

Voices of the Forgotten Half: The Role of Social Class in the School-to-Work Transition

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This study examines the impact of social class on the school-to-work (STW) transitions of young adults in working-class occupations. Using an exploratory, qualitative research methodology, interviews were conducted with 10 men and 10 women to examine the role of social class in the STW transition. All participants were working in low-skilled jobs and grouped into 2 cohorts based on their family's socioeconomic background: higher socioeconomic status (HSES) and lower socioeconomic status (LSES). The findings indicate that social class played an important role in the participants' STW transition. Individuals from the HSES cohort expressed greater interest in work as a source of personal satisfaction, higher levels of self-concept crystallization, greater access to external resources, and greater levels of career adaptability compared with their LSES counterparts.

I was forced into this way of life. It's like I was forced to drop out of school and being in the position I am in now. (Participant #40)

The voice of the young man who introduces this article conveys a powerful set of emotions about the experiences of working-class and poor individuals in many contemporary Western cultures. Social scientists and counseling practitioners can learn a great deal by listening to the voices of those who have been on the margins of our scholarly attention. Research and theory (e.g., Brown, Fukunaga, Umemoto, & Wicker, 1996; Richardson, 1993) have suggested that social class is a major factor in the work lives of people, reflecting a significant source of marginalization in our culture for those who are from poor and working-class backgrounds. As such, we believe that these marginalized voices can help create the needed knowledge about the role of social class in the domain of work.

A number of major policy analysts (e.g., Marshall & Tucker, 1992; Reich, 1991; Wilson, 1996) have noted that the United

States is becoming a nation of two classes—one with resources and access to the opportunity structure and one without. The disparity between the lowest and highest sectors of society is widening. For example, the top 1% of households has more wealth than the entire bottom 95% (Wolff, 1998). Wealth is becoming increasingly concentrated in the upper strata of society, which is impacting the vocational trajectories of many poor and working-class individuals. For instance, in most domains of social and economic life, social class plays a significant role in access to opportunities and options (Fouad & Brown, 2000; Kliman, 1998; Lerner, 1991; Wilson, 1996). Sewell and Hauser (1975) found that higher levels of social position are associated with higher occupational aspirations, greater levels of educational attainment, and higher salaries. Similarly, Owens (1992) concluded that individuals from the upper social classes were more likely to attend college, whereas members of the lower social classes were more likely to transition directly to work or enter the military. Moreover, in a review of the literature, Brown et al. (1996) revealed that the effects of social class are quite complex throughout the career choice and vocational adjustment processes. They suggested that social class affects occupational attainment, access to work opportunities, individual worldviews, and values placed on work as well as how an individual is viewed by others.

Furthermore, sociologists and anthropologists have focused extensively on identifying the complex ways that social mores and norms influence occupational behavior (e.g., Ogbu, 1989; Roberts, 1978; Rossides, 1990; Sennett & Cobb, 1972; Willis, 1977). A careful examination of the sociological literature reveals a complex intellectual debate with significant ramifications for career development theory and practice. On one side of this debate are the scholars who endorse a view that social class plays a broad structural role in people's lives, determining access to the resources that are needed for adaptive transitions from school to work and the barriers to access (Hotchkiss & Borow, 1996; Rossides, 1990; Sewell & Hauser, 1975). On the other side of this debate are the cultural production scholars (e.g., Willis, 1977), who argue that social class creates specific cultural elements that

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are internalized into the values and identity of adolescents. This internalization facilitates a process in which individuals from lower social classes seek to recreate or produce their cultural characteristics by rejecting middle-class norms, including higher educational and occupational goals. In the field of counseling psychology, a recent integrative analysis by Fouad and Brown (2000) endorsed a cultural production perspective in which social class is thought to influence selected aspects of an individual's self through a construct known as the *differential status identity*. According to Fouad and Brown, differential status identity refers to the internalization of status differences related to the psychological and psychosocial dimensions of race and social class. The experience of differential status identity is thought to be greater for those who are in subordinate positions in relation to those in a privileged status within a given culture. Unfortunately, these debates risk a further distancing of theory and interventions from the actual lived experiences of working-class adolescents and young adults. For example, by presuming that social class is internalized in some intrapsychic manner, we are in danger of creating a situation that may inadvertently blame the victim for not having the cultural characteristics of the middle class.

Although researchers in various fields have begun to explore the role of social class in the domain of work, the aforementioned scholarly contributions represent only the beginning of the intensive exploration that is needed to understand how social class influences work-based transitions. With some notable exceptions within the counseling field (e.g., Brown et al., 1996; Fouad & Brown, 2000; Savickas, 1999; Super, 1957), counseling scholars have not devoted much attention to exploring the impact of social class in the career development process. Although social class plays a clear role in determining one's level of educational and occupational attainment (e.g., Hotchkiss & Borow, 1996; McDonough, 1997; Sennett & Cobb, 1972), a considerable number of questions exist about how social class actually influences work-based transitions (Fouad & Brown, 2000). In fact, a particularly poignant criticism of career development in the latter half of the 20th century has been the relative neglect of the poor and the working class in comparison with the concerns of middle-class and wealthy individuals (Helms & Cook, 1999; Richardson, 1993). Moreover, although the research literature from the sociology of work has provided intriguing macrolevel theoretical debates about how social class attenuates the upward mobility of working-class youth (e.g., McDonough, 1997; Sewell & Hauser, 1975; Willis, 1977), counseling practitioners are left with little specific knowledge about how membership in a particular social class would affect decision-making skills, exploratory attitudes, relational resources, and other key elements of adaptive career development (cf. Brown et al., 1996).

Given the lack of knowledge about how social class functions in the work domain, we have initiated an exploratory, discovery-oriented project designed to develop inferences to foster subsequent research. The present study adds to the existing knowledge base by giving voice to young adults as they reflect on their school-to-work transition process, thereby providing a rare glimpse into the complex ways in which social class may influence a challenging vocational task. In our view, the moral consequences of ignoring the experiences of less affluent individuals in our field are enormous; therefore, we believe that it is critical to address the concerns of all individuals who work. To help facilitate the nec-

essary scholarship for a truly inclusive psychology of work (cf. Richardson, 1993), we have initiated this project to map the terrain of the complex ways in which social class influences the vocational lives of working-class and poor young adults.

We have specifically chosen to examine how social class influences the developmental transition from school to work. Blustein, Juntunen, and Worthington (2000), in a review of the literature, have suggested that social class seems to be most pernicious during the life space known as the school-to-work (STW) transition. This transition marks the period in which an individual moves from the world of education into the world of work. The STW transition reflects a key developmental transition into adulthood, particularly for working-class and poor individuals (Worthington & Juntunen, 1997). Hotchkiss and Borow (1996) argued that future vocational outcomes are influenced by the degree of success individuals experience as they transition from school to work. Thus, in order to understand how counselors may be able to help individuals from less affluent backgrounds to successfully transition into the world of work, researchers need to understand fully how social class influences vocational decisions and outcomes from the perspective of working-class and poor individuals.

Our thinking has been influenced by a consideration of the role that work plays in people's lives (Richardson, 1993; Savickas, 1995) and how the work role is differentially experienced across diverse social classes. As articulated by Richardson, the study of careers may reflect a bias that is not relevant to the lives of the poor and the working class. As such, this study intends to explore the role of work in a sample of young adults from the poor and the working class, who have essentially been the "forgotten half" in the career development arena (Blustein, 2001; Blustein et al., 2000; William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family, and Citizenship, 1988). Our position is that youth moving from high school directly into the work force are struggling with perhaps the most challenging developmental tasks of their lives while also facing a work context that is undergoing enormous and rapid transformations (Marshall & Tucker, 1992). As opposed to the youth of earlier investigations (see Savickas, 1999, for a review of studies conducted on social class prior to World War II), high school graduates who are not planning to attend college face a far more complex and demanding work environment that may function to further reinforce class boundaries (Reich, 1991; Wilson, 1996). Therefore, the study of social class within a population of young adults who have either not started college or dropped out of college would provide an informative glimpse into a world where differences in social class may affect the entire fabric of the career development process. We have elected to study a sample of young adults who have started from diverse social-class backgrounds but who have experienced a relatively similar work-based transition from school to the world of work. By keeping the current vocational status relatively constant, we have a unique opportunity to explore how diverse backgrounds may have differentially influenced the participants' experience of their past, present, and future with respect to education and work.

Consistent with previous scholarship (Brown et al., 1996; Krieger, Williams, & Moss, 1997), we are defining social class in terms of an interval-level index of socioeconomic status (the Nakao-Treas Socioeconomic Index [SEI]; Nakao & Treas, 1994). Specifically, we have elected to use parental occupation as an operational definition of social class (cf. Gorman, 1998; Hotchkiss

& Borow, 1996). The rationale for using parental occupational status reflects an intentional decision to explore how social class may have influenced the starting points of the participants' educational and career development.

Building on the recent trend toward discovery-oriented research in vocational and counseling psychology (Blustein, Phillips, Jobin-Davis, Finkelberg, & Roarke, 1997; Morrow & Smith, 2000), we sought to create inferences about the ways in which social class influences how youth approach and resolve developmental challenges in their transitions to work roles. In sum, the goals of this exploratory study are twofold: First, we intended to develop inferences about the impact of social class on the STW transition of this population. Second, we sought to provide a voice to the "forgotten half" of working-class young adults who are in the midst of their STW transition or who have already made the transition to work.

Method

The study design consisted of an in-depth analysis of a portion of narrative text that was initially collected for a qualitative study on the STW transition (Blustein et al., 1997). Given that the original narrative text gathered in Blustein et al. provided extensive narratives from a diverse cross section of respondents who described, often in great depth, their experiences in negotiating their STW transition, we believed that a subset of these data would be highly informative in understanding the role of social class in vocational behavior. The Blustein et al. study was devoted to developing hypotheses about the nature of the STW transition for working-class young adults, with a particular focus on identifying plausible antecedent conditions of an adaptive transition. Although social class was not directly examined in the Blustein et al. investigation, the participants were from diverse backgrounds with respect to social class in their families of origin, yet they were in relatively circumscribed occupations at the time of the interview. Their current jobs could be broadly classified as working-class occupations (e.g., full-time supermarket clerks/cashiers, security guards, factory workers). As such, this particular sample allowed us to examine the role of social class without the influence of a college degree, which might obscure the subtle social influences that operate in the STW transition process. Furthermore, the interview protocol invited participants to discuss the role that obstacles and barriers played in their work lives; this and other questions allowed space for participants to discuss class-related issues they had experienced.

The methodological framework was based on an integration of qualitative methods derived from consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997), naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The influence of social class was determined from a stratification of a smaller cohort of the Blustein et al. sample into two groups, each drawn from the top third and bottom third of socioeconomic class cohorts (determined by the participants' parents' occupations). The overall approach to the narrative data was based on our intention to develop inferences from the most common themes that emerged in our analysis of the participants' responses. Once we categorized our observations into coherent themes, we then compared the two cohorts, which facilitated the development of inferences about the role of social class in the STW transition.

Participants

The participants were selected from a larger data set (detailed in Blustein et al., 1997), which consisted of 45 employed men and women. The sample for this investigation consisted of 10 men and 10 women stratified by socioeconomic status and gender. We selected 20 participants to comprise two cohorts of 10 participants each—a cohort of participants from middle

to upper level social classes and a cohort of participants from the lower third of social classes. First, a tripartite split of participants from the top and bottom cohorts was conducted, followed by random selection of 5 male and 5 female participants within each socioeconomic group.

The 20 participants in our study included 16 European Americans, 3 African Americans, and 1 Hispanic participant. This ethnic and racial proportion, although inconsistent with much of the United States, is characteristic of the region where the study was initiated. The sample of participants from the higher level of social class backgrounds had a mean age of 21.9 years, a homogenous ethnic composition (all European American), and had graduated or dropped out of high school an average of 3.99 years prior to the date of the interview. The sample of participants from the lower level of social class backgrounds had a mean age of 22.6 years, an ethnic composition that included the four aforementioned individuals of color, and had graduated or dropped out of high school an average of 3.60 years prior to the date of the interview. (The disproportionate ethnic composition of these two samples was unavoidable, given the complex connection between race and class and the homogenous nature of the community in which the data were collected; this point is discussed later in this article.) In order to ensure that the participants were relatively homogenous with respect to their current social class, we excluded participants from the study if they were currently attending college full-time and/or had graduated from a 4-year college. As such, our sample consisted of young adults who were not full-time students at the time of the interview and who had not graduated from a 2-year or 4-year college. However, some of the participants were attending a community college on a part-time basis or may have attended a 4-year college without graduating.

Procedures

All of the participants in the data set were recruited through local employers in a moderate-sized northeastern city in the United States who agreed to allow their employees to participate in a semistructured interview during work hours. Once permission was obtained through employers, participants were recruited by letters and flyers from a large urban hospital, two supermarket chains, two department stores, a bottling company, a factory, and a car wash chain. Participation was voluntary and the interviews were kept confidential. The participants were not financially compensated for their involvement in the interviews, but were granted some paid time away from their job duties. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed by the original Blustein et al. (1997) research team.

Instruments

Demographic information. The participants completed a questionnaire developed to obtain information regarding their age, gender, race/ethnicity, years out of high school, parental occupation, employment and training history, and future plans.

Socioeconomic status (SES). To examine the effects of social-class background on the STW transitions of these young adults, we used parental socioeconomic status to classify participants. Our decision to use parental SES was based on the fact that these young persons were undifferentiated in the current socioeconomic status of their occupations. However, consistent with considerable scholarship (e.g., Brown et al., 1996; Rossides, 1990; Sewell & Hauser, 1975), the social class of their parents is likely to have influenced the participants across educational and vocational domains, although the precise nature of this influence is still not well understood.

To determine the SES of the participants, the Nakao-Treas SEI (Nakao & Treas, 1994) was used to approximate the participant's socioeconomic background. This index is based on ratings of occupational characteristics of 1980 U.S. Census codes, ranging from 17 (e.g., textile sewing machine operator) to 97 (e.g., physician). Participants' parental occupations were coded according to the SEI. The higher score reported from either parent

determined the participant's SEI. If participants reported a parental occupation that was not listed in the Nakao–Treas SEI, consensual judgments (cf. Hill et al., 1997) were made about the participants' SEI in conjunction with David L. Blustein. In the present study, a tripartite split according to SEI was generated to create meaningful cohorts of the top and bottom third of the sample. Thus, we established two cohorts: one group comprising participants from the lower socioeconomic status (LSES) and the other group comprising participants from the higher socioeconomic status (HSES). In this sample, the SEI ranged from 26 to 76 ($M = 50.35$, $SD = 20.23$), with a mean of 69.6 for the participants in the higher tripartite split and 31.1 for the lower tripartite split. Participants' SEIs in the lower tripartite ranged from 26 to 37, with the parents reporting such occupations as truck driver, welder, and construction worker. The SEIs of participants in the upper tripartite ranged from 63 to 76, including occupations such as small business owner, nurse, and restaurant owner.

Interview. The interview guide was developed on the basis of relevant literature from career development and the STW transition (Jordaan & Heyde, 1979; Marshall & Tucker, 1992; Super, 1957; Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996; Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1986) as well as grounded-theory research methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The semi-structured questions, which dominated the interview protocol, were initially general in their focus; however, prompts were used to help the participants more clearly understand the nature of the question. The semi-structured questions addressed such issues as the nature of the participants' support from family members, teachers, counselors, and co-workers or supervisors. The interview protocol also focused on such issues as educational and vocational decision making, the development of vocational interests, the nature of exploratory activities, future orientation and planfulness, the availability of role models, perceived educational skills and achievements, the participants' experiences at work, and the participants' overall degree of life and job satisfaction. We also asked participants to tell their own story about how they moved from school to work in order to encourage the participants to illuminate aspects of their work narratives not assessed by the interview guide. The interview protocol was relatively consistent during the data collection, with minor modifications as the interview team provided critical feedback about the order and wording of the questions.

Data Analysis

The research team for this study consisted of all of the coauthors of this article, four judges and two auditors. The team included four men and two women who generally endorsed a developmental–contextual perspective of vocational behavior (Super et al., 1996; Vondracek et al., 1986). Other theoretical influences among team members included postmodern theory (e.g., Richardson, 1993; Savickas, 1995), relational perspectives (e.g., Blustein, Prezioso, & Schultheiss, 1995; Flum, 2001), and sociologically oriented analyses of work and career (e.g., Wilson, 1996).

We used two teams, consisting of two judges per team, in the analysis of the narratives. To serve as a validity check and to control for researcher bias, one of the teams was initially unaware of the social class of the participants, whereas the other judge cohort was aware of their social class. The team that was unaware of the social class of the participants was able to determine the socioeconomic background accurately for 70% of the sample, thereby underscoring the degree to which social class pervades the work-based discourse of young adults. The judges were instructed to read the narratives and to consider major thematic domains within the data set, which is consistent with emerging convention within qualitative inquiry (Hill et al., 1997; Morrow & Smith, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The first phase of data analysis involved 10 cases, with 5 of the participants from the upper third of the socioeconomic distribution and the other 5 cases consisting of participants from the lower third of the socioeconomic distribution.

The judges used the coding system from the Blustein et al. (1997) study to provide an initial organizing function. The coding system included the

following categories: life satisfaction, job satisfaction; exploration; decision making; experiences of school and work; and resources and barriers in relational, educational, and job-related domains. This coding system was developed through an in-depth analysis of a small set of transcripts and was further revised as the research team reviewed the entire data set. The final coding system in the Blustein et al. study consisted of major categories that were broken down into more detailed subcategories. Because the goals of this study were so dramatically different from the Blustein et al. (1997) project, the judges in the present study developed a different means of organizing the narrative data. Specifically, we used the Blustein et al. coding system to facilitate our review of the narratives. Once we reviewed an initial set of transcripts, the team convened to generate a condensed list of major categories that could serve to organize subsequent analyses. These categories were constructed primarily from a review of the narratives in light of our goals in this project. This portion of the analysis, which culminated in an organizing structure of five general categories (detailed in the Results section), provided a coherent framework for the exploration of the role of social class in the STW transition.

Following the development of the thematic framework, each judge constructed a brief synopsis for each participant with the goal of transforming the general categories to more coherent inferences. The synopsis focused on exploring how social class may have influenced the participants' STW transition. Once we obtained summaries about each participant, both teams of judges then met with David L. Blustein to compare, discuss, and integrate their results into an initial set of inferences. On the basis of the CQR method (Hill et al., 1997), discrepancies were resolved by discussion among the judges until a consensus was reached. On a few occasions, Blustein resolved discrepancies on which the judges could not agree.

The second phase of analysis continued with both teams of judges reading the remaining 10 narratives from the lower and upper social-class cohorts. Data analysis continued in the same manner as before, with the exception that both of the teams were aware of the social class of the remainder of the participant narratives. At this juncture, the previous inferences were revised and additional inferences were generated from the next round of narratives. Once new inferences were developed, the judges reread the entire set of 20 narratives to confirm or disconfirm each inference, culminating in the development of inferences based on all 20 transcripts. The role of social class was a key consideration in the construction of these inferences and the consensual decision-making process. For example, we compared how the participants from the two cohorts fared with respect to various internal and external resources and barriers; this comparison allowed us then to infuse the role of social class into each proposition.

Following the guidelines detailed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Hill et al. (1997), the auditors then reviewed the data analysis procedures and results to verify the validity of the inferences. The auditors met with the judges and David L. Blustein to review their findings, which generally verified the inferences generated by the research team. The auditors' feedback was discussed in two larger meetings, which resulted in minor modifications of the inferences by the judges. The final conceptual framework generated from the data is discussed in the Results section in conjunction with illustrative vignettes from the narratives. In addition, we report the percentage of cases within each sample wherein we found support for a given inference.

Results

To organize the findings, we established the following five categories of relevant vocational, educational, and relational aspects of the participants' lives:

Functions of Work: This category reflects the diverse ways in which the participants viewed the functions and outcomes of work in their lives.

Self-Concept Crystallization and Implementation: This category represents variations in how the participants manifested their self-concept in the vocational domain.

Educational Resources and Barriers: This category reflects the participants' experiences of educational resources and barriers.

Relational Resources: This category describes the participants' level of emotional and instrumental support as well as their experience of relational disruptions.

Career Adaptability: This category represents the participants' attitudes and knowledge about exploration and career planning.

To examine the disparity that existed between the two social-class groups, we offer examples from participant narratives first and then present illustrative narratives from the LSES participants.

Functions of Work

The participants from the LSES group viewed the functions of work in relatively singular terms, with a particular focus on financial survival. In contrast, participants from the HSES group tended to name other reasons, besides money, for working. LSES participants viewed work in terms of survival—work was undertaken to pay bills or to obtain other material necessities. On the other hand, HSES participants, although also mentioning survival, offered additional reasons for working, ranging from personal satisfaction, enjoyment, and performing to the best of one's ability.

The narrative data from the HSES cohort generally conveyed a view of work that included survival but often encompassed other psychological functions. For example, Participant #33 defined career success as follows: "Being at a job and doing that job to the best of my ability. Um, . . . [being] in the career field that I want and just doing that to the best of my ability. That to me would be successful."

Another HSES participant (#27) identified reasons for working in terms of satisfaction. He stated, "I think you could earn a lot of money in a job . . . and everything; you're not going to be happy so it's like not really even worth it. [I]f you have a job that you enjoy doing, like you're not getting up in the morning going, 'Oh my gosh, I have to go in there again,' you know, like, constantly everyday. So as long as you're satisfied, that would be the main thing." HSES Participant #33 defined reasons for working as "interest in what I do. I like to come to work and like what I'm doing. Um, that's what I get the most out of."

Although financial considerations were important, the HSES cohort generally downplayed its significance. For example, Participant #41 asserted, "Like every person, the more the merrier, but it's [money] not real important." Participant #12 echoed these sentiments by noting, "Money just is not that important. I'd rather be happy with what I'm doing, you know, and able to move forward." Participant #35 also agreed, "If you are happy with what you're doing. It's not necessarily how much you make, it's, like, whether you like doing it or not. That's successful to me."

In contrast, the LSES participants viewed reasons for working almost exclusively in terms of survival—receiving money and meeting basic needs. When Participant #38 was asked to describe the importance of money, he replied, "Very [important]. It's the only way you're going to survive. Can't go out and live off the land nowadays." This same participant viewed career success solely in terms of money. He stated, "I guess money, it's kind of shallow, but money had to be a big part of it." Participant #26

echoed these sentiments when he expressed, "Money is important. . . . It's just that's why I want to get out of here and make some money. I don't care what it is. I'll do anything to make some money." Other participants in the LSES cohort defined reasons for working in terms of providing for their children and acquiring material objects.

The results are summarized in the following inference:

Young HSES adults tended to report a diverse array of reasons for working (e.g., personal satisfaction, or personal meaning), whereas their LSES peers viewed reasons for work primarily in terms of economic survival. (Percentages of inference support: HSES = 90%, LSES = 90%)

Self-Concept Crystallization and Implementation

Another major finding is that the extent to which the participants were able to implement their self-concepts in the world of work differed substantively in relation to their social class. As the examples that follow convey, most of the HSES individuals were able to implement their self-concepts in their work; however, none of the LSES individuals were able to do so at this point in their work lives. Although many of the HSES individuals had not currently reached their career goals, several of them were performing work that was related to their vocational aspirations. The following narratives from the HSES participants best illustrate these points:

Participant #33 reported, "I've wanted to be a cop since I was 12." She expressed that although she had not yet attained her goal of becoming a police officer, she was currently working as a security guard, performing work that was related to her vocational goal. She stated, "What I'm trying to do is get into police work, and this is very similar to that. . . . We have to go to court like a police officer would for incidents; um, it is very much like a police job." Similarly, Participant #37, who was working as a nurse's assistant, asserted, "I am going back to school again, and I am going into nursing. . . . It's what I want to do."

In contrast, participants from the LSES cohort were not as successful in obtaining work that was related to their aspirations and interests. When referring to her current employment, Participant #43 expressed, "I don't like the current job I have. I don't like working in the hospital. I'd like to work in an office, filing or data entry."

One of the most prevalent reasons reported by the participants of both socioeconomic backgrounds for not being able to implement their self-concepts in their current work was a lack of education needed to achieve their goals. For example, Participant #5 stated, "It's not what I want to do. I'm looking for another job, you know. I have been here for 3 years, but since I haven't gone to college I'm having trouble finding a good job." When asked what this participant would need to succeed in the world of work, she expressed, "Somebody to at least give me a chance to try. Um, places won't let me even try because I don't have the college education."

The participants from both socioeconomic backgrounds also differed in the likelihood that they were involved in activities that would help in achieving their vocational goals. The narratives suggested that most of the individuals from the HSES background were currently involved in some kind of training, education, or employment directed toward attaining their career goals. These

participants tended to have a clearer sense of their career goals and to be aware of what they needed to do to achieve them. The following narrative from a participant from an HSES background best illustrates this point: Participant #27, a male security officer in an urban hospital, who would like to pursue either civil engineering or medicine, stated, "I'm thinking about going back [to college]. I put in applications to (a state university in the Northeast)."

On the other hand, only a few participants from the LSES background were involved in intentional action directed toward reaching their career goals. Several of these participants acknowledged wanting to initiate some future planning and exploration but identified barriers (e.g., money, inadequate educational resources) that stood in their way. The following examples illustrate some of the obstacles that the LSES individuals faced in implementing their vocational goals:

When asked what she would need to be able to succeed in the world of work, participant #7 stated, "Money. I mean I'm sure if I applied for loans or grants I would have no problem. I'm just worried about cutting down my work hours and going to school and trying to maintain a house like that. Money is my only obstacle." Participant #40 reported that he would like to be a state trooper and was well aware of the actions that he needed to engage in to achieve his goal. He stated, "I know to become a state trooper you gotta have a high score in the GED. And also if you want to become a state trooper, you gotta go to college for some credits." However, he expressed the following reservations: "I don't know how, but I just gotta put my mind on the books. I don't know how people can do it, they just go to school and they can read. . . . I can do it, but it's the part of reading, it's just, then it comes to a test and I don't remember what I read."

The following inferences summarize our observations about the role of social class in the self-concept crystallization and implementation process:

1. Young adults from HSES backgrounds were able to manifest their self-concepts (e.g., interests, goals, and aspirations) in the world of work (referring to work-based experiences), whereas individuals from LSES backgrounds were less likely to manifest their self-concepts in the world of work. (Percentages of inference support: HSES = 60%, LSES = 100%)

2. Young HSES adults were able to more effectively engage in action toward achieving their vocational goals (e.g., current job, training, or education), whereas young adults from LSES backgrounds seemed to struggle with this task. (Percentages of inference support: HSES = 90%, LSES = 60%)

Educational Resources and Barriers (Internal and External)

Internal resources and barriers. The variability in the narratives with respect to internal educational resources and barriers revealed a highly informative perspective on the influence of social class in the STW process. In short, we found no major differences between the HSES and LSES cohorts in terms of internal educational resources (e.g., evident cognitive ability, sufficient motivation, endurance, and engagement with school) and internal educational barriers (e.g., lack of school engagement, motivation, and deficits in basic skills).

In terms of internal barriers, Participant #12, from the HSES cohort, described a "lack of interest, um, when I was younger, lack

of, just really applying myself, motivation. I just . . . I could have done a lot better. . . . I simply didn't apply myself." In contrast, the accounting ability and motivation of Participant #41, of the HSES cohort, reflects the manifestation of internal educational resources. He stated, "My accounting teacher was like, you know, I would really like you to go to UIO, which . . . was a contest between like all the area schools, and she wanted to know if I would go for the accounting. . . . And they give us our scores back. I think the highest was like, uh, the highest, you know, perfect score was like 410 I guess, and I had a 375."

The statements of Participant #1, from the LSES cohort, suggests an engagement and interest in education: "I liked high school. . . . I looked forward to going. It made me do good. And if I didn't understand something, I always waited and stayed after school." Conversely, Participant #26, of the LSES cohort, gave the following example of internal educational barriers in reference to a lack of commitment to school: "I could have done a lot better; I didn't put myself to it. Yeah. I could have done a lot better. I was just hangin' out and gettin' by, like everyone else."

The following inferences summarize our results with respect to internal resources and internal barriers:

1. Young adults experienced relatively similar internal educational resources (e.g., cognitive ability, sufficient motivation, endurance, and engagement with school) across lower and higher levels of socioeconomic status. (Percentages of inference support: HSES = 60%, LSES = 50%)

2. Young adults experienced relatively similar internal educational barriers (e.g., lack of school engagement, motivation, and deficits in basic skills) across lower and higher levels of socioeconomic status. (Percentages of inference support: HSES = 60%, LSES = 70%)

External resources and barriers. The way in which social class seemed to impact the external educational systems of these participants was somewhat less overt, yet the narratives did point to some notable differences that can be linked to differences in the socioeconomic status of the participants' parents. In general, the greater resources of the HSES participants' schools and the diminished resources of the LSES participants' schools characterized the difference between the two cohorts.

The HSES participants seemed to be afforded greater access to vocationally and personally salient resources within their educational contexts. For example, Participant #27 characterized his school context as follows: "It's a really good school for that; they have computers for all the colleges and everything. They have books galore. They have a huge guidance section." Participant #12 described her school guidance office as follows: "In high school, uh, we had a really good guidance counselor, um, she was always there if we ever needed anything. . . . We always, we had those, we had job fairs at school all the time, which were nice, um, they'd have people from all different fields come in. . . . They were real in-depth about jobs and stuff." Finally, Participant #33 described her experience in guidance as "very helpful. I used to have to take, answer questions, and they'd tell you what kind of fields you'd be good at, like, according to your personality."

The LSES participants also described their school as having a guidance office and other resources, but the participants described these services and the quality of these services as being less available and helpful in comparison to the affordances of the HSES schools. For example, although Participant #40, a

LSES participant, found his Job Corps counselor to be helpful, he was forced to drop out of high school because of the threat of violence.

The experiences of guidance by the LSES participants were qualitatively different than the experiences of the HSES cohort. Participant #26 described the guidance office at his school as “not the best in the world. The guidance counselor had so many kids that they just pushed you, you were a number. . . . They kind of pushed me out of there very fast, they pushed everyone out.” Participant #43 offered, “I had a guidance counselor. I went to see her. I wasn’t really going to school. I was just going to change classes, not to talk about a career. . . . No, she didn’t help me.”

In the barriers domain, both cohorts described external educational barriers to their goals. However, the LSES cohort seemed to face more prominent barriers than did the HSES cohort. That is, the HSES class cohort was not devoid of barriers, but the frequency and severity of their barriers were less overt and influential than those of the LSES cohort. For example, the external barriers of the HSES cohort were generally regarding tuition for college. Participant #27, in addition to being the first member of his family to attend college, also described that his parents “didn’t set aside any money for us [to attend college]. So, we’re all pretty much screwed in that department.” Another relevant comment by Participant #41 indicated that “I need . . . to get started—you know, the money for school. That’s what I need: other than that, I got everything else I need.”

In contrast, the barriers of the LSES cohort were more pervasive and less easily remedied. Participant #26 described barriers to including college in his aspirations in that his parents could not help him with this decision. He stated, “See they’re [parents] not really the most book-smart people in the whole world, so they don’t know about a lot of college-type things.” Participant #40 stated that he faced many external barriers to his goals. For example, he described barriers his family placed to his educational objectives as follows: “My father, he grew up in a rough life like that. So he was telling me to ‘drop out and get to work—you ain’t gonna do nothing in school anyways.’” In addition, he faced barriers to attending school: “I kept going to school, but they was trying to stab me, then they tried to pull a gun on me in my own building. . . . I was still wanting to go to school, you know, I said let me just not go to school, ’cause one of these days I’m gonna get stabbed or something.” Similarly, Participant #43 was forced to drop out of school to help her family financially: “I just stopped going to school. I just wanted to get a job to help my mother out with the bills and stuff like that. [I] wanted to work.”

These narratives, when considered collectively, suggest the following inferences:

1. Young adults from HSES backgrounds reported a context characterized by more external educational resources, whereas their LSES counterparts described a context characterized by fewer external educational resources in their STW transition. (Percentages of inference support: HSES = 90%, LSES = 50%)
2. Young adults from HSES backgrounds reported a context characterized by fewer educational external barriers, whereas their LSES counterparts described a context characterized by more educational barriers in their STW transition. (Percentages of inference support: HSES = 50%, LSES = 90%)

Relational Resources

Parental support. The availability and function of relational resources played a major role in the transition from school to work for all participants in our sample. Many participants from HSES backgrounds received instrumental and agentic help regarding career decision making and planning. These participants were more likely to have parents who were not only supportive and encouraged exploration but were also instrumental in their career planning. In addition, these participants had other relational resources that were encouraging of the career development process.

In contrast, participants from LSES backgrounds did not receive substantive instrumental help from parents, beyond encouragement or support, regarding career exploration or obtaining information about career-related opportunities. Job leads that LSES participants received from their parents tended to be unrelated to their career interests or aspirations. These job leads were more likely to help participants obtain unskilled, low-level jobs (e.g., cashier at a grocery store, car wash employee). When LSES participants did have supportive relationships in their lives, these individuals were not instrumental in offering career planning or decision-making advice. Thus, LSES participants often made decisions on their own regarding their education and careers.

The following narratives culled from the HSES cohort furnished an informative illustration of the major relational themes. Participant #9, who received a job and continued training at his father’s printing business, illustrated this finding. He stated, “When I was growing up, they always encouraged me to work.” His parents also encouraged his other interests: “They just encouraged me, whatever I wanted to do, to pursue it or keep pursuing it.” This participant also talked with his parents extensively throughout high school about his education and career plans: “My parents helped me more than anybody.” Along with instrumental help from his parents, this participant also had other people in his life (e.g., his brother, and his wife) with whom he discussed his interests and received guidance.

Participant #33 described the valuable support she received from her parents in pursuing a career path not typical for women. When asked how helpful her parents have been in her career decision making, she stated, “Very [helpful]. . . . I’ve wanted to be a cop since I was 12, and they never discouraged me. And, um, when I was 16, they helped me get into a post and explore a post with the police department. . . . They always encouraged me in what I want to do.” For this participant, her teachers and her boyfriend also encouraged and helped her to pursue her interests and career choice. Other participants from the HSES cohort received instrumental help from parents by obtaining job leads that were specific to their career interest or choice. In particular, Participant #37 received a job lead from her mother, who worked as a nurse in the local hospital. This participant also viewed her mother as a role model and stated that her mother “teaches me different things.”

In contrast, the remarks from LSES participants demonstrated the disparity that existed among their relational resources. Participant #1 highlighted how helpful her parents were in the career decision-making process, as follows: “My mother, not really. She just goes with the flow. If I tell her something she’s like, “OK, that’s good, even if she sees me doing something bad, well not bad but, like, if she doesn’t approve of or think it’s going to work, she

won't say it." This participant did not report any other relational resources in her life that helped her with career decision making and planning. She was currently working to support herself and her baby as a cashier in a grocery store. Participant #7 received jobs through her family and friends at family restaurants or at a grocery store. These jobs, however, were not related to her interest in working with computers. When asked about how her parents helped her with career decision making, she stated, "They just tell me to make my own decisions." Although she reported that she is close to her mother and boyfriend, her parents did not instrumentally support her in decision making about education and work.

Moreover, our findings revealed that parents who have less economic resources and education had difficulty imparting essential or necessary knowledge regarding educational and career pathways to their children that could have helped them in the career planning process. Participant #26, who attempted to engage his parents in discussions about his education and career plans, explained that his parents are "hard workers and they are always telling me things, but they haven't pursued it or done anything about it [college]. . . . They talk to me about it, but they haven't really sat down, just me and them, and asked me what they really want me to do." Participant #38 also highlighted this finding by stating that if he "had a family that had actually had a real success in college [his parents did not attend college] that the transition would have been a lot better."

Relational disruptions. Many LSES participants experienced relational disruptions compared with participants from the HSES cohort. Participants from LSES backgrounds were also more likely to have difficult STW transitions (e.g., undefined goals or not engaged in action toward goals). In addition, the majority of the participants from LSES backgrounds did not have other relational resources to compensate for the disruptions in their interpersonal relationships.

In looking at participants from the HSES background, few experienced a relational disruption that influenced their STW transition. Participants from more economically advantaged contexts either had no evidence of relational disruptions or had experienced relational disruptions and were able to overcome these difficulties. For example, Participant #12 moved around a lot because of her father's job. After she graduated from high school, she moved across-country after she was engaged because her fiancé was in the military. This move was a strain on her personal relationships and negatively impacted her STW transition. She stated, "It didn't work for me, but . . . um . . . doing that so soon after graduation." However, she was able to reflect on this experience as positive and growth-enhancing: "It seemed awful at the time, but now I am glad it happened because I learned. I mean, I learned the hard way, but I learned quicker than if I'd been protected." Participant #35, who experienced the death of his father when he was young, explained that he was also not very close with his mother and sister: "We don't really talk too much. We kinda keep to ourselves." Although he did not describe any relational resources, except for his girlfriend, this participant had strong interests in welding and attempted to integrate his interests into his work.

In contrast, participants from the LSES cohort experienced more relational disruptions as well as difficulties in the transition from school to work. Participant #26, for example, described his difficult STW transition characterized by his many arguments between

his parents. This participant felt overloaded and did not do well in school, which resulted in his dropping out of college. He stated, "Anytime I think about those things I think about that year. Parents fighting a lot, quitting school, yeah it was crazy. I just left home 2 months ago, but I lived in school when this was going on. So I really would have been better off going away. I would have been better off on my own."

Economic conditions also precipitated relational difficulties for some participants. For example, Participant #38 described how his family moved around because his father lost his job right after the participant graduated from high school, which prompted relational disruptions within the family. He expressed, "We had family troubles, ya know my father lost his job and that kind of thing. . . ." This participant wanted to go to college, but he stated, "My father did lose his job. If he had kept that job, we probably would have been a lot better off." Similarly, Participant #40 stated, "When I was growing up, my mother, she kept just moving around. And I got left back in the second grade. She was just moving around too much. I missed school for a half a year. Then she was moving to Puerto Rico. Then I was in the dumbest class. Then I got into an A student. Then she came and just took me out of school. She was doing whatever she wanted. She wasn't thinking about us that much." He dropped out of school when he was 15 because "it was like the hang-out was in me already." He further stated that this experience "bothered me a lot. Then I had to stay out of school for a certain amount of years, which learned a lot on the streets." This participant also reported that he did not receive any instrumental help from his parents in the career planning process, and was currently working as a janitor with aspirations to become either a police officer or electrician. While a few LSES participants did not experience major relational disruptions, these participants did experience some level of relational difficulties that appeared to impact their choice of jobs, identifying or expressing their self-concept, and educational attainment (e.g., dropping out of school).

The following inferences summarize our findings about the role relational resources played in our participants' STW transition:

1. Young HSES adults tended to report a context characterized by instrumental and agentic help from parents (e.g., job leads, specific ideas about where to receive training, and advice about vocational options), whereas their LSES counterparts tended to report a context characterized by the absence of instrumental and agentic help from parents. (Percentages of inference support: HSES = 60%, LSES = 90%)

2. Young HSES adults tended to report more available relational resources in their lives, allowing them to adapt to relational disruptions; in contrast, young LSES adults were more likely to experience relational disruptions as well as struggle with their STW transition. (Percentage of inference support: HSES = 50%, no evidence of relational disruptions = 40%; LSES = 70%, no evidence of relational disruptions = 30%)

Career Adaptability (Exploration and Planfulness)

This section reviews the interrelated concepts of exploration and planfulness. Taken together, these factors are presented under the rubric of *career adaptability*, a term developed by Super in describing the optimal array of attitudes and behaviors needed to resolve career development tasks (Super et al., 1996). These nar-

ratives provide some evidence that there is division along social-class lines with respect to career adaptability.

Career exploration. The narrative data suggest that individuals from the HSES cohort engaged in more systematic career exploration than their counterparts in the LSES cohort. (In this study, *career exploration* refers to the breadth and/or depth of self-exploration and the exploration of one's educational and vocational context [Blustein, 1997].) For example, Participant #33, who came from an HSES background, expressed interest in becoming a police officer from the age of 12. Supported by her parents, she engaged in extracurricular activities, which further expanded her interests in policing. She reported, "Most what I did out of school was involved with the police department. So it wasn't really subjects, it was just learning different aspects . . . dispatching, learning how to use the radio in the police cars, those types of things are interesting to me, you know? Going to accident calls and how to reconstruct accidents. Those are the types of things that I really liked."

Participant #9, who expressed interest in construction and currently makes stamps and engraves for his father's printing business, had many opportunities when he was in high school to explore different career options and interests. He stated, "Through high school we had a lot of exposure. Basically, 11th grade, you're supposed to pick out what we are going to. A lot of people don't know. And then, I pursued it through college and then left it. Exposure to different jobs, you get a lot of exposure in high school. And then obviously in college you have to pick what you think you want to do."

The narrative data from the LSES cohort did provide some evidence of exploration, but it lacked the breadth and/or depth reported by participants in the HSES cohort. For example, Participant #3 provided a typical response. He reported an interest in dental hygiene because he liked science and biology and eventually wanted to attend school to become an orthopedic surgeon. However, there was no evidence in the narrative data that suggested that this participant explored this field in any manner. Indeed, he was uncertain about going to college and took a year off, which he characterized as a big mistake. He asserted, "But, coming out of high school and going to college, I never really had anyone to tell me to go; everyone just assumed I would. No one ever said, 'Are you going to college?' I was really scared, I was afraid. I was so afraid. The last week of my senior year in high school was horrible. . . . It was very hard for me because I didn't know what I wanted to do."

Career planfulness. Another general trend that emerged from the data pertained to the concept of future-oriented planning. (Consistent with life-span, life-space theory [e.g., Super et al., 1996], *planfulness* in this study is defined by the careful weighing of options in a manner that embraces both short-term and long-term future perspectives.) Generally, HSES participants engaged in future-oriented planning or, at the very least, had some idea that planning was an important aspect in their transition from school to work. This was in sharp contrast to many of the LSES participants who did not seem to engage in significant future planning. The following vignettes from the HSES cohort illustrate this point aptly:

For Participant #11, a receptionist with aspirations to be an executive secretary for the president of a large corporation, she stated that she is planning for "retirement. I mean I'm concerned

about my retirement, but you have to, I mean, think about that now. I know people who are, like, 25 and not even concerned about that." Similarly, Participant #12, who is planning to go back to school to finish her degree, stated that she plans for the next "10 years . . . because I'm 23 and I just, I don't know, I'd like to see where I am 10 years from now and see. . . . I always think about that, what I'll be doing then." Although all HSES participants were not as forward-thinking about their future as were Participants #11 and #12, many of the participants contemplated a time frame from a few months to a few years in the future regarding their planning for careers and education. Participant #33 expressed the following time perspective: "Typically? Probably 3 months. But you know, careerwise I look forward to, you know, hopefully in 3 years, being in a police department, but in a couple months taking the test and then waiting for the results and seeing what happens then."

Although these cases illustrate how the HSES cohort considered the issue of future-oriented planning, the LSES narratives presented next provide a somewhat different perspective on planfulness. This perspective conveyed a more present-focused orientation in which the participants primarily were concerned with short-term work issues as opposed to long-term career plans. For example, Participant #43 reported, "I really don't plan. I just take it day by day. I can't really plan for something. Tomorrow, you could get hit by a car or something like that, so you just keep going."

Participant #44, similarly, had not undertaken any future-oriented planning and had a very short-term view of the future. "Probably a couple of hours . . . a couple of hours. . . . Probably an hour and a half, something like that, 2 hours." Similarly, Participant #1, who was working in a local grocery store to support her child, stated, "About 3 days. I don't look far ahead. I live for now and deal with the future when it gets here." Participant #38, also from an LSES background, expressed some regret over his lack of planfulness: "If I had . . . if I could go back to school and do it differently, I'd definitely do it differently. . . . It just wasn't planned, you know, it just . . . I had, I wanted to go to school, and I had a goal. . . . If I had a stricter plan. . . . I'd've been at [community college]. . . . This is my third year there, you know. If I had planned it a lot better, I would have been out of there."

Taken together the preceding narrative material is summarized in the following inferences about career adaptability:

1. Young adults from the HSES background reported a greater tendency to engage in self-exploration and environmental exploration as compared with young adults from the LSES background, who were less likely to engage in exploration. (Percentages of inference support: HSES = 80%, LSES = 80%)

2. Young adults from the HSES background were more likely to engage in future-oriented planning as compared with young adults from the LSES background, who tended to plan with a shorter time perspective. (Percentages of inference support: HSES = 80%, LSES = 70%)

Discussion

This study explored the various ways in which social class influenced the experiences of working-class young adults during one of the most critical vocational transitions in their lives. We listened to the voices of individuals who have been at the margins of our scholarly considerations to discover how social class has

impacted their transition from school to work. Indeed, the results of this study suggest that social class has played a pivotal role in this transition, thereby confirming findings identified in both sociology and psychology (e.g., Brown et al., 1996; Willis, 1977; Wilson, 1996). However, in contrast to previous knowledge, these narrative data illustrate in a vivid fashion how social class operates to enhance or hinder the work lives of the participants. Initially, we review each of the five major categories of findings, linking the results to previous theory and research.

The narrative data suggest that social class impacts the way in which working-class young adults make meaning of their vocational lives. Although participants from both socioeconomic groups wanted more from their work lives, differences were observed in their reasons and motivations for performing work. Although participants from the HSES background reported the luxury of working for reasons related to personal satisfaction and meaning, participants from the LSES background indicated that they were working primarily to ensure their economic survival. In contrast to the global notion that work can provide a means of self-concept expression (Super & Sverko, 1995), the results of this investigation suggest that finding meaning in work may be, in part, a function of access to opportunities. Specifically, our findings indicate that these value differences, although overtly residing within individuals, are strongly related to the social and economic context of their life experience.

The way in which young adults construct their work experiences seems to be conceptually linked to their opportunity to express their interests, values, and abilities (i.e., self-concept) in the labor market. Despite the fact that all of our participants were working at the time of the interviews, the participants differed in the likelihood that they were performing work that was related to their vocational aspirations and interests. Participants from the HSES background were more likely to be implementing their interests and goals in their work lives compared with their LSES counterparts. The HSES participants seemed to be afforded more opportunities to implement their self-concept in their world of work, a finding that is consistent with the conclusions reported by Brown et al. (1996) and Layder, Ashton, and Sung (1991). In contrast, the LSES participants did not tend to have jobs that were consistent with their interests and goals. Furthermore, the opportunities afforded the HSES participants seemed to influence the likelihood that they were engaged in some kind of action (e.g., education, training, or employment) that would facilitate their vocational aspirations.

Other ways in which social class may have impacted self-concept implementation and crystallization were by influencing access to external educational resources and by the presence of external educational barriers. Our findings suggest that participants from both class cohorts "come to the table" with similar internal educational resources and barriers (e.g., motivation, and cognitive abilities). This important finding offers an important counterpoint to the cultural production position, which suggests that class differences are manifested in various aspects of the self-concept system (cf. Willis, 1977). Thus, the differences in the vocational trajectories of our participants indicate that social class may function to offer young adults with distinct opportunities to develop and implement their self-concepts. The narrative data suggest that the greater resources of the HSES participants' schools and the fewer resources of the LSES participants' schools may contribute

to the diverse work-related characteristics of each cohort. Indeed, the differences in external resources noted by our participants are consistent with the observations of Kozol (1991), who reported that social class is instrumental in determining access to optimal educational experiences and social connections.

In addition to differences in educational resources, the narrative data reveal that the two cohorts differed in the instrumental help that they received from their parents in career decision making and planning. That is, individuals from HSES backgrounds were more likely to have parents who could provide them with instrumental help (beyond emotional support) during their STW transition compared with their LSES counterparts. Parents of the LSES participants did not seem to have the resources to provide their children with financial support nor the instrumental assistance in accessing opportunities. Once again, social class seems to operate by limiting the amount of resources afforded LSES individuals by the nature of their social and economic contexts (cf. Lerner, 1991; Sewell & Hauser, 1975). The lack of instrumental help that the LSES participants received from their parents resulted in several of them having to engage in career exploration and make work-related decisions on their own. It is critical to note that the findings did not point to a lack of altruistic desire on the part of the parents and friends of the LSES participants. In contrast, the paucity of exposure to the world of work and education for many parents and adults within the life space of the LSES cohort may have attenuated their ability to be helpful to the participants. These findings are consistent with the view that has emerged in recent analyses of poor and working-class communities wherein poverty influences familial and community processes in pervasive and often pernicious ways (cf. Kozol, 1991; Wilson, 1996).

The results regarding relational resources suggest that individuals from the HSES background tended to report greater access to instrumental and emotional support in comparison with individuals from the LSES background. On the surface, these results are consistent with recent research and theory that have implicated adaptive interpersonal relationships as major facilitators of career development (Blustein et al., 1995; O'Brien, 1996). This finding has important implications given that researchers have documented that positive relationships function to enhance the career development of young adults who are transitioning from school to work (e.g., Blustein et al., 2000). However, an in-depth analysis of the present findings reveals a more complex picture. As we noted, the LSES participants tended to report more relational disruptions (e.g., divorce, parental conflict, or emotional distance from one or both parents) than did the cohort of HSES participants. The overall impression that emerges is consistent with recent scholarship on familial and relational supports within poor communities (cf. Kozol, 1991; Patterson, 1998; Wilson, 1996) in that one of the consequences of poverty is often major disruptions within one's relational orbit. Specifically, the lack of access to financial resources, coupled with the difficulties posed by poor housing and inadequate health care, may leave individuals from LSES backgrounds feeling more fragmented emotionally and, at times, overwhelmed by their life circumstances (Kozol, 1991; Lerner, 1991; Patterson, 1998; Wilson, 1996). Thus, our findings, when considered in light of relevant research and theory (e.g., Brown et al., 1996; Sewell & Hauser, 1975), once again underscore the pervasive role of social class in creating a different starting gate for the development and implementation of a meaningful work life.

Finally, career adaptability represents a set of attitudes and behaviors, which shift according to one's life space and life stage, that are associated with optimal resolution of developmental tasks (Super et al., 1996). The results from this investigation suggest that the HSES participants were more likely to engage in exploration and were generally more planful than their LSES counterparts. However, a closer look at the results from this study, when considered collectively, suggests that difficulties in exploration and planfulness may be associated with insufficient educational, relational, and financial resources, which are more prominent among individuals from the LSES cohort. In addition to the noted deficits in important external resources identified earlier in this discussion, social class seems to influence the development of adaptive career behaviors and attitudes. This observation, in light of previous research and theory (e.g., Blustein et al., 2000; Brown et al., 1996), points to the enveloping nature of social class in the STW transition. In other words, these results suggest that the differences in exploration and planfulness are probably the outcome of the unequal access to social, economic, and educational resources.

Taken together, our results point to a number of significant observations about both the STW transition and social class. One of the interesting findings of this investigation is that the participants from both HSES and LSES backgrounds were in relatively similar jobs at analogous points in their developmental trajectories. Yet, individuals from HSES backgrounds seemed to have greater access to opportunity, based in large measure on their access to effective support systems in their relational and educational contexts. Why, then, were these participants in similar types of occupations in their young adulthood? Examining this question in light of our findings suggests different pathways to the relatively unskilled jobs that were characteristic of this sample. Specifically, the participants from the HSES background may have been passing through the vocational world of the "forgotten half" on their way to a more personally and financially satisfying work life, whereas the young adults from the LSES background seemed to be traveling on a one-way journey to a world of unskilled and dead-end jobs. This observation, although consistent with some empirical research on the STW transition (e.g., Klerman & Karoly, 1995), suggests the need for more research on the diverse pathways that individuals pursue in their work lives.

In sum, the picture that emerged from this study is that the nature of the STW transition differs in relatively predictable ways in relation to social class. The results of this investigation confirmed many of the inferences of previous research and theory on the role of social class in vocational behavior (e.g., Brown et al., 1996; Sewell & Hauser, 1975). However, the richness of these qualitative results deepens and enlightens the existing knowledge base. More precisely, individuals from HSES backgrounds tended to express greater interest in the personal meaning of work, higher levels of self-concept crystallization and implementation, greater availability of external educational resources and relational resources, and higher levels of career adaptability than their LSES peers. In addition, we observed that both cohorts of participants seemed to have similar levels of internal educational resources (such as motivation, cognitive abilities, and school engagement). Our results also have indicated that higher levels of socioeconomic status are related to greater access to relational resources, access to the building blocks of adaptive career behaviors and attitudes (cf.

Jordaan & Heyde, 1979), and greater likelihood of being able to implement one's self-concept in the world of work (cf. Layder et al., 1991).

Our findings have provided an informative set of inferences that demonstrate how social class impacts the STW transition for young adults. As the inferences have suggested, social class operates in a manner that either facilitates a more successful STW transition with the help of available resources or limits the career pathways for those individuals who live in a context that is economically impoverished. Despite the fact that all of our participants were working in unskilled, low-paying jobs, the narrative data suggest that access to the world of work is experienced differently by each cohort. The results from this study add a qualitative voice to the modest, but growing, concern in vocational psychology with social class, poverty, and equity (Blustein, 2001; Fouad & Brown, 2000; Richardson, 1993). Although it is premature to suggest that the various statements and research on social class should be revised or discarded, it does seem clear that social class is a critical part of the career development landscape (cf. Fouad & Brown, 2000). Indeed, the narrative data that we have presented provide compelling evidence that social class matters—it seems to matter in the external context of the STW transition as well as in an individual's values and attitudes about work.

The results that we have presented also suggest some promising directions for future research. One important next step is for a longitudinal investigation of the role of social class in various work-related transitions, including but not limited to the transition from school to work. Furthermore, following the work of Fouad and Brown (2000), research is needed to understand how individuals internalize social-class issues within their existing psychological structures and how these internalized schemas might influence vocational behavior. Another critical area that needs further inquiry is the complex relationship between race and class. In this study, young adults of color were exclusively found in the LSES cohort, underscoring a reality about race and poverty that still plagues the United States. Future research is needed to examine how young adults in the midst of work-based transitions experience the connection between race and class. Indeed, research on the interface between race and class, which is beginning within counseling psychology (e.g., Brown et al., 1996; Fouad & Brown, 2000), would inform a diversity of issues in our field, including multicultural counseling and assessment practices and policy. In addition, we recommend that counseling scholars examine their own feelings about social class, as we believe that internalized biases may have subtle, but pervasive effects in the design and development of theory and research in vocational psychology. Our findings, coupled with the recommendations from recent scholars (e.g., Brown et al., 1996; Wilson, 1996), provide a compelling rationale for a serious study of the role of social class in the work lives of youth and adults across diverse cultural contexts.

In relation to the design and delivery of counseling and psychoeducational interventions, our findings underscore the influence of social class on the STW transition and the pervasiveness of its impact. The results from this investigation, when considered in conjunction with other bodies of work in psychology (e.g., Brown et al., 1996; Wilson, 1996), suggest that social class influences both external and internal aspects of an individual's context. As

such, counselors need to be particularly sensitive to the way that social class may have attenuated an individual's educational and vocational aspirations. In addition, counselors and psychologists working with clients who have already made the STW transition need to be aware of how social class has impacted their clients and how it may hinder or prevent their clients from making productive changes in their work lives. In addition, our findings suggest that individuals from poor and working-class backgrounds may be attempting to resolve various vocational development tasks with a clear disadvantage. In the designing of preventive and developmental interventions in educational and training institutions, it might be prudent to help equalize access to the necessary internal and external resources that promote adaptive work-based transitions. Examples of these sorts of interventions can be culled from the literature and generated on the basis of a careful needs analysis of a given population (e.g., Gysbers, Heppner, & Johnston, 1998; Solberg et al., 1998). Building on the classic model of promoting progress in career development through guided exposure to knowledge of self and the world of work, our results suggest that attention to helping clients access quality educational resources and indigenous relational support would be quite helpful. Of course, one of the major interventions would be to reduce inequity in the distribution of resources to schools, communities, and racial and ethnic minority groups. Thus, our findings support the growing trend for counseling psychologists to engage in meaningful public policy and social justice work as part of their professional contributions.

As in any exploratory investigation, this study contains several limitations that ought to be acknowledged as we assess the meaning of our findings. First, we have conducted extensive interviews with a sample of individuals who represented a particular region of the United States and were not necessarily representative of the cross section of young adults. Second, the findings of a qualitative study are naturally susceptible to the implicit biases of the team that analyzed the data. Our use of auditors and our careful awareness of our individual and collective biases mitigated this limitation to some extent as we reviewed and analyzed the data. Third, the measure of social class that we used—socioeconomic status—although quite precise and sensitive (Nakao & Treas, 1994), does not capture the full richness of social class as it has been detailed in recent social scientific literature (e.g., Fouad & Brown, 2000; Kliman, 1998). However, our decision to use SEI is consistent with existing convention and allows for a more deliberate integration of our findings with other results in psychology and related fields. Finally, the relative lack of racial and ethnic diversity in our samples has limited our ability to explore the linkages between race and social class.

In closing, this study has attempted to place social class at the forefront of our thinking about vocational behavior. As our results suggest, the influence of social class is deep and wide—it affects the context of the STW transition and also influences how people feel about themselves and their work lives. Of course, these results need to be considered in light of the exploratory, discovery-oriented framework that guided this project. Yet, we are hopeful that the material presented in this article furnishes the necessary foundation for continued exploration and discovery of the pervasive and complex role of social class in work-related transitions.

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