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Different Time Frames, Different Futures: How Disadvantaged Youth Project Realistic and Idealistic Futures

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ABSTRACT

Existing sociological literature provides conflicting theoretical accounts of disadvantaged youth's aspirations. While structuralists and rational choice theorists contend that disadvantaged young people tend to form low aspirations in the face of limited structural opportunities, cultural sociologists maintain that disadvantaged youth construct highly aspirational imagined futures to claim their moral self-worth in the present. I argue that incorporating time frames into the study of aspirations helps resolve the tension by enabling researchers to investigate when—in what time frame—one model works better than others. I demonstrate the value of this approach using qualitative interviews with 31 eighth-grade students in China's rural Shanxi Province, where structural constraints of socioeconomic attainment undercut cultural ideals of social mobility. In this context, findings show that respondents focused on practical constraints from their academic performance and family economic strains when projecting their short-term futures (structural/rational choice model) while they constructed future selves distinctive from rural origins in their long-term futures (cultural model). I conclude by discussing this approach's implications for studying aspirations, expectations, and their relationships to educational and career outcomes.

KEYWORDS: time frames; future projections; aspirations; imagined future; realistic future.

When the odds of success are against them, do disadvantaged youth still dream big? Structuralist and rational choice theorists maintain that disadvantaged youth tend to hold modest aspirations given limited future possibilities (Bourdieu 1977; Breen 1999; Morgan 2005; Willis 1977). This proposition, however, is challenged by increasing evidence of disadvantaged youth forming high aspirations despite objective obstacles (Goyette 2008; Jerrim 2014; Reynolds et al. 2006). To account for this phenomenon, cultural sociologists argue that young people construct aspirations and expectations as "imagined futures," or "idealized visions of future selves" (Frye 2012:1573), to claim themselves as moral and worthy in the present. Past research provides insights into different ways in which disadvantaged youth project their futures but lacks a theoretical account for when and why disadvantaged young people view their futures in one way over others.

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I argue that incorporating time frames into the study of future projections provides a key to understanding when and why disadvantaged youth project realistic (structural and rational choice models) or idealistic futures (cultural model).[1] I illustrate the value of taking time frames into account using in-depth interviews with 31 eighth-grade students from rural Shanxi Province in China, where structural barriers to socioeconomic attainment undercut cultural ideals of social mobility via education. I find that, in the long term, respondents distinguished themselves from their rural origins by expressing aspirations to work and lifestyles that require higher education; by contrast, in the short term, respondents thought more about practical constraints, which prompted them to consider vocational education or migrant work. Moreover, findings also suggest that structural constraints and cultural ideals vary by gender, giving rise to boys' and girls' different long-term and short-term future projections.

This paper makes three theoretical contributions. First, it demonstrates that analyzing futures across time frames helps to resolve the tension between competing conceptualizations of aspiration by allowing researchers to investigate under what conditions people consider practical constraints or assert moral identities in their future projections. Second, by distinguishing varied ways of future projection across time frames, this paper helps to connect structural and cultural explanations of aspiration formation. Third, building on a growing literature on culture's role in facilitating or stalling social mobility, this paper shows how the dominance of an "undetailed script" (Streib 2017:139)—that education brings upward mobility—may obstruct pathways to upward mobility.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Future Projections of Disadvantaged Youth: Internalized Possibility, Rational Choice, or Moral Statement?

Sociologists disagree on whether disadvantaged youth hold high or low aspirations, relative to their objective circumstances. Whereas structuralist and rational choice theorists predict low aspirations within the limits of objective opportunities, cultural sociologists emphasize disadvantaged youth's ability to dream beyond what is realistically possible. Underlying these divergent predictions are different conceptualizations of the aspiration formation process: do people use what they have experienced to inform their aspirations, or do they form aspirations to project a worthwhile identity in the present?

Structuralist theories argue that disadvantaged youth internalize experiences of structural constraints and form modest aspirations. Bourdieusian and Neo-Marxist theorists conceive of aspirations as a structurally determined mental structure, arguing that disadvantaged youth develop aspirations according to objective opportunities afforded by their positions in the social hierarchy (Bourdieu 1977; Connolly and Healy 2004; McLeod 1987; Pun and Koo 2019; Willis 1977). Similarly, status attainment researchers conceptualize aspirations and expectations as emerging from academic performances and significant others' influences, two structurally shaped factors. Their work shows that, relative to their white middle-class counterparts, working-class and ethnic-minority youth hold lower educational aspirations and expectations (Bozick et al. 2010; Hardie 2015) and are less likely to maintain educational expectations over time (Johnson and Reynolds 2013; Kao and Tienda 1998).

In the same vein, rational choice theorists assert that disadvantaged youth form modest educational expectations based on the observed costs of and returns to education (Breen 1999; Hällsten 2010; Morgan 1998). Consequently, lower-class students' tendency toward risk aversion discourages them from choosing financially rewarding yet academically challenging educational routes (Breen, van de Werfhorst, and Jæger 2014; Gabay-Egozi, Shavit, and Yaish 2010), while relaxing economic constraints helps raise disadvantaged youth's aspirations and expectations (Lloyd, Leicht, and Sullivan 2008). Although rational choice theorists acknowledge that estimates of costs and returns may be inaccurate (Abbiati and Barone 2017), they contend that these calculations constrain disadvantaged young people's aspirations and expectations.

[1] Borrowing from cultural sociology (Mische 2009), I use future projection as an umbrella term that includes its different variants, such as aspirations, expectations, ideals, etc. In the next section, I will elaborate on how the framework developed here advances our understanding of future projections.

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However, researchers have found increasing evidence of disadvantaged youth holding high aspirations despite structural constraints. Adolescents around the globe, regardless of their class background, develop high ambitions exceeding what they are likely to achieve, as indicated by contemporaneous patterns of socioeconomic attainment (Goyette 2008; Jerrim 2014; Reynolds et al. 2006). These findings challenge conceptualizations of aspirations as choices bounded by limited possibilities.

To account for these seemingly unrealistic aspirations, cultural sociologists propose the concept of imagined futures, that is, idealized visions of future selves (Frye 2012; Mische 2009). They cast aside the conventional wisdom that individuals use knowledge and experiences acquired in the past to formulate views about the future. Rather, conceptualizing aspirations as part of an individual's moral identity, they argue that disadvantaged youth express high ambitions beyond what they are likely to achieve to claim moral worth in the present (Frye 2012). This model has been used to explain high aspirations of rural schoolgirls in Malawi (Frye 2012), rural-to-urban migrants in China (Cebolla-Boado and Soysal 2018), disadvantaged youth in the United Kingdom (Baker 2017), racial minority and low-income young adults in the United States (Deterding 2015; Nielsen 2015; Ovink 2017). These studies find that by expressing high aspirations, disadvantaged young people assert their moral identity as someone who strives for success despite objective obstacles.

Facing these competing models, sociologists thus far have lacked clear theoretical guidance regarding the conditions under which one model would work better than the others. Scholars use structural or rational choice models when aspirations are associated with family socioeconomic status, academic performance, parental expectations, and cost of education (Zimmermann 2020), while they invoke cultural models when aspirations seem to defy the constraints of the above factors (Frye 2012). In both cases, researchers continue to rely on one theoretical model—internalized possibility (McLeod 1987), rational choice (Morgan 2005), or moral statement (Frye 2012)—even when events happening in different time frames are examined (e.g., attending school versus childbearing, or choosing a college major versus maintaining social class status). However, if we seriously consider the possibility that a person may think about futures in varied time frames differently, those time frames can become a key to understanding when one theoretical model may work better than the others.

Different Time Frames, Different Futures

Cultural sociologists point to the possibility that people may project futures in different time frames (Jones, Flaherty, and Rubin 2019; Mische 2009). Research shows that middle-class youth develop long-term plans more often than their lower-class counterparts (Anderson et al. 2005; Brannen and Nilsen 2002). More recently, Tavory and Eliasoph (2013) distinguish among immediate future (protention), mid-range future (trajectory) and distant future (temporal landscape) and propose that people in social interactions simultaneously negotiate shared future projections in multiple time frames. Research has also shown that individuals use different narratives (everyday tasks versus choice biographies) when describing short- versus long-term futures (Jones et al. 2019).

While realizing that people develop long- and short-term futures side by side, sociologists still lack a theoretical account of how and why people project short- and long-term futures differently. To address this limitation, I turn to temporal construal theory in social psychology. The theory proposes that people tend to use abstract, schematic terms to represent events in the long-term future whereas they are likely to use concrete, situational information to represent events in the short-term future (Liberman and Trope 1998; Trope and Liberman 2003). For example, individuals tend to represent "moving into a new apartment" as "starting a new life" in the distant future, but as "packing and carrying the boxes" in the near future (Liberman and Trope 1998). This theory suggests that high versus low aspirations relative to objective possibilities may not be conflicting phenomena but may stem from individuals using abstract thinking versus concrete considerations when describing long-term versus short-term futures.

Integrating insights from cultural sociology and social psychology, I propose that people think about their futures in two ways: *imagined futures* refer to idealized visions of future selves ascribing significance and status to present selves (Frye 2012); *realistic futures* refer to concrete anticipation of future events based on considerations of existing resources and constraints. These two modes of future projection tend to correspond to different time frames: when projecting long-term futures, specifying

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life situations and experiences becomes difficult and thus individuals tend to resort to projecting imagined future selves laden with moral meanings; in contrast, when envisioning the short term, people tend to project realistic futures by anticipating practical constraints and calculating costs and benefits. Examining the time frames of aspirations and expectations, thus, enables synthesizing existing conceptualizations of aspirations and expectations—internalized possibilities, rational choice, and moral statements—as different cognitive processes people invoke when envisioning futures in different time frames.

Imagined and realistic futures, as distinct cognitive processes, provide conceptual tools for scholars to account for the meanings and formations of aspirations and expectations, two types of projected futures varying in the extent to which perceived chances of achieving future goals are considered (Morgan 2005). As existing studies show (Baird, Burge, and Reynolds 2008; Khattab 2003), both aspirations and expectations can be imagined or realistic. For example, in an impoverished community with low college graduation rate, if a young person expects to earn a college degree in five years to demonstrate his/her persistence in the pursuit of goals, the person is likely to be expressing imagined expectations (Deterding 2015); when a young person in the same community expresses aspirations to complete two courses at a local community college next year given the money and time available, the person may be articulating realistic aspirations. One way to understand why people think imaginatively versus realistically, I argue, is through an explicit examination of future time frames.

FUTURE PROJECTIONS IN STRUCTURAL, CULTURAL, AND GENDERED CONTEXT

To demonstrate the usefulness of incorporating time frames into the study of aspirations and expectations, I examine disadvantaged youths' future projections in rural China. This is a particularly illuminating case because Chinese rural youth face a widely held belief in education as the pathway to upward mobility as well as persistent educational and occupational barriers to achieve such mobility. This conflict between structural and cultural forces provides an ideal opportunity to examine whether and how young people's future projections operate differently in the long and short terms.

When projecting long-term futures, Chinese rural youth face the competing influences of the cultural model of upward mobility through education and the structural barriers to socioeconomic attainment. The historically rooted belief in the power of education to bring social mobility has largely persisted in its appeal thanks to the state, schools, and families touting the value of individual effort and responsibility (Hansen 2015; Kipnis 2011). Consequently, educational pursuit not only represents a way to achieve a better life but also takes on a meaning of moral deservingness (Xiang 2018). This cultural ideal, however, is undercut by the structural reality of rural youth's lack of access to economic, social, and educational opportunities (Hao, Hu, and Lo 2014). Despite China's higher education expansion in the past two decades, students of rural origin have largely concentrated in the vocational-education track (Koo 2016; Tam and Jiang 2015). Facing educational barriers and entrenched discrimination in access to socioeconomic resources, many Chinese rural youth migrate to China's urban areas and take up low-paying manufacturing and service jobs, a career path designated as *dagong*, or working for the boss (Lee 2007). Recent generations of rural youth have become increasingly dissatisfied with *dagong* because it brings low income, poor working conditions, physically strenuous labor (Meng 2012), marginalized social status (Zavoretti 2017), and limited opportunity for social mobility (Wu and Treiman 2007).

As rural middle school students approach the end of state-funded compulsory education (9th grade), they face conflicting moral and practical imperatives when making a short-term post-graduation plan. To advance from middle school (7th–9th grades) to high school (10th–12th grades), students are required to take the High School Entrance Exam; their performances on the exam determine whether they will enter academic high schools, vocational high schools, or the labor market (Hannum, An, and Cherng 2011). Rural students' under-performance, along with financial constraints, diminish their chances of attending academic high schools (Hao et al. 2014). However, under the influence of entrenched public discourse linking academic performance to moral value, vocational-track education and *dagong* signal a lack of capability and motivation, and thus a person's inferior moral status (Ling 2015).

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These structural and cultural contexts enable me to examine when each theoretical model works better. Cultural models would predict that considerations of moral meanings will lead middle school students to aspire to entering academic high schools in the short term and to achieving mobility through education in the long term. In contrast, structural and rational choice theories would predict that considerations of limited resources and opportunities will lead rural youth to plan for the beginning of *dagong* or vocational-track education in the short term and to expect maintaining their socioeconomic status in the long term. If temporality is an important parameter to investigate, however, we would expect moral meanings to figure more prominently in long-term futures while practical considerations to factor more heavily in short-term futures.

Structure and Culture as Gendered Social Forces

Our understanding of the formation of long-term and short-term future projections would be incomplete if structure and culture are conceptualized as genderless. Scholars have shown that gender is an integral part of the social system that differentiates men and women's structural opportunities for educational and career attainment as well as their cultural ideas about moral selves (Damaske 2011; Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Risman 2004; Vijayakumar 2013). Therefore, to more fully unpack the social forces underlying future projections, I also explore how gendered experiences of structural constraints and cultural ideals lead to gender differences in future projections in the rural China context.

Structurally, young men and women in rural China have varied access to educational and occupational opportunities. Girls in rural China have experienced a remarkable rise in educational attainment, leading to a leveling, or slightly advantageous, access to educational opportunities compared to that of boys (Dong et al. 2020; Liu, Jiang, and Chen 2020). Meanwhile, rural men and women remain highly segregated on the labor market, leading to distinctive experiences of *dagong*: male workers concentrate in hard manual labor (e.g., in construction and mining industries), while female workers are sorted into factory work and the service sector (Wang and Klugman 2020). Although existing research provides mixed evidence regarding gender differences in educational returns in China (Hannum, Zhang, and Wang 2013; Ma and Iwasaki 2021; Ren and Miller 2012), these gendered labor market opportunities are likely to shape youth's educational and career possibilities.

Culturally, young men and women may hold different cultural ideals about what it means to live a moral, worthy adult life, especially in relation to family responsibilities. Young men are valued for being filial sons who provide elderly care and economic support for their parents. Chinese society treats these responsibilities as a masculine obligation and fulfilling them generates a positive sense of self for young men (Lin 2014; Qi 2015). In contrast, young women are expected to take on caring responsibilities for their husband's family once they are married (Chuang 2016), but before marriage they enjoy a period of relative independence without expectations of providing financial support to parental homes (Kim, Brown, and Fong 2018).

As shown above, gender shapes both structural opportunities and cultural ideals in rural China. Therefore, we would expect boys and girls to project (a) different short-term futures based on varied schooling and work opportunities and (b) different long-term futures given gendered moral obligations in adult life.

DATA AND METHOD

This paper draws from in-depth interviews conducted in 2015 with 31 eighth-grade students from a homeroom[2] of a rural middle school in the Shanxi province of China. In-depth interviews are particularly suitable for obtaining detailed accounts of how respondents think about their futures and for understanding the local contexts from which their aspirations and expectations emerged. Through noting, probing, and presenting multiple ways of projecting the future, I use in-depth interviewing to unpack respondents' complex views (Pugh 2013) and to chart a way toward resolving theoretical contradictions (Pacewicz 2020).

[2] There were 40 students in the homeroom and 31 of the students and their parents granted informed consent to study participation. Students in a homeroom sit in the same classroom and followed the same class schedule.

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My sample included 14 girls and 17 boys ranging from 14 to 16 years old. I selected eighth graders because they were old enough to envision long-term adult life, while the prospect of finishing ninth grade was likely to prompt considerations about short-term futures one year ahead. All respondents were students in a homeroom at a public-funded rural boarding school,[3] which allowed me to hold school context and students' socioeconomic background relatively constant within the sample. The school was located in a village about 40 minutes away from the nearest city by bus. Most of the students came from surrounding villages; a small proportion of students were from villages further away because their parents believed this school offered better education than schools closer to home, which is manifested in a small number of respondents' academic performance competitive for entering academic high schools. Respondents' families typically relied on agriculture for subsistence while using *dagong* to generate additional income. Parental participations in *dagong* exhibited a gendered pattern: 22 out of 31 fathers had experience of wage labor away from home while only 5 out of 27 mothers had this experience.[4] Family incomes generated through these sources were generally low and unstable.

The semi-structured interviews, which lasted 30 minutes to an hour, covered respondents' schooling experiences, work experiences (including those of family members) and future projections. To unpack how time frames shape modes of future projection, I asked respondents about the short term after graduating from middle school in a year and the long-term adult life. To ensure adult life involved a longer time frame than graduation from middle school, I also asked how short-term plans fit into the pursuit of long-term goals. I established rapport with students by sitting among them during classes and spending time with them during class breaks and meals. Over the course of fieldwork, students appeared comfortable with my presence, which helped to conduct fruitful interviews. Additionally, when school was not in session, I visited students' homes and villages and conducted five interviews with parents of student respondents. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the author. A bilingual researcher, I conducted all interviews in Chinese, analyzed full Chinese transcripts, and translated excerpts into English at the manuscript writing stage.

My data collection procedure also had its limitations. First, the ways in which I asked about respondents' long-term and short-term futures—What is the ideal life you want to live in the future? And where will you go after graduating from here?—were designed to draw the distinction between long-term imagined futures and short-term realistic futures. Thus, the interview questions differed inherently in the level of realistic estimation they were likely to elicit. So, to supplement these main questions, I asked about perceived possibilities of achieving their goals in the long term and what they aspired to in the short term. Second, data from a single year cannot fully capture the process of aspiration formation and change. To address this limitation, I probed respondents' past experiences related to their future projections. Third, focusing on a group of young people from similar structural and cultural contexts enables me to examine the complexity of future projections, but future research is needed to pinpoint the effects of meso-level factors, such as the gender division of labor in households and labor participation in the community, on aspirations and expectations.

I conducted data analysis in four steps. First, I compiled all passages describing long-term futures and short-term futures, respectively. Following existing practice (Frye 2012), I coded these passages as aspirations when respondents used words such as "hope" (xiwang), "want" (xiang or xiangyao), and "aspire" (xiangwang) and expectations when respondents used words like "plan" (dasuan or jihua), "think" (juede), and "likely to" (dagai/keneng). Second, guided by literature reviewed earlier, I coded statements as structural/rational when respondents invoked past/present situations, such as academic performances and economic resources, as determinants of or justifications for aspirations and expectations. I coded statements as cultural/moral when respondents talked about futures as a way to overcome current constraints or when respondents projected futures regardless of chances of achievement even after further probing (Deterding 2015). Third, I compared long-term and short-term futures within and between individual respondents to identify dominant modes of future projection used in each time frame and to discern contextual factors related to the formation of future projections. Lastly, seeing gender differences emerging, I compared future projections and past experiences between genders to understand how gender differences arose.

[3] See Zhao and Parolin (2012) for a review of research on rural boarding schools in China.
[4] Four respondents lived with only their fathers and did not report their mothers' work status either because of their mothers' early death or their parents' divorce.

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FINDINGS

In this section, I present how respondents' descriptions of their futures differed across time frames. In the short-term—immediately following graduation of ninth grade—constraints from academic performance and economic resources factored heavily in respondents' plans, leading a majority of them to project entry into the labor market or attending vocational high school, even though academic high school was believed to grant higher moral status. In the long term—when thinking about their adult lives—respondents projected obtaining different lives than what they had and becoming a different kind of person from people they knew, despite current challenges. I also unpack how gender differences in both long-term and short-term future projections emerged from gendered family obligations and labor market opportunities.

Short-Term Futures: Considering Practical Constraints

When discussing short-term futures roughly one year ahead, most respondents (23 out of 31) reported a belief in the superior moral status of academic high school students, citing their ability to more easily "find a job," "pursue individual dreams," or expressing a normative belief that the academic track is "better" without articulating their reasons.

Given this shared belief in academic high school as the morally worthy path, if projections of imagined futures were operating in the short term, we would expect academic high school to figure prominently in respondents' post-graduation plans. This, however, is far from what happened. While expressing some lingering hope for entering academic high schools, most respondents (22 out of 31) projected that, after finishing ninth grade, they would either attend vocational high school or *dagong* (paid migrant work in urban areas). These respondents based their short-term projects on an assessment of their academic abilities and calculations of economic cost and benefit. For example, when asked about plans after graduating from middle school, Wei, who experienced a decline in academic performance and economic constraints from parental migrant labor, said the following:

> I think, I'll probably go *dagong*, or something like that. Or maybe I'll go to Beijing to attend computer school.... My mom wants me to go to high school, the best high school in the county, but I feel I don't have that ability. My mom said if not [going to high school] then go *dagong*. So, we considered the track of *dagong*. My dad is in Beijing. He said a lot of young people went to a vocational school called [Sunrise], but I think the tuition is too high. My dad said how about I go study computer. I don't know. We'll see after ninth grade.

For most respondents, like Wei, consideration of academic ability and economic constraints prompted them to consider either vocational school or *dagong*. While these young people understood the moral implications of these short-term plans, they used their experiences of educational and economic constraints in the past and present to gauge what would be possible for the short-term future.

A small number of respondents (9 out of 31) did report aspirations to attend academic high schools, but these aspirations seemed to have emerged from similar practical considerations of academic performance and economic resources. Some of these respondents had maintained high academic performance or still believed they could improve their performance. Others seemed to enjoy family economic support regardless of academic performance: "My dad said he'll send me to academic high school no matter what. If I can't test my way into one, he'll pay for it."[5] Statements like this indicate that these youths formed aspirations based on relaxed economic constraints.

While realizing the opportunity to attend academic high schools diminished for most respondents, boys and girls constructed divergent short-term futures in the face of this structural constraint. Most of the boys (12 out of 17) projected the beginning of *dagong*, a short-term plan they understood

[5] Some local academic high schools charge additional fees to accept low-performing students who fail to pass minimum score requirements in high school entrance exams. This option, however, is not available to most respondents given their limited family economic resources.

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would lead to bleak long-term life prospects. For example, Ruoteng experienced an academic decline following multiple school transfers due to changes in his parents' employment locations. Recently, Ruoteng's parents bought a new apartment in the city where they worked but found themselves without additional savings for interior furnishings. In this context, Ruoteng projected his short-term future as follows:

> *Interviewer:* Have your parents talked to you [about plans after graduating]?
> *Ruoteng:* After finishing ninth grade, I said I wanted to go *dagong* after ninth grade. My mom didn't allow me to *dagong*. She wanted me to attend vocational school.
> *Interviewer:* You said you wanted to *dagong*?
> *Ruoteng:* Yes because I wanted to help my parents make more money.
> *Interviewer:* Since when have you had this thought?
> *Ruoteng:* Since [I started] middle school. I have never thought of it this way before [middle school].
> *Interviewer:* What job do you want to do if you *dagong*?
> *Ruoteng:* Just do whatever I can do. I have talked to my mom before. Last winter break I told my mom I didn't want to go to school anymore. I wanted to go *dagong* and make more money for mom. My mom said [she] didn't need me to go [*dagong*] and my job was to study well. I said I couldn't learn anything. My mom said I had to study. Even if I can't learn stuff, I had to finish middle school. I said finishing middle school is just a waste of money. My mom said [we'll] waste if it's a waste.

Despite his mother's encouragement to stay in school, Ruoteng, prompted by academic and economic challenges, viewed *dagong* as his best option in the short-term. Despite his belief in education's power to bring a better life mentioned later in the interview, thinking realistically about the financial costs of continuing school and his academic challenges led Ruoteng to see further education as a barrier to meeting his family's short-term economic needs.

While some boys, like Ruoteng, talked about aspiring to work in the short term, others believed they had no choice but to start working due to the lack of opportunities for further schooling. For example, Ruxuan expressed his belief in the power of education by saying he wanted to "study well so that I would not have to do workers' jobs." But when asked about the short term, Ruxuan primarily considered his low academic performance as a determinant:

> *Interviewer:* Where will you go after graduating?
> *Ruxuan:* I want to study hard and take the high school entrance exam. I don't mind if I go to a good high school or a bad one. If I pass, I'll go. If I can't go to school, then I'll go *dagong*.
> *Interviewer:* How likely is it for you to go to high school?
> *Ruxuan:* I guess very little possibility.
> *Interviewer:* Why?
> *Ruxuan:* [My] test scores keep dropping. I'm afraid I can't pass the exam. I don't have any more confidence.

Recognizing the realities of his academic performance, Ruxuan envisioned *dagong* as a more salient and reasonable option, despite his belief in the value of education in the long term. Compared to Ruoteng, who expressed the intent to *dagong* to alleviate familial economic strains, Ruxuan viewed the nearing of migrant work more as externally imposed by the upcoming exam, a prospect he "couldn't accept." Nonetheless, they both projected short-term futures contradictory to their beliefs about the advantages of academic-track education.

In contrast to the boys, most girls (12 out of 14) talked about short-term plans to continue schooling, with the majority leaning toward attending vocational high schools, even though boys (10 out of 17) and girls (11 out of 14) both reported low academic performance in recent months. These girls constructed their short-term realistic futures involving vocational high school attendance, which they saw as a viable pathway to improved labor market prospects. For example, in the face of declining academic performance, Jingyi aspired to attend vocational schools over academic ones, based on

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evaluations of her academic ability: "I can learn what I want to learn in vocational high school. I can study more when I'm interested [in the materials]. I'll have a lot of pressure if I go to an academic high school. I can't understand most of the stuff [taught there]. Then it's also hard to go to college."

Girls and their parents also considered the job market prospects of vocational high school graduates in projecting short-term futures. For example, Mei recounted how she formed a post-graduation plan to go to a vocational nursing school:

> Earlier this year, my mom asked me if there is any chance I would be able to go to an academic high school. I said there is no chance. [My mom said] if I can't go to an academic high school, they'll send me to a vocational school. They'll keep me in school no matter what.... Then my mom suggested I go to nursing school and become a nurse. My big sister told me to go to a [teacher training school]. My second sister said I should study electronics.

Among these options, Mei decided to go to nursing school because "I could help if family members get sick." This case indicates that as the chances to attend academic high schools diminished, girls and their families considered a set of decent job opportunities that vocational training would lead them to.

Long-Term Futures: Distinguishing Future Selves from Rural Origins

If respondents considered the costs, benefits, and probabilities of achieving something in the long term as much as they did in the short term, we would expect respondents to think about what *dagong* (for boys) and vocational school education (for girls) would lead to—jobs in the lower end of the occupational ladder and financially unstable lives (Koo 2016). This, however, is not what interviewees reported. In the long term, respondents projected future selves distinct from what they had experienced growing up, expressing a moral urge to become a different kind of person most fully when asked about long-term possible futures beyond the confinement of current limitations.

When asked about ideal long-term futures, most respondents (14 out of 17 boys and 12 out of 14 girls) said that they would eventually prefer to lead lives different from the current one and be a different kind of person than most of the people they knew. They also viewed education as a crucial part of that future, for schooling would enable the pursuit of a different kind of life and signal the status as an education-oriented person. For example, Zhiguo, a boy, stated the importance of education for achieving his long-term future goals.

> *Interviewer:* Can you describe the ideal life you want to live in the future?
> *Zhiguo:* To go find a stable job and live well my everyday life.
> Interviewer: What job do you want to do?
> *Zhiguo:* White-collar [jobs] like in a company.
> *Interviewer:* Can you describe more specifically?
> *Zhiguo:* Going to work in a company and doing my job while sitting down every day.... Working and getting paid while sitting down every day is not that tiring.
> *Interviewer:* What plans do you have in order to have a white-collar job?
> *Zhiguo:* Go to college. Keep studying.

Zhiguo imagined a long-term career that would allow him to spend his workdays "sitting down." He attributed an essential role to education in achieving this goal, saying: "If I go to college, [I can] achieve my dreams. If not going to college, I can only do things that I have to do." His belief in education as the way to transcend his rural origin was made more explicit when he said, "Those who don't go to school will do farming, the same job as our father's generation. [If going to school] they won't go on the same path as our father's generation." Like Zhiguo, most of the boys recognized the importance of education for achieving their long-term occupational and life goals.

Girls also pointed to education as a crucial pathway to becoming a different kind of person in the long term. For example, Mei, a girl discussed earlier, presented continued education as a way to become different from other rural people, who, in her view, "are okay with just earning an acceptable life and don't have any goals or aspirations":

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> In their eyes, if kids don't want to continue schooling, they won't force them to and will just let them go home and work on the farm. I know a boy who is the same age as me. He didn't continue schooling after elementary school. His father let him go home and work on the farm. He also went *dagong* for a year. I think if he had gone to school back then he wouldn't have become like this now.

Like many other girls, Mei aspired to becoming a different kind of person even though she did not know what that future would look like concretely. The girls tried to define themselves as school-goers, as opposed to the numerous migrant workers they have known in their communities.

Boys and girls differed, however, in what their ideal long-term future lives and jobs looked like. Most boys (13 out of 17) mentioned economic stability and non-manual labor as defining features of long-term ideal life. They also used the lack of physical demands and economic returns to distinguish desirable and undesirable jobs. All the boys were able to identify jobs they did not want, namely physical manual labor and agricultural work, citing their own or their family members' work experiences to explain their strong aversions to such jobs: "[Farming] was exhausting with the sun burning all along"; "You plant and weed the vegetables over and over again and you have work to do every day." Construction work is "too exhausting and too dangerous." In expressing their strong aversions, these boys distanced themselves from the world of work they knew. When asked about desired occupations, however, fewer boys (12 out of 17) were able to articulate. Some of these boys described aspirations to specific jobs varying in occupational status, such as cook, glass maker, and software developer, but converged in their reasons for selecting these jobs – their lack of physical demands and promising income. Others found it difficult to specify jobs they wanted and thus relied on moral meanings to distinguish future selves from hard manual labor, articulating aspirations to "doing jobs better than workers" and "white-collar jobs" because "uneducated people work in factories and farmlands and educated people work in offices."

Girls also aspired to lives different from those they saw around them. Their ideal futures, however, were even vaguer than those of the boys. Many girls (7 out of 14) found it difficult to even imagine a long-term ideal future, responding to the question by saying "I don't know," or "I have never thought about it." Despite having clear short-term plans for further schooling, these girls found it hard to envision where education would lead them, in part because the experiences of their mothers, peers, and other women in their community offered little reference for such success. Thus, when imagining their ideal futures, girls who did provide answers beyond "I don't know" (7 out of 14) offered images of middle-class urban lifestyles, such as to "live in a nice house" or "have a car" or wanting to have a life "without ups and downs"—the kind they had likely seen depicted on television or in other media.

With respect to ideal occupational futures, girls also distinguished themselves from their limiting current experiences. Unlike boys who used work experiences of adult men in their communities as reference points to imagine desirable (i.e., non-manual and well-paying) and undesirable (i.e., physically demanding and unstable) occupations, girls rarely mentioned adult women in their communities as points of comparison. Instead, these girls turned to working women they came to know outside of their communities as reference points for occupational futures, emphasizing psychological satisfaction, rather than physical demand and economic returns, as a criterion to select desirable and undesirable jobs. Half of the girls mentioned teachers (especially at the middle school level) as an undesirable occupation, referring to their own instructors' jobs as "boring," and their teachers as "often upset by students," "not well liked by students." Slightly more girls (9 of 14) did mention jobs they wanted. Those jobs included not only gender-typical (but relatively high-status, at least in rural areas) occupations such as nurse and early childhood educator but also jobs that were rare for women in their community, such as painter, actress, and music teacher. Unlike boys who focused on physical and economic aspects of work, girls selected these jobs based on anticipated psychological satisfaction, citing that they "liked" working in these fields.

Why Did Boys and Girls Project Different Futures?

Respondents' projected futures not only differed across time frames but also between genders within each time frame. Below I unpack how these gender differences emerged from gendered expectations and experiences of boys and girls in their local communities.

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It is important to note first that boys and girls converged in their beliefs in the power of academic-track education to bring about life improvement, a generic cultural narrative that schools and families promoted. Most boys and girls reported that their parents, siblings, and sometimes extended family members championed the idea that education leads to a better life, without specifying possible career paths. Predominantly having obtained only some middle school education, these family members often cited their current degrading work experiences as proof of the importance of education to one's life trajectory. For example, many respondents reported that their parents and elder siblings, who were working low-wage manufacturing and service jobs, told them to "stay in school and not become like me." At school, respondents reported, the homeroom teacher highlighted attending academic high school as the only legitimate pathway to becoming a worthy person, emphasizing that only those who "wanted to go to academic high school" deserved better classroom seats, dorm rooms with other "good" students, and teachers' attention and guidance.

Yet, as declining academic performances rendered this generic narrative ineffective in guiding boys' and girls' short-term decisions, why did they project different next steps (i.e., *dagong* vs. vocational school)? My analysis suggests that these patterns emerged from gendered family obligations (i.e., boys providing financial support; girls providing caregiving support) and gendered occupational opportunities. As chances of attending academic high schools decreased, boys felt obligated to become economically independent and contribute to the family economy, positioning themselves as ready participants in the world of work and as central financial contributors to the family. For example, some boys envisioned *dagong* to gain economic independence: "I wanted to earn money for myself. I don't want to spend my parents' money." Others formed their plans in response to family pressure: "Two or three weeks ago, I got sick. I was leaning on the headboard of the bed and my mom was sitting beside me. She asked me if I can still learn something in school. I said I can't learn anything. Then she said I should go *dagong* in the summer." The gendered expectation of becoming a responsible young man encouraged the boys to choose the path of *dagong.* In comparison, boys and their families did not see clear economic returns from attending vocational high schools in the short term, with three boys mentioning this possibility while unable to articulate what fields they would enter and what returns vocational school would generate.

By contrast, girls did not face obligations to contribute financially to the family but instead are expected to take on caregiving responsibilities. Many girls reported that they regularly took on household labor, such as cooking, housekeeping, and caring for younger siblings, while only two of them reported desires to *dagong* either in the upcoming summer break or after finishing ninth grade. All but two girls reported their parents pushed for continued education beyond middle school despite limited possibilities of entering an academic high school. For example, girls mentioned that when hearing that hopes for academic high school had diminished, their parents "brought up nursing school" or said "they'd send me to a vocational school." These patterns indicate that girls, unlike the boys, perceived an expectation to focus on educational pursuit regardless of academic performance, viewing receiving financial support and career guidance from their families as appropriate at this age. Furthermore, gendered occupational structures presented realistic pathways for girls to obtain middle-class jobs through vocational education. Six out of 14 girls articulated aspirations to attend specific vocational training programs, particularly in female-dominated occupations such as healthcare and early childhood education. These girls learned from their parents or extended family members that entering these programs would allow them to "get jobs if they study well" and "earn [a] good salary." Another four believed that vocational training, as opposed to academic schooling, would improve job market prospects in general: "if I go to a vocational high school, I will be studying what I want to learn. That way, I can learn more. Then finding a job will be easier."

Both boys and girls aspired to becoming different from rural origins through educational pursuit in the long term, but why did becoming different mean different things for boys and girls? Findings indicate that boys and girls turned to their gendered experiences of the labor market as reference points for projecting ideal long-term futures as the generic cultural narrative about education as a pathway to life improvement offered limited concrete guidance. Boys learned about work experiences on manual labor jobs from their family members and peers: "[My brother] told me to study hard and not to *dagong* right after middle school as he did. [He's] tired and scolded [by his boss] every day." Many of the boys themselves also had concrete experiences of physically demanding, low-income

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work, including agricultural work (14 out of 17) and experiences or plans of *dagong* during summer breaks (5 out of 17). Some willingly took on these jobs to reduce their parents' workload and to contribute to the family economy; others participated only at their parents' request. For both groups, the words they most frequently used to describe their jobs were "exhausting" and "tedious." Thus, when imagining their ideal futures, these boys focused on their preference to avoid such hardship through less physically demanding jobs with stable incomes.

The girls grew up with different experiences and conceptions of work, which led them to think of ideal lives and occupations differently. Women in their local communities were either stay-at-home mothers who, in respondents' views, "do not have a job," or younger women participating in *dagong* who were described as completely different from education-oriented schoolgirls. Neither of these appearing as a career possibility at this point, women teachers in their school and other female-typical jobs, such as nursing and early childhood education, emerged as girls' frames of reference. Girls were also less likely to participate in family farm work, and, when they did, they were usually responsible for less physically demanding tasks such as sorting, packaging, and cleaning. Thus, unlike boys, girls did not have direct experience or face the imminent prospect of manual labor jobs. Rather, seeing their teachers' work and learning about female-typical occupations from their families, girls came to focus on the psychological aspect of work in their imaginings of future occupations.[6]

In sum, while downward academic trajectories underpinned both boys' and girls' short-term futures, the gendered family obligations and occupational opportunities contributed to boys' and girls' dissimilar post-graduation plans. Although boys and girls both believed in the power of education for future life improvement, their different experiences of paid work helped produce their different goals for work and life in the long term.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Sociologists have long debated whether disadvantaged youth hold high or low aspirations relative to what is likely to happen. While structural and rational choice theorists contend that individuals from underprivileged social positions form depressed aspirations, cultural sociologists argue that disadvantaged young people may express high aspirations to claim themselves as worthy in the present. To resolve this tension, I argued that bringing time frames into the study of aspirations and expectations helps to unpack the conditions under which young people are likely to use a specific mode of future projection. Using the case of young people in rural China, I found that respondents imagined upward mobility in the long term, distinguishing themselves from their rural origins, while they considered realistic possibilities in the short term, constrained by their family economic conditions and their academic performances. These findings demonstrate that studying time frames as an important dimension of future projections allows researchers to recast different modes of future projection underlying structural, rational choice, and cultural models (i.e., realistic futures versus imagined futures) as complementary cognitive heuristics that people tend to use in short-term versus long-term futures, respectively.

To be sure, to say long-term futures tend to be idealistic does not mean that they are divorced from structural realities. Rather, young people construct imagined futures with respect to the constraints and opportunities they experience and perceive, as exemplified by most boys and girls in my sample who turned to career possibilities they knew as reference points for imagining desirable and undesirable occupations. In the same vein, to say short-term futures are realistic does not mean they lack moral considerations. Rather, realistic short-term futures are infused with moral claims about who they are, as shown in boys projecting themselves as economically responsible family members and in girls persisting in their educational pursuit when constructing their short-term futures. This observation further demonstrates that disadvantaged youth do not become either moral beings or rational actors, as earlier research might suggest (Frye 2012). Rather, within a specific time frame, people use one mode of future thinking primarily, with input from other situational or moral imperatives.

[6] While existing research on return women migrants in China suggests that marriage figures prominently in their aspirations (Chuang 2016), in my sample of middle-school students, only two out of 14 girls mentioned marriage when asked open-endedly about a long-term ideal future. In both cases, much like in Frye's (2012) study, they presented themselves as more education-oriented and thus planning to delay marriage, as opposed to other girls in their villages who married early.

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Taking time frames seriously provides a useful guide for scholars studying aspirations and expectations in other contexts. My findings suggest that when opportunity structures contradict cultural ideals, young people are likely to think about short-term futures realistically and long-term futures idealistically, granted that what short-term and long-term mean may vary across contexts. Such contradiction characterizes the challenges facing many young people around the globe, given the rising economic inequality and neoliberal ideology preaching individual responsibilities. Under such conditions, realizing structural constraints in the short-term future may precisely prompt a construction of moral selves in the long term as perceived moral worthiness may help young people cope with immediate challenges. Across cultural and geographical contexts, researchers can investigate under what conditions short-term challenges are associated with ambitious or modest long-term futures and their respective mental health consequences.

Examining futures in different time frames also helps us better understand the formation of aspirations from the intersection of structural positions and cultural contexts. Existing theories of aspiration and expectation formation typically conceive of cultural beliefs about social mobility and structural constraints on realizing mobility as competing factors. Depending on how realistic future projections appear to be, scholars argue that one factor outweighs the other, often without clear theoretical guidance as to why that is. Incorporating time frames into the analysis of aspirations and expectations can help us form specific hypotheses about culture's more prominent role in shaping long-term futures and structure's strong impacts on short-term futures. These theoretical hypotheses will also help to guide researchers on aspirations and expectations in measurement design and cross-case comparisons.

Additionally, my paper contributes to a growing literature on the value of incorporating temporality into stratification research by highlighting how investigating time frames of future projections helps us connect cultural beliefs to educational decisions and mobility outcomes (Hitlin and Johnson 2015; Johnson and Hitlin 2017). Prior studies document that young people in disadvantaged situations may make decisions that diminish their chances of socioeconomic attainment despite holding cultural beliefs about social mobility (Harding 2010; Young 2011). This paper illustrates two ways in which cultural beliefs may lead to those decisions. On the one hand, it shows that while cultural beliefs about the importance of educational achievement may figure prominently in long-term futures (Frye 2012), they are less effective in shaping short-term futures that may affect educational decision-making directly. On the other hand, having only one undetailed script centering around educational pursuit may lead to damaged self-evaluations when structural circumstances limit opportunities for academic success, paving the way for educational decisions that reflect (and likely sustain) their perceived subordinate positions in society. Future research should continue investigating mechanisms through which cultural models inform career decisions.

Bringing temporality into the study of aspirations is long overdue. By conceptualizing aspirations as a temporal structure, researchers can go beyond the debate over whether young people are constrained or agentic in their thoughts and behaviors and better understand the complexity of human cognitions and actions. Multiple aspirations in differing time frames reflect young people's hopes and fears in a fast-changing world, at once maintaining inequality and opening doors for social mobility.

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