



# The consequences of unrealized occupational goals in the transition to adulthood



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## ABSTRACT

Do unmet occupational goals have negative consequences for well-being? Several social–psychological theories posit that aspirations become standards against which individuals judge themselves, thereby decreasing well-being when unmet. Yet other evidence points to young adults' goal flexibility and resilience, suggesting unmet aspirations may not affect well-being. This paper tests these alternatives using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth 1979 ( $N = 9016$ ) and the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 ( $N = 10,547$ ) to examine whether the degree of match between adolescent occupational aspirations (NLSY) and expectations (NELS) and later attainment affect job satisfaction and depression. This paper also examines gender differences in the cost to unmet goals. Findings reveal a cost to falling short of one's occupational goals, manifested in more depressive symptoms for men in the older cohort, and lower job satisfaction for both men and women across two cohorts born approximately 14 years apart.

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## 1. Introduction

The ethic of the American Dream is pervasive in the United States, contributing to a belief that the “good life”—including high occupational attainment and socioeconomic well-being—is both desirable and attainable (Hochschild, 1995; Jahromi, 2011; Turner, 1960). This shared optimism may have led to a crisis of unmet expectations, however. Recent research finds that about 70% of high school sophomores expect to work in a professional occupation (Goyette, 2008), but less than 15% of adults are employed in professional occupations (BLS, 2009). Similar gaps between occupational aspirations and attainment have been documented in other research (Csikszentmihalyi and Schneider, 2000; Reynolds et al., 2006).

Are there consequences to the American Dream, and if so, for whom? Scholars have asserted potentially negative outcomes associated with failing to achieve one's goals (Carr, 1997; Markus and Nurius, 1986; Merton and Rossi, 1968; Runciman, 1966; Schneider and Stevenson, 1999; Trusty and Harris, 1999), yet this relationship has rarely been tested. Two studies of unmet goals produce conflicting results. Reynolds and Baird (2010), using NLSY and Add Health data, find no evidence of increasing depressive symptoms among young adults who fall short of their earlier educational expectations, while Carr's (1997) prospective study of middle aged women's occupational aspirations using the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study finds a positive association between unmet occupational aspirations and depressive symptoms.

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The current manuscript provides the first nationally representative, prospective study of the consequences of unmet occupational goals<sup>1</sup> for young adults. It offers an improvement over prior studies of unmet goals by using two cohorts born 1957–1965 and 1974–1976, two measures of well-being, and an exhaustive set of covariates, and by examining differences in the relationship between unmet goals and well-being by gender. First, I investigate the relationship between unmet aspirations and job satisfaction and depression using the National Longitudinal Study of Youth, 1979 (NLSY). Job satisfaction is expected to be directly related to unmet goals because “satisfaction implies a convergence of aspirations and achievement” that is distinct from other measures of distress and well-being (Mirowsky and Ross, 2003, p. 28). Examining depressive symptoms will provide insight into whether the match between early aspirations and later attainment affects general indicators of well-being in the transition to adulthood. Second, I test whether these findings for job satisfaction are replicated using the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) (but not depressive symptoms, as NELS does not include this measure). Finally, I consider gender differences in the relationship between unmet goals and emotional well-being for both cohorts. Findings contribute to the literatures on social psychological theories of goal setting and self-concept (Higgins, 1987; Michalos, 1985; Mirowsky and Ross, 2003; Runciman, 1966), adolescent and young adult development (Brandtstadter and Renner, 1990; Heckhausen and Tomasik, 2002; Jacobs et al., 1991; Rindfuss et al., 1999), and occupational aspirations and expectations (Alexander and Cook, 1979; Carr, 1997; Reynolds and Baird, 2010).

## 2. Theoretical background

Occupational aspirations and expectations have become increasingly lofty over the past half a century (Csikszentmihalyi and Schneider, 2000; Goyette, 2008; Reynolds et al., 2006; Schneider and Stevenson, 1999), and two theoretical perspectives hold very different predictions regarding the consequences of these heightened goals. On the one hand, social psychological theories of goal setting suggest that aspirations can become standards against which young adults judge their success (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Merton and Rossi, 1968; Runciman, 1966). Falling short of these self-created measuring sticks can result in lowered well-being and satisfaction. On the other hand, some researchers posit that adolescent occupational goals are meaningless, pointing to their extreme ambitiousness (Alexander and Cook, 1979; Rindfuss et al., 1999), and theories of adolescent development contend that high early goals and later adjustment is a normal—even ideal—part of growing up (Heckhausen, 1999; Tomasik et al., 2009). Below, I describe these theoretical counterpoints and the evidence supporting them in greater detail.

### 2.1. Costs to unmet goals

Relative deprivation theory (Merton and Rossi, 1968; Runciman, 1966), multiple discrepancies theory (Michalos, 1985), and self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) suggest that well-being depends on one's attainment relative to some standard. Relative deprivation theory posits that individuals establish comparisons to judge their own accomplishments. Prior studies have assumed that these comparisons are made to a reference group such as peers, co-workers, friends, or neighbors (e.g. Bernburg et al., 2009; Yngwe et al., 2005). However, Runciman's (1966) work suggests that dissatisfaction and stress may arise in response to a conflict between the imagined self and present circumstances. Similarly, Michalos's (1985) multiple discrepancies theory posits that happiness and satisfaction are functions of the size of the gap between what one has and several comparisons, including what one wants, expected to have in the past, and expects to have in the future. Higgins (1987) self-discrepancy theory adds to this by considering the negative emotions (disappointment, dejection) that arise from discrepancies between one's self-concept and ideal self. In sum, these theories suggest that goals are a key metric by which individuals may judge themselves and evaluate their own happiness and disappointment. Importantly, comparisons may be made from a position of relative success or lack of success. Though prior literature has examined the repercussions of such comparisons to those above and below oneself in economic well-being (Stewart, 2006), the current study examines the implications of exceeding and falling short of one's occupational goals.

The theory of “possible selves” elaborates the mechanisms by which goals may become standards with which to judge one's success or failure. This theory argues that aspirations are reflections of individuals' hopes and fears about their future selves, and that these future, or possible, selves serve as a context for motivating, implementing, and interpreting behavior (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Ruvolo and Markus, 1992). Future selves exist and interact along a number of domains, such as occupational and educational attainment, social life, material possessions, appearance, and family life (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Yowell, 2000). Therefore, occupational aspirations may shape behavior and be linked to daydreams about home ownership, vacations, leisure activities, and other material expectations. For example, a young person who aspires to be a surgeon and a young person who hopes to be a firefighter are not only fantasizing about the types of jobs they wish to hold, but also about the lifestyle, friends, and living environment they envision for themselves. Falling short of these goals means

<sup>1</sup> There are theoretical and empirical differences between aspirations and expectations. Aspirations reflect ambitious goals that would satisfy desires but are not explicitly expected, and expectations are beliefs about likely future attainment (see Morgan, 1998). Measures of expectations produce more reliable estimates of future attainment than aspirations. However, not all nationally representative datasets provide both measures, and question wording varies by dataset. In this paper, I review literature from sources that use both aspirations and expectations, with disparate measures. The data I use also differs in the measures available. This is not ideal, but the two datasets offer other advantages. I use the terms aspirations and expectations when referring to studies that use these terms. When referring to several studies with different measures, studies that combine measures, or this paper's research, I use the terms “goals.”

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