

THE IMPACT OF PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT ON SOCIAL WORK SKILL  
ENGAGEMENT AND CAREER SATISFACTION FOR WOMEN

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ENGAGEMENT AND CAREER SATISFACTION FOR WOMEN

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### **Abstract**

A significant amount of literature discusses the changing nature of the social service sector and social work due to neoliberalism. The literature review discusses these neoliberal changes in connection with precarious employment and its' impact on social work skills, career satisfaction and resistance. A small qualitative study was done, from a feminist and critical perspective, to understand how precarious employment impacts the particular social work skills of: relationship building, advocacy and reflexivity. Also, this study aimed to learn whether or not social workers engaged in activities and discussions to address precarious employment in their organizations and whether the impact of precarious employment on social work skills affected career satisfaction.

This data for this study was collected through 5 semi-structured interviews. Participants held a Bachelors in Social work degree and or a Master's degree with a minimum of one years work experience. Their length of practice ranged from 1 to 14 years, and came from a variety of service sectors.

Through the stories participants shared it became evident that precarious employment had a negative impact on participants' ability to engage in relationship building, reflexivity and advocacy. Also, precarious employment negatively impacted career satisfaction. It also became evident that resistance to precarious employment became difficult; however, participants still resisted through the use of unions and smaller acts of resistance. Findings highlight the need for the social work profession and social work organizations to challenge the neoliberal norm permanent precarious employment

and to advocate for standard employment relationships with social workers.

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“The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life.”- Jane Addams.

## INTRODUCTION

A variety of factors contributed to my interest in the topic of precarious employment. Prior to post-secondary education; I envisioned a fulfilling full time social work job where I had ample room to go home and have a social life, spend time with family and experience what life had to offer. But after engaging in the Labour Studies programs at McMaster University, I was quick to learn that my employment experiences may not be as standard as I envisioned them to be. Additionally, as I was completing practicums which were required for my bachelors of social work degree, I was bewildered by the number of social workers around me in precarious employment situations.

I was quick to learn through colleagues’ stories and academic literature that standard employment is becoming less common within Canada. Since the 1990’s non-standard work/precarious employment has been rising (Cranford, Vosko & Zukewich, 2003, pg.9). Precarious employment is a growing trend that will impact many Canadians. In fact, precarious employment is impacting individuals in a variety of sectors; including working professionals and social workers. The financial crisis of 2008, increased labour flexibility, and decline of unionism increased the rise of precarity (Lewchuk, Clarke & de Wolff, 2011, p.19-59). A significant amount of literature exists around the effects of precarious employment on workers’ lives. Through the Labour



Studies program at McMaster and through research, I found that precarious employment impacts workers' health, the health of their households and their ability to engage in their communities (Lewchuk, Clarke & de Wolff, 2011, p.4).

My undergraduate and graduate social work program guided me towards being critically aware of social work ethics and social work skills. So while I had my disheartening understanding of precarious employment, I began to wonder what impact precarious employment may have on the social workers engaging in their roles and professional skills. Does precarious employment impact social work's agenda and the ability to engage in social change? This thesis is an opportunity and journey in answering those questions. Social workers engage in a vast number of professional skills and therefore I narrowed my interest to the impact of precarious employment on three common social work skills: advocacy, reflexivity and relationship building (Cournoyer, 2011, p.529-532). Additionally, through this thesis, I am sought to learn whether or not social workers have engaged in activities and discussions to address precarious employment in their organizations. Finally, I am hoped to learn whether the impact of precarious employment on social work skills also impacted career satisfaction.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW CHAPTER**

This chapter will provide a critical review and synthesis of the literature around my thesis topic by discussing conceptual themes and debates in the literature. How my research questions fit into the current knowledge (build on, compliment and contrast) will be integrated throughout this literature review. Gaps within the literature and how my research attempts to address these gaps will be implemented throughout this section. To begin, I will discuss the concept of precarious employment in order to understand its impact on social work skill (relationship building, advocacy and reflexivity) and whether precarious employment's impact on these skills has an effect on workers' career satisfaction. Additionally, existing literature on the impact of precarious employments on relationship building, advocacy and reflexivity will be presented. Finally, the conceptual themes of deskilling and resistance around precarious employment within social work will be discussed. In summary, this literature review will focus on existing literature on my thesis topic, debates, gaps, and the conceptual themes of precarious employment, deskilling and resistance.

### **Precarious Employment**

Precarious employment can be conceptualized as flexible staffing (part-time, contracts with no guarantee of renewal, casual and temporary work), thin staffing (solo and lean shifts) and split shifts (workers returning for two shifts per day) (Baines, 2006, p.28). The concept of precarious employment is the opposite of what a standard employment relationship offers. A standard employment relationship is where an

employee experiences fulltime work with work benefits, has one employer, and whose employment has no definite end date (Cranford, Vosko & Zukewich, 2003, p.455).

Additionally, precarious employment is a type of employment that is rising in Canada since the later part 1970s and growing once again during the mid 1990s (Lewchuk, Clarke & de Wolff, 2011, p.12; De Cuyper et al., 2008, p.1). The concept of precariousness is a term that is used abundantly by left leaning labour activists groups in Europe, but around the globe as well (Vosko, MacDonald, & Campbell, 2009, p.5).

### **Gendered Nature of Precarious Employment**

There is a connection between social location and precarious employment within Canada. Cynthia J. Cranford, Leah F. Vosko and Nancy Zukewich (2003) found that social location constructs who is more likely to be precariously employed, and that visible minorities (by race, gender, ability and immigration status) are more likely to be precariously employed (p.16). For example, the neoliberal changes that occurred had a direct impact on job security within social service organizations, which particularly affected women identified workers, as social services tend to be gendered. One study found:

Welfare state downsizing [...] had a disproportionate impact on women because it has reduced the number of better paid, full-time jobs available for women, replacing them with temporary, part-time and insecure employment, as well as an expansion of unpaid familial and voluntary care. (Baines, 2006, p.27)

Furthermore, precarious situations increase barriers for women identified employees.

Author Margaret Gibelman (2005) states, "Equality of opportunity for women in social

work has already been identified as an ongoing problem and the emergence of contingency work as an alternative to traditional employment patterns may exacerbate the situation” (p.463). Since precarious employment tends to be a gendered occurrence within Canadian social service sectors (Vosko, 2006, p.27; Baines et al., 2014, p.76), my research will complement existing work and therefore focus on female identified social workers.

It should be noted that precarious employment has been connected to the feminization of employment norms. Authors Cranford and Vosko (2006) explain, “The feminization of employment norms denotes the erosion of the standard employment relationship and the spread of forms of employment exhibiting qualities of precarious employment associated with women, immigrants, people of colour and other marginalized groups” (p.44). Precarious employment is now impacting individuals across a variety of employment sectors (Lewchuk, Clarke & de Wolff, 2011, p.206; Cohen, 1994). Precarious employment is also increasing within middle and professional classes (Baines et al., 2014, p.78).

### **Neoliberalism**

The literature consistently describes social work changing due to precarious employment within the social service sector. Precarious employment within the social services sector has not occurred on its own. Rather, precarious employment comes wrapped in a package of neoliberalism. In general, neoliberalism is a set of political and economic values around economic liberalism and free and flexible markets (Kalleberg, 2009, p.3). David Clark (2002) further describes neoliberal beliefs as:

[...] more specific propositions: that public deficits are intrinsically negative; that state regulation of the labour market produces rigidities and hinders both economic growth and job creation; that the social protection guaranteed by the welfare state and its redistributive policies hinders economic growth; and that the state should not intervene in regulating foreign trade or international financial markets. (p.771)

Under neoliberalism, Canadian social services have been restructured through a reduction in social service funding and services (Baines, 2006b, p.195). Neoliberal policies both provincially in Ontario and federally have contributed to the reorganization of health services, economically defined efficiency, privatization and market based principles within public spheres; which in turn has contributed to the reorganization of social service work (Aronson & Sammon, 2000, p.169). In Ontario, the 22nd Premier, Mike Harris was a driving force behind neoliberalism within Ontario through conservative policies (Clark, 2002, p.775). Mike Harris and his “Common Sense Revolution” promised:

[...] to reduce [provincial] government programme spending by 20 per cent (excluding health, law enforcement and education), and provincial income taxes by 30 per cent, over three years; cut the size of government and reduce the regulatory burden on business; convert the system of welfare to mandatory workfare; and eliminate employment equity legislation. (Clark, 2002, p.785-6)

Additionally, what contributed to the growing trend of precarious employment was market based principles such as accountability, best practice, competencies and

benchmarking with social service sectors (Baines, 2006b, p.196). Therefore, precarious employment is a part of a growing and broader neoliberal trend rather than a stand alone occurrence.

### **Precarious Employment within Social Services and Neoliberalism**

Neoliberalism contributes to precarious employment for social workers within Canada through a variety of ways. One way precarious employment is growing within social service organizations is through the ruling relation of funding. Funding processes impact how organizations can operate. Within Ontario, social service organizations no longer have the ability to engage in the core funding model, rather they have to engage with the 'project funding regime'. Authors Donna Baines et al., (2014) explain, "[...] core funding tended to be long-term and relatively stable while project funding is short-term (generally yearly) and unstable, since it is built upon a competitive bidding process on service delivery contracts issued by the government" (p.79). Therefore, the very nature of project funding regimes creates competition between organizations and thus organizations engage in precarious employment work arrangements for their workers in order to create efficiency and be able to obtain government funding. Project funding regimes dictate organizational activities that service users will receive, and the form of employment that workers can have within that organization (Baines et al., 2014, p.79). Temporariness often operates in the back of workers' minds due to the legitimate threat and fear of defunding (Shields, 2014.).

Funding shortages impact the way precariously employed social workers engage in their practice. Social workers must now change their work actions and duties to

address funding shortages. The Community Social Planning Council of Toronto, Family Service Association of Toronto and Israt Ahmed explain:

Chronic underfunding forces community agencies to spend more time on tasks not related to direct service, client support or day-to day operations of the organization. Additional time is required to fundraise, track clients, and meet reporting guidelines. Diverting increasing amounts of staff time to deal with these issues resulting in more paperwork and stressful relationships between workers and clients. (2006, p.8)

The restructuring that is occurring within social service organizations is contributing to more ethical dilemmas but with less worker control to respond to these ethical dilemmas (Abramovitz, 2005, p.175).

### **Relationship Building**

The literature discusses consequences of precarious employment on social workers, social service workers, social service organizations and service users. Studies find that precarious employment impacts how precarious social workers are able to do their jobs. For example, one study examining how women's domestic violence shelter work is being affected by precarious employment, found that it impacts mandatory roles that precarious workers must fulfill. For example, they are not able to follow up with women and engage in one on one counselling (Seifert et al., 2007, p.299). A contradictory study found that relationship building was impacted by precarious employment, but not for the precarious workers as they were able to spend more direct contact with clients (able to do time limited work with clients) but for permanent

workers because permanent workers were stuck with heavy workloads of documentation (Hoque & Kirkpatrick, 2008, p.11). Interestingly, precarious employment's impact on relationship building within the literature not only focuses on the effects on precarious workers but also for permanent workers. My study, however, will focus on relationship building for precarious social workers.

Another study found that due to precarious employment, workers felt as though good practice was not occurring because workers were losing relationships with service users, and this impacted assessment, planning and providing services since they did not have the relationship with the clients needed to do so (Aronson & Sammon, 2000, p.173). Furthermore, high turnover rates due to precarious employment can also impact relationship building with service users. One study found that a high turnover rate due to precariously employed social workers left service users without a continuity of care which confused clients, information was not fully passed along to new social workers, and this impacted the health of service users (Hoque & Kirkpatrick, 2008, p.10).

Project funding regimes within precarious settings can have an impact on relationship building. Social workers must continuously take a great amount of time to learn and explain new rules that come from funding changes to service users (Abramovitz, 2005, p.178). This can impact a precariously employed social workers' ability to engage in quality time and good practice skills with service users. In summary, precarious employment is a problem for social workers as it affects relationship building with service users.

Precarious employment's impact on relationship building does not only have



consequences for service users, but can also impact the reputation of social service organizations. Author Margaret Gibelman (2005) states:

Regular employees are able to solicit and receive referrals as a product of their ongoing relationships within the defined community. These relationships solidify the reputation of the service organization as capable of meeting the needs of clients referred to it. It is unlikely that contingent workers will be able or willing to develop these agency-specific formal and informal networks that enhance the organization's referrals and reputation. (p.465)

Additionally, precarious employment impacts worker's ability to engage in relationships within the organization. Precariously employed social workers' experienced difficulty forming collegial relationships since they were seen as outsiders and other workers knew of their short placement (Gibelman, 2005, p.466). This was also found among precarious social workers within a shelter as they were often isolated during night shifts (Seifert et al., 2007, p.306). Therefore, precarious employment not only impacts social workers' ability to engage in tasks that require relationship building, but this lack of opportunity to build relationships can impact organizational reputations and organizational relationships between colleagues. Within my research, I would like to build on understanding how precarious employment impacts relationship building, but would also like to specifically learn how precarious employment impacts relationship building skill engagement for my participants.

### **Deskilling**

Precarious employment is being presented as a problem for social workers as it

contributes to professional deskilling. For example, precarious shelter staff were excluded from skill learning and collective training as their shifts were placed during the evenings and overnights (Seifert et al., 2007, p.306). Other agencies specifically exclude precarious employees from skill training events since agencies see no point in including precarious workers because their brief contracts will end (Carey, 2011, p.186). This exclusion from formal social work skill development impacts how social workers perceive themselves. It reduces their professional confidence and increases their anxiety (Seifert et al., 2007, p.306). I plan on building on this work by studying whether this professional confidence reduction due to deskilling impacts social workers' career satisfaction. More specifically, I will focus on whether relationship building, reflexivity and advocacy deskilling impacts career satisfaction.

Authors Maria Seifert et al., (2007) agrees that there is a gap in the knowledge and more research should be done to determine to what extent work content is impacted by precarious employment (p.308). Similarly, Patricia G. Conway, Martha S. Williams and Janet L. Green (1987) found that social work job satisfaction can be determined by examining particular aspects of the job, however more aspects of the job need to be included in research (p.56). Therefore, I plan to fill this gap by including the job aspects of advocacy, relationship building, and reflexivity within a precarious setting. However, Conway, Williams and Green (1987) also state that there is a gap in who is included within studies and more research needs to be done around job aspects and satisfaction with both public and private, profit and not-for-profit social work organizations (p.56). I plan on addressing this gap (on a small scale) by leaving my research open to differently

structured organizations. In summary, precarious employment is shown to contribute to deskilling, I will build on this and attempt to address the gap of deskilling in regards to advocacy, relationship building, reflexivity and its impact on workers' career satisfaction.

Deskilling of relationships building further reduces social work professionalism.

Authors Ana Maria Seifert et al., (2007) explain:

Over the last few decades, relationships between low-prestige service-sector workers and clients have increasingly become transformed into encounters; [...]. If the client-worker interaction is defined as an encounter, it is easier for the employer to treat it as though it were widget production; the expertise of the service provider is treated as negligible [...]. (p.307; as cited in Gutek 1995)

Furthermore, deskilling due to precarious employment has an impact on the skill of relationship building. Researchers Jane Aronson and Sheila Sammon (2000) found that supervisors were trying to provide services in cheaper ways, thus creating piecemeal services through various providers, and therefore many providers knew a little about the service users instead of being able to know a lot (p.172-3). Fordization of care contributes to professional deskilling and impacts the quality of relationship building between social workers and service users. Furthermore, a lack of relationships between colleagues impacts skill usage. Workers who are precariously employed can be working by themselves in solo shifts thus they are not able to exchange ideas and practical skills with colleagues (Baines, 2006, p.30). Therefore, precarious employment impacts relationship building through piecemeal services, ability to gain and exchange practical skills, and a deskilling of relationship building reduces social work professionalism.

### **Advocacy and Reflexivity**

Precarious employment has also impacted social workers engaging in other practical skills. One study found that there was little room for advocacy efforts (Aronson & Sammon, 2000, p.174). If a social worker wanted to engage in advocacy for their service user, this work would have to be unpaid and taken up on the worker's own time (Aronson & Sammon, 2000, p.175). Another Canadian study undertaken by Donna Baines et al., (2014) found that many workers within the social service field felt moral pressure to work outside of their own time in order to obtain social justice for their service users, understanding that their organization was financially tight (p.87). Bryan Evans, Ted Richmond and John Shields (2005) report that workers within the social service field often work 30 minutes unpaid per day in an attempt to keep up with their workloads (p.92). Social workers attempting to maintain funding due to budget cuts may contribute to workers trying to conserve their positions rather than pursuing organizational justice/advocacy for service users (Weinberg, 2010, p.35; Abramovitz, 1998, p.520).

Precarious employment also impacts social workers engaging in reflexivity. Due to time pressures and narrow scope of work, there is little time left to be reflexive in practice (Aronson & Sammon, 2000, p.175). Additionally, over regulation for precarious workers can impact reflexivity. Authors Chris Miller, Paul Hoggett and Majorie Mayo (2006) note, "Over regulation restricts workers' emotional commitment, their 'psychological' contract with the job, and restricts the space in which reflexive practice can have an impact" (2006, p.370). In summary, precarious employment can impact

social work skill usage around advocacy and reflexivity which my research plans on investigating further.

### **Debates in Literature**

Although the literature notes many drawbacks to precarious employment for both social workers and clients, some literature debates the benefits of precarious employment within social service organizations for workers, organizations and service users. One contested benefit is that precarious employment helps to reduce the workload permanent social workers experience. Researchers Kim Hoque and Ian Kirpatrick (2008) interviewed social service managers and found that:

The social service managers talked about the psychological boost agency workers give to a team in instances where there are a number of vacancies. They also suggested a role for agency workers in covering some of the more basic work at the office that might take a lot of time, but is not the best use of an experienced permanent social worker. (p.10)

One could argue based on the information the social service managers provided that precarious employed social workers reduce the workload of permanent social workers and thus provide permanent social workers with greater ability to engage in their practical skills (such as relationship building). However, this may not always be true. As previously mentioned, Kim Hoque and Ian Kirpatrick's (2008) interviews with social workers found that social workers disagreed with the manager's perspectives and their workload was not shortened, rather it was intensified due to precarious employees' high turnover rate (p.11). Since this debate is tied to whose perspective of precarious

employment is being sought, my research will focus on the experiences of frontline social workers; so the information on precarious employment's effect on them will be coming straight from the frontline source.

Additionally, there is contrasting literature on whether precarious employment impacts deskilling. Some argue that labour turnover rates help those precariously employed learn new skills and knowledge (Matusik & Hill, 1998, p.686). Others argue that because precarious social workers are constantly moving to new organizations, it makes it more difficult to receive consistent social work experience and broader scope training (Carey, 2011, p.186). Furthermore, others argue that precarious employment benefits employees on a personal level and is not always thrust upon them. Malcom Carey (2011) explains:

[...] staff can also opt to undertake agency work because it reflects other needs: such as following early retirement or a wish to continue practicing part time without the commitment of a permanent post. Other staff such as parents may find locum employment easier to cope with; especially with the greater discretion typically permitted by more flexible employment. (p.186)

Hence, there is debate as to whether precarious employment is a negative trend or a flexible aspect certain workers choose. Some argue that precarious employment is implemented within an organization because there are a shortage of workers within agencies and/or there is a high demand for services (Carey, 2011, p.187). Therefore, it is argued that precarious employment helps organizations due to high work demands, and for service users to receive the resources they need. In summary, literature debates occur

around whether deskilling happens, the depth of precarious employment and the benefits/limitations of precarious employment.

### **Resistance**

The academic literature also addresses the resistance of social workers in the face of precarious employment within their organizations. One method social workers used to resist was through rule bending. Social workers sought other workers within their organizations who they knew would bend the rules for them to get the services that service users needed (Aronson & Sammon, 2000, p.176). Therefore, connections between workers were important for resistance. However, these connections can be reduced due to the isolation social workers experience due to precarity and high turnovers (Aronson & Sammon, 2000, p.176). Many workers may find it difficult to resist in this type of manner. Additionally, capitalizing on connections in order to resist does not address the root cause of systemic organizational issues (Aronson & Sammon, 2000, p.176). Although systemic organizational resistance is not occurring, author Donna Baines (2006) argues that small scale resistance can open up space for further resistance (p.31). Also, workers resisted the difficulties in relationship building. For example, some social workers engaged in relationship building outside of work (Aronson & Sammon, 2000, p.177). Engaging in unpaid work was also an act of resistance by participants within a study conducted by Donna Baines (2006b, p.206). However, this type of resistance also further exploits workers (Baines, 2006b, p.206). Furthermore, the literature explains as to why some social workers do not resist. Author Donna Baines (2006) explains:

Increased standardization means that work can be sped up and readily assumed by part time temporary and contract employees. Clearly the potential for professionals to be replaced [...] is not an idle threat. This threat, coupled with the decrease in job opportunities across the sector, constrain workers' willingness to protest unfair circumstances in their workplaces. (p.29)

Therefore, permanent workers may not protest precariousness in their workplace, and a lack of job opportunities may potentially influence precarious social workers in not resisting organizational unfairness. Building on the literature of resistance, my research will examine why or why not social workers resist the particular impacts, and how social workers and their colleagues resist particular precarious employment impacts on skills (advocacy, reflexivity and relationship building).

### **Conclusion**

A critical review of the literature around my master's thesis topic was provided. Particular attention was made to the impact of precarious employment on social workers engaging in relationship building, advocacy and reflexivity. The literature shows precarious employment as a growing gendered phenomena connected to a broader neoliberal agenda, thus I will focus my research on the experience of female identified precarious social workers. Additionally, precarious employment is conceptualized as a phenomenon that contributes to deskilling, which I plan to build on within my own research to determine how deskilling impacts social workers' career satisfaction. There is a gap in research of how precarious employment impacts job satisfaction within differently structured organizations (non-for profit, private, etc.) and thus my research



will be open to participants from different organizations. Despite information on the impacts of precarious employment for social workers, there are debates in the literature around deskilling, usefulness of precarious employment and the depth of the precarious trend. Finally, the literature provides knowledge that social workers are resisting the impacts of precarious employment. I plan on building on the concept of resistance to further understand how social workers resist particular impacts on skill, and why or why not they resist particular impacts.

## **METHODOLOGY CHAPTER**

The following chapter will provide insight into the methodology of this study. A discussion of the theoretical perspectives will be presented. Secondly, the two methodological frameworks of this study will be presented. Following that will be a discussion about the study's design where information about recruitment, participants, data collection and data analysis will be explained in detail.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

Critical social science (CSS) and feminism will act both as my theoretical and methodological perspective. Proponents of CSS believe that positivism can be narrow, anti-democratic and non-humanist (Neuman, 1997, p58.). The CSS approach disagrees with positivist assumptions that science can be a neutral and non-ideological process of discovering reality (Eakin et al., 1996, p.157). Feminism also challenges positivism's objectivity and disregard of societal values within the research process and results of research (Harding, 2007, p.49), and criticizes the hierarchy between subject-object within research (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p.8). Additionally, CSS does not pretend to be neutral and is overtly political. Joan Eakin, Ann Robertson, Blake Poland, David Coburn and Richard Edwards (1996) explain, "Researchers are to produce knowledge that can assist in bringing about [...] changes" (p.157). This politicization of CSS is to challenge injustices of society experienced by certain individuals. Neuman (1997) argues that, "CSS defines social science as a critical process of inquiry that goes beyond surface illusions to uncover the real structures in the material world in order to help people

change conditions and build a better world for themselves” (p.74). Furthermore, CSS views social reality as discoverable, however this social reality is ever evolving and being shaped (politically, socially, and culturally) and operated through power structures (Neuman, 1997, p.75-6). Finally, CSS proponents believe that mistreatment of individuals in society occurs, however individuals have the potential to resist by dispelling myths and coming together (Neuman, 1997, p.76). Dispelling myths and unveiling powerful structures is not an easy task, and thus CSS encourages the use of theory in order to explain past and present conflict (Neuman, 1997, p.77). For this reason, I have chosen to engage with the feminist theory in order to assist in understanding and deconstructing power.

Critical social science (CSS) and feminist perspective overlap in certain aspects. Feminist research has gained traction since the 1980s, building off critical social science and holding an activist lens that pursues feminist values and understanding (Neuman, 1997, p.80). Like CSS, a feminist lens examines power and societal construction. However, this examination centers around gender and other intersectional identities (Hammersley, 1992, p.87). Feminists believe that gender acts as a social division. (Neuman, 1997, p.80).

### **Methodological Framework**

Critical social science (CSS) and feminism were the two methodological frameworks I engaged with during this research project. CSS and feminism heavily guided how my research was framed (Harding, 1997, p.2) and shaped the methods I would engage with (Carter & Little, 2007, p.1317). These two methodologies are often

used in conjunction (Neuman, 1997, p.73) and they aligned with my study as they are engaged with the impact of power structures on people. Feminist methodology, values the lived experience and knowledge of women (Thompson,1992, p.9). With critical social science methodology, a researcher needs human participants in order to expose oppressive conditions in individuals' lives (Neuman, 1997, p.74). These two methodological perspectives impacted my choosing of a qualitative study with female identified, precariously employed social workers. Research with participants allows for the direct experience of precariously employed social workers to be heard.

Feminist methodology acknowledges that oppression is a complex process, and that rarely are women totally powerless to resist oppression and take action (Stanley & Wise, 1990, p.22). As feminist and CSS methodologies are action oriented, this impacted the questions I posed to the participants. For example, the interview guide included the question, "Considering your precarious employment, have you been able to engage in actions or advocacy around precarious employment within your work organization?" This question was posed in order to understand what action steps have already been executed, and to determine the success/and impacts of these actions for future reference and use, since the goal of CSS and feminist research is to empower individuals (Neuman, 1997, p.74-80). Additionally, both CSS and feminist methodology call for reflexivity (Eakin et al., 1996, p.158; Neuman, 1994, p.80). For CSS, reflexivity refers to:

[...] questioning of the basic assumptions and ideologies underlying the way research problems and methodology are conceived; recognition of the role of power in all aspects of research; acknowledgement of possible inherent

irreconcilable contradictions in research; and appreciation for the dialectical relationship between the formal and informal structures of society (institutions, social norms) and individual or collective human action. (Eakin et al., 1996, pg.158).

Since, reflexivity in feminist methodology would occur for the researcher throughout the entire research process, I must analyze my own bias and identity, as identity shapes belief and values which would impact research (Neuman, 1997, p.81). In summary, both CSS and feminist methodology are interested in personal and societal development, action based and call for reflexivity within the research process.

Unlike CSS, a feminist lens may use a consensus model, where participants are included within the research process and research design, and thus participants are co-creators (Holder, 2015, p.102). This is because there are hierarchical power relationships between participants and researchers. Thus researchers will bring participants in, to minimize this hierarchy and any potential harm (Devault, 1996, p.33). Unfortunately, due to the time restrictions, a limitation of my research was an inability to fully engage with feminist methodology by utilizing a consensus model. However, reflexivity was utilized to be cognizant of the power that I held as a researcher. Reflexivity occurred during interviews. During the interviews, I was aware of my own biases of the potential negative impact of precarious employment but I did not share this as to allow space for participants to share their true thoughts on precarious employment and social work skill engagement. Also, during the interviews I chose not to challenge any assumptions/ideologies that CSS methodology calls for doing (Neuman, 1997) because in

doing so I would have been imposing power over participants and potentially making it difficult for their knowledge/experiences to be shared. During the research process, I engaged in reflexivity on my own biases to find and allow any information that challenged my own preconceived information on precarious employment and social work. Furthermore, through feminist methodology, I was reflexive as to how this research could impact women's lives (CRIA W et al., 1996, p.21). One way this was done was through being honest with participants of any potential harm/risks in this study. Potential harm/risks were discussed within the Letter of Information/Consent that participants went over and signed. Additionally, I engaged in reflexivity throughout the research process to make sure the research facilitated empowerment in order to benefit the lives of women. Empowerment and how to address precarious employment was included within the discussion section of this thesis. Finally, feminist methodology encourages the use of accessible language (CRIA W et al., 1996, p.22) and this was kept in mind through all steps of this research process.

## **The Study**

### **Recruitment.**

The recruitment process for this study began by obtaining ethical approval from McMaster's Research Ethics Board (MREB) (See appendix D). Once ethical approval was received, I requested McMaster's social work department to send out a preapproved email script (See Appendix B) and letter of information (See Appendix A) to potential participants who were interested in engaging with this study. Participants were able to contact me directly if they were interested and I answered any questions they

may have had and re-sent out the letter of information and consent. The letter of information and consent outlined the purpose of the study, procedures involved with the study, potential risk and discomfort, confidentiality, participant withdrawal, and information about the study results/dissemination. Once participants indicated interest in participating, a date and location most convenient for participants was chosen. Furthermore, since past colleagues may have received my recruitment email and potentially recognized my name; there were some concerns about relationships being present between myself and participants. However, there was no expectation or pressure that my colleagues should respond to my recruitment email. If a potential participant who was a past colleague were to respond, I would have informed them of this via email, and if they wished to continue then their participation would be included.

### **Participants.**

Five participants were recruited from southern Ontario. Participants were recruited by a variety of criteria. Firstly, all participants had to self-identify as female, as female identified individuals are overrepresented in traditional caring positions and research shows they are more likely to be precariously employed (Vosko, 2006, p.27). Additionally, all participants had to have either a Bachelor or Master's degree in social work from an accredited school in Ontario. Participants were required to have a minimum of one-year work experience. Work experience for these five participants ranged from 1 to 14 years. A final requirement was that participants were either precariously employed (part time, contractual and/or hold multiple employment positions) or have experienced precarious employment.

### **Interview Process and Data Collection.**

In order to facilitate discussion during the interview, the interview guide (See Appendix C) was provided via email prior to the start of the interview. The interview guide was semi-structured. Semi- structured interviews gave myself and participants structure to address the topics at hand, but provided space to discuss relatable and relevant content and for unexpected information to come forward (Mason, 2002, p.62). Semi-structured interviewing was chosen to reduce researcher bias within the interview questions (Mason, 2002, p.65). Although the semi-structured interview guide asks what impacts the short-term nature of participants jobs have on certain social work skills, it is open to the fact that there may be no impacts, and asks why participants believe there are no impacts. This allowed for information which may have contradicted my own expectations around precarious employment. Feminist research should reduce researcher bias in terms of only hearing or seeing information that the researcher wants to see (CRIA W et al., 1996, p.30). Finally, in depth semi-structured interviews were a chosen method to obtain methodological consistency. Semi-structured interviews are commonly used within research utilizing feminist methodology, giving space for a variety of women to speak about their unique experiences (DeVault & Gross, 2007, p.174-5). Although, semi-structured interviews allowed more space for participants to share their narrative, as a researcher I was reflexive within these moments, understanding that interviews are rarely ever neutral or free of power, identities and cultural construction (DeVault & Gross, 2007, p.181).

Additionally, written informed consent was received from all participants.



Participants were given the Letter of Information and Consent (See Appendix A) prior to the start of the interview via email. I brought copies to go over and sign during the interview, and asked participants if they had any questions about the study or the consent process. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study, even after signing the consent form or part -way through the study or up until approximately one month following participant's interview date, because after this date I would have begun to analyze the data. Also, participants were told that if they were to withdraw, there would be no consequences to them. In case of withdrawal, any data the participant has provided would be destroyed unless the participant had indicated otherwise. If participants did not want to answer some of the questions they did not have to, but could still be in the study. All questions were answered by participants. All 5 participants agreed to be audio recorded and for me to take notes during the interview. Interviews ranged in length from 25 minutes to 50 minutes. All interviews were conducted in person and recorded with the QuickTime application on a Macbook laptop. These interviews were password protected and on a private device which I only had access to. Although, I did take some written notes, it was rare as I engaged in active listening in order to treat the interview more as an encounter rather than treating the participants as informants (DeVault & Gross, 2007, p.178). Four interviews were conducted at a local library within a privately booked room. One interview/discussion was held at a participant's private office at their place of employment.

### **Data Analysis.**

Both feminism and critical social science (CSS) guided thematic data

analysis. The audio recordings of interviews were transcribed verbatim into typed documents. Once transcription was completed, I read through each transcript, coding themes. Then I undertook a coding/theme narrowing process. I did this by identifying common themes and similar experiences among the five participants. Identifying themes was done through both literal and reflexive readings of the text. Literal reading of the transcripts involved looking at the verbatim language to identify themes. Reflexive reading involved myself as a researcher interpreting the meaning of certain sections of transcripts to examine norms, rules, and discourses that may have impacted the participants (Mason, 2002, p.149). Although, coding occurred within the data analysis process, it was not the analysis itself. Authors Amanda Coffey and Paul Atkinson (1996) explain, “Coding reflects our analytic ideas, but one should not confuse coding itself with the analytic work of developing conceptual schemes” (p.27).

Feminist and critical social science methodology guide researchers as to which conceptualizations to look out for. Critical social science methodology suggests looking for the concept of power. CSS looks for power in language, ideology, culture and pedagogy (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002, p.164). According to Steven Luke (1974), CSS also questions the dimension of power occurring: covert, subtle and overt (as cited in Eakin et al., 1996, p.158). Furthermore, author Poland (1993) suggests questioning the data in regards to how my own power as a researcher is impacting the research process and data analysis; this can allow for marginalized voices to be heard (as cited in Eakin et al., 1993, p.159).

A second concept CSS suggests looking out for is dialecticism. Authors Joan

Eakin et al., (1996) explain:

[...] larger economic, political, cultural and organizational forces in any society shape the everyday lives of individuals and groups, [...] [and] everyday practices of individuals and groups produce, reproduce and transform those same larger structural forces. A more constructive approach is to frame these two spheres as being in a 'dialectical' relationship with each other; each informs, produces and reproduces the other. (p.159).

In summary, CSS assisted me within the data analysis process by considering the concepts of power and dialecticism and by reminding me of how my own power can impact the analysis.

CSS also guides data analysis within reflexive reading. CSS calls for examining assumptions of ideology within data. Joan Eakin et al., (1996) explains:

Assumptions themselves reflect [...] a set of beliefs about social reality as well as customs, practices and behaviours which consciously or unconsciously embody this vision of reality. An important aspect of these assumptions is that they are often implicit, rendered invisible because they are perceived as self-evident truths rather than as socially derived conventions. (p.158).

Therefore, CSS guided me in questioning what ideologies were in play, and thus making these assumptions explicit (Eakin et al., 1996, p.158). A second reflexive CSS concept for data analysis is paying attention to the dimensions of contradictions. CSS calls for recognizing contradictions within data, so that they can be exposed, and lead to change; for example, contradictions may lead to the recognizing of the relationship between social

structures and individual actions (Eakin et al., 1996, p.159). In summary, CSS guided reflexive data analysis in regards to assumptions of ideology and contradictions.

Authors Caroline Ramazanoglu and Janet Holland (2002) state, “There is no general feminist methodological strategy on interpretation, you will need to decide how to put reflexivity into your practice (p.160). Like CSS, I needed to engage in reflexivity and question my own identity within the data analysis in order to understand that a range of interpretations are possible (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002, p.159). Additionally, a feminist lens like CSS, pays attention to dimensions of power. One should question within the data, “Whose voice is not present within the research? Are women’s interpretation credited?” (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002, p.161). Hence, throughout the data analysis I kept in mind that researcher’s interpretation is an expression of power. A feminist lens will also question within the data, “How does gender and power affect social life? Are there sexist assumptions present?” (Neuman, 1997, p.80). Feminism also adds another analysis dimension related to power of knowledge production. Within the data, I asked the questions, “Who is producing this knowledge in relation to female experience, and how is it being produced?” (Moss, 2006, p.373-4). Therefore, feminist data analysis included the questioning of reflexivity, power, knowledge production/

## **FINDINGS CHAPTER**

This section will discuss findings, which are based on broad themes in the data rather than answers to each of the interview questions. Themes discovered were:

- Impact of precarious employment on relationship building
- Impact of precarious employment on advocacy
- Impact of precarious employment on reflexivity
- Actions in response to precarious employment
- Permanent notion of precarious employment and the impact on advocacy
- Power and Powerlessness
- Impact of Precarious Employment on Career Satisfaction

Also, subthemes emerged within the themes listed. In addition, identifying information was removed and altered in order to protect the confidentiality of the interview participants. Finally, within the findings chapter participants will be referred to as Interviewees 1 to 5.

### **Information on Participants**

The following section will provide some background information on participants in order to provide context to the experiences of precarious employment that they had shared. Participants were precariously employed through either or both part time and contract work. Additionally, participants ranged in years of work experience from 1 to 14 years. One participant had 1 year work experience, another had 6 years, two participants had 12 years, and one had 14 years. Participants' precarious roles were in: child welfare, hospital social work/supervision, governmental contracts, mental health /student support services, and long term care work. Finally, the length that participants experienced precarious employment ranged from 1 to 12 years. One

participant had one year in precarity, another had 7 years, and two participants had 12 years in precarious employment situations.

### **Impact of Precarious Employment on Relationship Building**

The interview began by asking participants to what extent their job relies on their ability to establish trusting relationships with their service users. All participants expressed that the precarious jobs they would be speaking about relied on their ability to establish trusting relationships with their service users. All participants noted impacts on their ability to engage and the quality of their relationship building due to their precarious employment settings. In fact, at the end of the interviews, when I invited participants to discuss anything they would like to share about precarious employment and social work skill that they found to be important, Interviewee 1 stated, “For me, the relationship building piece is the hardest part, I think that is the piece most impacted by precarious employment.” An over arching knowledge on the part of both social workers and service users that the relationship will come to an end due to precarity, impacted relationship building. This concept of ‘relationships ending’ was expressed by Interviewee 1, Interviewee 3 and Interviewee 4. For example, Interviewee 3 stated:

I think when you work with people who know you’re not permanent, they’re not as open, especially young people in care. They have had a lot of transition in their lives, so they look at you like you’re transitional already to begin with.

Participants found that service users had difficulty engaging in relationship building due to the knowledge that their social worker was not permanent. One participant, Interviewee 4, found that service users would often complain about the precarity of their workers. She stated:

[...] the whole time you knew you were going to leave because of the nature of the organization, clients would often gripe to me that their worker was only there for a few months. The whole time I was sitting there nodding my head saying I'm going to do the same thing in a few months, it's hard watching them build trust but also knowing you're going to be doing the same thing eventually.

Interviewee 4, also spoke about the inability to mitigate challenges precarious employment has on relationship building as certain service users really did not want to trust her because they knew the relationship would end. For the participants, precarious employment impacted relationship building because service users knew the relationship would end soon.

However, participants felt that the knowledge of the relationship ending prematurely due to their precariousness also impacted their ability to engage in relationship building. Interviewee 4, for example, felt as though she always had one foot out the door. Interviewee 1 expressed that she did not want to get too close to her service users so as to not make the goodbye "more difficult than it needs to be" but at the same time she explained, "I have to be there for them, and still have that good relationship with them so it's kind of walking that fine line". Additionally, knowledge of the relationship ending impacted the mental state of certain interviewees. For example, Interviewee 4 stated:

I felt guilty, I felt bad doing it to the clients. I just felt like it wasn't the best care for them. They have a hard enough time in their lives, I don't want to contribute to that, I don't feel it's the best care at all for clients in that situation.

Similarly, Interviewee 1 expressed feelings of sadness over ending relationships with service users, the potential to make service users lives harder due to her absence, and the stress felt due to precarity 'looming overhead'. Interviewee 1 also found that colleagues

experienced stress due to their precarity which impacted aspects of their jobs such as relationship building. In summary, knowledge that the relationship will end impacted participants' ability to engage fully in relationship building and impacted certain participants' mental state when working.

Although not a specific question in the interview guide, some participants found that precarious employment impacted collegial relationship building. Interviewee 2 found that precarious employment heavily impacted her ability to engage in relationship building with colleagues. She explains:

If you're full time you've made relationships, you've built rapport, you've had connections with team members but if you're only there every other weekend, it takes that much longer.

The formal precarious structure of her organization in turn impacts the way she practices, presenting a dialectical relationship. Interviewee 2 explains:

I always just feel like I'm proving myself to them that I'm a good social worker, many of them don't know that I work full time in Kitchener. I'm tired of having to prove myself, [...] I do that by reminding them who I am, I'm visible, so you're out and about. You might not be in your office, you're documenting on a computer that isn't in the social work office just so the staff and team sees me, knows that I'm accessible. Where if you were established, you could do that work in your office. Sometimes, it would be easier to do it in the office, but you're trying to prove yourself to other people.

It was found that precarious workers seem to have to work harder in order to build those relationships with colleagues. For example, Interviewee 2 explained that she has had to work harder at building collegial relationships by staying late, and skipping breaks; which was all unpaid time. Precariousness has also impacted Interviewee 5's ability to practice in relationship building with colleagues as the hub of the work was during the day, whereas her hours were different and thus she experienced connectivity issues with



other colleagues. Interviewee 5 stressed that the lack of connectivity impacts the quality of care service users receive. She explains:

You're trying to figure out what is going on by reading case notes or reading care plans to see what has happened. Which impacts when a situation has arisen, you're expected to manage that situation but you haven't been in because you're part time. [...] you're managing with bits and pieces and not full information.

This is consistent with the sub theme addressed by previous interview recipients that of precarious employment impacted relationship building and thus affected the quality of service user care. Interviewee 3 also found that her precarious colleagues at times were more interested in what managers thought of them structurally, changing the focus away from service users. She discloses about past colleagues:

I think they don't fully engage with clients because they know don't know where they will be. Now that I think about it, I think people become way more focused on management and trying to essentially hustle to keep your job.

Interviewee 5 echoed similar thoughts about precarious colleagues:

I think when you are working two or three jobs or you're working contract positions then you're hustling. Because they're hustling, it's a little harder to build relationships with service users because you've got to get A, B, C, D assessment done, you need those questions answered, so it becomes not so much building relationships to get that information, but more of a task oriented approach.

Hence, participants found that precarious employment's impact on relationship building affects quality of care for service users through lack of collegial connectivity, being more focused on evaluations by management, and hustling to get tasks done.

When examining responses to the question of whether participants were able to mitigate the challenges precarious employment has on relationship building, a subtheme of working harder emerges once more. Interviewee 5 has also worked outside scheduled paid time similar to Interviewee 2. Interviewee 5 explains:

You work really really hard when you are there to establish relationships so that people do know you, but you need to work beyond your scheduled hours because you need to talk to workers who are in the nursing home, then you're having to make sure you're emailing them when they're there. So there would be times where I'd be in my one job, doing work from my other job in order to connect with people, so I think you have to work twice as hard.

It appears as though organizational structures that utilize precarious labour induce precarious workers to work harder in order to achieve the quality of relationship building that a full time worker may be able to achieve. To summarize, in order to mitigate challenges precarious employment has on relationship building, participants found that they had to work harder and they often did this by working outside paid time.

### **Impact of Precarious Employment on Advocacy**

A prominent theme that came through the interviews with participants is that precarious employment has an impact on advocacy. It should be noted that advocacy efforts were not completely abandoned due to precarity. Interviewees 1 and 2, expressed that they tried to advocate where possible on a day to day basis. Interviewee 1 explains, "I just kept plugging away at work. I had [precarity] going on in the background but with each day I just dove into the work." Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 4 also found that their colleagues attempted to advocate on a small and daily scale. However, precarious employment still had an impact on advocacy for all participants.

A common impact of precarious employment on advocacy expressed by participants were that of the impact on service users/clients. Precarious employment made any long term advocacy efforts for clients difficult to secure. For example, despite day by day advocacy by Interviewee 1, she still found long term planning/advocacy

efforts difficult as she would not be able to attend the meetings necessary due to her time with the organization ending. She did not know who would be taking over and what would happen with the long term planning efforts. Interviewee 1 also found that her precarious colleagues had similar issues with advocating on a long term basis.

Interviewee 3 echoed concerns of passing on advocacy efforts to another worker, “We both know in social work that if I start something and then I pass the baton to someone else, they have a different way and a different approach, so then that changes things.”

Interviewee 4 expressed concerns about the impact of passing the advocacy baton to another worker and the impact on service users/clients:

I would try to get things in place for clients, and then I didn't know who was taking over and whether or not they were going to continue with it, whether or not they understood. You can only write so much in a case note. Clients can only tell their story so many times, and you just felt bad. Knowing you're giving it to the next person to start over.

Additionally, Interviewee 3 found that precarious employment caused a lack of awareness of the deeper issues service users/clients experienced and wanted to address.

Interviewee 3 explains:

I think that when you're advocating and you are precarious, I think it's surface, just sort of an initial thing, and I also think sometimes you take cuts and corners because you don't have that space to actually be with people.

She also found that precarious colleagues experienced ‘tunnel vision’ when it came to advocacy for service users:

Ultimately [colleagues] determined the goals of advocacy for service users, because they had a shorter amount of time and they're trying to get things done. It makes you work quicker, and maybe that's not the best.

This brings into question the quality of advocacy for service users if precarious social

workers have to engage in surface level advocacy and have to cut corners due to lack of time/space to engage in advocacy work. Insufficient outcomes for advocacy was also an impact of precarious employment for Interviewee 5. She provides an example from her practice at a long term care home:

When you're working part-time you're not always available to advocate. For example, if I want to take a resident to court because they had a court appointment but I'm working afternoons; I know the court system would usually be assigned to someone else because I wasn't available because I'm at my other job, and then the resident doesn't get the desired outcome because the person advocating for them doesn't know the court system.

Interviewee 5, also stated that she found her precarious colleagues had similar concerns around advocacy for service users and time constraints. Furthermore, participants found it difficult to engage in systemic change through advocacy efforts for service users/clients. Interviewee 3 explains that at times the long term trajectory of advocacy just is not there, as she knows that the position is ending. Similarly, Interviewee 2 linked the inability to get involved in bigger advocacy issues to being a precarious worker. She also found that precarious colleagues who had to travel to multiple jobs faced the same challenges to get involved in advocacy efforts due to time constraints. In summary, precarious employment impacts workers' ability to engage in systemic advocacy, deeper level advocacy efforts for service users, ability to be there on a consistent basis to advocate for service users, and thus the results of advocacy for service users comes into question.

In some ways participants found that the challenges precarious employment has on advocacy can be mitigated, but not fully mitigated. Interviewees 1, 2, and 3 were still able to engage in simple daily advocacy, and took advocacy on "day by day". Others attempted to mitigate the challenges by engaging in intense documentation and

communicating to other workers through technology. Once more, the theme of having to work harder due to precarious employment emerges. However, the challenges may not have been fully mitigated as service users may have not received the quality of care needed. Interviewee 5 explains:

I don't think there's any way around the challenges, if you use email to leave messages but the responses aren't received till the next day when that person comes in and you're not in till the next evening, you're not able to access it. The best I can say is, you are communicating in messages but then everyone is waiting on a response, including the service user.

Interviewee 4 shared that her organization had a contingency plan on advocacy and precarious workers coming and going, and this was through intense documentation requirements. Interviewee 4 shares:

The agency was used to workers coming in and out, we had a really good tracking system. Everything went into the case note, everything was documented so anyone could step in and sort of take over. That's how we tried to mitigate it, but there was still flaws in the system.

Participants reflected that it was most difficult to mitigate the challenges precarious employment has on long term advocacy. For example, Interviewee 3 found that advocacy efforts she engaged with are no longer happening, because those who replaced her did not pick up on the projects started. Finally, one participant could not fully mitigate the challenges brought on by precarious employment and the stress that came with precarity, sharing that she prematurely quit her job due to the stress. In summary, participants attempted to mitigate the challenges by working harder through documentation and technological communication but most could not fully mitigate the challenges of precarious employment on advocacy, especially in regards to long term advocacy.

### **Precarious Employment's Impact on Reflexivity**

Most participants found that precarious employment impacted participants' ability to be reflexive. Interviewee 1 found that the stress associated with precarious employment at times impacted her ability to be reflexive, especially given the knowledge that the time within her organizations was ending. Interviewee 1 shared:

I think when you know that it is going to end soon part of you is like, 'Oh what's the point of me really trying to do all this reflexive work?' Right, because it is work. Why don't I just do the job and not worry about this reflexive stuff right now. I don't know if I ever thought that specifically but I think that was kind of in the background.

Interviewee 2 felt as though the time constraints impacted her ability to engage in reflexive practice. She also found that a lack of relationship with other social workers in the organization due to her precarity impacted her ability to bounce ideas off of other staff. Interviewee 3 echoed similar thoughts, sharing that there was a lack of work space to engage in reflexivity and that employers do not push precarious workers to reflect.

Interviewee 3 shares:

When you're not a permanent employee, I don't think your employer pushes you as much to do that and I don't think it's nurtured. Because how you practice is reflected a lot by how the organization allows you to practice, there's lots of constraints.

Similarly, Interviewee 4 felt as though reflexivity within the workplace was treated like a luxury, despite her thinking it should not be. Also, Interviewee 4 found it difficult to reflect when you are constantly looking for another job. Interviewee 4 states, "You don't ever have the piece of mind to imagine yourself in this place long term, imagine how you fit, how your values aligned, what your role is. There is no peace of mind." Additionally, Interviewee 4 found that a lack of time off due to her precarity impacted her ability to reflect in practice. Interviewee 4 explains:

Because I was part time, I hardly ever got any time off so I couldn't take a minute to think about what is going on. I didn't even have sick days. People who were employed full time in the exact same position as me were getting 5 weeks off. So you know the agency recognizes that it's hard work. But yet, in contract, you get a tenth of what they get.

Therefore for Interviewee 4, had she been full time she would have received more time to reflect. Lack of time to reflect was also expressed by Interviewee 5 when discussing colleagues experience of reflexivity and precarious employment. Interviewee 5 felt as though reflexivity was difficult as colleagues had to hustle amid time constraints.

Interviewee 1 and 3 found that precarious employment had an impact on their colleagues' ability to engage in reflexivity as they were not as invested and for Interviewee 3 this was related to not feeling part of the organization. In summary, precarious employment impacted participants' ability to be reflexive due to knowing employment will be ending, time constraints, not having the space to be reflexive, spending time looking for other jobs, hustling to get work tasks completed, and not feeling part of the organization.

Other participants spoke about how precarious employment impacts how one reflects. For Interviewees 1 and 3, precarious employment became a piece to be reflexive about. Whereas, for Interviewees 3 and 5, precarious employment changed the focus of reflexivity. Interviewee 5 explains:

Sometimes in that reflexivity there is that self blame. Because I couldn't accomplish this or that, and I couldn't advocate here or I couldn't do this. Internalizing it instead of looking at it as a result of precarious employment. So I think it skews reflexivity.

Therefore, for Interviewee 5, precarious employment caused internalization and self-blame during reflexivity. Whereas, for Interviewee 3, precarious employment removed the ability to be reflexive about the job but this opened up reflexivity towards her career.

She explains:

When you're precarious, you don't think of that specific job as much. For me, you think about how you operate as a social worker but may not so much in that role because you're not going to be doing that again. And I don't think that's a good thing to be honest.

In summary, some participants were still able to reflect despite precarious employment, however precarious employment became something to be reflexive about, removed the ability to be reflexive about specific jobs and caused internalization rather than an external understanding of precarity's impact on social work.

A strong theme emerged of participants not being able to mitigate the challenges that precarious employment had on reflexivity within practice. As previously stated Interviewee 1 was unable to mitigate the challenges precarious employment provided and had to quit because of the stress. It is my understanding that some internalization occurred for this participant when discussing mitigating challenges, "I think if I could have mitigated the challenges I would have tried to address the stress before it got to the point that it did." This comment suggests that had she been able to address the stress prior to quitting she may have been able to mitigate the challenges precarious employment had on reflexivity. Interviewee 3 and 4 echoed statements of being unable to mitigate the challenges. Interviewee 3 shared, "I think reflexivity is learning and growing and redoing in some ways and I think you don't have the opportunity to redo, and you don't have the opportunity to build that skill"; and therefore she was unable to mitigate the challenges of reflexivity due to not having the workplace opportunity to redo and build on that skill. Similarly, Interviewee 4 found that due to time constraints and no time given to reflect, she was unable to mitigate the challenges precarious employment had on



reflexivity. In contrast, Interviewee 5 attempted to mitigate the challenges by being reflective about the task at hand and how it could have been done more efficiently, but was unable to mitigate the challenges on reflexivity within a greater practice piece. Therefore, participants found that mitigating the challenges on reflexivity was unsuccessful, as one participant quit her job, internalization may have occurred, there was no room to grow within the organization through reflexivity, and time constraints were present.

### **Action in Response to Precarious Employment**

A theme present within the data is that of reacting to precarious employment. One way this was done was through unionization. One participant utilized her union to address employment uncertainty. Results of discussing precarity with the union was not discussed within the interview. Interviewee 5 spoke of an attempt to bring in a union to address precarious employment. Interviewee 5 stated:

The department which experienced precarious employment eventually unionized. So they advocated for themselves and they voted in a union which was interesting because it was a very peaceful and blissful year that they had a union and then everyone was laid off.

Although workers attempted to unionize and engage in advocacy around precarious employment, the results were unsuccessful. Interviewee 5 explains, “So even unionizing didn’t protect the jobs. And I think the message sent by the organization was very clear. That department was still not a valued piece of that organization.” It appears as though Interviewee 5 saw this layoff as the organization’s counter action move against advocacy around precarious employment and as the organization’s statement about the value of those laid off workers. In summary, unionization to address precarious employment was

an option to address precarious employment. Although for one participant the benefits of unionization towards precarious employment were brief.

Also, participants responded to precarious employment through small actions of resistance. Interviewee 1, who knew she would eventually be laid off, asked for staff meetings with the director, so that she and staff could receive more information as to what to expect. She also engaged in writing about precarious employment in performance evaluations. Interviewee 1 reflects:

We have our annual performance evaluations and at the end of that document there is space to provide input on what changes you want to see at the agency, so I think that for a couple of years in a row that was one of the things I put. I acknowledged the stress of not knowing what was happening with this job, I just kind of said that it makes it really hard for me to do my job when I don't know what what is happening in my own future. Who knows if that had any impact, but at least I stated what I felt and it's something that our Executive Director reviews, and he goes through them all.

Similarly, Interviewee 4 talked about precarious employment with her employer within her exit interview. Another participant engaged in smaller advocacy projects by signing a manifesto that was circulating in her organization. Interviewee 2 describes this manifesto as something that:

Calls for people to care for other people and the earth. It's sort of like a gap to address the way our government leads through neoliberalism. Government has cut back on social programs, neoliberalism has changed the landscape of society.

However, similar to other participants, Interviewee 2 expressed that she had not been able to engage in larger scale advocacy efforts around precarious employment due to the constraints caused by precarious employment. In summary, a theme present within the data is that of small scale advocacy efforts attempted by participants through signing manifestos, writing in performance evaluations and calling for staff meetings to address

unanswered questions around employment status.

### **Permanent Nature of Precarious Employment and The Impact on Advocacy**

Within the data, one could see an insidious neoliberal ideology in play that contributed to inaction around precarious employment. This ideology is the belief that precarious employment “is what it is and is here to stay”. For example, Interviewee 1 stated that, “I always just kind of accepted that it was a contract, okay I took it, it’s a contract, that’s when it’s going to end.” Similar thoughts were echoed by Interviewees 2, 3 and 4. For example, Interviewee 3 shared:

It’s always presented as this is how it is. You’re always presented that you either get hired on a contract or you get hired part time, and you just assume that’s the only way you can be working so you say nothing, and management says ‘this is an opportunity to be permanent’ so you’re secretly hoping for that and you never want to rock the boat.

Part of this ideology appears to be driven by organizations. Interviewee 4 felt as though we live in a time where we are lucky to have a job, and if you do not want the precarious job, “there are eager new graduates who will take your place in a second because there are no jobs anywhere, so you don’t really do anything about precarious employment.” Therefore, employment competition added support to the ideology around the norm of precarious employment and inaction. Furthermore, there appears to be a neoliberal ideology around the quality of employment that is acceptable.

Interviewee 2 shared that she has found that precarious employment and the quality of work that comes with it has been accepted. Interviewee 2 explains:

It’s the norm to not walk into a full time job, it’s the norm not to have vacation or sick time, not have any benefits. I hate to say it, but I feel like people don’t care. It feels like other social workers don’t care because they too had to work a

prolonged period or multiple jobs until they got full time. It's almost that mentality where 'I had to do it, so do you' type thing.

Participants expressed that colleagues felt similarly, as if there was an atmosphere of precarity being the norm. So it can be seen that present within the data is an acceptance of precarity being a societal norm, which contributed to a lack of grander action/advocacy to address precarious employment. Despite the norm of precarity, Interviewees 1, 4, and 5 expressed that colleagues within their organizations have expressed frustrations in discussions about precarious employment. Interviewee adds her feelings of frustration, "Why aren't we doing more about it? I'm guilty too."

### **Power and Powerlessness**

A prominent theme emerging throughout all the questions asked is that of power and the feeling of powerlessness when one is situated in precarious work. Organizations hold the power and control precarious employment impacts on workers' lives.

Interviewee 1 shares:

You feel like you don't have any control over what is going on, and you're trying to be there for your service users but at the same time you have a family and your own life, and I have a mortgage, I've been saving for marriage, for my wedding. You need to know on a personal level too what is going on.

Interviewee 4 echoed similar thoughts sharing concerns around lack of control, not being able to put all your eggs in one basket in order to secure your next meal. Hence, this lack of control/power impacted participants ability to personally plan. Additionally, this power over workers impacted the benefits received by workers and how they were treated. Interviewee 4 explains:

It's hard to do such a hard job with no down time, no vacation time. I would love to understand why this is the case. And maybe receive an explanation on their part

as to why. Doing that would have helped me because if it was something other than their bottom line, I might be more inclined to stick it out but when you are being treated like crap and you don't know why, it's really frustrating. Because you're like, "This is bullshit." It's just super unfair.

The power organizations hold impacted what benefits participants received within their employment (vacation time, sick time), and how they were treated. Interviewee 3 felt as though due to her precarious employment situation, the organization treated her with more scrutiny than non precarious workers.

Finally, participants also connected power around precarious employment to neoliberalism. Interviewee 3 connected precarious employment to a neoliberal agenda, "The neoliberal agenda- where it's results based budgeting, you're under the squeeze. You know there's 50 other people who want your job and so you have to do all these things- so you become a little more 'me' focused." The power of this neoliberal agenda impacted how participants operated within their workplace. Power was also tied to neoliberalism at the level of government policy. Interviewee 2 does not blame the field of social work for precarious employment rather the power of neoliberalism. She explains:

I think it's an outcome of government and neoliberalism. So for me, my social location allowed me to get through all the barriers I had, but not everyone can do that, so you're jumping through hoops just to get somewhere and when you're done it might not be what you thought.

Organizations influenced by neoliberal policies from higher levels (such as governmental policies) impose power onto participants, however the social location of workers and the power associated with social location will impact how neoliberalism and precarious employment is experienced and mitigated. In summary, participants expressed feelings

of powerlessness, and power being enforced by organizations and governments through neoliberal ideologies, which impacted their ability to plan their lives, how they practiced and how they were treated during their practice.

### **Impact of Precarious Employment on Career Satisfaction**

Through the information and stories shared by participants, a common theme was that precarious employment has a negative impact on career satisfaction. First, some participants (Interviewee 3 and 4) feel as though they do not have a career. Interviewee 3 states, “I wouldn’t necessarily call it a career because it’s not long term- that trajectory is really misshapen.” Interviewee 4 also felt like she did not have a career because she was not long term and she was constantly job hopping. She explains:

A career implies putting roots down somewhere, establishing yourself, making connections and I don’t think you do in precarious situations like this because you can’t make connections. It’s an insecure attachment to your job, which you don’t want to give your all to because you’re leaving.

For these participants, precarious employment contributed to the feeling of lacking a career, because their jobs were not long term, and connections and roots were not established.

Precarious employment also impacted career satisfaction by impacting the enjoyment that participants received from their careers. For example, Interviewee 1 is having career doubts due to unhappiness with her career. Interviewee 1 explains:

I have had doubts for a few years now. Is this really what I want to do? It is tough work, it’s stressful, but also there has been so much uncertainty in my other jobs it makes it hard because I would love to just have a job where I know I’m going to be there for a while and I can plan for my future. Social work is great in a lot of ways, because I feel like sometimes I’m doing things that are really meaningful but often there’s times where I feel like I’m just being shit on. That’s reflected in how precarious work is, one of the ways you’re undervalued.

Therefore, for this participant, precarious work shows the undervaluing of social work, and the resulting feelings of being ‘shit on’ which impacted the participants career satisfaction and contributed to career doubts. Also, precarious employment contributed to more anxiety which impacted career satisfaction for Interviewee 3. Interviewee 3 explains:

Precarious employment has made me a more anxious social worker. So I think you can't ever really enjoy your job unless you feel like you're doing a good job and like you're more settled. It made me more anxious with my coworkers, and I think it's made me more anxious with clients because you're always doing one thing. You're a one trick pony.

Hence, for Interviewee 3 career satisfaction was diminished because precarious employment contributed to anxiety, feeling unsettled, and the inability to develop more social work skills.

Also, Interviewees 2 and 3 stressed the impact precarious employment has on social work skills, feeling as though there were gaps in skill usage within their practice due to precarity. Interviewee 3 explained that employers treat you like you are precarious, meaning you do not receive the same training or investment as non-precarious employees. Interviewee 4 also spoke of not feeling settled as an aspect of precarious employment that contributed to career dissatisfaction. What also contributed to career dissatisfaction for Interviewee 4 is feeling as though she had to take the precarious employment situation given to her, as if it was the only option, that there is no room to be selective about jobs. Finally, Interviewee 5 felt dissatisfied within the career due to having to ‘hustle’. Interviewee 5 explains, “People are struggling to survive and working two to three jobs, and having to juggle those jobs and the needs and demands of those

jobs, and the personalities that they work with and all those things hugely impacts career satisfaction.” In summary, precarious employment has contributed to participants feeling as though they do not have a career, increased unhappiness, anxiety, workplace hustling, not feeling settled, being unable to develop skills, and inability to be selective about career choices which have all contributed to career dissatisfaction.

In general, participants still recommended the field of social work. However, their recommendation came with contingencies due to their experiences of the precarious nature of social work. Interviewee 1 stressed that she would recommend the field of social work to those willing to make personal sacrifices for this career. Interviewees 1 and 3 shared their thoughts that this career is not for those who want a stable life or have responsibilities for others, such as having children or taking care of elderly relatives. These participants are suggesting that due to precarious employment, the social work field may not be suited for individuals who are not willing to make sacrifices to their quality of life.



## **DISCUSSION CHAPTER**

The following discussion section will connect the findings to existing literature. Secondly, limitations of this study will be discussed. Next, implications for future research that stemmed from this study will be taken up. Then, this thesis will explore how social work practice/policies might be changed based on the study's findings. Finally, this study will provide concluding statements of the implications of my findings on social workers, their future, service users and the social work profession.

### **Connection to Literature**

This study attempted to address some of the gaps within current literature. Authors Seifert, Messing, Riel and Chatigny (2007) called for studies to include more work content that may be impacted by precarious employment. This statement led me to extend this study to determine how advocacy and reflexivity, not just relationship building, may be impacted. In addition, authors Conway, Williams and Green (1987) concluded that while social work job satisfaction can be determined by examining particular aspects of the job, more aspects of the job need to be included in research. Therefore, I attempted to address this gap by including the job aspects of advocacy, relationship building, and reflexivity within a precarious setting to determine career satisfaction. Finally, to address gaps in the literature authors Conway, Williams and Green (1987) suggest opening up research around job aspects and career satisfaction to workers who are in with both public and private, profit and not-for-profit social work organizations; and therefore I did not narrow my research to any specific type of

social work organization.

This study aimed to understand how precarious employment impacts female social worker's engagement with the skills of advocacy, relationship building and reflexivity. Participants shared that precarious employment did in fact impact their ability to engage in those practical skills. Similar to Seifert et al. (2007), the interviews revealed that precarious employment impacted social workers' ability to engage in relationship building which became more task oriented rather than fully engaging, precarious workers worked through breaks, they had difficulty building skills as they felt uninvested in organizationally, they experienced anxiety, self doubt, and reduced job satisfaction, they had difficulty engaging with colleagues, they felt a lack of control and they noticed an impact on quality of care for service users. Additionally, this study was consistent with Seifert et al. (2007) findings that females in caring positions were forced to work multiple jobs, having to "hustle" between jobs, experiencing time constraints and intensification of work. As found in Hoque and Kirpatrick's (2008) study, participants found that service users experienced dissatisfaction in their care due to a lack of continuity with workers as a result of high turnover rates due to precarious employment. Although not specifically asked within this study, participants stressed that precarious employment impacted relationship building with colleagues, a similar concern found in studies conducted by Gibelman (2005) and Sheifert et al. (2007). In addition to these similar findings within the literature, participants shared that precarious employment impacts relationship building due to workers focusing more on management's task oriented evaluations of performance, workers' stress, workers understanding that the

relationship was coming to an end, and service users knowing that workers were precarious.

Author Donna Baines (2006) found that precarious workers who work solo shifts are unable to exchange ideas and practical skills with colleagues. This was a similar concern found for the participants in this study who did not have colleagues with which to be reflexive and develop social work skills. However, this study also found that precarious employment impacted reflexivity through: stress, time constraints, hustling between jobs, and knowledge that the job was ending. Similar to findings by Aronson & Sammon (2000), participants found that if they wanted to engage in large scale advocacy efforts there was no room do to so in the workplace. Participants also shared that precarious employment impacted advocacy through the following: ability to engage in long term advocacy, lack of awareness of deeper service user issues, time constraints, and hustling between jobs. Therefore, quality of advocacy efforts for service users came into question.

Similar to the literature, a theme of neoliberalism being a source of precarious employment emerged within this study. Restructuring of Canadian social services has occurred through a reduction of social service funding and services (Baines, 2006b, p.195) and this was echoed by participants. Participants felt the pressure of the neoliberal agenda, and understood it was not the social work field acting on its own to encourage precarious employment. Consistent with the literature, that precarious employment was connected to market based principles of accountability, best practice, competencies and benchmarking (Baines, 2006b); participants shared that some

precarious colleagues appeared to be more focused on management's expectations of accountability in order to secure their positions rather than quality of social work service provided. They also stated that social work is moving towards standardization and accountability. As author Shields (2014) found; temporariness tied to neoliberalism was often in the back of participants minds; which impacted their practical skills and career satisfaction.

Rule bending as resistance did not occur due to connectivity needed between workers that comes along with rule bending (Aronson & Sammon, 2000). Participants shared that due to precarious employment, making those connections was prevented. Additionally, the literature found that at times resistance did not occur due to the potential for participants to be replaced (Baines, 2006); this fear was shared by participants. A lack of job opportunities and competition increased the fear of job loss. However, at times, participants did engage in small scale resistance and attempted larger resistance through union involvement. A theme of lack of resistance due to perceptions of the normativity of precarious employment emerged from the data.

## **Conclusions**

Through participants' stories, it was found that precarious employment has a negative impact on social workers. Participants reported feeling insecure in their work, as if they constantly had one foot out the door. Due to precarious employment, participants spent a lot of their time on constant job searches. Additionally, due to precarious employment's impact on relationship building, advocacy and reflexivity, participants reported feeling guilt, sadness, internalization, self-blame, powerlessness,

being undervalued and stress. Therefore, precarious employment's impact on social work skills effect social workers' mental state. Furthermore, evident from the data was that precarious employment impacted social workers' futures. Participants reported feeling as though they do not have a career due to precarious employment. Some participants shared that they would not recommend the field unless potential social workers were willing to make personal sacrifices. Precarious employment made it difficult to obtain stability and plan for the future.

Precarious employment's impact on relationship building, advocacy, and reflexivity had a negative impact for service users. The quality of care service users received came into question, firstly, due to relationships constantly ending, and therefore continuity of care became affected. Additionally, participants shared that colleagues were more interested in management's evaluation of them to retain their precarious positions than good social work practice; moving the focus away from service users. Furthermore, achieving long term advocacy was negatively impacted by precarious employment. Some participants found engaging in advocacy to be difficult to due precarity. While other participants shared that often social workers only understood service user's surface issues, which impacted the quality of advocacy that service users achieved. Participants also shared that it was difficult to engage in systemic change for service users.

Through the experiences participants shared, it became evident that precarious employments impact on skill usage has a negative effect on the social work profession. For one, workers are feeling less invested in their organizations as workers have to

constantly hustle to get tasks done and they find that the organizations are not investing resources back into workers or caring about their well-being. Also, participants found that due to precarity, work is becoming task oriented and there are gaps within their skill usage; which can negatively impact social workers professional image. Furthermore, neoliberal ideologies seem to be present within the profession. Insidious neoliberal ideologies such as poor employment standards for social workers and an acceptance that precarity is the norm; this negatively impacts the value of social workers and the profession. Participants expressed the prominence of these ideologies due to a lack of jobs and competition within the profession. In summary, the findings of this study not only show that precarious employment impacts relationship building, advocacy, reflexivity, career satisfaction and resistance; but also due to these impacts, social workers, service users and the profession are suffering.

### **Limitations of Research**

Limitations occurred due to the the time constraints needed for the completion of this thesis. The sample size needed to remain low in order to complete on time. This study would have benefited from having a variety of voices from different social locations and practices/organizations. Recruiting from different academic institutions which may hold different value and ideological bases may have given different perspectives on the impact of precarious employment on social work skill and career satisfaction. Furthermore, it would have been interesting to do this study with male participants, in order to be able to contrast the experiences and inspect gender differences in the experience of precarious employment and social work.

Furthermore, I experienced a methodological tension in utilizing feminist and critical social science methodology which created a limitation within my study. Critical social science calls for the exposing of ideologies to encourage action (Neuman, 1997). However, feminism calls for empathy (Neuman, 1997), having a meaningful relationship with participants and bringing them into the research process in order to reduce hierarchy (Holder, 2015). Thus, it was difficult to expose ideological assumptions in the moment with participants as I did not have a non-hierarchical relationship with participants and was reflexive that expressing my opinion might have been an imposition of a hierarchical power. In addition, it was within the process of transcription that I noticed the theme of precarious employment being accepted as a norm and thus did not engage in depth dialogue within the interviews in order to question this assumption. Finally, the time constriction of my research made it not possible to engage fully with feminist methodology of having participants be co-creators of the research and research process.

### **Implications for Social Work**

This study revealed that the way social workers operate is impacted by a broader neoliberal agenda through precarious employment. Some participants expressed enlightenment from the interview questions as they were able to connect precarious employment to their experience of practice tensions. It is my hope that through this research other social workers in precarious employment do not feel isolated or internalize the impact of precarity. Additionally, I hope the stories of how participants navigated the challenges of precarious employment and the difficulty they faced in mitigating these challenges may spark hope, discussion, ideas and action on how to

navigate similar situations.

So what should be done? Although for some participants, unionization may not have been fruitful, I still believe that social workers need to come together to address the tensions of precarious employment; and that unionization may be a tactic to consider. Generally, unions come with power, knowledge to address injustice and resources. The social work profession and social work organizations such as the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service workers should encourage social workers to mobilize against precarious employment.

Although there was clear and evident power over social workers; Fook (2000) reminds us that social workers are not completely powerless; the belief that we are powerless is a way out of responsibility to take action. As Interviewee 5 importantly shared:

I think precarious employment is a bane, and I think that society would be in a better place if people were secure in their work, had one job and could have the time to enjoy different things and enjoy just living instead of trying to figure out what to do.

Additionally, the social work profession should take on a larger advocacy role to educate those who employ social workers about the pitfalls of precarity for workers, service users and organizations. Furthermore, the social work profession and organizations should challenge the neoliberal ideological norms of precarious employment and the quality of work that comes with it. Organizations that employ social workers should treat their employees better. This can be done by providing a standard employment relationship and avoiding precarious employment relationships where possible. A standard employment relationship would entail: full time work with one



employer, benefits, and employment with no definite end date (Cranford, Vosko & Zukewich, 2003). Providing a standard relationship may increase career satisfaction by providing stability. Should a standard employment relationship not be possible; organizations should still try to treat their precarious employees better by attempting to provide some of the aspects of a standard relationship (ex: benefits, vacation time, paid sick days). Another way to treat precarious employees better would be to provide paid workplace time to reflect, engage in advocacy and relationship building. Precarious social workers should not have to work harder through their breaks and through unpaid time to complete assigned tasks and engage in their practical skills.

### **Implications for Future Research**

It may be beneficial to replicate this study using a greater sample size, with a variety of social locations and identities situated in different types of organizations. Secondly, a study with the inclusion of male identified social workers and perhaps contrasting it with female experiences of precarity may introduce similarities and/or gender inequalities. Additionally, as previously stated, participants unexpectedly discussed the impact of precarious employment on collegial relationships and how that impacts practice. It would be interesting for future research to examine the impact of precarious employment on organizational culture and how this effects both social work practice and service users. Furthermore, as participants shared that often they and their colleagues were unable to mitigate the challenges precarious employment had on relationship building, advocacy, and reflexivity; it would be interesting for future research to look into how to mitigate these challenges.

Another possibility for future research is to examine methods of engaging in systemic/organizational change to address precarious employment within a Canadian context, considering all the challenges (discussed in findings) that participants faced due to their precarious situations. Finally, since participants often spoke of the impact on service users; it would be beneficial to hear service users' voices and experiences of dealing with precariously employed social workers and the quality of services they received.

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## APPENDIX A LETTER OF INFORMATION / CONSENT

### A Study About The Impact of Precarious Employment on Social Work Skill Engagement and Career Satisfaction for Women

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**Purpose of the Study:**

You are invited to take part in this study on how precarious employment impacts (women identified) social workers' engagement with the skills of advocacy, relationship building and reflexivity. I am also seeking to learn whether or not social workers have engaged in activities and discussions to address precarious employment in their organizations. I am also hoping to learn whether precarious employments impact on social work skills impacts career satisfaction. This research project is being completed as a part of my degree requirements.

**Procedures involved in the Research:**

If you would like to participate in this study, you will be asked open-ended and semi structured questions and the length of the interview will be around 60 minutes. I will only ask to interview you once and this interview will take place in a mutually agreed upon location in which you feel comfortable and or potentially via Skype, if meeting in person is not possible. With your permission, I will audio-record the interview and take written notes. I will also be asking some demographic information such as your age, education, years in the social work field and length of your experience of precarious employment. I will be attaching the interview guide, however here are some sample questions.

- In what way are you precariously employed and for how long?
- What impact(s) do you think the short-term nature of your job has had on engaging in advocacy for/with service users?
  - [ ] If there are impacts, considering your precarious employment, have you been able to mitigate these impacts?
  - [ ] If there are no impacts, why do you think the precarious nature of your job does not have an impact on your advocacy skills?
- Considering your precarious employment, what actions or advocacy has occurred around precarious employment within your work organization?

[ ] If there has not been any action or advocacy, why do you think that is?

#### **Potential Harms, Risks or Discomforts:**

The risks involved in participating in this study are minimal. You may feel uncomfortable with (anxious, uneasy about) recalling experiences of precarious employment and social work practice. You may find it stressful to discuss actions taken or not taken around precarious employment within your organization. You do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable. We are often identifiable through the stories we tell. Please keep this in mind in deciding what to tell me. I describe below the steps I am taking to protect your privacy.

#### **Potential Benefits**

The research will not benefit you directly. I hope to learn more about how precarious employment impacts social work practice and career satisfaction. I hope that what is learned as a result of this study will help us to better understand and raise awareness of the impacts of precarious employment within social service organizations and to better understand how social workers are responding, and why or why not they are responding to precarious employment.

#### **Confidentiality**

You are participating in this study confidentially. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified (such as your organization's name). No one but me will know whether you were in the study unless you choose to tell them. However, once identifying information is removed, data will be shared with my thesis supervisor in a password protected file.

The information/data you provide will be kept in a locked cabinet in my home office where only I will have access to it. Your name and any identifiable data will be removed and replaced with a code tag in order for me to review and analyze the data. Information kept on a computer will be protected by a password. If participants wish they can review the data which they have provided via email to ease any concerns of that identifiable information is present. Once the study has been completed and following the successful defence of my thesis (up to one year), the data will be destroyed.

#### **Participation and Withdrawal:**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is your choice to be part of the study or not. If you decide to be part of the study, you can stop (withdraw), from the interview for whatever reason, even after signing the consent form or part-way through the study or up until approximately one month following your interview date, after this date I will have begun my analysis. If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise. If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

#### **Information about the Study Results:**

I expect to have this study completed by approximately August, 2016. If you would like a brief summary of the results, please provide me with an email and I will send the results via email.

#### **Questions about the Study:**

| If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact me at:

*Isabel Szczygiel, szczygi@mcmaster.ca, 905 512 8509*

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat  
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142  
C/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support  
E-mail: [ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca)

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**CONSENT**

- I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by ..... **Isabel Szczygiel**, of McMaster University.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive additional details I requested.
- I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time or up until approximately **one month following your interview date.**
- I have been given a copy of this form.
- I agree to participate in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant (Printed) \_\_\_\_\_

1. I agree that the interview can be audio recorded.

... Yes.

... No.

2. ... Yes, I would like to receive a summary of the study's results.

Please send them to me at this email address \_\_\_\_\_

Or to this mailing address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

... No, I do not want to receive a summary of the study's results.

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Email Recruitment Script Sent on Behalf of the Researcher by the Holder of the Participants' Contact Information**

**Isabel Szczygiel  
Masters Candidate in Social Work**

**Study Title:  
Impact of Precarious Employment on Social Work Skill Engagement and Career  
Satisfaction for Women**

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**Sample E-mail Subject line:** McMaster study about precarious employment's impact on skill engagement and career satisfaction

Dear Alumni,

Isabel Szczygiel, a McMaster student, has contacted the School of Social Work at McMaster University, asking us to tell our Alumni about a study she is doing on precarious employment. This research is part of her Master of Social Work program at McMaster University.

The following is a brief description of his study.

*I am hoping to learn how precarious employment impacts (women identified) social workers' engagement with the skills of advocacy, relationship building and reflexivity. I am also seeking to learn whether or not social workers have engaged in activities and discussions to address precarious employment in their organizations. Finally, I am hoping to learn whether precarious employment's impact on social work skills impacts career satisfaction.*

If you are interested in getting more information about taking part in Isabel's study please read the brief description below and or **CONTACT ISABEL SZCZYGIEL DIRECTLY** by using her McMaster email address. [szczygi@mcmaster.ca](mailto:szczygi@mcmaster.ca) . The researcher will not tell me or anyone at the School of Social Work who participated or not. Taking part or not taking part in this study will have no bearing on your relationship with the school.

Isabel Szczygiel is inviting you to take part in a 60-minute face to face interview that will take place at a convenient place and location for you. She will work out those details with you. She hopes to learn what social workers like you, think about precarious employment's impact on social worker skill engagement and whether consequently it generally impacts career satisfaction.

Ms. Szczygiel has explained that you can stop being in the study at any time during the face to face interview or not answer questions but can still be in the study. She has asked us to attach a copy of her information letter to this email. That letter gives you full details about this study.

In addition, this study has been reviewed and cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is being conducted you may contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat  
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142  
Gilmour Hall – Room 305 (ROADS)  
E-mail: [ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca)

Sincerely,

Darlene Savoy  
Director's/Graduate Administrative Assistant  
School of Social Work  
McMaster University

## Appendix C

### Interview Questions

#### THE IMPACT OF PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT ON SOCIAL WORK SKILL ENGAGEMENT AND CAREER SATISFACTION FOR WOMEN

**Isabel Szczygiel, (Master of Social Work student)  
(School of Social Work – McMaster University)**

**Information about these interview questions:** This gives you an idea what I would like to learn about precarious employment and social work skill engagement and career satisfaction.

Interviews will be one-to-one and will be open-ended (not just “yes or no” answers). Because of this, the exact wording may change a little. Sometimes I will use other short questions to make sure I understand what you told me or if I need more information when we are talking such as: “*So, you are saying that ...?*”, to get more information (“*Please tell me more?*”), or to learn what you think or feel about something (“*Why do you think that is...?*”).

- 1) Information about you: What is your education? How many years have you been working as a social worker?**
- 2) In what way are you precariously employed and for how long have you been precariously employed?**
- 3) Please inform me of the goals/purpose of your organization.**
- 4) Please describe your role as a social worker in your organization.**
- 5) To what extent does your job rely on your ability to establish trusting relationships with your clients?**  
 If there is not a large extent, please tell me more.
- 6) What impact(s) do you think the short-term (or part-time) nature of your job has on building relationships?**  
 If there are impacts, considering your precarious employment, have you been able to mitigate these impacts?  
 If there are no impacts, why do you think the precarious nature of your job does not have an impact on your relationship building skills?
- 7) What impact(s) do you think precarious employment has on your colleagues’ ability to engage in relationship building with service users?**  
 If there are no impacts, why do you think the precarious nature of your colleagues’ job does not have an impact on relationship building?
- 8) What impact(s) do you think the short-term (or part-time) nature of your job has on engaging in advocacy for/with service users?**

- If there are impacts, considering your precarious employment, have you been able to mitigate challenges precarious employment has on advocacy?
- If there are no impacts, why do you think the precarious nature of your job does not have an impact on your advocacy skills?

9) What impact(s) do you think precarious employment has on your colleagues' ability to engage in advocacy for/with service users?

- If there are no impacts, why do you think the precarious nature of their jobs do not impact their advocacy skills?

10) What impact(s) do you think the the short-term (or part-time) nature of your job has on engaging in reflexivity in practice?

- If there are impacts, considering your precarious employment, have you been able to mitigate the challenges precarious employment has on reflexivity?
- If there are no impacts, why do you think the precarious nature of your job does not have an impact on engaging with reflexivity in practice?

11) What impact(s) do you think precarious employment has on your colleagues' ability to engage in reflexivity?

- If there are no impacts, why do you think that the precarious nature of their jobs does not have an impact on reflexivity?

12) Considering your precarious employment, have you been able to engage in actions or advocacy around precarious employment within your work organization?

- If there has not been any action or advocacy, why do you think that is?

13) What kind(s) of discussions about precarious employment has occurred within your organization amongst colleagues?

- If there have not been any discussions, why do you think discussions have not occurred?

14) What impact(s) has precarious employment had on advocacy, relationship building and reflexivity in regards to impacting your career satisfaction?

15) Why or why not would you recommend the field of social work to others?

16) Is there something important I forgot? Is there anything else you would like to share about precarious employment and social work skill/satisfaction that you consider to be important?

END