

Where Passion Meets Precarity

Community-Based Youth Workers' Occupational Identity and Persistence Amidst Social Barriers

Dr. Deepa S. Vasudevan
Lecturer in Education
Wellesley College

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Overview

Research Motivations

Featured Research Study

Questions?

Research Motivations

*Keith Haring:
"We the Youth,"
South Philadelphia*



Defining Terms: Youth Workers



Defining Terms: Youth Workers

- Often **motivated by their love** of working with children and youth.
- Understand their work as **urgent** and **necessary**.
- Hold **varying pedagogical approaches** and views on schooling.
- Play **multiple roles** in the lives of young people.
 - As advocates, cultural workers, first responders, and so on
- Take on **ecological perspectives of child and youth development**.

Featured Research Study

Where Passion Meets Precarity:
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Social Barriers



Study Motivations

Why Persistence Matters

Positive, caring relationships *developed over time* between youth workers and young people is the key to successful out-of-school time programs and positive outcomes for children and youth.

Sources: Griffith, 2016; Hirsch, 2005, Jones & Deutsch, 2011; McLaughlin, 2000; Rhodes, 2004; Watson, 2012



Study Motivations

Professional Contradictions

- Job hopping, burnout, and anticipated exits from the field
- High levels of job satisfaction (compared with other occupations) and desire to stay in the field for 5 or more years

Source: Yohalem & Pittman, 2006



Research Literature: Persistence in Precarity

Workforce Surveys

Recruitment and
Retention Studies

Professionalization
Debates

Sociology of Caring
Professions

Occupational
Identity

Research Literature: Occupational Identity

Occupational identity is a salient identity status in the U.S.

People have different attachments to their work (e.g., callings, vocations), which can influence their wellbeing and success on the job

Identity development occurs within context.

Extrinsic influences, especially social status and families, can deeply influence choices around work.

(Daniels, 1987; Skorikov 2008, Duffy & Dik, 2009; Hirschi, 2012; Skorikov, 2008; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011)



Research Questions

What social conditions and experiences challenge experienced youth workers' occupational identity and career persistence?

How do *persisters* navigate and address these social barriers to stay in the field?



Research Questions

At what cost?





Methods

Snowball sampling for identifying participants

Sequential interviewing for “case saturation”

Narrative inquiry: phenomenological methodology
(Kramp, 2003; Silver, 2013)

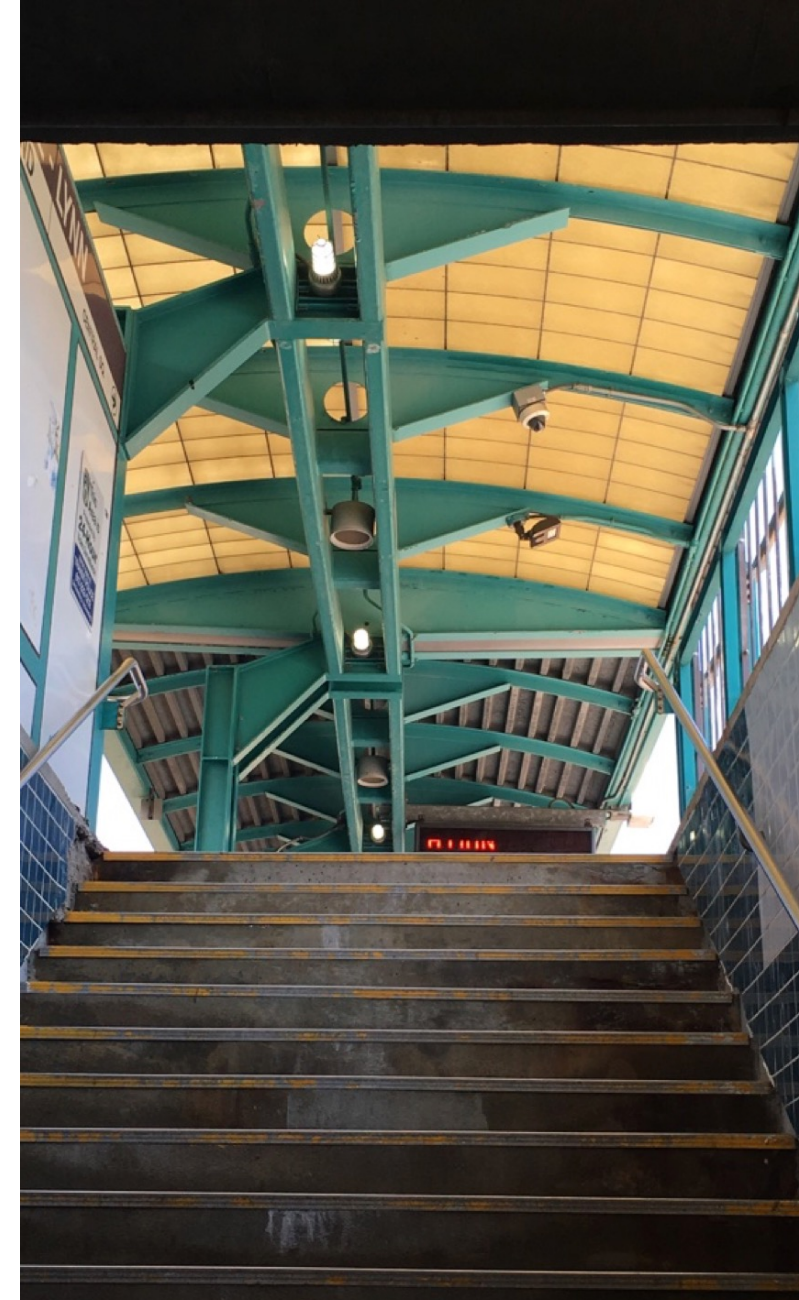
Methods:

- **44** “life-story” interviews ($n = 20$)
Paper timelines (Anderson, 2012)
- **15** program and neighborhood tours
- **Nine** program observations

Analysis: Use of NVivo and memo writing for categorical (etic) and grounded (emic) coding processes to identify themes

Sample

Years of Experience	4.5 +
Age Range	24 – 53 years
Gender	
Women	11
Men	9
Race	
White	7
Black	6
<u>Latinx</u>	4
Asian	2
Multiracial	1
Education	
Master's	8
Bachelor's	8
Associate's	2
Some College	2



Key Finding

To persist amidst barriers, experienced youth workers drew on their callings and employed individual coping strategies to stay in the work.

For racially minoritized youth workers and youth workers from low-income households, navigating social barriers came at a personal cost, exposing the precarious nature of persistence.

Key Findings: Emergent Barriers

Pushed Out
(Societal, Contextual)

Neighborhood gentrification, rising cost of living, housing affordability, student loan debt

Shut Out
(Organizational)

Workplace racism, professional undervaluation

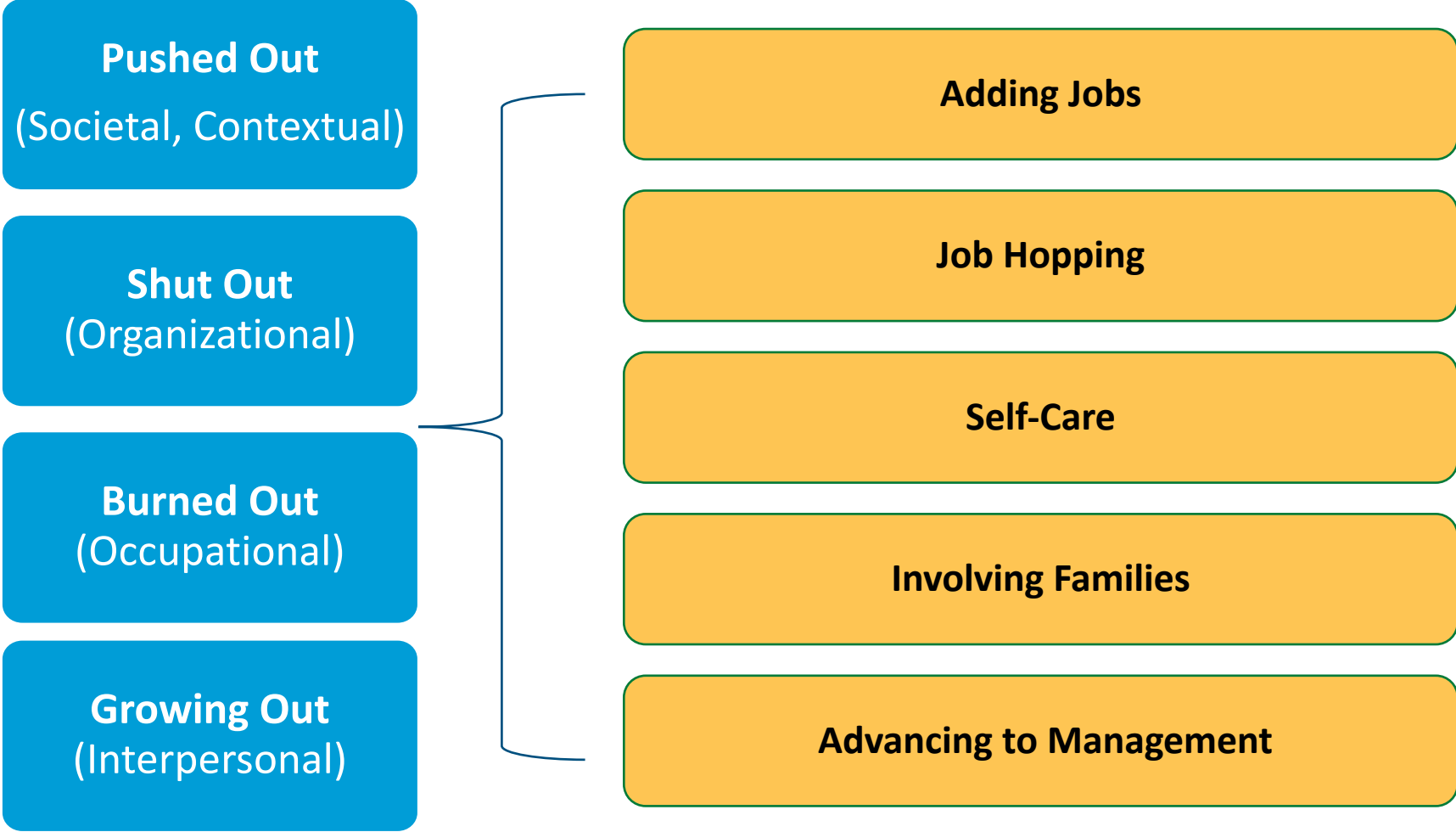
Burned Out
(Occupational)

Emotional stress from the work and occupational culture
Compounded stress from societal and organizational factors

Growing Out
(Interpersonal)

Parental and internalized pressures

Key Findings: Coping Responses



Focal Participant: Nicole

Pushed Out
(Societal, Contextual)

Focal Participant

Nicole

37 years old

Black/Haitian American youth worker

- Holds a bachelor's degree in human services
- Single working parent
- Legal guardian to former youth participant
- Unable to keep up consecutive loan repayments after her car breaks down
- Unable to afford rising housing prices



Focal Participant: Nicole—Pushed Out

Pushed Out
(Societal, Contextual)

“After I calculated all my bills and everything and budgeted, I probably had, I don't even know, less than \$50 left to my name. We didn't even do groceries yet by that time.”

—Nicole, 37 Years Old, Black/Haitian-American Youth Worker

Coping Responses: Adding Jobs to Persist

Pushed Out
(Societal, Contextual)



Adding Jobs

“I had to get side hustles and be creative about it to try to make up the differences that I wasn't making. When Uber first came out, I said, ‘Well, I guess I'll drive at night.’ Friday night, Saturday night, and Sunday was my rest day. But that was trying to make up for the extra money that I don't have. [For] supporting my child.”

—Nicole, 37 Years Old, Black/Haitian-American Youth Worker

Focal Participant: Pablo

Shut Out
(Organizational)

Focal Participant

Pablo

35 years old

Puerto Rican American

- Holds a bachelor's degree in fine arts
- Grew up in low-income housing
- Dual working parent household
- Experienced workplace racism and tokenization



Focal Participant: Pablo—Shut Out

Shut Out
(Organizational)

“I gave them my list of recommendations, and I explained why I chose those three [students]. They were all A students, they were well behaved, they were well spoken, and they were motivated to do different things. They would be perfect [for this opportunity], and they would also make us [SafeZone] look really good.. None of the kids that I chose were chosen. I asked, ‘Why would you not choose them?’”

—Pablo, 35 Years Old, Puerto Rican Youth Worker

Coping Responses: Job Hopping

Shut Out
(Organizational)

Job Hopping

“...if they needed a poster child, they go grab those kids, and take pictures with them, and we're on the news, and we're in newspapers... ‘You're okay with using [youth of color] for publicity, but when it comes to doing things that would benefit them, you won't use them. That doesn't make sense to me’ ...I told them ‘That's not okay with me.’ So, I had to step down.”

—Pablo, 35 Years Old, Puerto Rican Youth Worker



Robert “Problak” Gibbs’ “Afro Futurism/Breathe Life”



The Cost of Precarious Persistence

Anticipated Exits of Persisters

“I feel like most youth workers always have an exit plan, or exit strategy, or a door that they're just waiting to get close enough to that they can just walk through it... Hopefully it's within youth work, but it's not currently structured as something that people do for their life.”

—Josué, 30 Years Old, Black/Haitian-American Youth Worker



The Cost of Precarious Persistence

A Gentrifying Workforce

“It's hard, so you end up having people who come from more affluent families, or families who can support their kids, and can pay for their apartments. It seems like something's wrong there. The people that we want, that have the skills and the knowledge, just can't afford to do it.”

—Emilia, 50 Years Old, White Youth Worker



The Cost of Precarious Persistence

Impact on Young People's Well-Being

“I feel like the work will be done better [with a career track]. Because then they don't have that in their mind to get a second job. **Sometimes that gets in the way of the work.** Like my staff here, some of them do Uber, or they do Lyft, or they get a second job on the weekend, so they're tired when they come to work. **And this work is important.** If we don't do this, this is what we get. We get bodies [of young people] on the streets, which is the sad part.”

—Omar, 48 Years Old, Cape Verdean Youth Worker

Key Contributions: Why This Research Matters

- Adult well-being matters for positive youth development outcomes.
- Nuances our understandings of career pathways and disparities as related to race, class, gender, and immigration status.
- Interrogates the role of nonprofit management/leadership in shaping youth worker experiences.
- Centers youth workers' voices and experiences of everyday work.
- Bridges psychosocial literature on motivations with sociological research and the (dis)connect between professional convictions and social realities.

Policy- and Field-Level Recommendations

- Interrogate and change current public service loan forgiveness policies and plans.
- Provide government and philanthropic funding to support and recognize midcareer professionals/persisters (versus solely youth programs and projects).
- Develop membership organizations and collectives that focus on equity, rights, and dignity for youth workers (versus solely professionalization efforts).

Practice Implications and Recommendations: From Persisters

Professional Support

- Career mentors
- Professional networks
- Conferences and trainings
- Evidenced-based practices
- Degree programs and professors

Organizational Support

- Engaged supervision
- Curricular resources
- Salary raises
- Opportunities for learning new skills
- Paid professional development
- Subsidized or free childcare

Implications and Recommendations: Big Picture Analysis

- Support collectivized action for childcare and youth workers regarding livable wages and housing affordability.
- Work with community-based organizations to
 - reimagine the occupational culture toward well-being, and
 - restructure nonprofit compensation to value youth-serving roles.
- Cultivate reciprocal university-community-based partnerships.
 - Offer courses and opportunities that center youth development expertise (e.g., practitioner inquiry, participatory action research).



Dr. Deepa VASUDEVAN
Wellesley College, USA

Social Context of Youth Workers

What calls YOUTH WORKERS to this work?

- SOCIAL JUSTICE FOCUSED
- PLACE-BASED CHALLENGES
- SPIRITUAL DRIVE for MEANING
- REFLECTIVE of their own LIFE

Today youth workers are considered **PRECARIOUS WORKERS**

below socially accepted standards of **Worker rights, Protections, Opportunities, or pay**

What **BARRIERS** do youth workers face?

- PUSHED OUT**: Debts and rising costs
- SHUT OUT**: Organizational othering/devaluation
- BURNED OUT**: emotional work stress
- GREW OUT**: move out of the work to manage Pressure

To overcome barriers, youth workers hop jobs or freelance... reshape their **SELF-CARE** boundaries and move to **MANAGERIAL ROLES**



NETWORK GATHERING 2021 Digital Inclusion and the Creative Spark

@chriskem.75

Thank you!

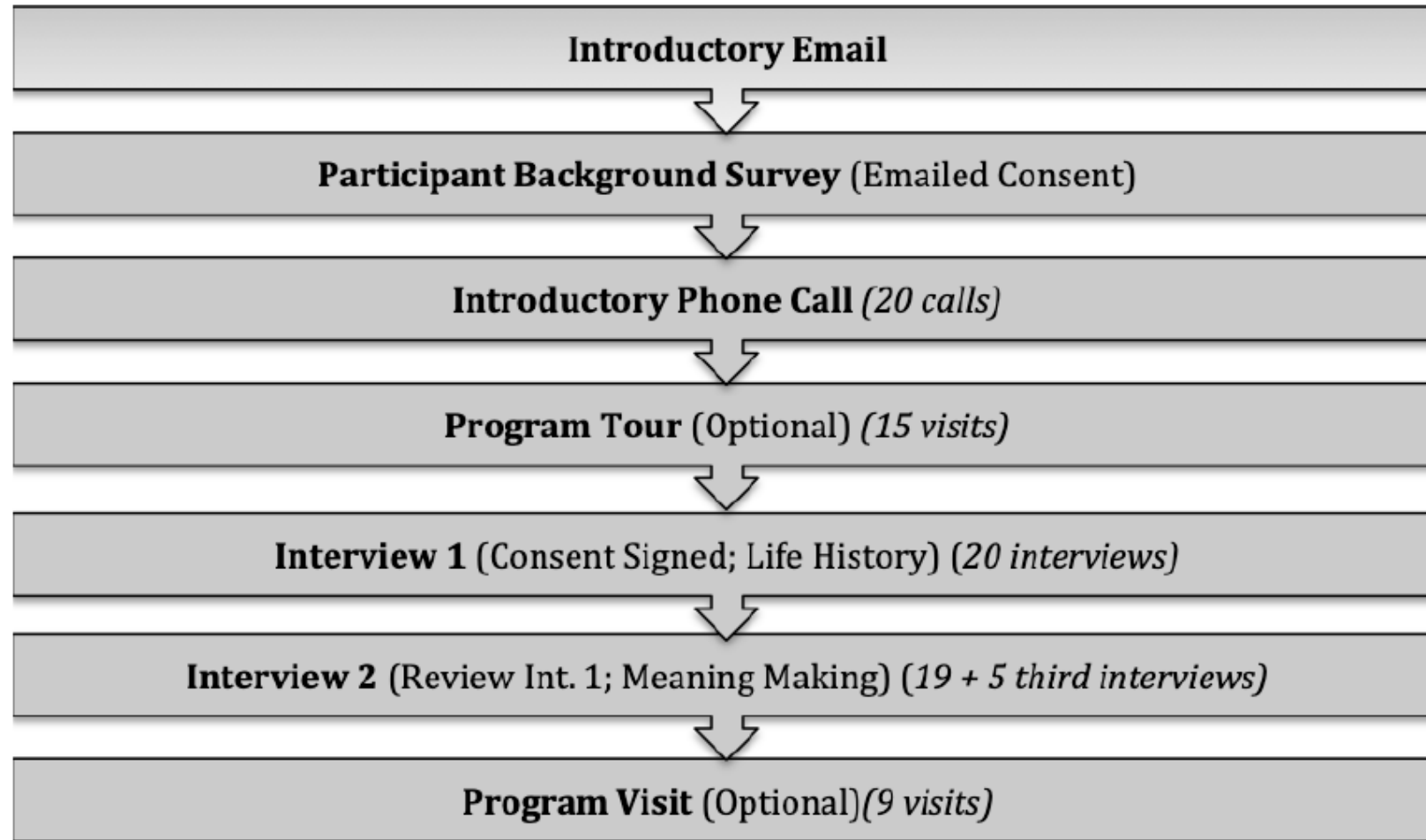
Questions?



Appendix A: Types of Organizational Affiliations

Types of Organizations	Examples (Pseudonym)
Community-Based Youth Centers	OurHouse; Adin Youth Programs; Pontu Cape Verde
Youth Leadership & Organizing	YouthActNow; CityVisions; Farm for Justice
Community Organizations (Youth Development Branch)	Bellas Artes; OurNeighborhood Productions; Adin Housing Authority Work Readiness
Sports-Based Youth Development	NetPositive

Appendix B: Detailed Methods Process



Appendix C: Key Location Pseudonyms



Appendix D: Research Interests and Expertise: An Interdisciplinary Approach

