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Perceptions and Experiences of Precarious Employment in Canadian Libraries: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

Precarious employment is a labour practice characterized for employers by flexibility and economic efficiencies and for workers by vulnerability and uncertainty as to job duration, scheduling, benefits, and pay. It is increasingly common in Canada and can result in physical, mental, financial, and social strain for people who experience it. In libraries, it can have negative effects on individual workers, organizational health, and service quality. However, literature on precarious library work is scarce, and it is unclear how it affects the library field or how its effects compare to those described in the broader literature.

The purpose of this study was to gather information about library workers' perceptions and experiences of precarious employment and to see how it played out in library settings. Thirteen library workers both with and without experiences of precarious employment in British Columbia participated in semi-structured interviews, which were synthesized into a narrative summarizing their thoughts and experiences. Results indicated that precarious work mainly benefited library organizations from scheduling and financial standpoints, while negative outcomes were more numerous, more salient, and affected both individuals and organizations. Participants also identified opportunities and challenges for future changes to precarious employment situations. Awareness of such perceptions and experiences may help to spark conversations and increase support for those experiencing negative effects from precarious work, and it can serve to reduce or eliminate factors leading to those effects. However, failure to address them can result in negative outcomes for library workers and organizations, such as stress, marginalization, burnout, turnover, leaving the field, reduced service quality, and more. Accordingly, this paper provides some of the first qualitative information on precarious employment in libraries and can be used to support broader discussions about the topic.

Keywords

library employees; libraries; precarious employment; temporary employment; precarity

Introduction

Precarious work is a kind of employment characterized by uncertainty. Defined more fully, it is a state of material and psychological vulnerability resulting from uncertain pay, schedules, hours of work, or employment duration and from a lack of access to the social protections and benefits usually associated with full-time employment. This type of precarity is increasingly common in many fields and is reflected in phenomena such as the gig economy, in which temporary or irregular contract labour fulfills on-demand services such as ride-sharing and food delivery. In library settings, precarious employment practices may involve reliance on contract and on-call staff along with staff who work part-time involuntarily or whose hours fall below the threshold for employee benefits.

Our motivation for this study arose both from our own lived experiences as precariously employed librarians and from the gaps in knowledge we saw about various elements of precarious work. Our goals included learning about the extent of precarious work in Canadian libraries and its effects on workers and workplaces. We also wanted to discover how library workers experience precarity in their careers and workplaces and how they view the issue in the library field. Precarity is characterized by uncertainty, and we wanted to explore how others perceive and respond to that instability. For some, precarious labour conditions may be stressful, while others may appreciate the ways that they enable increased scheduling flexibility or decreased hours. It is also important for managers, trustees, union and faculty association members, and funding bodies to understand the potential impacts of precarious work when they design positions, discuss benefits, or allocate funding. Our study aims to provide context for those

decisions based on library workers' experiences and perceptions of precarious work and to be a resource for anyone interested in the topic of precarious employment.

Literature Review

Definitions of precarious employment

Precarious labour is a state of insecure employment encouraged by neoliberal ideologies and globalizing influences (Monnier, 2013). Neoliberalism is a driver for precarity, with its focus on deregulated free-market economies, individual empowerment, and "labour flexibility" (Steger & Roy, 2010, p. 41). This focus prioritizes economic efficiencies for employers and produces an individualistic market of disposable and commodified labour, in part by stripping workers of social protections and relationships (Harvey, 2007). Such processes give rise to various kinds of "material and psychological vulnerability" among workers, such as financial, physical, and mental stress (Näsström & Kalm, 2015, p. 556).

The International Labour Organization (2012) described precarious work as involving a blend of "uncertainty as to the duration of employment, multiple possible employers or a disguised or ambiguous employment relationship, a lack of access to social protection and benefits usually associated with employment, low pay, and substantial legal and practical obstacles to joining a trade union and bargaining collectively" (p. 27). As this range of factors suggests, workplace precarity can take many forms. Authors such as Vosko, MacDonald, and Campbell (2009) and Herod and Lambert (2016) have demonstrated its variance across geographies, discussed the difficulties of defining it, and described its multidimensional nature which, for example, may affect workers' financial insecurity but not their mental health or vice versa.

Incidence of precarity in the workplace

Both the incidence of precarious labour and people's experiences of it are different in regions where it has been the norm compared with regions where more workers previously enjoyed secure employment relationships (Vosko et al., 2009; Herod & Lambert, 2016). One example in the latter category is Canada, where growing workplace precarity has been facilitated by state and corporate action, leading to increasing deregulation and weakening of labour protections in favor of neoliberal flexibility and efficiency (Procyk, Lewchuk, & Shields, 2017). This growing precarity is producing a widening gap between many Canadians' working conditions and labour policy's ability to address such conditions (Procyk et al., 2017; Zhang & Zuberi, 2017), and it is affecting workers everywhere from fast food restaurants to academia. While the current attention given to precarious work in Canada has partly been a response to its growth among white middle-class workers since the 1970s and 1980s, it also existed before World War II (Quinlan, 2012) and has always been more likely to affect marginalized groups (Bernhardt, 2015). Indeed, labour scholars have shown that precarious workers in Canada are more likely to be racialized, women, or immigrants, and that precarity's effects are intersectional and based on social location (Cranford & Vosko, 2006; Fuller & Vosko, 2008; Vosko et al., 2009; Bernhardt, 2015). Such

tendencies may result in additional pressures on those who are already subject to systemic forms of oppression such as sexism and racism. Surveys of various cohorts by interest groups, though they may have sampling limitations, have similarly suggested the overrepresentation of marginalized groups among precarious workers (Lewchuk et al., 2015; Canadian Union of Public Employees [CUPE], 2017, 2018; Foster & Birdsell Bauer, 2018).

Issues and problems in precarity

Common issues in the study of precarity include its effects on individuals, organizations, and society at large. Much of the literature focusing on individuals has examined the relationships between workplace precarity and health and has found negative effects and correlations resulting from precarious employment. Despite difficulties associated with measuring and comparing precarity across time and space, it has been increasingly recognized as a social determinant of workers' health (Benach et al., 2014), and recent research in different countries has borne this idea out. In Italy, Moscone, Tosetti, and Vittadini (2016) determined that temporary employment increased the probability of developing mental health problems requiring treatment. They also noted that moving from permanent employment to a contract was associated with poorer mental health, while a small improvement was observed when moving in the opposite direction. Canivet et al. (2017) found moderate associations between precarious employment and poor mental health in Swedish youth and a stronger association in middle-aged participants, while Han, Chang, Won, Lee, and Ham (2017) demonstrated associations between precarious employment, depression, and suicidal ideation in South Korean workers. Jang, Jang, Bae, Shin, and Park (2015) also studied the South Korean context and found that the onset of severe depressive symptoms was associated with both being precariously employed and moving from stable to precarious employment. They noted especially strong associations for heads of household, suggesting additional stress when the 'sole breadwinner' is precariously employed. Lewchuk, Clarke, and de Wolff (2008, 2011) observed similar associations in Canada, showing that poorer health outcomes were especially likely when workers experienced high levels of uncertainty, expended effort to minimize it, and received low support from employers, causing stress for both individuals and their employment relationships.

The varied forms of precarity also have other negative effects on individuals, such as financial strain, which can in turn contribute to health concerns (Aronsson, Dallner, Lindh, & Göransson, 2005), social isolation and strain on existing relationships due to variable and unpredictable hours (Bohle, Quinlan, Kennedy, & Williamson, 2004; Lewchuk et al., 2011), and putting off significant choices such as whether to engage in serious relationships or raise children (Golsch, 2005). Precarious work structures make it harder for people to engage in childcare and extracurricular activities (Procyk et al., 2017), and precarious workers may experience more negative effects compared to stable workers even when doing the same kind of work in the same workplace (Bohle et al., 2004).

Procyk et al. (2017) emphasized that these effects are not endemic only to specific workplaces, but also to broader labour structures that create precarious conditions for workers. Therefore, individual and organizational situations are part of a systemic problem, and they stand to have ripple effects on communities and society at large. The time commitments required by precarious work inhibit people's ability to participate in socially beneficial activities such as pursuing education and volunteering (Premji, 2017), potentially weakening community bonds. Precarity may even have effects on political engagement and the health of democracies. One survey (Lewchuk et al., 2015) suggested that precariously employed workers were less likely to vote, while Standing (2011) described how precarity's insecurities could make workers more susceptible to radicalization. As well, Näsström and Kalm (2015) have argued that precarity undermines the commitment required to sustain democracy by making that responsibility an individual and private matter rather than a shared, public one. Finally, authors have documented and explored the incidence and effects of precarious labour in academia (e.g., Foster & Birdsall Bauer, 2018; Brownlee, 2015; Poirier, 2018) and the nonprofit sector (e.g., Cunningham, Baines, & Shields, 2017; Fanelli, Rudman, & Aldrich, 2017), areas which may include libraries.

Discussions on precarity in libraries

While the scholarly literature's discussion of precarity in libraries has been scant, there has been growing interest in the topic, as demonstrated by recent conversations on social media and in conference sessions (Kaminker, O'Reilly, & Wightman, 2017; Brons, Riley, Yin, & Henninger, 2018; Brons, Henninger, Riley, & Yin, 2019). Other recent signs of interest include union surveys of precariously employed library workers (CUPE, 2017, 2018), the formation of a working group with precarious labour as one focus (Digital Library Federation Working Group on Labor in Digital Libraries, 2018), and a forthcoming issue of *Library Trends* on labour in academic libraries edited by Drabinski, Geraci, and Shirazi (Drabinski, 2018).

Precarity is also relevant to other labour issues in libraries. Dekker and Kandiuk (2014) have explored topics such as academic freedom and collective bargaining in Canadian academic libraries, which can intersect with precarious status. Wilkinson's (2015) study of early-career librarians in the United States focused on permanent part-time work, excluding precarious situations such as full-time contracts, but its emergent themes echoed many features of precarious work, such as potential involuntariness, financial insecurity, difficulty gaining experience, and differences from full-time permanent staff. The paper also charted how part-time employment has risen for new librarians over the past couple of decades, and its results suggested a common theme of part-time work as a means of getting a "foot in the door" (p. 359) for full-time work and hinted at challenges for staff in building career narratives.

As well, costs that may go unpaid or unrecognized in precarious situations, such as those caused by a lack of benefits, arranging childcare, or juggling schedules and relationships at multiple jobs, recall the attention given to labour in libraries as invisible (Settoducato, 2019), emotional (Matteson, Chittock, & Mease, 2015; Jocson Porter, Spence-Wilcox, & Tate-Malone, 2018), or both (Bright, 2018). Rationales for the extraction of labour via precarity may also intersect with Ettarh's (2018) description of

vocational awe as a phenomenon that contributes to burnout, undercompensation, and job creep. In all these cases, there are affective and material dimensions of library work that remain unseen when they go undescribed and unanalyzed.

Knowledge gaps for precarity in libraries

Despite the recent upswing in discussions about precarious employment, there is little more than anecdotal evidence on what it means for libraries, what its effects are, and how library staff perceive it. Given what is known about precarity in broader contexts, it is likely to have implications for the health and social relationships of precariously employed staff. In addition to affecting workers' material and psychological wellbeing, it is possible that precarious labour will affect the service those workers provide and the people to whom they provide it. There are also ramifications for professional, institutional, and personal values such as diversity, access, and equality, since precarious work may exert selective pressures or result in unequal access to opportunities. Finally, library workers' perceptions of precarity, apart from its actual incidence and effects, will also influence how they acknowledge, experience, or address it.

Illuminating and analyzing the effects, experiences, and perceptions of precarious work has the potential to inform and engage library workers and administrators and to support evidence-based decision-making on hiring, staffing models, service provision, workplace culture, and more. For example, this information can help library managers and administrators ensure that staffing decisions take into account the available evidence for precarity's effects and help unions to understand how to support and protect workers in precarious positions. It can also encourage workers to reflect on their own working conditions and those of their colleagues and to consider strategies for addressing them.

Given the scarcity of information on precarious work in libraries, we started a project to gather evidence that could support further research and discussion on this topic. For the project's initial stages, we sought to generate lines of inquiry from both quantitative and qualitative information sources; this paper focuses on the qualitative sources. Our main goal in conducting qualitative research was to discover and describe what library workers think about precarity in their lives, their workplaces, and the field as a whole. We were also interested in exploring how the experiences of library staff related to the broader literature.

Methodology

Our choice of methodology was guided by both our material constraints and our intentions for this project. Our status as precarious workers meant that we had no guarantee of long-term employment to dedicate to research, which in turn inhibited our ability to take on labour-intensive practices such as transcribing and coding data from large numbers of participants. As well, given the information gaps on precarity in libraries, we identified generating such information as an important first step that could be used to inform future analyses. For these reasons, along with concerns about

participant privacy, we did not choose a methodology that involved transcription or close analysis at the outset.

Instead, to begin laying the groundwork for further research into precarity in libraries, we used the hermeneutic dialectic process of inquiry first described by Guba and Lincoln (1989). This methodology is “hermeneutic because it is interpretive in character, and dialectic because it represents a comparison and contrast of divergent views with a view to achieving a higher-level synthesis of them all” (p. 149).

Responding to positivist approaches to evaluation, which assume there is a true and discoverable reality, Guba and Lincoln (1989) rejected the idea of uncovering “the ‘way things really are’ or ‘really work’” (p. 8). Instead, they aligned themselves with a constructivist, relativist paradigm and proposed a new method of qualitative evaluation that seeks to explore “meaningful constructions that individual actors or groups of actors form to ‘make sense’ of situations in which they find themselves” (p. 8).

The major purpose of this process is not to justify one’s own construction or to attack the weaknesses of the constructions offered by others, but to *form a connection* between them that allows their mutual exploration by all parties. The aim of this process is to reach a consensus when that is possible; when it is not possible, the process at the very least exposes and clarifies the several different views and allows the building of an agenda for negotiation. (p. 149)

This emphasis on contextual, collaborative, and iterative inquiry was appropriate for our research design as it offered our team a way to explore a relatively unknown area, accommodate unanticipated topics, and follow up on emergent lines of inquiry as they arose. It foregrounded the affective and experiential aspects of library workers’ perceptions of precarity, and it acknowledged the role of the researchers rather than erasing it or pretending to be objective, which we felt was appropriate given our status as precariously employed workers.

This methodology has been used in the library field by Fitzgibbons, Kloda, and Miller-Nesbitt’s (2017) study on journal clubs for academic librarians, which they noted was likely the first in the library field to use this process (p. 776). However, the method has been used in other areas to evaluate and reconcile diverse perspectives and to explore open-ended topics. For example, it has been employed in social science fields such as education (Evans, 2009), psychology (Anderson & Thomas, 2014), sociology (Duarte, Viana, & Olschowsky, 2015), and health sciences (Appleton & King, 2002). Our research team likewise used this methodology to interview library workers about their experiences and perceptions of precarious labour in libraries and to create a narrative synthesizing the results.

Sampling and recruitment

We obtained ethics approval from the Simon Fraser University Office of Research Ethics in March 2018. We limited sampling to library workers in British Columbia, partly to focus the scope of our sampling and partly because our prior analysis of job postings

(Brons et al., 2019) suggested that British Columbia, along with Ontario, had one of the highest rates of precarious library positions in Canada. Our goal was to incorporate a range of perspectives, so our parameters for eligibility were broad: eligible participants were library workers who were currently or previously employed at a library in British Columbia or who were actively searching for such employment. Previous employment was defined as happening within the last three years. We used purposive sampling as a method to recruit participants from specific groups. In sampling, it was important to us to investigate library workers as a whole, not just librarians. We wanted to explore how precarity affected people in various roles and the entire working culture. We were also wary of looking only at librarians due to the pre-existing focus on them in the literature and the important contributions of all library workers, not just those working as librarians.

We sent an invitational email in March 2018 to two library-related listservs in British Columbia: the British Columbia Library Association's main listserv and one aimed at library technicians and assistants. We sought to interview a minimum of eight participants, including four from public libraries and four from academic libraries. We intended to end the interviews once we had reached saturation, meaning no new information was being gained.

Data collection and narrative construction

From this call for participants, we received eighteen initial expressions of interest, which translated to interviews with thirteen people. We conducted all interviews in March and April of 2018 and acquired written and informed consent from each participant before the interviews began. Interviews occurred either in-person in secure rooms, on the phone, or via Skype. Each participant was interviewed by one member of the research team, and most interviews lasted from 30–60 minutes, though a few went as long as 120 minutes. Each participant was asked the same eight questions (see the Appendix), although interviewers could and did ask follow-up questions to elicit more details. Demographic information was not formally collected due to privacy concerns, a small sample size, and the fact that demographics were not a focus of this research. As the emphasis was on participants' perceptions and experiences, we left it up to them to share which demographic details they considered relevant.

After each interview, the research team analyzed and synthesized the participant's thoughts and experiences according to the hermeneutic dialectic process. We recorded all interviews so that each member of the research team could listen to the recordings before meeting to discuss the interview audio. We met via Skype to develop the written narrative construction by summarizing and integrating notes on the experiences and perspectives expressed by the participants. The usual procedure during these meetings was to go through each interview and discuss the comments, anecdotes, or in some cases, language that stood out to us. One of us would put notes from the conversation into a shared document stored in a privacy-compliant cloud storage platform. These notes were then refined and integrated into the narrative. In subsequent interviews, we sometimes asked participants to react to or reflect on themes or topics that emerged from previous interviews. With each subsequent interview, we expanded and refined the

narrative so that all participants' experiences would be represented in the document. Therefore, the process was iterative and reflective and sought to relate contexts and experiences to each other.

Once interviews were finished and the narrative construction was complete, we shared it with the participants and invited their feedback to ensure that the construction included all participants' perspectives. We asked them to read the narrative construction with the following questions in mind:

- Do you see yourself and your experiences reflected in this construction? If not, would you like to share additional experiences, anecdotes, or themes to ensure accurate representation?
- Are there new, alternate, or expanded issues or experiences that come to mind while reading this and that you would like to see included?
- Are there any areas that this research project missed, or directions you would like to see this research go in the future?

Several participants responded with questions or comments about the experience and our research, but no participant requested changes to the document. The final narrative construction was approximately 2,500 words.

Results

After conducting interviews with thirteen library technicians, librarians, and managers from academic, public, school, and special libraries, we felt that the narrative construction had reached saturation. This section consists of a condensed version of that narrative.

Some participants had firsthand experience as precarious workers, while others were securely employed but had experience as co-workers or managers of precariously employed workers. Types of precarious experiences identified during the interviews included auxiliary or on-call jobs, involuntary part-time work, short-term contracts, leave replacements, and freelance work. Many participants' experiences of precarity involved working in multiple simultaneous precarious positions or in successive precarious roles. Most participants' institutions were unionized, but not all workers were part of their local union.

Interview questions focused on four areas: positive outcomes of precarity, negative outcomes of precarity, factors contributing to precarity, and the potential for change in the future. Commonalities, themes, and occasional contradictions emerged from each of these areas.

Positive outcomes of precarity

Flexibility was the most common positive outcome that participants noted for precarious positions. For those caring for children, aging parents, or other family members, working precariously allowed them to balance those responsibilities with work schedules. Some

participants also described precarious positions as affording them a variety of experiences in different library organizations and work cultures. They felt that initial experience in diverse positions expanded the possibilities for their future careers and gave them a chance to find suitable positions and workplaces.

Many participants described positive outcomes at the organizational level. They mentioned on-call and short-term positions as providing organizations with flexibility to meet service requirements, especially during peak times and special circumstances. This flexibility was seen as especially benefiting managers, supervisors, and others with scheduling responsibilities. Participants also proposed that positions with limited hours and fewer benefits were a financial gain for organizations which allowed them to maintain service levels at reduced costs.

A few participants suggested that contract positions also gave organizations the chance to test-run positions and justify their value. Because of the difficulty in seeking financial support for new permanent positions, they proposed that temporary positions allowed managers to meet increasing demand in certain areas and demonstrate the value of making the position permanent to upper-level administrators.

Finally, several participants perceived organizations as benefiting from the cross-pollination of ideas and best practices within the workplace due to employee turnover and staff working in different branches or library systems.

Negative outcomes of precarity

The interview question on negative outcomes generated the most expansive and emotionally charged responses from almost all participants. People more readily offered negative examples and were unequivocal about many of them, indicating that precarity is seen as a net negative. Some expressed satisfaction that they could discuss the topic openly and frankly within the confidential environment of a research study.

Personal life and decisions

Participants described the financial and scheduling uncertainties of precarious work as limiting many kinds of planning in their personal lives, such as delaying having children, postponing weddings, and avoiding large financial commitments.

Numerous participants also said that precarity affected their decisions about where to live. In some cases, participants relocated to take full-time work, while others said that their lack of geographical flexibility created challenges such as limited employment opportunities and concerns about commuting distance.

Further negative outcomes included financial stress, especially for people who were their household's sole or primary source of income. In some cases, participants remained on Employment Insurance (EI) while working precariously, while others noted that their regular part-time hours were deliberately kept below the threshold for receiving benefits from their employer. Moreover, some participants reported that they or people

they knew held additional jobs outside of libraries or had to leave library work entirely to support themselves and their families.

Mental and physical health

Participants described precarious work structures as sources of stress and exhaustion, which they attributed to uncertainty, real or perceived needs to be constantly available, and working multiple positions. One participant described the extra labour involved in managing schedules from multiple employers, tracking shifts, and maintaining accurate availability for each workplace. In another case, precarious work structures were described as a barrier that prevented managers from following up on an incident of harassment, creating feelings of insecurity for the employee.

A lack of work–life balance affected participants' social relationships outside of work, and those in precarious positions felt a lack of integration with their organization, which connected to feeling isolated and devalued by their colleagues and employers. Some reported feeling implicit or explicit pressure to engage in unpaid labour outside of work hours, and some experienced vulnerability and silencing effects pertaining to discussions of precarity. Many participants with experience as precarious workers expressed fear or reluctance to speak openly about their experiences due to potential repercussions, such as getting fewer work hours or not having a contract renewed.

Precarious employment also affected workers' physical health. Participants without benefits such as extended health care and paid sick days described feeling pressured to come to work while sick or to delay treatment for health issues. In addition, uncertainty about whether contracts would be renewed or become permanent led to fear that taking any time off would indicate a lack of commitment or mean missing out on the opportunity for continued work. This perceived pressure sometimes led to respondents working every shift offered to them or not taking sick leave when it was available.

Career development and decisions

Participants identified precarity as having harmful effects on their career development and decisions, citing a lack of consistent supervision and support, a lack of opportunities and funds for professional development, and limited or insufficient training. They also reported that new and relevant experience was slowly gained, especially compared to regular staff. More abstractly, they felt a lack of freedom to take risks, share ideas, communicate changes, or take control over their time and career.

Participants also identified challenges in transitioning to full-time work with experience gained as a precarious worker. It was sometimes difficult to explain a resume with precarious employment to prospective employers in regions where precarious work was not the norm. Some participants described accepting permanent full-time positions that were not in their preferred area to avoid precarious working conditions, while others spoke of lowering their career expectations in geographic and working environments where precarious positions formed part of the expected career path.

Impact on library organizations

Negative effects for library organizations included high turnover, which resulted in extra work for managers and staff due to repeated cycles of scheduling, hiring, and training. Participants noted that short contracts and infrequent shifts inhibited the growth of institutional and community knowledge, while high turnover meant losing what knowledge had been gained. Irregular scheduling and temporary placements were implicated in weaker relationships with both co-workers and library users, poorer library service, and a reduced capacity for teamwork. Participants also perceived a lack of investment by organizations in their precarious employees and vice versa.

Factors contributing to precarity

The most common reason given for the existence of precarious work was libraries' budgeting and financial needs. Many participants stated that library organizations filled positions with on-call, part-time, or short-term contract workers under the benefits threshold to save money.

Many participants described a particular mentality in which new library workers, especially young people, were expected to prove themselves when entering the job market by working in precarious positions before getting full-time, permanent positions. However, they also questioned whether this system worked as intended, citing the difficulty of securing full-time positions and examples of people who had involuntarily spent several years in precarious positions. Precarious positions were also seen as a way for managers to test people as potential employees before they joined a union and became harder to dislodge. Participants spoke of dissatisfaction with these methods, noting that there should be better ways for managers to identify good workers and that precarious employment should not be seen as a training ground.

The challenge of staffing service points with limited human resources was another factor identified as contributing to the existence of precarious work. One participant also described a lack of physical space for employees to work as limiting the number of permanent positions that could be created.

Participants proposed that public policies lead to insufficient financial support for libraries, forcing management to create or sustain precarious positions, and that there was a lack of policy support for precarious workers at both organizational and governmental levels. Some participants identified the nature of larger social systems, such as capitalism, as contributing to precarity, with a couple of participants stating that maximizing profit and building communities that work together were mutually exclusive.

Finally, some participants also cited a perceived lack of initiative, creativity, or willingness to change as creating and maintaining precarious employment conditions.

The future of precarity and agents of change

Almost all participants anticipated increased precarity in the future, and many linked it to trends in the broader labour market, such as the gig economy and the rise of adjunct

labour in academia. Participants were generally pessimistic that matters would ever improve or that precarious labour would become less common in the field. Some participants stated that precarious work would not change as long as there were people willing to take on that kind of employment. However, a couple of participants thought that library management would eventually observe a decrease in service quality and connect it to precarious work, perhaps leading to positive change.

Collective bargaining through unions was the main agent of both potential and actual change identified by participants, with some conflicting responses. Some suggested unions could be a force for positive change, while others felt that union advocacy and bargaining could lead to negative consequences for precarious workers. One participant speculated that unions may encourage precarity by blocking library requests to create more full-time positions, though they did not offer examples of this practice, and another suggested that it may not be in a union's best interests to bargain for less precarious work. Some participants noted that unions with library workers may also include workers from other organizations whose needs may be different or perceived as more important. A few participants also proposed that change was inhibited by union participation being skewed toward full-time workers who had time to get involved and by young workers thinking unions did not have anything to offer them. On the other hand, other participants identified union advocacy as having caused positive changes within their organizations, including employee reclassification that resulted in increased pay and the creation of permanent part-time positions from auxiliary hours.

Many participants offered concrete suggestions that both unions and employers could use to mitigate precarious employment's negative effects. One participant proposed that unions could consider mandating benefits for part-time workers to decrease the financial appeal of keeping employees below a benefits threshold. Another suggestion was for unions to hold virtual meetings or increase their site visits to meet with workers and raise awareness about precarious work. Suggestions for employers included letting employees buy into extended health plans; matching percentages in lieu of vacation to actual vacation and statutory holiday pay rates; offering more sick pay, especially to auxiliary employees; and matching pension and pay rates to those of full-time employees.

Some participants saw potential for change as coming from more advocacy and discussion by library workers. One participant saw community advocacy as a force for change and proposed that demand for programs and services from the community could create greater pressure to hire or retain staff into less precarious positions. A couple of participants suggested lobbying the government to produce changes in policy, and several professed the need for conversations about precarity to reach library management. A few participants connected this need for discussion back to the idea of precarity causing silencing effects, suggesting that those with stable work or in management roles may not hear about the stress or dissatisfaction experienced by precarious workers. Others perceived that upper management considered their staffing models to be already solved and so lacked interest in examining the practices of precarious work. These last two situations were seen as inhibiting positive change.

Finally, many participants viewed this research project as a force for positive change. Its goals of informing people about the realities of current precarious work, opening conversation across hierarchies, and discussing the issue in the field were all named as positive steps for initiating change in precarious work environments. Some participants also listed these actions as examples of cultural changes that were necessary to support other kinds of change.

Discussion

Responses from study participants confirmed many findings in the broader literature regarding precarious employment's effects on individuals. These effects included financial and psychological vulnerability, difficulties with physical and mental health, difficulty pursuing social activities, and choosing to delay significant life decisions. Participants' responses especially supported the findings in Wilkinson's (2015) study of part-time librarians, which also noted features such as financial insecurity, unevenly gained experience, limited options based on geography, a mentality of getting a "foot in the door" (p. 359), and disconnection from full-time staff. Like Wilkinson, our study found that negative aspects of this employment were more extensively detailed than positive ones. It also built on Wilkinson's work by explicitly naming precarity as a systemic phenomenon, focusing on a Canadian context, and specifically highlighting phenomena such as temporary full-time contracts and variable part-time jobs instead of conflating them with regular part-time jobs.

Other topics running throughout these interviews included privation, dissatisfaction, and a desire for change. Participants framed precarity as involving a lack of choice, lack of stability, and lack of security, especially relative to workers in more conventional employment relationships. They expressed a range of emotions from discontentment to frustration to pessimism, and while some participants identified positive aspects of precarious employment, nobody viewed it as a net positive.

Overall, the positive outcomes of precarious work seemed mainly to benefit library organizations via scheduling and financial efficiencies, while its negative aspects were more numerous, more salient, and more likely to be assumed by individuals, with consequences for organizations as well.

Limitations and Future Research

There were several expected limitations due to the nature of this study. The sample size was small and self-selecting, and the choice to synthesize narratives in a dialectical manner did not allow for the examination of individual stories or variables. The inclusion criteria were limited to workers with ties to British Columbia, but experiences of precarious work could differ elsewhere, both within Canada and in countries with different employment systems and attitudes towards work, such as the United States. However, future research could easily compensate for these limitations, and the existing narrative provides a strong basis for further investigation.

Based on this narrative, it appears that precariously employed library workers have different needs and concerns compared to more securely employed staff, and there is a need for both research and practices that address those distinctions. Future research could use methods that express relationships between variables, such as surveys, or collect demographic data to relate precarity to equity, diversity, and inclusion, which were not explicit focuses of this study. It is especially worth considering how precarious employment in libraries reinforces broader structures of oppression, such as sexism, racism, ableism, and colonialism. How does it interact with selective pressures in hiring and retention? How are lived experiences of precarity different for women, people of colour, LGBTQ+ people, people with disabilities, and other marginalized groups? The information gathered in these interviews offers starting points to explore these and other questions.

Implications for policy and practice

Although there are common threads in experiences of precarious employment, understanding how it plays out in specific contexts is important for effecting meaningful change. Participants offered examples of concrete changes in their interviews, suggesting that they have a strong sense of what those actions could look like. It is also possible to determine some general implications going forward.

Responses indicated that people perceived the drive towards precarious positions as coming from organizations in a top-down manner, not from individuals. If this is the case, then the power to create change also rests with those responsible for setting the terms of employment. Just as Zhang and Zuberi (2017) have suggested that labour policy needs to better reflect the realities of precarious work, libraries may need to do the same. Employers must decide if economic efficiencies are worth the effects on workers and the workplace, and they must show that the choice to use precarious employment accounts for the evidence of its effects. Participants' questioning of existing work structures and their ability to envision alternatives suggest that changes to the status quo are both possible and desirable, but it is up to organizations to determine how to implement them. Individuals should not be solely responsible for dealing with the effects of precarious employment.

Precarious work was also shown to have consequences for organizational health. Many people reported feeling disconnected from their organization or divided from full-time or permanent staff, and it is possible to see how the structures of precarious work could produce these feelings. When people work different shifts at different locations or are hired on contract, it can reduce chances to build bonds with others in the same situation and limit opportunities for talking and sharing knowledge with those who are not. Irregular scheduling and turnover may also affect the capacity for teamwork and organizational knowledge. Finally, service quality can be inconsistent when library workers are not able to engage on a regular and sustained basis with members of their communities.

As members of institutions that advocate for intellectual freedom and against censorship, library staff should also be aware of precarity's effects on speech. The

silencing effects and lack of discussion mentioned by some participants indicate that employees may not feel safe speaking up about their situations. Regardless of whether that perception is true, the fact that it exists suggests that organizations should consider whether conditions are in place for workers to talk openly about their experiences. Workers experiencing negative effects may also view a lack of conversation from management, whether correctly or not, as a sign that library organizations are not invested in their employees.

Precarious labour also has implications for other library values and for the library field as a whole, since its economic and scheduling efficiencies require additional costs that are largely assumed by the precarious worker. Participants mentioned their own difficulties with health, finances, and family care along with people they knew who had left libraries due to similar difficulties. If precarious employment selects for people with the situational resources to assume these costs, then it risks leaving out or pushing out people who are less likely to have the necessary resources, such as immigrants, Indigenous people, people of colour, single parents, and people with lower socioeconomic status. Therefore, precarious work is likely to affect diversity and inclusion in hiring, retention, and the field at large. The gaps participants noted between precarious and stable workers in terms of experience and chances for professional development call the value of equal access into question, while the potential for stress and overwork stands to affect the mental health of those in the field.

Conclusion

This study explored how library workers perceive the effects and experiences of precarious employment in their careers, workplaces, and the field as a whole. Our team of researchers used the hermeneutic dialectic method of analysis to create a narrative synthesis from the rich qualitative data gained through semi-structured interviews. Participants suggested a wide range of outcomes due to precarity at the individual, organizational, and professional levels. The main positive results were identified as flexibility and economic efficiency for organizations. Negative experiences and perceptions were much more common, and they were described by precarious workers as stemming from a variety of financial, physical, mental, and emotional stresses caused by the structures and uncertainty of precarious employment. These outcomes aligned with the findings from other literature on the effects of precarious employment. Participants also identified potential actions and agents for change to existing work structures, such as union activity and community advocacy.

As an exploratory study, this project generated information and ideas upon which further research can build, perhaps with other groups, focuses, and methodologies. In addition to filling gaps in research and offering considerations for practice, this study has sought to raise awareness of realities that may not always be obvious, promote discussion across hierarchies and library systems, and bring the issue of precarious work into wider conversation. Such awareness and discussion can lead to actions that support those who experience negative outcomes from precarious work. While not everyone may be in a position to create positive change in this regard, these negative effects suggest that such change is needed. Failure to address them may result in stress,

marginalization, burnout, turnover, workers leaving the field, reduced service quality, and more. While precarious work is unlikely to be eliminated, it should not be an inevitable part of library employment. By imagining alternatives to existing structures through research, discussion, and practice, we can make our libraries better workplaces for everyone.

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Appendix: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Introductory Script

For this study, we are looking at precarious work in libraries. This term covers a variety of employment relationships, and it generally refers to employment of limited or uncertain duration where hours and benefits are reduced or not guaranteed. Examples of precarious positions include auxiliary or on-call work, contract work, family leave replacements, and so on. If you have any questions or concerns, or if you wish to stop the interview and withdraw from the study, you can do so at any time, without giving any reason and with no effects.

Interview Questions

1. Do you have any questions before we begin?
2. What is your experience of precarious work? *(Possible prompt: Are you or have you worked in a position that you would consider precarious?)*
3. Has the existence of precarious work influenced decisions you have made? *(Possible prompts: For yourself personally? For your career? For your workplace? For life outside of work?)*
4. What do you see as positive outcomes of precarious work? *(Possible prompts: For yourself personally? For your career? For your workplace? For life outside of work?)*
5. What do you see as negative outcomes of precarious work? *(Possible prompts: For yourself personally? For your career? For your workplace? For life outside of work?)*
6. What do you see as factors that contribute to the existence of precarious work?
7. How do you see precarious work in libraries changing in future, if at all? *(Possible prompt: Who or what do you think will influence these changes, if any?)*
8. Do you have any further questions or comments you would like to add before we finish?