

Introduction

In the 1980s, sociologist Ruth Sidel interviewed young women between the ages of 12 and 25 to understand how the new ethos that women could “have it all” was shaping their outlooks and hopes for the future.¹ She found that many young women fully embraced the American Dream. In her book, *On Her Own: Growing Up in the Shadow of the American Dream*, Sidel wrote, “Many of these young women are optimistic, adventurous, and, above all, individualistic. They see the future as bright and full of promise. They focus on career, on upward mobility, and on the need to be independent. They believe success is there for the taking; all they need do is figure out the right pathway and work hard.”² Young women looked forward to futures in which they would live in the “house on a hill” and enjoy an upper middle-class life.³ Sidel cautioned readers that these young women would soon face constraints: the imperative of two incomes in modern society and the gendered nature of family obligations. She cast doubt on the likelihood that these young women’s futures would be as bright as they anticipated, arguing that they had not taken stock of the barriers women faced in the labor market and at home. To the young women she interviewed, however, nothing stood in their way.

Two decades later, on the precipice of the Great Recession (2007–2009) and after years of mostly stalled progress for women and increasing inequality between the rich and poor, I set out to interview middle-class, working-class, and poor high school-aged girls about their aspirations for the future and plans for fulfilling these aspirations.⁴ Given the social and economic changes impacting women over the preceding years, would I find the same optimism among the girls I spoke to, and would they be prepared to follow through on these aspirations? I conducted these interviews with sixty-one young women interested in the health field in particular; these jobs offered relatively high wages, steady employment, and a predictable career path (i.e., clear educational credentials, training requirements, and job duties). Five years later I interviewed them again to follow their progress as they went to college, worked, and formed families in their early twenties. My goal was to understand why young people who start off with high aspirations fall short of their goals, particularly among the poor and working class, and what we can do to better support young people in fulfilling their aspirations.⁵ By following those who were interested in health, I was able to see how plans for “knowable” career paths (i.e., occupations that have very clear educational and training expectations) differed both in their details in high school and in their pursuit in young adulthood. I anticipated the girls I interviewed would hold lofty, unfocused goals for the future, as much of the research on adolescent aspirations had prepared me to expect that adolescents’ aspirations would be unrealistically high and poorly planned, much like those of Sidel’s young women.⁶ Moreover, prior research suggested this poor planning—that is, having “limited knowledge about their future occupations, about educational requirements, or about future demand for these occupations”⁷—would be what stood in their way. Both media accounts and researchers were clear: if only young women could prepare for the future better, they would accomplish more.⁸

Yet to my surprise, I found neither excessive optimism nor poor planning among those I interviewed. They were not Sidel’s young women with stars in their eyes and no roadmap to the future. Certainly their aspirations for school and work were lofty: most wanted to complete at least a bachelor’s degree and work in professional jobs. However, most of the girls’ aspirations were reasonably well planned. They had researched the jobs they

hoped to hold and knew the basic steps needed to attain these occupations. Many had reached out to professionals in their intended careers, although this was more successful for some than for others due to class- and race-based differences in both how much access they had to adults knowledgeable in these fields and the willingness of adults to offer help.

Would these plans be enough to successfully move them to adulthood? As I followed the girls into young adulthood, I found that it was much harder for them to enact their plans than anticipated. This was true for all of them, but especially for poor and working-class young women, for two main reasons. First, plans were not enough; they needed extensive guidance to prepare for college and career, beginning (but not ending) with an understanding of the college options that would lead them to the jobs they wished to hold. This was partially due to the vast complexity of the postsecondary system, encompassing a range of college and degree types and often unclear connections between college degrees and jobs. Second, they needed substantial financial and practical assistance to navigate college and job preparation in the transition to adulthood. Middle-class young women typically had both, not only through their parents but also through their communities and, once they reached college, higher education programs. Working-class and poor young women, however, were left largely on their own to navigate college while working long hours in low-wage jobs and providing emotional, practical, and sometimes financial support to their families. Indeed, I found that among the middle class, even poor planning sometimes led to relative “success” in the early transition to adulthood, while good planning among the working class and poor sometimes led to early exits from college and difficulty obtaining a steady job.

In *Best Laid Plans*, I argue that planning alone is not enough. Tangible and intangible resources—including advice and information, economic security, and family stability—also shape young women’s plans and their transitions to adulthood and, ultimately, their likelihood of success. These resources provide roadmaps through and buffers along a college and labor market landscape that is complex and uncertain. This does not mean that plans are unimportant but that plans, to bear fruit, need to be forged through class-based resources, require resources to enact, and are constructed in relation to what young people envision for their futures more broadly. In other words, what sociologists call structure, or the sets

of resources and schemas (mental maps or frameworks for understanding the world) that enable and constrain action, cannot be fully disentangled from the process of planning and enacting plans.⁹ By understanding how planning for the future and attempting to follow through on those plans is enabled and constrained by structural forces, we can better understand the role of both structure and agency (i.e., the capacity to enact one's will) in the transition to adulthood and class mobility.

My argument builds on a sociological literature on how parental social class is replicated across generations, in other words, what is known as the intergenerational transmission of inequality or the tendency for middle-class adolescents to become middle-class adults, working-class adolescents to become working-class adults, and poor adolescents to become poor adults. Prior work has suggested that either working-class and poor young people do not aspire to lofty enough goals or, conversely, their aspirations are too high and poorly planned. I discuss these arguments in the next section and why, I argue, they are incomplete. As I show throughout this book, plans without resources not only fail to produce the desired results, they put young people further behind. In subsequent sections, I situate the need for both planning and resources in light of the increasingly vast and complex higher education landscape and the changing opportunities and constraints for women in the labor market and increasing levels of inequality and uncertainty in the twenty-first century.

THE ROLE OF ASPIRATIONS IN THE INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF SOCIAL CLASS

Over three million high school students graduate each year and continue on to college, work, the military, or other pathways; many take more than one such path at the same time.¹⁰ Some follow the plans they laid in high school, while others deviate. Whichever path they take and however closely they hold on to their high school plans, the first few years out of high school are rife with uncertainty. Suddenly, the dual pillars of school and family shift from obligatory and predictable to voluntary and individualized. Data from the High School Longitudinal Study (HSLs) reveals that in 2012, in the first few months after graduating from high school, 92%

of middle-class girls and 70% of working-class and poor girls planned to enroll or had enrolled in college that fall.¹¹ Most of these young women also planned to start or had already started working, although this was true of less than half of the middle-class young women (40%) and almost two-thirds (60%) of working-class and poor young women.

Plans to complete a college degree do not always translate into a degree, however. Following a cohort of young men and young women who graduated high school in 2004 and went on to enroll in college, research shows that only slightly over half of first-generation college students completed a degree by eight years after first enrolling, compared to almost three-quarters of those whose parents had attended postsecondary school.¹² Type of degree completion varied as well, with less than one-quarter of first-generation college students completing a bachelor's degree, 13% completing an associate's degree, and 17% completing a certificate. Among those whose parents had at least some college education, over half completed a bachelor's degree, with 8% and 7%, respectively, completing an associate's degree or certificate. Racial differences emerge, too, and are not fully explained by social class.¹³ The path to completing a degree, therefore—and particularly a bachelor's degree—is highly unequal by social class and race.

Why do we see these disparities in educational attainment by class background? A classic sociological model of inequality, called the status attainment model, suggests that the social class of one's parents passes on to the social class of children via aspirations. The idea behind this model is that parents' occupational and educational attainment is related to their children's attainment, and that much of this association is explained by "social psychological" factors: parents' and teachers' encouragement to go to college, peers' college plans, and aspirations.¹⁴ Put simply, this model suggests that young people who grow up in higher-status families aspire toward higher-status goals, and young people who grow up in lower-status families aspire toward lower-status goals. These aspirations become plans, leading young people toward disparate educational and, subsequently, occupational attainment.

The status attainment model offers a tidy explanation of how the social class of parents passes down to the social class of their children in the intergenerational transmission of inequality: disadvantaged adolescents are not encouraged to go to college or seek professional jobs, and therefore

they are less likely to hold or pursue those goals for themselves. Instead, they pursue the kinds of education and jobs they know: those of their parents. Early research into the process of status attainment led many to believe that to improve poor and working-class young people's chances, we needed to raise their aspirations. Media accounts still imply this, pointing to the role of high aspirations in rags-to-riches stories.

This model of inequality, however, failed to explain how the intergenerational transmission of inequality persisted even as aspirations grew more lofty for adolescents of all social classes, and as aspirations to go to college and pursue semiprofessional or professional careers became nearly universal.¹⁵ Moreover, it failed to explain how aspirations are better predictors of attainment among middle-class and White young people than among working-class and poor and Black young people.¹⁶ Black youth, in particular, have long expressed loftier educational goals than White youth of similar class backgrounds, but these aspirations have not translated into higher (or even equal) attainment.¹⁷ If holding high aspirations is the key to educational and occupational attainment, we would expect everyone with high aspirations to complete college and obtain a good job. But that doesn't happen. Why do aspirations work differently for some groups than for others?

Some attempts to answer this question have focused on the aspirations themselves. Sociologist Roslyn Mickelson argued that Black youths' high aspirations did not match their achievement because, despite holding strong abstract beliefs in the value of education overall, they did not believe in the viability of education for their own and their family members' success.¹⁸ According to Mickelson, this difference between concrete attitudes and generalized beliefs arises because Black young people share in a collective understanding of education as a means of success generally but see those around them—family members, neighbors, and community members—struggle against barriers to success. They therefore express doubt about their ability to follow through on their aspirations, which in turn dampens their academic performance in school. White young people, particularly those in the middle class, in contrast, see evidence that “success in school is rewarded by good jobs, higher salaries, and promotion.”¹⁹ Thus, what allows aspirations to become a vehicle for achievement for middle-class Whites is evidence that education has worked for the people they know.

Other scholars have also focused on plans, arguing that if young people plan carefully, align their occupational aspirations with the correct educational plans, and exhibit good decision-making, they should be able to attain their goals.²⁰ In Schneider and Stevenson's *The Ambitious Generation*, the authors chronicle how mismatches between young people's early, lofty educational and occupational aspirations and their knowledge of how to pursue these goals lead young people to pick colleges and college courses poorly, finishing college but often not obtaining a useful degree—at least for their chosen careers.²¹ These researchers concluded that if young people planned better, specifically choosing more realistic career plans and the appropriate amount of schooling needed to fulfill those plans (what they call “aligned ambitions”), then they would be more likely to accomplish their goals. The ability to construct aligned ambitions reflects “planful competence,” as sociologist John Clausen calls the ability to make rational goals that will “lead adolescents to make more realistic choices in education, occupation, and marriage.”²² In essence, these scholars argue that having good plans is key to successfully attaining one's goals. This suggests that social class and race disparities in goal attainment might be due to differences in planfulness and holding aligned ambitions.

By focusing on the content of young people's aspirations and plans and not the contexts surrounding their development and pursuit, however, these arguments lend too much power to individual agency and too little to how structures—both schema and resources—shape the status attainment process. This does not mean that we must ignore the ways individual actions matter; however, it does suggest that by uncovering the structures that enable some actions and constrain others, we can see the full extent of young people's agency. It is possible to be *planful*—to put in the work needed to plan for future schooling and careers—and still not have all the “right” information or resources to put those plans in motion. Young women's plans for the future are molded by both the world as it is and the world as they see it; they may hold ambitious plans to go to college and graduate school, eventually obtaining a professional job, but they must also grapple with questions of where to go to college and how to fund this goal. Gathering information to answer these questions and constructing and enacting a plan requires substantial resources, including information and money, neither of which is plentifully available to those in the working