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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Educated People: Narratives of Ambition and Failure among Poor and Working-Class
Young Adult Women in Community College

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Sociology

by

Kelly J. Nielsen

Committee in Charge:

> Professor Amy J. Binder, Chair
> Professor Amanda Datnow
> Professor Isaac W. Martin
> Professor Hugh Mehan
> Professor Akos Rona-Tas

2016

The Dissertation of Kelly J. Nielsen is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and

form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2016

DEDICATION

To Sara, Oliver, and Malena for being here every day to help me through, and to my mother, Joy, who could not be here.

EPIGRAPH

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear

Adrienne Rich

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All who wander may not be lost, but they are subject to university deadlines. If it were not for the tireless dedication of my advisor, mentor, and friend, Amy Binder, I would have surely gotten lost and run even more afoul of the Graduate Division. From the moment I asked her to chair my dissertation committee, she has done more to support me in my scholarly work and academic life than I could have possibly asked for. She worked tirelessly to help me find the right words, the right theories, and the right people to make my work better. She (mostly) excised the passive voice from my writing, and she gave me way too much credit for this work and never took any for herself despite how instrumental she has been. If I would not have reached the end of this project without Amy, I never would have gotten started without Bud Mehan and Amanda Datnow. Bud taught me everything I needed to be a sociologist of education. He wandered with me undeterred and pushed me to really think. He trusted me enough to keep wandering that one day he left me a manila envelope filled with two books by Wittgenstein and several other texts with a note that stated in bold print: Do Not Read. To me as to many, many before, Bud is a role model and dear friend. I can only dream of one day retiring and receiving the outpouring of love that he received for his sociological wandering. Amanda made this project possible as the principal investigator of the Pathways to Postsecondary Success Project. But more importantly, she gave graduate students like myself a prominent role in the project and treated us like colleagues. She read drafts and took the time to talk about the project and life more generally whenever I stopped by her office, and she trusted me to take the project forward and make it my own. Amanda always left

me feeling confident and enthusiastic about my work. Isaac Martin has been a model of rigor and intellectual clarity. Whenever I imagine someone reading over my shoulder, and I worry if they will be convinced by my work, I typically think of Isaac. Akos Rona-Tas has helped me to see the bigger picture of my work and pushed me to bring forward what so often goes unthought or unsaid, what gets lost when you wander.

The data for this dissertation is the product of a group of extremely talented and dedicated researchers. Vicki Park is a brilliant leader and an incredible interviewer. She established a very high bar for this project and I have benefitted enormously from her hard work. Chrissy Cerven did more than anyone in the field to make sure the project was a success and pushed us to do the hard work of wrestling with so much qualitative data. Jennifer Nations did more than I can possibly list here to make this dissertation what it is. As team members, officemates, and co-authors, we shared so many ideas we lost track of their origins. I cannot imagine doing this research without having Jenn to joke and complain when things got tough. Much of the work here is a result of the countless hours I had to think and learn with her. I also could not have done any of this without the steadfast support of Sheila Keegan. Sheila not only kept this large and complex project running, she also made it possible for me to set out on my own once the Pathways project had ended.

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and I can say without a doubt that my intellectual identity is inseparable from the thinking we have done together over the years. Lastly, Joan Donovan and Nathalie Reid have become a part of my family. Joan has given no quarter in our war of ideas, which thankfully shows no sign of ending.

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More than anyone, my wife and best friend, Sara Nielsen, made this long and wandering journey imaginable. There is no way to express the proper gratitude to someone who says yes when their partner asks if they can pursue a Ph.D. She has given me the home to wander from and return to, and the immense love needed to keep me from getting lost. That home includes our wonderful children, Oliver and Malena, whom along with Sara I love more than anything. The three of them have given me the greatest reason to do my best work.

Chapter 1, in full, is a reprint of the material as it appears in *Inequality, Power, and School Success: Case Studies on Racial Disparity and Opportunity in Education*, edited by Gilberto Conchas and Michael Gottfried, Routledge, 2015.

Chapter 2, in full, is a reprint of the material as it appears in *Sociology of Education*, volume 88, number 4, pp. 265-283.

Chapter 3, in full, is currently being prepared for submission for publication of the material.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Educated People: Narratives of Ambition and Failure among Poor and Working-Class
Young Adult Women in Community College

by

Kelly J. Nielsen

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, San Diego, 2016

Professor Amy Binder, Chair

The role of higher education in the lives of individuals and the course of society is greater today than at any point in the past. Postsecondary credentials are required for many professions, and economies, from the local to the national, rely on colleges and universities to provide skilled labor. Higher education also gives access to socially-recognized, highly-valued identities. In this dissertation, I examine the meaning of higher education in the lives of 23 poor and working-class young adult women attending

community college as they pursue social mobility and places as valued members of society. I examine the narratives that they tell and re-tell through four waves of life history interviews over a three-and-a-half year period from fall 2010 to spring 2014. By focusing on poor and working-class women in community college, I look at those students who face some of the greatest obstacles and least possibilities of attaining their degrees. At the same time, the consequences of failure, both socioeconomically and culturally, are especially severe for poor and working-class women. I show how the community college functions as a *narrative hub* that ties together broad cultural beliefs, personal biography, and institutionally-structured life stories. When the women in this study experienced delayed or blocked progress toward college and career attainment, they either held steady to their aspirations or engaged in a process of narrative revision. They did so not only out of a pragmatic pursuit of social mobility but also as a way to fulfill a cultural imperative to be ambitious. I argue that the ability of poor and working-class women to display ambition is shaped by the institutional resources they have access to. The community college's open access structure and vocational character make ambitious storytelling possible, even when students make little or no progress toward completion. Outside of college, disadvantaged women may turn to institutions that allow for ambitious practices of self-improvement, such as religion or sport, or allow them to care for others, such as the family. Ultimately, this dissertation shows that higher education is as much a source of meaning and virtue as social mobility in today's society.

Introduction

Katherine was an honor's student at Riverside Community College when I first sat down with her in June 2011. At 20 years-old, she was preparing to apply to the University of California as part of her long term plan to become an optometrist. Her decision to attend the community college and transfer rather than enroll in a lower-tier university straight out of high school came at her brother's urging, himself a student at the University of Southern California. According to Katherine, her and her brother's academic achievements came in spite of her parents who paid little attention to their schooling and struggled to provide a stable living situation. Katherine described her father as a talented if unlucky entrepreneur, and his string of financial troubles meant spells of homelessness for the family, including the summer when we first met.

Over the next two-and-a-half years, I interviewed Katherine again on three separate occasions. Throughout this time she excelled academically and from the start she seemed on course to transfer and continue working toward a career in optometry. So I was surprised when she showed up to the third interview in July 2012 wearing an emergency medical technician (EMT) uniform. She explained that she had been accepted to the University of California but had dropped a difficult biology class that she needed to transfer; she needed to reapply the following year after making up the class. She was taking advantage of the extra time to earn EMT certification so she would have a steady job once she transferred. That is, *if* she transferred. Katherine was now considering enrolling in a physician's assistant (PA) program at the community college, a two year

program that was significantly shorter than the time it would take to complete medical school.

She had learned about the PA program from a classmate and had met a PA at a local hospital as part of her EMT training. She described in great detail the benefits of working as a PA and why it was the right career for her, not least because it would allow her to contribute more money to her household. Up to this point, she had used her financial aid and the little money she earned selling cutlery to buy necessities at home. A career as a PA offered a relatively quick route to a higher income. Like many of the other women in this study, Katherine encountered serious obstacles both in and out of community college that precipitated a reconsideration of her aspirations, of who she was and how that fit with who she wanted to be as she entered adulthood. For Katherine, it meant considering the possibility of lowering her professional sights, at least for a brief period.

By the fourth interview in December 2013, Katherine was finishing her first term as a student at the University of California, Irvine. Her decision to transfer rather than enter the PA program was as much a consequence of the money problems that had motivated her to look into the PA program in the first place. She could not afford to take the EMT certification test, which meant she could not work as an EMT and accumulate the work experience that she needed before she could apply to the PA program. Transferring turned out to be the path of least resistance, and she could keep pursuing her aspirations for a career in optometry. Katherine's good grades, her social capital from her

brother, and her fortunate inability to pursue a less ambitious pathway allowed her to stay on track and hold on to a story of striving for upward mobility.

The majority of the 23 poor and working-class women I interviewed between September 2010 and March 2014 faced obstacles at least as formidable as those Katherine encountered over the course of the study. Yet, many of the women's aspirations were delayed, interrupted, or abandoned when I last met them. Few had reached the goals they set out in the beginning of the study or taken significant steps toward them, such as transferring to a four-year university as Katherine had. With few opportunities available to poor and working-class women beyond those opened up by the community college, how do they make sense of little or no progress toward and, on occasion, outright failure to attain their goals? What are the consequences for how they understand themselves and others when they struggle to enter adulthood and the middle class?

Becoming a socially-recognized successful middle-class adult requires postsecondary education to a greater extent than ever before. Rising inequality means that today's poor and working-class youth aim for more education and higher-status careers than their parents in the hopes of achieving self-responsibility, independence, and the material rewards of middle-class life. Global economic competition, popularly understood, means that all youth are expected to attain more education, be more productive in high value jobs, spur innovation, and solve social problems through creative labor. Together, the private belief in getting ahead through school and the public

expectation of a more educated public make up an "education gospel" that links education, personal success, and social improvement (Grubb and Lazerson 2005).

Higher education means more than social mobility and labor productivity; it is the centerpiece of what Baker (2014) calls the "schooled society." Colleges and universities give access to the cultural resources required of the *educated person*. They have "charters" to bestow a socially valued and recognizable identity on young adults (Meyer 1977). Through higher education, young adults adopt and signal social membership by expressing commitment to the norms, values, and ideals of mainstream society. A value of prime importance is ambition, a commitment to individual improvement that will have benefits for all (Bellah et al. 1996; Hochschild 1995; Newman 1999). This may be especially important for poor and working-class young adults who have few opportunities and routinely encounter negative stereotypes in popular discourse and the institutions that govern their lives such as low-wage work, welfare, and the criminal justice system (Collins 2009). For students struggling to meet the challenges of getting through college and earning a degree, the cultural meaning of higher education poses a problem for how they make sense of their lives and present themselves to others.

Growing numbers of poor and working-class students have matriculated at colleges and universities across the country over the past half-century, including greater numbers of women and people of color, groups traditionally excluded from college campuses. American higher education systems responded to the changing demographic character of postsecondary students by expanding to accommodate increasing numbers of students with diverse needs and interests, particularly at the community college level

(Crookston and Hooks 2012). Two-year college enrollments expanded at over twice the rate of enrollments at four-year institutions from the mid-1960s to today (Deil-Amen 2011). By the end of the twentieth-century, nearly half of the students in public colleges and universities were enrolled in community colleges, doubling the figure from 1965 (Roksa et al. 2007).

Yet, completion rates among community college students are far lower than among their peers in four-year institutions. While over 80 percent of entering community college students indicate they want a bachelor's degree, only one-third of entering students transfer within 6 years. And of those who transfer, approximately 40 percent complete a bachelor's degree within six years of starting community college. That is, approximately 14 percent of entering community college students complete a bachelor's degree within six years (Community College Research Center 2015). If college is increasingly necessary for upward mobility and critical for signaling ambition and other socially desired traits, how do community college students respond when they struggle to reach their goals or stay on track?

The problem of rising aspirations and persistently low attainment rates for poor and working-class students in higher education has generated a great deal of sociological inquiry. Central to this research has been a long-standing concern over the propensity for community colleges to "cool out" student ambitions through institutionalized mechanisms that orient students towards more vocationally oriented pathways or to dropping out of college altogether (Alexander, Bozick, and Entwisle 2008; Attewell and Lavin 2007; Brint and Karabel 1989; Clark 1960; Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum 2002;

Dougherty 1994; Labaree 1997; Mullen 2010; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person 2006; Tierney 1991). This focus on cooling out poses several problems for researchers interested in the millions of students who rely on community colleges to get ahead. First, while the cooling out thesis is consistent with a large body of scholarship that links institutional arrangements to aspirations, and aspirations to behavior, it is based on assumptions about community college students' internal states. Researchers who ignore what students think and say as they change course or leave school are left to infer aspiration change from action, and they cannot explain the consequences for identity and well-being.

Second, the cooling out paradigm restricts scholarly attention to the community college. Like many institution-centered studies of higher education, community college research routinely isolates this single tier in their analyses. This is despite the multi-tiered and multi-institutional pathways students often follow throughout the higher education system (Goldrick-Rab 2006), the many interconnections among colleges and universities throughout the organizational field (Stevens and Kirst 2015), and the fact that many poor and working-class students leave for extended periods before returning to school (Alexander, Bozick, and Entwisle 2008). Students' backgrounds and lived experiences matter in very different ways under different institutional conditions (Mullen 2010). When the focus is on a single tier or college, our view of students' experiences is effectively cut off at the institutional edges. When students leave college altogether, the scholarly view, directed exclusively at the college, shows us even less of what is

happening in their lives and what could lead them to return to college or drop out permanently.

Talking with students and trying to understand how they make sense of their education can help explain not only how aspirations are shaped by postsecondary institutions but also how students understand the wider system and make decisions that could lead to more or less inequality. By taking an ecological approach to research with community college students, scholars can open themselves to a broader range of explanatory possibilities. Sociologists have a deep analytical tool box that community college researchers have generally left untouched.

Third, sociologists of higher education have focused primarily on educational aspirations and their relationship to educational and occupational attainments. This is problematic because aspirations derive not only from strategic concerns with social positioning in the labor force. They also stem from domains such as identity, politics, religion, and tradition (Gross 2009). Moreover, not only are aspirations multiple and dynamic, rising and falling, turning this way and that as people encounter institutions, they can be tools that people use strategically. Aspirations in one sphere, such as education, can be used to support other aspirations or solve problems in others spheres, such as the family. Their effectiveness in solving problems comes from their potential to be transposed across institutional spheres and because aspirations function as statements about what is good and worth pursuing. As such, aspirations serve as moral claims about the self's relationship to the good and worthwhile (Frye 2012; Nielsen 2015). Because

aspirations reflect moral systems, they can be constraining and consequential for a person's sense of self and well-being (Sanchez-Jankowski 2008).

In this dissertation, I look at both institutional effects *and* student sense- and decision-making processes to explain how 23 poor and working-class young adult women use higher education to pursue social mobility, construct identities, and manage their lives with others. Drawing on four waves of semi-structured interviews, I address the following broad research questions:

- How do community college students understand their community college experience?

- What problems do community college students attempt to solve with their aspirations and how do they use their aspirations to solve these problems in their lives?

- How do community college students manage their aspirations when they struggle or fail to make progress toward or reach their goals?

- What are the consequences for community college students' sense of self and their relationships with others when they struggle or fail to make progress toward or reach their goals?

- What role do institutions other than higher education play as community college students manage their aspirations?

My research shows that social mobility and the successful transition to adulthood are practical necessities *and* moral obligations in the lives of the women I interviewed. I extend our understanding of higher education in the lives of poor and working-class

young adults by situating their experiences in the wider cultural meaning of a college education, in an extended institutional framework, and in the self-making and problem solving they undertake.

Forming identities and solving problems takes time. Periods of struggle or failure can be heightened periods of making sense of one's place in the world and in relation to those around oneself (Swidler 1986). For these reasons, the experiences of poor and working-class community college students is a particularly useful subject for studying contemporary cultural life. Not only is the period of emerging adulthood one of increasing fits and starts as young adults face greater challenges transitioning to independent selfhood than in the past (Waters et al. 2011), rising inequality has made the challenges particularly acute for the poor and working-class (Grusky and MacLean 2016). The qualitative and longitudinal character of this dissertation makes it possible for me to uncover *processes* of becoming adults in a radically unequal and schooled society that makes ambition an ethical imperative.

In the chapters that follow, all of which are written in journal article form, I explore the narratives that the women in this study tell and retell as they bring together cultural understandings, institutional knowledge, and personal biography. In chapter 2, I show that how students understand and incorporate their community college experience into a coherent story is conditioned by the kind of life history that they are telling more broadly. Because their time in college is not an isolated part of who they are as people, the academic experiences that are meaningful to them fit with other aspects of their life. Although the explanation of college experiences is conditioned by subjective experience,

I identify four paradigms of explanation that are consistent with popular sociological frameworks. These include stories of institutional agents and the social capital they provide, of status competitions between social groups, of choices between multiple models of mobility that include school and non-school pathways, and of identity transformations as a result of a refigured social world and social imagination. I argue that attention to biography is essential if sociologists hope to identify sources of academic success and failure. Narratives attune students to particular features of complex systems such as community colleges.

In next two chapters, I turn to those women who struggled to get ahead or who gave up on the goals they held at the start of the study. Chapter 3 looks at women who "hold steady" to their aspirations for a college degree despite making little or no academic progress, or in the rare instances when alternative career pathways present themselves. I show that while the pragmatic pursuit of jobs is an important reason that the women hold steady, they are motivated to a large extent by the moral identity associated with pursuing a college degree. I argue that the community college's charter to grant durable, socially recognized identities allow women in this study to use their postsecondary aspirations to signal ambition and virtue. In the process, they draw boundaries between themselves and other marginalized people, challenge stereotypes about the poor and people of color, and manage their relationships with others. They are able to hold steady, I contend, because of the institutional structure of the community college and higher education more generally. Because the community college is an open access institution and higher education is largely vocational in character, poor and

working-class young adults are able to tell ambitious stories about their lives even when they struggle to make progress.

Chapter 4 develops the analysis of how institutions shape aspirations and identity through an examination of how students manage failure when they give up on the aspirations they held at the start of the study. I show that, similar to the way college experiences are understood in terms of personal narratives, aspirations are rooted in biography and articulated through institutions. While failure is commonplace during the period of emerging adulthood, widely available explanations for failure vary by social class and textured by race and gender. When poor and working-class young adults fail, they confront dominant discourses that portray them in pathological terms, as lazy, irresponsible, or mentally ill. How the women in this study respond to failure and a culture of poverty worldview is contingent upon the institutional resources that are available. Distinguishing between career, practice, and family institutions, I argue that poor and working-class young adults will use the available institutional resources to do narrative work and tell a story of renewed ambition. However, these institutions are more or less useful for telling ambitious stories. Ambition in the contemporary United States is most clearly articulated through the idea of a career, which promises both personal and social benefit. Practice institutions offer the possibility for self-improvement if not the improvement of society, whereas care institutions provide few narrative sources of ambition. When the women who fail struggle to tell an ambitious story of their life, they show greater signs of social and emotional distress. The unequal distribution of and

access to institutions that allow for ambition narratives, then, has consequences for the ability of poor and working-class young adults to be resilient in the face of failure.

Because each of the empirical chapters—as a freestanding publishable article—develops specific theoretical approaches and discusses important aspects of the data collection and analysis, in this introductory chapter I do something rather unusual for a dissertation. Rather than describe the particular theories, data, and analysis that I use in each of these pieces, I step back in this Introduction to describe the origins of this project, the decision making that led to the final study design, and the context in which it is set. In particular, I describe the larger project that this study originates from and the research I conducted to address particular questions that only emerged *in time*. I also explain the geographical and historical context of the study. Specifically, I describe the relevance of the Riverside, California area for studying the social mobility and identity projects of poor and working-class young adults, and the way these projects have been shaped by the Great Recession that began in late-2007. Riverside is paradigmatic of the new spatial distribution of opportunity and of the uneven effects of economic forces during periods of recession and recovery. In other words, the structural landscape of storytelling in Riverside can be found in cities across the country that exist perilously on the edges of major metropolises.

In addition to the theory, data, and methods discussions in each subsequent chapter, I have included extended statements on the methodological and theoretical frameworks of the dissertation at the end. In the Conclusion, I elaborate a theory of institutions as a process that involves narration and the recognition of social and

individual stories. Drawing specifically on Rosa's (2004) model of self-interpretation and Glaeser's (2014) "hermeneutic institutionalism," I outline an approach that links widespread culture, institutions, and personal biography over time, which I refer to this as *narrative institutionalism*. In brief, I describe a framework that links individual self-interpretation and self-understanding to institutions through a loose coupling of social and biographical discourse. The extent to which culture, institutions, and individual experience resonate or generate recognition across these spheres shapes outcomes, whether successful or pathological. The achievement of resonance or pathological non-recognition is a temporal process, and my dissertation suggests an important way that this process operates, namely through narrative work in institutions. The narrative institutionalism that I examine in this dissertation contributes to theories of self-making and institutional change or stability.

In Appendix C, I consider how interviews are useful for exploring the ties between culture, institutions, and individuals, and what they reveal in terms of social action. Specifically, I enter into a debate on the sociological value of interviews when explaining what people do in the world through a focus on longitudinal qualitative interviewing. I discuss separately the interview as a site of action, in which culture is reflected, the social world is produced, and the self is made, and the interview as a source of information about action that happens elsewhere. The ability of researchers to explain the act of accounting, of how narratives are made and remade, is an important benefit of longitudinal qualitative interviewing for sociologists, and I show how my research

contributes to core epistemological debates in sociology. But first, I turn to the design of the study.

Study Design

This dissertation is based on four waves of semi-structured interviews with 23 poor and working-class young adult women over a three-and-a-half year period from fall 2010 to spring 2014. Each of the women was enrolled in community college at the outset of the study and qualified for a tuition fee waiver or cash aid welfare targeted at poor students. Over the course of the study, some women stayed enrolled while others stopped out for short periods or dropped out altogether. This allowed me to examine the meaning of higher education and social mobility as the institutional context of their lives changed or stayed the same over time.

The bulk of the data come from the UC/ACCORD Pathways to Postsecondary Success project, a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation-funded project conducted by a research team under the direction of University of California All Campus Consortium On Research for Diversity (UC/ACCORD). The project consisted of quantitative analyses of nationally-representative data sets, a statewide survey of California youth between the ages of eighteen and twenty-six years old (the California Young Adult Survey), and three case studies of poor and minority youth in three Southern California cities.[1] From July 2009 to September 2012, I was one of four researchers conducting a three-year case study of low-income female community college students in Riverside, California. I was

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[1] For more, see http://pathways.gseis.ucla.edu/

involved in the research design process—including case selection and interview protocol and background survey development—and data collection at each stage, which consisted of three waves of semi-structured interviews with low-income female students.

Following the conclusion of the Pathways project, I conducted an additional round of interviews for several reasons. First, some of the women were nearing transfer to four-year universities by the third interview and I wanted to follow them as they made this transition or, in the event they stumbled right as they were about to reach their goal, understand the hurdles transferring students face. In chapter 2, I am able to show how several of the women interpreted their time in community college from the vantage point of a four-year university student. This distance, I believe, is crucial for how community college is incorporated into a broader life narrative. Second, the Pathways case study lasted approximately two years, which is the amount of time that most people think it should take to finish community college, popularly referred to as two-year colleges. While many of the women had been enrolled prior to the start of the study, others had only recently begun their college career. By extending the study to three-and-a-half years, I was able to explore how those women who expected to be finished in two years dealt with their apparently delayed progress. As chapter 3 shows, by the fourth interview some women were dismayed that they had not yet finished and worried about how the extra time it took them was reflecting on them as people. Lastly, some of the women were beginning to express frustration and doubts about the trajectories they were on and their likelihood of reaching their goals. As chapter 4 shows, narratives began to change most clearly during the third interview as they sensed that their aspirations were out of reach. I

wanted to know how they continued to make sense of their struggle to reach their goals and how, if at all, they told a different story.

There were other benefits from conducting a fourth interview, too. The rapport that I had built with the women I interviewed during the first three waves only continued to grow. As I discuss in Appendix C, rapport is a major benefit of and requirement for longitudinal qualitative interviewing. Katherine, whom I described at the beginning of this Introduction, for example, told me during the fourth interview that she had a boyfriend throughout the study and that her relationship had been a major scandal in both her and her boyfriend's family. She admitted that she had only felt comfortable enough to share this with me three years after we first met. Another woman asked me to help her write an application essay for a sign language interpreter program while yet another invited me to her wedding. These and other displays of confidence and connection happened more and more as I neared the end of the study. Another major benefit was the ability to interview women that I had not interviewed during the Pathways project. This was crucial for interpreting the early interviews, since I was able to witness emotional and embodied reactions as I asked about particular topics that spanned the study or revisited things they had said in previous interviews. As I discuss in Appendix C, this physico-emotional response is integral to the actions and interpretations of the social world that interviews capture.

Unlike the rest of the Pathways project, the Riverside case study focuses exclusively on women. As a group, women are both aspiring to and attaining greater levels of postsecondary education (Mickelson 1989; Roksa et al. 2007; Turley, Santos,

and Ceja 2006) while at the same time pursuing lower-status majors and careers with less-lucrative outcomes than their male peers (Carnevale, Strohl, and Melton 2011). Consistent with this trend, postsecondary enrollments and attainments are higher for women than for men in Riverside County.[2] As I discuss in chapter 3, this could be a result of fewer well-paying jobs for women at lower levels of education than for men, who are more likely to be employed in the warehousing and construction industries that predominate. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 30 years old during the first wave of the study. This age range gives a more accurate picture of American college students and contributes to the effort of higher education scholars to steer away from an overemphasis on traditional college students who are increasingly in the minority of people enrolled in postsecondary institutions (Deil-Amen 2011). It is also a better reflection of "emerging adulthood" (Waters et al. 2011), which covers young adults between 18 and 34 years old, as I discuss in more detail in chapter 4.

Towards the aim of more accurately reflecting the American college student population, the case study also included student-parents. Students with children, including increasing numbers of single parents (typically mothers), are enrolling in greater numbers, particularly at community colleges. Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen (2010) found that 17% of female undergradutes are unmarried parents. According to the American Community Survey 3-year estimates for 2008-2010, African Americans and Latinas are disproportionately represented among single mother headed households.

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[2] The one exception is Bachelor's or post-graduate degree attainment among white men and women. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, of white males 25 years and older in 2012, 22.6% have completed a Bachelor's or higher while only 18.9% of white women have 25 years and older have done so.

Furthermore, these groups of women experience greater unemployment and are disproportionately counted among the poor.[3] By focusing on poor women, including poor single mothers, the study included a larger proportion of black women (30%) and a lower proportion of white women (13%) than were enrolled in the Riverside Community College District (11% and 30% , respectively).

While the study is longitudinal, the sampling amounts to a snapshot of social class. Poverty and its consequences, such as welfare receipt, are often temporary states for individuals and families reflecting different patterns of downward mobility from non-poor positions (Hays 2003). Moreover, despite the strict accounting that welfare and other support services attempt in order to determine eligibility, program participation is a poor indicator of the resources that an individual has available to them (Edin and Lein 1997). As a result, there is a good deal of variation in the backgrounds of the poor. As the example of Katherine shows, challenging conditions such as homelessness can coincide with resources such as social capital from college-going family members. Others like Monica, whom I describe in chapter 2, had no one outside of school to turn to for information or advice when it came to higher education, but they had family members or others who could support them financially. Monica, for example, was able to live with her brother who had a stable, well-paying blue collar job, and she received regular support from the father of her son. Despite these differences, the women in this study faced tremendous challenges as a result of having limited material and cultural resources.

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[3] According to the U.S. Census, in 2009, 21% of poor California youth between the ages of 16 and 26 were in poverty and 53% of California youth in single mother headed homes were in poverty. Moreover, stratification scholars have long argued that mother's educational attainment is strongly linked to children's educational achievement (Sewell and Shah 1968).

Moreover, the resources available to these women were structured in important ways by the larger context of their lives: Riverside, California in the wake of the Great Recession.

Riverside, California and the Great Recession

To understand the mobility pursuits of low-income women, I situate this study in the broader political economic transformation that has taken place over the past forty years and fundamentally altered the American opportunity structure. Crises in the Fordist-Keynesian political economy of mid-century augured the transition to more flexible forms of labor, stagnating wages, and declining welfare provision (Gilmore2007; Jessop 2002). Flows of capital and people altered the landscape of cities and regions as both financial resources and disadvantage concentrated in distinct parts of the urban metropolis. The Los Angeles School of geographers and social scientists has done extensive work explaining the effects of these global processes in and around Los Angeles (Dear 2002), which Edward Soja (1987) describes as a "paradigmatic city" of the post-1960s era. As an urban environment that reflects widespread trends, Riverside and the Inland Empire on the eastern edge of the greater Los Angeles region are effective sites for studying processes that are a part of social life in major cities around the country and across the globe.

The spatial distribution of the consequences of urban restructuring has made the city of Riverside, California and the surrounding area, part of the region referred to as the Inland Empire, an example of many of the changes and challenges generated during this period (Soja 1987, 1996). As Soja and historian Kevin Starr (2004) have documented,

Los Angeles underwent a period of crisis-generated restructuring during which the Riverside area experienced rapid large-scale growth as people sought affordable housing, new opportunities for work, and an escape from the destabilization that followed the deindustrialization of large segments of Los Angeles. Riverside and the other major cities of the region (San Bernardino, Ontario, Corona, Moreno Valley) are "edge" or "outer cities" of the broader Los Angeles region that grew rapidly with the eastward sprawl of relatively cheap housing. Starr (2004:355) describes the motivations underlying the shift from the inner city to the outer cities of the Inland Empire as a desperate flight: "Knowing the dangers of American life, and its ferocious possibilities for downward mobility, people went to suburban, exurban, and edge city neighborhoods in an effort to escape what they feared: the debris-ridden streets of the inner city, its teeming and tumultuous population, its mean streets of violence and crime."

From 1990 to 2009, the population of the Inland Empire doubled (Bardhan and Walker 2011). However, it did not develop the jobs base to support the new population. Discussing the housing-rich-job-poor neighboring city of Moreno Valley, Soja (1996:437) points out that, "Without a large commercial or industrial tax base, public services are poor, schools are overcrowded, freeways are gridlocked, and family life is deeply stressed as residents contend with the psychological and financial costs of living in a new 'edge city'…that is becoming what might be called a new exopolitan slum." Unlike other regions on the Los Angeles periphery such as Orange and Ventura counties, the Inland Empire has come to be characterized by low-wage and precarious work. As a result, cities such as San Bernardino and Moreno Valley, once considered up-and-coming

boomtowns, have developed reputations for gang-related violence and economic stagnation.[4]

The Great Recession of 2007-2009 made an already unequal and challenging environment dramatically worse. In Riverside County, unemployment rose from 6.6 percent in December 2007 to a peak of 14.5 percent in July 2010 (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis 2016).[5] According to Rothwell and Berube (2011), high unemployment is driven in large part by the gap between employer demands for education and educational attainment, and Riverside has one of the highest "education gaps" in the country. Riverside was also a leading region in California for home foreclosures (Bardhan and Walker 2011) and over a quarter of young adults in the Inland Empire aged 25-29 were living at home with their parents (Qian 2012). During the recession, poverty increased by 3.6 percent across the Inland Empire and by up to 5 percent in some cities and suburbs, some of the highest poverty increases nationwide (Kneebone 2010). In the years following the recession, the Riverside area continued to struggle. An article in *The Atlantic* in 2012 explained that Riverside was "still in an economic free fall," even as other major cities and regions showed signs of recovery (Thompson 2012). As wages

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[4] According to Starr (2004:354), "The suburbanization of San Bernardino County had in two decades left the city of San Bernardino reeling on the ropes. In 1976 this foothill community had been ranked as one of the top ten All-American Cities in the nation. By the mid-1990s, some 40 percent of its 185,000 residents were on welfare. San Bernardino had become a classic example of an abandoned inner city and, ironically, a magnet for welfare recipients from the Los Angeles area, from which so many residents of San Bernardino County were fleeing." As a result, various groups and media outlets described it as a bad place to raise kids and dangerous for the general population.

[5] Nationally, unemployment in December 2007 was 5 percent and reached a peak of 9.9 percent in December 2009 (Economic Policy Institute 2016).

rose across the country, they continued to fall in Riverside three years post-recession while unemployment remained above 12 percent.

In the context of urban transformation and severe economic crisis that characterizes the region, the meaning of higher education in the lives of poor and working-class young adult women is sure to be in high relief. A college degree is a promise of opportunity in an opportunity desert. Moreover, there is a diverse local higher education system to use and think with. The Riverside-San Bernardino metropolitan area has two of California's public university campuses: the University of California, Riverside and the California State University, San Bernardino. In addition, the Riverside Community College District has 3 colleges that serve the Riverside area while San Bernardino has two community colleges. There are also many private, not-for-profit institutions, such as California Baptist University, La Sierra University, and the University of La Verne. There are, finally, a wide range of private proprietary colleges and universities. As a whole, the women I interviewed had experience with all of these colleges and universities as they pursued opportunity and adulthood.

For poor and working-class young adult women in Riverside, California following the Great Recession, pursuing mobility, adulthood, and a place in the schooled society is fraught with challenges and major consequences when they fall short. Unemployment and deepening poverty are risks that the women recognize and the data support. Desperation, depression, and an elusive sense of dignity for themselves and others are just as dangerous and feature just as prominently in their stories as more material concerns. Inequality in higher education is about more than differences in

employment and earnings. It is about who people become in a society that still reserves a place for the educated person regardless of their status in the marketplace.

Chapter 1 – Beyond "Warming Up" and "Cooling Out": The Effects of Community College on a Diverse Group of Disadvantaged Young Women

INTRODUCTION

The schooling environment is often hostile to the success of non-dominant students. Collective narratives of appropriate development and beliefs about good and bad student qualities serve to marginalize their experiences and categorize them as incapable, non-intellectual, and generally unsuited for higher education. Many poor and minority students develop learner identities and aspirations while embedded in school contexts where learning is associated with busywork, students are described in deficit terms, and low expectations are widespread (Foley 1990; Oseguera, Conchas, and Mosqueda 2011; Rubin 2007). In these settings, academic success is largely predicated on facility with cultural interactions shaped by race, class, and gender in ways that disadvantage poor and minority students (Bourdieu 1977; Heath 1982; Khan 2010; Lee 1995; Mullen 2010). By comparison, when students are deeply embedded in academic contexts that scaffold and support their experiences and ambitions schooling can be transformative in a positive sense by expanding students' capabilities, raising their aspirations, and shifting the conceptions they have of themselves and others (Armstrong and Hamilton 2012; Conchas 2001; Mehan 2012). Research on both secondary and four-year college and university students has shown the many similar ways that these institutions impact both positively and negatively the lives of disadvantaged students. To what extent, if at all, do community colleges differ from these two tiers of American education?

Research has shown that community colleges are, in many respects, unlike either secondary or four-year institutions. Community colleges are ambiguously located between them as a consequence of the institution's various roles as "a doorway to educational opportunity, a vendor of vocational training, a protector of university selectivity, and a defender of state higher education budgets" (Dougherty 1994, 8). How do students respond to this ambiguous and contradictory institution? This chapter examines how 23 low-income women attending community college developed educational and occupational trajectories and identities over a three-and-a-half year period. Scholars have largely focused on the extent to which community college students divert their aspirations from transfer to four-year institutions or unrealistically elevate them beyond vocational programs and degrees. In contrast to the binary framework of student transformation employed in much of the scholarly research on community colleges, the results of this study suggest four possible paradigms of student experience developed in the broader education literature that are well-suited for studying community college students' experiences. I refer to these models as 1) competing pathways, 2) institutional agents, 3) status competition, and 4) figured worlds. At the same time, I go beyond applying pre-established frameworks by focusing on the narratives that students generate to explain their experiences and formulate pathways through college. I argue that how disadvantaged students' experiences in community college align with these models is contingent upon the narratives that they form prior to and outside of community college. This is due to the fact that disadvantaged students are more loosely embedded in the community college environment compared to their four-year college and

university peers. Rather than providing the strong cultural frameworks for self-making that many four-year institutions provide, community colleges act as key sites for the intersection of narratives developed in other aspects of students' lives such as work, family, and community.

By drawing on these four paradigms of student experience, scholars can connect more directly to the large body of education literature to understand the effects of community colleges. Moreover, through attention to students' narratives and their lives outside of school research can sketch out the boundaries of community colleges' influence given their central role as institutions of social mobility and the high expectations that scholars and policymakers hold for them. The following section first considers the relationship between community colleges and the other tiers of American education before briefly outlining the dominant framework for understanding the experiences of community college students. Next, I propose an alternative framework that draws on concepts employed in the broader field of sociology of education. I then discuss the role of narrative in explaining variation in student experience. After, I present the data and methods, followed by a discussion of four representative cases. The chapter concludes with an emphasis on reevaluating the role that community colleges can be expected to play in the lives of disadvantaged students.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND THEORY

Community colleges have grown tremendously over the past half-century; while four-year college and university enrollments have doubled since the mid-1960s,

community college enrollments have expanded at twice that rate (Deil-Amen 2011). At the end of the twentieth-century, approximately half of the students in public colleges and universities were enrolled in community colleges (Roksa et al. 2007). This growth has been characterized by the over-representation of poor and minority students in community colleges, which tend to reflect the socioeconomic and racial makeup of the communities they serve creating segregated schools that mirror neighborhood segregation (Goldrick-Rab and Kinsley 2013). As a result, studying community colleges provides a critical entry point into the study of ongoing segregation and inequality in American communities.

Since Clark (1960) argued that community colleges "cool out" student ambitions, diverting them away from transfer to four-year institutions, the debate over the role of the community college has swirled around the cooling-out function (Brint and Karabel 1989; Dougherty 1994; Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum 2002; Alexander, Bozick, and Entwisle 2008). For the most part, scholars have clung to a narrative that community colleges either divert the dreams of ambitious working-class young adults motivated by the democratic promise and economic necessity of postsecondary education (Brint and Karabel 1989) or else "students are promised college for very little effort" (Rosenbaum 1998, 56) so that their ambitions warm up, at least temporarily, which only delays recognition of a more suitable pathway (Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum 2002). Focusing on the production of skills and labor market returns to community college attendance, sociologists have largely ignored how college students' experience, move through, and ultimately use this large and complex system (Bahr 2011).

If scholars are concerned with the democratic consequences of community college and hope to understand the effects of community colleges on students' lives, they must examine the way that community colleges are incorporated into students' understandings of who they are as well as where they are headed and how they get there. This means moving beyond the binary framework of warming up and cooling out, which developed as a result of community colleges' ambiguous institutional location between secondary schools and four-year colleges and universities. As this study developed, I saw that students did not conform neatly to either warming up or cooling out. While many students' aspirations changed, the reasons were often more complex than previous community college research would expect. Moreover, warming up and cooling out did not explain the experiences of students whose aspirations remained stable while their self-understandings and worldviews changed during their time in community college. Drawing on research across the secondary and postsecondary literatures, I identified four alternative ways that scholars have understood the experiences of students that can be applied more specifically to community college students. These are the competing pathways, institutional agent, status competition, and figured worlds approaches. Each casts a different light on student experiences, and by incorporating these concepts into the study of community colleges this chapter generates an important link with the much larger secondary and postsecondary research agendas.

First, the **competing pathways** approach argues that schools provide one cultural model of attainment among a range of competing images of success and available opportunities for disadvantaged students such as professional athletics, gangs, or family

businesses (Armstrong and Hamilton 2012; Collins 2009; Harding 2011; Lee 1994; Lew 2010; MacLeod 1995; Mehan 2012; Ogbu 1987; Willis 1977). In contexts where students must navigate multiple legitimate models of attainment, community colleges may have limited sway over students' ambitions and sense of self. Second, the **institutional agent** approach, argues that individuals who occupy high status positions can transmit or facilitate the transmission of resources to students such as distinct discourses, academic support, advice or guidance, and role modeling (Collins 2009; Stanton-Salazar 2011). In this case, individual actors may have a decisive influence over students' aspirations and the development of an academic and occupational identity, even in contexts where students are generally marginalized. Third, the **status competition** approach argues that students pursue postsecondary credentials in response to power imbalances between social groups and for access to particular occupations (Collins 1979; Khan 2010; Schleef 2000). Students engaged in status-seeking through higher education may believe that they do not need to go to college in order to technically do the kind of work they are pursuing or to become a more capable person. Nevertheless, they recognize the necessity of attaining a degree for access to particular jobs and membership in specific groups. Finally, the **figured world** approach argues that colleges are sites where new self-conceptions and ways of acting can emerge and take hold through links between broadly shared discourses and personal experiences (Binder and Wood 2013; Cech, Rubineau, Silbey, and Seron 2011; Kaufman and Feldman 2004; Rose 2012; Urrietta 2007). The particular way in which students are embedded in schooling environments is critical for explaining the transformative effects of schools. Organizational features such as class

sizes, housing arrangements, campus traditions, and support programs structure the interaction between widespread cultural forms, shared understandings about particular schools, and personal beliefs about students' present and future lives. For disadvantaged students, academic contexts that incorporate student experiences, community problems, and the collective histories of marginalized groups can affect how students understand themselves and others. These four categories represent ideal-typical pathways through the intersecting terrain of institutional narratives of educational and occupational attainment and individual biographies. In order to make sense of this intersection, however, it is necessary to understand how the community college functions as a meeting point, or hub, for different stories.

Narratives, Narrative Frameworks, and Narrative Hubs

An enduring aim of public education has been the provision of a common cultural heritage. In addition to this cultural heritage, schools provide narratives, in part, through their organization and the correlations between the degrees they offer and the occupations and lifestyles degree holders have. In this way, students with distinct biographies can partake in historical narratives of advancement and democratic citizenship (Brint and Karabel 1989). At the same time, particular pathways promote expectations about the people they are meant to serve, which can be understood in narrative terms as the plots, characters, and key events of a given trajectory (Armstrong and Hamilton 2012; Somers 1994). In particular, sociologists of education have focused on the way that schools have promoted the achievement ideology—the belief that if students work hard they will get

ahead and are to blame for their own failure (MacLeod 1995; Mehan 1992; Turner 1960)—and shown how schools have managed to alter marginalized students personal narratives to fit within dominant, oppressive ones. In cases where students develop counter-narratives to discourses that erase their experiences and the experiences of others like them, gatekeepers such as teachers have the power to silence them through the "terms of their inclusion" in mainstream settings (Collins 2009, 4), or else students may develop alternative frameworks of success and cultural belonging (Carter 2006; Delpit 1988; Lee 1994; Ogbu 1987; Willis 1977). However, schools can also provide the institutionalized pathways for students to imagine alternative futures and identities. Marginalized students can and do hold multiple, often competing, narratives about themselves and their future opportunities, what O'Connor (1999) refers to as co-narratives. Often, particular individuals, classes, or programs support co-narration. As a consequence, disempowered learners "must find a way…to synthesize the best of what the school teaches and what they know from their life experiences" within institutions that did not have them in mind when they were formed (Collins 2009: 10).

How do narratives of educational and occupational trajectories interact with narratives that take other institutional realms such as the family or the community as their focus? I argue that community colleges operate as hubs for student narrative frameworks.[1] This emphasizes both the narrative material that students bring and the

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[1] Available cultural forms within college and university settings are partly a consequence of the intersection of a range of social institutions such as the family, the broader economy, labor markets, and so on. Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum (2008) refer to this as the "hub" function of postsecondary institutions, since they have historically brought together elite interests in the organization of resources. Here, I shift the focus to the students and what the cultural material they bring. Additionally, Small (2002) suggests that narratives—

variable ways that this material is linked and understood through the schools and the narratives that they provide. At the same time, it recognizes the priority of schooling in the lives of many students and their families. The expansion of higher education systems and the rising wage premiums to postsecondary credentials since the 1980s have made the belief in the necessity of a college education commonplace (Goldin and Katz 2008; Grubb and Lazerson 2005). For many students, the alternative to community college is the low-wage workforce, which provides few opportunities for imagining a future, or welfare programs that place constraints on recipients' abilities to imagine anything beyond entry into the low-wage workforce.

Narratives are central to identities and trajectories. Personal biographies are linked to collective stories, and their extension in time facilitates sense making about the past and imaging the future. In this way, narratives carry students' lives from outside the school through higher education to the future of work, family, and democratic citizenry. By taking narratives as a key component of how community colleges affect poor and minority students, researchers are better able to account for students' lives both outside and within the community college. The specific form that students' experience take—competing pathways, institutional agents, status competition, or figured worlds—is determined by the way community colleges function as narrative hubs. To understand how student experiences vary in community college, I ask how community college students narrate their trajectories through school. How do community college students

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the ongoing and complex plots that individuals use to interpret their lives and take action—are shaped by narrower frames that provide cultural categories that filter particular contexts.

incorporate collective narratives into personal biography? And how does this process of incorporation lead to distinct experiences in community college?

DATA AND METHODS

Data for this study consists of four waves of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 23 poor and working-class young adult women in a large metropolitan area of Southern California for a total of 92 interviews (Solórzano, Datnow, Park, and Watford 2013).[2] Participation in the study was based on eligibility for income-based support to attend community college in California. Support for low-income students included CalWORKS, a program to support welfare recipients attending school, and a state-sponsored fee waiver from the California Community Colleges Board of Governors, commonly referred to as the BOG waiver. Of the 23 women in the study, 13 had one or more children and three reported being married in September, 2010. The women represented a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds: nine Latinas (39%), seven black women (30%), three white women (13%), two Asian-American women (9%), and two women who identified as multiracial (9%). They averaged 23 years of age at the first interview and 25 years of age at the fourth interview. The ages of the women ranged from 18 to 29 years old at the start of the study and 22 to 31 years old at the last interview. At the outset of the study, 18 of the 23 women (78%) said they planned to transfer to a four-

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[2] This research is an outgrowth of a larger study on community colleges and the sense- and decision-making of poor and minority youth. The project, *Pathways to Postsecondary Success*, was a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation-funded project conducted by a research team under the direction of UC/ACCORD. It consisted of quantitative analyses of various nationally-representative data sets, a statewide survey of California youth between the ages of eighteen and twenty-six years old, and three case studies of poor and minority youth in three Southern California cities. For more, see http://pathways.gseis.ucla.edu/

year university and by the final interview, all but two of the women (91%) reported that they would ideally like to earn a bachelor's degree or more. However, only seven (30%) had transferred to a four-year university by the fourth interview.

The women were initially recruited from three community colleges that were part of the Southeastern Metro Community College (SMCC) district. Together, the three colleges are part of the largest community college system in the nation, which consists of 112 colleges. The student population of the district is approximately 40% Latina/o, 30% white, 11% African American, and 5% Asian American. The completion rate for the 2005-2008 cohort—the percentage of students who attained a certificate or degree or became "transfer prepared" during the three-year period—was 21.93 % and the transfer rate for the 2002-2003 cohort showed that 28% of first-time students showing intent to complete subsequently transferred to a four-year university within six years. Among the SMCC student body, Latino and African American students are underrepresented in the population of transfers to four-year institutions.

The interviews were conducted over a three-and-a-half year period from September, 2010 to March, 2014. Each interview was conducted in person by one of four researchers, and the author conducted 56 interviews in total. Interviews lasted from one-and-a-half to three-and-a-half hours and took place in a location chosen by the respondent. The researchers inquired about their life history, social networks, and school experiences along with their perceptions of opportunity, sense of barriers and oppression, and hopes for the future. They were particularly interested in understanding how students had come to enroll at the community college and their educational and occupational

trajectories. By asking for specific examples, interviews can access narrative reasoning (i.e., the meanings behind the frameworks they describe and the actions they frame) (Pugh 2013), and the longitudinal nature of the study allowed us to examine how narratives developed and the extent to which action and narrative were linked. Multiple interviews allowed for reflexivity and revision, but also indicated how identities can resist instability and insecurity.

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. I focused on identifying the use of stories to describe particular episodes or critical junctures. These were the personal stories that students used to elaborate their understanding of particular moments within a longer story arc. I also looked for broad narrative patterns in students' trajectories and identity formation over time, such as a deepening attachment to an educational identity. Finally, I identified collective narratives that the women drew upon to make sense of themselves and their trajectories, such as narratives about the role of postsecondary credentials in socioeconomic mobility. In subsequent analysis, I looked for the intersections of personal and collective narratives as well as the intersection of school and non-school narratives. I considered these intersections in relation to their attachments to community college, or the extent to which they were embedded in the community college environment; educational and occupational trajectories; and aspects of identity that were separate from concerns about occupational attainment. Throughout the discussion of findings I refer to narrative frameworks and narrative hubs to refer to the way students tell life stories within the narrower context of schooling and the way that stories from different areas of students' lives intersect in the context of the college.

FINDINGS

I turn now to the stories that students bring with them, how they intersect with their experience in community college, and their combined effects on the way they talk about their future and their selves. Out of the 23 women I interviewed, I analyze four women's stories in order to examine in greater detail their experiences over time and show how they fit within the expanded framework I have presented. Each case was selected for analysis because it exemplifies the experience of competing pathways, institutional agents, status competition, or figured worlds. At the same time, each of the women discussed below shares experiences with other women in the study. The four women—June, Monica, Rachel, and Nancy—were also similar in several ways. First, each said that they were academically capable of attending a four-year institution at the end of high school. Moreover, each progressed academically throughout the study, with three of the four women eventually transferring to local universities. All four women arrived at the community college with relatively clear academic and occupational goals in mind: two had plans to transfer and two were aiming for associate's degrees. Also, each woman initially described weak attachments to SMCC, which meant limited involvement in the life of the school, few peer relationships, and limited interaction with institutional actors. Overall, they held largely instrumental attitudes toward community college. Finally, they were close in age, the youngest being 19 years old at the start and the oldest being 25 years old. One important difference, however, is that two of the women were single parents. While parenthood has been shown to strongly affect the worldviews of

working-class women (Silva 2013), here it serves to emphasize the importance of non-school aspects of the students' lives.

Competing Pathways

College is often only one cultural model of attainment that students have available to them. For several of the students in this study, already weak ties to SMCC became weaker or were severed entirely over time as narrative frameworks developed. One reason is that these students did not form narratives that linked educational and occupational trajectories or they developed competing narratives to ones that emphasize degree attainment, which made leaving SMCC a plausible option. One student with multiple, conflicting narrative frameworks was June, a Korean-American woman who was 19 years old at the start of the study. She explained her attendance at SMCC as a consequence of several missteps on the way to enrolling at a nearby California State University after high school. In the process, she reflected on the relative status of the community college saying, "To me, UC is top notch. Cal State is eh, ok. SMCC is like bad, bad, bad…So I was like, 'ok, I'm going here but I'm smart…I'm not like these people.'" Knowing she was qualified to attend a four-year university, June worked hard to craft a coherent narrative about her educational trajectory. Over time, she "met other people that were really educated" but couldn't afford to attend a four-year university. These examples helped her reframe community college as an alternative pathway for smart but disadvantaged students. Eventually, she developed a fragile understanding of her unsuccessful transition to a four-year university and subsequent attendance at SMCC.

During the second interview, she explained that by enrolling at the community college she could save both time and money while pursuing a nursing degree. Nevertheless, she often felt like school was "such a waste of time."

June's educational trajectory was made more tenuous by her ambivalence about her career goals and the role of credentials in the labor market. The idea to become a nurse stemmed from the example of her sister who was pursuing a nursing degree at a local for-profit school and reinforced by the experience of her father's kidney transplant. Yet, nursing was a recent goal, and prior to choosing it as a possible career she hadn't planned on having a job. She explained, "I think for the longest time when I was younger I wanted to be a house mom because I saw my mom as a house mom, and watching Korean dramas all the wives are house moms. So I'm like, ok, I want to be a house mom."[3] By the third interview, she was still pursuing nursing at the community college, but was learning more about nursing from her sister who had started working as a nursing assistant. Her sister described the patients as "rude" and detailed the hard work of patient care to which June responded, "I'm not patient like that. I'll slap her [the patient] in the face if she bugs me (laughing)… and I don't even like touching my own poop; how would I be able to touch someone else's?" She explained that she was "really scared" then added, "I can do it because I like helping old people. I love my grandparents so if I'm put in the position I'll be able to do it." Although she relied on a repertoire of helping

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[3] In her work on the mobility stories of Korean women, Abelmann (2003) draws on the concept of melodrama to explain how the women made sense of their lives. This use of melodrama as an explanatory device emerged from the women's constant reference to Korean television dramas. By drawing on this narrative form, June's experience points to the intersection of narrative forms across and within social systems.

others through the lower rungs of the healthcare industry to explain her motivation, her expressed desire to help others appeared largely as the presentation of an honorable self.

Central to her decision to pursue nursing was her understanding of the broader economy and the specific labor markets for occupations. During the first interview she said her favorite class was sociology where she learned about the precariousness of low-status work. This knowledge helped frame popular and personal narratives that suggest the value of a college degree is declining. Popular narratives included teachers being unable to get jobs and Harvard graduates becoming "bums." Personal narratives included a story of a co-worker's daughter who was long-term unemployed after a two-year vocational program. By contrast, nurses were "guaranteed" jobs right out of nursing programs. She concluded, "If I want to do something else, I won't get a job. So I'm just stick with nursing." The fear of nursing as a difficult job outweighed the fear of doing something else. In addition, June believed that nursing would allow her to "make a lot of money, go travel everywhere" and work part time. By narratively framing nursing as a "good job" that would allow her to work as little as possible and still provide her with the future life she imagines for herself, she was able to persist for over a year despite her general dislike of school and distaste for the perceived hardships of the job. In this way she is like other students who pursued nursing based on expectations about future work opportunities garnered from widely available beliefs about the profession, although she was often ambivalent about her choice and open to alternative narratives of mobility.

June often turned to the example of her immigrant parents who she described as successful entrepreneurs—her dad in landscaping and real estate, her mom selling

Amway cosmetic products. Detailing their rise from poor immigrants to self-employed business people, June drew on their stories to valorize trajectories outside of college. She described her mother's immigration story to the United States from Korea as a young adult who "didn't graduate any college or anything" but who nevertheless succeeded. Moreover, she was "learning biology and chemistry" as she learned about beauty products suggesting that people who left school did not have to give up learning more academic bodies of knowledge. Through her mother's example and encouragement, June considered the Amway business, saying, "I want a job like that, and a nursing job isn't like that…I could become really big and people will be working under me and then I'll just be staying home and just making money, which is what I want to do." As Lew (2010) found in a study of poor Korean-American youths, ethnic networks can affect youths in contradictory ways in terms of their schooling and career choices. While June's parents encouraged her to go to college and complete a college degree, her mother also encouraged her explicitly and implicitly to follow a more entrepreneurial path.

June noted that her mom had "been reading a lot of those books and speeches from Obama, people who started low who built their way up top." She added that her mother "always brags about how Oprah started out in the ghettos and then raised up to the top. She tells me, 'oh you could be like that too just if you try.'" Using Steve Jobs as an example, June affirmed that it was possible to forego college and still be successful while also resenting the degree requirements for jobs that were still out of reach. She complained that reliance on social networks in the hiring process meant that qualified applicants without ties are overlooked. She asked, "So why study? Why go through all

that money to study and apply for jobs when people who have friends in the corporation already have the upper hand to get hired?" These narratives reinforced her understanding of how education intersects with the labor market to diminish the value of a college education.

These anxieties over the labor market, the value of college degrees, and upper-middle-class status attainment are similar to the anxieties that motivate middle-class students to pursue professional degrees. However, for disadvantaged students heterogeneous and conflicting narrative frameworks mean that professional degree attainment is not necessarily viewed as the most appropriate or inevitable trajectory. By the fourth interview, June had left the community college to work with her mother as an Amway representative. The stories, people, and information that she used to construct a narrative framework came from outside of the community college. Already-weak attachments to school and the community college were completely undone by the intersection of popular and personal narratives that offered competing pathways.

Institutional Agent

Student trajectories may be shaped in important ways by institutional actors who share resources with students. For some of the women in this study, tenuous ties to the community college were balanced by the recognition that a college education is an unavoidable piece of their imagined future. However, there was a consistent uncertainty about how much and what kind of education was required or even desirable. In these

cases, the presence of institutional agents that provided new frameworks of attainment was central to their transformation as a result of attending community college.

One example is Monica, a Latina single mother in her early-20s pursuing a career in criminal justice. Monica believed that college was an essential step toward a particular career path and quality of life, and over time her ideas about education and career were transformed by the community college. Beginning in high school, she decided she wanted to work in criminal justice. Specifically, she wanted to become a probation officer after being sent to a military high school for a short time. She explained her early career choice as a consequence of television images of law enforcement as well as the example set by a woman in a role similar to that of a probation officer at the military academy saying, "seeing everything she did, how she interacted with the kids…once I met her, I decided I wanted to be a probation officer." Her difficulties in high school were compounded when she got pregnant and gave birth at seventeen.

Together, these challenges did not prevent her from graduating with her class but they did interrupt her plans to enroll in a four-year university, much as June's trajectory was redirected toward the community college. She said, "I hate going to SMCC. It's so depressing, like ahh! I go to a community college." Upon graduating, Monica's goal was to get an associate's degree in a field that would prepare her for some kind of criminal justice related job. Although she originally wanted to be a probation officer, by the second interview she had begun to consider alternatives. Here, she explains her thought process and the role of an influential professor:

Monica   Well before I wanted to do clerical stuff, right. I was okay
           with something like an associates, just helping out with the

	probation officer, something clerical but simple, like you didn't need much, and now it is like I still want to do paperwork stuff, but more into that, so maybe like writing the DA's reports…well after the police officers turn in their police reports…someone else goes through them and corrects them, files them, and gives them to the county, and stuff like that, and so it's still paperwork, but…obviously higher education is required.
Interviewer	How do you know that, about correcting police reports?
Monica	Because in my administration of justice class my professor…was the chief of police for like 20-something years…and then he was a police officer for Southeastern Metro Police Department for I don't know how many years, and he was like lieutenant I don't know what, was all these whatever crap, and I would ask him random stuff, like what do you do with the guns you find, and the drugs you find, and…I'd just be watching Law and Order…and I would just e-mail him.

She shows how her personal story intersects with the story of a professor and popular narratives in the media, which open the way for her to raise her aspirations. Later, she described how becoming a probation officer was also less ideal now that she had been in school for over a year, particularly in light of the fact that she didn't have any debt from attending community college. Reflecting on her changing ambitions she said, "I find this really weird, but the more I study, the more I want. Like before I just wanted, you know, just an associates, just a probation officer, and now I am looking at the job description, at the salary, at what it is, and it's like, why would I settle for this when I can do this?" When Monica later explained how her view of her future had changed since starting college, she referred to her changing ideas about working in the field of criminal justice. This time, however, she described what she imagined her life as a probation officer would look like, including details about the hours and interactions with parolees. Moreover, she combined these details with a story about a local police department that

she learned had reduced the number of probation officers to deal with budget cuts; all of which came from her criminal justice teacher.

Key to this transformation is the filling out of an imagined future with details about the job. The narrative of becoming a probation officer becomes less desirable as she imagines being on call, tracking down parolees, managing expanding caseloads, and being exposed to the negative effects of budget cuts. By the third interview, Monica had taken several classes with the same administration of justice teacher, had been accepted to a local state university, and was starting to imagine not just a bachelor's degree but even a doctorate in criminal justice. This imagined future took shape in relation to her experience with this particular teacher who told exciting stories of his own experience as a police chief and combined a display of intelligence with the appearance of understanding students on a personal level. As she explained, "he reads you, he looks at you and he can tell you your whole life story," remarking that "he didn't even go to law school but he's just so education smart. I just admired him so much and then I was like, I want to do that."

The importance of this example of educational and occupational success is underscored by the lack of other models in her day-to-day life and the absence of support for her goals. For instance, the trajectory that she imagines through the stories and example of her teacher contrast sharply with the expectations of her family. After looking unsuccessfully for a job, her parents mocked her aspirations. She recalled, "I know that if I go in and apply at McDonalds or Del Taco, or something like that…they'd probably hire me when they start hiring 'cause they hire everybody. But I don't want to do it,

and…my mom and my dad are like, 'oh, well, what do you want to do? You want to work for President Obama?'" She described her parents as "talking so much shit" and their seeming inability or unwillingness to adopt her narrative of future success contrasts sharply with her teacher's perceptive reading of her "like a book." When strong attachments are forged with particular institutional actors, it is largely because students' stories are incorporated into interactions that are otherwise highly routinized, short, and impersonal.

Rather than take a low-wage service job, Monica preferred to do something that would start her toward developing the disposition required to work in criminal justice. Although she was starting to consider extending her education beyond a bachelor's degree and began to express interests that drew more on the liberal arts aspects of college than the occupational, she also pointed to the limits of education in helping her achieve her career goals. After recounting a story about an acquaintance who works as a parole officer, she concluded that "education's not everything…I mean, I know it must be something big, but at the same time I know that experience being around, and especially that type of environment, you could have the highest degree possible, but it's not the same as if you've been around something like that." Believing that a college degree, even a doctorate, is "just to get your foot in the door," Monica considered a volunteer opportunity with a rape crisis hotline she learned about at a local coffee shop. In her mind, surrounding herself "with a lot of those pessimistic stories" would help her "later in the future to relate to it." Unlike June, however, Monica did not abandon the college narrative.

The community college and, in particular, her criminal justice courses served as a narrative hub where she brought together aspirations and experiences with family, work, and school. Over time, new people and new episodes transform a narrative that runs from a military high school to an eventual doctorate. The early experience with a probation officer and an interest in crime dramas established a trajectory from which Monica was able to develop an occupational and educational identity. Most importantly, the presence of an institutional agent during her time in community college was a critical resource for Monica that facilitated the narrative framing of her life's course, which included higher levels of education and specific work experiences.

Status Competition

Power imbalances between social groups and stratified access to occupations may lead some students to pursue postsecondary credentials as status signals. The previous two models of student transformation have shown how the community college was an important narrative hub for either deterioration or strengthening attachments to the institution. However, many students experience little change in their trajectories, persisting toward more-or-less defined ends in spite of the ups and downs of college-going. For example, Rachel, a black woman in her early-20s, expressed ambivalence about credentials and skepticism toward the uniqueness of the intellectual environment of colleges and universities. Nevertheless, she earned an associate's degree and transferred to a private university where she was near completion of a bachelor's degree in psychology when we last spoke. Her persistence can be explained by her recognition of

the status that attaches to postsecondary credentials, particularly in a context of widespread negative stereotypes about black women.

Like Monica, Rachel's career goals emerged from an unstable childhood that included periods of homelessness, addiction, and abandonment. And like both Monica and June, community college was plan B for Rachel, framed by the negative attitudes toward community college she formed in high school as a result of popular beliefs about the relative status of the institution. Nevertheless, she was committed to enrolling because she initially believed that it would help her achieve the goal she set for herself at thirteen-years-old to open up a non-profit chain of family outreach centers.

Unlike June, who was pursuing nursing largely for financial reasons and material gain while relying on repertoires about helping others as a way to frame the work as meaningful in itself, Rachel placed helping others at the center of her aspirations: "I don't have to have a huge car…I don't have to have the best job in the world. At the same time I'm not going…to stop at minimum wage doing something with no progress. I'm helping the people above me? No, I need to be helping the people that were me." She believed education would provide her both the skills and the status to help others.

Through her own story of "surviving" a difficult upbringing, she developed an academic and occupational path that she believed would allow her to help other people arrive at "a better understanding of themselves and why they're in the predicament that they're in." Unlike women whose career goals necessitated degree attainment, however, Rachel's aims were less structured around credentials. As she explained,

> Yes the degree looks nice, yes in the real world you have a degree, okay
> we might be able to work with you. I just want to be able to get the

knowledge, learn how do I do this, how do I speak to someone who has been through something different but worse than what I've gone through; how do I deal with a child that's running off of learned behavior that's gonna send them to jail one day if they don't change it; how do I start this non-profit so that I can help these people and convince them, you know not convince them but give them the resources to help themselves. I just want the education so I can retain it and apply it to my life and help others.

She could, conceivably, do the work she imagined without completing a degree. By the second interview, Rachel was considering leaving the community college because she didn't "feel like you have to go to college to be successful." Moreover, she not only believed she would still be able to pursue her goal but that leaving school might free her up to focus more intently on it. Similar to June she acknowledged that, "Not everybody has a degree who opens up anything." She explained the problem with following the college trajectory saying, "I'm so tied up with school in addition to working full time just because I have to support myself some way." It is possible that without the added burden of full-time work, Rachel might have felt less willing to leave school to focus on her career goals. But this does not alter her perception, similar to June's, that school was only one possibility in the overall plot guiding her decision making. In other words, it would be a "different route" to the "same goal." She did not deny that there were specific skills involved in the kind of work that she wanted to do, only that she could acquire them outside the structure of the college.

Yet, Rachel persisted and transferred to a four-year university to complete a degree in psychology. She returned to the framework of helping others saying, "I want to be able to help people who were in my position and were helpless because at one point that was me…I'm using that thought process to push me forward to saying ok let me get

myself to the point where I can help somebody." Importantly, the point where she could help others was also where she could help herself transcend constraints placed on her and other members of marginalized groups. Specifically, Rachel saw college as a way to combat images of black women through her own success:

> When I even look at my own people, my own race of people, sometimes I have to put my head down because to see where we started in Africa and all the accomplishments we made that nobody knows about…And to see where we are today, not an ounce of that history can be seen, not an ounce. And every day when I get up and I strive it's because I want to be who I know I'm supposed to be, not who society dictates. Because if I am to become who society says that I'm supposed to be, then I'm gonna be that low-income Black mother with a bunch of illegitimate children…And so yes, when I wake up in the morning I get up because not only am I gonna be a successful Black woman, I'm gonna be a successful woman, I'm gonna be a successful young woman. So many things going against me, you know what I mean? It's one thing to be a man. It's one thing to be a Black man. It's one thing to be a woman, and then to be a Black woman.

In this reflection on the relationship between her academic trajectory and her accomplishment of a successful black female identity, Rachel draws on historical narratives of black achievement, popular narratives of black female lives, and her personal biography of growing up in poor black neighborhoods. College acts as a narrative hub through which she is able to challenge status hierarchies.

Despite the turn to a discourse that minimized the role and value of a college education, she not only saw the study of psychology as a way to better help others but also believed that getting an education beyond an associate's degree at the community college would allow her "to have a more complex job" that, she says, would put her "in a position to help a little bit more people in a different type of way." Like Monica, she frames education as a source of greater authority and a foot in the door. For Rachel,

however, her experience with postsecondary education did not move her from her original dream of opening a community center for disadvantaged families. Instead, community college served as one step toward the status she would need to achieve her goals.

Figured World

Colleges are often sites where new self-conceptions emerge as new links are forged between collective discourses and personal biographies. Like Rachel, many of the women in this study reported seeking and/or learning skills that they believed would get them a job when they graduated. But some of the students at the community college also referred to less-tangible critical thinking and analysis skills that allowed them to develop a sense of themselves as knowledgeable and intellectually capable adults. Students also emphasized that they had changed their attitudes toward themselves and others, which in turn affected how they approached their education, their career choices, and other aspects of their lives. Nancy, a Chicana mother of two young boys, had enrolled at the University of California, Riverside upon graduation from high school but dropped out after a year because, she says, she felt directionless. She soon got married and had two children, but was separated from her husband a few years later. Living alone with her two boys, she entered community college with a clear academic and career trajectory. She developed her goal of becoming a speech and language pathologist in the course of caring for her severely disabled son who required intensive speech and language services among others. As her son reached school age, she found herself in regular conflict with her son's school

as she agitated for increased attention and support. Through these experiences she says she learned to advocate for herself and others, and saw her career path as one of advocacy on behalf of Spanish speakers in need of speech and language services.

Bringing this narrative of transformation and community uplift with her she came to see herself differently as a result of being in community college. She said, "I'm a strong person, stronger than I give myself credit. I used to be like, how do people do it, and once you get in the habit of doing things, like I call people's bullshit out all the time, I've changed completely…I say it how it is…I've learned that from school." As a low-income single mother of two children, Nancy sought out as much support from the community college as possible. This included enrolling in the Puente Program—a counseling, mentoring, and writing program aimed at increasing the number of transfer students to four-year institutions. Through Puente, she discovered and enrolled in Chicano literature courses. Additionally, she took a work-study job in the college counseling office where she found herself helping other in-need students. Over time she felt a greater sense of herself as an intellectual and independent actor: "I'll call myself an intellectual…I'm a go-getter. I feel like I'm more like a leader than a follower now; before I was more of a follower, just like, ok, go with the flow, and now I'm like, no, I'm doing what I'm gonna do for me, and for my kids, 'cause I want to, not because you're telling me to do it." This attitude is consistent with the highest ideals of democratic societies, which "call for a citizenry that is fully capable of administering its own affairs" and the empowerment of ordinary people (Brint and Karabel 1989: 227). At the level of individual language, performance, and embodiment, Nancy also expressed that she had

been transformed by her experience with community college. This transformation in one's mode of interacting with others often overlapped with their understanding of their occupational trajectory. Drawing on the idea of a professional mode, Nancy said,

> I'm not the same old person I used to be. The way I express myself, the way I write, the way I communicate with others is totally different. I still use cuss words…it's just that's what you're comfortable with…so it's like, whatever. That's never gonna go away, so…bummer…but, I feel like having the education that I have definitely does help put me in a better position because not only am I expressing myself better, but if I were to get hired on to a place, I'm representing that company or whoever I'm working for, so if I didn't have the education I wouldn't know how to deal with problems that come up, and having the education, it makes you really flexible in the way you think.

Here, she draws together learned language patterns, new modes of thinking, and the relationship between learned patterns and one's sense of comfort.

At the same time, Nancy experienced weakening ties to many of the people in her life. She described how she had learned to manage relationships: "So, I'm a whole lot more demanding too, I'm demanding on what type of people I surround myself with. I've cut a whole lot of people out of my life, and people don't understand…I explained it to my sister and my mom, people who I feel are bringing me down have no place in my life because I need people who are gonna motivate me." Through college, the networks that made up past figured worlds began to change. Moreover, Nancy developed an increased awareness of others outside of her personal network and greater tolerance toward difference, what Kaufman and Feldman (2004) refer to as growing cosmopolitanism, as well as changes to within-group beliefs. This meant reflecting on oppression within Mexican-American families and communities as well as developing an historical knowledge of Mexican Americans that she could connect with her personal history. On

the one hand, she had to generate a narrative framework outside of traditional role expectations. When talking about the education of Latina students, she explained,

> It's like, you're staying home, you're having children, taking care of them; that's it. Like, my dad…to this day he still fights me, he tells me, 'why you going to school? Your job is to stay at home and wipe your kids' asses and feed them; that's your job.' He's like, 'stop spreading your legs.' He thinks I'm a slut or something and I'm like, that's not what I'm doing when I go to school, I'm educating myself.

More than just resisting role expectations, attending and completing a degree at community college became an important aspect of managing the expectations of others. Nancy believed that completing an associate's degree at the community college would "feel good" because she would be "proving everybody wrong" and "just shut up all the people who are negative" in her life. At the same time, community college provided her with the intellectual tools to make sense of her own identity as a Chicana and an "advocate" for herself and her community. She said she first learned the meaning of the term Chicano when she enrolled in Puente and her Chicano studies class that taught her "how America subordinated Mexico." This knowledge helped her to make sense of the stories she had about her grandmother in Mexico during the 1930s by connecting world history to her own family history. Through personal and collective history, the symbols of Chicano identity, and experiences of gendered and classed forms of oppression, Nancy entered into the figured world of Chicana/o activism, "identifiable cultural, political, social, and historical landscapes" that provided "access to a more enduring identity, and other persons similar to them that they could relate to" (Urrietta 2007, 124).

By the fourth interview, Nancy had transferred to a local public four-year university and was still committed to her goal of becoming a speech and language

pathologist. Although she had not changed her academic and career trajectories, she experienced widespread changes in attitude, language, behavior, and social networks. These changes began prior to community college and were amplified as her personal biography intersected with narratives of empowerment, attainment, and struggle encountered in programs, classrooms, and on-campus jobs. Over the three-and-a-half years of the study, Nancy entered into a new figured world.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on popular frameworks of typical community college students, many students in this study worked to construct narratives that explained their enrollment in community college as opposed to a four-year institution. On the one hand, some students developed weakened attachments to the college and left. In contrast to the organizationally-focused community college literature, these women were not cooled out (Clark 1960) but rather were narrating alternative pathways due to a multiplicity of competing pathways, or cultural models of success. On the other hand, some of the 23 women in this study experienced a transformation in their trajectories, expanding their educational and occupational aspirations. This was a consequence of interactions with particular institutional agents who provided narrative frameworks for them to imagine futures other than what they entered with. Other students maintained weak attachments to the college while persisting. Though their trajectories through school did not change, they either questioned the value of a college education and postsecondary credentials or else they did not draw on the college as a source of identity and direction. Nevertheless,

concerns about status motivated them toward completion. Finally, some students entered entire new figured worlds that allowed them to reconstruct personal biographies in light of collective narratives of achievement encountered in support programs and classes. These students relied on personal and collective narratives that stemmed from outside of the community college, but over time the community college became more central to their identities. The four women highlighted above exemplify these experiences shared by other women interviewed for this study.

There are, of course, many overlaps and alternative experiences that these categories do not easily account for. Some of the women in this study reported that they had developed new skills, ways of thinking and communicating, and different conceptions of themselves as competent adults. For the most part, they did not attribute these changes to particular organizational arrangements or individual encounters with institutional agents. Instead, these changes appeared to happen as a result of attending college and being challenged in classes. Often, just their personal narrative of college-going served as a counter-narrative to collective narratives about social groups to which they belonged or the expectations of other people in their lives such as family or friends. However, this only reinforces the main argument of this chapter that sociologists studying community colleges can benefit from adopting and developing alternative frameworks to warming up and cooling out, which have dominated the field. By drawing on four approaches that are widely used in secondary and postsecondary research, and employing the concept of narrative to navigate these approaches, this chapter will hopefully provide a model for moving community college research from its ambiguous

location between the secondary and four-year institution literatures. It will also help us recognize the limits to what community colleges are able to do. The concepts of warming up and cooling out assume a great deal of responsibility for an institution that serves approximately half of American college students, most of whom plan to transfer and earn a bachelor's degree. Yet as this chapter has shown, students' are often loosely attached to community colleges to begin with, and their trajectories and identities are drawn from many sources. Moreover, the effects on students should be understood outside of simple income metrics.

As this chapter shows, for each of the students the college functioned as a narrative hub. Due to the centrality of higher education to the lives of so many American students and their families, future trajectories and individual identities were narrated in relation to higher education and the community college. The community college served as an institutional site to weave together narrative frameworks related to family, friends, work, education, and community. Unlike four-year colleges and universities, community college did not present the women with dominant repertoires that they felt they needed to adopt nor did it marginalize women whose narratives included aspects of their lives outside of school.

Given the importance of non-school factors in identity and trajectory transformations, the community college should move more visibly into the communities that they serve. This is in addition to the efforts to channel graduates into the local labor force or encourage high school students to continue their education. Community colleges should expand their presence in religious settings, workplaces, drug and alcohol recovery

centers, shopping malls, and anywhere else that community colleges can foster attachments between them and students. As state support for public higher education has declined, community college leaders and policymakers have shifted attention from expanding access to increasing timely completion (Moore and Shulock 2011). Research will need a more complex picture of community college experiences if it is to contribute to this effort.

Chapter 1, in full, is a reprint of the material as it appears in *Inequality, Power, and School Success: Case Studies on Racial Disparity and Opportunity in Education*, edited by Gilberto Conchas and Michael Gottfried, Routledge, 2015.

Chapter 2 – "Fake It 'Til You Make It": Why Community College Students' Aspirations "Hold Steady"

ABSTRACT

Sociologists of education have explored the relationship between students' postsecondary aspirations and their propensity to get "cooled out" in community colleges. However, researchers have directed little attention to students whose aspirations remain stable over long periods of time, or to the different roles that college degree goals play in the lives of disadvantaged students. Using four waves of longitudinal interviews, I examine the reasons why low-income women hold steady to their aspirations for college degrees over a three-and-a-half-year period. I argue that holding steady not only reflects rational expectations about future employment opportunities, but it also generates moral status in the face of marginalization and facilitates the navigation of personal relationships. I use the concept of an "ambition imperative" to demonstrate how aspirations for college attainment are a means of asserting moral status and pursuing virtuous social membership. This article contributes to theories of aspirations and offers an alternative explanation of the institutional effects of community colleges in the lives of students.

INTRODUCTION

Large numbers of community college students aspire to bachelor's degrees, but relatively few attain them (Anderson 1981; Brand, Pfeffer, and Goldrick-Rab 2014; Goldrick-Rab 2010; Kane and Rouse 1999; Rouse 1995). To explain this discrepancy

between aspirations and outcomes, scholars have drawn together, in varying degrees, four factors affecting student experiences: (1) broad cultural frameworks of educational attainment, (2) political-economic structures, (3) institutional arrangements, and (4) interactions between marginalized students and institutional actors (Clark 1960; Dougherty 1994; Karabel 1972; Pascarella, Wolniak, and Pierson 2003). Clark (1960) initiated this approach when he proposed that community colleges help resolve a key contradiction between cultural support for widespread postsecondary aspirations and the structural limits on labor market opportunities for bachelor's degree holders. They do this by "cooling out," or softly denying, the aspirations of poorly prepared and marginalized students. Over time, these students voluntarily withdraw from the competition for bachelor's degrees. However, Clark based his analysis of cooling out on social scientific assumptions about student responses to institutional pressures, rather than empirical data that showed changes in aspirations. As subsequent scholars followed this approach, they relied on similar assumptions. Only recently have scholars begun to track student aspirations empirically.

We now have a large body of research showing that college aspirations are far more widespread today than they were at mid-century (Reynolds et al. 2006; Schneider and Stevenson 1999) and that cooling out is a significant social phenomenon. But while some students do lower their aspirations after enrolling in community college, it is much more common for students' aspirations to "hold steady" over long periods of time. Even as they make little headway toward degree completion, students maintain a belief that they will finish their education (Alexander, Bozick, and Entwisle 2008; Rosenbaum,

Deil-Amen, and Person 2006). Why and how does this happen? What are the social bases of community college-going that shape one's decision to hold steady?

To investigate the phenomenon of persistent aspirations in contexts of slow or impeded progress, I examine community college students' motivations to hold steady and the cultural frameworks they use to maintain their aspirations. I base this analysis on four waves of semi-structured interviews with 23 low-income female community college students. I argue that the women in this study use two dominant narratives to explain their persistent college aspirations, which I call *pragmatic job-seeking* and *moral self-improvement*. My data reveal that the vast majority of respondents hold steady as a result of structural barriers to middle-class jobs. Faced with the prospect of low-wage work and insecure employment, these women draw on a narrative that links degree attainment with good jobs, which serves as a solution to problems such as forming families in conditions of hardship or managing the dissolution of their relationships. Yet their aspirations are not simply a reflection of instrumental job-seeking and problem solving. Rather, they also use a narrative of moral self-improvement that combines a belief in higher education as the main source of social mobility with a belief in high aspirations as indicators of moral worth and ethical social membership. Because educational aspirations are moral-laden, respondents use their college aspirations to (1) draw boundaries between themselves and other disadvantaged people, (2) challenge stereotypes about poor and minority groups, and (3) manage difficult relationships with significant others.

Together, these narrative frameworks function as an *ambition imperative* that makes it difficult to change course in the face of disconfirming evidence that a college

degree is attainable or worth the time, cost, and effort. Adherence to this social injunction to be ambitious signals high moral status while equating cooled-out aspirations with laziness, irresponsibility, and other socially undesirable qualities. I argue that the social identity conferred by community colleges, their open-access structure, and the vocational character of higher education more generally enables these students to adhere to this ambition imperative by providing narrative material that can be incorporated into individual life stories. As a result, community college contributes to both the stubbornness of aspirations and a form of moral equity, even for students who never finish a degree.

Community Colleges and Student Aspirations

Early studies of community colleges were consistent with broader social scientific concerns about the tendency of democratic societies to produce more ambition than opportunity (Merton 1957; Stinchcombe 1964; Turner 1960). Clark (1960:570) argued that the ideology of equal opportunity, popularly interpreted as unlimited access to higher education and institutionalized in the open-access policies of community colleges, encourages "the aspirations of the multitude." Students, many of whom are unqualified for college, are also driven by necessity as educational requirements for high-status jobs increase. Clark claimed that the popular demand for postsecondary credentials creates a problem of blocked opportunity for a majority of students, because the number of high-status jobs is limited by the hierarchical structure of the economy.

Theories of ambition management suggest that in the face of limited opportunities, institutional processes must structure and legitimate failure (Brint and Karabel 1989). In the absence of such processes, society risks widespread psychological distress and social deviance due to dissociation between culturally prescribed aspirations and structural limits to their realization (Merton 1957). Clark argued that mechanisms such as counseling, remediation, and self-assessment gradually guide low-ability students away from the transfer track and toward vocational programs or dropping out altogether. In the process, students abandon their aspirations for a bachelor's degree. Because community colleges appear to structure both aspirations and failure, Dougherty (1994) refers to them as contradictory colleges.

The generally assumed connection in community college research between structural conditions, institutional practices, and student aspirations has a theoretical basis. For instance, Clark's analysis of gradual institutionalized discouragement is consistent with Turner's (1960) account of the U.S. education system as one based on a norm of contest mobility. According to the cultural logic of the contest, schools give less able students repeated opportunities to compete for educational attainment until they voluntarily withdraw from the status competition. Clark's social-psychological conclusions about lowered aspirations correspond with practice-theoretical approaches that predict aspirations will tend to align with class-based probabilities for success over time (Bourdieu 1977). This suggests that poorly prepared, nontraditional students will gradually abandon aspirations for transfer and bachelor's degrees as they struggle to earn credits and do not have their particular experiences recognized or validated. Parsons's

(1953) contention that a lower-class preference for security over success (Morgan 2005) and Willis's (1977) observation that working-class youth actively validate manual labor—both of which lead lower-class students to develop aspirations for work instead of school—further suggest that struggling community college students will lower their aspirations toward more vocational aims. Taken together, this work forms a robust theoretical argument for cooling out.[1]

However, recent research challenges the assumption that low attainment among community college students is associated with lowered aspirations. Drawing on a national sample of beginning community college students, Rosenbaum and colleagues (2006) find that over a five-year period, the majority of respondents maintained their aspirations. Nearly 70 percent of the sample, including more than 40 percent of those considered dropouts, maintained the same goal over a five-year period. Looking more closely at students who hold steady, Alexander and colleagues (2008) find that students who are college-oriented in high school tend to be college-oriented 10 years later, regardless of enrollment patterns. Among students with expectations for a bachelor's degree in the 12th grade, more than 60 percent expect a bachelor's degree at age 22, and nearly a quarter continue to hold steady at age 28. When those holding steady at age 28 are

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[1] According to empirical studies, students with limited integration into the school environment, lower academic self-esteem, a greater sense of stigmatization, and fewer opportunities for mobility gradually disengage from some or all forms of academic work. In some cases, students eventually "disidentify" with college and degree attainment altogether (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Cech et al. 2011; Correll 2004; Crocker, Major, and Steele 1998; Tinto 1987). There is a strong relationship between marginalizing experiences and the social-psychological states of students, but it is often unclear whether aspirations decline as a result of low attainment. Moreover, researchers have largely drawn their conclusions from the experiences of secondary students and students attending four-year universities, not community college students.

combined with those who had already completed a bachelor's degree, fully half of students with expectations for a bachelor's degree in the 12th grade had either maintained their aspirations for a full decade, rebounded from a period of lowered aspirations, or graduated with the desired degree. Even respondents who never attended college but expected, in the 12th grade, to eventually earn a bachelor's degree, held steady at similar rates at ages 22 and 28.

These findings call for empirical study and new theoretical approaches. Clark recognized that by the second half of the twentieth century, high-status work opportunities for high school graduates had begun to erode, and social pressure for a college-educated populace was on the rise. These forces pushing students into college were part of a broad transformation of college-going into a moral as well as pragmatic pursuit. At the same time, the institutional processes that led to lowered aspirations changed. As a result, past theories of class-based aspiration formation and change are insufficient to explain these processes among current community college students. While cooling out may have been widespread in previous decades, large numbers of people holding steady today indicate an important shift in the character and function of college aspirations.

The Contemporary Context of College Aspirations

Since Clark (1960) first proposed the idea of cooling out, there have been important changes in the cultural, structural, institutional, and interactional contexts surrounding community college. Culturally, there has been a shift to the "college-for-all"

era, characterized by the widespread belief that all students can and should attend college (Rosenbaum 1998). Similarly, beliefs in the necessity of a college education to attain high-status work have solidified into an "education gospel," which stipulates that at least some college education is required for the knowledge-based, flexible jobs of the future (Grubb and Lazerson 2005; Reich 1991). Corresponding to this narrative of structural change is a sharp rise in the college-wage premium, or the relative incomes paid to degree holders, that began in the 1980s and continues to the present (Goldin and Katz 2008). Over the same period, wages have fallen and job quality has declined for workers without at least some college (Dudley 1994; Hatton 2011; Kalleberg 2011; Sennett 1998; Weis 1990). These structural changes altered the typical trajectories of both college- and non-college-educated adults, thereby changing the character of the decision to go to college altogether.

Rosenbaum and colleagues (2006) find that community colleges have largely institutionalized these cultural and structural shifts, which has altered how students interact with teachers, counselors, and others associated with the school. For instance, they find that students encounter a wide range of institutional actors, particularly faculty, who encourage bachelor's degree aspirations and try to minimize the stigma attached to remediation for poorly prepared students (see also Bahr 2008). There is also a general lack of access to information about students' trajectories and alternative, non-bachelor's-degree pathways, in contrast to the careful documentation of failure presented to students that Clark witnessed. Vocational tracks no longer serve as barriers to transfer in the way they might have in the past; occupational education routinely requires academic work and

includes four-year programs (Brint 2003; Grubb 1996). Tighter links between vocational and academic tracks reflect a trend toward vocationalization, and what Brint (2002) calls the "practical arts" in higher education more generally (see also Brint et al. 2005; Mullen 2010). Altogether this amounts to "a 'hidden curriculum' of transfer" for all students, regardless of prior academic preparation, current academic progress, or future academic and professional interests (Rosenbaum et al. 2006:62).

Yet, many young adults aspiring to a bachelor's degree have little or no interaction with the community college, so we might question the impact of purported institutional effects. Even in cases where students do spend long periods of time in community college, it is unclear whether this hidden curriculum of transfer is responsible for students holding steady. Another approach is to consider the role that community colleges play in defining persons, roles, and statuses. Meyer (1977) proposes that the legitimating effects of education shape people's behavior beyond the effects of any particular educational experience. Schools as an institutional system have "charters" to define people, and students tend to adopt social identities associated with the positions that schools give access to. In other words, students become the people that schools are expected to produce and their education is "more durable than work or income, more stable than family life and relations, and less subject to market fluctuations than 'real' property" (Meyer 1977:62).

The link between higher education and societal well-being also means that the kind of people who go to college are morally distinct from those who do not. In today's "schooled society," education, particularly higher education, shapes and gives access to

the values, ideas, and norms that constitute mainstream culture (Baker 2014). Bosses, parents, and strangers recognize the role of the educated person in the schooled society. As a result, community colleges' chartering function makes them a valuable resource for people to develop narratives of moral self-improvement. It makes community college, and higher education more generally, a tool for drawing moral boundaries, challenging stereotypes, and negotiating relationships with others.

In this article, I ask two questions. First, why do community college students hold steady rather than form new aspirations when obstacles slow or impede academic progress? Second, how do they hold steady? Aspirations must be plausible to both the person who aspires and the person with whom they share their aspirations; narratives are ineffectual when the sequence of events does not fit with the overall plot, or the character of the story does not fit the expectations of the listener (Polletta et al. 2013). As a result, holding steady is simultaneously a social imperative and a social accomplishment that education scholars have so far missed.

With this study, I identify varied purposes and rich meanings behind holding steady to offer a fuller account of the role of postsecondary aspirations in young adults' lives. I depart from the almost exclusive focus on the college experience to examine the uses students put their aspirations to outside of school. I show that these non-school purposes are important for maintaining ambition, and I extend research on postsecondary aspirations by focusing on their moral quality. In the college-for-all era, ethical social belonging may be just as important as socioeconomic attainment in the decision to hold steady.

DATA, METHODS, AND ANALYSIS

Data for this case study consist of four waves of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 23 poor and working-class young-adult women in a large metropolitan area of Southern California, for a total of 92 interviews.[2] A research team consisting of four researchers, including myself, conducted the interviews in person over a three-and-a-half-year period from September 2010 to March 2014.

We initially recruited participants from three community colleges that were part of the Southeastern Metro Community College (SMCC) district.[3] These three colleges are part of the largest community college system in the nation; it consists of 112 colleges. The student population of the district is approximately 40 percent Latino, 30 percent white, 11 percent African American, and 5 percent Asian American. The completion rate for the 2005 to 2008 cohort—the percentage of students who attained a certificate or degree or became "transfer prepared" during the three-year period—was 21.93 percent. The transfer rate for the 2002 to 2003 cohort showed that 28 percent of first-time students who showed intent to complete subsequently transferred to a four-year university within six years (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office 2014). Transfer figures are generally low, and among the Southeastern Metro Community College student body,

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[2] This research is an outgrowth of a larger project, *Pathways to Postsecondary Success*, a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation-funded project under the direction of Daniel Solórzano, Amanda Datnow, and UC/ACCORD (see http://pathways.gseis.ucla.edu/).

[3] Southeastern Metro Community College is a pseudonym; all other names have been changed to protect participants' confidentiality and anonymity.

Latino and African American students are underrepresented in the population of transfers to four-year institutions.

All the women involved in this study were enrolled at the time of the first interview. In addition to college enrollment, participation in the study was based on eligibility for income-based support to attend community college in California. Support for low-income students includes CalWORKS, a program to support welfare recipients attending school, and a state-sponsored fee waiver from the California Community Colleges Board of Governors, commonly referred to as the BOG waiver. Recruitment for interviews involved placing flyers around the college campuses and asking key institutional actors to notify qualified students of the opportunity to participate in the study. These actors included counselors and administrators in the CalWORKs, Extended Opportunities Programs and Services (EOPS), and Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE) offices, as well as teachers of remedial math and English, whose classes disproportionately serve poor and minority students. Incentives to participate were $50 for each of the first three interviews and $25 for the fourth interview.

By focusing on poor and minority female students, many of whom experience periods of remediation, this study is well-suited to address the question of holding steady, because the community college literature predicts that low-income female students are most susceptible to cooling out. Scholars often focus on people with similar backgrounds to illuminate subtle but important differences. Sociologists have bounded their analyses to marginalized black men (Young 2004), white female university students (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013), and college republicans (Binder and Wood 2013) to highlight

variation within these groups. Similarly, I am interested in the range of experiences that are possible from a specific social location and most visible when certain characteristics, such as gender, remain constant.

Men and women differ greatly in terms of educational processes, family responsibilities, and labor force dynamics. An important distinction between low-income men's and women's positions is the differential returns to education. While both tend to benefit greatly from postsecondary education, low-income women's employment in full-time jobs and earnings rise more once they have completed a bachelor's degree. By contrast, low-income men who have access to full-time work can earn substantially more with less education than can low-income women. Full-time employment and wages are also more stable for low-income men as their education increases, which means there is a lower wage premium for a bachelor's degree (Ashtiani, Burciaga, and Feliciano 2013). As a result, low-income men may have alternative sources of social mobility and moral worth. Focusing on women allows me to analyze the diverse ways of holding steady among the students who potentially have the most to lose from giving up their college aspirations.

Of the 23 women in the study, 13, or just over half, had one or more children, and three reported being married in September 2010. Fewer than 15 percent of undergraduates nationwide are unmarried parents, but nearly 60 percent of low-income independent female students—that is, students not financially dependent on their parents—are parents, and nearly 40 percent are unmarried parents (Center for Women Policy Studies 2004; Goldrick-Rab and Sorensen 2010). In addition to diverse family

types, the women represent a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds: nine Latinas, seven black women, three white women, two Asian American women, and two women who identify as multiracial. Their average age was 23 years at the time of the first interview and 25 years at the fourth interview. The women range from 19 to 29 years old at the start of the study and 22 to 31 years old at the last interview. See Appendix A for a description of participants.

I interviewed 11 of the women during the first three rounds of interviewing and all 23 women during the fourth wave. Twelve of the women were interviewed by one of three other researchers in waves one, two, and three. I personally conducted 56 of the 92 interviews. Interviews lasted from one-and-a-half to three-and-a-half hours in a location chosen by the respondent. Researchers asked questions about interviewees' life history, social networks, school experiences, perceptions of their own and others' opportunities, sense of barriers, and hopes for the future. We were particularly interested in understanding how students had come to enroll at the community college and how they envisioned their educational and occupational trajectories. By asking for specific examples, the interviews sought to access narrative reasoning (i.e., the meanings behind the frameworks described and the actions they frame) and get beyond belief statements aimed primarily at the honorable presentation of self (Pugh 2013), to which a study of holding steady conducted by highly educated researchers may be particularly susceptible.

Being a white man with an advanced degree means there is considerable social distance between the respondents and myself. However, several similarities helped bridge this gap. For one, I am the first in my family to graduate from college, just as most of the

women in the study are first-generation college students. For another, my academic career is broadly nontraditional. I attended community college off-and-on over a 10-year period before transferring to a public university, which I communicated with interviewees. Moreover, I had small children while in school, which was an important point of reference between myself and over half the women I interviewed. Nevertheless, I cannot presume that these similarities garnered complete trust. Multiple waves of interviews helped build trust over several meetings, and the research team and I built rapport as time went on. The use of multiple interviews also meant that as the women became more comfortable, they were able to revise past statements or elaborate on details they were initially uncomfortable sharing. While this process increased my confidence in the information we gathered, it also made me more cautious when it came to interpreting the data. For this reason, I tried to analyze particular statements within a broader portrait of the person generated from all four waves of interviews and field notes that captured physical cues and emotional tenors.

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. For each respondent, I briefly summarized the general narrative of their college aspirations across all four waves. This allowed me to compare their aspirations over time, identify changes to the general reasoning they offered, and discover emergent explanations for persistent aspirations. I approached community college students' aspirations as narratives that function as plausible stories that help coordinate interactions in the present and provide actors with "a sense of what will or should happen in the future" (Steinmetz 1992:499; see also Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Ewick and Silbey 1995; Somers 1994). Personal and

collective narratives are linked through symbols, linguistic structures, and vocabularies of motive that constitute and reinforce existing ideologies and relations of power and inequality. For example, when participants described themselves as "lazy" because they did not go to school while they worked full-time and cared for their children, they reinforced the belief that success and virtue are attainable and deserved through higher education.

Using Atlas.ti, I coded all the interviews myself.[4] I initially read the transcripts for evidence of holding steady and then relied on open coding to analyze the data more closely. Drawing on situational analysis, I sought to identify the range of human, institutional, and discursive elements that constituted these women's experiences (Clarke 2003). I first generated codes to distinguish between the job-seeking and moral explanations for holding steady. Job-seeking explanations linked education to either finding a job or finding a better job, such as when one participant who cleaned houses for a living explained, "I want to get a house and a car and a good job, and the only way I'm gonna do that is if I finish school." Moral explanations broadly linked education to some personal quality; a student may say they want a degree to show themselves or others that they are hardworking, intelligent, or responsible, for example. I then sought to identify variation within morality claims, in particular who the claims were aimed toward. Students might direct morality claims at themselves; at personal relations; at particular social figures, such as a boss; or at society, more generally. From this directional schema,

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[4] At earlier stages of the project, all four researchers coded the interviews. We developed codes and ascertained intercoder reliability through repeated discussions and debates until we reached consensus. I did not use these codes, although I developed greater familiarity with the data and was able to identify themes I could pursue at a later time.

I distinguished between claims for virtue, boundary-making, challenges to stereotypes, and attempts to manage relationships.[5] Finally, I compared each student's explanations across all four interviews and recoded the transcripts using the final set of codes while checking for omissions and revisions in the broader narrative.

At each wave, the majority of students aspired to transfer to a four-year university, expected to earn at least a bachelor's degree, and held steady over the course of the study but had not transferred by the fourth interview, three-and-a-half years later. At the outset of the study, over three-quarters of the women (18 of 23) said they planned to transfer to a four-year university; seven of the 18 transfer aspirants had made the transition by the fourth interview. Among the women who had not transferred, nine planned on transferring, including one whose plans had warmed up. Only three of the 18 women who originally planned to transfer were cooled out by the final interview: one abandoned her plan to transfer to a four-year university and left school with no intention of returning, another lowered her sights from a bachelor's degree to a for-profit

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[5] I define a virtue claim as a reference to some personal quality, which may be directed at one's self or someone else. For example, a student holds steady to prove to herself that she is smart or to prove to a boss that she is hardworking. Drawing boundaries refers to attempts to distinguish between one's own personal qualities and the personal qualities of another person or group, as when a student contrasts herself with people who leave school or never enroll in the first place. Challenging stereotypes refers to students' claims that holding steady runs counter to beliefs about a group to which they belong, such as a racial group, social class, or gender. Through holding steady, they tend to view themselves as an exemplary, as opposed to exceptional, group member. They may see their education as a form of group solidarity and improvement, rather than a way to distance themselves from others. Drawing boundaries and challenging stereotypes can overlap, as when someone accepts basic features of a stereotype but challenges its reductive and self-effacing character. Finally, I define managing relationships as an attempt to respond to or shape particular interactions and relationships through holding steady, for example, when a student explains holding steady as a way to deal with family problems or as a reason for delaying marriage. Women who manage relationships through holding steady may simultaneously draw boundaries or challenge stereotypes.

vocational certificate, and a third decided to pursue an associate's degree in nursing rather than a bachelor's degree in nursing.[6]

Students often responded differently in background surveys versus interviews, indicating that pursuits, plans, expectations, and ideals did not always neatly align. For example, a student might see herself as pursuing an associate's degree with no plan to transfer in the immediate future while nevertheless expecting to earn a bachelor's degree at some point and ideally wanting a master's degree later in life.[7] Similarly, she may list her most immediate goals in a survey but express commitment to alternative aspirations during the interview, depending on the topic of discussion. Because degree aspirations are complex and situational, I define holding steady as maintaining a degree plan, expectation, or ideal across two or more points in time, including the final interview. According to this definition, women could experience warming up and cooling out periods over the four waves, indicating that aspirations are not perfectly linear; these narratives serve a variety of functions in low-income women's lives.[8] Because I am

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[6] In addition to the three students who were cooled out, several women indicated uncertainty about their plans and expectations or temporarily lowered one or both. Sara, for example, reported in background surveys that she planned to transfer and expected a master's degree during each wave except the third, when she did not know if she would transfer and only expected a bachelor's degree. Another student, Rachel, planned to transfer during each wave and had transferred by the fourth, but she admitted during the final interview that she had considered leaving school with an associate's degree. These examples illustrate the complexity of short-term adjustments to aspirations and the challenges of determining if a student is cooled out.

[7] Although nine of the 16 women who had not transferred by the end of the study planned on transferring, 11 expected and 14 ideally desired at least a bachelor's degree at some point, including two of the three cooled out students.

[8] Even when temporarily cooled out students are included, the proportion of students whose aspirations were cooled out are lower than Rosenbaum and colleagues (2006) and others found. This could be an artifact of the study design. A longitudinal interview study may attract particular types of students, as opposed to a survey-based study that attracts a wider cross-section of the community college student body. Relying on voluntary respondents who are offered money to participate may also shape the sample in unexpected ways. Although respondents were under no obligation to stay in school or hold educational

concerned with the effects of community college and the consequences of slow or impeded progress, I focus on students who have not transferred to a four-year university, completed their education, or abandoned their educational goals in all their forms. This means I direct my attention to 14 of the 23 women included in the study.[9]

PRAGMATIC AND MORAL ASPIRATION NARRATIVES

Holding Steady for Pragmatic Reasons

Based on the belief that a college degree is necessary to get a good job, the women in this study made clear connections between the two. In part, they echoed the belief that middle-class jobs can only be accessed through college attainment. Their descriptions of jobs available to people without a college degree depict poor working conditions and a lack of opportunities for mobility. In her third interview, Amy put it succinctly when she said, "You have to go to college to get where you gotta go and that's it." A 22-year-old white woman with two kids, Amy has struggled to find work as a cosmetologist. She had recently been laid off from a records-keeping job and had stopped out of college to search for work. Still out of school a year later and working irregular hours as a housecleaner, she reiterated her belief that college is a necessity if she wants a

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aspirations to remain in the study, they nevertheless may have believed it was necessary. Another possibility is that the longitudinal interview process itself may have encouraged participants to maintain their educational aspirations. As I show elsewhere (Nielsen 2015), it can be difficult for students to explain cooled out aspirations. Abandoning an academic goal may compel cooled out students to reconstruct a virtuous trajectory from other cultural and institutional materials that they may not have similar access to. A further possibility is that, by focusing on women, I exclude men for whom a college degree is less critical for social identity and work opportunities, and who thus may be more likely to lower their educational aspirations. Alternatively, the cooling out rate among this group of women could increase over time.

[9] The analysis does not include the seven transfer students; one cooled out student without academic plans, expectations, or ideals; and one student who aspired to an associate's degree and left school once she had completed it.

career, concluding in her fourth interview, "I'm not going to get anywhere or do anything if I don't finish."

The job search was even more challenging for Patricia, a 28-year-old black woman with a prior criminal conviction, who recalled during her second interview, "I was adamant on trying to stay in school 'cause if I leave here, what do I have? I've been looking for a job for almost two years." Other women described a "bleak future" of low-wage "grunt work." They reported feeling "sick and tired of being sick and tired," restricted from utilizing their skills by the lack of a bachelor's degree. A college degree promises access to more than just jobs and higher pay; it holds out the possibility for a wide range of desirable qualities, including autonomy, independence, creativity, choice, variety, challenge, flexibility, and stability. While personal narratives are subjective representations of the opportunity structure, they nevertheless correspond in meaningful ways to the actual environment of work, including high rates of unemployment, degree requirements for jobs, and the added challenges facing applicants with criminal records.

As Silva (2013) documents, access to the markers of working-class adulthood, such as family stability and material goods, has become increasingly tenuous. For the 21 women in this study who desired at least a bachelor's degree, college solves a range of problems associated with instability in working-class adult lives. For the most part, the women in this study viewed degree attainment as the main mechanism that would propel them from the world of low-status work to middle-class work and, beyond that, to middle-class lifestyles. Routinely imagining the worst for themselves and their loved ones, they explained their aspirations as the pursuit of both security and success. The

limited opportunities available to them without finishing their postsecondary education made them feel a college degree was a goal they could not give up. This dominant narrative of pragmatic job-seeking conforms to the expectations of rational decision-making. For the most part, scholars and community college advocates focus on smoothing out this narrative by facilitating the passage from school to work. Yet, high-status work and the advantages it promises are not the only reasons why women in this study hold steady. Many women expressed concerns with virtuous social membership, a facet of holding steady that sociologists of education have so far neglected.

Holding Steady for Virtue

Scholars have observed that the educational aspirations of contemporary youth often exceed their occupational goals (Reynolds et al. 2006). Consistent with this finding, the women in this study tended to aspire to more education than their career goals demanded. The majority of participants were pursuing bachelor's degrees because, as the interviews showed, the bachelor's degree is typically understood as a requirement for a particular job or field of work. When they wrote down the degree they expect to earn and the degree they would ideally like to earn, however, the majority raised their responses to a master's or professional degree, and several women indicated that they expect or ideally would like to earn a doctorate. For the most part, they desired these postgraduate degrees for reasons other than career attainment. This gap between what students believe is necessary and what they ultimately hope to achieve indicates that education aspirations

are not simply rational responses to exigencies of the economy. Aspirations are claims on morality in the future as well as in the present.

Some women in this study recognized that a bachelor's degree is unnecessary and might even be detrimental to their careers, because it requires them to forgo work experience and network-building while they are in school. Nevertheless, these women held steady. Adele, for example, a Latina in her early-20s, continued to pursue a bachelor's degree over the course of the study. She maintained a course load largely consisting of classes related to the production of film and television, with transfer requirements taking up the smallest portion of her schedule. Her film and television classes included many hands-on group projects, such as producing a local news program. She was also given the opportunity to work as a production assistant on a television show filmed in the area. Between her classes and work experience, she developed social networks and industry knowledge that she could draw on to get a job.

Over time, Adele recognized that a bachelor's degree "wouldn't make much of a difference" to her career prospects, because potential employers value networks and experience, not schooling. She also struggled to do well in her general education classes, which seemed to push her toward work and away from degree completion. However, by the fourth interview she was retaking several failed classes and preparing to apply to transfer to a four-year university after four years of full-time community college enrollment. She explained that she has "just always seen it as important" and she holds steady because it "would kill me to know that I could not be an educated person." Community college gave her a crucial foothold in the film and television industry, but her

aspirations for education were not bound by career considerations: being an "educated person" indicates status that is available only through educational attainment.

Importantly, this identity is there for students who struggle to make headway. Hannah, for example, reconciled her sense of stalled progress with the importance she attached to college by holding steady, saying, "I want to treat myself as like I've already gotten there and now just work my way up there to finally do it, like fake it 'til you make it type thing." Holding steady was a way of holding on to virtuous social membership. The larger cultural positive social identity associated with college-going can threaten this sense of worth, however. When life circumstances impede college attendance and cast doubt on students' aspirations, young people are vulnerable to feelings of failure and flawed character. Interviewees complained of feeling lazy, unfocused, and idle. Amy believed that others could sense her aspirations. Reflecting on this idea, she said, "I feel like when you lose that motivation, everybody else can tell, too. And that's kind of where you get where you're at. You do the job you're doing and the money that you have is kind of because you're giving off that vibe and that's all you're going to get back." According to this understanding of social mobility, aspirations play a causal role by affecting the presentation of self and the interactions between workers and bosses. From this viewpoint, holding steady is critical for navigating the workplace due to the public recognition of college-based social identities.

This compensatory use of aspirations was particularly important to the eight women who stopped out of college at one or more points during the study, but who did not give up their degree aspirations. But it was also important to women like Gloria and

Margaret, who did not leave school yet still faced feelings of worthlessness. As Gloria explained in her first interview, "My whole entire life my family just insults me to a point where I didn't think I was worth anything, but I moved past that and now I'm here and doing fine." After years of low expectations from others, Gloria still cried when she described how others viewed her and said, "I feel like I have something to prove to them, that I can do it." She held steady to the goal of earning a master's degree to show everyone "that I did it, that I'm not stupid." Similarly, Margaret suggested, "If I continue to go to school that's something that they can say, 'Oh, she's good at this.'"

The recognition of oneself as an educated person apart from any specific skills or career outcomes is consistent with Meyer's (1977) description of the chartering function of education. For Adele, holding steady represented a claim on a particular social identity, one that has high moral value, whereas Hannah used aspirations to manage negative feelings about herself by assuming the moral status associated with college-going and attainment. Because education produces individuals—as well as definitions of success, conceptions of work, and models of social mobility—identification with education is simultaneously an identification with socially valued, widely recognized forms of life. One consequence of the social identity conferred by colleges is that it produces insiders and outsiders and reconstitutes social relationships. Aspirations often function as a narrative of moral self-improvement that explicitly draws boundaries, challenges stereotypes, and redefines relationships.

Drawing Boundaries

The strategy of distinguishing between those who maintain their goal of finishing college and those who give up fits with broader processes of identity formation. Just as the poor adopt conservative frameworks to criticize other poor adults, particularly welfare recipients (Hays 2003; Katz 2013; Lamont 2000), poor college students use college aspirations to create moral boundaries.

Comparing herself to young adults who are not in college, Adele insisted that "not everyone has that force in them to succeed." Non-enrollment signals weak or nonexistent college aspirations. Similarly, Patricia explained in her first interview: "You want to be bigger and better than where your mother was at. A lot of people are comfortable in the [housing] projects. That's all they know." During her second interview, she drew on her college experience to assert her virtuous character: "I'm still in school, I'm still clean and sober, and not in trouble with the law, and still taking care of my beautiful baby boy." Likewise, Rosa believed that persisting in school despite being a single mother reflected strength and determination, adding that most people "would have just stuck with the domestic work." At another point she said, "I mean, nothing against people who work at McDonald's, but it's like people can do so much better than that." Despite the fact that Rosa, a mother in her early-20s, had never worked for pay, she still constructed a boundary between those who work in bad jobs and those who "do so much better." And Hannah's commitment to college distinguished her from others when she said, "there's a lot of people who just would have given up."

For Margaret, being in college did not necessarily distinguish her from other poor women, but it did allow her to generate distance between herself and a certain type of

poor person. She is a white single-mother in her mid-20s who has never held a job. Throughout the course of the study she lived with her grandmother, mother, uncle, and daughter. None of the family worked, and they pieced together different sources of state support to make ends meet. Reflecting on her living situation she said, "I feel kind of like on the lower grade of people. I don't have any money or anything and I feel kinda crappy because of it." She said she had looked for work in the past but, for reasons she could not explain, she was never offered a job. Yet, college offered a pathway to a more virtuous lifestyle of self-reliance: "I don't like being in this situation but if I'm in this situation I'm gonna make the most of it and go to school so that one day I won't have to be like this, like my mother. You know, she's in this situation but she's just sitting there waiting for life to hand her things and I don't want to be like that."

By the fourth interview, Margaret had received an associate's degree but had not transferred. She said she lacks the self-esteem to make the transition to a four-year university even though she has the qualifications to do so. However, she was still taking a class at the community college, because being out of school made her feel "useless." Moreover, college allowed her to achieve some dignity and be a role model for her daughter: "I'm not a crack addict or a prostitute or whatever. I go to school, I have a very high GPA, I'm a very good mother, I don't engage in any bad things. I wasn't raised with any morals, but I have a very strict way of thinking I should live. And I try to be a role model for my daughter." For Margaret, holding steady meant holding on to an identity opposed to categories of social deviance. Contrary to theories of ambition management that stipulate students need to have their aspirations discouraged to avoid widespread

deviant behavior, Margaret's case suggests that students can use high aspirations to distance themselves from socially illegitimate ways of life.

Combating Stereotypes

In addition to creating boundaries between themselves and other disadvantaged people, the women in this study made it clear that education was a key safeguard against systemic abuse and stigmatization coming from others. As Jeanie concluded from her years of work in the criminal justice system, "I'm damned if I do, damned if I don't. Education is costly and ignorance is costly, too, so I'd rather have the costly education instead of the costly ignorance." Watching poor and minority young adults without higher education cycle in and out of prison reinforced her belief in education to generate moral status. Jeanie had no history of legal trouble and had held what she considered a good job for over a decade, yet she saw her pursuit of education in relation to the criminalization of poor and minority youth without college degrees. Women like Jeanie used their aspirations to resist and reject oppressive structures and ideologies. Another interviewee, Patricia, explained, "As a woman, as a black woman, I feel sometimes that I always have to work harder. I want to show that I'm a strong black woman to represent my race and that we're not just dysfunctional, loud, black ghetto women, you know." College, she said, gave her the sense that she was "worth it."

Several respondents envisioned a college degree as serving to buffer against racism in the labor market. Kimberly, for example, a black woman in her mid-20s who stopped out of community college after the first interview but held steady to her

aspiration for a bachelor's degree in social work, believed things had changed since her grandparents' generation: "Well, you know what, it is 2012, it is not 1956, or 1929. My grandpa was running from a white man. It's 2012, and I think it's kinda what you do with your life now." Similar to the black youth in MacLeod's (1995) *Ain't No Makin' It*, Kimberly's sense of progress shaped her perception of opportunity. Although she spoke at length about residential segregation, racialized gang violence, and discriminatory policing, Kimberly maintained a belief in the power of education to transcend discrimination. Pointing out that racist hiring practices are prevalent, she concluded that education, hard work, and self-presentation can transcend them:

> Of course, you might still have some racists—white man don't want to hire you, black people that won't hire black people, racist Mexicans that don't hire black people, racist black people who don't hire Mexicans— you gonna have racists regardless. You just have to do extra. It doesn't matter your color, your race, ethnicity, your last name, your first name. . . . It's how you make it. If it's something you want to do, then you know the obstacles that are gonna be in your way, you gonna have to work double time, and it doesn't matter what your background is. It should be your education and how you present yourself, not how your race represents you.

For Kimberly, the recognition of racism in employment outcomes led to the conclusion that education is the only signal that can be heard through the noise of discrimination. Holding steady reflected her understanding of the labor market and how it is structured by race.

Nevertheless, her beliefs about college and work are consistent with a long literature that finds disadvantaged students adhere to an achievement ideology that posits hard work will be rewarded. In the context of being stopped out of college, Kimberly's beliefs caution against easy conclusions about the relationship between perceptions of

opportunity and actions related to education. One might interpret Kimberley's perceptions of racist hiring practices and the fact that she is stopped out of college as an indication that she has disidentified with college, but this is not the case. Like other marginalized youth, her narratives and actions reflect a complicated relationship between discourse and behavior (Gowan 2010; O'Connor 1999; Young 2004). What this illustrates is the *moral* force of education.

Holding steady is also a way of managing stereotypes associated with poverty, single parenthood, and other stigmatized social statuses like high school dropout and welfare recipient. Together, these stereotypes constitute a highly gendered image of low achievement and unfulfilled ambition. Carolyn discovered that doing well at community college,

> Showed me that I could do something else because I never finished high school. I ended up having a kid and people aren't very nice when you do that. Especially when you don't finish high school, people are mean to you, especially when they have high expectations. So it kind of raised my own expectations for myself.

Success in college is something interviewees could look to as a source of worth. It is a way to "prove" they are "smart" and "worthy." As Margaret claimed, going to college shows that "I'm worthy of whatever it is that I'm gonna get. I am important. I don't know how important, but I fit somewhere in this world." For Margaret and others like her, college functions as a set of coordinates that guide others' estimation of one's moral standing and help repair damage to one's self-esteem.

Managing Relationships

In addition to fending off stereotypes coming from distant others, some women held steady as a way of managing personal relationships with those closest to them. As women get older, competing social roles, such as worker, wife, and mother, impede their ability to attend school full-time and complete degrees (Jacobs and King 2002). Holding steady often means negotiating these roles with significant others, which has consequences for employment, family structure, living arrangements, childcare, money, and a variety of other resources. College serves as an institution around which relationships form and are built because it carries moral weight, particularly for students who have few sources of power in their relationships. Family members are most often the main source of conflict and the biggest reason to pursue college.

Adele used her aspirations as a source of stability when difficulties at home overwhelmed her. During her fourth interview, as she neared transfer to a four-year university, she said that her parents were considering separating, and she noted that trouble at home had caused her to focus less on some of her goals, such as travelling and moving out on her own. She felt these goals were more out of reach than ever, because she might have to help support her mother if her parents separate. Although she described her dreams as "muted," she held steady to her goal of earning a bachelor's degree. When I asked her what the difference was between her aspiration for a college degree and her other goals, she responded that, "it's something stable I can hold on to, I think because it's a goal I can reach." College kept her positive and "looking forward to something, not dwelling on problems that I have to deal with. It's something for me to, just, kind of relieve some stress and work toward that." Adele was able to organize her life around the

institutionalized goals of transfer and degree attainment not only because they were clear, but also because they carried moral weight. Adele was not simply mooring her aspirations in a stable port during a storm. She explained that if she moves out of the house with her mother, they will have to move to wherever she decides to transfer. This demonstrates the life-structuring capacity of higher-education institutions, and the stability and durability of academic identities.

For some students, holding steady involved a *restructuring* of stable relationships as they pursued moral self-improvement. Carolyn explained her decision to return to school:

> I didn't feel like I was doing anything other than raising my daughter. I didn't want to be one of those people—you see them on TV—"well all I am is just their mom and I never got to do this or that or the other." I'd rather be able to go, "Yeah, I was successful in being a mom and I went to school and I was a good student."

Holding steady allowed Carolyn to negotiate her relationship with her daughter, spending less time parenting in exchange for an expanded source of meaning. The moral value of education makes a more limited mother role a plausible trade-off. Carolyn similarly resisted marriage, telling her boyfriend, "we can get married but we need to get more of our school done" first. Family structure and formal education are tightly coupled.

Margaret also held steady to shape her role as a mother, not to generate distance from it but to mitigate the conflicts that distance causes. She confided that she "would love to be a stay-at-home mom" but staying home would not ensure closeness. "As my daughter gets older, she's gonna hate me as all teenagers do," she explained, "I have to have my own interests, even though I don't believe in that." Imagining the worst, she

said, "If I do go to school and I learn about things that are interesting to me, when she does go off and say, 'I hate you, get away from me,' I can be focused on other things." Through holding steady, Carolyn and Margaret reconstituted the possibilities for motherhood. They drew on the virtues of independence and intellectual growth through their aspirations.

The ability to see clearly from moral ground allowed the women in this study to negotiate present relationships and imagine their relationships in the future. In some cases, it opened the way to imagine the absence of certain relationships, whether due to death, divorce, or the decision to remain single. For women like Adele, surrounded by single parents, having a "traditional family" of one's own was difficult to imagine; it was easier to imagine a pathway leading through school to a career and then stability and self-reliance for them and their children. College allowed them to avoid dependence and undesired partnerships, and it provided the moral ground to be a single parent in a society that denigrates such choices (Edin and Kefalas 2011).

In summary, outside the domain of work, the women in this study made sense of their educational aspirations through a narrative of moral self-improvement. Understood as a source of virtue, they used their aspirations to claim moral status and navigate personal relationships. They did this by using their college experience and aspirations to manage self-understanding, respond to the beliefs of others, and coordinate their lives with various people. Through these processes, continuing to pursue educational credentials indicates one's desire for success, emotional and socioeconomic security, and a virtuous commitment to the American Dream.

DISCUSSION

This paper addressed the experience of holding steady among community college students. I argued that the women in this study used two dominant narrative frameworks to explain holding steady. The first, which I call pragmatic job-seeking, is that a college education is necessary for secure employment outside the low-wage service economy. Understood more positively, a college degree is a requirement for jobs that offer work and life qualities that are highly valued, such as independence, self-determination, and creativity. Access to high-status work also bears on how people experience other institutions, such as the family. The second narrative framework, which I call moral self-improvement, asserts that the pursuit of a college education signals high moral status. Community college students hold steady to their college aspirations to form positive self-conceptions, often in contrast to dominant stereotypes. Holding steady indicates motivation, which bears on an individual's opportunity in the workplace. In other words, self-presentation as someone who strives generates its own rewards.

Both narrative frameworks rely on the cultural and structural resources that community colleges provide. The need for disadvantaged students to hold steady is rooted in the structural, cultural, institutional, and interactional changes that have occurred since Clark (1960) first proposed that community colleges cool students out. Together, these changes constitute the particular social context of possibility, the intersection of objective structures and subjective representations that shape students' life

chances (Bourdieu 1989). It is the complex moral aspect of aspiring to a college degree, however, that previous research has overlooked.

Cultural changes have affected the position of higher education in the popular imagination. Culture is constituted by the publicly available shared stories and moral categories that allow us to make sense of who we are and communicate that understanding to others (Illouz 2008; Lamont 2000). The emergence of the college-for-all ideology and the education gospel at the end of the twentieth century tracks the structural changes in the economy. Previous scholarship shows that these cultural frameworks express a moral position that everyone can and should go to college (Rosenbaum 1998), and an argument that college is the only pathway to particular types of high-status work (Grubb and Lazerson 2005). I build on this literature by showing how the women in this study similarly linked moral claims with beliefs about occupational attainment.

There is a long-standing relationship between the cultivation of individual productive capacities and moral status. In the early-nineteenth century, U.S. elites defined poverty as a moral condition (Bellah et al. 1996), and early-twentieth-century eugenicists claimed that economic growth, social progress, and resource preservation were bound to individual foresight, of which the poor were incapable (Mitchell 2011). Moreover, the American Dream stipulates that the pursuit of success is associated with virtue (Hochschild 1995). Postwar social science even formulated an American national character that was particularly achievement oriented (Katz 2013). From the perspective of a broad cultural imperative to be ambitious, the ideology of college-for-all is not just an expression of democratic ideals or economic rationality, but an integral feature of a

discourse of ethical social membership. Narratives that link college-going with life outcomes provide an explanatory system through which these women indicate to themselves and others that they are ambitious.

Given these structural and cultural trends, there is an interactional basis for holding steady. This interactional basis refers to the micro-level interactions through which subjects are produced and socially located (Foley 1990; Khan 2010; Mehan 2012). The women in this study emphasized the importance of indicating to others that they are ethical members of society. Interactions with family members, employers, and others were central to their narratives of pursuing educational and occupational attainment. On the one hand, this is due to the fact that social relationships involve the coordination of future orientations, from immediate futures to longer-term narratives (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013). On the other hand, seemingly unreasonable aspirations often serve as moral claims in the present, as opposed to meaningful expectations about future outcomes (Frye 2012). The moral-laden attitudinal and behavioral schemas associated with discourses of attainment, which are disseminated through mainstream institutions, give poor and working-class youth the cultural tools to navigate present relationships. For some of the women in this study, holding steady is oriented toward these present relationships as much as it is toward career attainment.

Past research focuses on interactions, but it privileges interactions between students and community college actors, such as counselors and teachers (Clark 1960; Rosenbaum et al. 2006). The women in this study did not make these institutional figures central to their narratives of holding steady, indicating that a narrow institutional focus is

liable to miss the range of people shaping the trajectories of community college students. This study supports research on working-class students in higher education that argues these students are more oriented toward people outside of the college environment than are their wealthier peers (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). Unlike previous research that has uncovered a relational function behind seemingly unreasonable aspirations, this study shows how rational expectations about work and moral claims in the present can operate simultaneously, and it demonstrates there are social and emotional costs to abandoning postsecondary goals.

Although the women in this study did not describe their interactions with others in the community college setting in their narratives of holding steady, the institutional context was key to understanding the phenomenon of holding steady. Institutions are the codified roles and rule systems that people adhere to within specific social settings (Binder and Wood 2013; Bourdieu 1990; Brint and Karabel 1989; Lareau 2011). The community college plays a critical role in facilitating individuals' adherence to the ambition imperative. As their narratives show, respondents often struggled to imagine the development of many aspects of their lives. By contrast, they could more easily imagine getting a college degree and going on to a career.

One reason for this is that although community colleges often fail to provide students with clear steps they can take to accomplish their academic goals (Rosenbaum et al. 2006), they do provide stable markers of academic progress along with direct and indirect links to the workforce—for example, transferring to a university, occupational certification, and institutional actors with practical experience in their chosen field

(Nielsen 2015). The vocational character of community colleges and higher education more generally allows students to imagine careers more clearly. If college did not align with occupations, it would have been harder for the women in this study to hold steady, because they would have been under greater pressure to abandon their degree aspirations. As it was, many of the women reported family members urging them to give up their goals and find work. Academic and vocational milestones stand in contrast to the increasingly less-attainable markers of adulthood, such as moving out on one's own or getting married (Silva 2013). Holding steady is possible because community colleges offer plausible outcomes.

Community colleges also make it possible for students to hold steady through their open-access structure and their willingness to give students multiple chances to compete for postsecondary credentials (Rose 2012). Even when students leave college and do not return for long periods, they can tell themselves and others that they can and will return. Furthermore, the chartering function of schools (Meyer 1977) is important: community colleges confer social identities that are publicly recognized and exceptionally durable. Whereas organizational structure makes college aspirations plausible, the institutional charter makes the aspirations socially valuable in their own right. For these reasons, community colleges contribute to a form of moral equity at the same time that so many students fall short of their goals.

These findings are important for research concerned with the rise of ambition among U.S. youth. While concerns about widespread deviance have abated since Clark (1960) began his investigations into community colleges, scholars continue to focus on

the psychological consequences of falling short in the pursuit of one's goals (Reynolds and Baird 2010; Vaisey 2006). In place of theories of ambition management, a theory of ambition imperative suggests that in the face of limited attainment, institutional processes must structure and legitimate holding steady. High aspirations are necessary, and students may not believe they have fallen short so long as they can hold steady. Rosenbaum and colleagues (2006) argue that community colleges' failure to cool out some students may actually delay their recognition of more appropriate pathways. Yet, holding on to aspirations for a bachelor's degree appears to be oriented toward more than simply finding the most appropriate pathway to a job.

Drawing virtue from adherence to the ambition imperative through higher education has several implications. Adele's desire to be an "educated person," rather than take a job that does not require more education, could negatively affect her career trajectory and eventual socioeconomic status. For people primarily concerned with the economic returns to education, Adele's decision is problematic, because she potentially hampers her own social mobility, goes into debt, and wastes public resources. Conversely, increased levels of education have a wide range of social returns (Hout 2012). From this view, Adele's persistence benefits her community and society as a whole and should be encouraged. Similarly, poor and minority students empowered to challenge stereotypes and manage relationships are an important outcome of higher education whether or not they are ultimately unsuccessful.

Other possible implications from holding steady are less readily answered. For students with few alternative, popularly supported, and institutionalized sources of moral

self-improvement, insurmountable obstacles to attending college can have serious effects on their well-being. Whereas the women in this study distanced themselves from socially illegitimate ways of life and rejected the negative views of others through their aspirations, working-class young adults cut off from traditional sources of self-worth are more likely to withdraw inward and develop hostile attitudes toward others (Silva 2013). The plausibility of degree aspirations may also degrade over time so that they are no longer a source of virtue, despite the open-access character of community colleges. For these reasons, students should receive as much support as they need to achieve their degree goals and increase their access to good jobs and other sources of moral worth not readily available to them. Initiatives such as free community college across the country, proposed by President Obama, or the Student Success Act in California, which aims to foster timely degree completion, are promising steps in the move from a focus on access to a focus on completion. Policymakers should avoid erecting barriers to access for students who may not meet criteria for timely progress but who nevertheless hold steady to the idea that they can and will finish. In a schooled society, there are few ready substitutes for actual schooling.

Another concern is that drawing moral boundaries through holding steady may reduce solidarity and resilience in poor and minority communities, while increasing support for punitive and exclusionary policies. The history of welfare illustrates how the intersection of morality and public services can generate divisions among the disadvantaged. Students who view people that stop out of school—or who never enroll in the first place—as lazy or unintelligent may be more likely to blame them, rather than

structural barriers, for their own difficulties and other social problems. Challenging stereotypes through holding steady may produce solidarity, but it must involve a rejection of the divisions that moral prescriptions generate.

I have proposed an expanded view of the many uses of university aspirations in the lives of low-income women. Future research should continue to identify the causes and consequences of adherence to an imperative to be ambitious through college degree attainment. Sociologists should also explore the limits to holding steady. The virtue from holding steady may be limited for certain groups or take different forms. Researchers should study holding steady among men, in particular, because the relationship between education and labor market outcomes differs for men and women, and masculinity likely shapes how stereotypes, boundaries, and relationships are managed through aspirations. This is certainly the case among wealthier students, who may face different expectations and pressures to complete their degrees. In the college-for-all era, it is imperative that we understand what college aspirations mean for all of us.

Chapter 2, in full, is a reprint of the material as it appears in *Sociology of Education*, volume 88, number 4, pp. 265-283.

Chapter 3 – Failure in Emerging Adulthood: Narrative Agency in Career, Practice, and Care Institutions among Poor and Working-Class Women

ABSTRACT

Emerging adulthood is a period of high ambition and a high likelihood of failure. The process of managing failure in the transition to adulthood requires narrative work. For poor and working-class emerging adults, popular narratives of failure are often pathologizing and undermine their ability to produce narratives of ambition. Nevertheless, they will respond to the pressure to tell an ambitious story. Drawing on four waves of life history interviews with 23 poor and working-class emerging adult women, I show how they use institutionalized life stories to narratively manage failure by channeling popular explanations for their failure and maintaining claims to ambition. I distinguish between career, practice, and care institutions, which shape the possibilities for overcoming failure.

INTRODUCTION

One period of life that is increasingly characterized by both ambition and failure is emerging adulthood (Waters et al. 2011). Scholars have identified several widely available explanations for failure among today's middle class 18- to 34-year-olds. They include lengthy periods of self-exploration (Smith 2009), economically-motivated returns to their parents' home (Newman 2012), and extended exposure to a higher education system that leaves graduates temporarily adrift and unprepared for independence (Arum and Roksa 2014; Clydesdale 2015). These "standard stories" (Tilly 1999) provide

middle-class emerging adults with a normative framework to make sense of failure without minimizing their ambitious status; it is "helicopter parents" who have failed to let their children grow up, or the economic downturn that has cost the labor sector jobs, or a higher education system that has run amok—not the young adults boomeranging and drifting—who are to blame (Newman 2012). By contrast, poor and working-class men and women who struggle to successfully enter adulthood encounter pathologizing narratives to explain their failure (Newman 1999b).

As scholars have begun to examine more closely how today's 18- to 34-year-olds experience emerging adulthood, they have shown that coming-of-age experiences, and how young people interpret them often vary according to race, class, and gender. Whereas middle class millennials have access to standard stories of delayed ambition, poor and working-class young adults often adopt, respond to, and manage narratives of deviance, disability, and disorder when they account for their own and their peers' failure to achieve normative adulthood. These include stories of personal irresponsibility, criminal behavior, mental illness, and emotional trauma (Edin and Lein 1997; Gowan 2010; Hays 2003; Levine 2013; Sanchez-Jankowski 2008; Silva 2012, 2013), passed on through families or taught by schools and media.

Marginalized young adults—like their more affluent peers—nevertheless remain ambitious and hopeful in the futures they imagine for themselves (DeLuca et al. 2016; Deterding 2015; Nielsen 2015; Young 2004). Facing normative expectations for ambition as well as narratives of pathological shortcoming, how do poor and working-class young adults manage failure over time? How do they respond to socially available explanations

for their failure and social pressures to maintain high aspirations as they tell and retell their life stories? Previous research that relies on a single narrative gathered at a particular moment has missed the *ongoing effort* that poor emerging adults make as they negotiate these opposing ways of understanding their lives.

Drawing on an analysis of the life history interviews with 23 poor and working-class young adult women gathered at four points in time over a three-and-a-half-year period, I explore how these women in young adulthood attempt to maintain a biography of ambition as they experience failure: giving up a goal pursued for the accomplishment of normative adulthood. I argue that because life stories bring together 1) broad cultural frameworks of social identity, 2) institutionalized life paths, and 3) individual biographical detail, failure involves narrative work on all three levels: the cultural, institutional, and personal. My data reveal that the low-income women laboring at the margins of educational and occupational attainment use two main types of institutions—*career institutions* and *practice institutions*—to revise their life stories in ways that present them as ambitious. While career institutions such as health care and teaching allow poor emerging adults to forge narrative ties to highly valued jobs, practice institutions such as athletics or religion offer a way out of the ambitious worker identity that is so difficult to fulfill. Practice institutions provide alternative means of displaying ambition with a greater likelihood of achievement. Yet because Americans value careers so highly, displays of ambition through practice are often a limited source of self-worth. Like practice institutions, *care institutions*, particularly the family, offer an alternative

moral system. However, care institutions are an even paltrier source of ambition or encourage the displacement of ambition to others, such as children.

As they make and remake their life stories, young adults express narrative agency in dealing with structural obstacles and cultural pressures. They create new stories, in part, to find a way forward when opportunities for social mobility are blocked and to generate resilience in a society that values ambition so highly but which provides poor youth struggling to enter adulthood with few positive sources of identity. While telling new stories is possible, it also takes time. Commitments to failed projects are often rooted deeply in biography and bound to institutional knowledge that may be difficult to replace. To tell a convincing story of redirected ambition requires new institutional knowledge and a personal history that makes the new pathway appear sensible or even inevitable.

Failure and Ambition in Poor and Working-Class Emerging Adulthood

Sociologists have a long history of documenting the moral framework of poverty confronting the poor. In a classic example, Liebow (1967:29-30) depicts a "labor scavenger" whose offer of work is repeatedly turned down by what he believes to be "lazy, irresponsible men." In the nearby suburbs, Howell (1973) describes poor white men and women labeled by their working-class neighbors and local preachers as "reckless" and "irresponsible" "sinners." The people around them understood their attachment to hard living as a moral failing rather than as a response to declining opportunities. Liebow's (1993) study of homeless women in the 1980s shows them confronting social service providers, potential employers, and others who see them as

"unreasonable," "mentally ill," "diseased," or "drug addicted." In each case, talk about the poor foregrounds culture and individual pathos while ignoring structural explanations.

These images continue to be part of the narrative material available to poor people. They provide the characters, plots, causal relationships, and moral judgements for giving an account of oneself and imagining the future (Butler 2005; Frank 2010; Polletta et al. 2011; Somers 1994). For poor emerging adults, I divide these narratives into tales of *youth-gone-bad* and *youth-gone-sad*. As Young (2004:9) points out, we expect poor and working-class young adults to react to their life situations and future goals "either with anger, conflict, and animosity, or with hopelessness and despair." Underlying these expectations are beliefs about responsibility and irresponsibility, which not only function as guiding moral concepts in popular discourse and poor communities alike (Sanchez-Jankowski 2008), but are also part of the institutional management of marginalized populations. The welfare, health care, and criminal justice systems along with family and media expose youth to stories of irresponsibility, deviance, illness, and trauma that they use to make sense of failure (Block and Somers 2014; Collins 2009; Edin and Lein 1997; Gowan 2010; Harding 2010; Hays 2003; Levine 2013; Newman 1999a, 1999b). Narratives of poor people and their families are often tales of bad, broken, and unambitious men and women.[1]

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[1] Poor youth are not only exposed to stories of deviance, illness, or trauma. Many directly experience these problems with important consequences for the outcomes of their lives (DeLuca et al. 2016). Still, there are standard stories for poor youth to make sense of and share these experiences. For example, Sered and Norton-Hawk (2014:27), after describing a woman who experienced severe sexual abuse, drug addiction, and incarceration, write that "the dominant model for explaining these connections singles out childhood abuse as causing lasting psychological damage that in turn leads to drug use and victimization. While the causal chain fits the American narrative of individual responsibility, connections between gender violence and incarceration are far more structural."

The broad cultural appropriation of therapeutic language and practice in recent decades (Illouz 2008) has contributed to the rise of a youth-gone-sad narrative. Focusing specifically on emerging adulthood, Silva (2012) argues that the failure of working-class young adults to achieve traditional markers of working-class adulthood is accompanied by the adoption of a therapeutic narrative that involves overcoming their painful pasts. Silva argues that the language of therapy courses through institutions that poor and working-class people encounter, from rehabilitation programs to the courts, low-wage jobs, and mass media. Unlike discourses of deviance and sickness, self-help and psychological improvement offer working-class young adults a way to imagine themselves as successful adults. Yet for poor and working-class emerging adults, neither the languages of sin and sickness nor therapy—not youth-gone-bad nor youth-gone-sad—provide a way to assert an ambitious path forward since they ultimately direct them toward a focus on overcoming past shortcomings in the present rather than anticipating a successful future.

Like their wealthier peers, poor and working-class emerging adults are under pressure to strive for more in their future. They, like everybody else, are exposed to a culturally broad imperative to be ambitious and anticipate the future (Adams et al. 2009; Nielsen 2015), which cuts across class in ways that narratives of failure do not. Central to the American worldview is the idea that individual well-being and social progress are bound to personal ambition, the poor included (Bellah et al. 1996; Grubb and Lazerson 2005; Hochschild 1995; Katz 2013; Mitchell 2011; Newman 1999a). However, this belief that ambition is a personal and social good can be difficult for poor young adults to

uphold. Comparing the United States and less-developed countries in the 1960s, for example, Lewis (1966:25) argued that the technological and educational advancement of the U.S. along with the spread of generally high aspirations through mass media meant that even the poorest Americans had to be ambitious about their futures. Lewis found that where obstacles to ambition were greatest, people developed beliefs and practices—a culture of poverty—that were inimical to thinking about the future and acting ambitiously. Since then, American youth have only gotten more ambitious while social mobility has declined (Newman 2012; Reynolds et al. 2006; Schneider and Stevenson 1999).

Rising ambition and declining mobility make failure an especially important cultural problem because socially valued ambition in the United States is most clearly articulated through work. For poor and working-class emerging adults, low-wage work simultaneously promises and limits access to the ideals of independence and autonomy that make work a source of moral value. On the one hand, low-wage work allows poor youth to distinguish themselves from the "do-nothing" unemployed (Newman 199b). And although low-wage work is stigmatized for its place at the bottom of the labor hierarchy and the few opportunities for advancement it provides, employers demand some commitment to the ambitions of the organization, which may include raising the level of education of the employees (Newman 1999b). This means that low-wage work is a source of idealized performance of a moral value (Goffman 1959) for poor and working-class emerging adults despite the stigma and limits to personal achievement.

On the other hand, because low-wage work offers little in the way of individual mobility while exposing low-wage workers to stigma, poor and working-class emerging adults must find other ways of expressing their desire for greater attainment. Caught between the identity of the unemployed do-nothing and the stigmatized status of low-wage workers, these young men and women must express socially required ambition through alternative means. People's ability to tell different kinds of stories about themselves makes the expression of ambition possible even when structural conditions make ambitious career-oriented action difficult.

Narrative Agency

While popular discourse and institutions provide material for young adults' life stories, people forge distinctive narratives out of their individual experiences. The stories people tell to explain their place in the world "are often in deep and ambiguous conflict with the official interpretative devices of a culture" (Steedman 1987:6). Not only do new events and characters emerge that people must incorporate into existing stories, they are actively engaged in interpreting experiences (Butler 2005; Frank 2010; Somers 1994). As Sennett (2006) argues, they have narrative agency.

Emerging adults may work to revise a narrative; they can move between dominant stories or reinterpret them, reorganize and retell their subjective experiences, or do both simultaneously since different narratives involve different plots, characters, and moral frameworks. Failure and people's efforts to overcome it can be heightened periods of revision. When people cannot integrate events into an intelligible plot, or when a story of

the broader social context is lacking—as in unsettled cultural periods (Swidler 1986)—they tend to become confused and may struggle to produce coherent stories about their lives (Steinmetz 1992). To deal with this confusion, people attempt to reconstruct the past to fit with the emergent present and make some revised prediction of the future (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). In Mead's terms (1932), the emergent present causes the past to become a different past. People may adopt new narratives or modify old ones in an act of bringing separate and distant aspects of a story together until it makes "a new and pertinent sense" (Steedman 1987:138). Moving between institutions can structure this logical movement: either as a person reconstructs herself in preparation for a life in an institution or once a person enters a new institution and looks backward (Goffman 1961).

Rather than revise, emerging adults may engage in considerable work to maintain a narrative in the face of disconfirming evidence that their life is likely to continue along the trajectory of that story (Nielsen 2015). They can extend the same goals into the future and engage in co-narration, accounting for personal experiences that do not fit within the dominant narrative (O'Connor 1999). In order to hold onto a pre-existing narrative that does not align with experience, actors must simultaneously make sense of the dominant narrative they hold onto and their subjective failure to align their life with that narrative. In other words, they have to narrate a trajectory they are on but also not on. This process can involve contradiction and revision and may take time to work out, if it is ever fully resolved.

Eventually, people who maintain their aspirations and fail will be faced with the task of telling a new story. Narratives rely on a listener to hear them who will question an account that does not fit with who they believe is telling the story (Polletta et al. 2013). There may be an apparent discrepancy between the character and the narrative that is being performed (Goffman 1959). In this case, there is pressure for the narrator to revise his or her story. Yet as Steedman (1987) points out, revision depends on listeners and readers who accept the new order of events and entities within the plot of a revised story. The interactional styles of different groups a storyteller belongs to can impose limits on how they retell their story (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). Telling a convincing story takes work, and this work can take time, particularly with listeners familiar with an older version. In what follows, I uncover young adults' work in this area and the cultural resources that make it possible. I show how poor and working-class emerging adult women explain failure as they abandon their goals and how they manage their aspirations once they have failed in their pursuit of a particular goal.

DATA AND METHODS

Generally, studies of poor and working-class emerging adulthood capture narratives of ambition or failed transitions at a single point in time (Waters et al. 2011). By contrast, I utilize four waves of interviews to give a moving picture of emerging adulthood.

Longitudinal qualitative interviewing (LQI) involves gathering interview data from the same people at two or more points in time (Hermanowicz 2013). LQI data allow researchers to analyze meanings and interpretations as conditions change and people

move from one status to another. They also provide a developmental history that researchers can use to contextualize particular outcomes. As Clausen (1993) points out in his examination of the longitudinal interview study of children born in the late-1920s and early-1930s, even "scoundrels" appear as "victims" when the full course of their life is revealed. Changing fortunes and changing selves require that we incorporate time into our evaluative framework.

The process of longitudinal interviewing also allows research participants to reflect on their understanding of their own story over time as each interview becomes an event, or a past performance, in the narrative (Goffman 1959). Giele (2009) contends that the life story method allows us to better understand the twists and turns that constitute a person's life path. Yet stories themselves undergo twists and turns as people tell and retell them. The meanings and purposes for action at one telling may change in a different telling while some details may disappear and new ones emerge. The "structured self-image" that constitutes the life story is a dynamic mediator between the self and an objective social identity.

Three other researchers and I gathered life stories from 23 poor and working-class young adult women attending community college in Riverside, California, a large metropolitan area east of Lost Angeles.[2] Participation in the study was based on eligibility for income-based support to attend community college in California. Support for low-income students included CalWORKS, a program to support welfare recipients

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[2] This research is an outgrowth of a larger project, *Pathways to Postsecondary Success*, a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation-funded project under the direction of Daniel Solórzano, Amanda Datnow, and UC/ACCORD (see http://pathways.gseis.ucla.edu/).

attending college, and a state-sponsored fee waiver from the California Community Colleges Board of Governors, commonly referred to as the BOG waiver. Of the 23 women in the study, 13 had one or more children and three reported being married in September 2010. The women represented a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds: nine women identified as Latinas, seven as black, three as white, two as Asian-American, and two as multiracial. They averaged 23 years of age at the first interview and 25 years of age at the fourth interview. The ages of the women ranged from 18 to 29 years old at the start of the study and 22 to 31 years old at the last interview. Finally, the average time between the first and fourth interviews was 2.75 years. While just under three years is not an exceptionally long period in the pursuit of a career, it may appear very long to emerging adults who are making little or no progress and who feel tremendous pressure to get ahead. Regardless, it was sufficient time for some women to give up on a career goal that they had been committed to from at least the beginning of the study.

By focusing on women who were enrolled in community college at the outset of the study, I am well positioned to study the management of ambition and failure. Poor and working-class women in community colleges often link college-going to ambition as a way to claim a virtuous social identity (Deterding 2015; Nielsen 2015). The vocational character of community colleges links college attainment to particular career trajectories, which helps disadvantaged students imagine futures of high status work (Brint 2002; Brint and Karabel 1989). At the same time, relatively low rates of degree attainment mean that failure is commonplace (Brand et al. 2014). Community college students, who

are disproportionately poor and working-class, are more likely to fall short in the pursuit of their goals.

Poor emerging adult women also face some of the steepest barriers to independent, autonomous, and stable living (Desmond 2012; Edin and Lein 1997). They are more often tasked with caring for children on their own or caring for other family members, which positions them in structurally difficult positions to act on their ambitions. Often attempting to balance school, work, family, and welfare, poor young adult women encounter tremendous obstacles to achieving their goals, setting them up for failure. They also face specific challenges, and possible alternatives, to forming ambitious narratives when they fail. While including men or middle-class emerging adults would be useful for uncovering narrative processes of failure, the particular experiences of poor women deserve being explored in close detail. In this approach, I follow scholars who aim to understand variation within a group that can teach us a great deal precisely because they are on the margins (e.g., Binder and Wood 2013; Young 2004).

On four separate occasions between fall 2010 and spring 2014, each of the women shared their aspirations for the future and explained the origins of those aspirations as well as the events that affected their goal attainment. The final result was 92 interviews, 56 of which I gathered personally, including all 23 interviews collected in the fourth wave. Interviews lasted from one-and-a-half to three-and-a-half hours and took place in a location chosen by the respondent. Research team members inquired about interviewee's work and school experiences; what their lives were like growing up and their aspirations

for the future; and their perceptions of opportunity, sense of barriers, and recognition of supports. At each interview we asked the women to tell us again what their goals were and how they had arrived at those goals. When their goals changed from one interview to the next, we followed up with questions about past aspirations.

To analyze the data, I first constructed a timeline of events and plans for each participant at each point in time. Comparing timelines across all four waves, I looked for changes to participants' key events and plans described by the participants. In particular, I looked for the disappearance or rejection of previously held aspirations over the course of the study. I found that the respondents exhibited three main trajectories. The first included nine women who made progress toward their original goals over the course of the study and told stories that described incremental steps in a consistent direction (citation redacted). The second included seven women who made little or no progress toward their original goals but did not abandon them (citation redacted). The last trajectory included seven women who failed to reach their original goals and revised their aspirations.

I focus on this last group of interviewees in this paper. For these women, I used the timelines and interview transcripts to produce a narrative for each wave. While the timelines show how events and respondents' aspirations changed or remained stable over time, the narratives captured change and stability in the way the women interpreted these events and aspirations, or their narrative reasoning (Pugh 2013). I employed a situational analysis approach (Clarke 2003), which involved identifying the range of human, institutional, and discursive elements that constituted these women's experiences at each

point in time. I distinguished between popular discourses, institutional trajectories (such as educational pathways), and personal biographical details to see how these three narrative dimensions were organized and reorganized. Because of the central role that institutions play in channeling both popular discourses and personal biographies, I looked for the institutions that were prominent in each of the narratives. This approach is consistent with life course research, which has focused on the intervening role that social institutions play as youth undertake the passage into and through young adulthood (Elder and Giele 2009).

I identified three main institutional categories: 1) institutions related to work and the attainment of a career, such as health care and higher education, which I call *career institutions*; 2) institutions related to self-improvement and personal development, such as athletics and religion, which I call *practice institutions*; and 3) institutions related to improving the lives of others, such as family and social services, which I call *care institutions*. Below I discuss six women who managed failure, how they drew on these three types of institutions in the process, and what kinds of stories they were—or were not—able to tell with them.

FINDINGS

Narrative Agency through Career Institutions: Linda and June

Linda and June had aspirations for careers in the medical field: one to be a doctor and the other a registered nurse. Both failed to get into the competitive degree programs they needed to make progress and then gave up. Whereas June described a completely new career path, Linda narrated a path to a supposedly truer version of herself within the

medical field, but at a lower level. Failure in a career does not cut off the possibility of a new career narrative, but it is contingent upon access to alternative career institutions or trajectories within a career institution such as health care.

When I met her in June 2011, Linda, a 24-year-old Latina with a bachelor's degree from the University of California, was an unusual community college student. Her low grade point average and particularly bad grades in science courses disqualified her from applying to medical school. Linda was retaking classes at the community college and preparing to apply to a program aimed at helping underrepresented students reach medical school. Her backup plan was a master's in nursing and a career as a nurse practitioner, which, she said, was basically like being a doctor.

When I asked her where the goal of becoming a doctor came from, she told a story about her parents receiving their United States residence cards after immigrating from rural Mexico:

> Ever since I was little, I always knew that I wanted to be a doctor. I remember when I was in front of the judge that gave my parents their residence cards…and he asked me what is it that you want to do when you grow up? I told him I wanted to be a doctor, and as soon as I said that he said, 'ok well then I hope that you come back in…20 years, and you see me, you treat me.' And I turned around and I saw my parents smiling and I'm like what's going on? I didn't know what was going on, but they had gotten their residence cards. The judge had granted them. Ever since then I remember I said I wanted to be a doctor.

In the years following this encounter, academic success in high school gave her the sense that she could go to medical school and become a doctor, and she described a process of mutual reinforcement between her aspirations and her attitude toward school.

Once in college, however, Linda struggled both academically and emotionally. She described college as "the worst time of my life." It was the source of identity and self-esteem issues that stemmed from interactions with counselors and teachers, interactions that left her feeling vulnerable and marginalized. Additionally, she said these experiences caused her to turn inwards and she explained her difficulties not solely as the failure of the institution to support a first-generation college student but as a consequence of her damaged self-esteem. Like the struggling working-class young adults Silva (2013) interviewed, Linda relied on the dominant discourse of therapy to locate the source of academic failure in her damaged psyche and make sense of her unattained goals.

By the second interview, Linda was not admitted to either the post-baccalaureate pre-medical or nursing programs. One possibility would have been for Linda to return to the therapeutic narrative and turn away from her aspirations to focus on overcoming the traumatic experience of college. Instead, over the second and third interviews, she extended the time frame and number of steps to reach her goals. She said, "I'm gonna keep trying, but I think I'm gonna wait a year." She also imagined a new trajectory into the profession. "I think I'm gonna do a short phlebotomy course or something small to just get my foot wet in the hospital or in a doctor's office and that way get a stronger recommendation from them." Linda completed a certificate to become a certified nursing assistant and had been admitted to the licensed vocational nursing program at the community college. The certificate allowed her to find work as a nursing assistant in an assisted living facility making around $8 an hour. She still held onto the goal of earning a master's degree in nursing, but now she "figured I'd start from the bottom since I didn't

get accepted at the top." The community college's wide range of health care training programs and links to health care professions allowed Linda to reimagine a career path.

In November 2013, when I last met with Linda, she was 26 years old. When I asked her what goals she had accomplished and what goals she had not accomplished at that point in her life, she responded that she had not yet earned a master's degree, gotten a steady job, left her parents' house, or had children by the age of 26. Moreover, she had given up her goal of becoming a doctor. When I asked how she had dealt with failing in her pursuit of becoming a doctor, she replied, "I'm good about it because I have that goal of the ideal job that I want: public health nursing." Linda had learned about public health nursing and key figures in the history of public health in a class at the community college. As Frank (2010) argues, stories have the power to interpellate people into new identities, that is, call on them to assume a new role, an experience Linda described as a revelation.

> When I read about it, it just gave me that epiphany of, this is where I am,
> I'm going in the right direction, just keep trying. I guess it was a sign from
> God, like, you know what, this is where you belong, you should continue
> to strive for it.

Not only did Linda ground her revised ambitions in the divine, she also tied them to a narrative of collective uplift. She had begun reading about pioneers in public health and talked about the ambitious end of helping her semi-rural, largely Latino community.

After eight-and-a-half years of postsecondary education, her imagined future was now in public health nursing. Linda had revised the plot of her life story and made working as a public health nurse her passion as well as a means of finding a new identity.

The original goal of being a doctor had been transformed from an assertion of childhood dreams to a goal imposed by others.

> I don't know how I grew out of pleasing people and trying to be a doctor, cause I feel like I was just striving for it to please others instead of myself…but, I just don't see myself doing that kind of stuff, that's not where my passion lies. So, I've been okay about it. I've been happy.

Drawing on the career institutions linked to health care, Linda had narratively transformed failure into discovery of the apparently correct and true path. When I asked if she'd consider pursuing another career she couldn't think of anything else she would be willing and able to do. The narrative work that made nursing newly central to her identity made other work impossible for her to imagine. It also led her to focus on the well-being of her community rather than turn inward to deal with her damaged self-esteem or her hostility toward the university, like many of the working-class young adults Silva (2013) encountered. The range of possible trajectories and identities still available to her made it possible to reconstruct a narrative within the imagined future of a career in health care.

For June, the field of health care was a dead end. A Korean-American woman who was 19 years old at the start of the study, she had always aspired to earn a bachelor's degree but decided to focus on nursing once she began attending community college. According to June, nurses were "guaranteed" jobs, unlike other professionals such as teachers. Her plan to become a nurse was rooted in a pragmatic narrative of attaining a stable, well-paying job that would allow her to "make a lot of money, go travel everywhere," and work part time. The experience of her father's kidney transplant reinforced her positive view of nursing and her sister, a nursing assistant, taught her about the pros and cons of the profession.

June held onto the aspiration of becoming a nurse and was enrolled at the community college through the third interview, but by the fourth interview she had dropped out of community college. Over the course of the study, June had steadily revised the narrative of her life trajectory until nursing—and careers that require any type of college education generally—was undesirable. As she failed to take the steps necessary for becoming a nurse she distanced herself from nursing as incompatible with her character, rejected the role of higher education in social mobility, and identified alternative career institutions.

First, June explained that she was "not patient" enough for nursing and incapable of doing the hard and dirty work that nursing required. She then turned to the example of her immigrant parents to revise her aspirations. She described them as successful entrepreneurs and explained that her mom was "learning biology and chemistry" as she sold beauty products through Amway. Using popular images such as Steve Jobs and Oprah Winfrey as examples, June affirmed that it was possible to forego college and still be successful. In order to downplay the risks of entrepreneurship, she described Harvard graduates who had become "bums" and complained that the hiring process for most jobs relied on social networks rather than qualifications. By the fourth interview she asked, "Why go through all that money to study and apply for jobs when people who have friends in the corporation already have the upper hand to get hired?"

During the final interview, June was living at home and selling Amway with her mother. According to June, it was the first step on the way to successful business ownership and great wealth. She would eventually help people, not through nursing but

through philanthropy enabled by the wealth she aspired to. June managed her failure to finish college—like she had always planned—by revising the plot of her life around ambition in an entrepreneurial career institution.

Both Linda and June relied on career institutions to manage failure. Linda used the different certificate and degree programs of the community college to imagine different trajectories into nursing, eventually discovering a career that she could substitute for her original dream of becoming a doctor. In the process, she revised her biography to make sense of her newfound passion—what DeLuca and her colleagues (2016) refer to as an "identity project"—and move past the dominant youth-gone-sad discourse she associated with her undergraduate struggles. Conversely, June developed a narrative that invalidated her long-held plans to earn a bachelor's degree in nursing and legitimate an entrepreneurial pathway into the institution of self-employment. She made sense of her failure to finish college by rejecting the legitimacy of college as an institution of social mobility. Unlike Linda, June did not draw on a narrative of therapy, perhaps because as a Korean-American she contended more with model minority and Korean immigrant entrepreneurship discourses (Lew 2004). In both cases, their capacity for retelling their life stories in line with available career institutions allowed them to project ambition in the domain of work.

From Career to Practice Institutions: Mae and Kimberly

Whereas Linda and June were able to find a renewed source of worth in career aspirations, Mae and Kimberly responded to career failure through practice institutions.

When I met Mae, a black 20 year-old woman, in spring 2011 she was finishing her final semester of community college. She decided she wanted to be a makeup artist when she was a senior in high school. As a "lazy" honors student who described herself as "a nerdy loner in a cowboy school," she wasn't sure what she wanted to do after graduation. But after earning an associate's degree in cosmetology she said, "I love makeup. I just love the art of transforming things and people into something else that's not even recognizable." In particular, she had developed an interest in special effects makeup and planned to start a career in film and television once school ended. "That's my passion right there, creating monsters and cuts and things that make people go, oh my God!"

Five months later, she had an internship with a special effects studio. She worked a few days a week at McDonald's and dedicated the rest of her time to her fledgling career. This meant waking up at a quarter-to-five in the morning to begin her commute by train, subway, and bus over 60 miles there and back. Once at the studio, Mae went "way above and beyond." Describing her work, she said, "Other interns are like, oh my God, she does that? But then the big people there are like, you impress me so much." She "took to heart" the insistence of her community college professors that she "take initiative" and "always strive to be above" average. In just a few months she had "learned so much" and had the opportunity to work on a movie, among other projects. Mae was forming a narrative that stretched along from a loose commitment to makeup in high school to "learning a good work ethic" in college and applying it in a way that earned her distinction, and, finally, pointing toward identifiable trajectories into a career.

By the third interview, she was a regular employee at the special effects lab, which meant she was now "the first one on the payroll" when work came in. Yet work was inconsistent and Mae began to see the challenges to making it as a makeup artist. She continued working at McDonald's and looked for "outside work" to continue building her portfolio and expanding her professional network because, she said, "it's really not too much about what you know, it's more about who you know." Facing obstacles to making it as a makeup artist, Mae began to revise her story from one of encouragement to one of discouragement. "I've been told, and it's been hammered into my head since I started, don't become a makeup artist unless you really want to fight, unless that is your absolute passion." By adding details like this, Mae changed the basic plot of the narrative: Her ambition was not enough to avoid failure.

Filling in the new story structure, she blamed the recession for a lack of jobs and low pay, saying "It's just recession everywhere and people don't want to pay people what they're worth. They'll find people fresh out of school who just want the job and want the credit and they'll take the little pay." She also began to see her lack of training in a traditional makeup school as a liability. "I am self-taught, and they've taught me a lot at my job, but there's still a lot that I don't know" compared to applicants who went to makeup school. "What you know" mattered when describing failure, even if "who you know" was her strategy for success. As she worked to forge a new narrative to explain her failure to get ahead, contradictory strands of the story emerged, complicating the narrative work that Mae had to do.

Mae described success as getting away from McDonald's, where she had worked for nearly six years. "The second that I can officially quit McDonald's, that is my first feel of success." She also wanted to move out of the house she shared with her mother, brother, sister, and cousin. Reacting against the discourse of youth-gone-bad, Mae said, "Responsibility and independence, that's success to me right now." Beyond that, she hoped to work "on a set somewhere" and "just do what I enjoy." At the same time, Mae described herself as "more ambitious now." Working in Hollywood was still her "dream" and her "goal." Considering her chances of making a career she said, "if I want to make it a reality, not only do I have to know I'm dedicated, I need to let other people know because they're my ticket to meeting other people and getting more work." She still had her eyes on a career in special effects. "I never stop dreaming. I never stop trying to achieve. I don't think I'll ever get to a point and be like, I made it, I want to stop, this is it. I don't think I'd ever get to that point…. You just have to be determined, believe, and just never give up."

It was over a year-and-a-half later when I met Mae for the fourth time in March 2014. She had finally left McDonald's, but she had also quit working at the special effects studio. She explained that "it got too expensive" and she "didn't really see a lot of growth doing that." Mae decided to leave the studio after "a couple of incidents where they overlooked me." Revising her narrative, she described her work as a waste of time and money. "I was basically waking up five o'clock in the morning, spending money on the train ticket, subway ticket, bus ticket, travelling for hours just to go somewhere and

clean and sit around for like five hours." She added, "I figured I'd learn a bunch, work on some good stuff, then, I don't know. I think I had fairytale hopes for that."

For the past four months she had been working at a car dealership part-time as a cashier and part-time doing "everything you would think a receptionist would do." When I asked her where she saw herself in five years, Mae said, "I have no idea. I have absolutely no idea. If five years from now, if my life were the same, if I'm working at the same job doing the same thigs, I wouldn't be disappointed." She was in a better job than McDonald's but was no longer on a career path. Yet the drive she had organized her narrative around in the first three interviews was not gone.

Mae described it as a "crazy year" since the third interview but incorporated the different challenges she had faced into her narrative by turning to religion. She explained that her Christian background had "always been there" but that she had really focused on it "during the trial parts and then the struggling parts." She recalled learning from the church that "you go through things that'll either get you closer to God or push you far away from God." Religion had "really helped me to stand firm and to start seeing things from a different perspective." Although she had practiced the Christian faith since she was a child, now she was "stepping up and living it, living what I preach." Mae revised the plot of her narrative to be less about hard work on the studio floor and more about the work of God and her religious *practice*.

As Mae developed a revised narrative around religion to account for the shift from a passionate pursuit of a career in special effects makeup to stability without much

chance for mobility in a car dealership, she focused her ambition on her religious practice. She explained:

> The most important thing that I'm basically worried about as far as time is concerned, more than my financial growth or where I'm working, what I'm doing, is mostly my spiritual growth. Because I know with my spiritual growth, all the good things follow, being disciplined and me really chasing after God. That's mostly my goal: spiritual growth. Then all the good things, all what I'm supposed to do, all that follows. So what I will be doing, I don't know, it's wherever God leads me to do in five years from now, I really don't, honestly don't have an answer.

Religion, rather than a career institution, provided Mae with a source of practice and meaning that she could rely on to change her life course as she failed as a makeup artist. Like June, Mae generally viewed college as a defunct institutional trajectory. She said, "honestly, I know this sounds terrible, but I know people who have bachelor's and stuff and they're still struggling, like people don't even look at your qualifications anymore." While Mae could no longer narrate a career in Hollywood, she had revised her narrative in a way that closed off the possibility of returning to school. By rejecting schooling in this way, Mae was free to be ambitious through religious practice.

Mae was also learning martial arts. Like religion, martial arts was a source of practice and self-improvement. She said, "You're just learning and training, you're learning about getting better at what you're doing." On top of soul craft, Mae was immersed in body craft. Mae described "a group of people who love doing the same thing you do and it feels great." She continued,

> We all love this, we all talk about it, we all have one goal in mind which is to get better, to work hard, to go to the next level, you know, we push each other, we sweat together, we hurt together, and it's just really great just to have a group of people who have the same goals in mind as you and have the same drive as you do and want the same things.

Because of the practice character of martial arts and the moral force of the community, Mae could substitute dedication to the martial arts for dedication in the career of studio makeup.

In spite of the challenges Mae faced between the third and fourth interview, she said she felt like an adult because she had "so many responsibilities" and she was "taking care of them on my own" even though she still lived at home. She was also confident, saying "If things get thrown at you where you either sink or you swim and, I'm still swimming, I'm still here, and I'm still doing stuff, and I've seen, you know, this is a part where I feel successful right now." Mae failed to make it in Hollywood, but had succeeded in telling an ambitious story of practice and responsibility through religion and sport.

Kimberly engaged in a similar pattern of narrative work using practice institutions as she failed in her aspiration to become a social worker. She was a 21 year-old single mother of an infant daughter when we first met. A black woman who moved to Moreno Valley from Los Angeles when she was in middle school, Kimberly felt like "the ghetto is following us…because when the black people start coming the white people started going." Although Kimberly sounded resentful and wanted "to get out of there so bad," she also pointed to these changes to explain her goal of becoming a social worker. Kimberly was working toward a bachelor's degree in social work so she could open a non-profit "to help the community." Expressing her ambivalence, she said, "I hate Moreno Valley. But really, I would like to be a part of people who help Moreno Valley become better."

By choosing social work, Kimberly followed the paths laid out by her mom, who was a social worker with the elderly for Riverside County, and her aunt, who she described as a "self-proclaimed pastor" whose "intentions were to target troubled kids, like gang bangers or crack babies or parents or kids whose parents are doing bad and to uplift them and bring them up and make them think or give them hope so they can do better." Together, the city and her family provided the narrative material for Kimberly to make social work a meaningful career trajectory. Helping others was central to how she understood herself and her future. "I'm very determined and I have to succeed. I cannot be a failure…. Whenever I see somebody in need…and I have enough to give, even if it's my last, you can have it because that's just how I am."

After the first interview, Kimberly's car broke down so she stopped attending class. Kimberly had moved out of her mother's house because it was "time to branch out," and she found "affordable living" with a friend from church. The apartment was in a "rowdy" neighborhood, but she felt "blessed." Her daughter's father had been released from jail after 11 months and they were trying to make it work as a family. She was also working at a hair salon and doing extra jobs on the side. Nevertheless, she struggled financially and had to rely on welfare and family members to make ends meet.

Although her progress was delayed and she still expected to be at the community college for three more years, Kimberly was still pursuing social work, the narrative stretching ahead unchanged. She not only continued to see it as a way to "help people and hopefully mentor kids" but also as a source of stability, "benefits, and 401K, retirement." She said that as a social worker, "I'll be able to pay my own life insurance." Altogether,

Kimberly still imagined a responsible life in a career institution. She was "really determined" and felt "like education is my ticket to furthering my career goals and furthering my career."

Eight months later, during the third interview, Kimberly explained again that she had once more stopped out of college. She said, "Since we've talked my car got impounded twice, two different cars, and I had to drop out of school because it was so hard trying to get to school with a baby sitter, with no car." Kimberly lived with her mother again and several other roommates. "We all have food stamps," she declared. She had also broken up with her daughter's father because he was a "deadbeat" and had "tried to hit" her at the grocery store. She was "broke" and "doing bad" as opposed to boomeranging like her middle-class peers. Although she expressed some satisfaction that her daughter had "a smile on her face," she struggled to describe her life in terms other than the pathologizing language of the criminal justice and welfare systems that she routinely encountered. Kimberly planned to return to school and finish the associate's degree "regardless" of any obstacles because "there's so many things I can do with my education if I finish my education." But she had to get enough financial stability to get back on the path to a career in social work.

A year-and-a-half later, during the fourth interview, Kimberly's story was very different. Kimberly was 24 years old and worked for Riverside County "maintaining the chart room" in a hospital after a long period of unemployment. She didn't "really love it," she said, "It's just something for financial stability" that would allow her "to put my

game plan together for my business ventures." No longer interested in pursuing social work, Kimberly planned "to go back to school for business."

Similar to the way June had turned to entrepreneurship, Kimberly revised the plot of her life around a business empire but without the models that June relied on to image a way forward in a career institution. And like Linda, she attributed her earlier aspiration for social work to the desires of others. When I asked her about her previous aspiration to become a social worker, she said, "I really think that that was because my mom did social work. I mean, I do have a compassion for people, and I do want to help people, I always have." Outside of social work, however, Kimberly fell back on the youth-gone-sad narrative to maintain her sense of helping others.

> My roommate, he has a daughter who's 19…I encourage her to live right
> with these boys and to live right, just pray for herself, you know, 'cause
> for a long time I had very low self-esteem, and her and all her little friends
> they come over here and I talk to 'em about empowering themselves.

Rather than relying on a therapeutic narrative as a way to focus on herself, though, she used it as a way to focus on others and maintain her aspiration to care for others in a limited form while she developed new career goals.

Although Kimberly imagined a new career trajectory, she felt like she was failing before she had really begun. She said, "I haven't started my businesses…I'm not going to school now, I haven't gotten a teacher's training program finished, I haven't got my business licenses." Instead, Kimberly told a different story of overcoming deviance and sin through practice in the church.

> Before I started going to church, I just found myself being wild again. I
> wasn't a wild teenager anymore, I was a mother. Not like I was going out
> every night because I didn't have money to go out every night but I would

go out sometimes a lot more than I should have as a single mom…and I would go out with boys and do stuff you wasn't supposed to be doing with boys and go out to the club and drink and wasn't doing like heavy drugs, cocaine or nothing, but marijuana, and it was no point, I didn't have no purpose for life 'cause I was just partying my life away. I wasn't being the best mom I could have been and I started to see that and I started to feel self-pity on myself and feeling condemned for my actions.

This story of youth-gone-bad not only put her delayed progress in context, it served as a basis for initiating a life of practice. Going to church made Kimberly feel better and she started feeling like her "life had purpose again."

This purpose emerged from two directions. One was the study of how to "live a life that's pleasing to God without all the drinking." She discovered that you could "read the Bible and identify with people who are in the bible and you know what your purpose is." Like Linda who found strong characters in the history of public health, Kimberly found a new identity through religious tales. She encountered figures like Abraham who "had so much faith in stuff that he did not see," and she identified new narratives to interpret her own life through. The other direction was through practicing celibacy with her fiancé. She had been "committing so many sexual sins" before they met but together, they were "trying to live our lives as godly as possible" even though it was "hard sometimes." Through challenging religious practice and the adoption of Christian narratives of purposeful living, Kimberly revised the plot of her life further through the church. She managed being "kind of depressed" by overcoming sin through stories of faith and practice in interaction. As a consequence, she felt like "a real full-grown adult" and no longer like she was "stuck in a standstill."

Whereas Mae fully abandoned career institutions and resorted purely to the practice institutions of church and martial arts as a means of narrating a future, Kimberly attempted to draw from both career and practice institutions as she failed to make headway toward a life as a social worker. Yet it was only through religious practice that Kimberly could tell a story of overcoming failure. Both women revised their life stories to minimize the importance and worth of career trajectories that they had previously been determined to pursue. In their place, stories of practice in religion and sport provided the ground for successfully overcoming failed aspirations. With neither career nor practice institutions, the women are left with caring for others as a source of virtue.

From Career to Care Institutions: Hannah and Christine

Hannah had "always had big dreams" of being a clothing buyer for a big department store and Christine had wanted to be a nurse, she said, "all my life." Both women faced major obstacles to finishing community college and left before finishing the degrees they needed to pursue the careers they had long been committed to. While both did narrative work to overcome failure, they struggled to imagine a way forward and turned to caring for others to forge identities of worth. Yet because caring for others offered less narrative space to be ambitious, their failures were harder to manage.

Hannah did not entirely abandon her original goal of a career in fashion. Yet she was disconnected from career institutions that would allow her to tell any sort of story of progress. After five years of community college, Hannah said in the first interview that she was on the verge of earning an associate's degree and transferring to a nearby

university. She was "really proud" and was now considering studying law after taking a class that she liked. Although she only recently imagined a career in law, she quickly embedded it more fully in her narrative.

> Well, just recently, I found out that my grandmother…had an affair with some guy, had their child and that was my dad. And he was a lawyer, and he was, like, part of a, I don't know, I'm just gonna assume it's through the blood, but I really got interested in it.

Hannah found a tale to support her pursuit of a law degree and a career in law embedded in her family history and genetic code.

After the first interview, however, Hannah left college without completing her associate's degree or the university transfer requirements. Detached from higher education, Hannah felt "like it's a domino effect, just like everything around me is going down" and she did not "want to go down with it." Hannah could not afford to attend college but she still planned to major in apparel merchandizing and management and aspired to go to law school, suggesting Baylor, USC, and UCLA as possibilities. Hannah had extended these goals in time so that she could get the conditions right to start over, but she had not abandoned them.

Hannah did not return to school before the final interview and she struggled to reimagine a way forward. Hannah harbored doubts about ever finishing college, saying "Deep down inside that is something I really want to do but I feel like it's so unrealistic financially." She compared looking for schools to attend to window shopping, which left her discouraged and frustrated. Leaning more toward the idea that school was unattainable required Hannah to look for ways to revise the plot of her life. She no longer aspired to work as a buyer for a major department store and instead imagined something

smaller and more immediately available: an online store of her own. Rather than make major changes to global supply chains, as she had dreamed of before, she now imagined "trendsetting" and "being able to help out the community a little bit" by not having "these trashy clothes out there." Hannah revised the plot in a less ambitious but possibly more attainable direction. Still, there was very little specificity in her imagined future apart from returning to school.

Like Kimberly, Hannah had few resources for imagining a trajectory into this entrepreneurial career but wanted to try it because, she explained, "I'm tired of someone telling me that I can't. So that's why I'm really open to running my own business or something that isn't gonna be too costly." She was "more than willing" to teach herself, nevertheless, she concluded,

> Just all these different ideas I feel like they're desperate ideas but, I mean, there's no other option I have, it almost feels like. It's like a cause and effect: I want to go to school but I can't until I make this money and then I can't start this internet business until I have money or overhead.

With her aspirations and plans to achieve them seeming further out of reach, Hannah turned to her emotional needs, her "need to be happy," and toward her significant others. In particular, she wanted to care for her mother.

> I felt because my mom's Asian, the older child always has that burden on them to like take care of their parents. I haven't been able to do that yet and I feel like because she's getting older, I see that, but I forget that I'm getting older, too. And it's like, I'm growing up and not doing what I want to do. I want to take care of my mom.

Her friends were also more like "family" and, she said, "I kind of feel like that's what anchors me here." The plot of her life was increasingly tied to successful relationships. Family, both nuclear and fraternal, emerged in the final interview as the only institution

she could use to narrate a successful future. Yet she was unable to do the care work that met her obligations. As a result, Hannah was largely left to learn from her past experiences and focus on emotional recovery along the logic of youth-gone-sad (Silva 2012).

Lastly, at 28 years old when I first interviewed her, Christine lived in her parents' garage with her two children. She described herself as Hispanic and white and, like Hannah, she dreamed of becoming a nurse. However, she was unable to continue with college for financial reasons that included a defaulted student loan from a medical assisting program at a for-profit college and an unpaid fine for shoplifting. Paying off her loan and her fine were difficult because she was unable to work after suffering back-to-back seizures. She quit her job, she said, because she said she didn't want her employer to be liable in the event she had another seizure and got injured. The only financial support she received was about $500 from the state for her children and food stamps. She said, "I have my kids to think of, their needs, and then by the time their needs are taken care of, I have nothing left." Even if she could afford school, Christine said her criminal record would disqualify her from a job as a nurse.

Christine had neither returned to the community college nor found a job by the fourth interview. To make sense of this she altered her past. She explained that prior to the first interview she had been diagnosed with depression and that it had never really gone away. More recently, she believed she had been suffering from anxiety. Employing the language of sickness and still living in her parents' garage, she did not feel like an adult because she was not taking care of things and had no money, even though she

believed that adulthood was more about maturity than income. When I asked her what goals she felt like she had accomplished up to that point, she replied in a barely audible voice, "Uh, nothing." Getting a job, she said, would have given her "a sense of pride" because she would be able to pay her "own way." At the same time, she insisted, "I work around here, I don't just lay around or anything. I clean."

For Christine, a "good job" was working as a "housekeeper, like a maid." This was consistent, she said, with her history of doing cleaning work that began when she cleaned RVs after high school. She recalled, "It's mostly what I've done my whole life, the majority of my life. I liked that job." While cleaning RVs had been a small detail in her work history at the outset of the study, it now became the core of her work identity. She said she tried to get a job at an upscale hotel but was told she needed experience as a maid. By the final interview, caring for the household by cleaning was way to reject the image of laziness and irresponsibility that unemployment and dependence suggested.

Yet cleaning the house was a limited source of virtue for Christine. Nursing was still something she "would love to do" but at this point, she said, "I'm not sure if I'm going to be one." She now wanted to move away because of "no jobs" and "the economy." She felt "like it's a prison here" and "sort of trapped." She still planned to re-enroll in school and imagined herself in ten years working in the medical field, having more children, owning a car, and "just living, having my own life." Yet she had few narrative resources to describe a path forward and Christine had begun to introduce a narrative of escape and renewal. In the end, she made a claim for self-worth through

caring for her children and working to take care of her family but held out hope for an ambitious future.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In a society that elevates ambition to a dominant source of ethical social membership, managing failure is a serious challenge. This is particularly important for poor and working-class emerging adults who are transitioning to adulthood with high aspirations, declining life chances, and culture-wide pathologizing explanations for their failure to get ahead. In this study, I examine the important role that different types of institutions play for low-income women to tell life narratives and deal with obstacles to reaching their goals. I distinguish between career institutions, practice institutions, and care institutions to explain the different ways that the women I interviewed narrated ambitious and worthy lives. Career institutions offer the clearest narrative material to tell an ambitious story in American society. When telling a plausible story in a career is too difficult, practice institutions provide an alternative source of ambitious display, if only temporarily. Care institutions such as the family, by contrast, offer a source of worth but little in the way of ambition. In the absence of career or practice institutions, people have few cultural resources to express ambition and reject stereotypes of the poor as lazy, irresponsible, and incapable.

Narrating one's life in career, practice, and care institutions to generate social worth in a society fixated on ambition and work is a significant accomplishment for poor and working-class emerging adults. I have argued that failure takes narrative work, and poor and working-class young adults will respond to the pressure to tell an ambitious

story. Since ambition requires commitment to an institutionalized narrative to garner recognition, it is consequential for our sense of self. Our capacity for narrative agency makes this work possible. Over time, the women in this study variously revised their narratives, extended their plans in time, and worked to resolve contradictions. We cannot appreciate this level of work with a snapshot approach to studying emerging adulthood. With these findings, I have contributed to a better understanding of how poor and working-class emerging adults navigate the challenges of becoming adults in an increasingly unequal society, one that nevertheless demands extraordinary ambition.

My findings contribute to research on the role of institutions in the lives of emerging adults by Deluca et al. (2016) among others by showing how they use industry, religion, family and other domains to form identities and imagine future trajectories. Sennett (2003) adopts the concept *Lebensführung*, which he translates as a "life narrative in an institution." Stable institutions help resolve "the experience of freefall, of moving jerkily or aimlessly forward in time"; they give a person "a sustained place in the world," and satisfy "a basic need for organizing one's life narrative" (pp. 165-166). Although a return to instability in capitalist institutions since the 1960s has destabilized this narrative source of self and virtue (Sennett 1998), today's' emerging adults continue to imagine futures in churches, martial arts dojos, families, and, above all, careers.

Hughes (1937:409-410) defined a career as "the moving perspective in which the person sees his life as a whole and interprets the meaning of his various attributes, actions, and the things which happen to him." Careers are typically thought in terms of jobs that connect individuals to institutional structures (Hughes 1997). However,

Goffman (1961) recognized that the concept of career has come to indicate both the trajectory through professional stages and the course of self-image and felt identity among members of a social category. Career is a particularly useful concept, then, for institutional approaches to studying the self. It helps us connect structured stages in the life of work with the life of the self. Career institutions not only allow people to define career stages and anticipate achievement, they give people a sense of social worth and may even function as symbolic statements (Newman 1999a). Linda's decision to pursue public health nursing or June's desire for entrepreneurship, for example, were more than simply blueprints for advancement in a job. They were statements about their social worth.

A practice institution allows for what Sennett (2003:13-14) describes as "an element of craft, of doing something well for its own sake" and "provides the individual with an inner sense of self-respect" and "becoming inside." Smith (2009:85) suggests that religion offers models for healthy living and accountability that help failing emerging adults move past self-described "stupid and self-destructive choices" (see also, Howell 1973; Silva 2012). Kimberly's use of religiously-motivated abstinence was a response to a period of deviant sexual sins. For some, religion serves as an institutionalized form of practice similar to other institutionalized forms of practice such as athletics (Sloterdijk 2013). Mae's narrative of overcoming failure in Hollywood demonstrates how both religion and sport can be sources of ambitious practice. Illouz (2008) similarly describes the development of modern therapy in near-athletic terms, as professional men and women work on their inner-selves, in part, to be more productive and capable adults. For

middle-class adults, therapy can be part of an ambitious lifestyle. Poor and working-class emerging adults, by contrast, may not be able to use therapeutic narratives in similarly ambitious ways because of how they encounter and adopt therapeutic narratives in the institutions that they rely on such as welfare. The women in this study regularly drew on youth-gone-sad discourse, but only as a way to explain past failure and not as a means of charting a way forward.

Institutions that allow for goal-directed, rule-bound self-improvement efforts function in similar ways. Work, education, religion, athletics, therapy, and other institutions may be sites of career attainment and practice, and therefore resources for the expression of ambition. Care institutions, by contrast, hold fewer possibilities for ambitious storytelling while providing people with a source of moral worth. Whether oriented toward caring for oneself or others, care institutions involve the displacement of personal ambition in favor of a narrative of sacrifice and what Sorokin (1950) called "good neighborliness" and "altruistic love." Care work such as low-status health care may provide little in the way of career prospects, but it can make a statement about one's virtue. For poor emerging adults, the family is an especially important site for engaging in care (Edin and Lein 1997; Hays 2003). Taking care of aging parents, as Hannah hoped to do, or small children, as Christine did, can impact one's ability to pursue or imagine ambitious trajectories. At the same time, family provides poor emerging adults with an institution that is socially valued and worthy of commitment even when it interferes with career and practice. People may create a family out of friends, as Hannah demonstrates, or even pets to give their narratives a sense of purpose and direction (Irvine 2013). In the

process, people may forego their own ambitions for those of other family members like children or spouses in the same way low-wage workers may embrace the ambitions of their employers (Newman 1999b).

There may be considerable overlap in the use of career, practice, and care institutions (Bourdieu 2000). Life in an institution such as the church, for example, can accommodate all three types of narrative. In managing failure, people can move among and within career, practice, and care institutions. Yet ambition and virtue in an institution requires commitment that makes disengagement from trajectories a narrative accomplishment. Telling a life narrative in an institution produces a recognizable self and a durable identity that must be managed through failure.

This study also contributes to the literature on emerging adulthood by making failure a central concept. Focusing on failure is important because it emphasizes the emotional and biographical commitments that some emerging adults make to their aspirations rather than treating them as flirtations. Treating their aspirations as unserious obscures the problem of managing failure in emerging adulthood. Moreover, taking the aspirations of emerging adults more seriously helps us to make sense of a topic that is anathema to how we understand ourselves as Americans. As Newman (1999a:8) notes, "Our optimistic heritage stands in the way of recognizing how frequently economic failure occurs." The promise of achievement is central to our national faith, which makes failure a challenging topic for Americans to face. We have a much less developed symbolic vocabulary for failure than we do for celebrating success. Yet as I have shown, this is less true for the poor and working-class than it is for the failing middle-class.

Although failure in middle-class emerging adulthood can be described in terms that obscure failure and uphold ambition, failure for the poor and working-class is richly described through a wide range of pathologies. For this reason, focusing on failure among poor and working-class emerging adults is necessary, since their experience and possibilities for presentation are distinct from their wealthier peers. It also shifts attention from the discourse of these youth as failures to their *successful management of* failure.

If institutions are so important for the narration of failure, how might institutions support failing emerging adults. In the absence of better career opportunities, institutions may be able to provide more narratives of socially valued adulthood. Frank (2010) provides the concept of "narrative habitus" to describe the collection of stories that identify a person and give shape to their life. In particular, more and better stories of failure leading to care as a worthy trajectory may be the most important for a couple of reasons. For one, the greatest consequences of failure appear to be most likely among emerging adults who cannot revise their life stories through either career or practice institutions. The women in this study who relied on care institutions—Hannah and Christine—were also the women who struggled most to manage the youth-gone-bad and youth-gone-sad explanations for their failure to reach their goals. Stories of mental illness or self-blame due to irresponsibility likely have very real consequences for their well-being. More effective care narratives may help them to manage pathologizing stories.

For another reason, caring may have benefits beyond managing pathology. Sorokin (1950:213) discovered that unselfish love and sanctity led to "a remarkable vitality, a long duration of life, an unperturbable peace of mind, and an ineffably rich

happiness." After examining the lives of men and women born around the Great Depression and followed for a half-century, Clausen (1993) found that a life well-lived involved career, practice, and care. Today, practice and, especially, care are secondary to ambition in a career. Family members, welfare caseworkers, drug and alcohol counselors, and other institutional actors can and should help failing emerging adults tell narratives of care that can challenge the demand for ambition in a career when structural barriers continually emerge.

Beyond care, social movement narratives can help poor and working-class emerging adults challenge youth-gone-bad and youth-gone-sad stories by bringing personal biographies in line with narratives of collective identity and structural barriers (Gowan 2010; Polletta 1998). Linda appears well on her way to a narrative of communal struggle that will place her failure to become a doctor in a radically different light, one that elides problems of self-esteem or false-consciousness. Kimberly had the beginnings of a collective struggle narrative when she aspired to be a social worker. But without a social movement to link her story to or a viable career path to do social work, she limited her care for others to spreading a warning of youth-gone-sad to those nearest to her. Institutions that tie care and collective identity together for poor and working-class emerging adults will likely have a powerful effect on their lives.

Chapter 3, in full, is currently being prepared for submission for publication of the material.

Conclusion – The Educated Person and the Pursuit of Freedom

In this dissertation, I have explored *how* the 23 poor and working-class young adult women I interviewed over a three-and-a-half year period narrated their lives over time. As more young adults attend postsecondary institutions and more jobs require at least some college, life narratives in young adulthood increasingly run through higher education. How that narrative takes shape is contingent on the story that students bring with them from life outside of school. As I showed in chapter 2, the community college is a narrative hub, which means that students can bring stories from other spheres together using the institutional resources that support and shape student aspirations. The women's trajectories through community college appeared as the logical outcome of the stories that they formed elsewhere. Whether students experience community college as a status competition, as a connection with an influential institutional actor, as a source of identity transformation, or as one of several options for building a future, their experience is shaped by the stories they are already telling.

I also made a case for *why* the women in this study told the stories they told. Their particular experiences and their narrative expression were embedded in broader narratives of ethical social belonging through postsecondary attainment. I argue that there is a broad cultural imperative to be ambitious that the women responded to when they accounted for themselves and their aspirations for the future. A widely accepted college-for-all ideology and a widely recognized social identity that higher education gives access to legitimate disadvantaged young adults' claims to ambition through higher education. Not only is a

college degree a greater necessity for a job that meets the requirements of ambition today than in the past, the cultural standing of higher education in today's "schooled society" (Baker 2014) makes the figure of the "educated person" more desirable than ever.

When the women in this study encountered obstacles that delayed or halted their progress toward a college degree or a particular career, they either held steady to, or gave up on, their aspirations. Those who held steady did so both because they recognized the necessity of a college degree for a job that will allow them to achieve middle-class status, but also because it showed a commitment to moral self-improvement. Those who failed and gave up on their aspirations responded to the same sets of pressures by attempting to narrate a new way forward.

Whether poor and working-class young adults hold steady or fail, they have to do narrative work. Holding steady means that they have to extend plans into the future and give reasons for their delayed progress. In the process, they distinguish themselves from people who would quit under the same circumstances or challenge the stereotyped images of other poor and minority people that are expected to fail by refusing to give up. Because holding steady indicates virtue, they imagine that they have the moral standing to manage relationships with others. Their ambitious stories include tales of negotiating major life decisions like marriage so they can finish school and tales of employers who see their go-getter character. In general, the narrative work they do makes holding steady the only decision that makes sense because it's who they are, an identity that others will recognize.

Failing means telling a new story of ambition, if possible. Popular discourses of failure among poor youth portray them as deeply pathological, as youth-gone-bad or youth-gone-sad. Whether or not poor and working-class young adults succeed in telling a new ambitious story depends on the institutions that they have access to. Career institutions satisfy the need for social mobility and the imperative to be ambitious whereas practice institutions allow for displays of ambitious self-improvement but without any obvious social benefit. Care institutions allow people to displace ambition to others and make an alternative set of moral claims rooted in sacrifice, but leave people without a story of personal ambition. Forging a new ambitious narrative out of failure requires not only access to and knowledge of institutions but a rejection of the stories of poor youth pathology that permeate mainstream culture and the institutions managing the poor, such as welfare or the criminal justice system. In the process of telling a new story, poor and working-class young adults may reimagine themselves by revising their pasts and discovering who they believe they "really" are. In other words, they have narrative agency.

This dissertation contributes to the sociology of higher education and the study of community colleges, in particular, in several ways. First, I contribute to the growing body of literature that seeks to understand student experiences with higher education. Sociological studies of postsecondary students have tended to focus on questions of social stratification, seeking explanations for unequal outcomes in terms of degree type and career attainment. In relation to community colleges, this concern has its roots in the ambiguous institutional space that the community college filled between high schools and

four-year institutions (Brint and Karabel 1989). The idea that community colleges were guiding students toward vocational paths and careers that did not require bachelor's degrees raised fears that students desiring higher-status positions would be diverted to lower-status jobs. Recent scholarship has examined other benefits to college attendance and attainment, particularly in the areas of health, family, and life satisfaction (Hout 2012), but generally sociologists have given much less attention to the meaning of college in students' lives. More specifically, sociologists have largely missed the relationship between college, ambition, and virtue that motivates behaviors like holding steady (however, see Deterding 2015). I show that higher education is a major stage in a morality tale linking cultural demands for high aspirations and personal biography, with consequences for the type of person poor and working-class young adults imagine themselves to be.

Second, I follow Alexander, Bozick, and Entwisle's (2008) suggestion that sociologists look at students' lives outside of college. I show that institutions such as the family, welfare, work, immigration, and criminal justice are critical sources of meaning as poor and working-class community college students make sense of their college experience. While sociologists expect students to have rich lives that they bring with them to college, they rarely consider how these institutions function in their lives independently of the college to shape educational experiences and decision making. The way students make sense of college, especially community college, may have less to do with the college itself than with life elsewhere. Similarly, college aspirations often have as much to do with life outside of school as within. My findings support Frye (2012) who

argues that educational aspirations are useful for solving problems in other domains, such as the family. Yet, my work goes further and shows the work that people must do when aspirations go unmet over time. Aspirations are useful only insofar as they fit within a plausible narrative. If aspirations are moral claims about the self and a source of moral identity, then aspirations are a challenge to the belief and presentation of a moral self when they start to appear out of reach.

This notion of plausibility relates to the third major contribution of this dissertation. I argue that the institutional structure of community colleges supports plausibly ambitious narratives. Community colleges, because of their open-access and vocational character, offer pathways into higher-status careers and a language of high-status achievement that many poor and working-class young adults can use to forge aspirations. The link between college degrees and high-status jobs allows poor young adults to incorporate otherwise out of reach careers into their narratives, since college provides plausible steps that they can take into their desired professions. Their open-access character means that students can leave the community college, or never enroll in the first place, and still tell a story of future college attainment. As an institution, the community college is especially *legible* for poor and working-class young adults who are attempting to imagine upward mobility. Programs such as counseling lay out steps and transitions on the way to recognizable careers, courses describe the ins and outs of specific careers, and institutional figures such as teachers often provide direct models of work in a particular field.

Many of the women in this study derived knowledge about careers and how to attain them from the community college. This suggests that the community college today is a largely unappreciated source for telling a life story in an institution for many young adults. As Sennett (1998, 2003) argues, the large bureaucratic organizations of the past that allowed working-class people to tell life stories have been fragmented and destabilized in the late-capitalist, post-Fordist era. For poor and working-class young adults who face irregular low-wage work with few opportunities for advancement, restrictive and time-limited welfare programs, a criminal justice system that makes finding employment or housing extremely difficult, or families that provide few examples of long-term stability, the community college is an exceptionally useful institution for telling a life story with an ambitious future. The legibility may even make it more likely that they will succeed. As Morgan (2005: 100) found, "Individuals who can easily envision themselves pursuing a specific future course of behavior will have high levels of commitment to that course of behavior and will accordingly put forth more effort in preparation for it." The community college is a critical source for envisioning future courses of behavior.

The fourth major contribution of this dissertation extends to the sociology of emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood is that period of life between the age of 18 and 34 years old marked by increasing delays in establishing normative features of adulthood, such as launching a career and forming a family in an independent household (Waters et al. 2011). Recent research has begun to puncture the prevailing view of emerging adulthood by showing how this period of life differs by race, class, and gender (Silva

2013). I build on these insights by showing that while emerging adults in general face an imperative to be ambitious, the discursive resources for poor and working-class young adults who fail in emerging adulthood differ. Whereas the dominant discourse of failure for middle-class young adults allows them to maintain an ambitious narrative, it is deeply pathologizing for the poor and working class.

Moreover, I argue that by treating emerging adult failures as evidence of youthful exploration and self-discovery, sociologists neglect the commitments that some emerging adults make to their aspirations. Many of the women in this study ground their aspirations deep in their biography and even, on a few occasions, in their genes. Their aspirations reflected who they were as people and followed inevitably from the arc of their life as they understood it. This commitment is due to the demands of displaying ambition. Rooting aspirations in biography and an understanding of one's true character may signal to others that they really are ambitious, not only because of the necessities of status seeking but as an existential necessity. When popular expectation is that you will fail, existential drive—the motivation to be who one really is—may be the only way to convince others that their ambition is genuine. Poor and working-class emerging adults are faced with greater challenges telling plausibly ambitious stories and the more that they can show commitment the more likely others will accept their story. Attending to abandoned aspirations as failure is a way to foreground the seriousness that some emerging adults place on their dreams and attunes researchers to the discourses that confront some emerging adults and not others.

These questions of plausibility, pathology, and legible institutions point to a fifth, more theoretical contribution of this dissertation. Through each of the chapters I have developed a *narrative institutionalism* that demonstrates how culture, institutions, and individual biography are linked and produce particular kinds of subjects over time. Narrative institutionalism provides a framework for analyzing social life through individual experience by recognizing the shared and institutionalized narrative material that personal biographical detail must be read through. To clarify what I mean by narrative institutionalism, I turn briefly to a discussion of Rosa's (2004) theory of self-interpretation and Glaeser's (2014) hermeneutic institutionalism.

Culture, Institutions, and Interpretation

Rosa (2004) proposes that there are explicit and implicit forms of self-interpretation that occur at the level of the social and the individual. They include discourses and texts, such as laws, literature, and theory (social and explicit); institutions (social and implicit); personal beliefs (individual and explicit); and embodied qualities such as emotions, tastes, and body-practices in the form of a habitus (individual and implicit). These forms of self-interpretation are the ways that people understand their relation to society. They function as guides that give institutions and individual lives their point, meaning, and character. The theory of college-for-all is an example of a self-interpretation at the social level that institutions like community colleges adopt and individuals embrace by narrating their lives as a trajectory through college and experiencing emotional responses to success or failure in college.

Although they intersect, self-interpretations are underdetermined by one another, which means that multiple interpretations are possible across the domains of society and self. At the level of the social, institutions can accommodate different theories or forms of discourse while theories may take different institutional forms. A similar process occurs at the level of the individual, where language, beliefs, convictions, and ideas align or conflict with the habitus. Across domains, these relationships of difference and determination shape how the social and the individual relate to one another, since "explicit individual self-images as well as habits and feelings are influenced by the dominant social ideas as well as institutions and practices – and vice versa" (p. 697). This means that an individual may interpret him or herself in relation to their physical and emotional experiences or their relationship to discourses and institutions in a variety of ways with greater or lesser degrees of fit. Someone like June with access to a range of self-interpretations from nursing to immigrant entrepreneurship eventually told a narrative in which college was, in fact, a bad bet.

Divergent self-interpretations across the four levels may generate pressures that lead to social and/or individual adaptations, creative reformulations, or pathological consequences that compel radical transformations of theories, practices, and identities. Pathological states are, of course, particularly troubling since they lead to "consistently contradictory impulses on the level of action" and entail human suffering (p. 699). For individuals, if articulated self-interpretations diverge too greatly from embodied, pre-reflective or social interpretations, crises of identity can emerge. Alienation, Rosa argues, results from the inability of individuals to recognize themselves in the institutions they

take part in or the dominant social discourses they encounter. Linda's failure to get into medical school, part of a narrative that began when she was a small girl, precipitated an identity crisis that Linda had to overcome by telling a new story of becoming a public health nurse that would allow her to recognize herself along the institutional trajectory open to her.

The dynamic interplay across interpretive domains can help explain individual and social histories. Rosa points toward a process of self-interpretation that accounts for both society and the individual. However, he offers few resources for thinking beyond the schemata of relative fits across the social and individual. By contrast, the hermeneutic institutionalism that Glaeser (2014) develops theorizes the process of social and individual understanding. Like self-interpretation, understanding is the varied sense people make of the world and their relationship to it, but refers more to the processual constitution of the self and its world. This involves processes that lead, on the one hand, from locally formed understandings to institutions that guide action and, on the other, processes of institutional determination of individual understanding and action.

Individual identity emerges out of a differentiated social system, since people are always understanding and acting in a web of institutional relationships that allow varied understandings to operate. At the same time, understanding requires "validation," either directly from an authority or indirectly through comparison with others. Understanding needs to be "corroborated" by successful action and "resonate" with existing knowledge. Institutions, Glaeser argues, are the stable, habitual understandings that are validated, corroborated, and resonant *over time* as people act and react. From this perspective,

institutions are continually made and remade at the same time that they shape the possibility for action through stabilized understanding. Linda's identity as someone capable of becoming a doctor was not validated or corroborated by the institution whereas the image of public health nurses resonated with her experience growing up in poor Latino community.

Ambiguity, ambivalence, and contradiction in understanding can motivate change to both individuals and institutions. Central to Glaeser's institutional theory is the capacity for imagination, which allows people to remember the past and project into the future, "thus carrying the possibility that both individual and collective lives are experienced as meaningful" (p. 212). According to Glaeser, "we can come to an understanding of what happened by lyrically re-invoking or narratively reconstructing events for ourselves and others. Just as importantly, however, we can use language to think through what might have happened, what still could happen, and what we might want to happen" (p. 223). Switching languages, or discourses, "may generate a solution simply because it picks out other possibilities for differentiating and integrating the world" (p. 224). People will understand themselves in entirely new ways when they change institutional environments, just as institutions change as new people engage them. The contradiction and ambivalence Mae experienced as a makeup artist expecting ambition to be rewarded but getting passed up for opportunities led her to reconstruct the narrative of her career choice. Ultimately, Mae adopted the language of practice in her relationship to God and in her martial arts community, and solved the problem of unrewarded ambition.

Glaeser's hermeneutic institutionalism thus contributes a processual framework to the model presented by Rosa. Together, they argue that self-interpretations develop from validated, corroborated, and resonant action in institutions, which are the stabilized understandings that guide and shape behavior. Variability in understanding means that the social world is open to creative transformation at both the individual and institutional levels. But this openness is limited by the webs of meaning connecting institutions and can lead to pathological states that generate human suffering. While Glaeser and Rosa provide a useful approach to thinking through the processes interpretation and understanding, they offer little suggestion of how to study these processes.

Narrative institutionalism helps to specify these processes, as the examples illustrate. Individual narratives link biographical detail with broad cultural interpretations—in this case an ambition imperative, college-for-all ideology, and an idea of the educated person in the schooled society—and institutionalized pathways that structure the story. Narrative institutionalism provides a means of identifying how gaps across interpretive domains emerge. As problems such as delayed or blocked progress emerge, changes in narrative indicate *how* identities and institutions are made and remade. People may start to question the institution as a narrative source or they may revise their personal history to question their fit with an otherwise legitimate institution. To manage these gaps, people draw on the institutional resources available to them to reconnect their biography with cultural ideals. When these gaps cannot be managed, narrative institutionalism can help us understanding the suffering and resilience that comes during crises of identity as people work to tell a resonant and validated narrative.

Suffering, Resilience, and Freedom

Sociologists have long focused on the suffering of marginal groups. Gouldner (1968: 116) insisted that "the social sciences cannot and should not be impartial toward human suffering." While all people may suffer as a basic character of their humanity, some groups suffer needlessly and deserve a greater share of our scholarly attention. The task of the sociologist is to balance a commitment to making a contribution "to a human unity of mankind" and a focus on unnecessary suffering. But what constitutes suffering? Bourdieu (1999: 5) distinguishes between material poverty and what he refers to as "positional suffering," a type of "ordinary suffering (*la petite misere*)" that has grown with the multiplication of social spaces in which people can judge their relative well-being against others. Material and positional suffering can and do coincide, and the community college is a particularly useful site for studying both types of suffering.

The legibility of community colleges enables the pursuit and narrative display of ambition and an attachment to being an educated person. Yet, attainments in community college are low relative to both students' aspirations and their peers in four-year universities, especially among disadvantaged students. As I have shown, holding steady is one possibility for struggling students, and failure is manageable through career and practice institutions. Nevertheless, this work can be difficult and marked by feelings of worthlessness and lost dignity, particularly when they have few institutional resources to imagine a way forward. Rosenbaum and his colleagues (2006) have argued that the college-for-all ideal and the open-access structure of community colleges can lead

students to do poorly academically and delay their recognition of more suitable pathways into the labor force. What they ignore by focusing on socioeconomic outcomes is the emotional toll and consequences for identity in a society that elevates higher education to a virtue. The cultural imperative to be ambitious is a universal condition of social life in America (Lewis 1966; Newman 1999b), yet poor and working-class young adults are more likely to suffer as a result of falling short.

To rely on a distinct narrative of ambition for some groups would seem to fall prey to what George W. Bush called "the soft bigotry of low-expectations." Yet, a distinct narrative of ambition outside of college *is* available to students from wealthier backgrounds. The examples of billionaire college dropouts offer a way to imagine ambition and success without completing a college degree. More antagonistic to college is the narrative developed most clearly by Peter Thiel, a venture capitalist and entrepreneur in California's Silicon Valley, who created the Thiel Fellowship to give one-hundred-thousand dollars and other resources to young adults who are willing to skip or drop out of college to invent a product or start a new business. In Thiel's anti-college story, college is an impediment to ambition. These narrative resources are available to young adults who want to forgo college, spread through mass media as a challenge to the education gospel that says college is necessary for social well-being. But like class-specific narratives of failure, anti-college ambition narratives appear to benefit those young adults with the resources to be inventive and innovative in specific ways.

Some of the women in this study aspired to entrepreneurship, but mostly did so through the institutional framework of college. They imagined that business, social work,

or cosmetology degrees would enable them to start their own businesses. One woman, June, even drew on the billionaire drop out narrative. But in order to chart a path that did not include a college degree, June had to do narrative work that diminished the importance of college for getting ahead by telling stories of failed college graduates (another woman, Mae, told a nearly identical story of college leading to career failure). While the Thiel Fellowship recipients are placed in a narrative that casts them as the next contributors of the great technological advances of the future, poor and working-class young adults have an anti-college narrative of dodging a bullet, avoiding the positional suffering that comes from competing in college and falling short in the labor market with a mountain of student debt to boot.

For women like June and Mae, the anti-college narrative they worked out by the end of the study was a form of resilience in failure. Lamont, Welburn, and Fleming (2013) argue that aspirations to "make it big" and start businesses, but also to attain higher education credentials, consume mainstream goods and services, and generally achieve autonomy and self-reliance are repertoires of resilience, or ideal responses to stigmatization, that have taken on increased importance in the neoliberal era. When faced with oppressive contexts, marginalized men and women draw on these repertoires of future success. Narratives of ambition not only create and support moral identities, they are situational sources of resilience when faced with problems such as racism and other types of discrimination. For the most part, ambition stories will run through college, and college success rates are much lower for marginalized students. College aspirations, then, are a problematic source of resilience.

Beyond moral identities and resilience, narratives have the potential for generating freedom. In his theory of slave agency, Roberts (2015) employs the concept of marronage, or flight from slavery, to articulate a concept of freedom that is both physical and mental. "During marronage," he writes, "agents struggle psychologically, socially, metaphysically, and politically to exit slavery, maintain freedom, and assert a lived social space while existing in a liminal position" (p. 10). Flight is both real and imagined, and freedom is a state of being rather than a final condition. For Roberts, marronage is part of the human condition and a response to "social death," or unfreedom. Imaginaries of freedom, he argues, have social consequences. They contributed to the end of slavery and they continue to transform institutions that create the conditions of unfreedom today. By telling new narratives other than stories of ambition in a career, poor and working-class young adults may be able to generate more than resilience: a state of freedom. These new narratives may still course through higher education.

Moral Education and Moral Equity

The connection between higher education and virtue for poor and working-class youth may be recent, but the ties between class and moral fabric are quite old and have long been linked with schooling. Adam Smith (2002 [1759]) noted at the onset of the Industrial Revolution that the tendency to attribute moral status based on class position was not a new phenomenon. People are disposed "to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and powerful, and to despise, or, at least, to neglect persons of poor and mean condition" (p. 72). The "vices and the follies of the powerful" are less often objects of

contempt than poverty and weakness. Industrial capitalism's development signaled the breakdown of the separation of wealth and greatness from wisdom and virtue. The Heraclitean ethics that associated good sense with the highest virtue, or the care of the self that prepared one to act ethically, was replaced by an ethics of status seeking, helped along by the spread of mass schooling and the bureaucratization of social mobility (Foucault 1986; Sloterdijk 2013: 130-164). This capitalist ethics became central to the American Dream, which stipulates "that the pursuit of success warrants so much fervor because it is associated with virtue" (Hochschild 1995: 23).

That higher education is bound up with the pursuit of success and virtue is yet another stage in the ongoing role that education plays in this moral system. Modernity was marked by two interrelated phenomena: a belief in expanding power through expanding populations and the belief in universal education to improve the productive abilities of surplus populations. Over time, schooling took on the character of a world improving institution through the improvement of the great mass of humanity being born in the midst of a demographic explosion on the European continent. John Amos Comenius, who pushed the idea of universal education in the early-seventeenth century, envisioned schools as machines that produced perfected humans that would lift up society. In this way, self-improvement through education became world-improvement. Yet, this process led to excess capability in the short-term, which Sloterdijk (2013) describes as a kind of "creative dysfunction" that generates "chronic disappointment." The problem of ambition management that Clark (1960), Merton (1957), and others

identified in the post-World War II United States has its origins in this world-improving education system of the Renaissance.

As democracy took on a political force in the West, Montesquieu argued that education was its best defense. The early American state builders, notably Thomas Jefferson, connected education in America with democratic politics, economic strength, and moral conduct. One of the clearest articulations of this equation was made in the 1983 *Nation at Risk* report. The "language and literacy 'crisis'" narrative portrayed "poor and minoritized children and families as illiterate, placing the very nation at risk" (McCarty 2012:3). By the turn of the twenty-first century, shortfalls in the number of college graduates threatened to leave the United States behind the rest of the wealthy nations of the world. Ambition for higher education became paramount.

At the same time, the equation of higher education and virtue cannot be reduced to economic competition. The ethics of good sense and moral disposition, of the perfected human, remain constitutive ideals in American colleges and universities, apparent (if elusive) in our commitment to critical thinking and the liberal arts (Clydesdale 2015). Montaigne's belief that education should equip a person with the capacity to move effectively among the wide diversity of humanity continues to shape schools and students today (Khan 2010). The relation between vocational and liberal arts education is similar to the relationship between forced labor and scholastic labor. The former refers to the experience of work purely as a result of external constraint whereas the latter is considered a "quasi-ludic activity" akin to the work of artists and writers. As one approaches the latter experience, the less wages motivate work and the more an

inherent gratification drives job performance. There are, Bourdieu (2000) argues, symbolic profits to be had in addition to, and in some cases in place of, wages. While these symbolic profits may dull a person's sense of inequality and exploitation, they may also contribute to a flight from unfreedom. The figure of the educated person is akin to the craftsperson. The symbolic wages of becoming an educated person are a form of moral equity in a context of rising inequality, and the narrative resources that higher education offers may be a source of freedom for poor and working-class young adults. A renewed and strengthened narrative of young adults habituating themselves to effective interactions across the great diversity of social life and building the capacity for democracy through higher education is a way to move from suffering and resilience to freedom.

Policy and Institutional Change

How can we create the conditions for strengthening this renewed narrative of higher education? Federal tax and welfare policies have offered institutional support to those who claimed a moral association between school and societal well-being. For one, advocates for welfare reform sought to shift support away from the "undeserving poor" (Bellah et al. 1996; Hays 2003; Katz 2013), which culminated in the 1996 welfare reform that took aim at an imagined "culture of poverty" that eschewed achievement, particularly in school (Block and Somers 2014). The Tax Payer Relief Act of 1997 included a range of government transfers such as the HOPE Scholarship Tax Credit, the Lifetime Learning Tax Credit, several tax incentives for college savings, and programs

that reduce student loan interest or forgive student loans. Although these tax provisions mostly benefit middle and upper-middle class students and families, they signified an institutional commitment to college at the same time welfare reform took aim at those viewed as "lazy, immoral 'welfare queens' happily soaking up money while transmitting a culture of dependence to their children" (Katz 2013: 8). Within this policy framework, college going represents moral individualism characterized by self-discipline, self-help, and independence above all while national problems stemming from structural changes to the economy are blamed on the poor.

Pushing poor and working-class young adults into college has not translated into greater attainments, and in recent years states and the federal government have focused on accountability measures for both students and schools. In California, for example, the Student Success Act of 2012 was aimed at increasing community college completion in a timely manner, in part through better guidance programs to help students quickly identify a major and career path and in part through sanctioning struggling students by limiting their access to courses and aid. In 2013, President Obama launched the College Scorecard to hold colleges accountable by comparing costs of attendance with potential future earnings. Both efforts are aimed at moving students more quickly and more profitably toward careers. The underlying logics are economistic, reducing college to instrumental job seeking even if their adherents imagine college as more than mere job training.

However, the social bases for a revised narrative of higher education must come from a commitment to ongoing access regardless of performance or career outcomes. This means that community colleges will have to expand access by offering more classes

and eliminating sanctions for slow or stalled progress as a result of stopping out of school or failing academically. The California plan to eliminate enrollment bottlenecks by removing the least successful students from the system should be replaced by a plan to add more seats to the system. If college is an expectation of the schooled society, then the opportunity to enroll and stay in college should be there for all students. This also means that college should not be priced in relation to future income. At the very least, community college should be free so that even college students who struggle and fail to earn degrees that translate into higher incomes can benefit from higher education and the identity it gives access to.

These changes require a large public investment and run counter to the dominant logic of austerity that has characterized American politics since the 1960s. But the demand for a more accessible community college system (and public higher education more generally) is gaining ground in Democratic policymaking. This follows a longer-term trend of spreading educational access to meet growing aspirations. For example, the aspirations of young people and their parents have played important roles in the push towards mass schooling in the 19th century (Goldin and Katz 2008), the diversification of the high school curriculum in the 20th century (Spring 1986), and the ongoing expansion of higher education in the 21st century (Deil-Amen 2011). For today's young adults, higher education is central to forming and using aspirations, and is under a great deal of pressure to adapt to both the aspirations of youth anxious to achieve a foothold in the middle class (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013) and a nation fearful of falling behind in the global marketplace (Berman 2012). The public desire for a higher education system

committed to democracy and self-improvement for purposes other than career advancement could have important effects on the future of higher education.

Sociologists can help equip poor and working-class youth and their families with narrative material that links higher education with self-making and democratic citizenship that doesn't rely on a plot that revolves around career attainment. At least not to the extent that higher education narratives do now. Social inequality is a major social problem for sociologists to tackle and social mobility is a central concern for inequality scholars. But so too is inequality in the ability to tell stories that do not lead to suffering and a sense of unfreedom. Poor and working-class emerging adults need resources for forging narratives that provide dignity and a place in the world that is not interpreted through stories of pathological failure. The American Dream is as much about what people can aspire to as what they should aspire to. The women in this study heeded the call to be ambitious in the face of tremendous obstacles to success. This is the story that we should tell.

Appendix A – Description of Participants, N=23

Name	Age at First Interview	Family Status at First Interview	Race/ Ethnicity	Enrollment Pattern	Aspirations	Narrative(s)
Hannah	23	Single mother, 1 child	Asian American	Stopped out after first interview	Held steady	Job-Seeking Virtue Drawing Boundaries
Christine	28	Single mother, 2 children	Latina	Stopped out after second interview	Held steady	Job-Seeking Virtue
Amy	20	Single mother, 2 children	Latina	Stopped out after second interview	Held steady	Job-Seeking Virtue
Kimberly	21	Single mother, 1 child	Black	Stopped out after second interview	Held steady	Job-Seeking Virtue Combating Stereotypes
Patricia	26	Single mother, 1 child	Black	Stopped out after third interview	Held steady	Job-Seeking Virtue Drawing Boundaries Combating Stereotypes
Sara	24	Single woman	White	Stopped out after third interview	Held steady	Job-Seeking Virtue Drawing Boundaries
Margaret	23	Single mother, 1 child	White	Enrolled at first and fourth interviews	Held steady	Virtue Drawing Boundaries Combating Stereotypes Managing Relationships
Carolyn	24	Single mother, 1 child	Multiracial	Enrolled at first and fourth interviews	Held steady	Job-Seeking Virtue Combating Stereotypes

						Managing Relationships
Rosa	21	Single mother, 1 child	Latina	Enrolled at each interview	Held steady	Job-Seeking Virtue Drawing Boundaries Managing Relationships
Jeanie	28	Single woman	Black	Enrolled at each interview	Held steady	Job-Seeking Virtue Combating Stereotypes
Gloria	22	Single woman	Latina	Enrolled at each interview	Held steady	Job-Seeking Virtue Managing Relationships
Adele	19	Single woman	Latina	Enrolled at each interview	Held steady	Job-Seeking Virtue Drawing Boundaries Managing Relationships
Linda	24	Single woman	Latina	Enrolled at each interview	Cooled out plans/Held steady expectation and ideal	Job-Seeking Virtue
Jennifer	28	Single mother, 1 child	Latina	Completed vocational certificate after third interview	Cooled out plans/Held steady ideal	Job-Seeking
June	19	Single woman	Asian American	Stopped out after third interview	Cooled out	
Mae	20	Single woman	Black	Completed associate's degree after first interview	Fulfilled	
Katherine	20	Single	Multiracial	Enrolled at	Transferred	

				each interview	after third interview
		woman			
Nancy	25	Single mother, 2 children	Latina	Enrolled at each interview	Transferred after third interview
Monica	20	Single mother, 1 child	Latina	Enrolled at each interview	Transferred after third interview
Amanda	20	Single mother, 1 child	Black	Enrolled at each interview	Transferred after third interview
Vicki	24	Single mother, 3 children	White	Enrolled at each interview	Transferred after third interview
Rachel	20	Single woman	Black	Enrolled at each interview	Transferred after third interview
Suzanne	19	Single woman	Black	Enrolled at each interview	Transferred after third interview

Appendix B – Interview Protocol Main Themes: Wave 1 through Wave 4

I.   Background

- When did you decide to enroll in college? Was there a specific person, experience, or event that influenced your decision?

- Have there been any major changes in school, family, or work?

- Have these changes impacted your goals? If so, in what ways?

II.   Educational Goals

- What do you seek to accomplish through your education/training?

- What degree are you pursuing? Have your educational plans changed?

- If you could go into any area of study, what would it be? What type of degree would you want?

- How would getting that degree affect you?

- In our last interview, you mentioned that you were pursuing_____. Can you briefly tell me again how you chose this particular course of study and the degree you planned to pursue?

III.   Enrollment and Course-Taking Patterns

- What led you to enroll?

- How would you describe yourself as a student?

- Has the course of study and the degree you are pursuing changed since we last talked?

- How would you describe your overall academic progress? Do you feel like you are achieving what you set out to do? Why/why not?

- Since we last talked, have you withdrawn from college at any point? If so, can you tell me about your decision and what led up to it? How did you feel when you decided to withdraw? Did it affect your plans for the future?

IV.   Supports and Barriers

- Who do you talk to when you need help in school?

- If you were to name two people who you talk about college the most with, either outside/at school, who would they be? What type of things do you talk about?

- Do you know anyone at school who goes out of their way to help you?

- What barriers, if any, have made it difficult for you to pursue your course of study?

V.   Work

- How would you describe your job?

- What would you say is a good job? What makes a good job?

- What do you think it takes to get a good job?

- If you could do anything, what kind of work would you like to do?

- Do you have a career/occupational goal?

- What type of job do you think you can get when you finish your education?

VI.   Self-Assessment and Meaning of Success

- How important is being a student to your overall view of yourself?

- What does it look like for you to be successful in life?

- What does going to school/getting an education mean to you?

- Since you started college, have there been any changes in how you see your future or yourself? If so, what do you think has been the cause of these changes?

- Has being in college helped you to learn or realize something about yourself?

Appendix C – Interviews and Social Action

I use longitudinal interviews to discover how poor and working-class young adult women understand their experience in community college, the expectations and opportunities they have for social mobility, and what it means to be a successful adult as they confront and work to overcome obstacles to reaching their goals. What can we learn from interviews and, especially, multiple interviews over time? How can longitudinal qualitative interviewing (LQI) generate knowledge that single interviews cannot? Hermanowicz (2013:190) notes that LQIs make it possible to study change and "expose process, evaluate causality, and substantiate micro-macro linkage." Recent critiques of interview-based studies, however, compel careful consideration of what types of claims researchers can make based on interview data. In particular, what can we say about social action when we rely on interviews and LQI research?

In their reflection on the special role of ethnography in social science, Jerolmack and Khan (2014) renew a debate about the ability of researchers to make claims regarding behavior from interview and survey data. Invoking Mills' (1940) observation that talk and action are often divorced from one another, they argue that what people say about what they do does not always match what they, in fact, do. Not only do people routinely give inaccurate accounts of past behavior, they also act in ways that are inconsistent with the attitudes they express. When researchers assume that accounts and attitudes accurately predict behavior, they commit what Jerolmack and Khan respectively call the accounting fallacy and the attitudinal fallacy. These are problems of *accounting-behavior consistency* and *attitude-behavior consistency*, or ABC problems.

Jerolmack and Khan distinguish between two types of action. First, they recognize that the interview is a form of action. Or more precisely, the speech acts (Lamont 1992) and affective responses (Pugh 2013) people engage in during an interview in a contrived research setting are significant actions, even if they are not predictive of unobserved behavior. Second, they distinguish interview-based action from "situated behavior": people interacting with others in "natural settings" as they engage in everyday action. According to Jerolmack and Khan, if you want to know *how* people act day-to-day you need to observe them in the act of acting. Moreover, sociologists can better account for *why* people act the ways they do if they situate their actions in specific contexts and observe them over time. I consider both types of action—the interview and situated behavior—and how LQIs do or do not shape our understanding.

The interview as action

As Jerolmack and Khan (2014) point out, the research interview is a contrived context that presents interviewees with conditions that are not wholly of their own choosing but within which interviewees *act* in different ways. In particular, they reflect culture, constitute the cultural world, and constitute the self. Analyzing how people talk to one another exposes a morally-loaded cultural universe and "culture in action" as people use cultural resources such as membership categories or interactional styles (Baker and Johnson 1998; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Swidler 2001). This is possible in large part because interviews, particularly semi-structured interviews, create the possibility for interview participants to construct narratives, or "standard stories." Tilly

(1999) defines standard stories as the explanatory accounts of self-motivated human action that people are prepared—either by socialization or cognitive development—to give. They "ordinarily join (1) moral judgments, (2) conceptions of what is possible, (3) ideas of what is desirable within that realm of possibility, and (4) causal accounts of social life" (p. 265) As Tilly (2004:447) explains, giving reasons accomplishes social work since people "are saying something about relations between themselves and those who hear their reasons. Giver and receiver are announcing or are negotiating their proper connection." Interviews are heightened instances of reason giving and storytelling, and a range of information is transmitted, received, and interpreted with social and personal effects.

Pugh (2013) distinguishes between four types of information that people may give in an interview setting. She calls these the honorable, schematic, visceral, and meta-feeling. In general, people convey an "emotional landscape" during in-depth interviews that includes not just how people think and feel but how they feel about those feelings. They express a broad set of motivations, beliefs, and meanings. Not only do they offer the frameworks through which they interpret the world, they show the researcher information articulated in cues such as facial expressions and sighs. This broad range of information—as much as *how* people say what they say in interviews as what they say— gives sociologists insight into how culture operates, often simultaneously and uneasily, across levels of discourse and affect. In some cases, they expose "the interactive edge where embodied culture and external pressures to feel or think a certain way collide" (p. 64).

The approach to interview research that Pugh describes is *phenomenological individualist* in that it reconstructs "meanings, feelings, ideologies, and theories that presumably motivate social action," even if it is unable to show how these conscious states affect action (Tilly 1999:263). An active interviewer focuses on the development of a response—the shifts, hesitations, and struggles for coherence—and how different positions on a topic provide insights into different identities and meanings (Heyl 2007). It places the interviewee in an "observer-like" role as they "communicate with their past and future selves," assessing and constructing "action plans based on past experience, future goals, and their role as both self and other" (Cerulo 2014:223).

Pugh (2013) suggests that the honorable level of transmitting information can operate as a "cultural barometer." Smith (2009) follows this barometric approach when he details 34 features of mainstream culture in emerging adulthood that routinely emerged during interviews. From these and a set of less-common themes, Smith aims to present the broad cultural world that emerging adults "use to construct their own lives" (p. 33). Yet people do more than reconstruct the cultural world as they interact in the interview setting. Interviewees do cultural work, and in the process they constitute the cultural world.

One way that the cultural world is constituted is by producing "views" through the conversation between the researcher and the interviewee (Heyl 2007). In particular, when an interview serves as a moment of criticism, the interviewee may do the work that produces society itself. Boltanski and Thevenot (2000:212) contend that justifying one's self in the face of criticism or when criticizing others involves work that they do "here

and now in order to construct the social world, to endow it with meaning and to confer on it a minimum of firmness." This involves reaching an agreement by subjecting a justification to a reality test involving a formulation of valid proof. Justification is a way of navigating what Boltanski and Thevenot call "orders of worth" (e.g., the worth of market or the worth of citizenship, which are in a relation of critique to one another). Just as interviewees offer an emotional landscape, they piece together a social landscape as they form judgements about themselves and others. In doing so, they *produce* more-or-less legitimate arguments about actors and situations.

The process of forming judgements and making justifications is often central to in-depth interviews. As interviewers press interviewees for further explanation, they may set up a situation where the interviewee works toward agreement with the interviewer or an imaginary critic. In some ways, the interview is a particularly effective situation for formulating arguments around questions of justice and morality. Boltanski and Thevenot (2000:216) suggest that, "The situations that lend themselves to the explicit formulation of what is or is not the just thing to do are situations where the decision does not impose itself, where there is no tacit cooperation between acquaintances, nor a violent clash. These are situations where the participants are driven to explain their judgement and to support it by drawing from the resources of the present situation." In short, the interview can be a site for actors to do justice and ethics.

Silva (2013) argues that working class young adults require an audience as they work to redefine successful adulthood. As traditional markers such as marriage and homeownership are increasingly out of reach, these young adults produce adulthood in

interaction. Telling a therapeutic narrative of successfully overcoming past trauma as a marker of the transition to adulthood necessitates that someone hear that narrative because the markers are increasingly discursive. The interview can be an important site for the communication of this narrative. Researchers regularly find that interviewing gives participants a unique opportunity to tell their story to an interested and engaged listener. Interviewees, Heyl (2007:375) argues, "can feel affirmed and empowered from being genuinely listened to," and it is from these positions of strength that redefinition is possible.

Reflecting the cultural world and producing justice, new conceptions of adulthood, or other cultural objects relates, at the same time, to the constitution of the subject. Stories can express reason, but they can also invite or incite people to recognize their moral obligations as a mode of subjectivation (Foucault 2003:111). This recognizing figure is what Critchley (2007:17) refers to as the "subject of the demand," a self that is shaped in relation to core values and commitments. In an interview, the demand for moral selfhood is often made through standard stories. Adapting the concept of interpellation from Althusser, Frank (2010:49) argues that stories call storytellers and listeners to "acknowledge and act on a particular identity." The interview may be one of the first and only sites for telling particular stories about the self. Thus, as interviewers and interviewees work to link biography and broadly available narratives in response to questions that ask the interviewee to account for themselves and their world, identities emerge that call to them. In telling the story of a life, moreover, a life becomes morally

recognizable. As an opportunity to tell a story for the first time, the interview can "*bring into being* what was not there before" (p. 75, emphasis in the original).

Although interviews are contrived contexts of action, a great deal is done in an interview. The cultural world is reflected in the interview and, in some cases, constituted while the subject herself may be called into being in new ways. How, if at all, do these processes change with multiple interviews over time?

Longitudinal Qualitative Interviewing

Recent reflections on longitudinal qualitative interviewing (LQI) argue that this method has been neglected by researchers in the social sciences (Hermanowicz 2013). However, it may be more accurate to situate LQIs within the traditions of ethnographic and life history interviewing. Heyl (2007:369) defines ethnographic interviewing as projects that involve on-going, genuine relationship with interviewees that are characterized by respect and "enough rapport for there to be a genuine exchange of views and enough time and openness in the interviews for the interviewees to explore purposefully with the researcher the meanings they place on events in their worlds." Heyl locates the origins of ethnographic interviewing in the Chicago School of the 1920s and 1930s and later shaped by the turn to a reflexive social science represented by figures such as Gouldner who argued that interviewer and interviewee were mutually constituted. Under the condition of collaboration, interviewees influence the content and course of the interview to a large extent as they interpret and re-interpret questions and responses, clarify their positions and the meanings they attach to them. However, ethnographic

interviewing does not necessitate multiple interviews, only conditions of exceptional rapport, which can emerge through other practices such as participant observation.

Life course research is designed around the regular collection of data—qualitative or quantitative—over an extended period of time. According to Elder and Giele (2009), early life course studies emerged out of the recognition, in the 1950s, that lives needed to be understood in context. Social historians and historical demographers began to emphasize the lives of people along with their families and communities. The 1960s saw the emergence of the cohort concept and studies of how age-restricted groups interacted with historical events to produce specific outcomes such as educational or occupational attainment. Sociologists began to take an "age-grade perspective," which focuses on age status, life course divisions such as young adulthood, and norms guiding age-based expectations. Over the last half-century, four paradigmatic factors have emerged as core features of life course research: 1) historical and geographical location, 2) social ties, 3) human agency in life course construction, and 4) variations in the timing of events. Through analyzing these factors together as the broad context of human lives, life course research aims to tie individuals to social structures to understand variable outcomes over time.

Longitudinal qualitative interview research combines the emphasis on meaning, reflexivity, and rapport found in ethnographic interviewing with the longitudinal design of life course research. Central to LQI research is a focus on change in three key respects. First and foremost is change in the *narratives* that participants tell across multiple waves of interviews (Gordon and Lahelma 2003; Hermanowicz 2013; Neale and Flowerdew

2003; Thomson and Holland 2003). Narratives change as turning points or defining moments occur over the course of the study. Time may allow the narrative to unfold and reveal the complexity of situations just as interpretations may change over time (Murray et al. 2009). Both perceptions of the past and aspirations for the future may change as participants gain emotional distance from events or gain confidence to tell the story they want across interview waves (McLeod 2003), thereby shifting the emotional landscape Pugh (2013) argues is a main feature of interview data. Changing narratives ultimately reveal the "*provisionality* of…identity work" (Plumridge and Thomson 2003:217, emphasis in original). By documenting narrative change, LQI research can reveal the durability of the cultural world and identities available to people and their capacity for narrative agency, or the active engagement in interpreting experience (Millar 2007; Sennett 2006).

Changes to narratives are related to a second change that happens over the course of the study: the *research relationship* can experience greater sensitivity, respect, trust, and overall rapport (Gordon and Lahelma 2003). Murray et al. (2009) found in their study of critically ill patients in a hospital that LQI research enabled participants to talk more openly about sensitive or embarrassing issues that are typically discussed in private. In addition, the interviewee may gain greater control over the process as they better understand the demands of the research process (Thomson and Holland 2003), which can have consequences for how they represent or work to produce the cultural world, or what identities appear available to them. Moreover, the shared reference to past interviews may encourage greater reflexivity as participants work to change narratives on the basis of that

familiarity. In other words, past interviews become part of the interview context at each wave.

In situ responses to past interviews are related to a broader, third change in the *interpretation* of data gathered in the interview. As the relationship changes, so to do the interpretations that interviewers make, which shapes how they gather and analyze the data. This is what Neale and Flowerdew (2003:192, emphasis in original) call the "*interplay* of time and texture." LQI researchers accumulate responses to read against one another over time, allowing them to search for patterns, themes, and interpretations longitudinally as opposed to cross-sectionally. LQI research is particularly well-suited to studying questions of the future in narratives over time. In a single interview, the aspirational future may function as a claim to a particular identity, which Frye (2012) argues serves as a moral claim that allows people to control their lives, at least to some extent, in the present. Yet single interviews cannot tell us what happens when aspirations are or are not fulfilled. In many cases, sociologists using multiple waves of interviews can learn what happens when an aspiration goes unfulfilled, since *the future may become past* in the time between interviews, or as participants fail to take the necessary steps to reach their goals. LQI researchers can ask what happens to these moral claims and how narratives do or do not change to account for unrealized ambition.

Through analyzing narrative change through multiple interviews, sociologists can examine "the recursive, shifting and uneven ways in which identities 'take shape', and in which we come to recognize and represent ourselves as certain kinds of people" (McLeod 2003:206). Plumridge and Thomson (2003:214) describe LQI research as "a means of

penetrating the 'artfulness' of accounts to detect the unfolding of the mechanisms informing the artifice." The mechanisms and strategies for managing and explaining change become evident through time (Millar 2007). Tilly (1999:266) suggests that we "tunnel under standard stories themselves." One way qualitative sociologists should tunnel under stories is by explaining how people "generate, transform, respond to, and deploy standard stories" (p. 267). This is, for Tilly (1999:270), a central aim of sociological analysis: "analyzing the processes by which people actually create, adopt, negotiate, and alter the stories they employ in routine social life." This leads us to the question of routine social life and what interviews can tell us about what people do in day-to-day interaction.

Standard stories "do essential work in social life, cementing people's commitments to common projects, helping people make sense of what is going on, channeling collective decisions and judgments, spurring people to action they would otherwise be reluctant to pursue. Telling stories even helps people to recognize difficulties in their own perceptions, explanations, or actions" (Tilly 1999:257). But do stories tell us about what actually happens outside the interview? As Tilly (1999:265) argues, the cause-and-effect relations responsible for most social processes are "indirect, incremental, interactive, unintended, collective, and/or mediated by the nonhuman environment." These cause-and-effect relations are typically beyond the bounds of standard stories.

The interview between past and future action

Jerolmack and Khan's (2014) insistence that observation is the only way to avoid attitude-behavior and account-behavior consistency problems generated a number of critiques. The most salient of these is the argument that past research has identified many cases where there are high correlations between attitudes/accounts and behavior (Cerulo 2014; Vaisey 2014). In cases where well-established correlations exist, we should be able to trust with greater certainty what respondents report during an interview.

Vaisey (2014) goes so far as to suggest that we should trust people's reports about behavior even if we are skeptical about their accounts, or how they answer the "why" questions. Vaisey makes the point that data collected at the individual level does not imply that the researcher has analyzed it at the individual level. For example, within a particular context, such as a school, interviews can capture interactional styles, or repertoires that constrain and facilitate action (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Binder and Wood 2013). Interviewers may be able to interpret claims about action based on what they discover to be the realm of possible action in a given setting.

This points to the question of institutions and their capacity to structure both action and narrative. People live their lives in institutions (Sanchez-Jankowski 2008) and tell life stories using the roles, statuses, and stages of development that constitute institutions (Sennett 2003). If narratives elicit stories, then stories structured by institutions may bring interview researchers closer to eliciting reliable statements about a particular class of actions. As DiMaggio (2014:234), suggests, "Attitude variation might have little effect on behaviors that are so highly institutionalized that deviance is difficult (e.g., picking a side of the road to drive on)." Taking an institutional approach to

interview research, then, is an important step toward making claims about action outside of the interview setting, even if it still falls somewhat short of direct observation. This is the case whether the researcher relies on one or multiple interviews.

Outside of the interview, sociologists may be unable to say much about *inter*action. As Martin (2011) argues, sociologists' unwillingness to accept first-person accounts lies not just in observable gaps between accounts and action. It is partly rooted in an epistemological dismissal of first-person accounts altogether in favor of third-person accounts that have the appearance of being more scientific. That is, sociologists can and should look for explanations for social action that are beyond the view of individual actors, even when individual actors rely on third-person explanations themselves. Sociologists may rightly view the "retrospective scrambles" people engage in when asked what they did and why as unreliable because they are wary of social desirability effects or because why questions predispose actors to tell stories that include the "spurious linkage of past, present, and future" as they defend their motivations (pg. 105). Nevertheless, there is a great deal of action that interview researchers can confidently describe as institutions research shows. More valuable to sociologists, however, may be the actions that go on within the interview itself: revealing culture, producing the cultural world, and constituting the self. While Martin suggests that, "The more 'accounting' is going on in a first-person account, the less useful it may be as a source of data" (p. 105), I take the accounting itself as important social action and valuable sociological data.

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