

Grill Guys and Drive-Thru Girls: Discourses of Gender in Young People's Part-Time Work

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We engage with poststructural feminism to examine how 32 young workers in Ontario and British Columbia perceived, replicated, navigated, and challenged gendered discourses. We discuss three related emerging themes. First, girls positioned themselves and other girls who work as "go-getters," resonating with "can-do" girlhood narratives. Second, many participants engaged in and embraced gender-typical work, while others raised critical, feminist concerns. Third, some participants experienced diversions from gender-typical work, and their reflections both reproduced and challenged dominant gender norms. We demonstrate that contradictory discourses of gender, gender inequality, and growing up shape young people's early work experiences in multiple ways.

Key words: young people; gender; work; part-time jobs; inequality

Early, part-time work experiences as cashiers, drive-thru attendants, and short-order cooks are common for youth¹ in North America, and sometimes popularly constructed as a way to keep youth "out of trouble" and prepare them for future employment (e.g., Raby, Lehmann, Easterbrook, & Helleiner, 2018; Usher et al., 2014). However, most literature on youth and work is focused on either health and safety risks (e.g., Breslin, Koehoorn, & Cole, 2008; Tucker & Turner, 2015) or the potential for early, part-time work to lead to negative academic and psychosocial outcomes (e.g., Lee & Orazem, 2010; Mortimer & Staff, 2004; Post & Pong, 2009). It is also largely quantitative in nature. More limited qualitative research has examined young people's experiences at work, mostly focused on how they balance school and work, their work tasks, and how they deal with workplace issues (e.g., Cohen, 2013; Raby et al., 2018; Zierold & McGeeney, 2016).

While gender is sometimes addressed in such studies, it is rarely a central focus; more is needed on gendered processes, inequalities, and experiences around early

work (Besen-Cassino, 2018). While many young people do work before they are 15 (e.g., see Breslin et al., 2008), North American research about youth and work also tends to focus on the experiences of youth over 15, overlooking younger people in jobs such as babysitting, lawn care, and newspaper delivery. This paper enhances the North American literature on young people's earliest job experiences and illustrates the ongoing saliency of gender and gender inequality in shaping these experiences. Most of our participants were positive about their early work as a way to earn money and develop skills, echoing observations made by others (Besen-Cassino, 2018; Herrygers & Wieland, 2017; Hobbs et al., 2007; Levine & Hoffner, 2006), although they also faced challenges around transportation, scheduling, and safety (Raby et al., 2018). In this paper we specifically focus on how gender shaped our participants' very first job experiences and their reflections on them. Unexpectedly in our analysis, many girls' comments reflected and reproduced a "go-getter" narrative (Harris, 2004) that positioned girls as more likely to work, whereas the boys we spoke to did not see equivalent gender narratives shaping young people's work. Overall, we focus on three themes: the girls' use of "can-do" and "future girl" narratives that position girls as "go-getters" (Harris, 2004; Pomerantz & Raby, 2017); the gendered nature of our participants' work and how participants discussed related gender inequality in their work; and how some participants managed diversions from gender-typical work. Before addressing these themes, we review literature on young people's gendered work, with a focus on North American research; discuss "can do" girls, postfeminism, and poststructural feminism; and explain our methods.

Literature review: Gendered work and "can-do" girls

Gendered work

Meanings and expectations of work are shaped by various intersecting social factors, including, but not limited to, gender (Besen-Cassino, 2014, 2018; Chan & Ng, 2013; Damaske, 2011; Francis, Archer, Moote, DeWitt, MacLeod, & Yeomans, 2017; Harris, 2004; Raby et al., 2018). Drawing on several quantitative studies and interviews with young adults about their recollections of early work, Besen-Cassino challenges the frequent focus on adulthood in research on gender inequality and work, and also controls for variables such as marriage and childcare that are typically used as factors to explain the ongoing gender wage gap. Besen-Cassino (2018) highlights that work-related gender inequality begins in earliest work. For instance, unlike boys, many girls learn that asking for a raise or a change to work terms is negative, a finding reinforced through a smaller research project Besen-Cassino conducted with parents employing babysitters. Unlike boys, girls are also told that brand discounts they receive should be enough compensation for their work, rather than getting a raise (Besen-Cassino, 2018).

Further, gender expectations significantly shape the kind of work that young people engage in and the tasks they complete in workplaces, which relates to gender inequality (Besen-Cassino, 2018; Blackstone et al., 2014; Clampet-Lundquist, 2013; Good & Cooper, 2016). Gender segregation begins in informal jobs (i.e., snow removal, lawn care, babysitting), which young people typically engage in before they are of legal working age (Besen-Cassino, 2018). Although some boys babysit, very few girls do snow removal and lawn care (Besen-Cassino, 2018). Further, boys tend to transition into formal work settings earlier than girls, in part because girls are often encouraged to carry on as babysitters (see also Besen-Cassino, 2018), preventing them from gaining the experience and higher pay that can come with formal work. More broadly, girls are frequently in positions that involve more direct interaction with customers, whereas boys frequently work in jobs that are seen as physically demanding and having more safety risks (Besen-Cassino, 2018; Breslin et al., 2007; Clampet-Lundquist, 2013).

Gender and dominant gendered expectations have been reported to influence the perception of safety risks, the reporting of workplace injuries, and the experiences and reporting of workplace sexual harassment (e.g., Breslin,

Polzer, MacEachen, Morrongiello & Shannon, 2007; Fineran & Gruber, 2009; Sears, Intrieri, & Papini, 2011). For instance, more feminine, female-dominated tasks (e.g., cashier) are perceived as having fewer safety risks, and both boys and girls are less likely to report injuries in more masculine, male-dominated workplace settings (Breslin et al., 2007). Notably, both young men and women experience sexual harassment at work, although gender shapes the frequency, intensity, form, and outcomes (e.g., Breslin et al., 2007; Cohen, 2013; Fineran & Gruber, 2009; Sears et al., 2011). For example, research with youth aged 14 to 19 has found that young women are harassed more frequently than young men, and young, single women who are new to their jobs are more likely than established workers to experience sexual harassment (e.g., Cohen, 2013; Fineran & Gruber, 2009). Further, previous research on service-sector work notes that age and experience influence the reporting of workplace sexual harassment (e.g., Blackstone et al., 2014; Good & Copper, 2016; McVittie, Goodall, Sambaraju, Elliott, & Trenjnowska, 2015). Younger workers in the service sector may feel less welcome to report instances to management, and may be less likely to perceive certain instances as examples of gender discrimination or sexual harassment or to naturalize these instances as “part of the job” (e.g., see Besen-Cassino, 2018; Breslin et al., 2007; Good & Cooper, 2016; Walters, 2016).

Early gendered work is also shaped by intersections of class and race (Besen-Cassino, 2014, 2018; Chan & Ng, 2013; Clampet-Lundquist, 2013; Damaske, 2011; Harris, 2004). Specifically, it has been argued that class shapes young people’s expectations around work and growing up, wherein middle-class families tend to emphasize education and future high-skill employment, while working-class students, especially working-class boys, are frequently streamlined into apprenticeship programs for manual labour that are associated with working-class masculinities (e.g., Damaske, 2011; Ward, 2018). Further, young, white, middle-class people are often constructed as ideal workers, especially in high-end or brand-focused retail settings and restaurants, while in other retail settings, young black women are often preferred workers compared to young black men (Besen-Cassino, 2014, 2018; Clampet-Lundquist, 2013). As a result, young people of colour, boys of colour, and those from poorer neighbourhoods are less likely to get “desirable” jobs and are frequently assigned to low-skill, invisible tasks in the workplace (Besen-Cassino, 2014, 2018; Clampet-Lundquist, 2013).

“Can-do” girls, “future girls,” and postfeminism

Discourses are socially constructed units of meaning and expectation that create “truths” in contextual settings (St. Pierre, 2000). Poststructural feminism, which recognizes the significant role of language in creating our social worlds, posits that gendered identities cannot be understood outside of our gendered discursive frameworks, which in turn produce our gendered subjectivities (St. Pierre, 2000). Individuals take up, refine, and sometimes disrupt dominant discourses of gender to create and recreate their gendered identities in shifting contexts (Davies, 1990; Pomerantz, 2008; Pomerantz & Raby, 2017). Dominant gendered discourses thus create standards for normative, “popular,” and “cool” gendered identities, which young people strategically negotiate and navigate in their social worlds (see also Pomerantz & Raby, 2017).

Discourses of girlhood shape how girls think about and experience early, part-time work. In their study with teenaged self-identified smart girls, Pomerantz and Raby (2017) draw on Harris’s (2004) work on “can-do” and “future girls,” concepts that evoke “girl power” discourses of teenage girls as confident and keen to seize opportunities. Such narratives of girlhood, while empowering, problematically reflect a postfeminist framework that situates girls as unfettered as they strive for success because gender inequality is no longer seen to be an obstacle. Harris argues that “can-do” or “future girls” are constructed as ideal working subjects within a neoliberal society that emphasizes individual choice, independence from the state, consumerism, and self-improvement, constructing girls as capable of independent success and thus worthy of investment.

There are two opposing sides of “future girl” success, however: “can-do” girls who are described as girls with “the world at their feet” (Harris, 2004, p. 14) and “at-risk” girls who are made “vulnerable by their circumstances” (p. 25). Harris asks how the challenges faced by “at-risk” girls are neglected by an exclusive focus on “can-do” girls. Indeed, she contends that “can-do” girlhood represents an elite girlhood identity that is elusive for most girls, especially girls marginalized on the basis of gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability (Harris, 2004). Further, girlhood discourses that celebrate “can-do” self-improvement and empowerment efface the ongoing relevance of gender inequality, complicating how many girls understand their experiences of sexism (Crofts & Coffey, 2017; Pomerantz & Raby 2017). For example, because both feminist and postfeminist narratives are prominent simultaneously, girls often explain that they are both empowered with “choice” and frustrated with sexism (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017). Similarly, such tensions may complicate how girls who work think about and respond to gender inequality in their workplaces.

Alongside addressing discourses evoking “can-do” girlhood, researchers discuss the equally problematic “failing boy” (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017; Ringrose, 2013) and “slacker boy” (Brown, Lamb & Tappan, 2009) gender narratives that have arisen in the media (Brown et al., 2009) and around schooling (e.g., Martino & Rashti, 2012; Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Maw, 1998). Homogenizing within gender, popular commentators have worried that while girls as a group are excelling in academics and beyond, boys are falling behind and/or uninvested in schoolwork (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017). Related to school, the “slacker boy” narrative suggests that boys can be smart, but that it should seem effortless, which some researchers connect to idealized traits of hypermasculinity such as toughness and resisting authority (Dekker, Krabbendam, Lee, Boschloo, de Groot, & Jolles, 2013; Platts & Smith, 2018). While others have addressed the “failing boys” narrative in relation to school, we are interested in how this characterization carries over into how young people talk about their gendered engagements with early work.

We discuss the portrayals of “can-do” girls and “slacker” boys to challenge the notion that gendered patterns are adopted naturally, homogeneously, and easily in a postfeminist world (Raby & Pomerantz, 2015). While our subjectivities are produced within specific and shifting discursive contexts (Pomerantz, 2008), people also participate in power relations by embracing and challenging dominant discourses (Raby & Pomerantz, 2015; St. Pierre, 2000). Young people are subject to discourses, including those that reflect and reproduce gender stereotypes and inequalities (Davies, 1990; St. Pierre, 2000), but they are also subjects when they negotiate and navigate these discourses. Poststructural feminism thus seems well suited to understand the gendered stories and views our participants shared with us that reflect, reproduce, and challenge dominant discourses of gender, including those connected to the “can-do” girl and “slacker boy” narratives. We are interested in how young people’s early work experiences are shaped by intersecting and contradictory discourses of gender and their effects, including gendered inequality, and related discourses around growing up and becoming workers.

Data collection

Although official statistics on youth employment in Canada focus on youth between the ages of 15 and 24, as we have indicated, many young people work before they are 15. Our general call for participants who were working in their very first jobs led to open-ended interviews with 23 participants from two cities in Ontario and 9 from two cities in British Columbia about a wide range of early, part-time jobs (see Raby et al., 2018). Many participants also talked about earlier work experiences, such as babysitting, that they had not previously recognized as jobs. For this pilot study, we were not seeking to compare job types, but rather to get a sense of the breadth of young people’s working experiences across three different research sites.

Following university ethics board clearance, participants were recruited using snowball sampling techniques, word-

of-mouth, flyers, and sharing information with youth service organizations. In addition to the initial 32 interviews, 12 participants agreed to a follow-up photo-elicitation interview (e.g., Böök & Mykkänen, 2014; Cappello, 2005). Our participants were mostly between 12 and 16 years old, the ages when most young people work their first jobs, although one was 11 and one had just turned 17. Our sample is comprised of 19 girls and 13 boys, most of whom were white, with class backgrounds ranging from working class to upper middle class. While broadly understanding class as relational and cultural, for this project we more categorically approximated participants' class backgrounds based on their answers to questions about their parents' jobs, education, and house ownership, as well as their own contribution to household expenses.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and then two researchers independently coded the initial interviews to develop descriptive codes, which were then refined by the research team. The team created a list of 59 codes, which were used to systematically code the remaining transcripts, and then common patterns within specific codes were identified. For this paper, we have concentrated on the specific codes related to gender and gender inequality. These codes were analyzed for key patterns, which we have organized into three related themes. First, we consider how participants' narratives reflected the "can-do" and "future girl" narratives, positioning girls as hard workers who were more committed to work than boys. Next, we discuss how much of the work that our participants engaged in and embraced was gender typical (with consequent effects) and how participants spoke about workplace gender inequality. Finally, we report on how diversions from gender-typical work were experienced and navigated.

Analysis and discussion

"Can-do" and "future girls"

Many of the girls in our sample perceived that more girls their age work in comparison to boys. Some saw girls collectively as more eager and ambitious than boys and suggested that girls are more likely to prioritize some benefits of early work, for example, for future education and career planning, but also for leisurely spending. A third of the girls in our sample saw boys as having a more laid-back attitude than girls towards working, although some noted that boys' attitudes might change once they need money or finish high school. For example, Amanda, who worked as a busser, echoed the "can-do" discourse:

More girls work (right) 'cause we're like, go getters, like we just want to get everything done, like we want to have money for university. Boys are like, more laid back and chill and they're like (right) "I'll make money when I need to, like I want to enjoy (right), like my high school experience."²

Other girls shared similar stories, positioning themselves and other girls as "go-getters," which they saw as connected to being ideal workers, echoing observations made by others (Harris, 2004; Pomerantz & Raby, 2017; Ringrose, 2013). Although some girls suggested that scheduling and balancing the various demands of school, work, and family could be challenging (Raby et al., 2018), they saw girls as capable of managing and thriving. Jane, for example, explained how many girls "are focused on a job and school work and are at the top of their classes" while the boys are more focused on taking it easy in high school. Jane thus reproduced both the narrow "slacker boy" discourse (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017; Ringrose, 2013) and the problematic expectation that girls should be able to do it all, which can be linked to significant stress and pressure (see Pomerantz & Raby, 2017). At the same time, Jane overlooked the more complicated intersections of race, class, sexuality, and ability that make "can-do" girlhood an elusive ideal for most girls.

In addition to constructing girls as "go-getters," a small number of participants explained that their families expected them to seamlessly transition from a "can-do" girl into a successful, career-oriented woman. For instance,

Olivia spoke about her plans for postsecondary education: “I’m going, obviously. It’s kind of like not really an option in my house.” Olivia mentioned that her family had already created a savings account for her tuition fees, echoing observations by Harris (2004) and Damaske (2011) about the role that certain families play in priming and supporting girls for “can-do” and “future girl” status. On the one hand, this is an exciting support for girls’ careers; on the other hand, it points to the relevance of class inequality and can fail to recognize the challenges of sexism and perfectionism that girls may continue to face.

In contrast to Olivia, Amanda was from a single-parent household with a mother who worked as a cleaner. Amanda was less sure about her future education plans. She thought her mother might “[give her] a little bit of money for school but, like, focus more on [her] sister, ’cause, like, she wants to go to university.” Although Amanda positioned herself as a “go-getter,” she seemed less sure about the feasibility of her future plans, aligning her more with the “at-risk” narrative (Harris, 2004). She was also quite heavily involved in part-time work, potentially undermining her schooling. Amanda’s story points to the implications of the “can-do” narrative for girls who may not be able to meet this ideal because of circumstances or resources. Emma was one of our few participants who noted this issue. Emma pushed back against the expectation that girls should be able to effortlessly succeed in school, work, and extracurriculars, asserting that school is her top priority. Emma recognized that postponing or cutting back on work is not something that all girls can do, however: “If you don’t have money at all and you’re broke [laughs], then as a kid then you probably want some more babysitting to get money.” Again, reflecting the importance of class inequality, Emma noted that some young people may not be in a position to cut back on hours or quit their jobs when there are school-work conflicts (see Cohen, 2013; Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2000; Purtell & McLoyd, 2013; Raby et al., 2018).

The girls’ stories highlight the pertinence of Harris’s “can-do” and “future girl” narratives in girls’ perceptions of themselves as being workers and becoming women, and of other girls and boys their ages who work (or not). Their stories also pointed to salient cracks in the “can-do” narrative. Girls’ reproduction and reflection of “future girl” narratives simultaneously positioned boys as “slackers,” a characterization that both emphasized girls’ need to work hard and denigrated boys, which we did not see reflected in the boys’ comments. In fact, the boys we spoke to did not raise “slacker boy” or “failing boy” narratives in relation to working at all, nor did they see girls as more ambitious or hard working. For example, when asked whether girls are more likely to be working than boys, Ginger argued: “I have not noticed any sort of difference, it’s really just 50/50.” Other boys positioned themselves as hard workers as well, but without suggesting that boys who work are “go-getters” or comparing their work ethic to girls’.

Gender-typical work and questions of gender inequality

Despite the “can-do” portrayal that girls are now doing it all, most of our participants engaged in what we characterize as gender-typical work. Specifically, 15 of the 19 girls in our study most often worked as babysitters, peer mentors, or hostesses or in other frontline retail and fast food roles. Similarly, we characterized 10 of the 13 boys in our sample as working in gender-typical work, such as lawn care and snow removal, and in the kitchens of fast food restaurants. Overall, dominant gender expectations often shaped where our participants worked, their job tasks, and the organization of their workplaces.

Ginger, one of our few boys who worked as babysitters, explained gendered patterns in early teenage work quite matter-of-factly: “Like, the two stereotypical teenage jobs that you can think of are like paperboy for guys and then babysitter for girls.” Alexander also talked about these gendered patterns and how they are linked to gendered beliefs: “You’re not gonna find a lot of males who are babysitting. It’s [a] very stereotypical thing (hmm) that all boys are gonna hurt the babies, whereas the girls [are] softer, gentle with the baby.” Further, many of our participants explained that girls who worked in fast food settings frequently took orders at the counter or the

drive-thru window. Michelle explained that she was placed at the drive-thru window and the sandwich station before she was formally trained to do so, which may be linked to the perception that girls are naturally able to manage customers or make sandwiches, echoing others' findings (Besen-Cassino, 2018; Breslin et al., 2007; Clampet-Lundquist, 2013). As Michelle observed, "if a guy went on sandwich or something, it was just kind of like weird 'cause there was always a girl on sandwiches (right). So it just kind of felt like, [...] making a sandwich, like was a girl's job." Zach also noted that "there was a lot more girls in drive thru." Patrick explained, "It's basically girls up in the front. Guys are in the back making food." He suggested this division made sense because girls "have like an open personality (mm) and they're really inviting to all the customers, which is ... almost a need for people that work in the front."

Like Patrick, many participants naturalized the gendered division of workplace tasks by suggesting that girls' personalities made them better at certain jobs. Although some may see this as a compliment because it suggests girls have refined interpersonal skills, it overlooks the possibility that girls may be good at other tasks as well (Besen-Cassino, 2018), reinforces the idea that girls need to be in a position of pleasing others, and neglects boys' social skills. The gendered division of labour was also frequently naturalized based on participants' bodies. Amanda, who had positioned girls who work as "go-getters," justified the idea that sweeping is a boy's job, for instance, arguing that "[girls], we're smaller, we're daintier, I guess." In another example, Alexander explained that there was not a gendered division of labour in his workplace " 'cause there's not a lot of heavy, manual labour that (right) so it's mostly just everything, everybody can do," implying that if there was heavy labour then that would be something that would require a gendered division of labour. Others expressed similar justifications for a gendered division of labour based on assumptions about girls' relative weakness. Angela explained that her boss asked the boys to lift boxes because "[he] didn't want someone getting hurt," although she was quick to add that if she could lift a box, she was "not going to go get one of [the boys]." The boss's justification for the gendered division of work as a way to minimize injury naturalizes gender-typical work, while covertly constructing girls who work as less capable of safely engaging in more physically demanding jobs. Although some participants naturalized the gendered division of labour, others, like Angela, offered more critical evaluations, suggesting that girls could also adequately complete more physically demanding jobs.

In contrast to girls who frequently worked in customer-oriented positions, boys in fast food settings were commonly called "grill guys" and worked the grilling stations. Michelle explained that she was trained as a fill-in to work on the grill after one of the "grill guys" quit. She suggested that the position involves lifting and managing hot oil, and as the only girl working on the grill she "just felt like [managers] gave [the grill position] to the guy 'cause [they thought] 'oh, he can take it.'" Michelle critiqued this assumption by somewhat proudly sharing that she also had gotten burns and bruises from working on the grill. She may have been suggesting that she is a unique girl because she worked the grill, or alternatively that other girls could also handle the task and its associated risks.

Other participants sometimes critiqued the gendered division of tasks and its effects within their workplaces, arguing that all young people could complete many diverse tasks if they were provided with the right training and opportunities to practice and improve. These stories provide glimpses of critical commentary and feminist insight (see also Crofts & Coffey, 2017; Harris, 2004; Pomerantz & Raby, 2017). For instance, when Olivia was asked to explain the logic behind the gendered division of tasks at the golf course she worked at, she replied:

I have no idea, honestly, [it] doesn't really make sense to me (yeah). I don't know what the boss is thinking 'cause I think guys, a guy would do a perfectly fine job serving a table (yeah) and bartending, and a girl would do fine riding the golf cart.

Ginger also critically noted that "stigma[s] that a certain gender can't do that job would withhold you from getting

experience, from getting money and getting your foot in the door for life: that's kind of stupid."

There were also occasions where participants would shift between denying inequality and noting discrimination, highlighting the complexity of navigating current gendered discourses (see Pomerantz & Raby, 2017). In one example, Amanda first explained that "there's not really discrimination, but um, you can do a banquet (yeah). So you'll have to set up, drag large tables down hallways and stuff. Females aren't allowed to do those, only males can." This policy alludes to the relevance of physical strength for justifying a workplace division, a policy which Amanda did not at first see as discriminatory, but then she changed her mind: "I think females should be allowed to do them too. Because you get a lot of hours from that (ah), and I don't think it's fair that we're not given the opportunity." Here, Amanda noted the unequal effects of this seemingly natural gendered division of labour and suggested that the policy should change.

In addition to a pervasive gendered division of labour that was often linked to gender inequality in early workplaces, some of the girls talked about concerns with sexual harassment at work. Amanda had "felt unsafe at work because someone [she knew] was um, almost raped by an, a coworker." When she was asked if her coworker formally reported the instance, she explained:

No. No one knows about it. She didn't want to report him to HR (yeah) because like, [pause] she didn't want him to lose a job. She would've felt bad (yeah), like no one said anything and it's happened to more than one person (yeah) that I've heard of.

Amanda also explained that she was nervous to take out the recycling to a dark and secluded area outside of the restaurant where she worked at the end of her shift because she was "like [...] pretty vulnerable. Like, I'm just a 15-year-old girl." Amanda noted that her coworkers were trying to protect each other instead of filing formal reports of sexual harassment, which might be thought of as a buffering strategy (see Good & Cooper, 2016) but also suggests discomfort addressing issues directly with management. Similarly, Lana explained that when she was sexually harassed by a customer, her female coworker supported her by telling the harasser to leave. While Lana was uncomfortable and nervous, she felt she could "handle it" in the future by not going near the customer, or telling the customer to "back off." Lana did not mention formally reporting this instance. In another example, while Angela did not see instances of gender inequality where she worked, she said that she would respond to an instance of discrimination or sexual harassment with some acceptance, "because I [...] I love my job and I think [...] I would probably be a little more like 'it's okay.'"

Amanda, Angela, and Lana made strategic choices around how to handle possibilities of sexual harassment, but their stories also indicate that young people, especially young women, feel unwelcome or ill equipped to formally report instances of sexual harassment (Blackstone et al., 2014; Cohen, 2013; Good & Cooper, 2016) or see this solution as risking their employment or affecting their workplace morale. Further, Angela's disinclination to report possible future sexual harassment or discrimination may resonate with other researchers' concerns that young people, and especially young women, might be likely to put up with discrimination and sexual harassment as "part of the job" (Besen-Cassino, 2018; Blackstone et al., 2014; Breslin et al., 2007; Good & Cooper, 2016; Sears et al., 2011; Walters, 2016). Beyond the need for training on workplace sexual harassment or discrimination, our participants' stories draw attention to risks of sexual harassment and even assault in the workplace and the need to provide young workers with supports and spaces to talk about and address sexual harassment.

Finally, in addition to discussions of workplace-based inequalities, some of our participants spoke about sexism in how their student peers treated them based on their work. Mia, who worked as a babysitter, explained that when she would pick up the children she babysat from school, peers thought "[she was] um ... gonna drop out of school

[...] and become a mother too early.” Mia’s comment provides an example of the scrutiny that some girls who work as babysitters may face and relates to earlier discussions of the “can-do” and “future girl” girlhoods wherein Mia seemed concerned that others might think of her as an “at-risk” girl (Harris, 2004). She then noted further judgment from a boy at school:

I haven’t had any like real problem with [sexism] but it’s been hard to be a 14-year-old girl working, and a lot of the guys kind of think it’s stupid and bad [...] one thought [...] girls shouldn’t be making money. Ridiculous idea.

Mia was proud that she had recently become comfortable responding to sexist comments from boys about girls who work at school, although she saw herself as “pretty much the only girl out of all [her], like, girlfriends that stick up for themselves.” However, Mia felt less confident speaking up to her employers about how their other babysitter’s laid-back attitude towards childcare seemed linked to how he saw babysitting as feminine (and therefore not needing to be taken seriously). Mia feared being called sexist and did not want him to get in trouble. Notably, Mia’s discussion of this boy’s laid-back approach also reflects the “slacker” boy narrative and positions herself as a competent “can-do” girl.

In this section we have illustrated how our participants’ stories highlighted ways that gender and gender inequality shaped their earliest jobs (see also Besen-Cassino, 2018; Blackstone et al., 2014; Breslin et al., 2007; Clampet-Lundquist, 2013; Good & Cooper, 2016). This pattern has effects. For instance, girls are often located in more caring work roles, which can be undervalued, and boys are more likely to do heavy physical work, which can bring added risk of injury. Some participants downplayed these gendered differences at work or asserted that people are given tasks based on naturalized gender or body type. Other participants challenged and critiqued gender-typical work, although they seemed more hesitant to link it directly to gender inequality in the workplace. We also observed how some of the girls navigated concerns about sexual harassment at work by addressing it informally and playing it down. Our participants’ stories suggest that they were entrenched in jumbled, contradictory discourses of gender essentialism, postfeminist freedom from inequality, and feminist critique of gender inequality, as well as intersecting discourses around growing up and becoming workers that complicated how they thought about and responded to gender inequality (see also Besen-Cassino, 2018; Crofts & Coffey, 2017; Harris, 2004). These tensions were set within the context of part-time, precarious, low-income early work, adding layers of vulnerability and uncertainty. Our final, related theme considers how young people experienced diversions from gender-typical work.

Diversions from gender-typical work

Although most of the young workers in our study engaged in gender-typical work, some spoke of experiences with gender nontypical work, or imagined what it would be like. The most commonly discussed diversions from gender-typical work were boys who babysat and girls who completed paper routes or worked in fast food restaurant kitchens. Specific participants’ navigation of diversions from gender-typical work were linked to their broader ability to challenge dominant gender expectations, and boys and girls experienced these diversions differently.

The boys who babysat spoke about how they felt about engaging in a job that is traditionally associated with girls. For example, Billy Pilgrim spoke about himself and his brother Ginger as babysitters, explaining that “all our friends know us as very feminine boys, I’d say [...], so they don’t care.” Ginger added:

If I tell [my friends] I’m a babysitter they won’t blink. If I tell them I’m going to wear a dress the next day they won’t blink. It’s, it’s not something that my friends ever bug me about really. And it’s a job, so, I mean, I was a paperboy and that was worse.

Ginger and Billy Pilgrim saw themselves as outside of discourses of dominant or popular boyhood, thus they seemed less pressured to draw on aspects of popular or dominant gender expectations in their navigation of early work. Further, Ginger's preference for babysitting over delivering papers may be linked to his flexibility around gender, perhaps implying that more "stereotypical" boys, unlike himself, might be better suited to newspaper delivery. Ginger and Billy Pilgrim's stories evoke questions about how and why they were able to so comfortably challenge dominant gender expectations. The two boys were growing up in a wealthier area with professional parents, and Ginger noted that he was involved in the music scene, contexts that might have allowed for more gender flexibility. Further, their class background may have led others to perceive them as compelling babysitting candidates.³

In contrast to Ginger and Billy Pilgrim, who argued that they babysat as gender-independent boys, Bob explained that he was especially well suited to babysit several young boys because he was athletic, noting that "they love spending time with me because they're both boys too, so we get along, like they like playing sports." Reflecting Doucet and Merla's (2007) work on stay-at-home fathers, Bob strategically drew on aspects of popular masculinity (i.e., sports) to position himself as both a masculine boy and an ideal babysitter. Bob's tactic allowed him to embrace what is often considered more feminine work without compromising hegemonic masculinity.

Jane spoke about her previous experiences with newspaper delivery, highlighting how there were both benefits and drawbacks to engaging in gender nontypical work and how people's reactions to girls who deliver papers, although positive, still reproduce dominant gender expectations. Jane explained:

You know, you'd see a guy doing his paper route and he'd kind of be looking at you like "oh, is she covering for, like their sibling or something?" People would actually come up to me and complain about the boy paper, paper carriers and say, [...] "oh, they just kind of throw it everywhere (right) they don't really care [...] but however you have a really good attention to detail."

In this example, even though girls are positioned as outsiders and substitutes for paperboys, the customers see Jane as a "good" worker and are favourable towards her. Their reactions position Jane as a "can-do" girl and ideal working subject (Harris, 2004), reinforce the common association between femininity, carefulness, and attention to detail, and simultaneously position boys as reckless and not caring (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017; Ringrose, 2013). Like Bob, Jane's disruption of expected gender norms around work is reframed, through these comments from others, to reinforce gender stereotypes. This was also the case when Michelle spoke about her aforementioned experiences working in the kitchen of a fast food restaurant when one of the grill guys had quit. It was considered unusual that a girl would work the grills because of the safety risks. She explained that "it was just really weird 'cause all the rest of the guys like, they were all guys who were on grill, and then I was like the only girl and everyone just kind of found that strange."

These participants' stories point to how young people who engage in early gender nontypical work both stand out and strategically navigate dominant gendered expectations. The stories largely highlight how hegemonic gendered practices are reproduced in young people's workplaces: by the managers and supervisors that delegate tasks, by customers' expectations of and responses to young workers, and by young workers themselves, even when they are involved in work that disrupts gender expectations.

Conclusion

In this paper we have drawn on the stories our participants shared about gender and gender inequality in their experiences as workers in Ontario and British Columbia and considered how their stories reflect, reproduce, and

challenge dominant discourses of gender and gender inequality, as well as intersecting discourses related to growing up and becoming workers. Our analysis contributes to research that extends the conversation about young people and work from the frequent focus on the benefits and weaknesses of early work experiences, providing insight into how young people think about themselves, and are positioned by others, in terms of gender. Our analysis moves the discussion of “can-do” girls and “slacker” boys beyond the school and illustrates that boys and girls comment and reflect on these narratives and their implications differently; indicates the ongoing prevalence of significant gender divisions in early work; and suggests that even disruptions to such normative gender divisions are often discussed in terms of dominant gender discourses. In relation to the topics and themes in this special journal issue, we have also illustrated how Canadian young workers’ experiences blur any lines that separate children and teenagers from the worlds of adults, work, and workplace gender inequality. We have illustrated how young people are active in their experiences as workers as they relate to, reproduce, and rework discourses of gender and gender inequality. The patterns we have noted, while located in two provinces in Canada, are helpful for thinking about gendered aspects of young people’s early work more broadly.

In terms of limitations, our sample was predominantly white, from three urban locations in Canada, making it challenging to consider how intersections of race and place influence young people’s gendered experiences with early, part-time work. Further, it was unexpected that many girls would talk about themselves as eager “go-getters” and position boys as less invested in their work, nor that boys would not reflect on these narratives when asked about the saliency of gender in their work experiences. Future qualitative research should ask young people more directly about these gendered narratives in relation to their work, to consider how boys who work also relate to, reproduce, and/or push back against such assumptions. It would also be valuable to look at the relevance of gender across various specific jobs. Further, longitudinal research might consider how gendered perceptions and experiences of teen employment are shaped as young people change jobs and grow up.

By listening to the stories of young workers, we have learned that young people experience gender stereotyping and inequality in their earliest jobs. Their stories remind us that gender inequality is not limited to adult work, and that early patterns of inequality have ramifications in the young workers’ present and future lives. Their stories also point to the need for accessible and meaningful health and safety education that acknowledges how gender inequality shapes young people’s earliest work experiences and provides young workers with skills and tools that equip them to respond to workplace gender inequality and sexual harassment. Ignoring the significance of gendered discourses in shaping the types of work that young people engage in, the organization of their workplaces, and instances of sexual harassment in young people’s work environments overlooks the complex realities and inequalities of young people’s earliest work experiences.

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(Endnotes)

- 1 Youth is a broad category that has been used to refer to a wide range of young people. Much of the literature on youth and part-time work concentrates on those who are over 15, so that is the literature we draw on in this paper. Our data, however, focuses on younger youth who were in their teens and a few participants who were 11 and 12.
- 2 The comments in parentheses in the excerpts indicate the researcher's voice in the conversation. Comments in square brackets note when a word was changed by the researchers in the writing stage to improve clarity/flow.
- 3 Although Besen-Cassino (2018) found prospective parents to distrust male babysitters who seemed feminine.