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1

Calling it like they see it? Young adults' discourses of employment and labour market inequalities

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Abstract

Purpose – Work experiences in the early career phase can have a lasting impact on employment engagement and quality of life. Not all young adults have access to resources that support labour market success. Some may contend with barriers to employment connected to their social identities and circumstances which perpetuate disadvantage. This paper examines how young adults frame their early work experiences and the advantage or disadvantage they may face in the labour market.

Design/methodology/approach – We conducted qualitative interviews with 47 young adults (ages 18–35 years) from Ontario, Canada representing diverse and intersecting identities of race, gender, sexuality, disability, education, socioeconomic level and immigration status. The data were interpreted using discourse analysis and through an intersectional lens.

Findings – Participants framed their early work experiences according to discourses of privilege, need and luck. Discursive constructions revealed or obscured advantage or disadvantage within early work experiences and highlighted how young adults with various intersecting identities understood their employment possibilities and choices.

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Originality/value – By focusing on discourses of early work experiences, we illustrate how young adults make sense of their trajectories exploring understandings of privilege along with oppression in uneven power relations and social structures. Adopting an intersectional approach, we offer a complex depiction regarding young adults' understandings of privilege, disadvantage and the role of luck, and challenge ideological notions of merit, choice and agency navigating contemporary labour markets.

Keywords Disadvantage, Discourse analysis, Intersectionality, Power, Young adults

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Young adults increasingly report challenges entering and advancing within the working world, including facing difficulties finding stable and secure employment (Martin and Lewchuk, 2018; Morissette, 2021). Young adults from economically marginalized groups, such as those who identify as racialized, persons living with disabilities or women, can face unique obstacles at the interpersonal, workplace and societal levels that contribute to disadvantage in entering and advancing in the labour market (Galarneau *et al*., 2023; Lindsay *et al*., 2023; Cabasés and Úbeda, 2022). The intersection of these identities has the potential to compound obstacles and contribute to greater disadvantage at work (Ingram *et al*., 2023; Zuccotti and O'Reilly, 2018; Zou *et al*., 2022). We conducted a qualitative study to explore early work experiences and how a diverse group of young adults (ages 18–35 years) in Ontario, Canada discursively framed their experiences including their advantage or disadvantage at work. Our research is informed by intersectionality to unpack systems of power in labour markets and employment relations that can deepen our understanding of employment inequities in early work experiences (Lee and Tapia, 2021; McBride *et al*., 2015).

The early working years are characterized by several dynamic and complex vocational transitions that include leaving education or training, finding paid work, sustaining employment and career advancement (e.g. evolving work roles, skills and expertise). Not surprisingly, these transitions provide a foundation that can impact long-term career success or employment disadvantage (Fauser and Mooi-Reci, 2024; Xu *et al*., 2024). Difficulties obtaining secure employment at the early career phase are thought to have an economic scarring effect that contributes to adverse outcomes (e.g. underemployment, lost productivity, job insecurity) that can extend across one's working life (Taheri, 2022; Xu *et al*., 2024).

In Canada, where the current study was conducted, there are nine million youth (ages 15–24 years) and young adults (ages 25–34 years), many of whom report challenges finding work (Morissette, 2021; Statistics Canada, 2018). Data from Statistics Canada paint a portrait of economic disadvantage faced by young adults who are less likely to have a job in comparison to older-aged adults even when accounting for educational attainment (Morissette, 2021). Thirteen percent of Canadian young adults (aged 15–29) report being entirely excluded from participating in employment, education or training (Layton, 2022). Additionally, young adults who do find paid work are more likely than older groups of workers to report working precariously including insecure, unprotected, non-permanent or low paying forms of employment (Martin and Lewchuk, 2018; Morissette, 2021). Precarious employment is a growing reality for Canadian young adults over the last three decades (Morissette, 2021). In 2019, 39.6% of Canadian young adults (aged 15–30 years) were in non-permanent or part-time contracts (i.e. employed <30 hrs/week) compared to 14.0% of older workers (Morissette, 2021). Precarious employment may mean that young adults are more susceptible to economic shocks than older age groups (Morissette, 2021; Taheri, 2022). For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic precariously employed young adults were more likely to report being furloughed, having their work hours reduced or being laid off when compared to older Canadian workers (Layton, 2022).

The experience of transitioning into the working world is not consistent for all young adults; certain groups of young adults may face more pronounced disadvantages that contribute to social inequities (Taheri, 2022; Zou *et al*., 2022; De Schepper *et al*., 2023). Race, gender, socioeconomic status (SES) or disability status can be related to the experience of discrimination or employment barriers during the job search and interview process (Lindsay

et al., 2023; Taheri, 2022; Zou *et al*., 2022). When they enter the workforce, some groups of young adults who face disadvantage may be more likely to work precariously or obtain lower quality employment when compared to their peers (Cabasés and Úbeda, 2022; De Schepper *et al*., 2023; Galarneau *et al*., 2023; Shahidi *et al*., 2023). For instance, a systematic review examining SES differences in transitions to employment found that young adults from families with low SES reported more difficulty finding work and were less likely to have better quality jobs compared to their peers from families with higher SES (De Schepper *et al*., 2023). In this review, higher SES was associated with greater access to material resources, social networks, education and extracurricular learning opportunities that were protective against precarious work (De Schepper *et al*., 2023). In another study of 395,000 Canadian young adults who earned bachelor's degrees between 2014 and 2017, persons of colour reported lower employment earnings than their white counterparts (Galarneau *et al*., 2023). The authors suggested structural racism may play a role in these disparities although their analysis relied on previously collected data that did not explore racial discrimination (Galarneau *et al*., 2023). Other quantitative research has indicated that exposure to ableism or sexism can contribute to unequal access to employment opportunities including secure and stable employment (Kamerāde and Richardson, 2017; Shahidi *et al*., 2023).

Intersectionality offers a theoretical lens to better understand how individuals may experience specific conditions and manifestations of discrimination or privilege that can emerge due to overlapping social identities and their positioning in broader and uneven power relations and social structures (Crenshaw, 1991; Bowleg, 2012; Nixon, 2019). The term "intersectionality" was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw and is rooted in legacies of Black feminist and legal scholarship that attends to the interconnected and interlocking systems of power and oppression such as racism, sexism, ableism and classism (Crenshaw, 1989; Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Nixon, 2019). A growing body of research has advocated for intersectional approaches to interpret axes of differentiation across individual identities and experiences and to examine the intersecting power structures that contribute to advantage or disadvantage within the working world (Lee and Tapia, 2021; McBride *et al*., 2015; McBride and Rodriguez, 2024).

There is not one agreed-upon method to applying an intersectional theoretical framework to research (Bauer, 2014; Bowleg, 2008, 2012; McBride *et al.*, 2015). Instead, intersectionality is seen as a flexible and dynamic approach that allows researchers to examine how socially constructed dimensions of difference shape individual experience (Misra *et al.*, 2020). Intersectionality attends to complexity, and how categories of difference are interrelated, entangled and grounded in particular social, political and historical contexts (Misra *et al.*, 2020). To date, few qualitative studies of young adults have applied an intersectional approach to unpack the discourses of early employment experiences.

Our paper aims to enhance our understanding of the complexities of the early career phase for young adults who differ across gender, race, sexuality, education, disability, immigration status and SES as they transition into work. We explore how young adults frame their experiences of employment in the early phase of their working lives, how discourses differ across participants and may be shaped by intersecting identities, and finally, what these discursive framings reveal or obscure about labour market advantage or disadvantage. We showcase the complexities of young adults' understandings and experiences of inequality, illustrate how axes of differentiation overlap in unique ways and why static, essentialized categories fail to capture the nuance and complexity of individual experiences and how young adults make sense of them.

We offer novel findings regarding young adults' understandings of privilege, disadvantage and the role of luck in their employment experiences among a Canadian sample. While previous research has explored meanings of meritocracy (Friedman *et al*., 2024), legitimization of precarious work (Trappmann *et al*., 2023) and gendered constructions of luck in career trajectories (Poorhosseinzadeh *et al*., 2024), our study adopts an intersectional approach to offer unique findings on young adults' discourses and the complexities of employment inequities which challenge ideological notions of merit, choice and agency navigating contemporary labour market realities.

Methods

Study design and theoretical considerations

We interviewed young adults about their early work experiences including finding employment, sustaining work and career advancement. We took a critical interpretive qualitative approach to inform our research and analyses which acknowledges that reality is constructed through language, interaction and individual meaning-making within historical and social contexts (Eakin, 2016; Lincoln *et al*., 2018; Kincheloe *et al*., 2018). Our inquiry is also rooted in an intersectional framework to enhance our understanding of the complexities in the transition to work for young adults with varying relationships to systems of power and privilege. An intersectional lens provided us with a tool to unpack how young adults with different overlapping social identities and dimensions of difference framed early work experiences and how they may be shaped by broader social structures of inequality.

Participant eligibility and recruitment

To examine a breadth of early work experiences, participants who vary across age, gender, race, sexuality, disability, immigration status and SES were purposively recruited for interviews. To be eligible, participants had to reside in Ontario, Canada and be between the ages of 18–35 years at the time of the interview. Three-quarters of participants were recruited using a survey research firm. Eligible participants identified by the research firm were sent email invitations and a study information letter. Interested participants were asked to contact a member of the research team directly to confirm eligibility, provide informed consent and schedule an interview. One-quarter of participants were recruited via snowball sampling where participants who completed the interview identified potential participants who would be well-suited to take part in the study. All interested potential participants were provided study information which outlined details regarding the study and asked to review and provide informed written consent prior to participation. Participants received a $50 honorarium for their involvement. All research procedures were approved by the University of Toronto's research ethics board (#40946).

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted and asked about young peoples' experiences finding and sustaining employment, their career ambitions and future employment opportunities. Prior to interviews, participants completed a brief online sociodemographic questionnaire. The questionnaire asked about age, marital status, SES, disability, care responsibilities, education, gender and sexuality. Survey responses were used, with participant consent, to inform specific interview questions and probes regarding how their social identities may impact employment experiences and opportunities. Most interviews were conducted virtually via the Zoom platform and a few interviews were completed by telephone as requested by the interviewee. Interviews were carried out by two trained qualitative researchers (KN, RS) on the research team between August and December 2021. Each interview lasted between 20 and 60 minutes and was audio recorded with participant consent.

Forty-seven young adults were interviewed of which 32 were women, 14 were men and one identified as non-binary. Sixteen participants were born outside of Canada, 31 participants were persons of colour and one participant was Indigenous (Métis). Eight participants identified as part of the Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and other people who identify as part of sexual and gender diverse communities who use additional terminologies (2SLGBTQIA+) (Government of Canada, 2024). In addition, nine participants reported living with a disability. Thirty-one participants had never been married, while 16 were married or in common law relationships. Nine participants reported having childcare and/or eldercare responsibilities. Work experiences varied widely, with a diversity of industries, employment contracts and work arrangements. Nineteen young adults were employed in permanent positions, while 12 did not specify whether their job was permanent or a short-term contract. Job tenure ranged from a few days to eleven years (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participant demographics ($n = 47$)

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Immigrant	Person of colour	Disability	2SLGBTQIA+	Care responsibilities	Family income ($)	Employment type	Employment temporality
1001	34	M					*	≥ 150,000	FT	P
1002	27	F		*				60–89,000	FT	Not given
1003	28	M						90–119,000	FT	T
1004	26	F					*	≥ 150,000	FT	P
1005	28	M						60–89,000	FT	P
1006	30	M		*				≥ 150,000	FT	Not given
1007	29	F			*	*		90–119,000	FT	Not given
1008	30	F			*		*	30–59,000	PT	Not given
1009	30	M	*	*				90–119,000	Independent contractor	
1010	Not given	F						30–59,000	FT	S
1011	33	M	*	*				≥ 150,000	FT	Not given
1012	21	M		*		Do not know		30–59,000	PT	P
1013	19	F		*				120–149,000	FT	S
1014	31	F	*	*	*			90–119,000	PT	P
1015	29	M		*				60–89,000	FT	Not given
1016	28	F	*	*			*	30–59,000	FT	Not given
1017	31	F	*	*			*	≥ 150,000	FT	P
1018	28	F		*				120–149,000	FT	P
1019	32	Non-binary			*	*		30–59,000	FT	P
1020	30	F		*				≤ 29,000	FT	Not given
1021	29	F		*				30–59,000	Unclear	Odd jobs
1022	25	F	*	*				60–89,000	FT	P
1023	23	F	*	*	*			30–59,000	FT	T
1024	25	M	*	*				60–89,000	FT	P
1025	30	F	*	*		*	*	60–89,000	FT	Not given

(*continued*)

Table 1. Continued

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Immigrant	Person of colour	Disability	2SLGBTQIA+	Care responsibilities	Family income ($)	Employment type	Employment temporality
1026	32	F			*	*	*	≤ 29,000	Medical leave	
1027	23	F		*				30–59,000	PT	T
1028	28	F						≥ 150,000	FT	T
1030	29	F		*				Prefer not to answer	Independent contractor	
1031	33	F	*	*		*	*	≤ 29,000	FT	P
1032	27	F		*		*		≤ 29,000	FT	Not given
1033	34	F	*	*			*	30–59,000	Unclear	Not given
1034	30	M	*	*				120–149,000	FT	P
1035	24	F		*				60–89,000	FT	T
1036	29	F			*	Do not know		30–59,000	FT	Not given
1037	29	M	*	*		*		≥ 150,000	Unemployed	
1038	28	M						60–89,000	FT	Not given
1039	28	F				*		30–59,000	Independent contractor	
1040	29	F		*	*		*	120–149,000	PT	P
1041	23	F			*	Prefer not to answer		30–59,000	FT	T
1042	31	F						90–119,000	FT	P
1043	30	F	*	*				Prefer not to answer	FT	P
1046	31	M		*				30–59,000	Independent contractor	
1047	Prefer not to answer	M	*	*		Prefer not to answer		30–59,000	FT	P
1048	31	F		*				≥ 150,000	FT	P
1049	29	F	*	*				30–59,000	FT	P
1050	26	F		*				60–89,000	FT	P

Note(s): M = Male; F = Female; FT = Full-time; PT = Part-time; P = Permanent; T = Temporary; S = Seasonal; * = Participant endorsed identity
Source(s): Authors' own work

Coding and analytic strategy

The audio-recorded interviews were professionally transcribed. All transcripts were reviewed by members of the research team to ensure accuracy. The transcripts were then uploaded to NVivo software for data management and to aid in the coding of transcripts. An initial descriptive codebook was developed and revised through several iterative conversations among members of the research team. Two transcripts were coded by three team members to ensure dependability. The remaining transcripts were coded by pairs of researchers (i.e. a primary and secondary coder) who took a comprehensive line-by-line coding approach.

Once coding was completed, we critically re-examined codes and noted prevailing and alternative discourses the participants used to frame their early work experience. Discourses can be defined as the ways in which individuals think, talk and write about phenomena or aspects of their reality (Rudman, 2005). In taking a critical approach, we viewed participants' accounts as situated social constructions in which individuals draw on discourses and other interpretive resources to make sense of themselves and their everyday lives (Eakin and MacEachen, 1998; Green and Thorogood, 2014; Laliberte Rudman, 2013). Importantly, language is not neutral nor value free and orders reality in a particular way which may reflect and reproduce societal power structures and dominant ideologies (Lupton, 1992; MacEachen *et al*., 2008). Using an intersectional framework, we then examined who used particular discourses and how discourses differed across participants at the intersection of salient identities. By comparing participants' discursive constructions of their experiences, we interrogated what the discourses revealed or obscured in relation to labour market challenges.

Findings

Our analysis revealed that participant accounts of their early employment experiences were constructed according to three discourses: privilege, need and luck. We briefly describe these discourses and the participants' intersecting identities who adopted them. We also explore tensions between luck and privilege that emerged from our data, showcasing how the discourse of luck obscured privilege in some cases and disadvantage in others.

Discourses of privilege

Discourses of privilege reflected the advantages that some participants described as they entered and advanced within the labour market. Privilege was explained by participants as a position of economic or social power reflected in access to resources (i.e. social, financial) that could enable better quality employment opportunities. Recognition and experience of privilege intersected race, gender and disability status. In this section, we present discourses of privilege as a point of comparison to discourses of need and luck presented in later sections.

Young adult participants who were white tended to recognize and articulate advantage in speaking about their employment opportunities drawing on discourses of privilege to frame their experiences; this was especially true among white men. Also, white participants described their access to resources that shaped their employment possibilities including their social networks and financial and educational resources which provided them with advantages over other young adults who were of different races. As an example, a 34-year-old white man working as a wealth management advisor described how he was able to rely on his family's social network to get a job after finishing his studies:

> The first job you get is probably the most challenging job for an individual to get just because you don't have any experience. . . . I was able to pull on the kind of personal connections that some people wouldn't necessarily have. (Participant 1001)

The early career phase was described by most participants as including several work-related transitions that could determine employment later in life. Participants' discourses around privilege revealed access to resources and support to navigate these early career transitions.

Participant 1001, quoted above, relied on family connections to get his first interview out of university and ensure a relatively smooth transition into the working world. He had worked at his company for over 11 years. Similar discourses emerged from other white men participants who often spoke of financial or familial support related to the advantages they had navigating their early work transitions.

A 23-year-old white woman with a disability recognized how financial resources and education contributed to the advantages she had in navigating difficulties finding and sustaining employment with a disability. The participant acknowledged that being white was connected to a level of affluence that may enable her to overcome barriers to employment related to having a disability.

> I feel like, even with my disabilities and stuff, I still have so much privilege over other people. I'm white, I have money to fall back on, so I don't have to take jobs that are horrible. I've had education . . . I think the biggest one [advantage] would probably just be affluence or access to money. (Participant 1041).

While the participant acknowledged her disadvantage because of ableism, she also recognized her advantages because of other systems of inequality (e.g. racism).

Other women participants offered a more nuanced discourse of privilege. A 31-year-old white woman working in finance and insurance stated:

> As a white woman, I know I come from a place of privilege . . . if there was really ever a barrier it would be just my sex, being a woman.

She reflected on the complexities of her identities and privilege in the labour market while recognizing that privilege in one system of inequality (i.e. racism) does not negate potential disadvantage in a different system of inequality (i.e. sexism).

In this first section, we outlined how some young adults acknowledged their privilege. Being white represented a salient identity that was frequently connected to discourses of privilege although, women and participants with disabilities constructed their privilege in greater complexity.

Discourses of need

Some participants framed their early career experiences around discourses of need. Discourses of need involved the requirement to make practical decisions for financial reasons often coupled with family care responsibilities and reflected limited personal power or choice with regards to employment. A discourse of need was associated with feeling forced to take low quality work with poor remuneration and limited job security. Limited resources with low quality work (e.g. financial insecurity, minimal work experience or family/social networks) further disadvantaged participants. Women and non-binary young adults that were also persons of colour, immigrants or persons with disability most often described discourses of need.

A 32-year-old white, single mother with multiple disabilities described having limited employment choices. The participant's low SES and financial need limited her educational attainment and her early work experiences. The participant was forced to undertake repetitive, strenuous, low paying jobs. She noted:

> Those of us who don't have a university degree are stuck doing the slave labour . . . you do the jobs for minimum wage that nobody else wants to do (Participant 1026).

Immigrant women participants, including those with post-secondary degrees or professional training, also discussed difficulties getting employment in their respective fields. They often noted that domestic work experience was seen as vital. Not having domestic professional experience resulted in being forced into low-wage jobs despite educational attainment and expertise. A 33-year-old South Asian woman participant who worked as an engineer before

coming to Canada described her frustration trying to find a job in her field of work. Potential employers did not recognize her international credentials. She eventually took a role as a customer support worker out of financial necessity.

> I just started work [in the customer service job]. You just started because you need the money after all. You have to survive here so that's the only option you have (Participant 1031).

In another example, a 32-year-old white non-binary young adult with a disability described the need for workplace supports to remain employed. This participant felt locked in a low paying job because they had obtained job accommodations from their current employer to manage their disability. Fearful that a better paying job may not offer these same accommodations, the participant was forced to take a second job catering on evenings and weekends to supplement their income. They admitted:

> I only really have the second job because I need the money. If I could just work one job I would (Participant 1019).

Their low SES coupled with their disability limited their career options and heightened their need.

This section has described the limited employment choices and possibilities that some young adults, especially women or non-binary persons that were racialized, immigrants, solo caregivers or experiencing disabilities, had as a consequence of their financial need. In these participant accounts, employment realities were determined by financial circumstances and consequently, the need to work.

Discourses of luck

In comparison to those who described their early employment experiences as being shaped by discourses of privilege or discourses of need, other participants attributed entering and advancing within the labour market to luck. The discourse of luck suggested that participants felt that their employment outcomes were due to good fortune while simultaneously diminishing other factors in their personal contexts. Discourses of luck intersected race, culture, gender and SES. People of colour with low SES minimized their agency in finding employment and also downplayed their exposure to precarious employment. Among white participants and those who reported a high SES drawing on discourses of luck minimized their privilege.

A 21-year-old South Asian man working in higher education suggested that there were a limited number of positions and increased competition in their field, especially during periods of economic decline. Reflecting on experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, the participant noted that finding work was challenging especially for new workers coming out of school with less job experience.

> I was lucky in that I was hired during that liminal period between when the pandemic was just getting started and becoming our new reality (Participant 1012).

Despite feeling lucky in finding work during a period of economic instability, Participant 1012 felt like he lacked opportunities for career advancement unless he obtained further educational qualifications. Still, Participant 1012 further reflected on his luck; working in an environment where his colleagues were welcoming of his cultural identity. Yet, he later revealed in the interview wrestling with having to disclose his identity if he wanted to participate in certain holidays.

> There's a certain amount of disclosure I have to give in order to receive what other individuals [get] . . . it's a given that they'll get Christmas off and Thanksgiving off. While I have to disclose certain parts of my identity or certain practices that I perform in order to have the same privilege. . . . if it was up to me, I would rather not disclose anything because I'd like to keep those two aspects of my life somewhat separate.

Participant 1012 had to disclose parts of his identity to access leave. While he felt "lucky" his workplace was welcoming, he still had to disclose parts of his identity which made him uncomfortable. He felt that it made him vulnerable to potential discrimination which could add to his disadvantage.

Framing career experiences through the lens of luck also undermined unfavourable working contexts which can often create barriers or challenges to career success. Some participants who characterized themselves as lucky described being fortunate to find any job, even if it was a short-term contract and were precariously employed. Despite a preference for stable full-time employment, a South Asian student working in an administrative role at a post-secondary institution described their experience of cobbling together multiple contracts with the requirement to re-apply for each successive contract. She admitted "*. . . it is obviously not ideal; I would prefer to just be given the job*" (Participant 1027). Still, she framed her circumstances as fortunate considering a lack of secure job opportunities.

Other participants that considered themselves lucky within their career also described working in a job where there was a lack of employer-provided benefits and limited opportunities for advancement and progression. Again, by suggesting the element of luck, this seemingly negated the very real job insecurity and limited opportunities that characterized the labour market. These participants often accepted the reality of obtaining short-term contracts and employment insecurity. For instance, some participants highlighted a broader reluctance among employers to hire permanent employees. Offering such rationales seemingly buttressed their beliefs that they were lucky to have *any* job at all, regardless of its quality. Within these accounts, luck operated discursively to reinforce the hegemony of precarious work and participants' lack of agency securing employment.

The discourse of luck also obscured the efforts participants took to obtain employment in a challenging job market. For instance, a 27-year-old woman of colour with a graduate degree just began working as an intern in a field that was directly aligned with her education and may provide a pathway to a high quality, secure job that met her career goals. She described:

> This was one opening that they had that I managed to get luckily so this is actually a job that is very well connected to what I studied in school (Participant 1032).

Yet she had been applying for positions for three years post-graduation and worked in retail in the interim. She admitted:

> I just basically applied over and over and over again until I finally got through, but in the meantime, I applied to numerous other jobs as well, a lot of jobs …. I was applying for jobs for three years (Participant 1032).

The discourse of luck among participants often diminished the effort that was required for young adults to find employment.

In another example, a 30-year-old woman of colour working at a community health centre described feeling "super fortunate" to have been hired through a summer jobs program after having to take a volunteer position. Interestingly, being a person of colour created a situation that led to her opportunity. She shared:

> I did partially feel like it worked to my advantage to be a visible female minority when I was applying, because there aren't very many of me around this area in particular. So, if my employer was looking to, I guess, check those boxes, I do think it probably worked to my advantage (Participant 1020).

By attributing her hiring to her identity, Participant 1020 downplayed her expertise and the time she spent volunteering and building job qualifications. The discourse of luck minimized her skills and work ethic and made her question if her identity was the basis for her employment.

Interestingly, among other study participants, discourses of luck obscured privilege in the labour market. In our sample, some participant's luck discourses concealed actual advantage. This was particularly salient among white participants and among those who reported a high SES which enabled employment possibilities and permitted employment choices that aligned with their ambitions, education and job skills (that were not solely a stroke of good luck). In this way, the ability to have choices was a marker of privilege among some "lucky" participants.

A 29-year-old white 2SLGBTQIA + -identifying female paramedic described her fortune to have found a permanent full-time position. As she explained:

> The job market is really tough. It's basically like 1,000 applicants for 100 positions, so you're fighting with so many people to get a job. And not many places will give you full-time, so I was one of the lucky ones to get a full-time job (Participant 1007).

She later revealed:

> A lot of the [work]places that offer full-time, which isn't a lot, are in the more secluded areas, that are under-serviced, so they want people to come to them. . . . I did turn down a position that was part-time that was about 30 minutes away from my parent's house, but I just didn't want the part-time hours, there's not guaranteed many hours. So, I chose to move halfway across the province (Participant 1007).

Although this participant attributed her ability to find full-time work within her field to luck, her quote reflects privilege of choice, including the resources and autonomy to move geographical locations. Those with limited financial resources may not have the same opportunities to apply to remote locations far away from their permanent residency, unable to afford the relocation costs that would be required. For other participants who considered themselves lucky, their privilege, in the form of access to financial support, meant that they could leave employment that had poor working conditions. Without access to these resources, they would not have been able to risk leaving unfavourable work arrangements.

Access to material resources also enabled certain educational pathways that were required to meet career aspirations. A white woman participant, currently enrolled in a program to become an aviation professional, described the prohibitive costs of her program for those without financial resources. This participant highlighted how her parents had provided money to fund her studies, and she recognised that her peers did not have access to these same resources. The participant was able to pursue her choice career. She too described herself as lucky and did not name her privilege.

> It's a very expensive program. The fact that there is not a lot of spare time to get a part time job doesn't help. I am very lucky that my parents set up a RESP [Registered Education Savings Plan] for me so I hopefully won't have to take out too many student loans to complete the program. But I know that is definitely a huge challenge for other people trying to enter the industry (Participant 1010).

Solely framing their circumstances as fortunate or lucky diminished participant's privileged socioeconomic positions that also contributed to their employment possibilities. Without naming their privileged social positions, participants perpetuated the invisibility of structural forces that maintained unequal opportunities.

In this section, we explored participants' discourses of luck. By attributing their early career experiences to luck, participants with different intersecting identities framed their experiences in such a way that diminished their precarity and effort, or their privilege.

Discussion

Entering and advancing within the world of work is not equal for all young adults. Our study contributes to the literature on inequities in the labour market by examining how early employment experiences were understood and discursively constructed, how discourses

differed across participants with various intersecting identities, and what these discourses revealed or obscured regarding the dynamics of privilege and disadvantage within the labour market. By examining a breadth of experiences according to gender, race, sexual identity, education, disability, immigration status and SES, we contribute to intersectional scholarship by highlighting a spectrum of advantage and disadvantage at the early career phase. Additionally, by interrogating the discourses young adults used to frame their experiences, findings highlight complexities in their understanding of privilege and disadvantage. Even among young adults that drew on the same discourse, we highlighted differences in participant experience based on intersecting identities. Our findings reinforce how overlapping systems of inequality can create complex patterns of advantage or disadvantage which may be amplified or diminished in different contexts.

Participants' discourses of privilege revealed access to resources which assisted them in navigating early employment. Findings suggested that more privileged discourses were often taken up by white participants and included the recognition of their access to resources and power within the labour market. Results align with a body of existing research highlighting the importance of different forms of capital (i.e. social, economic, cultural, symbolic, embodied) in successful transitions to work after graduation and confirms that access to forms of capital vary across class, race and gender which ultimately (re)produce inequalities (Burke *et al*., 2020; Ingram *et al*., 2023; De Schepper *et al*., 2023; Lehmann, 2023). Past research also suggests that white males often lack awareness and recognition of social privilege (Wu, 2021) and meritocratic beliefs remain (Mijs and Savage, 2020). However, in our study, we show that many white men participants drew on a discourse of privilege to speak about the advantages they had in their employment. Findings may suggest that within a more competitive labour market, young adults may be more aware of the advantages they are afforded in comparison to their peers.

Participants' discourses of need reflected their constrained possibilities and their exposure to systems of disadvantage, including being forced into low paying and unsafe employment. Findings align with past research which has shown that workers from historically disadvantaged groups are more often forced to confront discrimination and barriers to improve their working conditions or advance within their careers (Adams, 2022; Lindsay *et al*., 2023; Zou *et al*., 2022). This experience may be exacerbated among those with multiple identities that are connected with disadvantage. Indeed, navigating these interlocking systems of inequality may perpetuate young adults' limited employment choices and their need to accept low quality and precarious work as a consequence. Additionally, we illustrated that being white did not consistently equate to experiences of privilege in the labour market, highlighting instances where white participants faced employment disadvantages (e.g. women or those with disabilities). Our research further highlights the value of intersectional research on employment as a lens to elaborate on the nuance and complexity of individual experiences. We encourage further intersectional exploration of young adults' experiences to unpack broader structures of inequality that shape individual choices and the discourses they adopt to make sense of them.

Discourses of luck were used by some participants to attribute their employment success to circumstances that were outside of their control (i.e. an external force was responsible for their employment situation beyond their individual efforts and accomplishments). By acknowledging luck, participants challenged ideological assumptions around meritocracy, agency and choice, which offers a more complex depiction of employment inequities (Archer *et al*., 2023; Loveday, 2018; Sauder, 2020). Among study participants who were persons of colour and those with low SES who had secured employment, discourses of luck may have overshadowed their agency in taking steps to find work and overcome potential barriers to their employment. Discourses of luck may also have represented their sense of a lack of agency within a precarious labour market; a context in which working hard is not enough to ensure secure and stable employment. Luck discourses may have suggested an acceptance of, or normalization of, low quality work in which individuals felt fortunate to have any work. Finally, luck discourses may have also concealed actual advantage and privilege among some

participants. By framing themselves as lucky within the labour market, participants minimized the role their access to resources may have played in enabling employment possibilities and choices. Within the context of a precarious labour market, regardless of relative advantage or disadvantage, young adults may feel like employment success is outside of their control. Our findings bring to the forefront the importance of employment support programs to help navigate early career transitions.

Our work complicates Ingram *et al*.'s (2023) suggestion that luck is simply privilege in disguise. In their study, which followed 90 university graduates in their transitions to work over a seven-year period, Ingram *et al*. (2023) found that the discourse of luck was used by graduates to frame their work transitions when in fact it was the persistence of intersecting race-, class-, and gender-based inequalities which offered these graduates advantages in navigating the labour market (Ingram *et al*., 2023). Our findings suggest this is not always the case. Instead, our analysis more closely parallels a recent Canadian study conducted by Rollwagen and Mayhew (2023) who examined housing experiences among young adults. Interestingly, discourses of luck emerged among study participants who considered themselves lucky despite experiencing significant housing struggles and low-quality housing. In such cases, this reflected the normalization of poor housing realities. Similarly, in our study, luck discourses were employed by some participants despite their challenging employment experiences. Rollwagen and Mayhew (2023) note that luck was also used by those with privilege instead of naming their structural advantages in their access to housing. This is similar to how luck discourses were used by young adults in positions of advantage in our study. This framing made invisible the resources they had access to as a result of their privilege which enabled employment possibilities. Extending our own work, future research may explore why some young adults are more likely to recognize privilege and disadvantage in employment experiences versus those that equate their experiences to luck.

In our study, participants downplayed agency, effort or intrinsic motivation in accounts of their early work experiences. Surprisingly, meritocratic beliefs (i.e. that one's success is determined by effort, hard work and talent (Mijs, 2016)) and personal responsibility did not emerge as notable elements in their accounts of employment. While assumptions of meritocracy minimize the importance of external factors beyond an individual's abilities and efforts (Frank, 2016), our participants in contrast seemed to downplay the importance of their abilities and efforts. Instead, the discourses of privilege, need and luck seemingly challenge assumptions around meritocracy and suggest participants' diminished sense of agency, ascribing employment to factors outside of their control rather than their active and purposeful efforts undertaken at the early career phase. By attending to discourses of early employment, our analysis points to the different terms of understanding that young adults from diverse social positions draw upon to make sense of their experiences in a contemporary and precarious labour market.

The strengths of our study include the qualitative research approach that highlighted the early employment experiences of diverse young adults. Our diverse sample enabled us to gain breadth and depth in the complexity and dynamics of early employment and explore understandings of privilege *along with* oppression for a more complete understanding of the relationship between advantage and disadvantage in systems of inequality (Moradi and Grzanka, 2017; Nixon, 2019). Other strengths included an analytical process rooted in an intersectional framework. Through a reflexive approach, our study team was able to examine how intersecting identities may have shaped participant framings of experience. There are some limitations of our research. Interviews were conducted with participants at one time point; therefore, these young adults' stories, including the discursive framing of their employment experiences, capture how they viewed their early working lives at one particular moment, in the social and historical context in which they were situated. Moreover, our qualitative work does not allow us to definitively identify what factors led to certain early employment inequities. Instead, we focused on critically examining young adults' discourses and their intersectional identities. Finally, there is not one agreed-upon method to applying an intersectional approach to research (Hankivsky *et al*., 2010; Bauer, 2014; McBride *et al*., 2015).

We acknowledge that our use to explore who adopted particular discourses and how discourses differed across participants at the intersection of salient identities is one approach among many to study the complexities and multivocality of experience.

Conclusion

Our paper explored discourses of early employment, examining complexity in how young adults make sense of their early work experiences. Through discourses of privilege, need and luck, our research contributes to a growing body of literature to describe labour market challenges and inequities among young adults with intersecting social positions. We shed light on the unequal employment opportunities of a broad spectrum of young adults within Ontario, Canada and how discursive framings construct reality in ways that reveal or obscure advantage and disadvantage. Our findings reinforce the importance of examining the dynamic and interlocking systems of power that shape employment possibilities and choices to move beyond individual framings of employment. From an applied standpoint, findings highlight the need to consider the role identity plays in the design of employment support programmes tailored to young adults at the early phase of their careers.

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