

Emerging Adults' Unintended and Unpredicted Work-Life Pathways in a Rural Coastal Community

Breanna C. Lawrence and E. Anne Marshall
University of Victoria

Abstract

The transition from education to the world of work has changed significantly in recent years. Social and economic changes have impacted work-life transitions, particularly for emerging adults in rural and small communities. Much career development research has identified the needs of urban people; however, the needs of young people in non-urban areas have largely been omitted. Following up findings from a youth sample in a previous bi-coastal research project, this qualitative study explored the work-life pathways of young adults from a small coastal community in British Columbia, Canada. Using semi-structured interviews, participants described the impact of economic and employment changes experienced in their community on their work and life options and choices after high school. They described struggles with frequent moving, economic hardships, changes in employment, and adjustments to career aspirations. On the positive side, they also identified supportive families, community involvement, passion for their surrounding environment, and positive future outlooks. Supports to facilitate young adults' successful work-life transitions are discussed.

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Globalization of the world's economies has significantly changed

the nature of working life over the last few decades. Patterns of young people's work-life transitions have changed, becoming more protracted and complex (Blatterer, 2007). Today's growing unemployment, shrinking labour force participation, and prolonged education creates complexities and uncertainties for young people (Amundson, 2005). Thus, work-life transitions¹ have transformed to more gradual and individualized processes heavily influenced by changing socioeconomic conditions. For many young adults² in industrialized societies, the transition to adulthood is long and gradual. Arnett (2004) has called this period "emerging adulthood" and suggests that it is a "new and historically unprecedented period of the life course" (p. 4). It is a time when young people explore possibilities available to them in love and work as they gradually move toward making enduring decisions.

The work-life patterns and pathways of young or emerging adults in urban settings have received considerable research attention (Amundson, 2005; Jeffrey, Lehr, Hache, & Campbell, 1992; Meece, Askew, Agger, Hutchins, & Byun, 2014). In contrast, young people's process of entering the labour market in small and rural communities has received far less attention. Work-life transition research among urban populations suggests they may have different values and experiences than young adults from rural and small communities (Howley, 2006; Marshall, 2002). However, as Looker

and Dwyer (1998) observe, the impact of these contexts is often ignored or assumed to be simply "just one more variable to be entered into a multivariate equation" (p. 9). This "urban assumption," as labelled by Jeffrey et al. (1992, p. 253), has limited understanding of the contextual landscape of work-life transitions for rural and small community young adults. Statistics Canada's (2001) benchmark rural terminology recommendation considers several definitions of "rural" and summarizes associated definitional challenges. For research purposes the "rural and small town" definition is specific to populations living in towns and municipalities outside the commuting zone of larger urban centres (of 10,000 or more). The geographical classification of "rural communities" requires a population density of less than 150 people per square kilometre (Statistics Canada, 2001). Roughly 22 percent of Canada's population is classified as rural and small town (Statistics Canada, 2001).

There is also a paucity of research that follows young adults from rural and small communities at multiple points in their transition to work (Ling & O'Brien, 2013).

¹ Although many researchers and theorists use the term "school-to-work transitions," we use "work-life transitions" because it encompasses the variety of pathways (including reverse transitions from work back to school or returning to the family home) and does not assume there is a single school-to-work transition.

² The terms "young people" and "emerging adults" are used interchangeably in this article to describe people aged 19 to 25.

To address these gaps, the present study was designed as a follow-up to a previous research project entitled “Coasts Under Stress” that investigated the impacts of social and economic restructuring in communities on the east and west coasts of Canada (Ommer et al., 2007). Utilizing in-depth interviews, this qualitative study examined the work-life transition experiences, consequential supports and barriers, and future plans of young adults in a small coastal community in British Columbia, Canada. The study focused on four questions: (1) What had been the participants’ thoughts and plans back in high school about what they were going to do after graduation? (2) What has happened since the end of high school? (3) What difficulties did they experience moving forward with the plans they made in high school? (4) What has facilitated and/or hindered progress with their plans?

Context and Related Literature

This research is situated within social constructivist work-life development theory, which holds that peoples’ life context or life situation strongly influences both their understanding of and their choices about work and lifestyle (Blustein, 2006). A prominent theme in the current movement to contextualize career development is the exploration of the links between interpersonal relationships and the world of work (Blustein, Palladino Schultheiss, & Flum, 2004). The changes taking place in our current work world are significantly affecting the manner in which people live their lives. Blustein (2006) describes core functions that work has the potential to fulfill: (a) survival and power, with power referring to

the exchange of work for money or goods and services that sustain one’s life; (b) social connection; and (c) self-determination and identity formation such that an extrinsically motivated activity may become internalized and part of a broader set of values, behaviours, and goals. This approach to the psychology of working is understood as concerning the whole person and the combination of physical, social, political, economic, and cultural contexts rather than simply focused work or career choice alone.

Work-Life Pathways

The school-to-work transition period is both a vitally important and challenging developmental task for young people (Fouad & Bynner, 2008; Lapan, Tucker, Kim, & Kosciulek, 2003) and a process strongly influenced by cultural, social, economic, and historical circumstances (Young, Marshall, & Valach, 2007). Horowitz and Brominick (2007) drew attention to the increasing consensus about how social change has transformed the transition to adulthood from a relatively definite, logical pathway to a complex, perhaps fragmented, individualized process dependent on young peoples’ abilities to manage various landmark events and transitions. Emerging adults are increasingly required to individualize their work-life pathways to form working and personal relationships, gain educational credentials and employment experiences, and plan for the future in an increasingly complex milieu (Schwartz, Coté, & Arnett, 2005).

Young people often engage in short-term positions, change employment, experience unemployment, and they may

undertake postsecondary education more than once (Arnett, 2004). Thus, transition experiences are more prolonged and ambiguous than they were in the past (Goodwin & O’Connor, 2007), when transitions typically involved young people finding a job, getting married, and leaving the parental home in a relatively short period of time (Schwartz et al., 2005). Compared to twenty years ago, transitions have become less standardized and often include reversible pathways, such as transitioning from work back to school, moving back into the parental house from independent living, and changing relationship status (Molgat, 2007). Other examples include switching postsecondary programs, changing housing arrangements, and job loss. Walther and Plug (2006) refer to yo-yo transitions as the shifts back and forth between adolescence and adulthood. They contend that *yo-yo transitions* are not necessarily young people’s first choice, but rather result from traditional structures of social inequalities and other circumstances such as family need, financial need, health, and relationship changes.

The changing nature of the labour market has created a precarious economic environment that hinders young people’s attainment of some of the conventional markers of adulthood (e.g., financial and living independence and stable employment). Bradley and Devadason (2008) identified four typologies of labour-market-influenced pathways that emphasize the length, complexity, and variability of young peoples’ transitions: (a) *shifters* with no chosen career and various changes between types of work and employment statuses; (b) *stickers* pursuing a specific type of work; (c)

switchers making a major change of direction after a period of time in a specific vocation; and (d) *settlers* pursuing a single vocation after a period of shifting (Bradley & Devadason, 2008). Although Bradley and Devadason did not focus on rural participants, their typologies reflect how changing social and economic conditions significantly impact work-life pathways for young people. Ling and O'Brien (2013) found more jobs held in adolescence related to fewer jobs obtained after transitioning to the workforce after high school. Gaining various work experiences and processing what has been learned from being employed may develop proficiencies needed in career development.

Young Adults and Community Attachment

Bajema, Miller, and Williams (2002) suggest that the aspirations of young people in rural and small communities are vulnerable because of isolation, population size, and community culture. Physical isolation in combination with economic disadvantage can adversely affect educational trajectories and possibilities of mobility (Holland, Reynolds, & Weller, 2007). Howley (2006) contends rural young people both aspire to and expect less postsecondary education overall than do non-rural young people. Small communities provide unique opportunities to develop outdoor skills; however, some young people have expressed concerns about the transferability of such skills into urban settings (Shepard, 2004). Howley's findings suggest rural young people seek higher education within the context of their families' commitment to place, which mediates aspirations. Schools in

rural and small communities are often more likely to encourage trades programs rather than post-secondary education (Hutchins & Akos, 2013). These young people are more likely to attend a local college, to enrol in a trades program, and are less likely to pursue postgraduate education (compared to non rural young people). They often aspire to attain education that is relevant and needed in their community (Meece et al., 2014).

Particularly pertinent for rural and small community residents is *place identity* (Gustafson, 2000), a cognitive structure that contributes to identity processes and is often understood as *attachment to community* (Marshall et al., 2007). People who identify with a particular place explore the "Who am I?" question by answering the "Where am I?" question (Cuba & Hummon, 1993). Place identity is personally constructed and developed from subjective experiences within the physical environment. Rural attachment to place is depicted by unique relationships with land, connection with nature, and rootedness in local relationships. Previous research on young adults from coastal communities highlights the significance of how place for many of these residents involves the relationship with land, nature, local history, and knowledge (Cox et al., 2014; Marshall et al., 2007).

There is growing recognition of the struggle that rural and small community young people face between their community attachments and their attainment goals (Johnson, Elder, & Stern, 2005). Studies by Corbett (2005) and Ommer and colleagues (2007) involving communities on Canada's east and west coasts suggest that emerging adults from small coastal communities (and, likely, from rural

and northern communities) often face a more restricted set of options and opportunities. Cox and colleagues (2014) suggest that these young adults encounter different decision-making challenges, reflective of their community context, when considering future educational and occupational aspirations.

Coasts Under Stress (CUS) research project. This bi-coastal interdisciplinary research project (see www.costsunderstress.ca) investigated multiple impacts of socio-economic restructuring on the health of people, communities and the environment (Ommer et al., 2007). As part of this project, quantitative surveys, focus groups, and qualitative interviews were conducted with secondary school youth in five coastal communities in British Columbia (Marshall et al., 2007). The results identified problems associated with restructuring such as lower rates of school completion, health problems, reduced recreation and employment opportunities, substance use, depression, and family stress. Assets and strengths include place attachment, community solidarity, resiliency, parental support, family, and cultural identity. Youth in these coastal communities were aware of the impact of social and economic restructuring in their communities, yet, most were optimistic about their futures. One of the recommendations from the research was to follow up with the youth after high school to assess how their plans and aspirations worked out. There are very few follow-up studies that explore young adult transition processes and outcomes in depth (Bernes & Magnussen, 2004; Cox et al., 2014). The present research was designed to address this gap through follow-up interviews with young

adult CUS participants five to seven years after they had left high school.

Methodology

Extending the original CUS interview design (Marshall et al., 2007), young adult work and life transitions and experiences were explored through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Participants' perceptions and understandings of their lived experiences were elicited through research interviews that unfolded much like stories (temporal and situated personal narratives), with interview questions serving as conversational probes. Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) suggest that stories help people to understand others' thinking, actions, and reactions. Stories are not simply individual accounts, but are embedded in social relationships and structures that "provide unique insights into the connections between individual life trajectories and collective forces" (Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008, p. 3).

Study Location

Participants lived in a small coastal town and in surrounding rural areas on northern Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada. The community's economy is largely based on forestry, fishery, agriculture, tourism, and small business. Since the 1990s, restructuring and cutbacks, particularly in forestry and fishery, have resulted in substantial job losses, small business closures, high unemployment rates, and significant out-migration (Ommer & et al., 2007). When the CUS study began in 2001, the area population was over 5,000; however, it had declined by more than twenty percent to less than

4,000 at the time of the present study (Statistics Canada, 2001). The youth and young adult population aged 15 to 24 had dropped over 26% and this demographic was reported to be most affected by employment declines (Statistics Canada, 2001).

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were 3 females and 6 males between the ages of 21 and 25 who had all attended the community's only high school. Initially, recruitment was intended for the 17 participants who had been interviewed about their career trajectories when they were in grades 9 through 11 as part of the Coasts Under Stress study (Marshall et al., 2007). However, five years after data collection, many of the CUS participants and their families had left the community and could not be contacted (the original CUS interviews took place before internet and cellular service were readily available in this somewhat remote area). Three original CUS participants were located and interviewed by telephone. Then, through a process of snowball sampling, these participants helped recruit six additional participants in the same age range who had attended the same high school at the same time. These six "matched" interviews were conducted in person.

Interviews

One-on-one, semi-structured interviews addressing the participants' work and life experiences since high school were conducted, 6 in person and 3 over the phone. Questions loosely followed an interview guide. The order and format

of questions were flexibly adjusted to elicit each participant's narrative. Interviews ranged from half an hour to an hour. Combined with brief notes and observations when possible, the interview process allowed the interviewer to explore and comprehend the underlying meanings of the participants' descriptions of their work-life transitions (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

Data Analysis

Analysis involved two phases: within-participants and across-participants. Phase one began with listening to audio-recorded interviews, recording holistic impressions, then transcribing the interviews as close to verbatim as possible. Next, interview summaries were created and core information from each participant was identified (Walker, Cooke, & McAllister, 2008). Work-life stories, following Rhodes' (2000) ghostwriting method were constructed for each participant to honour the holistic and narrative nature of the data. Each participant's unique story included rich descriptions of work-life events and pathways in their own words (Lawrence, 2010); however, due to their length, they are not presented in this article.

The across-participant analysis involved iterative line-by-line readings of all transcripts and inductive labelling of text segments with code words or phrases (Saldana, 2013; Walker et al., 2008). Next, analytic memos were recorded while organizing code words and phrases into meaningful groups or clusters (Braun & Clark, 2006). Groups were examined for overlap and redundancy, resulting in a final list of seven main themes (see below)

common across all participants and more specific subthemes. As a final step, the data was integrated with existing research literature.

The qualitative research trustworthiness strategies described by Lincoln, Lynham and Guba (2011) were followed. *Auditability* was achieved through consistent interview recording accuracy, data collection, and analysis procedures. *Confirmability* was addressed through the maintenance of reflexive journals and interview logs. *Transferability* judgments were made possible by gathering comprehensive descriptions and contextual details, and *credibility* was achieved through participants' verification of their work-life stories.

Across-Participant Findings: Seven Themes

Seven main themes were identified from the phase two across-participant interview analysis, together with several more specific subthemes, as summarized below.

- High School Plans and Goals
 - High school goal setting, unintended outcomes, future plans
- Work and Education after High School
 - Frequent changes, high school influences, post-secondary, money
- Moving Away
 - Exploration, city difficulties and values
- Rural Living
 - Nature values and interests, place attachment, changing perspectives and returning, community benefits, community restructuring
- Relationships
 - Family, community adults

- Internal Constructs
 - Learning and motivation
- Hindsight and Insight
 - Responsibility and becoming an adult
 - Regrets

The seven main themes are described below; however, space limitations preclude a thorough discussion of all subthemes. Illustrative verbatim quotes from the participants are included *in italics*.

High School Plans and Goals

In high school, one participant had specific plans about completing her undergraduate degree and returning home to live and work and another planned to complete his apprenticeship and trade ticket and also remain in the community. The other seven participants described more general plans and vague goals. One young man said: *I just wanted to start working. . . I didn't have any idea of what I wanted to do with my life. . . . I seemed to care more about having a pick-up truck and stuff.* From a social cognitive career theory (SCCT) framework, Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1996) contend that young people's primary interests are likely to prompt corresponding choice-goals (e.g., those with entrepreneurial interests are likely to pursue a business career); specific goals, in turn, promote choice-relevant actions (e.g., applying for an entrepreneurship training program). When looking back, many of the participants described having broad and general interests in high school; most did not form specific choice-goals or determine goal-related relevant actions (although all would have participated in a

mandatory career development curriculum). Participants often discussed a career planning class that they did not find helpful while in high school. Nonspecific plans were common, such as *travel after high school*, and appeared to result in "unintended outcomes," as discussed in the next theme.

Work and Education after High School

After leaving high school, seven of the nine participants had either attended a postsecondary institution (college, university, or trades training), wanted to gain further education, or were currently enrolled. All of the participants who attended university or college changed their interests and programs. The two who did not, started (or continued) working. Some participants were employed in the local fishery or forestry industries. One young man noted: *Around here you normally get jobs around seventeen dollars an hour processing at the fish plant. . . . So that's not too bad when you are just out of high school and you are not really sure what you want.*

Most young people express the goal of college or university attendance and identify a range of career goals, many at the professional level (Corbett, 2005; Kenny et al., 2007; Howley, 2006). However, participants suggested that working at jobs at higher than minimum wage without required specific educational credentials was somewhat *binding*. This suggests it felt difficult for some participants to leave a job that provided regular *decent paychecks* and to pursue interests and educational aspirations that, while they may have been more personally fulfilling, felt more ambiguous, uncertain, and hence,

bound to their current job because of the decent paycheque.

Participants not in college or university were particularly interested in trades training or working in small businesses close to their community. However, many described feeling conflicted because of the emphasis during high school on attending university. One participant commented on the pressure to go to university: *When you are going to high school everybody's [teachers and parents] teaching you about going to university and getting out of town.* Another participant commented on exploring different postsecondary avenues: *I've noticed more people that want to take trades courses as their goals, instead of going to university and taking academics.* Previous research has noted rural-urban differences become noticeable when it came to the decision to aim for a university rather than college education (Cartwright & Allen, 2002).

Marshall's (2002) and Corbett's (2005) research suggests that schooling in coastal communities has several challenges for adolescents and those who educate them. To the extent that schools focus on postsecondary schooling, the emphasis tends to be on university preparation; however, more rural than urban young people go to some other form of postsecondary schooling (e.g., trades programs). Corbett (2005) argues that the emphasis on university preparation differentially disadvantages rural youth. In the United States, Hutchins and Akos (2013) found rural schools were more likely to have high school transition programs that encouraged trades rather than postsecondary. Overall, Ling and colleagues (2012) suggest there is a potential for career

practitioners to ensure the career success of all young people making the transition into the workforce, not just university-bound young people.

Many participants were not currently doing what they had thought and hoped in high school they would be doing. The subtheme of **unintended outcomes** was common for all participants. For example, one participant had hoped to be an electrician. Seven years after leaving high school halfway through grade 12, he was on employment insurance and struggling to find work. *So I totally screwed up my life in the beginning there. I found out that math wasn't my strong suit and I hate math.* This story and those of other participants are examples of what Molgat (2007) calls "reversible transitions." Choices are made that are not young people's first choices, but rather are a result of contextual influences (e.g., family need, health, financial need). Many of the study participants described feeling not well prepared for these unintended events and outcomes. Holland et al. (2007) contend that this struggle to maintain an educational route is the intricate interplay of agency, structure, resources, resourcefulness, contingency, and social policy. Contemporary transition experiences are often prolonged and destandardized for both rural and urban young people. However, rural communities differ from urban centres due to their access to resources. Compared to urban centres, rural communities are more often described in terms of what they lack, particularly regarding access to various private and public facilities and services (Looker & Dwyer, 1998). The aspirations of young people in rural communities are vulnerable to the social

influences of their community due to isolation, population size, and community culture (Bajema et al., 2002). Physical isolation in combination with economic disadvantage can adversely affect educational trajectories and possibilities of mobility (Holland et al., 2007).

Participants' work histories were dynamic and complex. **Frequency changes** subtheme included changing jobs or returning to jobs they had worked at in high school was not uncommon. These rural youth were not immune to the local economic restructuring and several were impacted by layoffs. One young man described a pattern that is common in small and rural communities: *I started off-loading fish boats in high school at 16 and did that for a couple years after I graduated and then escaped to go logging. But then I got laid off so I had to go back to off-loading fish boats. Then I escaped from off-loading fish boats again to go work at this rock crushing plant . . . got laid off from that so then I had to go back to off-loading fish boats.*

Participants' stories reflected the influence of the precarious labour market in their community. Many experienced periods of unemployment and multiple changes among types of work and employment statuses; their stories were reminiscent of Bradley and Devadason's (2008) shifters and switchers typology moving in and out of the labour market and between numerous temporary, low-paid, and low-status types of work. Schoon and colleagues (2007) conclude that over the last three decades young peoples' transitions have been increasingly associated with rising risks of unemployment because of rapidly changing economic and social contexts.

The **financial concerns** subtheme indicated that money was a significant factor that influenced work and educational decisions. Leaving education early to work to make money was a common theme. Many participants expressed concerns about attending postsecondary, accruing debt, and working at low-paying jobs. They had hoped to save money before returning to school; however, once they started working, most found it difficult to save. Going into debt or already having debt was a significant barrier to education. For example, when asked about his plans to return to school, a young man said: *I am stuck working right now until I figure out how to go back to school. . . . I am just getting by.* Few participants had financial support from their families, and this delayed participants' entry into postsecondary programs. Consistent with research by Fouad and Brown (2000) and Lehmann (2005), the influence of economic variables on educational and occupational attainment continues to persist over time.

Rural Living

Several major employers have laid off hundreds of workers on northern Vancouver Island since the 1990s (Marshall, 2002). Resource-based industries have been particularly affected. One participant commented: *Between economic times and a lot of job losses, people still manage to keep busy and working, but a lot of people are getting screwed over with their jobs, getting laid off.* Given that resource industries are expected to continue experiencing difficulties and decline, it is important that young people in resource-based communities

be prepared for different work (Marshall, 2002). Multiple options are prudent.

Participants expressed their sentiments about the beauty of their surroundings and their interest in the outdoors. A young man said: *The simplicity [draws people back here] more than anything, just quieter. . . . You can go away, hike your own trail, you can go away, get a lake to yourself.* Many participants with these strong outdoor/nature interests found urban living less desirable. Looker and Dwyer (1998) maintain that nature, calmness, and tranquillity are more positively valued in rural areas than in urban ones, as are physical space and a "clean environment." Rye (2006) also found that many young people perceive rural living as idyllic.

All participants commented in more depth on the positive aspects of their lives, rather than on the problematic (such as limiting work choices), which may have influenced their career decisions.

Place attachment subtheme recognized that all participants expressed appreciation for their rural community, especially with regard to raising families. A young man said: *Once you grow up in a small town, I think you're always a small town person at heart. I always say once you live here, you'll always come back.* This result is contrary to Jamieson's (2000) finding that some of those who stay in their rural community expressed embitterment. However, consistent with past research (e.g., other findings in Jamieson, 2000; Marshall, 2002), the majority of the participants who left still expressed feeling tied to their rural community. Marshall (2002) and others (e.g., Cox et al., 2014) have found that preference for place is a factor in career decision-making.

Participants commented on how their perspectives on rural living had changed since high school, often changing to a more positive outlook on rural living. While in high school participants reflected on the strong desire to leave their community, seven of the nine participants expressed their hopes to continue living on or move back to Vancouver Island. A young man said: *In high school we all would say how much we hated our town and we wanted to get away, but you realize once you move away—I definitely like smaller communities.* Changing perspectives underscore the importance of longitudinal and follow-up research. Even a few years' life experience seems to have resulted in some significant shifts in participants' priorities.

Moving Away

Eight of the nine participants discussed moving away from their community within the past five years (even if only for a short or temporary period). After high school, many participants were keen to leave the small community where they grew up. *Getting away and exploring other places* were the primary reasons for leaving. Garasky (2002) contends that it is the limited economic outlook for the local community that often motivates young rural people to move away from their home communities.

Frequent relocation was also common among participants who had moved away. One participant scoffed as she said: *I have moved so many different times. . . . But I have a place now that I have been for seven months, which is good.* Participants who had moved away usually lived in cities where either siblings or extended-family

members lived. Holland et al. (2007) emphasize the importance of sibling relationships and family networks and the consequential pull of family loyalty to different places.

Participants who had moved discussed their desire to explore and see new things when living in new places. A young man said: *I am used to a small puny town, and then I go to the city that is like a huge jungle. I was lost, but it was still an experience that I was loving it.* Arnett, Kloep, Hendry, and Tanner (2011) maintain that young adults often try out different ways of living and different options available in their work and personal lives.

Eight of the nine participants had experienced living in a city. **City difficulties and values** subtheme captured how many participations spoke of the difficulties they experienced, such as cost of living. Participants regarded the city as a place with more options but also more crime and fewer community ties. A young man said: *Trying to follow the rules down there and trying to make sure I was able to take care of myself in the city was hard.* Consistent with Looker and Dwyer's (1998) findings, those who moved to urban centres also encountered dissatisfaction with public transportation, the time it took to travel to work or school, and increased difficulties managing finances.

Relationships

Relationships with family and adults living in the rural community were described as supportive factors by eight participants. These participants felt closely connected to and supported by family and many community members. Similar to Shepard's

(2004) findings, participants described their families as offering emotional and financial support as well as transmitting moral values. Although not described explicitly as "role models," adults from the community were described as sources of motivation and information. A young woman said: *There was this lady that I worked with—she has always been a really good person to talk to. She knows everything that I have been through, and she always pushes me forward. She says, just do it, do it!* Research has shown that the availability of work-based learning, encouraging adults, and overall support from a variety of sources can enhance career development and positively influence transition experiences (Lapan, Aoyagi, & Kayson, 2007; Phillips, Blustein, Jobin-Davis, & White, 2002). Participants highlighted how encouraging adults working in their community were and that these adults were particularly influential and helpful people to discuss career plans with. Several participants felt workplace, older adult mentors understood their values, desire to remain in the community, and aspirations more so than past or present teachers who they felt pressured young people to leave the community to pursue options such as postsecondary. This is unique to a small community that does not have local postsecondary institutions.

Internal Constructs

All nine participants described some personal attributes and qualities as supportive factors in their work-life transitions. Participants described work-related personal qualities, such as work ethic, work experience, problem solving, and being *overall employable*. Specifically cited

internal constructs were positive attitudes and motivation.

Participants discussed learning from the difficulties they encountered during transitions that were not straightforward. One participant commented: *The whole adult life, just learning to cope with other adults and trying to be responsible, is really important, I've found.* Similar findings were described in Bradley and Devadason's (2008) study. Those researchers discussed "internalized flexibility" as involving an internalized discourse of adaptability and optimism about lifelong learning. Similarly, Bramston and Patrick (2007) described positive attitudes despite negative transition experiences as an effective coping mechanism.

Most frequently, when participants explained supportive factors, they described **personal motivation** subtheme as a means of overcoming hurdles experienced during transitions. A young man who felt unsupported and undervalued in high school exclaimed: *I pushed and I showed everybody that I can be better. So you just have to have your own ambition and want and desire to make something better out of your life.* In Devadason's (2007) study, when young adults retrospectively described how they overcame setbacks during transitions, hurdles were seen to ultimately strengthen young peoples' determination to succeed. This finding is similar to results described in youth resilience research, which focuses on the assets and resources that enable youth to overcome the negative effects of risk exposure or avoid the negative trajectories associated with risks. Resiliency researchers (e.g., Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005)

view assets as positive factors that reside within the individual, such as competence, coping skills, and self-efficacy.

Hindsight and Insight

All of the participants described more than one work-life possibility and several were moving toward making enduring decisions. Many participants discussed responsibilities; for example, a young man said: *I got a taste of reality, just trying to stay afloat and learn what it takes to be in the real world.* Although participants were generally optimistic about lifelong learning and their future plans, they also reflected on what they might have done differently. A young man said: *I would have rather just found some way, some way to just go to school right away. . . . I regret taking time off. It's kind of got me stuck.* Some participants were in serious or marital relationships, owned homes, or were operating small businesses—considered by Arnett (2004) to be stable commitments in Western contexts. The relative freedom and large range of social options during emerging adulthood were evident among the participants.

Many participants emphasized personal fulfilment and happiness. A young man enthusiastically described his future: *Like every young person, I want to travel, to explore, to find myself, and to be happy.* Some participants commented on continuing their current work or education but were unsure about the future. Participants had many unspecified, although hopeful, goals. For example, one participant described his future plans at age 23: *Keeping going with my business and stuff so I can be on the beaches of Mexico and not worry about nothing.* Other participants

lacked focused or specific future plans, perhaps a reflection that they were exploring underlying identity questions (e.g., What kind of work am I good at? What kind of work would I find satisfying for the long term?). Participants' descriptions about their plans suggested that they viewed the future as having numerous options. Arnett and colleagues (2011) maintain that emerging adulthood is a period of high hopes and great expectations during which young people are positively future oriented.

Many participants were in the process of making future plans based on the kind of work that would be the most satisfying for the long term and congruent with their notions of a realistic and fulfilling lifestyle. One participant said: *I want to grow a business, but I also want Saturdays and Sundays where I can head out to the west coast for the weekend and surf. I would rather go surfing than make six hundred bucks working that weekend.* These findings underscore the necessity of career exploration activities that prompt young people to investigate the social and “life” implications of different types of work.

Discussion

These nine young adults experienced many of the supports and barriers described in studies of school to work transitions for youth in rural and small communities affected by restructuring (Meece et al., 2014); unintended and unexpected work-life patterns were experienced as meandering, gradual, and individualized. Identity was continuously reformed, and redirected through various experiences. Exploring interests and abilities was the most evident feature of emerging adulthood, as

suggested by the frequent changes in work and education among the young adults in this study. As Arnett and colleagues (2011) and Konstam (2007) maintain, emerging adulthood is potentially a time to enhance agentic abilities and strengths and master obstacles presented in the social environment.

Participants commented on the impacts of social and economic restructuring in their community. Some participants discussed structural inequalities related to pursuing higher education, while others observed that the population of their small community was in decline without commenting in detail on the effects of this decline. Strongly tied to “place,” the young adults in this study expressed positive sentiments about the community in which they had grown up and passion for the beauty of their surroundings. Among these coastal young people, place identity contributed to identity processes and, consequentially, work-life planning.

Findings from this study contribute to understanding work-life transitions as perceived by rural and small community young adults, a population whose experiences have historically been neglected by vocational researchers. This study illuminates the unintended outcomes, positive future aspirations, and supports and barriers experienced by the participants. The study's major limitation was related to recruitment of participants. Findings are limited due to the difficulties in locating the original CUS participants. Participants retrospectively described their goals and experiences from the end of high school. Although the new participants attended the high school and reported

similar experiences, these new participants did not have the CUS interview as youth. Moreover, interviewing until the themes were “saturated” would have strengthened the study. While the interviewer travelled to the community to conduct several interviews, other interviews were conducted over the telephone because the participants were living in different geographical areas. Noticeably, the telephone interviews were significantly shorter and less detailed than the in-person interviews. As with all qualitative studies, the findings must be viewed with recognition of the boundaries of the study; they are not intended to be generalized beyond the participants’ context. However, while they are less applicable to urban young people, the findings could be representative of young adults from rural and small Canadian communities.

Implications for Theory and Research

The study of working is embedded in complex layers of social, cultural, and political meanings (Blustein et al., 2004). Young and Valach (2004) posit that within the last decade, qualitative research in career development has shifted from the margins into the centre of contemporary inquiry. Qualitative research has been pivotal in expanding the horizons of issues and problems within vocational psychology (Blustein et al., 2004).

Although existing studies have sought to describe various pathways influenced by the labour market, fewer studies describe how rural young people manage the hurdles and setbacks of complicated transition pathways.

Interestingly, participants in this research rarely described “barriers” even though they described “unintended outcomes.” Further in-depth research into experiences of work-life barriers would provide information about (a) what personal barriers are experienced; (b) strategies to successfully manage these barriers; and (c) how high school educators might help prepare youth for unintended outcomes. However, Swanson and Woike (1997) suggest that the barriers construct lacks a firm theoretical framework into which research findings can be incorporated; therefore, constructs other than barriers may be more empirically useful.

In this study there were obvious linkages between work and nonwork issues. Of note within the stories were “blurred lines” between work (or education) and nonwork issues. Blustein (2006) posits that this distinction is fading because changes taking place in our current work world are significantly affecting the manner in which people live their lives. For example, delaying education and taking an absence from work are clear indications that other life interests and/or pressures may be prioritized over work and education. Future research could further investigate the impact of significant psychological events, periods of grief, depression, or divorce and how such events influence emerging adults’ career development. Longitudinal studies are challenging but extremely valuable for theory and research. Following a group of people from youth through adulthood, over years if not decades, provides considerable insight into the changing nature of work-life pathways. Moreover, comparing the differences between urban and rural

peoples’ work-life pathways over time could be an important future research investigation.

Implications for Practice

Counselling psychology is well known for articulating the central role that work plays in human development (Worthington & Juntunen, 1997; Savickas, 1993). The findings of this study have implications for high school and emerging adult counselling practice and provide valuable information for career educators and policy developers. This study’s major theme of life planning highlights the importance of planning and goal setting to young people’s work-life transitions. Counsellors, educators, and parents need to pay particular attention to students’ goals at the end of high school. Helping students learn how to create steps for small and large goals is important for transition planning. Goal setting is also useful for other life issues, not just simply education and work. Demonstrating goal-setting strategies and following up on measurable steps is strongly recommended for counsellors working with adolescents or emerging adults on work-life issues.

Counsellors must pay particular attention to young peoples’ preference for place, which may have specific outdoor/nature elements in rural and small communities. Moreover, counsellors must understand the economy, political power structures, value systems, and changes occurring within the region (Corbett, 2005; Marshall et al., 2007). The community’s context is central to helping rural emerging adults explore work-life options. Several participants in this study suggested more community and educational role models and mentors are needed to provide information about the

world of work and to provide personal guidance and support. Contact with slightly older people could assist emerging adults prepare for the inevitable changes and unintended outcomes that almost all will experience. Participants echoed the need for helping young people to consider multiple options outside and within their communities as a critical role, for example, demonstrating that postsecondary education can take many forms, not just the university pathway. This study's major findings underscore the position that family is important in the process of career development. As such, work exploration and planning should involve family members and other significant adults who share knowledge regarding higher education and career pathways.

Final Comments

Overall, the participants in this study frequently moved for work or education and also returned to their community for work; they did not demonstrate "stable careers." Undoubtedly, technology and globalization of the world's economies are changing the personal experience of work and careers. Savickas, Van Esbroeck, and Herr (2005) speculate that "this globalization of economies affects where work can be found and who has access to it. . . . An increasing number of world workers are seeking educational and vocational guidance for themselves and their families" (p. 78). The findings of the study highlight the need for the development of career counselling resources to support young adults in rural communities to prepare for a wide variety of work-life pathways and unintended outcomes. Attachment to place may mediate work-life goals, particularly for rural young people. Practitioners must consider work-life career development

planning within the context of rural families' commitment to their rural and small communities.

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