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### Exploitation or Fun?: The Lived Experience of Teenage Employment in Suburban America

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# Exploitation or Fun?

## The Lived Experience of Teenage Employment in Suburban America

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Objectivist scholars characterize typical teenage jobs as “exploitive”: highly routinized service sector jobs with low pay, no benefits, minimum skill requirements, and little time off. This view assumes exploitive characteristics are inherent in the jobs, ignoring the lived experience of the teenage workers. This article focuses on the lived work experience of particularly affluent, suburban teenagers who work in these jobs and explores the meaning they create during their everyday work experience. Based on a large ethnographic study conducted with the teenage workers at a national coffee franchise, this article unravels the ways in which objectivist views of these “bad jobs” differ from the everyday experience of the actors. The findings show that from the perspective of the teenagers, these “exploitive jobs” are often seen as fun, social, and empowering and are free spaces where they can express their creativity and individuality. These findings demonstrate the importance of employing a constructionist view in understanding teenage employment and inequality.

**Keywords:** youth; work; suburbs; labor; inequality

*People think I do this for the money. “Oh, you are a typical teenager,” they say. “You need a car and a cell phone and clothes and stuff.” But . . . it’s not like that. I do [buy] stuff, but I don’t work here to pay for all that. It’s fun, you know. This is where I hang out.*

Jenny,<sup>1</sup> an 18-year-old college student, spoke these words to me as she emptied an overstuffed garbage bag at the end of her double shift. Jenny, like many teenagers, works everyday at the local coffee franchise after school. She commutes an hour and back every day after school, where she serves endless lines of demanding customers, mops floors, wipes tables, and

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carries loads of garbage. In her typical shift, she is asked to follow a detailed script and perform every task according to the “manual.” She does all of this work for minimum wage and no benefits.

Operating within an objectivist perspective, many sociologists would interpret these working conditions as undesirable and characteristic of “bad” jobs: highly mechanized, with minimal skill requirements, low hourly pay, and long shifts. Ritzer (2000) depicts such service work as “McJobs” that are boring and dehumanizing, in part because they involve deskilled, routinized labor that largely eliminates employee discretion and creativity. Such jobs are controlled by detailed rules and standardized techniques imposed from above.

From the employee’s perspective, McJobs are irrational because they don’t offer much in the way of either satisfaction or stability. Employees are seldom allowed to use anything approaching all their skills, are not allowed to be creative on the job. The result is a high level of resentment, job dissatisfaction, alienation, absenteeism, and turnover. (Ritzer 2000, 137)

Robin Leidner (1993), in *Fast Food, Fast Talk*, similarly depicts these jobs as detailed and scripted, in which the workers are left no autonomy and power.

Because objectivist scholars assume such jobs provide little intrinsic satisfaction, the reasons for working have been reduced to economic gratifications. That is why authors often assume these “bad” jobs are performed by the economically deprived: teenagers working after school, especially under severe conditions, are traditionally thought to be working to supplement their income and put themselves through school.

Surprisingly, Jenny, like all the other teenagers working at the coffee shop I studied, deviates considerably from these preconceptions. While such jobs have typically been associated with and taken up by the working classes, Jenny and her coworkers, with their fashionable hairstyles, designer clothes, trendy accessories, brand-new cars and high-technology cell phones, are far from working class. In fact, according to the U.S. Department of Labor’s *Report on the Youth Labor Force* (Herman 2000), a majority of the current youth labor force is comprised of teenagers from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. According to the report, only 15% of teenagers in the lowest income quartile work while employment increases substantially as the family income increases.

In both preconceptions and analyses of the youth labor market, the focus has been on the work experience of teenagers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. While the work experience of economically deprived teenagers

is more visible to many researchers—and is a valid and important subject for research—such a perspective overlooks the lived experience of much of the current youth labor force. The perspective of these affluent teenagers is also worthy of study: how they experience what are referred to as “bad” jobs, and how they perceive this exploitation, are often neglected.

Furthermore, bringing in this sometimes ignored portion of the current labor force not only provides a more comprehensive understanding of the current youth labor force but also offers a unique opportunity to study motivations to work from the actors’ perspective. If, in fact, these “bad jobs” provide only economic benefits (and meager ones at that), then why would affluent teenagers end up performing such jobs? Such an analysis will explain how “objective” inequalities are interpreted and justified in the everyday subjective experience of these workers’ lives.

This article focuses on the lived experience of a large segment of the youth labor force—affluent teenage workers in suburban America—and looks at the everyday experiences of work from the perspective of the actors as they define and understand their seemingly inequalitarian and exploitive occupations. In doing so, I hope to show that inequality and exploitation are socially constructed interpretations (rather than inherent meanings), and that scholarly analyses of these concepts can benefit if they are based on the everyday perspectives of actors rather than outside observers (see also Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Harris 2000). Such research is also important from an economic perspective, as it focuses on a substantial portion of the labor force filling service sector jobs in America today: affluent, suburban teenagers. As Chris Tilly (1995) argues, youth constitute a substantial portion of the current labor force as they perform an important part of all service sector jobs.

The prevalence of teenage labor in the United States is a result of a number of factors. First, the American economy has shifted to a predominantly service- and retail-based economy. Between the 1940s and mid-1970s, the service and retail sectors combined created 15.8 million jobs: 9.3 million in the service sector, and 6.6 million in retail (Ginzberg 1977). While the shift from production to service and retail created an unprecedented number of jobs, most of these jobs were what Ginzberg (1977) referred to as “bad jobs.” Greenberger and Steinberg (1986) characterize these jobs as having low wages; odd hours; irregular shifts, including nighttime and weekend work; seasonality; high turnover; and absence of benefits and promotions.

Because these jobs are assumed to be exploitive by nature—while providing few benefits to employees—work for these teenagers is typically reduced (in analysts’ thinking) to economic need. That is why little research considers why teenagers would take up such positions. The lived

experience of teenage employment from their perspective thus remains unexplored.

Although a rich sociological literature exists on teenage employment, it focuses on the effects rather than the causes of employment. The studies of these effects have included analyses of teenagers' development (Finch et al. 1991; Greenberger and Steinberg 1986; Mihalic and Elliot 1997; Paternoster et al. 2003), school performance (Bills, Helms, and Ozcan 1995; D'Amico 1984; D'Amico and Baker 1984; Greenberger and Steinberg 1986; Marsh 1991; Mortimer and Finch 1986; Steinberg and Dornbusch 1991), acquisition of human capital and skills (Gardecki and Neumark 1998; Mihalic and Elliot 1997; McNeal 1997; Pabilonia 1997; Ruhm 1997; Smith and Rojewski 1993), and deviant behavior (McMorris and Uggen 2000; Mihalic and Elliot 1997; Paternoster et al. 2003). While many sociologists have explored the effects of teenage employment, its causes have been left to economists. Coming from this perspective, researchers have studied the causes of teenage employment through macrolevel economic factors such as governmental policies (Neumark and Wascher 1992), minimum wage regulation (Gustman and Steinmeier 1988; Card 1992; Wellington 1991; Neumark and Wascher 1992), and fluctuations in supply of, and demand for, teenage labor (Pease and Martin 1997; Card and Lemieux 1997).

While extensive work exists on the causes and effects of teenage employment, stemming from both sociology and economics, the most central actors of teenage work—teenagers themselves—have been left out of the study of teenage employment. Interestingly, along with the near exclusion of teenagers, the work experience has also received scant academic attention. Although teenage employment has been studied extensively from the perspective of many individuals and *institutions* such as the parents, teachers, and employers, the perspective of teenagers has been neglected.

To bring this viewpoint into focus, my article looks at the lived experience of these “bad” jobs from the viewpoints of the teenagers who do them (Wacquant 1995). It also identifies the mechanisms through which they define their work activities and studies what these seemingly exploitative jobs mean to the actors.

Many sociologists consider these jobs to be exploitive, highly automated, alienating, and requiring no skill (Greenberger and Steinberg 1986; Tilly 1995; Ritzer 2000), concluding that the only reason to take them is to make money. While these jobs are not attractive for adults and are considered exploitive and bad from an objectivist perspective, the very same jobs are considered acceptable from the perspective of the teenagers. It is not surprising that corporations would want to employ teenagers, especially ones

from affluent backgrounds. Unlike the adults who would otherwise fulfill these positions, affluent teenagers are less concerned with having benefits, and the less than full-time hours are less problematic for teenagers. Therefore, low wages and lack of benefits that are typical characteristics of exploitive jobs are not necessarily considered exploitive by the teenagers who come from affluent backgrounds with ample allowances and health benefits through their families.

My article looks at the everyday experience of these “bad” jobs and argues that, from the perspective of the actors, they are not simply jobs to be endured for economic reasons. Rather, I have found that these jobs, ironically, provide opportunities for workers to have fun and exercise their individuality, control, authority, and power.

## Methods

This article is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork I carried out in 2001 to 2004 in two branches of a national coffee franchise in two affluent suburbs of a large city, both of which are predominantly white with a median income of \$70,000. With their economic and ethnic-racial composition, these suburbs offer representative examples of white, affluent suburbs.<sup>2</sup> While my research sites are not representative of all teenage jobs and it is important to acknowledge the idiosyncrasies of all jobs, I believe they provide useful examples as well as sources of inspiration for future research. The coffee shop I studied is probably similar to many teenage jobs, but other occupations—such as those involving fast food rather than coffee, or those that are found in urban areas—may differ substantially and also deserve ethnographic attention.

My main source of data stems from two sources. First, I draw on a vast body of nonparticipant observations collected at the two branches. Throughout the duration of my ethnography, I observed workers in 1- to 8-hour shifts, taking detailed fieldnotes. My notes focused on the detailed description of the tasks performed, recording of the interaction and dialogue between the coworkers throughout the shift, and capturing their interaction with the customers. My observations included both weekday and weekend shifts; morning, afternoon, and night shifts; opening and closing shifts where the managers are present, and other shifts where they are not; as well as shifts where teenagers are scheduled to work together and ones where they work with older employees. I started to record these observations first as a researcher sitting at a close table at the beginning of my ethnography, but

with the help of key informants and time, I gained the confidence of the teenagers and started to “hang out” at the counter with other friends of the teenagers who were working, sometimes just observing from the side and sometimes going behind the counter to help them. Such mobility allowed me to try to capture the work experience from different perspectives.

In addition to nonparticipant observations, I have relied heavily on semi-structured, in-depth interviews I conducted with 40 college student employees of the two coffee shops. The teenagers I interviewed were all students who worked part-time or full-time at the coffee shop. Sixty percent of my subjects were female, and 40% were male. The majority of the subjects were white (except for one Asian American employee and one of Indian American origin), and all subjects identified themselves as middle or upper-middle class. The subjects were all employees of the coffee shop during some or all of the duration of my ethnographic study. Every employee who was a student (full-time or part-time) and who was also a teenager was interviewed in several waves. I had secured contacts with two key informants through the university, both of whom worked at the coffee shop. These key informants have provided me access to the other workers.

My face-to-face interviews varied in length from 1 to 2 hours. Most of the respondents were interviewed again at different intervals. They are complemented by innumerable informal conversations, most of which took place in various corners of the coffee shops and at the teenagers’ schools. I interpret the interviews and the conversations in light of my extensive fieldnotes.

In the following six sections of this article, I highlight central dimensions of workers’ experiences with their jobs, comparing their interpretations with those of objectivist researchers and theorists. Then, I discuss the issue of exceptions before proceeding to my conclusion.

## **Power and Control**

Greenberger and Steinberg (1986) characterize typical teenage jobs as requiring no skills and creativity, highly mechanized, and low paying. Ritzer (2000) argues such jobs leave virtually no space for creativity. The coffee shops in which I carried out my research seem to fit that description, at least at first glance: the teenagers who work there are required to be at their shift on time and not leave the premises during their shift, save for a 15-minute break during which they are allowed one drink. Their tasks for each shift are strictly codified, described in detail in the employee handbook. Even what they are supposed to say to the customers is scripted.

From an objectivist perspective, it would seem that the detailed scripts and organization of this occupation, like other service sector jobs, mean that the individual workers hold little power. However, from the perspective of the teenagers, work at the coffee shop is “not like that.” The meaning of these jobs, therefore, is not inherent (Blumer 1969), as with other situations that sociologists define as unequal or exploitive (Harris 2000). Amy, a 19-year-old college student, describes a typical shift where she is in charge of the whole place. For her, getting to the coffee shop on the day of a blizzard despite her 4-hour commute and missing school was extremely important: she felt that if she didn’t show up, the shop could not function and serve coffee to customers on a cold day. “No one notices if I miss a class or two,” she says, referring to the large university where she is a freshman, “but it’s different here—they need me.” The fact that her tasks are specifically spelled out does not lead her to feel constricted, but rather gives her the feeling of being needed and being in charge of that specific task.

The sense of control over tasks does not come solely from the strict definition of those tasks, but also from the relative power the teenagers have over their work environment. Josh, a 19-year-old student, tells me he feels “in control of everything” throughout the shift because he gets to make the “important decisions.” Important decisions, according to Josh, are not the ones concerning the business of the shop: coffee or operating the cash register. He doesn’t mind those being strictly defined: in fact, he is happy that those “unimportant” things are clearly defined, so he does not have to spend his time worrying about how to make coffee or what to say to the customers. Rather, he finds freedom and control in the decisions concerning his clothing, appearance, shift schedules, and music. One of the reasons he chose to work at the coffee shop was that he could dress in almost the same way he normally does—in casual khakis and simple T-shirts. If you ask Monica, a fashion-conscious freshman, the uniforms are so fashionable that it’s like a “GAP commercial.” If she had to wear nylon uniforms, she tells me, she wouldn’t want to work there at all. Unlike workers at some fast-food establishments, who do not want to be seen in their uniforms, Monica says she wears her work clothes even after her shift is over. Besides, she adds, “we can accessorize.” One of the reasons why Monica wanted to work at the coffee shop was the freedom she had with her accessories: in her case, long nails and her signature South Asian jewelry showcasing her ethnic identity. None of these were things she wanted to give up for a job. Josh agrees that work is a place where he feels accepted. In most places, his tattoos and numerous piercings—on his eyebrow, lip, and ears—were constant sources of conflict. “School, parents, friends,” he says, were not too happy about his



appearance. When he came into the coffee shop as a customer, however, he felt right at home: the girl who served his coffee had similar piercings.

In addition to the freedom to express themselves through their appearance and clothing, many of the teenagers who work at the coffee shop feel that they are in control of their activities during the shift. While the activities throughout the shift are described in detail in employee manuals and are often highly scripted, from the perspective of the workers, they become creative acts. Josh tells me he doesn't mind that the job is so well defined and scripted: that means that it doesn't leave much time for worrying about the job, so you can actually enjoy your shift. "We can pick out any CD we want," he adds. The collection of music and their freedom to choose from the collection are very important to these teenagers because the music decision is, as Josh puts it, "the important stuff."

"We can also schedule the shifts however we like," Kelly says. Kelly is an 18-year-old student who just started college. For Kelly, scheduling her shifts with her friends was a paramount concern. She says that she and her two best friends, Kirsten and Mel, who also work at the coffee shop, try to schedule their shifts so they are able to spend time together while at work. Because of their hectic schedules, they often have trouble getting together, so working at the same shift is an opportunity for them to socialize. "Sometimes," Kelly adds, "I schedule my shift to *see* Ben," referring to her boyfriend who works at the pizza place next door, so that they can spend time with each other while she is at work.

Decisions about clothes, the accessories they use to express their personalities, music, and shifts are the issues that matter to the teenagers who work at the coffee shop. Thus, their lived experience of a work shift full of scripted responses and routinized button pushing is not experienced as one of rigid restrictions, but as one where they make the decisions—or at least the decisions that "matter."

### **Lack of External Authority**

Rigid rules and restrictions, repetitive work, and detailed, scripted interactions with customers are often presented as characteristic features of service sector jobs (Tilly 1995). Implicit or explicit in such analyses is the idea that workers are subjected to external sources of authority and control, usually represented and enforced by on-site managers and quality-control inspectors. Contrary to these preconceptions, the teenagers at the coffee shop characterize their work experience *as being absent of domination*, control,

and authority. While there is a “supervisor” scheduled to work during every shift, Josh tells me that “she is not really like that.” That is because the supervisor is Jenna, an 18-year-old college student, who is also one of his closest friends. The “manager”—who is usually (but not always) an older and longer-term employee for whom the coffee shop is a career—is present only during opening and closing shifts. The remaining shifts are supervised by Jenna and Anna, another 19-year-old college student. Because the supervisors are their peers and, in most cases, their friends, most of the teenagers who work at the coffee shop do not feel like there is a boss on the premises. “It’s more like hanging out with friends,” Jenna says. “I’m technically the supervisor, but . . . they’re my friends, you know.”

Among themselves, Jenna tells me they don’t feel like there is a hierarchy: she says they all “hang out.” “No one is assigned to one task,” she says, and hence no one is singled out to be in a separate place. Rather, they all hang out behind the counter at what they refer to as the “bar” area. Because there is no physical separation and restriction, the teenagers feel free to move about the shop.

The absence of formal occupational authority in the workplace is not the only form of freedom at the coffee shop. The workers feel that the coffee shop is a safe haven insulated from other forms of authority as well. As Josh says, it’s not only a great hangout place, but also “my parents are OK with it.” Like most teenagers who work at the coffee shop, Josh says one of the advantages of working is that the workplace is insulated from parental restriction and authority. He complains that his parents “always tell him what to do,” but when he works at the coffee shop, they do not ask any questions. Chores and even homework become secondary considerations when Josh has a scheduled shift. “Even the teachers are nicer,” Josh explains, referring to his professors. Because Josh spends so much time at the coffee shop, he often misses classes and, on occasion, tests—like many of the other workers at the coffee shop. However, he observes that his professors are much nicer to him because he had to work. Work, therefore, offers a space absent of authority—employer, parent, and teacher—and provides the workers with a feeling of control over their activities.

## Creativity

The feeling of control and authority also stems from the use of creative skills in these jobs. Traditional accounts characterize these service sector jobs as requiring minimal skills at best (Ritzer 2000), but this is not how the

workers see it. While credentials, experience, and skill requirements are limited in these jobs, from the perspective of the teenagers there is more to it than pushing buttons. Teenagers at the coffee shop do not perceive their work experience as one where they lack skills but rather as a space where they can make use of their skills and their creativity. Jenna tells me there is a lot more to coffee making than simply the button pressing described in the employee manuals. "It requires a lot of skill and concentration," she says, adding that they have informal foam-making competitions. Throughout the shift, they compete to see who can make the best foam: a good cup is a matter of pride. They all agree Anna makes the best foam. Anna takes this task very seriously: "Your milk has to be the *perfect* temperature and amount," she says as she elaborately describes how she goes about making *ideal* foam. Tasks like topping coffee with foam may appear to require no skill to an objectivist analyst. However, these teenagers define this (along with other aspects of their job) as something that utilizes their skills and concentration. "It's not just the foam," Anna asserts. Even the most straightforward tasks, like making regular black coffee, require engagement and creativity. "Anybody can make coffee, but making good coffee requires a lot of skill."

## Individuality

By working at the coffee shop, these teenagers not only feel like they're engaged in creative activity, but also feel that work is a way for them to express their individuality. Although typical service sector jobs are portrayed as jobs where employees are expected to look uniform and standardized (Ritzer 2000), for many teenagers, work is a way to express their individuality. Monica says that she feels anonymous and alienated at school, as she goes to a large state school with big classes. At school, nobody knows who she is: she is just one of the students. However, working at the coffee shop distinguishes her; among her friends from school, she is the girl who works at the cool coffee shop. Not only does her work provide her with a distinct identity, but it also gives her and her friends something to talk about. Before she started working, Monica often felt left out because her friends all worked and wanted to talk about their jobs. One of the reasons why she got a job was to give her something to talk about that was "hers."

Work provides these teenagers with a sense of identity not only at school and with their peers, but also throughout the work shift. According to the teenagers who work at the coffee shop, the uniforms they have to wear

do not take away from their individuality. "This is what I normally wear anyway," says Josh, referring to the khakis and casual T-shirt that serve as his uniform. Moreover, employees' accessories and personalized items like Anna's manicured nails, Josh's piercings and tattoos, and Monica's ethnic jewelry act as important signifiers of the teenagers' identities. In displaying these symbols, the workers at the coffee shop inform customers and employees of their interests and hobbies. Josh, for instance, is a first-year theater major and wears a necklace that resembles tragedy and comedy masks. These kinds of symbols are indicators of the teenagers' personalities and serve to smooth social interactions by giving information about themselves to everyone who comes into the store. Jenna tells me that these personality makers help workers meet people with similar interests. They also have developed other ways to communicate their interests. "Sometimes, instead of carrying or wearing your symbols, you can write them on personalized coffee cups," Jenna says.

### **Fun and Friendships**

Through these signs and symbols, workers define and use the coffee shop as a place where they can meet new people. While the work experience is traditionally portrayed as being endured rather than enjoyed (Adorno 1994), for these teenagers work provides the opportunity to meet others in the area and socialize with friends (Besen 2004, 2005). Josh was only 17 when he moved to town for college, and remembers that although he was coming to attend a large university, it was difficult for him to meet new people. A university, he says, was too big and impersonal. He didn't feel as though his school provided much of an opportunity to meet new people or to hang out with his peers. He decided to go to college because everyone in his family did and "it's something he has to do." But socially, he didn't think the university would offer him many options. "I didn't know anyone," he remembers, "so I thought work might be the best way [to meet new people]." Interestingly, even though he knew he wanted to work to meet people, he didn't plan it. As he explained, "I just came in to get coffee one day and I got a job with it." Instead of going through job listings, searching for contacts, and filling out long applications, he came in to get some coffee and the "manager," another college student, asked him if he wanted a job. The supervisor who hired him, Jenna, later remembers the day she talked Josh into getting a job at the coffee shop. She says that with his piercings, tattoos, and Radiohead T-shirt, he looked like a cool person, the sort that she would want

to hang out with. After she saw his theater-mask-shaped accessories and chatted with him about his passion for acting as she served his coffee, she realized they were very similar and asked him if he'd consider working at the coffee shop. "You always want cool people to work here," she tells me.

The conversations in the shop are centered on trivial matters and consumption; in general, talk in the coffee shop is loud and is accompanied by endless laughter and giggles. Not only are the conversations loud, but they are also expressive: they involve waving at friends and hugging and kissing whenever the teenagers arrive or leave.

Throughout a typical shift, these teenage employees—dressed in causal clothes, standing at the bar under spotlights, and holding cups filled with legalized stimulants—laugh, giggle, and engage in endless, loud talk about trivial matters. As they make shopping lists, they shuffle through music with the teenagers who come into the shop as customers, deciding what to play over the store's stereo system.

The other teenagers they hang out with at the coffee shop are a heterogeneous group. It consists of the peers they meet at the coffee shop, the friends they are scheduled to work with, and other friends who stop by to visit with the workers. The coffee shop provides the social space for the teenagers in the suburbs to meet new people. John, a 19-year-old full-time student who moved to town for college, remembers when he started working at the coffee shop. "I'd just moved [here], and I didn't know anyone. So, I got a job." Like Josh, he remembers being intimidated, feeling lost in the large university and lonely in the suburbs. When John moved here, from all the way across the country, he barely knew anyone. He moved away from all of his family and friends and found himself in the suburbs, where teenagers lacked space for social interaction. John didn't know where to meet people and find friends, and says that this motivated him to work. He says that he believed that the teenagers who worked there would be "just like him." He not only made a lot of new friends there, but also met his boyfriend, Chris.

Most people there are from the same age group and share similar interests. Furthermore, the workplace gives them the opportunity to interact with each other in a small, personal space and get to know each other better. This is further facilitated by their clothing and accessories, which are geared toward introducing themselves and marketing themselves to their peers. John and Chris were working at the same shift and, like many other teenagers working at the coffee shop, used their accessories to share their interests.

Similarly, Josh says that he met most of his good friends, like Rachel, Jen, and Joy, through his work at the coffee shop. These four are not just coworkers, but also have become close friends over the time they have

worked at the shop. They make sure to schedule their shifts together and spend a lot of time before and after the shifts. "They're not just colleagues or something, you know: we hang out all the time." As John says, "Where else can you meet people?"

Donna Gaines has characterized the lives of youth in the suburbs as a "teenage wasteland" (1990). Gaines justifies this label by referring to Satanism, suicidal tendencies, and so-called troubled teenagers. However, I found that for my respondents, suburbia was a "wasteland" because it was unable to provide opportunities for socialization and meeting new people. "You also get to meet other people," John said about his work at the shop. For the teenagers working at the coffee shop, coworkers are not the only friends to be made. There is a large group of premed students who regularly come to the coffee shop to study. This group of friends generally stops by the coffee shop at around 2:00 p.m. and sits in the "lounge" section to study and socialize. "That's how I met Dave," Kristen, a 19-year-old student, tells me. Kristen, with her endless chatter and jokes, has a very outgoing personality. Despite this, she says that she didn't have many chances for meeting people before she began working at the coffee shop. She says there is a constant flow of people into the shop and she enjoys being surrounded by so many different people. Dave, a 19-year-old student who spends almost every afternoon at the coffee shop and is Kristen's best friend, is a regular at the coffee shop. He usually takes a seat close to the bar, where Kristen works, and chats with her throughout her shift. During the breaks, they take smoking breaks outside together and often enjoy day-old pastries behind the counter. They are also joined by their friend, Joe, who brings leftover pizza at the end of the day from the pizza place where he works after school. In addition to the lack of opportunities to meet new people in the suburbs, the suburbs are also defined by workers as a social wasteland because of the limited space they offer for social interaction. At the shop, however, a typical shift is characterized by a constant movement of friends stopping by to hang out with the shop's employees. "It's such a convenient location, with my boyfriend working upstairs at the bar," says Kristen, whose boyfriend works as a bartender during shifts scheduled to coincide with hers. They see each other throughout their shifts and during breaks. With her boyfriend working upstairs, with her friends Joy and Jen working with her at the coffee shop, and with her best friend Dave visiting throughout the shifts, the coffee shop is for Kristen more a space for sociable interaction than it is a space for monotonous, oppressive work.

Among those who visit, there is a pattern, a set of informal norms, governing where the visitors stand in relationship to the employees. Usually,

acquaintances who stop by for a quick chat hang out by the side of the counter and chat with the workers as they enjoy their drink. This resembles hanging out at a bar or a club. Closer friends not only hang out by the side of the counter but also sit down in the lounge area, where the workers on shift come by periodically to talk and hang out with them. The closer friends like Dave, or boyfriends like Chris and Ben, are seated adjacent to the bar, so that they are free to join in the conversation and mingle with the workers, in front of and behind the counter. Although he is not an employee, Dave often goes behind the counter in order to help Kristen lift a heavy box or make coffee.

"Sometimes, we go out afterwards," Josh tells me, referring to Saturday night outings to clubs or parties, usually with Kristen, Joy, Rachel, and Jen. Right after the shift, the teenagers all go out, and the coffee shop provides a great place for meeting and preparing beforehand. This was evident at the shop during Halloween 2001. Jen, Joy, and Rachel all dressed up in their Halloween costumes, and not just during their shift: even those who weren't working that night were there to prepare, dress up, and make plans regarding a party after all of them were off work. Their friends, who stop by throughout the shift to get more information about the party, join them. "Which party are we going to?" asks a teenage boy in a Radiohead shirt as he stops by to get coffee. "The one at Gina's or Melissa's?" He hangs out by the side of the counter, chatting with Jen and Joy for 10 or 15 minutes as he finishes his coffee. "Gina's party is going to be better," Jen says. "Everyone's going to her [Gina's] party, but Melissa's party has a band." After extended deliberation, a number of phone calls, input from a number of friends and acquaintances grouped around the bar, and input from a number of acquaintances stopping by to ask about the party, they decide to go to Gina's party. "Great," the teenager in the Radiohead shirt says. He takes out a pen, scribbles something on a napkin, and hands it to Jen. "Would you give this to Michelle?" he asks. "She'll stop by later to ask about the party. Just tell her I'll be at the party at 9. She is around 5 foot 4—blonde with blue eyes."

As this example illustrates, the coffee shop is not only a sociable space for peer-to-peer interaction in the "social wasteland," where space for meeting people and social interaction is limited, but also a center for distributing information and leaving messages. The employees at this low-wage, service sector job are doing more than making lattes; they function as information brokers, making the shop a center in the centerless suburb. From my observations, it is no wonder that teenagers accept what objectivist analysts view as a bad job: in a very real way, it places them at the center of their peer group's social universe.

“It’s not just the parties,” Josh tells me in reference to the importance of the shop in coordinating social activities. Most of the time, there are no house parties hosted by friends, and being at the shop becomes a social activity itself. The suburb does not provide many places where they can all go and hang out: so, after the shift, the workers often stay at the shop. There, they continue conversations with the employees coming on the next shift and with friends visiting the shop; they even occasionally perform odd jobs that would be part of their responsibilities if they were still “on the clock.” For these youth, going to the coffee shop is not experienced as a negative or exploitive situation. Rather, it is one of the few ways for teens in the area to engage in social interaction, the employees as well as the visitors.

## Consumption and Pay

For these teens, work is more akin to a leisure activity, like going to the movies or to a club, than it is an economic activity. Work, traditionally viewed as production oriented, is also a form of consumption in the context of suburban teenage labor. While this work facilitates consumption—the workers and visitors eagerly examine the merchandise for sale in the shop, and compare notes on what they will buy—the work itself becomes an object of consumption. Few of the employees came to the shop looking for a job; they came, instead, for social interaction, and the money and benefits are almost irrelevant. Rather than spending their money—though they do that—they spend their time in order to interact with their peers, in the same way that their parents might have gone to clubs or lodges. Rather than work being a means to an economic end, the time they spend at work is an end in and of itself. These jobs are consumed along with other products teenagers consume and allow them to be associated with brands they desire. Jenny tells me she does not just work for money to “buy stuff.” It does not mean that she does not buy stuff, though: she tells me “of course” she has a car and the latest-style cell phone and fashionable clothes, but she says the money she earns cannot possibly pay for all her consumption: her parents, she says, pay or help pay for all those things. It’s one thing to purchase a branded item, but being associated with a “cool brand” though employment is priceless.

While objectivist analysts are correct that these jobs are typically associated with low pay and a lack of benefits, the low pay does not seem to be defined as an inequality or a problem for the teenage workers. There are two main reasons for this. First, as noted before, any economic gains from



their labor are almost superfluous, as the teenagers work more for social reasons than for money. Second, and parallel with this, most of the teenage employees in the shop come from affluent backgrounds. Jenna tells me she does not need the money—her parents are both professionals and quite wealthy—but she says she would pay the company for the opportunity to work at the shop and to be associated with “such a cool brand.” She says she could never work in a place if she didn’t like the brand or enjoy its products. As she tells me, she was going to get the products anyway, and “it’s good to get the discounts.” For Jenna, working is no different from consuming the products of the workplace. As she puts it, “When you work somewhere, you are seen with the products,” referring to the free coffee beans the store gives out every week to the employees or the one drink they are allowed per shift. For Jenna, it has to be a product she is proud to use and possibly show off.

Monica, a close friend of Jenna who started at the coffee shop just a month before I spoke to her, is also into shopping—not just clothes but stuffed animals, mugs, and coffee as well. Whatever she buys is from the brands she enjoys and sells to others. She tells me that her first paycheck went straight to buying stuff from the shop.

I would argue that the consumption element of the job is also present in how positions are marketed to potential employees. Rather than focusing on the benefits, pay, hours, or opportunities for advancement or experience, the ads ask customers if they “want a job with their coffee.” In these ads, and ones like them, the job itself is marketed as a product, as an enjoyable experience to be consumed by the teenagers. Also, the marketing of these jobs is designed to reinforce the potential employees’ consumption patterns. A job becomes a mean to obtain the goods sold at the store. The discounts for the coffee beans, chocolates, coffee mugs, travel cups, and stuffed animals sold at the coffee shop become an incentive to work. The job is marketed as a way to consume and associate oneself with the shop’s brand name, something teenagers feel happy rather than exploited to do.

## Exceptions

While my findings suggest a pattern of enjoyment and fun among the teenagers I studied at the coffee shop, there are some instances where workers complained. During periods when work obligations increase—such as when overtime or double shifts are required—some teenagers do grumble, especially if these requirements interrupt their social interaction. When the

coffee shop has unusually long lines that get in the way of chatting with friends, there is temporary uneasiness. However, just like other aspects of work, these obligations that hinder fun are reinterpreted to create a continuous meaning. For example, when I asked John how he handled his required double shifts one busy holiday season, he said this was an excellent opportunity to spend more time with friends! Therefore, while I acknowledge that teenagers' daily work experiences are not devoid of what objectivist scholars refer to by "bad jobs," I would argue that even these "bad" qualities tend to be perceived in a positive light by the teenagers, as they imbue even the most inconvenient qualities with positive, social meanings.

Another exception to the pattern of widespread contentment involved a less affluent worker who was not a teenager. Joann is a slightly older employee from a relatively lower socioeconomic background compared to the other students working at the coffee shop. Especially when her mother got ill and quit her job, she felt a greater need for money and started to be more concerned with getting benefits and working more hours. However, because the dominant culture of the coffee shop centered around fun (and related meanings), she defined her job along the lines of the other teenagers and started another job to earn money, keeping this one for social reasons.

## Conclusion

My ethnographic study of two suburban coffee shops explored teenagers' lived experience of work. While these jobs are often portrayed from an objectivist perspective as exploitive with no control and authority, limited opportunities to use skills or express individuality, and low pay and restrictive shifts, from the perspective of the teenagers the lived experience of these jobs differs substantially. Teenagers who work in the coffee shop define their everyday work experience as one of free space—free of adult supervision where they can socialize, make important decisions, and be creative. The teenagers *en-joy* their jobs, in the interpretive sense of that word. They define and treat their work as fun—as a situation of consumption rather than mere wage-earning production. Thus, the simple but larger point that I draw from my analysis is this: situations that appear (to analysts) to be clearly unequal and exploitive may not necessarily be experienced that way by the persons involved. Daily experience of work is socially constructed—that is, created through people's interactions and interpretations. Teenagers act based on their perceptions of the job: in this case, these jobs are not perceived as "jobs" but rather as social spaces of interaction, devoid of external

adult supervision, where they feel they have discretion and control. These findings regarding the suburban teenage workers of the coffee shop provide a necessary corrective to some of the taken-for-granted objectivist perceptions of work.

As Blumer (1969, 3-4, 11-12, 68-69) argues, meaning is not inherent. Accordingly, nothing is inherently equal or unequal. Power, exploitation, inequality, and similar qualities are meanings that people must define into being if they are to exist *for* those people. Borrowing from Blumer, Harris (2001) outlines a constructionist approach to studying inequality. He argues that a fundamental premise of this approach should be that “[p]eople act on the basis of *their* perceptions of inequality, if and when it is a relevant concern to them” (Harris 2001, 457). From an objectivist perspective, the jobs I studied lack power, control, creativity, and individuality, and are monotonous and dehumanizing. In short, conventional scholars define these jobs as “no fun.” However, a constructionist perspective alerts us to the fact that the very same occupations may not be interpreted or viewed as such by the teenagers. The teenagers who work at the coffee shop interpret and define their jobs as fun and social, with copious authority and freedom to express their individuality. Moreover, the coffee shop functions as an important center for social interaction and is central to the flow of information between teenagers in their centerless suburbs. In addition to pushing buttons and making coffee, the employees of these shops distribute information, however trivial it may seem to an objectivist scholar, about which party is going to be better, which products and brands are in favor, and who is going to be where, and when. In this function and others, teenagers find their work is creative and engaging. The routinized button pushing is often extraneous to what they see as their really “important” functions, just like the money they receive for doing so.

My research shows that these jobs are not inherently “bad” or “exploitative,” but that the actors transform these experiences into a different reality: one of social enjoyment, power, control, and creativity. From their view, the teenage workers do not feel exploited by the employers, but ironically feel like they are using these jobs for their own purposes. They are hired to push buttons and pour coffee, but fill their time instead with social interaction. They are paid, essentially, to do something that they would aspire to regardless: serve as the center of an otherwise centerless suburb. As such, the teenagers’ experience of these “bad jobs” differs considerably from the objectivist understandings of exploitive jobs.

The enjoyment of these “bad jobs” by teenagers, however, does not mean that fun is *really* what those jobs are, or that there’s *really* no need to improve those jobs. I am not using the idea that “Meaning is not inherent”

to imply that “Everything is morally OK just as it is.” Instead, I am using that constructionist premise to draw attention toward meaning making, toward how inequalities come (or not) to be defined, perceived, and experienced as such. I am arguing that in the study of work, too many scholars have imposed objectivist meanings, and that more attention could be given to the lived experiences of these sorts of teenage workers. Thus, constructionist research like mine does not necessarily undermine or discount the contributions of conventional research and the proposals for reform that emerge from it. However, my work does complicate the sometimes “totalizing” narratives that scholars such as Ritzer (2000) tell.

### **Implications, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research**

It is important to acknowledge that not all employed teenagers come from backgrounds as privileged as my respondents'. The employees of the coffee shop were predominantly white and identified themselves as middle to upper-middle class. The marked absence of race and working classes from the coffee shop obviously places limits on my study. Teenage workers in the inner cities may be less likely to define their jobs as my respondents did. Moreover, the workers I studied were employed by a brand that is widely considered to be “cool.” Clearly, not all service sector occupations share this trait. Hence, even in affluent suburban settings, it is likely that many teenager workers do not experience their work as my respondents did.

Representativeness and generalizability are important questions that can be raised about every ethnographic study; in the case of this project, I believe that the coffee shop portrays a useful example of the kind of jobs that teenagers take in the suburbs. It may be possible to generalize from the coffee shop to some other service sector jobs in the suburbs. If more researchers look, they may find what I have found. However, it is important to acknowledge that teenage workers in other kinds of businesses and in other areas (e.g., rural or urban) may or may not imbue their jobs with different meanings than what I found. It is an open empirical question. Unfortunately, my sense is that sociologists are not disposed to seeking out data that suggest that “workers may not experience their jobs to be as exploitive as we think they are.” This is why studies such as mine can be helpful. It is necessary to round out the sociological portrayal of work by respecting and studying workers' lived experiences—even (or especially) those experiences that may be inconvenient to sociologists' accounts.

On the other hand, there is a way in which my study can be used to complement and buttress conventional accounts of inequality. My findings suggest another way in which “the poor get poorer.” There can be important consequences when affluent teenagers consider work a fun activity and choose to spend their after-school hours hanging out in these “bad jobs”: their less affluent counterparts find it more and more difficult to find jobs.

This has important implications for the creation and reinforcement of existing inequalities, viewed from an objectivist perspective. Because “bad jobs” are enjoyed by teenagers who don’t need money or benefits, employers may prefer them over their counterparts who are concerned with material benefits. Less affluent teenagers are less privileged in finding jobs, as available jobs tend to be located in the more affluent suburbs and not in the inner cities. However, even when they travel long distances, they are often turned down and replaced by their more affluent counterparts (Besen 2005; see also Newman 1999).

Thus, by understanding the work experience of these bad jobs from the perspective of the actors, we can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the perspective of the employers. By employing this particular group, they have the advantage of having a body of employees who do not mind the low pay and long shifts and who truly enjoy the atmosphere and the products of the coffee shop. Understanding the work experience, therefore, increases our understanding of the creation and reinforcement of “objective” inequalities and allows us to see the mechanisms through which employees give consent to working under such conditions (see also Burawoy 1979).

While constructionist analyses can be made to serve such conventional sociological ends, the constructionist perspective must be used carefully and not overly selectively. In the study of work, where work has been taken for granted as a set of activities performed for monetary gratifications, the constructionist perspective teaches us to be cautious of meta-narratives. When objectivist scholars characterize entire employment sectors with broad generalizations, they risk obscuring and distorting the lived experiences of the people they write about. In contrast, a constructionist perspective encourages scholars to investigate putatively unequal experiences to discover what they mean to participants themselves. In the case of my study, the inequalities that sociologists decry were not experientially relevant features of participants’ lives. This critique is possibly true of many other occupations and many other social situations. Therefore, a constructionist view can benefit the understanding of work as well as many other sociological arenas that haven’t yet fully been studied from the perspective of the actors.

## Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.

2. Although one of the suburbs houses a large state university, the suburb itself cannot be described as a college town because an overwhelming majority of the undergraduate population commutes. The other suburb, on the other hand, does not house a university, and the in-depth interviews with teenage working at both these branches show no differences in terms of their experience of work.

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