

# Leaving Welfare for Work: Parallels to a Hostage Negotiation

In review with *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*

# WHY THIS STUDY?

The unemployment rate for people with mental illness has remained stubbornly high, despite numerous system improvements over the past two decades.

The system and individual level factors that prevent people with mental illness (PMI) from securing and retaining employment have been well documented (Corbière, Lanctôt, et al., 2010; Piggott, Sapey, & Wilenus, 2005).

The literature narrows significantly, however, when exploring the barriers to employment encountered by PMI who are in receipt of income benefits.

Even less is known about the specific system and individual level factors that facilitate exits from disability income support programs for employment (Vick & Lightman, 2010).

# STUDY PURPOSE

To examine the individual and system level factors that facilitate or hinder exits from Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) for recipients with mental illness.

# METHODOLOGY

Constructivist Grounded Theory approach

Data Collection: 13 semi-structured interviews, summer of 2017

Inclusion/Exclusion criteria

Data Analysis: Iterative approach to coding and thematic formation  
(Charmaz)

Data Management: Dedoose



# Participant Demographics

- **Recipients:** 3 males, 3 females; 4 former recipients, 2 had cycled back
- Range of employment – addiction counsellor, construction, cook supervisor, industrial cleaner, correctional officer, service
- Time on assistance ranged from 2-15 years and
- Time off ranged from 1.5 – 6.5 years



# Participant Demographics

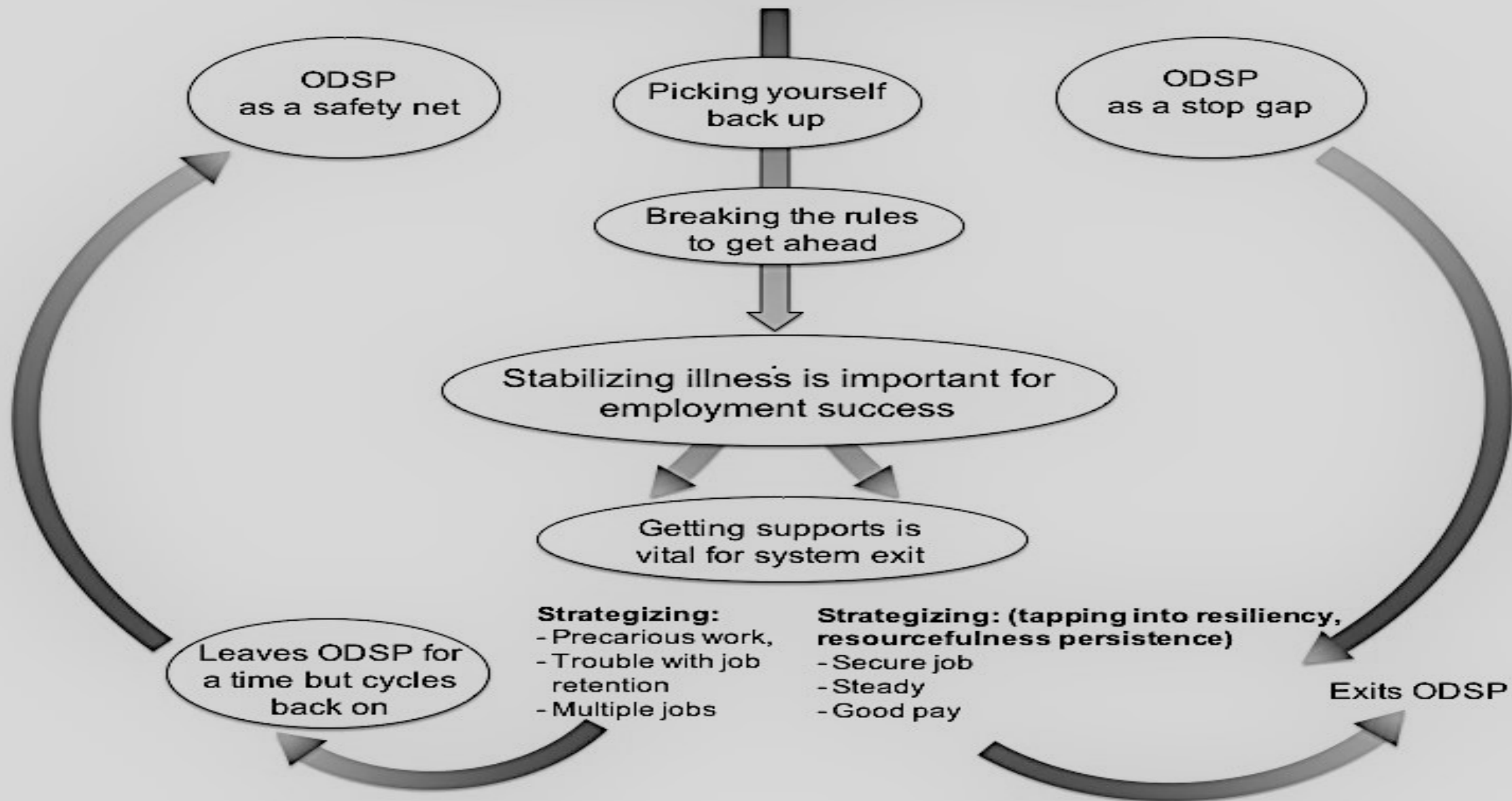
- Service Providers: 4 female
- Positions – job developer, employment service provider, employment coordinator
- Ministry Staff: 2 female
  - 1 regional director
  - 1 case manager

# FINDINGS

A metaphor for the employment process emerged from the data:

*“Employment is the difference between sort of being a hostage to a system since there are no other systems that people can shop around for. I mean really, we have hostages, not clients.”* - Regional Director

# The Hostage Negotiation Process





# FOUR THEMES


- The themes that emerged from the analysis are constructs of the larger “hostage negotiation” metaphor
  - Picking yourself back up
  - Breaking the rules to get ahead
  - Stabilizing illness for employment success
  - Getting supports are vital to successful system exit

# Picking yourself back up

Refers to a person's ability to rally after the health and/or life event that precipitated their arrival on ODSP

*"I know it's going to take me longer [to get off ODSP] because lack of working but I am doing it. And that's the end of it." Addiction Counsellor*

*"I went out and found the things that I wanted to do and did them . . . I started volunteering and realized how much I enjoyed it . . . . So then I got hired on as a cook and eventually got into the program as a cook supervisor . . . I want to do it better and I was not thinking employment at this point . . . So I went and I got a student loan out and went that way. And then went back and continued in the supervisory position before I got hired on to where I am now." Cook Supervisor*



Breaking the  
rules to get  
ahead

*“The amount of money that you’re allotted does not even come close to helping a person just pay for the basic necessities in life ... So, in order for me to break away ever from this system I need to make the money to pay bills and to buy stuff.”*

Industrial Cleaner



# Stabilizing illness

Stabilizing illness was a pre-condition for work exits

*“If a person obviously is doing well and taking their medications and it’s making them able to focus and it’s making them able to, you know, get there on time and complete the tasks and be . . . a productive employee . . . definitely, the medications are an important factor. If they start to go off the medications and then everything starts to fall apart. I mean that can be very detrimental.” — Job Developer*



# Stabilizing illness

Impact of removal of resources on employment

*“A mentally ill person not taking their medication is usually a very negative thing. So, the first thing that happens when you break an ODSP rule if you didn’t stock up on your meds you’re out of them in 3 days. Now, go ahead and make good decisions.” Fuma (pseudonym)*



# Getting supports: Vital to system exit

*“It’s the flexibility and the security and the removal of the fear that if I fail, what will happen to me and that’s I think for me, that’s one of fundamental things that happen at that transition time. That the clients or the person understands that if . . . something happens, that the flexibility goes back to, you can come back here.” Ministry Staff*



# Getting Supports: Vital to System Exit

*“I met the Director of X who’s a social worker. We just kept in touch . . . we just connected very well. We had coffee a couple of times and one of these nurses told me “oh there’s a position open,” and that was just at the time when I feel ready.” – Addiction Counsellor*



# Getting Supports: Vital to System Exit

*“It’s not about that they’re actually finding jobs in their education[al] background or fields but that they’ve just come in maybe with a different expectation of . . . what they’re capable of and what they’re going for.”*

*— Employment Service Provider*





## Getting Supports: Vital to System Exit

Cedric (pseudonym) believed that the purpose of ODSP employment supports is to help those recipients who want to supplement their ODSP

*“dabble in part-time stuff.”*

Ministry staff explained that employment is just one component of a larger social inclusion strategy:

*“At some point, your case worker is required to call you and conduct what we call “active case management,” which is to call you and not frighten you and not scare you but to call you and say you’ve been on ODSP for a while . . . How can they connect into the community?”*

# POLICY/RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

- Two broad issues at play
  - ✓ Tension between social and health services
  - ✓ Blame game

# POLICY/RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

No access to timely mental health support – continued employment challenges

*“You know if they give me somatic treatment when I needed it really I mean let’s say 2008 when I got there, by 2010 easily I was going to be able to fully work and be independent. It would save . . . I don’t know four years of ODSP payments. You know what I mean; they keep you there. They keep you there and . . . many of those, probably half of those, they don’t need to be there. That’s it. And it’s sad.” - Rafael*

# POLICY/RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

- Producing work but not necessarily quality long-term employment (Pennisi & Baker Collins, 2017)
- Underlying policy assumption that recipients are successful if they exit
- Findings suggest that ODSP is not designed to facilitate exit to employment
- Systemic change in the absence of political will?

# FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

- Need to look beyond immediate short-term solutions
  - richer dataset
  - quality of jobs
  - organizational culture



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# QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

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