2017

"You got to make the numbers work": Negotiating managerial reforms in the provision of employment support service.

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"You Got to Make the Numbers Work": Negotiating Managerial Reforms in the Provision of Employment Support Service

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ABSTRACT: Neoliberal activation logic has intensified in the employment services sector, accompanied by austerity measures and new public management (NPM). We report findings from the Canadian site of a collaborative ethnographic study addressing the negotiation of long-term unemployment, specifically focusing on local-scale implications of administrative reforms to employment service delivery. Informed by street-level bureaucracy and governmentality, we demonstrate how the articulation of managerialism in activation-focused employment services and the emphasis on 'making the numbers work' results in a series of inter-related effects, including: work intensification; reconfiguration of key relationships; and heightened insecurity. Simultaneously, frontline staff engage in forms of service provision unaccounted for under official metrics, but central to their perceptions of service users' needs. Our analysis confirms the necessity of ethnographic approaches to documenting street level enactment of, and resistance to, neoliberal governmentalities.

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KEYWORDS: Neoliberalism; Precarity; Activation; Governmentality; Austerity

Introduction

Labour market policy in Canada has undergone profound reforms over the past several decades. Federal and provincial governments have embraced the activation framework of labour market policy, which entails disciplinary approaches to the unemployed. In the name of removing work-disincentives, and buttressed by a parallel rise in austerity measures, activating reforms emphasize limiting unemployed individuals' access to income security programs such as Employment Insurance (EI) and enforcing their entry into paid employment through the adoption of rapid re-employment or 'work-first' employment service delivery models. Within service provision, there is an emphasis on interventions that enhance individuals' employability and job-seeking efforts through changing client behaviours and attitudes (Grundy 2015a; Porter 2015). Such 'work-first' models are bolstered through the use of techniques of new public management (NPM) in service delivery, including the extensive use of performance-based contracting of service providers and outcomes-based accountability measures. Policy makers promote these techniques as maximizing the efficiency of client re-employment and achieving greater value for money. Yet, as a growing body of critical social policy scholarship demonstrates, the adoption of NPM, as well as activation measures, can also be viewed as attempts to discipline managers, service providers, and clients' conduct in ways consistent with neoliberal rationalities (Brodkin 2011; Soss et al. 2011).

Reporting findings from a broader ethnographic study of employment service provision and long-term unemployment in Canada and the United States, and drawing on street-level bureaucracy and governmentality literatures, this article examines the consequences of

NPM as a concealed track of welfare reform (Brodkin 2013) for service providers and service users. Building on recent scholarship that emphasizes the need to study what actually happens when governmentality practices 'hit the ground' or the 'street level' (Brady 2011; Lipsky 1980/2010), our central claim is that the articulation of managerialism in employment service delivery, and the heightened pressure on staff to 'make the numbers work', results in series of inter-related effects. These effects include work intensification for service providers; reconfiguration of the relation between service providers, funders, and clients; and heightened insecurity for service providers and service users. We also highlight instances of resistance and subversion that demonstrate the ways service delivery staff seek to work around or, at times, push back against narrow quantitative measures of service delivery, often assuming the risk of undertaking unaccounted work and pursuing invisible outcomes in the process. Following Brodkin (2011), we contend that these combined effects of activation measures and NPM are often not made visible through dominant ways of studying service delivery, such as examining legislation and administrative documents or tracking official metrics, but instead require investigating policy in action within the contexts of service delivery and everyday lives. Theoretically, we demonstrate how employing an ethnographic approach to examining governmentality, combined with a sensitivity to street level practices, enables moving beyond linear, all-pervading assertions regarding the effects of neoliberal governance toward more complex understandings of how activation and NPM measures are negotiated in everyday practices.

Background and Theoretical Framework

Among many member nations of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) employment policies and services have been significantly reconfigured according to the paradigm of neoliberal activation, and in many countries this reconfiguration has intensified since the 2008 recession (Boland 2015; Evans & Albo 2010;

Porter 2015; Soss et al. 2011). Activation policy has redefined the problem of unemployment. While for much of the post-war period, policy makers conceived of unemployment primarily as an economic problem to be addressed through macroeconomic policy promoting full employment, contemporary 'activating' approaches to unemployment place much more emphasis on modifying the behaviour and attitudes of unemployed individuals. Within an activation paradigm, unemployment is essentially a problem of the unemployed, one to be resolved through interventions that 'activate' and 'responsibilize' unemployed individuals (Grundy 2015a; Ilcan 2009). Activation approaches are purported to transform passive unemployment into active job-seeking, discursively locating the factors causing unemployment within the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of individuals (Boland 2015). In turn, those experiencing unemployment are increasingly expected to demonstrate responsible citizenship through engaging in a range of activities such as resume writing, interviews, and networking, which are held out as ways to enhance and market the self within the labour market. In addition, engagement in expected activities is often a condition of benefit receipt and/or maintenance of benefit eligibility. There is also an emphasis on finding the 'quickest route to work' and being open to the broadest range of employment opportunities possible, with increasingly less consideration of work precarity, under-employment, or wage replacement (Boland 2015; Porter 2015). Overall, activation-based approaches, consistent with neoliberal rationalities, individualize the problems of and solutions for unemployment, privileging measures aimed at transforming citizens 'at risk' of state dependency into self-reliant, responsible, and productive citizens (Schram et al. 2010).

Labour market policy in Canada has undergone profound reforms over the past several decades that have sought to activate the unemployed and re-shape service delivery models in ways that emphasize individual responsibility (Grundy 2015b; Porter 2015). Moreover, individualization and the focus on rapid re-employment have been exacerbated and shaped in more disciplinary ways within a broader

'austerity' response (Evans & Albo 2010; Ilcan 2009; Soss et al. 2011). As Porter (2015) demonstrates, changes to Employment Insurance implemented in 2012, including alterations to the definition of suitable employment and measures that promote acceptance of precarious low-wage work, enact an austerity approach "aggressively moving to create conditions that would ensure a sizable low wage labour pool" (Porter 2015; 38; see also Grundy & Laliberte Rudman 2016).

The rise of neoliberal activation in labour market policies and austerity approaches has also been accompanied by the incorporation of NPM principles and practices purported to optimize the performance, efficiency, and effectiveness of employment services (Brodkin 2015; Grundy 2015a). Driven by overarching goals of 'doing more, with less' and re-making public bureaucracy in the image of the private sector (Baines et al. 2004), NPM focuses on the incorporation of market-based, competition-driven tactics to manage public services, such as using performance systems that monitor outcomes and emphasize accountability, establishing benchmarking systems, and employing competitive contracting mechanisms (Pollit & Bouckaert 2011; Soss et al. 2011). With the incorporation of NPM by the federal Liberal government in Canada accelerating in the 1990s, the implementation of NPM has involved a shift away from process or input measures in the employment services sector towards quantitative outcomes measurement (Grundy 2015a; Ilcan 2009). In an increasingly decentralized policy environment (Ilcan 2009), NPM has been drawn upon as a mechanism to delineate what activities and outcomes 'count' in the employment services sector; steer discretion in service provision processes; and optimize the fit of higher-level system goals with what occurs in street-level practices (Brodkin 2011; Schram et al. 2010).

Drawing upon a governmentality perspective, within this study we conceptualize NPM and the performance management techniques it promotes as "neoliberal systems for disciplining service providers" (Soss et al. 2009; i205). As such, we frame managerial reforms in the employment services sector as techniques of governance aimed at

shaping the conduct of service providers at a distance in an increasingly decentralized system. These techniques attempt to establish a 'chain of discipline' inter-linking various levels of government, service organizations, front line staff, and clients, through which a responsibilizing ethos emphasizing self-government is promoted, shaped, and monitored. Such techniques do not necessarily require various actors to accept or take up a neoliberal worldview or rationality. Rather, they operate by organizing fields of practice, for example, via establishing outcomes to be achieved and reported and backed up by rewards and penalties, in ways that shape decision-making and self-discipline (llcan 2009; Schram et al. 2010).

However, research has challenged the assumption that NPM strategies achieve their intended effects unproblematically. According to Soss et al. (2011), attempts at discipline through NPM cannot be assumed to be easily achieved given that "disciplinary power of the NPM (new public management) shapes consciousness and behaviour in ways that are deep and far reaching yet also fractured, inconsistent and incomplete" (i205). Ethnographies of neoliberal governmentalities further highlight the importance of attending to failures and contradictions that become visible when such strategies unfold in service provision spaces (Brady 2011, 2014). Moreover, research that has expanded on Lipsky's seminal work on street-level bureaucracy points to the importance of better understanding the "ways in which discretion interacts with managerial reforms and what that means for production of policy in everyday organizational life" (Brodkin 2011: i255). Thus, in this study we also draw upon Lipksy's work, particularly as it has been taken up by contemporary scholars who use it to frame policy implementation as involving "complex interaction between reflexive subjects involved in multiple relations of power and objective factors that present both opportunities for and constraints on action" (Prior & Barnes 2011: 268).

In our research, we aim to demonstrate how service provision organizations and front-line service providers negotiate the effects of NPM in their everyday practices and discretionary capacities. Based on

the data analysed below, we offer a critique of NPM's premises and promises by pointing to the contradictions, tensions, and 'unintended' implications that arise in its application (Brady 2011; Brodkin 2011).

Methodology

Findings presented in this article are drawn from a collaborative cross-site ethnography (Lassiter 2005; Lassiter & Campbell 2010) being conducted in Ontario, Canada and Missouri, U.S.A. that is funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Ethics approval for this study was received from universities in both study sites. This study focuses on illuminating the boundaries and possibilities for service provision and the individual negotiation of long-term unemployment in everyday life, as shaped through contemporary policy and employment service provision approaches.

In this article, we draw upon data from the Canadian site that focused on service provision processes and practices. In the Canadian site, the sample for this particular phase of the study consisted of 12 participants (10 female, 2 male) associated with four employment service provision organizations. Ten participants provided direct services to clients, while 2 had shifted into managerial positions. In contrast to their counterparts from the U.S.A. study site, these service providers spoke at length about the effects of activation and austerity reforms on their everyday work practices. In particular, the Canadian service providers described actively negotiating performance management initiatives that shaped possibilities and boundaries for service delivery. We collected data with these participants over a five-month period via one to two audio-recorded semi-structured qualitative interviews and one to four workplace observation sessions per participant. Observations explored various aspects of service provision including individual meetings with clients, educational workshops for clients, and team case conferences. Data were recorded in written and/or audio-recorded field notes. In addition, we held a site-specific focus group at the end of individual data collection efforts to discuss preliminary analytical findings with a sub-

group of five service providers. Following verbatim transcription of interview audio recordings, we used open coding, focused coding, and critical discourse analysis (Cheek 2004; Laliberte Rudman 2013) to achieve a complex understanding of the data.

Analytical Findings: The Negotiation and Implications of Managerial Reforms

This study's findings are interpreted in the context of changes to labour market policy in Canada. Austerity measures and policies have long been a driver of managerial reforms to employment service delivery in Canada. During the 1990s, the Canadian federal government significantly reduced public sector spending and simultaneously transferred increasing responsibility for employment support services to provinces via labour market partnerships (Ilcan 2009). In the mid-1990s, extensive budget cuts to Human Resources Development Canada, the federal department then responsible for delivering employment services, fueled the contracting out of service delivery to non-profit and some for-profit agencies (Grundy 2015a; Ilcan 2009). At the same time, the federal government implemented a performance measurement regime known as the 'Results-based Accountability Framework' for employment service delivery, which held service providers accountable for the number of clients returned to work, and the amount of savings to the Employment Insurance (EI) fund as a result of employment service provision. There was widespread acknowledgement that these performance measures led to systemic pressure among providers to offer short-term, work-first services to those most job-ready, while further limiting services for non-EI eligible clients (Grundy 2015b).

The federal government began to transfer employment service delivery to the provinces in 1996. Yet, it was not until 2007 that Ontario assumed control of the bulk of labour market programming following the signing of a Labour Market Development Agreement that entailed the transfer of federal staff and resources to the province. A subsequent Canada-Ontario Labour Market Agreement (2008-2014) provided

additional federal funds for services directed at those ineligible for EI-funded training, including immigrants, social assistance recipients, and the long-term unemployed (Ilcan 2009; Wood 2015). Within Ontario, the provincial employment service was branded as Employment Ontario (EO), intended as a comprehensive suite of employment supports including employment assistance services, labour market information, and job referral as well as training and apprenticeship programs. EO emphasizes a one-stop model with services delivered through 171 service providers located at over 300 sites (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities 2015). Extending the use of competitive contracting established by the federal government, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU), renamed the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD) in summer 2016, contracts for EO services mainly with non-profit agencies but also with publically and privately funded post-secondary institutions (EO 2011).

Consistent with a NPM emphasis on promoting accountability and ensuring efficiency through benchmarks and delineated quantifiable outcomes, since 2010 the MTCU/MAESD has monitored the performance of agencies through the EO Information System – Case Management Systems (CAMS). This system was designed as a mechanism to systematize how service providers across the province initiate, design, and enact services with clients. Through its on-line platform, CAMS establishes, tracks, and reports predetermined, quantifiable outcomes (employment, training/education, or other) at 3, 6 and 12-month time points for each 'assisted service unit' or client opened, commensurate with a 'quickest route to work' approach. Data that service providers are required to input through the system are used to track individual and organizational level performance, and are drawn upon to manage and organize the delivery and contracting of EO services (Employment Ontario Information System – CAMS, 2014). In its 2014/15 'Results-Based Plan Briefing Book', the performance measurement target set by the MTCU for EO was that "79 percent of Employment Service program clients will obtain employment or go on to

further education/training" (13).

The condition of the Ontario labour market poses additional challenges for service providers. A lasting effect of the Great Recession has been a persistent spike in long-term unemployment. In Ontario, during April 2016, 20 percent of the unemployed were long-term unemployed (unemployed for 27 weeks or more), whereas during April 2008 this figure was 13 percent (MAESD 2016). Beyond long-term unemployment, there are numerous indicators that precarious employment is spreading in the province's labour market. The share of employees in Ontario earning the minimum wage has increased from 2.4 to 11.9 percent between 1997 and 2014 (Block 2015: 2). The portion of Ontario employees earning within $4 of the minimum wage, that is, low-wage workers, also increased during this time, from 19.8 percent of Ontario employees to 29.4 percent. As well, six in ten minimum wage earners and four in ten low-wage workers experienced unpredictable and erratic hours of work. The share of Ontario employees working less than 40 hours a week is also increasing: in 1997 it was 42.5 and in 2014 it stood at 50.5, representing a 19 percent increase (Block 2015: 5). The greater prevalence of long-term unemployment and precarious employment makes the attainment of stable, high quality employment increasingly more difficult.

Shifting to data collected in our study, service providers (identified below using pseudonyms) fore-fronted discussion of changes in the nature of their work related to the specific implementation of the CAMS system; policy, funding, and labour market conditions; and a more general push towards an outcome-based system in which they felt increasingly pressured to 'make the numbers work' for individual and organizational performance metrics. Although they acknowledged the importance of tracking outcomes, service providers raised concerns about the implications of increased emphases on narrowly-defined predetermined outcomes, work intensification related to the demands for tracking and reporting, and changed relationships within the sector. As well, service providers framed NPM initiatives as setting boundaries on

their abilities to support clients' well-being and employability. In contradiction to the ultimate intended outcomes of enhanced employability or employment, service providers articulated that meeting demands to make their numbers work enhanced both their own precarity and that of their clients. Although service provides described how they complied with accountability measures, they also resisted their narrowing effects at times, raising concerns regarding how various types of outcomes they valued and needed to prioritize in their work with clients were made 'invisible' within existing metrics and framing themselves as obliged to engage in unaccounted work to support clients. Below, we illustrate these concerns and discuss them in relation to NPM as a technology of government, which is negotiated by service providers within employment service provision.

Making the Numbers Work

NPM measures aim to shape service providers' discretionary practices through delineating what activities count as performance and what outcomes are valued and rewarded (Brodkin 2011). Service providers described experiencing a pervasive pressure to 'make the numbers work' within the overall movement towards outcomes-based funding and contracting of services in the sector. As stated by Nicole, "Going back to the Ministry, across the provincial government, everything is moving to outcomes based programming. And that's not going to change." Similarly, Courtney indicated,

> "There's so much more expectation from the funder as far as accountability, right. How we're spending the money. And trying to prove our worth and that we are doing our jobs, and by trying to provide those statistics to the funder to provide that. So there's been so much of that since EO came into play."

This pressure to meet outcome expectations was further enhanced by the use of an approach in which service providers not only needed to show positive numbers but had to show continuous improvement:

> "The thing with the policy is the Ministry doesn't typically care what you are doing well, they want to know how you are going to improve the things that you are not doing well. So, because we are in a continuous improvement model you must always be continuously improving. Every quarter we have to report how we are doing well in our numbers or not" (Kevin).

Given the disciplinary function of NPM (Schram et al. 2010), service providers found themselves having to work with their numbers in ways that allowed for the demands of funders to be met because "you can't argue with the funder, the funder is who pays us" (Kevin).

However, in their efforts to make the numbers work, service providers often subverted the intent of the system through re-arranging reporting to meet system expectations, while at the same time obscuring work that was not expected or that defied the 'work first' orientation. For example, Kevin shared how he managed his monthly case closings in ways that made the numbers work from the Ministry's perspective, but at the same time resisted the Ministry's demands in ways that protected himself and his organization:

> "Am I closing the ones [referring to cases] that are bad outcomes?...No, I'm gonna wait until next month when I have a little more because I'm only allowed a couple bad outcomes a month. Right? So I push the ones that don't need to be closed this month...The numbers will work for the Ministry, no matter what."

Similarly, Kate shared that she and her colleagues always found a way to meet the funder's expectations: "I would say sometimes those parameters that are set by our funders are challenging so, but, you know, we always make a way to turn it into a success no matter how we have to work to get that done."

Pointing to tensions, service providers described experiencing ethical conflicts associated with 'playing' the numbers, but experienced such actions as necessary given the need to ensure their own jobs and the

survival of the organizations they worked for. These sentiments are expressed in the following two quotes:

> "The writing was on the wall that it was becoming a much more outcomes based [system]. Just the accountability of these agencies that you have to show and prove what it is that you are doing with the funding dollars. But there are games that are played with that, right? That is the frustrating part ethically, if you are going to follow the rules compared to others that don't…You got to make the numbers work" (Courtney).

> "The whole ticky box thing. It's like, am I meeting the criteria? Am I meeting so many clients? Am I getting so many open files? Are there so many closed files? What is the outcome of that particular client?…And, of course, it almost seems mechanical where we have taken out the need of the client and we're just kinda jumping through hoops so to speak, and that pulls on me sometimes" (Kate).

Thus, 'making the numbers work' did not reflect an unproblematic compliance with outcomes measures established via the CAMS system, but also involved subverting the system in ways that allowed the appearance of meeting required metrics. Although service providers addressed the importance of tracking outcomes and tried to do so in ways that met system expectations, they pointed to associated work intensification as well as tensions created through the narrow definition of success in NPM measures.

Work Intensification

Service providers' efforts to make the numbers work were associated with work intensification tied to caseload volumes, expected timelines, and inter-related tracking and documentation requirements. For example, in order to meet performance benchmarks, such as 20 successful outcomes and 20 intakes each month, service providers took

on large caseloads that allowed them to make their individual numbers work: "It's a really busy place…We're looking to close – we want results for 20, and we want intake for 20, so we all sit around 80 to 100 clients. That's manageable. It's busy" (Emily).

While sometimes described as manageable, increasing caseloads were also described as leading service providers away from a desired case management, client-centred approach towards crisis management. Combined with enhanced administrative burden tied to documentation requirements, service providers experienced increasing caseloads but decreasing client contact time:

> "Carrying a case load of 80 people is not my ideal world…it's really just putting out little fires. I can never really get ahead of my caseload" (Kevin).

> "A large part of our job now is paperwork, whereas somebody else used to do that before computers came on our desk. We were much more directly counsellors then than we are now" (Emily).

Another aspect connected to work intensification was the way in which the three-month time frame for outcome measurement set pressures to work intensively and quickly with clients, even if such an approach was seen as unrealistic for a client or not achievable within current labour market conditions:

> "So the expectation is, under CAMS, they come in, and they're out in three months. And it just keeps rolling….But the reality is, if you don't cycle through people quickly, you cannot meet your metrics" (Dwight).

> "Well, they want us to open and close the file…the shortest is three months. We can keep it open longer, but we have to justify reasons why we are. Overall, it sorta goes against their research if they're saying six to eight months to become re-employed in a recessive market, and so the expectations there, I think, are unrealistic" (Emily).

Overall, service providers described having to do more work within a shorter time frame and connected work intensification and the broader influence of NPM to undesired changed relations in the sector at several levels.

Changed Nature of Relations

Service providers talked about the changed nature of relationships at several levels, including with clients, with other organizations, and with the Ministry. In relation to clients, many service providers emphasized how important it was to employ a client-centred approach to counselling, in which they took the time to understand each client's perspective and needs in an individualized and holistic manner. However, they found that enacting this type of approach to counselling became increasingly challenging within current policies and systems. Sarah stated, "As a counselor, we need to be counselling, not only [getting people] employed…Honestly, we are getting sometimes very frustrated when we hear clients [talk about challenges]."

According to Schram et al. (2010), NPM practices extend beyond making agents accountable to reconstituting agency. Such reconstitution was apparent in how service providers discussed changed communication practices with clients. For example, in attempting to negotiate large caseloads and documentation requirements, service providers noted the lack of time to build a relationship through multiple in-person meetings. Instead, service providers resorted to relying heavily on virtual modes of communication with clients even though they found such modes insufficient to meaningfully connect with clients:

> "Our caseloads are so high for the work that we do, [so] that [we] do a lot on email now. So I can talk a little bit on email, but it's not the same as having them with me for an hour and it being a personal conversation…So we're finding that the amount of people we're seeing limits the amount of work we can do on those levels" (Emily).

"I'm doing much more mass communication…we don't have time to build the relationship…I communicate through social media, text, or email" (Dwight).

Service providers also highlighted other barriers to establishing meaningful relationships with clients, including a de-personalized approach stemming from the need to categorize or "cookie-cutter" (Courtney) clients and "call a person a unit" (Kevin). In addition, service providers discussed the challenge of constantly balancing the expectations and needs of funders and those of clients:

"Is it you meeting the numbers, or the client? We need to focus on the individual. We need to focus on the support we give. We don't need to be thinking in the amount of administrative jobs we need to do, because it's a lot. Be careful with this…Use the data, but don't pressure people with the data. Our mission is to give support and to produce results for the individuals and not for the government" (Teresa).

"It's important that they understand that I actually care about what's going on with them, and this is not me just putting a notch on a piece of paper, you know, the whole ticky boxes that we have to put in place. Sometimes it can be a little bit overwhelming, and I don't wanna lose my client focus. That's extremely important to me…So I make sure that I take the time to let them know that you're not just a number to me" (Kate).

Nicole, who had previously provided front-line services to clients and now carried out middle management activities, pointed to ways that human resources had been shifted towards administrative tasks and away from direct client service, further creating a barrier to establishing effective relationships: "And that [referring to documentation requirements of CAMS] is why so much human resources have been taken away from client facing activity, is because of the CAMS system". With respect to relations amongst organizations, consistent with NPM

principles, service providers noted how time-bound contract funding in the employment service sector had fostered increasing pressure to compete amongst non-profit organizations in the sector: "The other thing is not being able easily to collaborate with other partners. Like the funders have set it up kind like a survival of the fittest type scenario where you have to fight with each other over your clients" (Kevin).

In the same way service providers discussed trying to maintain positive relationships with clients in the face of de-personalizing systems and increasing work intensification, they also talked about how they attempted to maintain collaborative relationships with other organizations to meet clients' needs, even if this meant they might take a 'hit' on their personal numbers:

> "I have friends over at all the other agencies. So if I think they're going to be better served at X [another employment support services provider], I call my friend…We have an informal network that we use quite regularly. Everything is statistically driven; everything is outcome driven. So I just need to realize that out of my 20 for the month, I have four that are negative" (Dwight).

Nicole also addressed changed relationships with the MTCU. She indicated that although the Ministry, as the primary funder of service, was talking a language of 'partnership', it had been increasingly unresponsive to the perspectives or input of employment support service organizations: "The Ministry does not partner with us on anything…They don't do things with us. It's gone, there's no partnership whatsoever with the funder."

As in their attempts to make numbers work, service providers positioned themselves as in between the demands of the Ministry and the needs of clients. They struggled with the implications of meeting accountability demands of the Ministry for the relationships they could maintain with clients and other organizations. Within these struggles, a complex mix of compliance, subversion and resistance is revealed. The

findings demonstrate that NPM sometimes re-shaped their practice, as in shifting to virtual modes of communication, and sometimes was defied through actions such as collaborating with another organization to meet a client's needs, the latter of which could have negative implications for a service provider's performance assessment.

Heightened Insecurity for Service Providers and Clients

At the same time that service providers discussed ways they continued to push forward in providing services and working towards outcomes they viewed as important, they emphasized that doing so was increasingly challenging given a heightened sense of their own precarity. Demonstrating the disciplinary potential of NPM, service providers experienced boundaries on their exercise of discretion given that their own work security was connected to meeting funders' outcome expectations (Schram et al. 2010). Speaking to the conditions of their own work, they described experiencing on-going stress associated with having to ensure their own survival and that of their organizations through their numbers. Natalie, who shared that "in the last five years, I've been laid off twice", emphasized the on-going stress she experienced related to meeting the Ministry's definition of success:

> "I've already been laid off from an organization once because we lost a contract. And this could be the same with this program…if it's not successful in the eyes of the Ministry, then there could be another program that's lost. So the pressure is on."

Teresa also spoke to the on-going stress experienced in relation to meeting performance metrics, indicating that this made it challenging to focus on a client's needs:

> "Well, at some point, even if you keep your mind on the client, you are in the stress of the organization for being targets. So that is stressful. Sometimes, worrisome because you can lose your job. And that is the reality we

face every day...I would like to have less pressure for
the numbers really."

This sense of on-going precarity ultimately disciplined service providers to make the numbers work, not only for their own survival but also for that of their organizations:

"Okay, so our funding is based on if we hit our targets. So, we have monthly and yearly targets that we have to hit, which would be people that are, files that are employed or close...in training...If we didn't, if we all just kind didn't close that the files that we had to...our funding could not be given to us...our center would close" (Hillary).

Critics of activation-based approaches that emphasize the quickest route to work have argued that people are unlikely to have sufficient time to find a job in the area they were trained or to upgrade their skills, leading to a situation in which persons experiencing cyclical unemployment are increasingly pushed into the low-wage precarious labour force (Porter, 2015).

Our informants also pointed to ways that the current system, with its use of time limits, prioritization of obtaining work as a successful outcome, and limited space for the provision of comprehensive employment support services, not only shaped precarity for themselves but also for clients. Kevin discussed how a 'work first' approach often meant clients were not matched with appropriate jobs:

"They are looking to get people in and out as quickly as they can, which they should and I agree. I think that there are a lot of people who are not taking the right job fit because of the pressure to get them working right away" (Kevin).

Emily and Sarah emphasized the frustration that resulted from narrowly defining success as a 'survival' or temporary job and the potential cycle of precarious employment and unemployment that could evolve:

> "So the Ministry sees them working in a survival [job] and the file is close because they're working. So although the Ministry see it as a success…it's not the intent when they came in and sat down with me" (Emily).
> "Then, after a few months, they will contact us when they lose a temporary job to look for another job. So for me, as a person, I don't like to put that ticky point. Why? Because I want to help them to be in a stable career not only temporary" (Sarah).

Dwight connected the Ministry's use of short frames and focus on narrow outcomes to shaping a cycle of precarious employment for clients. He stated that "the timeframes attached to funding influence directly, affect how services are delivered as the entire process… is outcome based", such that, "the problem I have on a personal level is I've opened the same client multiple times within 12 months. They go to precarious employment, temporary job, come back in three months. I get them to access another temporary job." Although these numbers could be tracked in the current system as indicative of multiple successes in relation to attaining an employment outcome, service providers pointed to enhanced precarity for clients.

Subversion and Resistance Within Service Provision: 'Invisible' Outcomes and Unaccounted Work

To summarize findings presented thus far, service providers discussed the pressure to 'make the numbers work' to meet the expectations of the Ministry. Service providers discussed being aware of ways NPM measures were being enacted so as to shape their conduct. Yet they also described how they did not always comply with the narrow vision of organizational activity embedded in the performance measurement system. As noted above, they discussed playing with the numbers in ways that simultaneously met the Ministry's metrics while subverting its demands for timely reporting so as to extend service provision for clients and avoid the implications of reporting 'negative'

outcomes. They also discussed how they tried to establish individualized relationships with clients and collaborative relationships with other service organizations despite the barriers established by the setup of the system. In addition, service providers emphasized how they attempted to circumvent the shaping of services through NPM measures through working towards outcomes and enacting services not mandated nor counted in the CAMS, that is, toward outcomes beyond, as one participant put it, "they have a job or they're in training for a job" (Kevin). Such forms of service delivery are important to highlight because they demonstrate how techniques of neoliberal governmentality, such as performance measurement, are not unproblematically deployed across social and organizational settings.

Service providers were overtly critical of the many boundaries on service provision being shaped through the current EO model. In particular, they pointed to ways that current policies and accountability mechanisms meant that the needs of persons experiencing long-term unemployment or facing complex challenges to employment were often not adequately addressed. For example, Kevin and Emily were critical of the disincentives built into the system associated with providing long-term services to clients,

> "Employment Ontario really doesn't have any additional supports to help people move (out) of long [term unemployment]...Our points system is what marks...how well we do...If we take more than 90 days on particular item, actually hurts us...So, I guess just the way it was rated, like funded, kind of dictates that and long term really isn't supported in that capacity." (Kevin)
> "The people who really, regardless of how nice their resume looks or the interview skills look, they're just not bought in, they don't believe, they've given up...or there's addictions, there's things that we need to be working on with them and having them involved in before we ever open the file here because as we open a

> file here, the Ministry needs to see action, and those aren't even counted. It's a referral out, but it's a lost stat" (Emily).

Megan emphasized that the focus on 'work first' meant that she could not provide adequate pre-employment skills training that some clients required:

> "But that pre life skills training, personal counseling is something that, I think, is really lacking here. And if we had that, then people could move forward to employment…But these are barriers that really need to be addressed."

It was therefore clear that service providers, and sometimes the organizations they worked for, held more complex understandings of the pathways to employment and client success than the practices and outcomes codified via CAMS, resulting in challenges and tensions at the level of service delivery. For example, Megan discussed particular challenges providing services to clients who were recent immigrants and whose paths to employment tended to be lengthy due to numerous barriers: "We get outcomes for in training or education or employed, so our numbers have to reflect that and it can be challenging".

Natalie discussed tensions that arose for her when working with clients who faced barriers and could not directly move forward to the Ministry's outcomes, emphasizing she resisted the pressure to 'push' clients too early into a service even when this could have a negative impact on her own numbers:

> "The challenge I have is when things are out of my control, because I have stats I have to reach…when things are out of my control for whatever reason, it's just not the right time for the plan or the barriers…they come back and have mental health issues, or drug addictions, alcohol addictions…So that's, like it's a person I've lost so it's a stat that has gone, so I might explain myself. I am there for the client and I understand

that I have stats too, but I won't just push somebody into
a work experience when it's not the right thing for
them."

Thus, at the same time as describing the disciplinary effects of NPM on
their behaviours (Soss et al. 2011) such that they were constrained in
their ability to provide what they perceived to be essential services,
service providers also described moving forward in achieving outcomes
that remained unaccounted for given their understandings of clients'
needs and the values they held as service providers.

A common concern expressed by service providers was that
officially measured outcomes, that is, training, education or employed,
were too narrow to capture many of the outcomes that providers did
achieve with clients. Activities such as linking clients with personal
counselling, getting a bus pass for clients, or securing housing, were often
recognized as essential "baby steps" (Courtney), necessary to ensure well-
being and a stable foundation prior to addressing employment, education
or training but rendered invisible through performance management
mechanisms:

"The organization wants a solid number, so like,
employed, or, in training. So, they're not going to go,
'Yay? You went and registered for a course', or, 'You
went and grabbed your bus pass', or 'Oh, you were able
to move forward and…get more secure housing.' It
doesn't really – they don't measure the little steps"
(Hillary).

"Sometimes when you're working with people that you're
referring out to addictions counseling…to support
groups… you see changes in them, that's incredible to
me as a counselor, a success on a level that's not even
coded. It's considered a soft skill, so they wanna know
are you working or are you in school" (Emily).

Indeed, almost all service providers described work that they did that was
essential but not counted in the metrics of the current system. Such work

was often framed as subversive, that is, as intentionally occurring out of view of the Ministry metrics and, in many cases, as not accounted for in considering a service provider's work or quality of performance. For example, Hillary discussed how she continued to remain in touch with clients and "support them all the way through" even when the client case was officially closed in the Ministry system: "It's closed. It's not open sort of in the Ministry eyes. It's a closed file, but I mean, I assist so many people that aren't officially registered."

Natalie discussed working with her clients, who were mostly youth, on many "soft skills" that were necessary for them to move forward, acknowledging that this work was not counted or recognized: "There are so many steps that the youth make…But it doesn't fit with the ticky boxes. So it's not recognized by management. So you just have to find a way to push that to one side." Nicole shared how service providers developed their own outcomes, which they celebrated collectively and which continued to motivate them in their work:

> "I think it's really important that we have our own measures to satisfy those other needs. And we do. We celebrate, like if a client can't get out of bed and get into the office to attend a workshop, and they overcome that hurdle, we do celebrate those things….That's what fills our gas tanks…The bottom line is I don't get warm and fuzzy because I met my numbers, I get teary eyes when I see something amazing happen for a client."

While staff used their discretion to provide services based on their values and beliefs regarding best practices and their perceptions of clients' needs, such workarounds were not without personal or professional costs to staff, costs which are undoubtedly exacerbated by their own labour market and organizational insecurities. As explained by Dwight, "I have seen my team members bend over backwards taking their own time, their own personal energies." Working towards outcomes not valued in the system but valued by service providers and clients required personal investment: "And at the pace we're going…you've got to be really

invested and wanting to help. Our caseloads are way too high for the amount of work we do." Thus, as responsibilities and accountabilities are downloaded to the level of service provision, service providers are acutely aware of the costs of discretion, particularly forms of discretion that resist and subvert the aims and rules of NPM measures. In turn, these costs, such as work intensification that involves not only 'visible' work expected within the system but 'invisible' work that resists the limits of the system, may set boundaries on the extent to which service providers can incur the risks associated with such actions.

Discussion and Conclusion

The integration of NPM into the employment services sector has been one means to establish 'governing at a distance' through a chain of disciplinary relationships running from the provincial government, to organizations dependent on government contracts, to frontline workers and to clients (Schram et al. 2011; Soss et al. 2011). Within the context of this study, performance monitoring through CAMS attempts to enlist organizations and service providers in enacting a management culture in which pre-determined outcomes are tracked to reward or rebuke service providers on the basis of their performance. As recent ethnographies of neoliberal governmentality in employment service delivery demonstrate, however, technologies such as performance measurement do not completely determine what service providers do, given their many contradictions and inconsistencies (Brady 2011; Huot 2013; Soss et al 2011). Moving beyond textual based methods that often result in an account of the coherence and disciplinary effects of various forms of power, ethnographies of governmentality can capture the complex ways power operates including resistance, evasions and unintended effects of governmental techniques (Brady 2011). Through examining how service providers understand, enact, and negotiate NPM within the contemporary policy, funding and labour market conditions in Ontario, Canada, this study highlights both the disciplinary effects and cracks associated with the interweaving of activation, austerity, and NPM.

Pointing out such cracks serves to reveal not only problematic 'facts', but also opens up the possibility "for doing things differently" (McDonald & Martson 2005:379).

In many ways, this study's findings support critical scholarship on NPM that has suggested a tendency of performance management to prompt organizations, and front-line service providers, to make the numbers work in ways that may actually be contradictory to intended processes (Grundy 2015a; Soss et al. 2011). These findings illustrate how the articulation of managerialism in activation-based employment support services can lead to an emphasis on 'making the numbers work', such that service providers are disciplined to account for system-defined outcomes. However, given the narrow definition of successful outcomes, service providers simultaneously manage the numbers and exercise discretion so that they can achieve other outcomes that are preparatory for system-defined outcomes and are needed by clients in the complexity of everyday life. As the sector has become increasingly de-centralized (Ilcan 2009), NPM has been implemented in ways that download costs and insecurities to street level organizations and their employees (Baines et al. 2014; Phillips & Levasseur 2004). In this study, the costs and insecurities have been work intensification, barriers to establishing collaborative relationships, engagement in unaccounted work to achieve outcomes not visible in performance metrics, a pervasive sense of precarity for service providers, and an uneasiness about perpetuating precarity for clients.

The implementation of NPM within the employment service sector has been purported as a means to enhance service delivery outcomes through promoting efficiencies, enhancing accountability, and ensuring a 'work first' orientation (Brodkin 2015). However, highlighting how such measures can work against providing equitable, quality service, service providers underlined the ways in which the existing metrics and reporting demands set boundaries on who was served and what types of services could be provided. In particular, service providers' descriptions of their daily negotiations at the street-level raise concerns regarding how

such dynamics make it increasingly hard, as well as risky to service providers, to meet the needs of clients facing complex challenges such as long-term unemployment. At the same time, the 2012 EI reforms have further limited protections for persons experiencing labour market insecurities and have promoted the creation of a low-wage labour pool (Grundy & Laliberte Rudman 2016; Porter 2015), increasing entrenchment of particular types of workers in precarious labour. Addressing these contradictory effects arising out of the misfit between client needs and the organization of services and income security is essential to promote systems that enable service providers to respond more effectively to the heterogeneous nature of persons experiencing unemployment, many of whom are not 'work or training ready' given their life circumstances and conditions.

These findings also highlight the importance of going beyond an overall valuing of numerical performance targets to critical considerations of what 'outcomes' come to be valued and counted and who has a say in defining outcomes (Brodkin 2011; Grundy 2015a). Although service providers did not negate the importance of outcomes related to education, training and return to employment, the findings demonstrate concerns regarding the limits of such outcomes. For example, setting such outcomes within a time-limited service frame appeared to promote a 'work first' orientation, even when this was associated with perpetuating a cycle of low-wage, precarious work. As well, it also promoted unaccounted work addressing a series of other outcomes viewed as successes by service providers, such as securing transportation or acquiring needed food and housing resources. Without acknowledgement of the importance of such outcomes, and the work that is required to attain them, the needs of particular client groups may become increasingly marginalized and invisible and the working lives of service providers may increasingly be characterized by ethical conflict, stress and frustration. As argued by Phillips and Levasseur (2004), it is of concern that increasing pressures to conform to particular processes and outcomes implemented through NPM accountability frameworks can

promote "thinking small and inside the box" (458) in ways that stifle risk taking and innovation in service delivery. Moreover, service providers' experiences of precarity, work intensification, and tensions between what they can do and what they think and feel they should do raise concerns about the effects of such work on service providers' well-being and tenure in the employment support services sector (Eikenberry & Kluver 2004; Curtis 2006).

As Brodie (2008) reminds us, "[p]reviously cultivated identities, political consensus, and cultural ideals...constitute obstacles to the promotion of a new governing order, and its particular way of representing and intervening" (148). Drawing together governmentality and street-level bureaucracy literatures, this article examined both the implementation of, and resistance to, NPM in employment service provision. The findings support an understanding of service providers as 'situated agents' who act in contexts shaped by NPM as reflexive actors who interpret a range of structural, interactional and personal factors (Prior & Barnes 2001). In this study, service providers did express that NPM strategies had set the rules of the game (Brodkin 2011), but they simultaneously enacted discretion in ways that sometimes worked around, subverted and resisted such rules in creative and often hidden ways. Positioning themselves as intimately experiencing and negotiating the clash of clients' social needs and system pressures and boundaries on a daily basis (Schram et al. 2010), these service providers described challenges that evolved out of having to work in a business model while valuing their work as counsellors. Work-arounds often occurred when service providers experienced ethical tensions, or tensions between their own beliefs about service provision and their assessments of clients' needs with the forms of service provision valued and accounted for within the systems in which they worked.

However, while exercising discretion and engaging in work-arounds that subverted limits in service, service providers often had to do so at a personal cost, such as doing work that was not accounted for, putting their own numbers 'at risk', enhancing work intensification, or

drawing on their own personal time and resources to support clients. Ultimately, within the context of a system guided by a logic of activation and imbued with NPM, service provider discretion was limited by a sense of the precarity of their own jobs as well as the precarity of the organizations they worked through. As such, although the findings show moments of resistance and subversion, they also show the disciplinary power of NPM upon service providers. Theoretically, these findings point to the need for further studies that attend to how service level discretion happens within contexts of new managerialism as a means to expand upon Lipksy's original work that occurred in a historically different managerial context (Ellis 2011).

The implications of managerial reforms as a part of activation-based employment services have remained largely opaque to researchers because they cannot be apprehended through traditional sources of information such as formal policies, expenditure data, or outcome measures (Brodkin, 2011). Revealing such implications requires extending upon governmentality-informed textual analysis to examining how policies and techniques are experienced and negotiated in action (Brady 2011; Grundy 2015a; McDonald & Marston 2005). This study supports the contention that employing critical ethnography at the level of service provision is a fruitful way forward to illuminate the implications, and limitations, of the intersections of activation, austerity and NPM. As one example, the findings support questioning the sustainability of systems shaped through NPM and an activation logic which provoke mistrust and uncertainty as opposed to collaboration and shared responsibility, and which require service providers to transgress in order to ensure clients have access to foundational resources (Phillips & Levasseur 2004). In turn, there is a need for further attention to, and dialogue about, the types of partnership and management models that can support positive, collaborative relationships at various levels and more sustainable approaches to addressing accountability (Baines et al. 2014; Phillips & Levasseur 2004). As such, further ethnographic studies of street-level organizations can add to a counter history of activation

(Grundy 2015b) and thereby provide a "foundation for developing alternatives to it" (Brodkin 2011: i.253).

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