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Pursuing the Unachievable: Examining Worker Burnout in Ontario's Public Employment Services

Sheldon M. Bromfield[1] and Virginia Kanyogonya[2]

ABSTRACT: This paper utilizes the job demands–resources (JD-R) model to examine how the neoliberal governance of Employment Ontario (EO) contributes to worker burnout. The work of Employment Ontario specialists is governed by neoliberal policies, which are an apparatus of austerity politics mechanized through New Public Management (NPM). NPM places a strong emphasis on performance management, quantitative targets and the marketization of public services. This paper demonstrates how these neoliberal policies contribute to worker burnout in public employment services (PES). EO specialists who deliver PES, are tasked with helping vulnerable jobseekers quickly re-enter the paid labour force regardless of systemic barriers, which this study has revealed as a largely unachievable pursuit within a neoliberal market environment. Utilizing data from thirty-two interviews, our analysis indicates that EO workers/specialists experience burnout due to unreasonable job demands and a lack of sufficient resources, which inhibit their ability to meaningfully support vulnerable jobseekers. Having identified time pressures, work overload, lack of training and development opportunities and job insecurity as some of the stressors experienced by EO specialists, we conclude that prolonged exposure to these stressors leads to burnout.

KEYWORDS: Employment Ontario; New Public Management; Worker Burnout, Job Demands–Resources Model

Introduction

Employment Ontario (EO) specialists work tirelessly to support jobseekers in securing employment. Yet, the marketization of public employment services (PES), including the neoliberal governance systems within which EO specialists operate, has made it difficult for EO specialists to achieve desirable outcomes, such as helping clients obtain commensurable and non-precarious employment. EO is a provincially funded PES program typically delivered through non-profit community-based organizations. It involves the coordination of "a range of resources, supports and services to respond to the career and employment needs of individuals and the skilled labour needs of employers" (Employment Service Program Guidelines, 2017). Upon reviewing various municipal publications and interviewing client-facing EO specialists, the program seems to be encumbered with challenges that have inhibited its success. As noted by Minister McNaughton, "the current model for employment services is complex, fragmented and has not been effectively helping people find and keep full-time jobs, making it difficult and time-consuming for workers to navigate, particularly those on social assistance." ("Ontario Introduces Streamlined", 2021, para. 4). Not to mention, literature suggests that due to the marketization of PES, it is not uncommon for service providers to engage in "creaming and parking" to help them achieve their targets and maintain funding (Greer et al., 2018; Carter, & Whitworth, 2015). Creaming and

[1] Sheldon M. Bromfield holds a PhD from the Adult Education and Community Development program (Collaborative Specialization in Workplace Learning and Social Change), Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. The research was completed as part of a doctoral study conducted by Sheldon M. Bromfield, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and titled *Connected Yet Disconnected: New Public Management and Labour Expropriation within Public Employment Services Work*.

[2] Virginia Kanyogonya is a PhD candidate in the Adult Education and Community Development program, Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

parking can be described as a process where service providers respond to marketization by "providing only a minimal service for clients deemed distant from the labour market and focusing attention on job-ready clients" (Greer et al., 2018, 1428).

PES programs in Canada were first established by the federal government in 1918, after the First World War, to address the pressing unemployment issues of that time (Wood, 2018). This prompted the enactment of the Employment Offices Coordination Act, catalyzing the Employment Service of Canada (ESC), a national network of employment services that were operated by the provinces and partially supported by conditional grants from the federal government (Campeau & Howard, 2004; Wood, 2018). In these initial PES initiatives, the government acknowledged that addressing unemployment was a shared responsibility, and therefore, those who had lost their jobs could be supported through social income benefits (Campeau & Howard, 2004; Green & Riddell, 1993; Zhengxi, 1998). This Keynesian messaging of 'shared responsibility' shifted with the emergence of neoliberalism, wherein neoliberal activation policies became more favourable, resulting in the reduction of social income supports (Grundy & Rudman, 2018; Campeau, 2004). It was believed that this activation approach would motivate those who were unemployed to expedite their job search process in hopes of rapidly landing employment (Campeau & Howard, 2004). As noted by Rudman and Aldrich (2016), "activation-based policies set parameters for employment support services based on the rationale that citizens "at risk" of state dependency must be transformed into responsible, self-reliant citizens" (2). Hence, the demand for PES workers (e.g., EO specialists) arose out of the need to activate the unemployed (Rudman & Aldrich, 2016). This paper will expound on how activation measures—an aspect of neoliberal governance, contributes to the burnout of workers expected to activate job seekers. Utilizing the job demands-resources (JD-R) model to analyze data from thirty-two qualitative interviews, we argue that neoliberal governance policies, which include the marketization of public services and a focus on performance management and quantitative measures, have largely contributed to worker burnout experienced by the EO specialists interviewed in this study. Being forced to navigate a system that is essentially set up to fail has taken a toll on EO specialists.

Worker burnout has been identified as a syndrome in which emotional exhaustion is symptomatic and is often experienced by people who work in human services and care professions (Maslach, 1982). Similarly, the JD-R model suggests that the manifestations of burnout are shaped by extreme job demands and a lack of adequate resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001). Utilizing the JD-R model, we examine how neoliberal policies have impacted EO specialists who typically work for non-profits. These workers often have to contend with navigating the contradictory neoliberal businesslike practices that shape their work. Some of these practices are antithetical to working with the complex and emotional needs of vulnerable jobseekers. The sections that follow unpack this further.

The paper begins with a background outlining how neoliberal governmentality and New Public Management (NPM) act as the apparatus through which EO is marketized. We then present an overview of key literature on worker burnout framed within the JD-R model. This is followed by the methodology section, which outlines the research design and data collection methods. Thereafter, we then draw on research findings from qualitative interviews, to provide an analysis of the contradictory experiences of EO specialists. These contradictory experiences are framed within the JD-R model and reveal how unreasonable job demands and insufficient job resources exacerbate worker burnout for EO specialists. The paper contributes to the limited scholarly literature in the field of PES work in Canada and, more specifically, Employment Ontario, thus advancing our understanding of how job design influenced by neoliberal governance in non-profit

employment agencies produces burnout. Before proceeding to examine how EO specialists have experienced worker burnout, it is important to provide a brief overview on the manifestations of neoliberal governmentality in Employment Ontario.

Manifestations of Neoliberal Governmentality in Employment Ontario

Over the years, critical researchers and governmentality scholars have noted that the welfare state is being eradicated to engender personal responsibility as the new norm (e.g., Ilcan, 2009; Peterie et al., 2019; Rose, 1996). As the state endeavours to reduce public spending, it seeks to remove its responsibility from the social contract of ensuring security, welfare and prosperity, passing on these responsibilities to the individual. Thus, neoliberal governance becomes a disciplinary apparatus (Foucault, 1977) through which unemployed individuals are forced to adhere to neoliberal economic expectations. Evidently, the state ensures this adherence process through public employment services such as EO.

Within EO's operations, the clients (i.e., service users) are treated as numbers to be managed and files to be opened and closed within a specified timeframe (Rudman et al., 2017). Essentially, the aim of the EO program is rapid job placements, which can be rendered as a form of neoliberal activation. According to Rudman et al. (2017), neoliberal activation is mostly concerned with changing the individual rather than changing economic policy. It involves *incentivizing* and *responsibilizing* the unemployed and the EO specialists who are responsible for EO service delivery. This form of dual activation (Considine et al., 2018) increases EO job demands in terms of placing extraordinary time pressures on EO specialists. EO specialists are typically expected to make clients job ready and gainfully employed within three months. This short timeframe to transform vulnerable jobseekers into enterprising prospects in a precarious Canadian labour market mechanizes the role of these workers.

It is worth noting that marketization and privatization are strategies the state employs to govern at a distance. The withdrawal of state presence and responsibility is a form of neoliberal governance that is exercised through strategic emphasis on the private sector and the logic of market efficiency through New Public Management (NPM). As a common approach to public sector management since the 1990s peak neoliberal turn, "NPM asserts that governments should function more like the private sector, imposing market discipline on the provision of goods and services and reconstituting work structures" (Fanelli et al., 2017, 335). When qualitative work design is reconfigured in the image of competitive, quantitative, performative work experiences, workers' well-being is usually overshadowed. Furthermore, a contradictory work environment engendered by the consistent demands of governmentality can lead to a loss of purpose and a drain on the emotional resilience of EO specialists. As will be later demonstrated, a common sentiment shared by EO specialists is that they did not come into this line of work for pecuniary reasons or to pursue prescribed performance targets; but rather, they were drawn to the sector to meaningfully help people. This conflict between being able to meaningfully help people and meet performative targets reveals the entrenchment of neoliberal practices that dehumanize work and is one of the factors that contributes to burnout. We will turn to examining how and why the JD-R model is a useful tool for assessing worker burnout.

How Job Demands and Job Resources Induce Worker Burnout

The JD-R model is a theoretical framework that attempts to explain how job demands and job resources induce burnout (Zábrodská et al., 2018; Demerouti et al., 2001). According to Demerouti et al. (2001), job demands refer to the "physical, social or organizational aspects of a job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs" (501). Similarly, job resources are social, physical and organizational components of the job that (a) support workers in achieving their work goals; (b) help to reduce the cost of physiological and psychological job demands; and (c) help to propel personal growth and development (Demerouti et al., 2001). The JD-R model, therefore, suggests that extreme job demands that lead to exhaustion and a lack of external resources that make it difficult to meet one's job demands result in disengagement from work, which, in turn, leads to burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001).

Maslach (1982) describes burnout as "a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization [disengagement], reduced personal achievement that can occur among individuals who do "people work" of some kind" (3). It is worth noting that burnout should not be confused with anxiety, depression (Swider & Zimmerman, 2010) or compassion fatigue (Rossi et al., 2012; Sprang et al., 2007). Although closely related, Figley (1995) describes compassion fatigue as an occupational hazard that involves the professional relief of client trauma while the care professionals themselves unintentionally internalize the trauma, thereby resulting in severe emotional distress. Arguably, compassion fatigue is an antecedent to burnout; as burnout manifests in a more gradual fashion and compassion fatigue is observed as a symptomatic short-term processual feature of burnout (Adams et al., 2006). Therefore, prolonged exposure to client stories of traumatic incidences tends to induce compassion fatigue, which might eventually result in worker burnout. Over the years, burnout has been recognized as a pervasive yet pernicious occupational hazard across various professions (Solomonidou & Katsounari, 2020) that impacts workers' well-being. In a study that employed the JD-R model to examine burnout among 2,229 university faculty members, the authors found that tasks that increased quantitative demands, such as time spent on administrative grants and administrative paperwork, including publication outcomes that are often challenging to achieve, resulted in higher levels of burnout (Zábrodská et al., 2018). Zábrodská et al. (2018) further indicated that previous research has observed that paperwork contributes to academic stress. In their words, "as some qualitative research suggests, time spent on paperwork may increase faculty feelings of work pressures both because it is perceived as futile and because it steals time from activities academics truly value, namely, their research and teaching" (Zábrodská et al., 2018, 814). Interestingly, our study also found that EO specialists are forced to battle with bureaucratic paperwork demands that often take away time that could be spent with clients. Drawing on data from our participant interviews, we will expand on how these kinds of job demands influence burnout, but first, it is worth highlighting some noted limitations of the JD-R model discussed in the literature.

In an effort to provide a theory of employee engagement, Saks and Gruman (2014) assert that the JD-R model is insufficient in measuring employee engagement in that the JD-R model does not specify the requisite job resources related to engagement. They additionally note that the JD-R model solely focuses on "work" engagement, which does not take into account other forms of employee engagement (Saks & Gruman, 2014). The relationship between the constructs of worker burnout and disengagement is that having adequate resources could lead to higher levels of engagement (Demerouti et al., 2001). While we recognize this relationship (i.e., burnout and engagement), this paper is not focused on the theorizations of employee engagement, which has

its own extensive literature. Not to mention, some authors have argued that "while engagement is the antithesis of burnout, it is distinct and therefore should be measured independently of burnout" (Schaufeli et al., 2002, as cited by Saks & Gruman, 2014,164). By contrast, Korunka et al. (2009) conclude that after testing the robustness of the JD-R model in eight Austrian manufacturing and service companies, they found that the model was a useful framework for assessing burnout and worker engagement. Overall, a great deal of previous research has confirmed the value of the JD-R model in assessing burnout (e.g., Bunjak et al., 2021; Zábrodská et al., 2018; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001). Taken together, we conclude that even though the JD-R model may not be all-encompassing, it is still a helpful starting point for predicting and/or assessing burnout in public employment services. As far as we know, there are hardly any studies that have explicitly examined worker burnout within the PES sector and more so within Employment Ontario. While some scholarly literature *responsibilizes* burnout by claiming that personality traits and emotional dispositions are internal predictors of burnout (Kim & Qu, 2019; Lin et al., 2016; Swider & Zimmerman, 2010), this paper utilizes the JD-R model to demonstrate how the neoliberal governance of EO is a major contributor to worker burnout. Having laid out the usefulness of the JD-R model in assessing burnout, we will now turn our attention to the methodology section, which outlines the research design and data collection methods.

Methodology

This paper draws on findings from thirty-two semi-structured qualitative interviews across three different non-profit organizations in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). This study was part of a methodological design of a doctoral research project. The research participants were recruited over a period of twelve months through a snowballing approach. Interviews were conducted between November 2019 to November 2020. Fourteen of the thirty-two interview participants were former EO specialists, and eighteen were current EO specialists at the time of the interviews. Although we recognize that issues related to race and gender exist in PES work, the research study was not designed with the intention of analyzing the race and gender of EO specialists. This omission is noted as a limitation of this study due to a narrow focus on EO's neoliberal governance and its impact on work design that predisposes worker burnout.

To foster an environment where participants could freely share their experiences, a semi-structured qualitative interview style was used with open ended questions. The interview questions were designed to elicit candid responses on thoughts and feelings about participants' work experiences and how they were personally impacted. For example, the following two questions were asked: (a) What types of emotional strains exist as relational stressors (e.g., client and management/funder expectations) that come as part of the territory of the job? (b) Could you speak briefly about your ability to maintain a healthy balance between work and personal life? Interview participants were given pseudonyms, and their places of work were assigned an alpha-numeric code to maintain anonymity.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the interview data was analyzed using a combination of elements of open coding based on first impressions (Saldana, 2009) and axial coding based on inductive reasoning through categorical connections (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This process first involved thematically summarizing whole paragraphs into keywords (e.g., stress, pressure, overwhelm, overwork, worn down, exhaustion, and burnout). These excerpts were then grouped and analyzed by applying the JD-R theoretical lens and were placed into the job demand and job resource categories. The categories of conditions that induce experiences of burnout are discussed in the findings below. The final stage of categorization is what Kvale (1996, 192) refers

to as "meaning condensation" and "meaning categorization", which is paraphrasing long statements into a few words and reduced to general categories. For the purposes of this paper, the process of categorization involved a comparative analysis to identify which experiences bring forth compelling exemplars of how EO specialists are impacted by neoliberal governance.

How EO Demands and Lack of Adequate Resources Contribute to Worker Burnout

As noted earlier, many non-profit social service workers are drawn to the sector due to desires of "being part of something bigger than themselves" (Vincent & Marmo, 2018, 460). However, NPM austerity policies have resulted in limited program funding and resources combined with unreasonable targets that contribute to worker burnout. Based on these work conditions, 81 percent of interviewees commented that they had some experience with burnout, exhaustion and/or feeling overwhelmed. To help paint a better picture of the impacts of NPM policies within the context of EO, we will now briefly highlight some key narratives from the thirty-two interviewees who made references to experiencing worker burnout.

The narratives provided below, framed within the JD-R model, demonstrate how these EO specialists work with conditions that leave them predisposed to burnout. The working conditions include intense EO job demands, time pressures, work overload, and a general lack of adequate job resources to meet these demands. These job resources are mainly organizational components of EO work design, including training and development and job security, that support workers' efficacy towards the achievement of work goals. EO service providers typically secure their funding based on the numerical targets they achieve. It is no wonder that EO specialists tend to overwork themselves as their jobs are contingent on targets rather than the quality of service and the professional duty of care towards their clients.

EO Job Demands – Unreasonable Targets and Heavy Caseloads

As mentioned above, EO specialists have a three-month timeframe for moving clients from unemployment status to employment. In terms of job placement targets, the program is heavily numbers-driven. A program manager and a supervisor mentioned the following, respectively: "the funder only cares about the numbers" and the program is "all about the stats." In fact, 75 percent of interviewees confirmed that achieving targets is the main measurement of success of overall program delivery. The result is a largely transactional approach to fast-tracking clients into employment. However, EO specialists also see this approach as unfair to clients. Cindy, one of the Employment Counsellors interviewed, reflected on the challenge of balancing her desire to spend adequate time with clients while also experiencing the external pressure to quickly close client files in order to reach her targets.

> "It's so tough to have that balance. I try to not think about the targets in that aspect [seeing the clients as numbers] or else I could never work with a client. And that's where I always bring myself back to say what will be, will be. I mean I don't really have that control, but, when you're then kind of scolded because there are targets that weren't met, it's hard to in this type of industry to, swallow [accept] and then you feel like how am I going to support a client when I feel burnt out. I need some counselling, you know" (Cindy, Employment Counsellor).

Cindy's comment illustrates how a focus on targets has taken a mental and physical toll, so much so that she indicates needing counselling to help her cope with the demands of the job. Given that their performance is predominantly defined by quantitative targets, the daily work of EO specialists is deeply entrenched in a type of neoliberal governmentality that involves surveillance

and discipline (Gane, 2012) and time pressures that increase the demanding aspects of their work. Furthermore, these workers are conscious that their livelihoods are dependent on their attainment of these targets, which fosters anxiety and possibly burnout.

Interestingly, Claire, a former Youth Job Specialist, similarly expressed how she was impacted by her work and struggled with work-personal life balance and having too many clients in her caseload:

> "But just the work-life balance of the counsellors, like it's exhausting work and low compensation and they just run you to exhaustion, so you pretty much burnout and then again it all ties back to having too much on your plate, too many clients and then, you emotionally get worn down because you can't help everyone" (Claire, former Youth Job Specialist).

Cindy and Claire's reflections demonstrate how continuous exposure to the unfairness of a program with a strict focus on fast job placement targets creates a demanding work environment that fosters burnout. As Weiss (2020) confirms, burnout is predominantly a response to job demands, lack of fairness and transparency, and other issues beyond supporting clients in crisis. Having "too much on your plate, too many clients" signals work overload, and this type of work demand is not easily buffered by job resources. Once again, within the JD-R framework, having opportunities to grow within the workplace, receiving performance feedback, the ability to utilize a variety of skills and work autonomy are some examples of job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Hence, to ease the burden of this job demand of unreasonable targets and heavy caseloads, additional staff resources may be required to help spread workloads more equitably, which is challenging for publicly funded EO non-profit service providers governed by parsimonious budgetary constraints. Moreover, the application of the JD-R model to gauge burnout in these examples, as seen in Bakker and Demerouti (2007), indicates that when job demands increase in the absence of required job resources, there will be little to no effect on the mitigation of burnout. The issue of resources will be discussed in a forthcoming section.

Working with high job demands of heavy workloads and time pressures can lead to worker burnout . This type of work overload is symptomatic of neoliberal governance, where the expectation for these EO specialists is to focus increasingly more on the quantitative parts of their jobs, such as the time in which job placements are made (Rose, 1996), and a harmful unintended consequence is job strain (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The work terrain of the EO specialists in this study is primarily one of increasing work overload. More than half (62 percent) of the interviewees in this research discussed their experiences with heavy workloads. Nevertheless, burnout is characteristic of physical or mental collapse caused by consistent exposure to overwork (Wilson, 2016) or job-related stress (Lizaano & Mor Barak, 2015). To complicate the issue of work overload, non-profit organizations are often understaffed and tend to ceaselessly search for donors and sources of additional funding. Some organizations add new programs—without increasing staff—in an effort to secure additional funding and save labour costs (see Baines, 2004; Evans & Shields, 2005), which limits capacity and intensifies the work of the existing staff.

> "[W]e don't have enough capacity including employers to help people, I don't know what other challenge. Let me think. Yeah, to be honest, I've been there for seven years and I don't know if I should tell you this but I feel safe to say this I don't even care, I'm burnt out, and I'm not the only one. I'm looking for my way out to do something else that is more, you know more satisfying for me to help others. I cannot work in this model. Management is focused on funders expectation, which I understand, but the way that is designed is not really helping and if you tell that to management, you are the bad boy, right" (Lorna, Employment Counsellor).

The lack of "capacity" that Lorna refers to is based on the complexities of understaffing and high staff attrition that some non-profit organizations experience. In addition, within this non-profit funding model, EO specialists are expected to *do more with less* (Baines et al., 2014). Lorna mentioned that a recent trend at her organization was not to fill the positions of those staff who quit. Instead, management would distribute their caseloads to the remaining colleagues. This dissemination of extra workload induces role conflict, which Van den Broeck et al. (2017), using the JD-R model, confirms to be a major risk factor for burnout in their multi-sector analysis. Role conflict can arise in situations where "incompatibility in the requirements and [expectations] of the role, […] are judged relative to a set of standards or conditions which impinge upon role performance" (Rizzo et al., 1970, 155). For instance, role conflict occurs when expectations to meet targets remain unchanged with fewer resources, resulting in disharmony between management's expectations and the EO specialists' ability to perform their roles effectively. . Hence, the heightened levels of frustration and role conflict that workers like Lorna face affirms Bakker and Demerouti's (2007) work, in which they observe unfavourable working conditions with limited resources and high job demands, are more likely to produce worker strain and disengagement resulting in burnout.

Tracy, a former Employment Resources Consultant, commented similarly on why EO specialists, like herself, left the program.

> "Because we really could not handle it anymore and so they left because they were so unmotivated and burnt out from constantly trying to achieve an unachievable goal, and they are like, 'I cannot do this anymore, it's taking a toll on my health, it's taking a toll on my mental health, a toll on my family life and my personal space that I've just decided that I'm gonna get a job somewhere else.' And they leave the organization, right" (Tracy, former Employment Resources Consultant).

Tracy mentions "burnout from constantly trying to achieve an unachievable goal". An unachievable goal becomes a psychological stressor that can have spill-over effects on personal life contributing to work-family conflict. Work-family conflict has been associated with university faculty burnout (Zábrodská et al., 2018), and university faculty, arguably, work in a similar marketized public service environment like EO. Zábrodská et al. (2018, 813) study observed that work-family conflict performed a mediating role in the development of burnout. Further, positive work and personal life balance has been known to produce social relations that act as a buffer against burnout (Bunjak et al., 2021). In fact, the EO specialists interviewed in this research commonly remarked that it was the social ties with their co-workers, family and friends that helped them cope with their demanding work environment. However, it would be fair to argue that when these social ties are strained, and the psychological stress of their job becomes unbearable, workers will seek to exit these harmful work environments.

EO specialists tend to describe the EO program with market-oriented language, using terms such as "transactional," "always a hustle," and "a grind." In advanced capitalist countries, such as Canada, governmentality involves organized and hidden forms of power that initially captivate the desires and interests of passionate individuals and channel them into exploitative labour by enterprising the non-profit and voluntary sectors (see Ilcan, 2009). Simultaneously, governmentality hollows not only public sector organizations but also produces the abatement of organizations aligned with the social responsibilities of the state (Terry, 2005), like non-profits. Neoliberal governance and the shrinkage of state responsibility, and by extension, publicly funded

non-profits, can foster work environments with increasing job demands and overwork. In addition to the reduction of resources, job demands such as work overload and time pressures are significantly experienced by these EO specialists in these non-profits, as 62 percent feel obligated to work unpaid hours to meet targets. The result of these increasing job demands shapes a work environment conducive to burnout.

Cunningham et al. (2017) case studied two non-profit social service organizations in Ontario and also confirmed that managerial governance led to self-sacrificial work. They write, "Workers, moreover, appeared to be losing their capacity to exert discretion over working time, content and pace, and to strike a reasonable work-life balance" (386). Bunjak et al. (2021) argue that rapid accelerated work-life, irregular work hours, and increasing job demands pressure workers to push their capacity limits. EO specialists tend to feel obligated to sacrifice themselves for the greater good, as they tend to engage themselves in extra work, above and beyond their duty, which is unpaid and undervalued. Additionally, feeling overworked and being stretched too thin triggers existential angst and, of course, can eventually lead to burnout. Over time, these occupational stressors tend to accumulate and leave EO specialists feeling overwhelmed to the extent that some have left the sector with no intention of returning.

Lack of Resources That Support Workers in Achieving Their Goals

One of the reasons individuals are drawn to a vocation in social services is a desire to help underserved communities. The EO program targets marginalized/high-barriered individuals; however, EO specialists sometimes feel a sense of helplessness in meaningfully supporting clients. Feelings of helplessness lead to frustration, as more than half of the interview participants refer to EO as a program set up to fail. The program is set up to fail because, as EO specialists have remarked, they do not have enough resources to handle diverse needs of high-barriered clients. These high-barriered clients are described as being distant from the market and 'hard-to-serve'. As one interviewee stated:

> "When the economy is doing well, unemployment rate is low, so the folks that are left behind are truly what we call distant from the labour market. So, they [EO clientele] are long-term unemployed, dealing with mental health, addictions, disability, and those are the folks that we see through our doors. […]. So, our team gets burned out. Our team is feeling very stretched. Our team is feeling like they wish they had more tools in their tool kit. And the other part that we find that is challenging is that our focus is decent work, and we want people to have a good job with benefits, but the jobs that are out there and the employers that want to work with us, don't offer that, right. Precarious, part-time, crappy pay and there are some really good employers, but generally, big employers are looking for candidates that are not the candidates we have" (Kelly, Director, Employment and Training).

Kelly's assessment of the EO clientele and the capacity of the EO specialists helps demonstrate how the lack of "tools in their tool kit" impacts their ability to adequately serve clients. Burnout is insidious (Rossi et al., 2012; Weiss, 2020), and the lack of tools, combined with vulnerable EO clientele and a labour market that produces precarious jobs for these high-barriered jobseekers, over time, fosters a psychological strain that eventually leads to burnout. EO specialists work in a psycho-social environment (Zábrodská et al., 2018), which the JD-R model predicts that there will be an increase in psychological or physiological costs which result from not having the "tools" to address job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001), such as being able to effectively support clients in finding decent work.

For instance, some clients typically require referrals to other services due to the highly complex set of personal difficulties they experience as they struggle to find employment.

Notwithstanding these personal difficulties, EO specialists maintain that they are career counsellors and not clinicians. In the following excerpt, Pam, a Program Manager, expresses how she guides her team of EO specialists in navigating their lack of resources.

> "I'm very strict about, about this, it's having to let clients know that 'I'm here to help you with your employment goals. I can't be your therapist, but let me give you some referral, resources that you can use.' But they [EO specialists] feel really ill-equipped to deal with a lot of the issues and that causes them a lot of stress. Because they are compassionate people. They're in a helping profession and they can't help, and that makes it really, really hard" (Pam, Program Manager).

This scenario suggests that the inability to help clients mentally wears on EO specialists. At times, clients' needs far outweigh their capacity to extend care within the narrow constraints of the program. Pam mentioned high stress as a result of having compassion for clients but unable to adequately help them. Studies of social service workers have noted how carrying the clients' emotional health and dreams affects the well-being of these workers (e.g., Baines, 2011). The JD-R model identifies that resources that buffer against worker burnout also include those that help with propelling personal growth and development of workers (Demerouti et al., 2001). During Pam's interview, she noted that professional development was the first item to be cut from their budget based on funding constraints. "They are just not equipped with resources, and we don't have the money to train them on everything that they need to do their jobs", she noted. The limited program funds that Pam mentioned have not increased since 2010, with which EO non-profit service delivery organizations operate, represents the outworking of neoliberal governance and NPM austerity.

Lack of Job Security

EO specialists experience high levels of stress due to potential job loss if targets are not met. When asked what are the consequences of not meeting their target numbers, the immediate response is loss of funding, loss of jobs, and potential closure of the organization. Several interviewees pointed to EO service delivery organizations that have been forced to cease operations and close their doors. For instance, Hazel, an Employment Advisor, mentions that if she does not achieve targets for high-barriered clients, her employer will be forced to close their doors. Hazel's comment typifies a fairly common reality for those working within the non-profit sector, the fear of losing program funding and ultimately losing one's job. Within the EO performance-based model, the threat of job loss and organization closure is built into the employment structure of EO service providers. Both the organizations' financial stability and the clients' well-being are directly interpreted as the responsibility of the EO specialists (see Cvenkel, 2020). If they fail to meet their targets, the repercussions are dire: clients will remain unemployed, and EO specialists may also share the same fate. The threat of job loss due to "underperformance" produces job insecurity. Demerouti et al. (2001) typology of job resources identifies job security as a mitigating factor/variable against burnout. Moreover, research consistently indicates that prolonged exposure to low levels of job security contributes to burnout (e.g., Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bunjak et al., 2021; Zábrodská et al., 2018).

Loss of funding due to "underperformance" is a mode of governance that becomes a state of mind designed to impel EO specialists to overwork in light of this probable punishment (Foucault, 1977). This punishment of job-loss looms consistently over the heads of EO specialists. Given that quantitative targets predominantly define their performance, the daily work of EO specialists is deeply entrenched in a type of neoliberal governmentality that involves surveillance

and discipline (Gane, 2012). These workers are conscious that not only their livelihoods are dependent on their attainment of performance targets but also the fate of the non-profit organizations for which they work, and the overall well-being of their clientele is at stake if their services cease to exist.

Conclusion

By utilizing the JD-R model, we have demonstrated that EO specialists, in this study, work in conditions that make them predisposed to worker burnout. The JD-R model stipulates that burnout is more likely to occur in work environments where job resources are limited to support workers to effectively manage high job demands. In this paper, we have identified these job demands as unreasonable targets, heavy caseloads, and role conflict. Similarly, the job resource factors contributing to burnout are a lack of resources, training and development to meet the diverse needs of the EO clientele and low job security, specifically the threat of losing one's job if quantitative targets are unmet. Neoliberal governance exercised through NPM contributes to worker burnout; in that, it shapes a social service work environment that prioritizes quantitative businesslike approaches. The result is a highly performance-driven PES sector that focuses on unreasonable targets, as described by some EO specialists. Prolonged exposure to these high job demands, coupled with limited job resources, result in these elements of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach, 1982), and are characteristic of the performance-based EO funding model governed through NPM.

The excerpts from the interviews in this research have revealed instances in which EO specialists, for the most part, experience burnout. Their inability to spend ample time with clients without sacrificing the accomplishment of rapid job placement numbers, combined with staff attrition and increasingly heavy caseloads, diminishes organization capacity and induces individual work overload.

The EO targets-based funding model also engenders uncertainty and job insecurity. The threat of job loss that might be derived from unattained targets produces a precarious mindset, where EO specialists have noted that they are not far from needing the program themselves. A decreased perception of job security negatively affects the psychological aspects of work that creates feelings of stress and a decreased capacity to cope with job demands (Bunjak et al., 2021). Additionally, these EO specialists feel that they lack the tools that could help them reduce the cost of physiological and psychological job demands. This feeling of insufficiency relates to the profile of the EO clientele who not only possess complex circumstances that have led them into unemployment, but their circumstances and psycho-social dispositions are unique. As such, a transactional approach to employment is incompatible with effectively supporting them.

This paper contributes to the scholarly literature on burnout and PES by utilizing the JD-R model to demonstrate how neoliberal governance can be attributed as a major contributor to worker burnout. Although the current study is based on a small sample of participants, the burnout literature confirms that if workers do not develop supports to mitigate feelings of stress and emotional and physical exhaustion, then workers will seek to cope with the ultimate form of mitigation, which is to quit their jobs. Indeed, to secure health and overall physiological and psychological well-being, as this study has exemplified, some EO specialists have completely abandoned the PES sector. Our paper has not explored some of the ways in which burnout could be adequately mitigated within the current neoliberal PES work environment. Additionally, given that the research focus was on examining how neoliberal work design induces burnout, our analysis did not include the social categories of race and gender. This limitation points to the fact that a

deepened complexity can be achieved with further research taking into consideration race and gender issues within PES work. Lastly, future studies could also examine additional sources of burnout experienced by EO specialists and identify strategies to enhance the mitigation of worker burnout within the PES sector.

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