

**Canadian Sociological Association Webinar  
Career Pathways of Sociology Graduate Students  
September 16, 2021**

Transcript to accompany recording

**Slide 1:**

This webinar discusses the Canadian Sociological Association's report presenting the results of an online survey conducted to capture the education and labour market experiences of graduates from Sociology MA and PhD programs in Canada over the last ten years. The project team led by Dr. Karen Foster and PhD research assistant Alyssa Gerhardt, collected a combination of both quantitative and qualitative responses related to career aspirations, current employment, and perceptions of Sociology graduate programs and the graduate experience in preparing graduates for the labour market.

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**Land Acknowledgement**

While we meet here on a virtual platform, we should take a moment to recognize the importance of the land on which we are each located. We acknowledge the territory to reaffirm our commitment and responsibility in building positive relationships between nations and in developing a deep understanding of Indigenous peoples and their cultures. From coast to coast to coast, we acknowledge the ancestral and unceded territory of all Inuit, First Nations, and Métis peoples.

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**Interact with Panelists**

We invite you to communicate with panelists during the webinar. Scroll your cursor towards the bottom of the screen to participate. The tool bar appears as below.

- Chat (only the panelists can view your comments)
- Q & A (click to like any questions you would like prioritized)

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**Moderator - Dr. Qiang Fu, University of British Columbia**

Dr. Qiang Fu is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of British Columbia. His research interests include place-making, health, demography, social capital, migration, machine learning, and statistics. His recent publications have appeared in *American Journal of Epidemiology*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *Environment and Behavior*, *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A*, *Social Science & Medicine*, *Sociological Methods & Research*, and *Urban Studies*. He currently edits a themed section on big data and

computational sociology (to be published by the *Canadian Review of Sociology*) and chairs the CSA's subcommittee of Policy, Ethics and Professional Concerns.

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##### **Panelist - Dr. Karen Foster, Dalhousie University**

Dr. Foster is a sociologist whose research and writing spans the sociology of work, rural sociology, political economy and historical sociology. She has drawn on both qualitative and quantitative methods to study economic issues from a sociological perspective: occupational succession in rural family businesses, housing desires among rural and urban young adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder, local economic development, the history of productivity as a statistic and a concept, generational divisions at work, young peoples' experiences on social assistance, and youth outmigration from rural communities.

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##### **Panelist - Alyssa Gerhardt, Dalhousie University**

Alyssa Gerhardt is a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at Dalhousie University. She specializes in economic sociology and studies how personal debt shapes peoples' livelihoods, how it affects their wellbeing, and how it is socially experienced in everyday life. Alyssa's other research interests include rural sociology, political economy, and social inequality. Alyssa has worked on several research projects using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

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##### **Research Context**

We'd like to start by thanking the CSA, especially past-president Myrna Dawson, for setting things in motion and commissioning the report, and the irreplaceable Sherry Fox, for keeping us on track with administrative support at every step. We hope that the report we're presenting today is useful now, and spurs research in the future. We'll start with a bit of context for the study.

As most of you are probably aware, there has been pressure, probably since the 1980s, to increase enrolment in Sociology graduate programs, however, at the same time as the proportion of tenure track faculty positions at universities relative to temporary or contract jobs has shrunk. Although, as we note in the report, the tenure track career path has never been universal, the shift toward contractualization has shaped the fates of graduate students and graduates, and definitely impacts their perceptions of the value of our degrees. Specifically, there is a perception that there are too many graduates from Sociology graduate programs to fulfill limited job prospects, particularly in academia. This perception is popularized in the stereotype of the PhD-holding barista.

But there is mixed evidence to support this perception. On the one hand, two recent reports confirm the increasing reliance on contract academic staff in universities across Canada. In 2018 more than half of university appointments were contract positions. These positions were

disproportionately filled by racialized academics and women. In this regard, the labour market awaiting Sociology MA and PhD graduates does not seem promising.

On the other hand, the pathway from graduate education to a tenure track position is not the only one available, and evidence from other Canadian studies show that overall PhD graduates have strong employment outcomes and after five years of graduation they tend to make more than those with lower education levels.

However, there are some notable gender and racial differences in employment outcomes. For example, although women are more likely to be working in academia following their PhD, they are less likely to be tenured professors and more likely to make career sacrifices for their families. On disproportionate amount of racialized and women contract staff (see Foster and Birdsell Bauer 2018); on gendered differences in PhD outcomes (see Jonker 2016; Nerard et al. 2012 and Oleschuk 2020)

There are also some more subjective factors to consider in explaining career outcomes. For example, other studies have found that there is a “cooling out” process in graduate school, whereby students’ aspirations change as students get closer to confronting the job market upon graduation.

So, in this context of changing labour market dynamics, contractualization, shifting perceptions of the academic school to work pipeline, and research that points to more subjective and life course factors, we undertook our survey.

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### **Research Objectives**

There were several research objectives for this study. First, to examine the career pathways and outcomes for graduates of Sociology MA and PhD graduates in Canada. Second, to inform Canadian sociology programs and the CSA about graduates’ experiences in/after grad school to highlight areas of success and areas for improvement. And finally, to avoid the idea that Post-Secondary Education is a ‘worker factory’ but to also acknowledge that anything beyond survival depends on making an income, and work matters to people too. We had hoped to be able to make more connections between experiences in graduate school and career outcomes after, but we didn’t get a big enough sample to be able to make those kinds of comparisons reliably. That is another contextual piece—we launched this survey in September 2020, that is, 6 months into the pandemic, when many populations, including ours, we think, were beset by what other scholars are calling “survey fatigue.”

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### **Methods**

To recruit graduates, we invited every Canadian university with Sociology MA and/or PhD programs to email the survey link to graduates through their alumni office or Sociology

department. Most agreed, and we think just over half actually followed through. We applied for ethics approval at every single university, a process we would be happy to gripe about later. The survey was also shared on social media and through the CSA email listserv. There was a mix of both open- and closed-ended questions, yielding both quantitative and qualitative data. In total 225 MA and PhD sociology graduates between 2009 and 2020 participated in the study. We had hoped for 500.

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##### **Profile of Respondents**

Most of the sample (60% or N=135) held an MA in Sociology and some were pursuing a PhD at the time of the survey. 24% held both an MA and PhD in Sociology and 16% had only a PhD in Sociology. Approximately half of the sample were in their 30s at the time of the survey, which makes sense given the people most likely to still be paying attention to their alumni emails and on social media skew younger. Most survey respondents were women, which is common with voluntary surveys. One unexpected finding is that 42% of respondents reported that neither of their parents had attended university, meaning they were first generation university graduates.

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##### **CV Building**

Looking at methods specialization, we found that a greater number of graduates of both MA and PhD programs reported specializing in qualitative methods. We did run some crosstabs to see if methodological specialization had any connection to career outcomes, and while there were some interesting relationships, they weren't statistically significant, and we would not be able to say that they are representative of the population anyway. That said, they suggest an avenue for future research. Looking at publishing, almost all PhD graduates reported having at least one peer-reviewed publication where they were lead author or co-author by the time they graduated (94%), compared to only a third of MA graduates.

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##### **Labour Market Preparation**

We looked at differences between MA and PhD Sociology graduates and how they felt about their programs preparing them for the labour market. Overall, higher proportions of PhD graduates felt their program had prepared extremely well for the labour market compared to MA graduates.

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##### **Perceptions of Grad Experience**

The majority of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that their graduate experience was fulfilling; that an MA in Sociology is worth doing without a PhD; and that the graduate experience helped them to find and keep employment. However, the majority of participants also agreed or

strongly agreed that graduate programs produce too many graduates. There was more variation in level of agreement that sociology graduates find fulfilling and interesting careers and whether a PhD in Sociology is worth doing if you don't want to be a professor.

Finally, high proportions of participants either disagreed or strongly disagreed that if they did their degree again, they would choose a different field and that their graduate experience overqualified them, personally, for jobs. It might be a stretch, but this may point to a gap between the perception of an overproduction of grads and actual experiences—most people feel that they, personally, have not been overqualified, but that significant numbers of *other* people have.

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##### **Labour Market Preparation Qualitative Responses**

When asked in an open-ended question about how their program prepared them or failed to prepare them for the labour market, the role of supervisors and faculty mentorship were frequently mentioned. There was striking inequality between students who felt supported and those who felt abandoned or alone. These negative experiences can be compared to those who felt that they were well-prepared. You can see some of this on the slide.

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##### **Research Skills in the Labour Market**

Besides supportive supervisors and strong mentorship, graduates noted other aspects of their program that helped them in the labour market, particularly developing certain skills and gaining research experience. Several skills stand out as being important in the labour market and employment, according to participants, these were: research methods skills (and in particular, quantitative methods), critical thinking, and writing skills. Quantitative methods were mentioned both by participants who had quantitative training and considered it an asset, and those who did not have it, but entered a labour market where it was valued.

Participants who felt their graduate degree *failed* to prepare them for the labour market tended to say they had not developed skills employers wanted and did not receive any instruction on how to prepare for the job market. Some said sociology was not a “practical” degree. Some said they had to search for supports and career development training themselves because they were not offered them as a standard part of their graduate studies. Despite this, almost half of respondents said they used the skills from their graduate degree(s) *every day* in their job.

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##### **Cooling Out**

Participants were asked in both closed- and open-ended questions about whether their career aspirations had changed during the course of their graduate studies, and why. Higher proportions of PhD graduates strongly aspired to academia at the time of their program enrollment compared to MA students, 11% of whom did not aspire to academia at all at the time of program enrollment.

However, compared to the 70% of PhD graduates who strongly aspired to academia at the time of enrollment, only 35% felt strongly that they would be able to find a career in academia at the time of program enrollment, demonstrating a mismatch between aspirations and perceived likelihood of gaining employment in academia.

From the open-ended questions, participants attributed changing career aspirations to thinking an academic career was not feasible due to the realities of the academic job market: for example, the precarity of contract jobs, competition, and lack of permanent/tenure track opportunities. Some also decided they saw evidence of a toxic work culture in academic and did not want to be part of it. Some participants saw a disconnect between academia and the community or the real world, and said this drove them toward a different career path.

These stories contrast with those of participants who started their programs *without* aspirations to stay on an academic career path but decided to pursue one during their studies. This was much more common in the MA programs than PhDs.

Less common, but still notable responses for changing career aspirations were relational reasons—such as having children or having a spouse’s career to balance—geographical limitations (which were usually related to family, not being able to move), difficulty publishing, a change in interest, and discrimination or lack of diversity in academia. Some participants also noted how universities operating under neoliberal policies and norms resembled businesses and lacked diversity in both thought and representation. For those whose aspirations did not change, they were either steadily focused on a specific career in or outside of academia or open to both opportunities during their PhD.

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##### **Race, Gender and Career Pathways**

It is important to note that there were racial and gendered differences in both close- and open-ended questions related to career aspirations and outcomes. In the sample, a higher proportion of racial minorities were unemployed (20%) at the time of the survey compared to white participants (8%). These findings *were* statistically significant.

When we look at the gendered differences, we can see that a higher proportion of women currently in professor positions were not tenured compared to men, reflecting what other studies have found about academic work in general.

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##### **Career Outcomes I**

Of the participants who were currently employed at the time of the survey, 74% had full-time, permanent work. 41% of the sample who were currently employed at the time of the survey

worked in non-academic sectors, while the largest proportion of those working in the university sector (26%) were currently employed in a tenure-track position.

For those currently employed in a non-academic field, 28% of participants reported working in educational services; 19% in public administration; 18% in professional, scientific and technical services; and 12% in health care and social assistance.

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##### **Career Outcomes II**

We looked at both job satisfaction and differences in pay between MA and PhD Sociology graduates. A greater proportion of PhD graduates reported making a salary, compared to a MA graduates who reported in greater proportions being paid hourly. Still, the majority of sampled participants reported that they were paid by salary.

When looking at income and degree graduated, PhDs tend to make more money overall than MA graduates, who were concentrated in the lower income categories. For example, the highest proportion of MA graduates reported an income between \$40,000 and \$60,000 while the highest proportion of PhD graduates reported an income between \$80,000 and \$100,000.

Overall, Sociology MA and PhD graduates are satisfied or very satisfied with their work. The highest levels of reported satisfaction were associated with feeling like they were doing something meaningful and a safe work environment. The highest levels of reported dissatisfaction were associated with the ability to move up in their jobs and work/life balance.

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##### **Conclusion**

Overall, what comes to the surface for us is the value of the research methods, writing and critical thinking skills that come with a sociology graduate degree—this is something many of us emphasize and promote and should continue to do so.

The importance of good supervisors comes through, too—supervisors are the connectors to opportunities and supports graduates might not otherwise find their way to. We can also provide assessments of the labour market, connections to past graduates, our own career path stories and so on—this is work many of us are already doing and it seems to be worth it. But students should also know what they should expect from supervisors and be empowered to find a new supervisor if theirs isn't appropriately in their corner.

Helping graduate students see and prepare for a diversity of career opportunities also seems important. It is still, evidently, possible to get a tenure-track job in the social sciences. But it is also possible to land in any number of fulfilling jobs that draw on the skills we teach. While a graduate degree is not strictly job preparation, students do need to earn money when they leave us—that

is the world we live in. We should find a way to balance our social critique and our desire to be distant from “the market” with the future well-being of our graduates.

Finally, the qualitative responses, and the divergent career outcomes for racialized respondents point to structural racism, sexism, discrimination and exclusion within our discipline. Our survey has no way of saying how widespread these issues are, but we propose that they be taken seriously and studied further.

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##### Sources

#### Slide 22

##### Q & A

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This video will be uploaded to the CSA YouTube channel so you may view at your leisure.

#### Question Period

*Edited for clarity*

*1. We are still in the midst of the pandemic. What are the effects of COVID-19 on the job market? Should students postpone their job search? Is there anything supervisors can do to help students prepare for the job market and how could they prepare themselves for the job market?*

We did ask some qualitative questions in the survey, just about how COVID had impacted people's employment. The first one asked what aspects of their job satisfaction had changed because of the pandemic. The second question was posed to those who indicated they weren't currently employed and asked how the pandemic was affecting their search for employment (if they were looking at the time) and some of those. Responses indicated that there was a lot of hiring freezes happening due to budget cuts. Some who were even in the process of being interviewed had the process canceled. I think we probably will see more of that moving forward in terms of budget cuts and hiring freezes.

People were talking about how the COVID affected their current employment said they pointed to some work life balance things and there was actually an interesting. I guess there was a balance between people who said that they were really enjoying working from home and being able to not do their commute anymore so like things you would expect from any field.

One thing that we didn't collect data on because of the phase of the pandemic we were in but that I think is interesting is that there's the great resignation and people who are quitting their jobs. It is not CERB people staying home and taking in that money. They're making different decisions about what to do with their lives and whether they want to work full or part time. There's a lot of movement in the labor market.

I think in the university sector anyway there's maybe not as much of a freeze we might have expected. I think it depends on province or geography, and probably discipline. Looking at my own institution, hiring hasn't slowed much. It has slowed since the 1980s but it's no worse after the pandemic than it was before so I don't think we know enough to know how it's going to turn out. And I would just to say to people listening who are about to hit the labor market, I would not automatically assume that the pandemic has devastated everything.

*2. Do you have any sense if post-docs are becoming more common for Sociology PhDs before moving on to a tenure-track job? My SIL is in Neuroscience, and says it's unthinkable that anyone in her field would get a tenure-track job without a postdoc first.*

I think we do have the proportion of respondents that were that have a postdoc. We could also look at the samples to see who had done a postdoc and then obtained a tenure track or had a tenure track position, that's something we didn't do for the report but it's possible to look at. Just thinking about how the sample broke down, I feel like that might even be statistically significant and it's certainly feasible to at least try it.

As a faculty member who sits on hiring committees, I would say that it is increasingly the expectation that a person will have a postdoc, it's not necessarily that that we look and say that you need a postdoc. It's that a postdoc gives people the opportunity to publish out of their dissertation. It just adds time between your PhD and your first tenure track job. It's acceptable time.

I think this is worth critiquing, but when people have left the academic career path, some hiring committees can consider that a sort of a knock against you. But if you've used the that postdoc time to crank out some publications, make more connections, and maybe hone your ideas about your future research that is a good thing. I do think that is increasingly the expectation and it rises you to the top of the pile, bearing in mind that with most job competitions departments are looking for someone to fill a particular gap. And so, a lot of things have to align where your topic needs to be something that they're looking for expertise in.

This is unsolicited advice - not relevant to your question really - but is to think about how you can package and repackage your research expertise in order to fit the job ad because that's key to getting in the door.

I have the number here from the sample in this report. Of the respondents, 48% of PhD sociology graduates in the sample said that they had held a past postdoctoral fellowship. After their degree so whether it was completed at the time of the survey or it was ongoing.

Like Karen, I also served on faculty search committees, both in sociology and also sociology at UBC several times. My sense is definitely is like it's not really a postdoc position that we are looking for but it's definitely it's your publication record. If you have more time to publish, it will be easier for you to find a tenure track position. Another thing though is not to be discouraged by the situation, because we also tend to mirror your publication record by your career status. Different bars would be used for PhD candidates, postdocs, and even tenure track professors who are looking for a position in another institution.

*2. Which career is best for women who reside in rural areas other than education institutions?*

I am not sure what you exactly referred to by education institution. Do you mean universities or, tenure track position or some other like a high school or middle school education facilities? I would assume that you mean universities.

Certainly, nothing in the survey would give us any insights into rural career opportunities but as we said, there are sociology graduates across all sectors and industries. Health services stands out as being one of the popular ones in government. Obviously, there are all levels of government within - to some degree - rural communities. There are also (depending on where you are in Canada) colleges and universities spread out across rural communities. I can think of a few people who've gone on to smaller rural colleges and probably have a better work life balance than people in larger urban institutions.

There were a number of those working in non-academic sectors and one of them was healthcare social services which you will find in rural areas. Also, any kind of scientific technical services and public administration. All of these you would probably be able to find in rural areas. Other options include non-profits and charities who serve rural areas and that are in rural areas, and they do have research needs. If you have research skills, then conceivably you could end up working somewhere like that.

*3. I am from Pakistan. I did my research in on the topic " Causes and consequences of domestic violence against women". Could you please suggest how this topic could be helpful for my career and what kind of topic should I choose for a Ph.D?*

We did not delve into the impact of a topic of choice on career outcome so there's nothing really from the survey that that I could pull out. The topic is interesting and relevant so I feel like as a PhD topic, it would make a lot of sense and that's the kind of thing that can be shaped and reshaped for different types of jobs or even in interdisciplinary departments like gender studies and gendered Women's Studies departments. So, in terms of being like a current interesting and flexible topic it's already a good one.

Maybe you could also check criminology departments in Canada, maybe Simon Fraser University, as they have a very good criminology program.

*4. For a new PhD graduate, postdoc application is desirable. What to do if a tenure track job is offered before starting or in the middle of postdoc? I understand that for some postdoc fellowships, both cannot be done simultaneously.*

Take the job would be my advice. Definitely don't turn down a job because you want to finish your postdoc, that would that would be my advice. If you think about it like a filter, where this many people get a PhD, this many people get a postdoc, and then this many people get a job, it makes perfect sense to go for the job if you have it.

The only thing I would say is that you can usually negotiate with your prospective employer. If a department has selected you because you're the best candidate, they can probably accommodate some later start, and it certainly doesn't hurt to ask . You're not going to lose a job just because you asked if you can start a bit later. So that would be my advice - take the job if it's impossible to do both, but you can always ask if you're able to finish or at least get halfway through your postdoc before you start your teaching.

It appears to be a very natural choice for us, because it's the reason why you want to do your postdoc, or even your PhD. Chances are that you want to have a tenure track position. Now you have it so just take it.

On the flip side, I don't think your supervisor will give you a hard time, because once you have your tenure track position, you will be viewed as a part of, an essential member of, the community and that you will be a future colleague. I don't think anyone, including your supervisor will give you a hard time.

*5. Overall, I thought this was super helpful data with lots of insights into pathways and things I can use moving forward in my education and career. Very hopeful data. Any specific indicators you can think of when looking for "inclusion (ie EDID)" in a post-secondary institution or with a supervisor?*

It is hard to point to specific indicators because even if you had some quantitative data on the proportion of students that are racialized, or the gender balance of students in a particular program , it might not tell you how actually supportive that program is.

If you're comfortable, it's a fair question to ask those prospective supervisors and departments. 'What proportion of your students are from equity-seeking groups, or what supports are there for people like me in your program?'

You can also talk to other students about it and about the program. We definitely don't have enough data in the survey to determine particular institutions and say that they are doing a bad job of inclusion.

Departments are address inclusion as well. We just got a survey yesterday from the administration asking us about what we do to support students from equity-seeking groups in our department

and we have to run through a list of all the things we do and the ways that we actively work to try and combat discrimination.

A good department will have an answer to that and if you don't get an answer then maybe that's a pretty good indication that they're not thinking about it enough.

Just to add something which might be useful for us to understand this issue. Last year, I was on the task force in UBC to analyze data from racialized faculty. During COVID, the situation really varies, even inside my university. We cannot really assume that the Faculty of Science will face the same situation as the Faculty of Arts. I would expect the situation will also vary across different universities.

Another thing that surprised me as I analyzed the data is the disadvantages faced by female faculty members. They exist, because one of the most significant burdens for female faculty members are care responsibilities within their families. Often female faculty members tend to take a leave to care for family. That was something we needed to pay better special attention to with respect equity and the inequality and diversity issues. UBC may have posted that report and you can check their website.

I would just say that what you're talking about is evidence to support what I'm pretty sure is already happening, which is that universities are really taking equity, diversity and inclusion seriously. Everything's coming together to ensure that we are trying to diversify in hiring and also in accepting students into programs. I think it's promising that the Academy is diversifying but there are probably still some gaps in the supports.

What I'm also seeing from my racialized colleagues is that they are overburdened with a lot of extra work because they are often the person who gets asked to do everything on committees and to represent their particular community on every committee and in every event. And so, it's a lot of work and there's a lot of extra burdens for this first big push for more diverse people in academia. It is slow progress but it's good news and a reason to be hopeful.

## Conclusion

There are no further questions at this stage so we will end the webinar early. Thank you to Karen Foster and Alyssa Gerhardt for the presentation and Sherry Fox for her work coordinating the webinar. I wish everyone a good day.