Working Conditions of Front-Line Poverty-Reduction Staff at Non-profit Agencies

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Abstract

Over the past three to four decades in Ontario, neoliberalization and new public management have restructured the non-profit social services sector (NPSS) by reducing core funding and introducing a competitive proposal system with increased managerial accountability. These changes have generated immense workplace pressures for frontline staff. Frontline staff in the NPSS have seen an increase in standardization accompanied by the degradation of their skills. Through in-depth interviews with five frontline staff at two similar non-profit agencies serving people experiencing poverty in the Niagara Region, this paper explores the question: How do frontline staff in the non-profit social services sector describe their working conditions? And how resonant are the narratives of compassion fatigue and burnout. In contrast to the narrative of "compassion fatigue" that often describes the experiences of professional frontline workers, I found that burnout among frontline poverty-reduction staff stems primarily from encountering structural barriers, such as a lack of affordable housing, that limit what they can do to help their service users. Furthermore, I found a general lack of organizational supports for frontline staff as workers, including supports to prevent or lessen burnout. This research brings to light new perspectives regarding poverty-reduction work and ultimately points to needed supports for frontline staff that may improve their work lives, well-being and poverty-reduction effectiveness.

It is 2021, over a year since the first case of Covid-19 was confirmed in Canada. As I write this, Niagara, Ontario, is in our third lockdown with a stay-at-home order. Broadly speaking, the pandemic has illuminated the vulnerabilities in our society. More people are recognizing the gaps that exist in our social supports and the efforts of the organizations and people who attempt to address them. The non-profit social services (NPSS) sector is essential to supporting people in need, especially in the current political economy. Now, with more need for already in-demand services, the stress placed on the non-profit social services sector is increased. Neoliberalization and new public management have restructured the NPSS sector and created immense pressure by reducing core funding and introducing a competitive proposal system with increased managerial accountability. This pressure has been passed on to frontline staff.

Through in-depth interviews with five frontline staff at two similar non-profit agencies serving people experiencing poverty in the Niagara Region, this major research paper explores the question: How do frontline staff in the non-profit social services sector describe their working conditions? And how resonant are the narratives of compassion fatigue and burnout. This research brings to light new perspectives regarding poverty-reduction work and ultimately points to needed supports for frontline staff that may improve their work lives, well-being and poverty-reduction effectiveness.

Born in the 1980s, I grew up in rural Niagara Falls, Ontario, in a white, working-class family. My parents dropped out of high-school and worked in manufacturing; it was nearing the end of the era where a single blue-collar income could support a family. Post-secondary education was not a common discussion in my household growing up. Work was something you did to obtain a material standard of living; you worked for the weekend. So, my first thoughts of employment were that I would get a unionized job in a factory and work there until I retired. I

entered the labour market part-time in 1999. In 2003 when I was ready for full-time employment, all the "good" manufacturing jobs the generations before me enjoyed had been replaced with precarious, minimum wage employment in the service sector. Several years into the new reality of the labour market, and with injuries from repetitive actions required for my work, I began my university education to pursue better employment opportunities. I began my undergraduate degree part-time in 2012 and continued working part-time. Undergrad was the beginning of understanding my experiences as situated within a political economy perspective, which informs this research.

Political Economy

My analysis is situated within a political economy perspective and deploys the lenses of neoliberalization and new public management. The Niagara Region is the location of the two agencies from which I interviewed frontline workers for this study.

Neoliberalism, according to Harvey (2007), refers to the hegemonic ideology that state interventions in the economy must be kept to a minimum. Neoliberalism is simultaneously an elite-led agenda for policy reform and a cultural creed (Harvey, 2005) and is characterized by individualism, personal responsibility, privatization and government outsourcing, free-market ideals and supposed freedom from government regulation (Coulter, 2009a, 2009b, 2014; Giroux, 2004, 2005, 2015; Harvey 2005, 2007; Peck and Tickell, 2002). Moreover, Coulter (2009b) argues that under neoliberalism the relationship between the government and citizens shifts from understanding people as citizens, with social rights and entitlements, to treating them as consumers and taxpayers. The historical process of neoliberalization, however, is not universal or uniform. Arguments such as Harvey's (2007) capture the cultural and political aspects of

neoliberalization; however, they fail to address the project's geographic variability and temporal phases.

Challenging monolithic conceptualizations of neoliberalism, Peck and Tickell (2002) describe two broad movements of neoliberalization. At the transnational level, they argue, the historical process started with neoliberalism as an intellectual or philosophical project, which due to crisis conditions in the 1970s led to the purposeful state-produced restructuring in the 1980s. Peck and Tickell (2002) label this shift: "proto-" to "rollback" neoliberalism. Rollback neoliberalism is characterized by destruction, dismantlement, deregulation and the discreditation of welfarist thought and institutions. By the 1990s, neoliberal economics were normalized. As a response to the failings of earlier neoliberalism, the project shifted to what Peck and Tickell (2002) refer to as "roll-out neoliberalism." Under the roll-out phase, neoliberalized state governance is purposefully constructed and consolidated. Not only focused on the market, roll-out neoliberalism includes regulatory reform and invasive social policies. Hence, Peck and Tickell (2002) argue that roll-out neoliberalism "represents *both* the frailty of the neoliberal project *and* its deepening" (p. 390). For example, when crises arise, restructuring strategies are flexible enough to displace, minimize, localize or absorb them, highlighting the transformative feature of neoliberalization (Peck and Tickell, 2002). Neoliberalization is a purposeful project achieved through political intervention and new forms of institution-building in order to manage contradictions, secure legitimacy and extend the project further (Peck and Tickell, 2002).

The process of neoliberalization contradicts the neoliberal ideology of freedom from government intervention. Under neoliberalization, power tends to be centralized without accompanying accountability (Peck and Tickell, 2002). Although neoliberalization is global, the impacts and implementation of the purposeful project are varied and uneven. Neoliberalization

has been rolled back and rolled-out to varying degrees depending on the specifics of the location and time; therefore, it differs by nation, region and even city. The variability and unevenness enabled by the project's flexibility are in part why neoliberalization is challenging to define, despite these broad shifts.

In the NPSS sector, we can see the frailty and deepening of neoliberalization through the downloading of poverty-reduction efforts to municipalities and the contradictory government intervention that has increased government managerial power.

Neoliberalization in Ontario

In Canada, the election of the Progressive Conservative Mulroney government of the 1980s has been recognized as the moment of neoliberal seizure of the Canadian federal government (Coulter, 2009b). During the recession of the early 1990s, Canada, like other countries, experienced high unemployment rates, along with damage to the manufacturing and industrial sectors by free trade and continental integration (Coulter, 2009b). In Canada, provinces and territories are given responsibility for their own "revenue generation and collection, and the funding and delivery of healthcare, elementary, secondary and post-secondary education, social services, environmental protections, children's services and housing, among others" (Coulter, 2009b, p. 29). In Ontario, the lack of jobs resulted in high rates of welfare use. Increased public spending for welfare, combined with the backlash to some initiatives implemented by Ontario's social democratic government, created an environment of hostility towards the government itself as well as minorities and poor people (Coulter, 2009a, p. 29). In 1995, a right-wing populist, neoliberal party led by Mike Harris won a majority government in Ontario. The Progressive Conservative campaign blamed the economic climate on the welfare state, government regulation and high spending on employment insurance, rather than the increase in free trade and

transnational capitalist recession (Coulter, 2009b, p. 29). What followed was purposeful

restructuring and widespread cuts to social programs, vilification of the poor, the selling off of

public assets, deregulation and tax cuts, and a freezing of the minimum wage by the Ontario

government.

An illustration of the long-term consequences of neoliberalization for poverty is the

provinces' minimum wage policy, which has impacted Ontario's ability to achieve a current

living wage. Between 1995 and 2003, Ontario's minimum wage was frozen at $6.85 an hour.

Between 2004 and 2010, the minimum wage gradually increased to $10.25 an hour (Ministry of

Labour, Training and Skills Development, 2014). In 2013 the Liberal Government of Ontario

established the Ontario Minimum Wage Advisory Panel with the mandate to "examine Ontario's

current minimum wage policy and provide advice on an approach for determining the minimum

wage in the future" (Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development, 2014). The Ontario

Minimum Wage Advisory Panel made four recommendations: tie the minimum wage to the

Ontario Consumer Price Index, annual revision of the minimum wage, a review of the rate and

revision process every five years, and lastly, to ensure that policies are in step with the needs of

citizens. (Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development, 2014). Six years after the panel

made recommendations, The Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (2020)

announced that minimum wage rates *may* increase annually starting in 2020 and that the increase

will be tied to the Ontario Consumer Price Index.

The freezing of the minimum wage by the conservative governments of the 1990s and

early 2000s, at least in part, contributed to the lack of current liveable wages in Ontario. In

addition, the delay in instituting the Ontario Minimum Wage Advisory Panel's recommendations

and failure to institute all the recommendations, has made the gap between minimum wage and a

living wage challenging to close. Opponents of a living wage argue that the required increases

would be detrimental to business. They say it would be too much, too fast. Ontario has been

locked into a low minimum wage unable to achieve a living wage that is in line with the needs of

citizens. Thus, the inability or unwillingness to achieve a living wage keeps some residents in

Ontario stuck in poverty and is at least partly due to neoliberal policies.

According to the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network (2019), "A living wage is an

important income policy lever to help get Niagara families out of severe financial stress by

lifting them out of poverty and providing a *modest* [emphasis added] level of economic security

and social inclusion." Ontario's minimum wage remains low at $14.25 an hour (Employment

Standards Act, 2020). Meanwhile, the Niagara Poverty Reduction Network calculates the hourly

living wage for the Niagara Region as $18.12, or $32,981 annually, for 2019 (The Niagara

Poverty Reduction Network, 2019). Due to the complex impacts of Covid-19, there will not be a

calculation for 2020 (Smith, 2020). In Ontario, most NPSS sector frontline staff are paid rates

near the minimum wage. However, some organizations strive to increase pay to be closer to

living wages. The consequences of neoliberalization for Ontario's NPSS sector wages will be

discussed further during the analysis.

After two consecutive Progressive Conservative governments in Ontario, the 2003

election saw the Liberal campaign attempt to reconcile neoliberal approaches with social

democratic approaches in order to garner enough support to form government. This approach is

known as Third Way politics. Promoting themselves as responsible, in line with new public

policy management approaches *and* with an interest in public services, proved beneficial for the

provincial Liberal Party. Dalton McGuinty headed the new majority government for Ontario.

According to Coulter (2009b), the Liberals' third way strategy exposed a contradiction between

the Liberal government's rhetoric and action; despite speaking of diversity, it actively avoided

"the complexity of race, gender, and class politics" (p. 32). This avoidance is reflected in the

organization of the NPSS sector, a low-wage sector with positions predominately occupied by

white women.

Neoliberalism is not simply about policies and projects; it has been embedded in our

culture. Neoliberalism is now so deeply culturally rooted that it not only justifies cuts to social

spending, but individuals internalize the ideology and blame themselves for circumstances

beyond their control. According to Giroux (2015), the vocabulary of neoliberalism posits a false

notion of freedom, which it wraps in the mantle of individualism and choice, and in doing so

reduces all problems to private issues, suggesting that whatever problems bear down on people,

the only way to understand them is through the restrictive lens of individual responsibility,

character and self-resilience (p. 450). Additionally, Coulter (2009b) argues that the political

culture of neoliberalism lacks "discussion about existing inequities in power and economic status

or between genders and how these influence the ability of people to make choices in their lives"

(p. 28). Neoliberalization has restricted people and even municipalities' ability to make choices.

According to Peck and Tickell (2002), local manifestations of the neoliberal agenda and

policies are coerced from larger-scale processes, which privilege privatization and deregulation

and create competitive resource allocation. Moreover, if municipalities are noncompliant or

incompetent, they are excluded from funding streams and suffer neglect (Peck and Tickell,

2002). The argument of coercion by macro processes can be extended to organizations in the

non-profit social services sector. I refer to macro processes as structural barriers throughout this

major research paper, making them sound immovable. However, processes are changeable.

These macro processes or structural barriers unjustly coerce sectors, including the NPSS sector,

into neoliberal practices. For example, funding bodies set criteria for grants that prioritize neoliberal practices such as short-term funding cycles, standardization and doing more for less. If NPSS sector organizations want their grant applications approved, they are required to meet these criteria. As a result, NPSS sector organizations are forced to engage in neoliberal practices to ensure their survival. Thus, the roll-out of neoliberalization in the NPSS sector recruits the sector into neoliberal governance and rhetoric. The extension of neoliberalization into new sectors has reduced social spending by governments and blurred the lines between the for-profit and non-profit sectors.

New Public Management

Alongside governments 'transferring responsibility for services to non-government providers, management principles of the private sector have also been increasingly integrated into the public and NPSS sector (Baines and Cunningham, 2015). Part of the integration process of private-sector principles has been enabled by the philosophy of new public management (NPM). NPM has become a standard international model for reforming public administration (Schedler and Proeller, 2002), and according to Baines & Cunningham (2015), although perspectives differ and the impacts vary in degree across regions of different countries, "broad agreement exists concerning NPM characteristics," which have "radically altered the non-profit sector" (p. 185). While NPM appears to be developed for the public sector, it actually incorporates private sector principles, specifically, the principles of value for money and efficiency (Baines and Cunningham, 2015). NPM encompasses reduced government funding of social services, standardization of NPSS sector frontline work and 'hollowing out' of public services (Baines and Cunningham, 2015, p. 184).

Through the NPSS sector we can see a convergence of neoliberalization as both policy and culture. The cultural ideology of individual responsibility, self-blame and a lack of consideration for inequities complements the roll-out of invasive social policies and vice-versa. Both the policies and culture work together in normalizing neoliberalization.

Literature Review

To explore the research question: How do frontline staff in the non-profit social services sector describe their working conditions? And how resonant are the narratives of compassion fatigue and burnout. I first focus on broad trends in the non-profit social services sector and previous theoretical and empirical contributions on the topic. I review the literature on frontline staff in the sector as well as the concepts of compassion fatigue and burnout. Finally, I describe some of the unique social characteristics of the Niagara Region that are relevant to this topic.

NPSS Sector

The frontline workers interviewed for this study work in the NPSS sector, which is a sub-sector of the non-profit sector. The particular characteristics of this sector of the economy affect working conditions. The non-profit sector comprises various organizations, including hospitals, universities, sports and recreation organizations, arts councils, religious organizations, registered charities, volunteer groups, social clubs, trade associations, advocacy groups and social service organizations. According to Hall et al., (2003) although diverse in their activities, all non-profits share common characteristics that separate them from for-profit organizations and the government. Non-profit organizations are organized, self-governing, voluntary, nongovernmental and do not share profits with their directors (Hall et al., 2003).

In Canada, the *core sector* refers to the charitable and non-profit sector, not the public sector (i.e., public schools, libraries, hospitals, universities or colleges) (Ministry of Government

and Consumer Services, 2013). Non-profit organizations in this core sector deliver many critical services to communities and are vital to the economic and social quality of life in Ontario (Hall et al., 2003). In a 2013 survey for the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services, most non-profit organizations self-identify as regional or local, with 61 percent saying they primarily serve a neighbourhood, city, town, county, or rural municipality.

A sub-sector of the core sector is *social services*. In the 2013 State of the Sector: Profile of Ontario's Not-for-Profits and Charitable Organizations report, 18 percent of agencies classify themselves as social services-based (Ministry of Government and Consumer Services, 2013). This sub-sector, the non-profit social services sector (NPSS sector), includes organizations such as food banks, emergency shelters, drop-in centres, community health centres and other organizations that offer social services or identify as poverty-reduction or social justice programs.

The impacts of neoliberalization on the NPSS sector are profound. According to a study by Hall et al., (2003), in 2002, most Ontario organizations reported problems with acquiring adequate resources and were concerned about their ability to achieve their goals. More specifically, organizations struggled with the ability to keep paid staff and get the type of volunteers they needed. About ten years later, a Ministry of Government and Consumer Services (2013) study reaffirmed the impact of neoliberalization on the NPSS sector, with 82 percent of agencies identifying their critical challenges as obtaining sufficient funding to meet their mandate. Their most significant challenge was a lack of human resources. Neoliberalization and the resulting reduction in government social spending have strained the NPSS sector while simultaneously making the NPSS sector increasingly important to supporting people in need.

Relational Work

When people fall on hard times, it is expected that they will be cared for by their family, community and government agencies. However, according to Jindra and Jindra (2016), "non-profits serve as perhaps the strongest link between the lives of the poor and the wider society they are often alienated from, and their work is crucial in allowing people to have more options" (p. 639). Jindra and Jindra's (2016) argument reflects a significant trend among non-profits towards *relational work*, ranging from more informal coaching to case management. The NPSS sector helps people learn to navigate the world of work and institutions that most people need to thrive (Jindra and Jindra, 2016). Increasing the availability of work and institutions by restructuring the political economy does not equate to access for people living in poverty. Simply put, restructuring the political-economy alone would not improve the standard of living for everyone living in poverty. While changing structures may offer more opportunities such as living-wage jobs or education, people living in poverty with significant personal challenges would not be able to take advantage of these opportunities. Some service users require more than just opportunities; they may need help maintaining employment, overcoming problematic substance use, or learning basic life or social skills. Thus, we need both restructuring of the political economy and personal supports. According to Jindra & Jindra (2016), the debate between transforming society vs the person is not an either/or debate. Staff at most non-profits see the need for improvements in the system through improvements in jobs, benefits and more radical changes. But they know many people would not be able to take advantage of better social structures without personal transformations. Personal transformations via relational work, either informally or through case management, encompasses ongoing contact between a service user and non-profit, and a set of goals (Jindra & Jindra, 2016). The increase in relational work in the

NPSS sector since 2006 has meant more challenging work for frontline staff. Relational work requires staff to immerse themselves in the lives of their service users. Staying with service users for the long term takes a great deal of commitment, energy, and focus (Jindra, Pauelle, & Jindra, 2020). The implications for organizations are often increased reliance on volunteers and increased staffing, requiring more overhead.

Simultaneously to neoliberalization, new public management in the NPSS sector intensified. Overall, the impact of NPM has been to reduce public spending and shift welfare service provision to a radically altered NPSS sector. The NPM shift of the 1990s saw government funding move from core- to project-based funding, increased reporting requirements, and the expectation to find private funding and in-kind contributions (Allan, 2019). Under this shift, the role of voluntary organizations in the NPSS sector expanded considerably, particularly in social care. Not wanting to lose their funding but being increasingly controlled by government contracts, NPSS sector organizations have been pulled into focusing on cost reduction and efficiencies rather than social models of inclusive and participatory care (Baines and Cunningham, 2015). The impact of this shift has been felt by service providers, frontline staff and service users.

The increased focus on reporting and outputs to meet funding body requirements associated with NPM has lowered frontline staff working conditions (Baines and Cunningham, 2015). Frontline staff experience reduced autonomy and degradation of skills, accompanied by increased standardization, intensified workloads and increased supervision (Baines and Cunningham, 2015, Cunningham, Baines and Shields, 2017). NPSS sector organizations are generally understaffed and lack staff training and resources; also, contract staff lack job security. Organizations, however, are still expected to offer impactful, efficient services on short-term

funding cycles with burdensome reporting. The pressure created by the combination of reduced

funding and increased expectations have been passed on to frontline staff who are expected to

work additional unpaid hours and work through breaks. Some staff even experience mandatory

'volunteer' hours as a job requirement (Baines and Cunningham 2015; Baines, Cunningham, and

Shields, 2017; Cunningham, Baines and Shields, 2017).

Volunteers

Many non-profit organizations have come to rely heavily upon volunteers to meet their

missions. Volunteering is portrayed as a way to build a resume and gain skills and experience for

better employment opportunities in the future. However, as Allen (2019) argues, volunteer

labour exacerbates social inequalities. Volunteers are primarily recent graduates and immigrants,

and they often struggle to leverage their unpaid volunteer work into paid employment.

Volunteers' lifetime earnings do not catch up to paid workers' earnings.

In Ontario's core non-profit sector, 87 percent of agencies have volunteers who perform

over eight million hours of work annually or the equivalent of 215,000 full-time jobs (Ministry

of Government and Consumer Services, 2013). Ontario's NPSS sector specifically has seen a

growth in reliance on volunteers, which was up 16 percent in 2013 from 2003, with a total

estimated 3,388,826 volunteers contributing an average of 344.5 hours annually (Ministry of

Government and Consumer Services, 2013). In the NPSS sector, volunteers generate significant

savings for the government and fill gaps in services left by the expectation placed on

organizations to do more with less (Allan, 2019).

Before the pandemic, the condition of the non-profit social services sector was delicate.

Due to a history of underfunding, and the increased demand for services caused by Covid-19, the

non-profit sector has been acutely stressed. While many non-profit agencies have changed their

delivery models to maintain services, a flash survey of non-profit leaders by the Ontario Non-profit Network in 2020 found that 83 percent of respondents were experiencing or anticipating a disruption of services to service users and communities. Many non-profits, according to the Women's Foundation (2020), aim to care for the well-being of individuals, meet physical needs and provide a range of social services. These agencies make up over 90 percent of what the Women's Foundation (2020) calls the women's sector, which is characterized by feminized care work. In the women's sector, 82 percent of organizations fear they will have to close their doors." (The Women's Foundation et al., 2020 p. 17).

Frontline Staff in the NPSS sector

Most people spend a significant amount of their time in their workplace. Accordingly, Coulter (2014) reminds us that work has significant impacts on our lives; it affects our "income, health, schedules, identities and […] relationships, including those with other living beings and the environment." (p. 4). Yet, despite the significance of work in our lives, literature searches on the NPSS sector reveal a primary focus on funders, organizations or service users. Research that examines the working conditions of NPSS sector staff usually does so from an organizational management perspective or as an afterthought. Little research focuses primarily on frontline staff in the non-profit social services sector, their working conditions and the implications of those conditions.

The non-profit social services sector predominately employees white, middle-class women. According to the Ontario Non-profit Network (2019a), Ontario's non-profit sector employs 1 million people, 80 percent of whom are women (Ontario Non-profit Network, 2019a; The Women's Foundation et al., 2020). Additionally, while inclusion and diversity are cited as many organizations' values, the non-profit sector "does not appear to be diverse in its leadership,

or to have a strong commitment to diversity and inclusion at the organizational level" (Mowat Centre, 2014, p. 1). A 2013 study by the Ontario Non-profit Network found that 87 percent of organization leaders were white, and 80 percent were born in Canada (Mowat Centre, 2014). Furthermore, while these findings only reflect leadership roles, the study also found that 75 percent of organizations were not actively recruiting from diverse groups (Mowat Centre, 2014).

The result of the primarily female workforce and new public management is that wages, benefits, and sick pay have all failed to keep pace with these workers' public sector counterparts (Baines and Cunningham, 2015). The working conditions in the non-profit sector are worsened by the short-term funding cycles, which result in precarious contractual employment. According to Baines and Cunningham (2015), the new public management values of efficiency and cost-cutting interact with gender to "support the undervaluation of women's pay and conditions" (Baines and Cunningham, 2015). Furthermore, based on their gender, most NPSS sector workers are believed to have an infinite and innate capacity to care, which results in a high tolerance of the reduced working conditions (Baines and Cunningham, 2015; The Women's Foundation et al., 2020). However, Baines and Cunningham (2015) caution that this tolerance may be changing as the conditions deteriorate to the point where commitment to organizations is diminishing.

Within the NPSS sector, there exists a gender pay gap. Women receive lower compensation than men, with "racialized, immigrant, and indigenous women, and women with disabilities" experiencing the wage gap to a greater extent (Ontario Non-profit Network, 2019b, p. 3). The greatest wage gap occurs at the senior administration level, where men's salary on average is 17 percent more than women's (Ontario Non-profit Network, 2019b). The wage statistics show that the workers in the non-profit sector are generally undervalued and that the conditions of employment are poor, in part, because of the gendered expectations of women.

I have argued that neoliberal and new public management values of efficiency and cost savings interact with gendered norms that associate women with compassion. This insight helps us understand the normalization and acceptance of the stressful working conditions in the NPSS sector. Some scholars have also begun to question the idea that compassion is necessary for the non-profit sector, which is the argument I will turn to next.

Compassion Fatigue or Burnout

The concept of emotional labour was developed by Arlie Hochschild (1983) through her analysis of flight attendants' control of emotions as part of their required job performance. Emotional labour entails managing both the customers' feelings and the workers' own emotions to deliver excellent service, which will generate the most profit (Hochschild, 1983). According to Coulter (2014), whose book focuses on the working conditions of retail workers, "most kinds of service work require regular emotional labour" (p.34). While Hochschild (1983) and Coulter (2014) discuss emotional labour in terms of the private sector, it is also prevalent in the public sector, even though profit is not at stake. In the social services and non-profit sectors, emotional labour includes the management of workers' and service users' emotions. Service users who are struggling in one form or another often need emotional support or social connection. In the social services, emotional labour is discussed as the reason work is meaningful or satisfying, or negatively, as compassion fatigue and burnout, which are often spoken of as a pair that accompany each other.

A recent study by Schiff and Lane (2019) characterizes compassion fatigue as comprised of "two distinct components of negative emotional and behavioural responses to stress in the work environment: burnout and secondary traumatic stress (STS)" (p.455). Schiff and Lane (2019) go on to provide these definitions: "Burnout is marked by frustration, anger, depression

and exhaustion, while STS consists of the intrusive emotional responses of work-related

exposure to traumatized people" (p. 455). Secondary traumatic stress, sometimes also referred to

as vicarious trauma, has similar symptoms to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and is

common among people working with people who have experienced trauma (Petrovich et al.,

2020; Schuler et al., 2016). A distinction between PTSD and STS is that STS occurs from

exposure to second-hand accounts of traumatic events (Petrovich et al., 2020).

For non-profit social services sector frontline staff, the increased oversight and reduced

autonomy from standardization are problematic because, according to Schuler et al., (2016),

"lower levels of autonomy reduce psychological empowerment which is predictive of secondary

traumatic stress" (p. 97). Secondary traumatic stress, along with the already heavy workload and

emotional working environment, results in poor psychological outcomes for frontline staff and

reduced quality of services for service users (Jenkins and Baird, 2002; Lemieux-Cumberlege &

Taylor, 2019). In turn, increasing psychological empowerment through increased autonomy and

workplace support helps protect against STS so that workers are supported and better able to

serve service users. Additionally, research suggests that frontline staff should participate in the

decision-making process and be able to express concerns in a meaningful way.

In exploring job satisfaction, Lambert et al., (2005) assert that "If social service

employees are asked to provide social justice to those whom they serve, it is reasonable to argue

that they in turn deserve [organizational] justice at their jobs" (p. 425). Two types of justice

affect job satisfaction: procedural justice and distributive justice. Participation in decision-

making, also known as autonomy or, in some instances, self-determination, is part of procedural

justice. In this context, procedural justice is the sense of autonomy NPSS sector staff feel over

their job, whereas distributive justice refers to compensation rates. Procedural justice is more

important than distributive justice in the levels of commitment to an agency and overall job

satisfaction (Lambert et al., 2005). Job satisfaction is critical for NPSS sector staff as it is linked

with positive behaviours and attitudes (Lambert et al., 2005). Positive behaviours, attitudes, and

increased autonomy, in turn, result in better project delivery and improved experiences for

service users. Although the Lambert et al., (2005) study focused on social service employees, the

purpose was to improve staff retention rates. Increasing staff retention rates benefits agencies

because maintaining staff is cheaper than recruiting and training new staff.

 Research on compassion fatigue and burnout tends to focus on 'professionals' such as

nurses, police officers and social workers (Bride and Figley, 2007; Harr et al., 2014; Huggard et

al., 2017; Figley and Figley, 2017). Few research projects focus on 'non-professionals' such as

non-profit staff (Schiff and Lane, 2019; Schuler et al., 2016; Lemieux-Cumberlege and Taylor,

2019). There are many models of compassion fatigue and theories about the risk factors among

staff. The names vary, and the distinctions between compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic

stress and vicarious trauma are debated. However, compassion itself is taken for granted as good

and necessary.

 Some critical scholars challenge the idea that compassion is good, necessary and leads to

positive change which is relevant for efforts toward poverty reduction. For example, Bourdieu's

(1999) focus on personal suffering and emotion without social and cultural context is critiqued

by McRobbie (2002) for failing to make a political intervention. According to McRobbie (2002),

failing to make a political intervention illustrates that compassion is a social privilege. The

compassionate person has the privilege or advantage of being unaware of the structural

conditions creating suffering and creates a hierarchy between themselves and the person

suffering. Compassion, therefore, is a social relationship (Berlant, 2004).

Cartwright (2008) argues compassion can be deemed compulsory because it is performed based on what we think is expected of us and from a compulsion to act rather than a feeling. Similarly, Vitellone (2011), who examined visual representations of drug use to explore the political possibilities and limitations of compassion, argues that we have moved into a 'political economy of emotions,' where the cultural script has reduced compassion to "a short-term intensity of self-satisfied sympathy" (p. 586). The reduction of compassion to an individualized feeling results in compassion being linked to neoliberal values rather than redistributive social policies. The emotion of compassion has been removed and replaced with 'tough love' policies abdicating political and social responsibility. Hence, we need to contest compassion as it is currently accepted because it stops us from engaging with the broader structures that create the conditions of current social suffering. In challenging the compassion fatigue framework, we can reframe the representation of service users in the non-profit sector and the impact this representation has on staff and the expectation of compassion. We can re-frame service users as suffering the consequences of policy choices, thus generating a feeling of collective responsibility.

Burnout was originally described as depersonalization, diminished feelings of personal accomplishment and emotional exhaustion (Gillath, Shaver, and Mikulincer, 2005; Jenkins and Baird, 2002; Schiff and Lane, 2019). More recently, some scholars associate burnout with compassion fatigue and traumatic stress disorders. For example, Schiff and Lane, 2019 explore the co-existence and causal relationship between burnout and post-traumatic stress disorder. However, Jenkins and Baird (2002) argue that, while vicarious traumatization or secondary traumatic stress and burnout are moderately related, burnout is primarily due to "chronic tedium in the workplace rather than exposure to specific kinds of client problems" (p. 425). Jenkins and

Baird (2002) go on to say that burnout results in poor service delivery, withdrawal from service

users, and in combination with intense working conditions, this may reduce job satisfaction and

feelings of inadequacy resulting in feelings of failure and low self-esteem. Furthermore, Jenkins

and Baird (2002) argue against incorporating burnout into conceptualizations of compassion

fatigue and instead argue for distinguishing between theoretical frameworks of compassion

fatigue and secondary traumatic stress or vicarious trauma.

Following Jenkins and Baird (2002), I hold that burnout is due to poor workplace

conditions and a lack of support for frontline staff. Also, I reject the notion of compassion as

necessary to effectively perform frontline poverty-reduction work. Frontline staff in poverty

reduction can provide services without engaging emotionally. Therefore, this research focuses on

burnout. I argue that since job satisfaction, involvement in decision-making processes,

autonomy, psychological empowerment, and workplace supports reduce the likelihood of

'compassion fatigue' among staff, it is not actually compassion fatigue that affects non-profit

frontline staff. Frontline staff are not fatigued from exposure to their service user's trauma.

Rather they suffer burnout from unsupportive working conditions.

For this paper, burnout is understood in terms of its original characteristics:

depersonalization, diminished feelings of personal accomplishment and emotional exhaustion

(Gillath, Shaver, and Mikulincer, 2005; Jenkins and Baird, 2002; Schiff and Lane 2019). Burnout

is a state of exhaustion caused by prolonged or excessive stress where workers may become

unable to meet constant demands, feel overwhelmed and emotionally drained due to poor

working conditions.

The Niagara Region

In 1970, the provincial government restructured local governments in southern Ontario, transforming governance in Niagara. Originally consisting of 26 municipalities and two counties, the region was restructured into 12 municipalities and the Regional Municipality of Niagara (Niagara Community Observatory, 2019a). Since the amalgamation of 1970, governance in Niagara has remained largely unchanged. The two-tier system has a local council for each municipality in addition to the Regional Council (Niagara Region, 2021). The Regional Council has 32 councillors, including the 12 mayors of each municipality plus 19 elected representatives based on population and the Regional Chair (Niagara Community Observatory, 2019b).

Although the threat of further amalgamation by the current provincial government has passed, controversy over governance structure remains in the region. Some argue that the regional council is too large and that the size inhibits debate and effective governance. Others argue that the size allows for representatives from different areas, which allows for a sense of connection between residents and councillors. Another common criticism is that the dual system results in decentralized services and a lack of coordination between municipal governments. Recently, there have also been concerns about corruption. One instance of concern is the chief administrative officer hiring scandal, which embroiled the former regional chair and led residents to question their faith in the regional government (LeFleche, 2020).

Responsibilities are divided between the region and municipalities, with the most expensive services such as police and social services assigned to the region (Niagara Community Observatory, 2019a). Some responsibilities are shared among the region and each municipality, such as economic development and planning, while parks, recreation and wastewater collection are the responsibility of each municipality (Niagara Community Observatory, 2019a).

As part of the region's responsibility for social services, the Niagara Prosperity Initiative (NPI) was developed to support poverty alleviation projects by disbursing $1.5 million in project funding to local non-profit organizations annually through a call for proposals. According to the executive summary from the recent NPI evaluation study, in which this project has its roots, the NPI has funded 374 poverty alleviation projects since 2008 (Raddon, Soron, and Petrina, 2021). Furthermore, Raddon, Soron and Petrina (2021) argue that poverty continues to be a significant problem in the region even though the percentage of Niagara households affected by low income and unemployment was near or below provincial averages before the pandemic.

Like many other regions, Niagara has seen a decline in the manufacturing sector, which has resulted in the loss of permanent, well-paying employment for low-skilled workers. In turn, these jobs have been replaced with precarious, low-wage employment mainly in the retail and service sectors (Durrant and Phillips, 2015). Niagara has also lost many of its large employers, leaving behind small to mid-sized companies, which offer lower wages and are unable to provide benefits and pensions comparable to larger employers (Calcott and Conteh, 2018a). Despite the loss of large employers, Calcott and Conteh (2018b) further argue that recent years indicate an upswing in manufacturing in the region, which is hopeful. However, Raddon, Soron and Petrina (2021) state that while economic indicators suggest Niagara's economy has been strong in relation to other regions, they caution against complacency because low-income residents are not reaping the benefits.

Niagara has a low educational attainment rate which is troublesome because the region has struggled to attract professionals from elsewhere. According to data from the 2016 census, only 51 percent of Niagara Region residents have a post-secondary degree (Niagara Region, 2020). In fact, many Niagara residents who obtain degrees are drawn out of the region by better

employment opportunities elsewhere. Furthermore, social services are disadvantaged because the region does not have a professional school of social work to train residents to work in the region, forcing individuals interested in pursuing social work to leave Niagara.

Some of the other challenges the social services sector in Niagara confronts are the lack of affordable housing and high rates of opioid overdoses. Niagara is in the midst of an affordable housing crisis. The Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (2018) states that the unacceptably high need for affordable housing in Niagara is driven by an ageing population, the loss of unionized manufacturing jobs and growth in casual, low-wage employment. Income has not kept pace with the cost of housing in Niagara. Due to the lack of affordable housing, the 2020 waitlist for public housing in Niagara ranged from two to sixteen years (Niagara Regional Housing, 2020). Lastly, according to data from the Overdose Prevention and Education Network of Niagara (2021), opioid-related deaths in Niagara are one of the highest in the province.

The challenges mentioned above result in high demand for non-profit social services in Niagara, leaving many organizations unable to meet the need for food, clothing, shelter and relational work such as case management. High demand existed before the pandemic. Covid-19 has taken its toll and further exacerbated the region's problems. While it is too soon to know the impacts, one indicator of Niagara's current state of poverty is the jump in unemployment. According to Heslop (2021), the Niagara Region has lost 23,000 jobs since January 2020. The unemployment rate was 9.1 percent in December 2020 and 11.5 percent in January 2021. In comparison, Canada's unemployment rate in January 2021 was 9.4 percent. One thing is sure, the demand for non-profit social services due to poverty in the Niagara Region will not diminish any time soon.

Research Design

From the spring of 2018 until December 2020, I worked as a research assistant (RA) on the Niagara Prosperity Initiative (NPI) Evaluation, a multi-phase three-year study evaluating the impact of a poverty-reduction granting program that invests $1.5 million annually towards place-based projects. While this study focused on the delivery of short-term funded projects through non-profit agencies and the experiences of service users, there was minimal focus on the experiences of staff at the agencies. My previous experience working on the frontlines of poverty reduction in Niagara and my RA position led to the focus of this project.

The primary method of making meaning is thematic analysis through secondary use of the five interviews conducted with frontline staff as a research assistant. I utilized a political-economy framework to analyze the transcripts through the lens of theories of neoliberalization and new public management.

Methodology

Epistemologically, this study follows key principles to conducting anti-oppressive research developed by Potts and Brown (2005). In response to their argument that positivist assumptions about epistemology are still present in qualitative methods, they provide alternative research methods. They prescribe a research process that does not "oppress anyone or reinforce relations of domination" (Potts and Brown, 2005, p. 264). In other words, for Potts and Brown (2005), social justice can be a part of the research process and not just the outcome. To do this, researchers must continually reflect, critique, challenge, and "support their own and others' efforts in the process of research and knowledge production" (Potts and Brown, 2005, p. 260). Potts and Brown (2005) argue that making meaning, typically thought of as analyzing data, happens throughout the research process. Thus researchers should reflect upon issues of power,

the concepts that frame the analysis, who benefits from the analysis and what tools are appropriate. They suggest linking knowledge production and identity, privileging lived experience, and engaging in a circular research process that allows for reflection. Lastly, Potts and Brown (2005) urge researchers to move beyond formal written reports and consider alternative ways of presenting their results. In sum, Potts and Brown (2005) argue that "anti-oppressive research is not methodologically distinctive, but epistemologically distinctive" (p. 283).

In an attempt to practice Potts and Brown's (2005) principles, I continually engaged in reflection and challenged my preconceived notions. I privileged participants' experience and deferred to their knowledge which is rooted in their frontline work. Sometimes this was challenging. Having worked in the non-profit social services sector and gained theoretical knowledge through academia, I had my ideas which sometimes conflicted with participants' ideas. I prioritized checking in with my participants during their interviews, asking them to elaborate on what they meant if my understanding was unclear. Moreover, engaging in member-checking was extremely important to ensure that participants felt their voices were captured. Following Potts and Brown's (2005) principles enabled me to connect day-to-day experiences with compassion fatigue and burnout narratives. I reframed the research process not just as a means to a socially just end but also to pursue a socially just process.

Ethics

In line with the ethical requirements for research involving people, I completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2: CORE) course on Research Ethics and obtained my certificate on July 11, 2018. In addition, I received clearance through an REB modification to the NPI study in October 2019 (REB #17-411).

Procedures outlined by the REB and TCPS2 were adhered to throughout this project to ensure

the research practices and outcomes are ethical. I received participants' informed consent after

explaining the voluntariness of participating. I took steps to secure the interviews by saving all

data in a password-protected computer with all identifying information removed.

Several ethical concerns arose throughout this research project. One of the earliest ethical

concerns was whether to use the terms burnout and compassion fatigue when interviewing the

participants. Through several discussions with mentors, two perspectives emerged. First, I was

cautioned that these terms should not be named when I interview participants because they

would be leading questions. The alternative perspective is yes, naming the terms is appropriate.

In the end, I chose to use the terms compassion fatigue and burnout because if I did not use the

terms, it would be ambiguous. I would wonder if I captured what participants meant. In naming

the terms, I let participants explain what those terms meant to them and allowed them to share

stories that reflected their understanding of the terms.

Given the small size of the non-profit social services sector in Niagara, I was concerned

with maintaining participants anonymity. Likewise, I was concerned with the risk that staff may

be discovered complaining about their workplace and would result in negative consequences.

Thus to avoid identifying participants, I was meticulous and intentional with what information

and details I included in this major research paper. Additionally, some managers referred staff to

participate in this research; thus, there remains the ethical concern that their participation was not

entirely voluntary. As a result, I reminded participants throughout the interviews that they did not

have to proceed or did not have to answer any questions they did not feel comfortable answering.

Interviews were conducted in private offices at either Brock University or the participant's

workplace, based on their choice. Furthermore, I was mindful not to disclose participant

identities or interview details even if their co-workers or other participants were already aware of their involvement in this study.

Another ethical concern was how to represent my participants. I wanted to ensure I conveyed what my participants meant accurately. Additionally, some of my participants were college-educated in their fields, while others came from different fields without any relevant educational background. None of my participants had a professional social work degree. I strived to present my participants with respect and courtesy and to honour their knowledge. However, I also wanted to reflect that many frontline staff are working-class individuals and employment in the non-profit social services sector has left most of them economically precarious. Thus I attempted to balance these conflicting representations. I balanced these representations in their direct quotes, where I converted spoken word to written form while keeping their knowledge and vernacular.

I was also concerned that asking my participants to reflect on the emotional components of their work may bring up old or new emotions. Hence, I provided contact information for resources available should a participant have a negative experience.

Lastly, I grappled with whether there were ethical impacts from my working environment and progress. Due to Covid-19 interruptions, this research took longer than initially planned, with significant breaks of time without progress. As a result, there was a gap between the completion of the interviews and the analysis. To mitigate any potential loss of detail, I revisited my research journal along with the interview transcripts and audio recordings to refamiliarize myself with the data. In addition, member checking was crucial to ensure I captured what my participants said without declaring a universal truth.

Methods

The primary method of this study is qualitative interviews. In September 2019, the NPI

Evaluation Project Coordinator, Christopher Walsh, introduced me via email to the study's

Niagara Community Advisors. At a previous Niagara Community Advisors meeting, they were

introduced to my potential research and suggested that they may have staff interested in

participating. Hence, the Project Coordinator's email inquired about feedback for my project and

if they had any staff to refer for interviews. Of the four Community Advisors, two responded.

From the two Niagara Community Advisors, I was referred to three staff from agency A and four

from agency B. In the end, one staff from agency A and four staff from agency B were

interviewed. This research focuses on the frontline poverty-reduction workers' insights about

their experiences with burnout. In my analysis, I situated their stories within their respective

agency and broader non-profit social services sector trends. For confidentiality, I only detailed

general information or a range of information regarding the agencies to protect against

identifying the agencies.

Agencies

Both agencies were established in the Niagara Region over 30 years ago. During the '90s,

which coincides with the neoliberalization of Ontario, one agency relocated to meet growing

demands. Agency A is flexible to meet the changing needs of the community it serves. Agency

B's fundamental principles have remained the same throughout the years, while the services have

changed to meet the basic needs of the individuals and families they serve and assist them in

gaining self-sufficiency. Agency A and B are similar even though they are located in different

municipalities of the Niagara region. Both offer multiple poverty-reduction services and have

received NPI funding for multiple programs. The agencies are of similar size and offer various programs to address short-term and long-term needs.

Participants

The participants in my study reflect the demographics of Ontario's non-profit social services sector employees. Four of the five participants were women, and all five participants presented as white. The participants have worked as frontline staff in poverty-reduction work for between 7 to 16 years.

Two of the four participants, Ellen and Rebecca, started at their respective agencies to gain experience and build their resumes to find full-time employment. They were educated in fields other than social service work; however, once they learned about how many people were struggling, what started as a way to develop skills and experience became work they did not want to leave.

The other three participants went back to school as mature students and were trained in social services. Jessica and Mark took college courses after their previous employer relocated and left them without work. For Mark and the fifth participant Deborah, friends and relatives told them that they would be good social workers, leading them to pursue and earn college diplomas in social services and, subsequently, take up their work in poverty reduction.

Jessica said she always thought she would end up working in non-profits because of her personal background. Jessica had her own "troubles" and struggles with mental health and addiction issues, so she wanted to help other people. Deborah grew up living in poverty and had been a caregiver and advocate for a family member. Jessica and Deborah both discussed their backgrounds as motivation for their work and part of what makes them good at their work. Research has shown that 'lived experience' makes frontline staff good at their jobs. For example,

Raddon, Morningstar and Bouchaffra (2021 [unpublished report]) found that when former service users become service providers, their experiences "could be indispensable to outreach and trust-building with people with similar social backgrounds or life experiences (p. 20).

The interviews for this study were completed in October 2019 at the interviewee's location of choice, either a private office at their agency or a private office on Brock University's campus. Frontline staff were interviewed about how they came to their position, the nature of their work, including the working conditions in their respective agencies, and the broader conditions of non-profit work within the Niagara, Ontario region. Lastly, the interviews inquired into the emotional labour staff perform in the course of their poverty-reduction work. Participants received a $25 honorarium in the form of a gift card of their choice. The interviews were transcribed through a third party as part of the more extensive NPI study.

In July 2020, I engaged in member-checking. I emailed all five of the participants, thanked them again for their participation in the Niagara Prosperity Initiative Evaluation Research and reiterated that their interview contributes to the NPI Evaluation by providing insights from staff. At the same time, I reminded them that their interview would be the basis for my major research paper. Attached to the email was an encrypted copy of their interview transcript, and they were invited to review it for accuracy. I suggested that they consider whether anything would identify them and whether the text captured what they meant. Participants were also given my contact information if they had any questions or concerns after reviewing the transcript or had an issue accessing the transcript. Lastly, the participants were informed that if they did not respond, it would be assumed that the transcript is okay as is and that selected quotes may be used when writing about the NPI. None of the participants responded.

I coded the interviews beginning in December 2020 using NVivo software. Upon completing the first pass, I recorded my initial thoughts and reactions in a research journal. The second pass of coding was also completed using NVivo, at which time I refined the codes and reread the transcripts. Following guidance from Saldaña's (2013) book, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, I utilized a mix of coding methods, including emotion, evaluation and theming. Emotion coding allowed me to recognize the feelings and, in some instances, belief systems of the participants. Recognizing emotions and keeping them at the forefront of the process was essential to discussing the emotional labour involved in poverty-reduction work in the NPSS sector. Evaluation coding was utilized in analyzing and assessing the impact of broader policies on the participants' experiences. Lastly, the data was analyzed thematically. Extracting "significant statements" and "formulating meaning" allowed me to "cluster meanings into themes" that I could elaborate on with rich descriptions (Saldaña, 2013).

Analysis

This section details my analysis of the five interviews with frontline staff at poverty-reduction agencies in Niagara. I found that the political economy significantly impacts the NPSS sector and, therefore, the working conditions in the sector resulting in frontline staff experiencing burnout. Additionally, my analysis points to workplace support staff need.

Political Economy

Reviewing how agencies in the NPSS sector describe themselves and their activities provides insight into how the political economy has infiltrated the NPSS sector. For example, Agency A prides itself on engaging with the community with respect, compassion, dignity and understanding while working as a team to provide services based on cooperation, collaboration, equity and inclusivity. Furthermore, the agency seeks to be an effective organization that is

socially and fiscally responsible while advocating for and amplifying the voice of people living

in poverty. Likewise, Agency B prides itself on respect, compassion, openness, diversity while

also valuing fiscal responsibility, fairness and empowerment. Both organizations reflect a "third

way" political approach through the values of diversity, equity and inclusion and fiscal

responsibility. In keeping with my previous analysis, the organization's values indicate the

acceptance of neoliberalization in the NPSS sector.

  Further examples of neoliberal ideology and NPM principles exist throughout the

interviews I conducted with five frontline staff. For example, take the language used to discuss

NPSS sector organizations, staff, and service users. For the most part, the participants framed

their organization in a business-like manner, even referring to themselves as providing "customer

service" rather than providing social services. Staff are staff, but the service users are referred to

as clients or customers. This language mimics the private sector and reflects the cultural aspect

of neoliberal ideology.

  Reflecting the standardization imposed on the NPSS sector by new public management,

several participants discussed how they have to record their work. For example, Rebecca

mentioned how time-consuming it was to enter the same data twice, once into one system for the

region and a second time into a provincial system. Mark also discussed the requirement to record

interactions and progress with service users, saying he tries to be good with his notes and that he

has to put everything down to "show his work." Lastly, Jessica discussed the pressure created in

the NPSS sector through the principles of cost-efficiency and doing more with less. Jessica said,

"it is just so many clients to serve, and such little resources, it is really too bad."

  In discussing the working conditions, all five participants spoke to the integration of

private sector principles into the NPSS sector. They reflected on the impacts of the broader

trends outside the sector and that most NPSS sector service users are on Ontario Works or

Ontario Disability Support Program. Therefore, some participants concluded that their

organization supplements government sources that do not provide enough financial support for

people to live on. For instance, in the quotation below, Ellen discussed how programs only fill

the gaps left between government assistance and the absolute bare minimum people living in

poverty need to survive.

> Ellen: If we weren't just a band-aid. If we were actually able to put our clients first, and
>
> not just, 'This is how it is. You're never going to make ends meet, so you're going to keep
>
> coming here because' (pause) We're not doing anything to better their situation. We are
>
> band-aiding it every month.

Ellen recognized the connection between the broader political economy, service users'

experiences and the non-profit social services sector.

I will later argue that Ellen challenged the commonly accepted conception of compassion

because she does not individualize her service users' circumstances. She realized that a

significant problem is insufficient government assistance, which is justified through the

neoliberal ideology of individualism. More than this, without prompting, three of the five

participants acknowledged and reflected on the fact that they had, or could, end up needing the

services they provide. As I have touched on in my critique, the compassion framework requires

exertion of social privilege, whereas my participants do not see a hierarchy between themselves

and the service users; therefore, they cannot exert social privilege.

Frontline staff realize that most people, including themselves, could end up in the same

situation as their service users. Most people are one decision, a run of bad luck, a job loss, or

divorce away from needing support.

Ellen: If I didn't have a spouse, I would be coming here, realistically, with two kids.
(pause) And I have a great job. I love my job. I have benefits. I have sick time. I have
vacation time, but it's still (pause) [economically difficult] to be able to live in our new
world.

As the quotation above reveals, Ellen associated the economic precarity in which she lives with
the current political economy that also creates poverty for the people she serves.

When discussing their work, the other participants, like Ellen, always placed themselves
in their service users' shoes. In relating themselves to their service users, the participants felt
grateful for what they had, and even perhaps guilty. Take Deborah, for example, who talked
about the fact that she gets to "go home to an empty three-bedroom house" after having told
someone they had to sleep on the streets that night. Despite the gratitude and perhaps guilt, all
participants also underscored the importance of keeping boundaries on their relationships with
service users. Maintaining boundaries allows agencies to survive by limiting the resources going
out and allows staff to continue engaging in poverty-reduction work in a professional manner.
Limiting access to resources to manage agency survival speaks to the chronic underfunding of
NPSS sector agencies.

The cultural individualism and abdication of social or collective responsibility embedded
in neoliberalism perhaps heighten the personal responsibility my participants felt. All of the
participants were understanding of service users' situations and never referred to their frustration
with their work in terms of compassion fatigue. The frustration is from repeatedly coming up
against systemic barriers, such as lack of affordable housing, which stems from the political
economy.

Neoliberalization is also evident in the NPSS sector finances. The NPI evaluation study researchers collected data from the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) on organization financials, including employee compensation. According to this data, Agency A and B each had between 25 to 35 full-time and 15 to 30 part-time employees in 2019. In addition, the agencies each relied on between 190 to 240 volunteers.

In 2019, the total sum of employee compensation at Agency A was $937,326 for full-timers and $295,436 for part-timers. In 2018, the total sum of employee compensation at Agency B was $1,101,852 for full-timers and $365,945 for part-timers. Based on the data about the highest earning staff at these agencies, we can deduce that 24 of the 38 employees at agency A and 53 of 59 employees at agency B earned less than $39,999 annually. While we cannot accurately determine hourly rates due to a lack of data on the minimum compensation or how many hours worked, we can assume that full-time employees earn more than part-time employees. We can also calculate a rough average of annual compensation for part-time employees at these two comparable non-profits by dividing the total compensation by the number of staff.

Table 1

Average Annual Compensation for Part-time Staff

	Agency A	Agency B
Sum of PT compensation	$295,436	$365,436
Number of PT Employees	/ 17	/ 27
Average Annual Income	= $17,379	= $13,554

Based on the calculation in Table 1, we can estimate an average annual income of $17,379 at Agency A and $13,554 at Agency B.

The Niagara Poverty Reduction Network (2019) points out that many employment opportunities at non-profit agencies are funded by a combination of government and community funders. These funding bodies have significant influence over the compensation offered via their grants, as they approve applications for organizations that exhibit new public management values of high efficiency and low cost in their service delivery. The Niagara Poverty Reduction Network (2019) therefore suggests that funding bodies "consider the quality of the jobs supported by the funding and move to ensure that employment opportunities consider including Niagara region's living wage" (p. 7). The Niagara Poverty Reduction Network indeed is right that funding bodies concerned with alleviating poverty need to consider the quality of employment in delivering programs. Providing living wages would contribute to improving the quality of life for NPSS sector employees. However, it is important to note that the availability of a range of social services is essential to meeting the necessities of life.

According to the two agencies' annual financial reports, between 50 and 75 percent of their 2019 revenue came from fundraising and donations. While both agencies receive funding from government sources, this funding does not cover operating expenses, and agencies are required to undertake significant fundraising efforts. The requirement to continually apply for grants and to fundraise diverts agency resources from service delivery.

Neoliberalization and adoption of new public management in the non-profit social services sector force agencies to split their focus. Agencies must spend significant time applying for grants and ensuring they meet funder requirements, which takes away from the quality of service delivery. Frontline staff feel pressure to move individuals along as quickly as possible in order to meet quotas rather than spend time doing relational work with service users. The current

proposal-driven grant funding model limits the long-term impacts of services in alleviating poverty.

Working Conditions

As seen above, the current political economy significantly influences the working conditions in the NPSS sector. The NPSS sector is a fast-paced, often overwhelming environment strapped with high expectations and minimal support. Frontline staff described work roles as fluid, and day-to-day work as unpredictable. Every day they "piece" things together to meet the demand. They assist volunteers and answer questions, and regularly go outside of their duties. They work through their lunches and after-hours, and some are even required to volunteer at agency events on weekends. Rebecca reflected on some of the challenges of this unpredictable and stressful work environment when she discussed what would help her do better work. Rebecca linked the quality of her work with a lack of "manpower" and felt that she "could do better work if [she] had less things to do."

Despite the lack of resources and stressful working conditions, some participants noted limited advantages to working in the NPSS sector. For instance, Ellen discussed conversations with a friend who works in the public sector of social services. These conversations make her grateful to be in the NPSS sector because while her friend is better compensated, Ellen enjoys the flexible job role that comes with working in the NPSS sector. According to Ellen, the NPSS sector offers more autonomy than working in the public sector, though limited. While a source of stress, the varied roles and responsibilities can also be a means to assist service users better. For example, when a service-user is seeking assistance with housing and mentions they have no food or are wearing tattered clothing, frontline staff mentioned providing the service-user clothes and food from other programs their agency offers repercussions.

Although the impacts of neoliberalization and new public management are present,

frontline staff still carve out spaces to be creative and flexible to meet their service users' needs.

However, despite the limited satisfaction, Ellen argued that failure to provide support to staff

negatively impacts the quality of service delivery.

Ellen: An agency needs to recognize that […] you need to take care of your employees.

(pause) Your employees' job is to put the clients first, but as an agency, you also need to

put your employees first because if they're not being taken care of, they're not going to be

able to take care of their clients. So it's a full-circle thing.

Frontline Staff Wellbeing

All participants recognized both benefits and drawbacks to the working conditions in the

NPSS sector. In doing so, frontline staff differentiated between assessing the agency as a

workplace or as a service provider. Furthermore, the participants described a lack of formal

workplace support for employees' mental and emotional wellbeing. Often participants explained

the lack of mental health or emotional support as a result of how much it would financially cost

their agency. However, participants said support is necessary, especially in their line of work

where you are working with service users dealing with many issues.

Four themes emerged when participants discussed the impacts of their working

conditions on their wellbeing: fulfillment, compassion, burnout, and workplace supports.

Fulfillment

Notably, most of the participants expressed receiving some fulfillment from their work.

The participants always came back to the service users. Even when asked what would best

support them in their work, at some point, all of the participants mentioned something that would

help them improve the services they offer service users. All frontline staff went above and

beyond their work roles in one way or another. A common way was to give service users bus

fare or even rides if they knew doing so would significantly help service users access resources.

Although the environment is fast-paced and they see numerous service users daily, the

staff also recognized that coming to their agency was sometimes the only socializing some

service users get. Thus, frontline staff said they did not want to rush service users because social

interaction is important for people. Additionally, some participants felt privileged to hear service

users' stories and watch them "triumph through adversity." Take Deborah, who admired the

service user's perseverance.

> Deborah: they continue to get up and go, no matter what. […] although there's no
>
> resources, and there's no housing, and they have no money, and the rest of it, but they're
>
> still getting up and trying to figure out something for themselves, and it's very
>
> complicated for people, very complicated.

Meanwhile, Ellen talked about how people do not want to come to the agency and use the

services, and how the little things like a smile can make a difference.

> Ellen: People don't want to ask for food and clothing because they can't afford to buy it
>
> themselves. So if somebody's coming through that door, you need to be the first person
>
> who greets them with a smile and lets them know that you're here to help, and as much as
>
> nothing might be going right in their life, you're going to do whatever possible to try and
>
> help them with what you can offer, to the extent that you can offer. Is it enough? Not
>
> always, lots of time it is, and that's where you go home feeling good.

Even though the work is challenging, and sometimes participants questioned whether they are

making a difference in the grand scheme of things, they garnered satisfaction from their work.

They felt good about what they were trying to do. For instance, Ellen said, "I love my job. I love being able to come here and try to make somebody's day better."

While the emotional labour and pressure in the NPSS sector are draining, the frontline staff seemed content to do it. In fact, the staff had an abundance of compassion. It is not the management of emotions that was burdensome. Frontline staff found their work meaningful and felt they were making a difference, even if it was in minor ways. Even if they could not address all of a service user's issues, improving someone's day brought frontline staff fulfillment.

Compassion

Two of my participants noted a need to be on the frontline, where they are "really making a difference," rather than studying issues in academia, being in politics, or performing administrative roles in an organization where they felt they would be disconnected from the day-to-day experiences of service users. To these participants, it was essential to "be in the trenches" and "in touch" with the daily lives of people living in poverty.

Some participants mentioned involvement in committees or forums outside their respective agencies. These groups advocate for improvement to various political and social conditions that contribute to the service users' experiences. Therefore, the frontline staff exemplify McRobbie's (2002) argument to link personal suffering with broader social and cultural conditions. Other workers in the NPSS sector also discussed involvement with advocacy groups to create change and support for people living in poverty in Niagara. In their unpublished technical report for the NPI Evaluation study, Raddon, Morningstar and Bouchaffra (2021) found that involvement with poverty-reduction projects funded by NPI increased staff's commitment to combatting poverty and advocacy.

I argue that being in touch with people's day-to-day experiences living in poverty incites the emotion of compassion that connects individuals suffering with broader conditions and drives a need for political and social change. These frontline staff did not lack compassion or experience compassion fatigue. On the contrary, they felt an abundance of compassion for their service users.

When asked about the concept of 'compassion fatigue,' Ellen and the other participants said there never was a time when they experienced compassion fatigue for service users.

Ellen: I would have to say it's more so not in a work-related role for me. I am so grateful for what I have in my life that when I come to work, I can't imagine what our clients go through on a day-to-day basis, and I always feel that, always.

Ellen differentiated between having compassion and doing compassionate work. She can do compassionate work without having compassion. Ellen explained that she does not experience negative emotions from second-hand accounts of the horrible circumstances service users experience. Sometimes, she does not even hear service users' stories because there is not enough time for that deep interaction. Ellen said that providing counselling or engaging in compassionate emotional support is not what she does. Instead, Ellen explained that she does compassionate work because she connects service users to the resources they need and provides people with necessities. Ellen stated that there is empathy and compassion in the work that she does however, she does not consider herself empathetic or compassionate. Ellen's compassion does not align with the compassion fatigue framework as it is currently accepted, which expects compassion as an individualized feeling.

Beyond her paid employment, Ellen engages in advocacy work which, I argue, reflects her ability to connect the suffering of her service users with larger structural issues. In drawing

the connection between individual situations and the broad political economy, front-line staff like Ellen frame their service users' circumstances not as a personal failure, rather as the consequence of policy choices. Framing service users' circumstance as the consequence of policy choice challenges neoliberal ideology and mitigates Ellen's social privilege. Ellen does not experience compassion fatigue due to vicarious trauma, as the compassion fatigue framework implies. Rather, I argue that she and her coworkers experience fatigue due to recognizing inadequacy in social systems.

Reinterpreting Compassion Fatigue

In this section, I will argue that when frontline staff talked about compassion fatigue, what they were actually referencing is burnout. Frontline staff like Ellen are fatigued or burnt out from the repercussions of the current political economy and its impact on their working conditions and service users' lives.

When asked about compassion fatigue, what participants described as compassion fatigue was concerning personal relationships, rarely professional ones. In the rare instance, a participant felt compassion fatigue concerning work but it was not with the service users. Instead, this participant said it felt as though there was no compassion *for them* as frontline workers. This lack of compassion for the frontline staff from the organization was evident to the participant by their working environment and the lack of available supports.

Another participant noted they might have experienced compassion fatigue in relation to a co-worker. However, when they described it, it became apparent that they did not lack compassion for the co-worker. Instead, they were burnt out and overwhelmed from dealing with the implications of the co-worker's own burnout. The burden of dealing with burnt-out co-workers was placed on frontline staff because there was no human resources department in the

agency to deal with employee issues, leaving employees to sort issues amongst themselves. The lack of human resources in non-profit agencies places even more work on already burdened staff.

The common thread evident among participants' discussion of compassion fatigue was that it is, in fact, burnout, not compassion fatigue, that they suffer from. Moreover, the burnout stems from a combination of the subpar working environment and continuously coming up against structural barriers resulting in their work being ineffective. Recall Ellen, who characterized her work as a band-aid, saying it does not address the root problem. Similarly, Jessica described the impacts of the working conditions and the systemic barriers in her day-to-day work.

> Jessica: It's very overwhelming. Your head's spinning. My days are a blank. I blink my eye and 'Holy shit, it's already 4 o'clock. I still have to do this and this.' Which is good because my days fly, but it's terrible because what happened? What did I accomplish? You get spinning sometimes, because it's just so much to do, so little resources, and you feel like you're not accomplishing much, but then, sometimes, one good thing happens and it makes up for (pause) I don't know.

Notice how Jessica does not quite finish her thoughts. Although she goes on to say that one good thing makes up for the challenges, she stops herself. Like Jessica, Mark, a manager in the NPSS sector, discussed how he celebrated even the smallest wins with his staff to lift morale.

> Mark: I see a lot of staff, and they're kinda getting deflated because, housing, what do we do? Homeless people, what do we do? They're struggling with not enough income. What do we do? And so on and so on. You just feel like every direction you turn, again, we're running into that wall, and (pause) They're coming to us for help, and we feel overwhelmed and don't have the answers. We don't have the resources.

Mark linked his staffs' experience directly to the "wall" created by the political economy and the neoliberalization of the NPSS sector via the lack of resources.

Further illustrating the connection, Mark talked about securing funding and how NPSS sector organizations are expected to continue programs after funding has ended, describing it as a constant struggle.

> Mark: So in a perfect world, the funding would be there. We'd have the staff. And now still the challenge is dealing with the day-to-day things of what we deal with. But we have all of that in addition to the other things, and that's where it can really start to overpower you. Because you feel like you're being hit from every angle, and how am I getting out of this? How do we find our way forward, stay positive, focus and deliver services, and not be overwhelmed?

Mark connected the experiences of staff with problematic funding structures and articulated how the structural limitations of the NPSS sector compound the pressures of effective service delivery. Further, Mark described working with short-term funding as "moving pieces of the puzzle" that they "juggle" constantly. Mark related his experience to others by noting that he knows this is the case for many agencies in the NPSS. Every year they are trying to piece together enough funding from multiple funders to maintain their programs and staff, which involves a lot of extra work. While Mark pointed to the problems with short-term funding cycles, he ended with concern about the funding disappearing completely.

Similar to Mark's response, Raddon, Soron and Petrina (2021) found that organizations and their workers who received funding were grateful; however, they spoke of "some significant challenges arising from the uncertainties and administrative demands of short-term contract funding" (p. 8). Despite some funders allowing the allocation of up to 10 percent of funding for

spending on overhead costs, "this amount seldom compensates for the time given to grant and report writing tasks" (Raddon, Soron, and Petrina, 2021).

Mark and Jessica poignantly summed up the consequences of the challenging working conditions resulting from neoliberalization and the frustration of those systemic barriers. While Mark discussed that staff become deflated, Jessica thought that many frontline staff do not want to admit how hard the work is and how much is out of their control. To her, "there's nothing worse than feeling like you can't do anything." Mark illustrated Jessica's point when he described his role as to "try and pretend" it is okay.

> Mark: we're going to stay positive like the glass is half full mentality. 'Yeah, there's a lot of things, we need this or that or whatever, but hey, things are still good. We're making a difference here.' So you have to take that approach 'cause if you don't, it wouldn't be good for anybody.

Frontline staff are overwhelmed, frustrated, and know that they deserve better working conditions, but they do not see how they can ask, let alone achieve better working conditions. Rebecca and Ellen suggested that, at least in part, the hesitation to demand better working conditions stems from the ideology that all the organization's funding should go to service users because they are non-profit.

> Rebecca: I wouldn't want people to think that we're not spending their dollars on services. And I want to spend their money on services too, don't get me wrong, but there needs to be some, I think, some supports for staff.

> Ellen: For me, if our clients are getting food and they're getting clothing, (pause) at the end of the day, I am satisfied with that. But in the role of employee, and not client, service worker, it would be nice to be a little more appreciated or a little more valued.

The gratitude and hesitation in asking for extended funding periods shown by Mark are similar to frontline staff's hesitation to ask for better working conditions, even though NPSS sector staff know that core funding and improved working conditions would improve service users' experiences and program effectiveness. This hesitation is due to tension between accepting poor working conditions associated with the feminization of care work and pervasive neoliberal ideology, as previously mentioned, and wanting better for themselves and their service users. The tension between better working conditions for staff or services for service users does not need to exist if we adequately fund the NPSS sector. As the literature revealed, quality working conditions contribute to the efficient and effective delivery of social services.

Workplace Supports

When asked how they could be better supported in their work, the participants' answers were similar. All participants answered that they want more than increased compensation, and most did not even mention increased compensation, which aligns with the literature that found that staff prefer procedural justice over distributive justice. To my participants, the most important supports were autonomy and appreciation.

For instance, when speaking about the need for mental health days to use when she "just needs a day," Ellen said, "If we're going to offer clients dignity and respect, we have to offer all the staff dignity and respect, too." Ellen continued by expressing a desire for more flexibility in her work schedule. She wanted to leave early or take time off for appointments when needed "without being made to feel awful about it." Ellen thought this flexibility would be "huge" and lead to frontline staff "feeling valued as an employee." Unfortunately, some participants expressed that they were sometimes made to feel guilty for needing to take time off or using sick days. Ellen said she wants recognition that frontline staff, "are doing everything possible to

make their clients feel good, and maybe it could be reciprocated" by NPSS sector management.

Meanwhile, Rebecca thought they might lack mental health days due to "an old-school notion of

(pause) mental health [not being] necessarily important."

Recall that in addition to lacking mental health support and time off, some NPSS sector

employees also have mandatory 'volunteer' hours. Thus, the working environment in many

NPSS sector agencies involves the expectation that staff give emotional support and perform

unpaid work on top of their regular work roles with little to no support from the employer. For

example, according to Ellen, if she went to a therapist, which she "probably should," her benefits

would be maxed out after four sessions. Four sessions are not enough, but she could not afford to

keep going. Ellen found the insubstantial benefits and supports illogical, as illustrated below.

Ellen: You would think that (pause) Well, we work with people with addictions. We

work with people with a lot less. 'Hey, let's make sure you go to a course every year,

every other year.' Or, 'Hey, let's send you on a wellness retreat for two days.' Like

something for you. Even learning more about what it is that you're dealing with, it

shouldn't be, 'Well, you can't miss work to go do that.' Well, no, I should be able to miss

work to go do that because (pause) It should be a part of your work (pause). I think it is

part of my work and it's only going to benefit everybody if I go and do this.

Thus, participants said that their work-life balance and agency support was inadequate and that

supporting frontline staff would improve conditions for the staff and service users.

Meanwhile, Deborah wanted genuine autonomy and to feel recognized and valued for her

work. To her, autonomy meant being able to do something her way and not being told: "not to do

it [her way] because that's not the way it's done." Deborah wanted recognition and to feel valued

by being given the tools she needs to do her work. "That's recognition," she said. Likewise, when

asked, "In what ways could you be better supported in your work?" Jessica answered:

"Supported like if they would give me some affordable housing. I feel like that would be helpful.

I feel like if I had places to put people, that'd be great." Jessica continued discussing access to

affordable housing for low income people as a need she experiences in her job.

> Jessica: [The change that would make the most difference in my work] literally landlords.
> More landlords. Landlords who were willing to rent, also drop their prices. […] I'm
> getting really sick of kissing landlord's asses. If they're good landlords, I don't care. But
> you start learning what they want to hear. And I think if I just had more landlords that
> were willing to look at this problem and say, 'If you really cared about the city, man, you
> would really want to take care of this.' I think that's (pause) But can you blame these
> landlords? They just bought these places for what? $500,000 for a two-bedroom? Come
> on, man. So I can see all sides to this. But honestly, all I need is some affordable units
> that my clients even have a shot at.

The complexity of the affordable housing crisis reveals the connection between the current

political-economic landscape and how effective Jessica can be in her work. While Jessica felt

broader changes would be the most helpful, she recognized they were beyond reach, so she also

discussed how she could be better supported at the agency level. Jessica said implementing more

progressive programs such as outreach is effective and would be beneficial.

> Jessica: We could work together and do that fucking shit. That would be awesome. […] It
> can work as long as they're not caseloads over 20 people or whatever the number should
> be, because you see how that goes, people don't get seen and (pause), clients end up in
> places where their workers aren't coming around.

Jessica noted that even the implementation of progressive programs does not guarantee effective service delivery. The programs need to be adequately staffed to be effectively executed. Therefore, they need to be funded appropriately.

Rebecca echoed Jessica's call for adequate staffing when she discussed the various roles she fills.

Rebecca: If I only had half my tasks and job roles. I like to be busy, and I like to be helpful, but all the other stuff that isn't in my job title but that I do, is very all over the place (pause).

Rebecca wanted to be supported by having someone check in on her to recognize her work and support her mental health.

Furthermore, Rebecca knew that other agencies give their employees lieu time or pay if they are volunteering. Rebecca said she does not get that at her agency and that it is "the unspoken rule that everyone is to give, and we don't get time for it in lieu." She continued by saying, "I don't mind giving, by all means, once in a while, but it is a lot. We're asked a lot to give here." Thus, while she understood that staff are expected to model behaviour that is expected of the volunteers, she believed that "at some point […] enough is enough." For Rebecca, missing time with her daughter and family events is asking too much. When she has a long weekend, she does not want to be forced to work some of those days off at a volunteer event. Rebecca and the other participants want adequate time off, which would improve their work-life balance and hence mental health. As an alternative, Rebecca said she proposed volunteering at a different agency to break things up to support her mental health. According to Rebecca, however, suggestions like volunteering elsewhere or having workshops are not well-received at the "top" of NPSS sector agencies.

Participants relied on themselves to cope with the working conditions in the NPSS sector because their agencies do not have formal policies or practices to support staff or prevent burnout. For some, coping with these conditions manifested as reliance on their co-workers or friends who work in similar fields to debrief, talk, or vent, while some participants noted journaling and exercise. Mentioned above are the healthy strategies. One participant said they had to be self-aware because they sometimes caught themselves buying "one too many bottles of wine" in a week. Based on this, I suspect there are other unhealthy strategies that some participants kept to themselves to cope with the immense pressures of their workplace. Others engaged in advocacy to address larger structural barriers, perhaps to gain a sense that they are making a difference, a feeling that is sometimes fleeting in their line of work.

A common point made by the participants was that "there is no money" for "having people come in to do workshops for staff, talking about mental health and supports for the workers." Participants said they wanted more than just sick days and "dirt pay." While they knew they are "never gonna get paid thousands and thousands of dollars" (Rebecca) they insisted that "there's got to be a balance. So if you're not going to pay us, what we might get paid in a for-profit business, maybe do something over here" (Rebecca).

Frontline staff at NPSS sector agencies in Niagara want workplace supports in the form of autonomy, mental health days, recognition from management, and benefits that cover counselling. Participants need funding that allows adequate staffing rates, professional development and training, which would help them as frontline staff better serve their service users. Lastly, participants wanted workshops that teach them how to manage their work challenges better, offer them emotional coping strategies, and improve their mental health. All

participants believed that improvements in their working conditions would improve the delivery of services and service users' experiences.

Discussion

In discussing the emergent themes of this research, I consider the cultural and ideological aspects of neoliberalism and the process of neoliberalization relating to the NPSS sector. I elaborate on my argument that when participants talked about compassion fatigue, they were actually referencing burnout. I argue that the working conditions at non-profit agencies negatively affect frontline workers' well-being and explore the implications for poverty-reduction efforts. Further, I outline the workplace supports frontline staff want and need. Lastly, I discuss some limitations in this study and potential areas for future research.

Neoliberalism and Neoliberalization

The data provided examples of neoliberalism and new public management in the non-profit organizations. An example of the unique roll-out of neoliberalization in the NPSS sector in the Niagara Region is the Niagara Prosperity Initiative. The NPI has attempted to improve low-income residents' circumstances by providing per-project funding to non-profit social services sector agencies through grants.

The NPSS sector has become essential to mitigating poverty; however, they can only do so to a limited degree. Some scholars argue that in acting as a band-aid the sector prevents structural change. For instance, Tarasuk and Eakin (2003) studied food banks in southern Ontario and found that they provided food based on the agency's supply, not service users' needs. The food banks restricted the frequency and amount of food service users could get. Based on this finding Tarasuk and Eakin (2003) argued that the strategy of offering services

based on supply renders service users' unmet needs invisible. This invisibility hinders political

motivation to seek structural solutions for the problem of hunger (Tarasuk and Eakins, 2003).

While few scholars would argue for eliminating food banks, Tarasuk and Eakins (2003) research

exposes issues with entrenching services that purport to meet the needs of people in poverty but

mask the extent of the unmet needs.

Burnout, not Compassion Fatigue

The frontline staff who participated in this research often dismissed their own needs as

employees. The main concern always returned to the service users and, as previously discussed,

many frontline staff did not consider themselves entitled to make workplace demands. There are

undoubtedly cultural aspects to this, regarding gender, women are socialized and praised for self-

sacrifice, and care work has been feminized. Additionally, frontline staff are grateful for what

they have, especially in comparison to service users'. Informing service users that there is

nothing else frontline staff can do to assist them is emotionally taxing. The toll of poverty-

reduction work stays with staff long after their shift is over, as evident in the previously

discussed coping strategies. Consider Jessica and Rebecca, who mentioned seeing service users

on the street while they were out having dinner with friends. On their time off, these poverty-

reduction workers still interact with people on the street and direct them to social services or give

them some money.

Many frontline staff appeared to have felt guilt for their ordinary quality of life as if their

material well-being takes away from the needs of service users. In contrast to what I would argue

is a political or collective responsibility, the sense of personal responsibility felt by frontline staff

reflects the internalization of some cultural aspects of neoliberalism. While staff recognized the

connection between their service users' circumstances and structural barriers, they do not extend

that connection to themselves as employees. Some frontline staff reflected on their economic

vulnerability even though they were not living in poverty, some were close. They admired

service users' perseverance and prioritized service users' needs. Staff felt fulfilled and were

grateful for what they have. However, they recognized that their working conditions are poor.

Coupled with the poor working conditions, staff experience the stress of coming up

against barriers beyond their control. In contrast to the narrative of compassion fatigue, I found

that frontline staff described the characteristics of burnout, including prolonged stress and

diminished feelings of personal accomplishment and, for some, emotional exhaustion. Moreover,

I found that frontline staff have an abundance of compassion for their service users. Therefore,

for all of the reasons above, I argue that frontline poverty-reduction workers are experiencing

burnout, which stems from the impacts of neoliberalization.

Implications

The working conditions at non-profit agencies negatively affect frontline workers' well-

being. Frontline staff suffer from burnout and poor work-life balance, resulting in many impacts

on poverty-reduction efforts. As a result of neoliberalization, organizations spend significant

time writing grant applications and fundraising, which splits their focus. The constant need to

secure funds is a drain on agencies and frontline staff and diverts resources away from their

mission. Additionally, there is a lack of relational work being done and organizations cannot

fulfill social models of inclusion and participatory care (Baines and Cunningham, 2015). The

lack of relational work is unfortunate because, though more challenging for frontline staff,

relational work allows for service users' personal transformation (Jindra, Pauelle, & Jindra,

2020). Currently, frontline staff are "running from the moment [they] walk in, to the moment

[they] leave, and [they] feel overwhelmed, they don't have enough time to do everything they're

supposed to do" (Mark). The poor working conditions resulting from neoliberalization, including burnout and lack of autonomy, may reduce job satisfaction among frontline staff and lead to feelings of inadequacy, resulting in feelings of failure and low self-esteem (Jenkins and Baird, 2002). Additionally, lower job satisfaction reduces positive attitudes and behaviours among staff, which lowers the quality of service delivery and worsens the experience for service users (Lambert et al., 2005). Lastly, the poor working conditions which impact frontline staff wellbeing result in increased staff turnover rates. High staff turnover results in less experienced staff working the frontlines, negatively impacting poverty-reduction efforts.

My research participants felt that if they could take better care of themselves, they would be able to serve their service users "so much better." The most needed support identified to improve frontline staff wellbeing and poverty-reduction efforts were improving workplace supports. I found a general lack of organizational support for frontline workers, including support to prevent burnout and support for mental health and emotional well-being. Often, frontline staff explained they lack support, at least in part, due to limited agency resources.

Suggested Workplace Supports

Overall, in terms of how they could be better supported in their work, the participants wanted support in a few ways. In no particular order, they first wanted the tools they need to serve service users more effectively and improve their skills. They wanted adequate staffing, proper training, professional development opportunities and effective programs. The participants spoke of wanting realistic workloads, real autonomy and having their suggestions for programs seriously considered.

Secondly, they wanted more work-life balance and mental health support. The participants wanted to take their kids on the first day of school or go to an appointment without

being made to feel guilty or fear repercussions. They wanted to normalize the use of mental health days. They wanted professional workshops and adequate benefit coverage for regular counselling services.

Lastly, participants discussed how policy choices could support their work in the NPSS sector. They depicted issues with short-term funding cycles and called for adequate, permanent funding. With support in terms of adequate resources, NPSS sector agencies could focus on their mission and engage in effective poverty-reduction efforts such as relational work.

The suggestions made by the frontline staff are supported by Lalande et al., (2016), who found that many frontline staff in the NPSS sector are passionate but suffer from poor work-life balance. Lalande et al., (2016) argue that the sector dedicated to the interests of vulnerable people could pioneer jobs that are better for people. These better jobs provide paid holidays, leave and sick days, along with a predictable and reliable income. Further, they pay a living wage, offer equal benefits for all employees, offer autonomy, and provide opportunities to participate in professional development (Lalande et al., 2016). These findings point to the urgent need for supports for frontline staff working in the NPSS sector.

Limitations

The limitations of this study are, first, that the small sample focused on five staff from two agencies within the Niagara Region. Most of the participants worked at one agency because my sample came together through referrals. Without prompting, one participant recruited colleagues to participate from their agency. Meanwhile, recruitment from the other agency resulted in only one participant. Thus, the sample is not representative of agencies and frontline staff in the NPSS sector. A research design using a combination of random and purposive sampling and a larger sample size could be more generalizable to the NPSS sector.

Secondly, although participants in this research reflected the demographics of the NPSS sector, the sample lacked diversity in social location. A lack of diversity is problematic because it does not reflect the array of experiences of people working in the non-profit social services sector. In the future, ethnographic research could explore the complex intersection of gender, racialization, sexual orientation, and the impacts for employees in the NPSS sector.

Third, this research design was incapable of providing statistical data for context. A mixed-methods approach that utilized quantitative data by tracking employee turnover and movement between agencies in Niagara would provide insight into employment trends in the sector. Future research could also explore the difference in experiences and employment longevity between staff trained as social service workers and those from other disciplines. Likewise, a longitudinal study that collects data over several funding cycles, including survey data from frontline staff about their experiences and working conditions relating to funding periods, could provide descriptive data on the impacts of per-project funding on employees. Lastly, elaborating on this research, follow-up interviews could be completed with frontline poverty-reduction workers to inquire more concretely about how their wellbeing affects their poverty-reduction efforts.

Conclusion

As I finish this paper, Ontario is in a third lockdown and stay-at-home order. Failing to recognize the impacts of covid-19 would be remiss. The pandemic has dramatically increased rates of unemployment throughout Canada, including Niagara. Covid-19 has exposed the limits and precarity of the NPSS sector. Agencies had to develop safety procedures and purchase personal protective equipment for the safety of their staff and service users. Most NPSS sector agencies had to cancel annual fundraisers, or at least reimagine them. The limited opportunity to

fundraise has resulted in a loss of revenue for agencies. According to a recent news report by

Knox (2021), several Niagara non-profit agencies report a surge in the number of people they are

assisting and are "struggling to keep pace." According to the executive director of Port Cares,

Christine Clark Lafleur, the significant increase in service users is due to the conditions

contributing to poverty, including the low supply of affordable housing and job loss in the

service sector due to the pandemic. As a result of the surge, these Niagara non-profit agencies are

"asking government officials to work with service providers and develop sustainable

interventions to reduce the conditions contributing to poverty" (Knox, 2021). This research

supports the request for government officials to address the conditions contributing to poverty.

Neoliberalization has created poor conditions for frontline poverty-reduction staff. Staff

described their working conditions as lacking workplace supports and discussed fatigue. In

contrast to the narrative of compassion fatigue, I found that burnout among frontline poverty-

reduction staff stems from the working conditions, combined with the lack of affordable housing

and jobs. Furthermore, the combination of lost revenue and increased demand from Covid-19 has

intensified the pressure placed on NPSS sector agencies and staff. The problems with per-project

funding were already well known and are reinforced by this research, which points to the urgent

need for supports for frontline staff working in the NPSS sector.

Core funding for non-profit poverty-reduction agencies needs to be a priority. Core

funding would give agencies financial security for long-term planning and allow staff to focus on

poverty-reduction efforts and their mission instead of devoting labour-power to writing grant

applications to secure funds. In turn, agencies could provide more security and support to

frontline staff. Providing agencies with the ability to plan and focus on delivering services is

essential to the fulfilment of their missions. Improving working conditions and developing

supports for frontline staff, fostering their skills and drawing on their knowledge will lessen

burnout among staff and improve service users' experiences and the effectiveness of poverty-

reduction efforts.

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Appendix 1: Social Service Workers - Interview Guide

Preamble:

- Introduce yourself and talk about your involvement with the research.
- Request informed consent, ensure the participant understands the invitation letter, answer any questions and have the participant sign.

For this interview, we are interested in your work experiences and views. This interview is in three parts. First, I am going to ask some background questions, then I would like to discuss your working environment, and lastly, I will ask about the emotional labour involved in your work.

Background and day-to-day

1. What motivates people to get involved in poverty reduction? (let interviewee lead and then ask for concrete examples of admirable and not so admirable motives with reference to their responses)
2. Thinking about how your career has unfolded, could you describe what brought you to this position? (personal, educational, profession)
   a. What does a typical day look like?
   b. Do you see yourself continuing to work with people living in poverty?
3. *In your view, what are the qualities of a good service provider? What qualities would make some unsuitable as a service provider? Can you tell me about instances where you or people you've worked with exhibited these qualities?*
4. *How important is empathy to the effectiveness of your work?*
5. What leads service users to needing your agency's services?
6. Can you tell me about the types of interactions you have with service- users?
   a. How would you characterize your relationship(s) with service-users?
7. Have you ever assisted a service-user in a way that falls outside your role?
   i. How did that come about? (volunteer, client asked, directive, norm)
   ii. What do you think would happen if you did not go above and beyond?

8. *In your view, what type of service-users are most able to benefit from the services you provide? What type of service-user should not be requesting to use the services? Can you tell me about instances where people you've worked with exhibited these qualities?*
9. Do you feel that working with people living in poverty is valued by society? (how much social status does your work give you?)
10. How has your perception of service-users changed over time?

Working Environment

11. How does the working environment or climate of (name of agency) impact your work?
    a. What is the best part of your job? What is the worst part of your job?
12. Do you feel there are unspoken, or unrealistic expectations placed on you? By whom?
    a. Can you tell me about the last time that happened?

13. *In an ideal world, what roles would government, service providers, and service users play in reducing poverty? In your experience, how do government, sp, su live up to these ideals in reality? (may be best to ask about gov, sp, su one-at-a-time instead of the way I've phrased it)*

14. In what ways could you be better supported in your work?
    a. What would make your work more meaningful, effective or satisfying?
    b. What types of change would make the most difference to you? (wages, benefits, flexibility, vacation)

Burnout & Compassion Fatigue

"Okay, now moving on to Part 3, I am going to ask you about two difficult experiences that sometimes occur in poverty work: burnout and compassion fatigue. You have already alluded to _____, but I would like to go more in depth. Do not worry about repeating yourself."

15. When was the last time you spoke with someone about burnout? (overworked, unrelenting stress) Either yours or theirs or someone you know. (Can you think about a recent memorable conversation you have had about burnout?)
16. When was the last time you spoke with someone about compassion fatigue? (you can't quite manage the emotionality)
    a. When does this topic come up in your conversations?
17. How do you recover from or prevent compassion fatigue or burnout?
18. Does (name of agency) have policies to encourage workers to combat burnout or compassion fatigue? (explain)
        i. Do you find them effective?
19. Is there anything else you would like to add or share?