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Young Adults' Perceptions of Risk and Opportunity
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In our ever-changing economy, young adults must remain flexible and adaptable as they transition from school to work and plan their future life courses. It is difficult for today's youth to choose training programs which will guarantee them secure, long-term employment. As the future grows less predictable, greater uncertainty and risk are involved in each career decision.

This study concerns young adults enrolled in vocational education and training programs. The study sought to investigate the complex relationship between macro-structure influences such as social policy and job-market opportunities; micro-structure pressures, which include such things as family obligations, peer influences, and personal goals; and an individual's perception of risk and opportunity as he or she plans for the future and makes the transition from school to work.

Today, young adults must make career choices in life without being able to predict the future labor market. They must be able to reflect on their choices, assess their self-development, and evaluate their opportunities in regard to employment. To do so, young people must acquire skills and knowledge in formal training programs. Personal beliefs about values, social institutions, and moral behavior will also guide them in their decision processes. Risks, therefore, are embraced or avoided based on a complex interplay of personal, cultural, moral, and social standards.

The current study drew on individuals' narratives describing their future goals and life plans. In addition to questionnaires, information was gathered through focus groups

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and biographical interviews which were conducted with students enrolled in technical college training programs in a major city in the southeastern United States. From analyses of the young adults narratives and statements concerning their life and career plans, the researcher sought to determine how the students perceived risk and opportunities concerning their professional futures. The researcher also investigated the strategies, attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors the students employed to cope with risks and to enhance opportunities. Through personal interviews and focus groups the researcher explored to what extent the young adults in the study were aware of the various influences affecting their choices of careers and what promises or limitations they perceived these influences held over their futures.

Perceptions of Risk

The life course of young people today does not necessarily follow the traditional model of graduating from high school, completing professional training, obtaining a job, and building a family. Heinz (1997) outlined that today's life-course is increasingly dependent on vicissitudes in the labor market, which may lead to unexpected conflicts and risks. As a consequence, the individual has to be creative and innovative in order to compensate for uncertainties and change.

Ulrich Beck (1986, 1992) and Anthony Giddens (1990) wrote that the individual has become an active negotiator who either takes or avoids risks when there is uncertainty as to what the future may bring. According to Beck (1992)

> In the individualized society the individual must therefore learn, on pain of permanent disadvantage, to conceive of himself or herself as the center of action, as the planning office with respect to his/her own biography, abilities, orientations, relationships and so on. (p. 135)

Douglas (1978, 1992) proposed that a person's perception of risk is determined by his or her prior commitments to different types of social solidarity (Wilkinson, 2001). According to Douglas and Wildawsky (1982), risk perceptions are embedded within cultural meanings and exhibit a wide variability.

Risk is socially constructed and historically conceptualized (Lupton, 1999) and may differ between youth with

different social backgrounds or schooling. However, according to Renn (1998), risk is perceived as a multidimensional phenomenon that involves beliefs with respect to the nature of the risk, the cause of the risk, the associated benefits, and the circumstances of risk-taking. According to Douglas and Wildawsky (1982), a leading question in the analysis of cultural differences in risk perceptions is "Why do people emphasize some risk while ignoring others?"

In general, Americans believe strongly in individual choice (Furstenberg, 2003) and hold to the premise that everyone has equal opportunity and is free to rise above his or her social class (Hochschild, 1981). In the United States, institutional stratification is delayed and individuals get second and third chances should stumbling blocks occur along their paths through life. At the same time knowledge and networks are unequally distributed and opportunities might therefore not be practically accessible for every American (Cook and Furstenberg, 2002). Furlong and Cartmel (1997) agreed that the poorer part of society has to carry the biggest burden of uncertainty and risk.

The transition into adulthood has become more individualized (Buchmann, 1989) and disorderly (Rindfuss, Swicegood and Rosenfeld, 1987). Youth have an extended moratorium (Arnett, 2000) that enables them to explore several life options before committing to one. On one hand investigating a variety of alternatives might lead young adults to greater maturity and increase the likelihood of their making informed occupational choices and eventually achieving fulfillment in adult work and family roles. However, extended periods of floundering may also involve financial investments with no assurance of reimbursement through future jobs.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the data collection and analysis in this study:

- How do young adults in a technical college in a major city in the southeastern United States perceive risk and opportunity regarding their future life planning?
- How do young adults in a technical college in a major city in the southeastern United States cope with uncertainty

regarding the continuously changing requirements of the labor market?

▪ How do their underlying values guide young adults in a technical college in a major city in the southeastern United States in their planning for their futures?

Methodology and Methods

This study followed the life-course approach from Bremen (Marshall and Mueller, 2003). The Bremen school uses case studies to explore how people construct meaning in, and make sense of, their life courses. Through case studies, it analyzes the interplay of institutions and social policy to determine how these systems regulate the timing and sequencing of an individual's life course

The qualitative data for this study were collected through focus groups and individual interviews. Study participants also completed questionnaires. Additionally, in the course of the data analysis, the literature aided the search for explanations and interpretations.

The study subjects were drawn from students enrolled at a technical college in Atlanta, Georgia. The technical college provides training in various vocational fields. The fact that the subjects volunteered to participate in the study led to data collection by means of a convenience sample. Between November 2005 and February 2006, students enrolled in four technical programs (Drafting, Office Clerk, Accounting, and Plumbing for Heating and Air Conditioning) participated in this study. In total, 64 students filled out the questionnaires. Because the students' class schedules were arranged to fit their individual needs, and students did not necessarily attend all their classes with the same group of peers. The study participants were also at different stages in their progress through their programs of study.

Some of the students who filled out the questionnaires also agreed to participate in focus groups and individual interviews. The purpose of the focus groups and biographical interviews was to learn more about the students' future life and career plans and to what extent risk perception played a role in these plans. In addition, the focus groups and individual interviews gathered data to uncover the interrelationship

between the different institutions—such as family, school, apprenticeships, social programs, and government policies—that influenced a student's life. The analysis of the narratives sought to identify cultural patterns such as shared beliefs, attitudes, norms, roles, and values that shaped the students' decisions and choices.

Findings

Demographic Data

Sixty-four technology education students completed questionnaires. The students who filled out the questionnaires ranged in age from 17 to 50 years, with an average age of 28. Males and females were distributed fairly equally among the study participants. Thirty-four males and 30 females completed the questionnaires. The study subjects consisted of 11 Whites, 47 African Americans, three Hispanics, one Asian, and three Africans (Eritrea, Ethiopia).

A respondent's socioeconomic status was categorized by comparing it to the average monthly household income in Georgia which is $3,600 (Gale, 2005). Eighteen students stated that their family income was below the average amount in Georgia, 15 reported family income of around the average amount, and 15 indicated their family income was more than the Georgia average, while 16 of the participants did not complete that item in the questionnaire.

The exact occupational and educational background of the respondents' parents was impossible to determine because very few students filled in that item on the questionnaires. Many of those that did, simply named an employer but did not describe a profession. Nevertheless, the data revealed that the majority of the students had parents with working class backgrounds, which is typical of students who pursue vocational training (Shavit and Müller, 2000).

The majority of the students worked in low-skilled jobs for some time before entering the program and most continued to be employed while enrolled in the technical school. Almost all the students had some work experience. Two students helped out in a company owned by their parents. Others had found jobs on their own, and some had changed jobs several times. Only a few

students worked in a field that was related to their technical program, while the majority was employed in a wide variety of jobs.

Motivations, Problems, and Goals

To learn more about the young adults' choices and how their choices related to their perceptions of risk and opportunity, the questionnaire contained a number of items concerned with individual reasons for enrolling in the technical college as well as items eliciting the students future plans. In response to "Is the program you are currently in the program of your choice?" Fifty-nine students said "yes" while four said "no," which indicates that a large majority entered the training program as a conscious, self directed choice.

For most of the students, the main motivations for enrolling in the technical college were job security, independence, and higher paychecks. These comments were typical of many study participants:

> Luis (22): After I have this degree the job market is open. If I lose my job somewhere I can easily get another job.
>
> Marcus (25): I chose it because of the future and stability. I don't have to worry about that they close my company and I would be out of work. There will always be work available in this field. You can also work for yourself. You don't have to worry about money. You can be independent.
>
> Lucius (29): I chose this job because I got tired of people who take over your job or something. With this job you got a degree and that protects you more. In many jobs they can just hire anybody from the street. I used to work in a job where I needed to read barcodes and so. Everybody can do that.

Another student explained that he wanted to develop his skills to the best of his abilities. He felt he needed to be in an artistic profession, although he was not sure if the program he was in (heating and air conditioning, which had a drafting component) was the right one. But, after trying and abandoning welding, he believed that he was now getting closer to it. He also

valued developing "troubleshooting skills." Heating and air conditioning, he explained, is not just a job. It is a multitask profession with skills that can be applied in many different areas.

> Alex (27): It is also essential in troubleshooting where you learn how each component works with the other components. That assists you in troubleshooting and how something works. So, that is also a field where one learns how to think in that manner. Once you have learned it you can name and address problems in the other fields too.

Lucius described the neighborhood he lived in as one where a lot of people were unemployed and involved in crime. He had three children by three different women and kept in contact with all of them. Lucius had moved out of one crime-ridden neighborhood and planned to move again once he was employed. At the time of the interview he was taking care of the household while his wife, who was expecting a child, worked full time. He explained that his desire to avoid entanglement in drugs and crime were his main reason for enrolling in the technical education program.

> Lucius (29): It keeps you off the street. In my neighborhood there are many who don't work, taking drugs and getting involved in all kinds of criminal activities. I didn't want to end up there. That's why I chose to get more education.

In general the study participants chose to enroll in a technical program mainly to gain higher paychecks and secure greater job security. They did not perceive their choice as one that would direct the course of their lives. Some students viewed their technical training as a foundation which would allow them to move into a variety of other professions.

Floundering, or switching from job to job and from job to school, as well as the difficulties of juggling jobs, school, and family were among the difficulties and risks that arose in the discussions. For most of the students surveyed it was rare to have gone straight into technical college after graduation from high school. At 28, the average age of the students who participated in the study was well above standard freshman age. The students' reasons for not enrolling in a technical college straight away were

many and varied. Some students wanted to earn money or needed to save up in order to be able to afford schooling. Others did not like school or needed a break from it. Some who had been uncertain about which field of training to start had not wanted to waste time and money by enrolling in programs they might later find unsuitable. Caring for a household and children, dealing with a difficult family situation, or having a spouse that discouraged them from going to school were other reasons respondents cited for delay.

In the interviews and focus groups, the students revealed other problems and difficulties they faced while attending school. Some of the respondents held two or even three jobs at the same time and worked up to 70 hours a week. They explained how they managed their lives under those circumstances. Michael, in addition to working and attending classes, also had a family to take care of and friendships he wished to maintain.

> Michael (26): I am the storage media operator, basically a librarian in a big library. Get tapes, I mean get the books and put them back where they belong again. Check books out and check them in again. That's basically what I do, except there are no books it's A-Tapes. Then Max Living, you know it's a home improvement company. I am a cashier there. I am starting my career helping out in a drafting office. The other two are just jobs. So, I pick my career over jobs… Right now I am doing 70 hours a week, I go to school and I am a father.

Michael reported that he was applying for a drafting job since he had almost completed his training program. He stated that if he found employment in his field, he planned to quit the other jobs. Many of the young adults in the study struggled to balance work and school. Some students could only find time to take one or two classes per semester, which delayed their graduation. Others worked early in the morning or late in the evening or had long distances to drive.

The individual interviews and focus groups also revealed that self-employment was the ultimate goal for many participants. Many viewed owning one's own business as an indicator of true success.

Kevin (24): Having your own business is the way to make it. That is pretty much it. If you work for a man you never gonna make it. You gotta be the man.

Michel (26): That's my thing. I tell people that I go to school now and get a degree and then get a company and owe it. I mean I don't mind working differently now, but I see myself in the future at least buying a company. That's one thing that I want to do. If you work for somebody you loose money.

The students believed that graduating from a technical college can, in some cases, be more lucrative than obtaining a bachelor degree. The students reported that the teachers in the technical college supported this idea and informed the students about possible future incomes in the fields they were studying. In the drafting program, for example, students reported that an instructor had told them that former graduates had been hired for yearly incomes of $52,000. Despite high income expectations the students were aware of their limitations.

Kevin (24): There is a difference between just getting a degree out of college and getting a professional certificate. Financially, I will, on a long-term, not be able to make as much money as an architect, but we start out on the same level. That's the biggest thing for me—to make more money.

Another theme often mentioned by the study participants was retirement. Many students anticipated retiring sometime between 35 and 45 years of age. Further questioning revealed that many students understood retirement to be the point in life at which they discontinue outside employment. The students planned to work hard in a job until a certain age and then either start their own businesses or live partly from investment income and partly from income from other jobs or income opportunities. One study subject stated

June (20): I want to be retired at least by the time I am 40. But, a lot of us would say we want to have our own business and that would increase the chances of retiring earlier. If I can retire before 40, if I become successful in what I do that would be

great. I want to see lots of things. I want to be able to do whatever. I think there are no limitations. I don't see myself past 40 still working in the company where I am right now. Then I will have my own business. There are people who have their own business and become extremely successful in less than three years you know. They sometimes have only an education like us or even less.

Another study participant's life plan appeared to be drawn on the success of young television stars.

Shenique (19): I want to start very young, probably 35 if I can; if I can. I mean I don't want to work all of my life. I mean, both of my grandparents have their own business and they are both staying home. They have people working for them. That's what I want to have. I want to have my own business and stay at home and still make money. Not being at the job. That's how I want to be. I am trying to be how I deserve it. See that I get a degree and see how far we want to go from there. Make quick money, so that my family can be straight. And my boyfriend kind of motivates me now. He says, you are young, you can be rich. And you see the people on TV and see how young he is I think if they can make it, I can do it to. I will retire very young.

While Shenique dreamed of early retirement, a student in the drafting group argued that one should be realistic about retirement and that most of the students should expect to work at last until reaching the statutory retirement age. Other students emphasized the importance and necessity of generating an income beyond age sixty.

Jason (19): If you work on commission you work as much as you can. For commission you work 200%. I cannot imagine retiring. I will always do something. If I would retire, I would do something else

Timothy (34): Americans are money driven. There is plenty of stuff people want to buy, SUVs, nice

houses. Everybody wants to have it comfortable; so people work more to have more money.

Jeremy (22): I think most people want to work as long as they can. And when they are in their fifties and seventies they figure they don't have enough money that they need and they work the whole time to make it through to their seventies. Some work very hard in their twenties and thirties to have more money later. My parents worked hard until they were in their sixties because they didn't have the money to retire.

Despite the hardships and obstacles many of the students faced, optimism and a sense of opportunity dominated the students' discussions about their life plans Adrian (19) pointed out, "There are no limitations in life and I want to do a lot of things." Kevin (24) stated simply, "The sky is the limit."

When asked, "How sure are you that you will find a job with your training program?" 33 of the students said they were "very sure" that they would find employment after their graduation, 21 were "sure," seven had no opinion, and only 3 of the students stated that they were "not sure at all." The three students who were not sure about their employment prospects were immigrant students who explained that they had been rejected at many places because their language skills were not sufficient or their English pronunciation was not clear.

None of the participants expressed serious concern about unemployment, but instead viewed their future employment prospects with optimism. Consequently, risk perception in this regard turned out to be very low. The students in the drafting group described how their teacher helped successful students find employment in the drafting field.

Matthew (27): But they get you a job here. They don't have any unemployed graduate student that has already graduated. They said there is not one student that came through and studied with him who is unemployed. They are all working in drafting. It's a really good opportunity.

Students in the accounting program also explained how their instructor helped them establish contacts with the various

businesses where they might find employment such as the banking or the insurance industry. Accounting students reported that the technical school supported them by offering free retraining for those accounting students who did encounter serious employment difficulties. The situation in the heating and air conditioning program was similar. Students studying heating and air conditioning stated that they believed that there were many jobs available and thought they would definitely find something in their field. The results of the interviews indicated that there was strong optimism among the study participants concerning their future employment opportunities and their overall chances for success in life.

To help determine the young adults' perceptions of future opportunities, the students also answered the question, "Would you like to go in another program after this one?" The results showed that 23 students planned to start another program directly after completing the one they were currently enrolled in, while 13 stated they expected to do so in three to five years, and another 12 thought they would start another training program sometime in life. Ten of the students said that they were not interested in going back to school. The data generally supported the notion that many students believed in the importance of further schooling. However, for some, financial constraints hindered them from pursuing additional schooling.

> Jeniffer (30): But, potentially I could go back to school for a bachelor's degree. The idea is never out of my mind. I mean it could take me a while to go back for that sort of thing. It might take me another 5 years until I actually go back for a degree. But it is not something that is ever too late… Some companies require a higher degree for a higher position with better money. It doesn't really matter how long you have been with them

> Jermaine (21): I gotta get the money to go back to school. And I get better trained.

Generally, the students expressed their conviction that further education was necessary in order to upgrade skills, maintain competitiveness, and secure continued employment. Students also realized that, depending on developments in the

economy, they might have to change their career over the course of their lives.

>   Adrian (19): You wanna know as much as you can about yourself. You wanna be ahead of everybody. You wanna keep up with what is new in your field. You wanna stay on top of the game and beat everybody else.
>
>   Alex (27): For every individual it is not possible to think anymore that they are gonna continue in one field for their whole life. Because things change and even if we don't need air conditioning anymore then we need to be flexible and possibly change into something else. The economy can also put pressure on you and you have to find something else.
>
>   Angelo (20) I am always open to expanding my horizon. I don't want to limit myself to just one thing.

Increasing Chances for Success

The study respondents pointed to a number of personal qualities they could draw on to increase their chances for success. These included qualities such as persistence, stubbornness, getting along with people, determination, open-mindedness, persever-ance, and curiosity.

>   Matthew (27) It's usually your own fault if you don't achieve what you want. Usually it is. Sometimes it's not. But, most of the time it's your own fault.
>
>   Jeniffer (30): And the ones who don't achieve what they want, they didn't really want it. And it was someone else's fault. Usually they pick themselves up and they try it again and they usually end up succeeding. Somewhere I read something about people who were successful weren't really successful, they just failed more than anybody else. And they just tried it more than anybody else. They just tried it that many more times. I mean you could probably achieve anything here in America when you set your mind towards it.

The students expressed in their statements the view that the United States is still a place where, with determination and perseverance, an individual can accomplish anything he or she sets out to achieve. It all depends on the individual. Outside risk as a potential threat to success was not emphasized. In fact, one student dismissed discussion of risk altogether and argued that talking about risk is inappropriate for a male.

> Timothy (34): Can you go away from the idea that something can happen. Something is gonna happen. Come on. It seems not really the right thing to do for a man to talk about worries, concerns, and security.

Another student suggested that she preferred living in the present to concerning herself about her future. Though she took a passive stance towards career planning, she nevertheless complained that career counselors had not actively approached her. She described how she had been in a difficult living situation with her former boyfriend and admitted that she had made wrong choices in her life

> Deborah (23): You know most children are not concerned with their futures anyway. They think nothing can harm them. Teenagers think that nothing can touch them. I think it goes back to, what is it… sex and drugs, everything that you experience in high school. That's why we are not worried about the future. You are not worried about later, you are only worried about right now. We are having fun now.

Many students emphasized that they did not want to occupy themselves with worry over potential negative events for fear it might unmotivate them. The difficult living circumstances of some of the students contributed to the importance they placed on their own motivation. Self-motivation and the hope to achieve more stability and wealth in their lives appeared to be the driving force that kept many young adults on track to complete a technical degree.

Lisa was the only one of the study subjects who confessed to being a bit worried about finding a job. She was aware that her first job might not be exactly what she would want, but realized

she first needed to get a foot in the door. She admitted her greater fear concerned her ability to handle the unfamiliar life situation and the work conditions a new position in life might bring.

> Lisa (21): Yes, I do, I think when I get out of school will I be able to find a job. I think I will, but will I be able to handle it? And, will it be something that I like? I also wonder if I will be able to handle the hours.

The study participants' worries and concerns about the uncertainties of their futures seemed to be highly individualized and students seemed reluctant to talk about them in the focus groups. Except for the immigrants, fear of unemployment did not play a role for most of the students. Despite the overall optimism of the group, some students pointed out that they concentrated on the present and avoided long term planning deliberately, leaving themselves little opportunity to worry about the future.

Institutional Influences

The study participants' career decisions and life perspectives were also influenced by pressures and demands on the micro-structural level. During the interviews and focus group session, students reported social conditions that made attending school difficult for them. Financial concerns, the desire to have leisure time to spend on activities other than school work, encouragement, or lack of it, from parents, teachers, and friends; and the students' social environment, all played roles in the students' life planning strategies.

Some students stated that even though there may have been no money to pay for it, their parents expected them to acquire a college or university degree after completing high school. One student, however, pointed out that a bachelor's degree might actually be much less useful to her in finding a job than a degree from a technical college. Others said that their parents expected them simply to earn some kind of additional degree, though not necessarily a college diploma. Many of the students reported that their parents encouraged them to pursue education beyond high school and were glad that their children were attending school.

Jeniffer (30): Well, my parents always expected me to go to school once I finish high school. They kind of expected me to go to college. Even if it wasn't sure how we gonna pay for it. They expected me to go. Even as I stopped going and worked in between I always had this idea, yes, I would be going back to school.

Although some parents had not graduated from college themselves, they encouraged their children to do so because they had experienced first-hand how difficult a career could be without some sort of advanced degree.

June (20): My dad always said: "I don't want you to do anything but graduate from college." My dad never got a college degree. He started it, dropped out and never really went back. My mom got a master degree and she really pushes it. She wants everybody to go to school. But when you are a teenager you think, whatever, eventually I will get there. Well, you got your peers around you all the time and when your peers are not motivated, than you wouldn't be either.

Another student reported how her mother's lack of encouragement was superseded by the support and faith of her father and grandmother.

Shenique (19): My mom, well I stay with her, but its like, my mom was never forceful about school or about the future. She was, like, well I have my boyfriends, and my children, whatever. I always had my dad. I was like my mom; I was never motivated to finish school, never motivated to go to college. He said: "Well you can stay in this environment but you don't have to be a part of it." With my dad, so I know I gonna finish school, I gonna make it without my mom motivating me; I gonna finish. And I always had my grandma. She is a pastor. She stands on [by] me. You gonna go to college, you are not like the family; you gonna move out of town and make your own.

Some students recognized that their single parents had had little time to devote to building the family foundation necessary to help the students surmount the difficulties they faced as they attempted to climb out of their familiar social environment.

> Nathalie (21) Yes, right now. I don't worry about one day you know, or next week. When you are young, you don't really think like that. That's why the counselor does not understand that, and also the parents. It's a difficult situation right now in many families, you know. There are a lot of single mothers and it's not easy. Parents are an important foundation and so we don't have a lot of that. So, we live a lot into now.

The study participants differed on the importance of friendships in their lives. While some young adults reported that they had close friends who influenced them in their life decisions, the majority of the students either indicated that they did not have real friends, or they had detached themselves from their peers in order to avoid what they perceived as their friends' negative influences.

> Shenique (19): I don't really have friends or I don't hang around my friends at all. My best friend is the only one I would talk to. Some of them stand their mom, but they are not doing it. They are not going to school anymore. They are not paying their rent. They are doing nothing. I don't stay with them; I stay on myself. I don't hang around with them because if I would I would do nothing with my life.

Many students in this study expressed dissatisfaction with advice they had received from school counselors. Deborah was disappointed that her school counselors did not seek out students and follow up with them on career decisions.

> Deborah (23): I mean it's like you have to hunt them down, instead of them. They are your counselors and should call us down and ask us about our future plans. "Deborah, what are you planning with your life," instead of us coming up to them. I just figured out everything on my own.

Yet, another student felt that he had received sound advice from secondary school counselors.

> Kevin (24): Yes, my high school counselor didn't really lead me to drafting, but she led me going back to school. She just generally encouraged me to go back to school and get a degree. I knew in my mind that I needed to do that, but by that moment I was just working and enjoying my life and enjoying my new vehicle.

Most of the students denied that they were influenced in their life planning decisions by macro-societal factors such as governmental policies and political ideologies. One participant conceded that for someone seeking to establish a business, the availability of government funding might be an influential consideration. Three students discussed standardized testing in schools and argued that the trend of imposing various tests on students does not lead to a better education. None of the students expressed interest in changing current power structures or concern for policy reforms.

> Alex (27): There is nothing you can do about the government in a direct and immediate sense. They're gonna do what they wanna do and it is gonna be as corrupt as it is until something major happens. Because as the system is set up the way it is now, it's very hard to change anything and people with good intentions who go in the government and want to change things, they get kicked out or buried by people who want to keep things the way they are. And because there is nothing that I can do in a direct way about it, what good would it do to worry about it? It only impairs my ability to function. It would make me unable to see the solution that is there. Einstein or somebody was saying you should not focus on the problem, you have to focus on the solution if you gonna see it. If that's what I am focused on in making myself a part of the problem by being frustrated about it, I never gonna see what needs to happen to make the change. It would limit my

> ability to function… There is a principle that you can not address a problem head on or that it is most difficult to address a problem head on. If you work at something, especially a government in any country you work on it piece by piece.

Alex stated that change can only be created by taking little steps on a personal level. He did not view people as a whole as a collective power or an agent of change. The role of the government was mostly ignored in students' discussions. Each student tended to view him or herself as the navigator of his or her own individual life path while showing little interest in involving themselves in the fates of others or in improving the overall well-being of society. The students felt free to make their own personal choices and perceived their country as a place where perseverance pays off and individual dreams can be fulfilled.

Discussion

From the analysis of the data collected in this study several major themes emerged regarding the students perceptions of risk and opportunity, their strategies for coping with the uncertainties of a continuously changing job market, and the underlying values which guide them in their planning for their futures.

Perceptions of risk and opportunity

Arum and Shavit (1995) highlighted the fact that technical education in the U.S. serves as a safety net for those who are unlikely to pursue 4-year college degrees. The young adults who participated in this study appeared to verify that finding. The students perceived that their technical college training enhanced their opportunities for employment in higher quality jobs. They believed that the skills they were learning were in high demand and held for them the promise of stable employment and financial independence. They saw the degrees they were earning of value not only for the opportunities of immediate employment, but also as foundations for future self-employment. The risk of unemployment was almost no issue for the young adults who participated in this study. The students

contended that a technical degree would protect them from unemployment. They felt assured that the technical degrees they were earning are both well recognized in industry and respected by individual consumers.

The young adults seemed disinclined to make concrete active life plans, but instead kept themselves open to opportunities that might come their way. They preferred to be in a waiting position. They appeared to be passive life planners, but indicated that they would become active life agents in the short term if a goal presented itself within reach. The students' life plans were highly individualized. They viewed the completion of a technical program as a step in their employment progression, and many students could imagine returning to school at some future time in their life to pursue further technical training or a degree in another field.

Coping with uncertainty

The study participants took different positions on the development and application of coping strategies. Many students took a highly flexible approach towards seeking employment. They tended to keep their options open and avoided making long-term professional commitments. The students hoped their technical degrees would provide them with stable employment that would last for several years and held on to dreams for the future in order to motivate and encourage themselves.

In general the students set short-term goals and did not follow linear long-range patterns. Long-term plans seemed only cursorily thought through, as indicated by the students' vague plans for eventual self-employment and their images of retirement at early ages. While the young adults in the study recognized the need to plan for the short term, many appeared to assume that they would somehow manage to surmount the steps in their life courses without a clear-cut plan. The students appeared to avoid concrete long-term planning. By focusing on the present or the very near future, the students' optimism remained high, while a longer view of life seemed to threaten to overwhelm and discourage them.

Cook and Furstenberg (2002) assert that Americans can be risk takers because there are few institutional restrictions that

limit their planning of a life course. Americans, they state, tend to be more short-term planners who live in the present, keeping the future at bay (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002). The technical college students in this study appeared to fit this mold. The coping strategies that most of the technical college students in this study employed were to suppress concern for the future and to adopt a simplified approach towards making life plans.

Despite the challenging conditions and difficulties which many of the technical college students faced, they expressed a great deal of satisfaction with their employment prospects as well as the outlook for their lives in general. Furedi (1997) wrote that in American society "the inflation of problems which is a characteristic of today's risk calculations follows logically from the decline of support for the perspective of social change" (p. 61). Furedi believed that a culture of uncertainty was created in order to protect the status quo. However, this uncertainty did not appear prevalent in the minds of the young adults who participated in this study. Perhaps their perception of their job security and their optimism was based on naivety. Perhaps they viewed the paths they were taking as their best options for improving their situations. Whatever the explanation, these young adults remained optimistic regarding their ability to make positive changes in their lives by dint of sheer personal effort.

Guiding Values

The most powerful guiding value articulated by the young adults who took part in this study was self-motivation. The students looked for ways to keep their motivation high and avoid thoughts or circumstances that threatened to bring it down. They expressed their desire to stay away from negative influences of family members or peers who might discourage them in their pursuit of their careers. The students emphasized the importance of being the agent of their own life courses. In the students' view, the way to succeed was to lift oneself up by one's own bootstraps.

The students were mostly left alone to make and fulfill their career decisions. Some of them were surrounded by people who had never pursued an advanced degree, and many of the students did not have role models to provide them outside encouragement. For most, there was no institutional career

placement agency to channel them into appropriate training programs. The technical college students appeared to sense that they were on their own.

Some students, emerging from difficult and unstable childhoods, had the desire to change their life styles in order to live differently from their family members and childhood surroundings. Like Shenique, who wanted her family "to be straight," other students in this study viewed education as a pathway out of an impoverished lifestyle.

For most of the young adults, work was seen as a means to make money and not as a meaningful way to promote self-development or make changes in their society. Only the drafting students expressed some sense of identification with their chosen occupation.

The young adults in this study were highly independent and individualized. They did not view the government or public policies as helps to them in planning for their futures except, perhaps, as possible future source of funds. In general, they saw the concerns and events of large institutions as beyond their control and of little import to them personally.

Conclusion

The findings of this study may enhance the understanding of underlying perceptions as well as preferences, values, and visions that influence young adults' decisions about the transition from school to work and elucidate how these decisions are related to unique cultural realities. The study provides information that may help identify what drives young adults to make decisions regarding their professional future. Leisering and Leibfried (1999) pointed out that the United States places a strong emphasis on education, less emphasis on social security, and little emphasis on risk management. In this study, the young adults reported little perception of risk as they contemplated their life paths. These findings may provide information to encourage or influence the debate about the meaning and purpose of risk protection and the social consequences of it.

This study accentuates the need for schools to establish techniques for assisting a student in coping with uncertainty in his or her life planning course (Asbrand, 2005). Young adults

need to learn how to make constructive decisions and be equipped with the methods to carry them through to completion. Schools need to reconsider how to prepare young adults for the requirements of the labor market and how to provide them with the tools they need to meet job search and work place challenges. School counselors must concentrate more on guiding students through consideration of their employment options and career goals. Counselors should become aware of the students' values, beliefs, and attitudes in order to understand their perspectives and their needs. In addition, teachers need to address students' concerns and develop a pedagogy that prepares young adults for a world where they become active, participatory agents of their own life courses (Heinz, Kelle, Witzel, Zinn, 1998).

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