

**Title:** Precarity Doesn't Care: Precarious Employment as a Dysfunctional Practice in Libraries

Chapter in forthcoming monograph, *Libraries as Dysfunctional Organizations and Workplaces*, editor Spencer Acadia, published by Routledge.

### **Authors**

1. Adena Brons (ORCID ID: 0000-0003-0422-7483)
2. Chloe Riley (ORCID ID: 0000-0001-5858-000X)
3. Ean Henninger (ORCID ID: N/A)
4. Crystal Yin (ORCID ID: 0000-0002-0619-2774)

### **Abstract**

Precarious employment in libraries has significant yet underreported negative effects on library employees and the library field. Employees in precarious positions experience financial, social, and physical vulnerability, while other factors, such as reduced service capacity and worker burnout, affect organizations and communities more broadly. Such effects are often obscured by ideological mechanisms specific to libraries, such as invisibilization of labor and vocational awe. Precarity can, however, be resisted, and this chapter outlines possible means of survival, mitigation, and resistance for people working in libraries. Stably-employed workers and managers can support precariously-employed colleagues and use their power and influence to mitigate the effects of precarity, engage in acts of resistance, and provide worker support through unions and collective bargaining. In addition, the authors propose developing an ethics of care and relationality and using the concept of inclusive equity as ways to change the underlying attitudes and values of libraries that contribute to precarity. Positive material changes become

possible when workers' experiences and the negative effects of precarious employment are made fully visible, acknowledged and acted upon.

**Keywords**

Library Workers; Library Employees; Library Workplace; Precarious Employment; Labor Issues; Organizational Management



## Introduction

Precarious employment is a phenomenon typically involving “an inadequacy of rights and protection at work” and characterized by “lower wages, less access to benefits ... and greater uncertainty about future employment income,” as well as employer misconduct (Topp & Lubowitz, 2019, pp. 11, 13). Stress and instability can leave precarious workers especially vulnerable to negative health effects, exacerbated by a lack of health insurance, sick days, or sick pay. They also face long-term financial disadvantages due to income volatility, pay gaps, or a lack of access to employer pension and retirement plans.

To an extent, whether a person experiences precarity is subjective and dependent on context. Someone working in a temporary on-call position with inherited wealth or involved with a life partner who has a high-paying job may not experience precarity associated with their work, while a person in a job that appears stable may suddenly face precarity in the face of funding cuts or a pandemic. However, certain material employment structures are inherently precarious and substantially increase the chance that workers will experience precarity. Research into precarious employment often focuses on these structures for the sake of analysis and to identify potential loci of change. These structures may include contract, grant-funded, part-time, or on-call work, as well as other staffing structures that limit workers’ stability and access to benefits. Wildenhaus (2019) used the metaphor of a ladder to describe a possible sequence of job classifications from most precarious to least.

**Table 1**  
*Job Classifications from Most Secure to Most Precarious*

(↑ most secure)
tenured or continuous appointment positions;
non-tenured but permanent/indefinite positions;
long-term (>1 year) or renewable contract positions;
short-term (<1 year) or nonrenewable contract positions;
part-time/at will positions;
paid internships, paraprofessionals, apprenticeships;
unpaid internships;
work compensated on a per-task basis (such as through Mechanical Turk, crowdsourcing);
labor performed by incarcerated individual;
(↓ most precarious)

*Note.* From “Wages for intern work: Denormalizing unpaid positions in archives and libraries,” by K. Wildenhaus, 2019, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, 2(1), p. 12-13 (<https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v2i1.88>). Copyright 2018 Karly Wildenhaus.

Precarious employment is on the rise across many sectors of society, and libraries are no exception. A recent analysis of a nationwide Canadian library job board found that 42% of all jobs posted from 2017-2019 were precarious, with year-over-year increases in the overall proportion of precarious jobs, and significantly higher proportions among subsets of job postings, such as jobs requiring less education (Henninger et al., 2020). Given its potential to affect matters such as service quality, worker satisfaction, and organizational health, precarious labor in libraries deserves further attention, especially due to the dysfunctional effects already observed and reported in previous literature.

Before further discussing precarious employment as a dysfunctional feature in libraries, assumptions about what it means for libraries to be functional in the first place must be considered and explicated. Structures, systems, and beliefs exist to accomplish a given end or goal, and what is functional in accomplishing one goal may be dysfunctional in another. For instance, a book may function as a vessel for information or a doorstop, but it would be quite dysfunctional as a source of food for humans. The goals of libraries may be multiple, shifting,

and even contradictory, and it is important to resist attempts at simplifying these goals into a single mission or vision (Bales, 2015). Nonetheless, some broad goals may be identified. For example, if libraries' goals include sharing information, improving society, providing excellent service, and treating all staff and users equitably, then precarious labor functions poorly – it is dysfunctional – in realizing these goals. If libraries' goals, on the other hand, include reproducing society as it currently exists, prioritizing economic efficiency above other considerations, producing value at the expense of tired and stressed workers, reducing workers' investment in the library and willingness to take risks, and disproportionately affecting marginalized people, then precarious labor functions quite well in supporting these goals.

In describing how precarious employment in libraries is dysfunctional, this chapter takes as its starting point that libraries should be working towards the first set of goals just mentioned. The first part of this chapter describes problems that precarious work produces at the individual and organizational levels and reviews specific ideological mechanisms that give rise to these problems in libraries. The second part offers some ideas and practices aimed at counteracting these negative effects and helping libraries function better in pursuit of the first set of goals.

### **Effects of precarious employment**

Existing research on precarious work shows that such work is dysfunctional in various ways ranging from the inconvenient to the actively harmful. Precarious employment results in negative consequences for those individuals experiencing it and for organizations and communities as a whole. Precarity negatively impacts workers' physical and mental health (Benach et al., 2014; Canivet et al., 2017; Lewchuk et al., 2008; Matilla-Santander et al., 2020), financial security (Aronsson et al., 2005), and ability to make long term plans such as buying property or starting a family (Chan & Tweedie, 2015; Golsch, 2005). In Matilla-Santander et

al.'s study (2020), "precarious employment was significantly associated with exposure to violence or harassment" (p. 434), while Reuter et al. (2020) found a higher prevalence of unwanted sexual attention and sexual harassment reported by workers who experienced one or more indicators of precarious employment, in particular unpredictable schedules, inadequate information on occupational health and safety, and multiple simultaneous jobs (p. 11-14). These negative effects create larger-scale problems and cause stress for individual workers and their employment relationships with the organizations (Benach et al., 2014; Canivet et al., 2017; Lewchuk et al., 2008). Labor scholars (e.g., Bernhardt, 2015; Cranford & Vosko, 2006) have also shown how precarious workers are more likely to be racialized, women, or immigrants, meaning that there are also implications for diversity, equity, and inclusion in the distribution of precarious positions.

Another common thread in the literature on precarity is that it inhibits community and social connections both inside and outside the workplace. In the employment strain model, Lewchuk et al. (2008) referred to the concept of 'employment relationship support' and found that workers with low levels of support were associated with worse health outcomes. Precarity also degrades social cohesion and community strength by reducing people's abilities to engage in extracurricular or volunteer activities (Procyk et al., 2017) and may even affect political engagement and the health of democracies at large (Näsström & Kalm, 2015). As this research demonstrates, the consequences of precarious employment are far-reaching and are not restricted only to precarious workers themselves.

In libraries specifically, Henninger et al.'s (2019) exploration of perceptions of precarious employment in library workers found many of the same dysfunctional outcomes attested in the broader literature on precarity. The high level of uncertainty surrounding precarious employment was identified as harming or slowing career development, and

respondents often perceived a lack of consistent supervision and support from their employers. Workers also reported that precarity made them less likely or less able to report harassment, turn down shifts, or speak openly to their supervisors about issues. Additionally, some respondents reported working second or third non-library jobs or leaving the library field altogether as the only way to support themselves and their households.

Precarious library workers are less likely to benefit from the funds or time needed to pursue professional development (Hogue & Sisson, 1994). Neigel (2016) also highlighted unequal access to library education and professional development opportunities, pointing out that precarious workers are at a “perpetual disadvantage” when it comes to accessing the “expensive [library] credentialing system” (p. 2). These workers are also less likely to have the capacity to take on service work such as volunteering for local or national organizations (Henninger et al., 2019; Lacey, 2019). Yet, as Lacey (2019) pointed out, precarious workers will often feel pressured to agree to additional responsibilities or opportunities, putting them at higher risk of burnout (p. 4). Other authors have linked precarity to alienation and isolation (Hahn, 2019; Wildenhaus, 2019). Hahn (2019), for instance, reflected on precarity’s potential for creating trauma and how it creates “networks of isolation” that separate precarious workers from each other and from collective healing and support (p. 3).

As in the wider LIS literature, precarious library work intersects with other forms of difference and marginalization in ways that compound existing inequities. Writing on precarity in working conditions more broadly, Gibson (2019) described structural factors that contribute to increased precarity for women of color in LIS, while Moeller (2019) described how ableist deficit norms in the disclosure and accommodation of disabilities expose disabled library employees to additional risk and vulnerability. Focusing specifically on precarious employment, Alaniz (2019) explored how temporary diversity residencies “exploit the labor of ‘diverse’ early

career professionals while providing minimal employee investment, development and commitment” (para. 2). Research by Li (2021) demonstrated pay gaps for temporary and racialized staff. Precarious library work is also uniquely dysfunctional for trans library workers, who regularly attest to problems such as misgendering or deadnaming from staff and institutions. In these cases, the burden of education often falls on trans people, and, as a result, they may be reluctant to fully be themselves while at work (Jones et al., 2019). As these examples show, white, cis, able-bodied people are often better protected from the dysfunctions of precarious library work, while its dysfunction most strongly affects people from currently and historically marginalized and oppressed groups.

Many of these individual-level problems have ripple effects at the organizational level within libraries. The library as a functional organization is only possible thanks to the labor of its employees, whether shelving books, providing reference services, managing programs, or updating the catalog. In addition, the library field relies on employees’ volunteer labor to operate professional organizations, organize conferences, conduct research, and engage in other service and professional development work. All these activities are made more difficult when the workers performing them are learning a new institutional culture, suffering from stress or burnout, or have no available time or funds for professional development.

The toll that cyclical and precarious hiring takes on libraries is not often discussed in the LIS literature. Skyrme and Levesque (2019) identified learning the institutional culture of a new job as a challenge which librarians on short-term contracts will have to repeat across contracts. This period of acclimatization may take several months, after which point a librarian may only have weeks or months left in their contract. This toll is corroborated by Henninger et al.’s (2019) study, in which participants viewed high turnover as a loss for both employees and employers, as well as by Kendrick’s (2020) study on low morale that cites job attrition, overreliance on part-

time positions, and high turnover as factors making it difficult for staff to complete everything “from small projects to long-term or necessary administrative work” (p. 17). Employees faced with short-term contracts do not have as much time or incentive to develop an insightful or meaningful understanding of their job roles or the communities served. Meanwhile, employers lose knowledge gained by contract employees, and both are often forced to start over at square one due to repeated cycles of hiring. Full-time or regular employees may also feel strain from repeatedly training and supervising contingent colleagues (Bladek, 2019). Overall, the lack of investment from both organizations and their employees can lead to a reduced capacity for teamwork and put the library at risk of offering a declining quality of services.

### **Factors maintaining precarious employment in libraries**

The main driver of precarious labor is an extractive capitalist system which prioritizes economic efficiency over the wellbeing and dignity of workers, while reproducing colonialism, white supremacy, and other systems of oppression. However, these systems are not unique to libraries, and their operations in libraries and have been explored elsewhere (Leung & López-McKnight, 2021; Popowich, 2019; Schlesselman-Tarango, 2017). The scope of this chapter explores ideological mechanisms within these oppressive systems that pertain specifically to the continuation of precarity in the LIS field.

In general, the status quo relies on a lack of attention, whether intentional or not, to labor as a material reality. In libraries, the labor of individual workers may be treated as invisible or immaterial, a sacred vocation, or a necessary rite of passage. These ideological mechanisms manifest at both the organizational and individual level, and they obscure or dismiss the costs of precarious employment in particular. One common method of making precarious labor invisible is to conceive of and discuss the library as an idealistic institution or physical building while

ignoring the workers inside it, which Settoducato (2019) creatively explored by musing on the “death of libraries” discourse and (re)imagining library workers as ghosts (para. 21). Revitt (2020) critiqued the use of the library as a stand-in for library workers, identifying the feminization and gender of work in libraries as key factors driving labor’s invisibility. Similarly, Seale and Mirza (2019) discussed academic librarianship’s increasing focus on prestigious external validation and credentialing, aligning with an emphasis on male-dominated areas such as information technology and leadership; the attention on these factors within librarianship devalues other kinds of librarian and library labor and contributes to making them invisible. While these factors affect library work at all levels, they are exacerbated by precarious working conditions.

The invisibility of precarious labor may not be immediately apparent to outside observers when the LIS field focuses on fashioning itself to appear attractive and useful to those same parties or on cultivating relationships between users and the library-as-institution as opposed to relationships among users and workers. However, precarious labor still happens behind the scenes, and so it must be made visible in order to be accounted for, such as through the ghostly interventions proposed by Settoducato (2019) whereby workers “reveal their presence and the presence of structures that are supposed to remain hidden” (para. 21). For precarious workers in particular, erasure may occur when these workers are conflated with stably employed workers, resulting in their distinct needs and concerns going ignored. Users entering the library may not be able to distinguish between stable and precarious staff, but precarious employees are keenly aware of the labor involved in remembering procedures at a branch visited only once a month or gaining a deep knowledge of popular literature while employed on-call. As Settoducato (2019) wrote, “library workers must assert not only the value of our labor, but the very existence of it”

(para. 5). Highlighting the existence of precarious labor and its unique network of dysfunctions is a necessary first step to changing things for the better.

Closely related to the idea of invisible labor is an approach that treats library work as solely immaterial or intellectual in nature, because work that does not directly produce material goods can more easily be dismissed. As Bales (2015) pointed out, portraying librarianship as an idea-based field can facilitate the dismissal of the work's material realities by those who stand to benefit from doing so. Sloniowski (2016) highlighted further divisions between intellectual and emotional labor within the immaterial realm, with the intellectual nature of digital library work being valued over the affective care work involved, for example, in reference and instruction.

The selective attention given to immaterial labor – and, within that, to cognitive over affective labor – becomes especially relevant when one considers that withstanding precarity is in many ways more of an emotional concern than an intellectual one. Precarious workers engage in additional kinds of labor that go unrecognized by stable employees or by management, such as juggling multiple jobs and schedules, adapting to successive new workplaces, managing feelings of insecurity or vulnerability, constructing coherent career narratives, performing gratitude and excitement about any work experience, and self-monitoring behavior for fear of getting fewer hours or not having a contract renewed (Henninger et al., 2019). While such activities may be immaterial or invisible in many settings, they nonetheless have material effects on the workers performing them.

Even if these kinds of labor are made visible, they may still be justified by Ettarh's (2018) concept of vocational awe: "The set of ideas, values and assumptions librarians have about themselves, and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique" (Introduction, para. 3). Ettarh discussed issues such as under-compensation and a lack of diversity, that, while present

regardless of employment status, are exacerbated by precarious labor. As Ettarh (2018, Under-compensation section, para. 2) wrote, “through its enforcement of awe through the promotion of dramatic and heroic narratives, the institution gains free, or reduced price, labor,” which in turn screens out people who are unable to assume this labor due to their financial status, care responsibilities, disabilities, or other factors. Thus, viewed through the lens of vocational awe, the additional labor expended by precarious workers, the barriers created by precarity, and the lack of benefits and compensation are all necessary sacrifices in the service of library missions and values, and anyone critiquing these inequalities may be seen as insufficiently supportive of the sacred calling of library work.

Finally, library workers have attested to tropes documented in Henninger et al. (2019) of precarious library work as a way of ‘getting a foot in the door,’ ‘paying one’s dues,’ and ‘putting in time,’ all of which frame precarious labor as a necessary stepping stone or rite of passage on a linear path to stable employment. For example, the precarity of unpaid internships is often “the cost of entry to a career in libraries and archives” when it is made part of graduation requirements in LIS programs under the questionable assumption that internships “correlate positively to future job prospects” (Wildenhaus, 2019, p. 4). Such narratives simplify the reality of the job market, and they may also reinforce a naturalized hierarchy among library workers based on seniority, with the unspoken assumption being that ‘because this is how it was for me, this is how it must be for you.’ Framing precarious work in this way assumes a guarantee of stable employment in future, which is not possible for everyone, nor guaranteed.

Each of these ideological mechanisms succeeds in part because they rely on kernels of truth: library work may indeed be viewed as residing in libraries, it does have immaterial aspects, it is worthy of respect, and it may follow a certain progression for some people. However, such views are partial at best, and they risk naturalizing precarious work or approaching it in ways

that do not recognize its negative effects or the potential for change. As brief counterpoints to each mentality: to the invisibility caused by library-as-institution thinking, the work resides in libraries but is carried out by workers, without whom libraries would not exist; to the undervaluing of immaterial library labor, this work has material effects on the world and on the people who carry out the work and receive its benefits; to vocational awe, work being worthy of respect does not mean people should sacrifice everything to do it; to the narratives of precarious work as a necessary step, past approaches to stable employment do not hold true for everyone under current realities.

### **Resisting precarity**

The causes, manifestations, and effects of precarity are multiple and complex, and no single individual, library, or library system will experience precarity in precisely the same way. This complexity can halt discussions of ‘solving’ precarity before they begin, because for every proposed solution, there will be a situation to which it is inapplicable. In addition, answering the question of who bears the responsibility for enacting solutions can also delay or prevent responses to the problem of precarious labor. For individuals working within LIS institutions, solving or dismantling precarity can feel overwhelming and impossible. A single library cannot fix precarious labor singlehandedly, and neither can one person. Indeed, too much focus on individual actions ignores the fact that precarious workers are already working to mitigate and survive precarity, and it absolves those with institutional power from any responsibility on their part. As with many systemic issues, the problem is greater than any single person, but the responsibility for change rests most strongly with those who have the power to enact it – in this case, employers and unions. There are, however, two broad categories of actions that individuals

can take, whether they are precariously employed or not: coping mechanisms and acts of resistance.

Literature on overwork, burnout, and mental health often focuses on coping mechanisms that allow a worker to continue in their job or career despite the debilitating effects of their work situation (Agostino & Cassidy, 2019; Kendrick, 2017; Lacey, 2019). Often described as self-care, these actions focus on individual wellbeing. Examples include building exercise routines, meditating, seeking therapy, mentally disconnecting from work at the end of the day, and building social connections outside of work. While helpful to an extent, these actions are internally oriented and do not address the external conditions affecting workers' wellbeing. Skyrme and Levesque (2019) articulated how individuals using tactics such as self-branding via social media is an "individual solution to a mass problem" (p. 15) that results in precarious workers "divest[ing] personal energy from contributing to collective responses to a systemic issue" (p. 15).

Acts of resistance and advocacy are the second category of actions available to individual workers. Acts of resistance are externally oriented, aimed at drawing attention to the effects of precarity, calling for change, and holding decision makers accountable. Yousefi (2017) highlighted cases where there is a disconnect between the value statements, missions, and visions of libraries and their day-to-day "dispositions" and "propensities," writing that "it is difficult to fight with indignation what is not there" (p. 97). Precarity, then, is an example of the invisible and undiscussed status quo that is protected and enshrined by ongoing budgetary, staffing, and service planning decisions. A significant act of resistance that any precarious worker can engage in is to refuse to let precarity be invisible. Yousefi (2017) described this in terms of storytelling or gossip, sharing one's experiences, and connecting them with others: "Witnessing and acknowledgement can be powerful tools in disrupting the status quo" (p. 99). Making precarity

visible means being transparent about the conditions of one's employment, discussing salary and benefits, and building ties with other precarious workers, seeing them as allies rather than rivals. As a practical starting point, the document *Talking about Contingency at Work* by the Digital Library Federation Working Group on Labor in Digital Libraries (2020) provided a series of scenarios for talking about precarious work, with talking points and questions based on job role, type of institution, and type of communication venue, reminding those new to such conversations that "conflict is required for change and is a necessary part of interrupting patterns. Think about how you will prepare for discomfort and build your competency in productive disruption" (para. 2).

Workers in stable positions have additional acts of resistance and advocacy available to them. A second technique Yousefi (2017) described is the identity of the hacker: "The hacker is committed to the long game of progressive change," and it is an ideal role for stably employed workers who can "make use of smaller opportunities to initiate shifts and make modifications" (p. 101). These workers can be a voice for labor issues in organizational planning, such as strategic planning, budget development, and project prioritization, and they can also support and amplify comments made by precarious colleagues, whether by seconding in a meeting, signing a letter for change, or participating in job stoppages or strikes (Digital Library Federation Working Group on Labor in Digital Libraries, 2020).

Workers may have a variety of avenues open to them for advocacy, including the workplace, governmental policy, professional organizations, and library education programs (Wildenhaus, 2019). Professional organizations can participate in advocacy efforts, maintain lists of paid internships, or provide best practice recommendations related to job postings and hiring to employers in their field. Another form of collective advocacy is participation in unions or collective bargaining. Unions are generally seen as one of the best ways to improve working

conditions in libraries (Schomberg & Cole, 2017; Smith, 2018). Research on the efficacy of unionization is not always definitive, but several studies have found that unionization was associated with higher salaries for academic librarians (Applegate, 2009; Mills & McCullough, 2018). The Mills and McCullough (2018) study, in particular, found that academic librarians perceived a sense of job security as one of the four main benefits of being in a union. Union participation offers a way to connect with workers in adjacent fields, such as academic faculty or public service employees, who may also be similarly affected by precarity (Phillips et al., 2019).

At the organizational level in libraries, institutions have numerous options available to mitigate and reduce precarity. These could include examining and rewriting employment policies related to illness and work expectations, as well as building specific support for health benefits, mental health, and vacation time for precarious workers into collective agreements and employment contracts. Managers and administrators can review job descriptions and responsibilities to ensure that both are at an appropriate level for the duration, number of hours, and pay rate for the position, and can incorporate time for additional training, professional development, and service work for precarious workers in planning and staffing schedules. Additionally, management can develop robust change management procedures and effective onboarding to ease the learning curve of new employees and reduce knowledge loss due to turnover, such as scheduling overlap for training with previous employees in the role, providing clear direction for questions about policies and human resources, or maintaining up to date training materials. They should also create and follow through on thorough, supportive, and protective mechanisms for reporting and investigating harassment or bullying. Further, management can proactively create workplace culture that is inclusive of precarious employees, making sure that they are included in social events or strategic consultations and providing paid time to attend union meetings, conduct research, serve on professional organizations, or read

professional literature. Finally, management can offer both reliable scheduling and flexibility to workers juggling multiple positions, and they can count precarious work hours towards benefits or promotion thresholds. Organizations with unions could explicitly and proactively create chances for their precarious colleagues to share challenges and concerns and work with them to improve specific issues. Above all else, administrators and managers should advocate for the benefits of stable employment to be extended to as great a number of workers as possible. Institutions have the greatest ability to immediately and materially impact precarious workers.

### **Addressing attitudes and values**

While there are many practical, concrete actions that can improve the conditions of precarious work, supporting these material changes also requires changes to the deep-seated attitudes and values that govern employee-employer relations. The feminist framework of care ethics offers a starting point for considering how to reframe institutional policies, practices, and measurements of success. The devaluation of care within institutions is a broader issue than precarious labor, but exploring institutions' lack of care exposes many of the tensions and dysfunctions associated with precarious labor. Organizational attitudes towards precarious labor, and labor in general, are informed by the extent to which the institution demonstrates its care and concern for employees in its values and policies.

Care ethics centers relational and interdependent human experiences, explicitly naming the value of emotional labor, community building, and nurturing. Tronto (1993) extended ethics of care from the interpersonal to social, political, and organizational spheres, understanding care as a fundamental concept to shape society by noting that “an ethic of care relies upon a political commitment to value care and to reshape institutions to reflect that changed value” (p.178).

Centering an inclusive ethics of care could begin to address some of the inequity and negative effects that emerge from prolonged devaluation of care.

Higgins (2017) explored the possibilities of both feminist ethics of care and feminist standpoint theory to encourage library workers to value interdependence and “to decenter dominant positionalities, bodies, systems, and perspectives in our work” (p. 85). Higgins explains: “As library workers we need not engage in acts of nurturing, but in the way that we structure our spaces, services, and programs we can draw on our capacity to empathize, and be sensitive to the affective qualities of our work ... A feminist care ethic may enable us to center the collaborative, communal, and politically engaged-ness of library work” (2017, p. 83). Institutions such as libraries are ripe for re-examining their attitudes, values, and policies to (re)center inclusive care as a core value.

In 2020, Simon Fraser University’s Academic Women issued a report entitled *Radical Inclusion* (Academic Women of SFU, 2020), which explored the devaluation of care at the university and proposed a strategy of ‘inclusive equity’ at an institutional level. Grounded in a framework of an ethics of care, this report outlined the negative effects on faculty members from the lack and devaluation of care. These effects align with many negative individual effects identified with precarity, including decreased mental and physical well-being, professional dissatisfaction and demoralization, and feelings of isolation (p. 38). Furthermore, the report addressed the negative effects on the institution, including reduction of workplace cohesion and declining quality of service (p. 38). The report proposed that the university “become a place that values, rewards, promotes, and amplifies care” (p. 39) and urged other institutions to explore how a strategy of inclusive equity that centers care could change some of these negative effects. The *Radical Inclusion* report envisioned how to approach shifting institutional attitudes and values towards care where such transformation could bring about a culture shift with the

possibility for meaningful enhancement to material conditions for both workers and institutions in terms of service quality and employee satisfaction.

Extending a culture of care and interdependence to the organizational level requires institutions to examine their institutional attitudes and values. Only by first acknowledging and recognizing where inequity exists can institutions begin developing specific, measurable, and meaningful commitments towards addressing these issues. At the same time, caution must be exercised when neoliberal institutions co-opt the language of “care” in a way that maintains or perpetuates harm or dehumanizing hegemonic systems (McGregor, 2020).

Care ethics provide a framework for individuals and organizations to resist some of the pervasive ideologies that swirl around precarity and elide its negative effects, including the invisibility and immateriality of library labor, vocational awe, and the necessary rites of passage for library workers. Centering care ethics and interdependence meaningfully within an institution necessitates understanding employees as human beings with positionality, history, and potential. Within a meaningful foundation of care or inclusive equity, the materiality of precarious labor and its effects on an individual person are made unavoidably visible. Likewise, a framework that intentionally cares about and values individual needs and experiences also undermines views of library labor as a sacred vocation and the pervasive myths about ‘getting your foot in the door.’

## **Conclusion**

Precarity in libraries, as described in this chapter, is characterized by workers’ experience of vulnerability, instability, and disadvantages due to precarious labor practices. The negative effects on individuals are far-reaching and include physical and mental health issues, financial stress, difficulties with long-term decision-making, and vulnerability to harassment and abuse. For the institution, precarity affects service quality, long-term planning, and institutional

knowledge among staff. Ideological mechanisms such as invisible labor and vocational awe help disguise the effects of precarity and are, in turn, perpetuated by it, obscuring the dysfunction of precarious employment and making it difficult to change or resist the status quo. Such obscurity makes precarious work easy to overlook or ignore and there remains a lack of evidence on whether decisions on whether and how to use precarious labor take its negative effects into account (Henninger et al., 2019). Thus, precarity functions to uphold oppressive systems and to reward people who already hold other advantages. Ethics of care and relationality offer possible alternatives to these destructive ideologies by emphasizing workers as fully realized people with needs, histories, and inherent value.

Precarity is a complex and prevalent issue that demands more information, reflection, and action. Precarious employment affects all library workers, and while all workers have a responsibility to counteract and resist precarity in their workplace, some have more power and responsibility than others. This chapter outlined strategies and tactics available to workers in different positions and with differing levels of institutional and personal power. Precarity can not only be rehabilitated; rather, these strategies are steps toward broader and more meaningful change. While not exhaustive, these strategies are offered as a way of moving from reflection to action and from invisibility to solidarity.



## References

- Academic Women of SFU. (2020). *Radical Inclusion: Equity and diversity among female faculty at Simon Fraser University*. <https://www.sfu.ca/academicwomen.html>
- Agostino, C., & Cassidy, M. (2019). Failure to launch: Feelings of failure in early career librarians. *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research*, 14(1). <https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v14i1.5224>
- Alaniz, D. (2019). *Reflections on Temporary Appointments and Innovation/Diversity Culture in Libraries and Archives*. <https://laborforum.diglib.org/2019/08/14/reflections-on-temporary-appointments-and-innovation-diversity-culture-in-libraries-and-archives/>
- Applegate, R. (2009). Who benefits? Unionization and academic libraries and librarians. *The Library Quarterly*, 79(4), 443–463. <https://doi.org/10.1086/605383>
- Aronsson, G., Dallner, M., Lindh, T., & Göransson, S. (2005). Flexible pay but fixed expenses: Personal financial strain among on-call employees. *International Journal of Health Services*, 35(3), 499–528. <https://doi.org/10.2190/K0D9-RYQ5-TKEW-Y1RW>
- Bales, S. (2015). *The Dialectic of Academic Librarianship: A Critical Approach*. Library Juice Press.
- Benach, J., Vives, A., Amable, M., Vanroelen, C., Tarafa, G., & Muntaner, C. (2014). Precarious employment: Understanding an emerging social determinant of health. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 35(1), 229–253. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-032013-182500>
- Bernhardt, N. S. (2015). Racialized precarious employment and the inadequacies of the Canadian welfare state. *SAGE Open*, 5(2), 215824401557563. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015575639>

- Bladek, M. (2019). Contingent appointments in academic libraries: Management challenges and opportunities. *Library Management*, 40(8/9), 485–495. <https://doi.org/10.1108/LM-06-2019-0032>
- Canivet, C., Aronsson, G., Bernhard-Oettel, C., Leineweber, C., Moghaddassi, M., Stengård, J., Westerlund, H., & Östergren, P.-O. (2017). The negative effects on mental health of being in a non-desired occupation in an increasingly precarious labour market. *SSM - Population Health*, 3, 516–524. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2017.05.009>
- Chan, S., & Tweedie, D. (2015). Precarious work and reproductive insecurity. *Social Alternatives*, 34(5), 5–13.
- Cranford, C. J., & Vosko, L. F. (2006). Conceptualizing precarious employment: Mapping wage work across social location and occupational context. In L. F. Vosko (Ed.), *Precarious Employment: Understanding Labour Market Insecurity in Canada*. McGill-Queen's University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.cttq495n>
- Digital Library Federation Working Group on Labor in Digital Libraries. (2020). *Talking About Contingency At Work* (Collective Responsibility Labor Advocacy Toolkit). <https://toolkit.dobetterlabor.com/talking-about-contingency-work/>
- Ettarh, F. (2018). Vocational awe and librarianship: The lies we tell ourselves. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*. <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>
- Gibson, A. N. (2019). Civility and structural precarity for faculty of color in LIS. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 60(3), 215–222. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jelis.2019-0006>
- Golsch, K. (2005). *The Impact of Labour Market Insecurity on the Work and Family Life of Men and Women: A Comparison of Germany, Great Britain, and Spain*. Lang.

- Hahn, A. (2019). *A collective effort: Healing, trauma, and precarity in public librarianship*.  
[https://aireuhl.github.io/portfolio/Collective%20Effort\\_Hahn.pdf](https://aireuhl.github.io/portfolio/Collective%20Effort_Hahn.pdf)
- Henninger, E., Brons, A., Riley, C., & Yin, C. (2019). Perceptions and experiences of precarious employment in Canadian libraries: An exploratory study. *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research*, 14(2).  
<https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v14i2.5169>
- Henninger, E., Brons, A., Riley, C., & Yin, C. (2020). Factors associated with the prevalence of precarious positions in Canadian libraries: Statistical analysis of a national job board. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, 15(3), 78–102.  
<https://doi.org/10.18438/eblip29783>
- Higgins, S. (2017). Embracing the feminization of librarianship. In B. Yousefi & S. Lew (Eds.), *Feminists Among Us: Resistance and Advocacy in Library Leadership*. Litwin Books.
- Hogue, E. M., & Sisson, L. (1994). Bargains of the century: Part-time librarians. *The Bottom Line*, 7(2), 18–22. <https://doi.org/10.1108/eb025412>
- Jones, A., Plante, H. J., Tottenham, L., Shelby, & syr. (2019). Not cis in LIS: A roundtable discussion about being trans in libraries. *BCLA Perspectives*, 11(3).  
<https://bclaconnect.ca/perspectives/2019/09/05/not-cis-in-lis-a-roundtable-discussion-about-being-trans-in-libraries/>
- Kendrick, K. D. (2017). The low morale experience of academic librarians: A phenomenological study. *Journal of Library Administration*, 57(8), 846–878.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2017.1368325>
- Kendrick, K. D. (2020). The public librarian low-morale experience: A qualitative study. *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research*, 15(2), 1–32. <https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v15i2.5932>

- Lacey, S. (2019). Job precarity, contract work, and self-care. *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research*, 14(1).  
<https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v14i1.5212>
- Leung, S. Y., & López-McKnight, J. R. (Eds.). (2021). *Knowledge Justice: Disrupting Library and Information Studies through Critical Race Theory*. MIT Press.
- Lewchuk, W., Clarke, M., & de Wolff, A. (2008). Working without commitments: Precarious employment and health. *Work, Employment and Society*, 22(3), 387–406.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017008093477>
- Li, Y. (2021). Racial pay gap: An analysis of CARL libraries. *College & Research Libraries*, 82(3), 36. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.82.3.436>
- Matilla-Santander, N., González-Marrón, A., Martín-Sánchez, J. C., Lidón-Moyano, C., Cartanyà-Hueso, À., & Martínez-Sánchez, J. M. (2020). Precarious employment and health-related outcomes in the European Union: A cross-sectional study. *Critical Public Health*, 30(4), 429–440. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09581596.2019.1587385>
- McGregor, H. (2020, April 16). What are we talking about when we talk about ‘care’? *Hook & Eye*. <https://hookandeye.ca/2020/04/16/guest-post-what-are-we-talking-about-when-we-talk-about-care/>
- Mills, C., & McCullough, I. (2018). Academic librarians and labor unions: Attitudes and experiences. *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 18(4), 805–829.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2018.0046>
- Moeller, C. M. (2019). Disability, identity, and professionalism: Precarity in librarianship. *Library Trends*, 67(3), 455–470. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2019.0006>
- Näsström, S., & Kalm, S. (2015). A democratic critique of precarity. *Global Discourse*, 5(4), 556–573. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23269995.2014.992119>

- Neigel, C. (2016). Professional development for library workers: Exposing the complicated problems of equity and access. *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research*, 11(2), Article 2.  
<https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v11i2.3795>
- Phillips, M., Eifler, D., & Page, T. L. (2019). Democratizing the union at UC Berkeley: Lecturers and librarians in solidarity. *Library Trends*, 68(2), 343–367.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2019.0043>
- Popowich, S. (2019, March 20). Intellectual freedom—A positive or negative liberty? *Red Librarian*. <https://redlibrarian.github.io/article/2019/03/20/intellectual-freedom-positive-or-negative.html>
- Procyk, S., Lewchuk, W., & Shields, J. (Eds.). (2017). *Precarious Employment: Causes, Consequences and Remedies*. Fernwood Publishing.
- Reuter, M., Wahrendorf, M., Di Tecco, C., Probst, T. M., Chirumbolo, A., Ritz-Timme, S., Barbaranelli, C., Iavicoli, S., & Dragano, N. (2020). Precarious employment and self-reported experiences of unwanted sexual attention and sexual harassment at work. An analysis of the European Working Conditions Survey. *PLOS ONE*, 15(5).  
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0233683>
- Revitt, E. J. (2020). *The academic librarian as the subaltern: An institutional ethnography of a feminized profession* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Alberta].  
<https://doi.org/10.7939/r3-cr6h-pf98>
- Schlesselman-Tarango, G. (2017). Critical librarianship in a post-truth age. *Library Faculty Publications*. <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/library-publications/36>

- Schomberg, J., & Cole, K. (2017). Hush...: The dangers of silence in academic libraries. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*. <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2017/hush-the-dangers-of-silence-in-academic-libraries/>
- Seale, M., & Mirza, R. (2019). Empty presence: Library labor, prestige, and the MLS. *Library Trends*, 68(2), 252–268. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2019.0038>
- Settodicato, L. (2019). Intersubjectivity and ghostly library labor. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*. <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2019/intersubjectivity-and-ghostly-library-labor/>
- Skyrme, A. E., & Levesque, L. (2019). New librarians and the practice of everyday life. *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 5, 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu.v5.29652>
- Sloniowski, L. (2016). Affective labor, resistance, and the academic librarian. *Library Trends*, 64(4), 645–666. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2016.0013>
- Smith, C. (2018). Unions 101: What library unions do-and don't do-for workers. *American Libraries*, 49(11/12), 44–45.
- Topp, B., & Lubowitz, T. (2019). *Managing Precarious Work: Three Canadian Models for Rebalancing Bargaining Power in the Future of Work* (Key Issues Series). Public Policy Forum. <https://ppforum.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/ManagingPrecariousWork-PPF-NOV2019.pdf>
- Tronto, J. C. (1993). *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. Routledge.
- Wildenhaus, K. (2019). Wages for intern work: Denormalizing unpaid positions in archives and libraries. *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v2i1.88>

Yousefi, B. (2017). On the Disparity Between What We Say and What We Do in Libraries. In *Feminists Among Us: Resistance and Advocacy in Library Leadership* (pp. 91–105).

<http://summit.sfu.ca/item/17387>