Absurdly Ambitious? Teenagers' Expectations for the Future and the Realities of Social Structure

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Abstract

Expectations for achievement in the US border on the unrealistic. High school students expect to obtain better jobs and more education than current cohorts have achieved. Many youth also seem unaware of how to realize their ambitions. These findings lead to several questions about the causes and consequences of ambition. First, how do American youths' ambitions compare with those of past cohorts and what consequences stem from rising ambitions? Second, how likely is it that youth will achieve their ambitions? What structural forces hinder or assist the goal attainment process? Finally, what cultural and institutional forces shape ambition in the United States? We review available evidence for these questions. Experts agree that the youth are overly ambitious, but debate the consequences of over-ambition. Furthermore, youth privileged by their race, class, and gender status are more likely to achieve their ambitions than less privileged youth, confirming the key sociological premise that broader social structures play an important role in whether individuals realize their dreams.

'Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?'
– Robert Browning

Why are some people more ambitious than others? How do teenagers and young adults translate their ambitions into reality? The answers to these questions vary widely in the United States. Popular media would lead us to believe that ambition is an act of will. Many psychologists view ambition as 'achievement motivation', a relatively stable aspect of personality whereby some individuals feel an intense need to achieve. Alternately, political demagogues and professional comedians, among others, evoke cultural stereotypes that depict some groups as innately driven and others as unmotivated. However, all of these views fail to recognize the inherently social nature of ambition: expressions of ambition and likely future achievements are informed by the social structural positions that individuals inhabit. This article highlights the contributions of sociologists to the

study of achievement expectations among youth in the United States by describing recent trends in ambition, outlining how ambition is affected by history and culture, and demonstrating how expectations of future achievements contribute to various forms of social inequality.[1]

Optimism about the future and one's prospects for upward mobility is quite common in the United States (Harris Interactive 2005). The social reasons for such optimism are undoubtedly complex and interrelated, including the high proportion of immigrants in the United States, a strong economy, a cultural legacy of being 'the land of opportunity', a relatively open educational system, etc. This essay reviews research that extends our understanding of achievement expectations within the United States – surprisingly, there are virtually no cross-national sociological studies of achievement expectations. The vast majority of studies have sought to answer three broad questions. First, how ambitious are youth and young adults in the United States, and at what point do we conclude that they are too optimistic? Second, how are achievement expectations related to young adults' achievement and to what extent do structural constraints mediate this process? Finally, what broad cultural and institutional forces are fueling adolescents' rising achievement expectations and how do the meaning and impact of achievement expectations vary in response to changing institutional and cultural environments? These questions are inherently sociological, and they greatly extend more psychologically oriented perspectives on ambition. No other academic discipline is equally focused on societal trends, social psychological dynamics, and social inequalities.

How ambitious are teenagers and young adults in the United States?

Social scientists have noted for decades how ambitious American youth are when they describe their plans for the future (Agnew and Jones 1988; Morgan 2005; Schneider and Stevenson 1999; Spenner and Featherman 1978; Turner 1964). Of course, what counts as 'ambitious' as opposed to 'lackadaisical' or 'uninspired' is largely determined by the historical and cultural context. Writing in the 1960s, Ralph Turner described the pattern of one third of high school students planning to be professionals as 'clearly one of high ambition' (1964, 35). Given the composition of the workforce at the time, such achievement expectations truly did stand out. Today, many more high school students plan to be professionals in their careers, around two thirds of those who have plans, according to the most recent estimates (Ingels et al. 2005; Reynolds et al. 2006; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). Teenagers in the United States are equally optimistic about their prospects for post-secondary education. Although ten percent of high school sophomores in 2002 were unsure how far they would go, among those who did have educational plans more than three quarters (78

percent) expected to complete at least a bachelor's degree (Ingels et al. 2005), compared with less than half of high school sophomores in 1980 (Goyette forthcoming).

Achievement expectations: idealized fantasies or realistic assessments about what is to pass?

Sociologists generally make a distinction between aspirations and expectations to capture the difference between idealized hopes for the future (i.e. aspirations) versus more probabilistic assessments of what is likely to come to fruition (i.e. expectations). In our view, ambition and optimism more closely correspond to high expectations rather than high aspirations. It would be difficult to categorize as ambitious someone who ideally hopes to be a dentist but realistically expects to be a bus driver. Yet, this point continues to be debated in the literature. As a general rule, the aspirations of adolescents and young adults in the United States exceed their expectations, and it is our contention that ambition implies a realistic hope for success that is better captured by asking what youth expect to achieve in the future.

Although aspirations and dreams typically exceed expectations and plans, the degree to which aspirations surpass expectations is also shaped by one's social structural position in society. The gap between what teenagers would like to achieve and what they expect to achieve is strongly shaped by ethnicity, for one, providing insight into how ethnic group status and historical experience in American society shape achievement expectations. For example, African-American youth have higher aspirations but lower expectations than whites (Hauser and Anderson 1991), which likely reflects their recognition of structural constraints such as educational inequality and discrimination that limit the achievement of African Americans in the United States (Morgan 1996). Mexicans and Puerto Ricans also have both lower educational aspirations and expectations than do whites and blacks (Bohon et al. 2006). In contrast, Cuban teens and young adults, whose elder relatives entered the United States with relatively high socioeconomic status (SES), generally receive greater support for their education (Ogbu 1991; Vélez 1989), and Cuban adolescents have higher aspirations and expectations than whites, blacks, and other Latino groups (Bohon et al. 2006).

Although the gap between aspired and expected achievements tends to vary across social groups, there is also evidence that the gap between expectations and likely achievements is growing over time, such that expectations are shifting away from 'probabilistic assessments' to more idealized statements. That is, recent research suggests a potentially new phenomenon whereby teenagers' achievement expectations are increasingly out of line with what is probable. It is clear that today's teenagers seem much more unrealistic in their expectations when compared with

teenagers of the 1970s. As evidence, Reynolds et al. (2006) examined high school seniors' plans from 1976 to 2000 and compared them with what young adults were actually accomplishing in the same years. They found that the gap between the percentage of seniors expecting to obtain a bachelor's degree or obtain professional jobs and the actual percentage of young adults with such degrees/jobs increased dramatically. In other words, high school students' achievement expectations have increased at a much greater rate than concurrent young adults' achievements, suggesting proportionately more young adults will not realize their seemingly inflated expectations (see also Schneider and Stevenson 1999). Other scholars express concerns that youth in the United States today are more infatuated with fame than previous generations of teenagers and thereby set their sites on highly ambitious, and improbable, careers in the professional sports or entertainment industries regardless of their capacity to realize such plans (Chaudry 2007; Twenge 2006).

What are the mental and physical consequences of holding unrealistic achievement expectations?

Although popular culture celebrates the individual who 'reaches for the stars', it is unclear whether unrealistically ambitious achievement expectations are beneficial for young adults. Some research suggests that unrealistic plans will be psychologically harmful to young adults who cling to dreams that do not materialize (Carr 1997; Drebing and Gooden 1991; Wrosch et al. 2007). For example, Wrosch et al. (2007) found that college students who let go of unattainable goals – a process she calls 'adaptive disen-gagement' – subsequently reported less distress and better physical health than students who continued to hold on to them. Relative deprivation theory also predicts negative consequences of unrealistically ambitious expectations, arguing that young adults who planned and felt entitled to a certain level of attainment they never reached will be more likely to experience anger, frustration, and/or anxiety than those who realistically plan for more modest achievements (Reynolds and Baird 2007; Walker 1999; Walker and Pettigrew 1984; Walker and Smith 2002). Unrestrained praise and encouragement for unrealistic plans may also contribute to negative personality traits like narcissism or emotional fragility (Baumeister et al. 2003; Marano 2008).

A competing view on the consequences of unrealistic achievement expectations comes from the 'culture of self-worth' perspective. This view predicts that the consequence of young adults' failure to achieve their achievement expectations will not be entirely harmful because ambition is celebrated in American society and lack of ambition is looked upon as a failure of character (Twenge and Campbell 2001). A recent study, which used prospective data on a national sample to test these competing theories of how failed achievement expectations affected mental health,

failed to find support for the adaptive disengagement or relative deprivation hypothesis. Instead, planning to get a college degree and failing to within 8 years of high school was associated with greater self-esteem and mastery in young adulthood than realistically planning for the probable outcome of no college degree (Reynolds and Baird 2007).[2] Further research is needed to confirm this rather provocative finding: that optimism itself boosts young adults' mental health. If shown to be generalizable, this finding would cast a different light on whether parents and teachers should discourage unrealistic future plans expressed by contemporary youth.

Theoretical debates on the link between expectations and achievements

Early sociological studies of occupational mobility in the 'status attainment' tradition found that adolescents' achievement expectations were a key mediator linking individuals' social backgrounds and their eventual achievements (Blau and Duncan 1967; Sewell and Shah 1967, 1968; Sewell et al. 1969, 1970; Sewell and Hauser 1975; Spenner and Featherman 1978). The basic conclusion of this research was that elevated achievement expectations were a significant part of the reason why children from upper-SES backgrounds obtained more schooling and more prestigious jobs in adulthood than children from lower-SES backgrounds. These scholars assumed that ambitious plans for the future were a result of encouragement from parents, teachers, and peers, and that they served as a source of motivation that aided young adults to achieve greater success at school and at work. The strong empirical correlation between adolescents' expectations and their eventual attainments was interpreted by many scholars as evidence that such expectations were an important social psychological resource in the pursuit of socioeconomic achievement.

Other scholars have argued that this socialization/encouragement interpretation ignored the fact that access to educational resources and the odds of acquiring prestigious jobs are also shaped by systems of social inequality based on class, race/ethnicity, and gender. For example, Kerckhoff (1976, 1977) argued that individuals' ambitious schooling and work plans reflected their advantaged social position as much as they represented motivation towards achievement goals (see also Alexander and Cook 1979; Alexander et al. 2005). Coser (1975), Burawoy (1977), and Horan (1978) asserted that by focusing primarily on individuals' motivation as the impetus to schooling and career achievement, status attainment research failed to advance the chief agenda of the sociological discipline: to identify structural limitations that constrain individual achievement such as discrimination or inequalities in parental resources.

Bourdieu's (1977a, b) theories of class distinction and cultural capital provide a very different view of achievement expectations than that of the status attainment perspective. Bourdieu claims that individuals' assessments

of their likely future accomplishments are part of their class-shaped 'habitus' – their mental conception of the social world and their understanding of where they fit into it. Class background has an important influence on one's habitus because people of a similar class background share common opportunities, constraints, and experiences. These shared experiences tend to lead to similar achievement expectations and assessments of the likelihood of maintaining or improving one's social class. For example, working class individuals are likely to grow up in an environment where few obtain highly paid, prestigious jobs. They are also less likely to have high achievement expectations because they view high achievement as unlikely for people in their similar social circumstances (Baird 2008; MacLeod 1995; Mickelson 1990; Willis 1977). This view is reinforced by working class students' lack of upper-class 'cultural capital', a deficit of linguistic skills, tastes, values, and experiences associated with upper and middle social classes (e.g. attending private piano lessons or traveling outside of the country).

Finally, Bourdieu's concept of cumulative advantage and disadvantage underscores that privileged individuals will be more likely than disadvantaged individuals to develop and maintain high achievement expectations because they have many examples of individuals who have been successful in the labor market. Thus, their habitus consists of experiences with others and an opportunity structure that reinforce their likelihood of success. In contrast, disadvantaged individuals' past experiences and examples encourage them to develop a habitus that suggests they are less likely to be successful. Thus, even if disadvantaged students develop high achievement expectations, when they face challenges they have fewer resources on which to draw, including a habitus that reminds them of their lower likelihood of success. When privileged students face challenges, they are able to draw on a habitus that reminds them they are likely to experience successes similar to others who share their social location (MacLeod 1995; McClelland 1990a, b). Consequently, advantages tend to be reinforced and accumulate for privileged individuals, making it easier to maintain high achievement expectations.

Recent research on the underlying meaning of expectations

The debate as to whether achievement expectations represent ambition, motivation, entitlement, or fantasy continues in several areas. In the area of gender and work, one group of scholars argues against the importance of early achievement expectations for work outcomes in later life (Almquist et al. 1980; Gerson 1985; Jacobs 1987; Levine and Zimmerman 1995; Risman et al. 1999). According to this perspective, adolescents' achievement expectations are too far removed from the pressures of everyday life to affect attainments. Rather, factors such as the gendered division of labor in the home, financial stability, and experiences of

discrimination are more salient for success in schooling and work. Another group of researchers focus on the influence of achievement expectations in early life for later life outcomes but also acknowledge the importance of later life constraints and opportunities (Correll 2001, 2004; Okamoto and England 1999; Jacobs 1989, 1995; Reynolds and Burge forthcoming). These researchers emphasize a life-long process of career-related decision-making that occurs in the face of obstacles and advantages related to one's gender, race, and class background. What seems clear from many studies is that both cultural beliefs about gender and institutional constraints shape women's and men's career-relevant decisions, in both early and later life (Correll 2001, 2004; Okamoto and England 1999; Risman et al. 1999).

To resolve some of the questions as to what expectations really mean (e.g. motivation for achievement or privilege-based entitlement), sociologists have sought to differentiate those responses of ambition that seem to indicate a tangible resource for achievement versus an idealized fantasy or foregone conclusion (Alexander et al. 1994; Entwisle and Hayduk 1978, 1981; Hout and Morgan 1975; Kerckhoff and Campbell 1977; Kilgore 1991; Thornton 1977). As mentioned before, the general pattern is for youth to express more ambitious aspirations than expectations, a tacit acknowledgement that life will not work out the way we hope it will (Bohon et al. 2006; Hanson 1994; St. Hilaire 2002). Although adolescents typically hold high expectations for their future achievements, the chances of realizing one's early achievement expectations are not equal among adolescents. For example, Alexander et al. (1994) found that grade performance expectations for fourth grade students in Baltimore were less predictive among lower SES and minority students, partly due to class and race/ethnic differences in the ability to recall past grades accurately. According to Agnew and Jones (1988), selective recall of past performance and inflated expectations may serve an ego-preserving function for groups dealing with deprivation.

Institutional and cultural sources of American youths' rising achievement expectations

The fact that social structural positions of class and race/ethnicity shape the link between expectations and their realization shows a fundamental thesis of sociology: that levels of ambition and the odds of success are both shaped by institutional and cultural contexts. These profoundly social forces include cultural beliefs about men's and women's contributions to society, economic inequality, educational philosophies, the link between the skills acquired in education and the skills needed at work, and community contexts. To show how sociologists link institutional and cultural contexts to ambition and achievement, we focus on the question of why adolescents' achievement expectations have risen so dramatically in recent years. The explanations offered to account for this phenomenon

generally fall into one of five categories: cultural changes related to women's status in society, increasing economic inequality in our post-industrial economy, an educational philosophy that stresses higher education for all students regardless of adolescents' readiness for college, weak institutional links between education and work, and the effects of community contexts.

Gender convergence in expectations … almost

One of the more striking examples of the impact of cultural change on adolescent achievement expectations is the gender-related shift in the achievement expectations of adolescents that occurred in the wake of the Women's Movement (Reynolds and Burge forthcoming). Research in the 1970s through the 1980s indicated that boys' educational expectations were higher than girls' (Inoue 1999; Marini 1978a, b; Marini and Greenberger 1978; Sewell et al. 1980; but see Dennehy and Mortimer 1993; Rosen and Aneshensel 1978). Over time, however, the expectations of women and men have converged (Buchmann 1989; Green et al. 1995) partly because contemporary parents encourage their daughters more than they did in the 1970s and because a decline in curricular tracking has lead to greater curricular preparation for college between girls and boys (Reynolds and Burge forthcoming). In addition, women, especially middle-class women, born in the 1940s began to see their work outside the home as a career rather than a job, leading to increased educational expectations (Goldin 2006). In fact, in recent cohorts of high school seniors, young women have higher educational expectations than boys (Mahaffy and Ward 2002; Reynolds and Pemberton 2001); however, girls still tend to steer clear of plans to enter math and science careers (Correll 2001, 2004) and maintain an expectation that they will have more difficulties juggling work and family than do boys (Gerson 2002; Johnson et al. 2001; Johnson and Mortimer 2000).

Economic inequality

Economic changes such as an increasingly global economy and the move toward a service-based economy within post-industrial societies also have profoundly affected adolescents' schooling and work achievement expectations (Morgan 2005; Mortimer and Larson 2002; Shanahan 2000; Shanahan et al. 2002). First, whereas the wages of many skilled and technical workers increased in recent decades (Averett and Burton 1996; Massey 1996; Morris and Western 1999), unskilled workers' wages remained flat or declined as a result of outsourcing and the decline of unions (Alderson 1999; Gross 1995; Keister 2005; Marglin and Schor 1990). At the same time, compensation packages skyrocketed for the highest echelon of American workers, such as upper-level corporate

governance (Domhoff 2005; Shapiro and Friedman 2006). The increasing economic divide among workers may communicate to youth and young adults that planning on less ambitious pursuits could lead to downward mobility. Many European sociologists argue the recent upsurge in college enrollments is primarily an attempt to obtain at least as much schooling as one's parents (e.g. Van de Werfhorst and Hofstede 2007). Still, why increasing inequality in the US workforce does not contribute to pessimism rather than optimism about future achievements is unclear.

Educational philosophies: 'college for all' and de-tracking

Sociologists of education argue that high school students increasingly garner the message that a college degree is the only viable route to occupational success, prompting rising educational and occupational aspirations among adolescents (Kerckhoff 2003, 2002; Rosenbaum 1998, 2001; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). Other scholars maintain that 'going to college' has become so ubiquitous among American youth that contemporary teenagers view the transition to college as a normative part of the life course, irrespective of their academic preparation, career plans, or ability to finance a college education (Goyette forthcoming). One recent study, which traced the significant growth in adolescents' educational plans over the past two decades (1980–2002), examined competing explanations for the expansion of the 'college for all' norm: (i) parents' higher educational attainment fostered their children's educational expectations and (ii) students' rising career aspirations have necessitated greater commitment to higher education (Goyette forthcoming). Goyette's findings suggest that only a small part of the dramatic increase in teenagers' educational expectations can be attributed to parents' higher levels of educational attainment, and the relationship between adolescents' career plans and educational achievement also weakened during the period. Consequently, Goyette argues, a larger cultural shift in the normative transitions that lead to adulthood may be responsible for the sharp increase in adolescents' educational plans.

What role does the educational context play in propagating the 'college for all' norm? In an effort to uphold the ideals of open social mobility, high school administrators, teachers, and counselors have widely adopted the philosophy that most students should seek post-secondary education following high school, regardless of their readiness for college (Kerckhoff 2003, 2002; Rosenbaum 1998, 2001). Consequently, an overwhelming majority of students are directed toward college in preparation for their working years, without much regard to their individualized career achievement expectations and trajectories (Goyette forthcoming; Kerckhoff 2002; Rosenbaum 1998; Rosenbaum et al. 1996). Although American high school students understand the general importance of higher education for professional and higher-status work, not all are adequately

prepared to undertake the necessary steps to realize their professional achievement expectations (Csikszentmihalyi and Schneider 2000; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). From an institutional perspective, the shift in educational philosophy to a 'college-for-all' system stems from large growth in community colleges that have less restrictive admission standards, as well as the De-Tracking Movement, which largely dismantled strictly defined educational tracks (e.g. college preparatory, vocational education, and general education) in secondary school (Kerckhoff 2002, 2003; Rosenbaum 1998). Both teachers and students see community college as a viable route to higher education for students who lack direction or adequate academic preparation (Kerckhoff 2002; Rosenbaum 1998). The increasing accessibility of post-secondary education has lead to increased unrealism in adolescents' educational and occupational plans because academic performance in high school is only weakly related to college admission, which is seen as the necessary precursor to a professional career (Csikszentmihalyi and Schneider 2000; Reynolds et al. 2006; Rosenbaum 1998; Schneider and Stevenson 1999).

Large changes in the content of high school curriculum have occurred as a result of the De-Tracking Movement and also play an important role in adolescents' soaring achievement expectations. During the 1980s and 1990s, as schools' curricular offerings became designated on a course-by-course basis rather than an educational track, vocational curricular programs significantly eroded in high schools (Cantor 1989; Hallinan 1994; Lucas 1999). Furthermore, because schools have shifted their resources towards preparing students for the transition to college, support for vocational curricular programs has declined (Kerckhoff 2003; Lucas 1999). Once a viable alternative for students seeking a career in skilled trades and crafts, the loss of vocational curriculum in high schools means adolescents who do not intend to pursue post-secondary education receive few concrete, marketable skills during high school. Consequently, these students are left with little alternative to seeking higher education, whether at a community college or university (Kerckhoff 2003, 2002; Rosenbaum 2001, 1998).

The link between education and work

Weak institutional links between schooling and work in the United States also contribute to ambitious achievement expectations among young adults (Kerckhoff 2003, 2002; Shanahan 2000). In comparison with many industrialized countries, American secondary schools offer little in the way of vocational guidance, which means that adolescents often formulate work expectations without adequate knowledge of the demands of various careers and the skills necessary to realize their ambitions. Whereas some Western European countries offer nationally accredited apprenticeship programs that help to facilitate the transition from school to work,

apprenticeship programs in the United States are few and not nationally standardized. Therefore, many American adolescents face multiple barriers in the transition to the role of worker, including inadequate academic training, a paucity of vocational guidance, and an unclear path to the workplace (Kerckhoff 2003; Mortimer and Kruger 2000).

Ambiguity about how to successfully transition from school to work is reflected in high school students' lack of knowledge about the nature of various careers and the barriers to entry that characterize many professional occupations (e.g. credentials or time to degree). An overwhelming majority of adolescents expect to be in professional work; yet, far fewer have concrete plans for meeting those expectations (Reynolds et al. 2006; Schneider and Stevenson 1999). In addition, many adolescents have misaligned expectations, either underestimating the education necessary for the occupation to which they aspire or overestimating the credentials required for the job they hope to attain (Schneider and Stevenson 1999). Students seeking to work in trades or crafts or in other non-professional occupations whose educational and work expectations do not require college have even fewer resources upon which to draw for carving out a career, given their lack of marketable skills for our post-industrial economy. This is especially problematic because young adults without college credentials are at high risk for 'floundering', moving between a considerable number of unappealing jobs, as they seek sustainable employment (Kerckhoff 2002; Rosenbaum 2001; Rosenbaum et al. 1990).

The link between schooling and career advancement is also ambiguous for young adults in college, especially for young adults without clearly defined goals. Few academic majors bestow specific, technical skills that lead directly to a career path.[3] Instead, much of college curriculum is broad and general in application, with few direct credentials useful to young adults in meeting their work expectations. Thus, for many young adults – both college-educated and otherwise – the transition from school to work is tenuous, characterized by periods of floundering (Kerckhoff 2003). However, college graduates do have considerably higher odds of meeting their achievement expectations and fare better than those with less education given the increasingly stratified American labor market which rewards highly skilled workers (Averett and Burton 1996; Kerckhoff 2002, 2003). In addition, colleges and universities are increasingly taking a more pro-active approach to placing their students in employment opportunities, offering career counseling services and courses (Kerckhoff 2002).

Much of the weak linkage between schooling and work in the United States may be attributed to differences in educational philosophy relative to other Western industrialized countries as well as to the relatively weak involvement of employers in steering educational curriculum towards market-oriented skills (Dannefer 2000; Kerckhoff 2002, 2003; Shanahan et al. 2002). The American educational system is based on an open mobility model, whereby students are not tracked for different educational destinations,

but instead receive a broad, general education designed to allow for maximum educational mobility over a student's educational trajectory (Dannefer 2000; Kerckhoff 2003). This stands in contrast to countries such as Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom, which track students earlier in their schooling careers, but offer more vocationally concrete programs of study throughout the secondary levels of schooling (Kerckhoff 2003; Mortimer and Kruger 2000; Shanahan et al. 2002). In addition, whereas the institutions of schooling and work are largely separate in the United States, in some other industrialized countries, employers are more influential in offering and regulating curricular and apprenticeship programs such that students receive accredited credentials that are useful for obtaining work within their chosen occupational field (Kerckhoff 2003).

Community contexts

Another key interest of sociologists is the extent to which achievement expectations are shaped by broader contexts of opportunity such as local labor markets or the normative environment. It is perhaps not surprising that the composition of local labor markets affects young people's occupational and educational plans. For example, the level of occupational sex segregation in a local community affects the occupational plans of the young women and men living in that community, such that there is a positive feedback loop between the social distributions of current and future workforces (Xie and Shauman 1997). Similarly, young women who live in counties with higher female employment rates plan to work in occupations with higher pay than do young women in counties where women are less likely to be employed (Baird 2008). Others have found that increases in the unemployment rate encourages young adults to either return to school for more training or remain in school longer (Betts and McFarland 1994), ostensibly adjusting their educational ambitions in response to labor market conditions.

Community norms as expressed in localized class culture or in family patterns may also influence the achievement expectations of young men and women. In an ethnography exploring the culture of white, working class British boys in secondary school, Willis (1977) argued that the boys' beliefs about the importance of 'having a laff' and the association of manual labor with masculinity led to working class boys' rejection of the university as a means to a fulfilling career. More recently, Baird (2008) finds that young women living in counties with a high divorce rate have less ambitious work expectations than young women living in areas with lower divorce rates. Given the association between divorce rates and female poverty, Baird speculates that the negative association between community divorce rates and ambition is because these young women see other women facing economic hardships and become more cynical about their own job prospects.

Undoubtedly, there is still much to discover in terms of the ways that institutional and cultural forces shape achievement expectations. In our view, it is puzzling that expectations have become increasingly ambitious in an era when economic inequality is on the rise and in the face of recent scandals in government, media, and big business. Whether such ambition flows out of economic necessity, obsessions about mobility, or the psychological constraints of an individualistic consumer culture that above all else attributes success and failure to individual effort is an issue that pundits, politicians, and social scientists will continue to debate.

Conclusions

Whereas the available evidence suggests a consensus to some of the questions posed by this article, contradictory evidence exists for others. Achievement ambitions of youth in the United States are quite high and have increased over time. Many predict that unrealistically high expectations will result in mental and physical health consequences, but the current evidence is divided. It seems there may be some mental health benefits to holding high achievement expectations despite low levels of academic performance. We also considered how achievement expectations are related to young adults' achievements and to what extent structural constraints mediate this process. The scholarly 'jury' is also still out on this question. For the most part, studies show that achievement ambitions do have an influence on later work and schooling outcomes, but structural constraints in early life affect ambitions, and structural constraints in both early life and later life impinge on individuals' abilities to translate their ambitions into reality. Race/ethnicity, gender, and class profoundly affect the ability to translate one's expectations into attainments. Finally, we have highlighted five key institutional and cultural forces that have influenced the increase in achievement expectations in the United States. Cultural changes related to women's status in society, increasing economic inequality in our post-industrial economy, an educational philosophy that stresses higher education for all, weak institutional links between education and work, and the effects of community contexts all have important influences on the rise in American adolescents' achievement expectations. Future research will further elucidate these issues by continuing to focus on ambition as an inherently social phenomenon influenced by the social structural positions of individuals and the changing institutional context in which youth and young adults pursue their goals.

Short Biography

Chardie L. Baird is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Texas at Arlington. Her research examines social structural influences on individuals' careers. Her recent work, published in *Sex Roles*, examines

the influence of community context on young women's career aspirations. Another project investigates the organizational, worker status, and need factors affecting knowledge about parental leave benefits and is published in *The Sociological Quarterly*. Her current research explores the link between young women's career-relevant decisions and their eventual attainments as well as the mental health consequences of holding unrealistic educational expectations. She holds a BS in Sociology from the College of Charleston and a PhD in Sociology from Florida State University.

Stephanie Woodham Burge is a Visiting Lecturer of Sociology at the University of Oklahoma. Her research focuses on how gender shapes adolescents' educational transitions, such as choice of college major and degree. She also studies long-term care in the United States, examining how assisted living facilities' admission policies shape resident populations and factors that promote elders' successful transition into assisted living. She earned her BS, MS, and PhD in Sociology from Florida State University.

John R. Reynolds is Associate Professor of Sociology and an associate of the Claude Pepper Institute on Aging and Public Policy at Florida State University. His current research seeks to explain broad shifts in achievement ideology, such as the trend toward increasingly unrealistic career plans among teenagers, and to explicate the long-term consequences of such trends for gender, race, and class inequalities. Recent publications include 'Have adolescents become too ambitious? High school seniors' educational and occupational plans, 1976 to 2000' in *Social Problems*, 'Educational expectations and the rise in women's post–secondary attainments' in *Social Science Research*, and 'Mastery and the fulfillment of occupational expectations' to appear in *Social Psychology Quarterly*. He received his PhD in Sociology from Ohio State University.

Notes

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[1] Like most sociological research on this topic, we mostly use the more general term of 'achievement expectations' instead of 'ambition'.

[2] These analyses controlled for earlier levels of esteem and mastery to account for the fact that adolescents with a more positive sense of self have more ambitious achievement expectations, on average. Other statistical controls included gender, race/ethnicity, and parents' education.

[3] Of course, exceptions to this rule include nursing, engineering, and education. However, even undergraduate majors that are geared towards a professional career trajectory such as pre-law and pre-medicine still yield few credentials that qualify students for that specific line of work.

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