

Coming of age in changing times: Occupational aspirations of American youth, 1966–1980

Xiaoling Shu^{a,*}, Margaret Mooney Marini^b

^a Department of Sociology, University of California, Davis, One Shields Avenue, Davis, CA 95616, United States

^b University of Minnesota, United States

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Abstract

Young people in the United States are driven by an ideology of high achievement and hold ambitious occupational aspirations, yet little is known about the process by which they negotiate social conditions to come to terms with life's limitations. We use a life-course perspective to examine change in prestige, education, earning potential, and sex type dimensions in occupational aspirations in the U.S., using longitudinal data on cohorts of young people ages 14–29 during the period between 1966 and 1980. After their initial formation in childhood and adolescence, occupational aspirations are regulated by experiences in the educational system, the labor market, and for women, the adult family. The Civil Rights and the Women's Movements contributed to age-, cohort-, and period-related increases in women and black men's occupational aspirations. The economic downturn after 1973 also played a role, reducing young men's occupational aspirations and reverting black men's aspirations to the same level as that prior to the 1970s, negating the positive influences of the Civil Rights Movement. There is no evidence that the Vietnam War produced a net change in young people's aspirations. These findings show that after their initial formation under ascriptive influences, occupational aspirations continue to evolve as new life experiences associated with changed societal values and opportunity structure provide impetus for change. Despite these perturbations, socioeconomic background, race, and gender retain a pervasive impact on the regulation of young people's aspirations in adolescent and young adulthood in the United States.

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It has been argued that the social stratification system in the United States is maintained by an ideology of high achievement, which results from a “combination of futuristic orientation, the norm of ambition, and a general sense of fellowship with the elite” (Turner, 1960). Loyalty to this system is cultivated by encouraging individuals to think of themselves as viable contestants for elite positions and by sustaining these high aspirations through delaying the absolute point of selection for these prime professions. This futuristic orientation acts as an

effective means of social control, particularly among the disadvantaged groups who receive less than their proportional share of society's resources (Turner, 1960). The achievement ideology, combined with the educational system's less systematic regulation of allocation of individuals to desirable occupations, results in substantial numbers of American youth experiencing a discrepancy between their levels of aspiration and attainment (Jacobs, Karen, & McClelland, 1991; Marini, 1978a; Schneider & Stevenson 1999; Shapiro & Crowley, 1982). This discrepancy poses a puzzle: how do young people negotiate life's limitations and reconcile their high ambitions with the socioeconomic conditions of the labor market of their times?

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: xshu@ucdavis.edu (X. Shu).

There has been little research on the dynamic process that manages occupational aspirations during the period when young people leave school and begin the transition to becoming workers, spouses, and parents. With some exceptions, sociological work generally treats occupational aspirations as being formed in adolescence and remaining unchanged thereafter. Although we have some knowledge of the extent to which occupational aspirations change and the ways in which they change (Jacobs, 1989; Jacobs et al., 1991; McClelland, 1990a, 1990b; Rindfuss, Cooksey, & Sutterlin, 1999; Shapiro & Crowley, 1982), we know little about the factors associated with change. We also lack knowledge on whether change varies for subgroups of the population, is predisposed by other individual characteristics, is influenced by macro-social conditions, or is associated with particular events during the transition to adulthood.

It is important to study aspirations because they are a mechanism of stability or change in the occupational structure, as well as in the occupational mobility of individuals both between and within generations. These aspirations are predictive of the prestige, earning potential, and sex type of subsequent occupations attained (Marini & Fan, 1997; Sewell, Hauser, & Wolf, 1980). Occupational aspirations mediate a large proportion of the effects of ability and parental socioeconomic status on educational and occupational attainment, although the size of this association varies by race and gender (Hauser, Tsai, & Sewell, 1983; Jacobs, 1989:64–107; Marini, 1978a; Marini & Fan, 1997; Rindfuss et al., 1999; Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969; Sewell et al., 1980).

This paper furthers significantly our understanding about the ways in which the gap is reconciled between the high occupational aspirations of American youth and the reality of the occupational structure. First, we study the occupational aspirations of young people who came of age in a period of significant social change, which offers insights into the process by which shifts in broad social conditions influence individual orientations and behaviors. For example: early experiences of family deprivation in the 1930s left enduring marks on children of the Depression (Elder, 1974); women who came of age during the late 1960s and 1970s diverged from the traditional path of full-time motherhood (Gerson, 1985), and in the wake of the Women's Movement, the daughters of highly educated parents experienced an increase in occupational aspirations (Shu & Marini, 1998). These changes in societal norms and opportunity structure expose individuals to new experiences, and thus become an impetus for change in

their family and occupational orientations and behaviors.

Second, we differentiate the effects of age-cohort-period on occupational aspirations. Maturation associated with *aging* may produce ontological change resulting from development of the human organism and show high consistency across societies and historical periods. Changes that come with age are also affected by *cohort* as social variations alter life experiences of different cohorts of people that may modify occupational aspirations. A third source of such variation is historical, or *period* changes in the social environment that differentiates the life experiences of the same individuals in different historical times.

Last, we use dynamic statistical models suitable for studying change in latent psychological attributes measured on multiple dimensions. Occupational aspirations are expected to exhibit both stability and change over the life course. Change is appropriately modeled as a dynamic process characterized by stochastic variability, where larger perturbations reflect actual change. We use measures of four dimensions of occupational aspirations at regular intervals to estimate a series of dynamic models. We also simultaneously consider the interrelationships among the multiple dimensions of occupational aspiration to compare the amount of change across these dimensions.

In this paper, we use a life-course perspective to study change in occupational aspirations among young people in the U.S. from 1966 to 1980. A life-course approach highlights the unique ways that maturation, experiences, cohort membership and historical or “period” conditions influence occupational goals. We explore the effects of these forces by simultaneously estimating life-course change in four dimensions of occupational aspirations: prestige, education, earnings, and sex type. We also analyze multiple sources of influences, including continuing influences from individual characteristics and family background, and life-course events in the educational system, the labor market, and the adult family. Age, cohort, and period effects are differentiated to reflect historical transformations in context. We use the most recently available longitudinal measures of occupational aspirations for a nationally representative sample to study change in these aspirations during adolescence and early adulthood. Occupational aspirations were measured 10 times over a 13-year span for women and 9 times over an 11-year span for men. Although there have been more recent attempts to obtain longitudinal measures of occupational aspirations from national samples,

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