

**“It was a Meaningless Job”:
Exploring Youth Post-Secondary Students’ Employment in the Fast Food Industry**

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Abstract

Fast food work is often described as low-skilled, alienating, standardized, and highly routinized. The fast food industry employs a disproportionately large number of youth post-secondary students who work on a temporary basis and do so part-time or during school breaks to earn money toward educational and living expenses. To date, little is known about post-secondary student fast food workers’ perceptions of their employment. Data from interviews with 32 post-secondary student fast food workers were analyzed. The student workers viewed their jobs as unimportant and low-skilled; however, as students, they were not seeking work that provided opportunities for creativity and meaning, rather, they emphasized the temporary nature of their work and described the inherent stigma and lack of prestige associated with long-term employment in the fast food industry. The students were critical of longer-term workers and animosity between student and non-student workers was expressed. These findings suggest that identity management theories, such as Ashforth and Kreiner’s dirty work, may be better suited to understanding students’ participation in fast food work than traditional Marxist frameworks.

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Introduction

Canadian post-secondary students' employment and work hours have increased at a steady rate during non-recession periods since the 1970s (Marshall, 2010; Usalcas, 2005). Researchers attribute students' increased labour force participation to rising tuition costs (Ouellette, 2006). An estimated 63% of all Canadian students rely on some form of employment income to at least partially fund education expenses (Ouellette, 2006). Student employment is often viewed as serving an instrumental purpose, as arguably few post-secondary students have begun work in their ideal careers. However, student employment, despite its instrumental purpose, can often have negative impacts on stress levels and mental and physical health outcomes (Laberge et al., 2011). Despite high post-secondary student participation in the paid labour force, there is little qualitative evidence about the experiences of students at work (Dundes and Marx, 2006).

Canadian workers have been subjected to eroding work conditions and increasingly precarious employment relationships since the 1970s (Benach, 2014) which negatively impact their wellbeing (Lewchuck et al., 2008). However, little is known about the experiences of post-secondary students who disproportionately occupy precarious jobs in the service sector (Marshall, 2010). Marshall (2010) finds that 20% of students work in the food and accommodations industry, compared to 6% of non-students.

A small, yet critical, literature exists on the conditions faced by fast food workers in general and a smaller body of literature addresses Canadian fast food work in particular (Reiter, 1991; Woodhall and Muszynski, 2011). However, only one study, which was conducted in Australia, explores post-secondary students' perceptions of fast food work (Allan et al., 2006). To date, there are no studies that directly examine Canadian post-secondary students'

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perceptions of their work in the fast food. As students comprise a large portion of this industry, this represents a significant gap in the current literature on fast food employment. In addition to addressing this important gap, recent research indicates a higher prevalence of psychological distress in post-secondary students as compared with the general population (Currie et al., 2011) which indicates a need to better understand the lives of youth who are attending post-secondary institutions, which includes their participation in the workforce.

The objective of this manuscript is to investigate post-secondary students' perceptions of and attitudes toward their employment in the fast food industry. To meet this objective, this manuscript presents an analysis of qualitative data from interviews with 32 fast food workers who were also post-secondary students in Ontario, Canada.

A Brief Overview of Fast Food Scholarship

Much of the early scholarship on fast food work is situated within the disciplines of economics and management science and describes the impact of minimum wage increases on restaurant operations (see Brown, 1999; Card and Krueger, 1993; Neumark and Wascher, 1995), as well as mechanisms for improving productivity, company image and employee monitoring (see Highhouse et al., 1999; Lee and Ulgado, 1997; Love and Hoey, 1990; Stewart and Donno, 1981). A considerable literature also exists on the fast food consumers' purchasing, consumption and health behaviours (see Alviola et al., 2014; Cotti and Tefft, 2013; Garcia et al., 2012; Kruger et al., 2014). These traditional mainstream approaches to researching the fast food industry largely ignore the experiences of fast food workers. In the present overview, the focus is on the small, albeit rich, literature on the experiences and realities of fast food employees.

Social scientific studies of fast food work emerged in the 1980s with the initial appearance of Ritzer's (1983) now famous McDonaldization thesis. Ritzer's (1983) first outline

of this argument briefly notes the experiences of fast food workers as characterized by impersonal, fleeting relationships between employees and customers and between employees themselves who often occupy fast food jobs for short periods of time. This brief, yet impactful, mention of employee relations paves the way for future exploration of the conditions of fast food work. Subsequent studies on labour relations in the fast food industry employ Marxist arguments and find the work to be highly routinized and devoid of skill and creativity (see Leidner, 1993; Reiter, 1991). In these studies, fast food franchises are found to have employed Taylorist principles (see Braverman, 1998) in attempt to increase efficiency through standardization and the enforcement of rigid workplace policies (Leidner, 1993; Reiter, 1991).

Employee regulation also leads to loss of identity as workers' appearances, moods, emotions, and attitudes are regulated to conform to franchise specifications (Leidner, 1993). The performance of emotional labour (see Hochschild, 2003) is important to workers' experiences, as their interactions are often scripted and they are required to maintain pleasant demeanors (Ritzer, 2008; Seymour, 2000). These findings are reinforced by more recent manuscripts that emphasize the alienating, repetitive, unskilled, and highly divided nature of fast food work (see Schlosser, 2002; Woodhall and Muszynski, 2011).

Fast food work is poorly compensated, low-skilled, part-time, precarious, unsustainable and unfriendly to union organization (Royle, 2010). Following the emergence of Marxist accounts of fast food work, a second wave of labour movement studies emerge. Schlosser (2002) finds that the poor conditions in the fast food industry incent its employers to hire young workers who are viewed as more amenable to working for low-pay and easier to control. Despite knowledge of these poor conditions, attempts at union organization are uncommon and often unsuccessful in the fast food industry (Gould, 2013; Royle, 2000). In the rare event that fast food

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employees are able to organize, some benefits are obtained (e.g. set work schedules); however, jobs continue to be low-paying and dead-end (Tannock, 2001).

Although the aforementioned evidence paints a negative picture of fast food work, some authors argue that workers' experiences of fast food jobs are not as objectionable as presented (Allan et al., 2006; Gould, 2010). Earlier management science findings indicate that employees hold positive views of their work as they value participation in team work, training, and development of customer service skills (Barron and Maxwell, 1998; Knutson, 2000). Gould (2010) finds that employees do view their jobs as largely devoid of complex skills, and as repetitive; however, he finds that younger employees are not bothered by this. In other words, they are content with the organization of their work and obtain satisfaction from their jobs, whereas older employees express less satisfaction with the repetitive and easy nature of their work. Employees with higher education levels are also less likely to be satisfied with their fast food jobs (Gould, 2010). None of these studies solely investigate the views of young workers who are concurrently enrolled in post-secondary educational institutions.

Presently, only one study explores post-secondary students' perceptions of their employment in the fast food industry. Allan et al. (2006) surveys 269 first and second year students in Australia and finds that these employees hold both positive and negative views of their work. Although few students think of their employment in fast food as a lifetime career, many are satisfied with the training they receive, the skills they acquire, and the social relations between themselves and their fellow customers and coworkers (Allan et al., 2006). The majority of student employees are dissatisfied with their pay and find their work monotonous. Negative views are also held toward management when requests are made to work extra hours for free or to perform tasks faster. Although this study captures the perceptions of university student fast

food employees, the present study builds on Allan et al.'s (2006) findings, as the students in their study are asked to respond to a series of standardized questions and do not provide their personal perceptions of their work in their own words. Moreover, the present study is the first to exclusively explore post-secondary perceptions and experiences with fast food work in Canada.

Perceptions of Labour: Stigmatized Jobs & Dirty Work

Fast food work is stigmatized (Schlosser, 2002) and is often viewed as undesirable work that lacks prestige (Kalleberg, 2009). Yet, despite this, the concept of dirty work has yet to be extended to the investigation of fast food employment. Rather, fast food work is framed as appropriate transitional work for young individuals who occupy these jobs while they attempt to gain more prestigious employment through obtaining formal education (Kalleberg, 2009). In theory, these workers are temporary fast food employees who are in school to obtain the credentials that are necessary for employment in professional careers. However, many new graduates experience difficulty entering the job market (Vedder et al., 2013) which may prolong their residencies in fast food work. Yet, despite their disproportional and potentially prolonged representation in the fast food industry, little is known about post-secondary students' actual perceptions of their work. Therefore, researchers are unable to account for students' unique positions and perceptions when discussing appropriate lenses through which fast food work can be viewed.

The concepts of dirty work and occupational taint are used to describe work that lacks prestige and where workers perform tasks that are socially regarded as physically or morally dirty and undesirable (Ashforth et al., 2007; Drew et al., 2007; Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Selmi, 2012; Simpson et al., 2012). This work and its workers are stigmatized and so-called dirty workers are often aware of this stigma (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). The concept of dirty work

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is found in blue, white and pink collared work. For example, researchers have recently conceptualized domestic labour (Bosmans et al., 2016), private security work (Hansen et al., 2016), garbage collection and street cleaning (Slutskaya et al., 2016), exotic dancing (Mavin and Grandy, 2013), butchery (Simpson et al., 2014), and investment banking (Stanley et al., 2014) as dirty work.

Identity theories postulate that one's sense of self is intimately connected to his or her work and the way it is socially perceived (Ashforth, 2001). Participation in stigmatized dirty work requires workers to negotiate or manage their identities in order to maintain a positive sense of self, separate from the dirt associated with their job roles (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). Identity management occurs when workers reframe their work by attaching positive value or removing negative connotations from work (Ashforth et al., 2007; Bosmans et al., 2016). Workers may also emphasize the non-stigmatized elements of work and or focus on more positively perceived characteristics of their occupational group (e.g. expert knowledge held, high pay, etc.) rather than placing focus on the actual performance of the dirty work itself (Ashforth et al., 2007). Identity management also occurs when dirty workers use social weighting techniques to cope with perceived stigma. Social weighting techniques relevant to the present study include selective social comparisons wherein workers compare themselves to perceived inferior members of their own occupation or to other occupational groups to elevate sense of self-worth and in-group disidentification wherein workers stress alternative roles and identities in their lives to distance themselves from the occupational group (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Bosmans et al., 2016). This can result in the formation of strong bonds and close knit groups; however, it can also result in animosity between groups of workers across and within occupations. As fast food work is viewed as undesirable, unprestigious and is stigmatized (Kalleberg, 2009; Schlosser,

2002), the concept of dirty work may be prove to be a useful concept to employ to the investigation of student workers' perceptions of their employment in fast food.

Methods

In this paper, we present a subsample of qualitative findings from a larger two phase mixed methods study that explored Body Mass Index in the larger Canadian food service population (see Woodhall-Melnik et al., 2015) and the food choices of fast food workers (see Woodhall-Melnik and Matheson, 2016).

In the qualitative phase of this study, 40 adult workers who were (n=32) or had in the past year (n=8) been involved in fast food work participated in semi-structured interviews. The original study design involved recruiting multiple workers from a few fast food franchises. However, requests for franchise participation were either ignored or denied and a new recruitment strategy was formed. The recruitment strategy was threefold. Mass emails were sent to undergraduate university students in South Western Ontario and students were asked to volunteer for the study if they were fast food employees (n=24). Second, Facebook was used as a gatekeeper to locate potential participants. The names of various large fast food chains were typed into Facebook's search bar to locate individuals who had publically listed their employers on their profiles (n=6). Profiles of individuals who live in South Western Ontario and had listed fast food employment were identified and recruitment messages and information letters were sent to potential participants using Facebook's messenger function. In addition, every person who participated in the study was given an extra copy of the information letter with the researcher's contact information. They were asked to pass the researcher's information along to any coworkers if they felt comfortable doing so and their coworkers made email or telephone contact with the researcher to schedule an interview (n=10).

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The interviews for this study took place between September 2011 and March 2013. Of the 40 fast food workers interviewed for this study, 11 worked for McDonald's, 10 for Tim Horton's, 4 for Burger King, 3 for Harvey's, 2 each were from Subway, Pizza Hut, and Pita Pit, and 1 each were from Coffee Time, Starbucks, Second Cup, Coffee Culture, Williams and a small local café. The average age was 20.4 years and ranged from 18 to 25 years. 75% of the sample was female which was anticipated as women are overrepresented in fast food work (Woodhall-Melnik et al., 2015). Weekly work hours varied greatly, ranging from 5 to 65 hours per week. The sample was racially diverse: 5 workers were Black, 7 were Middle Eastern, 5 were Asian, 1 was Aboriginal, and 25 were white. Of the 40 workers interviewed, 32 were enrolled in part or full-time post-secondary education. For this manuscript, the responses of the 32 post-secondary students were analyzed. In other words, these 32 participants constituted a unique subsample.

Each respondent was offered the opportunity to participate in a one-time, semi-structured interview which ranged from 30 to 90 minutes in length. Interviews were conducted at locations that were convenient for participants (e.g. on campus, at a coffee shop, etc.). Remuneration for participation was \$15. All of the 40 interviews conducted were audio recorded. 15 of these interviews were transcribed verbatim by a transcription service. Detailed notes were taken by the interviewer for the remaining 25 interviews and the data were verified using the audio recordings. The transcripts and detailed notes were organized and analyzed in NVivo. In this manuscript, participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms. This study received approval from the research ethics board at the University of Waterloo.

As noted above, the main interview content focused on workers' food choices and their eating habits at work. However, the participants were also asked about their views of their work

in fast food and their future occupational goals. In addition to questions on food choices and health, the following specific questions were asked to all respondents:

- Do you think the work you do is important? Why or why not?
- How do you view the work you do? Is it desirable or undesirable work?
- Does your work impact how you feel about the rest of your life? How?
- What are your long-term employment goals? Where do you see yourself working in the future?

In the present analysis, post-secondary students' responses surrounding their views on their work were isolated and analyzed.

This analysis began by employing the principles of grounded theory, wherein no previously established theory or lens was applied to the initial analysis. The analysis for this paper employed Strauss and Corbin's (1990) coding method. First, words and ideas that appeared frequently were identified using open coding. This involved reading each transcript or research note. Each interview was then read during axial coding to analyze the common ideas and words within the context of each interview. During the selective coding phase, the words and ideas were grouped into similar thematic categories. All of the sub-sample's responses to questions pertaining to their views on work were then coded into these thematic categories. The themes "views of work" and "temporary views of work" are presented in the analysis below. The young student workers described their work as dirty, unskilled, unprestigious and undesirable. Upon recognizing this, the data were recoded to indicate where workers had described their work as dirty or stigmatized. The concept of dirty work was then employed as a lens which is used to better understand young student workers' employment in fast food.

Findings

The analysis of the interview data indicated that the post-secondary student workers held strong opinions about their own and others' employment in the fast food industry. Despite

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competitive professional job markets in North America, student employees' perceptions of their work impacted their ability to view their work as anything more than temporary labour to be performed while in school. The sub-sections below present the post-secondary workers' perceptions of fast food work and how these perceptions and attitudes impact their perceived occupational tenures and workplace relationships.

“It’s not Ground Breaking, Just Coffee and a Bagel:” Perceptions of Fast Food work as Unskilled and Unimportant

The student workers did not perceive their work as being meaningful, important or skilled. This was a result of the inherent nature of the work itself. For example, the students described their work as devoid of creativity and inconsequential. They were asked to follow directions and were offered little to no control over how they prepared the food and interacted with the customers. Max, a McDonald's worker, shared his perceptions of his work:

There was a stigma to working with the food. It's really gross, fast short order type stuff, where I think that cooking should be done a certain way. There should be some kind of effort and some kind of dignity to it and the idea of fast food ruins the dignity of food.

Max's words illustrated the lack of skill and individual control that are archetypal characteristics of alienating relations of production (Fromm, 1991). In standardizing job tasks themselves, the work was devalued and workers exercised little skill.

Respondents were asked whether or not their work was meaningful to their lives and if they viewed it as being important work. Almost all of the student workers (n=31) stated that their work held little importance. A Starbucks employee, Fiona, described her inability to feel accomplishment through her work:

[The work is] not very important at all because there's so many trivial things we have to do. I felt like the whole job was trivial. I felt like I was serving rich housewives everything and I didn't feel like I was accomplishing anything. It was a meaningless job.

Beatrice, a McDonald's employee described her work as:

[N]ot important. It's simply providing a service that is unnecessary. I don't enjoy it and I don't get respect from the job. I don't think the customers view it as important either. They yell at me about a hamburger that costs a dollar.

The lack of skill involved in fast food jobs contributed to the student workers' perceptions that their jobs lacked meaning and were therefore inconsequential. Beatrice and Fiona perceived their work as easy, unskilled and trivial. Similar to others, they felt as if they were not contributing to society and that their work was superfluous.

"It Is Gross and Smelt Bad:" Perceptions of Fast Food Work as Dirty

The post-secondary students described aspects of their jobs that they perceived to be "gross," "disgusting," or "dirty." For example, some of the students viewed their jobs in fast food as contributors to poor consumer health. Sawyer, a Pizza Hut employee, described this:

No it's not important, you are kind of just giving food to people who should just be making healthier food at home. We have a lot of regulars. 80% of our business comes from 20% of our customers. I don't want to judge their lives, but you see them so regularly that it's like a habit for them. They put a lot of stress on you to perform, but it's really not an important job...I am not contributing anything to society really.

Katie, a McDonald's employee said:

It's like cognitive dissonance. I feel like fast food isn't something practical or needed in society. Working there I know it's a waste of food and it's unhealthy too. The amount of food we waste every day is crazy. And the amount of meat we get every day is insane. I don't understand how animals aren't extinct. In little ways we make kids happy but I don't think we are making a positive difference in society.

These words emulate the moral taint associated with serving customers unhealthy food which is associated with increased obesity rates and poor health and environmental outcomes. The workers were also morally opposed to the wastefulness of their work which caused internal conflict for some workers.

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In addition to being morally opposed to providing customers with unhealthy food, many of the students described the physically dirty aspects of their jobs. Tim Horton's employee

Ashely stated:

It is gross and smelt bad. The smell was really off putting in terms of consuming everything. It is undesirable work [and] there was not much work to do, but there was the off time you had to pretend to do work, you couldn't stand around. It was a mess, [there was] coffee everywhere, cleaning, more cleaning.

Cindy also described the physically dirty aspects of her work:

It was gross...it's just like the horror stories of people at fast food restaurants saying don't eat here. Don't eat here. The manager is a dick because it was a family owned franchise so he didn't run it properly, food wasn't properly stored, lacking in hygiene, expired food, I threw out food that was expiring that day and the wife takes it out of the trash. It just really grossed me out...Basically, I didn't eat it because it wasn't sanitary.

When they were not serving customers or preparing food, fast food workers were often required to clean. Some of the workers interviewed in the present study described their workplaces as dirty or messy and described the actual food products they served as "gross" (Woodhall-Melnik and Matheson, 2016).

"It is Desirable Work for When you are Younger:" Varied Perceptions of Temporary and Long-term Employment in Fast Food

The post-secondary students did not perceive their work as desirable for adults who occupy full-time positions in the labour force. However, they did perceive the work as appropriate for students. Kathryn's words illustrated this:

It is desirable work for when you are younger and just looking for help paying rent or groceries but it's not something that I would do for the rest of my life. You don't put in any effort and get a decent pay cheque. But if I was 30 and working there it would be extremely undesirable. My idea of being older and having a career is not pouring coffee for somebody. I don't want to be just pouring coffee or handing out muffins. I want to have a career, house and a family and you could never afford that. I want to feel like I am making a

difference. I am not overly sure what I want to do, but I want to be in child advocacy, but not through law school, maybe through the OPP.

Alexandra stated:

Yes, I have met a lot of people who have committed so much time at Tim Horton's and there's not much advancement that you can do in the field. This Tim Horton's opened in 2000 and [my coworker] still works there and she has been on the same level her whole time, just storefront and drive thru. She seems happy but I can't really picture it as something that you can do for your whole life. More just a student run job. I am hoping to go to law school after I graduate.

The post-secondary student workers perceived fast food work as being an appropriate, temporary measure to finance one's education and life. All of the students who were interviewed occupied positions in fast food work to pay their bills. They were not searching for meaning or creativity within their work, rather, as Kathryn's words illustrate, they envisioned their future careers as providing meaning. Whether or not they gain meaningful careers in the future is beyond the scope of this paper; however, as Kathryn's words illustrate, the students wanted simple work that they could perform while they were in school.

The post-secondary student workers appeared to identify more with their roles as students than their roles as workers. In other words, it did not seem as if their self-identities were largely grounded in their part-time work. Fiona stated:

I identified as a worker, I have always had a clear separation between school and work. If I was at home, I would identify more as a student than a Tim Horton's employee.

Further, in addition to perceiving their own employment as temporary and secondary to their identities as students, the workers held negative views toward long-term employment in the fast food industry. For example, Cindy, a university student and former Coffee Time employee said the following about her work:

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[I]t is pretty menial. Its shit I don't get paid for at home. It's not ground breaking just coffee and a bagel. Definitely not work you should do on a permanent basis. I couldn't be in that environment for the rest of my life, to each his own but I wouldn't...I feel like these jobs aren't that hard to get and for me it was like I can't not have a job to pay for school.

Kathryn, a local café worker, also shared her perceptions of the temporary nature of fast food work:

It is definitely temporary. As a student, it should definitely be temporary, we just need extra income. Having a restaurant is a good business so being an owner, sure why not. Business geared people should be working there. There are people who are meant to be leaders, then those who are meant to be followers. We can't all be equal. Those people who don't want to take on too much burden, those people should work there.

John, a McDonald's employee, stated:

No, people shouldn't do it forever... I personally wouldn't want to do it for my whole life. If you didn't go to school, you just kind of do it. I would take 12 hours of manual labour over 8 hours of McD's. Definitely a stigma people look down on you. It's kind of like any kind of position. I serve at weddings and you are like the help and you are bringing them drinks, they have the money and the power and you are there to serve them. It's temporary for me.

The students did not view long-term employment in fast food as desirable or acceptable. Rather, they held stigmatized views toward employees who were not students. For example, Kathryn's words indicate that she perceived long-term employment in fast food work as indicative of personal failures (e.g. laziness or lack of leadership qualities) on the part of the workers who were no longer in school.

Some of the post-secondary student workers described animosity between themselves and the full-time employees. Ainsley, a Tim Horton's worker for seven years at the time of her interview, described her views of the "older" workers:

[It is] not important work. Really and truly we are just there to hand people their food and get them moving throughout their day. That's why I get so upset. The older people who work there abuse the students and make them do all of the physical labour. I get so upset because they have been there for 10

years at the same till and you are telling me that you can't even do one thing and do it correctly. It irritates me.

The post-secondary fast food workers viewed fast food work as unimportant and these perceptions were often discussed when they described their relationships with full-time, non-student workers.

Discussion

This data analysis indicates that post-secondary student workers' attitudes toward and perceptions of their work are both positive and negative. On one hand, students perceived their work as temporary, meaningless, unimportant, unskilled and devoid of creativity. However, on the other hand, some of the students discussed their desire to work in low-skilled, low-demand environments while they were in school. In other words, they were happy to perform simple job tasks to pay their bills while dedicating mental energy to their studies. However, the negative perceptions that student workers hold may meaningfully impact workplace relationships which are important for both student and non-student worker satisfaction. Additionally, research suggests that youth employment—despite its temporary nature—is formative and can impact educational and occupational outcomes (Marshall, 2010).

As formerly noted, traditional social scientific approaches to theorizing fast food work have illustrated the alienating relations of production within this industry. In these studies, the workers are presented as having little control over the production processes, as they participate in standardized, deskilled and routinized work processes which are stripped of creativity (Leidner, 1993; Reiter, 1991; Woodhall and Muszynski, 2011). Alienation, Marx's stated bi-product of relations in capitalist societies, is a state of estrangement which is reflective of participation in labour that is devoid of the traits that make one human—thought, self-directed action, meaningful interactions and creativity (Marx, 2007). The post-secondary student workers did

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describe their work as low-skilled and meaningless, which reinforces findings that fast food work is Fordist and alienating (Woodhall and Muszynski, 2011); however, these young workers did not seek meaning through their part-time jobs in fast food. Rather, they directed their thoughts and efforts toward their school work and future careers. The data indicate that the student workers sought employment that required little effort or thought and that filled a solely instrumental purpose. They did not expect to find purpose in their work and expected to use the credentials they were in the process of earning to establish meaningful careers.

In the present analysis, some of the conditions required to classify fast food work as alienating were indeed present. However, the post-secondary student workers' perceptions of their employment as being temporary and necessary while they work toward professional employment indicates that there may be a need to view student employment differently than full-time adult employment in fast food. Student workers do not necessarily constitute a class of workers who are participating in low-skilled, uncreative work for long periods of time. Nor do they exclusively or predominantly perform fast food labour as their main productive task. The students viewed their work as a temporary and peripheral activity used to fund their education. This is arguably very different than the experiences of full-time workers who indefinitely rely on their employment as their main source of productive activity. As such, these findings justify the exploration of student employment in fast food work using alternative concepts and frameworks. Although the student workers occupied their job roles for instrumental reasons, the data indicated that they held strong views about the status and prestige of fast food work. They perceived the work as unimportant and undesirable. These jobs were to be held on a temporary basis and the students stigmatized long-term or permanent employment in fast food. In addition to the lack of status that the student perceived in their work, they directly described their work as being "gross"

and “dirty.” Previous studies on fast food work have not explored the concept of dirty work; however, the present study indicates that workers view cleaning tasks and the products they prepare and serve as physically and/or morally dirty. These findings extend the concept of dirty work, as seminal writing on dirty work tends to focus on immoral or physically demanding labour (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999).

In addition to being aware of the lack of prestige or status afforded to fast food work and workers’ descriptions of the dirty nature of their work, the student workers words indicated participation in identity management processes which are critical for dirty workers. Identity management processes are employed by dirty workers to protect their sense of self from socially normalized discourse that problematizes the dirty or undesirable nature of their work (Ashforth et al., 2007; Bosmans et al., 2016). In this particular case, the student workers classified themselves as different from the older and longer term employees. They perceived these so-called “lifers” as participating in work that should be reserved for youth and students only and some workers cited personal failures such as laziness or a lack of education as contributing to longer term residence in fast food work. Ashforth and and Kreiner (1999) and Bosmans et al. (2016) define the process of comparing oneself to other workers using the term selective social comparisons. In this particular case, the post-secondary student workers compared themselves to those who were not enrolled in school. They defined fast food work as something that was acceptable for young people and students and not work that was to be performed for long periods of time. In addition to comparing themselves to the non-student workers, the students participated in in-group disidentification which is defined as separating oneself from the occupation (Ashforth et al., 2007; Bosmans et al., 2016). The student workers had placed themselves into a different group than others who had the same occupation and viewed those

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who were in the other group as inferior to themselves. They did not view themselves as being members of their occupational group; rather, they identified with their roles and statuses as students and hopeful future professional workers.

Bosmans et al. (2016) argue that stigma management strategies can be both adaptive and maladaptive. Selective social comparison and in-group disidentification are both social weighting coping techniques (Bosmans et al., 2016) which are effective in mitigating the impacts of participation in stigmatized labour on one's sense of self (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). However, social weighting can also be damaging to worker interactions and relations (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Bosmans et al., 2016). For example, some of the participants in the present study described animosity between the students and the longer-term employees which resulted in tension between the two groups in the workplace. This animosity could have arisen from these selective social comparisons. Similarly, in their study of student fast food workers, Allan et al. (2005) found that some students held negative perceptions of management and more senior or longer-term co-workers which is indicative of a need to better understand workplace relations in the fast food industry. Additional research is needed to determine the direct effects of social weighting on the relationships between longer-term and student employees. However, the use of the concept of dirty work should be considered a fruitful avenue for future explorations of fast food work and the actions of fast food management and employees.

There are some limitations to the data presented in this manuscript. The concept of dirty work was organically applied to workers' generalized discussions of their employment; therefore, the author was unable to quantify or measure the association between workers' perceptions of characteristics of fast food work and the concept of dirty work. Future studies should attempt to do this. Additionally, future studies are needed to fully comprehend the impact

of workers' participation in social weighting techniques on their relationships and to also understand the full-time, non-student workers' views of their younger, part-time coworkers. Lastly, in light of the students' negative views toward non-student employment in fast food and as a result of changes in modern labour markets in North America, future studies should investigate sense of self in recent graduates who are unable to obtain professional work and who become part of the longer term fast food workforce.

Conclusion

This paper presented youth post-secondary fast food workers' perceptions of and attitudes toward their employment. Generally speaking, workers found their jobs to lack skill and meaning; however, they viewed their work as serving an expressly instrumental purpose and were not seeking meaningful or challenging employment through their paid employment. Rather, these young workers identified with their roles as students and strove to obtain future professional employment. These findings have theoretical and practical implications. First, the findings question the utility of using a Marxist framework to study fast food workers as a homogeneous group. Rather, they indicate that the experiences of students working in fast food should be understood as unique from older, longer term workers. Second, the findings indicate that the concept of dirty work may be more applicable to investigate students' views toward their work and co-workers. Future research should employ a deductive approach to investigating fast food work as dirty work and test the applicability of this concept to the larger population of student fast food workers. On a practical note, these findings reinforce the importance of researching post-secondary students' employment. These jobs may be temporary for students; however, the negative views they hold toward longer-term participation in low-end service work can result in animosity between students and longer term workers.

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