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Career Decision-Making: Perspectives of Low-Income Urban Youth

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ABSTRACT

Minority youth from low income backgrounds face many challenges in planning and preparing for their careers. They are less likely than Caucasian youth and youth from higher income groups to believe that they will attain as much, educationally or professionally, as their peers from higher income groups. This study examines data from 9 focus groups of 91 youth, aged 15-18, in the Los Angeles area, and targets the career preparation aspirations and attitudes of low-income youth from Latino, African American, and Asian communities. The results are analyzed using emergent analysis to understand the processes in which the participants were engaged. The research asks policymakers and workforce preparation professionals to find new ways to provide low-income youth with clear, concrete information and experience about careers and the workplace. It also offers researchers in the field a new approach to conducting larger-scale empirical studies targeted to low income minority adolescents.

Few career development programs explicitly address the contextual issues that may impact the career preparation and decision-making process of low-income minority youth. Paradoxically, these youth often face economic pressure to enter the workforce early, and they may lack the education or vocational preparation to obtain well-paying employment that leads to upward career mobility. This study examines the perceptions of urban, low-income minority youth with regard to

their future careers and the process by which they identify, explore, and prepare for career options.

RELEVANT RESEARCH

Most of the research attending to the distinctive issues facing minority and low-income youth in their selection of and preparation for careers has focused on a single ethnic group, and has developed recommendations and conclusions directed to counselors and career professionals working with that particular group only. These studies are of limited use and maximized only in schools and career development settings where one racial or ethnic group predominates. In the urban areas of most western states, however, schools and youth-serving programs are likely to be composed of youth from a variety of racial and ethnic groups: African American (which can include youth from African, Caribbean, Central American or South American countries as well as indigenous African American youth); Hispanic/Latino (including Cuban, Puerto Rican and Dominican youth who are most often found in the Eastern US, and Mexican, Central and South American youth who are often found in the West); and Asian (including Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Thai, Hmong, Pilipino, and other Asian and Pacific island groups). Faced with so much ethnic/cultural difference, school and career counselors have difficulty developing an understanding of the different contextual factors appropriate for each group. Consequently, an integrated process for understanding career decision-making for low-income youth from a variety of ethnic backgrounds found in the Western US is required, as these youth are universally understood to be most at risk in the career development process (Alexander, 2004; Bell, 1992; Bruniois, 1998).

In a survey involving over 1,400 high school seniors, the 159 low-income minority respondents, while having a high level of decidedness about the limited options for their future work, were also less clear about their own interests and abilities than their more affluent peers (Braverman, 2002). They also indicated that they wanted much higher levels of educational attainment (and career attainment) than they believed they would be able to achieve. Similar results have been found in other survey studies (Gushue, Scanlan, Pantzer, & Clarke, 2006; Jackson, Kacanski, Rust, & Beck, 2006). The finding that a significant number of low-income minority youth appear to have resigned themselves to not achieving what they wanted to achieve is troubling, particularly since 63% of California's youth are from racial and ethnic minority groups, and more than 50% of these youth are in poverty (Casey, 2004; Lofland & Lofland, 1995).

Published research on career development for African American and Latino

youth suggests that the decision-making processes and problems may be similar for both groups, while major gender differences between the two groups persist (King & Madsen, 2007; Rollins, 2001; Torres, 2001; Weiler, 1997). This implies that both Latino and African American youth might be influenced by similar counseling and guidance strategies, with some attention to the differences found between African American females and Latinas. Asian youth, however, cannot be as easily categorized (Tang, Fouad, & Smith, 1999). In light of the fact that it is rarely possible to serve ethnically discrete groups in most school and agency settings, this research intends to develop a more cohesive understanding of the career decision status of low-income youth from a variety of racial and ethnic groups.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Ninety-one youth, ranging in ages from 15 - 18 years of age, who were representative of the major ethnic and racial diversity of the low-income neighborhoods of Los Angeles, participated in this study. All of the youth were attending school, and with two exceptions, were involved in either a career preparation program or a leadership development program for low-income and at-risk youth, operated by various locally-based nonprofit agencies. The particular programs and agencies were targeted both because their audience was youth from low-income communities, and because the programs had career preparation or planning as one of their objectives. Thus, the researchers reasoned that the youth were more likely to be engaged in thinking about their future careers.

   Participants volunteered in response to a flyer that was circulated by the agency with which they were affiliated. They were not compensated for their participation. Due to the voluntary nature of the youth's participation in the career-related programs of the agencies and their voluntary participation in this study, this sample is likely to exhibit a self-selection bias such that the youth are more likely to be engaged in thinking about and preparing for their future careers than a more broadly selected group of youth.

Data Collection

Focus groups were used to obtain information from youth involved in workforce preparation programs. Focus group interviews can be very useful in exploratory research, especially with audiences or subgroups that have not been extensively studied in the past. In addition, focus groups can help to uncover factors that in-

fluence opinions, motivations, and behaviors (Falconer & Hays, 2006; Krueger & Casey, 2000). For the purposes of this study, focus groups were selected for three reasons: (1) because career choice and preparation for low-income minority youth has not been sufficiently examined to develop validated instruments; (2) because our experience with surveys and with low-income youth in this age range suggest that they are often not engaged enough to complete survey instruments accurately or completely; and, (3) because the interchange between members of a well-run focus group elicits more youth participation and engagement (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Nine focus group discussions were conducted. Two of these focus groups took place in special school programs for pregnant and parenting teens. The focus groups averaged 45 minutes in length. The location and composition of the focus groups are displayed in Table 1. The actual names of the locations and agencies have been replaced with pseudonyms to assure anonymity.

The study team consisted of eight researchers, four of whom are White, two are African American, and two are Latino. The principal investigator is African American and was present for all of the focus groups except one. The focus groups took place in a classroom or conference room of the participating agencies and were conducted by the principal investigator and one other member of the research team, with the exception of the one focus group in which the principal investigator did not participate. This focus group was attended by two study team members. All of the focus groups were conducted in English. After brief introductions and descriptions of the study, one member of the research team led the discussions while the second member oversaw the taping of the discussion and took written notes. Leading the discussion involved asking questions from the interview guide, probing for understanding, attempting to engage and involve all focus group participants, and assuring that one or two youth did not dominate the conversation. The discussion guide is included as Appendix A.

Table 1: Career Preparation Focus Groups

Location	Organizational Affiliation	# of Participants	Gender	Ethnicity
South-Central Gardens	After School Leadership Program	9	M	African American
Sierra Vista High	Pregnant & Parenting Teen Program	15	F	Latina
Baldwin Mesa High	Pregnant & Parenting Teen Program	13	F	Latina
Sereno Valley One-Stop Employment Center	LA City WIA Site	17	M/F	Latino, Asian, African American
Valley Garden	LA City WIA Site	5	F	Latina
Community Action	LA City WIA Site	2	F	African American
Central City Service Center	LA City WIA Site	12	M/F	Asian, Latina
Highland High	After School Leadership Program	11	M/F	Latina, Asian, African American
Linda Vista	After School Leadership Program	7	M/F	Asian, Latino

Total n=91

Data Analysis

Tapes were professionally transcribed, and transcriptions were first examined for accuracy by the researchers who had conducted the focus group. Each transcript was then read by all of the study team members for content related to the focus group questions and for any new topics that may have emerged in the discussions. In this effort, the team was taking an "emergent analysis" approach to the data (Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Patton, 1990). In analyzing the data, all members of the study team arrived at consensus by identifying common themes, and resolving contradictory interpretations in analysis meetings. Through this iterative process, both the answers to the original research questions and a list of additional topics were identified.

FINDINGS

Focus group participants identified eight sources of influence on career information, career planning and decision-making: school resources; parents and family; media/public figures; work experiences; life experiences; peer influence; barriers; and mentors.

School Resources

Despite the efforts of many school-based programs to provide information about careers, the young people in these focus groups reported limited positive benefits. In many cases, the students saw these services as not being there to help them, but that they were for some other, not consistently defined, group of students. In some cases, these students appeared to be "*college prep*" students, while for others it meant "*anybody but me.*" Participants described their experience with school counseling staff as being rushed, minimal, and/or negative. The perception that counselors were uninterested, unhelpful, or too busy was common. As one participant shared: "They are more frightening than teachers…my counselor was no help at all…The only reason I got to see her was because she wanted to find out how I got into this program." Another participant stated: "that's not for kids like me, it's only for their picks and pets." Similar negative feelings were expressed about teachers. However, teachers were most often mentioned by participants when asked about individuals (outside of the family) that inspired their career choices.

   School-based career counseling centers were seen as outside of the flow of their life experiences. The centers were not integrated into their regular schoolwork and not promoted in ways that made the services understandable or accessible. In some cases, staff were either non-existent or perceived as uninformed:

> Even the college center, nobody is in there either, you had to help yourself to your own books if you (can) find them because they was junky and stuff, so I didn't find none, so I went on the internet and ordered me one.
>
> [The career center] may be there, but if you don't know where to start from or…what to look for, then you're pretty much lost.

With few exceptions, an adversarial tone permeated the relationship these students had with the school and school personnel as reflected in the following comments: "They gotten their paycheck, they don't care…," "The schools try to not

help you succeed in life for yourself," and "They [school staff] don't let us know nothing." Some participants indicated that career centers were available, but that it took personal initiative and knowledge to use them. Unfortunately, many of the participants didn't know where to begin.

Parents and Family

Many focus group participants indicated that their parents were very influential in motivating them to plan for and make positive career choices, although they were not often cited as a source of actual career information. One young man said of his mother, "She's always motivating me to do whatever I want to. She tells me, 'don't give up; there's your dream. You go for it!'" Another young man said, "I'm really trying to prove to my dad that I can do this, because he doesn't think that I can."

The work and career experiences of family members provided insights into possible work and career options. Some students had decided on careers in the restaurant industry, health care, accounting, and engineering because of their exposure to those fields through a sibling or extended family member. For example, participants made the following statements:

> Well… it's through my mom because she's a nurse. She really loves her job. For me it's really fun to care for others…, so why not?

> I'm the oldest daughter and then, so, it's not just for me, it's for my mom too. It's like she always wants… parents always want their children to have a better life then they do. And so, I feel like I have to be that kind of person that my mom wants me to be. And it's really important to me because it's my life. And then, I enjoy, you know, I want to become a biomedical engineer like my cousin, so that's my goal to be, to become that person and to have that kind of career or job.

On the other hand, the difficulties that some of the participants' parents experienced due to strained qualifications and low-paying jobs shaped the participants' views regarding the importance of education and preparation for a career. For example, many participants made assertions similar to the following:

> My mom went back to high school and finished, and she says that she wants us to go and at least complete high school, because our lives will be so hard if we don't.

> My mom dropped out of school at the 6th grade, but she went back to school and finished, then she didn't go to college, because she had a family and she has to work really hard, but she really wants me to make something of myself, and that's why I want to do it, for her.

Youth whose parents had immigrated to this country sometimes expressed a particularly heightened sense of responsibility to fulfill a family goal of "next generation" success. For example, one participant said, "I always remember I want to be a better generation. My family did not just come to this country for me not to do something with myself."

Many participants felt their parents were not able to provide them with ideas and suggestions for career development or planning because they did not have professional jobs or had limited formal education; though, these comments were less typical. One female participant commented, "As for me because I'm not really that connected into my own family, like I'm kind of like an outsider. I have to go my own way because they don't really have any information." When asked about the influence of her family on her career goals or preparation, another participant said, "Well, not to make my family seem like the worst or whatever, but none whatsoever. They aren't doing nothing and they can't see me doing anything, either".

The encouragement family members provide is often a critical element in these young people's confidence and motivation to succeed. Participants expressed their need for continual support, saying, "It makes me feel better, because they are pushing me to do good, and sometimes I need that."

Media

Media, especially television, provided some of our participants with indirect information or impressions about different careers. For example, sports and entertainment celebrities were seen as role models by many of the youth, especially by young men who said they desired future careers as professional athletes or entertainers. In most of these cases, the participants desired what they perceived as the lifestyle of these celebrities, though they seemed to have little information about their actual occupations or how to attain them:

> Nowadays by the time you get up to that age, (25-26) in the NBA, you gotta be making millions, like 24 million at the end of the year or something. Then you can really live.

> By the time I get to be 20 or so I probably will be a professional baseball player, because I really love to play baseball, or maybe professional boxing. For now, I'm just focusing on baseball.

However, some participants who aspired to celebrity status had some concrete ideas about alternative paths:

> Well in like the fantasy world I'll become a superstar at the high school. But most likely in the real world I'll just go to college and study probably either political science or film or like minor in Spanish.

Though many of the role models were public figures from popular culture, some historical figures such as Napoleon Bonaparte were mentioned:

> Napoleon Bonaparte, well he was evil but, you know, I believe think I can become a leader like him, but in a good way.

Work experiences

Work experience proved to be influential for many participants. For students who had previous or current work experience, these experiences were influential in two ways. For some participants, the experience helped crystallize a career path:

> I work, right now in a non-profit organization that helps the community. So I get to see how they interact with the people and they try to help them also, that, that makes me feel like I want to go into social work or something or just give back to the community, like if I have a lot of money, you know, when I'm old.

For others, current or previous work experience served to eliminate some occupations from further consideration:

> I tried working at the counter, but they gave you work to do, plus you have to answer the questions of the people who came in. Then I would make mistakes, and sometimes have to do the whole thing over. It was like one thing or the other, but I couldn't do both. So I want a job that's quieter.

Some participants who did not have a particular work experience were anxious to gain some first-hand experience in career fields that interested them and felt that such experience was necessary before they could make a final decision:

> Just because my interest is pretty much in math and reading I think in the future I might like to become an accountant or a librarian. Librarian is like, when I was a child I planned to be a librarian because I liked books, but I don't really know what librarians actually do when they aren't helping people find books, so maybe if I could work in a library to see…

Life experiences

Specific life experiences and situations provided exposure to careers in a way that gave participants personal meaning and importance. Encounters with the law, medical, or social services led to knowledge about careers related to law enforcement, nursing or medicine, youth services and youth development in the non-profit sector. An exchange with one participant highlights how life experience provided an early encounter with a possible career in medicine:

> Participant: Well, me being a nurse, has always been, so right now I actually have a chance, you know, to pursue, I'm still going to stick with it, maybe I can just find something, like a nursing assistant or something?

> Interviewer: How did you become interested in that, were there specific people that you knew were nurses or were an influence on you or your….?

> Participant: I guess me being in and out of the hospital because I'm diabetic, and there's a lot of diabetic nurses work in the hospital, too, and so that's what I figured I wanted to do, especially, I love kids, so I just want to work with kids, really, especially the ones who that's sick and need help, that's what I really wanted to do, so I wanted to pursue that.

For some, having the responsibility of caring for younger siblings helped participants identify an interest working with children. For example, one participant explained:

> I, at first I wanted to do hair, because that's what I did all the time, and a I still want to do that, but on the side, you know, part time. But I decided I wanted to work with kids because when I was younger, I'm the oldest child, and just stayed home a lot with the kids, and I enjoyed it, I played with them, even the kids next door. When I was older, I go talk to them, play with them, helping them with their homework, so I figured I'd just make a career out of something I enjoy. So when I came here to start their program, she asked me what kind of job I wanted to do as a career, and I told her, you know, child care, that's what she set me in. As I worked there over a couple of months, I enjoyed it, I was at work every day, and they just closed, all the children left, so that's how I made it a career, wanted it to be a career.

Observational experiences of other people at work sometimes stimulated a career interest or curiosity. For instance, a few participants commented on the construction they saw around them:

> Basically, I just see people around doing construction and all that…I see that's what I want to do.

> Building buildings, I like stuff like that. Maybe be an architect, that's what I'd like to do…

Other times, life experience clearly led participants to look for something else:

> I guess because of the environment and by you looking upon other people and what they do. And you just think man I don't want to be like that, you know. And you just have to try to push your hardest and do better than that. Sometimes, it shows you what you don't want.

Peer Influences

For most participants, individual peers were less important than the peer culture of the school or their peer social group. One participant said that at one high school she attended there were strong expectations that everyone should attend college or seek special training after high school: "That is just what you did—everybody was planning towards a career." However, when she moved to a new neighborhood,

those expectations were not a part of the culture of the new high school and it was difficult to stay focused on the goals she had set. Other participants had similar experiences:

> I had the same crowd in the 9th grade that were kind of pulling me down and wanting me to be with them, and I just kind of started slacking their way, but I had to let them go.

> But my friends, they'd rather me hang out with them, and that's not what I want to do…I'm trying to do something with my life, where they're trying to sit back and do nothing.

Such observations indicate that for many young people setting goals "to do something with my life" requires strong conscious effort.

Mentors

Mentors, as well as role models operate primarily as a protective support that reduces some of the negative impact associated with growing up in a risky environment: one that includes, for instance, poverty, violence, and/or discrimination (Rivera, Chen, Flores, Blumberg, & Pontrotto, 2007; M. B. Spencer, Dupree, Cunningham, Harpalani, & Miller, 2003; Taylor, 1989; Yancey, Siegel, & McDaniel, 2002). "Public figure" role models have been shown to be better than no role model, however, research suggests that youth who have some personal connection to the person they identify as a role model experience greater benefit (Taylor, 1989; Yancey, 1998; Yancey et al., 2002). Participants often identified one or two individuals who had provided continuous encouragement or help resolving specific issues, such as childcare, transportation or financial aid that made an important difference in helping them identify their career goals. In some cases, the mentors were teachers.

Perceived Barriers

The career development literature on minority and low-income youth makes frequent references to the perceived barriers to career and educational attainment, and how those perceptions "handicap" youth and limit their efforts (Constantine, Erickson, Banks, & Timberlake, 1998; Constantine, Wallace, & Kindaichi, 2005; Jackson et al., 2006; Rivera et al., 2007). Because of this, the youth in our focus groups were expected to identify issues they perceived as barriers to the attainment

of their career and educational goals.

This was not generally the case. The question of barriers was often met by silence and questioning looks, and needed additional probes, such as "obstacles" or "things that might make it hard for you to reach your goals". When re-stated in this way, the overwhelming response from these focus groups was money:

> I guess the financial part… If you don't have money, you won't be able to do that stuff [go to college], right?

> Money. You know you're going to need money to go to school, or get someone to watch your baby while you're in school. It all comes down to money.

Some participants saw their obstacles as principally lacking skills or academic ability. One participant reasoned:

> I think why am I thinking about a career that involves more school when I'm not good in school? Maybe I'd want to be a designer, but I'd have to have to be better in math than I am, so why even try?

In general, participants whose stated aspiration was celebrity status were the least likely to identify barriers.

Interestingly, participants did not identify conditions related to institutional racism, discrimination from teachers, counselors or potential employers, or the perception that people of their ethnic group or gender "couldn't" achieve a particular career objective. Much of the existing literature on career planning for minority youth suggests that the intensity of perceived barriers related to the history of discrimination dampens career-related self-efficacy and handicaps goal setting behavior in African American and Latino youth in particular (Constantine et al., 1998; Jackson et al., 2006; McWhirter, 1998). Possibly, these perceptions were not consciously felt by these youth, or in the largely mixed-gender, mixed-ethnicity focus groups these factors were not mentioned because of their sensitive nature.

DISCUSSION: A TYPOLOGY OF CAREER CHOICE PATTERNS FOR YOUTH IN "AT-RISK" SETTINGS

The process of making a career choice, developing a plan, setting intermediate goals and implementing that plan is a highly individual matter. While most of

the participants in these focus groups saw "having a career" as a way to transform their lives and have a successful life, some had taken more practical steps in their exploration than others, and had supported their career choices with adaptive life choices that appeared likely to result in affirmative outcomes. This model of the linkages between the circumstances of the individual and the choices he or she makes during the critical adolescent period has been proposed by Spencer (M. B. Spencer, and Swanson, D. P., 1991; M. B. Spencer et al., 2003; M. B. Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997; Swanson & Spencer, 1991), and has been applied to the career development process in my own work (King & Madsen, 2007). Three general career choice typologies emerged from our discussions with these youth.

Aspirations to Careers in Sports and Entertainment

Some participants, particularly young men, aspired to high profile, highly compensated careers in professional sports or entertainment and did not identify alternate career paths or aspirations. These findings are consistent with other research, especially with African American males (Conchas, 2006; Mincy, 2006). There is nothing inherently wrong with having such aspirations, and the literature on youth development is clear that the ability to imagine alternate outcomes is an important component of positive youth development that contributes significantly to adaptive decision-making. The concern about these youth is that while they express the desire for such high-profile careers, most were not engaged in activities that would help them realize their aspirations, nor were they engaged in other activities or plans that might lead them to viable and satisfying careers in lower-profile occupations. As one participant observed, these young people appear to have "dreams but no goals". Their work identity status seemed to be in moratorium, and the processes of exploration and decision-making that would help them achieve a work identity are not apparent. Other researchers have documented this phenomenon (MacLeod, 1995; McLaughlin, 1993; M. B. Spencer, and Swanson, D. P., 1991; Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003). Milbrey McLaughlin concludes:

> The absence of employment for youth and adults in inner cities not only makes the young deeply pessimistic about their futures and the value of school, but also means the young have no opportunity to learn how to work, or to learn the habits and skills of the workplace either through their own involvement or through the models provided by adults in their lives. (p.40)

Even in this relatively small sample, and with the limitations of focus groups, the celebrity goals stated by these participants appeared to mask the more troubling reality of no career planning in their lives.

Aspirations Influenced by Concrete Knowledge

Another group of participants expressed interest in careers that are often perceived as prestigious and well-compensated, such as doctors or lawyers. For some youth these aspirations may be promoted by parents, particularly in cultures where children are expected to have strong allegiance to family and to contribute to its financial support (Tang et al., 1999). For others, these career goals may have been stimulated by what was often articulated as the heroic nature of such fields. They also had some knowledge of the steps necessary to attain these careers. Engineering, teaching, armed service, and computer science-related careers also often appeared to be fields in which the youth aspiring to them had such knowledge of requirements. This pattern of career interests as related to exposure to the practice and concrete requirements of specific careers is the rationale behind the development of many career-oriented magnet schools (Conchas, 2006; Crain et al., 1999).

For some youth, career goals that require extensive education and training appear to be within their ability to achieve because of their stated academic attainment, concrete knowledge about the career's requirements and descriptions of supporting activities they had undertaken to attain their goals. However, other youth who expressed such aspirations (such as some of the youth contacted in teen parenting programs or those in danger of dropping out of school) appeared to face significant barriers to attaining these goals, even though they did not appear to be aware of these barriers.

Research examining the linkages between youth decision-making and life stage outcomes supports our perception of these young people (King & Madsen, 2007; Larson, 2000; M. B. Spencer et al., 1997). Similar to those youth aspiring to celebrity status, hoping for careers that might be beyond their reach in the foreseeable future, especially without making a concomitant effort toward more adaptive choices in all areas of their lives, may be a distraction to making plans and working towards occupations and careers that would be more attainable.

Aspirations Influenced by Work Experience

Career goals can be influenced by work experience in a number of ways. Some young people had current or past employment that they enjoyed and valued. Although they did not seek these jobs with the intention of making them careers,

they were now considering doing just that. As one participant said, "…I'm at that level that I have a job, where I want to be…I'm here, and if I like [it], I've decided, well, I want this as my career, so I'm going to keep on going until it becomes a career." However, some participants had started work with the intention of making it a career, but found they could not make a living wage, or that the work just did not interest them. Some typical comments included, "I realized that…you have to go to college and (to) get a career, a real career." and "Because it was customer service, and there was stuff to do, but I wasn't growing, I was just staying there, you know, as, it was like not a good, it wasn't a good position. It was a dead-end job." Such an experience highlights a weakness of workforce programs that may prepare an individual for particular kinds of work, but not to make a living in the long term. Such jobs may be entry-level positions with no clear "career ladders" for capable and ambitious workers to aspire to. For other participants, current or previous work experience eliminated some career areas from consideration because they did not care for the nature of the work itself. While some observers might regard these as negative experiences, such real-life work experiences give young people a taste of some of the career options that exist, and a chance to make practical decisions based on their own preferences, interests and abilities.

The three typologies of career choice can be useful to career counselors and those engaged in workforce preparation programs. First, it appears that concrete experience and knowledge motivate these youth in career selection. Youth who have limited experience and limited knowledge are more likely to identify a celebrity or "fantasy" career, and to put further planning on hold.

CONCLUSION

As an exploratory study of a relatively small sample of youth in a particular location this research has a number of limitations. However, it has provided some insights that can help to shape the conduct of future research. Instead of seeing what our earlier study suggested would be a large number of youth from low-income backgrounds who are settling for less, the majority of the participants in this study are still involved in exploration and decision-making. Some saw celebrity careers as dreams that were unlikely to materialize and continued to prepare for what they saw as more realistic career choices, while others appeared to use the hope for attainment of celebrity as a reason to avoid planning. Thus, the results from our previous survey of high school seniors likely reflected a snapshot of individual progress rather than a generalizable estimate of when career decisions will be made.

These participants saw career decisions as vital and important, but many seemed

to lack the personal and institutional resources to help them identify and pursue options that would be helpful to them. As a result, some did not understand the linkages between eventual career success and educational preparation, some lacked the motivation to make decisions that would help them to achieve meaningful career goals, and others had internalized their difficulties with school and decided there was no point in working toward a career.

An observation of the inequities in income and employment make it clear that the career attainments of non-minority youth and those from higher income backgrounds on the one hand and those of lower-income African Americans and Latinos (who made up the majority of the participants in these focus groups) on the other are quite different. Some researchers believe that these differences are the result of the persistent gap in school achievement between ethnic groups, but it is likely that the differences are more complex than these statistics suggest. The entire society is exposed to the same media-saturated images of popular culture, but we suggest that some urban, low-income and minority youth appear more likely to use those images to craft their career aspirations because there are few other models of success for them to draw upon. In addition, the affluence these media images exude is very important to them, both symbolically and intrinsically. At the same time, low self-efficacy, reinforced by school failure and combined with other personal and environmental risk factors, may have pre-conditioned these youth to expect low levels of educational and career attainment.

Clearly, there is a need for more research in the area of career behavior among low-income and minority youth, which is critical to the development of counseling strategies, practices and programs that will lead to better education and career guidance for this growing population of youth. This study suggests that low-income and minority youth need employment options and training opportunities that allow them to see clear career preparation paths to interesting and well-compensated employment.

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APPENDIX A

Focus Group Discussion Guide

1. What does having a career mean? Is it different from having a job? How?
2. How important do you think your career will be?
3. Have you thought seriously about what you'd like to do after high school?
4.   When do you think people should decide about school and work?
5.   How will you decide on a career or your post high-school plans?
6. What are some of the things that would help you to make good decisions or choices about your future? (*Information, Experiences, Where to get help if they need it*)
7. Who would you consider to be a good and reliable source of career information?
8. What steps do you think you might need to take to achieve your work goals?
9. What barriers or obstacles do you think you might have to overcome?
10. Are there personal skills, talents or qualities that will be helpful in your career?
11. Are there other skills you will need? How will you get them?
12. What is the most important thing you are doing now to prepare for your career?
13. The federal government has passed a new law, stating that all teenagers between the ages of 16 and 19 must identify a career goal and register it with the Department of Labor. The first submission on this new law is due tomorrow. You have 24 hours to decide and file your first statement. What will you do?

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