

# **Counter-Narratives of PhD Graduates: Understanding Careers in Context**

**by  
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## Abstract

The dominant narrative around doctoral students and career preparation is informed by a discourse which assumes that the purpose of doctoral study is training for academic work. Rising PhD enrollments and shortages in the academic labour market are cited as evidence that PhD graduates are not well-equipped for occupations outside of academia. Complicating this narrative is the sentiment of the *failed academic*: a PhD graduate who “fails” to secure employment within academia and must settle for second-choice job prospects. This discourse shapes universities’ efforts to support PhD students’ transitions to work outside of academia, informing policy changes, programmatic and co-curricular development, including career preparation activities. Yet the underlying neoliberal assumptions within this perspective deserve examination, since the career paths of PhD graduates who work outside of academic settings are not well understood. Guided by a set of postmodern and constructivist career theories, and using narrative methodologies, I explored the career journeys of eight PhD graduates from the social sciences and humanities who pursued employment outside of academia. Over two years, I met with these individuals for a series of individual interviews to better understand how their careers unfolded over time. I analyzed participants’ personal narratives and then collaborated with participants to reconstruct their narratives into storied accounts. The storied accounts highlight the ways in which the dominant narrative provides an overly simplistic and decontextualized reality of PhD students’ working lives, and one which does not accurately represent the career realities of many PhD graduates. These storied accounts can be viewed as counter-narratives to the dominant narrative. These counter-narratives speak to the need to understand careers in context - recognizing that personal, social, and environmental-societal factors influence an individual’s career journeys in unique ways. These counter-narratives beg for a reconsideration of how PhD students’ career pathways are conceived, in order to disrupt the harmful assumptions implicit within the narrative of the *failed academic*. These findings also suggest that a more nuanced understanding of the diversity of PhD students’ lives and careers is necessary to support PhD students in their career preparation while at the university.

**Keywords:** PhD; doctoral students; career preparation; professional development; neoliberalism; counter-narrative

## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to all the PhDs who thought they failed, simply for their choice to not work in the academy.

You did not fail – you chose to live your life.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge the eight individuals who participated in this study. This work would not exist without your bravery in sharing your life story with me. I thank each of you for opening up to me and sharing intimate details of your lives, the challenges you faced, and how you constructed your working lives over time.

My own doctoral journey highlights how important context is. It took me eight years to complete this doctorate, yet in those eight years I had a second child, I moved locations three times, and I changed jobs once. It was no easy feat to complete this process, and I could not have done it on my own. To my partner, Peter, thank you for always supporting me. You never gave up on me, and I know you take great pride in telling people there are two doctors in the family. To my extended family and friends, I say a huge thank you for all the times you helped out and helped us juggle work, school and childcare. Each of you played a part in helping me “get it done.”

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## List of Acronyms

PhD	The Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) is the academic research degree under discussion. The terms PhD student and doctoral student are used interchangeably in this dissertation to describe one who is pursuing a PhD. Professional doctorates such as EdD, DBA, EngD, or MD are outside of the scope of inquiry. PhD graduate refers to an individual who completed a PhD.
DPhil	DPhil is the term used in the UK to denote the Doctor of Philosophy. It is synonymous with a PhD.
CEGEP	This refers to institutions in Quebec's post-secondary system. CEGEPs are typically two-year programs in preparation for university or technical programs.
TA	Teaching Assistant
RA	Research Assistant

# Chapter 1. Introduction

In 2006, while completing my master's degree in Educational Leadership, I began listening to PhD students who were uncertain about their career prospects post-graduation. Since then, I have continued working in university settings, in student services, administration, teaching and in teaching support roles. For several years before and during this study I worked in the area of professional development for graduate students, supporting graduate students as they prepared to graduate from the university and find meaningful work. My work with PhD students, listening and learning about their lives, was the impetus for me to begin this study.

Initially, I wanted to bring to the forefront the stories students were telling me: stories of students who decried the label of the *failed academic* and intended to make ends meet with contract teaching work and postdoctoral positions, in hopes of eventually landing that tenure-track position; women who were soon to graduate, but wanted to start a family and couldn't conceive of relocating for academic work with a child in tow; PhDs who were scared to tell their supervisors that they didn't plan to continue in academia; and students who felt uncertain in their abilities to find jobs outside of academia. In the early days of my work in this area, I heard students say they felt unprepared, unskilled, and that they lacked confidence in their abilities to find permanent work, both inside and "outside" of academia. For many of them the realities of their lives were in conflict with what they believed they ought to be doing: staying in academia, looking for work on the academic-track, and relocating to find that work. In many of these cases the underlying sentiment was that the university had failed to prepare them for their work futures.

I began this study coming from a position of supporting PhD students—to explore ways for the university to better support them as they prepared to leave the university. To do this, I decided to learn more about the lives of PhD graduates who worked outside of academic settings and learn more about their career paths. This has been an understudied phenomenon, with very little known about the working lives of PhD graduates once they leave the university. I have a personal relationship to this work—as a professional development coordinator I often wondered how things turned out for specific students since I only saw them when they were students and rarely did I learn

how things turned out for them. And rather than hearing from them at their most anxious and uncertain periods of their lives, I wanted to hear how things progressed after they left the university. I wanted to learn more about their working lives outside of the academy, since in many cases the reasons PhDs decided to pursue work outside of the university was not consistent with the failed academic discourse I was hearing and reading about.

My desire to learn more about PhD graduates' working lives after leaving the academy resulted in this study. I listened to the life stories of eight PhD graduates who took up work outside of academic settings, to learn how their careers unfolded over time. I learned about their varied motivations for pursuing a PhD in the first place, and the context of their lives as they navigated transitions to various work settings. I heard how their personal lives impacted the choices they made, and how they navigated these changes. These stories offer a unique perspective from the dominant narrative, one which challenges the assertion that all PhDs want academic jobs.

What I have come to realize is the complexity and nuance within this area: while the students themselves and their experiences are at the forefront for me, a complicated educational debate is the backdrop of this study, including debates on the goals of the university, the value of a university degree, the purpose of a PhD, and the responsibility of the university to prepare PhD students for work. This dissertation represents an exploration of these larger educational debates and in doing so, examines a particular perspective on this debate voiced by some higher education policy stakeholders. They argue that PhD students are unprepared for work outside of academic settings, and advocate for changes within the university to make PhD students more "career-ready." A central issue that confounds this debate is the way in which these policy stakeholders - and many others in our educational institutions and in society at large - use the term *career* as though it is synonymous with employment, job, or occupation.

To begin, I briefly contextualize this debate concerning PhD students and their preparation for work.

## 1.1. Situating the debate on PhD students and preparation for work

I was a professional development coordinator for graduate students, and I lived in the realm of policy and practice. My work was guided by policy frameworks from various higher education councils and policy groups, raising concerns on the lack of workplace readiness and “transferable skills” of graduate students. There has been an abundance of policy documents and research, in Canada, the US and globally, which claim that an oversupply of PhD graduates and a lack of academic employment has led to a situation where PhD<sup>1</sup> graduates are inadequately prepared for the “non-academic careers” many of them will pursue. For example, in 2012 the US-based Council of Graduate Schools commissioned the report, *Pathways through graduate school and into careers* (Wendler et. al, 2012) and in 2015 Jessica Edge and Daniel Munro published a report for the Conference Board of Canada entitled *Inside and outside the academy: Valuing and preparing PhDs for careers*. These are simply two examples from a multitude of policy and research papers which posit that PhD students are not well-prepared for “careers.”

This argument that PhD students are not well prepared for their work futures is not entirely new—for over four decades various stakeholders have voiced concerns that many PhD graduates do not join the professoriate and suffer difficult transitions to work outside of the academy (see Geiger, 1993). Lately, this issue has gathered steam, becoming a mainstay at higher education meetings and conferences, within Canada, the US and internationally. The argument has now shifted and moved outside of the domain of higher education stakeholder groups and has become part of a dominant discourse on PhDs and career preparation. Former and current PhD students are weighing in, sharing stories of their experiences as a PhD student in online editorials and social media sites. The underlying tone of these editorials is that students feel anxious about their “careers,” and unprepared for work outside of the university. With these student experiences in mind, and guided by these policy documents, some stakeholders have voiced convincing opinions that the university must restructure PhD programs in order to reflect

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1 The Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) is the academic research degree under discussion. The terms PhD student and doctoral student are used interchangeably in this dissertation to describe one who is pursuing a PhD. Professional doctorates such as EdD, DBA, EngD, or MD are outside of the scope of inquiry. PhD graduate refers to an individual who completed a PhD.

the likely career path for students: work in professional settings outside of the university (as an example, see Cassuto, 2015). Some universities have even begun to create PhD programs that reflect this professional orientation to work (see UBC's Public Scholar's Program).

Stakeholder groups involved in this debate vary and include those from public policy, university stakeholders (including administrators), faculty members and university support staff (including career professionals), students themselves, and society at large including parents and family. Through researching and writing this dissertation, I have come to realize that this debate is being guided by a particular set of assumptions. This includes assumptions that an "academic career" has traditionally been the career pathway of PhD graduates, that the purpose and goal of a PhD is employment, and that all PhD students want academic jobs.

Embedded within this policy argument is a particular conception of *career* which I find problematic. My learning curve has been steep, as I began to understand the ways in which the argument voiced by the policy stakeholders is decidedly absent from a theoretical approach to career development. Many of the stakeholders engaged in this debate use the term *career* erroneously, as if it were synonymous with terms such as *job*, *work*, or *employment*. Career theorists have debated the concept of *career* for decades, yet it is now widely accepted that a conception of *career* encompasses much more than one's job. *Career* is never defined by these stakeholders; instead, stakeholders practice a colloquial usage of the term *career*, which I believe is quite harmful. This misconception of what constitutes a career is one of the many assumptions I unpack in this dissertation.

I have come to realize that differences in perspectives guide conceptions of this debate, and an exploration of assumptions related to school, work and career are at the heart of this dissertation. I have found the particular assumptions embedded within the policy stakeholders' argument reflect a neoliberal discourse which prioritizes employment outcomes over outcomes of learning. Through this exploration of neoliberalism, I was challenged to recognize how my own understandings of the purpose of a university degree were framed by these same neoliberal assumptions. Engaging in this narrative inquiry has meant that I am also a part of this study; since narrative is a relational practice it was essential that I situate my own story and my own subjectivities

throughout. This meant I engaged in reflection on my learning along the way—which resulted in me being attentive to my own biases of this debate. This attentiveness is represented throughout this dissertation by integrating my own personal reflections, stories, and experiences throughout.

## 1.2. Conceptual framework of career development theory

This study is situated within a career development approach and draws from a set of postmodern career development theories. These theories inform the conceptualization of this study through all stages of design and research. I draw upon a definition of career which views career as an ongoing process of one’s life, a “constellation of life-roles that an individual plays over his or her lifetime” (Magnusson, 2014). For example, one of the key theoretical approaches guiding this study is Savikas’ (2012) *career construction theory* which recognizes the agency of individuals to construct their careers to fit their lives. This conception of *career* aims to understand work in context and highlights the importance of work in relation to other life-roles (Savikas, 1997). Guided by this theoretically-informed conception of career, I focus on how work and life are intertwined, recognizing that one’s current work situation is not static: careers unfold and change over time and can only be seen in retrospect.

Situated within these contemporary career development theories, I highlight the ways in which this issue of PhD students and “careers” has been inadequately conceptualized by stakeholders engaged in this policy debate. There is a large gap between how “career” is conceptualized by these policy stakeholders, and the conception of career by contemporary career theorists. The policy stakeholders engaged in this debate are not informed by career theory and use the term career as though it is synonymous with related terms such as *job* or *employment* or *profession*. Yet these conceptions of career are problematic because they tend to be fixed and static, focusing on an individual’s current work, and even individual’s desires for work. Policy stakeholders engaged in this debate point out the high percentages of PhD students who *want* or *desire* academic work, in relation to low academic job availability. They conclude there is a mismatch between the “careers” that PhD students *want* and the reality of the “careers” many will work in. Yet, what they are really describing are labour market outcomes, focusing on immediate employment post-graduation; they are not considering how careers develop and change over time.

A theoretical conception of seeing careers develop over time brings a new perspective to the argument that PhD students are inadequately prepared for “careers.” The argument, and the popular [neoliberal] usage of the term “career” has become so entrenched in the policy world, yet it focuses solely on decontextualized employment outcomes and reinforces the neoliberal message that doctoral study equates to specific job training. Instead, guided by a set of career development theories which view career as unfolding over time, I intend to listen to the personal narratives of PhD graduates, in order to learn more about their working lives over time. Instead of focusing on anecdotal evidence of what PhD students *want*, *expect*, or *believe* their work futures hold for them, I ask PhD graduates themselves how they constructed their careers over time outside of academic contexts. Few people have explored PhD students’ career preparation from a theoretical career development orientation. This study is valuable since it fills a gap in the literature in two specific ways: first, by examining the experience of PhD graduates through a postmodern career development lens; and second, by exploring the working lives of these PhD graduates over time to view their career in context.

### **1.3. The Study**

Many PhD graduates work outside of academic settings. But the reality of what these PhD graduate’s career paths looks like over time is not well understood. In order to fill that gap, and framed by contemporary career theories, I explored the research question, asking “How do PhD graduates from the social sciences and humanities construct their careers outside of academic settings?” Using narrative methodologies, I explored the working lives of eight PhD graduates who pursued employment outside of academia. Over two years, I met with participants for a series of individual interviews, including use of an arts-based technique called the journey plot (see McAlpine, 2016), to better understand how their careers were constructed over time. I analyzed participants’ personal narratives (Riessman, 2008), and then reconstructed their narratives into storied accounts. Each participant collaborated with me to revise their storied account, increasing the trustworthiness of these accounts.

The storied accounts generated from these eight individuals highlights the experiences of individuals with PhDs, and the social complexities involved in how and why their careers unfolded as they did. The storied accounts generated from these eight individuals can be viewed as *counter-narratives* to the dominant discourse that all PhDs

want academic jobs, and only pursue work outside of academia as a “poor second best” (Cassuto, 2015). Counter-narratives are defined as “stories/narratives that splinter widely accepted truths about people, culture and institutions” (Mutua, 2008, p.133); they are stories which bump up against “official stories” or “popular truths” and provide alternative perspectives. These storied accounts “talk back” to the dominant neoliberal discourse, highlighting how PhD students’ work choices are not solely determined by labour market shortages for academic work.

These counter-narratives speak to the need to understand lives in context—understanding that personal, social, and societal factors such as health, family, and geographical locations influence individual’s lives in unique and perhaps unexpected ways. These counter-narratives beg for a reconsideration of how PhD graduates’ working lives are conceived. I argue that a more nuanced understanding of the diversity of PhD students’ lives is necessary in order to support PhD students more appropriately while at the university. I also argue that a theoretical conception of career is needed to shift away from the harmful neoliberal discourse which frames the policy argument, in order to support PhD students more effectively in their career planning while at the university.

## **1.4. How this dissertation is organized**

In this chapter, I introduced the argument surrounding the career preparation of PhD students, and introduced you briefly to my theoretical framework of career development. In the following chapters I will go into greater details on all of these aspects.

In Chapter 2, I explore the backdrop of this larger educational debate in order to better situate the dominant narrative as voiced by the policy stakeholders. I begin by briefly introducing the history and purpose of higher education in Canada and the US and explore the roots of liberal education and research education, and their impacts on PhD education. I categorize four distinct streams of research which explore the doctoral experience and situate the argument of the “inadequate preparation for careers” within a particular policy perspective in one of these streams. Finally, I introduce the concept of neoliberalism and highlight how this argument as posed by policy stakeholders is framed by neoliberal assumptions.

In Chapter 3, I introduce my conceptual framework guided by a set of postmodern career development theories. In order to understand why a theoretical conception of *career* is important to this study, I take a historical look at the career development field and highlight significant shifts in paradigm within the career development field. This helps to explicate how the policy stakeholders' conception of career is both outdated and inaccurate. I explore the inadequate ways an understanding of *career* has been conceptualized by these stakeholders and discuss how the theoretical perspectives I bring to this debate allow for a fundamentally different perspective on career development of PhD students.

In Chapter 4, I describe my methodological approach to this study. A narrative approach helped me explore this topic in a novel way, allowing me to view the construction of careers over time, through the life-stories of eight PhD graduates from social science and humanities disciplines. I describe my research design, the participants involved in this study, the ways I worked relationally with participants and how I analyzed the data. I also describe the creation of the storied accounts (the format I chose to share the results for this study) and the practices I embodied in order to ensure trustworthiness in the study.

In Chapter 5, I present three patterns of experience I located across participant's narratives, then present the storied accounts of all eight participants. The patterns of experience are that: schooling is part of a career, that a complex web of dynamics influences participants' decisions, and that participants exhibit agency as they construct their careers. The storied accounts are included to show the complex ways in which participants construct their careers over time. These storied accounts, in third person voice, describe each individual's recollection of their working lives. This retrospective view allows us to see careers over time and the ways in which careers unfold within a larger context of one's world. In each story, I identified a complex web of interconnected dynamics, which is consistent within certain postmodern career theories, such as McMahan and Patton's (2019) *Systems Theory Framework of Career Development*. In these storied accounts you will read how unique influences foreground individual's working lives, impacting across three systems: the personal, the social, and the environmental-societal. These storied accounts highlight how a labour market shortage for academic work is only one of a multitude of influences which impact and affect the

decisions PhD graduates make regarding work. These stories speak to the importance of understanding individual's lives in context.

In Chapter 6, I describe the ways in which the storied accounts do not align with the dominant narrative as posed by the policy stakeholders. I believe these stories can be viewed as counter-narratives, stories which “talk back” to the discourse of the failed academic, by highlighting how motivations change over time, and how career decisions are both multi-dimensional and highly contextual. I discuss how the neoliberal argument, embedded in a neoliberal discourse, is harmful to students; namely that it reinforces the failed academic discourse by perpetuating assumptions that the goal of a PhD is employment and that all PhDs want academic work. I conclude the dissertation with a broader discussion of how a shift from a neoliberal discourse to a theoretical conception of career can better support PhD students at the university, and actually disrupt the harmful failed academic discourse.

In the next chapter, I situate the debate on PhD students and career preparation.

## Chapter 2. The debate on PhD students and career preparation

*Since I can remember, the purpose of an education has always been couched within a discourse of jobs. I remember debating in grade 12 whether I would go to college or university after high school and being told by my career advisor that I had better go to university or I would never get a good job. I recall the advisor in earnest asking me, “Do you want to work as a cashier forever?” Getting a university degree was nested within a discourse of jobs, careers, and financial independence. I recall my parents being excited that I would go to university to complete a Bachelor of Arts degree—as the first in my family to attend post-secondary studies, they didn’t understand what that meant—but as long as I came out with a good job, they considered the benefit worth the cost.*

*As an undergraduate student in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the university, I recall being upset when I was pushed to declare a major. I wanted to do a general degree, but an advisor warned me, “You’ll never get a good job with a general Arts degree.” My disappointment was compounded in the final year of my degree, since I couldn’t see any job prospects on the horizon for me that were specific to my major in Psychology. I grew disillusioned with the university system and its illusive promise of jobs when I graduated with a bachelor’s degree, a high debt-load, and continued working as a cashier.*

*Ten years later, with a fair bit of experience in the workforce, I found myself enrolling in a master’s program in the field of adult education. I was motivated to return to the university by prospects of better job opportunities that awaited those with master’s degrees. (Reflective memo, March 17, 2020)*

I open this chapter with that short reflection from my own life, in order to acknowledge my own beliefs on the purpose of a university degree. Through this educational journey I have come to realize that my participation in post-secondary studies has always been motivated by employment gains. I am tempted to chalk this up to being a first-generation university student from a working-class background: where I come from people only pursue post-secondary education in order to secure a better job. The questions that are consistently asked by family and friends about my university studies, over my three degrees, are “What job will that get you?” and “Will you get a pay increase when you finish?” But in fact, research suggests that my orientation to the university is not unique: the most predominant motivations for first-year university students to attend post-secondary are career-related (Prairie Research Associates, 2016).

It was a shocking realization for me to consider that measuring the value of a university degree as it relates to employment is but one perspective among many. It had never occurred to me that the value of a university education could be decoupled from jobs; and it had never occurred to me how this instrumental view of higher education undermines many of the qualities I value within higher education. I have come to recognize that the assumption that universities have a responsibility for preparing students for “careers” is at the heart of this debate. This assumption is deeply embedded within a particular policy argument and integral to unpacking complex threads of meaning embedded in the discourse of the *failed academic*.

In this chapter I explore the debate on preparing PhDs for work. First, I explore the goals and mission of the university as an institution, as well as the purpose of the PhD, and consider the varying traditions, perspectives and stakeholders that are represented in the context of PhD education. From there I explore the literature on PhD students and the PhD experience, in order to better situate this debate within the research community. Next, I introduce the argument on the inadequate preparation for “careers” and describe some of the responses to address this issue. Then, I explore the framing of this argument, particularly by policy stakeholders, and explicate a set of assumptions embedded within their argument. Finally, I introduce the concept of neoliberalism in order to highlight how the assumptions align with a neoliberal discourse as to the purpose of higher education, specifically that the value of higher education be reduced to employment outcomes.

## **2.1. Goals and mission of the University**

The university, as an institution, is situated in a complex and ever-changing environment of societal, political, and economic realities. Various stakeholders are involved, including university administrators, faculty members, students, parents, policymakers, and governing agencies. These stakeholders do not all think alike—they may hold diverging assumptions of the goals, purpose and missions of the university, and different expectations of university degrees. Traditions of *utilitarianism*, of *pragmatism* and of *intellectual ethics* are some of the perspectives which guide individuals’ ways of viewing and thinking about higher education. These differing perspectives translate into different ideologies as to the purpose of the PhD, which impacts how the debate on the career preparation of PhD students is taken up by

different stakeholders. To better understand the purpose of the PhD, we first need to explore the goals and mission of the university in a historical context.

According to John Thelin, a historian of post-secondary and higher education, higher education in the U.S. and Canada evolved without much central planning (2011). Early beginnings in the U.S. were tied to the collegiate colleges with strong ties to liberal education, but post-civil war brought a proliferation of new types of institutions. Some were focused on agriculture and industrial mechanization, some on teacher training, others on scientific and technical training such as medicine and law. So, the landscape became populated with a mix of private and public institutions: some that promoted liberal arts, some which prioritized professional training, and some which combined liberal arts training with professional training. Thelin (2011) credits the industrial era for merging many of these various institutions, true to the vision to create the “Great American University” (p. 110). Massive growth continued between 1945 and 1970, resulting in what many have termed the “golden age” of education (Axelrod, 2002; Lagemann and Lewis, 2012).

Yet, the Faculties and Schools within these universities did not necessarily have a unifying mission, since they came from diverse traditions and purposes. For example, the traditions of liberal education are rooted in the perspective of intellectual ethics, with practices of teaching, learning and scholarship at the forefront. Axelrod (2002) describes the goals of liberal education as being two-fold: the first goal is to cultivate moral character and intellect by imparting new knowledge and building new skills; the second goal is to serve a commitment to the public good. Axelrod (2002) summarizes the competencies related to liberal education:

Liberal education in the university refers to activities that are designed to cultivate intellectual creativity, autonomy and resilience; critical thinking; a combination of intellectual breadth and specialized knowledge; the comprehension and tolerance of diverse ideas and experiences; informed participation in community life; and effective communication skills. (p. 34)

In large part, liberal education is thought to cultivate particular competencies or “ways of being” in students. This contrasts with the traditions of research education, where the advancement of knowledge and scholarly discovery is the highest ideal (Jencks & Reisman, 1968). According to Thelin (2011), the research-university promoted advanced scholarship in specialized research, and privileged research over goals related to

teaching. Meanwhile, the purpose of the professional schools, with their intent to train practitioners in specific fields (such as teaching, medicine, and nursing), aligns with the instrumental (and utilitarian) purpose of preparing graduates for a particular professional role in society.

While the purposes and missions of the liberal arts colleges, professional schools and research schools may have retained their own niche independently, combining these institutions together blurs their traditions and purposes. Some higher education scholars have coined the term *multiversity* (see Geiger, 1993) to describe these large universities: the term *multi* denotes the multiple purposes, goals and missions represented. Axelrod (2002) contends that different disciplines may even hold competing visions towards teaching, research, and professionalization. Weerts, Freed and Morphey (2014) use the terms *academic drift* and *mission creep* to describe loss of institutional diversity and institutional niche across different types of institutions within the higher education landscape. A local Canadian example was seen in BC in the early 1990's, when university-colleges first appeared on the scene. The hope was the university-colleges would allow students greater access to degree-granting programs. But their purpose and institutional missions were not well understood; some were worried about *institutional isomorphism*, and whether they would begin to resemble universities and compete with the research mandates of the universities (Metcalf, Mazawi, Rubenson, Fisher, MacIvor & Meredith, 2007). In much the same way, scholars contend that the goals and mission of the university as an institution are not necessarily unified, and individuals working within the university can hold different perspectives and values. This highlights how institutions do not necessarily retain clear boundaries and differentiation from one another (Jones, 2014).

An awareness of these differing purposes and varied traditions and perspectives is essential to an exploration of the purpose of the PhD. In the next section, I examine how the purposes of the PhD are viewed in light of these blurred missions and goals within the university sector.

### **2.1.1. Purpose of the PhD**

These varied traditions and perspectives impact how stakeholders understand the purpose of the PhD. For some scholars, “the PhD is the monarch of the academic

community. It is the very highest accomplishment that can be sought by students” (Walker et al., 2008, p. x). From another perspective, PhD graduates are considered an asset, in terms of their contributions to society and the economy due to their advanced skills in research and innovation (Council of Graduate Schools, 2007, 2008; Gardner & Mendoza, 2010). Given the evolution of graduate study, and the blurred goals and missions of higher education over time, it is not surprising that the purpose of the PhD remains elusive. To this end, Stimpson (2012) quips, “In the family of higher education in the United States, graduate education is the least understood sibling” (p.132).

The PhD cannot be described as one entity: its description, practices and goals differ depending upon academic traditions and disciplinary conventions. For example, social science and humanities disciplines are thought to be rooted in traditions of liberal education, with implicit ties to teaching, learning and citizenship (Cassuto, 2015; Rogers, 2020). Yet graduate education in these disciplines is focused on research and scholarly discovery, so we might expect an integration of the purposes of liberal and research education. Walker et al.’s (2008) *Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate* explored the purpose of the PhD across six different disciplines within the humanities, the sciences and the professions. They propose that the purpose of doctoral education is:

To educate and prepare those who can be entrusted with the vigor, quality, and integrity of the field. This person is a scholar first and foremost, in the fullest sense of the term—someone who will creatively generate new knowledge, critically conserve valuable and useful ideas, and responsibly transform those understandings through writing, teaching, and application. (p. 161)

Their description seems to situate the PhD at the intersections of liberal education and research education. For them, the PhD is not to be understood as “just one more learned profession” (p.x). Stimpson (2012) contends that doctorates are research degrees, “which may be used inside or outside the academy” (p. 137), with a focus on teaching as well as research. The Council of Graduate Schools (1990) defines the PhD as preparing “a student to become a scholar, that is, to discover, integrate, and apply knowledge, as well as communicate and disseminate it” (p. 10). This definition seems to imbue a greater focus on the research enterprise, where the term *scholar* could easily be replaced with the term *researcher*. Gardner and Mendoza (2010) describe the complexity in understanding doctoral education, and how scholarship must take into consideration disciplinary differences and academic traditions. Golde and Dore

(2004) discussed findings from the *2001 Survey of Doctoral Education and Career Preparation* in the US, comparing the experiences of English doctoral students to Chemistry doctoral students. They contend that disciplines have “different cultures” in the ways that students are trained, in the types of work they do, and what types of contexts students are prepared for. Students pursuing professional degrees (such as law, medicine, nursing, education, and business) may not be pursuing their doctorates with the same goals in mind as PhD students in English, history, and sociology for example.

Different stakeholders, such as students, parents, staff, and faculty members, may also hold divergent perspectives of the purpose of the PhD. Addressing the question of *who is responsible* for the PhD, Nyquist (2002) states that:

Although research institutions have tended to believe that they ‘own the PhD’ because they design the programs, recruit the students, and confer the degree, it has become abundantly clear that a PhD is the product of multiple owners or stakeholders, not the least of which are the doctoral students themselves. (p.14)

I have come to understand that the issue of “responsibility” is an important one; it is linked to questions of responsibility for career preparation. In the policy argument, this question of responsibility is never posed—there is an assumption that the university is responsible for the career preparation of PhD students. This ties to a utilitarian perspective where the purpose of education is for workforce development. However, in this complex landscape, since there is not one unifying goal or purpose of the PhD across academic traditions, disciplines and stakeholders, the question of responsibility should not be assumed. It is essential to understand that the narratives on preparing PhDs for work is embedded within these larger debates on the goals of the university and the purpose of a PhD.

In the next section, I describe the various types of literature on the doctoral student experience, in order to help situate this debate regarding the role of career preparation within the PhD.

## **2.2. Situating the argument within the research literature**

Since the 1970's a growing body of academic work has studied the doctoral experience, with the original impetus to better understand and offset doctoral student attrition at the university. Over time, however, interest in the doctoral student experience and PhD education has expanded; there is now a wide range of research invested in this area including research focusing on attrition and retention of PhDs; research on developing future faculty; research on diversity of PhD students and programs/disciplines; and research on career outcomes of PhDs. This dissertation is situated within this last stream, using a career pathways framework.

### **2.2.1. Literature on attrition and retention**

A large majority of the scholarly research on the doctoral student experience focuses on supporting students through their programs of study while at the university, tied to particular issues such as attrition and retention (Gardner & Mendoza, 2010; Golde, 1998; Lovitts, 2001). A socialization framework is the most commonly used lens to explore the graduate student experience. Researchers use theories of socialization to account for doctoral student attrition with "researchers often attributing poor or inappropriate socialization to a student's decision to depart the graduate program" (Weidman, Twale and Stein, 2001, p.5). The Weidman, Twale and Stein (2001) framework became the most heavily cited monograph on the subject of doctoral student socialization. This conceptual framework drew on previous work (such as Bragg, 1976) on graduate and professional students, as well as work exploring the socialization of faculty members (Tierney and Rhoads, 1993). This framework recognized diversity of disciplines and disciplinary cultures, as well as institutional and programmatic difference.

### **2.2.2. Literature on diversity within the doctoral student experience**

Some researchers critique Weidman, Twale and Stein's (2001) socialization framework for presenting the graduate student experience as monolithic. Researchers in this stream of literature highlight the importance of student difference (such as race, gender, and socio-economic status) and diversity between disciplinary cultures, programs, and institutions (Anthony & Taylor, 2004; Ellis, 2001; Gardner, 2007; Golde & Dore, 2004). These postmodern researchers pay particular attention to the ways

doctoral students differ, and how that difference affects various aspects of the doctoral students' experience. Researchers take up the use of other frameworks, such as using Bourdieu's (1977) theories on sociocultural capital to explore the ways social inequities in society are reflected within the graduate student experience.

### **2.2.3. Literature on developing future faculty**

The Weidman, Twale and Stein (2001) socialization framework has also been widely used in research on developing future faculty. In this framework, socialization is defined as follows:

Socialization in graduate school refers to the processes through which individuals gain the knowledge, skills and values necessary for successful entry into a professional career requiring an advanced level of specialized knowledge and skills. (Weidman, Twale and Stein, 2001, p.5)

While the framework does not explicitly denote preparing doctoral students for roles in the academy, the vast majority of literature on developing future faculty uses a socialization framework (Anderson & Anderson, 2012; Anthony, 2002; Austin, 2002; Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Gardner & Mendoza, 2010; Wulff, Austin, Nyquist & Sprague, 2004; Weidman & Stein, 2003). Interestingly, although the Weidman, Twale and Stein (2001) framework is defined in terms of "professional career," those professional careers seem to be taken up synonymously with *professorial* careers, since literature in this stream is focused on supporting PhDs into professional *academic* careers. The majority of research in this area is peer-reviewed, scholarly research.

### **2.2.4. Literature on career outcomes of PhDs**

The literature on career outcomes of PhDs is substantially different than the other categories. Concerns of employment outcomes, career pathways and transferable skills are a major consideration within this stream of literature. This stream of literature typically belongs to higher education researchers and scholars who take a critical look at PhD education. They often advocate changes within PhD education, make recommendations on policy and academic programming, and propose co-curricular interventions. The researchers and scholars working in this stream do not use a socialization framework; in fact, efforts to socialize graduate students are often critiqued as being out of alignment with students' 21<sup>st</sup> century needs.

For over twenty years this body of literature has been growing, addressing the changing contexts related to PhD education. Scholars have debated the need to *re-envision the PhD* (Nyquist and Woodford, 2000), *rethink doctoral education* (Walker et al., 2008), and *re-define the doctorate* (Park, 2007). These types of initiatives on doctoral education have often been funded through foundations (such as the Carnegie Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trusts) with the research led by academic researchers and faculty members. Since these studies are led by academic researchers who are situated within academia, these scholars bring with them a deep awareness of institutional differences, disciplinary differences, and academic traditions. These initiatives ask, “*how can the PhD meet the needs of the society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?*” (Nyquist, 2002), debating the need for shorter time to completion, greater interdisciplinarity, integration of new technology and preparation for alternative career paths. Scholars point to the relatedness of some of these issues; for example, a 2005 report published by the Woodrow Wilson Foundation found that time-to-degree is longest in fields where academic career prospects are poor, remarking “Why leave, then, when there is nowhere to go?” (p.6). The implication here is that PhD students are not motivated to graduate if their work futures are uncertain. These initiatives advocate for preparing PhD students for occupations both inside and outside of academia. In considering academic work, they do not prioritize research (tenure-track) appointments and advocate for pathways into academic teaching careers (see Nyquist and Woodford, 2000; Park, 2007; Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel & Hutchings, 2008). These initiatives are often tied to conceptual lenses related to teaching, learning and service.

In addition to the abundance of literature situated within conceptual frameworks related to teaching, learning and service, another strand of literature has developed. An abundance of research exploring various aspects of PhD students and PhD graduates’ career outcomes has flourished globally and introduced some distinct conceptual frameworks. In the following section I describe the typical features of three conceptual frameworks which explore PhD graduates’ career outcomes and refer to specific research examples to illustrate how these frameworks are taken up.

***Framework of Academic Capitalism.*** The literature on academic capitalism critiques the treatment of doctoral students while at the university. Using the framework of academic capitalism, scholars such as Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) and Mendoza (2007) raise awareness of how contract teaching delays time to completion and may

affect the long-term employment prospects for doctoral students. Some of this research has explicitly explored impacts on doctoral students in the STEM disciplines (Mendoza, 2007; Slaughter, Campbell, Holleman & Morgan, 2002). Researchers working from this framework often advocate for policy changes on a large-scale across the higher education sector (see Metcalfe, 2010).

***Framework of Career Pathways.*** Some researchers are beginning to explore the career pathways of PhD students, painting a more holistic picture of PhD student and PhD graduate's experiences of employment. Researchers using career pathway frameworks tend to use qualitative or mixed methods approaches, gathering evidence from students or graduates themselves, which allows for a more descriptive exploration of the experiences of PhDs. Conceptually, research in this area investigates contextual factors that impact PhD students or PhD graduates' career choices or career trajectories. I will elaborate on a few studies which draw from a career pathways framework, to highlight the methodological and conceptual frameworks they are using.

Taking a longitudinal grounded theory approach, researchers Kindsiko and Baruch (2019) in Estonia explored the career pathways of 69 PhD graduates. Framed by career theory on "chance" events and backed by a definition of career which is "the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time" (p.7), these researchers learned about individual's unique work contexts and the role of chance events in PhDs career pathways. They conclude that preparing PhD students to recognize and follow up on "chance" events could support PhD student's transitions to employment.

Another longitudinal study began in 2006 by Canadian researchers Lynn McAlpine and Cheryl Amundsen. The study evolved over time, shifting from its initial focus on factors contributing to doctoral student noncompletion to exploring the career trajectories of early career researchers with the desire to better understand the nature of career-related decision-making. The study followed 48 individuals from Canada and the UK, with backgrounds in social science and STEM disciplines, over a period of 5 to 7 years. Using a narrative approach, these individual's storied career narratives were collected and published in a 2016 compilation written for a PhD student audience. McAlpine and Amundsen's longitudinal study led to a grounded theory on *identity-trajectory* (2018) enabling a "unique way of examining career decision-making and development" (p. 27). A key aspect of the concept is identifying both individual and

structural factors which impact early career researchers' career choices and trajectories (see McAlpine, Skakni and Inouye, 2021).

Some researchers have chosen to explore in depth a particular contextual factor to learn more about its impact on career pathways. For example, American researchers Mirick and Wladkowski (2020) in a mixed-methods study, asked doctoral student women with children to self-report the perceived impacts of being mothers on their career trajectories. Over 700 doctoral student mothers (and recent graduates) completed a survey on the impact of parenting on their future career prospects. Results from the study were used to advocate for greater funding and professional development support for doctoral women with children.

Studies on PhD students framed by career pathways is an emerging field. And while there is good work being done, many of these studies are not explicitly tied to career development theory. For decades, scholars within the career development field have researched career pathways, yet a focus on PhDs has yet to be tied to those conceptual lenses. For this reason, my study, which takes a retrospective look at the career paths of eight PhD graduates from social science disciplines, is situated conceptually within a career development framework.

***Employability Framework.*** Policymakers, scholars, and researchers both within academic settings and outside of academia often situate their research within an employability framework. This type of framework (which researchers typically refer to as a public policy framework) focuses on the role of higher education in preparing and “training” PhDs for work roles outside of academia that help contribute to national and international policies on innovation, international competitiveness, globalization, and needs of “human capital” within knowledge economies. Statistics on labour market outcomes and other measures of employment are typically used to conceptualize occupational outcomes of PhD students and PhD graduates. This framework is evident throughout higher education research on a global scale, with researchers from Canada, the United States, UK, Australia, and other countries within the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) drawing from a framework based on promoting economic growth.

A majority of this research is situated within the STEM disciplines. It is typical for these researchers to use quantitative measures such as surveys, and secondary data sets such as population data, census data, or other public data sources. From my exploration of this research, I found there are two overlapping areas typically investigated by researchers using an employability framework: occupational outcomes and mobility of PhD graduates.

**Occupational Outcomes.** Many researchers are engaged in learning more about the occupational outcomes of PhD graduates, since it is recognized that a large majority of PhD graduates work outside of academic settings. Since most universities do not track students beyond graduation, most studies rely upon national population data and census information. For example, researchers Neumann and Tan (2011) drew on an existing national data set in Australia, the Graduate Destination Survey, to learn more about the changing employment patterns of PhDs between 2000 - 2007, including variations by discipline. In Italy, researchers Passaretta, Trivellato and Triventi (2019) used population data gathered from the Istat Survey on the Occupational Outcomes of PhD graduates to show that academic reforms within Italy and the economic crisis coincided with decreasing employment in academia for PhD graduates.

**Mobility.** An exploration on the mobility of PhD graduates to occupational roles outside of academia is often studied by researchers. This research is often premised on a skills “mismatch” between the skills PhDs bring to the employment relationship, and what employers are looking for. Research on mobility typically investigates the transition of PhD graduates to industry. Researchers have identified a multitude of factors to explain the “mismatch.” For example, De Grande, De Boyser, Vandevelde and Van Rossem (2012) from Ghent University in Belgium reported that doctoral candidates underestimate the importance of transferable competencies such as project management and business skills, as compared to employers’ expectations. Couston and Pignatel (2018) identified other factors, such as corporate hiring practices and universities’ undervaluing work in the private sector as contributing to the difficult transition of PhDs to industry. Other researchers have investigated which factors support PhD graduate mobility to industry and the private sector. For example, Gemme and Gringas (2012) found that students in disciplines with strong ties to industry and funding partners receive greater access to funding, mentorship, networking, and experiential opportunities off-campus with non-academic partners. The importance of networks in the

job search post-graduation was explored by researchers Germain-Alamartine, Ahoba-Sam, Moghadam-Saman and Evers (2020).

Employers have become a major stakeholder in this debate (Cumming, 2010; Nyquist & Woodford, 2000; Park, 2007). Some researchers are learning more about employers in sectors outside of academia to help bridge the “mismatch” issue. For example, Garcia-Quevedo, Mas-Verdu and Polo-Otero (2011) performed an econometric analysis to learn more about cooperation between private sector firms and universities, research and development opportunities, and other characteristics of firms such as size, sector, and productivity. Researchers often explore the relevance and value of doctoral education on PhD graduates who work outside of academia. For example, Kyvik and Olsen (2012) found that ‘generic skills’ such as “training in systematic/analytical thinking’ and ‘training in handling complex problems” (p.205) was rated higher than either completing the thesis or the coursework by PhD graduates who work outside of research systems. This debate on the skills “mismatch” has led to the use of skills frameworks to develop and frame professional development opportunities for graduate students.

**Policy argument in the Canadian context.** These questions of mobility, of occupational outcomes and of skills “mismatch” by various research scholars globally have resulted in a very distinctive argument from particular policy stakeholders in the Canadian context. The breadth of the discussion from the national initiatives exploring changes to PhD education to meet the 21<sup>st</sup> century needs has funnelled into a narrower argument which purports that PhD students are inadequately being prepared at the university for occupational roles outside of the university. A high proportion of the literature generated in this stream belongs to “grey” literature, denoting research and publications produced by organizations outside of traditional academic publishing and scholarly peer-review channels. In Canada, these include higher education councils and associations (such as the *Canadian Association of Graduate Studies*, and the *Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario*), research councils (such Canada’s *Tri-Agency*), and policy think-tanks (such as the *Conference Board of Canada*). This argument has been taken up by the general public, resulting in a mainstream narrative that is not solely confined to academic circles or peer-reviewed journals. The narrative cuts across forms of popular media, including mainstream literature, news, online editorials, and social media in the Canadian context. Current and former PhD students weigh into this

argument, feeding off of the data produced within the grey literature and vice versa. Going forward in this dissertation I will refer to this specific argument in the Canadian context as the *policy argument*, and the stakeholders involved as *the policy stakeholders*; however, I recognize it is not only policy leaders and researchers engaged in public policy who are situated in this argument, since the argument itself has become a dominant and mainstream narrative within the public consciousness. I also recognize there may be different strands of literature which explore this issue differently; however, my aim is to highlight how the issue is taken up in the Canadian context through this particular policy lens.

In the following section, I describe the argument as posed by the policy stakeholders. I outline some of the responses across the higher education sector to address this argument. And finally, I explore the basic tenets of this argument and describe a set of assumptions embedded within the argument.

### **2.3. Argument on the inadequate preparation for work**

Leonard Cassuto, a professor of English at Fordham University, articulates the crux of the policy argument in his book, *The Graduate School Mess*:

Thousands of professors are currently in the business of preparing thousands of graduate students for jobs that don't exist—or more precisely, those graduate students are being taught to want academic jobs that only a few will get, and in the process, they are learning to foreclose the prospects that actually exist for them. (2015, p. 2)

Stakeholders engaged in this debate routinely state that students who pursue a PhD do so with the intent to become university professors (Cassuto, 2015; Rogers, 2015; Rose, 2012). These stakeholders are critical of the ways in which universities prepare PhD students for work. They claim PhD students are socialized solely for academic roles within the academy, with the most highly regarded role being the tenure-track appointment (Cassuto, 2015; Maldonado, Wiggers & Arnold, 2013; Rose, 2012). These stakeholders argue that doctoral programs do not adequately prepare graduates for either the academic or non-academic “careers” that many of them will take up (Cassuto, 2015; Helm, Campa and Moretto, 2012; Maldonado, Wiggers, & Arnold, 2013; Rose, 2012). Cassuto (2015) states that for many students, academic work is their “career plan A,” while other work options are considered a “poor second choice.”

Statistics on PhD graduate employability patterns are slightly elusive, primarily because most institutions do not track PhD students beyond graduation. Yet the employment patterns these researchers draw on is fairly consistent. Most of these researchers contend that at least 50% of all PhD graduates work outside of academic settings (Porter & Phelps, 2014; Sekular, 2011; Sekular et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2008). Edge & Munro (2015) estimate that less than 20% of PhD graduates in Canada achieve full-time tenure-track appointments while Sekular et. al. (2013) estimates that less than 25% of PhD graduates work on the tenure-track. Stakeholders claim that the large majority of PhD students are unprepared for their work futures off the tenure-track.

Many researchers critique an overemphasis on research and their related activities, which they claim results in inadequate preparation for teaching and service roles in teaching-intensive institutions (Gaff, Pruitt-Logan, Sims & Deneckle, 2003; Golde, 2005; Golde & Dore, 2001; Nyquist & Woodford, 2000). Golde and Dore (2001) sum up these sentiments:

Doctoral students persist in pursuing careers as faculty members, and graduate programs persist in preparing them for careers at research universities, despite the well-publicized paucity of academic jobs and efforts to diversify the options available for doctorate-graduates. The result: Students are not well prepared to assume the faculty positions that are available, nor do they have a clear concept of their suitability for work outside of research. (p. 5)

Typical professional development activities for PhD students are critiqued for focusing primarily on research and writing within academic contexts. Activities such as attending and presenting at academic conferences, publishing books, book reviews, articles, and chapters, and writing grant proposals are critiqued for being overemphasized. Cassuto (2015) is extremely critical of the ways in which research and publishing are prioritized at the expense of other forms of scholarship, stating that “academic professionalization typically becomes a synonym for ‘learning how to publish’” (p. 165).

The dissertation itself, as the final written product of the PhD, has also been challenged (Cassuto; 2015; Porter & Phelps, 2014), since these stakeholders believe “the dissertation is often poorly calibrated to the kinds of work that doctoral students actually perform once they leave graduate school” (Cassuto, 2015, p.10). There is also a recognition that preparation for work can vary according to disciplinary conventions. PhD graduates from the social sciences and humanities are thought to be the least prepared

for career paths outside of academia (Edge & Munro, 2015; Rogers, 2015). Researchers claim that these graduates are often unable to convey the value of the skills they gained in their PhD programs, have limited awareness of occupational options outside of academia, and do not have established networks outside of the university (Cassuto, 2015; Nyquist & Woodford, 2000; Sekular et al., 2013).

The traditional apprenticeship model of supervision is also heavily critiqued (Cassuto, 2015; Edge & Munro, 2015; Rose, 2012; Sekular, 2011; Walker et al, 2008). Researchers report that the supervisor plays a major role in how students will perceive their work options, especially work outside of academia (Cassuto, 2015; Maldonado, Wiggers & Arnold, 2013; Sekular, 2011). Many echo Edge and Munro's (2015) sentiments that the apprenticeship model "provides students with only a single example and single path for professional development" (p.57). Although some of these researchers advocate changes to the apprenticeship model, many scholars respect how entrenched this model is within academic settings. Rose (2012) summarizes this dilemma: "researchers were themselves trained for academic positions and have traditionally seen themselves as preparing their students almost exclusively for entry into similar academic positions..." (p.7). Therefore, the cycle is seen as difficult to disrupt, especially at the structural and programmatic levels.

The label of the *failed academic* has become popularized throughout higher education circles, particularly with PhD students. A failed academic is a PhD graduate who tries unsuccessfully to land a tenure-track position and ends up working outside of academia. This discourse represents the belief that a PhD graduate is meant to work in the academy, with the tenure-track being the gold standard. The failed academic discourse has infiltrated mainstream media and social media. Popular news media such as the CBC run stories on the plight of PhD graduates stuck in the sessional track (Basen, 2014) and PhD graduates and PhD non-completers are telling their stories on social media, online editorials, and blogs. Rather than taking up the label of the failed academic, students are sharing their stories of why they decided to "quit" academia and pursue other career options (referred to as "QuitLit"; see Dunn, 2013). Online spaces are now burgeoning with critiques of the PhD experience, and consistent with the policy stakeholders, they lay the responsibility for inadequate career preparation at the feet of the university and demand changes to policy, practice, and co-curricular interventions.

### 2.3.1. Responses to preparing PhDs for work

In this section, I discuss the two very distinct approaches I have noticed in response to providing better career support for PhDs. Policymakers and agencies have relied upon employability frameworks, which equate success in terms of employment. This ideology is evident throughout higher education policy papers and directives at both federal and provincial levels (Tri-Agency, 2007; Canadian Association of Graduate Studies, 2008; “Research Universities,” 2014), resulting in the skills-development approach. Meanwhile, scholars and academic researchers’ approach is more integrated and framed through an understanding of the university’s diverse goals in teaching, learning and service. I acknowledge the ways that varied perspectives, values and traditions of individuals and of stakeholder groups are not necessarily tied to only one approach and there may be overlap between the two approaches. Yet for the purpose of highlighting the differences between them, I describe these as two distinct approaches. I explore both of these two approaches in greater depth below.

***Skills-development approach.*** The argument on preparing PhDs for diverse career paths is often premised on the notion that PhD students lack skills which transfer to diverse occupational roles outside of the university. In my role at the university, I have seen a rise in professional development programs for graduate students, aimed at supporting graduate students to “get skills,” in order to become more workplace ready.

Skills development frameworks, such as the *Generic Capabilities framework* (Bowden, Hart, King, Trigwell & Watts, 2000) and the *Graduate Attributes framework* (Barrie, 2006) are used to analyze the workplace readiness of graduate students (Edge & Munro, 2015). Research councils and associations (Canadian Association of Graduate Studies, 2008; Rose, 2012; Tri-Agency, 2007) have used such frameworks to guide their recommendations of best practice in skills development for graduate students. These recommendations have taken the form of generic skills-inventories, highlighting the academic and employability competencies graduates should attain while in grad school. This has resulted in professional development programs at most major universities (see Porter & Phelps, 2014), whose goal is to build and improve student’s *transferable* skills—skills that are supposedly highly sought after by employers. This approach is meant to improve a doctoral student’s success across a diversity of career settings (Edge & Munro, 2015; Rose, 2012; Cumming, 2010).

There remains a lack of evidence that professional development programs support PhD graduates' transitions to work. Participant perceptions from student satisfaction surveys are the primary measure of evaluation in the majority of these programs (Porter & Phelps, 2014), and they typically have not measured longer term impact. And although skill-building opportunities are highly valued by graduate students (Porter & Phelps, 2014) and advocated by policymakers and administrators, they have been critiqued for not being integrated into doctoral students' programs of study (Porter & Phelps, 2014). These skill building opportunities are also critiqued for their use of generic, prescribed solutions which tend to universalize student needs, experiences, and goals (Vander Kloet & Aspendlier, 2013). These programs are offered university-wide and most often are not customized to various student needs, nor are they attentive to disciplinary differences. This is in direct contradiction to recommendations made by Golde and Dore (2004), who contend that disciplinary differences should be considered—that disciplines have “different cultures” in the ways that students are trained, in the types of work they do, and the types of contexts students should prepare for. As supplementary programs they do not address any structural changes within doctoral education.

Cassuto (2015) critiques the skills-development approach for not challenging the myth of the tenure-track position. Instead, it reinforces the notion that the university has failed to prepare graduate students for work outside of academia, and it is now the students' responsibility to scramble and “get skills” in order to become more employable. These programs offset the responsibility for career preparation back to the student, and it is up to students themselves to get themselves “work ready.” These initiatives, supported by a deficiency ideology, plays into the failed academic discourse: doctoral students who work hard, who “professionalize” and are active in their professional development, are said to be successful in the job market (Cassuto, 2015; Vander Kloet & Aspendlier, 2013)—with the implication being that those who aren't successful only have themselves to blame.

***Integrated approaches.*** Whereas the skills-development approaches have been the domain of policymakers and administrators, integrated approaches are the domain of academic scholars and researchers, many of whom were engaged in the national initiatives on PhD education (Nyquist and Woodford, 2000; Park, 2007; Walker et al., 2008). Integrated approaches are often tied to conceptual lenses related to

teaching, learning and service, and are in opposition to those who argue from a skills perspective. Many scholars have voiced concern that the skills approach is *reductionist*: they reduce the outcome of doctoral education to what graduates can do, “thereby losing sight of students’ growing professional identity and the interconnectedness of their knowledge, values, intellect and performance” (Porter & Phelps, 2014, p. 57). Integrated approaches seek to restructure doctoral programs, policies, and practices to better suit the needs of today’s society, institutions, and PhD students. Porter & Phelps (2014) describe the tenets of an integrated approach as fostering “learner’s abilities to make connections across time and between domains of knowledge, skills, and contexts, and to build a capacity greater than the sum of the learning parts” (p. 58).

Many of the recommended practices of the integrated approaches grew from *The Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate* (Walker, et al., 2008). This US-focused initiative used the results of the *Survey of Doctoral Education and Career Preparation* (Golde & Dore, 2001) as guiding data. This action-research study involved 84 departments or programs across institutions in the US, in six disciplines (Chemistry, Education, English, History, Math and Neuroscience). Over 5 years, these researchers explored disciplinary differences and experimented with modifications in doctoral education.

Professional development seminars are one example advocated by scholars of these integrated approaches (Cassuto, 2015). The seminars are a mandatory part of a doctoral program and students receive credit for their participation rather than being co-curricular in the case of professional development programs. The explicit purposes of the seminars is to support PhDs in gaining an awareness of diverse occupational options and engaging in more diverse professional development activities. Yet, the issue of who should teach such seminars remains at the forefront. Scholars (Rose, 2012; Walker et al., 2008; “White Paper,” 2013) agree that faculty supervisors are not the best equipped to guide students on diverse career paths: “It would be naïve to prescribe a revolution in PhD training that leaves the responsibility for diversified training solely to academic mentors (“White Paper,” 2013, p. 19). Faculty supervisors often find themselves in unfamiliar territory when mentoring and advising students on work outside of academia. Some solutions have been proposed, such as recommending that universities create dedicated professional services to help prepare graduates for diverse careers (“White Paper,” 2013), while others advocate for allowing professionals in the field to play roles in doctoral student supervision (Porter & Phelps, 2014).

The research dissertation as the required “product” for the PhD has also been challenged on grounds that it does not help prepare students for work that is decidedly non-academic (Cassuto, 2015; Porter & Phelps, 2014). Scholars advocate “to break the dissertation mold and find forms better matched to the functions of scholarly life in diverse professional settings” (Walker et al., 2008, p. x). Some recommend integrating methods courses more fully around a collaborative project (Rogers, 2015) or replace the traditional dissertation with a “coherent ensemble of projects” (Porter & Phelps, 2014, p. 14), or a collection of smaller products such as essays and digital resources (“White Paper,” 2013). Rogers (2020), in her recent book *Putting the Humanities PhD to Work*, advocates for a renewal of humanities education by “embracing scholarship with meaningful public impact” (p.3), which includes allowing for creativity in dissertation formats. The Public Scholars Initiative at the University of British Columbia is one example of the integrated approach. Doctoral students in this program gain work experience outside of the university, there are opportunities to blend mentorship from individuals within and beyond the academy, and a dissertation which can include a diverse array of scholarly products.

The major limitation of the integrated approaches is that there are few examples to explore; for the most part, they remain highly theoretical. Integrating changes to the PhD, which is steeped in tradition, is not a simple fix. It involves cultural change and some scholars caution that there would be heavy resistance to change within the academic community, many of whom perceive changes as succumbing to an instrumental approach or as diminishing scholarship (Porter & Phelps, 2014; Walker et al., 2008). And while reports from smaller piecemeal initiatives appear positive (Cassuto, 2015; Porter & Phelps, 2014; Walker et al., 2008), they all rely upon students who have self-selected alternative modes of preparation. In reality, these scholars warn, many students are not aware of diverse occupational options and, therefore, do not negotiate and pursue these opportunities.

### **2.3.2. Framing of the “problem” of inadequate career preparation**

This issue is often framed by policy stakeholders as a “problem” of inadequate preparation for careers. Regardless of the solutions posed it is worth exploring how these stakeholders understand this issue within doctoral education. The general framing of this “problem” follows four tenets:

1. An increase in PhD enrollments has led to an oversupply of PhD graduates, which has created a highly competitive employment environment for academic jobs.
2. In this competitive environment, only a small minority of PhD graduates will land permanent [tenure-track] academic work. Another small minority will end up in non-permanent teaching roles in the academy, while more than half of graduates will end up working outside of academic settings.
3. Because PhD students are primarily prepared for work as academic researchers, the large majority of PhD graduates are inadequately prepared for work outside of academia (and many are ill prepared for academic teaching work) and suffer difficult transitions.
4. Changes must be made within doctoral education to better prepare PhD students for a range of occupations.

While much time and effort has been spent proposing solutions to the “problem,” it is worth spending time examining some of the underlying assumptions embedded within this argument. I have located three underlying assumptions that frame the issue, namely that:

- Employment in tenure-track positions has traditionally been the career pathway of PhD graduates
- All PhD students want academic jobs
- The goal and purpose of the PhD is employment

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I unpack these tenets and the three assumptions. I begin by exploring the assumption that employment in tenure-track positions has traditionally been the career pathway of PhD graduates. Next, I explore the second assumption, that all PhD students want tenure-track appointments. Lastly, I explore the underlying assumption that the goal and purpose of the PhD is employment, and the ways in which this aligns with a neoliberal discourse.

### **2.3.3. Traditional career pathways of PhD graduates**

One of the tenets of the policy argument is that an oversupply of PhD graduates has led to a competitive market for academic work. Embedded in this argument is the claim that the demand for academic work is higher than ever before. The argument implies that the competitive nature of academic work is new, since the “oversupply” of PhD graduates is new, and due to increasing PhD enrollments.

Yet history tells another story. Expansion of graduate education and doctoral programs continued after World War II, and by the 1970’s more PhDs were being granted than could be absorbed into academic work (Geiger, 1993). Between 1972 and 1976 six reports were issued from *A National Board on Graduate Education*, warning that too many doctorates were being granted for the limited academic employment that existed (Stimpson, 2012). In the 1970’s *teaching doctorates* were introduced, partially as a way of enticing graduate students to career pathways in the teaching colleges where employment was plentiful, rather than aiming for the top-tier research institutions where employment prospects were limited. Yet, even these teaching positions became competitive as the supply of PhDs took up the teaching positions in the colleges (Geiger, 1993).

According to these historical sources, the oversupply of PhD graduates to academic jobs is not new. And since the oversupply of PhD graduates is not new, it stands to reason that PhD graduates have not only pursued academic work. This is in direct contradiction to the assumption that the traditional career pathway for a PhD graduate is employment on the tenure-track. Indeed, it seems to be that since at least the 1970’s a large proportion of PhD graduates have had to look outside of academia for employment. This means that the competitive nature of academic work is not entirely new; and, for almost four decades, employment on the tenure-track has not necessarily been the traditional career pathway of a PhD graduate.

### **2.3.4. All PhD students want academic jobs**

The policy stakeholders typically draw on statistics which show PhD students *desires* for academic work to back up the claims that a large majority of PhD students want academic jobs. For example, Edge and Munro (2015) report that 60% of PhD

students in Canada *aspire* to the tenure-track. In Ontario, researchers report that two-thirds of graduates in doctoral programs pursued a doctorate with the *intention* of becoming university professors (Desjardins, 2012; Rose, 2012). Maldonado, Wiggers and Arnold (2013) reported that 86% of Ontario's PhD students in humanities disciplines *planned to become* university professors. However, intentions, aspirations and desires for work are merely a snapshot of an individual at one point in time, and do not necessarily account for the reality of people's lives.

Interestingly, historical accounts after World War II point to a hierarchy within PhD graduates' employment outcomes. Geiger (1993) draws attention to different levels of prestige afforded PhDs: PhD graduates who found appointments on the tenure-track with top-tier institutions claimed greater prestige for the institution, while those who went on the teaching track claimed a neutral prestige for the institution, and those who went outside of academia held negative prestige. I find it interesting to learn that the hierarchy of prestige on the tenure-track is not new and is actually documented. This is a reminder that PhD students themselves are not the only stakeholders involved, and others play a role in privileging particular employment outcomes.

I will explore this assumption further in the next section on neoliberalism, as well as the following chapter when I introduce my conceptual framework.

## **2.4. Neoliberalism in Higher Education**

Although neoliberalism is an economic ideology, its practices and discourses infiltrate many aspects of our society including the public domain of education. Neoliberalism, or *market fundamentalism* (Peck, 2010), is an economic ideology which gained popularity in the 1970's and 1980's, under the governments of Margaret Thatcher (UK), Ronald Reagan (US) and Brian Mulroney (Canada) (Kandiko, 2010). The ideology calls for a weakening of the public welfare system, and the withdrawal of the state from the economy. Instead, privatization, deregulation, and free market policies are advocated. A broad explanation of the concept is offered by Peck (2010):

Neoliberalism defies explanation in terms of fixed coordinates. Rather, it denotes a problem space, together with an accompanying ethos of market-complementing regulation. In the most abstract of terms, one can say that neoliberalization refers to a contradictory process of market-like rule, principally negotiated at the boundaries of state, and occupying the

ideological space defined by a (broadly) sympathetic critique of nineteenth-century laissez-faire and deep antipathies to collectivist, planned, and socialist modes of government, especially those associated with Keynesianism and developmentalism. (p. 20)

The past 30 years have seen major shifts in how post-secondary institutions function within this new reality. Metcalfe (2010), for example, points to increases in marketization, commercialization, and commodification of post-secondary education in North America (Metcalfe, 2010). A gradual reduction in funding from government sources (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004) has created what some scholars dub a “free market” of education (Giroux, 2010; Cassuto, 2015), where students are thought of as “consumers,” and colleges and universities compete to market their “services” to attract high-quality students who are “likely to bring a return on educational investment” (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004, p.1). Barnett (2011) terms this the *neoliberal university*, which functions in a competitive environment where “universities compete against each other for contracts, for clients and customers, and for public visibility and external confirmation” (p. 445).

Neoliberal trends and practices within higher education are well-documented (Metcalfe, 2010; Naidoo, 2005; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), even within Canada (Metcalfe, 2010). Yet, almost more ominous than the neoliberal practices themselves, are the ways in which neoliberal discourses frame discussions about higher education. Scholars critique a neoliberal discourse for its generic prescriptions to issues in higher education which lack an understanding of the complexity and diversity of disciplinary conventions and academic traditions (Axelrod, 2002; Barnett, 2011). Henry Giroux (2002), a critical theorist well-known for his theories on democracy in education, describes the tension created while corporate practices take hold within higher education:

Higher education should be viewed as a resource vital to the democratic and civic life of the nation against the current onslaught to corporatize higher education. Higher education needs to be safeguarded as a public good against the ongoing attempts to organize and run it like a corporation...Higher education must be embraced as a democratic sphere because it is one of the few public spaces left where students can learn the power of questioning authority, recover the ideals of engaged citizenship, reaffirm the importance of the public good, and expand their capacities to make a difference. Central to such a task for the university is the challenge to resist becoming a consumer-oriented corporation more concerned about accounting than accountability, and whose mission, defined largely through

an appeal to excellence, is comprehended almost exclusively in terms of a purely instrumental efficiency. (p. 450)

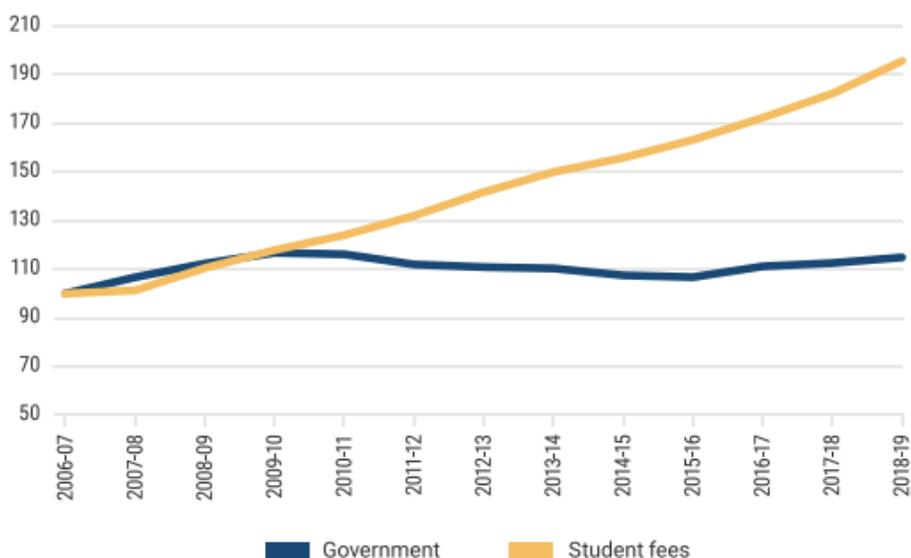
In the following section, I describe some of the neoliberal trends that affect the higher education system and explore how the policy stakeholders draw upon these neoliberal trends to support their argument that PhDs are not adequately prepared for their work futures.

### **2.4.1. Neoliberal trends affecting Higher Education**

There are particular neoliberal trends that scholars describe as influencing the debate on PhDs and career preparation. In particular the trend towards *professionalization* and *work-place readiness* (Giroux, 2010) of university graduates is at the heart of the argument on the inadequate career preparation for PhDs, which I explore later in this chapter. In this section, I discuss three neoliberal influences on the higher education system which policy stakeholders draw upon to support their claims: the diversification of funding sources, increased PhD enrollment, and a greater reliance upon contract labour.

***Diversifying sources of funding.*** In Canada, federal and provincial subsidies to institutions of higher education have steadily decreased since the mid-1980's (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2011). Federal cash transfers have fallen over 50% since 1983-84 (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2019). In BC, provincial subsidies have been outpaced by university's expenditures, resulting in government subsidies accounting for 64.6% of the budget in 1989 to 46.9% in 2009 (Statistics Canada, 2009). The Canadian Association of University Teachers (2019) reports that since 2002-03, this shortfall in funding has resulted in an 18.6% reduction of funding per full-time student.

To make up for this funding decrease, student tuition fees have become one of the major sources of revenue for post-secondary institutions. Across Canadian institutions Metcalfe (2010) reports an almost doubling of tuition fees between 1991 and 2005 for undergraduate programs, claiming university reliance on tuition fees as a revenue source rose almost 20% between 1997 and 2006. Usher (2020) graphically represents the dramatic shift in funding across Canadian institutions between 2006-07 and 2018-19, which I've included as Figure 2.1 below.

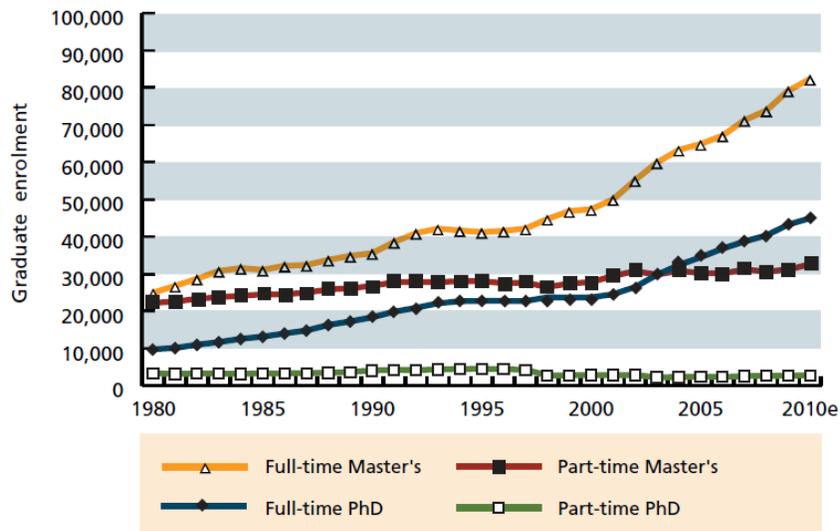


**Figure 2.1. Change in government and student fee income**  
Usher, 2020, p. 34

In addition to relying upon tuition fees as a funding source, scholars report closer ties with industry in order to take advantage of corporate donations (Metcalf, 2010; Giroux, 2002). This includes closer ties with funding councils, which some scholars warn can push universities for a “return on investment,” in providing “real-world applications” in areas such as bioscience and pharmaceutical sciences (Gemme and Gringas, 2012). Other scholars (Axelrod, 2002; Giroux, 2002) have warned of the impact on other “less profitable” programs and disciplines, who bring in less research dollars and do not have strong ties to industry, claiming they are becoming marginalized, underfunded or eliminated altogether. Giroux (2002) claims this has begun to happen in particular disciplines such as public health and the humanities.

**Increased Enrollment.** In order to take greater advantage of tuition as a revenue source, student enrollment is shown to be on the rise. Usher (2020) cites enrollment trends across Canada as increasing 78% between 2000-01 and 2019-20; and in BC, full-time enrollments rose 22.7% between 2009-10 and 2019-20. Usher (2020) also reports changes in fields of study across Canadian universities: between 2009-10 and 2017-18, with humanities enrollments down by 20%, while engineering increased by 42%, science by 33% and business by 20%.

In terms of graduate student enrollments, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) reported in 2011 that graduate student enrolments have outpaced undergraduate enrollments. These rising graduate student enrollments across Canada are shown below in Figure 2.2 from AUCC (2011). This graph compares enrollments from 1980 to 2010, showing that master’s degree enrollment had grown from roughly 20,000 to 80,000 while PhD student enrollment has risen from 10,000 to about 45,000.



Source: Statistics Canada data and AUCC estimates

**Figure 2.2. Growth of full-time and part-time PhD and Master’s degree enrollments**

Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2011, p.6

Edge and Munro (2015) report on increases in doctoral enrollment across the country. According to their report, PhD enrollments increased almost 73% between 2002 to 2011, resulting in a 68% increase in the numbers of PhDs granted annually by Canadian universities (Edge & Munro, 2015). Enrollment in doctoral programs in Ontario alone has nearly doubled, from 10,192 enrollments in 1999 to 19,000 enrollments in 2009, with the highest growth in the social and behavioural sciences, humanities, and physical and life sciences (Maldonado, Wiggers & Arnold, 2013). Enrollments in humanities programs are cited as rising 40% between 1992 and 2011 in Ontario (Rose, 2012).

Yet, there is a significant difference between enrollment and completion rates, since not all enrollments translate into degrees granted. Statistics on national completion

rates are not easily generated since the mechanics for collecting the data is not always consistent (for example, institutions vary in how these rates are calculated). However, some of the best data we have is collected by Statistics Canada – and according to a 2015 report where doctoral completion rates were tracked across the country in 5-year intervals from 2000 to 2015, there has *not* been a steady increase: In 2000, 4200 students completed doctoral degrees in Canada, but by 2005, this number had dropped to 3500; this number then nearly doubled in 2010 to 6600, and in 2015 fell to 5700 doctoral degrees granted (Statistics Canada, 2015). According to these statistics, the increased number of doctoral degrees granted between 2000 and 2015 is an almost 36% increase. Clearly, completion rates are much lower than the enrollment rate data being used to support the policy argument. In addition, simply looking at rising enrollments does not tell the full story. There are simply more institutions offering graduate degrees than there were 25 years ago, with more students able to participate in graduate education. Due to technological advances and relaxed residency requirements, granting institutions have become far more flexible in how students take programs. In addition, increased government funding opportunities has increased the financial accessibility for students (AUCC, 2011). Rising international student enrollments should also be considered; for example, the AUCC (2011) reported that in 2010 international students made up 23% of full-time PhD student enrollments across Canada.

***Reliance upon contract labour.*** Usher (2020) reported that these increases in student enrollments have led to an almost doubling of the ratio between university faculty (tenured and tenure-track) and the full-time student body at universities across Canada over the past 25 years. To alleviate these high teaching loads, contract faculty, sessional instructors and other non-permanent academic roles are on the rise at universities and colleges (Statistics Canada, 2011; Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2013). In 2013 the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) compiled a report to highlight these general trends. Their table, below, showed the general trends of University Professors across Canada, showing temporary employment rising, while permanent full and part-time employment was declining.

Employed Workforce	1999	2001	2003	2005	2007	2009	2010
Permanent Full-Time	79.40%	69.90%	72.00%	62.00%	69.30%	67.90%	65.00%
Temporary Full-time	9.80%	10.70%	11.70%	16.30%	14.20%	16.00%	17.00%
Permanent Part-time	4.00%	5.90%	4.00%	3.30%	3.30%	3.60%	2.90%
Temporary Part-time	6.90%	13.50%	12.90%	13.40%	13.30%	12.50%	15.20%

Source: Reproduced from Table 2.22 of the CAUT *Almanac* (2013).

**Figure 2.3. Trends showing temporary employment on the rise**

Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2013, p.39

Researchers (Cassuto, 2015; Kezar, 2013) report that these non-permanent instructors are being relied upon to help with the teaching load associated with the high enrollments. The claim is that casual employment relationships allow institutions to save on salary and benefits (Cassuto, 2015; Kezar, 2013). Some scholars argue that this neoliberal trend towards more corporate administrative practices results in valuing a cheaper “more flexible” workforce (Metcalf, 2010; Kezar, 2013). Meanwhile, sessional teaching instructors are said to teach a much higher teaching load than tenured-faculty, with lower pay, lower benefits, and almost no job security (Kezar, 2013). In a CBC news report, Basen (2014) reports that in Canada over 50% of all undergraduates are taught by contract faculty. Other researchers report that the ratios differ dramatically from university to university, citing ranges between 15% to 35% of courses taught by sessional instructors (Field et al., 2013). Usher (2020) cites data from survey sources that seem to show, at least in the last decade, that job security is increasing, with the ratio of full-time permanent teaching staff increasing in relation to temporary full and part-time appointments. Usher (2020) contends that universities, at least in Canada, are not becoming overly reliant upon a precariat teaching workforce.

**2.4.2. Data used are often unreliable and misleading**

The policy stakeholders use these trends as evidence to support their claims. These stakeholders contend that the tenure-track has traditionally been the career pathway of the PhD (Cassuto, 2015; Nyquist & Woodford, 2000; Rogers, 2015), and now there are more PhDs fighting over limited jobs than ever before. Researchers claim that while permanent tenure-track and tenure-stream positions still exist, they are not keeping pace with PhD enrollments (Field, Jones, Karram Stehenson & Khojetsyan,

2014; Giroux, 2002; Sekular, Crow, Annan & Mitacs, 2013). Yet the data and statistics used by the policy stakeholders is often unreliable and misleading. I will present an example from the grey literature to highlight this issue.

In 2015, Edge and Munro wrote *Inside and Outside the Academy: Valuing and Preparing PhDs for Careers* for the Conference Board of Canada. This report is typical of the grey literature published by the policy stakeholders; it contends that the oversupply of PhD graduates has resulted in a competitive environment for academic [full-time tenure-track] positions in the Canadian context. Next, they paint a picture of PhD students' career aspirations, arguing that a large proportion (60%) of PhD students pursue doctorates with the *intention* to become university professors. They use data of increasing PhD enrollments, and data of the contracting labour market for tenure-track positions as statistical evidence that PhD students are not being adequately prepared for the diverse occupations many of them will find themselves in.

Edge and Munro's (2015) report attempts to shed light on the types of occupations PhDs are working in. Using data from the Conference Board of Canada, Statistics Canada, and surveys from the Canadian Association of Postdoctoral Scholars (CAPS) Edge and Munro (2015) compiled a pie chart showing various occupations. This pie chart is included below, as Figure 2.4. Yet there are many issues with how the data is presented. For example, they tease apart full-time and part-time university professors, yet for colleges they combine both full and part time employment. This makes it impossible to ascertain a combined percentage of full-time professors, as well as impossible to ascertain those in sessional teaching roles across universities and colleges. In addition, it is not clear what percentage of PhD graduates are working in what is typically called "alternative" academic roles—individuals who work at the university in non-teaching or research roles, such as in management, or project-funded research. It is also not clear how they delineate between *occupation* and *sectors*; for example, it is impossible to understand what types of work the 11.3% of graduates working in "health" are doing—does this delineation mean healthcare fields only? Or could it include individuals working on health-related research projects within the university? What about those in management roles within the health sector—would they be captured under "health" or under "management"? This data does not give reliable indications of either sector nor occupation, and it certainly does not help to identify the percentage of PhDs who are working outside the academy—which was the point of the

entire report. They estimate that 18.6% of PhD graduates are working full-time as university professors, which I assume to mean tenure-track appointments. This report does little to clarify where Canada’s PhDs are actually employed outside of the tenure-track.



Sources: Statistics Canada, National Household Survey, 2011; Canadian Association of Postdoctoral Scholars; The Conference Board of Canada.

**Figure 2.4. Where are Canada’s PhDs Employed?**  
Edge and Munro, 2015, p, 17

Interestingly, while the policy stakeholders’ argument relies on [neoliberal] trends of supply and demand to support their claims, I have found the framing of their argument to align well with neoliberal ideals. In the next section I detail the ways in which this policy argument is framed by a neoliberal discourse.

### 2.4.3. Neoliberal discourse frames the argument

As I discussed previously, the argument on the inadequate career preparation for PhDs is situated within a broader debate on the purpose of the university and the purpose of a PhD. The utilitarian nature of education and schooling as tied to workforce development, with a focus on employment and job creation is not new. However, the past 30 years have seen increasing critiques by scholars regarding the ways in which a neoliberal agenda is influencing higher education. At the heart of this debate continues to be the concern that universities are sites for consumption (Giroux, 2010), with its primary goal to produce skilled workers (Giroux, 2010; Readings, 1996; Axelrod, 2002). Some scholars contend that the creation of a competitive environment pushes institutions and students to emphasize and market their values in instrumental terms such as work-related skills, skills training, and employability (Axelrod, 2002; Cassuto, 2015; Giroux, 2002). Through a neoliberal lens, with its ties to utilitarianism, the value of

higher education is measured in relation to employability and work-related skills, which negates the intellectual values, ethics and purposes of higher education (Barnett, 2011; Giroux, 2010; Naidoo, 2005; Readings, 1996).

The tenor of the policy argument follows this neoliberal trend in assuming the goal of the PhD relates to employment outcomes. This ideology is evident within most of the grey literature on the topic within the US and Canada (Canadian Association of Graduate Studies, 2008; Wendler et. al, 2012; “Research Universities,” 2014; Tri-Agency, 2007), and also represented in mainstream media and in the dominant discourse. The policy argument reduces the purpose of a PhD to “training” for a job (Barnett, 2011; Giroux, 2010; Naidoo, 2005; Readings, 1996), which aligns with a neoliberal discourse as to the purpose of higher education.

***Framing the “problem” as a supply-demand issue.*** Framing this “problem” as a supply-demand issue is evidence that neoliberal ideology is central to this argument. The policy stakeholders argue that increased PhD enrollments has led to an oversupply of PhD graduates. Yet the statistics presented deserve examination. For example, Edge & Munro (2015) report that Canada’s population of PhD graduates almost doubled in 10 years, from 2001 to 2011, and report that this increase in and of itself points to an employment gap. Other researchers report on increases in full-time PhD enrollment as evidence of the supply-demand problem. For example, Rose (2012) cites an increase in PhD enrollment of 40% between 1992 and 2011 in the humanities, while Sekular et. al (2013) report an increase of 52% between 2000 and 2010 across all PhD enrollments in Ontario. Yet this information is misleading, as full-time enrollments do not necessarily translate into numbers of PhDs granted, nor does it account for the contextual factors related to these increases.

However, increased PhD enrollments or increased numbers of PhD graduates does not, in and of itself, equate a problem of oversupply. The over-supply only exists when there is high demand for limited opportunities. Embedded in this argument is the belief that most PhD graduates want academic work, and the only academic work of value is the tenure-track appointment at research universities (Cassuto 2015; Rose, 2012). To highlight demand for academic work these policy reports compare rising PhD enrollment with availability of permanent, tenure-track positions—highlighting that permanent positions are not rising at the same rates as enrollments (Edge and Munro,

2015; Sekular et. al, 2013; Walker et. al, 2008). They argue that this creates a highly competitive environment for tenured positions, since a large majority of PhD graduates want permanent academic work. Yet contract faculty, sessional instructors and other non-permanent academic roles are shown to be on the rise at universities and colleges (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2013; Kezar, 2013); this could be interpreted as a greater variety of academic work than ever before. However, this non-permanent work is deemed to be of lesser value than the tenure-track, considered “a poor second choice” (Cassuto, 2015) by PhD graduates and other stakeholders. The reality is that these labour market trends are not unique to higher education, but neoliberal policies of privatization and corporatization are infiltrating many employment sectors (Peck, 2010). This supply-demand issue is still predicated on the assumption that most PhDs want academic work.

**Expectation Gap.** Scholars have voiced concern on the emphasis of marketing the value of higher education in instrumental terms such as *work-related skills*, *skills training*, and *employability* (Axelrod, 2002; Cassuto, 2015; Giroux, 2002). Cote and Allahar (2011) describe an *expectation gap*, where students, parents and other members of society view higher education in these instrumental terms, as training and preparation for jobs. *Learning* itself is seen as superfluous (Axelrod, 2002) by certain stakeholders, yet not all programs and degrees are guided by these instrumental purposes. Cote & Allahar (2007) contend that young people and parents are being misinformed as to higher education’s direct and linear paths to “finding jobs.” You may recall my reflection which opened this chapter; it described my own perception that universities are a pathway to better jobs. The expectation gap that I described was not created in isolation, but a condition of the dominant narrative I have heard from members of society since I was young.

Rothman, Kelly-Woessner and Woessner’s (2011) research on the goals of education found that faculty members across the disciplines rated *preparation for employment* as a non-essential goal, while students at both undergraduate and graduate levels consistently rated it high. This speaks to the expectation from students that a university degree will result in improved employment outcomes. And while research on undergraduate students does show that degree graduates have higher cumulative income levels than non-degree graduates (Statistics Canada, 2014), these effects are often not felt immediately (Maslove, Fischer & O’Heron, 1998). Browne and Russell

(2014) also show that higher levels of education are correlated to higher incomes and less employment disruptions. Yet an expectation gap exists, especially when university graduates may not feel an immediate employment benefit to having completed their degree. A large part of this problem is a lack of agreement of what a PhD is and what the purpose and goals of participating in a PhD program are. The expectation gap speaks to conflicting purposes of higher education for different stakeholders. This is not surprising considering the blurred mission and goals noted by Geiger (1993) in what he termed the *multiversity*.

In the next chapter, I continue to unpack the neoliberal assumptions embedded within this argument. I describe the contemporary career theories which support my conceptual framework in this study and allowed me to inquire into this issue with a different lens. I highlight the inadequate ways in which these policy stakeholders understand and write about *career*, *career preparation*, and *transitions*.

## Chapter 3. Conceptions of Career

*Only by looking in retrospect do I realize now that what was a small event actually precipitated a turning point in my career. During my master's degree in 2009, I remember getting a phone call from one of the Associate Deans where I worked as a TA on a teaching and learning research project. She called to ask me to take on a new RA position: to lead a small team of research assistants to investigate something she called "professional development of graduate students." I had no idea what "professional development" meant, and my plate was already full of coursework and various part-time roles at the university. She tried to persuade me that this project was important, and really aligned with my educational goals. I recall her telling me, "This project could change your future." After I got off the phone with her, I puzzled over what she said. How could it change my future? I convinced myself that it just didn't make sense to take on another contract. Later that day, my partner listened to me as I described the phone call; he was quick to try to convince me to take it on. He reasoned that some of the other part-time roles I was engaged in were not exactly aligned with my career goals—he commented on one of my jobs which was website updates in Dreamweaver—and asked me "Are you planning to put your skills in Dreamweaver to good use in the future?" I responded that I hated learning Dreamweaver, and I was only doing that job to earn a paycheck. "Exactly," he responded, "and don't you think this new role, with a focus on student's education and careers is a better fit for you?" I conceded that he knew what he was talking about. I called back the Associate Dean and accepted her offer to work on this new research project exploring the professional development needs of graduate students. And as I look back at that now, I see how right she was: it did impact my future and led me to where I am right now. (Reflective memo, July 29, 2020)*

I use this reflection to illustrate some of the elements of the career development theories that I am drawing on in this study. In the opening story, I was focused on work; at the time, I could not recognize how one opportunity would impact my future. It is only as time passes, as I reflect back, that I am able to see how that one opportunity affected my career. I am able to recognize that one interaction with the Associate Dean as a turning point in my career—if I had not taken on that opportunity, it is highly doubtful that I would be researching and writing about professional development for graduate students now, 12 years later.

The reflection illustrates a key idea behind the career construction framework (Savikas, 2012) that was most influential to me when designing this study. In Savikas' theory, people's careers unfold as chapters in their lives; that is, careers are not stable or static—they change over time. I use this reflection to point to the beginning of my

foray into this area of professional development with graduate students to situate the beginning of my career in this current chapter I am living. It also points to the difference between the concepts of “work” and “career”—you can recognize work opportunities in the moment, but careers unfold over time, and so require a retrospective look back over time.

The reflection also highlights the concept of *planned happenstance*, a phenomenon popularized by Mitchell, Levin and Krumboltz (1999), where job opportunities do not just present themselves by “luck” or being “in the right place at the right time.” In this story, I came to this opportunity because of previous connections and other work I had engaged in. It also illustrates intentionality—the active decision-making processes I undertook before agreeing to accept the opportunity, including the importance of reflection (in this case, done informally with my partner). At the time, the only dynamic I was weighing was my busy schedule. Yet, later in my life, the dynamics I need to weigh in my decision-making processes became more complicated since they involve caregiving for young children and life with my partner. So, my decisions around work often involve more than the work itself, they are situated in the context of my life. This idea is key to understanding a constructivist perspective of careers (which I will introduce later in this chapter).

In this chapter, I explore the particular career theories that have influenced my conception of doctoral students’ career preparation. These theories have helped me “see” the ways in which the policy argument is decidedly absent from a theoretical approach grounded in career development theory. Many of the stakeholders engaged in this debate use the term *career* erroneously, where *career* is popularized as being synonymous with *job*, *work*, or *employment*. This is a colloquial and outdated usage of *career*; this term has a very different conception theoretically. Career theorists have debated the concept of *career* for decades, yet it is now widely accepted that a conception of *career* encompasses much more than one’s job. The following definition from the Canadian Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners (2012) defines career as follows:

Career is a lifestyle concept that involves the sequence of work, learning and leisure activities in which one engages throughout a lifetime. Careers are unique to each person and are dynamic; unfolding throughout life.

Careers include how persons balance their paid and unpaid work and personal life roles. (p.2)

My conception of career is influenced by this perspective, which is grounded in the developmental theory developed by Donald Super (1980), and other career scholars (Magnusson, 2014; Savikas, 2005) who showed that career is inseparable from other life roles and choices. This theoretical conception is premised on the notion that an individual's work and employment decisions are not separate from their personal life: in this paradigm the personal and professional become aligned and the terms *career* and *career journey* naturally include the context of one's personal life.

In this chapter, I describe the various theoretical perspectives I am drawing from. I highlight the different conception of *career* as discussed within the grey literature by those stakeholders who advocate to "professionalize" doctoral education, compared with theoretical conceptions of career. I begin by describing a paradigm shift in the career development field; this shift in conception is important to understand, since stakeholders appear to use a traditional conception of *career*. I explore some of these theories, then provide examples of the insufficient ways in which this popular neoliberal conception of *career* frames the argument on inadequate career preparation for PhDs.

### **3.1. Early career approaches**

Career professionals and career services exist across many sectors, such as schools, post-secondary institutions, non-profit organizations, government agencies, health and wellness centres and even private career centres. A focus on placing individuals into jobs was a hallmark of early vocational guidance counseling in these various institutions. These grew from the field of vocational psychology, historically traced to helping workers transition from agrarian work to work in industrialized settings (Van Norman, Shepard & Mani, 2014). Parsons is considered the father of vocational guidance in the United States (Van Norma, Shepard & Mani, 2014); his job-matching approach focused on helping individuals choose a good employment match. This model became known as a *trait-and-factor approach* since they required individuals to consider their "traits" (such as abilities, interests, resources, limitations), the "factors" of different workplaces and employment roles and then match one's traits to opportunities. The goal of this approach is to "help people choose careers by systematically comparing personal characteristics to job requirements or workplace roles" (Neault, 2014, p.131). Many

career assessment tools used today, such as work-placement initiatives, employee screening assessments, and online career surveys have roots in this approach (Neault, 2014).

In 1959, John Holland extended the job-matching approach by drawing upon personality types (Holland, 1997). Holland's theory of vocational types categorizes individuals as best belonging to one of six personality types: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, Conventional (popularly known as *RIASEC*). In Holland's framework, each of these six personality types are congruent with a particular work environment; for example, those who fit the "enterprising" personality type are thought to fit well in management, marketing, and sales roles. Holland's theory has generated more research than any other in the field (Neault, 2014), and this approach became known as a *person-environment fit*.

Both the *trait-and-factor* and the *person-environment* approaches are still used in career services in various settings, such as community programming, educational institutions, and corporate career centres (Neault, 2014). They remain popular since they enable individuals to do their own self assessments, in order to better understand themselves and gain some insights into possible "best fits" for their personality types or traits. Some of these assessments are even popular outside of the career field; for example, individuals can find online assessments such as Strengths Finder or the Myers-Briggs personality tool online. Yet these types of approaches have been critiqued for being overly prescriptive, one-dimensional, generic, and static. Pryor and Bright (2011) for example, categorize these approaches as being positivistic, reductionist and deterministic, claiming they are based on a realistic epistemology which assumes that traits, values, and abilities are stable and "actually exist in the world as entities" (p. 30). Weinrach (1979) labelled these *structural approaches*, and other scholars have critiqued the embedded assumption within these approaches: that once you have made that "best fit" there is equal opportunity to realize that fit. That is, by focusing solely on the individual, these approaches negate the reality that inequities exist in society based upon social group membership, such as socio-economic status, gender, racial or ethnic backgrounds, and other social differences.

These approaches are also critiqued for assuming a linear career progression, where people remain in one occupation for life. Jarvis (2014) dubs these approaches the

*industrial age career-choice model*, and outlines the assumptions of this linear progression in 5 steps:

1. Explore one's interest, aptitudes, personality and values;
2. Determine the "best fit" by matching personal traits to occupational factors;
3. Develop a plan to attain the necessary education or training;
4. Graduate and get a secure job in a solid organization, then climb the ladder;
5. Retire as young as possible on a pension as a reward for decades of service (p. 63).

Jarvis proposes this simplistic and linear model in order to highlight the current lack of relevance in an unpredictable employment environment where "young people now entering the workforce are likely to have at least 10 to 15 jobs, in several occupations, and in multiple industry sectors during their working lives" (Jarvis, 2014, p. 63). So, while these "matching" approaches are still used by career professionals to help clients self-assess, they are typically recognized as only measuring one aspect of an individual and are not attentive to context. Progressive career professionals, such as career service professionals working in post-secondary institutions, are more likely to use these assessments in conjunction with other, more contemporary approaches and tools, which consider career influences beyond one's traits or personality.

### **3.2. New paradigm of career development**

Career theories and models emerging in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century reflect the rapid shifts of our labour market and the cultural diversity of our clients (Neault, 2014, p.131).

New career theories were introduced, which were responsive to a changing world of work where work interruptions were becoming more common place and people no longer stayed in one job for life. In these new theories, psychologists integrated theories of human development into vocational frameworks, such as those introduced by Maslow, Skinner and Erikson, with a greater focus on basic needs, behaviours, and identity development (Neault, 2014). The focus shifted from job-matching, to a greater emphasis on helping individuals identify their own needs, preferences, and motivations (Van

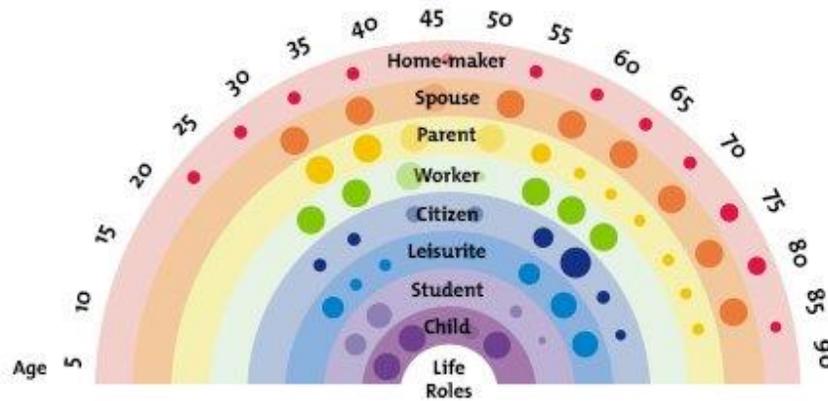
Norman, Shepard & Mani, 2014). Rather than a focus on vocational guidance or occupational matching, the field broadened to encompass an understanding of *career* that was developmental in nature—hence, the term *career development* was used to denote the emphasis on supporting careers over time, attentive to work and life’s fluctuating contexts.

This new paradigm of career development is primarily attributed to the work of Donald Super, a developmental psychologist who introduced the *life-span, life-space approach* where *career* is defined as “the combination and sequence of roles played by a person during the course of a lifetime” (Super, 1980).

### **3.2.1. Life-Span, Life-Space Approach to Careers**

Super published *The Psychology of Careers* in 1957 which had its roots in the trait and factor theories (Neault, 2014), yet the focus on developmental life stages and life roles was unique. He continued refining his theoretical approach over the next 30 years and is most well-known for his *Life-Span, Life-Space approach* to careers (1980). Super introduced the *Life-Career Rainbow*, to help individuals “see the interactive nature of the variety of roles constituting a career” (Super, 1980, p. 296). According to Super, people’s careers are not only made up of occupational roles; there are other roles in our lives which make up what he would call our *life-space*. Therefore, at any one time, our *life-space* can be made up of multiple roles, such as a worker, citizen, student, and parent. Development and life events may dictate which life roles are most salient at any one time; these life roles shift and change over time.

In this model, work is not assumed to be the central role in an individual’s life; work is highlighted in relation to the other roles (Savikas, 1997). This life-space will shift according to life events but also according to the *life-span*, with certain roles highlighted in developmental stages of an individual’s life. For example, the life-space of a graduate student, which may involve roles of student, citizen, and worker, may look very different to the life-space of a grandparent. I’ve included a graphic of Super’s life-career rainbow below (Figure 3.1), where you can see the eight life roles he identified. You can see how the rainbow is framed developmentally by age, with the roles nested within one another.



**Figure 3.1. Super's Life-Career Rainbow**

Super, 1980, p. 289

Super's approach was also attentive to an individual's skills in coping with role conflicts and career upsets. He introduced the term *career maturity* to describe fluctuations in individual's coping skills towards work decisions, one which acknowledged different career issues and needs at various ages and stages of human development. His theory acknowledged *determinants*, both personal (such as biological heritage, intelligence, interests, and values) and situational (such as family, economic conditions, and community), that could influence one's career choices. Personal determinants were also tied to self-concepts such as self-esteem and self-efficacy, which helped to support one's coping skills or career maturity.

Super's concept of career maturity drew some criticism, however. As a developmental approach, it implied an age-related appropriateness to career fluctuations – implying, for example, that at midlife an individual who suddenly found themselves out of work was not appropriate. Relying on this developmental age-appropriateness was critiqued for an alignment with the ideas of the trait-and-factor approaches which viewed occupational choice as a single event (Pryor & Bright, 2011) and not attentive to changing patterns of work. Super continued to refine his theory with his collaborators, later changing the term career maturity to *career adaptability*, to better capture the range of coping skills needed throughout one's career development (Patton & Lokan, 2001). Many other contemporary career theorists built upon and expanded Super's seminal theories of career development.

### 3.3. Postmodern approaches to career development

“Career” is a much larger set of concerns than “occupation,” and includes issues of life-role balance, satisfaction, and change; work role possibilities are extremely complex in scope (e.g., over 30,000 occupations in Canada’s National Occupation Classification, 2016), availability (relative ease of travel increases options), stability (many work roles change rapidly), and form (e.g., full-time employment, contracting, consulting, job sharing, the gig economy). (Magnusson & Redekopp, 2019)

Super’s developmental approach brought about a new paradigm in the career development field guided by postmodern, constructivist theories and frameworks. These contemporary theorists often view the traditional matching-paradigm as overly linear and reductionist and unable to reflect the complex and dynamic changes taking place in the world (Pryor and Bright, 2011). Some of these changes affecting the world of work include the increasing contractual nature of work, rapid technological advancement, globalization of consumer and labour markets, the speed of communication, and the need for lifelong learning (Pryor and Bright, 2011). Theoretical conceptions have largely moved from linear matching approaches to those that recognize the uncertainty and ambiguity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, despite advances in theory, the traditional way of thinking about *work* and *career* remains dominant outside of the professional career world.

The set of theories I draw on in this study are grounded in Super’s life-span approach, where careers are developmental in nature and exist over time. Yet these postmodern theories are guided by more than matching individual characteristics to jobs—they acknowledge the interaction between individuals and their environments (Neault, 2014 p. 136), paying greater attention to unique contexts, including the surrounding environment and the rapid changes affecting the world of work. Career counseling built on and extended Super’s (1980) notions of career competencies, so a key focus of these theories is also on supporting individual’s coping skills or *adaptability* when encountering work disruptions, transitions, and change.

In this next section I will describe several postmodern theories whose theoretical perspectives impact my conceptual framework and the way I designed this research study.

### 3.3.1. Career construction theory

Mark Savikas extended Super's theoretical ideas into his *Career Construction Theory* (2012). This approach views career as “always in process,” as part of the life-path, as stages or “chapters” of one's life. Savikas' expands on Super's (1980) conception of *career* to understand work in context, situated in an acknowledgement of the complexity of contemporary work arrangements. Yet it also highlights the agency of individuals to self-construct their careers based on their particular contexts and influences (Savikas, 2002). This emphasis on *career* and *life* recognizes the agency inherent within individuals to construct their careers to fit their own life; self-construction is an essential concept in this theory, one which evolves over time as a result of life experiences, personal, and contextual factors (Savikas, 2012).

This constructivist approach highlights the agentic nature of individuals to construct their careers to fit their lives— as Savikas' writes, “careers do not unfold; they are constructed” (Savikas, 2002, p. 154). Careers do not “just happen” with individuals as passive recipients in their career/life worlds; instead, people are active participants in the construction of their careers over time. The theory of career construction (Savikas, 1997) recognizes the complex ways in which individuals construct their careers by exploring the various chapters of their lives. The “storied” nature of reality is highlighted within the term “construct,” as individuals interpret their own reality and narrate their own story. Individual's own interpretations of their life's events is highlighted—and those interpretations may shift over time. The term “construct” brings together the theoretical notions of how people build or create their career over time, in parallel with the interpretive nature of how people choose to narrate their career/life story. Therefore, the phrase “constructing a career” denotes the active intention of “building” or “creating” of an individual's career/life over time as interpreted and narrated by the individual. The term “construct” brings together the theoretical notions from career development (how people build or create their career/life) with the interpretive layer of narrative (how people choose to narrate their career/life story).

Narrative approaches are promoted within career construction theory to explore these various chapters of one's life. Career construction theorists advocate for narrative methods in career counseling, in order to help people gain clarity on their vocational behaviour through an understanding of their *life themes*—these life themes “create

clarity in understanding what, how and why individuals author their lives and careers in order to help individuals develop a cohesive identity, adapt within their environment, and construct the next chapter of their career story” (Del Corso & Reh fuss, 2011, p. 334). As a constructivist approach, the knowledge and reality that is most important is how people interpret their realities in order to better understand choices and decisions in context.

Career construction theory and its perspectives:

Enable counselors to explore how individuals construct their careers to help them cope with feeling fragmented and confused, without losing their sense of self and social identity, as they encounter evolving economic and work life changes in an unsettled economy (Savickas, 2005).

The concept of *career adaptability* is central to supporting individual’s sense-making activities. This concept replaced Super’s (1980) earlier notions of *career maturity*, recognizing that work changes and transitions can happen at any point in an individual’s life. Savikas (2002) describes *career adaptability* as “an individual’s readiness and resources for coping with current and imminent vocational development tasks, occupational transitions and personal traumas” (p. 51). Savikas (2012) explains the four dimensions of career adaptability that support successful coping: an awareness of their career over time (*career concern*), feeling control over their work future (*career control*), being inquisitive and exploring new work roles (*career curiosity*), and anticipating success in new vocational/educational choices (*career confidence*). Career professionals guided by this approach would work at increasing clients’ competencies along these four dimensions, in order for them to self-construct the current chapter of their work life in a way that is consistent with their life themes.

### **3.3.2. Systems Theories**

While self-construction and personal agency is highlighted in the career construction approach, systems theories pay closer attention to context and influences which impact an individuals’ choices. Pryor and Bright (2011) note this difference in approach:

Postmodern approaches to career development stress the agentic properties of individuals and their capacities for constructing their own careers rather than simply entering occupations or accepting jobs. Such approaches, however, are likely to overemphasize the capacities of

individuals to control their lives in general and their work in particular. (p. 22)

Systems theories are more attentive to dynamics and influences that may be out of people's control and emphasize chance events and unplanned circumstances. Two systems theories I draw from are the *Chaos Theory of Careers* and the *Systems Theory Framework of Career Development*. I will introduce each below.

***Chaos Theory of Careers.*** Chaos theory is a theory about systems that was originally developed within mathematics and science. Chaos theory is now interdisciplinary in nature and has been applied to many fields to analyze the interconnectedness of complex systems. Pryor and Bright (2011) applied chaos theory to an understanding of the complexity of career issues encountered in a 21<sup>st</sup> century work environment. Pryor and Bright (2011) differ from Savikas' (2012) approach, believing that the uncertain reality of the labour markets and other complexities make it not entirely possible for one to actively "construct" their own careers. Their approach acknowledges "that there is a real world independent of human observations of it. However, this world is so complex that it can be viewed from many different perspectives" (p. 30).

Adapting from chaos theory such concepts as attractors, fractals and phase shifts, the *chaos theory of careers* emphasizes *complexity*, *change* and *chance* as important factors in how individuals construct their careers. Individuals are seen as complex dynamic systems; these systems exist within a matrix of other complex systems such as the national and global economy and the labour market. These systems "perpetually operate under influences of stability and change both internally and in relation to each other" (Bright & Pryor, 2011, p.163). The chaos theory of careers highlights contextual factors in career development. For example, these systems are made up of many influences such as family, parenting responsibilities, health, and geography, all of which are interconnected, in flux, and unpredictable (Pryor & Bright, 2011).

Pryor and Bright (2011), similar to Savikas' and his *career adaptability*, subscribe to the notion that building *career competencies* will help people navigate the rapidly changing, twenty-first century world of work. They believe in supporting the development of particular capacities within individuals to help them be successful no matter how their

work prospects may change over time. Competencies such as *confidence*, *self-efficacy*, *control*, and *curiosity* increase individual's abilities to navigate across and between diverse types of work, contexts, settings and learning environments.

**Systems Theory Framework of Career Development.** Many theorists have been attentive to how various influences impact people's career decisions, yet McMahon and Patton (2019) contend that their systems theory framework of career development is the first metatheoretical framework for career development based on a systems approach. This approach emphasizes viewing individuals "in the context of their lives" (McMahon, Watson & Patton, 2014, p. 30), by paying close attention to all of the influences at play in an individual's "system." In this framework, career development is seen as "a dynamic interplay between individuals and their systems of influence through which they construct their identities" (McMahon and Patton, 2019, p. 238).

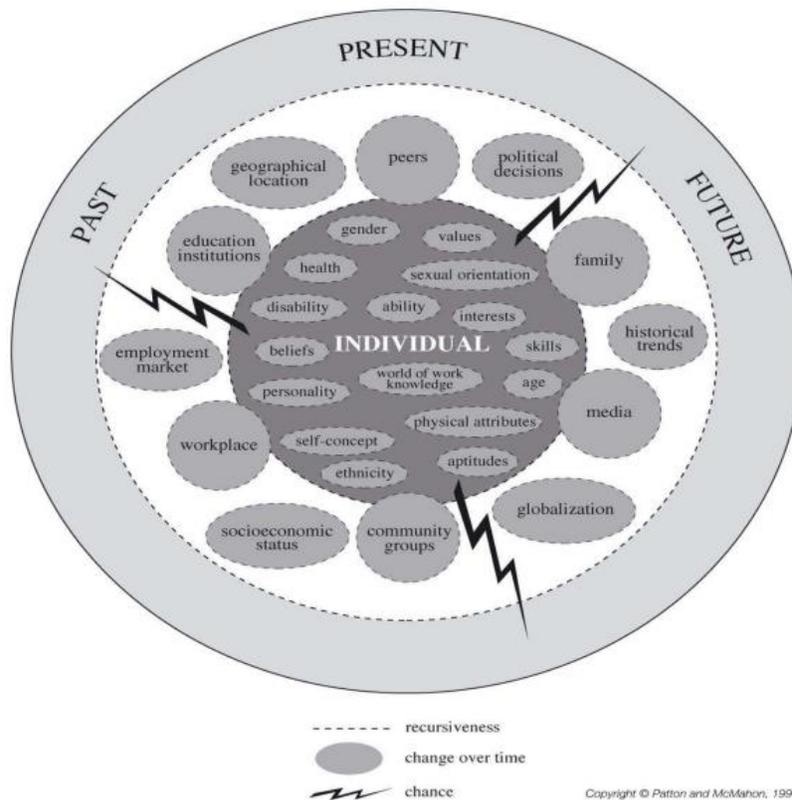
In the systems theory framework of career development, there are three interconnected systems: the individual system, the social system, and the environmental-societal system. Each of these systems contain various dynamics, described as *content influences*. The three systems and their content influences include:

**Individual system:** Content influences include gender, health, disability, values, sexual orientation, ability, interests, skills, age, world of work knowledge, beliefs, personality, self-concept, ethnicity, physical attributes, and aptitudes.

**Social system:** Content influencers include educational intuitions, peers, family, media, community groups, and the workplace.

**Environmental-societal system:** Content influences include the employment market, geographic locations, political decisions, historical trends, globalization, and socio-economic status.

I've included McMahon and Patton's (2019) graphic of the Systems Theory Framework of Career Development below, in Figure 3.2.



**Figure 3.2. The Systems Theory Framework of Career Development**

You can see the *individual system* in the inner circle, with the content influencers of the individual system denoted in ovals. The *social system* and *environmental-societal system* are both viewed in the middle circle—the content influencers of the *social system* are denoted in grey circles, while the content influencers of the *environmental-societal system* are viewed as grey ovals. McMahon and Patton, 2019, p. 239 (copyright 1999)

In this graphic you can also view *process influences*—those processes that impact people’s career. These include: *chance* (the role of unexpected occurrences), *change over time* (the dynamic nature of the systems and their process and content influences), and *recursiveness* (described as the interaction within and between various influences). The systems theory framework of career development speaks to the connectedness between both *content* and *process*: paying attention to not only what dynamics are at play but how they influence the rest of the system. All of this is housed within a larger system that denotes the temporal (past, present and future), and the ways that careers develop over time. The systems theory framework of career development is considered a constructivist approach to working with individuals to better understand the unique and subjective ways in which context impacts career.

### 3.3.3. Theories on Transitions

In addition to an understanding of career development, some scholars focus primarily on particular situations or events within career journeys. A theoretical conception of *transitions* is relevant in my study since much of the debate surrounding PhD students and career preparation is based on the assumption that PhD students suffer difficult transitions to work outside the academy (see Cassuto, 2015; Edge & Munro, 2015; Rose, 2012). I draw upon the work of two scholars to explore a theoretical conception of *transitions*.

In William Bridges' (1980) transition model, a transition is defined as "the natural process of disorientation and reorientation that marks the turning points of the path to growth" (p. 5). Bridges' (2009) model identified three zones that an individual will navigate through: the ending zone, the neutral zone, and the new beginning. The ending zone is characterized with tying up loose ends, completing tasks in order to reach closure. The neutral zone is identified as "a place of uncertainty that has been compared to being 'between trapezes' or 'walking on quicksand'". In the neutral zone, nothing seems stable or routine" (Neault, 2014, p.137). The new beginning is characterized when "individuals become established in the next phase of life" (p. 137). It is important to note the affective nature of these zones—for example, the beginning zone, is not necessarily aligned with beginning a new job, but rather dominated by emotional states of the individual, such as when "life feels 'normal' again" (p. 137). Therefore, the experience of a transition is a subjective experience and can be experienced differently by individuals.

Nancy Schlossberg's (2011) *4S Model of Life Transitions* attempts to explain why some people navigate through a transition differently than others. Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995) defined a transition as "any event...that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles" (p. 27). The 4S's refer to *situation*, *self*, *supports*, and *strategies*, all of which make up a unique context for how a transition is felt. Schlossberg's model is meant to support individuals in analyzing and successfully navigating transitions (Goodman, 2019). A theoretical conception of transition is essential to my work with PhD students who are transitioning out of their studies into the next chapter of their lives.

The postmodern theories I introduced so far in this chapter have impacted how I view the argument on the inadequate career preparation for PhDs. In the next section of this chapter, I apply these theoretical concepts to the policy argument and highlight some of the inconsistencies between these two perspectives.

### 3.4. Popular conceptions of *career*

A theoretical conception of *career* focuses on how people come to be in their careers, highlighting how careers change over time. Rather than viewing *career* as a job or an employment outcome, contemporary career theorists conceive *career* as an ongoing process of one's life, a "constellation of life-roles that an individual plays over his or her lifetime" (Magnusson, 2014).

Yet the argument as voiced by the policy stakeholders who argue that PhDs receive inadequate career preparation is absent of a theoretical understanding of *career*. Although this "problem" is framed as a career issue, stakeholders engaged in this debate are not informed by career theory. *Career* is never defined by these stakeholders; instead, the term *career* is used synonymously with *jobs*, *occupations*, and *employment*. Popular [neoliberal] conceptions of the term *career* are entrenched within the debate on PhD students and careers. For example, these policy stakeholders have defined *careers* as being either "academic" or "non-academic:" *academic careers* are roles teaching and researching in college and university settings while *non-academic careers* are defined as work outside of college and university settings. An additional term, *alternative academic careers* (more colloquially known as *alt-ac*), has become popular to identify individuals who continue to work in colleges and universities, yet in roles different from professorial research and teaching. These categorizations do not reflect classifications commonly used within the career field (such as *occupation* or *sector*), and they certainly do not reflect the multidimensional ways in which careers are constructed over time. Instead, use of this discourse perpetuates a binary where work outside of academic settings is always viewed in relation to what it is not: not academic. I believe this polarity reinforces the notion that work outside of academic settings is of lesser value—and reinforces the notion of the tenure-track as the gold standard for PhD graduates. This contributes to the discourse of the *failed academic*.

In this section, I highlight the ways in which these policy stakeholders understand and write about *career*. In the following four sections I refer back to the postmodern career theories to challenge the popular discourse of “career” and the claims these stakeholders make about the inadequate preparation for “careers.”

### **3.4.1. Research which reports employment outcomes not careers**

Conceptualizing *career* as “always in process” views a PhD student and their career differently than has been described by policy stakeholders. A developmental and constructivist approach (Super, 1980; Savikas, 2012) views life embedded within careers and emphasizes the temporal nature of *career*: while jobs, employment and occupations may change, careers manifest themselves over time. Education is seen as part of one’s life roles, where the role of student can be complementary with the role of worker. PhD students’ experiences would be acknowledged as part of their ongoing life roles: graduation from the PhD program would be viewed as another chapter in the *story of their career*.

Stakeholders invested in this debate use the term “career” synonymously with jobs, employment, occupations, and professions. For them, there is no distinction between having a job and having a career. Stakeholders engaged in this debate reduce PhD graduates’ “career” to a fixed employment outcome, and don’t consider how careers develop and change over time. Their confusing use of the term “career” creates inconsistencies in their evidence, such as the statistics they use to report “career” measures. For example, Edge and Munro (2015) report that 18.6% of PhD graduates in Canada are employed as full-time university professors while another 20.8% of PhD graduates are employed in non-permanent academic work. They conclude that 60% of PhD graduates are working in alternative “careers,” with a large majority of them working in non-academic “careers.” These statistics are based primarily on census data through Statistics Canada, yet it is unclear at what point in a PhD graduate’s “career” these statistics are sampled: are these new graduates? Are these graduates 5 years’ post-graduation? Is this ten years’ post-graduation? We are left to assume that all PhD graduates, at all points post-degree, are lumped together, leaving no distinction between employment outcomes and “careers.” Other researchers report similar statistics, for example Sekuler, Crow, Annan and Mitacs (2013) estimate that less than 25% of PhD graduates work on the tenure-track, while Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel and

Hutchings (2008) estimate that 50% of PhD graduates work in non-academic settings. It is clear the stakeholders are looking at employment outcomes or simply “being employed” as their measure, relying on fixed outcome data. These statistics provide little insight as to how a PhD graduate’s career is constructed over time. The static nature of “career” is common within the discourse of these policy stakeholders, with the vast majority of reports and policies on “career” being based on employment outcomes rather than an exploration of PhD graduate’s *careers* over time.

### **3.4.2. Career decisions are decontextualized**

The policy stakeholders perpetuate the belief that an “academic career” has traditionally been the career pathway of the PhD (Cassuto, 2015; Nyquist & Woodford, 2000; Rogers, 2015), insisting that the sole influencer of one’s career choices is the labour market—in this case the low availability of permanent academic [tenure-track] jobs. Yet the argument fails to account for the complexity of people’s career choices and disregards the influence of context: factors related to one’s personal life, social life and other external factors that might impact those choices.

A constructivist notion of careers (Savikas, 2012) identifies *contextual influences* as highly important factors in how individual’s make career choices. Pryor and Bright (2011) finds that *influences* play a major role in one’s career choices. These influences may include health, family life and caregiving, location, and ability/desire to travel, spousal and other family influencers. There is no accounting for influences on PhD student/graduate’s lives in the current framing of this argument. Instead, student testimonials of the type of “career” PhD student’s *want or desire* while in a PhD program are used. For example, Maldonado, Wiggers and Arnold (2013) report that in Ontario, 86% of PhD students in Humanities disciplines *planned to become* university professors, while 65% of PhD students in other disciplines *were planning* their way towards professorships. Edge and Munro (2015) report that 60% of PhD students across disciplines at Canadian institutions *aspire* to be tenure-track professors. These stakeholders point out the high percentages of PhD students who *want or desire* academic work, and conclude there is a mismatch between PhD students’ “career” choice and the reality of the “careers” many will work in. So, while it may be well-documented that students who pursue a PhD may, at some point in their PhD studies,

plan/hope/want to be university professors those choices reflect their current situations and people's situations change.

The surveys used to gather these statistics are not based on the reality of an individual's life, nor the reality of how people make decisions regarding work. It stands to reason that PhD students are likely to have personal, social, and environmental-societal factors which impact their choices (McMahon and Patton, 2019). Unplanned opportunities or *planned happenstance* (Mitchell, Levin and Krumboltz, 1999) and *chance* (Pryor and Bright, 2011) will also play a role in work decisions. The framing of the problem promotes a decontextualized and static reality for employment decisions—one that does not reflect the realities of people's lives, the ways work decisions are made, the unequal structure of opportunities, or the notion that careers are constructed over time. Instead, the presumption remains that the sole determinant for one's work decisions is the labour market.

### **3.4.3. The complex world of work is over-simplified**

The policy stakeholders who advocate for “professionalizing” PhD education often support changes to doctoral education's structure, curriculum, and professional development practices in order to promote students' career-readiness. They often critique the nature of doctoral education, stating that PhD graduates are not prepared for diverse employment outcomes. I find these prescriptions reminiscent of traditional career-matching approaches in which an individual would be matched to occupations based on their skills/training. This perpetuates the neoliberal message that doctoral education is training for a specific outcome and plays into an expectation gap between the purpose of education and its direct connection to employment outcomes.

According to career theorists, the career-matching approaches have been shown to be less helpful in supporting individuals to navigate unpredictable work futures of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Prescriptive solutions reinforce linear conceptions of career, do not reflect the reality of the complex world of work, or the multidimensional ways that careers are constructed. Contemporary career theorists would not advocate solely for “training to the occupation,” but would include a focus on building career competencies. For Savikas (Savikas et. al, 2009) imbuing people with the readiness to cope with change, and increasing individuals' *career adaptability*, is vital to people's successful navigation of the

rapidly changing economy and labour needs. I find the neoliberal approach to be overly simplistic, outdated and lacking an awareness of the complex world of work most PhD students find themselves in.

#### **3.4.4. Transitions are viewed as generic**

The policy stakeholders describe the transition of PhD graduates to work outside the academy as being *more difficult* than those who stay within the academic context. Graduates from certain disciplines (humanities, social sciences, and arts) are reported to suffer the most difficult transitions (Edge & Munro, 2015; Rogers, 2020), with the rationale that students from those disciplines are the most socialized to academic work (Cassuto, 2015). They often draw from the stories of PhD graduates (“QuitLit”), popularized across social media and online editorials to back up these claims. The majority of these stories are often anger-charged testimonials from PhD graduates who are in work-search mode, and having a difficult time finding satisfying work. One well-known example comes from Rebecca Shuman, who after completing her PhD in German Literature at the University of California-Irvine, began blogging in the popular online editorial magazine, Slate; frustrated with her inability to land an academic position after four years of trying, she criticized the “indoctrination” of the academy, stating “there are no academic jobs and getting a PhD will turn you into a horrible person” (Shuman, 2013).

According to transition theorists, transitions are conceptualized as *processes* in which an individual adapts and integrates to a new life role. There is a period of “disorientation” (Bridges, 2009) as people get used to “changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman, 1995). In both Bridges (2009) and Schlossberg’s (1995) models, transitions are known to be highly subjective; that is, individuals will experience a transition differently based on many personal and external factors. Yet, what these policy stakeholders are describing is not a subjective experience; their claims do not measure how particular individuals’ transitions are in relation to one another; they are not researching on the subjective experiences of PhD graduates’ transitions, nor are they able to provide context to what is a “difficult” transition compared to a “more difficult” transition. Their claims appear to be anecdotal and based on an assumption that PhD students have a difficult time finding employment outside of the academy after they graduate with a PhD. Their use of the term “transition”

does not seem to align with a theoretical conception, since transitions are subjective and not generic. Perhaps the term “transition” is meant to capture the period of time before settling in to satisfying roles.

I do not mean to imply that PhD graduates do not experience transitions, or that it may take several years to fully settle into satisfying work. It is likely that most PhD graduates experience a transition post-degree. Considering that for many they have been in academic contexts for significant periods of time, leaving the academy for a different environment would entail getting used to different routines and relationships. It should not be surprising that it is disorienting and takes longer to reorient to a new work environment. However, some might argue that there is also a transition for graduates who remain in academia, who shift from a student role to a professor role. I would argue, however, that the subjective nature of how transitions are felt would vary from individual to individual, based on a multitude of factors which make up their unique context. Clearly, a theoretical understanding of *transitions* is a helpful perspective to view how stakeholders conceive of these processes and re-examine use of the term “difficult” when describing such a subjective process.

### **3.5. Working lives of PhD graduates remain unexplored**

We can change our angle of view on the question of the ‘overproduction’ of humanities PhDs by beginning to recognize that PhDs might be able to follow a multiplicity of career paths rather than only one. Indeed, the non-academic careers that PhDs do develop in reality seem to be remunerative, fulfilling, and worthwhile. While there is certainly not enough evidence available yet concerning the professional lives of PhDs working in non-academic jobs, what we do know suggests that they do not do poorly. (“White paper,” 2013, p.8)

In this chapter, I described how a theoretical conception of career differs from how the notion of career is popularized in the grey literature by the policy stakeholders. I introduced some paradigm shifts in the career development field and highlighted several postmodern career theories which make up my conceptual framework. I believe that this theoretical conception of career lends a very different perspective to this debate, one that is essential to unpacking some of the embedded assumptions in the policy argument.

Some universities have been responsive to supporting the diverse career preparation needs of PhD students. For example, professional development programs have been in practice at some universities now for almost a decade. Meanwhile, the competitive nature of academic work is not a new phenomenon and PhD students are increasingly more aware of those realities. Within all of this what remains largely underexplored is the working lives of PhD graduates: where do they end up and how did they get there? Researchers have not made good use of the stories of PhD graduates who work outside of academia. The research literature investigating PhD graduate's career pathways outside of academic settings is scant. Reports and research have focused on student's *desires* for academic work and the short-term period post-graduation to employment outside of the academy. Yet, there is a gap in understanding the variety of work PhDs take up, and how they construct their careers over time.

In this study, I asked, *how do PhD graduates from social science and humanities disciplines construct their careers outside of academic settings?* This exploration extends beyond their employment or the jobs they've held. I wanted to learn about their working lives, and how they constructed their careers over time. In the next chapter I share my methodological approach for this study.

## Chapter 4. Research Methodology

*When I initially began planning this study, my plan was to use a semi-structured interview protocol, asking participants to comment on their experiences as a PhD student. I planned to ask questions such as their motivation for completing the PhD, the kinds of activities and professional development they took up while a PhD student, and their career plans while a PhD student. All of my questions asked about the time period when participants were at university, working on their PhD. One of my committee members astutely asked me “If your study is focused on careers, and careers unfold over time, then shouldn’t you also hear about people’s lives before and after the PhD?” I was shocked to notice this blind spot, and I realized that the questions I had planned to ask were the same typical questions that had been asked of PhD students before. And they were riddled with preconceived notions and colloquial usage of the term “career.”*

*My research question asked, how do PhD graduates from social science and humanities disciplines construct their careers outside of academic contexts? Viewing that research question now makes me cringe, because it reminds me of the biases I brought to this study—how I was still thinking about a career as synonymous to a “job” or “work.” I expected participants to tell me simple stories of the types of work they engaged in which led them to where they work now. I expected to hear linear stories, like piecing together pieces of Lego blocks, explanations of why their “career” turned out the way it did. Rather than asking about careers, perhaps I thought I was asking “How did you end up in your current job?” or “How did you transition from academia into a professional job?” Again, I have to acknowledge that my own early understandings were wedded to the popular neoliberal notion of career. But by asking about careers, and using a narrative approach, what I heard from participants was something very different. (Reflective memo, September 21, 2020)*

I open this chapter with that brief reflection, to acknowledge my own set of assumptions that I brought with me to this study. As I mentioned earlier in Chapter 2, my own understandings of the purpose of higher education were connected to work and jobs. This meant that as I began designing this study my understandings of “career” were only partial, and still connected to popular notions of career, where *work* is a synonymous concept. These are deeply embedded ideas and throughout this study I was confronted with the ways these biases attempted to guide the design of the study, my interview questions, and even my early analysis. Because I had been working directly with PhD students, I had always known I wanted to capture their stories. I was motivated to inquire into PhD graduate’s careers in order to explore the grand narrative of the failed academic, suspecting there is more to this narrative than is currently

represented within the grey literature and popular media. Yet only over time, while preparing to begin this study and over the 28 months that I interviewed and analyzed the data, did my assumptions begin to shift. My original intent in the study began to fall away, as the theoretical conceptions of career came alive to me as I read, analyzed, and conceptualized participant's stories through fresh eyes. The end result is a different study than what I had envisioned when I began this process.

My own perspectives and way of thinking about the research problem led me to design this study using a narrative approach, to explore this research question: How do PhD graduates from social science and humanities disciplines construct their careers outside of academic contexts? In this chapter I describe my approach to exploring this research question and the theoretical perspectives I hold which led me to design the study as a narrative inquiry in the life-story tradition of narrative. In this chapter I detail the specific methods I used, my approach to analysis, my approach to representing the results from my study, and the ways in which I worked to build trustworthiness throughout the study.

## **4.1. My Approach**

I believe an interpretive approach is best suited to understanding the social world, and to understanding the particular phenomenon of PhD graduates and their career journeys. Interpretive or qualitative research describes individuals, the ways individuals interact with themselves and their environments, and the ways in which individuals subjectively construct meaning and values to phenomena in their daily lives (Maxwell, 2013). What was most important to me was to understand the experiences of PhD graduates from their own perspectives and experiences.

My approach is also grounded in a constructivist paradigm, where I view knowledge as socially constructed. Denzin & Lincoln (2011) describe the constructivist paradigm as assuming “a relativist ontology (there are multiple realities), a subjectivist epistemology (knower and respondent co-create understandings), and a naturalistic (in the natural world) set of methodological procedures” (p. 13). I view individuals as not simply reflecting a knowable reality or ingesting knowledge, but as active participants in constructing meaning and interpreting that meaning in subjective ways—which includes

my own role as researcher, where I play an active role in constructing meaning throughout the study.

My desire to explore beyond this neoliberal discourse speaks to my own critical perspective: since I view society as socially constructed, I believe the discourses and understandings held by members of our society can change and be reconstructed differently. This reflects a critical lens and a change orientation. Post-structural perspectives also inform my thinking. The neoliberal discourse on PhD students' career preparation has popularized conceptions of career as being either *academic* or *non-academic*, as binaries that are polar opposites, and that are static over time. I seek a more complex explanation for how PhD graduates construct their careers, recognizing that the line between what constitutes academic and non-academic work may be a false dichotomy, and that individual's decisions regarding work do not necessarily regard these as in opposition from one another. I also decry the power dynamics created by polarizing these two terms, which results in the devaluation of "non-academic" work, since it is only conceived in relation to what it is not (*not academic*). I intend to explore outside of this neoliberal box of PhD students' experience, and view PhD graduates' lives in context. My own theoretical perspectives and epistemology, coupled with my desire to engage actively with participants in this study, led me to choose a narrative approach to investigate how PhD graduates construct their careers outside of academic settings.

#### **4.1.1. Narrative Approach**

Narrative approaches value people's lived experience and value the ways in which humans experience the world. Narrative work highlights the interpretive and subjective nature of experience by being interested in the ways in which participants *interpret* their lives and life-events, how participants *understand* their experience, and the *meanings* they give to specific events (Chase, 2011). Narrative inquiries highlight the interpretive nature of an experience, and the interpretive nature of research itself; therefore, narrative researchers are not interested in the accuracy or "truthfulness" of an account, but rather the interpretations of those accounts. This approach is consistent with my goal for the study—I want to explore how PhD graduates themselves interpret their career journeys, how their perspectives shifted or changed over time, and the meanings they attach to those experiences and events.

Narrative accounts are consistent with post-structural perspectives, because they move away from the general to the particular “providing readers a potentially deeper and more valuable understanding” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 21) of participant’s experiences. Rather than searching for generic solutions or a one-size-fits-all approach, I worked to understand the intricate details of each individual’s journey, in order to highlight the diversity and variety within each individual’s life. A narrative approach allowed me to highlight the uniqueness of each case, drawing attention to the individual experiences of each PhD graduate, highlighting contextual features of their lives that might not be noticed when looking at generic descriptions of “PhD students” or “PhD graduates.”

In narrative form, participants tell us about their lives, accessing and constructing meaning of their lives in the past as well as their present. Catherine Kohler Riessman (1993), a narrative researcher who studies lives in transition, states that individuals continually reformulate, interpret, and make sense of life’s events based on subsequent experiences. Mishler (1999) describes this as follows:

We continually re-story our pasts, shifting the relative significance of different events for whom we have become, discovering connections we had previously been unaware of, repositioning ourselves and others in our network of relationship. (p. 5)

This focus on the temporal is consistent with a constructivist approach to careers in which I frame the study theoretically, placing the temporal nature of careers front-and-centre in this study. Savikas (2012) emphasizes the temporal notion of one’s *career*: while jobs, employment and occupations may change, careers manifest themselves over time. Someone working from a constructivist approach (such as Savikas, 2012) would view PhD graduates as constructing their careers throughout their ongoing life roles and experiences, with the experience of being a PhD student only one of those roles and experiences. Because of this, I needed a methodology that was attentive to time, and allowed participants to recollect experiences earlier than the PhD experience. These broad conceptions of the temporal nature of careers guided my choice in choosing a narrative approach.

By hearing from PhD graduates who are able to draw on their past with an understanding of their present location, I elicited novel understandings of the ways in which PhD graduates construct their careers over time. This is important to acknowledge

as I asked participants to reflect back on their experiences in light of their current realities. As Riessman (2001) describes, “the truths of narrative accounts lie not in their faithful representation of a past world, but in the shifting connections they forge between past, present and future” (p. 705). I wondered what we could learn about the careers and working lives of PhD graduates if we listened to their perspectives while no longer a student.

### ***Life-story tradition***

The field of narrative inquiry is vast, and the ways in which this methodology is taken up differs by researchers and scholars from various disciplines such as education, psychology, law, and history to name a few. I situate my work within the narrative tradition of *life-story* which are narratives “about a significant specific aspect of a person’s life...an extended story about a significant aspect of one’s life such as schooling, work, marriage, divorce, childbirth, an illness, a trauma, or participation in a war” (Chase, 2005, p.652). My study aligns most closely with the life-story traditions within the fields of psychology and sociology. For example, psychologists McAdams, Josselson and Lieblich (2001) have researched and published extensively in this tradition of life-story, using people’s *turning points* as their topical matter, coining the term the *narrative studies of lives*. Riessman (2012) describes narrative inquiry in this tradition as a kind of case-centered research, where case studies of individuals’ storied accounts help us better understand the intersections of biography, history, and society.

Within this tradition, the work of sociologist Catherine Kohler Riessman has heavily influenced the design of my study. Riessman (2001), while situating herself in the tradition of life-story, prefers the term *personal narratives*, which she describes as “long sections of talk—extended accounts of lives in context that develop over the course of single or multiple research interviews or therapeutic conversations” (p. 698). I take up this same terminology and use the terms *personal narrative* and *narrative* to describe long sections of talk during the interview process, when participants shared extended stories of their lives with me.

In-depth interviews are the most common source of data in narrative inquiries (Chase, 2011). Narrative interviews typically do not have rigid interview protocols, as described by Clandinin (2013):

Conversations create a space for the stories of both participants and researchers to be composed and heard. Conversations are not guided by predetermined questions, or with intentions of being therapeutic, resolving issues, or providing answers to questions. (p. 45)

In narrative interviews, participants are invited to tell their stories; and narrative researchers pay attention to what are sometimes called *digressions* (Riessman, 2000). These digressions are extended periods of talk, or *personal narratives*, that participants feel are important for the researcher to understand; these digressions help understand the perspective of participants. This differs from traditional qualitative interviews which often seek opinions or support generalizations about participant experiences (Chase, 2011), often glossing over these digressions. Narrative interviews are said to be relational (Riessman, 2012); rather than asking participants to give an “opinion” or to “summarize” their experiences, researchers ask to hear about the experience itself. Interview protocols are typically designed to be more open-ended, inviting the participant to “tell a story.” Within narrative work, there is a recognition of the *situatedness* of the interview, implying that the interaction between researcher and participant influences how the narrative is told.

In the next section, I detail the design of this narrative inquiry, introducing the eight participants who took part in the study and the narrative interviews we engaged in together.

## **4.2. Study Design and Data Collection**

In this section I describe who took part in the study and the methods I used to collect the data.

### **4.2.1. Participants**

In order to understand how PhD graduates from the social science and humanities disciplines constructed their careers outside of academic settings, I purposefully recruited participants with the following characteristics: they were Canadian citizens with PhDs from social science and humanities disciplines; they were all employed outside of academic settings; and they had a desire to work outside of academic settings. I will describe each of these criteria briefly below.

***Canadian PhDs from social science and humanities disciplines.*** I

limited the study to Canadian citizens who hold PhDs. My primary reason for limiting the study to Canadian citizens was to get a standard set of experiences regarding work and career; I reasoned that immigration issues may impact the work experiences of non-Canadian citizens, which was not the focus of this study. However, these Canadian citizens could hold the PhD from any university (Canada, US, international); for example, two of the eight participants completed their PhDs outside of Canada.

Participants needed to be PhD graduates (Doctor of Philosophy), thereby excluding participation by individuals from professional-type doctoral programs (such as DBA or EdD). One participant, who completed her doctorate in England, graduated with a DPhil—a term used at her university which is synonymous to a PhD. There were no time boundaries on when they completed the PhD, provided they met the other criteria. I purposely sought out participants from the social science and humanities since the literature routinely identifies these graduates as suffering the most difficult transitions to work outside the academy (see Cassuto, 2015; Rogers, 2020). Precisely because of the focused critique on the career readiness of PhDs from these disciplines, I wanted to explore their work experiences.

***Employed outside of academic settings.*** I recruited participants who were employed “outside of academic settings,” meaning that they worked outside of university and college systems (ie. their work did not involve teaching, research, administration, or service within post-secondary environments). I actively recruited individuals who worked in other sectors, such as non-profit, for profit, or engaged in entrepreneurial activities (such as being self-employed). Participants had to be currently engaged in the workforce (ie. not retired or taking a leave from work), because I wanted to learn about their current work/life situation.

***Desired work outside of academic settings.*** Beyond simply being employed “outside of academic settings,” I intentionally recruited participants who *desired* this alternative pathway. This criterion was important, as I wanted to hear the experiences of people who were satisfied in their work outside of college and university settings; who either intentionally selected to work outside of academia, or who began working outside of academia, possibly not as an intentional choice, but were *now satisfied* with their occupational choice. These were all individuals who did not currently

desire academic work. The career experiences of those who hold PhDs yet who *desire* work outside of academic settings are an under-studied group; the prevailing discourse maintains that all PhD students want academic work and that those who do not hold academic positions do so only by default (as a Plan B). I wanted to hear the experiences of PhD graduates who were satisfied with their work outside of the academy, in order to solicit a point-of-view that is lacking in the literature. This criterion attempted to exclude those who were *not satisfied* with work outside of academic settings; this was not meant to create a selection bias, but to purposefully hear from individuals whose experiences are not well understood.

#### **4.2.2. Recruitment**

I primarily used email and social media as my main channels for recruitment. I circulated a recruitment email to my networks and colleagues within two universities in British Columbia, asking them to share the message broadly with their own contacts. I also relied upon social media sites; I used both Facebook and LinkedIn where I circulated a truncated version of my recruitment email message. These social media posts linked to my research website, where potential participants could learn more about the study: <https://PhDnarratives.wordpress.com/>.

These two strategies (email and social media) garnered different results. My LinkedIn posts were shared widely and gathered the most interest, with 11 people contacting me through LinkedIn. However, a large proportion of these people lived either internationally or in Canada's central and eastern provinces. I had envisioned meeting participants for face-to-face for interviews and so planned to interview local participants first. Five individuals who were not local yet met the inclusion criteria agreed to allow me to contact them in the future to discuss the study, if I pursued a second phase with distance participants,

Of the eight participants who took part in the study, four of them found me through social media while four were connected to me through my professional contacts. I touched based by phone with each individual, where I described what was involved in taking part in the study. This conversation helped me ensure each participant met the three recruitment criteria. In total 18 people contacted me with interest in the study: eight took part in the study; four did not meet the inclusion criteria; and five were potential

distance participants. There was one additional local individual who met the inclusion criteria, but I did not permit to take part in the study, solely because I already had representation from her discipline (history). In the end, I gathered enough data from 8 participants and did not pursue a second phase with the five potential distance participants.

***Participant demographics.*** Of the eight participants, six had completed their PhDs in Canada, while two studied internationally. Two participants held PhDs in anthropology, while the other six participants represented disciplines from history, educational studies, English, psychology, sociology, and an interdisciplinary degree in education/development studies. At the time of the interviews, all eight participants were employed outside of college and university settings, in sectors such as non-profit, for-profit and the public sector; five of these individuals were self-employed. Of these eight participants, five are women and three are men. They ranged in age from early thirties to early sixties. Their length of time since completing the PhD also varied: when I met with them the most recent graduate had completed her PhD three years prior to the study, while one individual completed her degree 19 years ago.

### **4.2.3. Data Collection**

Data sets included the audio-recorded interviews, interview transcripts, journey plots and my research journal. I will describe each of these in detail.

***Interviews.*** I designed two interviews with each participant, and a final touchpoint to review their storied account.

***First Interview.*** I aimed to keep the interview informal and establish rapport by meeting in an informal meeting place. During the first interview we typically met in a coffee shop near participant's work or home, and on one occasion I met a participant at their home. I audiotaped each interview and transcribed the interviews verbatim shortly after the interview (within 2 weeks).

The first interview was open-ended. My goal for this first interview was to sketch out the overall trajectory of their career path. I started the interview by asking them to reiterate some of the details they had already discussed with me over the phone, such as where and when they completed their PhD, in what discipline, and where they

currently work. My second question asked them to describe a typical workday: “From the moment you first wake up to when you go to bed, what does a typical workday look like for you”? This question was meant to gather details I did not know about their lives (such as partners, children, parents, recreation, and co-curricular activities). I reminded participants of the conversation we had on the phone, where career is made up of more than work or jobs, that I wanted to hear their whole story. I explained that I wanted to hear more than the types of employment they’ve had and would prompt them for the *how* and *why* of their experiences, drawing out connection and contiguity between their career/life events.

Then I asked the question which framed the rest of the interview: “So now for the rest of this interview, I’d like you to describe how you came to do a PhD in X discipline (eg. Psychology), and how you ended up being a (current role), working at X (current job)?” I told them the interview is now open for them to tell me their story any way they wanted. I gave them permission to decide where the starting point would be, whether in high school or before that, while an undergrad, or any other point they’d like to begin.

This interview typically lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. I reminded participants about the second interview, and they usually asked me to email them with some possible dates. After participants left, I jotted down some brief field notes, which included some details of the setting to help me remember the interview later, my initial reactions to the interview and anything else that was significant to me about the interview. The interview was later transcribed verbatim. My transcripts were very basic, using a paragraph format moving between participant and interviewer. I set my transcription software to document audio time directly on the document every 3 minutes. I used track changes to annotate and comment when reviewing the transcripts.

**Second Interview.** We typically set up the second interview over email a day or two after the first interview. Time between the first and second interview was on average three weeks, but in two cases, it spanned more than three months due to conflicting schedules and location challenges. Because the structure of the second interview was different, a coffee shop was no longer an ideal location, so I typically secured a room in either a public library or on a post-secondary campus.

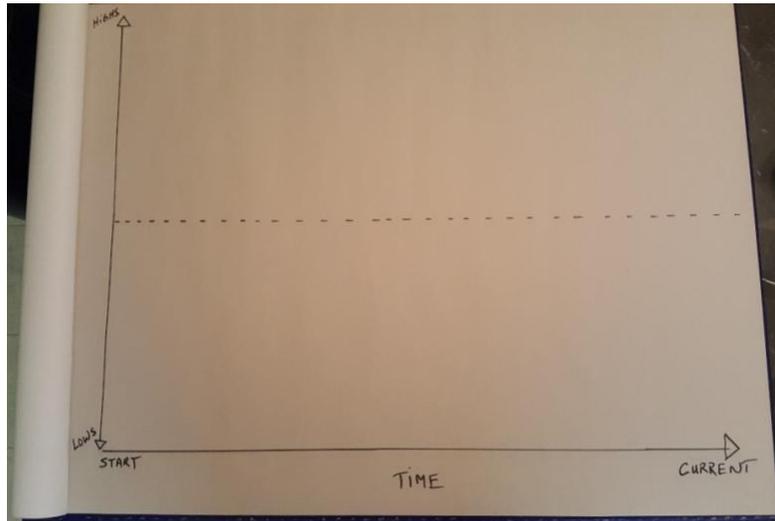
The focus of the second interview was to elaborate in greater detail on events, fill in time gaps and gather deeper insights about their experiences. The protocol for this second interview was emergent and designed specifically for each participant. I reviewed the transcript of their first interview prior to this second interview, with the hope of understanding their overall career path. I looked for areas that I did not understand, needed clarification, and aspects where I hoped to gain new details from them. Questions emerged as I reviewed the transcript—so this second interview was an opportunity to ask participants to clarify or build on aspects they had shared with me previously. Although each interview protocol was unique, the structure of this second interview had two elements that were consistent: an initial discussion, to clarify and elaborate on what I heard last time, and the creation of a journey plot.

The initial discussion was a strategy to support relationship building; I wanted participants to know that I had listened to their story. I brought in a few questions to ask them for further clarification, and when I asked these questions, I tried my best to contextualize elements they had shared with me. I wanted them to know I had listened to their story, so they could understand the purpose of this second interview was not to re-hash the same story but go deeper on aspects they shared with me. The discussion portion typically ranged from 20 to 30 minutes.

**Journey Plot.** The journey plot is a visual method where participants graphically represent their experiences over time according to some theme. I had read about the journey plot technique being used in a similar context, by scholars investigating the career journeys of early career researchers (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2018). The journey plot is unique as it asks participants to recall their life-story details (plotted over time on the X axis) and plot them according to life's emotional highs and lows (on the Y axis). As McAlpine (2016) noted, it is an effective way to draw out the emotional attention related to an experience. I decided to adopt the journey plot, as its attention to the affective domain might draw out novel understandings of participant's experiences.

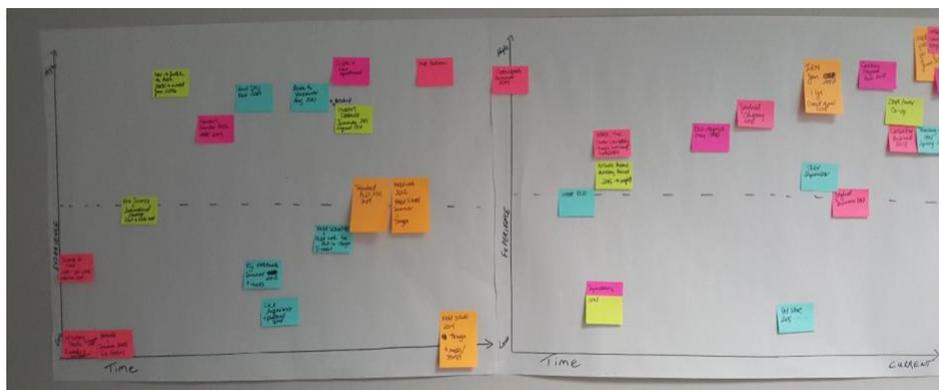
While preparing their interview protocol I created a chronological list of events and experiences they had relayed to me during the first interview. This supported the creation of the journey plots, where they plotted the events they had previously shared with me. I brought large flip-chart papers, sticky notes, and colored markers to support the creation of the journey plots. I gave participants the chronological list of events they

shared with me during the first interview as a way to give the mapping a focus and help them not feel like we were re-doing the entire interview (another version of member checking). Participants began with a blank journey plot that I brought with me (Figure 4.1), showing only the X and Y axis and the middle line of experience (a “satisfied” line, when things were going ok, neither ups nor downs).



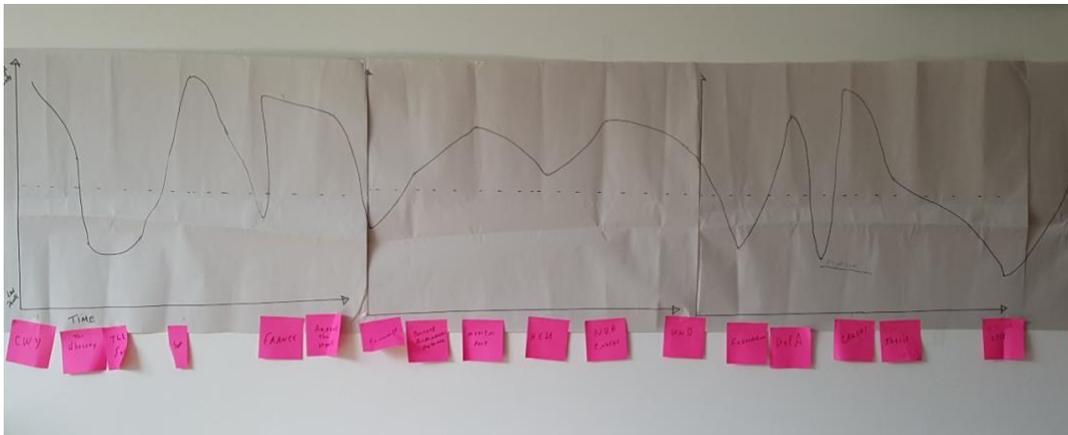
**Figure 4.1.** Image of the blank journey plot

I asked them to use the sticky notes to plot events over time, and in relation to the highs and lows of experience, as you can see in Figure 4.2.



**Figure 4.2.** Image of Sofia’s journey plot in process

The completed journey plot involves removing each sticky notes while adding a point to the map. The points were then joined together to create one graphic line (Figure 4.3).



**Figure 4.3. Image of Neill’s completed journey plot**

Each journey plot created was a unique visual representation of the individual’s career path and supported me in better understanding their experiences and perspectives. The process of creating the journey plot solicited more talk from participants—more details as they recalled events over time and especially as they were asked to plot attentively to the highs and lows of these experiences. It helped to remind people of experiences they forgot during our first interview. For example, when beginning this exercise Neil puzzled over the start of his journey plot; he looked over the list of events/experiences he had discussed with me previously and said, “Did I not mention my experience with [this organization] last time?” Then he was adamant that his plot begins with a particular experience from his youth, rather than where it began during our last interview. Several participants commented on the process of the journey plot, stating how much they enjoyed the exercise. I found the journey plot to be an effective tool which encouraged participants to talk—allowing them to open up and provide more context to their experiences.

This second interview typically lasted 90 minutes, with at least half of that time dedicated to the journey plot exercise. After participants left, I took photos of the journey plot and wrote a few reflective notes in my research journal. I later emailed the photos of the journey plot to each participant while thanking them for their participation in the study. I asked them to let me know if they had a particular pseudonym they would like me to use for their story. The interview was audio-recorded, and I later transcribed it.

**Learning from the journey plot.** Initially I had intended the journey plot to fit on one flipchart paper. But the first time I used the journey plot, the participant needed 3

flipchart papers to plot their career path! Most participants' maps were 2 pages taped together to create one large graph, and in two cases three papers were needed.

I reversed the order of the two planned activities of the second interview. I had initially intended to start the interview with the journey plot and then move into the discussion. But the first time I did the second interview, the journey plot took up all the interview time leaving no time left for my questions. It also felt awkward to begin the interview with the mapping, without any warm-up together. I decided to flip the order, asking participants questions first (which I believe helped create rapport since it showed my understanding of what they previously told me), and then shift to the journey plot. This felt like a more natural process. In two cases we ran out of time while completing the journey plot, but only at the final stage of connecting the events and drawing the line. In these cases, I completed the graphic line after they left and sent them photos of the journey plot as I had done for the other participants.

I typically gave participants a choice when creating the map: talk me through the creation of it *in situ* or create the map on their own (privately) and talk me through when they were done. I found this choice to be significant: talking about the details of the map while creating it led to more details being revealed; participants shared more robust talk as they shared their decision-making process, whether it was the highs or lows of experience, or in cases where it was both high and low, and why. There was only one participant who decided to build the map on their own, and when they talked me through the map it did not solicit all of that talk— her mapping decisions had been made (internally) and I only heard the outcome not the decision-making processes. In this case the talk and the map were more polished, and the interview less detailed.

Initially I was not sure whether the visuals of the journey plots formed useful data sets. I could not compare participant's journey plots and gain insight on their lives in relation to each other, such as trying to ascertain who suffered a "more difficult transition" after their PhD. The process of creating the journey plot was very personal and highly subjective. For example, while one participant plotted major ups and downs throughout their story (and the journey plot ended up having very jagged edges), others may not have interpreted their highs and lows in such extremes, even stating from the start, "I'm usually very optimistic so I don't expect to have many lows" (Ruth, when beginning the journey plot exercise). I came to realize that the benefit of the journey plot

was not in the graphic itself (the end product) but in the process of creating the journey plot. It encouraged more talk, as participants got engaged with the task, taking the “interview pressure” off them as they focused on ordering sticky notes and talking through the various experiences of their lives. But I have also come to see another profound importance of the journey plot—it helped people recollect their lives over time, instead of focusing solely on the PhD experience, allowing me insight into their lives. This provided a deeper understanding of their motivations and decisions. I describe in greater detail a little later in this chapter how I analyzed the journey plots, and the importance of this data set.

***Final touchpoint.*** I touched base with each participant after writing a draft of their storied account. The storied account is the result of my analysis of their personal narratives and this final touchpoint was an opportunity for me to solicit feedback on the storied account I wrote. Each of the eight participants engaged in this feedback process and collaborated with me to varying extents to revise their storied account. This process was quite significant, since it was my opportunity to solicit feedback on my analysis of the themes I found in their personal narratives. It allowed participants to tell me where the story felt like their story and when it didn't. We worked together to revise the storied account so that the story resonated with them.

I also asked them to read with an eye for anonymizing their story, which we engaged in together during this process. That involved our collaborative decision-making of which details (such as names of institutions, names of friends or family members, work titles, etc.) might be a threat to their anonymity, and deciding together on new ways to phrase things.

Their levels of engagement at this stage ranged. Some individuals met with me once and provided me with verbal feedback of their overall career path and suggested aspects that should be revised and details they wished anonymized. This typically resulted in a few versions being reviewed via email. A few individuals became very engaged in this process, meeting with me virtually more than once, providing feedback and revising significant sections of the storied accounts. I emailed each participant a copy of the final storied account after our revision process together was completed.

**Research Journal.** My research journal was a very active data set. Connolly and Clandinin (2006) recommend that researchers create both field notes and journal entries: field notes are outward descriptions of events, places, people and other happenings that the researcher experiences, while journal entries help to record the inward experience of the researcher (a much more reflective process). Because details can quickly become forgotten “field texts help fill in the richness, nuance, and complexity of a landscape, returning the reflecting researcher to a richer, more complex, and puzzling landscape than memory alone is likely to construct” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 83). My field notes included details of our interviews together (time, place, interesting details of our interactions), plus any emailed reflections participants sent me after the interviews. My journal entries were more reflective, written as I was reviewing transcripts and resembled analytical memos as I explored the data. I used *Evernote*, an online note-taking application, where I could write and record notes and memos, upload photos, literature, and documents, while adding annotations. Evernote has a great tagging system that helped me keep my entries well-organized. I could tag each entry I created with multiple tags—I have tags for each participant, where I would describe my thinking as I reviewed their transcripts and listen to the interviews; I have analytical tags that related to various themes I was finding, and what these tags meant, and where to locate particular sections of text. This robust research journal served several purposes. First, it allowed me to write down my thoughts in draft form and I believe even the process of writing my thoughts down helped them to grow and crystallize. Second, because of the tagging system it was easy to search particular themes and remind myself what I had already written; this helped to easily situate myself back to the particulars of each participant’s narratives. And finally, because I was writing in this research journal at all the stages of the study, it created an audit trail, where I could easily track what I had done and why. This was especially helpful when it came time to write this chapter, particularly around my analysis; I had left such detailed notes on how I was analyzing at different stages and why, so none of it was forgotten.

### **4.3. Analysis**

The analytic process began once my interviews started. There are various ways I worked with my data and engaged in analytic thinking while at different stages, and for different purposes. Polkinghorne distinguishes *narrative analysis* from *analysis of*

*narratives*—for Polkinghorn these are different (yet related) tasks: *narrative analysis* refers to the analysis of an individual’s narrative (the story they tell), with the goal of understanding the story itself in its entirety, while *analysis of narratives* is a different process—this is analysing multiple narratives for themes and patterns (see discussion of these differences in Kim, 2016). Conceiving of each of my eight participants as a “case” helps to simplify the language with my analytic process: I refer to Polkinghorne’s *narrative analysis* as “in-case analysis” while referring to *analysis of narratives* as “cross-case analysis.” I will attempt to clarify this by describing the different ways I engaged with my data during in-case and cross-case analysis. These were not two distinct phases, as my engagement within each case informed my analytic thinking across all the cases. It was an iterative process where both informed one other, as I will explain throughout this section.

#### **4.3.1. Early in-case analysis**

I was engaged in understanding each participant’s narratives during and after their first interview. This was an iterative process, as I revisited their narratives at various points: after their initial interview, while preparing for their second interview, after their second interview, and later, when I returned to their case to explore it in more depth. I noticed my analytic thinking changing throughout this process, as documented in my analytic memos.

At the early stages, as I listened to their interview and re-read the transcripts, I was mostly focused on understanding crucial details of their personal narratives: when things happened and why they happened. This was helpful as I prepared for the second interview, in order to identify gaps in the story or events that required further explanation. I prepared to ask for more details in the second interview, so in this early stage I was focused on understanding what they shared with me. I annotated my transcripts with track changes, with questions I had, contextual features of their narratives, and early ideas I was testing out. I worked on developing an understanding of the details of each case and understanding the individual’s experiences.

After the second interview, I listened to the interview and reviewed their journey plot while making notes in my research journal. These notes were very useful to me later, as I generally had to “park” this story and move on to interview other participants. I

wrote analytic memos in my research journal of my ideas as I worked with each participant.

### **4.3.2. Cross-case analysis**

As I was engaged in interviews, I was also thinking about the stories as a whole. I pondered what was similar across the cases, or what patterns existed as I viewed the participants' different experiences and context within their lives. I think of my analysis as a kaleidoscope: as I zoomed in to unpack particulars of each case, I would see one pattern, and as I zoomed out thinking across the cases, I noticed something different. This moving from specific to the general is consistent with Polkinghorne's analytic process described earlier, as well as other researchers (Riessman, 2001; McAdams, 2012) who engage in inductive analysis across cases. This inductive process "develop[s] a more abstract description of or theory about the phenomenon" based on sets of "psychologically rich and detailed autobiographical stories" (McAdams, 2012, p. 17). Thematic narrative analysis is sometimes even confused with grounded theory, yet its main difference is in how "narrative scholars keep a story 'intact' by theorizing from the case rather than from component themes (categories) across cases" (Riessman, 2008, p. 53).

I began to document early analytic thinking about the stories as a whole, as I identified patterns and contextual details that I thought were important across all the narratives. I created a participant matrix, a table with participant's names down one side, and early themes/contextual details in columns along the top. I began filling in details for each participant. Some of these early patterns included people's motivation to pursue the PhD, influencers in their life story, and contextual details of their lives, such as socio-economic class. As I interviewed more participants, I updated this matrix, and identified new patterns; as I dove into the different stories my understanding of the particulars deepened. This matrix was a helpful step later, when I created an analytic map of each participant's story (which I describe a little later in this section).

### **4.3.3. Analytic strategies**

I used different analytic strategies at various points in this research to analyze both the in-case narratives and across all cases.

**Analytic memos.** I documented analytic memos in my research journal throughout my analysis of all 16 interviews, including the final touchpoints. Documenting my thinking is also part of leaving an audit trail which I hope will help build confidence in the trustworthiness of my findings. These memos helped to remind me of my insights and ideas, return to them and let them grow. As an example, one of the memos I wrote was labelled “the story I want to tell” and I used the tags “analytic ideas” “identity” and “performance.” I began writing this memo when I began to notice the performative aspect of participant’s involvement in the interviews and I detailed what I heard and what I believed it meant. Over time, as I returned to this memo and added more details, and pondered what did these mean, I grew to understand the situatedness of the interview process—how it mattered who I was, and how the story participants told was the story they wanted me to hear. This led me to a deeper understanding of how identities are socially situated, and the importance of context. The ability to return to my writing and build on these memos spurred me onto new insights which are evident in this dissertation. My understanding of the performative and situated identities is detailed a little later in this chapter. This understanding of the performative helped me frame the storied accounts which you will read in Chapter 5.

Some of these memos had a reflective element. These reflective memos helped me refer back to my own educational and work experiences as I explored the analytic themes and made sense of the data. A select number of these reflective memos were retained in the writing of this dissertation at the beginning of Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5.

**Analytical questioning techniques.** Once I completed all 16 interviews, I returned to each case to continue my in-case analysis, analysing each in greater depth than I had done during the interviewing process. When I began this stage, I found myself becoming overly focused on the story itself, engaging in a similar cognitive process to when I was preparing for the second interview. In order to stimulate deeper analytic thinking, I began to ask questions as I read the stories, trying to focus less on the story itself but the meaning behind the story. I used questioning techniques to help me stay in an analytic frame of mind as I reviewed the transcripts, such as asking:

- What motivated them to pursue the PhD? Did this motivation change in any way? Why?
- Did their work aspirations change over time? If so, why?

- What significant people were/are in their lives? Did this affect their motivation or outcome in any way?
- Is there something in their story that they keep coming back to, something that seems to be a theme/issue/highlight in their life?

Often there would be *digressions*, or stories within the story, and I would ask “Why are they telling me this (particular) story? How does it relate to their career narrative? What do they want me to know?” Asking these questions helped raise my attention to the performative element in their personal narratives (which I will describe shortly).

I had already been developing some broad themes from my cross-case analysis, and this process helped to deepen these themes, see them differently, revise and locate new themes. This was an interesting phase: as I reviewed the interview transcripts, I found the notes in track changes I had made at an earlier phase (in preparation for the second interview)—these were almost entirely useless now as they weren’t thematic insights. I deepened my thematic analysis and annotated my transcripts differently this round. I spent several weeks with each case, reviewing the transcripts, listening to the audio, reviewing journey plots and writing memos. I began to locate *turning points* in the narratives, which helped to deepen my understanding of individual cases.

***Identification of Turning Points.*** From the outset of this study, I anticipated hearing personal narratives of change, as is typical in the life-story tradition. Clearly one’s life is not static, and participant’s narratives highlighted change in interesting ways. I decided to focus on identifying *turning points*, a narrative analytic tool used by Riessman (2001), as a way of seeing how identities shift over time. She describes turning points as “moments when a narrator signifies a radical shift in the expected course of a life” (p. 705). This became a useful analytic tool for me to engage in when analyzing the personal narratives. The journey plot proved to be an essential exercise in helping me identify these turning points—because of its focus on the affective domain, it gave a visual graphic of things turning upward. During the interviews, participants often verbalized turning points by describing events that significantly changed the course of their life. Locating participant’s turning points helped me better understand the plot lines of their narratives, which deepened my analysis.

***Analytic Maps.*** As I engaged with the in-case analysis, I needed to organize my data differently simply because the raw data for each participant was extensive. I had

two recorded interviews, a transcript from each interview, a journey plot (both a physical copy plus digital images), and field notes and analytic memos. I had already documented salient themes from each story into a matrix, and these themes helped me craft brief summaries (1/2 page) of each participant's story in relation to those themes. I created a new document I called an *analytic map*; each case had its own analytic map which began with a brief summary of their story and the themes I had identified. I then summarized events and pulled excerpts directly from transcripts and interviews, salient information as they related to the themes I had identified. So rather than multiple data sets to sift through, this new map was an integration of my analysis of each case. Depending on the case, the maps ranged from 12 to 20 pages. In most of the maps I have sections with extensive blocks of text (what I called 'storied excerpts'). These analytic maps guided the construction of the storied accounts.

**Graphic Displays.** As I was engaged in making sense of the in-case narratives I was also trying to make sense of the stories as a whole (cross-case analysis). I compared and contrasted the different stories, looking intentionally for similarities and differences. I built off the themes and ideas that I had documented early on in the participant matrix. As I engaged in this analysis, I began to understand the narratives in a new way, and new themes were bubbling up. As I engaged in this zooming-out process I was feeling confused holding so many themes, ideas, and notions in my head. I continued writing analytic memos, and was building upon themes, but I needed a way to make sense of the themes differently. I decided to follow advice of qualitative researchers Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) and created a graphic display to help me with this phase. I purchased a foam board and set to work arranging my themes and ideas on sticky notes on the board. This allowed me to move ideas around, as I played with the similarities and differences from the stories. I created clusters, rearranged the clusters, re-named the clusters, and started to notice the connections between these clusters. Seeing the themes graphically helped to spur deeper insight, as I began to comprehend the connections and broaden my analysis. This process helped me identify meaning across the varied cases, in a way that honored the intricacies of the individual cases.

This process helped me connect one of my major findings for the study: the importance of personal, social, and societal contexts in an individual's career journey. Until I began clustering on the foam board, I had a fuzzy sense of people's lives being

influenced by various different dynamics, such as socio-economic class, health, gender, location, and family. I had already identified the various dynamics that impacted people's stories, but because each story was so unique, I couldn't see how the various dynamics connected across all the cases. Once I mapped all these dynamics on the foam board, and looked at them with a bird's eye view, I began to realize how these all fit together: I realized that these dynamics were influential factors in each participant's lives, that these dynamics influenced their decision-making processes, and that these dynamics are both always present yet always in flux. This was a major discovery brought about through the process of creating the graphic display.

**Debriefing.** Throughout my analytical process, I was in touch with members of my supervisory committee, who listened to my emerging analysis of the data. This debriefing was invaluable and provided guidance and a sense of grounding as I engaged in this analytic process. At a later stage, one member listened intently to what I described finding throughout all the cases, and he recommended I return to the career literature, and explore particular career theories which drew more heavily on contextual elements of career. I began to explore other career theory frameworks and found my results were in alignment with the Systems Theory Framework of Career Development (McMahon and Patton, 2019) which I had not been attentive to before that point. A systems thinking approach emphasizes viewing individuals "in the context of their lives" (McMahon, Watson, and Patton, 2014, p. 30), by paying close attention to all of the dynamics at play in an individual's "system." In this framework, career is guided by three interconnected systems: the individual system, the social system, and the environmental-societal system; an individual's career is impacted over time by various dynamics across all three systems. This systems framework aligned perfectly with my analysis, and with the dynamics I had already identified within each case. This framework represented what I had found, where people described multiple dynamics at play in their lives, which impacted their work choices. This framework helped to ground the storied accounts I was writing and offered a theoretical backdrop in which to ground the results across all the cases.

**Performative analysis and situated identities.** Up until now, I had focused on thematic analysis of the narratives. I had reviewed the journey plots as well (a form of visual analysis), and as I analyzed these journey plots, I came to realize that the benefit

of the journey plot was not with the graphic itself, since my intention was not to match up dates, details or timelines for consistency with their story. Instead, the *process* of creating and talking through the journey plot exercise was the essential piece. It allowed participants to focus differently, attend to something else while they are telling their story, which appears to open up *the telling* in a less prescriptive way. As I compared the first and second interviews, supported heavily by the journey plot exercise, I realized in several cases I was hearing a different narrative.

One of the issues I identified early on, prior to recruiting for this study, is people's colloquial understandings of the word "career." For many people, "career" is synonymous to *work, job, or occupation*—yet using a career construction framework meant that I needed to expand this understanding beyond "work" and look at people's lives. And while I explained to participants in advance the focus of the study was to look at their career *which included their life*, I couldn't undo the fact that the study was called "Career Narratives of PhD Graduates," that I was recruiting PhD graduates, and that the study was focused on the "careers" of PhD graduates. This led participants to have a particular orientation to the study: to focus on their PhD experience and their work experience post-PhD. When designing the interview protocol, I took care to leave the interview question open enough that someone could begin their story from any starting point. However, many participants began with stories of being in university, around the time of their PhD.

As I listened to their narratives, I became attentive to the "performative" aspects of interviewing. Since storytelling requires an audience, the listener is implicated in the stories; that is, as research focusing on PhD graduates' "career stories," participants were primed to tell me about their experiences as a PhD student, and also about their colloquial understanding of "career." Riessman (2008) cautions that all interviews require some element of performance since there is a listener and a teller. She states, "We are forever composing impressions of ourselves, projecting a definition of who we are, and making claims about ourselves and the world that we test out and negotiate with others" (Riessman, 2008, p. 106). Riessman (2008) clarifies that this does not mean identities are inauthentic, "but only that identities are situated and accomplished with audience in mind" (p. 106). Early on in my analysis I was not attentive to the performative aspects of *the telling*. Yet, as I analyzed the journey plots and listened to the second interview, I began to notice the difference between the first interview and second interview. The

second interview, which primarily focused on the journey plot exercise, was vastly different from the first interview—it brought me along a journey with each participant, a journey of their life over time, and they described the highs and lows of that experience. I began to realize two things:

- Several participants had told me “why” they took part in this research in the first interview—yet I hadn’t initially noticed it. This was the performative aspect of their participation, where they had decided coming into the study what the study was about, and the type of information I wanted to hear. Recognizing this helped me better understand these “performances” they were playing—the situated identities they chose to share with me which framed the narratives they were telling me.
- This performative narrative was disrupted for several participants in the second interview through the use of the journey plot exercise. This exercise supported some participants in moving beyond the boundary of the narrative they intended to tell me, allowing me to view their lives in greater depth.

The following examples from five participants illuminate these points.

**Claudia.** In Claudia’s case, I did not need to “search” for the performative aspect of her participation. Claudia was very explicit from the beginning on why she wanted to take part in this research. Within the first five minutes of our first interview together, Claudia shared with me her history of anorexia and was very candid with me throughout the two interviews regarding her health issues. She told me she wanted to raise awareness of mental health issues, and reduce stigma associated with mental health. The context of mental health was foundational in Claudia’s story, which was the story she wanted me to tell.

**Sofia.** For Sofia, near the end of her first interview I learned her motivation for taking part in the study. A thread running through Sofia’s narrative was her dissatisfaction with her supervisor and her academic department for promoting a culture of an “old boys club,” dominated by gender bias and drinking. Near the end of Sofia’s first interview, I glimpsed her motivation for taking part in the study. She stated:

But what I was really kind of upset about is that there was no kind of exit interview or inquiry into why I didn’t want to be in academia. They had spent so much time with me, and they knew that was the career path I had originally chosen, so for them to just not even ask me why or sit down and have a conversation about it I felt was frustrating.

I surmised that this interview with me became her opportunity to tell her story, even though it was a different audience than she had hoped. Rather than tell me “How, with a PhD in [her discipline], did she end up as a health consultant?”, she told me the story of why she didn’t want to be in academia. She shared with me stories of conflict with her supervisor, of gender discrimination and shaming of her dietary restrictions due to a health condition. She shared all of this with me because she didn’t have the opportunity to share this story with administrators from her department. Understanding Sofia’s situated identity helped me better understand how she wanted to frame her own storied account. This was the story she wanted me to tell.

**Mason.** While analyzing Mason’s case, I began to compare what I heard during the first and second interviews. I realized something significant: Mason, at the 88-minute mark of our first 90-minute interview, concluded his story with the following statement:

“So that’s, I guess, I don’t know quite what more to say. That’s how I got out of academia.”

I had not asked him to tell me “the story of how he got out of academia”—I had asked him to tell me “How, with a PhD in [his discipline] from a top-tiered university in the US, did he end up working in the public sector at X organization?” Upon deeper review of his transcript I realized that he glossed over many of his early experiences as an undergrad and graduate student, and only really went in-depth over a two-year period where he struggled to “get out of academia.” This was the story he wanted me to know—this was the situated identity he wanted to share with me: his struggles to “get out” and find work outside of academia.

But the second interview brought out so many details from Mason’s PhD experience that hadn’t been discussed in the first interview. He described the research work he had been doing, supported by research scholarships. He seemed surprised when he was reminded of these earlier years and how much he enjoyed that work. He told me:

I like that I did that. I mean part of me kind of has to. Otherwise it’s just too traumatic. It was an experience. It was an experience I liked and actually I have some remarkable friends. Very, very interesting, insanely bright people, all over the world. And you know, I got to spend months at a time doing my research. It was really entertaining, you know? And getting paid to do it.

These recollections seemed to alter the rest of the interview, as his goal was no longer to relate “how he got out of academia”, but opened up to a revised, perhaps unintended version of his story. In writing Mason’s storied account, I was attentive to both of these situated identities.

**Holli.** For Holli, a significant feature of her story came to light while creating the journey plot. She had mentioned in the first interview a few times that she had suffered from either anxiety or depression, but she hadn’t elaborated. While creating the journey plot, as she was finishing up her experience as an undergrad, she took a big audible sigh, then admitted there was something she had “forgot” in the last interview that was actually quite significant. Here is an excerpt from that exchange together:

Holli: I was like super depressed when I was applying for grad school.

Sue: Ok.

H: Uhm [pause] And at the time that I made the decision I was [pause] also [pause] super [pause] depressed [speaking very slowly]. Uhm [pause] What is missing here is that [pause] is that [pause] uhm [pause] four months after I started grad school, I was hospitalized for a suicide attempt.

S: Oh.

H: So [laughing], uhm, I’ll just put hospital [on the journey plot].

S: Yes, let’s just add that one.

H: I forgot. I don’t think about that on a regular basis. Cause there is a low point here [on the journey plot].

The theme of depression became a central feature of Holli’s narratives, which only came out from the process of creating the journey plot. Plotting on the affective domain (highs and lows of experience) seemed to require Holli to include this information that she had previously omitted. Riessman (2008) would call this a “secret story,” which highlights the storied identities that people hold; individuals decide who and when to share certain aspects of themselves with others. It is a reminder to me how identities are socially constructed and *storied*, and how important it is to build ethical and trusting relationships together during the interview process.

**Ruth.** Ruth spent much of her time in the first interview focused on her life now (as a mother) and her earlier life as a graduate student. Ruth’s second interview was

very different, as her early university life before moving to BC came into focus. Interestingly, Ruth herself reflected on the process of the journey plot and recognized the “performance” aspect of her story. She sent me an email just after our second interview together which illustrated her intuitive understanding of storied identities. I will share a truncated portion of that email here:

Reflecting back on the mapping process...I think in our first encounter I talked mostly about the ‘PhD and beyond’ phase but the second encounter was structured in a way that made me think more about the first half of my life (pre-PhD). Then as I was thinking about this, I had a couple of thoughts arise:

I (among many others) continue casually seeing the PhD as the crowning achievement of an educational journey, in a kind of linear and uninterrupted fashion. Which is odd, because I of all people know from both personal experience and from research that there are SO MANY disruptions in people's journeys (educational/career/family etc.). But when I create a casual narrative around it, after the fact, I tend to neglect a lot of useful insight arising from life events that occurred before the PhD. Let's call it the shadow cast by the PhD, leaving many other life events in an undeserved darkness.

Let's call this the PhD halo.

... I am sharing this with you because I think the PhD halo definitely tints my recollection of my own journey and the projection of myself into the future...

Ruth's identification of the “PhD halo” summarizes precisely the difficulty within this study—to move participants beyond the “PhD halo” to look at other aspects of their career journeys. I was impressed with her reflection and how she articulated an understanding of how identities and narratives are situated. Yet she admits that the structure of the second interview (based around the journey plot exercise), supported her to think beyond that PhD halo. It was wonderful to hear that positive feedback regarding the journey plot exercise.

The journey plot exercise supported the aim of broadening the focus of people's narratives beyond the PhD, beyond *employment* and colloquial understandings of *career*. It allowed me to hear about careers being constructed over time, rather than just one point in time (the PhD). Many significant elements of people's stories were only brought to light in the second interview. I attribute this to the journey plot exercise; however, I am sure this was also supported by the fact that it was the second interview,

and we were building a research relationship together. An understanding of the performative and situated identities supported my confidence in crafting the storied accounts.

#### **4.4. Reconstructing the narratives into storied accounts**

I chose a storied approach to represent the results of this study. Reconstructing personal narratives into a storied format is a hallmark of a narrative approach. This reconstruction is much more complex than simply representing an interview or an experience in a storied format: personal narratives are co-constructed by both researcher and participant during the interview process; multiple layers of data (interviews, field notes, observation) are constructed over time; and the final storied account often combines the views and perspectives of both participant and researcher (Creswell, 2014).

I began this process of representing each case as a storied account only when I had a deep understanding of each case, where I had identified key themes, turning points, and in some cases, an understanding of the performative aspects and situated identities of participants. There is an ethical tension in representing these stories. As Kim (2016) describes, you try to balance the “told” and the “telling,” with the *told* being what was told to me, the *telling* being how I decide to represent it. All of my previous analytic work guided the reconstruction of the personal narratives into storied accounts.

I followed sociolinguist William Labov’s model as a framework to begin structuring the stories. The Labovian model is widely used in narrative analysis and in the restructuring of narratives into stories (see Kim, 2016). In Labov’s model, each story contains the following features:

- Abstract with a summary of the story and its points
- Orientation for the reader, providing details such as time, place and character
- Complicating action, a skeleton plot or an event that causes a problem
- Evaluation or reflection by the individual on the complicating action
- Result of the event or complicating action

- Coda, which brings the narrator and reader back to the present, and out of the story. (Kim, 2016, p. 201)

I structured the storied accounts using this framework. Because the personal narratives in my study took place over multiple interviews and represented participant's journeys over time, each storied account has several cycles of complicating action and evaluation (rather than just one if these were simple, discrete stories). Each storied account represents a portion of the results of this narrative inquiry. You will read these storied accounts in the following chapter, which are threaded with my own debriefs. For the storied accounts as co-constructed with each participant (without my debriefs), please see the Appendices.

#### **4.4.1. The dance of co-construction**

Once I drafted the storied account, I contacted each participant for the final touchpoint. I hoped they would be willing to provide input on the storied account, either in person, on the phone, or giving feedback through email. It was very important to me that I heard their response to my interpretation of their personal narratives. I was open to revising any aspects of the story they felt did not represent their experience, as I desired to co-construct and negotiate this representation together. I provided participants the draft version a few days before meeting together and asked them to review it in advance. I asked them to consider whether the story resonated for them, whether it felt like their story, and to identify aspects or details where it did not feel like their story.

There is an ethical tension here, as I was the author of these storied accounts. As I met with participants to share my draft of the storied account I had written, I became attuned to the intricacies of this process. All of the analytic work on the narratives until this point had been a solo act—it was only me involved in the analysis. But as I wrote each storied account, and engaged in this feedback process with participants, I became attuned to this tension; I called it the “dance”—a point when I was no longer a soloist engaged in this research, but at this stage I had a partner, and we needed to work together.

While writing the storied accounts I had to remind myself to stop at the first draft. I was tempted to anonymize details myself early on, since I generally knew which details participants would want anonymized. Yet I had to slow down and remind myself that my

first version was a “draft” and to keep the story intact—if I anonymized the details too early, participants might not recognize themselves in the story. It was important to me that participants “see” themselves in the storied account. So, I reminded myself that this first version was for each participant (not for myself or for this dissertation)—and they would weigh in on the key themes I’d identified, the structure of the story, and how they were represented in the block quotes. I had to slow myself down at this stage and remind myself that this first version was not the finished product, and I needed participant’s input to move beyond this draft.

The only detail I consistently anonymized during this first draft was their disciplinary backgrounds (since this was one detail that was consistently being anonymized across all stories). For two participants, their discipline was a key aspect of their career story, so we discussed how to alter this information so they would not be recognized. Anonymizing the story was the last step, as some of those details that I had previously worked hard to understand (place names, family members, etc.) now lost focus, were either stripped out completely, or altered to preserve anonymity. I followed Clandinin (2013), who recommends creating slight fictionalizations if needed to allow participants to control how their story is represented. As we worked together to anonymize the story, the account began to resemble them a little less (in some cases more than others). We also worked at cleaning up the language together, making it less “messy” and easier for a reader to comprehend. I emailed all participants the final draft of their storied account with all of their details still intact, plus the final anonymized version (which appears in this dissertation). I provided them with both copies since the version that was not anonymized likely felt more like their story.

## **4.5. Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness refers to attempts to persuade an audience of the validity of the claims of the research—a sense of trust that the research is solid in its description, presentation, and interpretation. I took care to ensure that my research study is trustworthy, by designing my study in an intentional way, and documenting the choices I made along the way. I primarily draw upon a set of trustworthiness criteria for narrative studies (Riessman, 2008), yet also include some discussion of the criteria and strategies used by Clandinin (2013), a narrative scholar who studies educational experiences. At a broader level, the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) has influenced my conception of

trustworthiness in qualitative studies, and I also discuss their criteria where it makes sense in my study. I draw upon these researchers as I discuss the following four criteria of trustworthiness: relational ethics, correspondence, coherence, and persuasiveness.

#### **4.5.1. Relational Ethics**

For Clandinin (2013) relational ethics are the primary measure of trustworthiness of a narrative study. Relational ethics refers to the “responsibilities negotiated by participants and narrative inquirers at all phases of the inquiry” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 199). Chase (2011) cautions that because narrative stories are much longer, and focus on an individual in-depth, more care must be taken to ensure relational rapport with participants. I understood that there was the potential for participants to feel vulnerable by sharing their life stories with me, so it was of utmost important to me that participants understood the study and their responsibilities in taking part.

I focused intently on building rapport and trust with each participant, starting from our very first interaction over the phone. During recruitment, I made sure to speak to potential participants on the phone and explain in depth the narrative approach I was using. I ensured they understood that taking part in the study would result in an anonymized storied reconstruction from the interviews. I answered any questions they had about the process before they agreed to participate, and I checked in with all participants at the start of both interviews to be sure they understood what participation meant in terms of representation into a storied format.

I focused on creating rapport when interviewing, working to understand each participant’s experience and point of view, which I believe helped them instill trust in telling me sensitive details of their story. I did not interview these participants all at the same time; instead, I engaged with each participant, their transcripts, their story over a short period of time (typically between one and two months). This allowed me to retain the particulars of their story between the first and second interview, which helped to build that rapport. For some participants, I know that the second interview drew out information beyond the “performative” story that participants had expected to share with me. I believe this is evidence of having built rapport and trust with those participants.

All eight participants completed the study. Several participants sent me emails after the first or second interviews—sometimes these were further reflections on the process itself (such as the journey plot exercise), or additional details they felt were important to their story but had been forgotten during the interview. All eight participants engaged in the feedback process of their storied account. Because of this I have confidence that I created an ethical relationship with each participant and that they felt safe in sharing their stories with me. Certainly, they showed commitment to the study by continuing to think about their story beyond the time we spent together in the interviews.

#### **4.5.2. Correspondence**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that credibility is increased when “data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with members of those stake holding groups from whom the data were originally collected” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.314). Riessman (1993) describes this as the criterion of *correspondence* in narrative studies, as it is important to learn what participants think of our interpretations of their stories. My study was designed intentionally so that participants themselves could deepen and clarify my interpretations. The purpose of the second interview was to deepen my understanding of their story, by asking for clarification and even getting feedback on my early interpretations of their experiences.

The purpose of the final touchpoint was for participants to read and negotiate the storied account of their narratives. It was essential that participants had the opportunity to read my interpretation of their personal narratives and give me feedback on what they read. I asked them “Does this sound like your experience?” and we discussed aspects that did not resonate for them. There were times when participants did not wish certain details to be included in the narrative—and we collaboratively discussed whether to remove it completely or alter it in some way. I revised the storied accounts based on their feedback, concerns and requests in order to produce a version that they felt represented their experiences and were satisfied to share with a broader audience. All eight participants engaged in reviewing the storied account and provided feedback on the draft I crafted. Six of the eight participants engaged in depth during this revision process and worked to co-construct it together.

### 4.5.3. Coherence

For Riessman (2008), coherence is a key facet of trustworthiness. In narrative studies, coherence describes the degree to which the interpretations are clear and understandable—do they make sense to a reader, or are there gaps and misunderstandings within the narrative? I needed to fully understand each participant's story: the *how*, *why* and *what*. Coherence required me to be attentive to gaps in each story while reviewing the first interview transcript, in order to ask for clarifications or encourage more talk where gaps existed. I took up the strategy suggested by Riessman (2008): where there were gaps in the story, I wrote questions in the margins which were rephrased into interview questions for the second interview. I analyzed performative aspects of these narratives, attempting to answer the question of “why” these participants took part in the research in the first place. I believe this increases the coherence of the study.

Related to coherence is the issue of how the narratives are represented. Riessman (2008) posits that how you present (write) the final version of your study can influence coherence. Coherence requires an ability to distinguish between the participant's views and the researcher's views, connecting any gaps in a coherent way. I have been honest with the fact that I drafted the storied accounts; I used a third person voice in the storied accounts intentionally, to clarify that these were written by me, from the perspective of the researcher. I have used participant's block quotes to highlight their own words and perspectives, and sometimes included our interview exchanges together to highlight our relationship in building the narratives together. I believe the storied accounts show coherence between my writing and participant's own words, and they support the theoretical claims I make in this dissertation.

### 4.5.4. Persuasiveness

Riessman (2008) describes persuasiveness as the ability to persuade readers that the theoretical claims are reasonable and valid. Persuasiveness includes a belief that the data are genuine, that the analytic interpretations are plausible, and that alternative interpretations have been considered. One of the strategies recommended by Lincoln & Guba (1985) for documenting the inquiry process has been referred to as leaving an *audit trail*, a strategy Riessman (2008) also recommends.

**Audit trail.** I aimed to be as transparent as possible regarding my methodological decisions. I kept my decisions well documented throughout all stages of the study: recruitment, data collection, and analysis by taking up the practice of keeping a research journal. My goal was to keep the study so well documented that another researcher could review my documentation and understand how and why I came to the conclusions I did. My research journal documented the following types of information:

**Reflexive journal entries.** I wrote reflexively throughout the research process, recording my internal perspectives, feelings, and decisions throughout the study.

**Field notes.** The creation of field notes is a common practice within ethnographic research, of detailing events, places, people, and other happenings that the researcher experiences. Because details can quickly become forgotten these notes “help fill in the richness, nuance, and complexity of a landscape, returning the reflecting researcher to a richer, more complex, and puzzling landscape than memory alone is likely to construct” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 83). Although my project is not ethnographic, I kept detailed field notes of the interviews to help me remember circumstances. I also included emails from participants as part of my field notes.

**Analytic memos.** Riessman (2008) recommends keeping track of all decisions and inferences made throughout analysis, to provide a clear and transparent trail to describe how interpretations were produced. But more than simply documenting my analytic process, the practice of writing analytic memos is recommended as a process to lead me to new theoretical insights (Birks & Mills, 2015). I took up this practice extensively, as writing these memos helped me make sense of my ideas as they grew.

In the next chapter, I present the results from this narrative inquiry. That chapter is organized into two sections. First, I describe three patterns of experience in relation to the research question, which asked “How did PhD graduates construct their careers outside of academia?” The second section of the chapter contains the storied accounts which I co-constructed with each participant. These storied accounts show up-close and personal accounts of the complexity of *constructing a career* over time and highlight the contextual factors in participants’ lives which impacted the decisions they made. Because these storied accounts are so detailed, they highlight how the generic neoliberal argument on PhDs and “careers” does not tell the full story.

## Chapter 5. Understanding careers in context

*I completed the journey plot mapping exercise, asking myself the same question I had asked the other eight participants in this study: “How, with a degree in educational leadership, did I end up being an educational developer and working at UBC?” I have worked in a lot of different places and had always thought my work experience was a bit random or disconnected. But my analysis of the journey plot brought me some clarity: my career looks like 4 distinct “chapters” of my life. There is an early cluster of jobs throughout high school and my undergraduate studies; then a substantial period of time I spent moving around, working and living abroad and in different parts of Canada, with various organizations and institutions; then there is a chapter centred around my master’s degree, and my jobs during and just after that master’s degree; then there is a period of turmoil, where my life becomes more complicated as I get married and my children are born. Through this map I can see how my early work life involved travelling, something I was very passionate about for many years. This shifted in my 30’s as I desired to move back to BC, got married and had children. My personal interests and desires played a major role in my early work life, and the context of where I now live and my responsibilities for a stable family life now play a larger role in my decision-making processes regarding work.*

*By reflecting on my journey plot, it became more obvious to me how my seemingly disparate work experiences were all connected and led me to where I am now. I recognized the various factors that were at play in my life at different points in time and how they affected my choices. And my career will continue to unfold based on decisions and choices that I continue to make - my career is probably going to look different ten or twenty years from now. A career is always in motion, shifting and changing; and while you might plan a work future which guides decisions that you make at various points in time, a career manifests over time. There is insight from viewing it retrospectively to see how it all fits together. (Reflective memo, May 5, 2020)*

My initial goal for this study was to learn from PhD graduates about their journeys to work outside of academia. I expected to hear some linear versions of the different types of work experiences they had, including volunteer jobs and professional career development while at the university, to help them transition to work in the professional world. Like building blocks, I expected to be able to view a linear progression of their work experiences fitting together in neat and obvious ways. I had not fully anticipated how much participants would be willing to share with me about their lives, and the ways in which their individual and unique contexts influenced the decisions they made about work along the way.

In this chapter I detail the findings from this narrative inquiry. This chapter is organized into two sections. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, I engaged in analysis in two distinct ways: across all the cases and within each case. Engaging in both types of analysis surfaced complementary insights in relation to my research question, which explored how PhD graduates construct their careers outside of academic settings. In the first section of this chapter, I describe the similarities across all participants' stories, referring to these as *patterns of experience*, since these broad patterns supported a deeper explication of the research question across all cases. The three patterns of experience that I describe are that: 1) schooling is part of a career, 2) a complex web of dynamics influence participants' decisions, and 3) participants exhibit agency as they construct their careers over time. These three patterns of experience have helped me to recognize the ways in which the neoliberal argument regarding PhDs and "careers" is decontextualized and generic. I explore all of this in the first section of this chapter.

In the second section of this chapter, I share my results from engaging in analysis within each case. In order to view the patterns of experience alongside the uniqueness of each participant's experience in context, I share with the reader the storied accounts I co-constructed with each participant. These storied accounts are organized into three sets, based on similar types of transitions experienced in the accounts. In each storied account, I introduce the reader to each participant, share the storied accounts we constructed together, while debriefing aspects of these storied accounts to highlight particular themes. The storied accounts provide the reader examples of the complex process of *constructing a career* by providing an up-close and personal reflective account of each individual's interpretation of their contexts and realities, their decision-making processes, their pain points, and the agency they exhibited along the way. These storied accounts breathe life into this chapter. The storied accounts allow the reader to see for themselves what is missed in the generic neoliberal argument which focuses primarily on employment outcomes of PhD graduates.

## **5.1. Patterns of experience**

In this first section I describe three overarching patterns of experience I heard across all participants' narratives. These are that schooling is part of a career, that a

complex web of dynamics influences participants' decisions, and that participants exhibit agency as they construct their careers. Then I return to an explication of the neoliberal argument on PhDs and "careers," and describe how that argument inadequately represents the reality of PhDs and their career development. In this section I describe these patterns of experience, so that later, as you read the storied accounts, you will be able to view these three patterns of experience as you read those accounts.

### **5.1.1. School is part of career**

For me, hearing participants' narratives strengthened my conception of career as "the constellation of life-roles that an individual plays over his or her lifetime" (Magnusson, 2014), reinforcing the notion that career and life are inseparable. These stories showed me how individuals enact more than one life role at a time; for example, a PhD student is not *only* a student—they are engaged in work ("worker" role), may have children ("caregiving" role), or engaged in service to the community ("community" role). What I heard was consistent with Super's career-life rainbow—and these various roles bring with them a complex web of dynamics which continually impact individuals' decisions regarding work. So, *work* does not exist in isolation from other priorities in one's life; work planning, career development, and decision-making do not exist in a vacuum.

Underlying all of this is a theoretical concept of career that is multi-faceted and can only be viewed over time. Careers are not synonymous with *jobs*, *work*, or *employment*. In this study the role of *student* was highlighted, and this role plays an integral part of one's career. Rather than suggesting that careers begin *after* completing a degree, I have come to understand that schooling is part of one's career. I hope these storied accounts support readers in better understanding how careers unfold over time and the relationship between school and career, rather than seeing school as a precursor to the beginning of an individual's career.

### **5.1.2. A complex web of dynamics influences participants' decisions**

Participants' narratives highlighted the uniqueness of each participants' life. Through extended periods of talk, I heard not only the types of work they engaged in, but all the context in their lives, including the various ways that their motivations changed as

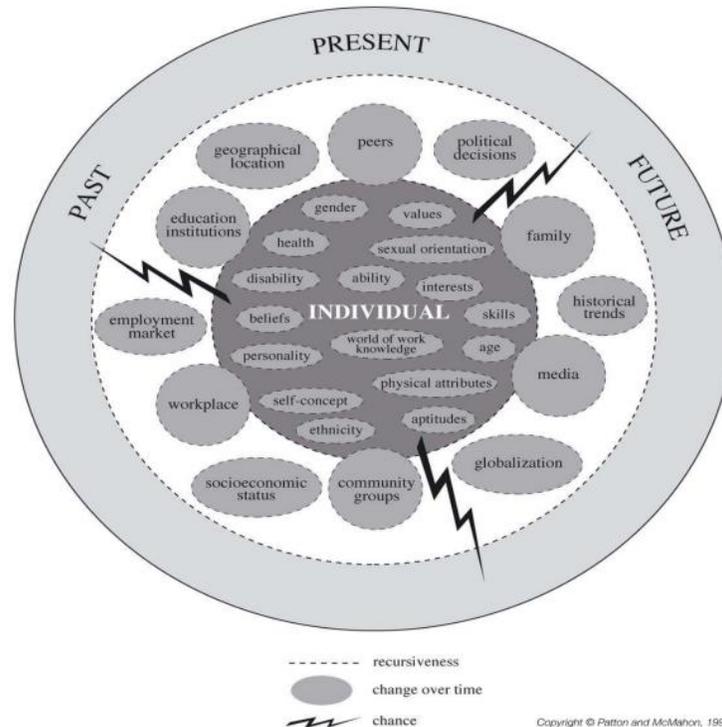
their lives change. Rather than a linear path to finding satisfying employment, I found a mix of dynamics at play that influenced people's lives and influenced the choices they made along the way.

I began to notice different types of dynamics: some that were personal, such as health, self-efficacy or personal beliefs; others that were situational, such as their socio-economic status or geographic locations; and others relating to their social lives, such as family, children and partners. I noticed how these participant's motivations and desires shifted and changed—they were not static as they described their experiences over time. This led me to understand how their lives were in motion as the various situational, social, and personal dynamics were constantly at play and influencing their decisions.

A constructivist notion of careers (Savikas, 2012) identifies *contextual influences* as highly important factors in one's career choices. Pryor and Bright (2011) find that *influencers* play a major role in one's career choices. These influences may include health, family life and caregiving, location, and ability/desire to travel, spousal and other family influencers. Actually, all of the social constructivist career theorists I draw upon take up the notion of contextual influencers as a key determinant of one's career development over time. However, I have decided to use the *systems theory framework of career development* (McMahon and Patton, 2019), as a lens to explain this aspect of my results. I appreciate Patton and McMahon's graphical representation of this theory (see Figure 5.1 below), and their explication of how the three inter-related systems intersect in complex ways.

In the systems theory framework of career development (Patton and McMahon, 1999), career development is seen as “a dynamic interplay between individuals and their systems of influence through which they construct their identities” (p. 238). There are three interconnected systems: the individual system, the social system, and the environmental-societal system. Each of these systems contain various dynamics, described as *content influences*. This theory also identifies *process influences* (chance, change, and recursiveness) and the ways in which these dynamics may influence the rest of the system. This is consistent with what I found: I heard how participants *changed over time* (for example, how their motivations changed over time), how *chance* affected their lives (for example, when a work opportunity presented itself, seemingly by chance), and how particular dynamics influenced other dynamics in unique ways (*recursiveness*).

In Figure 5.1 you will see the various content influences labelled in circles or ovals (such as gender, health, workplace, peers, etc.) and the process influences represented within the systems.



**Figure 5.1. The Systems Theory Framework of Career Development**  
McMahon and Patton, 2019, p. 239 (copyright 1999)

This graphic represents the various dynamics I located in participants' narratives. While McMahon and Patton (2019) use the term *content influences*, I will simply refer to these as *dynamics* or *influences* throughout this dissertation. Each participant's narratives were complex with various dynamics at play intersecting and impacting their decisions and their lives in unique and unpredictable ways, making it almost impossible to tease apart the various dynamics at play in their narratives. A complex and unique mix of dynamics influenced each individual's construction of career and their decision-making processes. This systems theory framework of career development is a helpful lens; it provides a way to zoom in and notice the various dynamics on different levels (the individual, the social and the environmental-societal). It is a useful lens to view the contextual details that are at work in complex ways. I appreciate the organization of this framework, since it is a theoretical representation of the influences I found in my study. My aim is to use this well-developed theory to explain this one aspect of my results

(rather than situate all of my results within this one theory), since this framework does not explain the complex decision-making process that participants engaged in as they constructed their careers.

### **5.1.3. Participants exhibit agency as they construct their careers**

While the systems theory framework of career development identifies various dynamics and influences on people's work decisions, it does not account for the agentic ways that individuals engaged in making meaning about their lives and about work. As I alluded to in my opening vignette, when I began this study, I had a particular orientation to the term career "construction." I expected to hear stories of how people built their working lives over time, how they built a "career." And I did hear this, but what I had not anticipated was the myriad of work-related decisions participants reported making as they weighed various dynamics and thought about how various work possibilities would affect their lives. These were decisions regarding their education, decisions regarding work opportunities, and decisions which considered all of those contextual dynamics that situated their lives. I noticed how deeply engaged individuals were in defining what they wanted for their future, and how they made meaning around what was important to them. For me, the phrase *constructing a career* highlights this active decision-making process that an individual engages in as they assess work opportunities that fit their lives. Now, if I were to rephrase my research question I might ask "what is the meaning-making process that PhD graduates go through when constructing their careers?"

I now more fully understand Savikas' (2005) definition of *career*. Savikas (2005) wrote:

From a constructionist viewpoint, career, or more precisely subjective career, denotes a moving perspective that imposes personal meaning on past memories, present experiences, and future aspirations by weaving them into a pattern that portrays a life theme. Thus, the subjective career that guides, regulates, and sustains vocational behavior emerges from an active process of making meaning, not discovering pre-existing facts. (p.43)

The constructivist approach highlights the agentic nature of individuals to construct their careers to fit their lives— as Savikas' writes, "careers do not unfold; they are constructed" (Savikas, 2002, p. 154). What I heard was consistent with Savikas' definition, and participants' narratives spoke to the ways in which they made meaning

about past experiences and realities, the choices they made and why. In many cases I heard participants describe aspects of their identity: who they are, what was important to them, and who they want to be. All of this speaks to the active process they experienced: their career did not just “unfold,” they were active participants, making choices and decisions along the way that made sense for them. These decisions and meaning-making process are an integral part of *constructing a career*: careers do not just *happen*; people exert agency on the direction of their career. This active decision-making process speaks to the agentic ways that participants engaged in career planning.

Pryor and Bright (2011) acknowledge that individuals are not free to construct their careers as they choose. They acknowledge the myriad of forces at play, such as the labour market or recent trends towards contract work, which impacts people’s working lives and impacts the degree of agency they can exhibit. I found this in my participant’s narratives, too. But participants were not passively waiting for their work lives to unfold for them; they engaged actively and made decisions regarding work while taking the personal, social, and societal influences that affected their lives into account.

#### **5.1.4. The neoliberal argument does not tell the full story**

By viewing the construction of career over time, and with a recognition of context and agency, the storied accounts tell us a different story than what is circulated from the policy stakeholders embedded in the neoliberal discourse on PhDs and “careers.” First, I explore the assumptions embedded within the neoliberal argument that I introduced in Chapter 2. In particular, I explore the related assumptions that an academic “career” has traditionally been the career pathway of PhD graduates, that all PhD students want academic jobs, and that the goal of a PhD is employment within the academy (and more specifically, tenure-track jobs). In addition, the policy stakeholders who are wedded to this neoliberal discourse often argue that PhDs suffer difficult transitions to work outside of academic contexts, and that PhDs lack skills and knowledge to help them transition to professional workplaces. What I heard from the participants in this study tells a different story: the storied accounts go deep into exploring complex motivations and decision-making regarding work. The results from this study disrupt many of the assumptions of the neoliberal argument.

Next, I briefly touch on these assumptions in relation to what I learned from the participants who took part in this study, before introducing the storied accounts where these insights will become more obvious.

### ***Not all PhDs want academic work***

Typically, proponents of the neoliberal argument report that all PhDs want academic work. They claim that PhDs only work outside of academia as a “poor second choice” or as a “Plan B.” In addition, there is an insistence that the sole influencer of a PhD student’s choice to pursue work outside of academia is the labour market—in this case the low availability of permanent academic jobs (Cassuto, 2015; Nyquist & Woodford, 2000; Rogers, 2015). In my study, while most participants made mention to varying degrees of the labour market shortage for permanent academic work, the labour market alone did not account for the complexity of the choices they made. It may be one of the factors that affected people’s decisions, but it was not the sole determinant for any of these participants. Instead, as I analyzed each participants’ personal narratives, I became acutely aware of the complex web of dynamics that played out uniquely in their lives. Each individual highlights an interplay of dynamics, influences and forces that exist in their worlds; recognizing these various dynamics helped me to better understand each individual’s motivations and actions.

From what I heard from the eight participants engaged in this research, not all PhDs want academic work. Several of these participants entertained notions of becoming professors at various points in their studies; however, in most cases, their motivations changed along the way as their lives changed. Of the eight participants, half of them sought out work opportunities in academia post-graduation from their PhD studies. Yet this number does not tell the whole story: even those four participants who engaged in academic work post-graduation spoke of conflicting desires or a lack of “fit” with their lives. In some cases, their work search was half-hearted, meeting an expectation that others had for them. Three participants admitted they never intended to work in academia. And in all cases, participants vocalized ways in which academic work just did not fit their life. For example, Holli, one of the participants who completed a postdoctoral fellowship post-PhD, told me that academia “looked like a terrible job and not the life I wanted.” As you read the storied accounts, you will read what these

individuals had to say about academic work, including in some cases, their shifting perspectives about academic work.

### ***Motivations to complete a PhD are not solely based on employment outcomes***

A tenet of the neoliberal discourse is that the goal of a PhD is related to employability and work-related skills. The underlying sentiment is that PhD students are motivated to complete PhDs by guarantees of employment and “career readiness.” The natural extension of this argument is that it is considered a “system failure” if you have more PhD graduates than tenure-track openings; and the consequence of these sentiments is that the academy, the program, the supervisors, and the students themselves are perceived as “failing” if guaranteed employment is not met immediately after graduation. Yet these participants tell a very different story about motivations to complete their PhDs. For six of the eight participants, they continued on their educational journeys from bachelor’s to PhD, with very few interruptions in between. Their storied accounts speak of an educational journey, describing their lives as a student, what they enjoyed within the university environment, and how deeply engaged they became in their research topics. Considerations of work and career were not necessarily driving their desires to complete the PhD. In contrast, two other participants returned to graduate studies after significant periods in the world of work; they describe their motivations to return to school as a need for a “career change.” And while they were motivated by employment outcomes of having a PhD, they were not necessarily motivated to work in academic contexts. In the storied accounts, you will read about different motivations for completing the PhD, and motivations that shifted and changed over time for various reasons.

### ***PhD graduates’ experiences of transitions vary***

The neoliberal argument contends that PhD graduates (especially those from social science and humanities disciplines) suffer difficult transitions to work outside of academia. Evidence for this is largely anecdotal as I discussed in Chapter 3, since the policy-makers do not draw upon a theoretical conception of transitions or define what makes a transition “more difficult.” Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995) defined a transition as “any event...that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles” (p. 27). And since the experience of a transition is a subjective experience, it

is difficult to quantify some transitions as “more difficult” than others. How participants experienced this transition to work outside of academia was based on their context: the various personal, social, and societal factors that make up their lives. This speaks to the subjective nature of transitions.

With that definition in mind, I learned that all eight of the participants in this study experienced transitions at various points in time. The transition from school to work (i.e., completion of the PhD) is not the only transition I heard about. For several participants, they described settling into new routines of work long after their PhD was over as they changed jobs, or transitioned into new roles of motherhood, or of relocating geographically. I heard about transitions beyond simply the context of transitioning from school to work. The experience of leaving the PhD is only one of many career-related transitions they encountered in their lives; therefore, transitions are not only felt in relation to schooling but at multiple junctures in one’s life. Transitions are ongoing and don’t only exist at expected points (such as graduation from PhD). The storied accounts can be viewed as stories of transition: since careers unfold over time and our lives are always in motion, I view transitions as a process; and how these transitions are felt is a subjective experience influenced by an individual’s context (including personal, social and societal dynamics).

### ***PhD graduates find satisfying work outside of academic contexts***

Proponents of the neoliberal argument often contend that because PhD graduates suffer difficult transitions, they are not prepared or “work-ready” for jobs outside of academic contexts. There has been a variety of critiques that PhDs are unskilled, resulting in attempts to “professionalize” PhDs through various professional development programs. However, all of the eight participants who engaged in this narrative inquiry found satisfying work outside of academic contexts. Three of the individuals work in the public sector, while five of them are self-employed. They all described the desire for independence in their work, and none of these PhD graduates regretted completing a PhD. Their storied accounts provide contextual details as to how they constructed their careers over time and how they ended up working where they are (at the point in time when I spoke with them).

These three patterns of experience highlight the importance of viewing careers in context. To support this deeper understanding of context and move away from generic,

decontextualized discourses, I have included the storied accounts as co-constructed with participants. These storied accounts allow the reader to *see* these patterns of experience in participants' lives, and to view the ways in which the neoliberal argument does not adequately capture their experience. As you read the storied accounts, please keep these patterns of experience at the forefront, and try to locate them as you read.

I turn now to introduce the next section of this chapter, the storied accounts.

## **5.2. Storied accounts**

Each of the eight individuals who participated in this narrative inquiry shared their very personal narratives with me. These storied accounts are a result of this time spent together; each participant shared intimate details with me as they narrated their career stories. We met together to discuss the storied accounts I wrote and worked together at revising them for accuracy and framing. These accounts increase the trustworthiness of the study, since participants were involved in revising these published versions. It would have been impossible to present the entirety of each participant's personal narratives in this dissertation, so the storied accounts synthesize each participant's career journey over time in a more concise format.

Each of the storied accounts shows the construction of careers over time, and each highlight how lives are in motion, viewing careers in context. Each storied account traces the career path of an individual over time, and each participant decided where their story begins; for some they went back in time only a few years, for others they brought me back to their childhood of 20 years ago. In many cases, these storied accounts are deeply personal; they highlight the feelings, values and beliefs that make up their lives as they adjusted to new routines and realities. These stories provide participants' own interpretation of their motivations, actions, and realities.

The storied accounts reveal a more nuanced explication of the realities of PhD students and PhD graduates' lives, in relation to the neoliberal argument on PhDs and "careers." These accounts highlight the interplay and interconnectedness between personal, social, and societal dynamics. While some of the dynamics may be similar across some participants, the ways they intersect and influence one another is unique. Through listening to participant's narratives, I grew attentive to these influences as they

relate to decision-making about work. Explaining people's work decisions in relation to only one dynamic is an overly simplistic explanation, and one that does not reflect the reality of these individual's lives. In addition, explaining the construction of career as solely influenced by these dynamics is also not the whole story; the sum is greater than the parts, and representing the results in these storied accounts is meant to highlight this.

This narrative representation of the career journeys of these eight participants is important because it allows us to view the construction of career over time. It has become obvious to me now that understanding the process is more important than knowing the outcome: the process of constructing their career is complex, and the outcome of where they work at the time of writing these storied accounts may have already changed since I interacted with them. These stories support the notion that careers are socially constructed over time, based on one's experiences and context. You will read about PhD graduates with a wide range of skills, interests, competencies, and knowledge. These stories reflect back a complexity that is absent within the neoliberal argument on career-readiness of PhD students. My goal with including the storied accounts in this dissertation is for you (the reader) to also recognize the complexity of "constructing a career," be able to view careers in context, and recognize the inadequacy of the neoliberal argument.

### **5.2.1. Organization of the storied accounts**

I organized the storied accounts into three sets of stories. Although each story is unique, I found there were some similarities in terms of "types" of stories participants told me. And individuals shared certain types of stories with me, for particular reasons. This speaks to the performative nature of narrative work as I described in Chapter 4: each individual who took part in this study wanted to tell me a particular story. I described this in Chapter 4 as the performative aspects of storytelling: while I asked each of them "how did you, as a PhD in X (discipline) end up as a (job title or role) at X (workplace)" they told me different types of stories. For example, Mason wanted to tell me the story of how he "got out" of academia. I present each participant and their storied account according to the type of story they told me, and similarities in experiences they focused on.

The first set of storied accounts includes individuals who primarily described their experiences at the university—leading up to the PhD and while in the PhD program—and wanted me to understand their transition from academia into their work environments outside of academia. I call these “Stories of transitions from the PhD.” Each of these three participants shared intimate details of their lives, how they felt during their PhD and described shifts in self-concept (identity) in some way.

The second set of storied accounts includes individuals who told me about their experiences at the university and their working lives after the PhD program was completed. These individuals did not focus on describing a transition to the workplace after completing their PhDs, but their personal narratives included other transitions that took place in their lives. These individuals described the experience where “work” and “career” challenges continued long after their PhD programs were completed. I call these “Stories of transitions beyond the PhD”

In the last set of storied accounts, two individuals focused on their work worlds prior to beginning the PhD, and how they returned to school after a significant period in the workforce. This set of stories differs from the others since the other six stories present individuals who followed a linear path from undergraduate to graduate degrees, culminating in the PhD with very little breaks in between. I call these “Stories of transitions back to school and beyond.”

As a reminder, these storied accounts were co-constructed with participants. Threaded through the storied accounts you will notice my own debriefs, a kind of “pause” from the storied account, where you will hear my voice drawing your attention to something that I felt deserves further explication. I have used a set of asterisks (\*\*\*) to denote a break from the storied account to my debrief; another set of asterisks (\*\*\*) will bring you back to the storied account as co-constructed with participants.

Now, let’s turn to the first set of storied accounts.

### **5.2.2. Stories of transitions from the PhD**

This first set of storied accounts focuses on three individuals who chose to share their experiences as a PhD student and the transition from their PhD to work outside of the academy. All three of these individuals describe an atmosphere where they were

successful in their studies and received funding packages and grants throughout their graduate studies. They describe a great deal of uncertainty in their work futures, as they describe an expectation that they will continue into academic work after their PhD. These are also stories of change—each of these three individuals underwent shifts and changes to their identities as they navigated the transition from an academic environment to the workplace. I organized these three stories together not only because they focus on the transition from the PhD, but because of the way these individuals spoke of that transition. Each of them shared with me features of their identity, of shifting beliefs, values, self-concept, and perception of aptitudes—which I believe impacted how they experienced the transition of working outside of academia.

### ***A Story about shifting beliefs and values***

I met with Sofia 3 years after she completed her doctorate and her experiences as a PhD student were still very fresh in her mind. Her personal narrative began in her bachelor's degree and spans 14 years. I identified a complex web of personal and social dynamics in Sofia's personal narratives which led to a shift in her beliefs and values about academic work. I analyzed dynamics of health, gender, her supervisor and peers, and the university where she studied, which all intersected in complex ways. Although I am teasing apart these dynamics in order to label them, in reality these dynamics do not work in isolation, they influence one another and interact recursively. All of these relate to one another in complex ways, yet what I found fascinating was how these dynamics influenced Sofia's own system of beliefs, values, and interests. In Sofia's narratives I viewed a shifting system of beliefs and values as being a central feature of change as she described to me her thoughts on whether to pursue academic work or shift gears. Sofia's personal narratives focused on her health condition and feeling a lack of belonging within her PhD program. In particular, she shared with me stories of feeling socially isolated and discriminated against because of her health condition, which led to this shifting set of beliefs about academia and her discipline.

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Sofia grew up in a middle-class family with working parents and a sister. She said there was never a question of whether she would go to university after high school—in her own words, it was “predestined.” She began her bachelor's degree in the Sciences but in the second semester of Year 2 she switched to Arts. She completed with

Honors, with a focus on gender in human history. She described what she enjoyed about university and what attracted her to academic work early on:

In my bachelor's I started thinking about academia as a career. In my discipline there aren't many career options outside of academia. And as an undergrad especially I loved it. I just loved it. I envisioned spending my life in the research libraries; I didn't envision academia being stressful, and having to work like 80 hours a week [because later] that's what I saw professors doing and that's not what I wanted... But at first, I didn't see any of that stuff. I just saw the option as going the whole route to professor or not at all. So, I decided early on I would go the whole route.

She received SSHRC funding for her master's degree and chose the university based on the ability of the supervisor to offer her field work experience, which she felt was essential for her career. She was funded throughout her master's and PhD and took up work in the field to supplement her income throughout this time.

Yet throughout all her years at the University, Sofia's health was an issue. At the age of 19, during the first year of her university studies, Sofia was diagnosed with a health condition. This disease impacted her life immeasurably as she had to alter her eating habits, her lifestyle, and take medication to manage the pain. She described to me in detail the year she was diagnosed with the condition and how traumatizing and disruptive this was during her first year at university—after almost a year she was so debilitated she could hardly function. Her health condition influenced her experiences as a grad student, as she needed to keep a strict diet to keep the pain at bay. She did not enjoy the social activities with her supervisor and others from the department—what she describes as an “old boys club”—where it was typical for her supervisor and other professors to hang out in the pub with students. Sofia rarely drank alcohol and pub food was not part of her health regimen—she felt harassed and pressured to partake in these activities but because of her healthy eating regime she just did not fit in and was routinely ostracized. She made many sacrifices to her health during her studies, trying to fit into this “old boys club,” especially during research trips when she was unable to stick to her strict regime. Sofia said:

While I was on research trips, it was very beer and fried food oriented. And it almost felt at the end like you needed to drink to be part of the club. And so, I felt alienated when I couldn't participate, I would be made fun of, and I wouldn't be part of the conversations if people went out for drinks.

Sofia described several of her experiences in the field, many of them traumatic. These were one to three-month research trips. Many of these were funded through grants or a salary was provided to her. During these trips she had a difficult time maintaining her lifestyle guidelines and would need to increase her medication. Her stories highlighted the behaviour of her supervisor while in the field, who made the experiences more stressful, which had direct impacts on her health. Sofia describes these field experiences:

So, it would kind of get worse when I was really stressed. So, research trips would be the most stressful time, so I'd have to increase my meds for that. I'd get sick really, really easily and caught infections a lot more quickly. Being on medication, I just pick up everything. So, I got sick a lot. Never really felt great when I was stressed. But for the time when I was on research trips, I was just eating what was available and just never feeling that great. And also, there was the drinking culture and the really stressful environment with our supervisor that a lot of us just drank to fit in and to not deal with the trauma we were experiencing.

She realized the department itself was very male-dominated, and she shared with me several examples of how the department discriminated against women, from its hiring practices (there hadn't been a female hire in more than 25 years) to inappropriate comments made by her supervisor.

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Sofia confided in me how the gender discrimination at first seemed to radiate from her supervisor, who had significant social influence within the department. She spoke at length about poor hiring practices and a lack of female representation within the discipline itself. Over time she began to perceive the actions of the department and the discipline itself as biased against women.

I view health and gender as the two primary personal dynamics that influenced other aspects of Sofia's narratives, and find it interesting how these dynamics intersect with her social and societal spheres. For example, Sofia's health condition restricts her ability to socialize in a traditional way with her supervisor and an inner circle of peers and professors; this leads to a perception of gender discrimination (a societal dynamic). This begins to color the way she views her academic institution and her growing perception that her academic discipline is traditional, male-dominated, and discriminatory against women. Much of this is bound up in beliefs—beliefs about her

supervisor and beliefs about her institution—showing the complex ways that beliefs are influenced by personal, social and societal systems (and vice versa); this speaks to “recursiveness:” the way that the system influences itself over time.

While Sofia’s health condition is an individual influence (personal dynamic), you can view the influence of her health condition on other aspects of her life; in particular feeling discriminated and ostracized by her supervisor at that particular institution. Sofia told me several personal stories which highlighted her tumultuous relationship with her supervisor and led her to feel like an outsider. When I asked Sofia if she ever sought support through university channels, such as the ombudsperson, she told me, “You can’t really say anything because if I did want to complain, my supervisor was well established and there was no one I felt safe to talk to.” Her feelings of social isolation were not confined to her beliefs that she did not belong with her supervisor, or in her department, but ultimately led her to re-examine the values in the academic discipline itself. Although Sofia’s feelings of discrimination might be isolated incidents at this one university, with this one supervisor, she perceives the discipline itself to be dominated by men.

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I asked her at one point whether she ever felt like changing supervisors or quitting the program. Here is our conversation:

Sofia: I feel like every time I got really sick, I would say to myself ‘I’m not going to put myself through this again’. But then the money was there, and the opportunity was just easy to stick with it.

Sue: Money in terms of you had the SSHRC?

Sofia: Yeah. And enough [money] is important to not have to work outside of academia for my PhD.

Sue: Yeah. Did it ever cross your mind, ‘maybe I should just quit?’

Sofia: It did but I figured I spent so much SSHRC money doing this work, I felt like I should finish it. I had seen lots of students change their supervisors over time, and then I saw how much extra work they had to do to work in a different field. And I knew that’s just going to be more difficult and I could deal with it for another couple of years.

So, she stuck with the same supervisor and continued feeling isolated, unsupported and discriminated. She started considering what her next steps would be after the PhD. She told me:

But in my last year of study, I was going to apply to a postdoc, and I couldn't make myself do it, because I reflected on where my career path was going to go, what my life would look like, how I felt in academia at the time. Nothing felt very positive or reassuring. So, I decided to explore what else was possible, and I just started to sign up for every free program available at the University.

Academic work no longer appealed to Sofia: in addition to feeling isolated in the department, she saw other professors with little work life balance, who were tied to their work and continually stressed out. She was also considering starting a family and couldn't conceive of moving around every few years on the postdoc track, chasing contracts and working up the tenure-track ladder. Sofia's negative experiences within the department and with her supervisor were the decisive nail in the coffin: she didn't perceive the discrimination she experienced as belonging solely to this one department at this one University, but part of the discipline itself, which was male-dominated and misogynistic. She couldn't conceive of living a life where she continually felt discriminated against and isolated.

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### *Shifting perception of academic work*

Sofia shared with me how she was actively seeking new career ideas by participating in as much career and professional development offered on campus as her schedule would permit. She could not bring herself to apply for the postdoctoral fellowship near the end of her degree, because she no longer wanted to be in academia.

I believe Sofia's feelings of isolation and discrimination ultimately led her to feel a lack of belonging in academia, and partly responsible for her lack of interest and motivation in persisting in her academic endeavors. But these feelings did not exist in isolation, and Sofia described other dynamics that were responsible for her shifting perception of academic work. Over the two interviews, I learned how Sofia's interests in working in academia changed over time. She told me that, as an undergraduate, she thought it "sounds cool to be a professor." She also thought there were limited career

options for students who pursued graduate studies in her discipline, with professorships being the common goal. But later, in her graduate work, she began to notice aspects of the work that didn't appeal to her:

I started to see that maybe professors weren't that happy. Maybe they were really stressed and don't have a good work life balance, and the ones that try to don't get very far in their career.

In her narratives in the first interview, Sofia described a multitude of reasons why academia no longer appealed to her. In our second interview together, Sofia described how all these reasons fit together:

The prospect of making money in academia is not very concrete. The thought of spending my thirties trying to get a job and get tenure somewhere seemed impossible, especially when I started thinking about wanting to have kids. I would have to be moving all around the world to do a postdoc, and then hopefully get a tenure-track somewhere and then spend my thirties working 80 hours a week. Plus, when I saw the gender division and how unequal the job market was for women, it just seemed like obstacle after obstacle and didn't seem realistic.

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Sofia no longer felt she belonged in academia and her academic dreams lost their lustre.

Sofia explored other work options. A turning point for Sofia was when she visited a doctor who specialized in her condition, who helped her realize she could manage her health condition with lifestyle adjustments, freeing her from the medication which gave her so many ill side-effects. This ignited her passion for the healthcare field, and she decided she wanted to help others with similar conditions.

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### *Turning Point and shifting interests*

Through Sofia's narratives I noticed a *change over time*: Sofia's interests shifted, and she no longer wanted to be a professor. And this can be attributed to not only Sofia's life situation changing (for example her health condition), but also her experiences at the university, influencing her beliefs and values about work in academia (for example, academic work offering poor work-life balance; academic work in her

discipline being discriminatory towards women). So, it is not so simple as noticing Sofia's life having changed, but the ways in which she viewed the world also changed.

I believe this change in beliefs and values is fundamental to understanding Sofia's shift in career direction. Sofia described how she had lost interest in academic work, and her interests had shifted to understanding healthy lifestyle choices which could increase her quality of life. Sofia, while working on her journey plot, identified meeting the naturopathic doctor as a *turning point* in her career. She described this as a critical point when she realized she wanted to help others successfully manage their health condition through diet alone as she had. But what I find interesting is how this identification of a turning point can only happen reflexively in relation to what happens next. For example, Sofia described meeting the doctor, and how it led her to adjust her own diet, and how over time this led her to reduce her dependence on medication. But this change in her health condition did not happen overnight, it took time. And her decision to help others manage their conditions through diet alone also developed over time. So, the meeting of the doctor was not a turning point in and of itself—a turning point is identified in relation to what follows, and how things unfold. Only in retrospect was Sofia able to identify meeting that doctor as being instrumental in “shifting the course of her life”—which led her to pursue her new passion in healthcare. Viewing change over time, her shifting beliefs and interests, understanding Sofia's life in context is vital to understanding the decisions she made.

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Sofia now works in the health field with her own consulting business, teaches courses on health at private institutions, and is invited to give speaking engagements around the province. Sofia is satisfied with her work: she is relieved that she changed directions to work in an area she is passionate about. She doesn't regret completing the PhD, since it helped build some of the skills essential to her new endeavor, such as project management, teaching, and her ability to communicate to a lay audience. She feels a deep sense of belonging in her work that she did not feel while pursuing her graduate studies.

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## ***A Story about identity***

When I first met with Mason, he had completed his PhD 7 years earlier. His narratives focused on three points in time: his life leading up to the PhD, the PhD experience itself, and his life after the PhD. In Mason's narratives, I became attentive to his socio-economic status as a societal dynamic and his relationship with his partner as a significant social dynamic that influenced his choices in complex ways. In Mason's personal narratives, he identified many environmental factors which influenced his journey: the dynamic of where he was living (in the US), his educational institution (being a top-tier research institution), the employment market (low availability of academic research work), and his socio-economic status (being from a working-class background). All of these were influenced by social dynamics (his family and colleagues) and personal dynamics such as his self-concept, aptitudes for school and work, and beliefs about the world of work.

While the environmental factors lend a backdrop to Mason's story, Mason shared with me intimate details that give me insight into who he is as a person. I identified a central feature of Mason's personal narratives is him grappling with his own shifting identity, and the ways in which school and work are central to his identity. In his narratives, I heard about ongoing conflicts between his self-concept, his perception of his aptitudes, and his beliefs and values, particularly in relation to school and work. In this storied account, I share how I interpreted Mason's shifting perception of academic work, and how he conveyed his shifting identities to me.

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Mason grew up in a working-class family and after high school put most of his energies into playing music. He had a false start at college after high school as he preferred putting his energies into his band. After a while he got sick of the band lifestyle and decided to enroll in night school. He started with one course a term, then two, then three, feeling more confident in his abilities as a student as time went on. After a few years he had enough credits to transfer to university to complete a Bachelor of Arts.

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*Attentive to his own identity*

From our first few minutes together in our first interview, Mason shared aspects of his identity with me: that he is from a working-class family and the first in his family to complete a university program. It seemed important to Mason that I understand who he is and where he comes from.

Mason described how he changed the course of his life twice, and each time he used the term “re-invention” to describe the changes he had gone through. I believe he was describing changes to his own self-concept, his identity, when he used the term “re-invention.” He began by sharing with me his life before attending university, where he was part of a band, living a self-indulgent lifestyle. He told me about the lifestyle changes he made: quitting the band, slowly taking on college courses, and generally turning his life around. When he got accepted into university to finish his bachelor’s degree, he told me “I had re-invented myself.” He told me, “school saved me” and was so thankful to have his life back on track.

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Mason loved being at university: he excelled in his courses and received some financial awards and recognition. He felt relieved to have “re-invented” himself, to save himself from the path of the struggling musician. He met a core group of friends and enjoyed having intellectual conversations with his peers and his professors. He felt inspired to stay at the university and was conflicted when he was about to complete his degree:

I was about to graduate with a BA and I panicked. I was like ‘oh my god this is over!’ I had spent all this time cultivating this identity and I don’t know what to do now—I’ve been building a road here and there’s a step here and I don’t know what it is, I don’t know where it goes. And then I realized I don’t know how the world works. I had been out of the job market for a few years and nobody really gave me any insight of how the world works, I was just trying to figure it out. I didn’t know what to do so I went back into school. I’m not ready—so I enrolled for Honors and just kept going.

Mason began to feel a strong sense of belonging within this scholarly environment and talked at length about cultivating an academic identity. He told me:

I would sit there with my professors and we’d have drinks and talk. And that was the other thing, we were starting to be treated like peers, you know? Because we weren’t the riff raff, we were the honors students, we were to be taken seriously.

His honors supervisor encouraged him to continue on to graduate work, and even suggested he apply to some of the top-tier universities in the United States where he might get a full scholarship. Mason applied to four schools and was shocked when he was offered full funding at three of them. He chose one of the most prestigious universities in the US, packed up, and found himself in a whole new world.

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### *Sense of belonging in academia*

Mason described to me how he began to feel a sense of belonging at university. He talked at length about this new person he was becoming: someone who excelled in his studies, received fellowships and funding to pay for tuition, enjoyed intellectual conversations with his peers and instructors, and generally enjoyed the academic lifestyle. More than any other participant in this study, Mason explicitly described how he cultivated an academic identity through his years at the university. He was eager to continue into graduate work, and receiving a full scholarship reinforced to Mason that he had the aptitude to do graduate work.

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Mason took some time to settle into this new environment, where he didn't quite fit in:

I was the first in my family to go to advanced education—I come from a working-class family—so there was this arc I was on [to do graduate studies], and then I get there and I was like 'I do not live in this world.' These people, their parents were professors, they were rich kids. I mean I kid you not. It was different.

Mason had a very difficult time in his first year. The workload was very intense and there were no grades, which was stressful because he never knew how well he was doing in the program. He also had a complicated relationship with his supervisor, who had different interests and perspectives from Mason. Mason panicked as he worked on his first research project—he had serious doubts he would succeed. Plus, he missed his girlfriend who was back in Canada; at times he just wanted to quit and go back home. We shared this exchange as he described that first year:

Mason: I couldn't invest in this life. It started to feel foreign. After all this time there was an alien-ness to this culture and everything.

Sue: An alien-ness to the academic life?

M: Yes, something felt weird. And I didn't know what it was. And I started to wonder if I deluded myself—like what I was actually doing is something more immediate, self-gratifying...the grades, the awards, the people blowing smoke. It was something like, now I'm on the marathon.

S: So, at this point, early on, you were already thinking those types of things?

M: Yah, I was starting to doubt a little bit. I started to realize I am going to now be a lone wolf in the woods. The life of the academic, who is off there by his or herself, and sort of convenes with the pack once a year at a conference. But other than that, you're completely isolated.

S: This sounds to me like it [the academic life] started to look a lot different [than it had previously].

M: Yah, oh yah. And it was terrifying. And then I thought, 'have I somehow been doing this work in such a way that I was hiding, hiding...a ...like a lack of actual ability?' Like I just worked really damn hard, harder than the other kids. But my natural ability was not that [great]. I was grinding it out in such a way that someone who was doing this work shouldn't have to grind it out. So, this is the imposter syndrome and it was really sinking in.

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### *Shifting sense of belonging*

Through Mason's personal narratives, I learned that aspects of his academic identity were not always stable. While an undergraduate he felt a strong sense of belonging in academia, I believe in large part because he did well academically. Yet, when he transitioned to graduate work at the top-tier university, he relayed how difficult it was and told me he "didn't belong here." I believe this was partly due to the intense workload causing him to doubt his aptitude for the work, but also in large part due to his working-class background—he described how he found himself in a world where many of his peers came from privileged backgrounds, with generations of family members having attended the same university.

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Mason's girlfriend was a lifeline during this stressful period. He wasn't sure if this academic life was going to work out, but he knew for sure he wanted his relationship to work out. So, they got married that year, and she encouraged him to stick with it. His plan was to reunite with his wife as soon as he passed his comprehensive exams and complete the research by distance.

In his second year, things started to improve as Mason got a better grounding in his program and the institution. He described how weekly seminars functioned, how he began teaching, and how he learned to read a little more strategically. He told me he learned to play the "game"—to "be more authoritative and assertive" with his opinions and ideas. He started to find his groove, met some friends and had a social life. At the end of his second year he had more confidence and started applying for regional fellowships to support his dissertation research. The research funding started rolling in and took him in interesting directions: he spent his third, fourth- and fifth years on research trips, visiting other universities, museums, and libraries, collecting data for his dissertation. He explained:

So that's how it worked in those few years. I would get funding to do research; it was a fun time. I was challenged. I was travelling around. I met a lot of interesting people. I was a visiting scholar and I gave talks and seminars.

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### *Cultivating an academic identity*

In his second year, Mason adjusted to this new normal and began to enjoy things. In his senior years of his dissertation research, Mason's aptitudes for the work were confirmed for him when he got several fellowships which allowed him to do research visits in neighboring states and abroad, collecting data for his research. He was often at other universities, allowed to use their libraries and archives as a visiting scholar. He was paid through different public and private grants and fellowships for his contributions to the scholarly community. He spoke to me of the freedom he had to explore his research interests and take up opportunities that presented themselves. I believe Mason began to cultivate an identity of himself as a researcher and as a scholar; yet this self-concept came into conflict near the end of his degree when he began looking for permanent work in academia.

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Since he hadn't returned to Canada to work on his research, his wife decided to join him in the States so they could finally live together. He continued working on his dissertation and contemplated writing a book based on the insights from his research project. He was no longer living the life of a grad student but was trying to look for work. He picked up an adjunct teaching position, but it was short-lived and he didn't really enjoy teaching. He attended conferences occasionally and tried to care about his research, but his motivation was low. He felt aimless during this period and was trying to care about his work, trying to finish his dissertation and start to work on the book. But he felt like a lone wolf again, feeling isolated in his endeavours, and began to have serious anxiety about the prospects of landing permanent academic work with a research focus.

Mason completed his dissertation and graduated from the program. But finishing his studies was a double-edged sword, since this meant his student status disappeared. While he was able to work part-time as a student, now a working visa was harder to come by. He applied for academic jobs but couldn't find permanent work: there were so few job prospects in his field, and he couldn't imagine asking his wife to start again in a new location. Mason described how difficult this period of uncertainty was:

That year was really dark for me. I was completely lost. I was really not sure what was going on. We had started to think, 'Do we stay here?' I'm stressing out because I'm trying to play along because I don't want to disappoint anyone, but I'm just thinking this can't work, this can't work, this can't work, and I'm getting really stressed out. I'm not working because of my alien status and I can't apply for jobs without leaving my wife, because there's nothing local. I'm fearing the atrophy of the adjunct where you start to smell bad, and you will never get a real job.

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### *Shifting perceptions of academic work*

Mason explained to me that there was a hierarchy within his top-tier university, with research activity being at the top while other academic responsibilities, such as teaching, were less valued. This translated into his prioritizing of research and writing; he told me he was not confident in his teaching abilities, and generally disliked teaching:

I get one teaching gig and I'm a lone wolf again. I mean, I now have a faculty card and can now do things. I can go and bump into people in

the department—I have an office that I share with someone who’s never there—but, I also realized that I had a mistaken notion of my aptitude for teaching, or maybe it’s my appetite for teaching? And had I maybe been taught to teach it might have been different, but we weren’t taught to teach, you were just thrown at it, like ‘here, go do this thing.’

In this quote I hear Mason doubting his aptitude for teaching. He described the conflict this created for him, as he contemplated his life as an adjunct professor:

When I was adjuncting I started to really question, not just did I like doing it, because I really hated prepping for these classes; I told myself, “this is it, this is what you do now.” And the books and the research that I had to keep doing to remain competitive were a super distraction from what I had to do to get a paycheck.

Mason had a serious conflict between the teaching work he needed to do to pay the bills, and research work he enjoyed. He told me:

I would rather just be researching and working on my own stuff. But even that became really hard, because I had already been questioning this all along. Because I thought ‘who the hell cares about these weird little minutia items?’ I mean, I find them intriguing but only because I had just read piles and piles of garbage and this is an interesting little nugget. So, I was teaching but I started to question whether I should be teaching.

In this quote, I hear Mason questioning two aspects of his work: he is contemplating the relevance of his niche area of research, and he is also questioning whether he should be teaching at all. He went on to tell me:

And so I thought, ‘So this is how it’s going to be.’ Either I’m going to be the scholar who really doesn’t care about students and it’s just this thing I gruffly do, and I go off and do my work. Or I need to figure out how to teach. Or care. But at this point I was questioning quite a bit.

Mason describes himself in that quote as a *scholar*, which is crucial to understanding the conflict Mason was feeling. Mason wants to continue being a scholar and doing research, not teaching. He fears being on the adjunct-track, where he would cobble together a salary, and every semester apply to teach courses at various institutions. There is an instability and loneliness to this prospect for Mason. Yet, Mason’s desire for an academic research position is limited by other dynamics, in particular his geographic location: his work options were already limited by virtue of living in a country where he was not a citizen, and Mason had no desire to continuously uproot him and his wife as he took on contract appointments. Mason regards the likelihood of

him landing a tenure-track professorship near his current location as very low and sees the life of the adjunct the more likely reality. Mason's perception of what academic work will look like for him has shifted—it most likely looks like adjunct teaching, rather than the scholarly research he wants to do, which is largely responsible for his decision to “leave” academia.

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Mason wanted stability: stability in his location, stability in his finances, and stability in his relationship. He simply could not see a future for himself in academia. They finally made the decision to leave the States and return to Canada, to take advantage of the family support and resources they had there. Mason told himself he needed a new career plan, to “re-invent” himself once again, since the academic life had not worked out. As they prepared their exit from the States, Mason scoured the internet, for work and educational opportunities that might make him more employable:

I tried to fish about for ideas in how to reinvent. I even thought I might still find a different role in the University. And I started to apply to some schools. And then—I don't know how it came up—but the topic of a professional degree in [discipline] came up, and I went like, the record needle kind of came off. I had never considered professional degrees to have much substance, but it made a lot of sense, you know! It seems very flexible; hard skills; something quick and dirty. And I can spin my work in that direction. So that's when I started to figure that out.

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#### *Lack of support for his choices*

Mason told me, “nobody was talking about non-academic work” within his institution. Mason described the university where he studied as very traditional, and there were very few voices warning of the difficult job market for academic work, and no support to help students transition into other contexts.

He had a difficult time discussing his options with his supervisor. When Mason applied for the professional program, he asked his supervisor for a recommendation letter. This meant he had to share the news with his supervisor that he was no longer considering academic work. This was a difficult conversation to have, and Mason shared

with me the meeting they had together when he went to pick up his recommendation letter for the professional program. Here is our exchange:

Mason: So it's like a personal challenge to go up to your supervisor who has kind of mentored you all of those years, and kind of put his name on the line for you more than once, to say 'Actually I need you to write me a letter for this other thing,' which essentially means 'I'm out.' And he's like, .... 'So ummm, so when will you have the book done?' I'm like 'Pardon?' And he says, 'Will you have the book done before this program starts?' And I'm thinking what on earth are you talking about man? Like—this is not happening! Yes, I have, in the back of my mind, got this desire to maybe close the circle one day, you know, no one has really written about the research I dug into that was really rich, so maybe I'm gonna get scooped if I don't do it soon, but I have no plans to write that book.

Sue: Right. And he's written you the letters. And knows you're planning to go to the professional program.

M: Yah, but he just doesn't get it. This notion that I would just walk away...was entirely alien to him. So, like getting out, leaving academia is a conversation that doesn't happen, right?

When Mason relayed this story to me, he was fraught with frustration. He went on to describe how he continually had to explain his choice to others, such as friends and colleagues, many who tried to convince him to “stay” in academia. I can only imagine this lack of support and continual need to explain one's self must get tiring and frustrating.

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Learning about the professional program was a turning point for Mason. He realized that his academic background was actually a good fit within this professional work world, and it would give him the practical experience he wanted in the workforce. Mason struggled with his “re-invention” of himself, with leaving his academic identity behind, and trying to keep his PhD a secret.

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*Identity struggles*

Leaving academia and starting anew was painful for Mason, not only the move and relocating, but an internal struggle with his own identity. Being a scholar was part of who he was, and now he found himself leaving that behind. He told me:

You know, it was a really difficult transition; psychologically, just getting to the point where I could disassociate from the identity I've built for myself for more than a decade. It was pretty weird and traumatic.

I believe part of what made it weird and traumatic was the need to hide a very important aspect of himself and his background. Mason told me:

I was also advised during my professional program that I might want to downplay my PhD. So, I spent a lot of time burying a lot of my past in my resume. Hiding it behind other words.

This “hiding” continued when Mason began working in professional work environments. He rarely revealed to people that he had completed a PhD, and when he did, he found people unable to engage in conversation about it. He described academia as a “black box:”

Academia is a black box for most people—there's like a default respect response but they don't know how to ask about, they don't know how to talk about it, and they're afraid of it and so they don't talk about it. So, there's this ongoing mystification.

I interpret this to mean that Mason was unable to bring all of himself to the table—he had to hide a vital aspect of his background and his identity. He told me he changed how he presented his PhD, downplayed his scholarly knowledge and turned his academic work at the university into tangible skills that would appeal to employers.

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Mason completed the program and gained practical work experience. His confidence increased as he gained more work experience—and he began to appreciate the value of many of the skills and competencies he'd gained from his graduate work.

Mason now works in various roles in the public sector. He enjoys the collegial working culture and finds the work itself to be challenging since he takes on new projects all the time. He is satisfied that his skills in research, analysis, and writing are put to good use. He and his wife finally have the stability they craved and have built a life together.

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Over time, as Mason gained more work experience, he began to reveal more about his background. He was more confident describing the value of his PhD in a way that people would understand. He began to recognize his skills as valuable, and Mason told me “I had succeeded in ‘re-inventing’ myself again.” I interpreted this re-invention to be the point where he is able to integrate and merge these various aspects of himself (self-concept, perception of aptitudes, and beliefs and values), into a new identity of who he is. It speaks to Mason settling into new routines in his work and coming out the other side of a transition.

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As the painful transition from academia begins to fade, Mason confessed that if his new job wasn't keeping him so busy, he would have an interest in “closing the loop:” resurrecting his PhD research and writing that book he'd been working on.

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### ***A story about motivation***

The dynamics I identified in Holli's personal narratives were personal influences of mental health, self-efficacy, and her world of work knowledge. A central feature of Holli's personal narratives was her low self-efficacy, in particular her perception of her lack of aptitude for research work. I also found that uncertainty and anxiety about the future permeated many of Holli's personal narratives. I noticed how Holli repeatedly referred to her lack of world of work knowledge which seemed related to her experiences of uncertainty and anxiety towards her work future. I viewed this lack of world of work knowledge, poised in this storied account as a lack of “career options” as partially responsible for her motivations for pursuing graduate work and completing the PhD.

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Holli grew up in a family of four in an urban centre. Her father was the sole breadwinner of the family and her mother was responsible for taking care of the house and kids. Her parents, as immigrants to Canada, held strong cultural values about the importance of education; because of these strong cultural values, doing well in school

was never an option for Holli, it was an expectation. Holli went to a high school where the students were already streamed for academics. All of her friends went to university, with the large majority of her graduating class heading to the same university as she did.

Holli was not the first in her family to go to university; her father had an advanced degree from his home country that he made many sacrifices to obtain. But she mentioned that her parents “had no understanding of what the university system was like,” at least in North America. Since her parents thought so highly of a university education, she also believed it was important to get a university degree.

Holli did well in university, completing a bachelor’s degree with honors. Holli confessed that during her undergraduate studies she often suffered bouts of depression. She recalls one significant episode of depression being triggered by her indecision about her future after her undergrad degree. Holli said:

There was definitely a significant period related to not knowing what I was going to do. I was working in a lab. And I was very torn. Like, not even torn. I was like lost, just so lost. And the only thing people knew to tell me to do was to go to grad school. And I was like ‘I don’t really want to do this, but...’ And I knew that wasn’t really what I wanted to do, but I didn’t know what else I wanted to do.

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### *Career path uncertainty*

Uncertainty about her career path is a thread that follows through Holli’s narratives. Holli told me several stories of being anxious about her future. In this first story, Holli recounts a situation from Grade 6:

When I was young, I assumed I would do what my mom did which was get married and have kids. It just didn’t occur to me that there were other things to do. And I remember the first time, it was in grade 6 and our teacher said ‘we’re going to go around the class and everyone’s going to say what they want to be when they grow up’; and then she said ‘Can you imagine, a couple of years ago three girls still said they wanted to be homemakers.’ And then she laughed, and I was like ‘Uh-oh.’ So, I panicked! Fortunately, she started on the other side of the room—and I was sweating the entire time; I was thinking ‘I can’t be a mom!’ And so, I came up with writer, because that was something I had been told I should try. And this was supposed to be an innocent exercise in grade 6, but it left me panicking.

She recounts a similar experience in grade 7, anxious about writing a one-pager on what she wanted to be when she grew up. She stuck with “writer,” the choice she had come up with under pressure, just to satisfy the assignment. She narrated a similar scenario in Grade 11, where she was filling out forms for university, and told to pick a major. She picked [discipline] because she thought it would help her understand “being a confused 15-year-old.”

Holli talked at length about these moments when she was forced to decide on her future. She recounts the anxiety of being forced to pick one option rather than being given options to explore. She said:

It’s something that I’ve struggled with but it started early and I remember these very striking moments where I was put on the spot, and that sense of being under a lot of pressure...And there was no encouragement to entertain different possibilities. [I only ever heard,] ‘Give me one option! For your entire working life!’

This desire to be given guidance and shown career options is repeated throughout Holli’s personal narratives. She said she never had any guidance during high school—it was assumed she would head to university. Yet this lack of guidance filled her with uncertainty.

Holli narrated a story of how she dealt with her anxieties about her future as she began university as an undergrad. She said, “I mapped out my entire undergraduate career before I started my first class.” She went on to tell me how she deviated very little from this plan for four years. It gave her relief because it bought her time: she didn’t have to think about her future for four years. She mentioned while working in the lab after her undergrad she had a bit of guidance:

I had more support in some ways than during my undergrad where I had no adult support. But in the lab, there were people [peers] who were trying to give me advice and guide me, but I had nothing like that in my undergrad.

Yet again, Holli perceived only one option available to her: go to grad school.

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Holli told me, “I was also really depressed at the time and having no idea what I wanted to do was amplifying that.” But she applied anyways because she didn’t know

what other options were available to her. She was encouraged by her peers and her work supervisor, so she followed several peers who applied for graduate degree funding. She received a funding package and accepted the offer at a new university. She moved to a new city away from her family and friends, where she started a new program at a new university. With all of this going on, Holli fell into a deeper depression. Four months after starting grad school Holli was hospitalized for a suicide attempt. Holli remembers those years painfully as our conversation illustrates:

Holli: I was really, really depressed. I had been struggling.

Sue: It sounds like it had been going on for quite a while.

H: It had been. And then moving to a new city, starting a new program and not knowing anybody. It was just [pause] I don't know how much it had to do with grad school, but it certainly wasn't a place where I felt like I belonged. I don't feel like it was related to grad school, but it was the whole context of it. And it was like [pause] I was going to great efforts to try to keep my schoolwork up when I was in the hospital. I didn't want anyone to know [pause] I would attend classes and then have to return to the hospital at the end of the day, working on my assignments in the psych ward.

S: That must've been a very difficult time.

H: It was. I think I didn't realize at the time how bad things were, like in retrospect those [pause] those were [pause] like my master's degree was rough, my first year was really bad. I still did well but I was really struggling emotionally.

Holli described how she got set up with the hospital and the university's health services, which was critical to her well-being at the time and essential to helping her get through grad school. Recalling those days, she said "Grad school was terrible! It was a cesspool of misery!"

Holli completed her master's degree, and although she still struggled emotionally, she managed to keep her grades up. She decided to continue into a doctoral program. Holli explained that staying in grad school was a relief because it delayed her making serious career decisions:

It was kind of like a holding cell, like a holding pattern, I don't know. I'm just going to do this, because I'll get an education out of it, and it will also keep me from actually having to decide what I want to do. So, yes, I managed to do that all the way to the postdoc.

She told me her doctoral studies were “better than my master’s.” She recounts some of the highlights including her social group of friends and the freedom she had in grad school to make her own schedule of work and time off.

Holli received full funding throughout her two graduate degrees—funding from various Canadian agencies. She said this funding provided a sense of safety for her, because it gave her a sense of purpose in being at school. The upside was that being at school became like work—she quipped “Why wouldn’t I do it if it’s just like a job, where I’m getting paid and I’m getting an education?” She described the downside being that it delayed her from exploring work options.

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#### *School as a way to defer decision-making*

This theme of “buying time” was repeated in Holli’s narratives. For Holli, deferring decision-making was a motivator to doing the PhD. She described how her motivation to stay in school and complete her graduate studies was tied to the research funding she received. She said, “It allowed me to park decision- making,” and so she continued through her degrees because “at least I’ll still get paid.” So, while Holli managed to stay in school, get an education, and in large part be paid to do it, it didn’t help her gain knowledge of the world of work outside of an academic setting.

Holli made it abundantly clear to me that she always felt pressured to choose one career path—and rather than a host of options, she felt like she was only ever presented one option. According to Holli, there was never anyone along the way who gave her career guidance or raised awareness of her career options. While a PhD student, Holli visited the career centre but said “they couldn’t help me,” since they only gave her two options: be a professor or a sessional instructor. Of course, she was already aware of these two options! Her supervisor and her peers also presented her with only one option: academic work. We shared this brief exchange:

Holli: I had no help. People meant well but they also had no idea.

Sue: So, there was never anyone along the way who showed you something different?

H: No, not really.

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Holli described at length how she felt tied to the academic funding cycle. Here is her description of the process of waiting for funding to be approved:

In the meantime [while waiting], you just squirrel away and do other things and just not think about it [whether you want to continue schooling and what to do if it was not approved]. But it also means you're not really dealing with the problem on an ongoing basis. You're just postponing—it allows you to park your decision making for almost a year. It's like 'well I put in something [research proposal] that might turn into this, so I'll just keep going and then if that doesn't work out then I'll decide at that point.' And if I decided in the meantime that I'm going to do something else, then I don't have to say yes to this [research funding]. Except when you don't really know how to explore [work options] or what to do, you just kind of have that as a 'well, you know, maybe something better will come to me that I'll want to do'. And then you get to that point [where you might consider other options]—but then you get the funding! and it's like, 'well, here it is!' [pause] I still don't know what I want to do so I guess I'll do this [continue schooling] because at least I'll still get paid! So, it does sort of put you in a limbo, it allows you to park decision-making, and move forward without really exploring other options.

Holli received significant funding packages from various sources throughout her graduate work, buying her time, since she was being “paid” to be there. Yet, one of the issues Holli continued to struggle with was her lack of confidence in her abilities as a researcher. She said she felt like a “research fraud,” someone who had “no particular talent for research.” So, although Holli received funding continuously, her insecurities ran deep: she doubted that her scholarships relied on merit; instead, she believed that she'd been lucky the first time and once you received funding, it paved the way for you to receive more of it.

The notion of working as a professor filled her with anxiety—she completely lacked confidence in her ability to research and to teach. Besides her low self-efficacy, there were other aspects of faculty work that didn't appeal to her. She saw it as a very stressful job with very little work-life balance, and no downtime. And she was not interested in relocating—most of her friends who had gone on to academic work had to relocate to other places, usually smaller cities. She was not interested in living in a smaller university town—she loved where she lived and didn't want to leave. She said, “It looked like a terrible job and not the life I wanted.”

She was encouraged by her peers and supervisor to apply for academic work as her completion date for the doctoral degree approached, but she explained to me:

I told them the lifestyle was not appealing to me, it didn't look like something I wanted to do. Underlying that was a deep insecurity that I couldn't do it. I never had doubts that I could be a good student. But I had doubts about being a good professor. I told my supervisor [but] he just didn't know how to support me. He understood but he couldn't help me.

Holli felt pressured to apply for academic work, so she applied and accepted a one-year postdoctoral position in another city. She hoped to consider her work options during that year. But after a few months, depression set back in so Holli moved back home and completed the contract by distance. She applied half-heartedly for a few jobs that seemed related to her skills and knowledge—and then was surprised to get an interview for a position that matched her skillsets in research and writing. She got offered the job and found herself in a unique position: working at the university but not as a faculty member. This position was a turning point for Holli: she realized she knew a lot about research, that she wasn't a fraud at all.

This position was instrumental in boosting her self-confidence in her research abilities. Yet the work environment wasn't ideal, and the position was only part-time. So, Holli took up additional contract work on the side with a research organization. Holli enjoyed this work: it offered her the freedom she craved, where she could set her own hours and work anywhere. The work was rewarding because it was always a different research project and you got to research new and interesting things. Holli worked with them, building up more confidence in her abilities. Eventually Holli decided to leave the permanent job behind and invest in the business, becoming one of the owners of the consulting firm. She now works full-time as a research consultant, is her own boss, and loves her work.

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This concludes this first set of stories which highlights the transition from an academic environment to the workplace. In each of these stories, participants shared vivid accounts of their time at the university, and I noted shifts in how they described aspects of themselves, such as their identities, self-efficacy, beliefs, and values. In each of these storied accounts, these dynamics intersect with other personal, social, and

societal influences, such as health, location, and socio-economic status. These three storied accounts conclude as each individual finds satisfying work outside of academia. This differs from the next set of stories which carry on past that transition point of school to work.

### **5.2.3. Stories of transitions beyond the PhD**

In this next set of three stories, participants did not focus as intensely on the transition from their PhD to work. In these personal narratives, participants began with sharing their lives at school, and then continued to describe their lives as they navigated the world of work long after completion of their PhD. For these three individuals, the transition from their PhD did not play as central of a role in their personal narratives as the previous set of three storied accounts. This may be because more time has passed for each of these participants since they completed their PhD degree, and they had other “chapters” of their lives to share with me. These storied accounts are longer than the previous set, since they cover a longer time period and include significant aspects of their working lives after the PhD.

This set of stories highlights how transitions are ongoing: for two of the individuals they were in process of navigating changes in their working lives when I spoke with them. This speaks to the notion that just as lives are always in motion, so too are careers.

#### ***A story about juggling multiple responsibilities***

When I met up with Brandy, she had completed her PhD 10 years earlier. She discussed what led her to complete the PhD and her life after the PhD—where she worked and the different roles she’s played at various organizations. She was transitioning from one work context to another when we met, making for interesting conversation as she was retrospective about her career journey so far.

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Brandy grew up in a suburban city and had a baby shortly after high school. It was a very difficult time for her, especially since the baby’s father was not well-equipped to look after the baby and Brandy no longer lived at home. With the baby only 8-weeks

old, she began waitressing at a local restaurant while her sister and mother helped her with babysitting whenever they could. It was extremely stressful, and Brandy was just trying to survive, to make ends meet, and keep the baby safe.

At that time, Brandy had no plans to attend university. She told me:

When I was in high school, I didn't come from a family where anyone has done post-secondary. None of my aunts, uncles, nobody even in my extended family network. So, it wasn't something that I really thought about very much.

But then she read that the best way to improve the long-term health of her child was maternal education, so this motivated her to enroll in college courses.

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#### *Early motivation for university*

In this first part of Brandy's story, the dynamics of being a single mother and a parent, and a first-generation student from a working-class background are highlighted. When I met up with Brandy for the second time, I asked her explicitly about her motivation for post-secondary in the first place considering how difficult it had been for her to juggle the children and her finances. She told me this story:

So, when I first started my [discipline] degree I was pregnant with my daughter and had left a really violent relationship. And this was all sort of happening at the same time and it was kind of right around my 21st birthday that I started. I left my waitressing job. I was pregnant. I had a one and half year old. I was by myself. I was dealing with the family court and criminal court related to that. And I started taking full-time classes. And I read an article—because you start to hear about statistics about single moms, or maternal age, and kids' outcomes—and that was actually very stressful to see. And then I read an article in anthropology class that said that the greatest predictor globally of children's well-being was maternal education. So, I got on this right track that if I did this [degree] then that would be really good for them. It's really silly when I think about it now because that's not at all what they were talking about. They were talking about literacy and basic public health education.

In that personal narrative, I learned that Brandy's early motivation for her university studies was tied to her children's wellbeing: that a good predictor of positive outcomes for her children was the education of the mother. So, this was one of her early motivators to complete her bachelor's degree.

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Brandy started taking courses at her local college when her son was only 10 months old:

I had him. I was working in a restaurant. And I just decided I was going to take one or two courses. So, there's the local college where I was living. And, honestly, I had no idea what [discipline] was. The only reason I ended up in that course was because my sister could babysit the night that it was on. And, I was good at this subject in high school. This sounds like kind of the same thing. I was actually imagining I would do an English degree; I don't know. And then, I took a first class and it was from that moment it was life-changing in that I was just fascinated by the ability to put context around an experience. So, as soon as I did that, I had a sense that I wanted to do something in that [discipline].

Brandy took college courses for a year while working, then transferred to the closest university where she could complete a bachelor's degree. By this time, her second child was born, so she was a single mother caring for two children. She couldn't find childcare so was juggling schoolwork while raising a two-year-old and an infant. She recalls bringing her children to her parent's house so they could watch the kids while she tried to complete her schoolwork.

Eventually both children were accepted into the university's childcare program a few days a week, so Brandy moved closer to the university. She received student loans to pay for tuition and other living expenses, and she started working on campus. She got involved in campus groups, including a social justice group on campus, since it aligned with her interests.

Brandy loved being at university. She aspired to continue in academia, perhaps become a professor herself. She said:

I had such supportive professors, just absolutely so supportive, which was fantastic. And really open to talking about things; really supportive and encouraging of me. So, I actually stayed there to do my master's.

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### *School as intrinsic motivator*

Brandy's motivation to pursue her studies changed over time. Later in the interview, Brandy went on to tell me:

But so, I kind of had that motivation. I think it was also an important self-esteem piece that I felt really out of place in school. Even though I did really well in school, I still sort of felt really different than everybody else, or I didn't really belong there. And so, if I kind of—I felt like if I just kept going, I would feel more [pause] Because I had the kids, and my life was different, and I didn't have any money, and all of those things. And then I thought, 'I actually just love learning, and I'd like to keep doing this.'

In that personal narrative, I hear Brandy describing how continuing her education into her graduate studies has become intrinsically motivating: as she describes it “it's a self-esteem piece.” She sees herself as different than many of her peers at university for two reasons: 1) her socio-economic status, and 2) because she has kids; yet, being successful at school was a value of her worth. So, this was an intrinsic motivator for her to continue and to stay in academia.

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Brandy met her current partner on campus while finishing up her bachelor's degree, so she continued on with her master's at the same institution. Things were going well, both kids were now full time in daycare, and she was picking up more work on campus to make ends meet, since the student loans were never quite enough to get by. She got involved in the student union and was a teaching assistant most semesters. Her life primarily existed on campus. As Brandy was finishing up her master's degree her third child was born. She took five months off to stay home with the children.

I was really sort of unsure about what I was going to do next. I wanted to do the PhD, but I didn't know if it made sense financially, all of those things. Obviously, my student loans were already crazy by that point.

By the time Brandy started the PhD she had an infant and two young children. She told me how difficult this period was:

I just didn't know what I was going to do; it was an overwhelming time. Going back [to school] was really hard. The 3 kids were a lot. It was a handful. Our place was small. The reality of not having any money rather than the romanticizing of having no money became real.

As the reality of their lives set in, Brandy began to doubt the likelihood of working in academia after her PhD. She explained:

Even probably for the first two years there [during the PhD], I was still thinking academic track, but I was much more engaged with activism

as well and definitely was having that sort of existential crisis that some people in social sciences have around 'will I have impact?' those kinds of things. So that was a piece of it. It was a very stressful, busy time, and then the other piece was just seeing what it takes to compete; there's people around me who were flying to all the conferences to present papers and all of those things—and I was coming home from class and breastfeeding and—having no resources at all. And that didn't seem feasible. And then thinking about, 'Go do a sessional lecture section here for nine months, then move here,' that started to feel like that just was not going to work for us. And things were very competitive. I thought about maybe college teaching. I taught a bit at one of the colleges which was fine, but still, yeah, I just didn't really have a sense that it was feasible. That was quite a hard time, actually.

Brandy was not funded well during her studies. She told me “The PhD felt like a huge mountain to climb. And the only thing I could see financially was I was going to have to start paying student loans back.” She became more activist-oriented and wanted to be involved in societal change in her local communities—it was not enough to simply theorize about the issues. Her plan had been to complete the PhD and then become a professor, but her interests in other opportunities was piqued:

During that time, I started hearing about a non-profit on the news—they were working on similar issues that I had been researching—and there had never really been an organization doing that. And when I would hear them, I was like, 'They sound amazing.' And then when I was done with my comprehensive exams, I was sort of imagining what work am I going to do? Am I going to try to find another course teaching?

She reflected on her work options and her current situation. She was heavily in-debt with student loans and had three children to raise. The insecurity of sessional teaching work did not sound like a great option to her.

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### *Lifestyle fit*

This last excerpt illustrates how Brandy's desires for work changed over time, as her life changed. She did not begin university planning to be a professor. But as she continued in her graduate work, Brandy described being passionate about her research, and enjoyed being in the world of “ideas”—she also had supervisors that she looked up to. In Brandy's master's degree she began to entertain thoughts of becoming a professor herself, as she felt supported by a supervisor she respected. She was already engaged in typical scholarly activities, such as publishing, teaching and going to conferences.

Brandy loved working at the university and wanted to continue there. So, her motivation to remain at the university (as a professor) was tied to her personal interests.

Yet the reality of her “differences” from her peers was very real, and the reality of her life (family and socio-economic status) was very real. She held a lot of student debt and needed to provide a stable income for her family. Her awareness of the competitive nature for academic work also influenced her decisions—she couldn’t imagine relocating the whole family to seek out academic work or trying to piece together an income from short-term teaching contracts. So, although Brandy had a desire during her graduate studies for a professorship, the academic lifestyle did not fit her reality of raising three young children and paying off student loans.

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Then an opportunity presented itself in the form of a research position at the non-profit organization she had heard about:

A job came up—with that same non-profit—a half-time researcher position, for one year, and I was like, ‘I can do that for a year.’ And I wanted to try something different. It felt like a really good fit.

This was a turning point for Brandy: it was a good fit, because it kept her engaged in activism and it paid the bills. The contract position rolled into a permanent position, with a stable salary and benefits. The work at the non-profit kept her busy: it was a demanding organization which was under-staffed and under-funded. There was little time to rethink the choices she made: the working culture at the non-profit was very demanding, with overtime and late hours the norm.

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### *Identity as an activist*

Brandy also held an identity as an activist, and social justice work in the community appealed to her since it aligned with her personal interests. In her personal narratives, Brandy explained that she was relieved when the PhD program was completed so she could have a stable job and bring home a steady income.

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In addition to the demanding job, Brandy also had a very heavy load at home:

I had three children and we homeschooled them, so my partner was at home with them and he was working evenings. So, I was coming home and then it was all kids, all the time. Which in some ways I think was good because it meant there was a hard stop to my [work] day and other things in my life. So that was good, but it was very stressful. There was a lot of strain in our lives because of it and we were still not paid very well. I think I was making maybe \$46 or \$48,000 a year at that point and so we were still really struggling financially, paying back student loans, all of these things. So definitely at that time I was like, 'I think I might have made some strategic errors here', but I also really enjoyed the work.

About five years after she completed the PhD, Brandy realized she was getting further away from her dreams of professorship, because she had no time to do research and publish. She applied for a position at one of the local universities, a limited-term position—and was surprised to be offered the position. Brandy reflected on what attracted her to academia and her impressions of the differences between academic work and her current work. She said:

[In academia] the ability to sort of hold my own analysis without as much of the negotiation that happens when you work in organizations and in coalitions and things. So, some of that freedom, that sort of intellectual freedom. And the time: the time to really value, the time to read the literature and have that be part of your job. And really be able to focus. I mean especially in the work that I do—compared to academic work we're an inch deep and a mile-wide right? Like I'm expected to be an expert on pretty much everything to do with every type of social issue. Versus in academia, and I think this is the double-edge sword, I think you can get very deep expertise of a very narrow issue.

So, although Brandy had this desire to slow down, have time to research and grow that deep expertise, there were significant downsides to taking the limited-term position. It was not permanent and was meant to last only one year. This wasn't a great option for Brandy who needed permanent work and income. Brandy weighed her options but felt guilty when she thought about leaving the organization, especially now when the organization was growing again. It just wasn't the right time to leave and the demands of the organization were difficult to step away from.

Turning down the limited-term position was another turning point for Brandy. She had always expected to go back into academia but now realized it wasn't going to happen: her life had taken a different direction and led her somewhere else.

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### *Weighing her work options*

In this second half of Brandy's story, you can view the difference Brandy's storied account and the first three set of stories: in her personal narratives Brandy discussed her life well beyond completing her PhD, and gave me entry into her working life years after the PhD. This is significant, since I learned how career decisions continued to present themselves to her; it is not only at the juncture of completing her PhD that Brandy had to make decisions regarding her work future, but they continued throughout her journey.

This second half also highlights how the complex dynamics which influenced her decision to join the non-profit world instead of academia were still dominant influences five years after completing her PhD: Brandy turned down the limited-term position since the one-year position did not offer her the stability she needed for her family and her finances. This type of work arrangement still did not work for her. And reflecting on that decision, Brandy recognized it as a turning point: almost as if she is describing a fork in the road, Brandy recognized that the two opportunities brought about different career futures for her.

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Over time Brandy started to resent the organization she had worked at for so long, especially the ways it infringed on her life outside of work. She described the workplace culture and the issues they worked in as being "emotionally charged." She said, "I was unreasonably devoted to it [the organization]" and described the late hours, working from home late at night, the inability to step away from the work. She said, "I didn't have a good sense of what's normal" in terms of work-life balance. She relayed to me an experience that really encouraged her to make a move out of the organization:

I had an experience in my last year of being confronted in an alley by a client who wasn't allowed to come back to the Centre. And it was quite emotionally scary and dangerous. And I wanted to feel like I could leave my email for the day and nothing would collapse. And I wouldn't be letting anyone down. And I just needed more boundaries, where my boss isn't texting me at 11:00 at night—and that was totally the culture we had—and a lot of times it was fun. But just more boundaries.

Turning down the academic position led her to re-evaluate things: she realized she needed to put change into motion, she needed to distance herself from the one organization that had demanded so much of her for so many years. She went to work in a larger non-profit where she grew her expertise in organizational development. Brandy described this as a much-needed break from the work she had been emotionally invested in for many years:

I needed a break from what I'd been doing—there were a number of people I worked with very closely in the community die over a period of years. Working with women who lost their children is really emotional and even when you make progress, it's still hard because you're still getting all of these calls from people who still are in deep crisis. Even when you fix one issue in their life, there's ten others that are coming back. So, I think it was actually really good for me to get that space away from that for a little bit.

After two years working in the larger non-profit, she was asked to return to her previous organization, and offered the top leadership role. She took the position, where she remained for several years. She instilled new boundaries with her staff and tried to change the demanding culture of the workplace. She took email off her phone and no longer checked her messages after leaving the office. She encouraged her co-workers to do the same, and actively encouraged a healthier workplace environment. Reflecting back on the limited-term academic position, Brandy recognized it as a pivotal decision:

I think had I done the academic position it would have led me back one direction like maybe back into academic sort of work, whereas the larger non-profit has led me more into organizational development. So, there was a point there—I don't know which one would have been better but I'm happy with where it landed.

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### *Work-life balance*

Brandy's desire for a healthy work-life balance was a central theme in her personal narratives. She relayed to me her struggles of being overly committed to her job, and how she tried to set healthy boundaries in the workplace. Brandy relayed to me these ongoing struggles in her personal narratives, and I interpreted this as a growing awareness of her world of work. In her early days of working with the non-profit she didn't realize the demands of the organization weren't "normal"—but she describes a growing awareness of how the demands of the organization no longer fit the work-life

balance she was trying to achieve. She was active in her attempts to dictate her own work-life balance, which resulted in her deciding to leave the organization and become self-employed.

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Throughout this time Brandy's children were becoming more independent and she found herself with more space to explore her career options. She wanted to try something new and was open to a new challenge. Rather than join another organization she said she wanted to use her expertise in organizational dynamics "without being so deeply engaged in the issues." The decision to leave the organization she invested 10 years in was the highest point on Brandy's journey plot. She continues to work in the non-profit sector, as a contractor and consultant, where she has more choice in the projects she wants to work on, and more control over her own work-life balance—a very satisfying place to be.

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### ***A story about getting healthy***

When I met with Claudia, she had completed her DPhil<sup>2</sup> 19 years ago, at the age of 29. She shared with me personal details of her early upbringing, which provide a backdrop to the themes of physical and mental health that thread throughout her story as she moves through the university system and navigates the world of work. In addition to her health, socio-economic status is highlighted, and family and relationships play a significant role.

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Claudia spent much of her earliest years in the care of her maternal grandparents, as her mother and father split when she was about a year old. She then grew up in a blended family from the age of three, with a loving stepfather, a very controlling mother, and two older stepbrothers. Home life was fraught with frequent verbal conflicts between her parents. Claudia's mother was anorexic and as Claudia

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<sup>2</sup> DPhil is the term used in the UK to denote the Doctor of Philosophy. It is synonymous with a PhD.

recalls, had always used food as a weapon. Her grandfather passed away when she was only 10—which was very traumatic for Claudia. She told me,

The next year, my mom disclosed to me that my best friend, my grandpa, had actually sexually abused her. So, I found that out, and that really messed me up, but I couldn't show it to her, and I didn't have anyone to talk to.

Life at home was not easy—her mom and stepdad had ongoing issues that affected her and her stepbrothers. At the age of 12, Claudia also developed anorexia.

Claudia describes her family as having a “very working-class background.” She recalls having a paper route when she was nine, then starting her first part-time job at the age of 14, in customer service at a chocolate shop. She worked part-time throughout almost all of high school. Claudia had always excelled at school and was streamed for academics from a young age. Amidst all the other ups and downs going on in her life, school was a relief for her, and a welcome distraction from the issues at home. She began university at the age of 17, enrolling in human sciences, although her earlier dreams had been to become a veterinarian, since she loved animals. However, her mother didn't want her going away to school, so she had no choice but to stay in her hometown. At this young age, she recalls having her first paid professional job at the university, when a volunteer placement turned into a paid position in a science lab. She told me:

I got this job. I felt very grown up, to get paid for it. And I loved it. I was working with postdoc people. And they treated me like a grown up. And it was fun. I just loved going there. I spent all my time there.

Claudia worked throughout her undergraduate degree because she needed the money—she received help with one term's tuition and a couple of months' rent from her dad but otherwise was self-supporting through her part-time jobs and by earning scholarships. She told me, “Academia was my stable place.” But while she was doing well in her studies, her health was declining. During her second year at university, she was hospitalized for a month because of her eating disorder. She recalls being hospitalized over the Christmas holidays:

So, I was hospitalized. At that point they did not have a designated unit for eating disorders, so you went into a general psych unit. So, I was 18 and I was in a general psych unit voluntarily, but most of the other people there were certified. So that was a fairly dramatic and traumatic

experience. I was trying desperately to study. I was there in December. God, being in a hospital around Christmas time is just the worst, and I've been in that [situation] twice. It's like everybody else is festive and you're—yeah, depressed, and scared. So, trying to study for my midterm and my finals for the first terms, trying to figure out how the hell to live in a psychiatric unit [pause] I was in there for a month.

Because of her health, her mother convinced her to quit the job in the lab that she loved so much. At this time, she was also struggling with one of her courses, and she recalled a pivotal moment in her university journey:

I had my midterm in botany, and the prof called me into his office and just tore a strip off me. It was just really unacceptable behavior, and I just left feeling like, 'That's it. I'm useless. I'm worthless.' I already felt like that coming out of the psych ward, but I just decided, 'That's it. I'm leaving.' I decided to do withdrawals so that I wouldn't just quit university. I had enough sense to think maybe I'd come back. I just pulled out and withdrew, got a bunch of Ws on my transcript, and just thought, 'Okay. I need to work.'

At this point, Claudia was only 18, her parents had split up, and she had moved out on her own. She took a clerical job in a hospital to pay the bills and enjoyed the working culture. She said, "I liked the job, I felt good. I was competent. I was appreciated. And I felt safe. Safety was a big thing." She spent a few months in this job, and eventually decided to go back to university, but switched to Arts. She did well academically even though her health continued to be an issue. It didn't take long until she ended up back in the hospital because her weight was too low. She remembers it being a super low point and recalls meeting her boyfriend around that time: "So I was still in the psych unit when I met him, I was literally out on a day pass when we met."

Even though she struggled with the eating disorder, Claudia excelled in her studies. She received several scholarships during her undergrad. Although enrolled in an honors program, she found it too confining to accommodate her interests in classical studies, so she left the honors program and did an unofficial minor in Classics. In the final year of her bachelor's degree, her supervisor encouraged her to continue on to graduate work in England. He helped her apply for funding, and Claudia received a fully funded three-year Commonwealth scholarship at the age of 23. She was headed to Oxford: "It was amazing. I just couldn't believe it. I was just so thrilled and so excited and felt so good about myself."

Claudia began her graduate studies at Oxford, but her stress and anxiety were in overdrive. She felt isolated moving to a new country, and although her partner (now husband) had accompanied her, he had his own issues. She was stressed about passing the first year of the program, which had a 25% failure rate. She quickly began losing weight again. The lack of structure in her graduate program didn't help: she wasn't well-supervised, no one was checking up on her, and she didn't have a community of peers to socialize with. In addition, her supervisor convinced her to abandon a line of study that she found very interesting to instead work in an area that he knew about. She toyed with the possibility of switching out of this program and into an ornithology program at a Canadian university; she applied and was accepted into a master's program, but she ultimately decided that she owed it to the Commonwealth Foundation to complete the doctorate. Life with her partner was not going smoothly either—they separated twice—which added to her stress level. Summarizing her time at Oxford, she told me: “I was lonely. I was scared. I was starving.” She elaborated on this period in her life:

I was back down to, I believe—going over there I was probably about 115 [pounds] and I was back down to 90 [pounds] within a couple months. So that wasn't good. And my health remained very, very dodgy all the time that I was over there. And I was fragile, more fragile than I thought, and I don't think that I was going to be terribly resilient to any kinds of shocks and upsets. And of course, when you're so—I'm small, I'm five foot two and a half—and when your body weight gets down to, or your body fat percentage gets below a certain amount, you become quite cognitively impaired. So, I was just kind of running on fumes for the entire time over there.

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### *Physical and mental health*

In this first half of Claudia's story her struggles with anorexia and her overall physical and mental health are central features in her personal narratives. Other influences include her family, her relationships, and the educational institution where she is studying. All of these dynamics influence one another in complex and recursive ways: for example, her tumultuous relationship impacts her physical and mental health, yet her health in turn impacts her relationships; her feelings of being isolated at Oxford impact her health, and this in turn impacts her ability to function socially at Oxford. She shared that her feelings of loneliness led her to be further reclusive.

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Claudia returned home to Canada at one point because her health was so poor—she was down to 67 pounds. She told me, “It was really, really scary stuff, so I had to come home just to stay alive basically.” She had another stint in the hospital, where doctors once again used nasogastric tubes to give her nourishment, without addressing any of her underlying issues. Claudia returned to Oxford once she had her strength back. A highlight on her return was working at Oxford University Press, doing research work within databases. Her health was still poor, and she developed a dependency on anti-anxiety medication to help her (“benzos”). Meanwhile, her scholarship had finished, and working part-time was not enough to pay her living expenses, so she returned to Canada again, committed to completing her dissertation by distance.

Over the next several years, Claudia’s work life and personal life had tumultuous ups and downs. She took on clerical work with the government and began tutoring international students, which she enjoyed. The unstable relationship with her husband finally ended with separation and, ultimately, a divorce. After this final separation, she pulled herself off the benzodiazepines cold turkey, which led to her attempting to commit suicide. Shortly after that, she met a new partner, which she described to me as a high point in her life. She volunteered at a publishing company and enjoyed that, too. She began teaching courses in English and Literature and enjoyed this. Claudia’s health improved and she physically recovered from anorexia at the age of 29. Her partner seemed to be a stable influence for her. They shared many things in common, including a strong academic background. Things seemed to stabilize for a while, and after seven years Claudia completed her DPhil.

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#### *Inability to plan her work future*

As Claudia’s health begins to improve, so do her relationships, and she completes her doctorate. In this first half of Claudia’s story her health takes a central role and I didn’t hear her describe any kinds of career planning. I asked Claudia if she had attended Oxford and completed the DPhil in order to work in academia. She explained that she had never particularly wanted to become an academic, but it became an

expectation of her, “because I was this kind of student that had this kind of intellect and if I didn’t do it [become an academic] I’d be some kind of a failure.” She talked about doing it to please others, such as her supervisor: “When you please others you think it’s happiness but it’s just relief because you haven’t disappointed others. It wasn’t me that wanted it.” She went on to describe this sense of relief:

I decided that I wasn’t going to go on the vanilla, as I call it, the ‘vanilla academic path,’ I already decided that I just wasn’t going to—I wasn’t cut out to do the academic thing. It wasn’t heartbreaking at all to not do academic work. There was a relief. But everything gets overshadowed by the ill health. Everything is kind of through a haze.

In this excerpt, Claudia alludes to either not wanting the “vanilla academic path” (i.e., the tenure-track) or believing she wasn’t “cut out to do” it. Either way, as Claudia astutely put it “everything gets overshadowed by the ill health”—which highlights how even her career planning is absent; she is not in a healthy enough state to think about her work future. Everything is focused on her health which influences all aspects of her life. And completing her DPhil after 7 years is almost a footnote in Claudia’s story, since she had already returned from Oxford and had been working on it remotely for several years while working.

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Claudia was still having a hard time making ends meet. She began working in the public sector, in a federal service job that offered a high salary and good benefits. But the job was a really poor fit for Claudia, and she experienced high levels of stress. The work culture was not healthy for her; she told me, “I began drinking heavily. Most people in that job did.” She noted that her health hadn’t totally improved:

I recovered from the anorexia, at least physically, but I went right into using alcohol to deal with all the issues that had led me to be a high-functioning anorexic to a high-functioning alcoholic.

During this time, she had split up with her partner, and found herself in an abusive relationship with an alcoholic. She told me she was in this destructive relationship for four years “because I thought I was worth nothing. It was really bad for me.” She was relying more and more on alcohol to get through her stressful days. The lowest point for her was when she took a job at a department store as store security; she

told me, “I had a DPhil from Oxford in English, and I was working as store security.” She was just not living the life she wanted to live and didn’t know what to do.

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*Socio-economic status is highlighted*

As we view Claudia’s health improving other dynamics in her world move to the forefront. For example, her working class background is highlighted as we see Claudia move from job to job, struggling to make ends meet. She doesn’t have the liberty of pausing on work and exploring her options, she needs a steady income to survive. She takes on roles in the government because of the higher salaries, yet these roles are stressful and lead her back into addiction.

Through these various roles, I view Claudia’s world of work knowledge expanding. Claudia reflected back on those earlier periods in her life, working and trying out so many different jobs. She told me, “I really didn’t know who I was.” She explained how she had been trying to find a career and fit that career around her life but realized that wasn’t working for her. Instead, she needed to exert more control over her work future.

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She sought emotional support from her dad and his family, who helped her think about her work options. Her stepmom helped her identify aspects of work she found fulfilling: work with the publishing companies, teaching, tutoring, writing, editing. There were aspects of academic work that she found highly fulfilling, but she didn’t want the stressful job of an academic. She reached out to her academic mentor who had helped her gain the Commonwealth scholarship, and he connected her with a semi-retired professor who had his own press. She began volunteering for him doing manuscript reviews in her spare time. Claudia got back into teaching at a learning centre and met with students for private tutoring, which she described as a godsend:

I really enjoyed teaching and it improved my sense of self-esteem and helped me get out of this [abusive relationship]. And built up a whole bunch of skill sets.

She also began volunteering for a cat rescue organization, which transformed her life for the better and also helped her gain the strength to get away from the abusive relationship. Eventually, the volunteer editing work turned into paid contracts. She recalls:

My first paid gig went really, really well. So, I thought I'd gained a little bit of confidence that I could start doing this freelance thing. And that's literally how it started.

Claudia's confidence was growing, and she took on more and more paid freelance work, while continuing to teach and tutor. She had switched to a different, much healthier full-time job with another government agency and was now also co-managing a very busy cat rescue organization. She was working an 80-hour work week to fit in all her various work and volunteer commitments. Then, one day, she had this realization:

One day I was sitting by the beach and I did the math. And I thought, I can do it. I can quit my government job and I'm going to go freelance. I'm going to do that crazy thing of giving up a secure government job with a pension.

During this period of transition, as she was focusing on building her business, one of her clients invited her to a retreat centre in an isolated community. She spent the weekend in this community and fell in love with it. She told me:

I just absolutely fell in love with this place. I'd already been thinking that I wanted to live outside of the city. But then I came here, and it was just like, 'Oh, this is where—I don't know how the heck I'm going to do it—but this is where I want to be.' So that was part of what precipitated me quitting the job and going fully freelance was realizing I want to live here. That means I have to be fully self-sustaining in terms of a career.

This was a turning point for Claudia. Claudia reunited with her former partner around this time, and they bought a home together in the small community. She went on to describe how this desire to shift gears in terms of location and lifestyle really meshed with her inner values:

So yeah, that's when that part of my life kind of pulled together a bit and by that time I was comfortable basically letting go of all my teaching commitments—apart from going back and forth doing a bit of teaching, but at that point, it was as much just for personal stuff if anything—so

at that point, I made the full commitment to doing this [freelance work] and it's gone really, really well.

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### *Exerting agency on her work future*

A turning point came for Claudia when she started to gain more awareness of her own desires in the world of work. She told me:

I switched from 'What do I want to do with my life as a career?' to 'How do I want to live my life?' And then 'What work am I going to do that's going to facilitate that?' And I'd always been driven by the other thinking. The 'you decide what your jobs going to be and then you have the life that goes around it.' And I finally realized I know the kind of lifestyle I want to have. It's got to be out of the city. It's got to be with my cats, because I was heavily involved in cat rescue at the time. It's got to be flexible. I want to be my own boss. What can I do?

It's worth noting that this intentional reflection on her career future only took place once Claudia's health was on the mend. And while Claudia was quick to clarify that she continues to have ongoing issues with her health, she has found a better sense of balance. Now she is able to describe what aspects of her working lifestyle really work for her. She described what she loves the most of her freelance work:

I love the flexibility. Well, I mean, there's different components, right? Like in terms of lifestyle matters, I love the fact that I can live here and that I work when I want and where I want. And for the most part, especially now—this was not so much true earlier in my career, but I really do get to work on what I want. And so I find the work itself really rewarding in that sense, because I get to select the projects that I work on and decide, 'Yeah, this is how I actually want to spend 30 hours of my life.' So it's important to me to be able to say, 'Yeah, okay, I'm going to spend 30, 40, sometimes 120 hours of my life on this [project], do I really want to be doing that?' Because that's a big chunk of time. Yeah, so those are the two things that I love; content and freedom.

As Claudia shared these excerpts with me, it was clear that she had a very keen awareness of how she wanted to live her life. The key was deciding how to fit her work around her lifestyle. Claudia went on to describe how her experience in academic settings continues to be relevant since many of her clients are academics, and she can relate to their work environment:

I just wanted to be in it [academia] for the ideas. Which is why I'm happy being the vicarious academic because I get to do all of that and

get to swim around in all the ideas. Plus, I've got enough knowledge of how academia works that when my clients need support, a shoulder to cry on or somebody just to empathize with what they're going through, I can say, 'Yeah, I actually do understand.'

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Claudia is a self-employed editor and writer, running a very successful business for over 12 years. Technological advances allow her to work from home—phone, email or video conferencing are all she needs to connect with clients. She has won a national award for her editing work. She stopped drinking and has been free of addictions for over three years. After 10 years of marriage, she and her second husband separated, and she now lives in a different small, close-knit community that offers her the slow-paced lifestyle that she requires to continue healing her mind and body. She still nurtures her passion for animals through volunteer work and has a family of cats she has adopted over the years. Claudia summarized her career journey thus far:

In terms of where I live and what I choose to do for a living and my overall health, I'm in a better place than I've ever been. So, from the chaos, some good things have emerged. There's still quite a lot of chaos, but from a professional standpoint I'm doing well.

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### ***A story about decisions in conflict***

When I met up with Ruth, she had completed her PhD 10 years ago. In Ruth's story, several dynamics are highlighted, including Ruth's socio-economic status, her awareness of politics and social policies, the gendered role of parenting, and her personal beliefs, values, and ethics. All of these can be viewed as interconnected in Ruth's story. Interestingly, more than any other participant in this study, Ruth clearly articulated how these dynamics influence her story. Ruth was extremely engaged in the process of co-constructing her storied account and she re-wrote large sections of text by herself.

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Ruth started out by giving me a brief synopsis of her early life:

I come from a French Catholic background of people that could have been Protestant in the Protestant ethic kind of sense of the word. My

dad is from a family of 17. My mom is from a family of 11. And the vast majority of my aunts and uncles are in some form of a family business or another. My parents had a farm when I was born. They had cows before I was born, and then they had pigs.

Ruth went on to describe how she grew up working in the family farm business—how at the age of 14 she actually started her own corn business. Ruth did well in school and was accepted into an international baccalaureate program during high school, and then transitioned to an academic pre-university collège d'enseignement général et professionnel<sup>3</sup>, commonly referred to as CEGEP.

Being from such a large family from a working-class background is important to Ruth's story; she is grateful for the deep social and economic changes that gave her the privilege of continuing into higher education and enjoying low tuition fees, an opportunity that was not afforded to children of working-class families like hers in past generations.

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#### *Complex and recursive dynamics at play*

In Ruth's personal narratives her socio-economic status was highlighted early on. I learned of her working-class and farming background, and Ruth repeatedly commented on the amount of privilege she was afforded by being able to pursue her degrees. She comments on this from her early days of beginning at CEGEP, which continues up to her doctorate: she is grateful for the funds that allowed her to continue her education without acquiring any student debt along the way. Yet her personal beliefs and value system are also implicated here: she believes the social system should supply this funding within society, so rather than being seen as a privilege it should be a right. Ruth conveyed her strong beliefs in the socio-political systems of society to me throughout our interviews together, and it was obvious to me that she is deeply engaged in political issues, with a keen sense of social and environmental justice. She was acutely aware of how politics and social policies have impacted her life and was able to describe to me specific political events which she attributes to impacting her life (such as receiving full funding packages for tuition). I believe Ruth's passion for and engagement in socio-political realms, influenced by her beliefs and values systems, are related to her working-class

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<sup>3</sup> This refers to institutions in Quebec's post-secondary system. CEGEPs are typically two-year programs in preparation for university or technical programs.

background. In this way, her personal interests and aptitudes are tied to her personal beliefs and values, and are connected to her family's culture and background, which includes her socio-economic status growing up. All of these function in recursive ways which intersect and influence one another in unique ways—including impacting work-related decisions that Ruth makes later on.

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Ruth is very politically and socially minded, so it's not surprising that Ruth became involved in student politics at CEGEP and later in university. Ruth described the socio-political context as an undergraduate:

I was involved in the student movement in Quebec and in junior-level kind of politics. And there was a referendum and so I was involved a lot in the student associations. You may remember, the Axworthy reforms announced in 1994 that had significant cuts in interprovincial transfers, which meant that there would be much less funding for higher education, so there were massive protests and things. So, I became involved in the executive level of the student associations, which is relevant because my interests in my discipline converged with my engagement in higher-education politics. Eventually, I got exhausted and dropped out of student politics.

Leaving student politics was a low point for Ruth, although she remained connected to politics by participating in the Quebec model parliament and junior-level party politics. So, she continued with her interests in politics, just no longer with student associations. She also talked about being “rescued” during this time by a professor who had funding to hire her as a Research Assistant:

In my field, every undergrad student that was interested, basically, would get a job as a research assistant because there was so much to do. And it was a time where funding was starting to become more significant to study academic scientometrics, like counting publications. The computing was available to do stuff that previously you couldn't do unless you had a big, big, big, big pile of index cards. But it still needed a lot of monkeys to clean it—that was us undergrads. And so, there were lots of jobs in that field that was really booming at the time. The Quebec Government was investing in research about higher education, research about research basically. And so, I was I very lucky—and that ties into my PhD funding—I've never lacked funding which has been a big bonus compared to so many other grad students.

In addition to research work at the university, Ruth took on other part-time jobs to help pay her expenses. She shared with me one of the interesting jobs she had while an undergrad, which highlights her interests in business and technology:

I was a young woman with more than a basic knowledge of IT, which wasn't very common in 1995. So I learned about this job at Industry Canada, they were trying to get SME's—small, medium enterprises—to get websites, and get the internet, and email and all of those. And basically, we had to cold call, and say 'Hi, I'm so and so from Industry Canada, and I would like to connect you to the internet!' It was something ridiculous like that, and we'd be spending the whole day there. But we were paid more than minimum wage, it was a pretty good job for students. And then we'd go to these different businesses. And for me, it was fascinating, it was super fun, because I'd go to these manufacturing companies, like places that made furniture, or clothing importers, or mechanics shops, or all kinds of random things that you don't even suspect exist, right?

When that job ended, Ruth began doing freelance work with some of the clients she had helped connect to the internet. She became skilled in setting up websites and troubleshooting internet issues for clients. Ruth became savvy with the internet early on, starting her own website and writing in it daily—and she began to have a following online. This led to her being featured on TV, and then to landing a part on a TV show on the science and technology channel.

Ruth went directly into a master's degree after her undergrad and continued working as a research assistant. She told me she loved doing research and her master's was great:

The master's was cool because I wrote a grant proposal for a Quebec program and it was funded. There was a professor who agreed to put his name on as principal investigator, but he really did it to humor me I think. We had 250 participants—it was a huge project, over 2 years. So, my master's was funded by that. I was coordinating a team of 15 research assistants, and everyone was doing interviews, and we were transcribing everything, and coding everything. And it was awesome, because it was funded—I never had to worry about money—and learned so much about so much in that time, both project management and research.

Ruth described this period of time as exciting: of writing grants, of disseminating results, writing papers, and taking on smaller contracts, both internal and external to the university. As her master's was finishing, Ruth worked with a different professor and applied for a substantial SSHRC grant on a related topic; that project got funded, too.

Ruth said this was validating since her position on the new research project was elevated; she was no longer a student research assistant but became an associate researcher—a position that was not contingent on her being a student. She was in this role for three years and loved doing the research and managing the project. She enjoyed publishing and disseminating the research, but started to realize that, without a PhD, she could not advance in her career. Ruth told me:

After I finished the master's, I was working for three years as just a professional researcher—but I realized even if I wanted to get into policy-making in my field, everybody had a PhD, that was the cost of entry into the system. There were a lot of people who had been trained through the same programs as me but the people who were in charge of making the decisions, which I kind of aspired to doing, had PhDs. It was the cost of entry to become a decision-maker there and so I thought, 'Okay.'

Ruth had career aspirations to work in politics or government, and believed the PhD was necessary to get there. Ruth relocated to a different province to pursue her PhD at a different university. She told me she wouldn't have done the PhD if she hadn't been fully funded:

I had decided that I would not ever pay to study. And to me, it was very clear that universities greatly benefit from their PhD students and I was not going to be the person who was paying for it. I thought it was fair that the system would pay for my work. And so, I was not going to start until I had funding, and I did, so I came [and started the PhD].

Ruth, who was always interested in politics, enjoyed being in a new province, experiencing things anew. She told me, "It was the most wonderful, interesting place to study. And it gave me great insight into the province." One of the highlights for Ruth at this new University was her acceptance into a unique graduate student residence. She became very involved in the social learning experiences within her residence, such as public lectures and interdisciplinary exchanges. She even became involved in student politics again through her involvement in residence. She met her current partner there, too.

As her PhD was winding down, her attention turned again to her job prospects. She told me:

I never wanted to be a university professor for as long as I can remember. I didn't even know it [professorship] existed as an undergrad. And I did my master's and I still had no notions to be a

professor. When I entered the PhD, it was still not my intention to become a professor.

But at one point near the end of her program, Ruth applied for a faculty position, even though she felt conflicted about it. She told me:

I did apply for one job in the university I studied at. And they had, I think, 150 applicants. And my application was half-hearted. I was not even sure I wanted to do it. But I think I did it because my supervisor wanted me to, or it was kind of the right thing to do. I don't know. I knew I wouldn't get the job.

She told me that was the only faculty position she ever applied for. She shared this story with me, which speaks to the conflict she felt about a faculty work:

There was a professor that told me, he had started his career in government. Then he came back to do a PhD and he became a professor. And he told me, 'You know, I'm not stupid, this is a pretty good gig.' And it's true! I think many professors don't appreciate how much they can do, whatever they want, you have a lot of agency, you can really do some pretty bad-ass stuff as a professor, right? But for me it was not worth the compromise of uprooting ourselves. I could've had a position maybe in the U.S.—I have a colleague, and she got a job in another province. Her husband had no job prospects there, and she's been commuting back and forth—and then she came back for a year, like her sabbatical was for a year, and she was trying to make it work. And it didn't work! And now they've all moved there, and she's miserable! She hates it, right? And so, for me that was not important. I didn't want to have my destiny determined by one single kind of job that I could do.

Ruth did not want her work to dictate where she lived. She wanted more control over her life, which she didn't see possible if she took up faculty work and had to relocate, changing cities and perhaps provinces again.

Ruth found other interesting work opportunities. Through contacts Ruth had from her research projects, she began working with a government research lab with university ties. She stayed there for two years but eventually began to doubt the impact of the research she was involved in. This experience really started to colour how she viewed the academic research enterprise:

So much energy is spent within the academic field, the university field, in a narrowly defined manner, where only the views of your peers matter. But relative to the complexities of problems in our society, I would rather put research dollars towards fixing our world rather than fixing strictly academic problems.

So, Ruth left that research lab. Through her connections, Ruth accepted a new position within the university where she supported faculty research projects, helping academic researchers increase the impact of their work. She described this position as her “dream job,” a position that was a perfect fit with her skills and training, and exactly on track with expectations she had for her career trajectory. However, a few months later Ruth’s family situation changed: she had a new baby to care for while her husband was completing his education and transitioning into the job market. This next period was challenging for Ruth to balance work and family life; through leaves from work coupled with some flexible telecommuting options, she managed to stay with her husband as he completed further training abroad.

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### *Juggling new responsibilities*

The influence of Ruth’s beliefs and values, her family background and socio-economic status, and influence of social policies continue to impact Ruth’s choices and decisions. All of this is viewed over time, and now we see a new dynamic being introduced: the social dynamic of family, responsibilities of parenting, and financial implications of family. Her life is not static, it is constantly changing, and new influences are brought into the mix. These new set of influences plays a central role in this second half of the story: because Ruth chose to tell me “more than” the story of completing her PhD, I learned how she is faced with ongoing uncertainty regarding her work future long after she completed the PhD.

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When Ruth became pregnant with her second child, she felt conflicted about her choices—she didn’t want to give up her secure position at the university yet doubted the feasibility of working full time and securing childcare for two children. Ruth realized the gendered dimension of work was very real: her husband now had a full-time position with a much higher salary than Ruth’s, but a big commute. The difficulty and cost of getting another daycare spot and the unlikelihood of her husband being able to help with pick up and drop off meant that either Ruth would have to deal with a lot more stress, or agree for her career to be put on hold. She resented the lack of childcare supports and flexible work options for working parents in the province where she lived. If they had

moved to Quebec, social support systems would have been better, but they didn't want to relocate. Ruth was frustrated with what she perceived as a dead-end yet combining full-time work and primary childcare responsibility for two young children seemed like too high a burden for her health compared to the monetary and career gains. After three years at her dream job, Ruth quit working at the university.

Ruth was anxious about being out of the workforce for a significant period of time, so she didn't want to stop working completely. She contemplated what kind of flexible work could fit her new reality of raising young children. She wasn't sure she wanted to stay engaged in the work she had been doing at the university. While she enjoyed certain aspects of her university job, she also recognized that she had become critical of the academic research enterprise. She told me she "had a moral problem with that kind of job, helping my university compete against others" and wanted to engage in different work, something that was more meaningful to her—something with positive, immediate, and tangible social impact. She drew a connection between her family background and her work ethic:

And coming from a business background—well, it's not that I come from big business or anything, but I come from the peasantry. I come from a peasant family, I was lucky to benefit from the education I did, but I was coming from, big families, people that valued real work in the sense of material engagement with the world. Right? And so, for me, the belief that the education system would connect to the work we do, became more important.

Ruth wanted her education to be put to good use—she wanted her work to have impact on society and align with her social and environmental ethics.

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### *Ongoing transitions*

When Ruth revised this storied account with me, she wanted to ensure that readers would understand she was in conflict with many of her decisions. She is grateful for the privilege of a university education, yet she remains conflicted by her beliefs and value, her strong interests in social and environmental justice; she wants the work she does to have a positive impact on society. And she found that personal mission to be at odds with the work she was engaged in at the university. So, she began to reevaluate what she thought was her "dream job." This conflict was heightened when she became

a mother of two young children. She is faced with the reality of the gendered dynamic of the workforce and is conflicted between pursuing her career in an environment that isn't aligned with her values or staying at home with the children. Ruth's strong morals and sense of justice are at work when she decides that her work at the university is not as fulfilling as it could be. This sense of justice is explicated through Ruth's explicit awareness of the social-political systems that are lacking in the province where she lives; if the social safety nets were designed differently, she wouldn't need to make the decision she made. However, she moves forward, guided by her beliefs and interests in social and environmental justice, strong self-efficacy, and knowledge of the world of work, and constructs a working life that fits for her and her family.

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Ruth reflected on her skills, her education and work experiences:

I never felt like I only had one skillset. I think a lot of the process of the PhD is not so much giving you skills as convincing you that you only have *one* set of skills that cannot possibly apply to other fields. And I was thankful that that didn't happen to me. I did project management, I managed businesses, I did more paralegal things, and I was doing politics when we had to write bylaws and government policy and regulations and things. So, I know a little about a lot of things, more of a generalist. I felt that enabled me to do so many other things.

What happened next seems like a natural fit: Ruth became her own boss and lets her interests dictate the projects she pursues. In the past five years, she started a small business related to sustainable, low impact living. She is now primarily focused on cooking education, helping her clients incorporate a vegan diet into their lifestyle. She is happy to be her own boss; it gives her the freedom she needs to care for her children, cycling them to and from school and their various activities. It allows her to set her own hours that work for her and her growing family. She is grateful that her husbands' salary covers their family's financial needs for now, so even if her business doesn't pay her a salary equivalent to what she earned previously, they can still manage. She still feels conflicted about the gendered dynamics that underpin her current reality, but at the same time Ruth is happy to have this time with her family, and she expects as her children get a little older, her businesses will expand, or she'll start something completely new. Contemplating her career journey thus far, Ruth proclaimed:

I've done all of these weird disconnected things. I was on TV. And I was in the student protests. And I was an academic. But it all goes together, trust me. This is the story.

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This concludes this second set of storied accounts. For these three individuals, they did not describe the transition from PhD to work as a central feature of their story; instead, their stories focused on navigating other transitions in life, such as parenting and health, and the ways in which they negotiated work to fit with their ever-shifting lives. There are some dynamics that are similar within these stories. For example, gender is highlighted in Brandy and Ruth's stories as we learn how their work decisions are affected by their role as mothers. And all three individuals describe coming from working-class backgrounds, which continued to influence their work decisions over time. In order to understand the choices they made you need to understand the context of their lives. These storied accounts also highlight how careers are always in motion, as two of the three individuals were navigating workplace changes when we spoke. The notion of ongoing transitions continues in the next set of stories, which highlight a return back to school after a significant period of time in the workforce.

#### **5.2.4. Stories of transitions back to school and beyond**

This final set includes the storied accounts from two individuals whose pathway into the PhD looks different than the other six individuals. In the other storied accounts, all six participants continued from bachelor's to graduate studies with little breaks in between. These two stories are different- in these two stories, both participants had spent significant time in the workforce before deciding to return to complete their PhDs. In both cases, they made the explicit choice to return to school, looking for a "career change."

Since both of these storied accounts are premised on navigating a career change, both accounts feature dynamics that relate to the role of the labour market, their past work experiences, and the role of networks and relationships in fostering their work transitions. As well, both participants exhibited a high degree of self-efficacy, and a deep awareness of their personal interests and aptitudes, which supported their career transitions.

## ***A story about building work relationships***

Marco completed his PhD 13 years ago. Marco's story highlights his work experience, his personal interests and aptitudes, his socio-economic status, and social influences of networks and relationships.

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Marco grew up in a working-class family from the depression-era Prairies, a family of five, whose parents always worked hard. Marco had a paper route in elementary school and began working part-time as a teenager in customer service and retail. Marco did well in high school, was the class valedictorian, and started studying journalism after high school. But he didn't stay long at college and within his first year transferred to a general Arts degree at university. Marco's brother and sister both went on to technical colleges, so he was the first in his family to go to university.

Marco continued working part-time while in university, and after only 3 semesters he had saved enough money to take a year off, to travel and work. He spent the next year in different African countries, taking up short-term work in community development and agro-tourism. This experience made a huge impression on Marco: he loved the cultures and the people he met, and although he returned home and back to university, he decided to find a way to return and work abroad.

This motivated him to work hard at university—so after completing his bachelor's degree, which he changed into a double major due to his new interests, he went straight into a master's. He anticipated that a master's degree would give him more credibility with international work. He took on teaching work while completing his master's degree, teaching a few classes per term at local colleges. But he didn't love teaching and was keen to return overseas and explore living in another country. Marco finally completed his master's and returned overseas to work. But while the culture and people were all he remembered he quickly became disillusioned with the work:

I had gone to Kenya briefly after my master's for a term to see if I could find lucrative work there. I thought having a master's in international development would mean something, but it was ultimately frustrating because at that time they were just hiring people off the street, and so I have a master's and they just wanted to put me in a YMCA. So, I tried that for a semester and then I came back.

Marco returned to Canada and continued teaching in the local college system, but still contemplated international work, just in a different capacity. Then, through a chance encounter with one of his former professors, an opportunity presented itself:

I ran into a former professor of mine who had risen up to an administrative role at the university. And he said, 'Oh I was thinking about you the other day, I know you like this international stuff, I think you'd be interested in this project in East Africa.' So he introduced me to the guy who was putting this project together, and we, you know, smoked cigarettes and drank coffee for a year, and talked about this project. And I went out to Africa for the feasibility mission basically, a one-month contract to help draft the implementation phase of the project, to look at the sites and see what we'd need and everything. I ended up writing the terms of reference for the training part of the project. And then we came back, got it approved and started hiring people. So that's how that came about. I'd been to East Africa before, I'd liked it, and after 4 years there, I absolutely loved it.

Marco worked on this government-funded development project in East Africa for four years. This experience was a turning point for Marco. He took on many different roles over those four years, lived in rural and urban areas in various East African countries, learned Swahili, and built up a network of peers and colleagues in the field of international development.

When the project started to wind down, one of Marco's contacts connected him with a Canadian non-governmental organization (NGO) looking to develop an international program. They were keen to use his expertise to launch some new programming. He was offered a permanent role managing a new department and tasked with creating the new program. In those early days he was considered an expert in the field and wasn't offered much guidance from upper management; they trusted him to build the program and the only advice he was given was, 'Don't embarrass us and don't cost us a lot of money.'

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### *Work relationships are key*

Marco's story highlights his socio-economic status, his work experience, interests and aptitudes, and the importance of networks and relationships to his career growth. We learn how Marco was working while in high school which continued throughout his university life, in order to support himself and pay tuition. He describes himself early-on

as being attentive to his work future: he was motivated to complete the master's degree in order to find fulfilling work overseas. We learn of his work experience growing over time, which aligns with his interests and aptitudes for work in his field. Throughout Marco's story we see how his work relationships and networks support his career journey; he finds opportunities through his networks, and others seek him out because of his expertise in the field of international development.

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Marco was very good at his job and built up the department and its programming—the staff contingent of his unit grew to almost 20 people in the next decade. Marco was very loyal to the organization, but after 10 years of being in the same position, Marco began thinking about a career change. He wanted a new challenge but wasn't sure what he wanted to do. It had never occurred to Marco to complete a PhD, but he contemplated his knowledge of the field of international development. He told me:

What I realized was that I was actually seen to be a bit of a leader in terms of what we were doing, but I had no philosophical basis for what we were doing. I had no grounding in terms of what was the history of international development, what are the objectives, qualitative or quantitative outcomes of what we were doing, can we test this, can we measure this? I realized that there wasn't a lot of literature available on what was then a new field; there was some interesting research being done in the European Union, but not much in North America. So that's when I said, 'Ok I'll start looking at this' and I put together a package [for the PhD].

Marco decided to invest in his education again, in order to grow his knowledge in the sector he had worked in for over 15 years. Very few PhD programs existed in his field, and none within Canada, and he didn't want to relocate—he wanted to continue working while pursuing his PhD. Through relationships he had built in the local universities he connected with faculty members from three different Faculties, and they helped him design an interdisciplinary program so he could explore different facets of international development. He continued working full-time in the top leadership role of his unit in the NGO while working on his PhD.

Working on the PhD while working full-time proved to be very difficult. Marco managed a very busy office at work, tried to work on his studies at home, and had a fair

bit of travel for work. He struggled juggling work life, school life, and life at home. It became increasingly difficult to satisfy so many competing priorities, and his marriage suffered, ending in divorce. He began to doubt his goals for completing the PhD:

A couple of times I took semesters off and was trying to re-inspire myself to go back; and on more than one occasion I almost withdrew from the program and it wasn't necessarily because I was going to change the world with any great opus.

One of Marco's mentors reminded him of his purpose for doing the PhD; he told him, 'You're not an academic, you're an administrator, you're not going to be an academic, you're doing this degree to help you and help the field and get some credentials.' Marco admitted that pride kept him motivated and he would've felt like a failure if he didn't finish. He reflected on his goals for completing the PhD, which wasn't to become an academic, but to improve the sector he was working in. His goal was to write a "practitioner-friendly dissertation."

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#### *Motivation to complete the PhD*

Marco continued working full-time throughout his studies. He did not take up typical PhD student activities, such as TA work or participate in academic conferences. His work world continued to exist in a professional office setting, with his studies on the side. Marco commented on his inability to engage in campus activities while completing both of his graduate degrees:

And I was working full time, not full time, almost full time when I was doing my Master's as well, and, you know, academically I would have gotten more out of both of those degrees if I had not been distracted by other things, and took more classes, and thought more deeply and things like that, but most of them I was either against the clock or against life—I didn't have time to sort of sit under a tree and ponder these questions, you know.

Marco never intended to stay in academia after completing the PhD—his motivation for pursuing the PhD was to further his professional knowledge in the field of international development. He expects the knowledge gained from his PhD to be invaluable, in addition to the credential itself having value. Marco attributes the knowledge gained in his PhD to be essential to his career growth: he believes that because of his "expertise" in the field of international development, more opportunities came his way.

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Marco completed his PhD after seven years. He was so relieved to have it behind him, but at the same time he hadn't really achieved the "career change" he was looking for. He had all this new knowledge but returned to work in the same department he had been with for over 17 years now. He just wasn't feeling very challenged there anymore. Luckily, through his connections, a short-term opportunity presented itself: a chance to join a small team in the public sector, where he could put his new knowledge and skills to the test. With support from his employer in the form of a secondment, Marco jumped at the opportunity, especially since it involved overseas work again.

This was another turning point for Marco—eventually the short-term contract turned permanent and Marco left the unit he'd built up over the past 17 years. It was time for a new challenge, this time with industry and in government, to lead the field of international development at the policy level. Marco described the next couple of years as a period of tumultuous change, of "metamorphosis" as he adjusted to his new reality as a leader in his field and in the public sector. His family life had also changed: he had remarried and welcomed his first child to the world.

Marco remains with the public sector and is very proud of the growth and direction of the unit under his leadership. He sees himself as a policy maker, leader and practitioner in his field. He credits his PhD experience for growing his confidence in his knowledge, in his expertise in the field, including the ability to critique choices made by other stakeholders, and lead the field in new directions. He told me "We're punching above our weight in BC and in Canada, so that makes me very happy."

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### ***A story about happenstance***

When I first met Neill, he had completed his PhD 7 years earlier. Neill's story highlights his personal interests and aptitudes, his world of work knowledge, and his social sphere of networks and colleagues. His story also highlights external influences such as political upheaval and the employment market.

Neill's story, similar to Marco's, highlights the influence of world of work knowledge. In Neill's story, he has a gap of 20 years between completing his bachelor's

and his graduate degrees. The influence of his social system is important, since he has contacts, colleagues, and networks through his various work experiences to support his career growth. His story is also influenced by two external dynamics: Neill makes mention of the “disastrous” prospects for work, speaking to the labour market shortage for academic, tenure-track positions; and he speaks repeatedly of political changes within government which affected his employment prospects.

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Neill grew up in a middle-class family who worked predominantly in health care. His parents had post-secondary certifications, and other extended family members had attended university. After high school he took part in a youth leadership program, which gave him the opportunity to travel across Canada for several months, as well as a long stint abroad. He recalls being the “only white guy in town” when he lived in a small town in the South Pacific for five months. He cites this period as being pivotal for his growing understanding of how the world works, his commitments to social justice, and his interest in politics. His spark for activism was lit.

During his bachelor’s degree he began working with the student paper on campus. This volunteer work quickly led to part time employment as a journalist with a local newspaper. From the moment he graduated, he had a full-time job as a journalist. He stayed in journalism for the next nine years, which he enjoyed; but he could tell that if he stayed in journalism permanently there wasn’t a lot of upward career mobility. Neill decided he didn’t want to be a journalist for the rest of his life and was up for a new work challenge. He wasn’t sure what, so decided to travel again: he stayed in France for six months, honing his French, then travelled through Europe, the Middle East, and across the Asian continent.

When Neill returned to Canada, he worked freelance with various news agencies, and got involved with local non-profits, organizing social justice and political campaigns. Eventually he landed a permanent job as a journalist for a well-regarded specialty publication. This work was satisfying since it had stable hours and decent benefits; Neill worked with them for more than three years. Then he met someone who lived on the other side of the country—and a long-distance romance wasn’t going to

work—so Neill looked for work again. He secured a role in communications with a trade union and moved across the country.

Neill and his wife got married, and Neill contemplated writing a book about Canadian archaeologists. He said, “I always had this interest in archeology. When I was a kid, I didn't want to be a hockey player, I wanted to be an archeologist.” He finally got moving on writing the book; his wife had connections to the publishing business, so this helped him throughout the process. His life became punctuated with working his stable job in the day, then writing in the evenings. His vacations from work became opportunities to travel and research details for his book. He also connected with the editors of a journal in archaeology and began writing articles for the journal.

Neill stayed with the union for six years but couldn't see a future for himself there and decided to move on. He always had a strong interest in politics and had made some strong connections through his role in the union, so he applied for a communications role in the public sector. He landed a very appealing job with the government and him and his wife happily relocated.

The communications role was a highlight for Neill; he was no longer simply reporting political news as a journalist; he was part of it. And the work was exciting: the pace was not always predictable, and he had to react to new developments quickly. But while the role was interesting, there was one major flaw with this job—it relied on the current government to remain in power. After close to five years of working in the public sector, the party was set to lose the next election; as Neill said, “That was one freight train you could really see coming.”

Neill began laying plans for his next big career move, asking himself, “So what do I want to do with the rest of my life?” He was still working studiously in his spare time on his book, and he considered how to merge his personal interests in anthropology with his career. How could he shift from writing and researching in his spare time to doing it professionally? He had always thought of doing a PhD and decided this was a good time to do it since, as he said, “I've got nothing better to do.”

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### *Motivation for the PhD*

Neill, similar to Marco, was motivated by employment outcomes to return to school. He was looking for a career change—he was in-between jobs and thinking about his work future. In this next excerpt, Neill describes why it made sense for him to go back to school:

And so, I knew that things were not going to be very good after the election. And here I am, 'So what do I want to do with the rest of my life?' And actually, when I was studying French a few years before, and I was in Paris, I stayed at a student residence which had a number of Canadians in it including this woman from Saskatchewan, and we became friends. And she was doing her doctorate studies. And I was thinking, 'Well, maybe I should do this now.' But I was actually horrified at how hard she had to work. So, I didn't do it at that time. But then here it is another few years later, and I thought, 'Well, this is my last shot. Do I really want to do this? And anyway, I've got nothing better to do.' And by then I was writing a book to do with archaeology because my wife's in the book business. So, academia didn't seem so terrifying, especially because I had nothing better to do.

In that excerpt, Neill explains that the timing was right for him to go back to school for the PhD. He later explained to me that he thought he could “market” his niche area in archaeology, meaning that he hoped that work opportunities would present themselves around his specific interests in his niche area in archaeology. Although he did not fully anticipate how the PhD would support his career, he wanted to merge his aptitudes in writing and research with his interests in archaeology.

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As Neill had predicted, the party lost in the next election. But Neill had already decided to return to university to complete his master's degree. He had over 20 years of work experience under his belt and chose a graduate program that aligned with his career goals. He told me:

I thought I could market this archeology thing because I become aware of a university in the States that offered this special program in archaeology that fit in with my particular interests in this field.

It was an online program which took Neill two years to complete by distance. He had some savings to make ends meet but described this as a very difficult period, taking on freelance work to try and pay the bills. It was also a big change of pace for Neill, to go

from working with a huge team in the government to working mostly at home, isolated and trying to keep himself motivated. He continued writing articles for the journal and began working on a second book in his spare time. Neill completed the Master's, and decided on his next steps:

So, I graduated in 2003. And nothing really came out of that, so I thought, 'Well, I'd go on and get my doctorate.' I thought, 'Nothing better to do.'

So, Neill searched for a PhD program that would fit his niche area of interest:

I looked at a number of options—political science and archeology. My degree is in archeology. So where was a place I could go? University of Toronto has a program, but it involved a difficult language requirement. Then there was a guy who at that time was doing research work in a field closely related to mine, at a university closer to me.

Neill was ecstatic to be accepted to the program since it was not an easy program to get into. He found out that having published a book was one of the things that helped him get accepted. He had to relocate for a few years but him and his wife made frequent trips to see each other. Neill wasn't well funded and stayed afloat with savings and income from being a teaching assistant. Around the time that Neill was finishing up his comprehensive exams he was commissioned to write two more books. He relocated home to work on his dissertation and on the books. Ever since he started the PhD program, he had entertained the idea of becoming a professor. He told me:

I went and did the PhD I only had to be there for a couple of years and then I could come down and get through my comps and then do the dissertation. So anyways, I did all that and it had its ups and downs, but I enjoyed doing it and because you can TA and stuff like that. I was kind of keeping the wolf from the door. I finished off and by then the job market for newly minted PhDs was best described as disastrous.

So, Neill completed the PhD, but realized there wasn't going to be an academic job waiting for him. To stay afloat, he worked freelance and took up sessional teaching; he hoped that he might be able to return to his previous work in politics after an upcoming election. But the election happened, and the party didn't win. Neill told me, "It was really, really bad when we didn't win;" this was the lowest point on his journey plot map. Neill thought to himself, "What the hell am I going to do now?"

The next 18 months were a difficult time financially. Through one of his networks, Neill landed a professorship at a nearby college. But after a year the program got

cancelled by the government. Reflecting back on how much of his career had been influenced by political and economic changes he said, “I sort of feel like my life has been trying to stay one step ahead of the bean counters and not always successfully.”

Out of the blue, an interesting opportunity presented itself: a multi-year research contract came up, to lead the research and write a book on a topic in his field, related to his area of interest. It was through an American organization—so initially Neill didn’t even know if he qualified. But several of his colleagues from different institutions encouraged him to put together a small team and write the proposal. He told me:

We had a better bid than anybody else. And apparently one of the things—it probably didn’t hurt that I had this endorsement from my faculty advisor. But I later asked around and they [the hiring team] said, ‘Well, you have a track record of writing books.’

So, they got the bid and Neill became lead researcher and author on the project. This was a turning point for Neill, not only because it was a stable income for the next few years, but because it really merged his personal interests in archaeology with his professional skills. His full-time job became researching and writing a fully commissioned book in his area of interest, something that in the past he had always done on the side.

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### *Happenstance*

Neill’s story highlights the ways he pursued his own personal interests and intentionally constructed his career (including his graduate degree programs) to fit around his personal interests in archaeology. He was intentional about which master’s and PhD programs he enrolled in, since he wanted it to align with his personal interests. He also exhibits a high degree of personal agency in authoring and publishing books in his own time, which lead to receiving commissions to write more books, and then later to landing the multi-year research project. Neill’s story shows how he navigated around those external influences of labour market shortages and political upheaval, to construct a working life around his personal interests and aptitudes. Neill’s intentionality of career planning reminds me of the concept of *planned happenstance* (Mitchell, Levin and Krumboltz, 1999)—where work opportunities may appear to be a product of “luck” or “being in the right place at the right time,” but they are actually the result of intentional career preparation. I believe Neill’s story shows happenstance in practice; it was not

“luck” that got him the bid for the fully commissioned book, it was the result of the intentionality he had applied throughout his career planning.

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This project helped to situate Neill as an author and researcher in his field. He is now well connected in the field of archaeology: he is editor of a well-respected journal and president of a non-profit society. He continues exploring his other interests as well, taking on freelance roles that suit his interests in the field of politics. Neill is well connected to the publishing world and has now published five books, with one more being published next year. Neill is contemplating writing his next book on a completely different topic; he told me, “I’m always thinking about, ‘What’s my next book?’”

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This concludes this final set of storied accounts. These two accounts emphasize experience in the world of work, and the ways in which this manifested in both Marco and Neill’s successful “career change.” For example, through years of work experience they had both built a substantial network of colleagues, which proved helpful when navigating work changes. Their world of work knowledge also supported them in intentionally designing their PhD programs to suit their interests and aptitudes. All of this led to successful navigations through their PhD and into new and interesting work that suited their lifestyles.

### **5.3. Careers in context**

In this chapter, I introduced three patterns of experience I found across all the participants’ narratives and attempted to show these findings in a holistic way through the storied accounts. These accounts highlight how lives are in motion, how careers unfold over time, and how careers need to be understood in context. The storied accounts highlight how PhD students’ lives are complex, with a web of unique dynamics and influences which affect each person differently. Pathways to the PhD vary, knowledge and experience in the world of work varies, and each individual’s personal, social, and external context is unique. I used the *systems theory framework of career development* (Patton and McMahon, 1999) as a lens to view these shifting dynamics, in order to highlight how these dynamics intersect in unique ways, and also to highlight

change over time. Completing a PhD is a lengthy process, and during this time individual's lives are in motion, their life realities are changing, and so too are their motivations and desires for work.

Ultimately, these are stories of change, transition, and agency. While I heard stories about constraints and influences that heavily impacted people's lives, participants still made informed and intentional decisions regarding their work futures. This leads me to a deeper understanding of the concept of agency, one which cannot be decontextualized. Agency is more than an individual's capacity to make free choices; choices are never "free" of constraints, of personal, social, and external influences. Instead, the concept of agency is more nuanced: people navigate around these constraints, acknowledge the influences in their worlds, and exhibit agency in the choices they make. Interestingly, Savikas' (2011) defines agency as "the means by which something is done" (p.180), which implies an acknowledgement of navigating through context. I argue that attempts to support PhD students in their career planning must be centred in an understanding of their lives in context, rather than decontextualized and generic supports that continue to dominate the landscape for PhD students.

In the next and final chapter of this dissertation I compare the findings from this narrative inquiry to the neoliberal policy argument on PhD students and "careers." I tease out some of the patterns in these storied accounts which speak to the assumptions of the neoliberal argument, such as desires for academic work, motivations for completing the PhD, and how transitions are experienced. I argue that these storied accounts should be viewed as *counter-narratives* to the neoliberal argument and discuss how the neoliberal argument actually perpetuates the failed academic discourse.

## Chapter 6. Counter-narratives of PhD graduates

In this dissertation, I explored how PhD graduates construct their careers over time outside of academic settings. I examined the policy stakeholders' beliefs that PhD students are not being adequately prepared for "careers." I found this argument to be entrenched in a neoliberal discourse with several underlying assumptions: that employment in tenure-track positions has traditionally been the career pathway of PhD graduates, that all PhD students want academic jobs, and that the purpose of the PhD is employment. Guided by a set of postmodern and constructivist career theories, I engaged in a narrative inquiry with eight PhD graduates from various social science and humanities backgrounds to learn how they constructed their careers over time outside of academic settings. In the previous chapter I shared three patterns of experience that were represented across these eight cases, namely that 1) schooling is part of career, 2) a complex web of dynamics influences participants' decisions, and 3) participants exhibit agency as they construct their careers. In order to view the uniqueness of these patterns, the storied accounts that I co-constructed with participants were shared. These storied accounts allowed the reader to view careers in context, in order to more fully comprehend the ways in which the neoliberal argument provides an overly simplistic and decontextualized reality of PhD students and graduates working lives, one which does not accurately represent the career paths of many PhD graduates.

The results of this study have transformed my understanding of careers. Careers are not mapped out in advance, and they are not planned for or constructed out of context. Context is everything. A career unfolds over time just as a life unfolds over time, and is always in motion, never static. I now understand that "constructing a career" refers to the decision-making process that one engages in an ongoing and iterative manner – and these decisions are not simply employment decisions, they are influenced by various dynamics and context of one's life. Decisions are not made in isolation; they need to fit the context. All of this became apparent to me as I listened and learned from the eight participants who took part in this study.

In this final chapter of this dissertation, I discuss the findings from this study in relation to the neoliberal argument regarding PhDs and their career preparation and explore the implications of this study in supporting PhD students' career preparation

while at the university. I begin by reviewing the conceptual contributions of this study, namely the insights from participants' personal narratives framed through a career development lens: that each individual is unique, and context is everything. Through these eight storied accounts, I heard various motivations to pursuing a PhD—not all of which were motivated by employment outcomes. Motivations are not stagnant and change over time as lives change. Work decisions are heavily impacted by individual, social, and environmental-societal influences, consistent with the systems theory framework of career development (McMahon and Patton, 2019). I draw attention to the ways in which the neoliberal argument presents an outdated conception of PhDs, one that is not grounded in the reality of their lives. I argue that these storied accounts can be viewed as *counter-narratives* (Mutua, 2008) to the neoliberal argument and that these findings should be taken up by various audiences including researchers who explore career outcomes of PhDs, by policy stakeholders of higher education, and by career professionals at the university.

In the second part of this chapter, I discuss these counter-narratives in relation to these larger educational debates regarding school, work, and career. I argue that these counter-narratives are essential in shifting the assumptions embedded within the policy argument, and within research in this area. In particular, I explore the harm caused by this neoliberal discourse to students, parents, and those working with PhD students and graduates (faculty members, staff, administrators, employers)—in particular the ways in which the assumptions which frame the neoliberal argument perpetuates an expectation gap in higher education, and actually reinforces discourses of *failure* amongst PhD graduates. I argue that future research in this area should be aware of its potential to reinforce these discourses through their embeddedness to these neoliberal policy frameworks.

In the final section of this chapter, I advocate a conceptual shift in policy and practice in order to disrupt this neoliberal discourse. Rather than being guided by outdated and neoliberal assumptions, PhD student's career planning should be guided by contemporary career theories and practices, which ground the experience of PhD students in a scholarly discourse. Essential to this grounding is the notion that school is part of career—recognizing that students are building careers while on our campuses. Careers do not begin when a student leaves the university, and careers are not synonymous with *work* or *employment*. An understanding of how careers are

constructed in context with one's life is essential to helping students reclaim their agency – so they can engage in career preparation that fits their lives, rather than generic professional development that works to compartmentalize their PhD work as “school-related” and thus less valuable than “professional” work.

I begin with a discussion on the findings from the previous chapter, and the ways in which the neoliberal discourse does not accurately represent the career paths of PhD graduates.

## **6.1. Neoliberal argument does not accurately represent PhD graduates' career paths**

In this narrative inquiry I set out to explore *how PhD graduates from social science and humanities disciplines construct their careers outside of academic settings*. In the previous chapter I described three overarching patterns of experience in the narratives shared by participants in this study, namely that: 1) schooling is a part of a career, 2) a complex web of dynamics influences participants' decisions, and 3) participants exhibit agency as they construct their careers. I included the storied accounts of these eight participants in order to highlight these overarching patterns and the unique ways in which these individuals constructed their careers over time. The storied accounts were organized into three sets of stories, with each set emphasizing particular patterns of transitions, such as the transition from school to work, ongoing life transitions while navigating work decisions, and the return to school and ensuing life transitions. What I learned from the eight participants who took part in this study was a nuanced account of each individual's lives and the context of work within this life. I learned that the assumptions foregrounding the neoliberal argument on “careers” does not adequately represent their experiences.

Policy decisions and programmatic changes have been based on some critical assumptions that I explored. Policy stakeholders present this career preparation issue and describe PhD students and PhD graduates in very generic terms, as if they were one entity. There is an assumption that *all* PhD students pursue the PhD for guarantees of employment, that *all* PhD students want academic “careers,” and that the only reason PhDs pursue employment outside of academic settings is due to a labour market shortage for academic [tenure-track] work. This argument lacks an understanding of the

complex motivations which guide PhD students to pursue a PhD, the transformative ways in which the knowledge, competencies and skills gained in a PhD program may manifest in different ways over time, and the complex web of influences which impact people's work decisions. The argument fails to consider an individual's own context or their own agency, as individuals come to learn more about themselves over time (constructions of self) and the world of work. In this section I describe the ways that the neoliberal discourse fails to capture the lived experiences of PhD graduates.

### **6.1.1. Not all PhDs want academic jobs**

Inherent in the neoliberal discourse is a belief that all PhDs want academic jobs on the tenure-track. The assumption is that people complete PhDs in order to land academic work, with the goal to become a tenured faculty member. This assumption has set up a polarity, where academic work on the tenure track is viewed positively, while work in other roles or other contexts is less desirable and considered a "Plan B" that one only engages in if Plan A (work on the tenure-track) does not pan out. The phrase *failed academic* has been popularized to capture those who don't succeed in landing an academic job and must pursue employment outside of the academy. Labour market shortages for academic work are blamed as the sole reason why PhD graduates work outside of academia. Social media, news reports, and higher education blog posts continue to reinforce this mainstream narrative and draw upon the policy argument within the grey literature to support its claims.

What I heard from participants ran counter to the assumption that all PhDs want academic jobs. Not all PhDs want academic jobs, and their decisions involve much more than labour market shortages. Half of the participants in this study (Claudia, Holli, Marco, and Ruth) never intended to pursue academic work post-graduation. The other four participants (Brandy, Mason, Neill, and Sofia) had desires at varying points in time while a PhD student to work on the academic track, with two of them picking up contract teaching and research work. Yet these four participants also described reasons why academic work no longer fit their lives. In particular, they discussed the highly competitive nature of academic work including the need to relocate, something they felt was part of pursuing an academic career path. This was a major deterrent for all of them. For example, Brandy told me, "I would need to travel around the country and that was just not going to work for us"—her use of the pronoun "us" exemplifies that she is

not only thinking of herself but needs to take in the needs of her whole family. Mason told a similar story, where he couldn't imagine asking his partner to quit her job and follow him whenever he needed to relocate for an academic job. Ruth described how picking up her family and moving around the country for every job was just not how she wanted to live her life; she wanted more control over her life and did not want her work to dictate how she lives. Both Sofia and Holli described their impressions of faculty life, noticing a poor work-life balance, and they decided this was not how they wanted to live their lives; for example, Holli stated "this is not the life I wanted to live."

Understanding participants' context, in particular the personal, social, and environmental-societal dynamics that influenced their work decisions, is integral to understanding how these participants constructed their careers over time. Expectations revolve around the assumption that PhDs are employed in academic contexts, and that the most respectable career pathway for a PhD graduate is the academic track. Yet this assumption does not consider the reality of people's lives, or how they desire to live their lives. This neoliberal argument is premised on the notion of sameness, that each PhD student's life is the same, and that academic work is a good fit for everyone. This, however, was shown to not be the case in this research. This is consistent with other emerging research in the field. For example, McAlpine and Amundsen (2018) in their longitudinal narrative study, identified the construct of *identity-trajectory* to describe the unique ways that work-related decision-making takes place for PhD graduates. They identified both individual and structural factors that impact individual's decision-making. The results of their longitudinal study are well-aligned with the Systems Theory Framework of Career Development (McMahon and Patton, 2019) that I have situated my results within. I would encourage more research in this area to better understand how PhD student's career-related decision-making is in constant flux based on the unique ways in which individual, social and environmental-societal dynamics impact their lives. This application of a systems approach to the career development of PhDs is a unique contribution of this study.

In the next section I describe various motivators that these participants talked about while pursuing the PhD.

### **6.1.2. Motivations to complete a PhD are not one-dimensional**

Embedded within the neoliberal discourse is the assumption that education is directly linked to employment, that one engages in a program of study in order to increase their likelihood of employment success. The implication is that people's motivations to complete a PhD are tied to employment outcomes, and as described earlier, with the "gold standard" being an academic job on the tenure-track. In this narrative inquiry, I learned how motivations to complete the PhD are not one-dimensional. There may be multiple motivators at once, and these can change over time depending on context. The storied accounts highlighted how motivations were not static for these participants: their motivations changed over time as their lives changed. These participants had different entry points into the PhD: six of them continued straight from their undergraduate studies into graduate degrees, while two of them returned to complete their PhD after significant time in the workforce. I heard different motivations based on these pathways. Motivations to complete a PhD are complex, and dependent upon various factors that are always in flux (as noticed in the systems theory framework of career development). What follows are the motivational patterns that played a role in these participants' decisions to pursue the PhD. In many cases, as their lives changed, so did their desires regarding work.

#### ***Motivated by employment prospects***

Of the eight participants in this study, only two of them explicitly described their motivation for completing the PhD as tied to career outcomes. Marco and Neill both returned to complete the PhD after significant periods in the workforce, after many years of professional work experience. Both of them were explicit in their motivation to complete the PhD: they were looking for a "career change" and saw the PhD as an opportunity to open doors, learn new knowledge, and become an "expert" in a disciplinary field. Marco described his goal in returning to the PhD as strengthening his knowledge in his chosen field. Neill found himself in-between jobs, where the timing was right for him to go back to school; he hoped it would open doors for him into academic work. For the other six participants, employment prospects were not a major motivator of their decision to begin the PhD. Three of them expected to end up working as professors (Mason, Brandy, and Sofia) yet this desire emerged over time, rather than being a sole motivator to begin the PhD in the first place.

Several participants described an expectation that they would pursue academic work post-graduation. Holli, Ruth, Sofia, and Mason all described the academic track as being the only work option they were shown. Typically, they described the people surrounding them, their supervisors, others in their department including other PhD students and peers, their parents and significant others being influences. For example, Ruth told me she applied for one academic position near the end of her PhD and she only did it to please her supervisor. In Holli's storied account, she repeatedly discussed not being shown other employment options, and even completed a postdoctoral position because she did not know what else to do. Claudia coined the term "vanilla track" to describe the career path to tenured professorship, and told me there was an expectation (since she was at Oxford) that she would continue on the "vanilla track"—implying that failing to do so was a failure on her part. Yet she was unable to even contemplate the "vanilla track" as she struggled with an eating disorder throughout her studies. For several of these participants, academic work was not their first choice, and for many it never was.

### ***Expectations and perceptions of academic work***

Three individuals (Sofia, Mason, and Holli) explicitly described an expectation that they would pursue an academic (tenure-track) position after their PhD. Two of them at some point were planning to become professors, while one never had the desire for an academic (tenure-track) job.

While various personal, social, and societal factors played into each individual's choice to not pursue academic work, all three individuals described an awareness of the competitive nature of the job market for tenure-track jobs. They described the more likely reality of taking up contract work as sessional instructors or contract researchers (such as postdoctoral fellows) which would require years of relocating for various jobs. Each individual described the prospect of relocating for work to be one of the most unappealing aspects of working in academia.

### ***Motivated by a sense of belonging***

Six of the eight participants in this study completed their degrees in linear progression from undergraduate through graduate studies and completion of the doctorate. All six participants described their early university life positively: they did well

academically, took up work opportunities on campus such as teaching assistantships (TA) or research assistantships (RA), and were encouraged by mentors and/or peer groups to continue to the PhD. They described their lives mainly existing on campus and enjoyed the intellectual work at the university and had strong social networks. They valued higher education, and this was reinforced in their social realms with peers and supervisors, and with family and partners.

I heard several of these participants describe what I interpreted as “a sense of belonging” at the university, during their undergraduate studies. For example, Claudia, who suffered from anorexia and a complicated family situation, described school in her undergraduate years as “my safe place.” For Holli, who suffered from depression and a lack of self-efficacy, she spoke of school as being “the one thing I was good at.” Mason described how “school saved me” as he reinvented himself as an academic after several years spent without clear direction or purpose. For Ruth, she felt a strong sense of belonging with student advocacy groups on campus. I believe this sense of belonging within the university environment played a major role in these individual’s desires to continue into graduate work and onto the PhD.

However, throughout participant’s narratives, I heard this sense of belonging shift as people’s lives changed. As participants progressed further in their graduate studies, their lives changed in significant ways with new responsibilities emerging, such as child-rearing and commitments to partners. For all six of the participants who progressed linearly in their studies, they began to doubt whether academic work was the best fit for their new realities. This led me to understand how a sense of belonging also shifts: a sense of belonging at the university as a student does not necessarily translate into a sense of belonging for long-term academic work. This is consistent with Super’s (1980) *life-span, life space approach*, where the centrality of work in an individual’s life shifts depending on what other life-roles they take up. For several participants, as roles of parenting or roles of being a partner become more significant, their occupational roles shifted and become less salient.

### ***Motivated by funding and work opportunities***

For five of the eight participants, grants, scholarships, and funding packages were integral to their motivation to complete the PhD. All of these participants elaborated on the role that funding played in their decisions to complete the doctorate. As a

reminder, both Claudia and Mason were fully funded to complete their graduate work at prestigious institutions in the UK and US. Similarly, Holli, Ruth and Sofia were all successful in their scholarship and grant applications throughout their graduate studies to fund their PhDs. Receiving scholarships and grants was a source of pride, and an acknowledgement of the good work they were doing. Several participants noted they would not have completed their PhD if they were not paid (funded) to do so. For example, Ruth told me explicitly, “I wouldn’t have done it if I wasn’t paid. It is work just like any other kind of work and I should be paid for my work.” Clearly, funding played an integral role in their continuation and completion of their graduate studies.

These individuals also described their motivations as grounded in the work they enjoyed doing at the university, such as research, research trips and the social aspects of university life. Six of the eight participants spoke at length of the various activities they got involved in on campus during their graduate studies. For most of these participants they were engaged in academic environments for almost 10 years, and they voraciously took up work opportunities while on campus, in the form of teaching work, research work, or policy work on campus. They built knowledge and expertise through paid employment in various ways. A theme that emerged as I listened to these stories was how school became like “work” for these participants: they were paid to be there, were constantly applying for new work and grant opportunities, and worked on various different and interesting projects. They sought out funding opportunities and applied for research grants. While the funding was somewhat precarious, they cobbled together an income to support their livelihoods. For example, Sofia was paid to be in field schools overseas, and mentor undergraduate students, in addition to teaching work she took up on the side of her studies. Ruth was engaged in multiple different research projects, speaking engagements and policy work with the student union. Holli worked on different research projects, while Brandy picked up a multitude of RA, TA, and advocacy work. Mason had multiple research grants which funded his research visits, and he built connections with other institutions as a visiting scholar. Of these six individuals, only one participant did not describe university life as a “working” life. This was Claudia, who readily acknowledged that her poor health overshadowed many aspects of her life, including her work life.

The other five participants were engaged in work while a student, building their knowledge and expertise. They went beyond the confines of taking courses and doing

their own research and they no longer saw themselves as a typical “student:” they became a part of the university community. They spoke of the freedom they had to explore their own interests and take up opportunities that presented themselves. So, although they officially had student status until they defended their theses, their identities were evolving: Ruth saw herself as a visiting scholar, as she traveled to various universities across the country and disseminated her research; Mason saw himself as a researcher and visiting scholar; Brandy saw herself as an activist, as she got more engaged with student activism. What I heard from this group of participants was the way in which their lives at the university were “working lives” rather than “student lives.” Whether in the form of scholarships and grants, research or teaching contracts, these individuals describe an environment of being paid like “work.” And being paid while completing the doctorate is motivating, as Holli quipped, “I was getting an education and being paid to do it, so why wouldn’t I do it?” This highlights the roles of “student” and “worker” blurring together. This is significant, since it aligns with socially-constructed career theories, where school is viewed as part of one’s career path, rather than seeing “career” or “work” as something that begins upon completion of an educational program.

In this narrative inquiry, I heard about complex and shifting motivations for completing the PhD. While employment prospects may be one motivator, it was not the sole and dominating motivator for these individuals to complete the PhD. The neoliberal discourse is not attentive to any of these other motivators, insisting that employment prospects reign supreme. This is an important finding, since so much of the research in this field is dominated by quantitative data – usually student surveys or secondary data on employment outcomes. Policy researchers who contribute to the grey literature in the Canadian context rely on student survey data as evidence that PhDs complete doctorates in order to pursue academic work. Yet these complex and shifting motivators will not show up on a survey, since surveys are static representations of only one point in time. This speaks to the need for different types of research – such as interpretive, qualitative, and longitudinal work –to be able to view changes over time. For example, if the eight individuals in this study were asked to complete a survey while a PhD student, they may all have checked “yes” to a question asking them if they planned to work in academia post-graduation. Yet, these surveys only measures motivation or desire *at one point in time* and don’t account for shifting and multiple motivations. They do not account

for the complexity of motivations, or the ways these shift and change over time depending upon one's own contextual dynamics.

### **6.1.3. Experiences of transition varies**

The neoliberal discourse routinely asserts that PhD graduates suffer difficult transitions to work outside of academic contexts. Yet stakeholders do not define the concept of a transition and rely upon anecdotal stories of PhD graduates who take several years to find satisfying work. So, a “difficult” transition appears to be related to length of time settling into satisfying work, but it is not conceptually well-developed. I argue that a theoretical conception of transitions is necessary to more accurately understand how transitions are experienced by PhD students. In this section I will describe *transitions* as I heard about them from participants and analyzed through the lens of two theoretical conceptions of transitions, the work of William Bridges (1980) and Nancy Schlossberg (2011).

Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995) defined a transition as “any event...that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles” (p. 27). A transition is defined by Bridges (1980) as “the natural process of disorientation and reorientation that marks the turning points of the path to growth” (p. 5). Both of these theorists refer to transitions as being a subjective experience and can be experienced differently by individuals. Schlossberg's (2011) *4S Model of Life Transitions* explain why some people navigate through a transition differently than others, with the 4S's referring to *situation*, *self*, *supports*, and *strategies*, all of which make up a unique context for how a transition is felt. What I heard from participants aligns with this subjective nature of transitions; participants' experiences ranged from some having deep anxiety over the ensuing transition post-graduation while others experienced relief. And since the experience of a transition is a subjective experience, it is difficult to quantify some transitions as “more difficult” than others. How they experienced this transition from school to work was based on their context: the various personal, social, and societal factors that make up their lives. This speaks to the subjective nature of transitions.

Next, I describe what I heard about both anticipated and unanticipated transitions.

## ***Anticipated Transitions***

Participants talked to me about a particular kind of transition – what Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg (2012) describe as *anticipated transitions*. These are expected events that individuals expect to occur, and one can plan for. All eight participants retrospectively described how they felt about the completion of their PhD, and the planning and preparation they engaged in before that period. Their experiences were not all the same, and there were highly subjective differences in how they approached this anticipated transition. I refer back to the systems theory framework of career development (Patton & McMahon, 1999) to remind the reader of all the contextual differences that situate each participant's life. This is consistent with Schlossberg's (2011) *situation* and *self* (two of the 4S's which make up the unique context for how a transition is felt).

## **Anxiety regarding their work futures**

Three participants described having a considerable amount of anxiety as they contemplated their next steps post-PhD. Considering this group of PhD students has been studying and working in university settings for up to 10 years or more, it is not surprising several of them experienced anxiety contemplating their future work prospects. As Holli told me, "I've always been a professional student; I would've kept going if I could"; and Mason noted, "I had no idea how the world worked." It is important to note that the anxiety they experienced began well in advance of the transition event itself (graduating from the PhD program), and all three of these individuals described a persistent anxiety that grew stronger as they got closer to their completion point. They described a desire to plan their next steps post-graduation but did not feel well supported in this. Mason and Holli told me they did not receive any career planning support. Holli spoke of her supervisor wanting to help her but not knowing what to do, and how she had had tried the career centre but "found no help there." Mason felt totally unsupported by his supervisor and his institution; he told me, "No one was talking about jobs outside of academia." For Sofia, she sought out career counselors and took part in career planning activities for graduate students, which she said helped her "think about her options." Yet, she described how she needed to hide this from her supervisor who discouraged this, considering it a distraction from her real work of writing her thesis.

Bridges (2009) identified three zones that an individual will navigate through during a transition: the ending zone, the neutral zone, and the new beginning. For these three participants, they completed their PhDs, which was their ending zone (characterized with tying up loose ends, completing tasks in order to reach closure). They found themselves in the neutral zone where they did not have satisfying plans for their next steps. The neutral zone is identified as “a place of uncertainty that has been compared to being ‘between trapezes’ or ‘walking on quicksand.’ In the neutral zone, nothing seems stable or routine” (Neault, 2014, p.137). Mason continued applying for sessional work to bring in an income, while hoping a research-track appointment would pan out. Holli accepted a postdoctoral position since she had nothing else lined up. And Sofia worked part-time while she decided what her next steps would be. But none of these solutions were permanent and they continued experiencing anxiety about their work futures.

I believe this neutral zone is the transition period that is referred to by policy stakeholders embedded in the neoliberal discourse. When they refer to a “difficult” transition I believe it is this period of work uncertainty they are referring to, prior to Bridges’ (2009) third zone, called the new beginning. This zone is described as when “individuals become established in the next phase of life” (p. 137) or when “life starts to feel normal again” (p. 137). For these three individuals I interpreted their “new beginnings” to begin when they settled into new routines with work they were satisfied with. They no longer suffered anxiety regarding their work futures. For these three individuals, progressing through their transition (all three zones) lasted between 2-5 years. And while this may seem to be a lengthy transition period, it is likely that finding permanent and satisfying work within academic contexts also takes a significant period of time.

### **Relief at completing the PhD**

The other five participants described a very different experience of their anticipated transition: they felt relief to have completed the PhD. Several of these individuals had been working outside of academic settings while completing the PhD, so completing the PhD was almost a footnote in their narrative. For example, in Claudia’s case, she had been working remotely on her DPhil for several years while working full-time, so it was simply a relief to be finished. For Marco, he completed the PhD while

working full-time so he felt relief to have less on his plate. For Neill, he had continued to take on contract work while completing the PhD, so now he had more time to dedicate to that. For Holli and Ruth, they quickly adapted to life outside of academia: Holli had already begun an internship at a non-profit society, and now was eager to have more time to dedicate to that work. For Ruth, she reached out to her research network and easily transitioned to a research management role. Referring to Bridges' (2009) zones of transitions, they seemed to navigate through those zones without much difficulty. It is important to notice that these experiences of transitions are completely absent within the neoliberal argument.

### ***Unanticipated transitions***

The transition of completing the PhD was not the only transition I heard about. I heard about many other transitions that were unanticipated as participants' lives unfolded. Participants told me how they made the transition to other work roles, to roles of motherhood and parenting, of relocating geographically, and making a transition both mentally and physically to healthier states of being. I learned that the transition from school to work cannot be captured as a single point in time. For example, while Claudia felt relief at completing the DPhil since she was already working full-time, she spent almost five years working in various public service positions before finally deciding to work as a self-employed editor—and those five years brought with them a series of personal and work-related transitions. This example highlights how transitions are a process that unfold over time. And this example from Claudia is only one example from the group of eight participants: I heard about transitions beyond the context of school to work, with the experience of completing the PhD only one of many career-related transitions participants encountered in their lives.

This is an important contribution since it puts PhD student's transitions to work in context—by viewing this experience through the lens of transition theory we learn that transitions are an essential part of one's life; they are inevitable. Transitions to work are not necessarily unique to PhD students moving into employment outside of academic settings. A large majority of the research on career outcomes of PhDs has focused on PhD student mobility—or the transition to work outside of academia. There is a history of describing a skills “mismatch” between the skills PhDs bring with them to employment settings, and the skills that employers wish these individuals had. The area of

professional development for graduate students was premised on this notion of a skills mismatch. Researchers work to identify what factors contribute to that mismatch, or what factors contribute to a successful match. I argue that conceptually framing this issue from the lens of transition theory allows for new and unique understandings of how to prepare PhD students for the inevitable transitions that will ensue as they graduate from their doctoral programs. Rather than conceiving of a “difficult transition” as a length of time to employment, researchers should pay more attention to the subjective nature of transitions, recognizing how individual’s unique contexts impacts how they experience the transition from school to work. Researchers should explore how a theoretical conception of transitions might lend new insight to understanding how transitions are experienced by PhD students and how they can be better supported while at the university.

#### **6.1.4. PhDs are well-suited to work outside of academia**

Policy stakeholders assert that PhDs are “trained” for work in academic contexts, making them less suitable for work outside of academia. They often advocate for skill-building programs and professional development programs, all in service of making PhDs more “workplace ready.” As I discussed earlier this often presents as a discourse of deficiency, where PhDs are viewed as unskilled, or unprepared for work in “real world” contexts. But the narratives from these eight participants tell a completely different story, with each of them working outside of the academy in unique and interesting roles.

Each participant constructed their work life to fit their own unique contexts. When I met with these individuals, they worked in the following roles:

- Brandy was director of a non-profit society, and was transitioning to freelance work as an organizational consultant
- Claudia is a freelance editor, with a home business
- Ruth has several home businesses focusing on environmentally sustainable practices
- Mason is a researcher and analyst within the public sector

- Marco works in the public service, as director of a crown corporation
- Neill is a freelance researcher, author, and writer
- Holli is a research consultant in her own research firm
- Sofia is a self-employed health professional

Through their various narratives, I gained an understanding of two important features of their work choices: a desire for autonomy in their work, and a fluidity in how their disciplinary knowledge is used. I will comment on these patterns in the following two sections.

### ***Desire for autonomy in their work***

Most participants spoke of the need for autonomy in their work—what became satisfying for them was the ability to have ownership over their work, and the freedom to dictate their work-life balance. It is interesting to note that six of the eight participants were self-employed, contracting their services in various ways; the two individuals who were not self-employed (Mason and Marco) work in the public sector, and both spoke of high degrees of autonomy in their roles. Many mentioned being used to working independently, and how being self-employed was similar to being a PhD student, where the income came through fellowships, grants, teaching and research work. For those who are self-employed, while the income sources may be different, the processes of finding work are very similar.

Holli, for example, described at length how she craved work that allowed her to set her own hours and fill up her days in ways she wanted to, which might be working in the mornings and evenings but pursuing her own interests in the afternoon. She told me “I needed to be my own boss.” Ruth explicitly talked about the ways in which PhD students manage multiple jobs and set their own schedules; she said “there was no difference when I started my first home business. I had already been my own boss for so many years in grad school.” She went on to describe how her home businesses allow her to prioritize her strong ethics in social and environmental justice—something she always struggled with when working for organizations whose ethics did not match her own. Mason described the ways his role in the public sector is similar to the research work he used to do in the PhD. Speaking of the PhD, he said, “There was lots of

ambiguity and having many balls in the air at once and cooking up multiple projects at once.” And in his current role, he told me, “There's lots of areas that I don't know anything about, so I have lots of learning to do, which sort of plays to my strength I suppose. I'm not going to lie; I've been sort of a professional student my whole life I suppose.” He went on to tell me how he is often given more freedom in his role than others might:

I still have the luxury of being given time. They probably give me more breathing room than they should because of who I am, because of my background [having a PhD]. They're just like 'just leave Mason alone, he'll be fine'—something good usually comes out in the end.

Clearly, this pool of PhD graduates gravitates towards independent work options, allowing them to continue to have freedom and ownership over their work.

### ***Use of subject matter expertise differs***

Marco and Neill are the two participants who completed their PhDs after many years of working in professional contexts. These two individuals made intentional plans to return to the university and complete the PhD. They both invested significant time in crafting a doctoral program to suit their career goals. In Marco's story, for example, he shows how the contacts and professional relationships he had before starting the PhD were instrumental in helping him design an interdisciplinary program that suited his professional interests. Similarly, Neill sought out a PhD program that aligned with his research interests, and he hoped would support his career goals. In both cases, these individuals expected their PhD research to align with their professional work in terms of subject matter expertise. Both Neill and Marco continue to work in roles where they use the subject matter expertise gained in their PhD programs. Their knowledge (and perhaps the credential) has been critical to the opportunities that presented themselves. For example, Marco works in international development, drawing on theory and expertise he studied during his PhD, and continuing to keep abreast of the discipline. Similarly, Neill writes books in his particular area of archaeology and is considered an expert in his field.

This contrasts with the other six participants in this study whose current work does not necessarily rely upon the subject matter expertise they gained in their PhD programs. For them, they describe the skills and capacities they built as a graduate student as being essential to their career growth, rather than the disciplinary knowledge

they studied or researched. For example, Claudia is a freelance editor. She credits some of her success to understanding academia, since many of her clients are faculty members and scholars. Brandy is now a consultant and contractor in organizational dynamics and the subject matter is no longer essential to her work. For Holli, her skills and knowledge in research are used, not the subject matter expertise of her PhD studies. For Sofia, she relies upon skills she honed in her graduate studies for her work in health care such as communicating to lay audiences, teaching experience and research skills. Ruth, similarly, relies upon her skills in project management and the ability to take risks in order to be comfortable with her home businesses. For Mason, he uses his skills in project management, writing and research for his work in the public service. So rather than using their content knowledge, this group of individuals found their graduate work to be essential in *how* they work rather than *what* they work on: their roles have shifted to focus on process rather than on content. For each of them, they pivoted away from their subject matter expertise and use their transferable skills, competencies and abilities in ways that transcend their content expertise.

Use of subject-matter expertise can also change over time. Brandy, for example, began working in a specific non-profit because of her subject matter expertise gained through her academic work. Over time, however, she became less interested in using her disciplinary knowledge and more interested in organizational development. She now works as a consultant in organizational dynamics, where her subject matter expertise is no longer related to the work she does. Neill described being flexible in the subject areas he works in, relying on his ability to adapt to different work contexts. Since he has broad interests in multiple areas, he told me he doesn't feel constrained by being an expert in only one niche area. He told me:

So yeah, I have experience in archaeology. And then of course before that, I worked in politics. My next book, it could well be about politics, nothing to do with archaeology at all.

So, although he currently draws upon his subject matter expertise in archaeology, Neill is able to adapt since he had interests in multiple areas. This was true for Ruth as well, who exhibited a high degree of flexibility in terms of the subject matter of her home businesses. It appears that PhDs are not confined to their subject matter expertise, but may actually be inspired to shift, learn and grow in new and interesting areas to suit their own interests and shifting contexts.

Recognizing these patterns is an important contribution of this study. Current PhD students themselves can gain insight from learning where former PhD students end up working, in order to better understand their own career prospects. From my own work with graduate students, I know they are hungry to learn more about the types of roles available to them, and the potential to be entrepreneurial and self-employed might be new concepts for some students. It can also be eye-opening for students to learn that they may not use their subject-matter expertise in their work future—that the research area they've engaged in so heavily at the university might not be the expertise they take with them into the world of work. Recognizing these common patterns would also be helpful for career professionals who counsel PhDs at the university.

### **6.1.5. Counter-narratives of PhD graduates**

Through this narrative inquiry, I walked alongside eight individuals as they shared with me how they constructed their careers over time. I learned about the complexity of their lives and how their employment decisions mirrored the context of their lives. Rather than hearing about motivations for completing the PhD that are solely dictated by employment outcomes, I heard about various motivations for completing the PhD, and the ways that motivations shift and change over time as one's life is in motion. Desires for academic work were not at the forefront of these decisions for any of these participants. I heard how this group of individuals faced transitions in their lives, whether anticipated school to work transitions or unanticipated transitions. I learned how their desires for independence in their work helped them take risks and design their working lives to fit their personal lives. I heard from highly-skilled, highly-educated individuals; these are not stories of deficiency—instead they are stories of strength, intelligence, and resilience. In exploring a retrospective view of career, I was able to gain insights as to how these PhD graduates' working lives shifted and changed over time and identify patterns of experience that are a new and valuable contribution to the field.

I challenge the current neoliberal framing of the “problem” that PhD students are inadequately prepared for “careers.” I believe these storied accounts can be viewed as *counter-narratives* to the neoliberal discourse which insists that graduate students only complete PhDs in order to secure academic work. Counter-narratives are defined as “stories/narratives that splinter widely accepted truths about people, culture and institutions” (Mutua, 2008, p.133). Counter-narratives are stories which bump up against

“official stories” or “popular truths” and provide alternative perspectives. These storied accounts “talk back” to the dominant discourse that PhDs pursue work outside of academia only as a “poor second choice,” and highlight how PhD students’ decisions regarding work are not solely determined by labour market shortages for academic work. These counter-narratives speak to the need to understand lives in context, recognizing that personal, social, and societal factors influence individual’s career paths in unique and often unexpected ways. These counter-narratives beg for a reconsideration of how career preparation for PhD students is conceived, highlighting how this neoliberal discourse genericizes the realities of PhD students’ lives.

In the following quote, Lueg, Bager and Lundholt (2020) assert that counter-narratives are important in drawing attention to marginalized positions. They write:

Stories revealing these marginalized views can be called counter-narratives...Counter-narratives resist another narrative (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004, p. 1), this one often being, or being perceived as being, more powerful. This simple rule indicates the assumption of two narratives in confrontation and apprehension. Most affirmatively, counter-narratives can be interpreted as creative, innovative forces fostering beneficial societal change; forces holding productive potential for progress, development, as well as for ethical issues such as justice and accessible resources. (p.4)

The storied accounts highlight the inadequate explanations used by policy stakeholders within the Canadian context, and how the argument draws on a static, one-dimensional conception of career. The research approaches predominant in the grey literature are not attentive to the ways in which PhD students’ careers change over time, nor are they attentive to the ways that personal, social, and environmental-societal dynamics impact decision-making. Instead, analyses are routinely dominated by analyzing the student experience at one of two static points in time: either while a student; or, post-graduation, without accounting for context. Policy governing this topic has been informed by research dominated by quantitative data which lacks an understanding of PhD student’s experiences over time and past graduation. I argue that richer conceptual frameworks grounded in career development theory and a shift to interpretive research methods would enrich this research area, allowing for more nuanced understandings of the diversity of PhD students’ working lives in order to better support PhD students in their career planning while at the university.

In the next section of this chapter, I explore the reasons why these counter-narratives are so important. I discuss the ways in which the neoliberal argument is harmful in perpetuating an expectation gap which further fuels the *failed academic* discourse.

## 6.2. The neoliberal argument is harmful

*I have puzzled over this neoliberal argument since starting this study, asking myself why and how these neoliberal discourses are so entrenched in our society. How is it possible that learning itself is seen as superfluous, and employment gains are seen as the sole purpose for pursuing a degree? I know that this is what I was socialized to believe. Listening to these eight participants describe the context of their lives and their decision-making processes over time helped me understand how: the reality of people's lives are so complex, and because there is so much complexity, it is easier to align with generic explanations. It is its generic simplicity that allows these discourses to replicate so easily within society. The neoliberal discourse thrives on generic, overly simplistic explanations, such as purporting that all PhD students are the same, that all PhDs want academic work, and the only reason they pursued a PhD in the first place was to land an academic job. These explanations work because many people can align their experience to something that is generic; anyone can "see" themselves in a generic explanation.*

*I have a collection of anecdotal stories that align with this school to work narrative. As an example, my partner was fully-funded throughout his two graduate degrees, and his dissertation was nominated as one of the top 10 STEM dissertations across the country—yet it took him 1.5 years to find his first job in his field of engineering. I have a multitude of other people's stories that also fit into this same narrative: they completed a graduate degree but took a long time to find work. These stories are explained as a failure of the university to produce "career-ready" graduates. The neoliberal discourse is premised on the notion that the goal of a university degree is to be prepared for the workforce. This neoliberal ideology is so rampant within our society, so that when PhD students leave the university without a "career" (that is, without a job lined up), it is seen as a failure of the system. The underlying premise is reinforced: that education is training for a job.*

*Since a neoliberal discourse equates the value of a university education to employment, it becomes an explanation that many people can replicate. And it becomes a story that our society's members tell one another; everyone knows this story; everyone agrees how it works—and these stories back up other stories. And within all those similar stories, no one is looking to see "what's different here?" What is the context here? How are these not the same? And the experiences continue to be oversimplified, and generic. It benefits the neoliberal ideology when the collective consciousness reinforces these simplistic notions.*

Throughout this study I have sifted through the landscape of this educational issue and now recognize the harm caused by the neoliberal discourse. In this section of the chapter, I outline three specific ways in which the neoliberal discourse is harmful. First, I discuss the expectation gap that is created by valuing a degree in terms of workplace readiness and explore how this further perpetuates the failed academic discourse. Next, I describe how a colloquial understanding of “career” is damaging to students. Finally, I briefly describe how the deficit discourse embedded within professional development programming for graduate students contributes to reinforcing these harmful assumptions.

### ***Expectation gap fuels the failed academic discourse***

I argue that the neoliberal discourse has been largely responsible for creating an expectation gap regarding the purpose of a PhD. As described in Chapter 2, an expectation gap is where students, parents and other members of society view university degrees as training and preparation for jobs (Cote & Allahar, 2011), where learning itself is seen as superfluous to this goal (Axelrod, 2002). For decades now, scholars of higher education (Axelrod, 2002; Cassuto, 2015; Giroux, 2002) have voiced concerns about marketing the value of higher education in instrumental terms such as *work-related skills*, *skills training*, and *employability*. Research on student development and student engagement has noticed this trend of careerism within the student body. Browne and Russell (2014) note that in the last two decades the majority of students identify gaining meaningful employment as their main motivator in attending higher education.

This trend of careerism relates to an expectation gap where students and parents expect that a university degree translates into immediate job security. Research shows that university graduates fair better *over time* in terms of salary and wages (Browne & Russell, 2014), yet there are only certain programs with ties to accreditation bodies (such as nursing, teaching, engineering, law) where the university degree is training for a particular profession. Most programs in the social sciences and humanities (where this study is situated) have no direct relationship to particular occupations. This creates dissonance between what is expected and what is received: hence the term, *expectation gap*. Since there is an expectation of workplace readiness post-degree, students are more likely to feel a sense of “failure” (whether of themselves or of the system) when completing a degree and finding no job lined up.

The discourse of the *failed academic*, a PhD graduate who does not work in an academic context, is tied to this expectation gap—in particular, tied to the assumptions embedded within the neoliberal discourse. The policy stakeholders engaged in this argument perpetuate this expectation gap by continuing to assume that the sole purpose for engaging in the PhD is employment outcomes, and that the traditional career pathway of a PhD graduate is academic work on the tenure-track. The discourse of the *failed academic* is connected to this assumption that PhDs have traditionally followed an academic career path. Yet, I have shown that historically this is not the case since the 1970's (see Geiger, 1993), where academic work was already highly competitive. In addition to this, the competitiveness for academic jobs has continued to be well documented for the last 20 years. In the storied accounts participants described how their motivations for completing PhDs were not necessarily tied to employment outcomes, nor did they all want academic jobs. Yet, these assumptions continue to be repeated and reinforced; there remains an *expectation* that PhD graduates are prepared for roles within academia, and if they are *not* (or do not want to) they (or the university system and its members) have failed. So, the neoliberal discourse, by perpetuating these faulty assumptions, contributes in large part to the discourse of the failed academic. Research on career outcomes of PhDs that is situated within these policy frameworks also reinforces these assumptions and contributes to perpetuating this expectation gap.

The failed academic discourse continues to replicate because the underlying assumptions embedded within the argument go unquestioned. The highly subjective experiences and unique personal, social, and environmental-societal contexts in which PhDs live is invisibilized. Their lives are not the same, their experiences are not the same, and their decisions regarding work are not the same. I argue that these counter-narratives, by showing a different version of PhD graduates' realities, can contribute to recognizing the underlying assumptions of this discourse. These stories, which do not align with the generic explanations, are necessary to re-examine the neoliberal argument with a new lens.

### ***Colloquial conception of “career” is damaging***

The conception of “career” as popularized within the neoliberal discourse is misleading, inaccurate, and I would argue, damaging to students. A colloquial usage of

“career” is used, one that is synonymous to *job*, *work*, or *occupation*. The current framing of the neoliberal argument views PhD “careers” as an event that takes place post-graduation, synonymous to starting a new job. This perspective assumes that the role of “student” is separate from the role of “worker,” because there is an assumption that the purpose of education is training for work. Therefore, in this mindset, a student is planning and preparing for a “career” (i.e., work) that begins once the program of study is completed. However, as I showed through the storied accounts, the roles of “student” and “worker” blur together, as PhDs engage in various types of professional work while at the university. They are not waiting for their “careers” to begin; school is one of the many activities that make up their career. Their lives on campus are part of a career which they have already been constructing over time as part of their life process.

The policy stakeholders in the Canadian context have polarized conceptions of career by popularizing “careers” as being either *academic* or *non-academic*. The terms *academic career* and *non-academic career* are consistently used to demark work within the academy (on the tenure-track) and work outside the academy. The persistence of the term *non-academic career* to describe those working contexts in opposition to what they are not (*not academic*) sets up and again reinforces the failed academic discourse. In addition, these policy stakeholders describe *non-academic careers* using generic terminology, such as work with *industry*, *for-profit* companies, and *not-for-profit* agencies. They do not draw upon occupational classifications or other measures used by career professionals. The inaccuracy and polarization caused by these terms cannot be underscored. This colloquial usage of “career” plays into the failed academic discourse and creates anxiety: as PhD students prepare to leave the university, they feel they must make a “choice” about their “careers”—about the work they will engage in for the rest of their lives.

The neoliberal discourse is rooted in dated conceptions of *career*. Compare the neoliberal conception with the conception of career as defined by the Canadian Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners (2012):

Career is a lifestyle concept that involves the sequence of work, learning and leisure activities in which one engages throughout a lifetime. Careers are unique to each person and are dynamic; unfolding throughout life. Careers include how persons balance their paid and unpaid work and personal life roles. (2012, p.2)

This definition contrasts with the neoliberal conception in many ways, but namely, that career is “a lifestyle concept,” and involves more than one’s occupation. This conception of career aligns with what I found in participant’s narratives: where careers unfold over time throughout a lifetime; where careers are dynamic and attentive to varying influences and dynamics in one’s world; where careers include paid, unpaid, *and* personal life roles. The neoliberal conception of “career” exists in a vacuum, detached from an individual’s personal, social, and societal context. It is reminiscent of the job-matching traditional perspectives, such as the *trait-and-factor* and *personality-environment* approaches, where the goal was to train individuals for a particular kind of work, one that was a “good fit” for their skills, experience, and traits. But this kind of career preparation is known to be one-dimensional, as it does not consider the complexity of people’s context, nor does it consider the complexity of the environmental-societal factors at play in the 21<sup>st</sup> century world of work, including the inequitable structure of opportunities for work. These structural barriers could be seen throughout several of the storied accounts, in terms of gender roles and responsibilities for parenting, in terms of working-class socio-economic status, and in terms of varying abilities due to health conditions. In the neoliberal discourse, all of these contextual factors are ignored, and generic approaches, such as skills-building programs, are promoted. The colloquial usage of “career” is evident in most of the research literature on PhDs and career outcomes. The emerging area of PhDs and career pathways is the exception to this, and I would encourage other researchers to take up postmodern and constructivist conceptions of career that are grounded in career as a lifestyle concept.

I explore this more in the following section, where I outline how professional development programs for PhDs play into the neoliberal rhetoric in harmful ways.

### ***Professional development approaches perpetuate a discourse of failure***

Professional development programs for graduate students were developed at many Canadian universities in the last decade and a half. These programs were created in response to policy stakeholders who criticized the lack of workplace readiness for graduate students. These are primarily skill-building programs intended to support students in gaining *transferable skills* which are seen as desired by employers outside of academia. However, as I’ve explained in Chapter 2, these programs are guided by a

deficit approach, where graduate students are seen as unskilled, and reinforce faulty assumptions that PhD students are “failures” who do not have “skills.”

Couched in the professional development discourse, which is guided by neoliberal assumptions, students blame the university for failing them, and feel this scramble to “get skills” that will translate into employment outside of academic settings. Yet the professional development approach simply reinforces the same neoliberal assumptions that a PhD is training for a job. This makes sense in a neoliberal orientation, where students are often seen as “consumers.” Browne and Russell (2014) note that:

The evolution of postsecondary students as consumers has been underway for some time but has certainly accelerated as the amount of money students pay in tuition has soared. As consumers, students want to ensure that they “get what they pay for.” (p. 374)

I cannot help but view these professional development programs as a response to the neoliberal insistence of workplace readiness, aligning with a discourse where students are viewed as “consumers.” I’ve come to understand that the notion of responsibility for career preparation is highlighted in this debate: who is responsible for career preparation at the university? According to the neoliberal discourse, universities are responsible for ensuring students who graduate are employable. This “failure” to be “career-ready” is seen as a responsibility of the university system. In response to these critiques, universities have created professional development programs, with a focus on skill-building as career preparation. These programs in effect turn the responsibility back to the students themselves: it is now *their* responsibility to pursue their own professional development if they want to be “career ready.” The blame and failure for securing a “career” (i.e., work) post-graduation now falls back on the students themselves—and the discourse of the failed academic shifts back to the student.

In addition to their ill-devised rationale, these programs have not been proven to better prepare PhDs for transitions out of the university or for work. At least in Canada, evidence of the success of these programs is based almost entirely on student satisfaction surveys, not longitudinal evaluations which analyze their effects on students and graduates post-graduation. In my experience, these programs are situated within a colloquial discourse, where “career” is synonymous to “job,” where students are provided options to help them “choose” between either *academic* or *non-academic careers*. By

presenting all-or-nothing choices, this approach perpetuates unrealistic expectations of what a “career” is and produces anxiety in students as they believe their career future rests on this one choice. This reliance on skill-building does not prepare students for the complex world of work they will encounter in the future. Rather than an integrated approach to support PhD students’ career planning, these skill-building approaches are decontextualized from their lives and from the world of work: students are told to “get skills” and prepare for occupations that they don’t yet know exist for them. This neoliberal approach is attached to an outdated conception of career, which is not attentive to the complex and changing world of work. This approach falls prey to neoliberal ideas that individuals pursue post-secondary studies for the sole purpose of securing a good job.

Instead of this one-dimensional purpose, a focus on career development could better support students in navigating their unique contexts. The Canadian Standards and Guidelines for Career Development Practitioners (2012) defines career development as “the lifelong process of managing learning, work, leisure, and transitions in order to move toward a personally determined and evolving preferred future” (p.2). Career professionals who draw from socially constructed career frameworks would also advocate for supporting students in building a set of career competencies to help them navigate the complex world of work. McMahon, Patton, & Tatham (2003) comment on the needs for the worker of the future

While technical and job-specific skills sufficed in the past, it is increasingly being accepted that the worker of the future will need a more comprehensive set of meta-competencies that are not occupation-specific and are transferable across all facets of life and work. The economic value, to the individual and the nation as a whole, of a workforce equipped with these meta-competencies cannot be underestimated and their development cannot be left to chance. (p. 3)

I advocate for the importance of supporting career development, in addition to professional development, for PhD students.

These counter-narratives are important to help unsettle these deep-rooted assumptions. It begins by recognizing that a PhD is not simply training for a job. Seeing the PhD as training for a job is a self-fulfilling prophecy, since the only job that it could be training for is academic work, which is not the desired outcome for many PhD students. This reliance on perpetuating the belief that a PhD program should train students for

particular jobs also does not prepare students for the complexity of their work futures. Instead, we need to work on shifting this discourse, unsettling its underlying assumptions, and viewing the potential of PhD students to find satisfying work outside of academic settings.

In the next, and final section of this dissertation, I describe the various conceptions and discourses that need to be disrupted in order to better support PhD students in their career planning while at the university.

### **6.3. Shifting conceptions and discourses**

*People send their kids to school so they will get good jobs. Everyone who pursues a PhD wants a good job. I want a good job. But believing that securing a good job is the sole and only purpose of a program of study undermines the learning inherent in the educational process: all of the knowledge, skills and capacities built up over time become ignored in this discourse, and outcomes related to employment reign supreme. Inherent within the exploration of this study are questions of responsibility, of agency, and support. According to the neoliberal discourse, universities are responsible for ensuring students who graduate are employable. But is that a fair and balanced assessment of responsibility?*

*I have for so long equated schooling as preparation for work, putting the responsibility solely on the university. I think back to my own experiences at the university, and I ask myself what kinds of help did I ask for? What role did I play in trying to figure out my next steps post-degree? I can say with certainty: almost none. I recall going to the career centre once, in my third year, to find career advice; but when I was there I didn't know what I was supposed to do or say, so I looked at a few job boards and said, "I don't need any help, thanks." When I consider my partner's situation, he firmly believed he would be head-hunted for work after his degree. It came as a shock to him when he completed his PhD and didn't have job offers coming in. And because of this blind spot, he had not engaged in any career preparation while at the university. I come back to these two experiences and realize now that we had put all of the responsibility on the university, on the notion that just by virtue of completing these degrees, we were more employable. But I had not considered what I did - or didn't do; and I didn't proactively engage in any career development while at the university. I didn't realize career development was a thing—or at least a thing I needed to engage in—in order to successfully make that degree “work” for me. I equated university degrees with jobs and felt things would fall into place for me with work. Yet, I blamed the university system for failing me (as many others have), while failing to recognize my own personal responsibility to engage in career planning. And this failure to see myself as personally responsible is again tied to the neoliberal discourse—because I was told repeatedly by everyone around me:*

*parents, program advisors, friends and family, and society in general, that being in university would help my job prospects. So, I expected that just by virtue of completing those degrees, I would be more employable. This is the fallacy. This is the harmful nature of the neoliberal discourse.*

The results from this study have changed my perspective on the notion of responsibility for career preparation. And through these eight participants and their personal narratives, I see how important students themselves are in this mix. They are the only ones who fully understand their own context, their lives, and their situations, in which to plan their work futures. It is not solely the responsibility of the university, but a shared responsibility between students and their universities, programs, mentors, and other support systems.

I have also come to understand how the policy stakeholders' argument is situated within a much larger educational debate regarding the purpose and goal of a university education. The neoliberal discourse perpetuates an expectation gap that equates education with employment gains. Our society is so entrenched in this discourse, so that many students, parents and policy-makers alike have traditional orientations to what careers are, and how to engage in career preparation. A conceptual shift is needed to look at PhDs and career planning through the lens of postmodern and socially constructed theoretical frameworks. Preparing PhD students for the complex world of work requires such a paradigm shift, from a colloquial understanding of "career" embedded in the neoliberal discourse, to a theoretical conception which is attentive to how careers are socially constructed over time. This approach to career development will better support PhD students in their career planning for the complex world of 21<sup>st</sup> century work. Rather than being guided by outdated and neoliberal assumptions, PhD student's work futures should be guided by contemporary career theories and practices. Essential to this grounding is the notion that school is part of career—recognizing that students are building careers while on our campuses. Careers do not begin when a student leaves the university, and careers are not synonymous with *work* or *employment*. An understanding of how careers are shaped over time is essential to helping students recognize the skills and knowledge they grow while on campus—and not compartmentalize these activities as "school-related," thus de-valuing their work experience. This paradigm shift, moving from a colloquial understanding of "career" to a conceptual understanding of careers is difficult—the neoliberal tendency to equate educational opportunities with preparation for work is

pervasive throughout society; but the expectation gap that this has created does harm both to the university and to its students.

Scholars and researchers who investigate career outcomes of PhDs play a major role in this paradigm shift. While I situated my critique in this study specific to a particular policy argument within the Canadian context, there is an international body of research on PhDs and career outcomes which informs that policy argument. That body of research is largely dominated by employability frameworks that align with a neoliberal discourse, and the research is largely dominated by quantitative, and secondary data. I would urge researchers working in this area to explore the embedded assumptions within the conceptual frameworks they draw from in order to ensure they are aligned with their own values and perspectives on higher education. There is some emerging research in this area that draws from a career pathways perspective using qualitative, interpretive methods, such as McAlpine and Amundsen's (2018) longitudinal study on identity-trajectories of early career researchers, but more research tied explicitly to career development frameworks is needed in order to counter the dominant neoliberal paradigm and support PhDs in their career preparation while at the university.

In this final section of this dissertation, I discuss three broad recommendations to support this paradigm shift and reconceptualize PhD students' career preparation. These are to recognize PhDs as working professionals, to support PhD students using socially-constructed career development frameworks, and to focus efforts on career development in addition to professional development. All of these recommendations rely upon shifting conceptions of career and unsettling the neoliberal discourse and its harmful assumptions and can be taken up by various audiences such as researchers, higher education administrators, career professionals, and PhD students themselves.

### **6.3.1. Recognize PhD students as working professionals**

The current framing of the problem views PhD "careers" as an event that takes place post-graduation, synonymous to starting a new job. I argue that this outdated notion is fraught with these policy stakeholder's assumptions of what a "student" *is* and what a "student" *does*. While these stakeholders may recognize traditional aspects of a student role, such as coursework, they fail to recognize the myriad of work activities PhD students engage in during their tenure at the university. From this group of eight

participants, I learned about a variety of work they engaged in while at the university: working on research independently, working on research teams, coordinating research work, proposal and grant writing, teaching and mentoring other students, giving research talks, travelling for research collection and dissemination, in addition to leadership opportunities on campus. There is a wide variety of professional work opportunities that PhD students engage in while a “student.” The neoliberal perspective assumes the role of “student” is separate from the role of “worker”—where students are planning for their “careers” to begin post-graduation.

There is a tendency to disregard the work students are engaged in on campus as “academic work,” insisting that these opportunities do not prepare students for work outside of academic settings. This plays into the same misguided assumption that “academic careers” are different from “non-academic careers.” These conceptions create a false binary of types of work. In my work with PhD students, I have found the students who are most anxious about their career futures believe that they are unskilled and have no work experience. There is a disconnect between the work they do at the university (TA and RA roles, team projects, publications, etc.) and their beliefs in the “skills” needed outside of the university. In my experience, graduate students consistently devalue their work at the university, believing it does not transfer to the “real world.” Binary conceptions of career as either “academic” or “non-academic” has created a false dichotomy where these two types of “careers” (i.e., work) are perceived as worlds apart. I have found that many PhD students hold these preconceptions about their experiences and perceive that university-related work doesn’t count in the world outside of academia. These students often go to great lengths to hide their work experiences on their CVs (for example, as we heard Mason do when he began working in the public sector) if these experiences took place while a student.

Instead, a theoretical conception of career acknowledges that careers unfold over time, and the role of “student” is part of one’s career. Especially for PhD students, I advocate for a shift in perspective of how “students” are viewed: PhD students are not sitting in desks, receiving instruction from experts, and passively ingesting information. This is the conceptual shift: recognizing the work they do at the university is less like a tradition “student” and more like “work”: being independent, performing specific duties, managing projects, searching for funding and grants. Many of the skills and capacities of a PhD student are sought after in many occupational settings; yet employers seem slow

to recognize the skills and knowledge of PhDs. There have been huge investments by government to promote an educated workforce, in support of the “knowledge economy” and “innovation” (Council of Canadian Academies, 2021), yet there remains a lack of understanding of how PhDs are educated, and the types of work they do while at the university.

Conceptualizing *career* as “the sequence of work, learning and leisure activities in which one engages throughout a lifetime” (“Canadian Standards,” 2012, p.2) views a PhD student and their career differently than has been described by these policy stakeholders. A constructivist approach (Savikas, 2012) would view PhD students as already constructing their careers throughout their ongoing life roles and experiences. Post-graduation from the PhD is simply another chapter in the *story of their career*. This is a shift that I believe is essential to shifting the discourse of the failed academic. As more and more PhD students find themselves working outside of academic contexts, it is essential that their skills, knowledge, and competencies be better understood to support their transition to meaningful work. There is a role for researchers to play here in identifying the types of work that PhD students do while at the university, and work at shifting conceptions of PhD students for employers and within the mainstream debate.

### **6.3.2. Support from career professionals**

People pursuing PhDs are deeply curious, exploratory, and passionate about their work; that curiosity is essential to research. Imagine what could happen if doctoral students were invited to apply a similar approach of inquiry, creativity, and exploration to their potential professional lives beyond the university’s gates. (Rogers, 2020, p.2)

PhD students need support from career professionals who hold a theoretical conception of careers and understand how careers are socially constructed. In order to shift the expectation gap and move away from the colloquial understanding of “careers,” PhD students need to understand how careers are not the same as work. There must be greater emphasis on helping PhDs understand how that their school experiences and roles are part of their careers—and that they have actually been building their careers throughout their lives. Rather than focusing on locating a “good fit” for their skills and knowledge, an awareness of how careers are socially constructed will support students in recognizing their own agency within career planning, so they take into account their own context, desires and beliefs as they plan their work futures. Students need better

support in recognizing their work experiences on campus, to be confident that those experiences in academic settings count, that they are highly skilled, and that they have already been building a career over time. A conception of career which recognizes the multi-dimensional ways in which careers are constructed would recognize learning (i.e., the role of “student”) as an essential component of one’s career.

This conception of career recognizes the agentic nature of career planning. In my own work with graduate students, I often perceive students as viewing their work experiences as a series of disconnected opportunities – as if they happened by “luck.” Instead, students need support in understanding the role they play in career planning, in terms of making work-related decisions that make sense in their worlds. This supports students in gaining confidence that they are in control of their career path, rather than feeling adrift as if they have no control over their work future. They have agency and need to gain an awareness of how the social dynamics of their worlds will influence their career decisions over time. PhD students need support from career professionals who understand careers in context, who can work to support students in better understanding the influences of their own lives. The eight participants in this study told me extensive stories which highlighted reasons why they didn’t want to stay within academia. For a multitude of reasons, academic work simply did not fit with their lives. And for many, it is not a question of the work context they *want* to be in, it is what fits for your life. This is consistent with Savikas’ (2012) career construction theory, where people construct a career over time to fit an ever evolving and changing lifestyle. It is complex and one-size does not fit all. PhD students themselves are not always aware of the personal, social, and societal dynamics which impact their choices, and professional insight should be encouraged and promoted while at the university.

This recommendation to support PhD students through career development grounded in postmodern and constructivist approaches is not necessarily an easy task. Career professionals who work in centralized university career centers differ in the conceptual frameworks they draw on. The job-matching approach is still a mainstay on many campuses, and students are often keen to engage in these one-dimensional surveys – they are tempting because they give you an “answer” (your good fit match) when you are desperately seeking some guidance. Yet, we know that these approaches do not prepare students for the upsets of their working lives and the multitude of career-related decisions they will make along the course of their lives. And in the case of highly

skilled and experienced PhD students, a personalized approach is needed. This will help prepare students to be less anxious about their work futures and more prepared for the transitions that are inevitable.

### ***Better support in preparing for transitions***

Many PhD students have been in university settings for a decade or more. Many lack an understanding of how to find work opportunities outside of academia or how to describe their skills, abilities, and knowledge to employers outside of the university. PhD students need particular support in navigating the transition out of the university. As was shown in this study, PhD graduates tend towards work where they retain a sense of autonomy and independence. Career professionals should be supportive of work alternatives, such as consultancy, freelance, and other opportunities for PhDs to be their own boss, recognizing their independence in the world of work.

Since PhD students have been working in academic contexts for a significant period of time, as they prepare to complete their degrees they could be viewed as *changing careers*. In my own experience, I have heard from career advisors who find it challenging to advise PhDs since they have become such niche specialists in their disciplinary fields. As shown in this study, some PhD students may not use their content knowledge expertise as they shift to work outside of the university (and this may be unexpected for many of them). Instead of focusing on their niche disciplinary knowledge, PhDs should be advised as you would counsel someone who is changing careers—since they have been in academia for a long period of time, and their schooling is like work; in many ways, when they embark on the next chapter of their working lives, it is like changing careers. Career professionals who work in the specific area of *transitions* will be especially supportive at this juncture.

### **6.3.3. Focus on career development**

I would encourage stakeholders who are engaged in PhD students' career planning to recognize the assumptions embedded in the professional development discourse, and shift to a focus on career development for PhD students. I would recommend a focus on building career competencies rather than focusing solely on building "skills." This will reduce the expectation gap since students will become more

actively engaged in their own career planning and gain a better understanding of their own unique contexts in relation to work.

In addition to the centralized support offered at the universities, PhD students often rely on less formal types of career guidance. Former PhD graduates have become a great source of mentorship to current PhD students, especially through social media and in online spaces. For example, I am a member of many online groups and newsletters, and almost daily receive advice from well-intentioned former PhDs on how to plan my “career” post-PhD. These online editorials, newsletters and blogs are readily available, yet it is rare to find individuals within these informal networks with a background in career development. While the mentorship, advice, and experience from former PhD students to current PhD students is well-received, there is a tendency to rely on anecdotal evidence which is not grounded in a theoretical conception of careers. This often results in reinforcing the same assumptions embedded in the neoliberal discourse, and as I’ve discussed earlier in this chapter, contributes to perpetuating the failed academic discourse. So, while these student-to-student dialogues are important, they do little to disrupt the neoliberal foundations of this argument. Individuals engaged in this informal career counseling would benefit from an awareness of career development, and in particular, the ways in which individual’s careers are socially constructed.

#### **6.4. Limitations and future research**

This was an exploratory narrative inquiry, and as such there are some limits to the transferability of these findings. In particular, there were some important features of this group of eight participants. I specifically sought out individuals for this study who were working in settings outside of academia and were satisfied with their work. I believe this has been an understudied group, and the voices of individuals working outside of academia were not well understood. However, I recognize that a different group of PhD graduates who did not have this orientation to work outside of academic settings may have very different patterns of experience. I would also expect that the length of time when interviewing PhD graduates is an important feature of any study: the PhDs I interviewed had a large variation in length of time since graduating from their PhD programs, from 3 years to 19 years. It is also important to remember that I recruited PhD graduates from backgrounds in social science and humanities disciplines. PhD graduates from other fields, such as the sciences, or professional fields, may have

different experiences based on different occupational preparation at the university. I also limited the study to Canadian citizens - I would expect some different patterns of experience with international students, in terms of citizenship and work preparation.

As an exploratory study, this study adds to the emerging research in this area, yet there is room for future research. Gathering more counter-narratives will assist in unsettling the entrenched neoliberal discourses of work, career, and school. I would encourage scholars who research career outcomes of PhDs to be mindful of the conceptual frameworks they draw on, and recognize the assumptions embedded within the policy frameworks. To this end, I would encourage a greater attention to use of interpretive methodological frameworks, framed by career development theory to build off of this study. This would support learning more about the working lives of PhD students and graduates, and potentially learning more about the experiences of those who belong to socially marginalized groups. In this study, dynamics of social class, gender, and ability were highlighted –and in the absence of discussions on race, whiteness is also highlighted. Finally, I would implore more career professionals who work at the university to be more vocal in highlighting their research and work with PhD students, in order to counter-balance the research literature that is focused on employment outcomes with literature on PhDs grounded in a recognition of careers in context.

## **6.5. Conclusion**

In this dissertation I took a deep dive into an educational debate regarding the responsibility of the university in the career preparation of PhD students. I highlighted how the policy stakeholders who advocate for changes to policy and practice at the university are bound to a highly neoliberal discourse which perceives the purpose of a PhD in relation to employment outcomes. Through a set of eight counter-narratives from PhD graduates, I emphasized how the assumptions which guide this narrative are inaccurate, generic, and outdated. My conceptual framework was informed by a set of postmodern and constructivist career development theories. This shift in approach allowed for new insights into patterns of experience of PhDs and their career pathways, including the alignment of a systems theory approach (McMahon and Patton, 2019) that draws upon a recognition of context made up of individual, social, and environmental-societal dynamics that influence career decision-making. This theoretical conception of

career can promote a recognition of the variety of work contexts in which PhD graduates may find themselves in, and support students in being able to navigate the increasingly complex worlds of work.

In this chapter, I discussed how the neoliberal discourse and its ensuing assumptions are damaging, and more work must be done to shift this discourse and its pervasive linkage of school with work. A paradigm shift in understanding school as part of career is needed to help reduce that expectation gap and shift particular assumptions about PhDs. We must work harder to disrupt these assumptions that PhDs have traditionally worked on the tenure-track, and that all PhDs want academic work. These assumptions need to be addressed across contexts (higher education policy; university policy and practices; within students and family); there is room for more intentional work to debunk and challenge these assumptions. I hope that these eight counter-narratives will contribute to this cause. I recognize that these recommendations are not easy to implement—shifts in conceptions and discourses are not easy, particularly when popular and colloquial uses are so embedded in our society. Yet, I believe career professionals can support this shift, at least with doctoral students themselves, as they help to prepare them for transitions out of the university. Researchers working in this area can also support this shift by becoming aware of the assumptions embedded in the policy frameworks and choose to align with conceptual frameworks located within career development theory.

My study was framed methodologically in a narrative approach. In this narrative inquiry, I explored how eight PhD graduates constructed their careers. Using a narrative approach led to interesting findings. I believe the use of the journey plot exercise was a very useful strategy to support participants in telling their stories, since it asks people to recall not only events in their life journeys, but to recall their affective (emotional) states along the way. By including the storied accounts co-constructed with participants, I was able to *show* (not tell) how careers unfold over time and are unique to each individual, highlighting the personal, social, and environmental-societal dynamics that influence individual's context.

The strengths of this study lie in its novel conceptual framework and in its use of a narrative, storied approach to understanding PhD graduate's career pathways. Through this novel approach, I highlighted how careers are constructed in context, with

many dynamics influencing an individual's unfolding career. I believe this study enhances an understanding of the working lives of PhD graduates, leading to new insights which can inform policy and practice for PhD students within university settings. I would encourage future research in this area to build upon my conceptual and methodological frameworks, in order to breathe new life into a debate that for too long has been dominated by inaccurate, misleading, and generic understandings of PhD student's career pathways.

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## Appendix A: Brandy's storied account



When I met up with Brandy, she had completed her PhD 10 years ago. She discussed what led her to complete the PhD and her life after the PhD—where she worked and the different roles she's played at various organizations. She was transitioning from one career context to another when we met, making for interesting conversation as she was retrospective about her career trajectory. Her story highlights the dynamics of being a single mother and a first-generation student, and how these intersected with societal dynamics such as her socio-economic status, as well as her personal interests.

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Brandy grew up in a suburban city and had a baby shortly after high school. It was a very difficult time for her, especially since the baby's father was not well-equipped to look after the baby and Brandy no longer lived at home. With the baby only 8-weeks old, she began waitressing at a local restaurant while her sister and mother helped her with babysitting whenever they could. It was extremely stressful, and Brandy was just trying to survive, to make ends meet, and keep the baby safe.

At that time, Brandy had no plans to attend university. She told me:

When I was in high school, I didn't come from a family where anyone has done post-secondary. None of my aunts, uncles, nobody even in my extended family network. So, it wasn't something that I really thought about very much.

But then she read that the best way to improve the long-term health of her child was maternal education, so this motivated her to enroll in college courses. Brandy started taking courses at her local college when her son was only 10 months old:

I had him. I was working in a restaurant. And I just decided I was going to take one or two courses. So, there's the local college where I was living. And, honestly, I had no idea what [discipline] was. The only reason I ended up in that course was because my sister could babysit the night that it was on. And, I was good at this subject in high school. This sounds like kind of the same thing. I was actually imagining I would do an English degree; I don't know. And then, I took a first class and it was from that moment it was life-changing in that I was just fascinated by the ability to put context around an experience. So, as soon as I did that, I had a sense that I wanted to do something in that [discipline].

Brandy took college courses for a year while working, then transferred to the closest university where she could complete a bachelor's degree. By this time, her second child was born, so she was a single mother caring for two children. She couldn't find childcare so was juggling schoolwork while raising a two-year-old and an infant. She recalls bringing her children to her parent's house so they could watch the kids while she tried to complete her schoolwork.

Eventually both children were accepted into the university's childcare program a few days a week, so Brandy moved closer to the university. She received student loans to pay for tuition and other living expenses, and she started working on campus. She got involved in campus groups, including a social justice group on campus, since it aligned with her interests.

Brandy loved being at university. She aspired to continue in academia, perhaps become a professor herself. She said:

I had such supportive professors, just absolutely so supportive, which was fantastic. And really open to talking about things; really supportive and encouraging of me. So, I actually stayed there to do my master's.

Brandy met her current partner on campus while finishing up her bachelor's degree, so she continued on with her master's at the same institution. Things were going well, both kids were now full time in daycare, and she was picking up more work on campus to make ends meet, since the student loans were never quite enough to get by. She got involved in the student union and was a teaching assistant most semesters. Her

life primarily existed on campus. As Brandy was finishing up her master's degree her third child was born. She took five months off to stay home with the children.

I was really sort of unsure about what I was going to do next. I wanted to do the PhD, but I didn't know if it made sense financially, all of those things. Obviously, my student loans were already crazy by that point.

By the time Brandy started the PhD she had an infant and two young children. She told me how difficult this period was:

I just didn't know what I was going to do; it was an overwhelming time. Going back [to school] was really hard. The 3 kids were a lot. It was a handful. Our place was small. The reality of not having any money rather than the romanticizing of having no money became real.

As the reality of their lives set in, Brandy began to doubt the likelihood of working in academia after her PhD. She explained:

Even probably for the first two years there [during the PhD], I was still thinking academic track, but I was much more engaged with activism as well and definitely was having that sort of existential crisis that some people in social sciences have around 'will I have impact?' those kinds of things. So that was a piece of it. It was a very stressful, busy time, and then the other piece was just seeing what it takes to compete; there's people around me who were flying to all the conferences to present papers and all of those things—and I was coming home from class and breastfeeding and—having no resources at all. And that didn't seem feasible. And then thinking about, 'Go do a sessional lecture section here for nine months, then move here,' that started to feel like that just was not going to work for us. And things were very competitive. I thought about maybe college teaching. I taught a bit at one of the colleges which was fine, but still, yeah, I just didn't really have a sense that it was feasible. That was quite a hard time, actually.

Brandy was not funded well during her studies. She told me "The PhD felt like a huge mountain to climb. And the only thing I could see financially was I was going to have to start paying student loans back." She became more activist-oriented and wanted to be involved in societal change in her local communities—it was not enough to simply theorize about the issues. Her plan had been to complete the PhD and then become a professor, but her interests in other opportunities was piqued:

During that time, I started hearing about a non-profit on the news—they were working on similar issues that I had been researching—and there had never really been an organization doing that. And when I would hear them, I was like, 'They sound amazing.' And then when I was done

with my comprehensive exams, I was sort of imagining what work am I going to do? Am I going to try to find another course teaching?

She reflected on her work options and her current situation. She was heavily in-debt with student loans and had three children to raise. The insecurity of sessional teaching work did not sound like a great option to her. Then an opportunity presented itself in the form of a research position at the non-profit organization she had heard about:

A job came up—with that same non-profit—a half-time researcher position, for one year, and I was like, 'I can do that for a year.' And I wanted to try something different. It felt like a really good fit.

This was a turning point for Brandy: it was a good fit, because it kept her engaged in activism and it paid the bills. The contract position rolled into a permanent position, with a stable salary and benefits. The work at the non-profit kept her busy: it was a demanding organization which was under-staffed and under-funded. There was little time to rethink the choices she made: the working culture at the non-profit was very demanding, with overtime and late hours the norm.

In addition to the demanding job, Brandy also had a very heavy load at home:

I had three children and we homeschooled them, so my partner was at home with them and he was working evenings. So, I was coming home and then it was all kids, all the time. Which in some ways I think was good because it meant there was a hard stop to my [work] day and other things in my life. So that was good, but it was very stressful. There was a lot of strain in our lives because of it and we were still not paid very well. I think I was making maybe \$46 or \$48,000 a year at that point and so we were still really struggling financially, paying back student loans, all of these things. So definitely at that time I was like, 'I think I might have made some strategic errors here', but I also really enjoyed the work.

About five years after she completed the PhD, Brandy realized she was getting further away from her dreams of professorship, because she had no time to do research and publish. She applied for a position at one of the local universities, a limited-term position—and was surprised to be offered the position. Brandy reflected on what attracted her to academia and her impressions of the differences between academic work and her current work. She said:

[In academia] the ability to sort of hold my own analysis without as much of the negotiation that happens when you work in organizations and in coalitions and things. So, some of that freedom, that sort of

intellectual freedom. And the time: the time to really value, the time to read the literature and have that be part of your job. And really be able to focus. I mean especially in the work that I do—compared to academic work we're an inch deep and a mile-wide right? Like I'm expected to be an expert on pretty much everything to do with every type of social issue. Versus in academia, and I think this is the double-edge sword, I think you can get very deep expertise of a very narrow issue.

So, although Brandy had this desire to slow down, have time to research and grow that deep expertise, there were significant downsides to taking the limited-term position. It was not permanent and was meant to last only one year. This wasn't a great option for Brandy who needed permanent work and income. Brandy weighed her options but felt guilty when she thought about leaving the organization, especially now when the organization was growing again. It just wasn't the right time to leave and the demands of the organization were difficult to step away from.

Turning down the limited-term position was another turning point for Brandy. She had always expected to go back into academia but now realized it wasn't going to happen: her life had taken a different direction and led her somewhere else. Over time Brandy started to resent the organization she had worked at for so long, especially the ways it infringed on her life outside of work. She described the workplace culture and the issues they worked in as being "emotionally charged." She said, "I was unreasonably devoted to it [the organization]" and described the late hours, working from home late at night, the inability to step away from the work. She said, "I didn't have a good sense of what's normal" in terms of work-life balance. She relayed to me an experience that really encouraged her to make a move out of the organization:

I had an experience in my last year of being confronted in an alley by a client who wasn't allowed to come back to the Centre. And it was quite emotionally scary and dangerous. And I wanted to feel like I could leave my email for the day and nothing would collapse. And I wouldn't be letting anyone down. And I just needed more boundaries, where my boss isn't texting me at 11:00 at night—and that was totally the culture we had—and a lot of times it was fun. But just more boundaries.

Turning down the academic position led her to re-evaluate things: she realized she needed to put change into motion, she needed to distance herself from the one organization that had demanded so much of her for so many years. She went to work in a larger non-profit where she grew her expertise in organizational development. Brandy

described this as a much-needed break from the work she had been emotionally invested in for many years:

I needed a break from what I'd been doing—there were a number of people I worked with very closely in the community die over a period of years. Working with women who lost their children is really emotional and even when you make progress, it's still hard because you're still getting all of these calls from people who still are in deep crisis. Even when you fix one issue in their life, there's ten others that are coming back. So, I think it was actually really good for me to get that space away from that for a little bit.

After two years working in the larger non-profit, she was asked to return to her previous organization, and offered the top leadership role. She took the position, where she remained for several years. She instilled new boundaries with her staff and tried to change the demanding culture of the workplace. She took email off her phone and no longer checked her messages after leaving the office. She encouraged her co-workers to do the same, and actively encouraged a healthier workplace environment. Reflecting back on the limited-term academic position, Brandy recognized it as a pivotal decision:

I think had I done the academic position it would have led me back one direction like maybe back into academic sort of work, whereas the larger non-profit has led me more into organizational development. So, there was a point there—I don't know which one would have been better but I'm happy with where it landed.

Throughout this time Brandy's children were becoming more independent and she found herself with more space to explore her career options. She wanted to try something new and was open to a new challenge. Rather than join another organization she said she wanted to use her expertise in organizational dynamics “without being so deeply engaged in the issues.” The decision to leave the organization she invested 10 years in was the highest point on Brandy's journey plot. She continues to work in the non-profit sector, as a contractor and consultant, where she has more choice in the projects she wants to work on, and more control over her own work-life balance—a very satisfying place to be.

## Appendix B: Claudia's storied account



When I met up with Claudia, she had completed her DPhil<sup>4</sup> 19 years ago, at the age of 29. She shared with me personal details of her early upbringing, which provide a backdrop to the themes of physical and mental health that thread throughout her story as she moves through the university system and navigates the world of work. In addition to her health, socio-economic status is highlighted, and family and relationships play a significant role.

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Claudia spent much of her earliest years in the care of her maternal grandparents, as her mother and father split when she was about a year old. She then grew up in a blended family from the age of three, with a loving stepfather, a very controlling mother, and two older stepbrothers. Home life was fraught with frequent verbal conflicts between her parents. Claudia's mother was anorexic and as Claudia recalls, had always used food as a weapon. Her grandfather passed away when she was only 10—which was very traumatic for Claudia. She told me,

The next year, my mom disclosed to me that my best friend, my grandpa, had actually sexually abused her. So, I found that out, and that really messed me up, but I couldn't show it to her, and I didn't have anyone to talk to.

Life at home was not easy—her mom and stepdad had ongoing issues that affected her and her stepbrothers. At the age of 12, Claudia also developed anorexia.

Claudia describes her family as having a “very working-class background.” She recalls having a paper route when she was nine, then starting her first part-time job at

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<sup>4</sup> DPhil is the term used in the UK to denote the Doctor of Philosophy. It is synonymous with a PhD.

the age of 14, in customer service at a chocolate shop. She worked part-time throughout almost all of high school. Claudia had always excelled at school and was streamed for academics from a young age. Amidst all the other ups and downs going on in her life, school was a relief for her, and a welcome distraction from the issues at home. She began university at the age of 17, enrolling in human sciences, although her earlier dreams had been to become a veterinarian, since she loved animals. However, her mother didn't want her going away to school, so she had no choice but to stay in her hometown. At this young age, she recalls having her first paid professional job at the university, when a volunteer placement turned into a paid position in a science lab. She told me:

I got this job. I felt very grown up, to get paid for it. And I loved it. I was working with postdoc people. And they treated me like a grown up. And it was fun. I just loved going there. I spent all my time there.

Claudia worked throughout her undergraduate degree because she needed the money—she received help with one term's tuition and a couple of months' rent from her dad but otherwise was self-supporting through her part-time jobs and by earning scholarships. She told me, "Academia was my stable place." But while she was doing well in her studies, her health was declining. During her second year at university, she was hospitalized for a month because of her eating disorder. She recalls being hospitalized over the Christmas holidays:

So, I was hospitalized. At that point they did not have a designated unit for eating disorders, so you went into a general psych unit. So, I was 18 and I was in a general psych unit voluntarily, but most of the other people there were certified. So that was a fairly dramatic and traumatic experience. I was trying desperately to study. I was there in December. God, being in a hospital around Christmas time is just the worst, and I've been in that [situation] twice. It's like everybody else is festive and you're—yeah, depressed, and scared. So, trying to study for my midterm and my finals for the first terms, trying to figure out how the hell to live in a psychiatric unit [pause] I was in there for a month.

Because of her health, her mother convinced her to quit the job in the lab that she loved so much. At this time, she was also struggling with one of her courses, and she recalled a pivotal moment in her university journey:

I had my midterm in botany, and the prof called me into his office and just tore a strip off me. It was just really unacceptable behavior, and I just left feeling like, 'That's it. I'm useless. I'm worthless.' I already felt like that coming out of the psych ward, but I just decided, 'That's it. I'm

leaving.' I decided to do withdrawals so that I wouldn't just quit university. I had enough sense to think maybe I'd come back. I just pulled out and withdrew, got a bunch of Ws on my transcript, and just thought, 'Okay. I need to work.'

At this point, Claudia was only 18, her parents had split up, and she had moved out on her own. She took a clerical job in a hospital to pay the bills and enjoyed the working culture. She said, "I liked the job, I felt good. I was competent. I was appreciated. And I felt safe. Safety was a big thing." She spent a few months in this job, and eventually decided to go back to university, but switched to Arts. She did well academically even though her health continued to be an issue. It didn't take long until she ended up back in the hospital because her weight was too low. She remembers it being a super low point and recalls meeting her boyfriend around that time: "So I was still in the psych unit when I met him, I was literally out on a day pass when we met."

Even though she struggled with the eating disorder, Claudia excelled in her studies. She received several scholarships during her undergrad. Although enrolled in an honors program, she found it too confining to accommodate her interests in classical studies, so she left the honors program and did an unofficial minor in Classics. In the final year of her bachelor's degree, her supervisor encouraged her to continue on to graduate work in England. He helped her apply for funding, and Claudia received a fully funded three-year Commonwealth scholarship at the age of 23. She was headed to Oxford: "It was amazing. I just couldn't believe it. I was just so thrilled and so excited and felt so good about myself."

Claudia began her graduate studies at Oxford, but her stress and anxiety were in overdrive. She felt isolated moving to a new country, and although her partner (now husband) had accompanied her, he had his own issues. She was stressed about passing the first year of the program, which had a 25% failure rate. She quickly began losing weight again. The lack of structure in her graduate program didn't help: she wasn't well-supervised, no one was checking up on her, and she didn't have a community of peers to socialize with. In addition, her supervisor convinced her to abandon a line of study that she found very interesting to instead work in an area that he knew about. She toyed with the possibility of switching out of this program and into an ornithology program at a Canadian university; she applied and was accepted into a master's program, but she ultimately decided that she owed it to the Commonwealth Foundation to complete the doctorate. Life with her partner was not going smoothly either—they

separated twice—which added to her stress level. Summarizing her time at Oxford, she told me: “I was lonely. I was scared. I was starving.” She elaborated on this period in her life:

I was back down to, I believe—going over there I was probably about 115 [pounds] and I was back down to 90 [pounds] within a couple months. So that wasn’t good. And my health remained very, very dodgy all the time that I was over there. And I was fragile, more fragile than I thought, and I don’t think that I was going to be terribly resilient to any kinds of shocks and upsets. And of course, when you’re so—I’m small, I’m five foot two and a half—and when your body weight gets down to, or your body fat percentage gets below a certain amount, you become quite cognitively impaired. So, I was just kind of running on fumes for the entire time over there.

Claudia returned home to Canada at one point because her health was so poor—she was down to 67 pounds. She told me, “It was really, really scary stuff, so I had to come home just to stay alive basically.” She had another stint in the hospital, where doctors once again used nasogastric tubes to give her nourishment, without addressing any of her underlying issues. Claudia returned to Oxford once she had her strength back. A highlight on her return was working at Oxford University Press, doing research work within databases. Her health was still poor, and she developed a dependency on anti-anxiety medication to help her (“benzos”). Meanwhile, her scholarship had finished, and working part-time was not enough to pay her living expenses, so she returned to Canada again, committed to completing her dissertation by distance.

Over the next several years, Claudia’s work life and personal life had tumultuous ups and downs. She took on clerical work with the government and began tutoring international students, which she enjoyed. The unstable relationship with her husband finally ended with separation and, ultimately, a divorce. After this final separation, she pulled herself off the benzodiazepines cold turkey, which led to her attempting to commit suicide. Shortly after that, she met a new partner, which she described to me as a high point in her life. She volunteered at a publishing company and enjoyed that, too. She began teaching courses in English and Literature and enjoyed this. Claudia’s health improved and she physically recovered from anorexia at the age of 29. Her partner seemed to be a stable influence for her. They shared many things in common, including a strong academic background. Things seemed to stabilize for a while, and after seven years Claudia completed her DPhil.

Claudia was still having a hard time making ends meet. She began working in the public sector, in a federal service job that offered a high salary and good benefits. But the job was a really poor fit for Claudia, and she experienced high levels of stress. The work culture was not healthy for her; she told me, “I began drinking heavily. Most people in that job did.” She noted that her health hadn’t totally improved:

I recovered from the anorexia, at least physically, but I went right into using alcohol to deal with all the issues that had led me to be a high-functioning anorexic to a high-functioning alcoholic.

During this time, she had split up with her partner, and found herself in an abusive relationship with an alcoholic. She told me she was in this destructive relationship for four years “because I thought I was worth nothing. It was really bad for me.” She was relying more and more on alcohol to get through her stressful days. The lowest point for her was when she took a job at a department store as store security; she told me, “I had a DPhil from Oxford in English, and I was working as store security.” She was just not living the life she wanted to live and didn’t know what to do.

She sought emotional support from her dad and his family, who helped her think about her work options. Her stepmom helped her identify aspects of work she found fulfilling: work with the publishing companies, teaching, tutoring, writing, editing. There were aspects of academic work that she found highly fulfilling, but she didn’t want the stressful job of an academic. She reached out to her academic mentor who had helped her gain the Commonwealth scholarship, and he connected her with a semi-retired professor who had his own press. She began volunteering for him doing manuscript reviews in her spare time. Claudia got back into teaching at a learning centre and met with students for private tutoring, which she described as a godsend:

I really enjoyed teaching and it improved my sense of self-esteem and helped me get out of this [abusive relationship]. And built up a whole bunch of skill sets.

She also began volunteering for a cat rescue organization, which transformed her life for the better and also helped her gain the strength to get away from the abusive relationship. Eventually, the volunteer editing work turned into paid contracts. She recalls:

My first paid gig went really, really well. So, I thought I'd gained a little bit of confidence that I could start doing this freelance thing. And that's literally how it started.

Claudia's confidence was growing, and she took on more and more paid freelance work, while continuing to teach and tutor. She had switched to a different, much healthier full-time job with another government agency and was now also co-managing a very busy cat rescue organization. She was working an 80-hour work week to fit in all her various work and volunteer commitments. Then, one day, she had this realization:

One day I was sitting by the beach and I did the math. And I thought, I can do it. I can quit my government job and I'm going to go freelance. I'm going to do that crazy thing of giving up a secure government job with a pension.

During this period of transition, as she was focusing on building her business, one of her clients invited her to a retreat centre in an isolated community. She spent the weekend in this community and fell in love with it. She told me:

I just absolutely fell in love with this place. I'd already been thinking that I wanted to live outside of the city. But then I came here, and it was just like, 'Oh, this is where—I don't know how the heck I'm going to do it—but this is where I want to be.' So that was part of what precipitated me quitting the job and going fully freelance was realizing I want to live here. That means I have to be fully self-sustaining in terms of a career.

This was a turning point for Claudia. Claudia reunited with her former partner around this time, and they bought a home together in the small community. She went on to describe how this desire to shift gears in terms of location and lifestyle really meshed with her inner values:

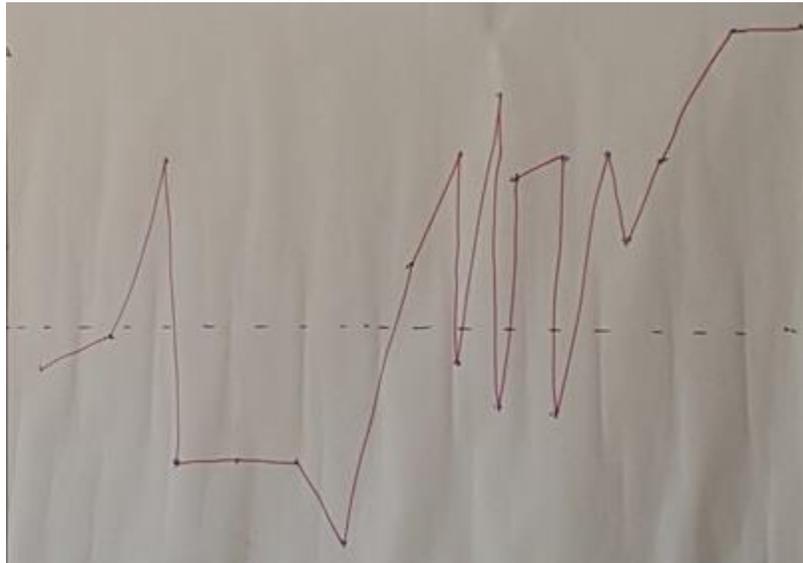
So yeah, that's when that part of my life kind of pulled together a bit and by that time I was comfortable basically letting go of all my teaching commitments—apart from going back and forth doing a bit of teaching, but at that point, it was as much just for personal stuff if anything—so at that point, I made the full commitment to doing this [freelance work] and it's gone really, really well.

Claudia is now a self-employed editor and writer, running a very successful business for over 12 years. Technological advances allow her to work from home—phone, email or video conferencing are all she needs to connect with clients. She has won a national award for her editing work. She stopped drinking and has been free of

addictions for over three years. After 10 years of marriage, she and her second husband separated, and she now lives in a different small, close-knit community that offers her the slow-paced lifestyle that she requires to continue healing her mind and body. She still nurtures her passion for animals through volunteer work and has a family of cats she has adopted over the years. Claudia summarized her career journey thus far:

In terms of where I live and what I choose to do for a living and my overall health, I'm in a better place than I've ever been. So, from the chaos, some good things have emerged. There's still quite a lot of chaos, but from a professional standpoint I'm doing well.

## Appendix C: Holli's storied account



When I met up with Hollie she had completed her PhD 13 years ago. Her story centred on two points in time: her life prior to and leading up to the PhD and her working life after the PhD. Themes highlighted in Holli's narratives are health, self-efficacy, career guidance, the role of funding in her career planning, and geographic locations.

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Holli grew up in a family of four in an urban centre. Her father was the sole breadwinner of the family and her mother was responsible for taking care of the house and kids. Her parents, as immigrants to Canada, held strong cultural values about the importance of education; because of these strong cultural values, doing well in school was never an option for Holli, it was an expectation. Holli went to a high school where the students were already streamed for academics. All of her friends went to university, with the large majority of her graduating class heading to the same university as she did.

Holli was not the first in her family to go to university; her father had an advanced degree from his home country that he made many sacrifices to obtain. But she mentioned that her parents "had no understanding of what the university system was like," at least in North America. Since her parents thought so highly of a university education, she also believed it was important to get a university degree.

Holli did well in university, completing a bachelor's degree with honors. Holli confessed that during her undergraduate studies she often suffered bouts of depression. She recalls one significant episode of depression being triggered by her indecision about her future after her undergrad degree. Holli said:

There was definitely a significant period related to not knowing what I was going to do. I was working in a lab. And I was very torn. Like, not even torn. I was like lost, just so lost. And the only thing people knew to tell me to do was to go to grad school. And I was like 'I don't really want to do this, but...' And I knew that wasn't really what I wanted to do, but I didn't know what else I wanted to do.

Holli told me, "I was also really depressed at the time and having no idea what I wanted to do was amplifying that." But she applied anyways because she didn't know what other options were available to her. She was encouraged by her peers and her work supervisor, so she followed several peers who applied for graduate degree funding. She received a funding package and accepted the offer at a new university. She moved to a new city away from her family and friends, where she started a new program at a new university. With all of this going on, Holli fell into a deeper depression. Four months after starting grad school Holli was hospitalized for a suicide attempt. Holli remembers those years painfully as our conversation illustrates:

Holli: I was really, really depressed. I had been struggling.

Sue: It sounds like it had been going on for quite a while.

H: It had been. And then moving to a new city, starting a new program and not knowing anybody. It was just [pause] I don't know how much it had to do with grad school, but it certainly wasn't a place where I felt like I belonged. I don't feel like it was related to grad school, but it was the whole context of it. And it was like [pause] I was going to great efforts to try to keep my schoolwork up when I was in the hospital. I didn't want anyone to know [pause] I would attend classes and then have to return to the hospital at the end of the day, working on my assignments in the psych ward.

S: That must've been a very difficult time.

H: It was. I think I didn't realize at the time how bad things were, like in retrospect those [pause] those were [pause] like my master's degree was rough, my first year was really bad. I still did well but I was really struggling emotionally.

Holli described how she got set up with the hospital and the university's health services, which was critical to her well-being at the time and essential to helping her get through grad school. Recalling those days, she said "Grad school was terrible! It was a cesspool of misery!"

Holli completed her master's degree, and although she still struggled emotionally, she managed to keep her grades up. She decided to continue into a doctoral program. Holli explained that staying in grad school was a relief because it delayed her making serious career decisions:

It was kind of like a holding cell, like a holding pattern, I don't know. I'm just going to do this, because I'll get an education out of it, and it will also keep me from actually having to decide what I want to do. So, yes, I managed to do that all the way to the postdoc.

She told me her doctoral studies were "better than my master's." She recounts some of the highlights including her social group of friends and the freedom she had in grad school to make her own schedule of work and time off.

Holli received full funding throughout her two graduate degrees—funding from various Canadian agencies. She said this funding provided a sense of safety for her, because it gave her a sense of purpose in being at school. The upside was that being at school became like work—she quipped "Why wouldn't I do it if it's just like a job, where I'm getting paid and I'm getting an education?" She described the downside being that it delayed her from exploring work options.

Holli described at length how she felt tied to the academic funding cycle. Here is her description of the process of waiting for funding to be approved:

In the meantime [while waiting], you just squirrel away and do other things and just not think about it [whether you want to continue schooling and what to do if it was not approved]. But it also means you're not really dealing with the problem on an ongoing basis. You're just postponing—it allows you to park your decision making for almost a year. It's like 'well I put in something [research proposal] that might turn into this, so I'll just keep going and then if that doesn't work out then I'll decide at that point.' And if I decided in the meantime that I'm going to do something else, then I don't have to say yes to this [research funding]. Except when you don't really know how to explore [work options] or what to do, you just kind of have that as a 'well, you know, maybe something better will come to me that I'll want to do'. And then you get to that point [where you might consider other options]—but

then you get the funding! and it's like, 'well, here it is!' [pause] I still don't know what I want to do so I guess I'll do this [continue schooling] because at least I'll still get paid! So, it does sort of put you in a limbo, it allows you to park decision-making, and move forward without really exploring other options.

Holli received significant funding packages from various sources throughout her graduate work, buying her time, since she was being “paid” to be there. Yet, one of the issues Holli continued to struggle with was her lack of confidence in her abilities as a researcher. She said she felt like a “research fraud,” someone who had “no particular talent for research.” So although Holli received funding continuously, her insecurities ran deep: she doubted that her scholarships relied on merit; instead, she believed that she'd been lucky the first time and once you received funding, it paved the way for you to receive more of it.

The notion of working as a professor filled her with anxiety—she completely lacked confidence in her ability to research and to teach. Besides her low self-efficacy, there were other aspects of faculty work that didn't appeal to her. She saw it as a very stressful job with very little work-life balance, and no downtime. And she was not interested in relocating—most of her friends who had gone on to academic work had to relocate to other places, usually smaller cities. She was not interested in living in a smaller university town—she loved where she lived and didn't want to leave. She said, “It looked like a terrible job and not the life I wanted.”

She was encouraged by her peers and supervisor to apply for academic work as her completion date for the doctoral degree approached, but she explained to me:

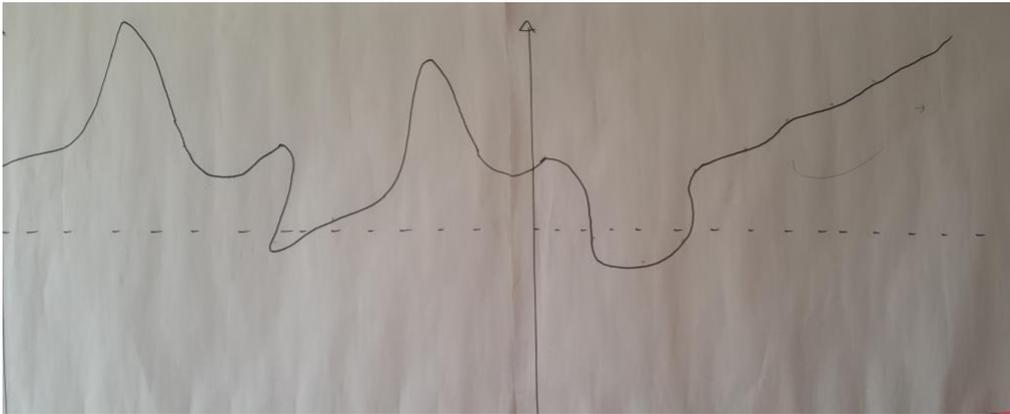
I told them the lifestyle was not appealing to me, it didn't look like something I wanted to do. Underlying that was a deep insecurity that I couldn't do it. I never had doubts that I could be a good student. But I had doubts about being a good professor. I told my supervisor [but] he just didn't know how to support me. He understood but he couldn't help me.

Holli felt pressured to apply for academic work, so she applied and accepted a one-year postdoctoral position in another city. She hoped to consider her work options during that year. But after a few months, depression set back in so Holli moved back home and completed the contract by distance. She applied half-heartedly for a few jobs that seemed related to her skills and knowledge—and then was surprised to get an interview for a position that matched her skillsets in research and writing. She got offered

the job and found herself in a unique position: working at the university but not as a faculty member. This position was a turning point for Holli: she realized she knew a lot about research, that she wasn't a fraud at all.

This position was instrumental in boosting her self-confidence in her research abilities. Yet the work environment wasn't ideal, and the position was only part-time. So, Holli took up additional contract work on the side with a research organization. Holli enjoyed this work: it offered her the freedom she craved, where she could set her own hours and work anywhere. The work was rewarding because it was always a different research project and you got to research new and interesting things. Holli worked with them, building up more confidence in her abilities. Eventually Holli decided to leave the permanent job behind and invest in the business, becoming one of the owners of the consulting firm. She now works full-time as a research consultant, is her own boss, and loves her work.

## Appendix D: Marco's storied account



Marco completed his PhD 13 years ago. Marco's story highlights his work experience, the importance of networks and relationships to his career growth, and how his PhD supported his professional knowledge in his field.

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Marco grew up in a working-class family from the depression-era Prairies, a family of five, whose parents always worked hard. Marco had a paper route in elementary school and began working part-time as a teenager in customer service and retail. Marco did well in high school, was the class valedictorian, and started studying journalism after high school. But he didn't stay long at college and within his first year transferred to a general Arts degree at university. Marco's brother and sister both went on to technical colleges, so he was the first in his family to go to university.

Marco continued working part-time while in university, and after only 3 semesters he had saved enough money to take a year off, to travel and work. He spent the next year in different African countries, taking up short-term work in community development and agro-tourism. This experience made a huge impression on Marco: he loved the cultures and the people he met, and although he returned home and back to university, he decided to find a way to return and work abroad.

This motivated him to work hard at university—so after completing his bachelor's degree, which he changed into a double major due to his new interests, he went straight into a master's. He anticipated that a master's degree would give him more credibility

with international work. He took on teaching work while completing his master's degree, teaching a few classes per term at local colleges. But he didn't love teaching and was keen to return overseas and explore living in another country. Marco finally completed his master's and returned overseas to work. But while the culture and people were all he remembered he quickly became disillusioned with the work:

I had gone to Kenya briefly after my master's for a term to see if I could find lucrative work there. I thought having a master's in international development would mean something, but it was ultimately frustrating because at that time they were just hiring people off the street, and so I have a master's and they just wanted to put me in a YMCA. So, I tried that for a semester and then I came back.

Marco returned to Canada and continued teaching in the local college system, but still contemplated international work, just in a different capacity. Then, through a chance encounter with one of his former professors, an opportunity presented itself:

I ran into a former professor of mine who had risen up to an administrative role at the university. And he said, 'Oh I was thinking about you the other day, I know you like this international stuff, I think you'd be interested in this project in East Africa.' So he introduced me to the guy who was putting this project together, and we, you know, smoked cigarettes and drank coffee for a year, and talked about this project. And I went out to Africa for the feasibility mission basically, a one-month contract to help draft the implementation phase of the project, to look at the sites and see what we'd need and everything. I ended up writing the terms of reference for the training part of the project. And then we came back, got it approved and started hiring people. So that's how that came about. I'd been to East Africa before, I'd liked it, and after 4 years there, I absolutely loved it.

Marco worked on this government-funded development project in East Africa for four years. This experience was a turning point for Marco. He took on many different roles over those four years, lived in rural and urban areas in various East African countries, learned Swahili, and built up a network of peers and colleagues in the field of international development.

When the project started to wind down, one of Marco's contacts connected him with a Canadian non-governmental organization (NGO) looking to develop an international program. They were keen to use his expertise to launch some new programming. He was offered a permanent role managing a new department and tasked with creating the new program. In those early days he was considered an expert in the field and wasn't offered much guidance from upper management; they trusted him to

build the program and the only advice he was given was, ‘Don’t embarrass us and don’t cost us a lot of money.’”

Marco was very good at his job and built up the department and its programming—the staff contingent of his unit grew to almost 20 people in the next decade. Marco was very loyal to the organization, but after 10 years of being in the same position, Marco began thinking about a career change. He wanted a new challenge but wasn’t sure what he wanted to do. It had never occurred to Marco to complete a PhD, but he contemplated his knowledge of the field of international development. He told me:

What I realized was that I was actually seen to be a bit of a leader in terms of what we were doing, but I had no philosophical basis for what we were doing. I had no grounding in terms of what was the history of international development, what are the objectives, qualitative or quantitative outcomes of what we were doing, can we test this, can we measure this? I realized that there wasn’t a lot of literature available on what was then a new field; there was some interesting research being done in the European Union, but not much in North America. So that’s when I said, ‘Ok I’ll start looking at this’ and I put together a package [for the PhD].

Marco decided to invest in his education again, in order to grow his knowledge in the sector he had worked in for over 15 years. Very few PhD programs existed in his field, and none within Canada, and he didn’t want to relocate—he wanted to continue working while pursuing his PhD. Through relationships he had built in the local universities he connected with faculty members from three different Faculties, and they helped him design an interdisciplinary program so he could explore different facets of international development. He continued working full-time in the top leadership role of his unit in the NGO while working on his PhD.

Working on the PhD while working full-time proved to be very difficult. Marco managed a very busy office at work, tried to work on his studies at home, and had a fair bit of travel for work. He struggled juggling work life, school life, and life at home. It became increasingly difficult to satisfy so many competing priorities, and his marriage suffered, ending in divorce. He began to doubt his goals for completing the PhD:

A couple of times I took semesters off and was trying to re-inspire myself to go back; and on more than one occasion I almost withdrew from the program and it wasn’t necessarily because I was going to change the world with any great opus.

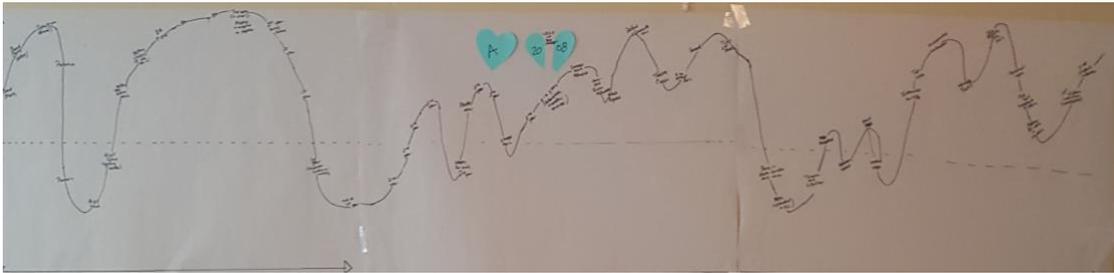
One of Marco's mentors reminded him of his purpose for doing the PhD; he told him, 'You're not an academic, you're an administrator, you're not going to be an academic, you're doing this degree to help you and help the field and get some credentials.' Marco admitted that pride kept him motivated and he would've felt like a failure if he didn't finish. He reflected on his goals for completing the PhD, which wasn't to become an academic, but to improve the sector he was working in. His goal was to write a "practitioner-friendly dissertation."

Marco completed his PhD after seven years. He was so relieved to have it behind him, but at the same time he hadn't really achieved the "career change" he was looking for. He had all this new knowledge but returned to work in the same department he had been with for over 17 years now. He just wasn't feeling very challenged there anymore. Luckily, through his connections, a short-term opportunity presented itself: a chance to join a small team in the public sector, where he could put his new knowledge and skills to the test. With support from his employer in the form of a secondment, Marco jumped at the opportunity, especially since it involved overseas work again.

This was another turning point for Marco—eventually the short-term contract turned permanent and Marco left the unit he'd built up over the past 17 years. It was time for a new challenge, this time with industry and in government, to lead the field of international development at the policy level. Marco described the next couple of years as a period of tumultuous change, of "metamorphosis" as he adjusted to his new reality as a leader in his field and in the public sector. His family life had also changed: he had remarried and welcomed his first child to the world.

Marco remains with the public sector and is very proud of the growth and direction of the unit under his leadership. He sees himself as a policy maker, leader and practitioner in his field. He credits his PhD experience for growing his confidence in his knowledge, in his expertise in the field, including the ability to critique choices made by other stakeholders, and lead the field in new directions. He told me "We're punching above our weight in BC and in Canada, so that makes me very happy."

## Appendix E: Mason's storied account



When I first met with Mason, he had completed his PhD 7 years ago. His stories focused on three point in time: his life leading up to the PhD, the PhD experience itself, and his life after the PhD. His story highlights external dynamics of geographic locations, the employment market, and socio-economic status, influenced by the social dynamics of family and his personal knowledge of the world of work.

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Mason grew up in a working-class family and after high school put most of his energies into playing music. He had a false start at college after high school as he preferred putting his energies into his band. After a while he got sick of the band lifestyle and decided to enroll in night school. He started with one course a term, then two, then three, feeling more confident in his abilities as a student as time went on. After a few years he had enough credits to transfer to university to complete a Bachelor of Arts.

Mason loved being at university: he excelled in his courses and received some financial awards and recognition. He felt relieved to have “re-invented” himself, to save himself from the path of the struggling musician. He met a core group of friends and enjoyed having intellectual conversations with his peers and his professors. He felt inspired to stay at the university and was conflicted when he was about to complete his degree:

I was about to graduate with a BA and I panicked. I was like ‘oh my god this is over!’ I had spent all this time cultivating this identity and I don’t know what to do now—I’ve been building a road here and there’s a step here and I don’t know what it is, I don’t know where it goes. And then I realized I don’t know how the world works. I had been out of the job market for a few years and nobody really gave me any insight of how the world works, I was just trying to figure it out. I didn’t know what to

do so I went back into school. I'm not ready—so I enrolled for Honors and just kept going.

Mason began to feel a strong sense of belonging within this scholarly environment and talked at length about cultivating an academic identity. He told me:

I would sit there with my professors and we'd have drinks and talk. And that was the other thing, we were starting to be treated like peers, you know? Because we weren't the riff raff, we were the honors students, we were to be taken seriously.

His honors supervisor encouraged him to continue on to graduate work, and even suggested he apply to some of the top-tier universities in the United States where he might get a full scholarship. Mason applied to four schools and was shocked when he was offered full funding at three of them. He chose one of the most prestigious universities in the US, packed up, and found himself in a whole new world.

Mason took some time to settle into this new environment, where he didn't quite fit in:

I was the first in my family to go to advanced education—I come from a working class family—so there was this arc I was on [to do graduate studies], and then I get there and I was like 'I do not live in this world.' These people, their parents were professors, they were rich kids. I mean I kid you not. It was different.

Mason had a very difficult time in his first year. The workload was very intense and there were no grades, which was stressful because he never knew how well he was doing in the program. He also had a complicated relationship with his supervisor, who had different interests and perspectives from Mason. Mason panicked as he worked on his first research project—he had serious doubts he would succeed. Plus, he missed his girlfriend who was back in Canada; at times he just wanted to quit and go back home. We shared this exchange as he described that first year:

Mason: I couldn't invest in this life. It started to feel foreign. After all this time there was an alien-ness to this culture and everything.

Sue: An alien-ness to the academic life?

M: Yes, something felt weird. And I didn't know what it was. And I started to wonder if I deluded myself—like what I was actually doing is something more immediate, self-gratifying...the grades, the awards, the people blowing smoke. It was something like, now I'm on the marathon.

- S: So, at this point, early on, you were already thinking those types of things?
- M: Yah, I was starting to doubt a little bit. I started to realize I am going to now be a lone wolf in the woods. The life of the academic, who is off there by his or herself, and sort of convenes with the pack once a year at a conference. But other than that, you're completely isolated.
- S: This sounds to me like it [the academic life] started to look a lot different [than it had previously].
- M: Yah, oh yah. And it was terrifying. And then I thought, 'have I somehow been doing this work in such a way that I was hiding, hiding...a ...like a lack of actual ability?' Like I just worked really damn hard, harder than the other kids. But my natural ability was not that [great]. I was grinding it out in such a way that someone who was doing this work shouldn't have to grind it out. So, this is the imposter syndrome and it was really sinking in.

Mason's girlfriend was a lifeline during this stressful period. He wasn't sure if this academic life was going to work out, but he knew for sure he wanted his relationship to work out. So, they got married that year, and she encouraged him to stick with it. His plan was to reunite with his wife as soon as he passed his comprehensive exams and complete the research by distance.

In his second year, things started to improve as Mason got a better grounding in his program and the institution. He described how weekly seminars functioned, how he began teaching, and how he learned to read a little more strategically. He told me he learned to play the "game"—to "be more authoritative and assertive" with his opinions and ideas. He started to find his groove, met some friends and had a social life. At the end of his second year he had more confidence and started applying for regional fellowships to support his dissertation research. The research funding started rolling in and took him in interesting directions: he spent his third, fourth- and fifth years on research trips, visiting other universities, museums and libraries, collecting data for his dissertation. He explained:

So that's how it worked in those few years. I would get funding to do research; it was a fun time. I was challenged. I was travelling around. I met a lot of interesting people. I was a visiting scholar and I gave talks and seminars.

Since he hadn't returned to Canada to work on his research, his wife decided to join him in the States so they could finally live together. He continued working on his dissertation and contemplated writing a book based on the insights from his research project. He was no longer living the life of a grad student but was trying to look for work. He picked up an adjunct teaching position, but it was short-lived and he but didn't really enjoy teaching. He attended conferences occasionally and tried to care about his research, but his motivation was low. He felt aimless during this period and was trying to care about his work, trying to finish his dissertation and start to work on the book. But he felt like a lone wolf again, feeling isolated in his endeavours, and began to have serious anxiety about the prospects of landing permanent academic work with a research focus.

Mason completed his dissertation and graduated from the program. But finishing his studies was a double-edged sword, since this meant his student status disappeared. While he was able to work part-time as a student, now a working visa was harder to come by. He applied for academic jobs but couldn't find permanent work: there were so few job prospects in his field, and he couldn't imagine asking his wife to start again in a new location. Mason described how difficult this period of uncertainty was:

That year was really dark for me. I was completely lost. I was really not sure what was going on. We had started to think, 'Do we stay here?' I'm stressing out because I'm trying to play along because I don't want to disappoint anyone, but I'm just thinking this can't work, this can't work, this can't work, and I'm getting really stressed out. I'm not working because of my alien status and I can't apply for jobs without leaving my wife, because there's nothing local. I'm fearing the atrophy of the adjunct where you start to smell bad, and you will never get a real job.

Mason wanted stability: stability in his location, stability in his finances, and stability in his relationship. He simply could not see a future for himself in academia. They finally made the decision to leave the States and return to Canada, to take advantage of the family support and resources they had there. Mason told himself he needed a new career plan, to "re-invent" himself once again, since the academic life had not worked out. As they prepared their exit from the States, Mason scoured the internet, for work and educational opportunities that might make him more employable:

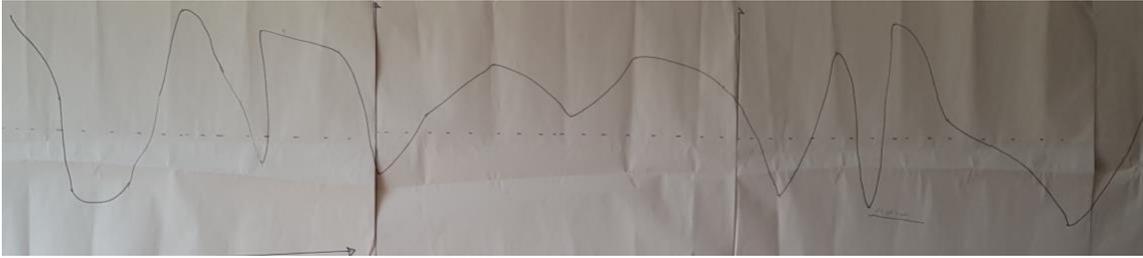
I tried to fish about for ideas in how to reinvent. I even thought I might still find a different role in the University. And I started to apply to some schools. And then—I don't know how it came up—but the topic of a professional degree in [discipline] came up, and I went like, the record needle kind of came off. I had never considered professional degrees to

have much substance, but it made a lot of sense, you know! It seems very flexible; hard skills; something quick and dirty. And I can spin my work in that direction. So that's when I started to figure that out.

Learning about the professional program was a turning point for Mason. He realized that his academic background was actually a good fit within this professional work world, and it would give him the practical experience he wanted in the workforce. Mason struggled with his “re-invention” of himself, with leaving his academic identity behind, and trying to keep his PhD a secret. Mason completed the program and gained practical work experience. His confidence increased as he gained more work experience—and he began to appreciate the value of many of the skills and competencies he'd gained from his graduate work.

Mason now works in various roles in the public sector. He enjoys the collegial working culture and finds the work itself to be challenging since he takes on new projects all the time. He is satisfied that his skills in research, analysis, and writing are put to good use. He and his wife finally have the stability they craved and have built a life together. As the painful transition from academia begins to fade, Mason confessed that if his new job wasn't keeping him so busy, he would have an interest in “closing the loop:” resurrecting his PhD research and writing that book he'd been working on.

## Appendix F: Neill's storied account



When I first met Neill, he had completed his PhD 7 years earlier. Neill's story highlights his personal interests and aptitudes, his world of work knowledge, and his social sphere of networks and colleagues. His story also highlights external influences such as political upheaval and the employment market.

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Neill grew up in a middle-class family who worked predominantly in health care. His parents had post-secondary certifications, and other extended family members had attended university. After high school he took part in a youth leadership program, which gave him the opportunity to travel across Canada for several months, as well as a long stint abroad. He recalls being the "only white guy in town" when he lived in a small town in the South Pacific for five months. He cites this period as being pivotal for his growing understanding of how the world works, his commitments to social justice, and his interest in politics. His spark for activism was lit.

During his bachelor's degree he began working with the student paper on campus. This volunteer work quickly led to part time employment as a journalist with a local newspaper. From the moment he graduated, he had a full-time job as a journalist. He stayed in journalism for the next nine years, which he enjoyed; but he could tell that if he stayed in journalism permanently there wasn't a lot of upward career mobility. Neill decided he didn't want to be a journalist for the rest of his life and was up for a new work challenge. He wasn't sure what, so decided to travel again: he stayed in France for six months, honing his French, then travelled through Europe, the Middle East, and across the Asian continent.

When Neill returned to Canada, he worked freelance with various news agencies, and got involved with local non-profits, organizing social justice and political campaigns. Eventually he landed a permanent job as a journalist for a well-regarded specialty publication. This work was satisfying since it had stable hours and decent benefits; Neill worked with them for more than three years. Then he met someone who lived on the other side of the country—and a long-distance romance wasn't going to work—so Neill looked for work again. He secured a role in communications with a trade union and moved across the country.

Neill and his wife got married, and Neill contemplated writing a book about Canadian archaeologists. He said, "I always had this interest in archeology. When I was a kid, I didn't want to be a hockey player, I wanted to be an archeologist." He finally got moving on writing the book; his wife had connections to the publishing business, so this helped him throughout the process. His life became punctuated with working his stable job in the day, then writing in the evenings. His vacations from work became opportunities to travel and research details for his book. He also connected with the editors of a journal in archaeology and began writing articles for the journal.

Neill stayed with the union for six years but couldn't see a future for himself there and decided to move on. He always had a strong interest in politics and had made some strong connections through his role in the union, so he applied for a communications role in the public sector. He landed a very appealing job with the government and him and his wife happily relocated.

The communications role was a highlight for Neill; he was no longer simply reporting political news as a journalist; he was part of it. And the work was exciting: the pace was not always predictable, and he had to react to new developments quickly. But while the role was interesting, there was one major flaw with this job—it relied on the current government to remain in power. After close to five years of working in the public sector, the party was set to lose the next election; as Neill said, "That was one freight train you could really see coming."

Neill began laying plans for his next big career move, asking himself, "So what do I want to do with the rest of my life?" He was still working studiously in his spare time on his book, and he considered how to merge his personal interests in anthropology with

his career. How could he shift from writing and researching in his spare time to doing it professionally? He had always thought of doing a PhD and decided this was a good time to do it since, as he said, "I've got nothing better to do."

As Neill had predicted, the party lost in the next election. But Neill had already decided to return to university to complete his master's degree. He had over 20 years of work experience under his belt and chose a graduate program that aligned with his career goals. He told me:

I thought I could market this archeology thing because I become aware of a university in the States that offered this special program in archaeology that fit in with my particular interests in this field.

It was an online program which took Neill two years to complete by distance. He had some savings to make ends meet but described this as a very difficult period, taking on freelance work to try and pay the bills. It was also a big change of pace for Neill, to go from working with a huge team in the government to working mostly at home, isolated and trying to keep himself motivated. He continued writing articles for the journal and began working on a second book in his spare time. Neill completed the Master's, and decided on his next steps:

So, I graduated in 2003. And nothing really came out of that, so I thought, 'Well, I'd go on and get my doctorate.' I thought, 'Nothing better to do.'

So, Neill searched for a PhD program that would fit his niche area of interest:

I looked at a number of options—political science and archeology. My degree is in archeology. So where was a place I could go? University of Toronto has a program, but it involved a difficult language requirement. Then there was a guy who at that time was doing research work in a field closely related to mine, at a university closer to me.

Neill was ecstatic to be accepted to the program, since it was not an easy program to get into. He found out that having published a book was one of the things that helped him get accepted. He had to relocate for a few years but him and his wife made frequent trips to see each other. Neill wasn't well funded and stayed afloat with savings and income from being a teaching assistant. Around the time that Neill was finishing up his comprehensive exams he was commissioned to write two more books. He relocated home to work on his dissertation and on the books. Ever since he started the PhD program, he had entertained the idea of becoming a professor. He told me:

I went and did the PhD I only had to be there for a couple of years and then I could come down and get through my comps and then do the dissertation. So anyways, I did all that and it had its ups and downs, but I enjoyed doing it and because you can TA and stuff like that. I was kind of keeping the wolf from the door. I finished off and by then the job market for newly minted PhDs was best described as disastrous.

So, Neill completed the PhD, but realized there wasn't going to be an academic job waiting for him. To stay afloat, he worked freelance and took up sessional teaching; he hoped that he might be able to return to his previous work in politics after an upcoming election. But the election happened, and the party didn't win. Neill told me, "It was really, really bad when we didn't win;" this was the lowest point on his journey plot map. Neill thought to himself, "What the hell am I going to do now?"

The next 18 months were a difficult time financially. Through one of his networks, Neill landed a professorship at a nearby college. But after a year the program got cancelled by the government. Reflecting back on how much of his career had been influenced by political and economic changes he said, "I sort of feel like my life has been trying to stay one step ahead of the bean counters and not always successfully."

Out of the blue, an interesting opportunity presented itself: a multi-year research contract came up, to lead the research and write a book on a topic in his field, related to his area of interest. It was through an American organization—so initially Neill didn't even know if he qualified. But several of his colleagues from different institutions encouraged him to put together a small team and write the proposal. He told me:

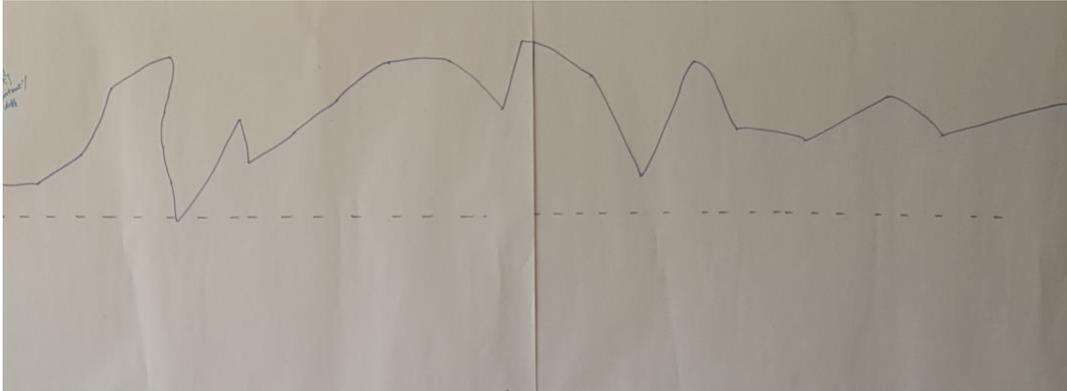
We had a better bid than anybody else. And apparently one of the things—it probably didn't hurt that I had this endorsement from my faculty advisor. But I later asked around and they [the hiring team] said, 'Well, you have a track record of writing books.'

So, they got the bid and Neill became lead researcher and author on the project. This was a turning point for Neill, not only because it was a stable income for the next few years, but because it really merged his personal interests in archaeology with his professional skills. His full-time job became researching and writing a fully commissioned book in his area of interest, something that in the past he had always done on the side.

This project helped to situate Neill as an author and researcher in his field. He is now well connected in the field of archaeology: he is editor of a well-respected journal and president of a non-profit society. He continues exploring his other interests as well,

taking on freelance roles that suit his interests in the field of politics. Neill is well connected to the publishing world and has now published five books, with one more being published next year. Neill is contemplating writing his next book on a completely different topic; he told me, "I'm always thinking about, 'What's my next book?'"

## Appendix G: Ruth's storied account



When I met up with Ruth, she had completed her PhD 10 years ago. Dynamics identified by Ruth in her personal narratives relate to her socio-economic status at various points in time, the socio-political contexts where she lives, her strong ethics towards work, society and the environment, and the gendered role of parenting.

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Ruth started out by giving me a brief synopsis of her early life:

I come from a French Catholic background of people that could have been Protestant in the Protestant ethic kind of sense of the word. My dad is from a family of 17. My mom is from a family of 11. And the vast majority of my aunts and uncles are in some form of a family business or another. My parents had a farm when I was born. They had cows before I was born, and then they had pigs.

Ruth went on to describe how she grew up working in the family farm business—how at the age of 14 she actually started her own corn business. Ruth did well in school and was accepted into an international baccalaureate program during high school, and then transitioned to an academic CEGEP.

Being from such a large family from a working-class background is important to Ruth's story; she is grateful for the deep social and economic changes that gave her the privilege of continuing into higher education and enjoying low tuition fees, an opportunity that was not afforded to children of working-class families like hers in past generations.

Ruth is very politically and socially minded, so it's not surprising that Ruth became involved in student politics at CEGEP and later in university. Ruth described the socio-political context as an undergraduate:

I was involved in the student movement in Quebec and in junior-level kind of politics. And there was a referendum and so I was involved a lot in the student associations. You may remember, the Axworthy reforms announced in 1994 that had significant cuts in interprovincial transfers, which meant that there would be much less funding for higher education, so there were massive protests and things. So, I became involved in the executive level of the student associations, which is relevant because my interests in my discipline converged with my engagement in higher-education politics. Eventually, I got exhausted and dropped out of student politics.

Leaving student politics was a low point for Ruth, although she remained connected to politics by participating in the Quebec model parliament and junior-level party politics. So, she continued with her interests in politics, just no longer with student associations. She also talked about being “rescued” during this time by a professor who had funding to hire her as a Research Assistant:

In my field, every undergrad student that was interested, basically, would get a job as a research assistant because there was so much to do. And it was a time where funding was starting to become more significant to study academic scientometrics, like counting publications. The computing was available to do stuff that previously you couldn't do unless you had a big, big, big, big pile of index cards. But it still needed a lot of monkeys to clean it—that was us undergrads. And so, there were lots of jobs in that field that was really booming at the time. The Quebec Government was investing in research about higher education, research about research basically. And so, I was I very lucky—and that ties into my PhD funding—I've never lacked funding which has been a big bonus compared to so many other grad students.

In addition to research work at the university, Ruth took on other part-time jobs to help pay her expenses. She shared with me one of the interesting jobs she had while an undergrad, which highlights her interests in business and technology:

I was a young woman with more than a basic knowledge of IT, which wasn't very common in 1995. So I learned about this job at Industry Canada, they were trying to get SME's—small, medium enterprises—to get websites, and get the internet, and email and all of those. And basically, we had to cold call, and say 'Hi, I'm so and so from Industry Canada, and I would like to connect you to the internet!' It was something ridiculous like that, and we'd be spending the whole day there. But we were paid more than minimum wage, it was a pretty good job for students. And then we'd go to these different businesses. And

for me, it was fascinating, it was super fun, because I'd go to these manufacturing companies, like places that made furniture, or clothing importers, or mechanics shops, or all kinds of random things that you don't even suspect exist, right?

When that job ended, Ruth began doing freelance work with some of the clients she had helped connect to the internet. She became skilled in setting up websites and troubleshooting internet issues for clients. Ruth became savvy with the internet early on, starting her own website and writing in it daily—and she began to have a following online. This led to her being featured on TV, and then to landing a part on a TV show on the science and technology channel.

Ruth went directly into a master's degree after her undergrad and continued working as a research assistant. She told me she loved doing research and her master's was great:

The master's was cool because I wrote a grant proposal for a Quebec program and it was funded. There was a professor who agreed to put his name on as principal investigator, but he really did it to humor me I think. We had 250 participants—it was a huge project, over 2 years. So, my master's was funded by that. I was coordinating a team of 15 research assistants and everyone was doing interviews, and we were transcribing everything, and coding everything. And it was awesome, because it was funded—I never had to worry about money—and learned so much about so much in that time, both project management and research.

Ruth described this period of time as exciting: of writing grants, of disseminating results, writing papers, and taking on smaller contracts, both internal and external to the university. As her master's was finishing, Ruth worked with a different professor and applied for a substantial SSHRC grant on a related topic; that project got funded, too. Ruth said this was validating since her position on the new research project was elevated; she was no longer a student research assistant but became an associate researcher—a position that was not contingent on her being a student. She was in this role for three years and loved doing the research and managing the project. She enjoyed publishing and disseminating the research, but started to realize that, without a PhD, she could not advance in her career. Ruth told me:

After I finished the master's, I was working for three years as just a professional researcher—but I realized even if I wanted to get into policy-making in my field, everybody had a PhD, that was the cost of entry into the system. There were a lot of people who had been trained

through the same programs as me but the people who were in charge of making the decisions, which I kind of aspired to doing, had PhDs. It was the cost of entry to become a decision-maker there and so I thought, 'Okay.'

Ruth had career aspirations to work in politics or government, and believed the PhD was necessary to get there. Ruth relocated to a different province to pursue her PhD at a different university. She told me she wouldn't have done the PhD if she hadn't been fully funded:

I had decided that I would not ever pay to study. And to me, it was very clear that universities greatly benefit from their PhD students and I was not going to be the person who was paying for it. I thought it was fair that the system would pay for my work. And so, I was not going to start until I had funding, and I did, so I came [and started the PhD].

Ruth, who was always interested in politics, enjoyed being in a new province, experiencing things anew. She told me, "It was the most wonderful, interesting place to study. And it gave me great insight into the province." One of the highlights for Ruth at this new University was her acceptance into a unique graduate student residence. She became very involved in the social learning experiences within her residence, such as public lectures and interdisciplinary exchanges. She even became involved in student politics again through her involvement in residence. She met her current partner there, too.

As her PhD was winding down, her attention turned again to her job prospects. She told me:

I never wanted to be a university professor for as long as I can remember. I didn't even know it [professorship] existed as an undergrad. And I did my master's and I still had no notions to be a professor. When I entered the PhD, it was still not my intention to become a professor.

But at one point near the end of her program, Ruth applied for a faculty position, even though she felt conflicted about it. She told me:

I did apply for one job in the university I studied at. And they had, I think, 150 applicants. And my application was half-hearted. I was not even sure I wanted to do it. But I think I did it because my supervisor wanted me to, or it was kind of the right thing to do. I don't know. I knew I wouldn't get the job.

She told me that was the only faculty position she ever applied for. She shared this story with me, which speaks to the conflict she felt about a faculty work:

There was a professor that told me, he had started his career in government. Then he came back to do a PhD and he became a professor. And he told me, 'You know, I'm not stupid, this is a pretty good gig.' And it's true! I think many professors don't appreciate how much they can do, whatever they want, you have a lot of agency, you can really do some pretty bad-ass stuff as a professor, right? But for me it was not worth the compromise of uprooting ourselves. I could've had a position maybe in the U.S.—I have a colleague, and she got a job in another province. Her husband had no job prospects there, and she's been commuting back and forth—and then she came back for a year, like her sabbatical was for a year, and she was trying to make it work. And it didn't work! And now they've all moved there, and she's miserable! She hates it, right? And so, for me that was not important. I didn't want to have my destiny determined by one single kind of job that I could do.

Ruth did not want her work to dictate where she lived. She wanted more control over her life, which she didn't see possible if she took up faculty work and had to relocate, changing cities and perhaps provinces again.

Ruth found other interesting work opportunities. Through contacts Ruth had from her research projects, she began working with a government research lab with university ties. She stayed there for two years but eventually began to doubt the impact of the research she was involved in. This experience really started to colour how she viewed the academic research enterprise:

So much energy is spent within the academic field, the university field, in a narrowly defined manner, where only the views of your peers matter. But relative to the complexities of problems in our society, I would rather put research dollars towards fixing our world rather than fixing strictly academic problems.

So, Ruth left that research lab. Through her connections, Ruth accepted a new position within the university where she supported faculty research projects, helping academic researchers increase the impact of their work. She described this position as her "dream job," a position that was a perfect fit with her skills and training, and exactly on track with expectations she had for her career trajectory. However, a few months later Ruth's family situation changed: she had a new baby to care for while her husband was completing his education and transitioning into the job market. This next period was challenging for Ruth to balance work and family life; through leaves from work coupled

with some flexible telecommuting options, she managed to stay with her husband as he completed further training abroad.

When Ruth became pregnant with her second child, she felt conflicted about her choices—she didn't want to give up her secure position at the university yet doubted the feasibility of working full time and securing childcare for two children. Ruth realized the gendered dimension of work was very real: her husband now had a full-time position with a much higher salary than Ruth's, but a big commute. The difficulty and cost of getting another daycare spot and the unlikelihood of her husband being able to help with pick up and drop off meant that either Ruth would have to deal with a lot more stress, or agree for her career to be put on hold. She resented the lack of childcare supports and flexible work options for working parents in the province where she lived. If they had moved to Quebec, social support systems would have been better, but they didn't want to relocate. Ruth was frustrated with what she perceived as a dead-end yet combining full-time work and primary childcare responsibility for two young children seemed like too high a burden for her health compared to the monetary and career gains. After three years at her dream job, Ruth quit working at the university.

Ruth was anxious about being out of the workforce for a significant period of time, so she didn't want to stop working completely. She contemplated what kind of flexible work could fit her new reality of raising young children. She wasn't sure she wanted to stay engaged in the work she had been doing at the university. While she enjoyed certain aspects of her university job, she also recognized that she had become critical of the academic research enterprise. She told me she "had a moral problem with that kind of job, helping my university compete against others" and wanted to engage in different work, something that was more meaningful to her—something with positive, immediate, and tangible social impact. She drew a connection between her family background and her work ethic:

And coming from a business background—well, it's not that I come from big business or anything, but I come from the peasantry. I come from a peasant family, I was lucky to benefit from the education I did, but I was coming from, big families, people that valued real work in the sense of material engagement with the world. Right? And so, for me, the belief that the education system would connect to the work we do, became more important.

Ruth wanted her education to be put to good use—she wanted her work to have impact on society and align with her social and environmental ethics.

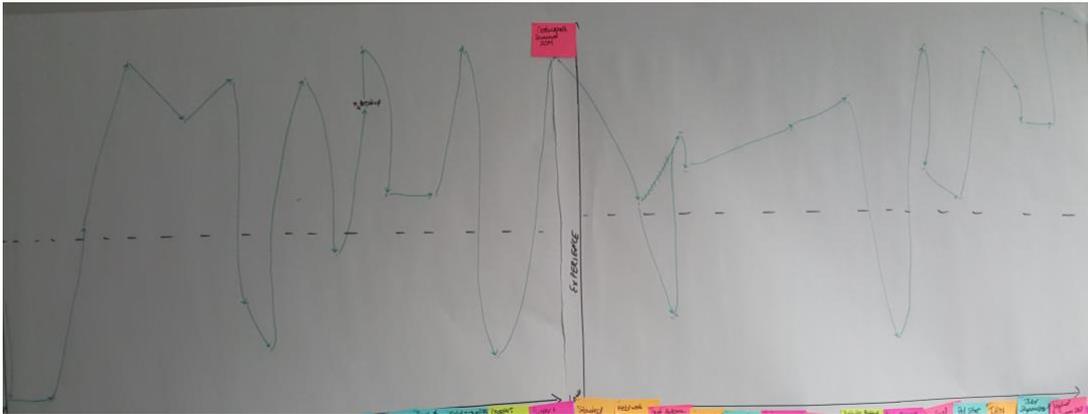
Ruth reflected on her skills, her education and work experiences:

I never felt like I only had one skillset. I think a lot of the process of the PhD is not so much giving you skills as convincing you that you only have *one* set of skills that cannot possibly apply to other fields. And I was thankful that that didn't happen to me. I did project management, I managed businesses, I did more paralegal things, and I was doing politics when we had to write bylaws and government policy and regulations and things. So, I know a little about a lot of things, more of a generalist. I felt that enabled me to do so many other things.

What happened next seems like a natural fit: Ruth became her own boss and lets her interests dictate the projects she pursues. In the past five years, she started a small business related to sustainable, low impact living. She is now primarily focused on cooking education, helping her clients incorporate a vegan diet into their lifestyle. She is happy to be her own boss; it gives her the freedom she needs to care for her children, cycling them to and from school and their various activities. It allows her to set her own hours that work for her and her growing family. She is grateful that her husbands' salary covers their family's financial needs for now, so even if her business doesn't pay her a salary equivalent to what she earned previously, they can still manage. She still feels conflicted about the gendered dynamics that underpin her current reality, but at the same time Ruth is happy to have this time with her family, and she expects as her children get a little older, her businesses will expand, or she'll start something completely new. Contemplating her career journey thus far, Ruth proclaimed:

I've done all of these weird disconnected things. I was on TV. And I was in the student protests. And I was an academic. But it all goes together, trust me. This is the story.

## Appendix H: Sofia's storied account



I met with Sofia 3 years after she completed her doctorate and her experiences as a PhD student were still very fresh in her mind. Her narrative begins in her bachelor's degree and spans 14 years. Themes related to health and gender are prominent in Sofia's narrative.

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Sofia grew up in a middle-class family with working parents and a sister. She said there was never a question of whether she would go to university after high school—in her own words, it was “predestined.” She began her bachelor's degree in the Sciences but in the second semester of Year 2 she switched to Arts. She completed with Honors, with a focus on gender in human history. She described what she enjoyed about university and what attracted her to academic work early on:

In my bachelor's I started thinking about academia as a career. In my discipline there aren't many career options outside of academia. And at as an undergrad especially I loved it. I just loved it. I envisioned spending my life in the research libraries; I didn't envision academia being stressful, and having to work like 80 hours a week [because later] that's what I saw professors doing and that's not what I wanted... But at first, I didn't see any of that stuff. I just saw the option as going the whole route to professor or not at all. So, I decided early on I would go the whole route.

She received SSHRC funding for her master's degree and chose the university based on the ability of the supervisor to offer her field work experience, which she felt

was essential for her career. She was funded throughout her master's and PhD and took up work in the field to supplement her income throughout this time.

Yet throughout all her years at the University, Sofia's health was an issue. At the age of 19, during the first year of her university studies, Sofia was diagnosed with a health condition. This disease impacted her life immeasurably as she had to alter her eating habits, her lifestyle, and take medication to manage the pain. She described to me in detail the year she was diagnosed with the condition and how traumatizing and disruptive this was during her first year at University—after almost a year she was so debilitated she could hardly function. Her health condition influenced her experiences as a grad student, as she needed to keep a strict diet to keep the pain at bay. She did not enjoy the social activities with her supervisor and others from the department—what she describes as an “old boys club”—where it was typical for her supervisor and other professors to hang out in the pub with students. Sofia rarely drank alcohol and pub food was not part of her health regimen—she felt harassed and pressured to partake in these activities but because of her healthy eating regime she just did not fit in and was routinely ostracized. She made many sacrifices to her health during her studies, trying to fit into this “old boys club,” especially during research trips when she was unable to stick to her strict regime. Sofia said:

While I was on research trips, it was very beer and fried food oriented. And it almost felt at the end like you needed to drink to be part of the club. And so, I felt alienated when I couldn't participate, I would be made fun of, and I wouldn't be part of the conversations if people went out for drinks.

Sofia described several of her experiences in the field, many of them traumatic. These were one to three-month research trips. Many of these were funded through grants or a salary was provided to her. During these trips she had a difficult time maintaining her lifestyle guidelines and would need to increase her medication. Her stories highlighted the behaviour of her supervisor while in the field, who made the experiences more stressful, which had direct impacts on her health. Sofia describes these field experiences:

So, it would kind of get worse when I was really stressed. So, research trips would be the most stressful time, so I'd have to increase my meds for that. I'd get sick really, really easily and caught infections a lot more quickly. Being on medication, I just pick up everything. So, I got sick a lot. Never really felt great when I was stressed. But for the time when

I was on research trips, I was just eating what was available and just never feeling that great. And also, there was the drinking culture and the really stressful environment with our supervisor that a lot of us just drank to fit in and to not deal with the trauma we were experiencing.

She realized the department itself was very male-dominated, and she shared with me several examples of how the department discriminated against women, from its hiring practices (there hadn't been a female hire in more than 25 years) to inappropriate comments made by her supervisor.

I asked her at one point whether she ever felt like changing supervisors or quitting the program. Here is our conversation:

Sofia: I feel like every time I got really sick, I would say to myself 'I'm not going to put myself through this again'. But then the money was there, and the opportunity was just easy to stick with it.

Sue: Money in terms of you had the SSHRC?

Sofia: Yeah. And enough [money] is important to not have to work outside of academia for my PhD.

Sue: Yeah. Did it ever cross your mind, 'maybe I should just quit?'

Sofia: It did but I figured I spent so much SSHRC money doing this work, I felt like I should finish it. I had seen lots of students change their supervisors over time, and then I saw how much extra work they had to do to work in a different field. And I knew that's just going to be more difficult and I could deal with it for another couple of years.

So, she stuck with the same supervisor and continued feeling isolated, unsupported and discriminated. She started considering what her next steps would be after the PhD. She told me:

But in my last year of study, I was going to apply to a postdoc, and I couldn't make myself do it, because I reflected on where my career path was going to go, what my life would look like, how I felt in academia at the time. Nothing felt very positive or reassuring. So, I decided to explore what else was possible, and I just started to sign up for every free program available at the University.

Academic work no longer appealed to Sofia: in addition to feeling isolated in the department, she saw other professors with little work life balance, who were tied to their work and continually stressed out. She was also considering starting a family and couldn't conceive of moving around every few years on the postdoc track, chasing

contracts and working up the tenure-track ladder. Sofia's negative experiences within the department and with her supervisor were the decisive nail in the coffin: she didn't perceive the discrimination she experienced as belonging solely to this one department at this one University, but part of the discipline itself, which was male-dominated and misogynistic. She couldn't conceive of living a life where she continually felt discriminated against and isolated. Sofia no longer felt she belonged in academia and her academic dreams lost their lustre.

Sofia explored other work options. A turning point for Sofia was when she visited a doctor who specialized in her condition, who helped her realize she could manage her health condition with lifestyle adjustments, freeing her from the medication which gave her so many ill side-effects. This ignited her passion for the healthcare field, and she decided she wanted to help others with similar conditions.

Sofia now works in the health field with her own consulting business, teaches courses on health at private institutions, and is invited to give speaking engagements around the province. Sofia is satisfied with her work: she is relieved that she changed directions to work in an area she is passionate about. She doesn't regret completing the PhD, since it helped build some of the skills essential to her new endeavor, such as project management, teaching, and her ability to communicate to a lay audience. She feels a deep sense of belonging in her work that she did not feel while pursuing her graduate studies.