

## The Process of Occupational Decision Making: Patterns during the Transition to Adulthood

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In this paper, we consider how recent social changes in the United States may be affecting vocational decision making. While adolescents often maintain high educational and occupational aspirations, the transition from school is characterized by few institutional supports, the prolongation of education, and a multitude of options with respect to the combination of school, work, and family. In such a context, what themes characterize decision making about schooling and occupational careers? We draw on qualitative interviews collected as part of the Youth Development Study ( $n = 1000$ ), a longitudinal study of work through adolescence and early adulthood. Multiple themes were identified including unfulfilled expectations, the postponement of decisions, turning points that crystallized decisions, and resources and obstacles including, among others, family, work, school counseling, and teachers. These themes characterize contemporary occupational decision making and thus would be appropriate focal points for future research. They also suggest that social policies may need to be modified to facilitate the young people's quest for vocational identity and work. © 2002 Elsevier Science (USA)

Behavioral scientists interested in the process of occupational attainment traditionally have focused on adolescence. Thus, Erikson (1968) proposed that adolescents' primary developmental task during this phase of the life course is to establish a coherent sense of identity through role experimentation; the occupational arena is one major zone of such exploration. Likewise, many influential theories of vocational development situate key elements of the process of occupational attainment in the second decade of life. By the early to mid 20s, the individual is expected to

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have become “established” in work, having attained a viable occupational identity and embarked, in most cases, on the initial phase of a lifelong career (Ginzberg, Ginsberg, Axelrad, & Herman, 1951; Osipow, 1968; Super, Starishevsky, Matlin, & Jordaan, 1963).

For sociological theories of the attainment process, the period of adolescence is also crucial. It is during this period that the young person must make critically important decisions—choices about whether to enter the labor force directly following graduation from high school, whether to go on with further schooling, and if so, what kind of postsecondary institution to attend (Featherman, 1980). Clausen argued that adolescent planful competence—the thoughtful, assertive, and self-controlled processes that underlie choices and the pursuit of life goals—represents a critical resource that facilitates these decisions. According to this perspective, more planful adolescents make better choices about school, work, and family (that is, choices that more accurately fit their interests, values, and talents with opportunities afforded by the social context) than less planful adolescents, and these better choices establish relationships and institutional commitments that endure into adulthood and provide the context for achievement and satisfaction (Clausen, 1991, 1993).

Yet choices about school, work, and family take place within the context of institutions, organizations, and structured labor markets. In fact, the effects of adolescent planfulness on education and occupational achievement vary by historical experiences (Shanahan & Elder, 2001; Shanahan & Hofer, 2001), suggesting that choice making is constrained and enabled by one’s circumstance: People make choices about school, work, and family, but they do so within structured settings that are subject to historical change. Thus, a key consideration in the study of vocational development is the situated nature of decision making as youth leave adolescence and enter adulthood.

In this paper, we consider the contemporary context of the transition from school to work and its implications for vocational decision making. The timing and quality of adolescence and the transition to adulthood are highly sensitive to social and economic conditions, and they have undoubtedly changed at the start of the 21st century. How can these social and economic conditions be characterized? In turn, how do youth report making decisions about their occupational careers? As the context of adolescence and the transition to adulthood changes, new research themes may emerge and old themes may need to be accentuated.

We begin by reviewing life course research that documents how the transition to adulthood has individualized, creating increasing variability in how youth combine the roles of student, worker, spouse, and parent. This increasing variability may indicate both greater latitude in decision making and also fewer structural connections between school and work. We then examine a set of qualitative interviews that focus in part on vocational decision making during the transition to adulthood. These interviews highlight themes that are often neglected in the study of vocational decision making but may nevertheless be worthy of study given the changing nature of adolescence and the transition to adulthood. Finally, drawing

on our results, we discuss how institutions that structure life experiences during this period of the life course can be changed so as to assist youth in making a successful transition to adulthood.

## THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT OF VOCATION DECISION MAKING

In the United States, the adolescent's own decision making becomes especially important in the absence of structured pathways from school to work (in contrast to the German apprentice system, for example). There are few institutional supports for most young people as they make the transition from school to work if they do not achieve a college degree. For those fortunate enough to finish college, placement offices provide some guidance and connections to employers.

As is widely recognized, the adolescent "psychosocial moratorium" (Erikson, 1968) is a time of exploring alternative vocational identities and finding a suitable niche, without being burdened by the responsibilities of adulthood. This period of the early life course has become considerably extended in the United States and, increasingly, in European and other societies as well (Arnett, 2000; Heinz, 1999; Mortimer & Aronson, 2000; Noble, Cover, & Yanagishita, 1996; Shanahan, 2000). Youth increasingly pursue a strategy of what Reitzle and Vondracek (2000) call "optimizing qualifications," which allows the young person "to meet the high demands of a restructuring and innovative market." With approximately 90% of recent U.S. cohorts completing high school, and close to two-thirds of high school graduates continuing to college, the young person no longer is faced with monumental vocational decisions at the time of high school graduation. Since most teenagers expect to attend, and graduate, from college, decisions about work are effectively postponed. Many will not enter full-time employment until they are well into their 20s (Kerckhoff, 2002).

But for most college aspirants, graduation from college is elusive. Today, approximately 60% of young people in the United States obtain some college education (Arnett, 2000; Arnett & Taber, 1994; Kerckhoff, 2002). However, only about one-fourth of 25- to 29-year-olds have received 4-year degrees; 8% have 2-year degrees. About one-third of recent cohorts become college dropouts who, like those who do not attend college, must rely largely on their own resources and informal strategies to find a job (Kerckhoff, 2002; Rosenbaum, 1999).

In view of these odds and the classic theoretical perspectives, one might think that career exploration would be a fairly important pursuit among young people in the United States today. However, as described in a recent book by Schneider and Stevenson (1999), *The Ambitious Generation*, only a minority of high school students seriously considers potential career paths by seeking information or by engaging in appropriate activities, even though almost all report occupational aspirations when asked. In addition, many lack basic information about how much education is needed for the occupations they are considering. Schneider and Stevenson's (1999) analysis is based on a wealth of survey, interview, and observational data.

Schneider and Stevenson (1999) report that adolescents today have high aspirations; almost 70% of the 1992 cohort of high school seniors (participants in

the National Educational Longitudinal Study) expected to earn at least a bachelor's degree. As a result, consideration of vocation during middle school and high school seems rather premature to both youth themselves and their parents. Adolescents' primary concerns become getting into college, and for many, being admitted to the most prestigious college for which they are qualified. High school counseling efforts are directed toward assisting students with college entry and obtaining a suitable match. Even in college, many young people postpone serious consideration of work until they graduate.

Clearly, the period of adolescence has been extended in response to multiple, connected macrostructural conditions: the increasing pace of technological innovation, the growing complexity of work, rapid change in the occupational structure, the expansion of higher education, and the increasingly bifurcated character of the labor force between workers in good, primary jobs, with high pay, ample job benefits, and considerable opportunity (often due to well-defined internal labor markets), and workers who are relegated to low-skill service jobs, with low pay, marginal fringe benefits, and little in the way of career prospects. Youth (and their parents) realize that the jobs in the desirable tier are most often obtained by graduating from college. Indeed, the income gap between college graduates and high school graduates has increased markedly in recent decades. In 1979, college-educated males received 27% higher wages than high school graduates (when experience, race, and other characteristics are controlled); by 1997 the wage premium increased to 44%. For women, the differential increased from 31 to 51% over the same period (Mischel, Bernstein, & Schmitt, 1999).

Thus, adolescents are encouraged to delay making occupational choices and may even be discouraged from active engagement in an exploratory process. The postponement of occupational commitment is linked to other manifestations of the prolongation of adolescence: the delay of marriage, the tendency to return (after leaving) to the parental home, persistent economic dependence on parents, and the continuation of schooling well into the third decade of life.

## EMERGING THEMES IN VOCATION DECISION MAKING

Although the trends are clear, their evaluation is not. Some applaud these changes, noting that contemporary youth enjoy extensive freedom to go to school, to explore alternative fields of higher education (which often involves shifting majors and extension of college well beyond the traditional 4-year period), to travel, and to try out various work situations before "settling down" (Arnett, 2000). Given the extension of the human life-span, those who applaud recent trends ask whether it is necessary, or even reasonable, to expect persons in their teens to be seriously engaged in deciding what they will do for their entire adult work lives. Indeed, at a period in the life course when society is providing extensive (and expensive) educational resources to develop the intellectual foundations for work, work is a very distant prospect for many young people (Hamilton, 1990, 1994).

Another line of reasoning is less sanguine. The majority of youth who do not receive a bachelor's degree enter the labor market without certification and without

vocation-specific skills that have been acquired through formal education. A prolonged period of “floundering,” shifting from job to job, often results, as both employers and youth attempt to obtain a suitable match (Kerckhoff, 2002). Psychologists note high rates of depression among contemporary cohorts of youth (Arnett, 2000), which could be linked to difficulties in establishing themselves in the labor market and other domains.

If Schneider and Stevenson’s analysis is correct, we must wonder how contemporary young people in the U.S. context make the transition from school to work. How might we characterize the *process of occupational decision making*? When do such processes typically start, how do they unfold, and how do they conclude? In the absence of formal structured programs to assist adolescents in this process, do other subtler or more informal mechanisms fill the void? It is often noted that because of rapid technological and occupational change, parents in contemporary industrial (and post industrial) societies cannot guide and certainly cannot very often “place” their children occupationally. But what then has their role in youth vocational exploration become? As the pace and quality of the transition to adulthood changes, what are the resources that facilitate and the obstacles that hinder vocational decision making?

Furthermore, we were interested in what might be considered the *subjective transition to adulthood*. Despite much speculation, little is known about how young people themselves view their circumstances. How do they subjectively reconstruct the process of transition from school to work? What experiences, persons, or personality traits do they see as helpful or problematic? What kinds of people and what experiences or activities may have supported their initial vocationally related explorations and goals? What do they think have been the key obstacles in their paths?

Although the normative status of age norms has long been debated (Marini, 1984a, 1984b, 1987), do young people feel pressure to become occupationally established, and to acquire other markers of adulthood, at particular ages? In thinking about their progress to adulthood, do youth pay heed to the same markers as demographers, e.g., finishing school, acquisition of full-time work, marriage, and parenthood? Do youth feel “off time” or “on time” with respect to their own development, or is such age grading no longer a salient consideration? In general, how do contemporary young people go about finding their way?

## METHOD

While the findings to be presented rely primarily on in-depth interviews, our research integrates both qualitative and quantitative research methods. We selected a group of participants to interview from an ongoing longitudinal study of youth, focused on work investments and activities, so as to illustrate a diverse range of life experiences. The Youth Development Study (YDS), a longitudinal study of youth attending school in St. Paul, Minnesota, began in 1988 when respondents were mostly 14 and 15 years old. A random sample of ninth graders was selected for participation; the first-wave sample was representative of the students attending

the St. Paul public schools in that year. Almost three-fourths (74%) of the panel were White, 10% were African American, 5% were Hispanic, and 4% were Asian (the remainder did not place themselves in any of these categories or identified themselves as “mixed”). Twenty-three percent of the children were from single-parent families. Among the parents, 11% had less than a high school degree; 39% were high school graduates; 28% had attended college, 9% had graduated from a 4-year college, and 11% had done graduate work or obtained professional degrees (for further description of the panel, see Mortimer et al., 1992). Median household income fell in the range of \$30,000–\$39,000 in 1988. Participants were initially surveyed in their high school classrooms. They have been contacted annually since leaving high school by mail. Seventy-six percent of the initial 1000 respondents were retained in the panel 7 years beyond high school (1998), when they were 24–25 years old.

Each survey included detailed information about educational and occupational experiences; on several occasions the questionnaires also included questions about occupational aspirations. These asked, “What is your long-term career goal (include homemaker).”

A “person-oriented,” or configural approach (Cairns et al., 1998; Reitzle and Vondracek, 2000) highlights the diversity of trajectories of vocational development; not all contemporary young people become engaged in thinking about their future work at the same time, nor do they simultaneously develop serious vocational commitments. In fact, we were able to define five categories of youthful career aspiration trajectories based on the annual questions about occupational choice; participants were randomly selected from each category to be interviewed.

The first three categories describe distinct patterns of occupational aspirations. The first, “no change,” includes those participants who continued to pursue the occupational goals they reported in high school, up to the age of about 23 to 25. For persons in the second category, “one change,” occupational goals changed after high school but remained consistent six and seven years after high school. The third category, “recent change,” included participants who had inconsistent occupational goals through the period of observation. The fourth and fifth categories captured those participants who failed to answer the question on occupational aspirations or failed to complete the survey in one year.

Tables 1 and 2 describe the panel distribution, and our interview sample distribution, across these categories. Note how small the group labeled “no change” was in the entire panel distribution (Table 1). Only 8% of the panel made a firm occupational decision in high school that has since guided their occupational pursuits. The fairly large group (35%) in the “response missing” category was also noteworthy. These were youth who responded to the surveys but failed to answer the question regarding occupational choice. In view of the very low nonresponse rates in other sections of the surveys, we suspect that this nonresponse rate results from the absence of well-crystallized vocational aspirations.

Our goal was to conduct in-person interviews with equal numbers of men and women from each of these categories. We elicited participation by sending over

TABLE 1  
Panel Distribution Determined by Occupational Aspirations in Waves 4, 9,  
and 10 (W4, W9, W10)<sup>a</sup>

	Female	Male	Total	Proportion
No change <sup>b</sup>	37	33	70	8%
One change <sup>c</sup>	75	55	130	16%
Recent change <sup>d</sup>	144	90	234	28%
Response missing <sup>e</sup>	166	121	287	35%
Survey missing <sup>f</sup>	43	63	106	13%
Subtotal	465	362	827	100%
Not included <sup>g</sup>	63	120	183	—
Total	528	482	1010	

<sup>a</sup> W4 was the year participants were in their final year of high school; W9 was 6 years later, and W10 was 7 years later.

<sup>b</sup> W4 = W9 = W10: Same occupational aspirations since high school.

<sup>c</sup> W4 ( ) W9 = W10: Same occupational aspirations both 6 and 7 years after high school.

<sup>d</sup> W9 ( ) W10: Different occupational aspirations when assessed 6 and 7 years after high school.

<sup>e</sup> Missing data for any of the responses in W4, W9, or W10.

<sup>f</sup> Recipient failed to respond to a survey in one of the waves (W4, W9, or W10).

<sup>g</sup> Recipient failed to respond to a survey in more than one of the waves (W4, W9, or W10).

250 invitational letters to YDS respondents, asking them if they would be interested in participating in the interview study. We completed 69 interviews, each approximately an hour long. Table 2 shows the actual breakdown of the completed interviews across career choice categories. As Table 2 reveals, the categories were unevenly represented and more women than men were interviewed. The “recent change” and “response missing” categories were somewhat underrepresented. These could possibly be persons who had more difficulty establishing their work lives. Thirty-nine of the interviews were face-to-face; the remaining interviews were conducted by telephone with participants who had moved away from the Twin Cities area and were primarily living out-of-state. The present analysis was based on the 37 interviews that had been transcribed by the time of writing.

Overall, 30% of these interview respondents were married and 5% were engaged to be married; 30% of respondents had children. Participants had a range of careers. Fourteen percent (4 females and 1 male) were both attending school and working, while two females (5% of participants) were homemakers. Other respondents reported a range of occupations, including photographer, teacher, police officer, attorney, waiter, architect, shop worker, social service, administrative support, video and animation, electronic technician, insurance underwriter, customer service and public relations, auto mechanic, accountant, manager, Internet technology business owner, and arborist.

TABLE 2  
Interview Sample Groups Determined by Occupational Aspirations in Waves  
4, 9, and 10 (W4, W9, W10)<sup>a</sup>

	Female	Male	Total	Proportion
No change <sup>b</sup>	9	4	13	19%
One change <sup>c</sup>	7	9	16	23%
Recent change <sup>d</sup>	12	4	16	23%
Response missing <sup>e</sup>	13	5	18	26%
Survey missing <sup>f</sup>	2	4	6	9%
Total	43	26	69	100%

<sup>a</sup> W4 was the year participants were in their final year of high school; W9 was 6 years later, and W10 was 7 years later.

<sup>b</sup> W4 = W9 = W10: Same occupational aspirations since high school.

<sup>c</sup> W4 ( ) W9 = W10: Same occupational aspirations both 6 and 7 years after high school.

<sup>d</sup> W9 ( ) W10: Different occupational aspirations when assessed 6 and 7 years after high school.

<sup>e</sup> Missing data on occupational aspirations in W4, W9, or W10.

<sup>f</sup> Recipient failed to respond to a survey in one of the Waves (W4, W9, or W10).

The interview protocol was designed to elicit a narration of vocational decision-making and work experiences in as nondirective a fashion as possible. Thus, for example, the interview begins with “What are you currently doing?” If the respondent does not mention work, after probes exploring the response to this question, the interviewer would ask “Do you currently work?” The protocol then elicits narrative on the high school years (“Can you tell me something about your interests in high school?”), and, using these experiences as a temporal anchor, explores pre-high school and then post-high school experiences leading to the present. Interviewers asked nondirective questions about interests, activities, plans, perceived influences, involvements in school, work, and family, self-conceptions, and evaluations. The interviewers consisted of graduate students with interests in qualitative methods and the life course and a professor who has been affiliated with the Youth Development Study and maintains an interest in the life course of school and work.

As will be apparent from the findings, the young adults followed many pathways in developing their occupational careers. While some made their work a primary focus, others appeared to spend more time developing other areas of their lives, such as building a family or pursuing other interests. Although each interview revealed a unique life story that was built on individual experience and circumstances, they also revealed certain patterns. Our analytic strategy is not intended to arrive at statistical statements that explain how often something is observed in a population. Rather our perusal of the data is meant to identify themes in vocational decision making that reoccur through the interviews and that may reflect the changing nature of late adolescence and the transition to adulthood.

## FINDINGS

*Normative Age Grading and Expectations*

We first consider the degree of youth's subjective awareness and evaluation of the prolongation of adolescent status. Do young people think of themselves as being different or unusual vis-à-vis prior generations? Do they report a conception of the "ideal time" at which life plans are made? Much social-psychological research on age norms starts with the assumption that individuals develop a "mental map" of the life course which they then apply to assess their own lives as well as the lives of others (Settersten, 1999, p. 86).

We elicited thinking about this subject, as nondirectively as possible, by asking the youth about whether their lives had progressed as they thought they would when they were in high school. We had expected that many respondents would avoid the issue of timetables entirely, by talking about their successes, accomplishments, and problems since high school. But fully 12 of the 20 women interviewed—more than half—spontaneously indicated that during high school they expected that by this age (most respondents were 26 and 27 years old at the time of the interview) they would be married, have kids, and be "settled down." Many women were also disappointed in their career development because they had not achieved a career-type job. Consider the following comments to the query, "Have things worked out the way you thought they would since high school?"

Case 1695, Female, p. 5:

No. I thought, you know, I'd be into my career now and I said I was going to get married at twenty-six or twenty-seven. Pshhh. (Laughs). No, not at all. And I didn't think I'd be still living at home.

Case 1747, Female, p. 19:

Not as I expected. I mean, I'd have a business and by this age, in high school, I thought that I would be married with kids. You know instead I'm not, which is okay. I'm just kind of this big little kid right now. Just sort of having fun.

Case 1032, Female, p. 14:

Oh, God, no. Oh, no. If I thought it'd turn out this way, trust me, . . . with a possibility of floundering for years in a low paid job because of, I mean, I knew that was possible, but it was kind of my nightmare.

Thus, women might mention unrealized expectations about family life and occupational career. While only one male commented that he thought he would be married by his current age, many of the young men revealed that their early anticipations were likewise not yet realized. Consider the following responses to the query, "Thinking about your life since you left high school, has it worked out as you expected it would?"

## Case 821, Male, p. 9:

No. I thought I'd graduate college in four years . . . . The second one, I think would be I would like more of a personal life. I thought, I'm twenty-seven, I thought I'd be married now or close to marriage . . . .

## Case 702, Male, p. 13:

It seems to be getting better now, but it's taken so darn long.

*Interviewer:* What do you think has allowed it to get better now?

Because I'm noticing all the things I want in life for myself now and I've got to accomplish them, so I'm just setting goals for myself now. It's never too late.

One male respondent described a narrow escape from a potentially disorderly life course. These comments reveal a clear recognition and acceptance of age norms.

## Case 1967, Male, p. 14:

Yeah. I never knew what I was going to do, so I can't say that that worked out. I always wanted to have enough money to be comfortable. And that's been fine. I felt like I did things in the right order which in my mind I always . . . my plan was to graduate from high school, go to college, get a job, get married, buy a house. IN that order and I did all those things in that exact order and it worked out each step of the way and it was pretty comfortable each step of the way. So, it did work out that way, how I expected it.

*Interviewer:* Tell me more about the right order. Why did you think this was the right order?

I don't know. My wife laughed at me. She had a pregnancy scare once where, you know, in college I thought she was going to have a baby and she wasn't pregnant, but that really got me worried about the order cause it was something that was out of order and I thought that that would kind of potentially wreck my life. I would be destined to work in a factory at night and live in squalor because we had this baby earlier than planned.

Some respondents had to discard desired occupational goals, perceiving themselves as "too late," although social comparisons and other social psychological processes seemed more common than perceived normative pressures. Many interviewees gave up on their dreams of creative careers.

## Case 1032, Female, p. 4:

As high school went on it became clearer and clearer that I was . . . I mean, so clear actually that I didn't even consider majoring in it [music] in college. I thought I wanted to, but I didn't. But I knew it wasn't going to happen, because I could see the level of preparation of people around me and I knew that I'd started way too late.

## Case 1173, Female, p. 11:

I was trying to get into senior line [dance team] and not getting in and that was my goal—get into senior line, get into senior line, so when that didn't happen I think I started thinking to myself "I'm never going to progress past this point. I'm never going to be a dancer. I'm just not good enough even though I love it."

Others described how they coped with goals that were not realized.

## Case 1456, Male, p. 4:

I had planned on being in medical school right now, heading towards doctor [name of interviewee]. I really did, but it didn't work out.

*Interviewer:* How do you feel about that?

I've learned to accept it. I have a good life. I have a lot of good friends. I didn't become a doctor. Big deal. It's time to move on. I've learned that . . . it took me awhile to accept . . . It takes awhile to accept that.

Even some highly advantaged youth, in training for high-level professions, worried about "sunk costs," given the already substantial investment of money and time. One young woman observed of some fellow medical students.

## Case 1173, Female, p. 11:

You go into it going, oh, I can do anything and then suddenly you're like, I don't know how long I can do this, but I've already invested all this money in it and I just want to make a good amount of money and retire and then do what I want for the rest of my life.

Others expressed greater satisfaction, affirming the value of the extended "moratorium," and gratitude that they were able to postpone the responsibilities of adulthood.

## Case 834, Female, p. 8:

I was a hostess at a restaurant, which was actually one of my best years. I just, I mean, no responsibility at all. Just go to work, come home, don't bring your work home with you . . .

## Case 228, Female, p. 17:

I think it would have been nice to get in here [school] and out of here the first time around, but at the same time, what would I be doing then? And would I know that I was in the right job? No, because I never would have considered human resources or human resource development at that age. I mean, that wasn't even in my thought pattern at all, so I guess that's almost more of a positive that at least, no matter what pressure I felt from my parents, which I did feel from them with quitting, you know, I made that decision myself and now it's going to pay off for me whereas, like I said, for some of my friends who don't have a degree in what they want to do—now what do they do?

A few respondents did express feelings of being further along in life than their peers of the same age. Still others described themselves as doing as well or better than they expected they would be by this time in their lives. Each quote either implicitly or explicitly recognizes that there is a right time for transitional events and experiences in the passage to adulthood.

## Case 108, Female, p. 1:

I've been married seven years. I've known my husband over ten years. I am not the typical twenty-something person. Twenty-something people are single or engaged, living in an apartment, work a nine-to-five job, work hard, party hardy. That's not me.

## Case 1024, Male, p. 9:

For me I've been pretty fortunate ever since out of high school and it's just kind of been this structure all the way through. I guess I'm fortunate in that I can compare myself to my other friends out of high school . . . It's taken a lot of them a long time to kind of find their niche in what they wanted to do. So I feel that I'm a little bit unique in that everything's fallen into place for me. It's real fortunate and lucky in that way and I've kind of known what I wanted to do from the beginning . . .

*Postponements, Turning Points, and Trajectories*

Our interviewees' comments support Schneider and Stevenson's (1999) depiction of the American teenager as being little engaged in occupational decision making. Several young adults commented that they had given virtually no thought to what they would do later while they were still in high school; for some, this continued through college and beyond. One interviewee commented, "I had no idea how to mesh my interests with the work world." Many youth described their present work situations as occurring by default or random luck.

## Case 1967, Male, p. 3:

It was a pretty casual decision, just that it was kind of a default decision. Well, if you're good at this, then maybe you would want to do [this] and it's a good career and I didn't have a good idea of what an engineer did until I was already in the program or what the different careers were.

## Case 622, Female, p. 2:

When I first started working here as a legal secretary people told me that I would be good at working this particular department . . . I never really thought, this is exactly where I want to be. It just kind of happened there and it turned out to work out pretty well.

## Case 1173, Female, p. 14:

I feel like I've been lazy in the respect that I haven't really investigated things very well . . . Sometimes I feel like I've just been going down the path of least resistance, but it's hard to say.

Another interviewee noted the problem she had with indecision, given the seemingly limitless options before her. This interviewee was in a real dilemma, feeling that so many options lay before her that she would suffer undue (in economic parlance) "opportunity costs" in investing in any particular one.

## Case 1032, Female, p. 14:

*Interviewer:* How do you feel your life has unfolded?

Haphazardly. Kind of being pushed along by circumstance or other people, partially due to my indecision. I know that I could control the direction somewhat. I'm not sure how much I could control it. I know I could control better than I do . . . I've never . . . everything looks good. It's like the kid in a candy store-type attitude. I have never been particularly focused on one thing. A college prep curriculum and a liberal arts education certainly do all they can to encourage the kid in a candy store attitude. I've never been very good at

picking one thing out and following it. So, afraid of not liking what I pick and then getting stuck.

Still another interviewee spoke of not wanting to “construct” her life:

Case 1628, Female, p. 9:

... but it's a combination of that and being done with school and having student loans come due and like all of sudden realizing you're done with college and you know, I put pressure on myself and there is silent pressure to sort of move on with your life. Like make the big decisions all of a sudden and I wasn't ready just because I turned a certain age, to make those decisions. It wasn't something that ... those decisions I didn't want to make them happen. I just wanted them to happen themselves. I didn't want to completely construct my life.

Other respondents describe how they did not have encouragement to make specific career decisions in high school; instead they were encouraged to focus on getting into college.

Case 228, Female, p. 3:

*Interviewer:* Did anybody talk to you about what you might do once you left high school?

Not really. No, just really more college. You know, you need to go to college. You need to go to college, but not necessarily specific jobs.

Case 834, Female, p. 3:

No, for me it was just automatic college. So, no matter what we did or no matter what I wanted to do it was just college was just like an extension of high school. It wasn't like a choice at all.

Given the tremendous emphasis on college, what then precipitates making a career decision? Why do youth not continue this kind of “limbo” indefinitely? That is, can we identify turning points that crystallize the vocational decision-making process? We asked the youth if they experienced any particular turning points along the way, activities or experiences that provided the impetus to making a definitive choice or taking a particular pathway. Several were identified, including a few failure experiences.

Case 1456, Male, p. 16:

A turning point in my life. I guess, your big one is on my third MCAT (Medical College Admissions Test), when I didn't get in. That was it. I pretty much decided I've given that an honest shot. For now that door is closed. I don't ever say it's closed forever, but I do say that door is closed for right now. That's the biggest turning point in my life.

Case 108, Female, p. 10:

I would have to say that's when I got pregnant with my son. When my husband and I decided that we were going to have a child, I was still working at that gas station and when we decided to get pregnant, it's like, I can't be around these fumes when I'm pregnant. That's when I made a conscious choice to make a decision for someone else other than myself.

## Case 191, Female, p. 5:

Um, I realized pretty early on in my senior year that I wasn't going to go to college. I did the normal SAT's and going to the resource center and researching colleges, and all that in the beginning of the year. But I think it was almost half way through where I just realized I wasn't going to go to college and I took the ASAP test for the military and, um, rated pretty good on it . . . So I joined the coast guard, but from when I decided to join and when I left it was all within a couple of weeks.

Alternatively, others recognized a degree of satisfaction or comfort in their initial pathways that increased their commitment to them. Some point out that they have arrived at a position that allowed them to support themselves and their families at a certain desired level or found a position that enabled them to use their skills. For some getting a particular job was a turning point.

## Case 1083, Male, p. 13:

That was my first real eight to five job where I decided, okay, it's totally time to grow up now. You're done with school. You're done with all the running around. You work eight to five. You have responsibilities you have to meet, deadlines, etceteras.

## Case 1284, Male, p. 12:

Starting my own business is just a very exhilarating thing. And I'm glad I did it. And will keep doing it hopefully for a long time . . . . Being the employer versus the employee . . . . I have a very career-focused life right now.

Finally, other young adults could not identify a turning point in their decision-making process, but referred to a trajectory of experiences that built upon themselves to solidify an occupational commitment:

## Case 1173, Female, p. 2:

I can't even say there are specific moments that I remember saying, oh, this really makes me want to go into medicine. I think it's more of my general feeling of comfort when I was in that environment or feeling that I feel like I can do this. This seems a little natural to me.

*Resources, Supports, and Obstacles*

The youth mentioned many different types of resources and obstacles to their progress, with greater emphasis on more informal experiences and relationships. Some also benefited from mentoring programs and school activities. Work was a prominent theme. In particular, it was striking how many young people mentioned early family experiences as highly influential in moving them toward their interests and eventual occupational destinations. Most frequent were mentions of parents.

## Case 34, Female, p. 2:

My mom is a nurse and I guess I didn't really know anything else that I was interested in, so I would go to work with my mom.

## Case 414, Male, p. 6:

*Interviewer:* How did your dad know about this job? Was he in the same field?

Yeah, he's a creative director and they have, like, recording studios and video shoot studios there, so he's a client of the place that I got the job and I guess one of the managers mentioned to him that they were looking. So, he told me to call and gave them my name.

One respondent mentioned negative family experiences that may have resulted in his less stable career path.

## Case 702, Male, p. 11:

... there were probably a couple issues of why I probably quit a couple jobs, honestly. I've never really been influenced by my parents to actually stay at one place or whatever. I can call home and go, Mom, I hate this job. "Well, quit it. If you don't like it you quit it." Not "tough it out. You can do it." You know, I was never really pushed into that. I guess, I didn't have the correct guidance really, so that probably had a big part of me jumping around [jobs].

A police officer described discouragement that he received from his mother and other family members.

## Case 1024, Male, p. 2:

*Interviewer:* Were there certain experiences or people or things about yourself that you feel pushed you away from what you're currently doing or discouraged you?

I think there were ... not really pushed me away from it ... but maybe my mother. I don't think she really wanted me to do it and some of the other relatives [did not want me to become a police officer].

Several respondents mentioned the influences of high school teachers or coaches.

## Case 1032, Female, p. 3:

*Interviewer:* Were there any specific experiences or people that you think led you to be interested in becoming a college professor?

No I didn't really know anybody very well who was a college professor ... I did have a lot of respect for some of my teachers in high school. My French teacher, for example a couple of my history teachers, a couple of my English teachers. I really thought, you know, this is where it's at and the people I've met who liked what they were doing were teachers so there's got to be something there.

## Case 1173, Female, p. 4:

*Interviewer:* Did you think about becoming a journalist when you were in high school?

Yeah, that was after I had entered journalism, my teacher ... was a great guy and I think that he ... and there was another English teacher and then a biology teacher that I felt like I was pretty close to and that actually cared about what I was going to do with the rest of my life and he was one of them and he was very concerned about where I was going to college and they wanted to see me do well after high school, so I think maybe that helped me in that direction, thinking that way because I could see that he was doing this. He loved it and he was the type of person that I would want to be in the future.

## Case 1083, Male, p. 3:

I did have the baseball coach, my sophomore and junior year, [he] was one of the guidance counselors and I was on the baseball team and I would talk to him once and awhile and ask him although he wasn't my assigned counselor.

While counselors have been found to have considerable impact in facilitating the school to work transition (Blustein et al., 1997) remarkably few of the interviewees in this study recalled positive influences of school counselors, although some did gain assistance from them.

## Case 1967, Male, p. 4:

I think I just, I was coached from the career counselor to identify areas of interest which would be things that I liked or things that I was good at and I didn't feel like I liked a whole lot, but I knew I was good at a few things, so I'm sure there was a list of if you're good at math and science then you can do these certain careers or these certain majors would fit. It would be like chemistry, physics or engineering sort of a thing, so I picked out of that.

## Case 34, Female, p. 2:

... So, like in high school, I think, I may have talked to counselors about what I wanted to do and when I started, like, community college, I talked to counselors and they helped me get on track as far as getting the right courses done and stuff.

Nonetheless, most of the comments about counselors were negative and did not recognize any positive role of counselors with respect to vocational exploration or goal setting. One young man reported that guidance counselors devote most of their resources to the highly accomplished students; he had never discussed his future with anyone at the school except informally, on a few occasions, with a baseball coach (see above—1083). Another teenager kept a private list of vocational options, but did not share them with her counselor.

## Case 1173, Female, p. 10:

*Interviewer:* Some people as part of these planning activities they talk to other people. Have you done that, guidance counselors or things of this nature?

I had a guidance counselor in high school, but, yeah, I wouldn't call that a relationship at all. I basically, they would say, you're doing a great job and we're very proud of you and this is, I think, you should go here or, you know, I don't know. I don't remember if they really guided me in any direction and in my planning tasks it was a very private thing actually. I don't even think I ever showed anybody my lists much less talked to anybody about it.

## Case 208, Male, p. 3:

The counseling program wasn't all that great at (my high school) ... Like I think I had three different advisors over four years and they didn't seem in tune other than making sure that my class slate was filled and everything ...

## Case 934, Female, p. 3:

I graduated with a class of 360 and unless you took yourself to the guidance office they weren't coming to search you out.

## Case 1150, Female, p. 17:

I don't remember being told that [going to a counselor] was an option for me. You know, like, come in speak to a counselor, and I always thought that bad kids needed to talk to counselors, and at home I never had problems, so I never had to go into the office of the principal or talk to a counselor.

Many participants recalled completing interest assessments in class or with counselors in junior high or high school, but these did not appear to have had much influence on the development of their career interests and goals.

## Case 487, Male, p. 7:

... there were a lot of tools and assessments and evaluations that I completed to kind of help me think about [interests], but [they] were never a big influence.

## Case 834, Female, p. 4:

I remember taking tests telling me, like the tests to see what you might want to do, but I remember while taking those tests, answering according to not what I really was interested in, but what I think would be cool to be interested in . . . . I was kind of manipulating the results in some kind of form because it's like you want it to look good . . . .

However, interest inventories did appear to be beneficial when they were used to channel students into mentor programs to further develop their interests and aptitudes.

## Case 137, Female, p. 2:

In ninth grade we did a survey . . . and it basically so you can learn about the job if you're interested before you actually spend all the money to go to school and become that, so we did this survey, this career interest survey and the police department sent me a letter. So, when I was fifteen I joined [the city's] explorer program, which is a volunteer position and I did that for seven years . . . once I actually was in the Explorer Program they have advisors that are police officers and they take you through everything and teach you everything and you really get to know them very well and so a couple of those people . . . influenced me a lot and I don't think I would have made it on the police department so young if I would never have been an Explorer.

The results of interest inventories appeared to be more valued by participants when they were completed later, after high school (e.g., in college or in the workplace). This observation is consistent with developmental career theory, since older students were likely, on average, to have more crystallized vocational identities than younger high school students.

## Case 544, Female, p. 12:

I took some tests because they require you to take these tests before you even try to register for school just to see where your mind is— what kind of things you are interested in doing. I took the test and it came out that my skills and my thoughts were of . . . business marketing . . . . It showed business marketing as my interest and as my skill level . . . . I am really considering it.

Others also mentioned mentoring programs as providing the opportunity to pursue their career interests or helping them to build confidence in themselves.

## Case 487, Male, p. 3:

I was involved in an academic program called Inroads . . . . Inroads is a . . . national program. It's a program for talented minority youth who are interested in business and industry and their mission is to develop and place talented minority youth in business and industry and prepare them for corporate and community leadership. So I became involved with that program in ninth grade, so that really steered me. There were a lot of workshops on career planning. A lot of stuff like that were continual tools to think about what I wanted to do.

Some mentioned high school extracurricular activities, such as photography clubs, sports, or drama as helping them to develop skills or explore nascent vocational interests. An attorney talked about being involved in mock trials:

## Case 834, Female, p. 2:

I did not know any attorneys growing up. I did not know any, um, I did in high school get involved in mock trials, which was kind of a fake trial that kids put together and I thought that was a lot of fun . . . .

One woman in medical school talked of her interests in journalism:

## Case 1173, Female, p. 3:

I earned Chief of the yearbook and I really liked doing that. Laying out the designs, writing as well and so I played with the idea of going into journalism, but I never became involved in any papers or anything at Northwestern, which is where I went to college. I still, when I was thinking about a career I'd thought about writing for like a biological magazine, like *Discovery* or something like that, but it's just something I didn't pursue.

A man working in public relations discussed his public relations work to promote sports at his high school.

## Case 821, Male, p. 3:

We had fairly good sports teams when I was in high school . . . , so I would design T-shirts. We'd sell the T-shirts to make money, but more along the lines of bringing the school together, I guess, to support the teams . . . . It made the front page of the paper.

Friends during and after high school were also perceived as having positive influences on career development.

## Case 842, Female, p. 12:

My friend through high school and junior high had already been going to—for medical assistant or something like that and she was saying, "they're coming up with a vet program. Let's do it." She was like, "I know you'd be great at it," because I've had animals and all that. So I said, "okay."

## Case 1628, Female, p. 1:

My roommate's . . . uncle was a complete plant freak. So, he just talked the whole time about flowers and plants and trees and it sort of got me going about flowers and plants and trees and so I was like, if I do something else, what do I want to do? I didn't want an office job. I didn't want to go back to school . . . it was sort of like the perfect mix of something that I

was really interested in that would keep me interested like knowledge-wise and the fact that it was creative and fun and I love flowers.

Romantic partners were also perceived to be influential. Both males and females described the importance of romantic partners, but females mentioned romantic partners more often.

Case 2211, Female, p. 15:

I guess I didn't have nearly as high an expectation then as I do now. And I really do have considerably higher expectations now. And that's my husband. That's my husband's influence. He has these really, really big expectations.

Case 1747, Female, p. 18:

*Interviewer:* Has it (the relationship) in any way affected your perspective on work?

... I guess I was actually doing pretty okay when I met him, but it's just I haven't really been marketing myself like I should and at least now that I met him he actually thought ... well, have you thought about bringing anyone on as a partner? It was like a little light bulb that went on in my head. It's was like, oh, that's brilliant. You know, what a great idea. You know, get someone else to just have in the office and someone to, you know, hold you accountable for the things that you need to do. That's just how I work. I work better when someone else is saying, do this.

Case 1083, Male, p. 10:

With the moving or jobs and etceteras my wife was very instrumental. I mean, she was very supportive. She always came with the idea if you weren't happy, go try to find something else. If you need to leave there, leave. We'll make do. Whatever we have to do to get by. She was very supportive and strong.

Most of the interviewees held part-time jobs while they were in high school. Almost all of these young adults described the benefits of early work, especially the encouragement of responsibility.

Case 1967, Male, p. 6:

I learned to work for what I want in life. I learned some responsibility. I had to be on time. I had to get it done before I went to school. I had to collect the money.

Case 1695, Female, p. 3:

I think it helped me to develop a good work ethic like my parents hoped.

It was also very common for interviewees (especially females) to describe how working in high school helped them learn how to relate to others and increased their confidence.

Case 1695, Female, p. 5:

Actually I think the library was good because ... or the good part about it was I started out shelving books, but then eventually I started doing clerk work, which was working at the counter checking out and I was really shy when I was younger and it's helped me a lot, I think, in terms of dealing with people.

## Case 834, Female, p. 4:

... the development I've had was from working because I remember being very shy when I first started [working in high school]. Like, I never wanted to talk to anybody and I was like, ah, I can't talk now, but after working, I think, it's more like you realize that, especially in the context of selling something to somebody, that everyone is just a person and they have the same needs ... So, I think that was one of the things that I took from it is kind of developing more interpersonal skills ...

## Case 1738, Female, p. 6:

I think it was really positive for me in that it was a real safe, comfortable environment where I [could], you know, see what it was like to work and see if I was good for, as far as interacting with people, um, I think it built some self-confidence ...

A few participants described how part-time jobs helped them explore possible career choices. Blustein et al. (1997) emphasize the importance of "methods of exploratory activity that entail vivid exposure to specific work environments and to the realities of work life" (p. 376). One female interviewee got a job in a photography shop in high school, before going off to photography school.

## Case 1747, Female, p. 9:

It helped me learn a lot more about photography and printing on a basic level. I learned about over-exposure and under-exposure. I learned what the different film speeds did. I learned a lot more about customer service. I learned how to work the printing machine.

A medical student, who initially was not admitted to medical school, worked as a patient care associate after high school.

## Case 1173, Female, p. 2:

Well, actually I'd already decided to do medicine before I got the job. It was sort of to beef up my resume or application, but I certainly was excited about going to medical school more after having done this and liking what I had to do ...

Another worked for a bank during college leading to her decision to stay in the banking business.

## Case 228, Female, p. 7:

I decided at that point that I really liked working for a bank and not necessarily that bank, but that I would probably really like to stay in the banking business.

However, even more commonly, participants described how work in high school or after helped them to decide what they did *not* want to do in the future.

## Case 108, Female, p. 7:

It taught me I never wanted to work in an office again. Seriously.

## Case 260, Female, p. 4:

It taught me I didn't want to work at a gas station for the rest of my life.

## Case 821, Male, p. 8:

[High school jobs] narrowed it down and helped me figure out what I did not want to do.

## Case 1032, Female, p. 9:

Made me resolve never to have another food service job. I promised myself, which I broke subsequently, but I said, oh, God, I really got to do well in college, so I don't have to do this the rest of my life.

What factors do the youth now see as obstacles in their path? Many mention the lack of resources to attend, or to continue in, school (see also Blustein et al., 1997). Often the costs of tuition and other expenses of higher education delayed their completion of college.

## Case 1695, Female, p. 8:

I think I might have a teaching job now if I was able to graduate earlier, but I think, because I had to put myself through school, and I had to work full-time for a while, it took me eight years to graduate and then when I had to student teach I had to live at home. And I kept thinking, how do people do this? I mean, you don't get paid. So I think that I could be further along in my life somewhere if I'd had a family that had more money . . . .

## Case 268, Male, p. 13:

Like having the degree, the schooling for the job. I really should have it [a college degree] and it's necessary now that I get it—if I want to move ahead it'll be better . . . . I'll be better at my job and I don't know how other people manage to get through school, four year colleges especially. Financial trouble has always been a big obstacle and I think that's probably been the single biggest problem for me. It's not fun trying to study while you're hungry.

Most of the young people who attend college worked during this period and most reported significant difficulties balancing college requirements and the need to pay expenses. They struggled to continue, working and studying in tandem, or alternating periods of work and study. For some, the financial stress became altogether too much. The following responses to the query, "How did you balance work and school and the others things that you were doing?" were noted.

## Case 1695, Female, p. 8:

I didn't (laughs). That's why I left school . . . I didn't do so well in school. Going to work was going to work versus going to school meant studying and homework and all of those things, so I didn't do it so well.

## Case 907, Male, p. 10:

I did the best I could. Some stuff I just didn't make it to or do. I'd push it off. But I tried the best I could with . . . cause I'd work, go to school, work, and then I'd have to do homework after work. Sometimes I wouldn't get the homework done, so it wasn't easy.

One respondent male selected not to attend college, because he expected that his college experience would be limited if he had to balance school and work. Again, financial considerations were critical.

## Case 1964, Male, p. 8:

I kind of decided if I was going to go to college, this is what I told my parents, is that if I went to college I would like them to help me out financially and I don't want anything but studying and to absorb the whole college . . . yeah, I didn't want to do anything but study and probably get straight A's. I just wanted to totally turn it around . . . My father paid his way through all his school and his Masters and all that stuff and he figured I should do the same and I think my scholarship was about three thousand dollars a year for four years and that didn't cover everything, so that means I would have had to get a job and I figured if I was going to get a job, then I'm going to get a good job and just work. Maybe it was a wrong decision or maybe it was a right one. I don't know.

Early parenthood was seen as a definite obstacle, propelling teenagers (usually) or women in their early 20s into the full parental responsibility of adulthood, but also led one man to feel the need to postpone or not pursue additional education.

## Case 2211, Female, p. 3:

When I was in high school was when I had my daughter, so I was young and I remember missing a lot of school and then in my senior year I stopped going regularly to school and went to night school in order to be able to complete it.

## Case 702, Male, p. 2:

I had a lot of things going through my head. I wanted to do architect. I wanted to be an architect and then I was so involved with vehicles and I loved cars that I thought, well, maybe I'll be an automotive technician. A lot of things raced through my mind, but then I graduated from high school in 1992 and I had two babies in 1993, so that put a little damper on my education for a while and then I just never pursued anything after.

Some respondents perceived age discrimination as an obstacle to their career progress. Perversely, even while age grading is loosening, some youth perceive remnants of this in the labor force, whereby persons who have more seniority are recruited into managerial-supervisory and high paying positions, even though these workers were less qualified than their (younger) supervisees. This problem may be especially exacerbated in the rapidly changing computer industry.

## Case 2036, Male, p. 15:

I just think people, young people, are really, they're not really given a chance to really show what they can do because people don't believe in them. They think they're lazy or they get bored too easy or something. I think they're really underpaid considering what they've had to go through to get to where they are, where other people are, you know, they've done well throughout their lifetime. They need to give us a shot to do well, too. And certainly . . . especially when they write job descriptions they want somebody who has X numbers of years experience doing this or that, so maybe the thing has only been around for a few years. It's like, I guess employers are just not willing to train anyway, which I just find incredibly frustrating.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of our analyses was to uncover prominent themes that presently characterize vocational decision making in the United States. Although the interviewers were nondirective (i.e., encouraged the participants to tell their story

in their own words), we approached the transcripts with recent social and economic changes in mind. Adolescence and the transition to adulthood are changing dramatically due to social, economic, cultural, and other circumstances; consequently they must be conceptualized in new ways by life course sociology and developmental psychology.

In the process of interrelating these young people's experiences with models of social change, policy issues were raised. While the special nature of the sample—a small group of youth in St. Paul, Minnesota—is an important caveat, the experiences of these people nevertheless imply changes in policies directed toward youth who are making the transition from school to work.

### *Implications for Future Research*

The transition from adolescence into adulthood changed in remarkable ways during the last half of the 20th century. The available evidence suggests a trend toward individualization of the life course as found in the increased variability in the sequencing and overlap of transitions out of the home of origin, from school, to work, and to marriage and parenthood. The period of education has increased for many youth, while the structural connections between school and work are few and tenuous. Moreover, youth are provided few resources with which to think about their vocational identity and future occupational career.

Given such a context, what themes do we observe in the vocational decision making of youth? Our results underscore the developmental nature of vocational identity: most of the themes refer to dynamic properties of a process that could not be studied adequately with cross-sectional data. The first theme, not surprisingly, is delay. Many youth reported that their high school expectations about young adulthood had not been met: many women, for example, thought that they would be married by age 28, and men might mention not finishing college in four years or not realizing their occupational goals yet. (In fact, some of the interviewees who had already realized their goals expressed surprise and good fortune, noting that many of their age-mates had not had similar experiences.) There is, however, considerable diversity in reactions to delay, and this diversity warrants further research. Some young people expressed regret but adjustment, while others considered the delay a helpful period during which further experiences could be acquired. None of the interviews was characterized by fatalism, resignation, or even notable distress due to delay. What explains these diverse reactions to delay and under what conditions can delay actually benefit vocational development?

Second, in some cases delay is due to postponement, which often appears as "temporizing until something happens." Some youth are aware that they are uncertain about their plans and that they are not engaged in clarifying them; instead, they live on a day-to-day basis and hope that "clarity will happen." In some instances, whether an individual is postponing a decision or not, a turning point occurs, a relatively discrete event that leads to a qualitative change from indecision or lack of commitment to achieved identity status. In still other cases, individuals refer to a trajectory of decision making, a slow process of growing awareness that a

particular occupation is preferred. Why are some youth seemingly content to temporize? Perhaps this is apt to happen in very good or poor economies: in the former case, youth may be optimizing their chances by acquiring new experiences and contacts, while in the latter case, they avoid commitment in a depressed labor market. In any event, little is known about the conditions that give rise to postponement, reactions to it, or its long-term implications.

Finally, given that many youth delay or postpone a decision, but eventually achieve a reasonable vocational identity, the issue becomes what resources facilitate and obstacles hinder decision making? These data suggest that family and friends are especially important, as well as significant unrelated adults (e.g., teachers, coaches). Guidance counselors are rarely referred to as positive and constructive influences by the youth that we interviewed. Most interesting, perhaps, are the forces alluded to in many interviews, when youth refer to becoming “increasingly aware” that an occupation was desirable, or that they “suddenly realized” their vocational identity. Such phrasings suggest contextual cues that aid or obscure decision making, but these cues have not been studied. What cues from significant relationships, organizations, and institutions are canalizing in the decision-making process? Interestingly, many of these cues do not push youth in the “right direction,” but are instead “eliminators” that rule out future possibilities. This was observed, for example, among young workers, who often said that while their experiences had positive value, they also ruled out occupations for themselves (indeed, sometimes whole categories of jobs). Thus, an interesting theme for future research is the identification of cues from relationships and organizations that help to crystallize the decision-making process, especially in contexts marked by uncertainty.

### *Implications for Social Policy*

Our interviews suggest that some policies that are currently in place may need to be strengthened and modified, particularly with respect to vocational counseling. Few interviewees spoke of having guidance in finding career paths that were appealing; those that did appeared to be more vocationally stable today. More commonly, our interviews reveal that youth had little interaction with guidance counselors and were sometimes discouraged by them from pursuing further education beyond high school. In addition, although opportunities to learn about specific vocational choices and educational opportunities are present in high schools, few of the interviewees found these resources to be helpful. Several respondents reported going to the library on their own initiative to learn more about their occupational prospects. Some reported trying a series of jobs, college majors, or even postsecondary schools and colleges because they had little idea what the actual experiences would involve. All participants did not necessarily experience these forms of educational and occupational “turbulence” as stressful, but some did note the extra challenges they experienced as they moved through these circuitous routes. These challenges sometimes detracted from the interviewees’ efficient use of educational resources.

Our findings to date suggest several ways that this problem can be addressed. Attempts should be made to help students find career paths that are appealing, to explore their dream jobs as well as to extend their horizons to other possibilities. More systematic efforts are needed to provide vocational information to youth in high schools. This could involve the Internet (which one interviewee used to select his line of work). Also, pervasive efforts should be made to provide students with actual experiences with the schools and occupations that they express interest in. Such experiences have been found to be important in differentiating satisfied and dissatisfied entrants to the labor force, as well as those whose interests and jobs are congruent (Blustein et al., 1997).

The process of vocational exploration should begin during high school, when early experiences can be reflected upon and influence later choices. Less desirably, it can begin to take place only after graduation from high school or even college. For youth who lack vocational direction, shifting schools and jobs can entail substantial economic, personal, and social costs.

Initiatives need to be made to assist the large portion of youth who enter, but do not graduate from, college. Kerckhoff (2002) notes that young people in the United States are faced with an "all or nothing" decision, which puts a premium on obtaining a 4-year college degree. He has proposed that there be additional, and more widely recognized, intermediate credentials to ease the school-to-work transition for young people who do not finish college.

However, in view of the dizzying pace of technological change, establishing programs to provide young people with vocational experiences that will be pertinent to their futures is increasingly challenging.

Case 2036, Male, p. 15:

*Interviewer:* And did you ever think about work you might do once you left high school?

I do remember thinking that I know whatever I want to do probably hasn't been invented yet and I don't know if what I do that actually had been invented yet or not. Probably maybe I guess I would say. (Laughs). There wasn't a lot of people who did it at the time.

*Interviewer:* And what was that that you were interested in?

Well, high tech. Something that, you know, like a web master, for example is something that didn't exist six years ago or you for sure not seven years ago and so that would be a good example of something that didn't, I mean, something that I thought I might be suited for. Something involving computers or technology that hadn't really been invented and I knew I just needed to kind of be ready for it ... that turned out to be a pretty good strategy I guess.

The interviews demonstrated considerable diversity in the subjective transition to adulthood. Though commentators have recognized the lack of institutional supports for American youth in making the school-to-work transition, our data suggest what this looks like from the perspective of those who traverse this bridge. It was apparent that age norms governing the transition to adulthood are still very much alive, though contemporary youth are much less likely to conform to these norms

than previous cohorts. Our interviewees reveal perceived difficulties, uncertainties, and challenges.

Lacking guidance from counselors, and with few formal mechanisms to help youth to locate suitable work, a variety of informal processes fill the void. In making their vocational decisions, young people today appear to be guided by their parents, in some instances by teachers and coaches, by friends, and by their own experiences in part-time employment. In our subsequent interviews and analyses, we hope to learn more about the factors that enable some youth to develop, and to effectively use, these sources of social and human capital in exploring their career options.

In any event, those who are responsible for institutions that prepare youth for adulthood need to be aware of young people's difficulties and accomplishments after they leave their supervision and to use this knowledge to improve the preparation of future cohorts. Yet this knowledge depends on research agendas that are sensitive to the changing nature of the transition to adulthood. Changing societies are often associated with a reshaping of life's phases, which in turn calls for a constant reevaluation of our conceptual tools and hypotheses. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews represent one way to explore the manifold connections between changing social structures and changing biographies.

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