

The Dynamics of Young Men's Career Aspirations¹

Jerry A. Jacobs,^{2,3} David Karen,⁴ and Katherine McClelland⁵

Career aspirations have assumed a central place in our understanding of the process of social mobility, yet aspirations themselves have been subject to remarkably little scrutiny. We conduct an empirical analysis of the dynamics of aspirations in a cohort using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Young Men. Our results indicate that (1) occupational aspirations decline with age; (2) the overwhelming majority of young men have high aspirations at some point; (3) occupational aspirations, highly unstable among teenagers, become more stable with age; and (4) differences by race and social origin grow with age, reflecting growing race and social class differences in educational attainment.

KEY WORDS: aspirations; career dynamics; occupational status; socioeconomic attainment.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past generation, a highly elaborated model of status attainment has been developed in the stratification literature. First introduced by Sewell and his colleagues, aspirations are the central component in a social psychological theory of attainment (Sewell, 1975; Sewell *et al.*, 1969; Sewell *et al.*, 1970; Sewell and Hauser, 1972). This model stresses that an important part of the association between background and outcomes is due

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²Department of Sociology, University of Pennsylvania, 3718 Locust Walk, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104-6299.

³To whom correspondence should be addressed.

⁴Department of Sociology, Bryn Mawr College, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania 19010.

⁵Department of Sociology, Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster, Pennsylvania 17604-3003.

to socialization processes that lead children from different backgrounds to plan for and move toward different goals.

Yet the causal role of these social-psychological variables in the attainment process has been hotly debated (cf. for example, Spenner and Featherman, 1978; Kerckhoff, 1976, 1984, 1988; Campbell, 1983). As Kerckhoff (1976) and others pointed out, the associations observed between background and aspirations, and between aspirations and outcomes, are also susceptible to another interpretation: social allocation. The background-to-aspirations association could be the result of a recognition by lower status adolescents that they face greater barriers to a successful future. The actions of gatekeepers and others could also work to channel the ambitions of young people into "appropriate" futures; thus, differential childhood socialization may be less important than actual experiences at school and work. Ethnographies and case studies of the behavior of gatekeepers, especially in educational institutions (for example, Hollingshead, 1949, or Cicourel and Kitsuse, 1963), provide additional support for this argument, but it is ultimately, as Kerckhoff recognized, simply a reinterpretation of the same aggregate associations cited by the socialization school.⁶

Because researchers using both conceptualizations normally have a measurement of aspirations at only one point in time, there has not yet been a systematic examination of the stability of aspirations over time. Various theories and empirical studies from outside the status attainment tradition suggest that teenage aspirations are quite subject to change. Whether they refer to "overambition," "cooling out," the process of "contest mobility," or the need for "vocational realism," diverse theoretical and empirical traditions view aspirations as having a trajectory of their own.

From Merton's classic essay "Social Structure and Anomie" (1968), onward, evidence about overambition in modern industrial societies has come from a number of sources (cf. Hopper, 1971, 1982). Merton (1968) argues that in American society, the only officially recognized barriers to success are personal: the guiding ethos encourages everyone to aim for the top, though clearly not all can reach it. In his discussion of systems of social mobility, Turner (1960) argues that American society, with its system of contest mobility, delays selection for top positions until a relatively late age (in comparison with "sponsored" mobility systems), thus encouraging the maintenance of high aspirations among a large number of young adults who will never attain them. Hopper (1971) writes of the various needs of

⁶The socialization perspective does not completely preclude the operation of something like allocation in the process of expectations formation (see, for example, Sewell and Hauser, 1980, cited in Campbell, 1983). The distinction between the two perspectives, however, is an analytically useful and commonly employed one (see, for example, Kerckhoff's articles on this topic: Kerckhoff, 1976, 1984, 1988).

industrial societies to "manage" ambition, cooling out those who have aimed too high and "heating up" those who have aimed too low.

The literature on vocational counseling (Holland, 1973; Super and Bohn, 1970) emphasizes the gradual movement toward "vocational maturity" during the late teenage years as young men and women become increasingly informed and "realistic" about their occupational goals. While the socioeconomic consequences of this realism are not typically specified, changing interest, information, attitudes, and ultimately occupational goals are at the center of this stream of research.

What all of these arguments have in common is the notion of ambition as a personal attribute *with its own trajectory*. Aspirations are not fixed but evolve as they are buffeted by the experiences of young individuals in educational and employment settings. Each of these views also maintains that in American society (and others like it), a high level of aspiration prevails among adolescents, aspirations that cannot be completely satisfied by the available positions.

Thus, from this perspective we would expect to find many young Americans experiencing changes in their aspirations well into their 20s, and perhaps even their 30s, as attainments fail to match aspirations. Evidence that this change does indeed take place, however, is limited. Clark's (1960) classic study of cooling out in a California community college stands as one important exception. Clark studied in detail the process by which junior college counselors sought to discourage their students from pursuing the bachelor's degrees they aimed for; the successfully cooled-out student blamed him/herself for the failure to persist, and accepted as just the relegation to an A.A. degree. Karabel's (1972) extension of Clark's study showed that working-class and minority students are disproportionately less likely to continue on to their B.A., and more recent findings show that this pattern has continued (Anderson, 1981; Velez, 1985). Several studies in the 1960s and 1970s showed that American youth did, indeed, overaspire occupationally as well as educationally (Turner, 1964; Kanouse *et al.*, 1981; Kerckhoff, 1974; McClelland, 1985). Thus, it seems inevitable that these aspirations will eventually have to change, if the overall level of ambition in the society is to conform successfully to the distribution of available opportunities.

There are, then, both theoretical and empirical reasons for expecting changes in occupational and educational aspirations, but we lack a systematic understanding of the dynamics of this change. Although it might be possible to develop such an account from within the socialization or allocation frameworks, none has yet been elaborated. Bourdieu's work—especially his concept of habitus—appears to be a good starting point to help us formulate predictions about who is most likely to change their goals.

Bourdieu's Framework

Elaborated in a series of books and articles published over the last 25 years, Bourdieu has set forth an ambitious theoretical framework for studying social reproduction and the symbolic order. (For good secondary accounts of Bourdieu's work as a whole, see Swartz, forthcoming, 1977; Brubaker, 1985; DiMaggio, 1979.) At the heart of this framework is the notion of "habitus," defined as "a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences and actions, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions" (Bourdieu, 1973:83). Habitus is thus similar in some respects to a frame of reference. Informed by an individual's past experiences, it shapes one's understanding of both the present and future. The influences of significant others, reference groups, and class, status, and ethnic group cultures are recognized as key components; thus, social structural location has a critical impact on the development and social trajectory of individuals and their conceptions of their possible futures.

So far, habitus sounds like a restatement of numerous social psychological pronouncements about the critical ties that exist between the individual and his/her social location—another socialization hypothesis. But here Bourdieu extends the more traditional analyses in two respects. First, he argues that aspirations are formed by an "internalization of objective probabilities for success" (Bourdieu, 1977). In this model, children look around themselves and observe, either consciously or unconsciously, the relative success or failure of like others in their environment. An upper middle-class child whose father and uncle are doctors, whose mother is an attorney, and whose older siblings and cousins attend Ivy League colleges grows up surrounded by images of educational and professional success, and seeing this as a probable and "normal" outcome for him/herself as well, aspires to similar success. By contrast, a working-class child whose parents dropped out of high school, whose father works long hours at a factory job, whose uncle is periodically unemployed, and whose siblings and cousins married and settled down to blue-collar jobs confronts a very different picture of the likelihood of occupational and educational success, and is likely to develop aspirations in accord with it. It is more than just a "role model" argument, for, according to Bourdieu, children do not need simply to have the "correct" path pointed out to them—they need to believe in the possibility of attaining these goals based on their own experiences. Thus, sheer weight of numbers becomes an important part of the argument—one sibling who becomes a doctor from a family and neighborhood where most work at low-paying service jobs is not enough to change the calculus of success for most children. As Swartz (1985) summarized,

“(h)abitus ... generates self-fulfilling prophecies according to different class opportunities and judgments.” Aspirations, then, are not simply formed as passive responses to the expectations and injunctions of others; they involve an active, experiential, if not always conscious, calculation on the part of individuals.

Second, according to Bourdieu, one’s “habitus” is not cast in stone by a specific age. It intersects with different “fields”—or opportunity structures in given arenas—to produce an individual’s actions. Thus, depending on the degree to which one’s encounter with a given field reinforces one’s initial orientations to the future, we would expect greater or lesser change in one’s outlook on life. Though early childhood socialization is important, then, new experiences are constantly assimilated to one’s habitus, and, in a process reminiscent of Piaget’s developmental schema, enough anomalous experiences can bring about a fundamental reorganization.

This also implies, of course, that experiences in a given field will be differentially filtered by individuals from different social backgrounds (and different habitus). The experience and consequences of scoring 800 on the SATs will thus be different for the working-class and the upper middle-class child cited above; so, too, would be experience and consequences of failing to achieve a passing grade in one marking period in high school algebra. Eventually, the working-class child who continues to experience success in school may develop “matching” occupational and educational aspirations but because of her/his different initial starting point and how this success is experienced and reflected back by significant others, she/he will still be somewhat less likely to do so than the upper middle-class child with similar experiences.⁷

There are two predictions about the relationship between position in the social structure and the likely trajectory of aspirations that follow from this perspective: “cumulative disadvantage” and “selectedness.” The former suggests that individuals from subordinate groups over time are likely to face growing barriers to success due to their disadvantaged origins. Some of these barriers will be actively posed by gatekeepers: sexual and racial harassment and discrimination are two examples. Others can operate at a more internal level. Though one’s habitus can and does change with time, it remains influenced by early experiences. The knowledge that one is

⁷There is a certain tension in Bourdieu’s work between the relatively “fixed” notion of aspirations implied by the class-based notion of habitus (as derived from the “internalization of objective probabilities”) and the more flexible one derived from his use of the “field” concept. The strong connection between these “fixed” and “flexible” notions is implied in Bourdieu’s summary formula for understanding individuals’ actions: “(habitus) (capital) + field = practice” (1984:101). Our focus on changing aspirations might, perhaps, more properly be considered an extension of his argument rather than a direct application of his ideas. We are grateful to David Swartz for clarifying Bourdieu’s notion of field.

fighting against long odds may never be entirely lost for those from disadvantaged groups; similarly the lack of peers in one's immediate circle who have faced the same challenges and have overcome them may deprive one of an important reference group. Or the need to divorce oneself from earlier reference groups that are less relevant to one's new world may pose emotional costs that members of advantaged groups never have to pay (Park, 1950:344ff). Members of certain disadvantaged groups (especially those defined by race and class) may also, as a result of their primary socialization, lack the comfortable familiarity with the cultural, social, and linguistic "capital" necessary to success in the higher reaches of the educational and professional world. Although Bourdieu notes that these can be acquired through the educational system itself, those who must use this route risk being forever marked by the lack of facility that comes with early childhood exposure (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

Together, these factors can ultimately result in a process of cumulative disadvantage, in which members of previously disadvantaged groups who do develop high aspirations despite the disconfirming evidence of their social milieu are much less likely to achieve their goals than those from advantaged social groups.

The prediction regarding selectedness is based on the idea that bureaucratized societal institutions (especially the educational system), in reproducing the social structure, enable certain individuals from subordinate groups to "slip upward" in the social structure, thus preserving the legitimacy of the prevailing selection mechanisms. Children from minority or working-class families who succeed in school represent a highly selected group, as they have had to battle more obstacles than their peers from privileged social groups (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). On some dimensions—such as grades, academic ability, motivation, or aspirations—individuals from disadvantaged groups who manage to attain a high level of education may actually outperform their peers from advantaged backgrounds, for in overcoming their initial handicaps, they have had to work harder and to perform better than their advantaged peers. Among young people who have attained a relatively high level of education—a college degree, for example—the aspirations of those from subordinate groups will likely be just as high, and possibly even higher, than those of individuals from advantaged groups.

Applied to the American context, aspirations reflect an interesting mixture of societal and personal influences. The conscious/unconscious calculus of objective chances does indeed lead members of disadvantaged groups to develop lower aspirations than members of advantaged groups; however, overlaying this process is the American "success ethos," noted by Merton and imparted, to some extent, in the educational and other fields

throughout one's adolescence. Examples of individuals who "beat the odds" receive much attention and fanfare, and indeed, this is the process of "controlled mobility" that legitimates the ostensibly meritocratic system of social mobility (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). This message is received more clearly by those in whose environment it makes the most sense, specifically those who are already surrounded by examples of success. Yet it is also heard by the disadvantaged, and may provide, in combination with reinforcing, successful experiences in another field (school or work, for instance), a means by which their success—unanticipated from their initial starting point—can be understood. The overaspiration referred to above is the outcome, but it is played out against the background of class, race, and gender differences such that advantaged groups are still over-represented among the most ambitious.

Implications

Bourdieu's framework thus enables us to incorporate both the observed associations between background and aspirations and the changes (mainly downward) in aspirations that we expect to take place during the teenage and young adult years. By studying the process of change, we can begin to identify the way particular components of the environment shape aspirations. The timing of change may be particularly helpful in identifying the mechanisms responsible for these developments. For example, if occupational aspirations were set at age 15, then we might look to family and school as the most significant elements of adolescent boys' habitus. On the other hand, if there were a sharp decline in occupational goals that coincided with the timing of labor force entry, then we might conclude that labor market experiences play a role in young men's "calculus of the probable." To the extent that a process of cumulative disadvantage is in operation, the aspiration gap between advantaged and disadvantaged groups will grow over time. And if selectedness were exerting effects, we would expect to find that those from disadvantaged backgrounds who were successful in a given field, especially the educational field, would have as high—or higher—aspirations than those from advantaged backgrounds. The present study analyzes these dynamics by examining the occupational aspirations of a group of young American men over a 10-year period. A substantial literature on the differences in formation and effects of occupational aspirations by gender cautions against any simple extension of these results to the parallel population of young women; separate analyses are clearly called for (Jacobs, 1989).

If we accept Bourdieu's framework as a *general* starting point, several predictions can be made about the dynamics of aspirations change.

1. Somewhat countering the effects of class and race on habitus, the American "success ethos" and its infusion through the various fields encountered by young American men will produce high aspirations among a high proportion of young American men. Most will set high goals at one point in time or another, although they may not succeed in keeping their sights high. (Presumably, Bourdieu would not make this prediction for France.)
2. Since there are not enough high-status positions for all of these aspirations to be fulfilled, and since the educational field (and later, the workplace) operates to select students for different futures, aspirations will decline over the teenage and young adult years, but the rate of change will slow with age.
3. Given their major role in constituting the habitus, both race and social class will be associated with the level of aspirations at all points in time.
 - 3a. Over time, the race and social class differences will gradually become stronger as the effects of cumulative disadvantage are felt. Downward revisions of aspirations and expectations will be more common (or more rapid) for those from disadvantaged racial or class groups.
 - 3b. Due to a selectedness effect, those from disadvantaged social origins who attain a high level of education will be as likely or more likely to express professional aspirations than will their peers from advantaged origins.

Thus, while it is expected that aspirations and expectations do change during the teenage and young adult years, it is also expected that these changes will be patterned, not random. They will reflect the effects of the general American success ethos and class- and race-based factors.

It might be possible to derive similar predictions regarding the trajectories of aspirations from within the socialization and allocation perspectives. The remarkable fluidity of aspirations seems to us to require some major emendations or revisions for both these perspectives. Bourdieu's concept of habitus seems a more compatible framework for developing a plausible set of predictions.

DATA AND METHODS

We analyze data from the national Longitudinal Survey of Young Men (NLS) which was initiated by Herbert Parnes and his colleagues in

1966 (Center for Human Resource Research, 1981). The sample of 5125 young men aged 14-24 in 1966 has been followed annually or biannually since that time. The NLS data include a question on the occupation in which the young men hope to be employed by 30. This question was asked through 1976, when more than half the sample was age 30 or older. These data enable us to trace the trajectory of the aspirations held by this cohort of young men.

Ideally, we would have liked to simply follow this cohort year by year to trace the changes in goals they report. In this as in any panel data set, however, sample attrition, skipped years between surveys, and missing data greatly complicate this procedure. Rather than restrict our analysis to the small fraction of respondents for whom a reasonably complete set of reports is available, we instead borrow techniques from demography to use all available data to trace the rates of change.

We first transform the panel data into age-specific data. We then report age-specific results, and calculate age-specific transition rates. For example, the rate of change between age 16 and age 17 is based on all the data available for this interval. In addition to obtaining the most reliable estimates possible, this procedure provides age-specific measures that allow us to make projections. Although no single individual was observed every year from age 15 through 27, since there are only 8 survey years between 1966 and 1975, age-specific rates allow us to estimate the changes that we would expect an individual to have experienced between ages 15 and 27.

A potential pitfall of this procedure is biased sample attrition. We checked for this by recalculating a series of results on subsamples of respondents who were in the survey 2 consecutive years. We did not observe any significant bias in these validity checks.⁸

We focus on the patterns of occupational goals held between ages 15 and 27. This age range allows us to trace the pattern of change during high school and continuing on into the early labor force years. We deleted ages 14, 28, and 29 from the analysis because of the small number of cases.

Our approach to measuring occupations was to employ 10 major occupational categories: professions, managerial, sales, clerical, craft, operative, transportation, service, farm, and laborers. This grouping is a

⁸Those who left the sample were more likely to be black, had fathers with less education and lower socioeconomic status, had less education, and lower educational and occupational aspirations than those who remained in the sample. These differences, however, have little impact on our results. We compared the trajectory of aspirations for the entire sample and for stayers and leavers. The trends for the entire sample were parallel to those for both stayers and leavers.

conventional one, has substantial support in the literature, and is detailed enough to be of substantive interest. The categorical approach to measuring occupations enables us to track changes that might be obscured in a measure such as average SEI score. For some of the analyses, we collapse these categories in five broader aggregations.

We first examine age-specific aspiration distributions. We then calculate age-specific entry and persistence rates. On the basis of these rates, we calculate the cumulative probability of adopting a given occupational goal. Similarly, we calculate the chances of persisting with a given occupational goal from age 15 to 20 and age 15 to 27, and the median expected duration of persisting with a given occupational goal. These age-specific patterns are then compared for different subgroups, defined by race and father's occupation. Finally, to evaluate the selectedness hypothesis, we examine changes in aspirations for these subgroups controlling for their educational attainment.

RESULTS

Stability and Change

Table I displays the distribution of age-specific aspiration data for 10 major occupational categories for ages 15-27.

For comparison, we also present the proportion of this cohort actually employed in each of the major occupations at age 30. Clearly more young men aspire to high-status occupations than are likely to be so employed. Fifty-seven percent of 15-year-old boys aspired to become professionals by age 30, while only 21% of them were so employed at age 30. By age 26, 26% of young men aspired to be managers, while only 14% had become managers at age 30. At the lower reaches of the occupational hierarchy, a deficit of aspirations (compared with employment) is observed. For example, the proportion of young men aspiring to be factory workers (operatives) never rises above 6%, yet 12% were employed as operatives at age 30 (and even larger proportions worked in factories at earlier ages.) For each of the blue-collar occupations, employment at age 30 exceeds aspirations, although sometimes by a small amount. (An aggregate correspondence between aspirations and employment at age 30 is observed for sales and clerical employment, but this does not indicate that individuals in these fields are employed in the occupations of their choice.) The evidence on high aspirations is consistent with the findings of earlier research on overaspirations (Kerckhoff, 1974; Turner, 1964; Kanouse *et al.*, 1981; McClelland, 1985).

Table I. Proportion Aspiring to Major Occupational Groups, by Age of NLS Young Men

	Age											Actual occupations age 30		
	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25		26	27
No. of cases	889	1422	1774	2013	2140	1953	2284	2197	2603	2586	2179	1908	1499	508
Professional	0.57	0.53	0.53	0.51	0.49	0.46	0.43	0.39	0.34	0.31	0.30	0.27	0.26	0.21
Managerial	0.06	0.07	0.09	0.11	0.14	0.17	0.19	0.20	0.22	0.25	0.23	0.26	0.26	0.14
Sales	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.05	0.05
Clerical	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.04	0.04
Craft	0.22	0.23	0.21	0.19	0.18	0.17	0.15	0.17	0.18	0.18	0.19	0.20	0.21	0.23
Operative	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.05	0.05	0.07	0.06	0.06	0.07	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.12
Transport	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.07
Service	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.05	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.05
Farm	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.05
Laborers	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.05

Also evident in Table I is the unmistakable downward drift in aspirations. The clearest evidence for this conclusion is the steady and consistent decline in the proportion of young men aspiring to professional occupations. The proportion aspiring to the professions falls steadily from 57% among 15-year-olds to 26% among 27-year-olds. An interesting countervailing trend is the growth in the proportion of young men reporting managerial aspirations. Only 1 in 20 15-year-olds set their sights on being a manager (6%) while fully one quarter (26%) reported this goal by age 27. Evidently, the attractiveness of managing is something young men learn during their 20s. The pattern of declining aspirations to be a professional and increasing aspirations to be a manager can be seen as consistent with Bourdieu's ideas of the ways in which "fields" operate. Individuals' experiences in the educational system make it clear for some that their currency is not convertible in the market for professionals and they should thus relinquish their aspirations for the professions. Yet others' experiences in the workplace—specifically, their daily encounters with their supervisors and managers—may convey the impression that they have what it takes to be a manager (especially given the heterogeneity of the managerial category). In aggregate terms, the growth of proportion aspiring to managerial employment partly offsets the decline in professional goals reported. The proportion aspiring to *either* professional or managerial occupations declines from 63% at age 15 to 52% at age 27; without the growth of managerial aspirations, this decline would be 20 points steeper.

The clerical, laborer, and farm categories remain unpopular goals, while craft jobs draw a steady 20% of the choices. Sales, factory employment (operatives), and transportation grow slowly in popularity, but none receives as much as 10% of the choices by age 27. Thus, there is support for the notion that young individuals reassess their aspirations, and as a result, the "excessive" aspirations they held as young men are substantially reduced by the time they have reached their late twenties.

While Table I reports the aggregate patterns of change by age, Table II presents age-specific first-time entry rates for each of the occupational categories. These figures represent the proportion of individuals volunteering the choice of each occupational group for the first time at a given age. The population "at risk" is the portion of the cohort that has never before selected a given occupational group as its goal. Combined with the proportion aspiring to each occupation at age 15, the increment rates allow us to calculate the cumulative proportion aspiring to each occupation by age 20 or 27.

The increment rates decline with age or are stable for most of the occupations. The professions, for example, attract 19% of potential new adherents among 16-year-olds, but only 3% among 27-year-olds. Also,

Table II. Age-Specific First-Time Entrance Rates for Major Occupational Categories

	Increment rate by age											
	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
Professional	0.19	0.14	0.14	0.09	0.08	0.08	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.04	0.03
Managerial	0.05	0.06	0.07	0.08	0.10	0.12	0.10	0.12	0.14	0.10	0.10	0.10
Sales	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.03	0.01	0.03	0.02	0.03
Clerical	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02
Craft	0.10	0.09	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.04	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.07
Operative	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.02
Transport	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.01
Service	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Farm	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Laborers	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.02
Professional/ managerial	0.19	0.18	0.15	0.17	0.17	0.20	0.16	0.15	0.17	0.14	0.14	0.10
White collar	0.17	0.18	0.15	0.17	0.17	0.20	0.16	0.17	0.16	0.15	0.15	0.10
Blue collar	0.13	0.10	0.10	0.08	0.09	0.07	0.11	0.10	0.10	0.10	0.09	0.09

newcomers to the crafts represent 10% of the at-risk pool among 16-year-olds, which declines to 7% of 27-year-olds. The other occupations are quite stable in the proportion of new converts, with the exception of managerial positions. The proportion newly reporting managerial ambitions grows from 5% at age 16 until reaching the 10–12% range when these young men reach their early 20s. As we will see, the cumulative effect of these increment rates is that large proportions of individuals can be expected to aspire to several of these occupational categories.

Table III reports age-specific annual persistence rates for each of the major occupational categories. These data reveal a great deal of individual turnover, which generally declines with age. The persistence rates are quite stable with age for the professions, hovering around 80% per year. Similarly, the craft occupations have a steady persistence rate of 60–70% per year.

For most of the occupations, the persistence rate increases with age. The managerial occupations are the most extreme case: the annual persistence rate for managerial aspirations was only 35% at age 15, which rises to 62% by age 26. The less popular occupations also experience an increase in persistence rates.

The entry and persistence figures presented on Tables II and III enable us to calculate the chances of individuals adopting a given occupational goal during a specified age range. For example, we can calculate the proportion of young men who can be expected to adopt a professional goal between ages 15 and 20, or 15 and 27. Similarly, we can calculate the chances of maintaining an occupational goal over the same period of time.

Table IV presents a series of statistics that describe the entry and persistence patterns for each of the 10 major occupational categories. The first panel of Table IV presents the cumulative probability of aspiring to each of the major occupational categories, for ages 15–20 and 15–27. These statistics provide us with estimates of the chances for choosing each of the major occupations *at least once* by age 20 or 27. Consider the case of the professions, for example. We calculate the cumulative probability of aspiring to a professional occupation by adding the new converts to the original professional aspirants. Fifty-seven percent of 15-year-olds aspired to the professions, as indicated in Table I. In Table II, of those with other goals at age 15, 19% reported a professional aspiration at age 16, which represents an additional 8% joining the ranks of the professional aspirants for the first time (19% of the 43% who never previously aspired to the professions). By age 16, then, a total of 65% had reported a professional aspiration at least once. If one follows this procedure for 5 years, inserting the age-specific

Table III. Persistence Rates by Age for Major Occupational Categories

	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
Professional	0.80	0.83	0.80	0.84	0.82	0.84	0.79	0.78	0.76	0.78	0.75	0.70
Managerial	0.35	0.43	0.49	0.63	0.62	0.68	0.62	0.71	0.66	0.64	0.69	0.62
Sales	0.38	0.61	0.41	0.39	0.39	0.40	0.36	0.48	0.38	0.44	0.44	0.44
Clerical	0.24	0.30	0.28	0.42	0.26	0.28	0.36	0.37	0.37	0.36	0.33	0.30
Craft	0.70	0.61	0.64	0.65	0.59	0.58	0.72	0.65	0.63	0.70	0.64	0.64
Operative	0.31	0.41	0.43	0.49	0.43	0.55	0.44	0.53	0.53	0.44	0.54	0.57
Transport	0.64	0.56	0.46	0.62	0.54	0.54	0.58	0.64	0.65	0.69	0.49	0.54
Service	0.52	0.67	0.68	0.61	0.47	0.57	0.62	0.62	0.62	0.75	0.77	0.86
Farm	0.65	0.66	0.78	0.76	0.76	0.79	0.87	0.72	0.74	0.64	0.75	0.60
Laborers	0.40	0.23	0.22	0.23	0.29	0.48	0.30	0.25	0.31	0.59	0.28	0.18

Table IV. Cumulative Entry and Persistence Patterns of NLS Young Men

A. Entry				
Occupation	Cumulative probability of entry ages 15-20	Cumulative probability of entry ages 15-27		
Professional	0.78	0.86		
Managerial	0.35	0.72		
Sales	0.07	0.20		
Clerical	0.12	0.24		
Craft	0.49	0.68		
Operative	0.15	0.30		
Transport	0.06	0.14		
Service	0.08	0.15		
Farm	0.08	0.14		
Laborers	0.07	0.16		
Professional/managerial	0.86	0.95		
Nonmanual	0.87	0.96		
Manual	0.60	0.80		

B. Persistence				
Occupation	Average annual persistence rate	Percent persisting ages 15-20	Percent persisting ages 15-27	Median spell length (years)
Professional	0.79	36.6	5.90	2.96
Managerial	0.60	2.9	0.155	1.39
Sales	0.43	1.4	0.003	0.87
Clerical	0.32	0.2	0.0001	0.74
Craft	0.65	10.5	0.51	1.64
Operative	0.31	1.2	0.01	0.94
Transport	0.47	5.5	0.13	1.33
Service	0.58	6.8	0.46	1.65
Farm	0.65	19.3	2.04	2.21
Laborers	0.31	0.1	0.00004	0.72

increment rate as appropriate, then by age 20 one obtains 78% of the cohort aspiring to a professional occupation at least once.

The data in Table IV dramatize the high aspirations of young men in the United States during this period. Fully 86% could be expected to aspire to the professions at least once between ages 15 and 27, while 72% aspired to managerial positions. The joint probability of aspiring to professional *or* managerial occupations by age 27 is a stunning 95%, only slightly exceeded by the 96% who aspired to a white-collar occupation. Aspirations frequently cross the manual vs. nonmanual line, as 68% of young men

aspired to be craftsmen at least once by age 27, and 80% aspire to a manual occupation at least once.

These results demonstrate that a simple cross-sectional snapshot of young men's aspirations seriously understates the proportion who set their sights high at one point or another. Young men consider a series of occupational goals in succession; the high-status professional and managerial occupations are nearly always considered at some stage in this process.

The second panel of Table IV documents the flip side of the dynamics of aspirations: high turnover rates. Not only do most young men adopt high occupational goals at some point, but they persist with these goals only for relatively short intervals. We present several statistics that indicate the extent of annual turnover: the average annual persistence rate, the percent persisting from age 15 through age 20 and 27, and the median spell length (or half-life) of each occupational goal.

The figures presented in Table IV document remarkably short persistence in each occupation. The professions have the highest persistence rates, with 36.6% expected to persist between ages 15 and 20. But even for the professions, only a mere 5.9% can be expected to persist with this goal every year between ages 15 and 27. Farming is the only other occupation where more than 1% of those aspiring at age 15 could be expected to retain that aspiration continuously through age 27.

The high turnover can also be observed in the statistics on spell length. The longest spells are observed in the professions: half of those aspiring to the professions maintain these goals for more than 3 years. The median spell lengths for the other occupations are all much shorter, with only farming displaying a median persistence rate of more than 2 years.

We have examined the potential effect of measurement error on these results, and have concluded that the impact is probably quite small. If there were an important random component to individuals' choices, then repeated observations would result in inflated increment rates for each occupation. In turn, high increment rates quickly raise the cumulative proportion aspiring to a given occupation. Consequently, random responses could generate the conclusion that high aspirations are ubiquitous even if this were not in fact the case.

Yet Table II indicates that for 7 of the 10 occupational groups, annual increment rates never exceed 3% per year, and for 5 occupations rarely exceed 2% per year. Nearly 40% of the increment rates on Table II are 1%, a result inconsistent with high rates of random reporting error. Consequently, we believe the extent of random reporting in this data is small, i.e., less than 1% per occupation. The cumulative probability aspiring to each occupation measured over 12 years is not likely to be overstated by more than 12% (1% per occupation per year).

Table V. Trends in Occupational Goals, by Race of NLS Young Men

	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Whites							
Professional	0.58	0.55	0.55	0.52	0.50	0.47	0.43
Managerial	0.06	0.08	0.10	0.12	0.15	0.18	0.20
Other white collar	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.05	0.04	0.04	0.05
Craft	0.21	0.22	0.20	0.19	0.18	0.17	0.15
Other blue collar	0.12	0.13	0.13	0.12	0.13	0.14	0.17
Blacks							
Professional	0.47	0.42	0.44	0.42	0.37	0.35	0.34
Managerial	0.06	0.06	0.05	0.08	0.11	0.08	0.16
Other white collar	0.08	0.08	0.08	0.09	0.09	0.08	0.07
Craft	0.27	0.28	0.26	0.22	0.20	0.21	0.18
Other blue collar	0.12	0.16	0.16	0.20	0.24	0.28	0.25
Ratio white/black							
	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Professional	1.23	1.31	1.25	1.24	1.35	1.34	1.26
Managerial	1.00	1.33	2.00	1.50	1.36	2.25	1.25
Other white collar	0.50	0.38	0.38	0.56	0.44	0.50	0.71
Craft	0.78	0.79	0.77	0.86	0.90	0.81	0.83
Other blue collar	1.00	0.81	0.81	0.60	0.54	0.50	0.68
15-17							
	18-20	21-23	24-27				
Professional	1.26	1.31	1.21	1.26			
Managerial	1.44	1.70	1.43	1.66			
Other white collar	0.42	0.50	0.90	0.95			
Craft	0.78	0.85	0.83	0.74			
Other blue collar	0.87	0.55	0.68	0.70			

Table V. (Continued)

	22	23	24	25	26	27
Whites						
Professional	0.39	0.34	0.32	0.31	0.27	0.26
Managerial	0.21	0.23	0.25	0.23	0.27	0.25
Other white collar	0.07	0.08	0.06	0.07	0.07	0.08
Craft	0.17	0.18	0.17	0.19	0.18	0.19
Other blue collar	0.17	0.18	0.20	0.20	0.21	0.22
Blacks						
Professional	0.34	0.28	0.24	0.25	0.23	0.20
Managerial	0.15	0.14	0.17	0.16	0.12	0.17
Other white collar	0.07	0.08	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.07
Craft	0.19	0.24	0.24	0.23	0.24	0.28
Other blue collar	0.25	0.27	0.28	0.30	0.33	0.28
Ratio white/black						
Professional	1.15	1.21	1.33	1.24	1.17	1.30
Managerial	1.40	1.64	1.47	1.44	2.25	1.47
Other white collar	1.00	1.00	0.55	1.00	1.00	1.14
Craft	0.89	0.75	0.71	0.83	0.75	0.68
Other blue collar	0.68	0.67	0.71	0.67	0.64	0.79

It should be noted that there are equally important reasons for thinking that these measures understate change. Aspirations were obtained only once a year: surely many individuals change their aspirations on a more frequent basis.

The data are consistent with our first and second hypotheses. High aspirations, ubiquitous among young Americans, decline with age, and the rate of decline generally slows with age. This pattern of change in occupational aspirations is consistent with a Bourdieuan perspective. Occupational goals are not simply a product of early-life socialization, since they remain so volatile through young men's late adolescence and early adulthood. The high level of early aspirations reflects the American commitment to a success ethos, a view that encourages everyone to compete for occupational success. The trajectory of change underscores young men's growing recognition of limited prospects. The timing of change suggests that experiences in the educational system and perhaps early occupational experiences inject a strong dose of realism into the young men's worldviews. Aspirations thus reflect a combination of learned orientations and adaptations to circumstance.

Race and Class Effects

Our third hypothesis predicts the presence of race and social class differences in aspiration levels. Our fourth hypothesis predicts a pattern of cumulative disadvantage, growing race and social class differences in aspirations. Table V presents age-specific data on aspirations by race. These data are collapsed into five categories. We grouped sales and clerical occupations together into an "other white-collar" group, and blue-collar occupations other than craft into an "other blue-collar" category. We collapsed these categories because of the small number of choices reported for the sales, clerical, operative, service, farm, and laborer categories, and because the results from the first several analyses suggest that a relatively stable proportion select each of these occupations.

There are modest differences in aspirations by race for most of the occupations. Whites are consistently more likely than blacks to aspire to the professions and to managerial occupations, while blacks are consistently more likely than whites to aspire to other white-collar occupations, craft, and other blue-collar occupations.⁹

We examined these data for evidence of increasing race differences by age, and conclude that there is some evidence for a growing gap

⁹The modest racial gap in aspirations we observed may reflect the raised aspirations generated among blacks by the civil rights and associated black empowerment movements.

between whites and blacks. The last panel reports the ratio of white to black aspirations for each of the occupational groups. Because the relatively small number of black respondents results in ratios that fluctuate from year to year, we averaged 3 adjacent years to obtain a more reliable comparison.

The white/black ratio increases or remains stable for 2 of the 3 white-collar occupations, and declines for both blue-collar ones. For the professions, the overrepresentation of whites remains stable, while white overrepresentation among managerial aspirants grows from 1.44 at ages 15-17 to 1.66 at ages 24-27. For sales and clerical occupations, here grouped together as other white-collar, white underrepresentation at ages 15-17 moves closer to equal representation by ages 24-27. In contrast, white representation declines slightly in the crafts and in other blue-collar occupations. The differences between whites and blacks grow in absolute as well as relative terms. As measured by the index of dissimilarity, at age 15, 10.5% of blacks would have had to change occupational goals to be distributed in the same manner as whites; by age 27 this gap had grown to 15%.

Of the two highest status occupational groups, it is noteworthy that there is stability in the white/black ratio of professional aspirations and an increase in the white/black ratio of managerial aspirations. The civil rights movement, the black mobility of the 1960s and 1970s, and the resulting change in the opportunity structure for professional occupations (including the expansion of black enrollment in higher education) together may have kept blacks' professional aspirations as high as whites'. Bourdieu's research on the French peasants (1974) and his conception of how fields affect practice would lead us to predict such an outcome. In the very heterogeneous managerial occupations, however, where personal ties may impinge on regularized career advancement, blacks are less likely to have or to maintain managerial aspirations. Promotion into the ranks of management remains problematic for blacks, since performance evaluation is especially subjective in managerial work and because feelings of mutual trust are crucial in promotion decision making (Fernandez, 1981; Pfeffer, 1977; Collins, 1979). Thus, differences in these opportunity structures articulate with habitus to produce the race differences in the dynamics of aspirations.

When we calculate data on the cumulative entry and persistence patterns by race (not shown), whites are 6 percentage points more likely to aspire to a professional occupation at least once by age 20 (80 vs. 74%) and 5 points more likely by age 27 (87 vs. 82%). The gap is even bigger for managerial positions, with whites 10 points more likely than blacks to choose a managerial occupation by age 27. Blacks' aspirations exceed those

Table VI. Trends in Occupational Goals, by Father's Occupation

	15	16	17	18	19	20
NonManual						
Professional	0.70	0.67	0.67	0.64	0.61	0.58
Managerial	0.08	0.11	0.14	0.15	0.19	0.24
Other white collar	0.07	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.05	0.05
Craft	0.11	0.12	0.09	0.10	0.09	0.08
Other blue collar	0.04	0.06	0.05	0.07	0.06	0.06
Manual						
Professional	0.51	0.48	0.48	0.45	0.45	0.41
Managerial	0.05	0.05	0.07	0.09	0.12	0.13
Other white collar	0.04	0.04	0.03	0.05	0.05	0.05
Craft	0.26	0.27	0.25	0.23	0.22	0.22
Other blue collar	0.15	0.15	0.16	0.17	0.16	0.19
Ratio nonmanual/manual						
Professional	1.37	1.40	1.40	1.42	1.36	1.41
Managerial	1.60	2.20	2.00	1.67	1.58	1.85
Other white collar	1.75	1.00	1.33	0.80	1.00	1.00
Craft	0.42	0.44	0.36	0.43	0.41	0.36
Other blue collar	0.27	0.40	0.31	0.41	0.38	0.32
15-17 18-20 21-23 24-27						
Professional	1.39	1.40	1.50	1.49		
Managerial	1.93	1.70	1.37	1.37		
Other white collar	1.36	0.93	1.22	1.09		
Craft	0.41	0.40	0.49	0.55		
Other blue collar	0.33	0.37	0.34	0.56		

Table VI. (Continued)

	21	22	23	24	25	26	27
NonManual							
Professional	0.54	0.51	0.47	0.42	0.40	0.32	0.36
Managerial	0.25	0.26	0.25	0.30	0.28	0.35	0.29
Other white collar	0.05	0.07	0.10	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.10
Craft	0.10	0.09	0.10	0.10	0.14	0.11	0.12
Other blue collar	0.07	0.07	0.08	0.12	0.12	0.15	0.14
Manual							
Professional	0.39	0.34	0.29	0.28	0.26	0.25	0.22
Managerial	0.17	0.18	0.21	0.21	0.20	0.23	0.26
Other white collar	0.05	0.07	0.06	0.06	0.08	0.08	0.07
Craft	0.17	0.21	0.22	0.21	0.21	0.22	0.22
Other blue collar	0.22	0.21	0.22	0.24	0.24	0.23	0.24
Ratio nonmanual/manual							
Professional	1.38	1.50	1.62	1.50	1.54	1.28	1.64
Managerial	1.47	1.44	1.19	1.43	1.40	1.52	1.12
Other white collar	1.00	1.00	1.67	1.17	0.88	0.88	1.43
Craft	0.59	0.43	0.45	0.48	0.67	0.50	0.55
Other blue collar	0.32	0.33	0.36	0.50	0.50	0.65	0.58

Table VII. Professional Aspirations by Level of Education, by Age^a

	Respondent's education attainment					Total
	Less than high school	High school	Some college	Bachelor's degree	Post BA	
Age 20						
Nonmanual	8 25.7%	46 32.8%	299 68.1%	10 75.5%	0 0%	363 58.2%
Manual	24 13.8%	76 21.6%	279 72.7%	4 74.4%	0 0%	383 41.9%
White	46 17.9%	140 25.1%	621 69.0%	13 74.5%	0 0%	819 47.4%
Black	8 10.1%	22 32.2%	38 79.4%	0 0%	0 0%	68 35.6%
Age 22						
Nonmanual	6 19.8%	35 25.1%	137 52.6%	121 70.0%	32 85.3%	331 51.6%
Manual	13 6.5%	78 19.1%	124 52.9%	110 76.3%	22 95.0%	347 34.2%
White	33 10.9%	143 21.5%	269 50.4%	258 71.4%	59 88.6%	762 39.5%
Black	9 11.8%	20 24.7%	33 81.2%	12 75.3%	2 70.0%	76 35.0%
Age 24						
Nonmanual	4 10.4%	40 20.9%	89 33.2%	113 53.0%	115 80.6%	361 42.1%
Manual	16 6.3%	81 14.9%	96 37.0%	117 59.7%	59 90.1%	370 28.0%
White	30 7.7%	147 16.3%	211 35.3%	248 54.5%	190 83.3%	826 32.0%
Black	5 4.9%	22 20.1%	22 50.5%	14 62.2%	4 84.9%	67 24.4%

(Continued)

Table VII. (Continued)

	Respondent's education attainment					Total
	Less than high school	High school	Some college	Bachelor's degree	Post BA	
Age 26						
Nonmanual	0 0%	13 9.8%	41 21.9%	55 39.9%	91 69.0%	200 32.0%
Manual	4 2.3%	45 11.8%	66 38.8%	64 46.0%	66 78.4%	246 25.6%
White	10 3.5%	75 11.5%	124 29.0%	144 43.2%	179 74.2%	531 27.2%
Black	3 4.5%	13 18.0%	13 41.0%	11 76.3%	8 96.7%	48 24.1%

^aFractions are based on weighted *ns* of cases; *ns* reported are rounded to nearest integer.

of whites for clerical and sales positions (.53 vs. .36 by age 27), craft jobs (.78 vs. .67 by age 27), and other manual jobs (.74 vs. .57). Moreover, whites are slightly more likely to persist in their choice of high-status occupations, while blacks are more likely to persist in their choice of lower status occupations. The median spell length for professional choices is 2.95 years for whites vs. 2.81 years for blacks. In contrast, blacks maintain their choice of craft occupations for 1.77 years vs. 1.61 years for whites. Overall, there are differences in aspiration levels by race that grow over time. The same differences are reflected in the data on persistence rates and aspiration spells. Though the results are in the hypothesized direction, we are surprised at how small are the differences. Indeed, one might surmise that black men might have higher aspirations than white men, once SES were controlled. (Data on more recent cohorts of high school seniors indeed indicate that blacks have higher aspirations than their white counterparts [Hauser and Anderson, 1989].) Table VI reports the age-specific aspiration data by father's occupation (manual vs. nonmanual). The differences in aspirations by father's collar color are greater than those by race, and social class differences in aspirations grow for professional but not other occupations. Differences in professional aspirations grow between ages 15 and 27, with the advantage of sons of white-collar fathers growing from 1.37 to 1.64 during this interval. The gap for the other occupations, however, narrows somewhat. The 3-year average gap declines for managerial, other white-collar, craft, and other blue-collar occupations. The index of dissimilarity is 25.5 at age 15, and falls to 20 by age 27.

Analysis (not shown) of cumulative chances of entry and persistence rates by father's occupation revealed that sons of white-collar fathers were more likely to aspire to the professions at least once between ages 15 and 27 (96%) than were sons of blue-collar fathers (81%). Craft occupations were more likely to be a choice of blue-collar sons (75%) than white-collar sons (50%) between ages 15 and 27. As we saw in the case of race, persistence patterns reinforce these differences. White-collar sons are more likely to persist in each of the 3 white-collar categories, while blue-collar sons are more likely to persist in each of the blue-collar occupations.

The growing racial and social-class differences in professional aspirations reflect the divergence in educational attainment with age. Education is a powerful predictor of high occupational attainment (analyses not shown), and race and social class differences in educational attainment grow with age. The racial gap in educational attainment grows from a white/black ratio of 1.07 at age 18 to a ratio of 1.19 at age 27. Similarly, the social class gap (white-collar sons/blue-collar sons) grows from 1.06 at age 18 to 1.20 at age 27.

The growing racial differences in aspirations and the growing social class differences in professional aspirations are consistent with a cumulative disadvantage interpretation of the formation of aspirations. Individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds are somewhat less likely to have high aspirations, somewhat less likely to persist with these aspirations, and are further from the goals of their more advantaged counterparts by age 27 than is evident at age 15. At the same time, the tables indicate that, in general, young men from all groups examined have remarkably high aspirations, and that there are some noteworthy convergences in the aspirations of young men from super- and subordinate groups. For all nonprofessional occupations, sons of manual and of nonmanual fathers tend to get closer in their aspirations over the age span considered. In our examination of race effects, only small—often fluctuating—differences were detected across occupations. Seen in this light, a cumulative disadvantage interpretation seems less plausible.

To test the selectedness hypothesis, we examined the effect of social background on aspirations by years of schooling completed. Ages 16 and 18 are not considered because respondents would be too young to have begun college. For each of the 5 categories of educational attainment (less than high school, high school, some college, bachelor's degree, and post-graduate work), we examined the proportion who reported professional aspirations. These figures were compiled separately for blacks and whites, and for sons of blue-collar and white-collar fathers.

The selectedness hypothesis predicts that among respondents who had achieved a high level of education, members of disadvantaged groups would express as high or even higher levels of aspirations than members of advantaged groups. As the figures in Table VII show, this prediction was borne out for both race and social origins, and the pattern becomes somewhat stronger over time. At all ages, advantaged groups are more likely, overall, to state professional aspirations (this appears in the final column of Table VII). This pattern is also observed for those with the lowest levels of education (a high school degree or less). Yet when respondents with "some college" education or more are examined, blacks and those with blue-collar fathers are shown to be as likely, if not more likely, to state professional career goals. It might be argued that the selectedness argument is weakened by the fact that blacks with only a high school education have higher aspirations than similarly educated whites. While this is true, it is notable how much stronger—across the age range—are blacks' than whites' orientations to professional occupations among those with "some college" or more. (While the relatively small number of blacks with high levels of education suggests the need for caution, the consistency of these results lends confidence in our interpretation.) Thus we see that among those who have achieved a high level of education, members of disadvantaged groups are actually at least as likely as members of advantaged groups to hold professional aspirations.

Another key finding emerges from Table VII: the importance of educational attainment in the formulation of occupational goals. The links between education and occupation (especially for the "credentialed" occupations, such as the professions) are by now well understood by most of the population. Thus, it is no surprise that those who have gone farther in school are more likely to set high occupational goals for themselves. No doubt part of the racial and social origins gap in occupational aspirations is produced by differences in educational attainment.

DISCUSSION

Evidence of high aspirations of young men during their teens and twenties is unmistakable, as is evidence of an overall downward trajectory of aspirations. The rate of choosing a new occupational goal declines with age, while the rate of persisting with an occupational goal increases with age. The cumulative chances of choosing a high-status occupation, especially a professional or managerial occupation, are extremely high overall, and surprisingly high for blacks and sons of blue-collar fathers. The great majority of individuals from all social strata set their sights high at one

point or another. Occupational aspirations have a short half-life, however: the median life expectancy of occupational aspirations is generally well under 3 years.

Although we have found race and social class differences in our examination of aspirations change, they are much smaller than we had expected. Results that followed strictly from a cumulative disadvantage perspective would have exhibited both greater initial and over-time differences between super- and subordinate groups. In Bourdieu's terms, it is indeed surprising that one's habitus has seemingly weak effects as one's aspirations confront the fluctuations of different fields. With respect to the selectedness argument, we find that among the highly selected—individuals who are successful in the educational field—those from disadvantaged groups have aspirations at least as high as those from advantaged social origins. But even here, as noted earlier, we find specific results that weaken the support of the hypothesis.

One factor that might be responsible for these deviations from our original expectations is a strong period effect. The 1960s were an exceptional period with respect to mobilization around civil rights, educational expansion, and economic boom. These elements might together have provided a strong lift to the aspirations of disadvantaged groups, but especially of blacks. Indeed, MacLeod (1987), with respect to working-class blacks' occupational aspirations, and Karen (1991), with respect to increases in blacks' and working-class students' orientations to higher education and for blacks even to elite higher education, provide support for this conjecture.

CONCLUSIONS

Race and social class form important elements of the habitus of young American men, but so too does the American ideology of pervasive opportunity. The result is a high level of occupational aspirations throughout the society. The great majority of American young men, whatever their social class or race background, set their sights toward the top of the American occupational structure. These aspirations become increasingly salient and stable in late adolescence and early adulthood, when the harsh realities of educational failure and limited employment opportunities become impossible to ignore. These experiences in different fields, as they are refracted by young men's habitus, lead to a general decline in the level of aspirations. Race and social class continue to play a part in this process, and consequently those from disadvantaged backgrounds are least likely to persist in maintaining their professional aspirations.

Although it does not provide strong support for the theory, this analysis nonetheless demonstrates the utility of a Bourdieuan framework that directs our attention to the dynamics of aspirations. We have argued that we can further our understanding of the attainment process by studying the formation of aspirations. Detailed analyses of the factors that explain changes in aspiration levels are needed. Parallel analysis of the socioeconomic dimension of women's aspirations should also prove informative.

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