

Article

# Perceived Causes of Career Plateau in the Public Service

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper was to develop a better understanding of the causes of career plateau in the public service, focusing on 67 people who we determined to be career plateaued. Our interviews identified examples of incidents describing successes and interruptions in careers in developing an overall picture of the reasons for people being plateaued. We identified ten themes, which were grouped into three areas: deficiencies in experience, skills and education (four themes); competition skills (four themes); and perceptions of favoritism and discrimination (two themes). In addition to feeling plateaued because of the inability to demonstrate experience, education, and knowledge, many people offered examples of being plateaued because of the lack of interviewing skills or evidence of favoritism and discrimination. Those who are plateaued because of favoritism or discrimination verbalize feelings of disgust and frustration and illustrate a tendency to become less engaged with their work. We think that the negative impacts of favoritism or systemic discrimination have important implications because they are likely to have an impact on employees and their engagement in their work and life. However, as our results are based a sample of 67 government employees in the Canadian public service, they require verification in other settings.

**Keywords:** career plateau; discrimination; favoritism; public service



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## 1. Introduction

Most people would agree that a most frustrating and demotivating work experience is to be stuck in a job or blocked from advancing in one's career. This experience, often referred to as a career plateau, is defined as a stage that some people experience when the probability of being promoted in the future is unlikely. Career plateaued individuals generally report unfavorable affective outcomes, such as lower job satisfaction and feelings of well-being, as well as undesirable work outcomes related to lower job performance, organizational commitment, and higher turnover intentions (Yang et al. 2019).

While much of the existing career plateau research has focused on the impact of the career plateauing experience relating to job satisfaction, well-being, commitment, and turnover (Yang et al. 2019), there is little research exploring what employees perceive to be the causes of career plateau in the public service. As such, the purpose of this study is to develop a better understanding of the perceived causes of career plateau for employees in the public service. The study first reviews the career plateau literature and the potential causes and consequences from being career plateaued. We then summarize how we gathered examples of experiences that 67 employees felt helped or inhibited their career progression and themed these perceived causes of career plateau.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Career Plateau Research across the Decades

A career plateau was originally defined "as the point in a career where the likelihood of additional hierarchical promotion is very low" (FERENCE et al. 1977), a definition which guided a great deal of subsequent work in career progression where career status was seen as the relationship of one's progression to an organization's hierarchy. Career plateaus were viewed as a natural consequence of the pyramidal structure of organizations, with

fewer senior positions and ultimately one single position heading the organization. As such, there is a certainty that most people will plateau at some point during their careers. The proposition that plateau was a natural consequence of organizational structure was in opposition to the concept of the 'Peter principle', published almost a decade earlier (Peter and Hull 1969), which viewed promotion in terms of the level of one's incompetence as a management norm. Identifying the pyramidal structure as the foundational cause of career plateau opened the search for other contributing factors that could be explored beyond simply placing the blame on the abilities of the individual and the number of positions at the top.

Ference et al. (1977) divided career plateaued workers into two distinct categories. The first, termed "solid citizens", were high performing individuals who might be unlikely to be promoted because of fewer positions in the pyramidal structure of the organization. Other causes are from the fierce competition for limited senior positions and older workers being passed over as a younger manager is viewed as having the potential to contribute to the organization for a longer period of time (Ference et al. 1977). Solid citizens can also be personally plateaued if they lack the personal characteristics required for further promotion or they do not desire further promotion.

The other category of career plateaued employees was termed "dead wood" (Ference et al. 1977). Dead wood employees are poor performers who are unlikely to be promoted and were identified as ineffective. In addition to the two categories of plateaued employees, non-plateaued employees were identified as "stars" who are high performers with a high likelihood of promotion, and "learners" (comers) who were low performers with a high probability for future promotions. Ference et al. (1977) also suggested that organizations focus on stars and deadwood at the expense of employees they defined as "solid citizens".

Later, researchers broadened the concept of career plateau to include lateral position movement within an organization. As such, a 'content plateau' describes becoming plateaued in the growth of opportunities in the work, with a corresponding lack of opportunities to learn new skills (Veiga 1981). The need for employees to learn new skills and maintain lateral mobility was recognized as being one way to avoid the worst outcomes of being hierarchically plateaued (Bardwick 1986).

Hierarchical and content plateau were further refined into three types: structural (hierarchical), content, and life (Bardwick 1986). Life plateauing was described as resulting from work-committed individuals who might be unsuccessful at work becoming plateaued and trapped in life. Bardwick (1986) describes career plateaus as involving stages of resistance and resignation. In the resistance stage, employees still believe they have an opportunity for promotion and continue to remain committed in the hopes of achieving a new position. Once they realize this is not going to happen, they move into the resignation stage, characterized as a gradual withdrawal from work and increasing passivity in the workplace (Bardwick 1986). Later, researchers suggested a fourth type of career plateau, a 'double' plateau, being both hierarchically and content plateaued at the same time (Allen et al. 1999).

As the number of studies on career plateau has increased, common approaches for the study of career plateau can be identified. The assessment of career plateau status has been based predominantly on individually reported assessment (see, for example, Veiga 1981; Nachbagauer and Riedl 2002; Ettington 1998; Milliman 1992; Tremblay et al. 1995; Jung and Tak 2008; Xie et al. 2016; Wang et al. 2014), with four studies relying on the individual and organizational assessment of plateau status (Slocum et al. 1985, 1987; Carnazza et al. 1981; Stout et al. 1988) and only two studies relying solely on organizational measurement (Orpen 1983; D. T. Hall 1985). Studies that rely upon a self-reported measure to determine plateau status are subject to the concerns of any research relying on self-reporting, such as reporting bias, error by participant, etc. (Carnazza et al. 1981; Stout et al. 1988). While those studies relying on the organizational determination of plateau status could be subject to reporting bias by other members of the organization. This is potentially troubling as

appraisals and assessments of plateaued staff are less likely to be unbiased when compared to assessments of non-plateaued staff (Near 1985; Ettington 1997, 1998).

The most highly debated aspect of career plateau research before the mid 1990s was the operationalization of plateau status as an objective or subjective variable. Subjective or perceptual measures of career plateau have been empirically demonstrated to be a better measurement approach and has grown to be the dominate method for classifying career plateau experiences from the mid-1990s (see Chao 1990; Milliman 1992; Tremblay et al. 1995; Lentze and Allen 2009). Subjective assessments involve the individual employee perceiving that they are at a dead end in terms of learning new job skills and knowledge or having advancement opportunities. Milliman's (1992) scale (or scales derived from his work) has been the most used measurement scale in career plateau research and subjected to the greatest empirical validation (see Listing 1), and was used in the current study.

**Listing 1.** Career plateau subjective measurement scales.

Scale	Study
Milliman (1992) (similar or derivative)	Allen et al. (1998); Allen et al. (1999); Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel (2009); Drucker-Godard et al. (2015); Cheng and Su (2013); Ettington (1997); Ettington (1998); Godshalk and Fender (2015); Helimen et al. (2008); Hurst et al. (2017); Jiang (2016); Jung and Tak (2008); Lapalme et al. (2009); Lentze and Allen (2009); McCleese et al. (2007); McCleese and Eby (2006); Milliman (1992); Wang et al. (2014); Wen and Liu (2015); Wickramasinghe and Jayaweera (2010); Xie et al. (2015, 2016)
Tremblay (1993)	Tremblay and Roger (1993); Tremblay et al. (1995); Tremblay and Roger (2004)
Chao (1990)	Chao (1990); Lee (2003); Lemire et al. (1999)
Corzine (1992)	Corzine et al. (1994)
Nachbagauer (2002)	Nachbagauer and Riedl (2002)
Carnazza (1981)	Carnazza et al. (1981)
Chay (1995)	Chay et al. (1995)
Rotondo (2000)	Rotondo and Perrewe (2000)
Sylvia (1986)	Sylvia and Sylvia (1986)
Unclear	Beheshtifar and Modaber (2013); Ettington (1997)

Career plateaus are believed to be more common in public sector organizations (Sylvia and Sylvia 1986; Lemire et al. 1999). This is an important point as research has established the relationship between career plateaus and decreased job and organizational commitment (e.g., Lentze and Allen 2009; Lemire et al. 1999; McCleese and Eby 2006; Milliman 1992; Nachbagauer and Riedl 2002; Stout et al. 1988; Xie et al. 2015), and decreased commitment was seen as having an impact on the quality of public services and citizen satisfaction with public services (Bei and Shang 2006; Wisniewski 2001). The decreased satisfaction with public services can contribute to elevated citizen distrust in government (Vigoda-Gadot et al. 2012). Despite the benefits to society from engaged and committed public organizations, much of the career plateau research has been focused on the private sector (e.g., Carnazza et al. 1981; Corzine et al. 1994; Ettington 1998; D. T. Hall 1985; Lee 2003; Nicholson 1993; Veiga 1981). There are only three studies (Lentze and Allen 2009; Rotondo and Perrewe 2000; Sylvia and Sylvia 1986) which focus exclusively on career plateaus in the public sector.

## 2.2. Discrimination as a Cause of Being Career Plateaued

Despite decades of career plateau research and dozens of published studies, there have been less than 20 studies that have touched upon the relationship between favoritism or discrimination and career plateau. Of these studies, most have examined issues of gender, race, or age as control variables when exploring the impacts of career plateau on the individual.

Five studies have found that older workers are more likely to be plateaued (Corzine et al. 1994; Near 1985; Jung and Tak 2008; Nicholson 1993; Savery and Wingham 1991). However, the relationship between age and plateau is not necessarily causal and is linked to a related concept of tenure, or how long an employee has been in a position in the organization. Some studies that point to age and tenure as being significantly associated with being career plateaued do not explore the concepts independently to examine the differences in the explained variance on an outcome measure. For example, Near (1985), in reporting the significant differences in age between plateaued and non-plateaued managers, did not attempt to account for interactions among these variables. While Evans and Gilbert (1984) found that the negative impacts associated with career plateau were caused by age, they felt that a sampling error might have partially contributed to their results.

Other studies explore the relationship between age/tenure and career plateau in greater detail. For example, Jung and Tak (2008) and Corzine et al. (1994) indicated that older workers are more likely to become plateaued, while several more in-depth studies indicate that there is a weak correlation between age and objective and subjective career plateau (Tremblay and Roger 1993; Orpen 1983). Tremblay et al. (1995) found that being career plateaued is responsible for several consequences, even after controlling for age, despite subjective plateau being positively correlated to age. Similarly, Stout et al. (1988) found that age and tenure were covariates with plateau, but neither variable had a significant impact on the outcomes, even though the plateau status did.

Several studies have focused on trying to explain the relationship between being plateaued and impacts such as turnover intentions, job satisfaction, and job search behavior, while controlling for several demographic characteristics, including age. For example, while age and job tenure accounted for less than 5% of the variance in the dependent measures, the addition of the perceptual measure of career plateau resulted in a significant increase in the explained variance (Chao 1990). Other authors support these findings, indicating that plateaued participants differed significantly in terms of work behaviors from non-plateaued people after controlling for age (Gerpott and Domsch 1987; Chay et al. 1995).

There are only a few studies that have reviewed the impact of being plateaued using gender and race as control variables (Chay et al. 1995; Allen et al. 1999; Cheng and Su 2013; Helimen et al. 2008; Jung and Tak 2008; McCleese and Eby 2006; Rotondo and Perrew 2000; Tremblay and Roger 1993; Tremblay and Roger 2004; Wang et al. 2014; Xie et al. 2015; Lu et al. 2003; Xie et al. 2016). The studies that have considered race and gender do not offer a clear picture of the impacts. Allen et al. (1999) surveyed plateaued and non-plateaued managers to explore the impact of plateau status on attitudinal variables. In terms of race, white participants were more likely to be hierarchically and double plateaued, as well as non-plateaued, than black participants, who were more likely to be content plateaued. In terms of gender, men were more likely to be double plateaued or non-plateaued than women, while women were more likely to be hierarchical or content plateaued. Burke and Mikkelsen (2006), in exploring career plateau amongst police officers, found plateaued officers included more women. Corzine et al. 1994 looked at the impacts of mentoring, downsizing and gender on career plateau, job satisfaction and salary in the United States (US) banking sector. No relationship amongst gender was uncovered. Drucker-Godard et al. (2015), in examining aspects of career plateau amongst professors in France, found men were more satisfied and committed to their jobs than women. However, males were more likely to leave the organization than females. Milliman's seminal dissertation work (Milliman 1992) uncovered that non-Caucasians are more likely to be hierarchically plateaued, but women were no more likely to plateaued than men.

In review, most of the career plateauing research does not focus on the perceived causes of career plateau. In responding to this need, our study sought to develop a better understanding of the causes of career plateau among public servants who felt they had been plateaued.

### 3. Methodology

The general research approach used an intensive interview design, which sought to develop a better understanding of the perceived causes of career plateau for people working in a public service organization. All of the participants in the study worked for the Canadian public service.

#### 3.1. Sample

We initially interviewed 74 individuals and focused on 67 people who we determined to be career plateaued using Milliman's (1992) questionnaire. In our research, people described both being stalled from moving up the organizational hierarchy (hierarchical plateau) or being stalled in one's growth and career progress because they had mastered their work. Some suggested that their job was boring and there are no ways to make the job more interesting and challenging (content plateau).

Our purposeful sample focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of the representative experiences of being plateaued in a public sector organization. The average age of the study participants was 49.1 years. Twenty-eight participants were male (43%) and 38 were female (57%). The participants' average job tenure was 5 years. The participants' average public service career tenure was 19.3 years. Consistent with Patton's (2015) recommendations, the participants in the study were selected because they represented "cases" illustrating career plateau experiences, which provided a profile to guide future research that might empirically verify the research findings to a broader population. While it is difficult to determine the appropriate size of non-probabilistic purposive sample size a priori (Palinkas et al. 2015), the goal of our sampling was to achieve a theoretical saturation point where the addition of data would not result in more information about properties within a concept (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Guest et al. (2006) provide experimental evidence that the saturation point can be reached with as few as 12 interviews. Although we felt that our interviews illustrated saturation and could be a reliable reflection of our specific sample, there is a need to examine our findings in other contexts.

#### 3.2. Interview Design

The interview participants answered a range of questions on their careers in government and their overall career experiences. The interviews sought information on the perceived reasons they felt career plateaued, with questions seeking to understand their experience of being plateaued and perceived reasons or causes. The participants were also asked about the personal impacts of being plateaued, as well as how they adapted. The interviews took approximately 1 1/2 hours, with a few interviews being as short as one hour and several lasting over two.

This style of question implemented a critical incident technique in eliciting examples (Flanagan 1954), an interview approach which has been used in various areas, such as determining competencies and behaviors related to managerial performance (Boyatzis 1982) and emotional and social competencies for teams fighting wildfires (Boyatzis et al. 2017). The technique provides a rich, qualitative look into events that illustrate the issues experienced or observed. The open-ended nature of the process allowed for exploration by the interviewee without forcing them into a biased or yes/no response. It also provided an opportunity to "drill down" on answers of particular interest, allowing individuals to tell stories related to their experience of being career plateaued (Krueger 2010). Stories capture the imagination and the audience's attention, which also provides insight that cannot be captured through quantitative data.

#### 3.3. Echo Sorting and Content Analysis

The interviewees relayed over 395 examples of experiences, which were categorized into themes, thus illustrating the number of examples in each theme area. The number in each theme represents the number of individual comments. Although there have been various computer-aided text analysis methods developed in recent years, we relied on



individual and group Echo procedures in content analyzing the information we gathered (Cunningham 2001). This procedure is similar to other thematic analysis processes (Patton 2015; Braun and Clarke 2006; Boyatzis et al. 2017) where researchers individually sort the various examples in developing themes and the names of the themes are based on the words used by the interviewees.

#### 4. Findings

In developing an overall picture of reasons that people are plateaued, we identified ten themes, which were grouped into three areas: perceptions of favoritism and discrimination (two themes); deficiencies in experience, education, skills and education (four themes); and competition skills (four themes). Figure 1 illustrates our overall findings within the *organizational iceberg* view of an organization and its underlying culture, where the top part of the iceberg (above the water line) is most visible while a very large part is hidden (below the water line) (E. T. Hall 1976). As such, the top part of the iceberg illustrates the most visible reasons for being plateaued (42% of all examples or 147/352). These comments were offered by 78% of our sample (52/67).

Illustrated below the waterline of the iceberg, a large number of people offered examples of being plateaued because of the lack of competitive skills or evidence of favoritism and discrimination (205/352 comments). Some of these related to an inability to effectively compete and demonstrate the skills needed in the selection process ( $n = 21$  or 31% of 67 individuals offering 52 comments). Several employees perceived that the process of promoting and hiring was based on how well they performed in interviews or other parts of the selection process, skills they felt might not be as relevant to the job. For example, one participant indicated that: “some people can interview with confidence and demonstrate a veneer of competence”, while another added, “it is all about how you answer the questions”.

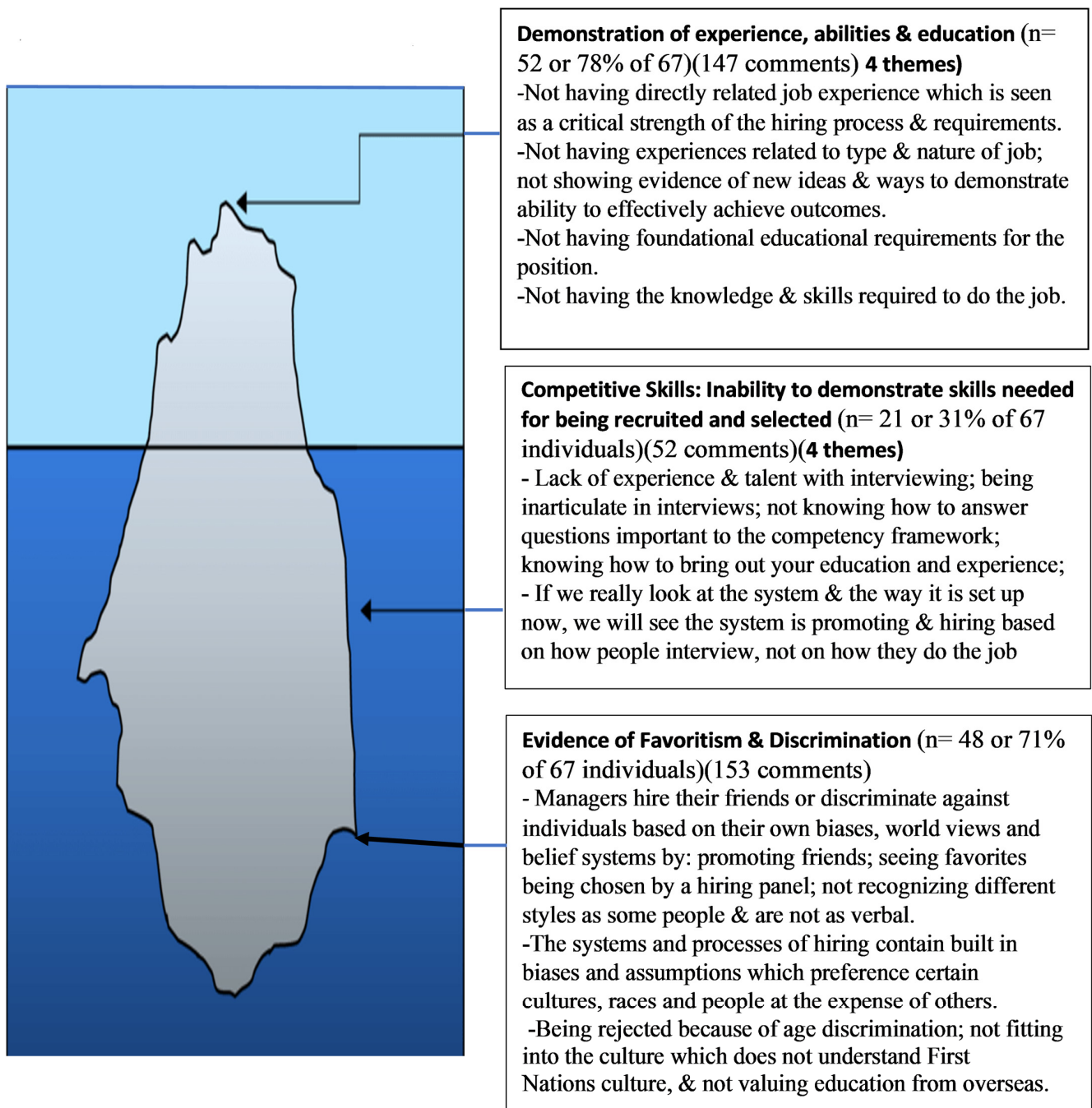
A final area in Figure 1 relates to “perceived favoritism and discrimination”, and comments of being unfairly prevented from opportunities and promotions of “not getting ahead because of not having the right connections” or “not fitting into the dominant culture”. This was illustrated by 48 or 71% of 67 individuals who offered 153 comments. While some people indicated that they benefited from some of this favoritism because of a friend, others believed that friendships gave certain people more opportunities than others. The sense of appropriateness of the favoritism appears to relate to the employee’s perception of being a victim or a beneficiary. Being a victim involved “being backed by the wrong people and paying the price following a power struggle when they are on the chopping block”.

##### 4.1. Inability to Demonstrate Experience, Abilities and Education

On the face of it, experience, education, skills and abilities are the most verifiable way to improve one’s capability for progressing in a career. From an organizational perspective, these assets represent a person’s human capital and contribute to an individual’s productivity, as well to potential returns on organizational productivity. The task of the organization is to find employees who have the right knowledge, skills, and abilities to support the organization in achieving its goals and mission (Schultz 1961; Becker 1962; Selden 2009; Baldi and Trigeorgis 2020).

Having the relevant job experience was seen as an important criterion in career progression, as illustrated for 37 of the 67 individuals in Table 1 and, on the face of it, this seems to illustrate fairness in the selection process. As indicated by one person, “Having the right experience helps land a job where new opportunities are possible”. However, several participants point out that gaining the right experience can be difficult as jobs usually go to those who already have certain experiences. This creates the possibility of being unable to obtain a job because of a lack of experience, but not having the chance to obtain a job to gain the experience necessary to be promoted for the desired job. Despite such contradictions, experience is often viewed as a legitimate requirement that, even

when unfair promotions occur, managers often point to as justification for the successful candidate. “Even when hiring a friend, managers attempt to play up the experience of the candidate as the main reason for the selection”. In response, individuals often focus on gaining experience through temporary appointments and taking on new roles in their existing jobs, and “not getting stuck thinking that only one type of experience counts”.



**Figure 1.** An iceberg view of the visible and less visible causes of career plateaus.

**Table 1.** Inability to demonstrate experience, abilities and education (52 Study Participants contributing 147 Comments) N = 67.

Job Experience 37 Participants 49 Comments	<p>-Experience is a basic requirement: You need to have experience related to the work and be able to demonstrate this during an interview. Every job posting has an experience requirement. Sometimes the posting language allows the waiving of requirements through an equivalency clause; you have to have recent experience which is relevant to the team.</p> <p>-Experience is hard to get when you are new. Even though experience is a requirement, it is hard to get experience when you don't have experience.</p> <p>-How can you get a management job if they say you have to management experience to apply? It is hard to figure out what experiences are more important.</p>
Education 32 Participants 41 Comments	<p>-Education is seen as a foundation. You won't get the interviews for a promotion or even lateral movement if you don't have the right education. It is ve logical and makes sense . . . Really, education is the foundation of a good society . . . it depends entirely on what job you're doing. If it is a financial job and they require a CPA, then you really need it to understand government's accounting and financial requirements.</p> <p>-Training is important to support the skills you need to do the job and government does a really good job of providing work training with online courses . . . I went back to school to get my master's degree so I could be more competitive.</p> <p>-Education is a requirement, but not always; The education requirement can be waived. Usually, an advanced degree is required for senior positions though sometimes they give the escape clause of 'equivalent' education and experience. But you don't see equivalent education and experience for a law degree. The lawyers won't let that happen . . . I have been screened out of job opportunities because I didn't have the right education, as my history degree isn't valued the way it should be.</p> <p>-My degree from China isn't valued the same as Canadian degrees . . . Not everyone can afford the time and money to go back to school.</p>
Skills and Abilities (Knowledge) 29 Participants 36 Comments	<p>-Knowledge or Skills and abilities are important. You need to have the right skills to do the job. Without the skills and abilities, you won't be successful. Managers won't give you the chance to have the job to start with and if you did somehow manage to land the job you will struggle.</p> <p>-You need people who really know what they are doing, people with knowledge and insight.</p> <p>-We often use written assessments to gain an understanding of the candidate's policy knowledge.</p> <p>-You need to understand how things are really done. If you're working with FN communities, you need to understand how we do things. You must know the people you are working with.</p> <p>-Knowledge is hard to define; Knowledge relevant to the job is different than education and harder to judge; Knowledge is a very subjective criterion and is often judged by skills and abilities, but what is that? How do you gain knowledge other than through experience? Knowledge is common sense and ability to do the right thing, but how can we assess that?</p>
Fair Hiring and Promotion Process 12 Participants 21 Comments	<p>-A fair process is perceived to be fair; I have been in a few competitions where I was well prepared but was simply beat out by a better candidate; When I can see that the person who beat me is capable, I'm fine with that.</p> <p>-I'm a glass half full person so I realize that these things happen. I have been in a few competitions where I could tell I lacked what they were looking for. Sometimes, it was a little annoying as they could see that I didn't have the qualifications, but they still interviewed me, sort of wasted everyone's time but they do get a better candidate.</p> <p>-It makes me feel good to see someone promoted because of their experience and education. It helps counter the negativity I carry when I think of people getting ahead because they are simply willing to serve up. A fair outcome is a good outcome, whether you are the winner or loser.</p>

Table 1 also illustrates the other visible criteria, which are used in selections and promotions that appear verifiable, but which might involve denying promotion opportunities because of a rule or norm. That is, education and abilities are foundational criteria, but there are norms which say that only a certain type of educational qualification or degree is relevant. The participants who identify educational requirements as a barrier to advancement reflect a perception that these requirements are simply part of the job market. However, there are perceptions of imbalances in the system, as not all education is equally valued. As participants said, "my degree from China is not seen the same way as a degree from Canada", or "a law degree is more important than a degree in management". Others suggest that "the engineers in my department are more likely to hire other engineers than



someone with an arts degree” in pointing out that some groups are more likely to hire people with a similar educational background to themselves. As such, the value of an educational degree, in the eyes of the interviewees, appeared to relate to what managers felt were more acceptable.

The next most frequent cause of being career plateaued in Table 1 relates to abilities and skills illustrating one’s knowledge. For some people, these might be perceived as natural abilities, implying that people are either born with innate abilities or they developed them through their life experiences.

“Naturally, some people do better with stress. They can handle the pressure of higher positions and not let it grind them down. They were just born like that and they have an edge”. These natural abilities include confidence and communication where people “shine in their environment and get noticed”.

On the other hand, this same person indicated that “introversion was a characteristic which really holds people back and is an unfair disadvantage”. In other cases, “people stop moving up once they no longer have the temperament to match their goal or they give up from the stress of trying to reach a goal they aren’t suited for”.

Table 1 also offers a positive perspective of the hiring process, indicated in a comment which suggests that:

“It makes me feel good to see someone promoted because of their experience and education. It helps counter the negativity I carry when I think of people getting ahead because they are simply willing to serve up. A fair outcome is a good outcome, whether you are the winner or loser”.

That is, it seems that the focus on job experience, education, and skills and abilities (knowledge) has the appearance of fairness, even though there are illustrations of bias.

Overall, the ability to demonstrate one’s experience and education is seen as important to guide career development, based on the assumption that there will be more opportunities for career advancement for those who take more responsibility for their career development (Rosenbaum 1984). The criteria used are often assumed to be part of a human capital model, based on the assumption that they are easy to establish and implemented fairly, so that no employees are given advantages over other employees. However, as illustrated in the above comments, there are some difficulties in the implementation. The following section illustrates other difficulties and biases related to the application of promotion and selection criteria in career development.

#### *4.2. Competitive Skills: Inability to Demonstrate Skills in Getting Recruited and Selected*

Career progression is often denied because of the inability to demonstrate the skills needed in interviewing or responding to a selection panel. While experience, abilities and education might be logical ways to guide and assess career progression, many people are plateaued because of their lack of competitive skills in the promotion and selection process, which is often seen as having very little relationship to the skills advertised for being successful in the job.

Interview skills were often mentioned as a reason that people did well in the selection and promotion process and, as illustrated in Table 2, there were comments suggesting that “some people talk well and make their points well” and “some people seem to know how to answer questions in a fashion which is impressive”. Successful people are able to “present lists of reasons supporting their points and can articulate alternatives illustrating they are good thinkers”. On the other hand, some people do not do well as they “were nervous and were unable to illustrate their answers in a logical way”. Others indicated that the poor performers “answered the questions with short statements and textbook-like answers”. Several participants lamented that they wished they could be promoted based on their work performance rather than an interview process, which is often not related to the job.

**Table 2.** Competition Skills (21 Study Participants contributing 52 comments) N = 67.

Interview Skills 16 Participants 16 Comments	<p>-I think if we really look at the system and the way it is set up now, we will see that the system is promoting and hiring based on how people interview, not how they do the job.</p> <p>-People who can talk well and make their points well in an interview will do better.</p> <p>-It's an experience thing. Not experience with the job but experience with interviews. Like anything, the more you do it the better you get. But if you don't get screened in you don't get the experience. Some people benefit from the experience of interviewing and get more and those of us who don't we just fall further behind. The rich get richer they say.</p>
Giving Panel the Answers They Want 13 Participants 13 Comments	<p>-I went in totally with the wrong attitude. I knew the area and I knew the panel members knew my work, so I didn't cover my answers in the detail I needed to.</p> <p>-One time, early in my career, I didn't know how the system worked. I didn't realize when you do an interview you have to say specifically what you did and cover off everything, you can't leave anything out or assume they know you know how to do the job, even if they do. You must use the exact words and phrases they are looking for or you won't be successful.</p> <p>-The panel is forced to use what information you give. Even if they know you could do the job and do it well, even if you have done the job in the past, they aren't allowed to consider that stuff. It is a stupid system that ignores reality.</p>
Preparation and Confidence 11 Participants 14 Comments	<p>-Not preparing is a killer because people don't answer questions well and often show they are not prepared because of their lack of confidence. Preparation creates confidence and this is so important in hiring and promotion.</p> <p>-When I know I haven't had the time to prepare and get myself ready, I know that I'm not bringing my A game to the interview. I start to feel less confident even before going in. Not being prepared costs me an opportunity in a couple of cases . . .</p> <p>-If you are really busy at work and have young children, how do you find the time to prepare?</p>
Having the Right Competency Examples 9 Participants 9 Comments	<p>-They ask you to tell them about this time when you did something, to explain how you would be good at the job, but it is really about examples that fit their competency stuff.</p> <p>-The entire competency framework as it is used for interviews in government requires you to tell a story that illustrates the competency. But I don't think of things that way, more like what I do for the job. So, it kinda gets lost in translation: The challenge is that this approach gages your ability to tell a story around a competency. It doesn't find your talents.</p>

A related theme is responding to the interview panel and “giving the answer that the panel members want to hear”, which is portrayed in the following comment:

“It is just a game where you know what they want to hear in the job advertisement which outlines the position requirements and key assignments. So, they are going to ask what you would do and all you have to do is tell them what you would do in a 1, 2, 3 style. Then, to be smart, you should talk about the acceptable practices which usually mean involving people, listening to staff, and recognizing diversity and inclusion issues . . . This is what they need to hear because, in the review afterwards, they will be saying things like: How do they involve staff? How would they respond to minorities and indigenous people?”

A third theme in this area relates to knowing the competency framework used as the basis of selection and promotion. In using it, there are a number of competencies relating to teamwork, leadership, communication, and resolving a conflict and the standard approach is for the interviewer to ask you to provide a positive and not-so-positive example or incident in each area. For example, in regard to teamwork:

“they will ask: can you offer an example where you worked in a team and it really worked well and tell us what you did to help the team. And, could you offer an example of working in a team where it did not go well and what your role was?” The bottom line here is that “you need to get all your stories ready ahead of time to put forward the story they are looking for in the interview”.

A final category is related to preparation and confidence. Even when some people did not have the experience, education, or knowledge, they were able to impress the panel because they had researched the department, its vision and mission statements, and knew the people in the department and the main priorities. One panel member suggested that: “People are impressive and confident when they have done their homework and know the job they are being hired for. They “redo their C.V. and bring out the competencies that we are using in the hiring process”, and even though they do not have experience, a panel member is more prone to give them a chance over others.

Often, panel member might say, in reviewing the candidates, “she really answered that question well”, or “I liked the way that he knew about our vision statement and recent planning effort”. In the end, hiring a person based on the person’s preparation gives less attention to the key factors identified in the job.

#### *4.3. Favoritism and Systemic Biases as a Reason for Being Plateaued*

Table 3 presents two themes, summarizing examples of personal and systemic biases in the systems and processes of promotion and selection. These illustrate being plateaued because of not having the connections or values to people in the system, alluding to the presence of personal preferences to hiring friends or known associates, views of culture or race, and biases illustrating a preference for certain personal characteristics. These examples also illustrate a “group think” bias in defining procedures supporting those in power, or how the person will fit into the culture.

The first theme illustrates three types of biases experienced: personal preferences for hiring friends, predilections linked to cultural differences, and personal predispositions related to certain personal characteristics. The interviewees offered several examples of personal biases in hiring friends or people who were referred by friends, which suggested that people were prevented from opportunities for reasons that they feel should not be tolerated. These were illustrated with comments such as: “Of course, people promote their friends, it happens all the time”, and a perception that in order to progress, you had to intentionally cater to superiors by serving up in the organization. There were suggestions that many successful people make sure they “look good in front of the boss and make sure they get credit for things they are doing”. Others indicated that successful people had advocates who “are looking out for you and talking you up!” These awareness-raising activities center around raising the organization’s awareness of a favored employee, as well as linking a favored employee to opportunities in the organization.

Some individuals seemed to resent others gaining the benefits of favoritism, while accepting their own benefits from favoritism as somehow legitimate and right. For example, one individual said:

“... of course, I’ve received the benefit of the doubt a few times, I can’t pretend I didn’t benefit from having friends”, and another asked: “Why shouldn’t they favour me? I’m a known performer so why wouldn’t they favour me?”

The sense of the appropriateness of favoritism appears related to the employee’s perception of themselves as the victim or beneficiary. However, there are also perceived risks to playing the favoritism game, as “you can be backed by the wrong people and pay the price following a power struggle when they are on the chopping block”. It was also noted that the perceived ability to play favorites is less practiced in the union environment and more obvious among managerial employees.

**Table 3.** Favoritism and Systemic Biases (48 individuals offering 153 comments) N = 67.

<p>Personal Bias 40 Participants 109 Comments Favoritism and discrimination arising from individual beliefs and actions</p>	<p>-People promote their friends; I don't want to say this happens in the majority of cases, but a significant number of people who get hired by their friends -A manager who I don't like asked me if I was going drinking with the ED after work. I said "no" and he looked me and said "well that's a career limiting move" -We all have a bias to hire those whose work we know and we are familiar with -If you aren't in the club, you never will be and you must get into the executive club -A friend of mine once shared that a colleague was making fun of my Chinese accent and laughing at me. -A boss of mine didn't see my overseas education as valuable -I feel I don't have as much of a future in the Ministry as others because I'm First Nations (Indigenous). -A black woman like myself doesn't get into the network the same way white people do. How can I be in the social network when I'm not in the room (not invited to places where the important networks are)? -In China, we rely on a principle called "Face", which highlights "relationships, reputation, and connections". It's central. So, if people are critical of people is hard for me. -Good looking people are more likely to be promoted. It sounds silly but it's true. There was this DM who worked for one ministry who was always hiring good looking women. -My anxiety and introversion puts me at a real disadvantage, and is an invisible disability; it impacts my life and people make judgements about me -People are incredibly prejudiced and biased against heavy people. Obviously, I'm heavy. They judge me and my intelligence based on my weight. It is incredibly wrong and humiliating, but it is really happening.</p>
<p>Systematic Bias 30 Participants 44 Comments Bias and discrimination built into system processes or deeper social, cultural or organizational issues beyond the individual</p>	<p>-The hiring approach using events-based interviews and competency frameworks are biased. They discriminate in favor of fitting in rather than illustrating diversity. -A good answer to questions in a Western culture is to illustrate what you did and your personal strengths over others. This works against some other cultures in interviews. -Culture plays a very big role but most people in the majority culture have no idea. To them it is invisible. Everything from education, interview processes, work examples . . . it has biases built on a foundation of western and male beliefs. -Panel members seem to collude or are trained to score based on what our culture feels is important. Credit is given to answering questions well and presence rather substance -Political connections protect people from being fired and increase chances for promotion. Alignment with Minister or party is a huge source of power and privilege. -Fit is important. Right now, the important words are "enhancing diversity, equality, and equity", and "protecting the environment". -We lack a culture respecting diversity. To me, diversity is attention to different cultures and styles; FN experience or knowledge is not valued. I had to go to university to study non-traditional knowledge to get my job in government. -We have so few FN people in government. If fitting with a culture is important, how do we, as First Nations, be recognized? We illustrate different values. -Women communicate differently than men, something which is not recognized here. -Young leader programs discriminate against older employees disguised as some kind of merit or marketing exercise.</p>

A second area where biases existed were related to known and unknown cultural differences between groups with unique ethnic identities, educational differences and workplace cultures. These comments point to personal biases against people who are from a different culture and, in these cases, they were examples related to Chinese and First Nations. In Chinese culture, for example, the concept of "face" is important in indicating that actions and words that are disrespectful might cause someone to "lose face", which is one's sense of pride, dignity and prestige. However, the tendency to be critical of others is important in Western organizations, but is not always valued in Chinese culture. A First Nations person indicated that, " . . . I feel that I will never get ahead because I'm First Nations", and "even when people want to do things differently, it's hard because we have 150 years of White ways built into hiring". Another person said, "I am not a person who can be openly critical of others as relationships are important".

The final area of biases describes areas of personal biases where personality and personal appearance seemed to affect the selection of people. The examples illustrated that people seemed to be swayed by a person's attractiveness, extroverted personality, and weight.

#### 4.4. Systemic Biases

Table 3 also points to unique systemic biases related to the practices and behaviors of hiring employees. The most common systematic biases are related to procedures that reflect a human resource "group think", involving a hiring approach and procedures to demonstrate the skills and abilities to be used in evaluation, which do not represent other cultures. One example of this is in the wide acceptance of competency based interviewing approaches, which asks candidates to provide examples of times when "they" demonstrated competency in various areas, such as teamwork, meeting a deadline, or handling a conflict. Indigenous and Chinese individuals indicated that they felt uncomfortable talking about themselves and thought this to be "bragging and pushy", while pointing to a cultural preference towards modesty that might be hindering their advancement. Other procedures illustrated other systemic biases that suggest that a human resource "group think" of fitting certain norms and prerequisites in a rational process where individuals must fit a wide range of skills and abilities, some of which might not be as important. The assumption is that the existing hiring process is somewhat rational and quantitative, while it is entirely possible that the process involves a great deal of subjectivity. The rationality myth encourages us to define processes that we can measure while the important criteria, for some cultures, might be hard to measure with rational methods as they are currently constructed.

A second sort of groupthink is illustrated in the veil of informal connections that shade the evaluation process, where "political connections protect people from being fired and increase chances for promotion". A part of this relates to hiring people who fit in or who demonstrate a government "ethos". This is often illustrated with terms such as being able to talk about issues and provide a "governance perspective", using terms such as "teamwork", "collaboration", "working across Ministries", and "being strategic", or, when talking about policy issues, words such as "recognizing stakeholders needs", "enhancing diversity, equality, and equity", and "protecting the environment" are in vogue.

The final area illustrates a groupthink that defines what culture means. While culture and recognizing the needs of different individuals and groups is a prominent statement central in most mission and value statements and espoused ways of working, the work of developing a multicultural organization is just beginning. At present, there are many misunderstandings, inappropriate statements and differing expectations of what it means to be a multicultural organization. While people are sometimes critical of the perceived overemphasis given to First Nations, women, minorities, older people and other groups, the existing procedures still give stronger emphasis to traditional male European values.

#### 4.5. Impact of Being Plateaued

Being plateaued is not a pleasant experience for people, but it is more frustrating for people who feel they have been plateaued because of favoritism and discrimination rather than because of a lack of skills and abilities or not being competitive. The first column in Table 4 describes some of the comments about being plateaued because of feelings that there was favoritism and discrimination. They illustrate the negative impacts in life and at work. The table reveals three themes, describing feelings of disgust, withdrawal, and learning how to play the game. Feelings of disgust are described as frustrations of seeing people who are willing to "prostitute themselves to the boss" in progressing and "not knowing what to do". The second theme describes a "giving up", "not trying to compete for other positions" and "clinging to my current position and holding on until retirement". The final theme relates to learning how to play the game in becoming "involved in networks or meeting specific people just because they felt that this was the way to influence the system", while others felt that they were unwilling to "suck up to people just to play the game".



**Table 4.** Impacts of Being Plateaued (67 Study Participants contributing 187 Comments) N = 67.

Maladjustments in life and work because of favoritism and Discrimination 33 Participants 98 Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-It is sort of unbelievable how willing people are to prostitute themselves to the boss and how willing the boss is to take advantage of the situation.</li> <li>-My anxiety has been a significant challenge and I have seen a counsellor for my social awkwardness, and it helped some but is so discouraging because I can't really control this.</li> <li>-There is 150 years of racism against indigenous people built into the system. What can you do?</li> <li>-People don't understand how black people face barriers, from subtle to overt barriers.</li> <li>-I have given up. I don't even try to get any new positions anymore.</li> <li>-The strategy now is to cling to my position and hold on to retirement.</li> <li>-Most don't believe there is discrimination and others don't want to hear it. Nobody wants to say they got ahead in a system that discriminates. They feel better thinking they got ahead in a fair system.</li> <li>-What can I do all by myself? Compromise myself and learning how to play the game?</li> <li>-I constantly try and build my network and suck up to the boss. It's just smart; while I don't know what to really do about it, we have to do something and I play the game more now.</li> <li>-Discrimination? Well, I don't really know what to do about this. Not sure we will ever be free but we have to do something. I just ignore it and make the best of it by pretending I don't notice.</li> <li>-I see these young people getting ahead and I have trouble sucking up to people who are a whole lot younger than me. But you do what you have to, even if it burns you to do so.</li> </ul>
Being plateaued because of lack of skills and abilities in a competition 29 Participants 52 Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-I take Temporary Appointments when I can to get new experience required for me to move up.</li> <li>-I try and get new experiences at work. I keep asking for a chance to work on new teams and doing new things.</li> <li>-I went back to school for more education to gain promotion opportunities.</li> <li>-I try and take online courses that are offered by the PSA, so that is something.</li> <li>-My goal is to learn new skills and competencies to bring to future jobs.</li> <li>-I personally go to experts or mentors for advice and seek out their knowledge and expertise. I ask biologists questions related to their expertise and value it.</li> <li>-If I don't win because someone better beat me out, I still feel like there is a chance because it was legitimate</li> </ul>
Being plateaued because of I did not do how to compete 18 Participants 37 Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-I went about learning the system and the rules that impact hiring and promotion. I learned the game and how to play it.</li> <li>-I make more of an effort to prepare for interviews and try and change the way I prepare when I don't win a competition because of my lack of preparation.</li> <li>-I practice for my interviews and write up my competency answers and prepare really well. I usually ask my wife to review my performance and help me with my answers.</li> <li>-The competencies need to be understood and used to spin the panel.</li> </ul>

Table 4 also describes how people reacted or responded when they were plateaued for what they perceived to be more legitimate reasons of a lack of skill in a competition or not knowing the norms of how to compete. In both cases, the reactions did not illustrate that people were disgusted or wanted to withdraw. Rather, these comments suggest that people recognized their deficiencies and tried to correct them in improving their skills and abilities for future competitions.

In review, the above tables describe comments about being plateaued in one's career. They generally illustrate that the larger percentage of people who were plateaued when they felt they experienced favoritism and systemic discrimination had more negative reactions in their life and work. The next section provides a comment on how these results provide a unique perspective in the career plateau literature.

#### 4.6. Limitations

Our results are exploratory in developing an understanding of the causes of plateauing based on the examples illustrated by interviewees. In seeking to identify examples of when people were successful and less successful in their career, and when they might have felt plateaued, the individuals referred to both hierarchical and content plateaus. As our findings did not distinguish between these different types of plateaus, further research is needed to build on our results. Our results, in providing a wider view of the causes and impact of plateauing, also need further research in identifying and testing the hypotheses.

## 5. Discussion

This study uncovers a deeper understanding of the perceived causes and impacts of being career plateaued in the public service and provides a rich description of the impacts resulting from personal biases and systemic discrimination over other causes. Our results use the iceberg metaphor in Figure 1 to suggest that the causes of career plateau can be illustrated at three levels. That is, the most obvious reasons that people are plateaued, in Figure 1, related to job experience, education, skills and ability, as 78% of the 67 respondents indicated that this played a role in their being plateaued. However, 71% of our respondents also provided examples of favoritism and discrimination affecting their careers. While objective career success might be associated with human capital skills and demographic predictors, an individual's subjective view of career success is strongly explained by individual differences (Ng et al. 2005). Our research illustrates a range of comments, in Table 4, related to competitive skills and evidence of favoritism and discrimination, which provide an extended view of the reasons why people might not be successful in a career.

A less obvious reason, identified by 31% of the employees, relates to the competitive processes, which are partially hidden within the selection processes where there are biases that favor those who know how to demonstrate their capabilities. For this reason, we suggest that this bias is displayed in the middle of the iceberg model because it is not obvious or perceived to be a key limiting factor in promotions. However, we are suggesting that this bias favors those who are able to perform well in interviews and those who provide better examples to the questions asked, rather than criteria directly related to the performance of the specific job.

The most vivid and disturbing finding is that favoritism or discrimination might be seen as a major reason why people become stuck at a career level rather than progressing. Many comments (71%) from the 67 individuals added 153 comments on favoritism and systemic biases. A larger number of these comments (40 individuals offered 109 examples) related to personal biases or favoritism and discrimination compared to systemic biases (30 individuals offering 44 examples), suggesting that the favoritism in a political and interpersonal world is a greater contributor.

While most organizations position themselves as having hiring and promotion processes free of biases and discrimination, public service organizations in Canada pride themselves on merit-based hiring and fairness while ensuring merit-based hiring through law, organizational policies, and initiatives. Despite the efforts to create fairness, expressed through "open and transparent approaches to hiring; objective and relevant means of assessment, equitable treatment of applicants and reasonable decision", such "objective" means of assessment seem to be affected by political and interpersonal relationships.

There is a conventional wisdom that public servants behave responsibly with strong traditional Westminster values, and that public service remains "merit-driven". However, Rhodes (2011), in studying the British government and the relationships between elected officials and their professional public servants, notes that policy directives and regulations are "meaningless when confronted by the imperative to cope and survive" as managers, politicians or civil servants (Rhodes 2011, p. 85). This suggests that the complex political and interpersonal relationships that exist between public servants illustrate a survival imperative that Rhodes identifies as impacting ministers and their public service staff. Other research has clearly revealed forms of discrimination illustrated in hiring and promotion based on race (Jones et al. 2017; Bartkoski et al. 2018; Zschirnt and Ruedin 2016; Quillian et al. 2017), gender (Koch et al. 2014; Jones et al. 2017; Davison and Burke 2000), weight (Rudolph et al. 2009), physical attractiveness (Hosoda et al. 2003) and age (Ng and Feldman 2010). The public service is not immune to these forms of discrimination that occur in the wider societies, of which the public services are part.

The study adds to the previous studies that have illustrated that some of the causes of being plateaued can be linked to job and career satisfaction, the degree to which a person identifies with his or her work (Godshalk and Fender 2015) and the lack of opportunity

from upward promotions or from jobs which were too narrowly defined (Hurst et al. 2017). In other research, people plateaued because their roles as career officers changed from seeing oneself as warriors to being managers and technologists (Cheng and Su 2013). The current study is generally consistent with the previous research, but explores some of the issues in greater depth.

### *Impacts*

Our research provides an eye-opening perspective of the impacts of being plateaued because of favoritism and systemic discrimination, and the possible profound personal impacts. Individuals seem to be able to make adjustments if they are plateaued because of a lack of skills and abilities, feeling they were uncompetitive in effectively demonstrating their skills in interviews, or do not know people who can be helpful in referring them to opportunities. That is, many took courses, engaged in other experiences, or practiced their interviewing skills to enhance their chances. In addition to feeling plateaued because of experience, education and knowledge, the respondents offered examples of being plateaued because of a lack of competitive skills or evidence of favoritism and discrimination. However, those who are plateaued because of favoritism or discrimination verbalize feelings of disgust and withdrawal, less engagement with work, or buying into practices that they originally felt were not honorable.

## **6. Conclusions**

This study provides a picture of the unique impact of being plateaued because of favoritism and systemic discrimination over other causes. While most people would agree that being stuck in a job or blocked from advancing in one's career is a frustrating and demotivating, it is much more so when one perceives that there is favoritism and evidence of systemic discrimination. Career plateaued individuals generally report unfavorable affective outcomes, such as lower job satisfaction and feelings of well-being, as well as undesirable work outcomes (Yang et al. 2019); however, being plateaued because of perceptions of favoritism and systemic discrimination may have more personal damaging impacts relating to a disengagement with work, giving up and withdrawal. More specifically, they point to ways that career advancement might favor those who know how to "play the game" and succeed in the interview and selection process.

Our findings suggest that the reason people are plateaued relates to their lack of skill, as well as the fact that there were better candidates for the job. However, beyond this, our interviewees perceived other causes of being plateaued, relating to the ability to demonstrate the skills and abilities in a job, the interview and selection process, which might give more importance to skills demonstrating an ability to answer questions rather than the skills necessary for a job, and evidence of favoritism and systemic discrimination. The biases and contradictions that cause career plateaus illustrate several "Catch-22's" of being trapped in a number of contradictory dilemmas. Examples of the Catch-22s related to career progression include:

- Needing to connect to people who can help you progress in your career, but being unable to meet the right people who can help.
- Needing experience to be promoted, but being plateaued and not promoted because of a lack of experience, but not having the chance to obtain a job to gain the experience necessary to be promoted.
- Needing to meet the requirement or criterion for career progression (i.e., education level as a foundational criterion), but not having the degree or education individuals or groups perceive as being more important.
- Needing to illustrate the effectiveness of one's skills for the job, but not being promoted due to being unable to demonstrate one's true skills because of not being good at answering questions in the interviewing and the selection process.

- Needing to be connected to the values of the people in charge, but being plateaued because of biases, culture, or personal preferences or the group thinking of those in power.

In a Westminster-like model of a Canadian public service organization, there is the expectation that career progression is a process based on merit. However, some people in the study felt plateaued because of an unfair system in which favoritism and systemic discrimination exists. What is new in this research is the possible devastating effect of being plateaued because of favoritism and discrimination, suggested by the greater likelihood to verbalize feelings of disgust, withdrawal or becoming less engaged with work. While these feelings are illustrated by the total sample, they may be particularly more devastating for minorities, women, indigenous people or those with disabilities.

While our results did not intend to focus on minorities, women, indigenous people or those with disabilities, it might have implications for further research in this area. That is, while it might explain some of the feelings of the broader population, it might also provide insight in explaining the frustration of disadvantaged employees who are likely to experience more favoritism and systemic discrimination. This might have implications for why inequities continue to exist for these groups.

We are mindful that our results are, at best, exploratory, as they are based on exploratory interviews of a small sample of government workers in the Canadian public service. Although we felt that our interviews illustrated saturation and additional interviews might not have elicited new examples or types of experiences, we cannot generalize our results. Future hypothesis testing research might focus on procedures that help encourage people to recognize how the process of selection illustrates a range of biases that need to be better understood.

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