Constructing the Future in the Liminal Spaces Between Adolescence and Adulthood: Responsibilities, Careers, and Social Contexts

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Abstract

The following paper explore the way a sample of young people in New Brunswick constructed, conceptualized and expressed concerns about adulthood, in relation to their career aspirations and their socio-economic context. The notion of liminal adulthood is used to frame the discussion in order to capture the in-between spaces of vocational identity. Furthermore we explore how these spaces are historically and socially constructed.

Contemporary research on transitions is shifting away from traditional, structural understandings of youth development towards a more relational way of examining the transition to adulthood. This shift in the research may be partly in response to media speculation that young people are delaying the movement into adulthood due to a lack of desire, focus and sense of responsibility (Aronson, 2008). Transitions to adulthood are an important phenomenon to study because the process of transitioning into adulthood has a significant influence on people's long-term outcomes. Existing theories provide substantial information about how youth can and do take on adult roles (Nelson & Barry, 2005; Schlossberg, 1987), but few have elucidated the process of how they form aspirations, learn to be adults, and the central role career plays in definitions of successful adult identity. The purpose of this research is to begin to address this deficit by exploring the conceptualizations and concerns about adulthood that are constructed by graduating high school students, in relation to their career aspirations and socio-economic context. The concept of liminal adulthood was used to frame the analysis.

Developing clear occupational aspirations is an important step in the formation of adult identities. It is becoming increasingly important in times of economic uncertainty (see Beck, 2000) to understand the ways in which adulthood is signified and the role that career and work hold in the creation of successful adult identities because, as The European Group for Integrated Social Research (EGRIS)(2001) points out, "young people are actively trying to shape their present and future lives, albeit constrained within the economic, social and cultural conditions they find themselves within" (p.103). Thus as young people developing their adult identities, at the same time there has been a significant downturn in the economy in many parts of the country, reducing the availability of jobs and limiting opportunity for the attainment of successful adult work identities.

This shift in economic trends is particularly true in an Atlantic Canadian where employment trends are marked by the loss of a traditional employment base, which focused on the resource economy, and marked increases in unemployment. The national unemployment rate in Canada currently hovers at 7.4%. In New Brunswick this figure is closer to 10.4% overall, with the rural areas having even greater unemployment topping out at 19.6% in some areas (Statscan, 2012). There can be many interpretations of what these unemployment figures mean but one obvious reason is a decline in available jobs. It can also mean those who have been displaced in this declining economy do not possess the education and skills required for the available labour market. Even recent improvements to the economy have been limited to certain sectors (e.g., ship-building, oil industry). At the same time, there is also a regional identity, and many Atlantic Canadians continue to identify with their home province even if they leave to work elsewhere (Corbett, 2004). All of this creates specific constraints on the way that young people in Canada are shaping their lives.

Recent changes in the timing and nature of how a person traverses a life course require an unprecedented redefinition of adulthood and a shift in understanding the role of work in the transition process (Young et al., 2011). Responding to these changes, scholars such as Blatterer (2007) and Raby (2010) have proposed the concept of liminal adulthood. Raby explains that, "modern understandings of growing up have conceptualized childhood through progressive movement towards the end-point of adulthood, with youth as a liminal, in-between phase before such adult stability" and argues that adults need to focus "on the present in the face of open-ended, temporary, reversible and individualized options for the future" (p. 69-70). With neo-liberal shifts in the global economy, Raby and Blatterer have both argued that there is an unprecedented marketing of youthfulness and, consequently, adulthood is now also coming to be defined by liminality. The strength of this perspective is that it takes into account how the transition to adulthood is socially constructed and historically and culturally specific. Thus, the ages, stages, and actions that young people use to describe adulthood can be understood to be mired in their social positions within society (Weedon, 1997; Wyn & White, 1997).

Literature

Theorizing Transitions To Adulthood

In order to situate this study, we first address some of the literature that theorizes transitions to adulthood. Akin to the shift in how we conceive a liminal adulthood is a more nuanced understanding of how work and career aspirations are key aspects of the adult identity formation process (Young et al., 2011). One example of the shift in the literature was the proposal of a new category of development called emerging adulthood. Scholars such as Arnett (2000) conceptualize emerging adulthood as a distinct developmental stage spanning ages 18-25, characterized by the exploration of prospective adult roles in areas such as work, love, and worldviews.

Arnett (2000) explained emerging adulthood as a period of time when "different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period" (p. 469). Identity exploration during this stage involves examining identity through experiences in the areas of love, work and worldview (Arnett, 2000). With regards to work, emerging adults explore identity issues as they explore a variety of work possibilities, for example, "What kind of work am I good at? What kind of work would I find satisfying for the long term? What are my chances of getting a job in the field that seems to suit me best?" (Arnett, 2000, p. 474). In his view, a number of demographic factors, including changes in the median age of marriage and the age of first childbirth, and changes in the proportion of young people entering higher education after high school, have created an extended period of identity exploration and development in industrialized societies.

Other researchers have extended and expanded upon Arnett's conceptualization by adopting a more agentic approach to the phenomenon. For example, "self authorship," the internalization of meaning-making and adoption of an active role in defining identity, beliefs, and relationships, has

been proposed as a process through which young people transition into adulthood (Baxter Magolda, 2008; Creamer & Laughlin, 2005; Kegan, 1995) Similarly, Young and colleagues (2011) frame the transition to adulthood as a project that is actively and jointly constructed by young people and significant others in their lives through action, internal cognitive and emotional processes, and social meaning. Finally, Raby (2010), along with Blatterer (2007), discuss the concept of "liminal adulthood," in which the transition to adulthood needs to be considered as emergent in ways that emphasize internal, psychological achievements such as self-confidence and flexibility to define adulthood. These concepts, particularly liminal adulthood, not only speak to the issues surrounding the transition into adulthood in contemporary North American society, but also provide a useful addition to the literature on aspirations: The language of aspirations is often used to capture the various desires, ambitions and conceptualizations held by young people about their possible futures (Turok, Kintrea, St Clair, & Benjamin, 2008). The present study was guided by Raby and Blatterer's concept of "liminal adulthood."

Aspirations have been conceptualized as a key influence on numerous developmental outcomes, including playing a role in determining future educational activity (e.g., university attendance) and eventual occupational attainment and status (Andres, Anisef, Krahn, Looker, & Thiessen, 1999). Additionally, the formation of school and work-related aspirations is conceptualized as an important part of the psychological process of transitioning into adulthood (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Although aspirations can be thought of as the process by which young people determine their goals while they are transitioning into adulthood, career aspirations have also been regarded as having the potential to equal out social differences (Morrison, Gutman & Akerman, 2008). The presumption that it is possible for young people to pursue whatever career paths they desire when they grow up is the basic tenant of aspirations in their social context (St Clair & Benjamin, 2011). As a corollary, it is also assumed that improving all young

people's aspirations can reduce the discrepancies in educational outcomes and life opportunities (Turok et al., 2008). However, it is not known whether all young persons perceive their aspirations as boundless. Some, especially those coming from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds or from regions where there are fewer employment opportunities , including many parts of Atlantic Canada, may not believe that their aspirations are attainable, which can have an impact on their thinking and action during the liminal period between adolescence and adulthood.

Development of Vocational Identity

A commonly held attitude in the popular media and general public that that to ascend to successful adult identities, young people must have clear career aspirations. At the same time, there is a greater focus in the psychological literature on career decision-making difficulties experienced by young people (Osipow, 1999). This trend in the literature is motivated by the fear that young peoples' continuing indecision about careers can (and will) result in missed opportunities, inappropriate decisions, and anxiety. Osipow, Carney, Winer, Yanico, and Koschier (1976) suggested four reasons for occupational indecision. These are: a lack of self-knowledge or insight into personal interests and aptitudes; an aptitude and interest for many different areas; an internal conflict preventing the making of a decision; the inability to come up with alternative solutions in the face of external barriers. Individuals typically grow more cognizant of occupational issues, and become more concrete and realistic about occupational choices with age. For example, younger adolescents may be less motivated to make a decision, seeing the necessity of making a choice as still existing in the future, or they may not have experienced the necessary self-development to have achieved a stable sense of identity (Arnett, 2000; Morgan & Ness, 2003).

In an effort to help researchers and practitioners better understand the antecedents of occupational indecision, Gati, Krausz, and Osipow (1996) developed a career indecision taxonomy that defines a variety of problems that

individuals may have in making their occupational decision. Their taxonomy identified difficulties in three broad areas: a lack of readiness to make a decision; the lack of necessary information to make a decision; and inconsistent, and therefore problematic, information. The situation is further complicated in an Atlantic Canadian social context, by historic and current high levels of unemployment. This creates additional sources of career decision-making difficulties, such as indecision due to a poor fit between youths' aspirations and the options that are available in the local economy, and conflict between the desire to remain connected with one's home community and region versus the desire to pursue their aspirations by emigrating to other regions of Canada where there are better employment opportunities (Corbett, 2007).

Key to this discussion is the need to develop a clear understanding of what is meant by identity and how we start to understand both adult and vocational identities. Building on the foundational work of Erikson (e.g., 1956, 1968), who proposed that conceptualized identity as knowing who you are and how you fit in to the rest of society, Marcia proposed four identity statuses that can be experienced adolescents and early adults, which have more recently been conceptualized as stages of vocational identity development (Morgan & Ness, 2003). The "diffusion" status or stage is evident when the individual has not yet experienced a developmental crisis and would not have made a commitment to vocational choice. "Foreclosure" represents an ongoing identification with the values of adolescence and a commensurate vocational commitment, though this commitment is likely without sufficient self-exploration. "Moratorium" would be evident when an individual has started to question the values of their youth and is exploring options but has not yet made a commitment to any particular vocational identity. The identity exploration characteristic of this stage sets the groundwork for commitments being made during early adulthood and beyond, and it is during this time, for college students in particular, that marked identity exploration and commitments in the career domain occur (Springer &

Kerpelman, 2010). The final stage, "achievement," represents a status of definite commitment to a vocational area based on a clearly defined vocational identity.

Late adolescence is viewed as the period in life when childhood identifications are synthesized (Marcia, 1966) and as a time of growing occupational and ideological commitment (Erikson, 1956) as ego-identity moves towards a a more achieved status. These propositions have been born out by empirical research. For example, Kroger, Martinussen and Marcia's (2010) comprehensive meta analysis of 40 years of identity research concluded that identity achievement increases over this developmental period, although the authors also found that many individuals have not yet attained identity achievement. Identity formation involves a significant amount of personal exploration and Côté and Levine (1988) point out that the social contact typical of the university experience is likely to pressure students into exploring their identity, even when they may appear to have already made firm, albeit sometimes premature, identity commitments. Extrapolating from this concept, it is likely that individual who enter the workforce immediately after high school are also likely to experience pressure to examine their identity from the social context in which they find themselves. Furthermore, Skorikov and Vondracek's (1998) study of vocational identity development indicated that adolescents who have successfully achieved a sense of identity in one or more of the identified identity domains (e.g., the domain of future lifestyles) also tended to be more advanced in terms of vocational identity. Their explanation for this finding was that, although vocation and the world of work is a distinct domain of identity development, it is related to, and often precedes, the achievement of identity in other domains.

Current Issues

In tying together the concept of liminal adulthood and vocational identity, Raby (2010), albeit tentatively, suggests that there needs to be "an emphasis on skills which need to be imparted and developed over time" (p. 74)

that allow young people to both be actively constructing self as well as protected through the process of developing adult identities. This makes sense in terms of developing a vocational identity for young people. Economic uncertainty and worry about the future become important factors for young people as they start to explore and understand what adulthood could look like, while at the same time we need to challenge binary positioning of young people as adults, or not yet adult, based on the attainment of a vocation. Vocational theorists that use more what Raby (2010) describes as, traditional, stable markers of adulthood, which tend to create illusive categories that young people cannot attain.

Building on this body of literature, the problem our study sought to address is the need for a deeper understanding of how young people develop vocational identities (as reflected in their emerging occupational aspirations and expectations) in the liminal space between adolescence and adulthood. This phenomenon is particularly important to examine in the context of individuals who have grown up in regions with limited economic opportunities, such as Atlantic Canada. We explored this issue using a mixed-methods research design. The quantitative component of our study involved survey data collection and the use of chi-square and ANOVA to identify differences on grade 12 students' expectations and concerns about future careers, as a function of socioeconomic status (SES). The qualitative component involved inductive thematic analysis of grade 12 students' written responses to open-ended questions about multiple aspects of their career/educational plans and transition to adulthood. By achieving these objectives, we sought to advance knowledge in the fields of transitions to adulthood and career development, as well as help to develop educational policies and practices that can help high school students to make an optimal transition into the labour force or into appropriate post-secondary education.

Method

Sample and Data Collection Procedures

Participants consisted of students in their final month of Grade 12 from one large high school in a mid-sized city in Atlantic Canada. The full sample consisted of 63 males, 62 females, with an average age of 17. Most participants (78%) were English-speaking, 3% identified as aboriginal, 14% identified as belonging to a visible minority, and 3% reported themselves to have a disability. The invitation to participate was announced during an assembly and the study was explained. Volunteers were administered the self-report survey in the school setting, which took approximately 30 minutes to complete. The survey consisted of demographic items, quantitative self-report items, and open-ended written response questions. No incentive was provided. The Research Ethics Board of the University of New Brunswick vetted procedures for the survey.

Quantitative Variables

For the quantitative component of the study, most of the variables were constructed from dichotomous, single-item self report items, such as "Do you worry about getting a career/job? Yes/No," Variables representing participants' perception of (a) being able to attain their ideal career, (b) being worried about careers, (c) having their career prospects affected by the fact they live in New Brunswick, and (d) being worried about adulthood were constructed in this manner. Participants were also asked about the occupations that they (a) ideally aspired to, and (b) realistically expected to achieve if they were not able to attain their ideal career. Responses to these open-ended questions were coded using the National Occupational Classification (NOC) system maintained by Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. These NOC codes were used to operationalize the prestige levels associated with the general categories of participants' reported ideal and expected careers. Finally, participants' perceived socio-economic status (SES) was as-

sessed using a 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from "poverty level" to "wealthy." However, because more than 80% of the participants reported being "average" or "above average," it was necessary to dichotomize the SES into two categories: (a) average or lower; (b) above average or higher.

Qualitative Variables

For the qualitative component the young people were surveyed through open-ended questions that touched on areas such as what careers they were interested in, what they found appealing about those careers, and the people and situations, including geographic location/place, that may have influenced, both positively and negatively, their education and career plans. Other questions asked the young people to consider what they thought it meant to be an adult, what they planned to do after high school, and what they thought the chances were of getting a job after formal education. The young people were also encouraged to share anything else they thought would be relevant about what they wanted to do in the future and the ways in which they thought about adulthood.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Screening of the data revealed minor amounts of missing data in the dichotomous variables (Concerned about Attaining Ideal Career = 3 cases; Concerned about Future Career = 0 cases; Concerned about the Effect of Living in the Province = 3 cases; Concerned about Becoming an Adult = 3 cases). A regression-based multiple imputation technique was used to estimate the missing values for these cases. In contrast, there were substantial amounts of missing data in ideal career and expected career variables, which precluded the use of missing data estimation methods for these variables. Instead, cases with missing data on these variables were removed from the analyses that used occupational categories based on socioeconomic status as the dependent variable, resulting in a sample size of 84 for these analyses. Although relatively low, power analysis revealed that this final sample size

would be adequate to detect medium sized effects ($a = .05$, $1 - b = .80$, $f = .30$).

Chi-square analyses were conducted to determine whether there were differences between the higher and lower SES groups in terms of the proportion of participants who expressed concern about attaining their ideal career, about careers in general, about the effects of living in their home province on their career prospects, and about becoming an adult. A Between-Within ANOVA was used to determine whether (a) there were significant differences in the socioeconomic status levels of students ideal versus expected careers, (b) the SES of students' career aspirations differed according to their SES, and (c) whether any interactions existed between SES and ideal versus expected career aspirations.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Data from the open-ended questions were analyzed using an inductive, iterative (nonlinear) thematic analysis strategy. Two researchers worked together on the analysis of the data and discussed possible interpretations and identified the content in the written responses that were relevant to the focus of the inquiry. Categories of themes emerged from the data, rather than being specified a priori. Focus was paid to the language and discourses that emerged in the short answers. The data were coded by marking segments with descriptive words and then scrutinizing the discourses that emerged.

Understanding discourse was essential to this study and is based on an understanding of how our social worlds are inscribed in and expressed through language (Bové, 1990). Discourses shape the object that is being spoken about through grids and hierarchies that aid in the institutional categorization of people (Foucault, 1972). Power relations are inscribed in discourses as knowledge, and power relationships are achieved by a construction of "truths" about the social and natural world (Luke, 1995). In one sense, discourse is both a social practice that constitutes the social world and is constituted by other social practices (Phillips & Jørgenson, 2002). What this means is that language

should be looked at within its social context and moreover it is important to examine how discourses function ideologically. As Phillips and Jorgenson (2002) suggest, "discursive practices contribute to the creation and reproduction of unequal power relations between social groups" (p. 63). Thus there are ideological effects of discourses that are important sites of study. Phillips and Jørgenson (2002) also connect discourse to ideology and hegemony pointing to how discursive practice can be seen as an aspect that contributes to reproduction of the order and discourse of which it is a part.

Reflexivity, in keeping with a discursive approach, was an important part of the process of data collection and analysis (MacBeth, 2001). This involved thinking and rethinking the data and considering how interpretations changed throughout the process of conducting and analyzing the research. This process also required a continual examination of the beliefs held by the researchers and the process of conducting research, and questioning preconceived notions of career, responsibility and the role of liminality (Benjamin, 2012). The researchers paid attention to how personal understandings and experiences affected the ways in which data interpreted.

Results

Quantitative Findings

The data revealed that a large majority of the students believed they would succeed in obtaining their ideal career/job (n = 95; 79% of the sample); less than half the participants were worried about future careers (n = 51; 43%); approximately half believed that living in their specific province within Atlantic Canada would affect their career choices (n = 58; 48%); and a majority of the students were not worried

about becoming an adult (n = 77; 66%).

Chi-square analyses revealed some important differences between the higher and lower SES groups, in terms of perceptions about these phenomena. Specifically, students in the lower SES group were significantly more likely to report being worried about their future careers than those in the higher SES group ($c2(1) = 5.84$, $p < .05$) but were significantly less likely to report being worried about becoming an adult than those in the higher SES group ($c2(1) = 4.19$, $p < .05$). The two groups did not, however, differ in terms of their expectation of being able to attain their ideal career ($c2(1) = 0.24$, $p > .05$) or their perception that living in their province would affect their career choices ($c2(1) = 2.98$, $p > .05$)

Results of the Between-Within ANOVA revealed no significant differences in the socio-economic level between students' ideal careers, and the careers they realistically expect to attain ($F(1,83) = 0.61$, $p > .05$). One contributor to this apparent incongruence may be that some students seemed to think of ideal careers as those that fulfilled their passions, and their realistic careers as

ones that are more practical, but not necessarily ones that are easier to obtain. For example, one student whose ideal career was "interior designer/real estate agent" because "I am interested in housing and that field of work" cited "businesswoman" as her realistically expected career, because "it is easier." The ANOVA also revealed no significant differences between lower and higher SES students in terms of the socioeconomic levels of the careers to which they aspired ($F(1,83) = 0.15$, $p > .05$), and no interaction between the effects of ideal versus expected careers and SES ($F(1,83) = 1.28$, $p > .05$).

Although the results were non-significant, charting the marginal means of the sub-groups from the ANOVA suggest that it may be worthwhile to continue to explore the issue of how SES can affect students' career aspirations (see Figure 1). Specifically, it is possible that limitations in our study (see Limitations section) are masking the existence of a real SES by aspiration interaction effect such that, for lower SES students, students' expected or 'back-up' careers are less prestigious than their ideal ones, but for higher SES students, their ideal
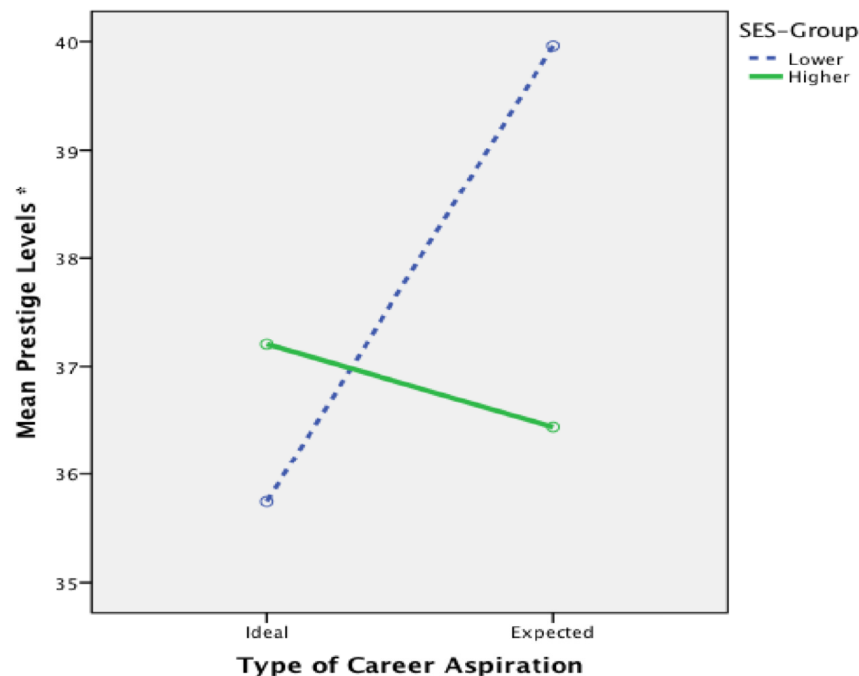

Figure 1: Differences in mean socioeconomic levels of students' ideal career aspiration and the career that expected to realistically obtain if they were unable to attain their ideal one.
* Higher numbers correspond to less prestigious occupations, consistent with the NOC classification system. (e.g., management careers = 0; Occupations in manufacturing / utilities = 9)

and their expected careers are approximately equal in socioeconomic levels. However, since no significant differences emerged in the ANOVA, this possibility remains a speculation at this time.

Qualitative Findings

The themes that emerged highlight three constructs that this group of graduating high school students are experiencing as they reflect on the transition to adulthood: (a) adulthood is associated with taking on more life responsibilities; (b) the issue of finding work and pursuing careers is a substantial worry for people at this stage of development; and (c) students are aware of the socio-economic conditions that shape their ability to become adults.

Participants' responses suggest that the notion of adulthood is constructed around a liminal adult identity that includes the need to become more responsible. One young person summarized this association by reporting that she defined adulthood as having "more responsibilities to deal with." This expectation reflects a hallmark of a liminal adulthood, because it emphasizes the internal psychological achievements that are used to define adulthood. Many young people also perceived that they would need to take on greater responsibilities to become adults, a prospect that they found worrying. As one young person stated, "I worry about all the new responsibilities that I'll have, paying the bills, finding a career and starting a family are all the big challenges." Similarly, another young person reflected, "Sometimes all of the responsibilities adults have can seem a little scary." Responsibility in this context has become part of the social construction that Raby (2010) and Blatterer (2007) describe, as young people have learned that they need to be taking more responsibility in order to achieve successful adult identities.

The data also illuminated some of the occupational and work-related issues that young people are concerned with as they form adult identities. Many students described experiencing substantial career indecision even as high school graduation was looming, a finding that is consistent with existing literature suggesting that vocational identity formation and career indecision can extend well past adolescence (Marcia, 1966; Osipow, 1999). One student wrote, "I have absolutely no idea what I want to do after high school." Another young person described this concern in the following way, "It's scary. Whether they admit it or not, the thought of picking their future career at 17 terrifies most teenagers. As a general rule, everyone just wants to leave a mark." Here career is seen as an outcome that must be attained in order to achieve adulthood rather than the other way around; that is, participants' statements did not reflect a belief that one must first become an adult before being capable of making a career decision. This has important implications if the indecision is rooted in a liminal space. Specifically, many young people hold ideals in their heads about future careers and while there is stress about making a career decision it still remains an ideal - that when you are an adult you will have a specific full-time job. But at the same time there is a great deal of fear and worry about this full-time job because there has been such erosion in secure available jobs.

Others articulated that, although they were not worried about being adult in general, they were concerned about obtaining secure employment: "Not so much being an adult, but … getting a secure job ... the responsibilities once you have graduated high school are huge!" One young person expressed this concern as being worried about "doing everything that needs to get done right." Another young person contrasted the consequences of financial difficulties in adulthood with those experienced in adolescence, "It is hard to predict what will happen with the economy. How will I support myself, let alone a family? If I lost a job or get laid-off, I can't ask my family for help like I can now with my parents." Overall, the pattern of findings that emerged regarding work and career contradict contemporary media representation of young people as individuals who are stalling in their development of adult identities. Instead, the data from this study suggest that work and career are a central concern even at the end of High School, as young people look to the future.

Occupational aspirations and conceptions of adulthood also appeared to be affected by socio-economic marginalization (Furlong, 2005). Some participants described concerns about being unable to pursue their ideal images of what they would like to be as adults due to their socio-economic conditions (e.g., not having sufficient funds to attend university) or lack of opportunities available in the region (e.g., realizing that there are no jobs in a desired occupational field within the province). These findings are consistent with the socio-economic context of Atlantic Canada, as well as previous research on young people's career development in the region (Corbett, 2004; Jeffery, Lehr, Haché, & Campbell, 1992).

Discussion

The results from both the qualitative and the quantitative analyses suggest that, when you are less well off, you are more worried about concrete things like work and income than about general notions of becoming an adult. In contrast, young people from higher SES backgrounds assume that the work will come and therefore are able to think about adulthood in more general, conceptual terms. These findings are consistent with existing research but are important to consider because they highlight the usefulness of viewing the transition to adulthood as liminal: As demonstrated by these young people, there is a flexibility and a nervousness, as well as, for some, a self-confidence to how they are defining adulthood.

One of the primary contributions of this study is to shed light on how the aspirations and conceptions of career of young people about to graduate from High School in Atlantic Canada reflect a period of liminal adulthood. Although previous studies have examined aspirations of youth and the literature on transitions to adulthood (Aronson, 2008; Furlong & Biggart, 1999; Young, et al., 2011), it is important to continue to examine how young people develop adult identities related to work, and the aspirations they expect to carry with them into adulthood. The results of this study suggest that research on human development must allow for a dynamic understanding of the transition

to adulthood, and how factors such as career concerns and socio-economic contexts can affect how a young person proceeds through liminal adulthood. There must also be more provision for understanding of how constructions of adulthood change over time, and how these constructions may be linked to young people's career development and employment opportunities in the context of socio-economic circumstances and constraints. Although the location of this study in Atlantic Canada highlights these issues, many of the findings are generalizable to other regions and countries where there are relatively few opportunities within local communities.

The results also challenge popular media assumptions that young people are avoiding and delaying the transition into adulthood. As such, our study adds empirical support to Arnett's claim that the persistent belief of individuals at this life stage being "suffering, selfish, slackers" is a myth (Arnett, 2007, p. 23). Indeed, participants in this sample appear to be preoccupied with the issue, and are highly emotionally invested in becoming adults and finding work. Apparent delays and avoidance in acting to achieve their adult identities may actually reflect a perception that the process of becoming fully adult to be fraught with barriers and challenges, some of which appear to be overwhelming. This understanding of what is occurring can provide a foundation for educational policies and practices that can help high school students to make an optimal transition into the labor force or into appropriate post-secondary education.

Implications for Educational Practice and Policy

This study adds further weight to the growing body of evidence that challenges simplistic notions of adolescence versus adulthood that continue to be taken as status quo by some educators and reified in educational policies. There is a need to critically examine the ways in which professionals and policy makers acknowledge the transition to adulthood, and the distinct educational and vocational needs of individuals who are experiencing liminal adulthood. Indeed, EGRIS (2001) argues that "the co-

incidence of increased risks and uncertainty in young people's transitions to adulthood makes them a high priority for policies concerned with social integration: education and training, labour market policy, welfare institutions, youth and social work … most institutions continue to neglect the changing nature of transitions and therefore run the risk of failing to address young adults' aspirations, needs and possibilities, they are confronted by what we refer to as 'misleading trajectories'" (p. 101-102).

Recognizing and understanding liminal adulthood and the transition into the labour force may assist educators to (a) modify policies to better account for the reality of the transition to adulthood, (b) identify when best to situate interventions, and (c) understand what kinds of interventions will best address the needs of individuals in this phase of life, which are different from both early adolescents and adult learners who are in the third decade of life or older. For example, some of the pressure that students at the end high school feel about the future may reflect a dichotomization of adulthood as adults who know what they want to do for a career and have the capacity to take on life's responsibilities, versus adolescents are lacking these qualities. If so, then some of the worries may be relived by introducing the notion of liminal adulthood in high school guidance programming, to normalize the concept of an extended transition period that is characterized by uncertainty and exploration of both careers and broader identities.

Limitations

The results of the quantitative portion of the study must be interpreted with caution, due to the presence of several limitations. The fact that an overwhelming majority of participants reported being of "average" or "above average" SES suggests that there were inadequate numbers of students from substantially low and high SES backgrounds in the sample. Although this is representative of the city in which the data were collected, drawing on samples from other locations in the province, with more extreme ranges of SES, may be necessary to truly uncover the effects

of SES on career aspirations and perceptions of future work and life. Similarly, the relatively low sample size in the ANOVA was another limitation, although it must be recognized that the non-significant results cannot be explained by low power, given the fact that power analyses revealed that sample size was adequate to yield significant results for medium-sized effects. A more substantive problem may be that the NOC classification code does not adequately capture gradients in occupational socioeconomic levels that reflect social norms and understandings. If this is the case, then a more sensitive classification system may be necessary to fully explore differences in high school students aspired versus expected career paths. Unfortunately, the authors are not aware of any such system that has been created for the Canadian social context.

The qualitative data, while providing some rich understandings of how young people learn adult identities, also has its limitations. It is important to note that the survey employed brief written responses rather than interactive interviews, and so did not permit probing or clarification questions to gain a deeper understanding of what the participants meant by their statements. Similarly, this approach relied on participants' willingness to self-report answers and was dependent on participants' capacity to present their ideas in writing; the experienced of individuals with language difficulties, poor written expression or other difficulties with writing may not have been adequately captured in our study. Finally, although the anonymous nature of the surveys may have freed the students to write what they wanted without fear of judgement, it also precluded any form of participant validation, thus increasing the likelihood that some experiences were not adequately captured or described in the themes that emerged. While these issues do not invalidate our findings, these limitations help us to recognize to the need for continued examination that employ more in depth data collection methods as the study continues.

Conclusion

Given that the subject of liminal adult identities and the influence of occupational aspirations and expectations on the formation of those identities is relatively new to the fields of vocational and counseling psychology, we believe that our findings may be most useful in suggesting future directions for research. In addition to the study of liminality and the influence of occupational aspirations, which we noted previously, we also recommend a continuation of research that builds on this study and the findings of other career and education scholars working in an Atlantic Canadian context, (e.g., Borgen, Amundson, McVicar, 2002; Corbett, 2004, 2007; Jeffery, et al., 1992) to continue to examine young peoples' processes of developing adult identities and the influence of the individual, school, family and place on educational and occupational aspirations and occupational expectations.

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