining from interrupting the participant when they were expressing themselves as much as possible as well as offering positive affirmations.

### *Procedure*

This project focuses on work-time arrangements in public service careers in Ontario and interviews a sample of 4 interns at public service organizations. These interns had varied experiences at municipal, provincial, and federal levels of government. The rationale for this number of participants is that the project has an exploratory purpose. While this project will not produce generalizable results, it will begin to develop a sound methodological strategy for future research. These public servants were recruited on the basis that they have been employed in that capacity within the past 5 years. This specific time period was selected in order to provide information that was specific to the snapshot that will be captured in this project. Participants were selected on the basis of their self-identification as having had worked in the public service.

This project was initially conceptualized as a space to chronicle the testimony of public servants who identified themselves at various levels of seniority and in various work arrangements (i.e. part-time full-time, contract, precarious). In particular, it was hoped that we would engage with public servants who were interested in reflecting on their career trajectories and the nature of the profession. It was quite challenging to recruit public servants for this topic. One can only speculate on the reasons that this was. Some speculations are that this may

not have been seen as a value-added activity, fear of repercussions, or that the project felt irrelevant to their lived experiences.

Finding participants was even difficult with the original recruitment strategy that focused on unions for whom a significant part of their work is to promote employment security for public servants. The original recruitment strategy consisted of contacting local representatives at unions that represent public servants in Ontario at various levels through their publicly available contact information. The recruitment strategy was eventually broadened beyond unions. It is significant to note that the most receptive group to participating in this study were young people. In fact, there was a small snowball effect in that after one intern was interviewed they would often point to another who would be a good candidate for interview. The high level of youth participation was incredibly valuable to this project because in many ways youth attempting to enter the labour market through public service careers provide a useful picture of the contemporary norms of the public service.

The interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 1 hour depending on an individual's comfort level and schedules, and were conducted solely in English. The interviews were semi-structured and participants were assured that the interview was their space to express themselves in the way that they wanted. However, some prompting questions were provided to the participants to give them an idea of things that they could discuss. During the interviews, participants were asked to provide their stories and work-time experiences. The questions included:

- What is the title of your position at work? What does it require that you do?
- How would you describe your work-time arrangement (full-time, part-time etc.)

- How long have you had this position?
- How would you describe your professional identity?
- How are things at work right now? What are your excitements or concerns?
- Can you describe your career trajectory? How has your work-time schedule over the course of your career?
- What are your thoughts on the ideal work-time arrangement?
- How does your current work-time arrangement relate to your expectations?
- What are your thoughts on the world of work today?
- How do you see your profession developing? What will it look like in the near future?

The interviews with the interns took place outside their working hours at a time that participants determined to be convenient.

## **Data Analysis**

### *Life Histories and Narrative Analysis*

The approach to data analysis taken in this project was also informed by the literature on life histories and narrative analysis. This project constitutes a life history in the ways that participants provided a snapshot of their professional trajectories. However, it also constitutes material for a narrative analysis because it focuses on a time and a place in the life history – namely, the transitional space that an internship occupies. A life history can be described as research method that is often used to address sociological questions (Bertaux and Kohli 1984, p. 218). Paul Thompson (1978) identifies the life history approach as having a social project of enlarging the scope of history beyond the powerful through including the testimony from individuals from the under-classes (Thompson 1978, p.5). He argues that this provides “a more

realistic and fair reconstruction of the past, a challenge to the established account” which he asserts can have a transgressive affect against dominant narratives (Thompson 1978, p.5).

Like Bourdieu, Thompson argues that in this type of approach “History becomes, to put it simply, more democratic” (Thompson 1978, p.7). From a methodological standpoint, these interviews are also important because “the historian comes to the interview to learn: to sit at the feet of others who, because they come from a different social class, or are less educated, or older, know more about something” (Thompson 1978, p. 8). Thompson also posits the social project of oral history for socialists to be “not simply to celebrate the working class as it is, but to raise its consciousness. There is no point in replacing a conservative myth of upper-class wisdom with a lower-class one. A history is required which leads to action: not to confirm, but to change the world” (Thompson 1978: p. 17). It is in a similar spirit that this project has been undertaken, in order to go beyond the grand narratives of power that are seen in contemporary discourse on the benefits of public sector careers and centre a worker’s experiential knowledge of precarity.

There are numerous trends in the life history approach that are often specific to geographical areas and specific modes of thought in these areas. This paper was inspired by the trends seen among French sociologists that use the life history approach. In particular, the French approach to life histories was influenced by structuralism. This can be seen in Bertaux’s analysis that life histories are important sources because individual life trajectories often are a window into sociostructural relationships because they place constraints on individuals (Bertaux and Kohli 1984, p.226).

In particular, the life courses of individuals occupying various professions can be analyzed to understand internal labour markets and the relations of production within a trade (Bertaux and Kohli 1984, p. 226). This ethnosociological approach has been done on numerous spaces in society such as migrants to the cities, working class families, and activists (Bertaux and Kohli 1984, p. 226). This project will be using the method that is composed of multiple life stories. One of the best known examples of this is *Children of Sanchez* in which the researcher explores the life of a poor family in a Mexican city through taking accounts from the parents and children in order to present a multi-dimensional picture (Thompson 1978, p. 204).

Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame's 1981 work on artisan bakers in France was also an instructive source on conducting the life histories and in particular in using them to understand careers and economic relations. In this work, the authors aim to understand how bakers work and live and to answer the question of why it is that in an industrialized world, France still has 90% of its bread produced by small bakers (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1981, p.169). In their project, the authors interviewed bakery workers regarding their work and working life in order to understand the structure of their working week and how it evolved from the 1920s to the 1970s (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1981, p. 176). Through studying these factors, the authors were able to uncover distinct professional trajectories that were distinct between the Pyrenees (or among rural bakers) and Paris (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1981, p. 181).

Through comparing these professional trajectories the authors were able to discover patterns, structural mechanisms, constraints, and rules of the games (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1981, p. 181). In other words they were able to "see what was the social logic

underlying daily practices and whole life trajectories” (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1981, p. 181). Their work highlights the ways that sociological research relies on uncovering and explaining structural patterns that lie underneath social phenomena (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1981, p. 188).

The other methodological orientation that has influenced this work has been that of narrative analysis. In particular, analysis of narratives in organizations and the ways in which individuals situate themselves within these narratives. Storytelling is a means by which participants in an organization make sense of their project and the space that they occupy (Boje 1991, p. 106). These stories are constantly going through dynamic processes of refinement and reinterpretation (Boje 1991, p. 106). These organizational narratives provide accounts that can give guidance for future individual decision-making and actions (Boje 1991, p. 106). The performance of the stories is also critical because of the ways that the teller chooses some dimensions to shorten and others to emphasize (Boje 1991, p. 124). This makes it especially important to observe the stories not only as texts separate from their original context but within their natural settings (Boje 1991, p. 125).

These narratives often have ethical implications in that narratives often mobilize time and space in order to produce ethical consistency (Paquette 2013, p. 146). In conjunction with narratives, the professional life history approach has primarily been used to look at professional groups in periods of contestation (Paquette 2013, p. 147). In his study of the careers of museum professionals, Paquette finds that childhood is often used in an individual’s self-

construction to convey a level of coherence over one's professional life because they provide 'authentic' motivations for pursuing a particular career path (Paquette 2013, p.146).

Of particular interest to this study is the ways that this study was undertaken during a period in which museum professionals were facing numerous challenges that emerged from society and government that have placed pressure for museums to operate in ways that comply with market expectations (Paquette 2013, p. 147). In particular, museums have had pressure to change their ways of operating in order to comply with expectations of entrepreneurialism and self-reliance (Paquette 2013, p.147). In a similar way, this examination of internships takes place during a period of contestation and change in the ways that work-based learning programs are reconstructed on an ongoing basis in relation to the third spirit of capitalism. This contestation can be seen in the ongoing activism surrounding redefining internships, as embodied in Canada in the Canadian Intern Association<sup>1</sup> and, internationally, with Génération Précaire.<sup>2</sup>

### **Life Histories and Organizational Narratives: Life between the gaps**

While this project looks to the Bourdieu text as a key blueprint from a methodological perspective, it will deviate a bit from this text a bit in its presentation of the findings. In *La Misère du Monde*, each account is preceded by a brief contextual narrative that often contains a sociological analysis and is then followed by a full transcription of the interaction. The data for this paper will be presented as a life history in order to highlight the ways that individual and organizational narratives often clashed and the impact that this had on the individual. It is in

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, visit the website of the Canadian Interns Association < <http://internassociation.ca/>>

<sup>2</sup> There is active website for this organization, but they are quite active on social media.

this way that it is hoped that each life history will be able to provide a snapshot of precarity. Hopefully, this will help in gaining a better understanding of what precarity means beyond simply its material impacts.

Based on these life histories, it became apparent that precarity is the point in the in the life history where there is a gap between the organizational narrative and the individual professional trajectory. This gap is highlights the structural component of a context in which the new spirit of capitalism often directs work arrangements. In the testimony given by all four participants, a window is provided into the experiential phenomenon of living within that gap. For all four of the participants these gaps were characterized by uncertainty and disposability. In particular, for Amy and Janet, precarity is a heightened feeling of disposability which leads to feelings of low self-worth and a pressure to prove oneself. For Pamela and Gerald, precarity exists in the uncertainty of whether your internship will produce tangible results towards your career objective.

*Amy<sup>3</sup>, Dispensable Agent of Production: precarity and sense of self*

When I met Amy she had just left her full-time contract job at an arm's length body of the Ontario government. She was in a transitional period in her career, and exploring options for going back to school to pursue a law or a master's degree. Prior to her last job, she had participated in three internships and had taken on numerous temp jobs. We met at a public library to discuss, her career trajectories and reflections on the world of work, and in particular, her experience in various internships in different parts of the public sector at the federal and

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<sup>3</sup> The participants' names have been changed to protect their identity.

provincial levels. A key theme that emerged from our discussion of her career trajectory was the ways in which work has always played a role in her life.

“I started working when I was fifteen years old. I guess I’ve been in a position that I’ve kind of always had to work... as long as I can remember. When I was in my undergrad, I was actually happy to get my first real job, in retail... as a sales associate. I was there for a year and a half. After that, I got a job with Service Canada, I thought this was amazing. I got a government job and I’m pursuing a government degree this is exactly what I’m supposed to be doing. When I was in my undergrad, I really saw myself moving my way up the civil service and staying there post-graduation. Of course that didn’t happen, the year I graduated there were major cuts in the civil service. And, where traditionally students were bridged into full-time roles, that year it wasn’t happening. Most students were completely cut, and their contacts were not renewed. I was one of those students.”

Amy’s expectations for career advancement and achieving the narrative that she had set out for herself came in confrontation with the narrative of the organization which was focused on objectives to reduce its size. It was a traumatic experience for her because work had played such a crucial role in her life and was intimately linked to her identity. For Amy, living within this gap had significant impacts on her sense of self and in particular her self-worth.

“It was a shock for me after I graduated because I was, for the first time, unemployed for several months, and I became very depressed actually. I was able to find some kind of part-time job that allowed me to tell people that I’m technically employed, but it was extremely few hours .... It was just such a blow to my identity; I’ve always identified myself as somebody who is very high achieving, very accomplished, and would be capable of getting a good job. I graduated at the top of my class, *summa cum laude*, so, I would’ve thought it would be no problem. Application after application was sent out and I wasn’t getting any kind of response.

Several months had passed by until I had got into a really great, prestigious internship actually.... and that sort of gave me hope again. But, I think it had really affected my health, going through that sort of depression. Leading up to the internship, I took on many temp roles just to save money so that I could relocate and be closer to my workplace. So, of course, I entered that internship completely exhausted and anxiety prone. Whereas, a lot of my colleagues came in relaxed and taken care of, and in a fresher state, and I came in totally exhausted. So, that set the stage for a second bout of depression through that internship.

Again, after that internship, I’ve had a lot of short-term contracts doing a variety of different things.... The last roles, in the last couple of years, have been purely administrative; something that you could do with a high school diploma. So, actually I feel like... a downward spiral where there’s been an expectation set up that with my background that I should be able to, but the reality for me coming from a working-class background is I’ve always felt the need to work. So, you take the first opportunity that

comes your way, which isn't always the best, especially in this market. So, it's been a little demoralizing."

Amy's expectations for career advancement within the public sector through participating in internships did not materialize in the ways that she had expected and demonstrated a gap between her own professional trajectory and the ways in which that space between school and the workforce would be mobilized to promote her career advancement and the experience that she had once she entered these spaces. As the life history went on, it became clear that the dimension of precarity that her experience in the public service revealed was the ways in which this space can have very personal consequences to an individual's mental health and well being. The incredible toll that this takes on an individual can also be seen in her description of life as a temp worker.

"You don't feel very confident as a temp worker because you do go in initially with a lot of expectation, and a lot of hope and a lot of optimism. Maybe this will lead to a contract with the organization or a permanent, full-time role, but, honestly, most of the time that just does not play out. As time goes by, you've taken on more and more temp roles that haven't materialised into any kind of job security. It's pretty demoralizing, actually. You feel kind of used; a chunk of your pay is not in your pocket it's the temp agency that's taking it. You kind of feel very dispensable... you feel like just another dispensable agent of production"

This discussion of the ways in which organizational narratives and her own personal aspirations did not match can especially be seen in Amy's reflections on the world of work today. A key theme that emerged from this part of the discussion are power structures and the imbalance between employers and employees in the employment relationship for working people, in general, as well as among youth.

"I think it's quite depressing, actually. I'm also coming from a place where I've always had to work. There is so much precarious employment; there are so many temp agencies out there. They are a very solid business, in the sense that, they connect people to jobs – that's fine. But, of course, they take a lot of the pay; these employees are not guaranteed any kind of benefits or any type of job security at all. You could be dropped at any time, you could be let go at any time, and there's really no cushion for you

when you go through this avenue. And, unfortunately, that's the reality for a lot of people that they just have to take on these sorts of roles. I feel like employers are in a very dominating place where they are able to exercise a lot of power, and virtually do whatever they want. And employees are always at the mercy of them. They can let go very easily, they are usually on contract, and there are very few permanent, full-time jobs. It's difficult."

"For a lot of youth, but even folks that are not youth, I think there's just not enough protection out there for employees. Most folks are not part of any kind of a union a lot of people just don't know their rights. A lot of people are just extremely desperate and need to survive. So the situation is just really bad for a lot of working people out there and is even worse when you go down the socio-economic ladder to working-class folks who just always had to work"

The impact of precarity on an individual's sense of self is also evident in the ways that self-care became an important theme of our conversation. Towards the end of the interview Amy provides her conceptualization of the ideal work arrangement.

"For me, the ideal work-time arrangement... I definitely don't think that Saturday and Sunday off are enough. We should be having three day week-ends to be a lot more rested. I also feel that every day doesn't have to be a nine to five day. I think there should be days where you do get off a little bit earlier. I feel like this should apply to all folks not just the ones that have been senior and have been there for a long time. I think that young people need a break too. I think sometimes, with young people, it's expected because you don't have the same responsibilities or attachments that you have a lot more hours that you're expected to give. But, I really feel that we need that time to rest and take care of ourselves as well. "

Through Amy's narrative, it becomes clear that there are significant challenges for individuals who hope to achieve upward mobility, or in this specific scenario, upward class mobility. It becomes clear that internships have become a less effective way to achieve this sort of advancement and are primarily shaped by organizational needs which as a result create a gap of precarity. The dimension of this gap that our conversation with Amy highlights is the profound impact this can have on an individual's sense of self and self-worth. As illuminated by Amy's testimony, precarity includes, through the feelings of disposability that it encourages, an affront to an individual's self worth.

*Janet, paying your dues and proving yourself*

When I met Janet, she was a contractual worker in the provincial Public Service. She was eager to share her experiences and reflections on life as an intern. She was also interested in sharing her knowledge on contract work that she gained. Janet held a variety of internships in her career including at the provincial level as well as an internship at a municipality in Ontario. We conducted our interview through a video call on an evening that was convenient for Janet after work. She had recently started a new contract, and was optimistic about future prospects. In giving her account of her expectations and career path, Janet clearly articulates that a career in the public service was not where she had always envisioned herself.

“I didn’t! [Always want to work for the public service] So when I was growing up I had this, I have a social equity background like many of us that work in policy or in cities or whatever we have a social justice underpinning that makes us choose the work that we do. Because of that I always thought that I would maybe end up working for non-profits or something until I realized, I realized a few things, that I would be poor my whole life if I worked for non-profits because there’s just not a lot of money there. I also realized that, it was actually when I interned for the city when I was still in my grad school degree that I realized that there are a lot of people within government that are doing really, really, good work.... I kind of had a jaded vision of government; I thought if I went to work for government I would be selling my soul. I was naive; I didn’t really understand. Then when I was in government and I saw that there are so many people that are doing really, really good work or people that care I kind of thought that this would be a good place to be.... and now that I’ve been doing it for a while now I feel like that’s where my skills are. I don’t feel like I would necessarily be best suited to private sector work because I have certain kinds of skills.”

Janet’s individual description of her career trajectory clearly highlights that not only did she hope that her internships would lead to a long-term career, but also that this would lead to a career that would be meaningful and align with her personal values. She had a social equity background and a keen interest in social justice. In providing her personal life history, Janet also takes the time to outline her perception of the organizational narrative that should found taking place within provincial and municipal governments.

“As a side note, it’s very different at the city. At the city, it’s a lot harder to hire someone without a competition. I find at the province their able to hire on short term contract, no benefit, that kind of thing but at least you get a foot in the door. They are able to hire based on operational needs. Whereas at the city, it’s kind of smaller, smaller staff-wise and there’s kind of less opportunity for policy jobs so that’s how I ended up at the province. So basically my manager had work that needed to be done; he knew me, he trusted me, he brought me on and that’s how I’m here. I’m on a nine month contract so after the nine months we’ll see what happens but at least I’m in which is better than the alternative which is not working anywhere. In that way, it’s beneficial that I’ve been able to get myself back in.”

In her discussion of her internship, she is very quick to remind the listener that these internships paved the ways for her current career trajectory for which she had a considerable amount of optimism. She highlights that although the institutional narrative was focused on operational needs, there were spaces within these needs in which she was able to find a place to advance her personal career objectives.

“When I was an intern, I think one mistake that I made was working too much for free. It was a legal internship; it was through my school everything was fine. It’s not like it was one of those horror story unpaid intern kind of situations. But, I definitely for me...I hadn’t had any government experience so I really, really wanted that. I was excited about this project.... It’s never really easy to work unpaid, it’s a tough thing to do but I feel like if I hadn’t taken that unpaid internship I don’t know that all the other doors that have opened for me would’ve opened because I had that government experience. I got a really great reference out of it and a contact that I still have....For me the benefits have outweighed any cons, through the fact that I’ve gotten great paying jobs since then have made that okay.”

“Even though I’ve been on contract, and that’s not an easy thing. When a contract is ending it feels like crap. You’re stressed, you need to find something, you don’t know when you’re going to find anything. The more jobs you have the better you start to feel about your abilities. Now, because I know that I have skills in project management, stakeholder management, policy development...all these different things... I feel a lot better, I feel like I’ll get something. Even despite that kind of uncertainty I know that if I want to pursue this career path, you kind of have to pay your dues is how I see it. Almost everyone in government starts off on contract. It’s very difficult to get in if you’re not ... the fact of the matter is that there aren’t a lot of permanent jobs. That’s how it is.”

In her reflection of the world of work today she, like Amy, also highlights this feeling of disposability that often faces young workers. However, she poses it as a challenge for young workers to mobilize these narratives in their own pursuit of their own goals.

“The nature of work today is that there’s just a lot of competition, everything’s expensive, workers are so disposable...it’s just unfortunately how it is. So that’s why for me it’s kind of even more important to seek a career path where I can be happy. For me now, I’m on contract, I don’t like being on contract it

kind of sucks but I know at least I'm in a place where I'm going to get good experience and may like near the end when I'm eligible for internal competitions and there are more internal jobs than external. So a lot of the time it's just finding someone who will take a chance on you and getting your foot in the door and then working really hard to prove yourself.... homeownership, that is such a far away goal. I'll be happy if I own a box in the sky"

"As I'm talking, I'm thinking as I'm talking, and realizing things that I didn't realize .... the reality is that's the nature of how things are becoming and it's unfortunate because it makes it difficult for someone to get a good job. But, I think from the government's point of view, they can benefit from that in terms of not just giving anyone permanent if the person doesn't prove that their worth permanent"

An important reflection on precarity that Janet provides is the ways in which there is a constant challenge to prove oneself. When one exists within the gap between the narratives of public service organizations and their own personal life histories and professional trajectories, this poses a challenge to the individual to find ways to bridge this gap through working hard to prove their worth. This pressure to prove yourself once you have been given the opportunity is also an aspect of precarity that was been unfolded through this interview.

*Pamela, Cap on success: precarity and career mobility*

When I met Pamela, she was as an IT professional in the private sector in a stable full-time position, and was content with her career trajectory. She was very excited about having the opportunity to share about her experience in the public sector and her reflections on the world of work. She started working at a Service Canada centre in a municipality in Ontario in 2011 during her undergraduate degree. We met at a bubble tea shop, and had an in-depth conversation that ended up surrounding youth career prospects and the contemporary world of work. Pamela started her career with considerable optimism about having the opportunity to intern in the federal government, but these hopes were soon to be disappointed.

"I did that for about two or three years, and then they started having ... their problems. The budget was tight. You heard on the news that's when they started laying off a bunch of people"

In our interview, a key theme that emerged was the ways in which there was little investment in her growth as a worker in the environment and how she had the expectations to gain an opportunity to learn and how these fell short. Instead, what she found in that workplace was a space that structured the internships as a much more self-driven experience.

“We kind of have this paper where we track our stats – how many people we talked to, how many people we helped. And, it’s categorized into was it based on social insurance, employment insurance... like what is it on. So, we have that little sheet so we just keep it so at least they know that we’re doing something.... During our lunch break, we have to go back into their system... and you input your stats”

“We do have someone we report to, but she was very hands off. I guess maybe because we were students so she didn’t really give a shit.... I remember when I first started there we didn’t have any training we were just given ‘Oh hey, here’s your stat sheet, make sure you keep a record and just input it. We expect you to have around fifty a day or something.’ There’s expectations there but it wasn’t very we need you to do this, this, and this. It’s pretty hands off, and if we have a question we just go back, and ask them. We don’t really have any training... barely... everything is pretty much learn as you go.... we were just on contract so there’s not that much real investment there.”

She also highlighted how after a while this self-driven arrangement became something that appealed to her after a while.

“I, honestly, maybe this is just me because I’m kind of chatty, I prefer doing the public outreach stuff. That’s like going out in the community, because I set my own schedule, I pre-book everything and I let my manager know ‘Hey, I’m going to be out x, y, and z here so it’s not like they can’t track me or anything. And I love going out into the community...”

In this case as well, it becomes clear that there is a difference between the expectations of gaining skills and knowledge that would be useful for career advancement and the opportunities that internship arrangements provide the individual with the opportunity to achieve that goal. For Pamela, this was seen both in her experiences with non-renewal of her contract or few bridging opportunities, but also through her observations of her senior full-time colleagues.

“Everyone always thinks ‘when you work for the government you could get paid a lot, there’s lots of job security, lots of training, life is good.’ After working for them, the pay was good at that time, as a

student, obviously, if I were a permanent staff I would say, no, the pay isn't high enough, it's pretty average. It's a little better than some people but it's still not as high as I would imagine it to be."

In her story, Pamela also highlights the ways that these challenges to attain career advancement beyond the internship are structural. Indeed, this can be seen through the ways that she highlights the mechanical nature of applying for jobs through internet applications. This also places applicants within a state of precarity because of the ways in which while the mechanization of the job application process can serve the organizations in their recruitment processes, it also creates a structural barrier for individuals to gain the opportunity to enter these organizations.

"Nowadays it's so hard to differentiate yourself because everyone is applying through emails. It's just a piece of paper at the end of the day... I feel by looking someone eye to eye .... they're kind of like 'Oh, I actually like her' or 'I think she'll be a good fit.' So I feel that gives you a higher chance"

Through Pamela's account it becomes clear that a dimension of precarity includes a feeling of stagnancy due to the ways the ways in which career can be hampered by few opportunities to learn new skills that will be useful for pursuing greater career development. In these organizations, there is little investment in young workers to aid them with their career advancement through skills development. Instead, the organizational narrative does not include a dimension that allows for training students with the expectation that they would have an opportunity to work there long term and move up in the organizational chart. As a result, this creates a ceiling of sorts on the amount of career development that prevent young interns or young people in general, from gaining entry into these organizations.

*Gerald, "A thankless, tiring job"*

At the time of our interview, Gerald was in the process of pursuing an advanced degree. He was kind enough to meet with me to discuss his experience as an intern with the federal government. His internship was done in the process of pursuing his degree. We met at a cafe to discuss his experiential engagement with public service work and his reflections on the profession. In his account of his experience as an intern within the public service, Gerald described very well the organizational narrative and the specific pressures that this placed on him as an intern.

"As a student, I ended up working as a sort of jack-of-all-trades in terms of sometimes doing things as menial as file sorting versus at other times I was actually doing some pretty comprehensive stuff in terms of developing databases and writing actual reports. I kind of did a whole variety of things from one side of the spectrum to the other."

"[My typical day or typical work week] kind of varied of the span of working there. For the most part, I worked three days a week and often out of necessity, because of the workload and the deadlines we had due, I often worked a lot of overtime. Sometimes, I usually start work at eight in the morning, and I was supposed to work until four in the afternoon. On a few occasions, I even stayed until midnight just to get stuff done so it varied quite a bit from one week to the next depending on when deadlines were due and at what times."

The expectations that the organization placed on Gerald demonstrates the ways in which organizations have embraced the narrative provided by the new spirit of capitalism. This is clearly seen in the expectation of flexibility both in work time as well as in terms of the tasks that were required of him. In terms of his own career trajectory, Gerald was very clear about the ways in which he envisioned this opportunity to work in the public service as a bridge towards other career objectives.

"As I sometimes joke about, having done all my education in public administration, that it's a field that much as I often looked at government as something I don't necessarily see as a career for me it

was sort of a stepping stone. It was something that realistically helped pay the bills; the hours were flexible enough that I continued to do academic work without having to necessarily compromise it too much. Though, as I said, the hours and the workload and the expectations were getting to a point where it was affecting my academic career so I cut it out.”

This narrative that Gerald provides demonstrates the ways in which the individual career objectives and organizational narratives are often not congruent. This can be seen in the way that Gerald’s expectations of a job that would provide him with experience and funds to pursue his educational pursuits clashed with the organization’s instrumental view of its young workers.

“You almost get the impression at times that, because student employees are cheaper labour than full-time employees or even contract employees, they kind of to take as much advantage of that as they can. Sometimes I was tasked with certain responsibilities that I shouldn’t have been, because some people were giving me work that they didn’t necessarily understand or didn’t have the time to do but that they have the qualifications to do it whereas I didn’t.”

“I think one of the challenges, and I think this was perhaps a by-product of they kept me on so long as a student, and why at some points they had three or four different students working at the same time is that...again, this is something that might change with respect to our new government and what might come from that. What I think we saw a lot of especially for youth is that a lot of the work that was available was contract work, it was five or six-month contracts or it was positions through FSWEF or it was through internships and school placements. I’m sure for a lot of them they did get careers; I know a lot of people who I went to school with in my undergrad who have full-time positions working in government now and part of that was through bridging. They did co-ops and were bridged in that way, and others it was just, in part, having had experience through things like FSWEF that does give you a foot in the door if you want to pursue a job in government. But, I think, by and large, for youth it’s probably a little harder to find a permanent position than perhaps it was for the older generations who are currently working there full-time with those guaranteed positions.”

It is important to note that Gerald’s reflection on flexibility provides some important nuance. While he appreciated the flexibility to be able to both work and pursue his educational objectives, he found that the expectation of flexibility went to an extreme that he was uncomfortable with. This speaks to the framework new spirit of capitalism and, in particular, the ways that it has changed to absorb its critiques. It appears that flexibility has been

mobilized in a way that can serve the organizational narrative. Gerald's testimony on flexibility provides insight into the ways in which this organizational narrative and his personal expectations interacted.

"I appreciated the flexibility in terms of it allowed me to keep active in student life and do a lot of the stuff that I had to do for school whether it be go to conferences or attend lectures at certain points or... earlier in the year I was also teaching an undergrad course so it allowed me the flexibility in that respect that I could switch days here and there to make up for it. But, I think part of the challenge with flexibility is that it also, at times, opens the door to working excessive overtime hours because there's that inherent notion that I'll take that time off later, but it doesn't always happen that way. I think when I ended up leaving there I probably could've taken a couple weeks of overtime off that I just never did because I didn't have the time to because the work and the expectations were very demanding."

"It's hard to say because I think my experience... was a pretty unique experience. I think part of it was that ... and I was told by some people who were working there that time is that it is relatively unheard of for students, especially for FSWEF to get renewed contracts and especially not for over three years. They would've continued renewing my contracts had I not said I had enough and left"

Through Gerald's testimony, the dimension of precarity that was revealed was the ways that expectations of high levels of flexibility for workers in organizational narratives place considerable strain on individual workers. Furthermore, the ways that this strain is not commensurate with the individual's professional trajectory. In other words, precarity includes working hard for few of the expected rewards. This is encapsulated in the way that Gerald's contract was renewed continually as opposed to entering another space within the government.

## **Discussion**

### *On Precarity*

Through the conversations that composed this project it became clear that the requirements of the new spirit of capitalism has structured organizational narratives in a way that has impacted internships in particular ways. This new economy primarily values flexibility

and entrepreneurialism and has shaped organizational needs and subsequent management practices in significant ways. In particular, it has made it difficult to pursue individual narratives of career advancement. It is within this context that this project has aimed to unfold the experience of precarity. Through the testimonies of the young workers that were engaged with, it was found that the experience of precarity can be those experiences or individual feelings within the differences between organizational narratives and individual aspirations. These feelings include affronts to self-worth, feelings of disposability, pressure to prove oneself, experiences of overwork with few rewards, and stagnancy with little investment in individual success.

A clear example of this, that was expressed more than one interview, were the cuts to the public service in 2011 that appeared in the life histories. These individuals were referring to the cuts that came in a wave of cuts that followed the election of the Harper Conservatives into government in 2006 (Macdonald 2012, p.5). These cuts featured the Strategic reviews of 2007-2010 that was worth \$1.82 billion in cuts and a loss of 6300 jobs by 2013-14 (Macdonald 2012, p.5). The next part of this program was the \$2-billion Personnel Budget Freeze that was announced in 2010 (Macdonald 2012, p.5). Most pertinent for this project, and indeed the cuts that some of these interviewees mentioned was the \$4-billion cut in 2011 under the Strategic and Operating Review (Macdonald 2012, p.5). Within this context, we can see that these will shape the employment opportunities of youth who aim to gain entry into the workforce via a public service avenue. This is because while the organization is building a narrative of leanness and efficiency this is in contrast with the lived realities of young workers who are attempting to bridge that gap between their education and entering the workforce on a fulltime basis.

*Reflections on the Research Method*

The main purpose of this project was to unfold the meaning of precarity through taking a phenomenological approach to understanding this experience. This meant going beyond its material impacts and examining individuals' experiences and their testimonies of their experiences. The aim was not to produce a generalizable conclusion on precarity, but rather to test out a research method that could be used for further research. In order to achieve this aim, this project took out a small sample of interviewees and conducted a semi-structured interview. Through this approach, this project was able to provide a portrait, guided by the life history tradition, of what it is like to be an intern within the context of the third spirit of capitalism.

As this was an experimental run of this research method, there were a few discoveries that were made in the process of further developing the protocol beyond the initial ideas that were established. One important dimension of the project that was consistently under review was set up a protocol and approach to the interviews that would allow the participant to feel as though they had the space to share their story. This was a bit more challenging than what is anticipated because many people felt that there was a rush to complete the interview in spite the interviewer assuring them that it was their space to do what they wanted to do with it. It was a struggle to operate in a way in which the participants felt comfortable, and so there were many changes that were made along the way. One technique that was helpful was to send the questions in advance to the participants. This was helpful because it gave them an idea of what to expect and to reduce any anxieties that they had regarding taking on the interview. This

technique was very helpful because it also gave them an opportunity to reflect on their answers to the questions and provide a more robust life history in the interview.

Another important dimension to note about these interviews and research method was to note who participated. While this project was not initially developed with the aim of engaging with interns primarily, this was the most responsive group to calls for participation. There was also a small snowball effect, because after interviewing one intern they would lead the researcher to another one who may or may not be interested in participating. This was significant because it speaks to the principle in Bourdieu's research which requires reflexivity from the researcher in terms of engaging with participants with similar levels of cultural capital. In this scenario, the principal researcher was also occupying that space between leaving school and entering the workforce and this may have influenced the sorts of things that were mentioned in the life histories.

This is especially significant if we understand that the ways that narratives are performed often depend on the audience. This can be seen in the ways that participants sometimes said things like "a master's degree really helps" knowing that the immediate audience, the principal researcher was in the process of obtaining a master's degree. This idea is spoken to very well in Boje (1991) in which the author argues

"As listeners, we are co-producers with the teller of the story performance. It is an embedded and fragmented process in which we fill in the blanks and gaps between the lines with our own experience in response to cues, like 'You know the story!' Because of what is not said, and yet shared, the audible story is only a fraction of the connection between people in their co-production performance" (Boje 1991, p.107).

This was significant to mention with regard to the research method because it influenced the ways that the narratives were told in some cases, and may provide some level of a constraint on the generalizability of the results.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this project has found that precarity occurs in the telling of the professional life history when there is a gap between organizational narratives and individual professional trajectories. It is in the experiential knowledge that can be gained from individual testimony about life within this gap that one can begin to uncover and unfold the experience of precarity beyond simply its material consequences. The results of these ideas are often management practices that emphasize flexibility and entrepreneurship amongst employees as well as a smaller public service to reduce the size of the state. As a result, organizations often maintain their staff contingent on operational needs.

In contrast, the individual worker often has a life story with a professional trajectory that is defined by their own goals. These goals can often include things like having the ability to buy a house, to achieve certain levels of professional success, or simply to gain access to the world of work. The gap between the individual professional trajectory and the organizational narrative is especially seen in the life history of an intern, who exists in a transitional space between their educational phase of their lives and entering the working world. The narrative of the individual and these organizations often interacts through workers doing many different things to fit the expectations of these organizations in order to get their start in the profession. As suggested by life histories presented in this project, the uncertainty of life within this gap

between professional trajectory and organizational narrative is often characterized by considerable strain on the individual that induces feelings of disposability, pressures to prove oneself, low self-esteem and self-worth, and feeling a sense of stagnancy.

The life stories provide insight to broader structural issues. In particular, they point to the way that the new spirit of capitalism shapes the contemporary world of work. As argued by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) values such as creativity, pursuing personal aspirations, and escaping the inherent violence of the state have seemingly been co-opted by the spirit of capitalism in order to assure its survival (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p.202). This is seen on the level of the individual workplace in the ways that entrepreneurship and flexibility are held up as norms in the working world. While both of these things are often attractive to many young people, it was seen in the life histories, these ideas were often co-opted in service of the organizations needs.

In the context of studying public sector careers, this project has highlighted a shift in career trajectories in public service careers. As was highlighted in the interviews, it appears that career trajectories in the public service appear to increasingly include some time spent in a contract position. This challenges the common wisdom that public service jobs always represent the ideal work arrangement. It appears that these careers are increasingly facing pressure to appear like other professions, and that public sector work environments are increasingly shaped by the new spirit of capitalism. It can be argued that these shifts are caused by pressures for a smaller state and distrust of bureaucracies within the new spirit of capitalism

that leads to the creation of personnel management strategies that are driven primarily by organizational needs.

This project was also based on the idea that the public sector could illuminate dimensions of precarity that are not always seen. In its public perception, public service careers are seen as one of the few good jobs left. As a result, these careers highlight that gap between professional life history and organizational narratives sharply because of the drastic contrast between these two elements. Individuals, especially young people, see these jobs as an opportunity to access a stable career and realize quickly that their expectations do not necessarily match reality. In this way, the public sector is a particularly special space to study precarity.

This exploratory research on precarity on the public sector can be expanded in many ways. One way in which it can be expanded is through deeper investigation of work-based learning within the public sector and tracing this mode of entry into the career path over the years to provide a deeper understanding of work-based learning within public sector careers. This can especially be useful in understanding the values that shape public service careers and the ways in which this has shifted over the years in responses to changes in the spirit of capitalism. It would also be worthwhile to investigate the ways in which this can fit into a framework of understanding how these values are transmitted within a work environment shaped by uncertainty.

Another dimension of future research that this project could encourage is on research method. This project was grounded in a life history approach to understanding professions and

social positions and it aimed to test out a methodology that could be used for future research. Moving forward future work can be made towards improving ways that we approach individual testimonies as well as oral history in general as a valuable tool in social science research. This could include developing more techniques so that individuals feel comfortable sharing their stories and experiences.

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