Calling Out Injustice: Youth from Differently Privileged Backgrounds Narrate About Injustice

"...we should think in terms of how is it that the combination of our various subjectivities impacts the way we perceive the world around us" (p. 57).

1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This study explores how different levels of *privilege* influence the ways in which youth perceive and express social injustice. Privilege is defined by demographic factors, such as economic status, school type, parental education and occupation, ethnicity, and language, that can be "associated with the position a person and their respective communities occupy within a larger society" (p. 43). The author explores the connection between young people's views on fairness and their treatment by authorities and peers, which are closely associated with academic performance, behaviour, coping strategies, moral development, and civic engagement.

2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

Participants were recruited from youth organizations located in diverse New York City neighbourhoods. These sites represented a wide socioeconomic range, from areas below the federal poverty line to communities with household incomes exceeding $100,000.

3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

The study included 64 youth between the ages of 15 and 18. For the purposes of analysis, participants were categorized into two groups based on privilege:

- *lower privilege:* 55% of these youth identified as Latino/a, 30% as Black/African American, 5% as Native American, and 5% as Middle Eastern.
- *higher privilege:* 70% of these youth identified as White, 15% as Latino/a, 5% as Black/African American, and 5% as Asian.

4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

Participants were presented with an intentionally ambiguous, school-based scenario involving student peers and a teacher, in which someone likely engaged in deceit and a student was excluded. Participants were then invited to engage in four narrative activities:

- Personal Story: participants were asked to tell a personal story about something similar that had happened to them.
- Culprit Email: participants were asked to retell the story from the perspective of the plausible *culprit*.
- Victim Email: participants were asked to retell the story from the perspective of the plausible *victim*.
- Complaint Letter: participants were invited to narrate by addressing a school official.

The narratives were analyzed using *blind coding*, meaning that the researcher was unaware of each narrator's participant demographic information and analyzed narratives in a random order to avoid bias. Through *plot analysis*, each narrative was broken down into its basic structure — characters, the main problem or "trouble," actions, conflict, and

resolution — with the researcher paying particular attention to what 'triggered' the story, such as dishonesty, exclusion, or competition. Next, through *content analysis*, the narratives were coded for fairness-related words, like "not fair," "cheated," or "excluded," noting differences in tone between the 'victim' and 'culprit' perspectives. Finally, the researcher compared results across groups, looking at how often fairness language appeared and what kinds of "trouble" youth described, showing patterns that could be linked to their different social backgrounds.

5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

Findings indicate that youth from *less* privileged backgrounds narrated more openly about instances of dishonesty and exclusion. When interpreting the hypothetical scenario, they were more likely to see exclusion, lying, and deception as the main 'troubles' that set events in motion and made the story worthy of telling. They used the opportunity provided by the activity to narrate about the likely causes and outcomes of situations involving lying and exclusion. These youth also used language that more explicitly addressed exclusion, lying, and deceiving.

In contrast, more privileged participants were prone to "playing the middle ground" – using strategies that diminished their own responsibility in situations of exclusion or deprivation of a desired outcome. They were also more likely to view *unintentional* exclusion as the main "trouble" trigger.

6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

Youth from less-resourced, racialized contexts may develop a sharper lens for recognizing exclusion and deception, and they may use more direct language to call it out. Understanding these differences supports practitioners to interpret youth narratives with sensitivity to context and power. The research also underscores that fairness perceptions may be tied to wellbeing and school engagement.

This crucial insight demonstrates that the *level* of privilege young people hold may influence not only how they *experience* the world, but also how they *interpret* and *express* power dynamics. Recognizing these differences equips youth workers to better understand diverse perspectives and to validate the realities of young people who may feel silenced or overlooked.

This research calls on youth workers to **prioritize critical awareness and empathy** in practice. By engaging with how youth from different backgrounds narrate injustice, practitioners can create spaces where young people's voices are taken seriously, power imbalances are addressed, and support is truly responsive. In doing so, youth work becomes not only a site of care but also a platform for fostering justice, equity, and belonging.

Jović, S. (2021). Calling out injustice: Youth from differently privileged backgrounds narrate about injustice. *Human Arenas, 6*(1), 41–61.