

A Brown Girl's Journey Through the Canada Summer Jobs Program

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Abstract

This critical feminist autoethnography explores the tensions between empowerment and exploitation in Canada's Summer Jobs (CSJ) program through the lens of a brown girl, descended from migrants, two generations removed from the Partition of India. Tracing my trajectory from CSJ participant to nonprofit employer administering the program, this paper situates my experiences within broader structures of postcolonial displacement, economic precarity, and gendered care work. While CSJ is framed as a state mechanism for youth empowerment and equitable labour market entry, this article argues that it also reinforces age-coded, racialized, and gendered inequalities. Drawing on Baines et al.'s (2004, 2017) framework of compulsion and coercion in unpaid caring labour, the paper reveals how youth, particularly gendered, racialised youth are structurally positioned to absorb affective and relational labour, often invisibilised and devalued. Through three case studies, I examine how mentorship is often a discursive cover for emotional overextension, and how organisational austerity enables the reproduction of exploitative dynamics under the guise of opportunity.

Keywords

Second-Generation South Asian Women; Career Barriers; Youth Leadership; Voluntary Sector; Feminist Autoethnography

Arora: A Brown Girl's Journey Through the Canada Summer Jobs Program

Introduction

The Canada Summer Jobs (CSJ) program is an employment-based initiative administered by Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC). The program is designed to bridge gaps in the labour market by providing wage subsidies to various employers, including those in the private, public, and nonprofit sectors, to create summer employment opportunities for youth aged 15 to 30 (ESDC, 2025). Its stated purpose is to reduce youth unemployment and make labour market entry more equitable, particularly for newcomers, Indigenous youth, racialised youth, members of the 2SLGBTQI+ community, and other marginalised groups (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2024).

In this critical feminist autoethnography, I trace my trajectory from a youth participant in the CSJ program to someone who later administered it through my own nonprofit organisation. I explore the tensions between empowerment and exploitation, particularly as a brown girl, two generations removed from the Partition of India, navigating the public sector as both a beneficiary and an administrator. While CSJ often functions as a site of harm, exploitation, and long-term emotional burden for youth, it also played a key role in creating a pathway for me to build material security through work experience, references, and income—resources that ultimately supported my own liberation.

Although there is existing literature on youth-employment programs, there appears to be a notable absence of the CSJ program itself. This article aims to examine the experiences of racialised youth, particularly newcomer women-identifying youth, as recipients of a state-sponsored employment program. It surfaces how social policy is shaped by intersectional inequalities, gendered care work, and paternalistic, age-coded assumptions embedded in the structure of CSJ. Additionally, there is limited inquiry into how Partition-related historical trauma shapes the experiences of Indian diasporic women (Qureshi et al., 2023). This autoethnography contributes to these emerging bodies of work by situating economic precarity as one manifestation of intergenerational trauma within the Indian community.

Arora: A Brown Girl's Journey Through the Canada Summer Jobs Program

Methodology

This article employs Allen's (2023) concept of critical feminist autoethnography (AE). AE is an approach to qualitative inquiry where the researcher uses anecdotal experience as a particular example to speak to a more generalised experience and to shed light on the systemic implications of that experience (Allen, 2023; Lapadat, 2017). Its disciplinary origins include autobiography and ethnography; autobiography is the literary device of self-narration, while ethnography is a methodology where data is collected in fieldwork and analysis interpretation is conducted through writing (Lapadat, 2017). The large language model, ChatGPT was used as a reflexive and organisational tool to support the development of this article. I utilise artificial intelligence as a dialogic partner to help externalise and scaffold my thinking through prompt engineering to structure the article layout, edit my writing grammatically, and explore themes that run across the article as a sparring partner. Moreover, a critical feminist approach to AE foregrounds the researcher's subjectivity and deconstructs the relational ethics of power in knowledge production and research processes (Allen, 2023). One of the ways this is executed is beginning the AE with a disclosure of the writer's positionality, locating how the interpretation of the data is filtered.

Positionality

I am a second-generation descendant of Jalandhar, Punjab, born and raised in Scarborough, Toronto. I am a PhD student at McMaster University, with both a bachelor's and master's degree in social work from Toronto Metropolitan University, and a registered social worker with the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers. I identify as a middle-class cisgender, able-bodied, queer woman, a Canadian citizen and Settler on Indigenous lands. While I do not always prefer to be referred to as a *brown girl*, I recognise it as a significant political and cultural identity marker, one that connects me to a broader cultural phenomenon shaped by the experiences of daughters of South Asian immigrants navigating the tensions between confinement and liberation. These tensions are born out of intergenerational survival responses to colonialism and postcolonial displacement. I situate this paper and the case studies within it through this

Arora: A Brown Girl's Journey Through the Canada Summer Jobs Program

embodied position. My analysis is grounded in the lived contradictions of being a brown girl in Canada, where policies like the CSJ program may appear to offer empowerment but, in practice, reproduce gendered, racialised, and age-coded conditions of exploitation.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: Children's Aid Society

When I applied for the Summer Student Job posting at Children's Aid Society (CAS), I applied the night before, one minute before the deadline at 11:59 PM. I was sceptical of being considered for a position at what is considered a cornerstone organisation in the Canadian social work landscape, with no previous work experience. At the time, I was 20 years old, an undergraduate student, and restless about landing my first-ever job. As a brown girl from an immigrant family, I grew up under implicit expectations shaped by the discourse of honour (*izzat* in the Hindi and Punjabi vernacular).

The Discourse of Honour/Izzat

Situated in an Indian-Punjabi context, *izzat* is a discursive term symbolic of family honour, respect, and reputation (Patel, 2019). It is a discourse codified as a personal legal system with origins predating the Partition of India (Virdi, 2013). It has become a developing area of research, particularly in relation to its intersections with other historical (caste, religion, legal/personal state); contemporary (diaspora, transnationalism, migration, class, education/career) and subjectivity discourses (marriage, sexuality/desire, gender, and race). Within the discourse of *izzat*, women are positioned as the direct bearers of a family's social standing and respectability (Patel, 2019; Somerville, 2019). As a social and cultural construct rooted in shame and guilt, *izzat* functions as an affective mechanism that governs both family members and neighbouring communities (Mucina, 2018). Through this discourse, gendered roles are reproduced: women's bodies become sites of family honour, while men (fathers, brothers, uncles) alongside male community members, monitor and regulate them (Gill, 2022; Mehrotra, 2016; Justin, 2004). This communal affective communication sustains and measures *izzat*, embedding moral codes that

Arora: A Brown Girl's Journey Through the Canada Summer Jobs Program

privilege sons and devalue daughters (Mucina, 2018; Sondhi, 2013; Virdi, 2013). In doing so, men are granted greater leeway in their actions, while women's choices, behaviours, and bodies are strictly policed (Somerville, 2019; Mehrotra, 2016). For example, women are discouraged from socialising outside of school and work, as they face curfews and interrogative questioning that hinder the development of friendships (Somerville, 2019), and are prohibited from exploring romantic or sexual relationships, stunting their sexual development and relationship building skills (Gill, 2022; Krishnan, 2021; Patel, 2019; Mustafa, 2013; Sohal, 2009). The discourse of izzat is transnational, evident in how parents frame themselves as martyrs for having migrated to provide better opportunities for their children (Cader, 2017; Somerville & Robinson, 2016; Sohal, 2009). In turn, this creates a moral expectation of their children that they must make these sacrifices 'worthwhile' by pursuing careers that are positively tied to a family's social standing, revealing that employment is not just about earning, it is about izzat (Mucina, 2018; Virdi, 2013; Sohal, 2009).

Izzat as a Mechanism of Career Regulation.

Within this framework, the unspoken rule was that I would enter *formal, professional* employment only after completing my education. This reflects a common parental practice where children, especially daughters, are discouraged/prevented from working during their studies because it is perceived as a threat to academic performance (Aurora, 2015; Sohal, 2009). In contrast to the North American norm of youth working retail to develop life experience, it is discouraged in many middle to upper-class Indian-Punjabi families because not only is retail considered low-class and risks bringing quiet shame to the family, but it violates gendered ideologies, in which women should not take on physically strenuous or low-status labour. If daughters push to work, they are compelled to work around parental parameters. However, the jobs considered acceptable by parents: white-office-collar positions within proximity to the family home, were largely inaccessible without a completed degree. Meanwhile, the youth jobs that were available were primarily pink-collar (e.g., waitressing, cashier, receptionist, caregiving) and were outside the parameters. Consequently, this tension positioned daughters to work only after completing higher education, thereby remaining financially dependent on their parents. More critically, it also reveals

how financial dependence is framed as protection for women, conveying that they do not need to worry about money and can instead devote themselves to their education (Aurora, 2015; Sohal, 2009). Accordingly, this reflects how higher education is positioned as a marker of class distinction and respectability (Sohal, 2009).

Careers in fields such as Science, Technology, Engineering, or Mathematics (STEM) are closely tied to elevating a family's social standing (Shariff, 2015; Aurora, 2015; Sondhi, 2013; Mucina, 2018). In contrast, the arts are heavily stigmatized as less respectable and are seen as bringing embarrassment to the family. This stems from the fact that, unlike in the North American context where individuals are often judged by personality, South Asians are more frequently judged by occupational position and social status (Somerville & Robinson, 2016). Beneath this structure lies a deeper tension: financial independence can destabilize parental authority, while financial dependence reinforces it, functioning as a mechanism of control (Aurora, 2015). In these ways, izzat translates into the regulation of women's aspirations, mobility, and intimacy—key core aspects of identity development—under the guise of parental protection. Thus, in my context, CSJ became a pathway to gaining financial independence while meeting the unwritten and unspoken expectations around izzat. CSJ offered professionally “appropriate” jobs, the white-office-collar jobs, that my parents would have approved of, shielding me from parental policing and from being seen as further transgressing izzat. As a result, I became the first person in my immediate family to begin working before completing my education. However, it was still considered transgression of this norm, and I was left to navigate the psychological effects, cognitive dissonance, and the moral conflict of defying familial expectations (Mustafa, 2013; Sundar, 2009). As a result, I felt guilty for breaking the familial moral code, which manifested as rumination, anxiety, social isolation, and exclusion, that I carried with me into CAS (Cader 2017; Sohal, 2009).

To my surprise, I was called for a virtual interview, which was short and straightforward. Looking back, that moment marked a disconnect between what I was told, what I presumed, and what I experienced. I had a surface-level understanding of the job role and organisation. I was uncertain about my role, and I presumed I would shadow other child protection workers and assist them in

Aurora: A Brown Girl's Journey Through the Canada Summer Jobs Program

their primary duties. However, once I entered the role, I was ambushed with the realisation that I was primarily filling in for permanent staff on summer vacation. This stood in sharp contrast to the goals outlined by the CSJ program, which is intended to provide youth with meaningful entry points into the workforce through practical learning experiences, skill development, and mentorship opportunities (ESDC, 2025). My role as an access worker included independently supervising visits between parents and their children who were temporarily placed in foster care. Typically, these supervised visits occur after an investigation is initiated, following a complaint, where an intake worker assesses a family's situation. If deemed necessary, CAS intervenes, placing children in care while working with the family toward reunification. Stress injuries associated with child welfare are well-documented. de Boer et al. (2022) reveals that court involvement, crisis management, and child apprehensions are significant sources of stress for child welfare workers (CWW), and earlier studies linked these responsibilities to burnout. It was also reported that most CWWs experience at least one incident of physical or verbal aggression, citing a CASW (2018) national survey in which 44% of workers reported firsthand experiences of such aggression. In sharp contrast, my training consisted of a series of online modules and the shadowing of three visits supervised by a CWW. Five days into the role, I was assigned my first independent supervision. I was tasked with transporting an infant to his mother in transitional housing and supervising their visit for three hours, alone. Although I expressed discomfort to my managing director about the immediate supervision visits, she assured me there was no need to worry, saying that "she was not planning to throw me out to the wolves."

For the next four months, I filled in for staff members on vacation, taking on a caseload of over 25 families. de Boer et al. (2022) cite a report, undertaken by the British Columbia Government and Services Employees Union, revealing that over 30% of seasoned CWWs were assigned between 20 and 29 cases per month. By contrast, it is recommended that CWWs carry no more than a caseload of 20 clients. As an entry-level youth worker earning minimum wage, I was expected to meet and exceed the workload of experienced certified staff without adequate mentorship and support and with only minimal training. I was also expected to learn the organisational culture, an

environment shaped by what critical scholars describe as the social work gaze ¹(Margolin, 1997) and neoliberal logic, which included excessive documentation, strategic CC'ing to build paper trails, relational risk management that discouraged collaboration, and a broader culture of blame-shifting and deflection.

Case Study 2: Grassroots Tamil Settlement (The Agency)

‘Protective Control’ as a Technology of Izzat.

I was confronted with the paradox where my parents cared deeply but also constrained me: they wanted me to be successful and equipped with the capital they never had, such as higher education, freedom from financial burden, and the resources that would open doors (Sohal, 2009). However, at the same time, this justified delaying other dimensions of my adulthood, like entering the workforce, building my professional identity, and claiming financial independence (Mustafa, 2013). The narrative framed the delay as care and protection to safeguard me from hardship, not limit me (Somerville, 2019; Sohal 2009). This reveals a broader structural reality of newcomers surviving colonial violence in the Global South and navigating immigration in the Global North (Mucina, 2018; Shariff, 2015). In my case, my parents are the children of parents who survived the Partition of India and developed generational survival strategies in response to displacement, gendered shame, and upward mobility (Qureshi et al., 2023; Mucina, 2018). Thus, as a third generation shaped by two generations of migration, one forced by colonization and another driven by postcolonial dislocation, pushed my family toward economic opportunity in Canada, and in-turn, my life became shaped by the aftermath of displacement, which included survival strategies, fears, and ambition for something better (Somerville & Robinson, 2016; Sohal, 2009).

One of these survival strategies is what I coin *protective control*: a mechanism embedded in the discourse of izzat in which the discursive framing, historically situated in colonization and post-colonialization, where parents restrict their daughters because of protection but, in practice,

¹ The Social Work Gaze refers to the process in which social workers in child welfare leverage affective and relational labour to generate positive relationships with their clients to extract information, as a form of state-sanctioned policing and surveillance.

function to maintain control, and naturalizes the surveillance as healthy parental and communal intervention and duty. These mechanisms often remain unspoken yet significantly shape much of one's life. Navigating this paradoxical discourse with parents is difficult; children cannot openly discuss it with their elders without transgressing another boundary of disrespect. As a result, daughters are left to lie to their parents to work around these rules (Somerville, 2019). Ultimately, this becomes a way of living: a double life in which daughters endure guilt and shame in silence, transgressing boundaries in exchange for fragments of freedom and autonomy (Somerville, 2019; Sundar, 2009, Justin, 2004). Hence, the possibility that this could have been my life until marriage, which is how parents frame the stage at which their daughters will be granted more freedom, left me overwhelmingly confined. In-turn, I saw the CSJ program as a pathway to build financial freedom and, eventually, liberation, so as soon as my contract wrapped up, I started at a grassroots Tamil settlement agency (Agency) as a grant writer.

Due to my experience at CAS, I was incredibly nervous to start my new role at the Agency. My hands were clammy, and my heart was racing, unsure what to expect. I told myself to keep my head down and do the work. On my first day, I was tasked with submitting a three-million-dollar settlement grant within two weeks, even though my only prior experience was writing student-led scholarships. The organizational structure was small: two executive leaders, one manager, and approximately five youth staff, including myself (Baines et al., 2017). While this space was more relational and grounded in care, I quickly recognized familiar tensions between empowerment and exploitation. Nonprofit employers often leverage workers as a band-aid to the structural gaps of underfunding and disparity between high client demand and staff scarcity (Baines et al., 2017). These barriers are amplified by precarious, short-term, underpaid contracts, which normalize a work culture where overtime and unpaid work are expected and rarely questioned. Consequently, this encourages workers to compete for additional hours, short-term contracts, and the rare opportunity of a full-time job. This was mirrored at the Agency, where youth staff, including myself, were given senior-level tasks with little mentorship and training.

My experience at CAS made adapting to the Agency's expectations easier. I understood that succeeding in this context required proactivity and the ability to navigate the organization's embedded neoliberal pressures. To that end, I regularly initiated one-on-one meetings with management to clarify my roles and responsibilities. Since they were often occupied with frontline duties during regular hours, I frequently worked unpaid overtime to collaborate on grant drafts. This strategy, however, proved to be a double-edged sword. While it demonstrated my ability to work independently and with minimal supervision, it also increased responsibilities beyond my contractual duties, as management relied on my self-direction and competence; this included drafting organizational policies, designing outreach materials, stakeholder engagement, and occasional frontline work. I was doing this to position myself to compete for a full-time position, ideally, or at minimum, an extension of my current contract, which I achieved for an additional month. I was also tapping into the CSJ culture where opportunity trumped labour protections: I was prioritizing the material value of the experience that I could later leverage for future employment either at the same agency or elsewhere (Leanard et al., 2015).

Nonetheless, my experience was marked by a paradox of empowerment and exploitation. While I was undeniably exploited, there was undoubtedly genuine care, community, and cultural belonging. Although I cannot speak on behalf of my colleagues, some of whom found the experience frustrating due to unreasonable work expectations, the relationality made a difference for me. The organization was Tamil-run and women-led. They actively encouraged community and relationship-building, in sharp contrast to the relational risk management I witnessed at CAS, where coworkers were encouraged to work in siloes. I began befriending the other youth staff, many of whom were around my age and fellow brown girls. The employers regularly stocked the office kitchen with snacks and groceries for staff and consistently bought us lunch, such as biriyani, uthappam, and other Tamil dishes. The Agency offered accessibility by allowing youth to call in sick and shift their work schedules around to accommodate unforeseen circumstances while ensuring they could recover those hours later.

Case Study 3: The South Asian Yard (SAY)

Arora: A Brown Girl's Journey Through the Canada Summer Jobs Program

Founders often create organizations because they are intimately connected to the problems they seek to solve (Carman & Nesbit, 2012). For example, Birk (2013) documents how the experiences of second-generation Brown women can become catalysts for activism as a form of resistance. Similarly, my drive to build The South Asian Yard (SAY) came from a desire to create space, dialogue, and representation for the brown girl community. My experiences working in CSJ-funded roles not only shaped my understanding of institutional structures, but it positioned me to navigate the public sector with skill. Through academia, I founded SAY during my third-year capstone project and later incorporated it as a nonprofit during my fourth-year social work placement. The summer before starting my master's in social work (MSW), SAY received CSJ funding to hire two youth employees. This reflects Canada's broader policy focus on youth development and increase in youth-led grants (Heritage Canada, 2021). Although research depicts the positive impact of state-funded youth-led opportunities with reported feelings of empowerment and being recognized as contributing members of society (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2012), there is little scholarship capturing how racialized and gendered youth leaders navigate these opportunities within the precarious structures of the public sector, particularly when occupying leadership roles.

Although I initially applied for CSJ to fill a funding gap and build staff capacity at SAY, the purpose of the grant soon became deeply personal. My founding team member, who was also a friend before SAY began, had been working voluntarily for nearly a year when she began navigating financial precarity compounded by izzat-related barriers. During this time, she confided in me that she was counting on the CSJ grant to help alleviate some of these challenges. This further pushed me to secure the grant not only to sustain the organization but also to support her. What was happening here was threefold. First, as the leader of a nonprofit start-up, I felt pressure to secure the grant to sustain SAY and build the staff capacity we urgently needed. Second, as both a friend and a leader, not only did I want to honour her commitment and the voluntary labour she had contributed when SAY was still just an idea, but her disclosure created an added layer of urgency and responsibility.

SAY was a two-person team and was rapidly growing; its revenue increased from an initial \$5,049 investment to \$32,000 in one year through grants and sponsorships. On paper, we were thriving, but beneath the surface, I was cracking under the pressures of being an insider–outsider. When SAY acquired CSJ funding, I hired my founding team member and one external youth employee (applicants were not permitted to hire themselves) (ESDC, 2025). I sought to create a better youth work experience by introducing flexibility into the workplace. Unlike the standard nine-to-five model, SAY employees were given agency to design schedules that worked for them, they completed their daily hours and maintained some overlap with the rest of the team. This allowed for professional consistency while accommodating individual needs. Further, although the CSJ reporting framework did not formally allow for paid sick days, SAY offered unpaid flexibility, where employees could take a sick day when needed and make up the hours later. I was also intentional about how I approached youth leadership, I understood that for both employees, this was an early exposure to the professional landscape, and I wanted to create space that reflected that reality, balancing mentorship with accountability.

The founding team member understandably expected greater flexibility in her working arrangements, not only because she had put in the time when SAY was just an idea, but also because she was navigating an increased financial precarity intersected with izzat. I was more than willing to meet this expectation; yet at a certain point, it began to blur into leniency. It placed me in a difficult position where she was no longer carrying her share of the weight, which became unfair not only to me but also to the newly hired employee. It is important to note the nuance and complexity of this moment, which lay in the multiple subject positions I occupied: I was a nonprofit leader, colleague and friend, each carrying its own relational and emotional expectations. From the perspective of a leader, I was in a position where I needed to address unequal workloads and blurred expectations particularly when they emerged from within the founding team itself, which made it difficult to model consistent and fair leadership. I also occupied a position of relative power, where I held more experience, power, and institutional access. I felt responsible for creating the kind of space I had once wished for when I worked in CSJ-funded roles, which meant extending understanding and grace when I recognized the systemic and personal barriers shaping someone's

Arora: A Brown Girl's Journey Through the Canada Summer Jobs Program

capacity to work. Yet, in hindsight, my expectations for my founding team member were also layered because of her *executive* role. I expected her to meet a standard closer to my own level of professionalism and responsibility, shaped by my own internalized sense of what legitimate leadership looked like.

At the same time, I had invested the money, carried greater responsibility, and assumed all the organizational risk. My face and name were tied to SAY's public identity, I was the one negotiating funding, attending meetings, and sitting at tables with public sector leaders. I had been absorbing organizational risk, carrying a heavier workload, and working unpaid the longest—an imbalance that became more visible and amplified through the CSJ program. Still, I accepted this mindfully, knowing it came with the territory of being the founder and leader. Finally, as a friend, I wanted to honour her commitment as she had taken a chance on helping me build what began as a childhood dream and reciprocate care and support while she navigated a tumultuous tide. Moreover, I was twenty-three years old, stepping into what mirrored a seasoned leadership role, completing my MSW full-time, while navigating my own izzat-based struggles. I was overwhelmed and learning, in real time, how to hold space for the very paradoxes and tensions that defined my leadership while learning how to navigate them. In trying through conversation and extending grace, I found myself overextending, absorbing the emotional labour that came with being both a Brown girl and a young leader. Essentially, I built SAY's foundation on moral compulsion, a sense of responsibility that, while well-intentioned, became increasingly strained under the CSJ program. This dynamic ultimately marked the beginning of the end of my relationship with the founding team member, and the central tension of youth leadership, where those who share oppression, friendship, and collective resistance must navigate the contradictions between solidarity and hierarchy, care and accountability, and the ideals of anti-oppressive practice and the realities of structural reproduction (Ng, 1996).

Discussion

My experiences across these case studies are not intended to morally critique specific organisations, their leadership, or any individuals; instead, it serves to expand on Baines et al.'s (2017) work in

Arora: A Brown Girl's Journey Through the Canada Summer Jobs Program

Filling the Gaps: Unpaid and Precarious Work in the Nonprofit Social Services Sector, which asserts that:

employers have found various ways to fill the gaps in funding through the extraction of unpaid work in various forms... [and calls for further theorization] ...to account for the multiple and gendered forms of unpaid labour and the ways they are extracted in the contemporary, under-funded, managerialized social service workplace (pp.625-626).

Across my case studies, the CSJ program creates mechanisms that enable both public and private sector employers to exploit youth labour. This exploitation operates through three interlocking mechanisms: (1) structural and financial conditions that incentivise cheap labour; (2) developmental discourses that frame precarity as personal growth; and (3) relational and affective labour demands, especially for racialised and gendered youth.

Structural & Financial Conditions that Incentivize Cheap Labour

The structural and financial conditions embedded in the CSJ program are designed to incentivise the public and private sectors to hire youth, not for development, but for cheap labour. Referring to the ESDC's CSJ Applicant Guide (2025), the CSJ program is commonly regarded as the seasonal window for minimum-wage jobs spanning June to August, aimed at those aged 15 to 29. The program's objectives include hiring youth "that are underrepresented in the labour market, including Black and racialised, Indigenous, and 2sLGBTQI youth" (p.20). The program provides a 50% wage subsidy to public and private sector employers (including those receiving at least 50% of their operating budget from government sources or businesses with fewer than 50 full-time staff). Nonprofit organisations, however, receive a full 100% subsidy, including mandatory employment-related costs. This creates an ideal funding scenario where nonprofits and public sector organisations are fully or partially reimbursed and can consistently offer short-term part-time or full-time contracts, typically ranging from 180 to 480 hours, with minimal oversight from the government.

Austerity in the Public Sector

Arora: A Brown Girl's Journey Through the Canada Summer Jobs Program

The CSJ program becomes an ideal funding source for nonprofits because of the prolonged systemic barriers to funding that have produced persistent service shortages (Gallagher et al., 2024; Hall et al., 2005; Baines et al., 2017; Ramsundarsingh & Falkenberg, 2017; Cunningham et al., 2017). Fund development, which comprises grant writing, ideally requires an extensive team of researchers, program designers, budget planners, stakeholder coordinators, writers, and editors. However, because of limited funding, these responsibilities often collapse into one role, as shown in the second case study (Malenfant et al., 2019). Further, government funding has shifted from supporting organizational development toward short-term project-based funding (Gallagher et al., 2024; Hall et al., 2005). In doing so, these project-based grants leave little room for more general organisational costs, and although some overhead costs are allowed, they must be directly tied to the project (Clément, 2022). For example, expenses such as website and domain fees, bookkeeping services, or accounting software are only partially covered in proportion to the project timeline (Burkart et al., 2018). Otherwise, using funds for general operations is discouraged, creating barriers to organisational sustainability (Altamimi & Liu, 2022; Chikoto & Neely, 2014). A result of short-term funding is nonprofits are continually engaged in the process of applying for grants, consuming significant organisational resources, putting them in a chronic state of financial instability (Evans et al., 2005).

Additionally, systemic priorities shape government funding, often compelling organisations such as SAY, whose mission falls outside these priorities, to bend their core mission to align with the grant criteria (Gallagher et al., 2024). This is a common practice among nonprofits to attain funding, illustrating the dilemma between organisational survival and integrity (Chen & Bozeman, 2012). Nonetheless, this reflects a larger phenomenon where public sector organisations negotiate ethical tensions regarding resource allocation, political agendas, and administrative considerations, positing them to chronically choose between organisational agency and dependence (Saidel, 1989; Burkart et al., 2018). These funding gaps result in service shortages, frequent turnover rate, and chronic burnout (Gallagher et al., 2024; Hall et al., 2005). Hence, the CSJ program remedies these funding barriers by offering organisations the room to employ youth with minimal restrictions and

accountability, while allowing greater flexibility and support in organisational development and sustainability.

Moreover, CSJ-funded organisations design contractual obligations to replace full-time, part-time and relief staff; to be vague enough to allow organisations to redefine job roles mid-way through the term or to cram multiple positions into a single hire (Malenfant et al., 2019). This is synonymous with Baines et al., (2014) concept of lean work where social care is contracted out, advancing neoliberal priorities of cost-effective labour and standardisation. For example, my role at CAS was designed to substitute for precarious on-call workers who would relieve sick or vacationing full-time staff, but at a fraction of the cost. My role at the Agency was intentionally vague, allowing it to shift over time and become overstuffed with multiple job positions. As shown, grant writing eventually expanded into frontline support, stakeholder engagement, program and outreach design, and human resource development. Similarly, I used the CSJ program at SAY to fill the funding gap by hiring youth to build SAY's staff capacity. Although the CSJ funding application states that the roles cannot "displace or replace existing employees or volunteers, even if they are absent" (ESDC, 2025, p.11), across the case studies, organisations appear to routinely ignore this guideline because of the minimal labour protections and accountability systems. Thus, this reveals the tension in how the CSJ program incentivises the public and private sectors to replace the jobs of accredited full-time, part-time and relief staff with youth labourers who are compensated at a comparably lower rate and with fewer labour protections.

Building on the minimal labour protections for CSJ youth is the lack of access to paid sick leave or lieu time. Although the CSJ program frames youth employment around mentorship, support, and an accessible, equitable entry point into the labour market, the case studies reveal a stark tension: youth are positioned as learners and mentees expected to learn from staff yet treated as precarious contract workers. For example, due to restricted funding windows, agencies are structurally unequipped to offer paid sick leave and lieu time. As a result, CSJ youth cannot shift their work schedules to accommodate unforeseen circumstances or illness. Not only does this disincentivise youth from calling in sick since doing so means losing paid hours, but when CSJ-

funded roles are designed to replace full-time or part-time staff, it intensifies the pressure to show up, even when unwell, since taking a sick day can be seen as a lack of reliability, risking both their perceived employability and access to future references. In contrast, youth were offered lieu time at the Agency and SAY because the organisations were willing to bend the CSJ-reporting framework to provide flexibility. Referring to Baines et al. (2004; 2017), the compulsion–coercion model of unpaid caring illustrates how unpaid labour operates along a spectrum, where at one end is compulsion, framed as a moral threat to one's sense of self (e.g., failing to be a good or committed worker), while at the other end, is coercion, involving material consequences such as the loss of work hours, income, or future employment. Evidently, the CSJ program functions as a site of coercion, where the state enables public sector organisations to leverage youth's structural vulnerability around material security in exchange for cheaper unprotected labour.

Neoliberalism

As described above, the funding barriers and precarious work contracts depict a broader theme in how the CSJ program reinforces the ongoing entrenchment of neoliberal logic in the nonprofit sector. Since the 1980s, the government has undergone a systemic change, implementing *neoliberalism*: a political-economic project that valorises minimal state intervention, optimises businesses' profit-making, and shrinks public expenditures for human services (Malenfant et al., 2019; Fanelli et al., 2017; Baines, 2017). Neoliberalism fosters a privatised market and an individualistic ethos of competition, meritocracy, and self-sufficiency (Gallagher et al., 2024). Within the public sector, these reforms crystallised in the framework of new public management (NPM), reframing the relationship between the state and public sector into a purchaser-provider model (Cunningham et al., 2017). This can be characterized by the state creating competitive performance-based funding; precarious and temporary work contracts; pressures to cut down labour costs while doing more with less; and emphasizing commercialized revenue generation supplemented with private donors, venture philanthropists, and social entrepreneurship (Gallagher et al., 2024; Cunningham et al., 2017; Fanelli et al., 2017; Baines, 2017).

Thus, the structural and financial conditions of the CSJ program: the competitive short-term project funding and precarious work contracts coercively position nonprofits to use CSJ-funded roles as band-aids for organisational survival. This reflects the reality in which nonprofits are both coerced and complicit in mobilising neoliberal logic in the public sector, referred to as a 'crisis of care' (Fraser, 2017). Organisations reliant on state funding are compelled to alter their organisational identity to secure funding and safeguard staff and services (Malenfant et al., 2019). This phenomenon, also known as copability, refers to the chronic state of adapting to the continually shifting climate of the market intersecting with public sector demands (Schmid, 2013). Due to nonprofits operating in complex, pluralistic, morally loaded environments, copability produces low and permeable organisational boundaries (Schmid, 2013) that extend into labour practices. This can be seen in CSJ work contracts, particularly ones that repackage full-time, part-time, and relief positions into temporary precarious youth roles; designed to be redefined mid-term or to cram multiple responsibilities into a single hire.

Developmentalist Discourses that Frame Precarity as Personal Growth

Although the CSJ program is designed to incentivise both the public and private sectors to hire youth for cheap labour, the state packages this incentive under the guise of skill development, mentorship, and opportunity. For example, when viewed through the lens of systemic design, the CSJ funding application's core objective requires organisations to provide opportunities for youth to develop and improve their skills (ESDC, 2025). Specifically, organisations are mandated to develop a mentorship plan for youth employees and identify skills they will develop during their employment (ESDC, 2025). The keywords: "youth," "mentor," "develop," "skill," and "supervise" are mentioned in the guide 149, 49, 29, 39, and 32 times, respectively. Accordingly, when viewed through the lens where policies get carried out in practice, youth working outside their scope of responsibilities, overtime, and underpaid becomes normalised under the guise of personal and professional growth, grit and resilience (Leonard et al., 2016). In doing so, the discursive framing of youth receiving the opportunity by the agency creates a gratitude/silencing culture where they are compelled to feel grateful for the opportunity and silenced about the exploitation.

Arora: A Brown Girl's Journey Through the Canada Summer Jobs Program

Baines et al. (2017) argue that employment programs often function as smokescreens, appearing to resolve labour market barriers when, in contrast, they compel unemployed individuals or newcomers in need of Canadian work experience to work unpaid for a reference to increase their chances of securing paid work in the same agency. Similarly, the CSJ program, a state-sanctioned employment program, functions to correct the youth unemployment rate but alternatively pushes youth into underpaid roles in hopes of securing employment or a reference. However, beneath this lies a deeper tension: what is, in fact, a structural vulnerability, that is, a youth's lack of institutional power and, specifically, professional experience, which becomes reframed as a personal responsibility. For example, most youth yet to enter the labour market have not learned how to navigate workplace politics, advocate for themselves, or identify the unspoken codes of organisational survival. At the same time, they are under significant pressure to build professional portfolios, secure work references, and earn income to sustain themselves. Hence, youth are positioned at a structural disadvantage: the intersection of limited experience and material necessity, which the state exploits by enabling private and public sectors to extract cheap, precarious labour under the guise of opportunity (Leonard et al., 2016). In turn, this reinforces a dangerous cycle where, on a policy level, youth are offered opportunities and mentorship to help bridge the gap of entering the labour market with no work experience. However, on an organisational level, the opportunity becomes the primary site of learning, shifting the responsibility of mentorship away from staff and onto the job itself. As demonstrated across the case studies, these opportunities mirror the responsibilities of seasoned professionals, creating a structural setup that disadvantages youth before they even enter the labour market (Leonard et al., 2016).

Thus, when youth inevitably struggle to meet these unrealistic expectations, it is framed as a personal shortcoming rather than the organisation's neglect to provide adequate supervision and mentorship. This cycle shows that youth are outwardly encouraged to take on these opportunities. However, beneath the surface, they are structurally set up to feel compelled to take on the role, as the refusal is framed as a personal deficiency and a failure to prove their employability. This then becomes a site of coercion, as they are cornered into accepting the role due to the threat of material

Arora: A Brown Girl's Journey Through the Canada Summer Jobs Program

security (access to work experience, references, and income). This ultimately benefits the state and state agents as they gain access to cheap, precarious labour while avoiding the responsibilities of mentorship, supervision, or long-term investment.

Relational & Affective Labour Demands: Racialised and Gendered Youth

The last two sections explored how the CSJ program enables the public and private sectors to exploit youth labour through structural and financial conditioning and discursive framing. This section focuses on the impact of those conditions on youth, specifically, the relational and affective demands placed on them through these forms of labour. Referring to James (1989), emotional labour is understood as an invisible form of work, a social process involving regulating and managing emotions. To further this, Glucksmann's (1995) reconceptualisation of "work" challenges the one-dimensional framing of "work" as purely economic and alternatively argues that it "is embedded in, entangled with, conducted and expressed through other activities and relations which may be social, political, kinship, sexual, or familial" (p. 65). Building on this, Baines et al. (2017) highlight the gendered ethos of altruism embedded in caring work, particularly in the nonprofit sector. They point to normative ideas of womanhood that assume a willingness to work unpaid, to care for others, and to sacrifice personal well-being even under poor pay and working conditions (Malenfant et al., 2019).

A recurring theme emerged across the case studies where I was structurally disadvantaged and funneled into a labour market where my employability hinged on how quickly I could adapt to the role's emotional and relational demands. Mentorship and "professional development" masked expectations of affective labour, especially the burden of navigating multiple spheres of labour (domestic, public, and communal) involving emotional and economic dimensions (Ng, 1996). In the domestic sphere, I was a Brown girl defying izzat-based expectations from my family, where my pursuit of financial independence was framed as morally transgressive. In the public sphere, at CAS, I operated in a persistent state of fear, coerced by my managing director and walking on eggshells with clients to avoid potential incidents of verbal or physical aggression. I was blindsided by the misrepresentation of the job role and the rigid, unspoken organizational culture that

Arora: A Brown Girl's Journey Through the Canada Summer Jobs Program

demanded hypervigilance and emotional suppression. In the communal sphere, at the Agency, ethnic belonging and relationality provided a sense of relief but also produced a form of compulsion. Shared identity markers such as race and gender obscured power hierarchies, enabling the mechanism of care to justify overworking (Leanard et al., 2015). At SAY, as the founder with a dual consciousness: a former CSJ participant and administrator, I not only used the CSJ program to fill the funding gap, but I was also navigating relational labour across overlapping roles: leader, colleague, mentor, and friend. Ultimately, what makes youth care work uniquely precarious is the compounded vulnerability of age and gender. Beyond being devalued through paternalistic attitudes, youth are also less able to resist authority, making their invisible care labour doubly invisibilized. Gendered bodies reinforce expectations that they will ‘step in’ to fill these gaps, often from a place of expectation rather than choice. This is not only dangerous because of the power wielded against youth in the moment; it also functions as a technology of inheritance, shaping how young people understand work, authority, and work-place survival. These experiences imprint on their sense of work identity, self-esteem, and capacity to navigate hostile environments, with long-term psychological consequences.

Conclusions

This critical feminist autoethnography responds to Baines et al.’s (2017) call to examine how public sector programs extract unpaid and underpaid labour under the guise of care and opportunity. Existing research on the public sector already demonstrates significant tensions described as a crisis of care. Within this context, the state’s emphasis on expanding youth leadership opportunities through grants carries a complex reality: while these initiatives create important openings for young people, they can also inadvertently exacerbate the crisis of care by drawing youth into existing gendered and racialized care work and layering on the vulnerabilities associated with age. Drawing on my dual positioning as both a youth participant and later an administrator of the CSJ program, I surface such tensions embedded within these structures.

This analysis also reveals the self-governing technologies the CSJ program employs. Its neoliberal logic obscures hierarchies by shifting accountability from managers onto the job itself, while

Arora: A Brown Girl’s Journey Through the Canada Summer Jobs Program

meritocracy and “deification” models shape expectations for youth entering the labour market. Although future research has yet to fully document these repercussions, CSJ exemplifies how neoliberalism molds young people, naturalizing surveillance and precarious power dynamics as part of the standard work experience. With that said, further research is needed to generate more data on the lived experiences of youth participants in the CSJ program. This autoethnography reflects the experiences of one individual, and while it may gesture toward broader patterns, additional research is required to confirm, complicate, or challenge these patterns. Moreover, there is a pressing need for gender-disaggregated and race-based data on CSJ participants to better understand how intersecting identities shape youth labour experiences.

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