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Young adult experiences with securing employment: Perceptions of and experiences with employer discrimination and expectations hinder successful labour market attachment

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Abstract

The increasingly precarious nature of North America's labour market has created challenges for young adults in securing and maintaining adequate employment. In a study to better understand these barriers, one-to-one interviews and focus groups were conducted with 36 young adults (between ages 18 and 29) in a neighborhood in Toronto, Canada. Findings show that varying forms of discrimination experienced and perceived by young job seekers, along with expectations of employers within current labour markets, act as key barriers to successful labour market attachment. The findings suggest that the challenges to attach to the labour market can have a lasting psychosocial impact on young people. Consequently, the negative socio-cultural perceptions of young adults and those that hold them, in conjunction with the precariousness of a labour market that supports and maintains social inequality, must be addressed through more substantive policy, regulatory and program based initiatives.

Résumé

La nature de plus en plus précaire du marché du travail en Amérique du Nord a créé des difficultés pour les jeunes adultes à obtenir et conserver un emploi convenable. Dans une étude afin de mieux comprendre ces obstacles, des entrevues et des groupes de discussion en tête-à-tête ont été menées auprès de 36 jeunes adultes (entre 18 et 29 ans) dans un quartier à Toronto, Canada. Les résultats montrent que différentes formes de discrimination vécus et perçus par les jeunes demandeurs d'emploi, ainsi que des attentes des employeurs au sein des marchés du travail actuels, agissent comme les principaux obstacles à la participation au marché du travail avec succès. Les résultats suggèrent que les défis à joindre le marché du travail peuvent avoir un impact psychosocial à long terme sur les jeunes. Par conséquent, les perceptions socio-culturelles négatives de jeunes adultes et ceux qui les détiennent, en liaison avec la précarité d'un marché du travail qui soutient et maintient l'inégalité sociale, doivent être adressées par la politique plus concrète, la réglementation et les initiatives de programme en function.

Introduction

Globalization and technological advances, along with an increasingly unregulated capitalist market, have had a resounding impact on domestic labor market conditions. Specific factors that negatively impact young adult labour market attachment include the decline of middle-income occupations, increasing challenges in securing full-time and permanent employment, and an intensifying polarization within the labour market between high-skill high-wage and low-skill low-wage jobs (Wilson et al., 2011; Statistics Canada, 2005). These tendencies have been identified in the North American labour market, where current employment trends have shown increases in the proportion of part-time, temporary, and contract positions in relation to full-time employment opportunities. Although not all part-time employment is precarious – there are certain situations where part-time employment opportunities are preferable – for most of the population, full-time permanent employment is desirable.

In Canada, the precariously employed comprise 40 percent of the workforce (Cranford, Vosko, & Zukewich, 2003). Similarly, the amount of part-time and temporary employment has been increasing in the United States. Between 1990 and 2008, the number of temporary employment opportunities rose from 1.1 million to 2.3 million (Luo, Mann, & Holden, 2010); and as of August 2011, 8.8 million people were employed in involuntary part-time positions, an increase of 400,000 from the preceding month (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). These positions are considered involuntary because hours had been cut from full-time employment or these people were unable to find suitable full-time alternatives. Many individuals filling these positions are at the entry level within the labour market, many of which include youth and young adults. As a result, these lower paying and inconsistent types of employment support a continued marginalization of young adults in relation to labour market participation (Wilson et al, 2011; Sawchuk, 2009).

Beyond the need for full-time employment to meet individual or familial subsistence, employment is also an indicator of social status; more often than not, society measures success with employment and type of position. As a result, having employment provides both manifest (financial income) and latent (meeting psychological needs) functions (Jahoda, 1982). Work can also support social inclusion through greater networks while increased activity can improve self-perceptions as well as help instill socio-cultural values, such as a desire for advancement (Creed & Reynolds, 2001). However, deprivation associated with the lack of employment generally leads to deterioration of manifest and latent functions. For instance, lack of employment for young adults can lead to depression, low self-esteem, and anxiety (Creed, 1999; Brief, Konovsky, Goodwin & Link, 1995; Evans & Banks, 1992). Also, unemployed young adults are likely to engage in destructive behaviors related to psychological distress, ranging from heavy use of illicit substances, alcohol and tobacco, and participating in criminal activity (Bjarnason & Sigurdardottir, 2003; Gunnlaugsson & Galliher, 2000).

There is currently little research being done to investigate the subjective experiences of young adults who are unemployed and seeking full-time work in today's labour market. Howerver, there is burgeoning ethnographic research on homeless young adults who are unemployed (Baron, 2001), and some broader, survey-based research on the subjective understandings of young adults (Rantakeisu, Starrin, & Hagquist, 1997). There are researchers who have delved into the psychological effects of young adult unemployment (Banks & Ullah, 1988) as well as the social effects of young adult unemployment in marginalized neighborhoods

(Bourgois, 2003; MacLeod, 1987; Newman, 2008). In these studies, several factors are identified as contributors to young adult unemployment. For example, Newman (2008) finds, after a longitudinal investigation, that familial and educational experiences can contribute to success or failure among visible minority young adults. But little research delves into young adults' understanding of specific strategies they could deploy to attach and remain attached to labour markets. As a corrective, the present article seeks to understand the subjective experiences of young adults (individuals aged 18 to 29) when accessing the labour market. And in particular, to investigate the social-psychological and socio-cultural manifestation of labour market barriers that impact successful labour market attachment. Specifically, we focused on the research question: What are the pathways to improvement in economic status (such as improvements in pathways to employment, education, or other social capital) for young adults?

Employment and education are two of the key determinants associated with young adult socio-economic risks and social exclusion (Keiselbach, 2003). Furthermore, previous scholarship has found that barriers to labour market attachment among young adults can be heightened particularly amongst racial minority youth who grow up in low income neighborhoods (MacLeod, 1987; Bourgois, 2003; Wilson et al., 2011).To investigate this research question – and including such factors as neighborhood, concentrated poverty, and racialization – young adult participants from racial minority groups were recruited from one marginalized community in Toronto, Canada (the Jane-Finch community). The generally low-level of education of the young adults in the Jane-Finch community, as well as the pervasive unemployment they face, are key as to why Jane-Finch is identified as an "at-risk" neighborhood (Strong Neighbourhoods, 2005). While the area's average young adult unemployment rate appears equivalent to the Toronto Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) rates – with 15.1% of young adults unemployed in Jane-Finch and 15.2% overall for Toronto – among various local census tracts, young adult unemployment figures vary considerably, including one of the highest rates in the city in the Tobermory and Finch census tract (34.5%). Such young adult unemployment disparities within neighbourhoods suggest that local neighbourhood dynamics (or outsider perceptions of neighbourhoods) might contribute to high rates of young adult unemployment. Further research needs to done on how young adult unemployment can be so heavily concentrated in some local census tracts. Demographic and characteristic analysis of the population might be a useful place to start this investigation.

Jane-Finch is considered one of the most ethnically diverse communities in the world. In comparison to the total population, the community has one of Toronto's largest populations of young adults, sole support families, refugees, immigrants, and low-income earners. Jane-Finch is also home to one of the city's highest concentrations of subsidized housing units. In 2006, single parent households comprised 11 percent of all households in the Toronto CMA. In Jane-Finch, the figure is substantially higher with over 23 percent of Jane-Finch households headed by a single parent. The United Way's *Poverty by Postal Code* report (2004) noted that Jane-Finch was one of the neighborhoods identified with exceptionally high rates of poverty, with many census tracts having among the highest rates of people earning less than the Low Income Cut-Off (LICO) thresholds set by Statistics Canada. Among all households, LICO rates in Jane-Finch were as high as 42.8 percent (almost four times the Toronto CMA-wide figure of 11.8 percent). In 2006, 32.4 percent of Toronto CMA residents were renters. On average, roughly 51 percent of Jane-Finch residents are renters.

Together, these figures highlight several aspects of vulnerability towards successfully attaching to the labour market for young adult residents. For example, the poverty experienced

by many of the young adults in this community also translates to access issues (for instance, inadequate transportation resources), stunted educational development and progress (as people become more concerned with their day-to-day subsistence), and relationships that do not support upward social mobility (such as relationships that lead to the informal – and most often illegal – labour market). While poverty can be a defeating factor for young adults, attachment to the labour market can improve their situations; therefore, greater awareness of those conditions that impede successful labour market attachment can help focus policy and program discussions on young adult unemployment.

Methododology

To understand labour market factors that impede young adult employment, data were collected through one-to-one interviews (n=36) with young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 in the Jane-Finch neighbourhood in Toronto, Canada. Of these 36 respondents, 25 are male and 11 are female. The mean age of the respondents is 22 years old. Fifteen of the respondents had experienced some post-secondary education – either having completed university or college programs, being presently enrolled in a post-secondary program, or having finished some coursework but on a leave of absence. Each respondent identified as being a member of a racial minority group. Twenty-nine reported being Black, 3 Latin American, 1 South Asian, 1 Middle Eastern, 1 West Asian, and 1 East Asian. This study received ethics certification from the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board at the University of Calgary.

Participants were recruited through a process of snowball sampling with the aid of six community partners working on the project and with young adults in the Jane-Finch community seeking employment. The inclusion criteria for the study were that young adults lived in the Jane-Finch community, were between the ages of 18 and 29, and fit into one of the following four categories: 1) Actively seeking employment (n=20); 2) employed but feeling frustrated by their employment (n=7); 3) not employed and not in school (n=6); or 4) employed and satisfied (n=3). Including respondents from a range of categories in relation to their employment status or situation aided in developing a comprehensive understanding of young adult experiences. It is not a surprise that the smallest category was "employed and satisfied," because individuals who fit with this category were less likely to be utilizing services offered by the community partners that aided in employment recruitment. Further research might explore in more detail these individuals' experiences with labour market attachment to determine what aspects might contribute to this level of satisfaction – an important consideration for policy personnel trying to increase young adult labour market attachment and to contrast and compare with the findings presented here.

Data were collected using standard interviewing techniques (Fetterman, 1998, 2008; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Patton, 1990; Seidman, 1991). Respondents were interviewed once. The interviews were conducted in person by two members of the research team using a semi-structured, open-ended interview model. The interviews lasted approximately one hour. Questions prompted respondents to describe their current and past experiences with employment and barriers that they experience when searching for and accessing employment opportunities. Reporting here eliminates identifying characteristics such as place names and dates. This has been done to maintain the confidentiality of participants' identities. Identifying numbers are included after each excerpt along with the participants' gender and age.

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data was analyzed using qualitative methods. The transcriptions and the interviewer notes taken throughout the interview and focus group processes were examined. Analytic induction and constant comparison strategies (see Goetz & Lecompte, 1984; Glasser & Strauss, 1967) were used to detect patterns within the transcribed interviews. Specifically, emergent themes (see for example: Charmaz, 2000; Williams, 2008) and patterns (see for example: Creswell, 2009; Fetterman, 2008) were identified within the transcribed interviews with a focus on the factors that respondents identified as having an impact on their present employment situation. The first step in the coding process was to read through all the transcribed material with the objective of identifying common themes. These were coded and the data were searched for instances of the same or similar phenomena. Finally, the data were translated into more general categories that were refined until all instances of contradictions, similarities, and differences were explained, thus increasing the dependability and consistency of the findings. The research team collaboratively worked on this stage of the research to maintain the credibility criteria of the study (i.e. discussing the rationale for determining particular codes that emerged).

Findings

In their search for employment, respondents revealed that they face discrimination and systemic barriers linked to the labour market, and these both have implications on individual psycho-social functioning. With regard to discrimination, respondents described negative experiences and perceptions in relation to their race, religion, age, and place of residence from prospective employers. In relation to systemic barriers within the labour market, the primary hindrance was employers' perceptions that young adults would most likely be unable to meet job expectations. As a result of these experiences of discrimination and systemic barriers to the labour market, respondents described implications for their own psycho-social functioning, such as internalizing and placing blame on themselves for their lack of labour market success.

Discrimination in the Labour Market

Discrimination within the labour market is prevalent. In Shier, Graham and Jones' 2009 study of individuals with long-term difficulties attaching to the labour market, the authors found that employer perceptions of employees' abilities limited successful labour market attachment. Likewise, in a study of employed people experiencing homelessness, Shier, Jones, and Graham (2011) found respondents had similar experiences, but instead of negative perceptions of ability, the respondents identified negative employer perceptions of people experiencing homelessness as one factor impacting their successful transition into stable employment. Respondents in this present study on youth employment described similar experiences with employers. For instance, race-based discrimination was a perceived factor identified by respondents as influencing their ability to secure employment.

Race-based discrimination stems from the predetermined definition or perspective a person holds about another's abilities and aptitudes (Anderson, 1991) based on their race. Discrimination (or the perception of it) can result in the internalization of oppression, which in turn can diminish human capital characteristics (i.e. knowledge and personality attributes), and have individual social-psychological consequences (such as decreased self-esteem and confidence), thus impacting current and future employability (Elmslie & Sedo, 1996; Graham, Shier, Jones, & Grey, 2009; Shier, Jones, & Graham, 2010). Some respondents described the

perception of direct/informal discrimination as reflected in behaviors and attitudes they encountered when personally handing out resumes and engaging with potential places of employment:

> I handed out resumes at [respondent names place] a month ago, and I went to [respondent names store they were applying] to hand out my resume. I said to the employee working, "Hi, good day, may I speak with your manager please". [She replied] "No, she is not here". I said, "Okay, thank you, would you be able to give me an application?". [She replied,] "No, you can come back when the Manager is here". I just said, "Thank you so much, have a good day". I didn't say anything else because I am not confrontational. She just looked at me and sized me up. I was dressed well, I wasn't dressed like an interview, but I had on black jeans and simple sweater; a normal outfit to go hand out resumes. (YS 3; Female, 17 years old)

Similarly, some respondents shared how attributes such as their birthplace and cultural practices negatively impacted their job search. One respondent explained:

> I went to an interview once and the employer asked me where I was from. I told him Jamaica. And, they asked me how long have I been here [in Canada]. I told them how long I've been here and they said somewhat of a racial slur, which I don't really want to repeat. (YS 38; Male, 25 years old)

Likewise, some young adult Muslim participants expressed their dismay with similar experiences. These respondents described their perception of experiencing discrimination by employers based on their religious practices and the physical manifestation of their religious beliefs. One respondent described:

> I was looking for a job for six months. I applied to so many medical offices. They called me for an interview and they asked me if I have experience. I told them I was a new graduate, and they said they need someone with experience. Like the second thing I was thinking, maybe it is because I wear a scarf; maybe that's why they don't hire me…. [Because I was] wearing a scarf, maybe they think it is uncomfortable [for other people accessing the services]. Often people come, they look and see there is a scarf and they think "why is she working here, why is she wearing it". Maybe that's why, they didn't hire me. Two or three times this happened. When you first enter, they look at you from top to bottom. They interview you still, but they don't ask too many questions, but they always say they will call you back; but they don't call back. It makes me have low self-esteem, like this is not a mistake that I wear a scarf; it is my religion. Everyone is different, there are Jewish people, there are Muslim people, Christians, etc., like we have to respect each other, right? (YS 7; Female, 21 years old)

Perceptions that employers have of potential employees are not entirely based on the individual candidate's capabilities. They are informed by their own personal beliefs and internalized cultural stereotypes about diversity and ability. While this last respondent discussed multiple aspects of discrimination – such as her religious beliefs or perceptions of her ability – each contributes to her successful attachment to the labour market. Employer perceptions of ability tend to be described by these respondents as having adequate previous experience and training to undertake a particular job. One respondent described their experience when applying for a job as an administrative assistant in an office. Their duties would involve answering telephones and directing calls. They reported not getting the job since they did not have previous experience in that specific role. But, is having worked previously in the role of an administrative

assistant a valid precondition to determine if someone will be successful working in this role in a current position? Discrimination by employers around perceptions of individual ability continues to remain unregulated, allowing employers to openly discriminate based on perceived ability. The question here is not about whether or not employers are hiring the most suitable candidate for a position. In the low-skill and low-pay labour market many of the required skills for the position could be learned on the job. However, there are simply no expectations held towards employers within the Canadian labour market to aid in the development of the work skills of workers.

Another form of discrimination is age based; another factor identified by respondents as a barrier to finding employment. Perceived stereotypes of young adults as non-committal, irresponsible, and untrustworthy were identified by many respondents as impeding their successful labour market attachment. For instance, one respondent described:

> When I was 18 and 19, employers treated me poorly because I was young. I had to work [a] job in the mall as a janitor. I got that job because of my appearance, because I looked young. If you look good for the job you get it. Employers treated me different, based on my appearance or judged me because of my age. Because you're young, you're irresponsible. Or because you're young you're good for this job, not for that job. I felt like a piece of meat because they judged me for my age…they don't give you a chance to prove yourself. (YS 12; Female, 28 years old)

Knowing that age-based discrimination by employers is prevalent, it is necessary to consider how these socio-cultural stereotypes emerge. In some cases, the negative portrayal of young adults by the local media, usually centering on crime and violence, has damaged young adult capabilities in securing employment. For one respondent, having been injured in a violent incident in his community resulted initially in loss of employment. While seeking re-entry into the labor market, during his interview he disclosed to his potential employer the reasons for having left his previous post, only to be rejected. For this respondent, his inability to find employment is a direct result of the inappropriate generalizations about young adults from his particular community. His continued experiences with rejection augmented his sense of marginalization and extended his feelings of victimization.

> Recently, I went for a job interview and they asked me where I was working before. I told them where I was working before and they also asked if I was working now, and I told them no. I wasn't working at the time, which I'm still not working. So, they simply asked why haven't I been working; why I was out of a job... I told them that I just [respondent describes situation of being injured]– not my doing. I wasn't involved in anything illegal. After that, they didn't seem like they had any interest. I was supposed to lie! I should have lied because I don't know how they would have found out if I would have gotten a job there. (YS 38; Male, 25 years old)

Related to the excerpt above, several respondents described increasing discrimination as a result of the wider community's (i.e. Toronto's) negative perceptions of the Jane-Finch community, where these respondents live. These perceptions acted as a significant barrier to respondents' ability to find stable employment. This is an example of place-based discrimination—discrimination against someone for simply living in Jane-Finch (for other research on the nature of place-based discrimination see Callister 1998; Glennerster, Lupton, Noden & Power, 1999; Jargowsky 1997; Morrison 1993; Wilson 1987, 1996). In their

experiences, respondents indicated that employers are hesitant to hire young adults from the community as a result of negative perceptions of the community. For example, one respondent described:

> I've never failed interviews…I spoke really well and whatever, when I called, they told me to call two hours after, and they told me that I didn't get the job but they didn't want to say why; which I later concluded that it was mostly likely the address. Sometimes people have a perception of Jane and Finch as being a bad area but it is not. (YS 15; Female, 20 years old)

This conclusion reached by this respondent is informed primarily by the prospective employer's reaction to where she resided during the interview. Still, it remains inconclusive whether this was the reason the individual did not receive this employment opportunity. For respondents though, place-based discrimination is difficult to overcome mainly because there is a general absence, if not a shortage, of job opportunities within the community itself. For this reason, most seek employment outside of the community, and so long as the wider Toronto community maintains a negative perception of the Jane-Finch neighbourhood, perceptions of place and place-based discrimination will impact how the inhabitants of that neighbourhood experience securing employment. This form of discrimination is also a likely contributing factor to concentrated young adult unemployment in specific census tracts within the city of Toronto.

During the process of seeking employment outside their community, respondents faced other barriers, such as finding money for transportation to and from work and having childcare during work hours.

> Some people are not able to find money to go for interviews or transit tokens to get to that interview. Also it is difficult finding the type of job that is going to go well with daycare times. Because once you finally get back to pick your child up at a certain time, it could be an issue for some people. (YS 5; Female, 20 years old)

This final excerpt succinctly describes how certain barriers intersect with other aspects of the labour market – in particular, expectations held by employers of employees. Expectations might include being satisfied with an insufficient rate of pay, aligning one's entire life around employment, and remaining flexible and available as needed. This previous respondent describes some of these compounding barriers that make it difficult to successfully attach to – and maintain – employment (see also: Jones, Graham, & Shier, 2007/2008). These challenges are explained in greater detail in the following section.

Expectations within the Labour Market

The global capitalist production system is typified by a general shift away, in its labour force, from full-time permanent employment to precarious employment opportunities (International Labour Organization, 2011, 2004; Wilson et al., 2011). This "new typology of employment," also known as non-standard employment, is low paying, unprotected, and insecure work, offering very little, if any, benefits (Vosko, Zukewich & Cranford, 2003). Often, precarious work is associated with part-time, fixed/term, on-call, temporary, or self-employment. In North America, precarious employment is distributed among these different employment types across broad industry groups; in addition to women, equity seeking groups and young adults are exceedingly overrepresented in non-standard employment (Wilson et al., 2011; Vosko, 2002).

Moreover, the shift towards precarious work is visible at the employer-employee relational level (demonstrated in part by the excerpts from the previous section), maintained

through regulatory changes and produced and normalized through weakened labor standards (see for example: Graham, Jones, & Shier, 2010; Shier, Jones, & Graham, 2011). Respondents' recounting of their experiences in the labour market was percipient in its detailing of how precarious employment impacts their relationship with the world of work and employers. They related the degree of uncertainty of continuing employment in a particular place and the personal risk of loss of employment, along with the fear of this reality, as factors keeping them in employment situations that are unstable, insecure, and offering limited protections, rights or benefits. One respondent recounted:

> I worked for a housekeeping company. I would work from 8 in the morning and leave about 10 in the evening and I would work for $6.50 an hour. Coming from a different country, I take information on everything. So, when I work, I write my hours down and I talked to the lady at the end of the week when I am supposed to get paid. So I go to her and I'll say to her, "Well listen that is not adding up, did you take off taxes and so forth?" So she says, "Yeah, tax has to be taken". I say, "I have been working under the table, why does tax have to be taken off?" And she will give me this story, and tell me how I have no rights here, and she can't do this and can't do that, and if I don't like it then I am going to have to leave. But because I need the money, I have to send [money] every month to my family, I have to take it, right? (YS 8; Female, 27 years old)

Without adequate enforcement of regulations for employment standards, individuals are easily taken advantage of by employers who hire people "under the table." Similar experiences of expectations held by employers, about rates of pay, pace of work, and working conditions, were consistently identified by many respondents as the only type of labour market attachment opportunities they have been afforded.

The increasing abundance of precarious labour offered by temporary work agencies that seek to meet the needs of employers is another aspect of how labour market opportunities impact the transition to formal and stable employment. These temporary work structures contribute to employment insecurity by diminishing control held by employees over current and future employment prospects (Lewchuck, De Wolff, & King, 2007). One respondent accessing employment through temporary work agencies describes:

> I worked in an ice cream freezer; that's cold. So, I mean, I got like nine dollars and something an hour, and that was just minimum wage – a dollar more than minimum wage, at the time. Some of the jobs they have to put up more money….I did only three hours and told the manager straight up, I can't deal with this. I'm out of here…I got sick on top of that. So, some of the jobs, these guys have to offer up more. And, agencies have to issue up more money and better jobs. (YS 35; Male, 26 years old)

In situations of temporary employment, the agency securing the labourer for the job receives a fee from the company and then pays a part of that to the worker; a convenient situation for employers that only require short-term workers and for temporary employment agencies that receive a part of the wage earned by the efforts of the worker. For this respondent, the critical element of income was of concern.

Respondents' narratives also gave insight into "employment strain" – typified by the stress caused by the lack of control over employment pathways and maneuvering multiple precarious jobs at once (Lewchuck et al., 2007). These reflections describe the complex and challenging experiences of these young adults with employment as they navigate and negotiate

what appears to be a highly precarious labour market. However, despite the uncertain nature of the market, some young adults remain persistent in their efforts to overcome economic marginalization.

> Most of my employment has concentrated around retail and my first years [of] working were in janitorial. But you get stuck in it and you need to provide more, it's kind of…it's like a dead-end job; you'll always be working the same thing. And, it's very hard; it takes a long time [to move up]. But it has also limited me, because, you know, I could be so much more if they gave me the chance or if you would train me a little bit more to move up to the next level. So, yeah just small odd jobs, here and there; anything. I even make piñatas and sell them at kids' birthday parties, just to make extra cash or whatever – anything. If I see that my family needs it, I'll do it. (YS 21; Female, 24 years old)

As similarly described by this previous respondent, employment strain has made the job search and employment related decision-making challenging. Mounting personal responsibilities have resulted in some respondents having no options but to accept a position simply for the sake of being able to meet individual and familial needs. What is particularly troubling is the process of personal compromise, in addition to the cut in wages they are willing to undertake to simply survive.

> I am kind of in one of those stages where I will take anything. For me that means that I'm getting into a job for the money and not being totally into it. A money job, that's what I really want at this point, but I am very, very desperate. (YS 6; Male, 29 years old)

There are many individually rooted psycho-social consequences for these intersecting barriers of discrimination and employer expectations. The literature indicates that employment provides a structured environment and a sense of responsibility most often required to fend off dangerous influences (International Labour Organization, 2010; Lewchuck et al., 2007; Bjarnason & Sigurdardottir, 2003). However, facing constant obstacles to finding stable employment can lead to apathy and discouragement among young adults (International Labour Organization, 2010). Alternatively, having employment develops strong competencies, a positive self-identity, and a sense of community and civic involvement (International Labour Organization, 2010). Under these circumstances, and in need of subsistence, young adults engage in a broad range of informal economic activities.

> Not being able to find employment or not being able to find the right kind of employment, just sort of [leads you there] [Respondent referring to illegal activity to get money]. We all grew up together – that's the funny thing about Finch; all of us grew up together. Each generation, they all grow up together and then as they grow, you see the guys who are the jewelry thieves, or the older guys that are selling drugs. We just get caught up in that. Sometimes, some of us will just buy a fake diamond watch just to look the part. They had given up on work to live that lifestyle, and the only thing that is working for them is selling drugs. (YS 13; Male, 28 years old)

Alternatively, some respondents iterated overcoming some of these labour market barriers by either volunteering or – as stated in previous excerpts – taking on any job in the hopes of increasing choices in the labour market. One respondent explained:

> I was hurting because I wasn't able to find work. What I was able to find was the telemarketing job, which was a commission job. Without that voluntary experience, I didn't have a good chance of getting a job right away…You have to have that experience

> before you can get a job, and I think after having the experience it was really easy to get a job. (YS 15; Female, 20 years old)

For some, volunteering was recognized as a great point of entry into the labor market – allowing for networking, and ultimately the goal of gaining valuable Canadian experience. An emerging finding within academic literature shows that volunteering is a means by which some young adults are able to move from a more precarious labour market situation to stable, permanent employment. But more often than not, respondents could not conceive of the intrinsic value of volunteering as they perceived, based on their experiences, that volunteering does not lead to being hired on a permanent, full-time basis. Furthermore, they equated the time and resources used to train volunteers not only as wasteful, but also misleading.

> Canadian experience, they say is normally volunteering, but that is a waste of time. I think all that is required is you hire the person and then train them. Even if you don't want to train them out of your own pocket, at the end of the day they know they are training for a job that they will definitely be guaranteed, so they will make back that money that they have lost. Another barrier is even after you have done that voluntary experience, maybe you will be considered for a job, maybe not. (YS 15; Female, 20 years old)

Of note within these excerpts, are the multiple expectations that the labour market will constrain respondents' access to formal types of employment. For instance, in some regards, the labour market has become less responsible for providing the necessary training and development for employees. This increasingly encroaching informality to the North American labour market is a barrier that needs to be addressed at a public policy level. Many of the challenges respondents experienced when trying to secure employment are directly attributable to a widely unregulated formal labour market. Without sufficient opportunities within the labour market for young adults (and other precariously employed individuals), along with positive workplace experiences, cyclical patterns of poverty and negative social behaviours – such as involvement in crime – will be maintained. To adequately address these challenges, more effort is also needed at a service delivery level that seeks to address these negative socio-cultural stereotypes of young adults and ability.

Discussion and Conclusion

Previous scholarship has suggested that the marginalization and social inequality that result from inadequate income and labour market success among vulnerable populations (such as racial minorities and impoverished youth) are the outcomes of our social institutions that support a dominant cultural paradigm within society; a cultural paradigm that not everyone fits within. For instance, Bourdieu's notions of social reproduction and cultural capital have been used to describe the ongoing challenges and situations of marginalized groups in the United States and elsewhere (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourgois, 2003; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Collins, 2009; MacLeod, 1987). While most of this research highlights the influence of the educational system in reproducing the dominant notions of success (see for example: Foley, 1990; Collins, 2009), the findings from our research demonstrate that it is imperative to also look more deeply at the functions of the labour market in maintaining social inequality, and how these perceptions of social inequality become manifested cognitively by young adults. Rather than looking at the specific deficits of individuals and supporting a breadth of skills training programs aimed at aligning individuals with this dominant culture to improve upward social mobility, we need to also consider the realities of current labour market expectations and overall perceptions held by employers in relation to diversity – including ethnic and religious background, age, and ability. It

is imperative to question whether reform of the hiring practices of the labour market might serve a fundamental cultural and societal purpose to better meet the inherent needs and desires of the people it is meant to serve. Without adequate legislation and enforcement, many individuals – such as most of the respondents here – will continue to be victimized and marginalized by an increasingly precarious labour market, characterized by low-skill, low-pay, part-time, and temporary employment opportunities.

Many respondents in this study experienced insufficient economic opportunities that lead to the production of cyclical patterns of labour market attachment difficulties that can contribute to other negative life circumstances. These include poverty, homelessness, criminal behavior, and substance abuse (see also: (Brodsky & Ovwigho, 2002; Hong & Wernet, 2007; Pandey & Guo, 2007). On an individual level, inadequate opportunities result in personal psychosocial challenges that inhibit future employment success.

Evidence for this last point is present in the excerpts where respondents describe their perceptions of the experiences with discrimination and the stigmatization they faced when interacting with employers. The work of Erving Goffman (1963) on the concept of stigma is useful in explaining this point. Goffman states: "the normal and the stigmatized are not persons but rather perspectives" (p.138). Some young adults perceive their lack of success to attach to the labour market as a psychological process of realizing their stigmatized identity in relation to the expectations of that market. Other respondents were highly critical of the barriers that they faced when trying to attach to the market. But many young people identified the challenges they experienced as being rooted primarily in their own abilities, educational attainment, or other aspects of diversity (such as race or religion). Building on Goffman's work, it can be understood that the stigmatization of young adults in the labour market, together with their internalization of their differentness from what is considered to be normal, creates and maintains a hierarchy in labour market participation and social status generally.

Goffman identifies two possible outcomes that might help individuals resolve the issue of stigmatization. The first is that stigmatized individuals could support (or conform to) the norm, but maintain a status in society where they are not recognized as being part of that norm. The second is for individuals in the stigmatized category to alienate themselves from the norm group and community where the norm is manifested. These outcomes resonate with what has been witnessed with some young adults and their participation (or lack thereof) in the labour market. For instance, for the respondents who aim for the first outcome as they continue to experience discrimination and the internalization of a stigma related to identity, perceive that their own deficiencies – such as ability, age, and lack of experience – contributed to their lack of labour market attachment. They end up filling low-skill and low-pay employment positions, as these are what are made available to them. Despite this, they seek out further educational opportunities and voluntary positions to gain experience and skills in the hope of moving up in the market. In other situations, the second outcome has also manifested, noted in texts describing young adult participation in the illegal labour market with a disaffiliation (or lack of willingness to engage) with the formal labour market (See for example, Bourgois, 2003; MacLeod, 1987).

While Goffman (1963) focuses on describing the social situation (which has not changed much since his writing), there has been less insight into ways to address social inequality. With regard to how stigmatization is manifested in the social institution of the labour market, government-level decision makers need to implement structured policies that promote meaningful young adult employment. It is insufficient to just provide short-term summer employment programs providing entry-level experience. At the end of the summer, young adults

still experience the hardships of seeking full-time employment and also continue to maintain their stigmatized identities. Also, the rhetoric of "creating jobs" needs to be structured and focused on key populations that have been impacted the most by the drastic labour market shifts in North America during the last two decades. This does not just include considering young workers, but also other workers who have been negatively impacted by a "low skill/pay – high skill/pay" polarization. Furthermore, government-supported programs and initiatives that promote young adult employment should consider these individuals' experiences when trying to attach to the labour market. Greater emphasis could be placed on educating the employers about young adult unemployment and the barriers – socio-cultural and personal – that they face. In addition, further research should investigate the issue of discrimination from the perspective of employers. Such an analysis would complement the findings from this study that show that young adults do perceive experiencing various forms of discrimination, which in turn can have long-lasting psycho-social implications.

New programs that address young adult labour market attachment difficulties could be structured around engagement with employers to begin to address the perceived challenges with ageism, ableism, racism, and other forms of discrimination that these young adults find prevalent within the labour market. And, programs should focus on addressing the internalization of stigma experienced by young adults, as they struggle to conform to the norms expected of "normal" employees, currently generated in the labour market. The integration of these recommendations would help promote young adult intrapersonal development (and support a more equitable labour market), which can have a life-long impact on the lives of these youth. In addition, these strides forward could help move current expectations beyond individual social and human capital development toward the collective creation of a market that promotes labour market attachment for all young adults.

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