

# **Snapshots of Precarity: Life Histories, Organizational Narratives, and Public Service Internships in Ontario**

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## **Introduction**

This paper will analyze the life histories of public service interns to investigate what these narratives reveal about challenges to collective action in contemporary state and democratic institutions. The interviews that were analyzed in this paper suggest that the sense of precarity interns experience in their career trajectories has implications for collective action in public service organizations. Precarity is conceptualized here as the portion of a worker's life history where there is a dissonance between that individual's professional objectives and the organization's narrative. This paper will argue that precarity presents a challenge to collective action in the public service because it does not provide an incentive for workers to personally identify with the organization or its goals. This will be proven through an inductive study of the phenomenology of precarity.

## **Background**

### *Internships and the public service*

This paper will centre the life histories of public service interns as an example of precarious employment and as a useful space to inductively investigate the meaning of

“precarity.” Internships have been increasingly under scrutiny since the 2008 financial crisis. Indeed, it was the figure of the unpaid intern that became a key symbol within the discourse on work post-2008 (Frenette 2015, p.351). Internships often function as a means of improving an individual’s employability and, therefore, highlight skills employers value at a particular moment (Smith 2010, p. 294).

Work-based learning has long been a key institution in capitalist societies to bridge the gap between the classroom and the world of factories and offices (Perlin 2011, p.xi). The historical antecedent of the internship is the apprenticeship which lasted a few years in contrast to internships which are often a few months (Frenette 2015, p. 352). Apprenticeships were part of the life cycle since the Middle Ages as a means to train youth in crafts and trades (Frenette 2015, p.352). These arrangements also composed a social and economic system in that apprenticeships required exchanging training for labour (Frenette 2015, p.352).

The shift from apprenticeships to internships can be seen through legislative changes but also through the development of a post-industrial economy (Frenette 2015, p.355). In a context of flexible and non-permanent jobs, less-regulated internships grew in prominence more than heavily regulated apprenticeships (Frenette 2015, p.355). The labour market has shifted from an emphasis on work-based learning programs and policies - which aimed to assist young people navigating that transitional space between school and the workforce - towards an intern economy that provides and normalizes low paid or unpaid labour (Frenette 2015, p.355).

Internships have become critical to career advancement and a key structure in contemporary capitalism as the “unrivalled gateway to white-collar work” (Perlin 2011, p.xii). In

fact, internships have become such a key structure in the world of work that many of those at the highest places in society were former interns and perpetuate this system that gave them their own start (Perlin 2011, p.xiii). As a result, it is useful to study internships as a point of access to white-collar work such as public administration.

### *Theoretical Framework*

#### Boltanski and Chiapello, (2005) *New Spirit of Capitalism*

This paper's analysis of shifts and trends in public service careers will be grounded in Boltanski and Chiapello's *New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005) which builds on Max Weber's concept of the 'spirit of capitalism' - the ethical motivations that inspire entrepreneurs to pursue capital accumulation (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p.8). They posit a progression of capitalism through a series of spirits that inform the normativities of the world of work. They argue that the driving force for different manifestations of capitalism are its critiques because "it needs enemies, people whom it outrages and who are opposed to it, to find the moral supports it lacks and to incorporate mechanisms of justice" (Boltanski & Chiapello 2005, p.27).

The first spirit of capitalism emerged at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is embodied by the figure of the bourgeois entrepreneur (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p.17). This figure is further described as "the captain of industry, the conquistador, [which] encapsulates the heroic elements of the portrait, stressing gambles, speculation, risk, innovation" (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p.17). The capitalist adventure that is revered in this model is seen in spatial liberation that allows the young (male) to emancipate himself from his community, enslavement to the land, and family to pursue his own fortune (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005,

p.17). In other words, capitalist adventure in this framework is marked by unlimited possibilities.

Boltanski and Chiapello posit the second spirit of capitalism as emerging between the 1930s and the 1960s (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p.17). This spirit of capitalism absorbs critiques of the previous spirit and, beginning at the end of the 1930s, finds its source of indignation in the ways that private interests thrived at the expense of exploited workers (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p. 201). As a result, the second spirit of capitalism inspired the establishment of the welfare state (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p. 201).

In this iteration of the spirit of capitalism, the heroic figure was no longer the individual, adventurous entrepreneur but, in era characterized by large, centralized, bureaucratized firms, the heroic figure became the manager (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005, p.17). The manager is unlike the shareholder in that his or her personal wealth is not invested in the enterprise. However, their main focus is on expanding the size of the firm through developing mass production that is based on economies of scale, product standardization, the rational organization of work, and new techniques for expanding markets (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p. 18).

The subsequent third and 'new spirit' is expressed in the 'globalized' capitalism that incorporates critiques of the second spirit (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p.19). The new spirit of capitalism grounded its critiques in the ways that industrial society had become mechanized (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p. 201). In particular, this critique felt that mechanization

prevents individuals from expressing themselves and realizing their full creative potential (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p. 201).

In order to absorb these critiques of the mechanization of society, the new spirit of capitalism adapted profit-making techniques that gave individuals the space to realize self (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p. 201). This new spirit of capitalism responds to critiques of the state developed by the ultra-left in the 1960s and 1970s which rejected the socialist state because of the ways that the state was seen as “an apparatus of domination and oppression, in so far as it possessed a ‘monopoly on the legitimate violence’ (army, police, justice, etc.), and of the ‘symbolic violence’ practiced by ‘ideological state apparatuses’ – that is to say, schools in the first instance, but also all the rapidly expanding cultural institutions” (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, p. 202). This project focuses on the shift between the second and third spirits (or new spirit) of capitalism.

## **Methodology**

### *La Misère du Monde*

This paper's methodology is based on Bourdieu's *La Misère du Monde* (1993), a text composed of a series of accounts by a cross-section of French society recorded in the early 1990s with an aim to demonstrate the ways in which politics has become technocratic and “turned inward, absorbed in its internal rivalries, its own problems, its own interests” (Bourdieu 1993, p.627). In a similar spirit, this research project aims to study testimony from interns at public service organizations to inductively understand ‘precarity’ in hopes that these lived realities may highlight dimensions of this condition that often do not appear in policy-level

conceptualizations of the concept. In particular, this project, like Bourdieu, aims to go beyond capturing the material suffering of those in precarious positions, *la grande misère*, and instead to focus on ordinary suffering, *la petite misère* (Bourdieu 1993, p.3).

Following Bourdieu, this project will rely on data collected in interviews with four public service interns and will attempt a small sociological-ethnography. In *La Misère du Monde* (1993) there is an aim towards compiling the perspectives of individuals who occupy similar spaces but provide various, and often competing, points of view (Bourdieu 1993, p.3). This paper follows this example through capturing the experience of interns who existed in different parts of the public sector and yet could testify to their experiences within the larger space.

### *Procedure*

This project is engaged in semi-structured interviews of 4 interns at public service organizations. These interns had varied experiences at municipal, provincial, and federal levels of government. The participants were recruited on the basis that they have been employed in that capacity within the past 5 years. This specific time period was selected in order to provide information that was specific to the snapshot that will be captured in this project. Participants were selected on the basis of their self-identification as having had worked in the public service.

### **Data Analysis**

#### *Life Histories and Narrative Analysis*

The approach to data analysis taken in this project was informed by the literature on life histories and narrative analysis. These interviews that are the basis of this project constitute life

histories in the ways that participants described their professional trajectories. It also constitutes material for a narrative analysis because it focuses on a time and a place in the life history – namely, the transitional space occupied by an internship.

Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame's 1981 work on artisan bakers in France was a particularly instructive source on conducting the life histories to analyze careers and economic relations. In their project, the authors interviewed bakery workers on their working life in order to understand the structure of their working week and how it evolved from the 1920s to the 1970s (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1981, p. 176). Through studying these factors, the authors were able to uncover distinct professional trajectories that were distinct between the Pyrenees (or among rural bakers) and Paris (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1981, p. 181).

Through comparing these professional trajectories, the authors were able to discover patterns, structural mechanisms, constraints, and rules of the game (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1981, p. 181). In other words, they were able to “see what was the social logic underlying daily practices and whole life trajectories” (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1981, p. 181). Their work highlights the ways that sociological research relies on uncovering and explaining structural patterns that lie underneath social phenomena (Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1981, p. 188).

The other methodological orientation that has influenced this work has been that of narrative analysis. In particular, analysis of storytelling in organizations and the ways in which individuals situate themselves within these narratives. Storytelling is a means by which participants in an organization make sense of the space that they occupy (Boje 1991, p. 106).

These stories are constantly going through dynamic processes of refinement and reinterpretation (Boje 1991, p. 106). These organizational narratives provide accounts that can give guidance for future individual decision-making and actions (Boje 1991, p. 106). The performance of the stories is also critical because of the ways that the teller chooses some dimensions to shorten and others to emphasize (Boje 1991, p. 124). This makes it especially important to observe the stories not only as texts separate from their original context but within their natural settings (Boje 1991, p. 125).

In conjunction with narratives, the professional life history approach has primarily been used to look at professional groups in periods of contestation (Paquette 2013, p. 147). As mentioned earlier, this examination of internships takes place during a period of contestation as seen in the ways that interns have come to represent one of the most recognizable examples of precarious employment. Further, this is seen in the ways that work-based learning programs are reconstructed on an ongoing basis in relation to the third spirit of capitalism.

### **Life Histories and Organizational Narratives: Life between the gaps**

Based on these life histories, it became apparent that precarity is the point in the in the life history where there is a gap between the organizational narrative and the individual professional trajectory. This gap highlights the structural component of a context in which the new spirit of capitalism often directs work arrangements. In the next section, the testimony that the four participants provided will be analyzed for insights on the phenomenology of precarity and its implications for collective action in public service organizations.

### **A Phenomenology of Precarity**



*Amy<sup>1</sup>: Precarity and sense of self*

When I met Amy she had just left her full-time contract job at an arm's length body of the Ontario government. She was in a transitional period in her career, and exploring options for going back to school to pursue a law or a master's degree. Prior to her last job, she had participated in three internships and had taken on numerous temp jobs. We met at a public library to discuss, her career trajectories and reflections on the world of work, and in particular, her experience in various internships in different parts of the public sector at the federal and provincial levels.

Amy's expectations for career advancement after her first public service internship and graduation came in confrontation with organizational narratives that are focused on efficiency through maintaining a small staff. It was a traumatic experience for her because work had played such a crucial role in her life and was intimately linked to her identity. For Amy, living within this gap had significant impacts on her sense of self and in particular her self-worth.

"It was a shock for me after I graduated because I was, for the first time, unemployed for several months, and I became very depressed actually. I was able to find some kind of part-time job that allowed me to tell people that I'm technically employed, but it was extremely few hours .... It was just such a blow to my identity; I've always identified myself as somebody who is very high achieving, very accomplished, and would be capable of getting a good job. I graduated at the top of my class, *summa cum laude*, so, I would've thought it would be no problem. Application after application was sent out and I wasn't getting any kind of response.

Several months had passed by until I had got into a really great, prestigious internship actually.... and that sort of gave me hope again. But, I think it had really affected my health, going through that sort of depression. Leading up to the internship, I took on many temp roles just to save money so that I could relocate and be closer to my workplace. So, of course, I entered that internship completely exhausted and anxiety prone. Whereas, a lot of my colleagues came in relaxed and taken care of, and in a fresher state, and I came in totally exhausted. So, that set the stage for a second bout of depression through that internship.

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<sup>1</sup> The names of the participants have been changed to protect their privacy.

Again, after that internship, I've had a lot of short-term contracts doing a variety of different things.... The last roles, in the last couple of years, have been purely administrative; something that you could do with a high school diploma. So, actually I feel like... a downward spiral where there's been an expectation set up that with my background that I should be able to, but the reality for me coming from a working-class background is I've always felt the need to work. So, you take the first opportunity that comes your way, which isn't always the best, especially in this market. So, it's been a little demoralizing."

As Amy continued to testify, it became clear that the dimension of precarity that her experience in the public service revealed was the ways in which this space can have very personal consequences to an individual's mental health and well being. The incredible toll that this takes on an individual can also be seen in her description of life as a temp worker.

"You don't feel very confident as a temp worker because you do go in initially with a lot of expectation, and a lot of hope and a lot of optimism. Maybe this will lead to a contract with the organization or a permanent, full-time role, but, honestly, most of the time that just does not play out. As time goes by, you've taken on more and more temp roles that haven't materialised into any kind of job security. It's pretty demoralizing, actually. You feel kind of used; a chunk of your pay is not in your pocket it's the temp agency that's taking it. You kind of feel very dispensable... you feel like just another dispensable agent of production"

This discussion of the ways in which organizational narratives and her own personal aspirations did not match can especially be seen in Amy's reflections on the world of work today. A key theme that emerged from this part of the discussion are power structures and the imbalance between employers and employees in the employment relationship for working people, in general, as well as among youth.

"I think it's quite depressing, actually. I'm also coming from a place where I've always had to work. There is so much precarious employment; there are so many temp agencies out there. They are a very solid business, in the sense that, they connect people to jobs – that's fine. But, of course, they take a lot of the pay; these employees are not guaranteed any kind of benefits or any type of job security at all. You could be dropped at any time, you could be let go at any time, and there's really no cushion for you when you go through this avenue. And, unfortunately, that's the reality for a lot of people that they just have to take on these sorts of roles. I feel like employers are in a very dominating place where they are able to exercise a lot of power, and virtually do whatever they want. And employees are always at the mercy of them. They can let go very easily, they are usually on contract, and there are very few permanent, full-time jobs. It's difficult."

“For a lot of youth, but even folks that are not youth, I think there’s just not enough protection out there for employees. Most folks are not part of any kind of a union a lot of people just don’t know their rights. A lot of people are just extremely desperate and need to survive. So the situation is just really bad for a lot of working people out there and is even worse when you go down the socio-economic ladder to working-class folks who just always had to work”

Amy’s testimony highlights that a dimension of the phenomenology of precarity is the profound impact this can have on an individual’s sense of self and self-worth. As illuminated by Amy’s testimony, precarity includes, through the feelings of disposability that it encourages, an affront to an individual’s self worth.

*Janet: Paying your dues and proving yourself*

When I met Janet, she was a contractual worker in the provincial Public Service. She was eager to share her experiences and reflections on life as an intern. She was also interested in sharing her knowledge on contract work. Janet held a variety of internships in her career including at the provincial level as well as an internship at a municipality in Ontario. We conducted our interview through a video call on an evening that was convenient for Janet after work. She had recently started a new contract, and was optimistic about future prospects.

In providing her personal life history, Janet clearly outlines the organizational narratives that she perceives in provincial and municipal governments.

“As a side note, it’s very different at the city. At the city, it’s a lot harder to hire someone without a competition. I find at the province their able to hire on short term contract, no benefit, that kind of thing but at least you get a foot in the door. They are able to hire based on operational needs. Whereas at the city, it’s kind of smaller, smaller staff-wise and there’s kind of less opportunity for policy jobs so that’s how I ended up at the province. So basically my manager had work that needed to be done; he knew me, he trusted me, he brought me on and that’s how I’m here. I’m on a nine-month contract so after the nine months we’ll see what happens but at least I’m in which is better than the alternative which is not working anywhere. In that way, it’s beneficial that I’ve been able to get myself back in.”

Within the context of these organizational narratives, her reflection of the world of work today she, like Amy, also highlights this feeling of disposability that often faces young workers.

However, she poses it as a challenge for young workers to mobilize these narratives in their own pursuit of their own goals.

“The nature of work today is that there’s just a lot of competition, everything’s expensive, workers are so disposable...it’s just unfortunately how it is. So that’s why for me it’s kind of even more important to seek a career path where I can be happy. For me now, I’m on contract, I don’t like being on contract it kind of sucks but I know at least I’m in a place where I’m going to get good experience and may like near the end when I’m eligible for internal competitions and there are more internal jobs than external. So a lot of the time it’s just finding someone who will take a chance on you and getting your foot in the door and then working really hard to prove yourself.... homeownership, that is such a far away goal. I’ll be happy if I own a box in the sky”

“As I’m talking, I’m thinking as I’m talking, and realizing things that I didn’t realize .... the reality is that’s the nature of how things are becoming and it’s unfortunate because it makes it difficult for someone to get a good job. But, I think from the government’s point of view, they can benefit from that in terms of not just giving anyone permanent if the person doesn’t prove that their worth permanent”

For Janet, a dimension of the phenomenology of precarity is a constant pressure to prove oneself. When one exists within the gap between the narratives of public service organizations and their own personal life histories and professional trajectories, this poses a challenge to the individual to find ways to bridge this gap through working hard to prove their worth.

### Precarity and Collective Action

*Gerald: “A thankless, tiring job”*

At the time of our interview, Gerald was in the process of pursuing a graduate degree. He was kind enough to meet with me to discuss his experience as an intern with the federal government. He undertook public service internships in the process of pursuing his degree. We met at a cafe to discuss his experiences working within the public service and his reflections on the profession. In his account, Gerald illustrated the common dissonance between

organizational narratives and individual career trajectories. He was very clear about the ways in which he envisioned this opportunity to work in the public service as a bridge towards other career objectives.

“As I sometimes joke about, having done all my education in public administration, that it’s a field that much as I often looked at government as something I don’t necessarily see as a career for me it was sort of a stepping stone. It was something that realistically helped pay the bills; the hours were flexible enough that I continued to do academic work without having to necessarily compromise it too much. Though, as I said, the hours and the workload and the expectations were getting to a point where it was affecting my academic career so I cut it out.”

Gerald’s expectations of a job that would provide him with the experience and funds to pursue his educational goals clashed with the organization’s instrumental view of its young workers.

“You almost get the impression at times that, because student employees are cheaper labour than full-time employees or even contract employees, they kind of take as much advantage of that as they can. Sometimes I was tasked with certain responsibilities that I shouldn’t have been, because some people were giving me work that they didn’t necessarily understand or didn’t have the time to do but that they have the qualifications to do it whereas I didn’t.”

“I think one of the challenges, and I think this was perhaps a by-product of they kept me on so long as a student, and why at some points they had three or four different students working at the same time is that...again, this is something that might change with respect to our new government and what might come from that. What I think we saw a lot of especially for youth is that a lot of the work that was available was contract work, it was five or six-month contracts or it was positions through FSWEF or it was through internships and school placements. I’m sure for a lot of them they did get careers; I know a lot of people who I went to school with in my undergrad who have full-time positions working in government now and part of that was through bridging. They did co-ops and were bridged in that way, and others it was just, in part, having had experience through things like FSWEF that does give you a foot in the door if you want to pursue a job in government. But, I think, by and large, for youth it’s probably a little harder to find a permanent position than perhaps it was for the older generations who are currently working there full-time with those guaranteed positions.”

The instrumental view of workers and contingent employment relationship that Gerald describes suggests that the contemporary internship may not be constructed to inspire a sense of collective purpose.

*Pamela: precarity and career mobility*

When I met Pamela, she was as an IT professional in the private sector in a stable full-time position, and was content with her career trajectory. She was very excited about having the opportunity to share about her experience in the public sector and her reflections on the world of work. Her public service internship took place during her undergraduate degree at a Service Canada centre in 2011. We met at a bubble tea shop, and had an in-depth conversation that ended up surrounding youth career prospects and the contemporary world of work.

Pamela started her career with considerable optimism about having the opportunity to intern in the federal government, but these hopes were soon to be disappointed.

“I did that for about two or three years, and then they started having ... their problems. The budget was tight. You heard on the news that’s when they started laying off a bunch of people”

In our interview, a key theme that emerged was the ways in which there was little investment in her growth as a worker. Instead, what she found in that workplace was a space that structured the internships as a much more self-driven experience.

“We kind of have this paper where we track our stats – how many people we talked to, how many people we helped. And, it’s categorized into was it based on social insurance, employment insurance... like what is it on. So, we have that little sheet so we just keep it so at least they know that we’re doing something.... During our lunch break, we have to go back into their system... and you input your stats”

“We do have someone we report to, but she was very hands off. I guess maybe because we were students so she didn’t really give a shit.... I remember when I first started there we didn’t have any training we were just given ‘Oh hey, here’s your stat sheet, make sure you keep a record and just input it. We expect you to have around fifty a day or something.’ There’s expectations there but it wasn’t very we need you to do this, this, and this. It’s pretty hands off, and if we have a question we just go back, and ask them. We don’t really have any training... barely... everything is pretty much learn as you go.... we were just on contract so there’s not that much real investment there.”

In this case as well, it becomes clear that there is a difference between the expectations of gaining skills and knowledge that would be useful for career advancement and the

opportunities that internship arrangements provide the individual with the opportunity to achieve that goal.

Through Pamela's account it appears that in public service organizations, a trend may be emerging of an organizational narrative does not operate to train students with the expectation that they would have an opportunity to work long term and personally identify with the organization's goals. This poses a collective action problem because young workers are not incentivized to adopt the organizational narrative as their own.

## **Analysis**

### *On Public Sector Precarity*

These life histories suggest that public service careers are increasingly facing pressure to appear like other professions, and that public sector work environments are also increasingly shaped by the new spirit of capitalism. This poses a challenge to the expectations that some interns may have of the full-time, indeterminate work that was previously the norm in public service career. This is seen in Amy's testimony when she states:

“When I was in my undergrad, I really saw myself moving my way up the civil service and staying there post-graduation. Of course that didn't happen, the year I graduated there were major cuts in the civil service. And, where traditionally students were bridged into full-time roles, that year it wasn't happening. Most students were completely cut, and their contacts were not renewed. I was one of those students.”

This shift away from a model employment that anticipates and encourages long term service can be argued to be caused by pressure for a smaller state and distrust of bureaucracies driven by the new spirit of capitalism. As a result, the specific contribution that public service careers offers to understanding precarity is the ways in which it represents a gap between a worker's

aspirations of achieving long-term employment in a career that has long been shaped by a stable career trajectory, and organizational realities. Public service careers also more vividly highlight the ways that precarity has implications for collective action functions within organizations because of their mandate to work in public interest.

### *On Collective Action*

Examining precarity through the life histories of interns also provides insight on challenges for collective action. In particular, a collective action problem emerges in the ways that organizational narratives have shifted away from a model that values incentivizing employees to personally identify with the organization and its goals. It appears that public servants seem to no longer be called to be personally invested in the organizational narrative due to the contingency of their work. This is because workers in the context of the new spirit of capitalism are now seen as responsible for creating, selling, and being ultimately loyal to their own brand of skills and expertise as opposed to being personally invested in a brand constructed by a large organisation.

A useful illustration of this can be seen in pop culture representations of this worker. In particular, this archetype can be seen in the character of Don Draper on the AMC series *Mad Men*. This series is significant for this conversation because it takes place in the 1960s - in the period just before the shift to the third spirit of capitalism. A key plot point in season three of the series is Draper's refusal to sign a contract to the agency – an unconventional approach to managing his career that generates confusion among the agency's partners. His justification of this choice is that "no contract means that I have all the power. They want me but they can't



have me” (*Mad Men*, 3.7). In this statement, Don Draper highlights the career management approach that is idealized in the new spirit of capitalism. Draper knows the worth of his brand – that is, his expertise – that he can market and choose to submit to a variety of organizational narratives that he will encounter in the various spaces that he is employed in over the span of his career.

This archetype of the ideal worker within the precarious third spirit of capitalism suggests that due to their short tenure at any given job, workers are not receiving the incentives, such as benefits or employer provided training, to adopt the organizations goals as their own. In this scenario, the worker’s self-interest is in opposition to that of the organization. This suggests an erosion of the archetype presented in Whyte’s (1956) *The Organization Man* who is driven by the social ethic, or a belief in the power of the collective (Whyte 1956, p.9).

#### *On Research Method*

This project presents some preliminary results of a research method that could be used on future research on precarity. As a result, the aim was not to produce a generalizable conclusion on precarity, but rather to test out life histories as a research method that could be used to engage in research on precarious employment. In order to achieve this aim, this project took out a small sample of interviewees and conducted a semi-structured interview. Through this approach, a portrait of precarity was provided, guided by the life history tradition, of what it is like to be an intern within the context of the third spirit of capitalism.

An important note on the generalizability of this project, aside from the small sample size, is to understand that the ways that narratives are performed often depend on the

audience. In this scenario, the principal researcher was also occupying that space between leaving school and entering the workforce and this may have influenced the sorts of details that were mentioned in the life histories. This can be seen in the ways that participants sometimes said things like “a master’s degree really helps” knowing that the immediate audience, the principal researcher, was in the process of obtaining a master’s degree. This idea is spoken to in Boje (1991) in which the author argues:

“As listeners, we are co-producers with the teller of the story performance. It is an embedded and fragmented process in which we fill in the blanks and gaps between the lines with our own experience in response to cues, like ‘You know the story!’ Because of what is not said, and yet shared, the audible story is only a fraction of the connection between people in their co-production performance” (Boje 1991, p.107).

However, it provided some preliminary results to be expanded in future research of using a phenomenological approach to precarity relying on professional life histories to understand public sector careers within the third spirit of capitalism.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this project has found that the precarity experienced by interns poses a challenge to collective action because it does not incentivize workers to adapt public service organization narratives as their own. This exploratory research on precarity on the public sector can be expanded in many ways. First, this research project could be particularly relevant in a public administration context in terms of examining the ways that the precarity that some public servants experience could impact public policy outputs. In particular, it inspires the question of what parts of the organizational narrative do public servants today most identify with and participate in.

Another way in which this project can be expanded is through deeper investigation of work-based learning within the public sector and tracing this mode of entry into the career path over the years. This can especially be useful in understanding the values that shape public service careers and the ways in which this has shifted over the years in responses to changes in the spirit of capitalism. It would also be worthwhile to investigate the ways in which this can fit into a framework of understanding how these values are transmitted within a work environment shaped by uncertainty.

Another path for future research is to broaden it beyond one professional capacity in the public service and to understand other positions such as the contract or casual worker within public service organizations. This project could also make linkages or compare and contrast with other careers outside the public sector. For example, another project could analyze the experiences of, and make structural connections, regarding careers that are often mobilized in contemporary activism, research and thought as the figures of precarity (e.g. the intern, the temp worker, sharing economy participants).

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