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# **Flows, Eddies, Swamps and Whirlpools: Inequality and the Experience of Work Change**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

The main concern of this paper is how inequalities are implicated in the capacity individuals have to deal with changes in their work. The ability to deal with change - to seek it out, go with it, benefit from it - is a key aspect of neo-liberal discourse on the contemporary economy. Yet, there is little recognition within this discourse of the different capacities individuals have to initiate or respond to work change. This paper draws attention to such differences, and adds to arguments challenging the flexibilization and individualization encouraged by neo-liberal accounts of the economy. In particular, the paper examines the way inequality structures two main strategies individuals are advised to adopt in managing employment change – lifelong learning and networking. We identify two types of employment change (with occupational continuity and with occupational change) and demonstrate the significant inequalities structuring individual efforts to negotiate such changes. Occupational continuity or change, and access to advantaged or disadvantaged forms and levels of resources, combine within four dynamics of work change: flows and eddies for the advantaged, and swamps and whirlpools for the disadvantaged. Our research suggests that attention to how individuals negotiate changes in their employment will help to illuminate the dense and complex character of socially embedded work trajectories, as well as the intricate role of inequality in structuring the processes of change.

# **Flows, Eddies, Swamps and Whirlpools: Inequality and the Experience of Work Change**

## **Introduction**

The main concern of this paper is how inequalities are implicated in the capacity individuals have to deal with changes in their work.<sup>1</sup> The ability to deal with change - to seek it out, go with it, benefit from it - is a central mantra in neo-liberal discourse on the contemporary economy. Flexibilization is a foundational plank in what has been called the “new conventional wisdom” concerning what makes an economy successful.<sup>2</sup> Individuals are encouraged to embrace change, and cultivate a flexible orientation to work, as a strategy for employment success. Yet, there is little recognition within this discourse of the different capacities individuals have to initiate or respond to work change. This paper draws attention to such differences, and adds to arguments challenging the efficacy, and fairness, of individualized strategies for managing work change. We highlight the need, in both research and policy development, to consider work change as a more complex, socially-embedded experience deeply structured by inequality.

The paper draws on research done within the SSHRC-funded project entitled Social Citizenship and the Transformation of Work. An aim of the research has been to broaden the context for understanding work change in two ways: 1) by placing people’s employment experience in a broader context of work experience that also includes unpaid domestic work, voluntary work and work-related training, and 2) by placing decisions about and reactions to work change in a broader context of life experience. Regarding the latter, we have been especially concerned with the ways in which work change both requires and is facilitated by changes within family and household circumstances. We have also considered the importance, for individuals experiencing work change, of opportunities and obligations located within wider

social networks. In the research project, we were interested in how people managed change in any of the four types of work experiences that we have identified. In this paper, we highlight employment change, although typically this involves some alternation in the individual's other types of work as well.<sup>3</sup>

We present information from our research interviews to support the contention that, in the context of the flexibilization strategies promoted in Canada's current policy regime, the capacity to embrace change and benefit from it is an experience of the already advantaged. For people in disadvantaged circumstances, responding to and initiating work change can be fraught with difficulties and demands that may put their lives in further turmoil and exacerbate their already precarious circumstances.

The paper has three sections. In section one, we place our analysis of work change within the discussion of contemporary issues and trends in the transformation of employment structures and experiences of work. We briefly review recent policy directions, highlighting particularly the focus on flexibilization, including the drift to individualizing responsibility for transitions between jobs, and between forms of work (especially between employment and unpaid or voluntary work). In the current policy context, individualized strategies such as lifelong learning and networking are officially promoted as effective ways to manage employment change. We note that while change in the quantity and quality of employment is extensively researched and discussed in Canada as a structural phenomenon, understanding what these mean for how individuals negotiate change in their jobs and their broader work life is correspondingly underdeveloped. Our research is positioned to add to our knowledge of the latter. This section also addresses the increased interest, in Canada and elsewhere, in examining the dynamics of an

individual's work life. Our research supports the trend in this approach toward understanding work trajectories over the life course as complex, socially embedded experiences.

In section two, we introduce our research and identify the two types of employment-driven work change we intend to discuss in detail. The two types differ in terms of whether or not employment change also involves occupational change. We argue that the capacity to negotiate both types of employment change is strongly structured by inequality. We identify and provide paradigmatic examples of four profiles of work change: flows and eddies for the advantaged, swamps and whirlpools for the disadvantaged.

Finally in section three, we highlight individual experiences of successfully moving from disadvantaged employment circumstances to a more stable and adequate situation. We argue that the experiences of this upwardly mobile group challenge, rather than confirm, the wisdom of the individualized drift in current public prescriptions for managing work change.

### **Dealing with work change - public prescriptions for finding new and better jobs**

A signature feature of the current public discourse on the economy is the claim about the constancy of change. In terms of employment trajectories, the now common wisdom is that we shall all have many jobs, many employers and many forms of employment relationships over our lifetime. Flexibility is touted as a necessary survival strategy. With respect to wider profiles of work, we are to expect periods of change where we transition between various configurations of training, volunteer, care and paid work. As many commentators have noted, responsibility for these transitions is highly individualized in the sense of there being little institutionalized, public support. Messages from all levels of government in Canada make it clear that dealing with the demands for and of work change is primarily an individual responsibility. Two strategies for

dealing with work change are often recommended and relate to issues explored in this paper – lifelong learning and networking.

The first strategy recommended for dealing with work change is to be an ever-ready learner. The importance of a constantly accumulating portfolio of skills and credentials is identified as a key resource helping individuals navigate their way through a constantly changing employment environment. Lifelong learning has emerged as the centrepiece of how governments intend to address the demands for and of work change. It has been identified by the federal and provincial governments as the key strategic resource for managing life transitions and maintaining a flexible and adaptable orientation to work change. In government talk about how to manage in a climate of economic transition and development, continuous education and training are portrayed as essential steps to employment success. A human resources publication from the government of Canada proclaims, today's job market "not only demands that we invest in education when we are young, but that we continue to invest in ourselves to keep pace with changing working conditions....knowledge brings personal success." (HRDC 2002a:3). Human Resources and Social Development Canada continues to identify "providing Canadians with the tools to thrive and prosper in society and the economy through access to learning and training opportunities" as a central plank of its mandate (HRSDC 2007). Provinces promote lifelong learning as a primary initiative to create and sustain a dynamic economy. Cities too are encouraged to become "learning cities" (CCL 2007) and, in turn, instruct us that we "will never stop training and searching for a job".<sup>4</sup>

The second strategy promoted for successfully managing work transitions is networking. While education and training are key factors in securing employment, "networking know-how" is identified as essential for tracking job opportunities. Networks are identified as especially critical

in gaining access to the “hidden job market” – those positions filled through personal contacts not job advertisements. Links between networks and labour market success are a continuing matter of policy interest and discussion at many policy levels. As an influential OECD publication straightforwardly asserts “Social networks help people to find jobs” (OECD 2001:3). The quality, and resource consequences, of networks were central to the approach adopted by the Canadian government’s Policy Research Initiative (2003) on Social Capital as a Public Policy Tool. The Ontario government links young job searchers to internet sites with advice on the importance and intricacies of networking – informing them that networking strategies help to access the 85% of available jobs that are not formally advertised.<sup>5</sup>

Attention to the inequalities structuring how individuals negotiate work change is crucial for assessing just how successful such public prescriptions are likely to be. The emphasis on lifelong learning and networking as key individual strategies for employment success begs questions about the capacity individuals have to undertake these activities. At the very least, both require substantial amounts of time and money. It also begs questions about the quality of such resources. Learning opportunities and social networks are themselves structured by inequality. It follows that the capacities gained through opportunities for learning and networking will reflect the varying quality of these resources. Such concerns draw our attention to how inequality is identified in the analysis of work change. We turn to a short discussion of this question.

### **Inequality and the experience of work change**

At the aggregate level, it is known that far from generating more opportunities and resources for the benefit of many, shifts toward the types of jobs and employment relationships characteristic of an economy increasingly shaped by neo-liberal policies have generated greater

polarization and a decline in real living standards for middle and lower income Canadians (Broad 2000; Jackson 2005; Vosko, 2006). Gender and race feature strongly in the growth of income inequality in Canada, in terms of both incidence and depth (Picot and Myles 2005). With continued neo-liberal impulses in the relationship of government and public policy to labour markets and employment contracts, there has been little in the way of a public response to alleviate growing inequality and rising poverty levels. Indeed, as many argue, neo-liberal tendencies in the Canadian government's approach to policy interventions over the 1990s and into the 2000s have at worst fostered, and at best tolerated, growing inequality as a necessary consequence of revived and enhanced market-based opportunities.

Critical academic commentary has been, on the whole, vigorous in identifying and decrying the increasing gap between the living standards of the well and the worst off, and in exploring innovative ideas for progressive forms of social support and solidarity.<sup>6</sup> Much of this research, however, takes place at an institutional or broader structural level of analysis. There is a substantial gap between what is known about the structural dynamics, institutional transformations and aggregate conditions of the contemporary economy, and what is known about how these features interact with individual efforts to absorb and initiate changing work patterns and expectations. A small, but growing, body of research literature examines how individuals in Canada embrace and challenge changes associated with current trends in the structure and organization of work.<sup>7</sup> Our research is located in this more experientially-focused approach to analyzing the impact of inequality on the experience of work change.

Our interest in individual experience over time brings our research into a conversation with the growing attention given to the life course as a focus for sociological and policy analysis. In analyzing individual negotiations of work change (or, in the life course nomenclature,

transitions), our research touches on key aspects in discussions about using life course analysis as a policy lens in Canada (Bernard and McDaniel 2009; Hicks 2008; Voyer 2004) and elsewhere (Esping-Anderson 2002; OECD 2007). Our specific concern here is the way in which inequality and work change are conceptualized and analyzed in life course research.

Discussions of neo-liberal influences on the conditions of work emphasize that along with the decline in the prevalence of standard employment relationships, there is a decline in the prevalence of the standard life course (for example, Lowe 2000; Marshall et. al. 2001; Marshall and Meuller 2002; O’Rand and Henretta 1999; Policy Research Initiative 2003). Older ideas, based largely on men’s employment experience, of an orderly progression from education to employment to retirement are argued to be increasingly out of step with what is happening to both women and men as shifts toward flexibilized work experience affect larger sections of the labour force. Marshall and Mueller (2002:5) summarize the new developments in life course research as a trend to “increasingly individualized and less chronologized” patterns. Discussions of a “contingent” life-course and of the significance of examining “linked lives” (Elder 1995, Heinz 2002) are part of the move toward regarding life course patterns as more variable and open-ended but within identifiable structural conditions.

In concert with these arguments, Canadian policy analysts and academics are part of an international trend toward using life course analysis as a tool for identifying social problems and appropriate policy mechanisms. There is general agreement in this new approach that life course analysis (and with this the analysis of work trajectories) must match the complexity of lived experience. There is recognition that for individuals many dimensions of life are happening at once, resources flow in from and out to many sources, opportunities are socially structured and individual are linked in networks of significant others. This general turn in policy analysis to a

more complex understanding of how individuals live their lives is to be welcomed. We place our own research in line with this move to add sufficient complexity to the understanding of work change. Work trajectories are deeply socially embedded, and addressing their complexity involves bringing into view a multi-faceted and shifting relational network of social and material circumstances.

While there is a consensus about the advantages of a more complex understanding of individual experience, there appears to be different perspectives on the impact of inequality in the life course of individuals. On the one hand, there are discussions which introduce a distinction between more and less serious episodes of inequality. Esping-Andersen (2002:6-7) has presented an influential argument in favour of targeting longer-term experiences of disadvantage for policy intervention, and for using life course analysis as a means to “separate momentary (and possibly inconsequential) from lasting hardship”. Some Canadian commentators (Picot and Myles 2005:21) are picking up on the practice of distinguishing short-term from “more serious” long-term resource difficulties. The assumption underlying this approach is that there is no necessary relationship between short-term and longer-term inequality. On the other hand, there are approaches to life course analysis that assert a strong relationship between immediate and longer term inequalities, observing that advantage and disadvantage accumulate over the life course. This approach is a feature of recent explorations of the value of life course analysis for Canadian policy development (Bernard and McDaniels, 2009) and is consistent with research on the working poor and the difficulties individuals face in escaping poverty.<sup>8</sup> These different understandings of the relationship between earlier and later moments of the life course could have a substantial impact on decisions about the purpose and timing of policy interventions, and about appropriate policy mechanisms. A crucial question to address is what sorts of evidence

would be needed to reveal temporal patterns of inequality within individual experiences of the life course, and more specifically for our purposes, within individual trajectories of work change.

In their extensive review of the cumulative advantage approach, DiPrete and Eirich (2006) repeatedly note that observations of cumulative individual and group inequalities over the life course need to be matched by explanations for how and why this occurs. There remains a strong tendency in the life course literature to be oriented to specific types of life events and to consider research issues to be those of timing and sequencing. There is, in short, a focus on *what* happens and *when*. In contrast, our primary orientation here is a focus on *how* things happen, and we approach this question using qualitative analysis of individual accounts of work change. While much life course analysis continues to be performed using highly sophisticated quantitative techniques, there is growing recognition of the need to have socially contextualized insights from qualitative data in order to understanding of how linked lives are lived. This is described in the methodology literature as a shift from “variables-oriented” to “person-oriented” analysis (Laub and Sampson 1998:221). How to effectively incorporate qualitative investigations into life course analysis is an important on-going academic interest (Heinz 2001, 2002) that is also of concern in discussions of the significance of life course analysis for policy formation (Hicks 2007, Bernard and McDaniel 2009). As a contribution to this development, we offer in this paper an illustration of the process insights to be gained from a person-oriented, qualitative analysis, and suggest that this approach is particularly suited to understanding how inequality is reproduced in the negotiation of work change.

**Dealing with work change - Individual experiences of (not always) finding new and (not always) better jobs**

Our research began with the question of how individuals deal with employment changes and the broader work change that can accompany this. Our interest in this question was piqued by events happening on our doorstep in the city of Ottawa. The city was undergoing tremendous flux in the fortunes of private and public sector employment. A few years before the study got underway, the federal government announced the largest-ever downsizing of government jobs, most of them located in the city of Ottawa itself. Meanwhile, local newspapers presented a roller-coaster ride of boom and bust headlines regarding the fortunes of the high-tech sector. Consistent with much speculative corporate hype that characterized the high tech industry in the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was continual conjecture about exactly when Ottawa would cease to be a city dominated by government jobs and fully take on the mantle of Silicon Valley North.<sup>9</sup>

We interviewed 101 people who had experienced some form of work change since 1995. Recruitment was done primarily through advertising in community newspapers, local networks and snowball sampling. Interviews were conducted between 2001 and 2003. In recruiting participants, we sought to cover a broad range of experiences, aiming to interview a sufficient number of individuals within significant categories. Half of our interviewees were female, and half were below the age of 40. Roughly two-thirds were Anglophone, and just over 10% Francophone. About one-fifth of our interviewees did not have either English or French as their first language, or were not Canadian by birth. Half of our respondents were in standard employment relationships, a quarter were employed on term contracts and a quarter were self-employed. The range of employment, in terms of industrial sectors, included the federal civil service (28%), technology (20%), business (17%) service (20%) and retail (8%). Two-thirds of our respondents were living with partners at the time of the interviews, and 20% had children of pre-school age.

As the project progressed, we also used a form of theoretical sampling whereby we selected respondents according to emerging interpretive possibilities.<sup>10</sup> In our first round of sampling we put out a call for anyone who had experienced any type of work change. In our analysis of these initial interviews, we noticed that just about everyone was engaged in some type of strategy to alter their employment prospects, from smaller efforts aimed at further developing the path they were currently on, to larger, more dramatic steps to enter a completely new field of expertise. We became intrigued by those who took a decision to move into a different occupation - a decision involving re-training and the development of a new skill set. In our second round of interviews, we used snowballing techniques to track down more individuals who were following or had followed this more dramatic path for it seemed to us that their more disrupted experience would help to reveal the social resources required to make work change happen. As well, toward the end of our fieldwork, we briefly re-interviewed a few of our initial participants who had experienced more dramatic changes to see how things had progressed for them.

Semi-structured interviews were done using a schedule of questions which could be covered in any order over the course of the 1 to 1.5 hour interview. Interviews were focused on people's current experiences as well as the 6 to 7 years leading up to the time of the interview. While the time period covered by our interviews is limited, the retrospective information does provide a picture of circumstances preceding those at the time of the interviews, and allows us to explore in detail the personal and wider social contexts leading up to, and in some cases following, the most recent experience of work change.

All of our respondents were dealing, or had dealt with, work change of some sort, and in this paper we focus on change led by movements into, out of and within employment. Typically, employment change was accompanied by alterations in the individual's other types of work

(work-related training, volunteer work or unpaid domestic work). In listening to the accounts people gave of how employment change came about, and how the issues and other transitions it prompted were managed, it became clear that we needed to identify two types of employment change. The first type is change of employment situation but not occupation. An individual may lose a job, or return to employment after child-rearing, or change to part-time hours or become self-employed – but these changes occur within the continuity of an occupational skill set (for example, as a web designer, a nurse, or a retail service worker). The employment change may precipitate (or indeed follow) a period of training. If undertaken, training involves enhancing, upgrading or updating in order to advance the individual in an occupation in which they already have some experience. The second type of employment change is more dramatic in that it does involve a change of occupation. This type of employment change typically includes a period of re-training to acquire a new set of skills and, by so doing, puts the individual in a position to secure employment in a new occupation. For example, a federal government administrative assistant may become a chiropractor, or a teacher’s aid may train for a job in computer user support. Both types of employment change occur in advantaged and disadvantaged circumstances resulting in four patterns of work change dynamics (illustrated in Table 1).

**Table 1**

**Four work change dynamics**

	Employment change with occupational continuity	Employment change with occupational change
Advantaged circumstances	Flows	Eddies
Disadvantaged circumstances	Swamps	Whirlpools

We have labeled these four patterns of change with terms which we hope capture the main character of the dynamics involved. The flow dynamic is one of smoothly and easily heading in a positive direction. Eddies are movements out of the mainstream, but with little difficulty in eventually returning to the flow. The swamp dynamic indicates substantial difficulty in moving forward. This path is full of obstacles and takes much effort for little, if any, headway. The whirlpool dynamic, like the eddy, is a movement out of the mainstream, but in this case individuals are dragged down into further depths of disadvantage.

### **The impact of inequality on the negotiation of work change**

Examining how people negotiate work change provides some insights into the complexity of circumstances which lead to the diversity of work trajectories within life courses that is remarked upon in contemporary policy and research discussions. The four dynamics of change we have identified here show the dramatic impact of inequality on an individual's ability to

manage the time, money and other demands involved in shifting from one set of employment circumstances to another. Inequalities feature in the negotiation of work change both in terms of resources available at the beginning of a transition period, and in terms of new resources made available specifically for the costs of transition. We examine the impact of inequality within the two types of employment change identified (that is, with and without occupational change).

To demonstrate the social embeddedness of work change, and the complexity and nuance in peoples' lives as they negotiate flows, eddies, swamps and whirlpools, we present brief summary narratives. The narratives we present were chosen because they reveal paradigmatic aspects of the four dynamic patterns of change.<sup>11</sup> Each narrative is primarily the circumstances of a particular individual. However, to preserve our respondents' anonymity, and to elaborate the paradigmatic case to include other relevant features, we have in all instances modified individual narratives by substituting information from the narratives of others who also exemplify the same dynamic type. In this sense, the narratives are composites. By giving prominence to these paradigmatic cases in the following discussion of networking and lifelong learning, we hope to demonstrate the limitations of these policy approaches in helping people to cope with and succeed in an economy that makes increasing demands on the flexibility and adaptability of its workforce. In short, these policy approaches appear to assist those already well positioned, and do comparatively less for those not so well placed.

***Employment change, with occupational continuity: Flows and swamps***

Flowing through work change is an experience of the advantaged. People who are in a flowing pattern experience work change that could be planned, such as returning to school for a higher degree, or unplanned and very difficult such as job loss. While unforeseen or unplanned

events may occur, and some of these may be very challenging, there is, in the flowing pattern of work change, a continuity of occupation, perhaps also of career identity, and secure sources of support. People flowing through work change have the personal and social support resources to manage the time and money costs of change relatively easily. When people are able to go with the flow of change, they do so in a manner that supports and often advances an established expertise and career pattern. They are typically able to use work change as an opportunity to better their employment prospects and rewards. “David” is an example of someone for whom work change is a flowing experience.

**David – work change is a flow**

David is in his mid-30s. He is married, and his partner is employed full-time. They have no children. David has a BA and was working in the high-tech sector in a start-up company when he was laid off. The leaving package from this lay-off was very minimal. However, he immediately obtained access to government-sponsored training geared to advanced level high-tech employment. As he already had employment experience in this sector, he knew what sorts of training would be most helpful. The cost of the course was paid for by the government program and David was paid to attend the program. The program involved co-op work placements, and during his first placement the employer offered him a job which he accepted. Although losing his job was a difficult disruption for David, he managed in a fairly short time period to both enhance his qualifications and land a job that was better paid and more secure than his previous employment.

David was able to manage his work change from job to training to job without much disruption to his life-style or standard of living. Although suffering the unexpected loss of his job, David was able to engage in government supported and supplied lifelong learning at a suitably high skill level and at no cost to himself. David was already well-resourced, in terms of education (with his BA) and job experience, giving him an advantaged entry point to further

training. His household obligations were stable, undemanding in terms of time and well covered in terms of finances. He is an example of the point in the literature that those already advantaged in terms of education/training/experience are those more likely to participate in lifelong learning, and in the more advantaged (ie. post-degree level) forms of training (Jackson 2005; Swift 1995).

Another example of flowing through work change involves using the opportunities provided by a job to build up resources to support transitions. “Derek” is an example of someone who was able to draw on training, and a well-established communications network offered by his employer, to later voluntarily change his employment status and become self-employed.

<b>Derek – work change is a flow</b>
Derek, a man in his 30s with a young family, decided it was time to move on from his paid employment in a communications firm, and to set himself up as a self-employed web-designer. Prior to quitting his job, he was able to use the opportunities and resources offered in his current job to both network with people who would later become his clients, and to upgrade his computer skills. He and his partner found an affordable house in a neighbourhood where an extensive network of their friends already lived, and procured a mortgage before quitting. With the help of friends and neighbours, they renovated their new home, and created a home office for Derek’s new web-design business. The first year Derek managed to make as much money working for himself as when he was an employee. At the time of the interview, he anticipated making 20 to 30% more in his second year. During this time Derek and his partner had a second child and decided to care for both children at home. This is his partner’s primary responsibility, but Derek routinely does some hours of child care during the day to give his partner a break and himself time with the children. Besides his paid work, Derek also does a good deal of web-design related work as a volunteer for various NGOs. While motivated by a sense of community engagement, he also sees this volunteer work as way to generate more business.

Derek was able to use the time and resources provided in his previous job as an employee to help make the transition to self-employment. A number of his network contacts through his job became his clients as he moved into self-employment. We also heard stories of this as a strategy to manage “serial contact” employment. The ability to draw on training and networks

within a particular employment situation, helps people to manage and minimize disruptions associated with job change, and to flow more easily from one employment situation to another. It is important to note also, however, that a huge aspect of Derek's success at managing his work change is a deliberate and energetic strategy of building, maintaining and drawing on networks of personal support. These networks helped Derek to cover the housing needs of his family, and to provide a domestic space where he could do both his paid work and help to look after his children. The volunteer work he took on kept his network of employment contacts active and helped to provide a pool of paying clients, as well as offering an opportunity to support causes he valued. In every respect, Derek has successfully negotiated major changes in his work (paid, unpaid domestic and volunteer) without experiencing much disruption in his economic circumstances and ultimately increasing his quality of life.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast to these examples of using lifelong learning opportunities or networking to successfully flow through work change, we have identified swamps as a work change dynamic that is comparatively more belaboured and lacking a positive direction. Those swamped by work change are in disadvantaged circumstances, where financial resources do not meet personal or household needs, or needs are met only through extra-ordinary effort. This extra effort includes multiple job-holding, possibly for each adult individual in the household. Trying to manage on inadequate resources can also include taking in borders, continuing to rely heavily on parental resources, or living with other relatives (brothers, aunts). Individuals use lifelong learning and networking strategies to try and make improvements in their employment situation, but changing jobs can as often as not bring more of the same. Despite all efforts, those swamped by work change make little headway and continue to just get by. "Nelson" is in such a situation.

### **Nelson – work change is a swamp**

Nelson, his wife, and their young child came to Canada from Africa more than ten years ago on his student visa. They have since become Canadian citizens, have had two more children, and have taken into their home a nephew recently arrived from Africa. Despite having a master's degree from a Canadian university, Nelson has not been able to secure anything but precarious, low-paying, unskilled work. Between them, he and his wife are currently holding four jobs – two full-time and two part-time – and even so they are barely surviving financially. Nelson's most significant employment is working on the assembly line of a local high-tech company, a job he holds through an agency that supplies the high-tech company with assembly workers employed on a contract basis. He works the night shift so that he can earn an extra dollar per hour for a total of \$11.39. He describes his co-workers as "Anglo dropouts" and foreign-born degree holders like himself who he estimates make up the largest portion of the workforce. The company is not doing well financially, and Nelson is expecting to be laid off any day. Nelson's wife works a part-time night shift as a cleaner and a full-time day shift as a care assistant, both contracted through agencies. Three of the four jobs held in this household are subject to the fees that agencies deduct from their employees' paycheques. Nelson calculates that, between them, he and his wife pay out 20 per cent of their earnings in agency fees. While Nelson's full-time job has not changed in the last 7 years, his part-time jobs change frequently. He tries to work part-time, and to do volunteer work, in his area of expertise in the hope of building up his resume and getting contacts. He has done this for the last 4 years without any offers of full-time work in his field. Nelson says he is working very hard to get nowhere.

According to public prescriptions for negotiating work change, Nelson is doing everything right. He has high-level Canadian education credentials. He has extensive volunteer experience, is well connected within his community and has been proactive both in networking and in creating work for himself. Yet, he cannot get a well-paying, full-time job, let alone one in his field. Nelson is well-networked; however, the people he knows socially and through work are in the same disadvantaged position as himself and cannot help him except through emotional support. He and his wife have therefore had to rely on the formal networks offered through temporary work agencies, which Nelson finds impersonal and exploitative. His attempts to job search through formal channels into the public service have also not got him anywhere. Nelson's

perception of high tech work is that it is easier to get into because there is less discrimination against foreign qualifications compared to other industries. However, his own employment experience in this industry has been confined to unskilled positions despite his Canadian qualifications. The dynamics of racial discrimination are clearly traceable in Nelson's account of how education and networking are not bringing him expected outcomes. With his household resources stretched to the limit, Nelson can't afford the time or the money to take on any further training opportunities. His main strategy for building up some profile of work activity in his preferred area of employment is trying out different part-time and voluntary work opportunities. He works 6 days a week, in many weeks both during the day and at night. Nelson's experience of work change is one of intense effort for little gain.

"Denise" is also a case of being swamped by work change. She is in a not uncommon situation where women undergo dramatic alterations in their employment and living circumstances after divorce. She is also emblematic of the way in which care responsibilities fall on women's shoulders to the point where they have a hard time bearing the weight. She is a determined but struggling member of the sandwich generation, giving priority to the needs of older and younger family members to the detriment of her own mental and physical health. The economic consequences of her divorce and her limited employment prospects make a tough situation even more difficult.

<b>Denise – work change is a swamp</b>
Denise is in her mid-fifties. She lives with her infirm elderly father and her daughter. She has a high school diploma. She went no further in education because she was drawn to a life in business and has spent most of her career in self-employment. Fifteen years ago, she was running a specialty food business with her husband. The business was doing reasonably well, although Denise and her husband had a lot of personal money invested in it (including a second

mortgage on their house). Both the business and the marriage came to an abrupt end, and Denise found herself without a job, without a home, and with substantial debts to pay. She has no further contact with her ex-husband and neither does her teenage daughter, who hopes to go to university in two years. Denise and her daughter rented an apartment, and both found jobs – Denise as a full-time retail clerk in the industry where she previously worked, and her daughter as a part-time waitress after school. It became clear to Denise very quickly that one full-time job in the retail sector, at \$9.25 an hour, was not going to help her clear her debt or help her support her daughter through university. She therefore took on a second job in the evening as a cook's assistant in a small private nursing home. She also took in a boarder to help cover some of the day-to-day running costs of the apartment. Just as things seemed to be picking up, Denise's father became very ill. He had access to some homecare, but it was not enough to cover all of his needs – especially his need for night time care – and Denise took on the responsibility of staying with him through the night. After several weeks of working two jobs and taking care of her father at night, she herself became ill. She and her daughter decided to leave their apartment and move in with Denise's father. Denise left her day-time job, as she now had less to pay out in terms of rent and utilities. She and her daughter continue to work part-time. Denise is determined to get her life back on track and to find time to develop her own business interests. She hopes to get involved in some kind of business training for women, although she worries that her age may disqualify her from any available programmes. In the meantime, she says her only consolation in the midst of their very difficult circumstances is that they have become poor enough for her daughter to qualify for a student grant.

The change in her employment situation was not a matter of choice for Denise, and her options for moving to a new employment situation have been severely constrained by both the debt she carries and the care responsibilities she shoulders. Denise's situation underscores the point that the burden of care that falls disproportionately on women can have devastating consequences for their own personal health, resources and well-being. Despite her current difficulties, Denise is at heart a business woman and wants nothing more than to resume her life as a small business owner. Until such an opportunity presents itself, she keeps her hand in the area of business she knows and enjoys by enduring what she describes as the menial life of a part-time kitchen skivvy. She is under no illusion that her part-time job will lead to anything more permanent or fulfilling, but she does see it as a

source of potential business contacts. Her hope for the future lies in some form of business training open to older women, but even if such training exists, she would be hard pressed to find the time and money to take advantage of it.

***Employment change, with occupational change: Eddies and whirlpools***

The impact of inequality on capacities for managing work change is equally significant for those who have experienced the more dramatic disruption of occupational change as well as employment change - eddies and whirlpools. For this group, there is a dramatic break in their employment trajectory and a turn toward a new occupational path. Both lifelong learning and networking strategies play a key role in efforts to redirect one's occupational skills. As we shall see, however, these are not neutral resources that mean the same for everyone, for they are themselves structured by inequality. As in the cases of work change discussed previously, the success of these occupational redirection attempts depends on the circumstances people are in when they start and the kind of support they get as they go through. The more advantaged redirect themselves with good personal and social supports in place. This is the dynamic of the eddy exemplified by the experience of "Jane".

**Jane – work change is an eddy**

Jane is in her late 50s. She is separated, lives alone and has no dependents. She has an active extended family network (within and outside of Ottawa), and occasionally offers financial assistance to other family members. She was a full-time employee of the federal government for many years, and over this time built up a good local network of colleagues and contacts. This came in handy when she was laid off during the 1990s and decided to change careers. She enrolled in a full-time training program as a chiropractor. This involved moving cities for the duration of the training – a period of over 2 years. She sold her townhouse, in part to finance her training. After the training course was completed, Jane returned to Ottawa and set up practice on a self-employed basis. The colleagues and contacts from her previous job helped to

establish the beginnings of a client-base for her new profession. During Jane's absence from Ottawa, the price of housing shot up. For this reason, coupled with the financial demands of a new business, Jane was not able to get back into the housing market.

The leaving package offered to Jane by the federal government involved a lump sum payment, plus the early start of pension payments. This financial base was sufficient and secure enough for Jane to undertake an entirely new direction in life, involving extensive and intensive re-training. Even so, she decided to sell her townhouse in order to help finance her costs while on the training program. The flexibility of Jane's personal circumstances made it possible for her to move cities in order to participate in the training programme she judged to be the best available. The local networks built up over many years made self-employment a feasible option, as they provided an initial source of clients. Jane has done well in her new profession, and although she lost her housing investment, she feels financially secure and able to plan for the future.

In contrast, those in less-advantaged circumstances are less likely to be successful in their attempt to re-launch their occupational path despite intense effort and considerable expense. Out of pocket, possibly in debt, with not much to show for it - this is the dynamic of the **whirlpool**. These individuals try to use lifelong learning and networking as strategies to move from one occupational skill set to another. However, the time and money demands of both strategies put extreme stress on their resources. While developing networks does not involve formal costs such as tuition fees, there are, nevertheless, time and money costs involved in networking activities such as visiting, meeting, mailing and calling. Also, networks are reciprocal, requiring those who want something from the other people in them to be prepared to respond when called upon themselves for a favour. Attempts at lifelong learning typically involve reduced income and increased costs – a double dip into the resource pool. The more limited money and time

individuals have to invest in lifelong learning buys them a more marginal educational experience, and this can turn out to be an expense that does not pay off in terms of advancing their employment position.

Specifically in the experience of our interviewees, the field of IT is an important employer in Ottawa and the prospect of using lifelong learning opportunities to break into the sector was attractive to many people. Unfortunately, obtaining credentials in this field can be costly and will not necessarily improve a person's situation as the following two examples illustrate. Whirlpools can be more or less deep. In our first example, "Susan", the main transition costs were covered by the generosity of a family contact, although other obstacles hindered the full completion of her movement into a new skill set.

**Susan – work change is a shallow whirlpool**

In her early 30s, Susan's life completely changed. She was a single woman, living independently and enjoying thoughts of world travel. But then she discovered she was pregnant. To make matters even more challenging for her, she lost her job as a personal care assistant. With the baby on the way, and no means of support, she found herself living on social assistance and wondering how she was going to support herself and her child over the longer term. She had a high school diploma and mainly service sector job experience. Then good fortune came Susan's way. When her child was 2 years old, Susan unexpectedly received an inheritance from a distant relative. The sum of money was small but enough to give her the time and finances to support herself and her child while pursuing education for a new career. She decided to enroll in an Information Technology training program at a local community college. Unfortunately, the college did not offer her preferred course on a part-time basis – an option that would have helped her to manage her child care needs and schooling obligations. Eventually, Susan discovered that the IT program was inflexible in other ways as well and she was experiencing increasing difficulty juggling her need for child care and the scheduling demands of her IT training program. When offered a limited-term employment contract during one of her course work placements, she decided to take it – even though it meant not completing the community college course. Her current salary is just enough to cover routine household expenses. Whether or not her job will be renewed is uncertain. As a form of insurance against the future possibility of unemployment, Susan supplements her income by taking in boarders, and building up a casual work network by doing computer-support for friends and neighbours.

Susan knew that to really make her investment in lifelong learning pay off, she needed to take a course that was the best her money could buy. While Susan would have liked to complete her degree—and was in her own words “a straight-A student”—in her experience, IT training programs are set up for people coming out of high school with no family responsibilities.

Although some college training has been better for her than none at all, Susan’s educational efforts have resulted in an employment position that is marginal and precarious. Her inheritance has been spent and she has no educational qualification to show for it.

In many respects, Susan’s circumstances are similar to Denise’s, and this highlights the vulnerability of those in disadvantaged circumstances. Susan may recover from her shallow whirlpool. She was able to get some training without incurring any debts. Her new occupation and employment situation link her to a significant, though volatile, local industry, and she has her relative youth on her side. Her child is now in elementary school full-time, and the time and money demands of childcare have lessened. Her “recovery”, however, may shift her only slightly into the dynamic of the swamp.

In our second whirlpool example, a downward spiral is well in place. It is a poignant case of the promises of quick-training fixes conning a poorly-resourced person and pushing them down a path of unmanageable debt and limited job prospects. While prepared to be self-motivated, flexible, and pro-active in investing in training and establishing networks, “Jeff” has ended up far worse off than when he started his effort to retool for the high tech industry.

<b>Jeff – work change is a deep whirlpool</b>
Jeff is in his late 20s. He is single and supports no dependants. After leaving high school and working in a series of retail jobs, Jeff decided it was time to try building a decent career. He was attracted by advertisements on television for the many career possibilities in information technology. He decided to take IT training in the city

where his parents live, moving in with them for the duration to save on living expenses. He entered a 9 month course at a private college and borrowed \$15,000 to cover the tuition. After completing the course, he moved to Ottawa and was hired through a local employment agency to work at a computer customer service call centre. The initial pay was \$15 an hour. Although his living expenses were modest, and he tried to keep costs down by boarding, he found that he could pay off the monthly interest on his loan but nothing of the principal. He continues to hope to move up the IT career ladder, and regularly undertakes self-directed training courses. His interest in our interview was to gain experience communicating with people to help his networking skills. He is aware, however, that no one hired through the agency where he works is employed above supervisory level. When contacted a year after our first interview, Jeff was still in the same job and now concerned that he would be laid off because there was talk of the call centre being shipped overseas. His pay has increased by \$1.20 an hour to \$16.20 and he now had the most seniority of those still working the calls.

Jeff tried to use lifelong learning opportunities to acquire a new occupational skill set but did so from a disadvantaged position. His limited educational background, and inability to spend much time or money on his re-training, made him vulnerable to the advertisements of private IT courses which promised a fast-track to high paying IT jobs. Sadly, this has not been Jeff's experience. While his family could provide him with limited support in the form of housing for the duration of his course, to secure the money for the high tuition fees charged by a private college he had to take out student loans from both the federal and provincial governments as well as a personal loan. There were no employment networks built into his IT program, and Jeff had no personal network. To find employment after his training course, he was forced to rely on the networks provided by local employment agencies. At his call centre job, his contacts are people in a similar situation to himself and he has not been able to enrich his employment network. Now, doubly struggling with a large debt and the frustration of marginal, insecure employment, Jeff is clearly worse off than he was before he attempted his new career path.

**Moving out of disadvantaged circumstances - what makes this possible?**

We have been arguing that disadvantaged work profiles persist in part because strategies to negotiate change are also structured by inequality. There are inequalities in the resources people have at the start of a transition period and in whether additional resources come on-stream during the transition. We have also suggested that specific strategies for negotiating work change are themselves marked by more and less advantaged forms. The types of life-long learning opportunities and networking available to those in flowing and eddy circumstances, are of a higher quality than those in the dynamics of swamps and whirlpools. Disadvantage in these latter circumstances is extremely challenging and may be difficult to break free from. There are individuals among our interviewees, however, who have managed to move from a disadvantaged employment situation to a more advantaged one. The cases we encountered of individuals managing to escape precarious or marginal forms of employment show that the social resources and supports required are very extensive and deep.

“Jill” is an example of family networks and support providing solutions to otherwise unsustainable material circumstances. In preference to lifelong learning strategies, she puts her confidence in the advances made through unionized workplaces as the major means to improving her employment conditions and overall work satisfaction.

**Jill – moving out of disadvantaged circumstances via unionized employment and the reconfiguration of domestic circumstances**

Jill found herself unable to cover her living expenses when her 10 year relationship ended in the mid-1980s. She had both a university degree and a college diploma, and had been in her education assistant job for a couple of years. However, this job was only for 10 months of the year and offered limited income. Also, because Jill was relatively new to the job, she was not yet a full member of the bargaining unit and she had little say in where or when she worked. She faced a difficult decision. To support herself she needed more money, but even when she became a full union member, it would be a while before she would accumulate enough seniority in her

current job to be earning a sufficient wage, and have a more stable work placement. She could look around for a job that paid higher wages, such as a teaching job, but she reasoned that this option would require further education and a period of even greater financial hardship. Meanwhile, Jill's oldest brother's wife died and he became a single parent of a teenage boy. Theirs had been a dual income household and, now on one income, her brother was also facing a period of difficulty in terms of household financing. Since they lived in the same city, and had always been in close contact, the two siblings decided to find suitable accommodation that would allow them to share housing and food expenses. They moved into a 3 bedroom apartment and split all household expenses 50/50. Jill wanted to directly help in supporting her nephew, so she covered his weekly allowance and make regular contributions to an RESP for him. Although she and her brother planned to move in together as a temporary measure, the arrangement has worked so well that they now see it as a permanent possibility and are looking to buy a house together.

For Jill, this novel housing solution was a strategy to moderate her living expenses so that she could endure the lower wage and indeterminate work schedule of someone new to her job. As she accumulated more seniority, and as her union continued to negotiate good wage settlements, she gradually moved upward toward a better wage and a more secure employment position. Reconfiguring her domestic situation, and an internal labour market structure at her unionized workplace, helped Jill to move away from a difficult and precarious situation, to one where she feels secure and satisfied. With everyday expenses well under control, she now is able to save money on a regular basis. As she says "I think I have the good life".

Some have managed to use lifelong learning and networking strategies to move out of precarious and low quality employment into more substantial paid work. In terms of job and training opportunities, these individuals were able to successfully catch the local high-tech wave. But individualized efforts to obtain education and activate employment networks were not sufficient to carry these individuals out and up toward more advantaged circumstances. In addition, they received extensive support throughout their work change from a wide variety of sources including immediate and extended family members, government programs (federal government on-the-job training for students, student loans, employment insurance), former employers (severance packages), friends (employment networks) and community groups (local economy support groups). "Mike" is such a case.

**Mike – using networks and education to move out of a disadvantaged employment situation, but with intensive support from many sources**

Mike is in his early thirties and has a three-year community college diploma in computer engineering technology. He is married and has infant twins. He is currently employed on a full-time basis for a high tech firm, in as permanent a contract as the firm offers. His current salary is over \$50,000. Before starting his community college diploma, Mike worked in retail industries for ten years after dropping out of high school. Motivated by concerns for the future of his work and family, and encouraged by his wife, Mike quit his job, collected unemployment insurance while he considered his options and then returned to school. In order to fund his education, he took out student loans and received help from his parents in the form of an old family car. Mike's in-laws managed rental property and they offered the young couple a rent-free apartment while Mike was at school. The two families now live very close to one another and Mike's mother-in-law provides childcare for the twins. This allows Mike's wife to maintain her full-time job – a source of income that was crucial to maintaining the family while Mike was at school. Mike got his current job immediately after completing his diploma based on a tip from a friend now working in the same firm. This was a new friend Mike had made at college who had graduated and entered the job market a year before him.

Mike focused his skill development in the area of information technology at the height of its lucrative period in the late-nineties, and he hit the job market at a fortunate time. Unlike Susan, who had to go it alone with her child to support, Mike received a lot of support from a variety of sources and this was crucial in making his transition to a new occupation a success. His immediate and extended family helped to meet financial, transportation, housing, and child care needs during his engagement with lifelong learning. This support was critical in allowing Mike to devote himself full-time to his studies and to complete an extended, quality training programme. So too was the support he was able to access via government programs in the form of unemployment insurance and student loans. Plus, a new friendship network developed at college kicked in and sent an inside job tip Mike's way. All of these important elements came together

and supported Mike's transition from a low-paid retail job into quality training in a new career area, and then into a well-paid job as a qualified graduate.

### **Conclusions**

This research draws attention to the gap between what is known about recent structural trends in the organization and quality of work, and what is known about how such conditions interact with individual efforts to absorb and initiate change in their personal work profiles. Our research is exploratory but nevertheless suggestive of important directions for future work. To conclude, we'd like to draw attention to three issues.

First, qualitative investigations of managing work change at the level of individual experience provide important insights into processes, revealing how transitions happen and the depth of the social character of these dynamics. The way people respond to and initiate change in their work tells an important tale of the extensive embeddedness of employment experience, and of the close interrelationships between all forms of work. Negotiations of work change can be only minimally understood as individualized sequences of decisions and events. They involve the viewpoints, circumstances and cooperation of partners, children, extended family members, friends, work colleagues, and neighbours. In more socially expansive circumstances, such negotiations also involve relations with, even the support of, employers, social organizations, cities and provincial and federal governments. Whether or not these social relations and supports are available, come together at crucial moments, and can be sustained for sufficient periods of time, are important in appreciating the social density in the dynamics of individual work change.

Second, a feature of discussions about work change over the life course in academic and policy literature is that they tend to conceptualize inequality as a *consequence* of various events, timing and conditions of experience. The research reported here, with its interest in how

employment precipitated work change happens, considers inequality a *constituent* feature of the how change is experienced. The resources to negotiate employment change – lifelong learning and networks – are themselves structured by inequality. Disadvantaged individuals typically are embedded in disadvantaged social networks and have access to less advantaged forms of education.<sup>13</sup> This is not a new insight – but it needs to be reiterated in light of policy discussions and prescriptions where such strategies are presented as level playing fields for those who need only individual ambition and dedication to get in the game. As an experiential process, inequality structures one’s ability to deal with the demands of and for change.

Third, we hope the research we have presented encourages further reflection on the significance of all experiences of disadvantage. Our research supports the view that the advantaged or disadvantaged profile of resources at earlier moments of a work trajectory is linked to the development of that trajectory. For both types of work change discussed – employment change with occupational continuity and employment change with occupational change – inequalities of personal, social and material resources structure the experience of transition from one set of circumstances to another. That there are social processes linking inequalities across time suggests there is a need to address policy intervention at earlier moments. How we understand the operation of inequality over time is clearly critical in shaping possibilities for more progressive forms of public support for individuals in their efforts to manage work change.

The need for policy to be better attuned to the complexity of the social and its dynamics has been strongly identified in recent literature addressing various dimensions of the problem of inequality in Canada and elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> The individualizing trend of recent public policy – with its focus on cheerleading individuals along a path of self-investment, flexibility and adaptability - does not acknowledge the social embeddedness of work trajectories or address the inequality

structuring recommended strategies for managing work change. We hope that further research on the complexity of work trajectories, and on the role of inequality in work transitions, will inform new ways to think about how to reverse the growing divide between those who benefit from the experience of change, and those who do not.

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<sup>2</sup> Buck et. al.(2005) challenge this “new conventional wisdom” in relation to urban economies in Britain. Several authors in Shalla and Clement (2007) undertake a similar critical exercise for Canada.

<sup>3</sup>To clarify our terminology, we use ‘work’ as a general concept that includes paid work, unpaid domestic work, volunteer work and work-related training. To refer to paid work, we use the term employment or refer to jobs. See Siltanen (2007) for a discussion of inequality in work change in terms of an argument to extend social citizenship claims within employment relations, and Siltanen et. al. (2007) for a discussion in the context of social innovation.

<sup>4</sup>This quote is from the City of Ottawa’s website information for job seekers

[www.ottawa.ca/residents/efa/employment/help/index-en.html](http://www.ottawa.ca/residents/efa/employment/help/index-en.html) accessed June 2008.

<sup>5</sup>[www.mazemaster.on.ca/jobsearch/networking.htm](http://www.mazemaster.on.ca/jobsearch/networking.htm) accessed June 2008.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Atasoy and Carroll 2003; Breton et. al. 2004; Drydyk and Penz 1997; Fudge 2001; Jackson 2005; Leitner 2007; Lowe 2000; Vaillancourt and Tremblay 2002, Warskett 2007; Zuberi 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Examples include Anisef and Axelrod 2002; Armstrong and Armstrong 2003; Barndt 2002; Bezanson 2006; Cranford et. al. 2005; Krüger and Baldus 1999; Lewchuk et. al. 2007; Neysmith et. al. 2005; Ranson 2001; Shalla 2007; Swift 1995; Vosko 2000; Winson and Leach 2002.

<sup>8</sup> See the studies on the working poor by Fleury and Fortin (2006) and Fortin (2007). Neysmith et. al. (2005) offer many accounts of the difficulties the already marginalized have of escaping poverty.

<sup>9</sup> Hunt (2001) has further details. Speculation about the profile of the high tech industry in Ottawa has been heightened recently with the request for bankruptcy protection by Nortel – the largest private sector employer in the city.

<sup>10</sup> Our interviews were analyzed with the aid of ATLAS.ti. Throughout our fieldwork, we held regular meetings to engage in reflexive team work the purpose of which was to forge on-going interpretations of work change experience. Extensive details of our fieldwork practices are presented in Siltanen et. al. 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Flyvbjerg (2001) presents an orientation to post-positivist research strategies that has informed our research practice. He offers an especially strong argument for the role of case studies in building context-dependent sociological knowledge. While our whole study is itself a case, we have made further information-oriented case selections from our sample in order to choose which experiences to present here. These cases are paradigmatic in Flyvbjerg’s sense of encompassing definitive qualities.

<sup>12</sup> Although there were some examples of women experiencing work change as a flow, this was definitely a more privileged, male dynamic.

<sup>13</sup> In more general terms, Bottero (2004) discusses the ways inequality is reproduced through the operation of hierarchically structured social networks. See also Brooks (2006) on the highly stratified character of lifelong education.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Bezanson (2006), Brady (2008) Neysmith (2005) and Zuberi (2006) on the need for a more complex analysis of the context of inequality in the development of Canadian policy, particularly in terms of the household /paid work dynamic. Hyman, Scholarios, and Baldry (2005) discuss this issue (as does Brady) specifically in relation to policies focused on work-life balance.