Educational and Vocational Exploration in Vulnerable Youth

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Though numerous studies indicate that youth and young adults who are involved in one or more social service systems have poor educational and employment outcomes, little is known about the pathways to employment and education in this population. In this qualitative study of educational and employment exploration in vulnerable youth, 11 individuals participated in a series of research meetings over the course of several months as they engaged in a work or school transition. The participants' progress toward self-defined educational or vocational goals during the study period was characterized as steady progress, planned exploration, accidental exploration, *and* frustrated aspiration. *This article discusses findings for the participants whose experiences fit into each of these groups and presents policy recommendations for supporting vulnerable youth through educational and employment transitions.*

KEYWORDS emerging adulthood, vulnerable youth, work transitions

A hallmark of emerging adulthood, the period of the life course from ages 18–25, is the opportunity for exploration at a time of increased independence and relatively few adult responsibilities (Arnett, 2004). Education and employment are important areas of exploration for emerging adults, as they make decisions related to work and schooling that shape lifelong career trajectories (Schulenberg, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 2000). Though numerous studies indicate that young adults who are involved in one or

more social service systems or are low-income ("vulnerable youth") have poor educational and employment outcomes, little is known about the pathways to employment and education in this population. The purpose of this study was to understand these pathways, as well as the supports and obstacles that vulnerable youth experience in this transition. This information can be used to develop programs and policies to improve outcomes. This study followed 11 vulnerable youth ages 19–23 over the course of approximately 16 weeks as they engaged in a work or school transition.

EMERGING ADULTHOOD AND VULNERABLE YOUTH

Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood, the period of the lifespan between the approximate ages of 18–30, has been the subject of much attention since the publication of Arnett's (2000) widely read article. It is a relatively recent phenomenon, evolving from several social and demographic trends in industrialized countries that began in the 1960s (Shanahan, 2000; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). There is now a longer gap between the end of adolescence, as marked by biological maturity and achievement of social milestones such as eligibility to vote, and the assumption of adult responsibilities (Shanahan, 2000). For example, in 1970, the average age of marriage was 21 for women and 23 for men, while in 2000, it was 25 for women and 27 for men (Arnett, 2004). The average newly wedded couple will have their first child after one year of marriage, and though this interval remained constant from 1970 to 2000, because the age of marriage has increased, so has the age of transition to parenthood (Arnett, 2004). Reflecting the fact that many jobs require more education than in the past, many young people do not complete their schooling until they are in their mid-to-late twenties (Arnett, 2004).

The transition to adulthood is also more heterogeneous than it was during the first half of the twentieth century, which gives young people more freedom to shape their individual paths (Shanahan, 2000; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). This heterogeneity is distinct from other periods of the lifespan, where the population shows greater similarity in their experience of the key life domains of living, work, and relationship situations (Arnett, 2000). Though some emerging adults may experience discomfort with the lack of structure and social support in their lives, many report that they enjoy being at an age when they can experience the privileges of adulthood, such as a driver's license and lack of a curfew, without many of the responsibilities, such as major financial obligations and parenthood (Arnett, 2004).

Vulnerable Youth

Despite the growing body of research about this life phase for individuals in the general population, relatively little is known about this period of the life

course for youth who are low-income or involved in public social service systems. In their book on the transition to adulthood for vulnerable youth, Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, and Ruth (2005) focus on individuals involved in seven social service systems: mental health, foster care, juvenile justice, adult criminal justice, special education, health care (youth with chronic physical illnesses), and homeless shelters.

Estimating the number of youth who may be considered "vulnerable" is difficult because there is a lack of agreement about how to define the population (Tanner, 2007). However, even including just one or two of the groups described above suggests that many youth are at-risk for problems in the transition to adulthood. For example, 20% of youth in the general population can be diagnosed with a mental illness (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999), and 8%–10% are involved in the juvenile justice system (Chung, Little, & Steinberg, 2005). Not all of the youth who are involved in these and other government systems will experience significant difficulties as they transition to adulthood, but 5%–7% have persistent problems with working, maintaining a social network, and living independently (Wald, 2005).

Vulnerable youth may experience emerging adulthood differently than youth in the general population. Much of the research on emerging adulthood was conducted with college students (Booth, Rustenbach, & McHale, 2008), but vulnerable youth are less likely to attend any type of post-secondary institution than their non-system-involved peers (Foster, Flanagan, Osgood, & Ruth, 2005). Vulnerable youth are also more likely to become parents earlier, and, because a significant proportion of them come from low-income backgrounds, they may have to choose work over school or unpaid training opportunities, hastening the transition to adulthood (Foster et al., 2005).

Because vulnerable youth may need to assume adult responsibilities at a younger age, Hendry (2007) suggests that the popularization of an explorative emerging adulthood period as an essential youth experience presents vulnerable youth with a "Tantalus syndrome," in which they see others delaying the responsibilities of adulthood, but lack access to the same opportunities. In Greek mythology, Tantalus was punished for all eternity by standing in a pool of water with a fruit tree overhead. When he reached for the fruit, the tree moved away from his grasp, and when he tried to drink the water, it receded, so he was constantly tempted and never satisfied. Hendry suggests that vulnerable youth may be faced with the same dilemma, in which they see other youth exploring educational opportunities, romantic relationships, alcohol and other drugs, artistic pursuits, and other activities, while they must work to support themselves. In contrast, Cote (2005) argues that vulnerable youth may be at risk of "floundering" in a social environment that provides little guidance about the path to a successful adult existence. In either case, there is a concern that this period of enjoyable exploration may only be available to youth from affluent families who can support a young adult's lengthening adolescence (Clausen, 1991). Indeed, the average American parents provide

$2,200 each year to their adult children from ages 18–34, plus 367 hours of supportive services such as assistance with budgeting and guidance on career and educational decisions (Schoeni & Ross, 2004). Vulnerable youth are less likely to receive this level of parental support as they transition to adulthood.

Another important difference between vulnerable youth and those in the general population is that formal service providers play a large role in the support networks of vulnerable youth. A risk of having a support system comprised of formal providers rather than natural connections is the likelihood that these relationships will be affected by institutional transitions (shifts from one provider to another, or changes in eligibility for certain services due to age cut-offs) that are driven by programmatic requirements rather than youth needs (Mallory, 1995). For example, youth living in the foster care program "age out" abruptly at 18 (in some states, 21). Youth receiving special education services, living in juvenile justice facilities, and those with chronic physical or mental health problems also navigate abrupt shifts in services as they reach the age of majority, or when administrative changes in their care are made. Unfortunately, these institutional transitions are likely to be occurring at *exactly* the times when young adults would most benefit from consistent support, as they negotiate the developmental tasks of this life phase, including attainment of stable employment and completion of education.

Education and Employment for Vulnerable Youth

Finding stable employment and completing schooling are chief among the difficulties vulnerable youth encounter (Foster et al., 2005). For example, more than 90% of 19-year-olds in the general population have completed a high school or general equivalency diploma, but only 63% of youth who have aged out of foster care have attained this level of education (Courtney et al., 2005). Similarly, 58% of 19-year-olds in the general population are employed as compared to 41% of former foster youth (Courtney et al., 2005). Education and employment outcomes are equally concerning for youth with mental illnesses. Close to one-third of youth with serious emotional disturbances who receive special education services drop-out of high school, and only 42% of those out of school for one year are employed (SRI International & National Center for Special Education, 2005).

Table 1 shows the education and employment outcomes for select groups of vulnerable youth that have been included in large ($n > 100$), multistate studies. Youth who received special education services for any reason fare about as well in employment as youth in the general population, but youth with serious emotional disturbances (SED) and those who have aged out of foster care have an employment rate 16% or more below youth in the general population. There is an even greater gap in educational outcomes for youth in the general population as compared to vulnerable youth. As shown

TABLE 1 Employment and Educational Outcomes of Select Groups of Youth Involved in Social Service Systems

Population	Employment	Education
Youth with SED (SRI International and National Center for Special Education Research Institute for Education Science, 2005)	42% currently employed (youth out of school for at least one year).	63% left school because they graduated. 32% dropped out. 33% attended some type of post-secondary educational program.
Youth who aged out of foster care (Courtney et al., 2005)	41% currently employed.	63% had a diploma or GED. Approximately 39% enrolled in some type of educational program.
Youth incarcerated in adult prisons (Harlow, 2003)	N/A	48% have a high school diploma or GED. 4% have participated in some type of post-secondary education.
Youth who received special education services (SRI International and National Center for Special Education Research Institute for Education Science, 2005)	55% currently employed (youth out of school for at least one year).	80% left school because they graduated. 18% dropped out. 45% attended some type of post-secondary educational program.

in the table, the high school completion rates of vulnerable youth are 10%–42% lower than those for youth in the general population.

The education and employment outcomes of vulnerable youth lag behind those of the general population. It is important to note that in addition to the special problems of vulnerable youth reported in the previous section, low educational attainment is highly correlated with socioeconomic status, and vulnerable youth are more likely to be from low-income households. Socioeconomic status is considered one of the most influential characteristics in determining academic achievement (Zarrett & Eccles, 2006), so the study described in the remainder of this article included low-income youth.

Completion of education is of particular concern because education is associated with lifetime financial stability. Individuals without a high school diploma earn about $7,000 less per year than those who have one, and the difference in annual earnings between those with a bachelor's degree and those with only a high school diploma is over $20,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). The estimated difference in lifetime earnings between those without a high school diploma and those with a bachelor's degree is over a million dollars (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

In addition to the financial advantage of completing schooling, education and employment warrant attention because they confer other advantages as well. Vulnerable youth frequently suffer from social exclusion (Osgood et al., 2005). Gainful employment is an important marker of adulthood (Mech, 2003; Shanahan, 2000) that facilitates inclusion of marginalized groups into society (Webster et al., 2004). Work can also help youth build

other key developmental assets. These include learning to balance multiple roles, making meaning of these roles, acquiring self-knowledge of personal assets and limitations, choosing activities that build on personal strengths, and adapting to life transitions (Eccles, Gootman, & the Committee for Community-Level Programs for Youth, 2002). Given the many benefits of working and completing schooling, it is necessary to understand how vulnerable youth navigate school and work transitions.

METHODS

Study Overview

This qualitative study examined transition pathways to work and school for vulnerable youth. Eleven participants ages 19–23 who were engaged in a work or school transition at the time of their entry to the study were tracked for an average of 16 weeks each, during which time they participated in five in-person meetings. To triangulate the data and increase validity, one telephone interview with "someone who knows you well" was also completed for nine of the participants (one participant declined to name someone, and one "person who knows you well" declined to be interviewed). Therefore the data gathered was rich and detailed, spanning 55 meetings and over 45 hours of interviews with youth and select members of their support networks. Data were collected between March 2006 and February 2007. This study was approved by the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects at the University of California, Berkeley, in October 2005, and the approval was renewed in September 2006. Participant stipends and professional transcription were made possible through a dissertation grant from the Fahs-Beck Fund for Research and Experimentation. Details about the study methods, in particular, the strategies for engaging and retaining the participants, are reported elsewhere (Taylor, 2009).

Recruitment and Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants meeting three selection criteria: (a) Ages 18–25; (b) low-income; and (c) currently engaged in a school or work transition as defined by having begun a new work or school situation two weeks or less before the screening meeting, or having concrete plans (i.e., recent participation in a job interview) to begin a new situation within two weeks following the screening meeting. All three of these criteria were self-reported by participants during the screening process. The average income of participants in the study was $764 per month ($9,168 annually), including money participants reported receiving from family and friends, and the range was $0–$2,000 (up to $24,000 annually).[1]

    Recruitment occurred between March and June 2006 through staff contacts at community mental health agencies, Job Corps, foster care, community

colleges, and other youth-serving organizations in the Greater San Francisco Bay Area. To enroll in the study, social service providers gave recruitment materials to potential study participants, and those who wished to make an inquiry were invited to call or email the researcher.

All those who volunteered and met the three criteria outlined above were accepted into the study following a phone screening and brief in-person meeting with the researcher. Given the difficulty of recruiting young adults for a research project requiring multiple interviews, some flexibility was required in the sampling frame to obtain a sufficient sample, as is common in studies with vulnerable and difficult-to-access populations (Abrams, 2010). Specifically, three youth who expressed interest in participating were low-income, but had higher levels of education than the other youth in the study, and there was some uncertainty about their appropriateness for the study. Two of the youth had a Bachelor's degree, and one had just completed his first year at a four year-college. Two heard about the study at their nonprofit workplace, where they were employed as interns. The third learned about the study from a friend who was already participating. Though these three youth had higher levels of education than most vulnerable youth, they still met the three key study criteria and were invited to participate. The participation of these youth proved valuable, as their experiences contrasted significantly with those of the other young people in the study as described below.

Sample Characteristics

The final sample ($n = 11$) included vulnerable youth from many communities. Seven women, three men, and one transgender individual (female to male) were involved in the study. Four participants were White, four Asian American, and three African American. The past or present system involvement of the youth included mental health (7), juvenile/criminal justice (3), and foster care (2). One participant was a teenage parent, two were gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered, three were first- or second-generation immigrants, and two were living with physical disabilities or chronic health conditions. (See Table 2.)

Data Collection

Each youth in the study participated in five meetings; the in-person screening meeting and four in-depth 45- to 90-minute interviews. Participants were given a stipend of $140 during the study period: $15 for the screening meeting, $25 for the first three interviews, and $50 upon completion of the final interview. The principal investigator, then a doctoral candidate in Social Work with several years of experience as an interviewer in qualitative studies, conducted all of the interviews. The first meeting consisted of a card sort task, an adaptation of Sixsmith and Sixsmith's Multiple Sorting Task (1987) in which participants used index cards to select and prioritize broad

categories such as work, school, health, family, and friends, and then described their experiences with each topic. After sorting the cards, youth were asked the following three questions:

1. What was it like to try to sort the cards?;
2. Starting with _____ (the card picked as most important), can you tell me how you chose to put this at the top (or other relative position) of the pile?; and
3. How has _____ been important in your life? Recently? In the past?

Probes following these questions were tailored to each individual, and for each topic, included questions related to goals, setbacks, accomplishments, services they had accessed to manage setbacks or to achieve goals in the topic area, and how they felt about those services. Remaining interviews incorporated follow-up of themes introduced in the first meeting, such as asking what a new job was like, as well as thirty questions selected from a semi-structured questionnaire developed by the MacArthur Network for Youth Transitions (used with permission; F. Furstenberg, personal communication, 15 December, 2004) that focused on past and present personal, educational, and employment experiences and attitudes. Some example questions from the semi-structured questionnaire are: (a) Looking back, what is your overall impression about your high school experience?; (b) Are there any jobs you would refuse to do? Why?; and (c) At what age did you start thinking of yourself as an adult? Why?

These 30 questions were incorporated into the interviews as time and conversational flow allowed. Interviews were ideally scheduled three to four weeks apart over the course of three to four months, but there was variation

TABLE 2 Sample Characteristics

Characteristic	Sample ($n = 11$)
Race	4 White/European American
	4 Asian American
	3 African American
Gender	7 Female
	3 Male
	1 Transgender
Sexual Orientation	9 Heterosexual
	2 Homosexual
Income	Average income = $764/month ($9,168 annually)
	Range in income was from $0–$24,000/annually
System Involvement (Some involved in more than one system)	7 Community mental health
	3 Juvenile/criminal justice
	2 Foster care
Other key characteristics	3 First- or second-generation immigrant
	2 Living with a disability or chronic health condition
	1 Parent

in the interview interval and length of overall study participation due to scheduling issues inherent to working with a highly mobile population in transition. This ideal interview interval and length of participation were based on research on youth from low-income backgrounds and youth with mental illnesses, which found that youth are most likely to leave a job within the first two to four months of employment (Bullis, Moran, Benz, Todis, & Johnson, 2002; Holzer & LaLonde, 1998). The average length of participation was 16 weeks, and there was no attrition.
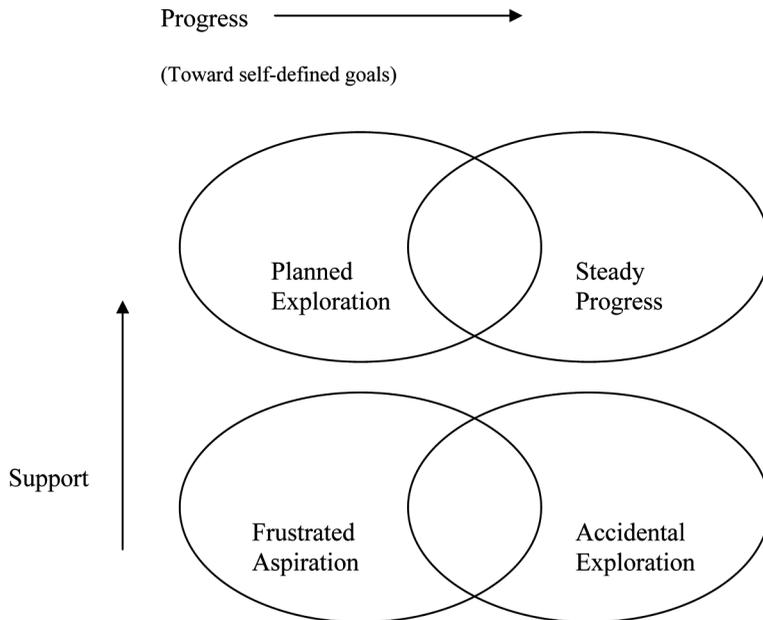
Analysis

Analysis involved three phases: (a) multiple reviews of field notes; (b) index coding to organize the data using ATLAS.ti software; and (c) exploration of patterns and themes in the indexed categories using maps and matrices. Within 24 hours after each interview, a memo describing the interviewer's subjective impressions and a brief summary of the interaction was written. To gain an overview of the transition activities of each participant, analysis began with a careful re-reading of the memos and mapping (i.e., creating a visual representation) of each participant's efforts to obtain or maintain work, and/or enter, complete, or continue schooling. These maps visually represented moments of progress, pauses, and detours in the participants' educational and employment transitions.

A start list of index codes was developed by identifying key themes from the literature review (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Using Lofland and Lofland's (1995) technique of global organization, the research design, interview protocol, and index codes were broadly influenced by a reading of the academic literature and conversations with informed colleagues. For example, the literature on emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000) and life course theory (Elder, 1998) informed the design by suggesting that transitions take place over time, are caused by certain processes (such as turning points), and may manifest in a specific way for this age group. Ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) emphasizes the importance of understanding human experience at multiple levels and examining the interactions among those levels to learn about the factors that could be related to work and school transitions. These theories, along with the literature that describes the unique challenges for vulnerable youth, shaped the analysis, including the creation of index codes.

These index codes were applied to the data and revised as needed to incorporate emergent findings once analysis began. After mapping the major events of the transition trajectories based on the memos, details were filled in using interview data index-coded as "transition activity" as well as "short-term goals" and "long-term goals."

These comprehensive transition summaries were then analyzed through a constant comparison process (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in which a given participant's map was compared with each of the others. Through this process, two

key elements, *support* and *progress*, were found to distinguish the transition experiences. Using these two elements, the participants' experiences were then categorized by evaluating the participants' progress in achieving their self-defined goals, as well as the amount of support the youth received from others. Figure 1 illustrates this categorization scheme. To increase validity, the data was searched for instances in which the typology did not fit, a technique Miles and Huberman (1994) describe as looking for negative evidence.

Progress ———————→

(Toward self-defined goals)

Planned Exploration   Steady Progress

Support ↑

Frustrated Aspiration   Accidental Exploration

Steady Progress (more support, more progress): Linear, strategic movement toward goals. Long-term goals are well-defined and short-term goals are logical steps in the path of the long-term goal. The individual is motivated by external and internal forces.

Planned Exploration (more support, less progress): Purposeful engagement in activities the individual believes are tangential to long-term goals. Long-term goals may be vague, but the individual is unconcerned that short-term exploration will be an impediment to defining and achieving long-term goals.

Accidental Exploration (less support, more progress): Ambivalent engagement in vocational and educational activities, guided by immediate needs for food, clothing, and shelter. Goals may be vague or specific, but tend to shift as the individual experiences serendipitous events and reconciles the gap between hopes and realities.

Frustrated Aspiration (less support, less progress): Goals may be vague or specific, but immediate life circumstances demand constant attention and inhibit achievement of even short-term goals. A lack of support combined with extraordinary challenges exacerbates these difficulties.

FIGURE 1 Typology of participant experiences with work and school transition.

Peer-debriefing (Spall, 1998) was also used to increase validity of the findings; throughout the data collection, analysis, and writing process the researcher met at least monthly with fellow researchers and senior colleagues to discuss, refine, and hear constructive criticism on the research as it unfolded.

FINDINGS

Though the study was brief, eight of the eleven participants engaged in numerous work and school transitions during the study period. The remaining three participants engaged in work-seeking activities, but remained either totally unemployed, or only very sporadically employed and dissatisfied. Participants' experiences of work and school transition were categorized as: *steady progress, planned exploration, accidental exploration*, and *frustrated aspiration*. Participants' experiences as related to these categories are summarized in Table 3. The findings in each category are presented as follows: (a) General description of the youths' experiences in that group; (b) results from the card sort exercise in the first interview; and (c) some common characteristics of the youth in that group.

Steady Progress

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Lisa and David's[2] experiences were categorized as *steady progress*. They and their support systems set achievable short-term goals, and throughout the study period, they either met or moved toward these goals. Lisa and David also had well-defined long-term goals, and their short-term goals were necessary steps on the way. David wanted to be a reading specialist or special education teacher, and Lisa, a medical assistant and phlebotomist. Both

TABLE 3 Employment and Educational Transition by Participant and Category

Pseudonym	Steady progress	Planned exploration	Accidental exploration	Frustrated aspiration
Lisa	X			
David	X			
Jane		X		
Sylvia		X		
John		X		
Crystal			X	
Kyle			X	
Thomas			X	
Stacey				X
Helen				X
Trisha				X

participants described a clear connection between their educational and vocational goals. For example, David said:

> If I want to become a teacher, I have to get a B.A. I know that much. I'm going to do childhood development for an A.A. then I'm going to try to transfer to a state college and try for my B.A. because community college doesn't go [that far], they just do A.A.

CARD-SORT RESPONSES

Lisa selected school as her first priority during the card-sort task, while David chose family. Nineteen-year-old Lisa was extremely motivated to finish high school, and expressed regret that she was not able to complete high school sooner and without the support of a specialized program like Job Corps. In describing why he chose family as his first priority, David said, "*Family always comes first,*" but when asked to elaborate, he was unable to provide more detail. David also commented that though he chose five cards, because that was the instruction provided, for him, they really represented three categories: family/friends, school, and health/mental health. School was David's second priority. Family was Lisa's second priority, so both participants in this category had similar responses on the card-sort interview, with the first and second priorities reversed.

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS

Lisa and David shared four important characteristics. First, both youth were current participants in social service systems. As noted above, Lisa was in Job Corps. David had graduated from a non-public special education school, and received services through the Department of Rehabilitation.

Second, Lisa and David lived with family (one with both parents, and the other with a single parent) who they described as very supportive, and though their families were low-income, they felt their living situations were stable.

Third, they experienced significant health challenges that influenced their career choices. Lisa had back surgery for severe scoliosis during high school, and that event exposed her to medical professionals and led to her interest in medicine. David has muscular dystrophy and dyslexia, and reads at a fifth-grade level. Because of his own learning and health difficulties, he wants to work with children in special education.

Fourth, by the end of the study, both were working part-time in retail positions though neither had expressed an interest in that kind of work. However, David and Lisa had commented during the course of the study that they would be willing to do *any* job until they had gained the experience and education to work in their desired fields.

Planned Exploration

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Jane's, Sylvia's, and John's experiences were categorized as *planned explo-ration*. These participants were focused on long-term goals that were less well defined than Lisa and David's in the *steady progress* category. Jane and John were not certain what type of job they wanted, stating only the kinds of things they were interested in doing. For example, Jane said:

> Maybe I want to do more administrative stuff, like planning projects, or maybe I want to do more one-on-one work, talking to clients or patients, and encouraging them to do certain things. I don't know what aspect. Either one-on-one or supervising a team of people who are at the very top, people in the government agency who design the program. I don't know in what spectrum I would want to work in and I just feel like I shouldn't just jump into [a job] without talking to people first.

John expressed similar ambiguity:

> I'm not really sure where I want to go with my life. Government job maybe, but not really sure anymore . . . I always wanted to be an architect and I was reading books on architecture and that side of me came out kind of, but I still want to work in a government job.

Jane's, Sylvia's, and John's short-term goals involved learning new skills, having fun, and taking a break from stressful work or school situations they had been experiencing during the few months before entering the study. All three of these participants were engaging in work that they had no intention of continuing for more than a few months. These participants held jobs that either they defined as temporary, or were time-limited by design: Sylvia was a bartender, John was a summer day camp counselor, and Jane was a program assistant for a social service summer program. In describing her bartending job, which Sylvia chose to do as a purposeful deviation from her ultimate goal of going to medical school, she said:

> I'm kind of excited. I'm really excited actually about the bartending thing. I wanted to do something different and something I wouldn't be able to do [in the future] because this whole I time I was working on pre-med stuff, and now it's going to be med school so I want to do something fun.

CARD-SORT RESPONSES

Sylvia and John listed school as their first priority, and Jane chose work. When I met John, he had just completed the first year at his four-year college. As mentioned above, Sylvia was applying to medical school, and was taking pre-requisite courses. Jane was supporting herself entirely from work (unlike

Sylvia and John) and did not have immediate plans for graduate school, therefore work was a priority for her.

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS

Jane, Sylvia, and John shared three characteristics that distinguished them from the rest of the sample. First, all three had completed, or were enrolled in, four-year colleges, while the rest of the participants in the study were either not in school, or enrolled in a high school completion program or two-year college.

Second, these three were all from immigrant families. Jane was born outside of the United States and immigrated when she was five years old. John and Sylvia were the first generation of their families born in the U.S.

Third, though all three received salaries that could be classified as low-income, and had experienced some significant personal challenges, none of them described a current or past involvement with any government social service system, in contrast to the other eight participants. (It is possible they had experiences that they did not disclose.)

It is also notable that the living situations for the participants in this group were more varied than in the *steady progress* group and, for Jane and Sylvia, somewhat fragile. John lived with both parents and felt his housing was stable. Jane was living alone, and she felt significant pressure to earn enough money to continue paying rent. Sylvia was living with her parents when the study began, but by the middle of the study, she had moved in with her boyfriend, and as of her last interview, reported that she and the boyfriend had ended their relationship. She was planning to continue living with him temporarily, but was looking for alternative housing.

Accidental Exploration

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Crystal's, Thomas's, and Kyle's experiences can be described as accidental exploration. These participants had long-term goals that involved many years of training, experience, and/or good fortune. They seemed to have a difficult time reconciling their long-term goals with the reality that they needed to earn enough money to live independently and that it might be necessary to do things inconsistent with these goals to meet their basic needs.

Thomas, who wants to be an actor and/or opera singer, described his desire to take classes he likes (in music and theater), even though those classes might not help him to obtain a more lucrative job or satisfy the general education requirements for an associate's degree. Crystal hoped to be a "*chef at the White House*" or the owner of a catering business. Kyle wanted to work with at-risk youth as a Master's-level social worker. Though his goal was a little less grand than the others, he also found it difficult to find satisfying, reasonably paid work that related to his interest, and so made frequent, unintentional job changes.

All of these participants experienced more than one work transition during the brief study period. Thomas changed jobs at least twice during the three and a half months that he was involved in the study. He and Kyle, who was about to change jobs the week after his last interview (after having held the previous job for less than 3 months), described their process of moving from one job to another similarly:

> I've had so many jobs. I've been working since I was 16. I've only been working four years and I had three jobs in a year. I've never been fired but I just get sick of jobs and I get pissed off and quit. (Kyle)

> I get tired of it [a job] usually. I get bored, or some [jobs] I left for school, but a lot of them I'm just like, eh. (Thomas)

Crystal was at Job Corps when she began the study. She completed her vocational trade certificate in catering there, and left before passing the exit exam, which is necessary for earning a high school diploma. At her final interview, she was working on-call as a hostess in a restaurant and going to real estate school. Crystal had not expressed interest in real estate during our three prior meetings. She had talked about wanting to work on a cruise ship, own a catering business, or cook in the kitchen at the White House, but during our final interview, she no longer seemed interested in pursuing any of these possibilities.

For each of these participants, job changes were often precipitated by serendipitous events. For Thomas, the event was a temporary staffing firm calling him unexpectedly to return to a job he had held in the past. Crystal began thinking about enrolling in real estate school after a cousin of hers received his realtor's license and was able to buy a house in Hawaii with his earnings. Soon after learning of her cousin's success, she saw a prominent newspaper advertisement offering paid training for people interested in acquiring a real estate certificate and she enrolled. For Kyle, it was making a bold request to the principal of the alternative high school he had attended years before, who promptly agreed to hire him, though no position had been advertised:

> I walked into the County Office in Education and I talked to my old principal, who's like the director. He's my principal but he's still the Director of Alternative Education. I was like, "Hey, [name omitted], I need a job." He said, "What do you want to do?" I said, "I want to work with at-risk youth." He asked, "In the high school?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Do you want to be a teacher's aide?" I was like, "Cool! Yeah!" So, he had me fill out applications to show I was legit and then I did my fingerprints and a drug test. I don't have enough college credits so I need to take a test, and he said it's the same stuff that's on the high school exit exam, and he gave me a study guide and I thought, "I'm going to ace this thing. Don't worry about it." He said he thought I would. So, I take the test next week and then I start when school starts and I'm so excited!

CARD-SORT RESPONSES

Interestingly, all three participants in this category selected different cards as their first priority, none of which were work or school. Crystal chose family, Kyle selected health, and Thomas picked friends. Crystal's family situation was complex. As described below, she lived with her siblings, and though they were older than she, she felt responsible for supporting them, as they were all receiving public assistance. Crystal was also the legal guardian for her younger brother, so for her family was a priority, but in a different way than for other participants who selected family. While others felt they received support from their families, Crystal was as likely to provide support as she was to receive it. Kyle selected health as his first priority because he was in the process of transitioning from female to male, and he spent considerable time and energy caring for his health as he took hormonal medications and was planning to have surgery on his chest. For Thomas, friends were a priority because, as a gay man, he had needed to seek support from other gay men and allies when he came out, and these friends were like family to him. He maintained contact with his biological family, but he reported that relations were strained since he came out and began to experience mental health problems at age 15.

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS

Kyle, Crystal, and Thomas shared four important characteristics. First, all of them were living with peers in housing that they described as unstable. Kyle and Thomas were living with roommates, and Crystal, with her siblings. For all of them, the housing was unstable for financial reasons and each of them expressed concern about making timely rent payments. All three also described interpersonal difficulties with their housemates. Though these problems may not have led to housing instability, they did contribute to the stress that Kyle, Crystal, and Thomas experienced. Finally, Thomas and Kyle's living situations had recently changed, and they were adjusting. Thomas had moved into a house with two other young men about six weeks before our first interview. He met his housemates on an internet bulletin board, so they were strangers before living together. Kyle was living in a small one-bedroom apartment with a fellow foster youth and her infant, who also participated in the study. They moved in about one month before our first meeting. Prior to that, Kyle had lived in the apartment with a girlfriend for a few months, and then alone. By our third meeting, Kyle's roommates' sister had also moved in.

    Second, none of them received significant financial support from their families. Kyle, as a former foster youth, did not have contact with his family of origin. Thomas reported that his parents provided no financial support, and Crystal commented that she was often the provider of financial support to her siblings, who were all receiving public assistance.

Third, these three participants were involved in one or more government social service programs. Crystal, as mentioned above, was enrolled in Job Corps, a free federal program for young people that provides high school completion assistance and vocational training. Kyle had been in foster care and was still receiving health and mental health benefits as a former foster youth. Thomas was seeing a therapist through community mental health and receiving SSI. Additionally, both Kyle and Crystal had been incarcerated in juvenile detention facilities as youth.

Fourth, though they might not describe themselves this way, they exhibited instability and impulsivity. During the study period, each of these participants had a major argument with one or more important people in their lives, and for two of the participants, the disagreement was serious enough that they and the other person stopped speaking to one another for several days. In addition to these arguments, there were other indications of impulsive behavior. Thomas described an abrupt move to the East Coast at age 18, where he became suicidal. Kyle told me about a fight he had with his roommate after he started driving dangerously on purpose, and the roommate and her baby were in the car at the time. Crystal did not describe specific negative impulsive behaviors, but her "person who knows you well," her father, noted that before Crystal went to Job Corps, she was "hot-tempered" and had "a real short fuse."

Frustrated Aspiration

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Stacey, Helen, and Trisha's experiences can be described as *frustrated aspiration*. Though each of these women had a short-term goal of finding a job, none of them was able to begin one during the study period. When Trisha and I first met, she told me she was about to be hired as a peer counselor for other young people with mental health problems, but this position was never formally offered. (Trisha's "person who knows you well," her mental health coordinator, confirmed that she had applied for the position, and stated that the mental health team felt that Trisha was "not ready." However, throughout the study, Trisha expressed the belief that the position would be offered.) Stacey wanted to continue her training in construction work. She had already completed a youth training program in construction and enjoyed it. Helen hoped to find a job as a paraprofessional counselor for other individuals with mental illnesses.

Stacey and Helen were very focused on their long-term goals, with Stacey wanting a permanent job in construction, and Helen planning to be a nutritionist. Trisha was uncertain about the type of career she would like to pursue long-term. She expressed a desire to find a "stable" position that would allow her to live independently without social security insurance (SSI), though she also felt anxious that her benefits would be permanently terminated if she worked.

During their time in the study, all three participants made concrete efforts to obtain employment. They completed job applications, called potential employers, and had job interviews. Stacey was offered a job, but was unable to take it because her infant was still nursing and refused to drink from a bottle, despite Stacey's efforts to teach the infant to do so. Helen also came very close to being employed (she had been told she was likely to be offered a job), but she was arrested on a felony charge as a result of her mental illness, and her employment was delayed if not entirely thwarted.

CARD-SORT RESPONSES

As with the *accidental exploration* group, all three participants in this category selected different cards as their first priority, none of which were school or work. Stacey chose family, and when asked to describe family as a priority, she gestured to her baby daughter and said, "*Well it's her.*" Throughout her interviews, Stacey described the commitment she felt to her daughter. In particular, she wanted her daughter to have a better life than she had, as Stacey was involved in the foster care system at age twelve, when her mother died. Helen selected housing as a first priority. She was currently living in a transitional housing program for individuals with mental illnesses, and she needed to find a permanent living situation within a year and a half, when her two-year placement would terminate. Before moving to this facility, she had moved six times during the previous eighteen months. Trisha selected mental health as her first priority because her mental health directly affected her employment prospects. Her anxiety was so severe that it caused debilitating physical symptoms that she felt would interfere with her ability to work.

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS

Stacey, Helen, and Trisha shared three common characteristics. First, all three were currently participating in one or more government social service programs. Stacey was receiving public assistance and continued to participate in limited foster care aftercare services. Helen and Trisha were both involved with the community mental health system, and they received support for their housing. Helen's housing was provided by community mental health, and Trisha received Section 8. Helen and Trisha met their basic needs through SSI.

Second, housing for Stacey, Helen, and Trisha was somewhat fragile. Stacey was living with Kyle and her baby daughter, and during the study, Stacey's sister moved into the small one-bedroom apartment as well. Stacey, Kyle, and Stacey's sister were all concerned about being able to pay rent. Helen had been experiencing housing instability for over a year, and though her current housing was expected to remain available for another year and a half, she was nervous about losing her place before her contract ended. One of the house rules was that residents must not engage in self-harming

behaviors, and unfortunately this was one of the symptoms of Helen's mental illness. Trisha was not as concerned about her housing, but she did worry that if she worked, and made too much money, her SSI and Section 8 benefits would be cut, leaving her at-risk of homelessness. This was an additional barrier to her successful employment, since she wanted to work, but feared the consequences to her financial security.

Third, all of these participants had complicated relationships with family, if any at all. As noted above, Stacey's primary family connection was with her daughter. She did have supportive relationships with her brother and sister, but like Crystal, these relationships were ones in which she was as likely to provide support as she was to receive it. Helen maintained contact with her parents and sister, but the relationship was strained. For example, when a felony charge against Helen was made, Helen's mother refused to speak with her, even though the action that triggered the charge was a result of Helen's mental illness and a recent change in her medications. Helen also told me that her parents were going to be moving to another state soon, and she was not invited to come with them. Trisha described challenging relationships with family as well. Her father would not support her desire to obtain a driver's license, even though the public transportation where she lived was inadequate. Trisha's mother suffered from mental illness as well and was not always available to provide guidance to Trisha. Trisha did feel cared for by her brother, who gave her generous gifts such as a cell phone and bicycle.

DISCUSSION

Emerging adulthood is marked by exploration of self, career, and relationships (Arnett, 2000). Though developmentally all of the youth in this study may have had a need to explore, only a few were able to do so. The youth in the *planned exploration* group described experiencing purposeful, enjoyable exploration, but the youth in the other three groups had a very different emerging adulthood experience.

The three youth in the *planned exploration* group explicitly stated that their short-term goals involved trying new experiences and learning about their work styles, habits, and interests. Two of these youth had already completed Bachelor's degrees, and one was about to enter his second year at a four-year institution. The youth themselves were low-income, all came from lower middle class backgrounds, and each received significant support from family, friends, and professional contacts. In contrast to the other eight study participants, none of these youth reported receiving formal public social services, and none reported having a disability, mental illness, or serious health condition. Comparing these youth to each of the other groups reveals important differences in access to an exploratory emerging adulthood experience.

The two youth in the *steady progress* group also received significant tangible and intangible support from family and friends, but they both participated in government social service programs as well. Lisa was raised by her mother alone, and grew up in a poor neighborhood. She felt unsafe at her high school, due to frequent fights and police activity. David grew up with both of his parents, in a lower middle class family, but he attended an alternative high school due to his disability. For both of these youth, exploration would have been a luxury they could not afford, and they seemed cognizant of that fact. Lisa commented that she did not want her mother to have to "worry" about taking care of her as an adult, and David talked about how his parents literally "push" him "out the door" to go to work and school.

The youth in the *accidental exploration* group may have been suffering from the "Tantalus syndrome" that Hendry (2007) suggested was likely for disadvantaged youth, who see more privileged emerging adults having an exploratory experience to which they do not have access. These three youth had very limited support from family and friends, and experienced difficulty in reconciling their ambitious goals with the daily realities of meeting their basic needs. Had these youth been from more affluent backgrounds, it is likely that their parents would have provided some financial support and/ or assistance in accessing professional connections to facilitate their participation in specialized training related to their interests.

Finally, the youth in the *frustrated aspiration* group were understandably too preoccupied with their significant personal challenges to engage in exploration of self and career. Two of these youth had serious mental illnesses, and the third youth was a young, single mother. All three of these youth received little tangible or intangible support from family and friends, and many of their primary relationships were with formal service providers.

Despite the inherent selection bias present in this sample of youth who had enough initiative to volunteer for and complete a short-term longitudinal study, many of these young people experienced significant difficulties and stress as they attempted to find and maintain employment over the relatively brief study period. The buffering hypothesis suggests that social support can moderate this stress (Cohen & McKay, 1984). The theory argues that the conditions under which support is most likely to be helpful include having a socially acceptable problem that others can relate to and are knowledgeable about, and about which others can remain calm (Cohen & McKay, 1984). Work and school transitions are likely to meet these criteria, and support can be instrumental to successful transitions. It must also be emphasized that support should be implemented within a developmental framework that considers the unique needs of vulnerable youth.

The findings of this study suggest that a focus on strengths, resilience, and building supportive relationships would be helpful to vulnerable youth. The youth in this study were highly motivated to work and their continuing participation in the study alone is an indication of their ability to form strong

connections with supportive adults. Providers should take advantage of this motivation and capacity for forming relationships. Several specific practice models are indicated.

First among these is motivational interviewing. Motivational interviewing can support youth throughout the successes and setbacks of employment and education transitions by matching an individual's stage of change with appropriate support for that stage (Miller & Rollnik, 1991). For example, Trisha, who wanted to work but was worried about losing her SSI benefits, could be considered to be in the contemplation stage, and would benefit from counseling around her worries and ambivalence regarding working. Because of its utility in facilitating a transition to work, motivational interviewing is a core component of the Individualized Placement Support (IPS) model of supported employment (Becker & Drake, 2003). IPS emphasizes rapid job placement in competitive employment settings and intensive follow-up support. Similarly, Supported Education programs that teach skills necessary for success in community-based educational settings would also be helpful (Mowbray et al., 2005). However, regardless of the specific models of support offered, policies and resources must be allocated to developing systems that can effectively support vulnerable youth to complete schooling and obtain stable employment.

Three policy changes could ease the work and school challenges that vulnerable youth confront. First, youth programs should extend services beyond age 18 or 21. The young people in this study, ages 19–23, were very much in transition and in need of consistent support. Second, young adults must have their basic needs met and require strong natural support networks. The two groups of participants in this study whose housing and financial stability were unstable, and whose natural support networks were fragile, the *accidental exploration* and *frustrated aspiration* groups, made the least progress. Efforts must be made to provide young adults with accessible, consistent formal supports and to help them connect with a natural support network. Third, vulnerable youth need access to work opportunities that are accommodating to their life situations and personally meaningful. The participants in the *frustrated aspiration* group were motivated to work, but had great difficulty finding employment that could accommodate their family responsibilities and/or mental health needs. The participants in the *accidental exploration* group did some "floundering" (Cote, 2005), but they may not have needed to if opportunities to engage in work related to their interests were more available. The career interests of these participants typically require years of unpaid or poorly paid education or internships and are less accessible to vulnerable youth.

The policies recommended above echo those of Settersten (2005), who suggests that young adults need opportunities to develop their career interests, services beyond age 18 or 21, and stronger natural support networks. Settersten also highlights the heterogeneity of experiences in the transition

to adulthood, and comments that programs and policies must be individually tailored to accommodate this variation. The findings of this study reinforce these policy recommendations with examples from the lived experiences of vulnerable youth in transition.

An additional policy consideration is that the participants in this study were *not* the most vulnerable young adults. The participants in this sample were connected to at least one social service provider, friend, or employer who told them about the study, and they had the initiative to call an unfamiliar adult and participate in a 16-week research study. The most vulnerable young adults require more, and perhaps different, support. The kind of support that would be most helpful to the 5%–16% of young adults who are disconnected from school, work, and other social institutions is unknown (Brown, Moore, & Bzostek, 2003; Levitan, 2005; The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2003).

The findings of this study indicate several directions for future research. Research is needed to refine the concept of emerging adulthood to reflect the multiple and distinct experiences of vulnerable youth. Given the growing academic and popular interest in emerging adulthood, a more complex understanding of how this phase of life is experienced by individuals who may not be adequately represented in previous studies is essential, lest it be applied universally. More research about the experience of emerging adulthood in vulnerable youth, those from non-Western cultures, or those who are not college-bound would enhance our understanding of this life phase for a greater proportion of the population.

As noted above, the participants of this study were not the most vulnerable youth. Future research should focus on the needs of youth who are disconnected from social service agencies, employment, and work. Accessing these young people is extremely difficult, but a greater understanding of their needs can inform policies and programs to help them reconnect.

This study demonstrates the value of longitudinal research, even with a brief follow-up period. The number, variety, and antecedents of work and school transition were surprising. Participants also experienced numerous transitions in their personal lives, such as moves, changes in romantic relationships, and changes in health situations, which were not the subject of this article. Cross-sectional surveys may not accurately capture this variation, particularly in populations that are mobile and in transition. In future studies of this population, it would be ideal to use a mixed-methods longitudinal approach that can accommodate a larger sample, but also explore the rich developmental context in which transitions to school and work occur.

NOTES

1. Though the federal poverty guideline is $9,800 for a one-person household (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006), the guideline is not adjusted for regional variations in the cost of living. For example, the median income in Oakland, CA is $58,700 for a one-person household; any person

making less than half of the median, or $29,250 is defined as very low income by California State Law and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (City of Oakland, 2006).

2. Pseudonyms are used to protect participant identities.

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