



## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Brooke J. Dolenc for the degree of Master of Science in Human Development and Family Studies presented on June 3, 2009.

Title: Coming of Age in Rural America: Sense of Purpose, Coping, and Perceived Progress toward Adulthood

Abstract approved:

---

Richard A. Settersten, Jr.

Individuals in their 20s today have more diverse experiences with school, work, and family transitions than previous cohorts. Contemporary young adults take longer to finish school, settle into marriages or partnerships, and begin parenting; they frequently change jobs or hold multiple part-time positions. Little is known about how young adults evaluate their progress toward adulthood in light of these prolonged and variable transitions, especially among rural youth. Rural communities are often idealized as being supportive of youth, yet rural communities also bring limited opportunities and unique challenges for young people. This study examines perceptions of progress toward adulthood among 201 young adults aged 18-32 who were raised in a rural setting. Using survey data and path analyses, the project explores how perceived progress toward adulthood is shaped by community support, adult transitions (e.g., living apart from parents), sense of purpose, and proactive coping. Results indicate that those who have a more purposeful outlook and stronger coping skills also have a stronger sense of progress toward adulthood. In addition, the achievement of a greater number of transitions

indirectly influences perceived progress toward adulthood through sense of purpose and proactive coping. Participants who feel more supported by their community also have stronger proactive coping skills. These mitigating factors yield insights into how families, schools, and communities might facilitate a more stable transition to adulthood for rural youth.

©Copyright by Brooke J. Dolenc  
June 3, 2009  
All Rights Reserved

Coming of Age in Rural America:  
Sense of Purpose, Coping, and Perceived Progress toward Adulthood

by  
Brooke J. Dolenc

A THESIS  
submitted to  
Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the  
degree of

Master of Science

Presented June 3, 2009  
Commencement June 2010

Master of Science thesis of Brooke J. Dolenc presented on June 3, 2009.

APPROVED:

---

Major Professor, representing Human Development and Family Studies

---

Chair of the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences

---

Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

---

Brooke J. Dolenc, Author

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express sincere gratitude to all who have provided support, guidance, and belief in me on the journey to this degree. First, I want to thank my major professor, Dr. Richard Settersten, for his support, creativity, guidance, and assistance. Thank you for encouraging me and allowing me to experiment with new ideas throughout this process. Secondly, I would like to thank Dr. Katherine MacTavish and Dr. Samuel Vuchinich for sharing their knowledge, insight, and passion on rural communities and statistics with me. In addition, I would like to thank my fiancé, Jonathan Nott, for tireless help with data collection and management and kindly listening to all my ideas. Thank you for the continuous patience and care throughout this process; your character and steadiness inspire my work. I extend a deep appreciation for the support, love, and guidance of my parents, brothers, and their families, without your support and belief in me, I would not be here today. Thank you all for modeling a strong work ethic balanced with family time. I would also like to acknowledge the support of all the friends who have been beside me in this process. Thank you to the many friends who helped in data collection and participant recruitment; above all, you have been a constant source of encouragement and joy. And lastly, I would like to thank the professors at Whitworth University who encouraged me to continue my education and instilled in me a passion for learning and justice.

## CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORS

Dr. Richard Settersten was involved in the design of the study and manuscript. He also provided editorial comments on the manuscript and suggestions on the interpretation of the findings. Dr. Samuel Vuchinich provided suggestions on the data analysis and editorial comments on the manuscript. Dr. Katherine MacTavish was involved in the design and editing of the manuscript.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Schemas on Young Adulthood .....	3
Coming of Age: Growing Up Rural .....	5
Structural and Individual Factors.....	6
Protective Psychological Characteristics .....	7
Theoretical Perspectives .....	8
Research Questions.....	9
Coming of Age: Perceived Progress and Transition Markers .....	10
Individual Characteristics: Sense of Purpose .....	16
Individual Characteristics: Proactive Coping Skills .....	19
Community Context.....	21
Family and Individual Background Variables .....	26
Analytical Aims and Hypotheses.....	28
Method.....	30
Study Design.....	30
Sample Recruitment.....	30
Sample Characteristics.....	30
Site Characteristics .....	31
Questionnaire .....	33
Data Analysis Strategy .....	35

## TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

	<u>Page</u>
Chapter 2: Manuscript .....	36
Coming of Age: Enduring Change .....	36
Schemas on Young Adulthood .....	38
Coming of Age: Growing Up Rural .....	39
Protective Psychological Characteristics .....	41
Theoretical Perspectives .....	41
Research Questions.....	42
Coming of Age: Perceived Progress and Transition Markers .....	43
Individual Characteristics: Sense of Purpose and Proactive Coping.....	46
Community Context.....	48
Family and Individual Background Variables .....	50
Analytical Aims and Hypotheses.....	51
Method.....	52
Study Design.....	52
Sample Recruitment.....	53
Sample Characteristics.....	54
Questionnaire .....	55
Demographic and Community Questions.....	55
Community Support.....	55
Perceived Progress Toward Adult Goals .....	56
Transition Markers.....	56

## TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

	<u>Page</u>
Sense of Purpose.....	57
Proactive Coping Proactive .....	58
Depression .....	58
Self-efficacy.....	58
 Data Analysis Strategy .....	59
 Results.....	60
Young Adults Perceived Progress in Adulthood Measure .....	61
Path Analysis .....	63
 Discussion.....	64
Limitations .....	70
Practical Implications .....	72
 References.....	82
 Chapter 3: Conclusion .....	90
Limitations .....	99
Why Study Subjective States? .....	99
Subjective States Matter for Young People.....	99
Practical Implications .....	102
 References.....	105

## LIST OF TABLES

<u>Table</u>	<u>Page</u>
1. Young Adult Demographic Variables: Descriptive Statistics .....	74
2. Model Variables: Descriptive Statistics and Sample Questions.....	75
3. Correlations between Background, Predictor, and Outcome Variables .....	77
4. Unstandardized Coefficients, Standard Errors, and Standardized Coefficients of Direct and Indirect Paths.....	78

## LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figures</u>	<u>Page</u>
1.1. Hypothesized Path Model Leading to Progress toward Adulthood .....	10
1.2. Hypothesized Path Model with Corresponding Hypothesized Paths. ....	29
2.1. Hypothesized Path Model Leading to Progress toward Adulthood.....	43
2.2. Path Model of Background Variables, Transition Markers, Sense of Purpose, and Proactive Coping Skills on Perceived Progress toward Adult Goals .....	80

## Coming of Age in Rural America:

### Sense of Purpose, Coping, and Perceived Progress toward Adulthood

#### Chapter 1: Introduction

##### *Coming of Age: External Changes*

Young adults in their 20s experience a more diversified and unreliable social landscape related to career paths, educational attainment, and traditional timing of “adult events” compared to previous cohorts in the last 50 years (Osgood, Ruth, Eccles, Jacobs, & Barber, 2005). Young adulthood is not only different from prior generations but is less uniform. A “typical” route between the teenage years and reaching adult status no longer exists. Young people today take longer to finish school, settle into marriages or partnerships, and begin parenting (Settersten, 2007; Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005). They attend school and work simultaneously and frequently change jobs or hold several part-time positions.

The overarching expectations related to the attainment of traditional adult markers by certain ages and lockstep patterns of transitioning into adulthood (i.e., education, career, and marriage) are not congruent with what actually occurs for contemporary young adults. Out-dated societal expectations of young adults and their expectations of themselves frequently do not match their objective experiences. The varied paths and required plasticity of young adults is often not supported in archaic social structures, such as a lack of health insurance for the part-time jobs young adults often hold (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005). Local and global job market trends, demands for increased education,

and changing views of family, marriage, and childbearing require new skills and resources of young people. Young adults endure a great sense of instability because of these new, different, and unclear experiences; they are taking new pathways into adulthood, and they are doing so in a world that has changed considerably (Settersten, 2007). This new backdrop begs researchers, policy makers, and educators to more clearly understand what is happening in the lives of young adults.

### *Coming of Age: Internal Changes*

Overall, several gaps in research on young people's transition to adulthood currently exist. According to Frank Furstenberg, "this era from the late teens to the early 30s is a poorly understood period. We don't know what's going on in the minds and hearts of young adults and how their perceptions change, of themselves and others, as they navigate young adulthood" (MacArthur Research Network, 2005, p. 4). In many developed countries, youth express ambivalence about their transition to adulthood and question their preparedness for this transition. In the United States, it is reported that at least 200,000 – 300,000 young people do not effectively transition to independent adulthood by the time they are 25 and remain economically and socially disconnected from society (Wald & Martinez, 2003).

The new social, economic, and cultural experiences of young adults are also exacerbated by the *first time transitions* characteristic of the movement from adolescence into young adulthood, such as moving out of the house, paying bills, graduating from school, purchasing a house or car, and initiating long-term relationships. Similar events help narrate the entire life course, but young adults uniquely experience such transitions

rapidly, in volume, and as novices (Berry, 2004; Settersten, 2005). Many young adults are adrift or feel adrift as they endure these new experiences.

Given these internal and external changes, concerns about youth transitioning into adulthood in a manner that positively engages them with society are well founded. Where are young people headed as they transition to adulthood? In addition, do they have the skills, resources, and supports to get where they are headed? These questions become even more important as the experiences in young adulthood help form the subsequent life course (Settersten, 2007; Gore, Aseltine, Colten, & Lin, 1997).

### *Schemas on Young Adulthood*

Young adulthood is a time of kaleidoscopic internal and external changes; thus, several researchers have proposed schemas about this changing developmental phase (Berry, 2004). Arnett (2000) has pointed to three aspects of what he labels “emerging adulthood,” including demographic, subjective, and identity changes, making young adulthood a distinct developmental phase. Demographically, young adults are experiencing a myriad of markers different from other developmental phases: the ending of school and/or beginning of higher education, first time jobs, and initiation of long-term relationships. The new events, however, are experienced in great diversity by young adults. According to Arnett (2000), young adults have a broad scope of opportunities before them and are less constrained by roles compared to other life phases. The result, Arnett (2000) argues, is the present diversity of experiences in young adulthood.

Subjectively, young adults are ambivalent about their adult status. Often a semantic match to their development phase is hard to articulate, as most individuals report feeling

adult-like in some areas and not adult-like in other areas (Molgat, 2007; Arnett, 2007; Shanahan, Porfeli, Mortimer, & Erickson, 2005). Experiences in young adulthood may feel convoluted for individuals because of this developmental subjectivity. The subjective sense of feeling adult-like is often unrelated to the demographic status changes of young people (Arnett, 2000). Young adults are more likely to report “responsibility” and “independence” as accounting for their adult status as opposed to demographic changes such as, parenthood, marriage, and educational attainment.

Heightened identity development is also occurring for young adults in the areas of romantic relationships, work, and worldviews. According to Arnett (2000), young adulthood offers the most varied opportunities related to such domains and the identity exploration usually characteristic of adolescence is an even more serious pursuit for young adults. Arnett (2000) argues that because of the aforementioned demographic changes, subjectivity around feeling adult-like, and identity explorations, a new developmental phase has emerged for young adults.

On the other hand, researchers argue that the variation of experiences in young adulthood is primarily due to institutional and social contextual changes, including social class, gender, education and locality, which have increasingly impacted young adults. The timing and speed of young people’s new transitions is dependent upon these institutional and structural factors. Several researchers argue that Arnett’s concept of “emerging adulthood” does not give legitimate attention to social class, gender, education, and locality influences in young adulthood (Bynner, 2005). Côté and Bynner (2008) emphasize that young people are not necessarily choosing their varied pathways, but their human

capital directly restricts and affords multiple pathways for young people into adulthood.

The individualization giving young people access to unlimited exploration of identity, aspirations, and experiences described by Arnett (2007) as central to young adulthood is constrained by social and cultural structures. Not all young adults have been given the same opportunities or privilege of exploration during this phase, including more disadvantaged populations of youth, such as foster care, disabled, juvenile offender, homeless, and rural youth (Settersten, 2007).

### *Coming of Age: Growing Up Rural*

Specifically, the institutional and social structural influences pertinent to young adults vary for those raised in a rural environment as opposed to other settings. More often than not, youth living in rural areas are at greater risk of societal disconnection (Wald & Martinez, 2003). Rural young people have few options for post secondary schooling and jobs in their hometowns. To be competitive in today's economy, rural young people often face the difficult decision of leaving behind the communities and families they have known, migrating to larger towns and cities where they must confront very different ways of life. Furthermore, researchers have historically identified rural students as having lower expectations and aspirations for education and work-related goals compared to urban youth (Smith, Beaulieu, & Seraphine, 1995). According to Oyserman and Fryber (2006), rural youth lack job opportunities and career role models, leaving these young people more vulnerable in terms of school and work transitions. A study by Crockett, Bingham, and Raymond (2000) showed that rural youth have expectations for earlier adult transitions than youth in urban settings. These youth who choose to have families earlier may be

restricted to their home towns where higher education and job training opportunities to bolster their chances of economic success are limited.

At the same time, the assets of rural communities can provide a strong buffer to youth in the face of such setbacks. Many rural communities provide strong support systems of adults for youth (Elder & Conger, 2000). Strong social supports and the smaller school sizes, characteristic of rural areas, lead to positive social and emotional outcomes in young people. Youth are also often more engaged in small school settings and experience increased school belonging (Crockett, Shanahan, & Jackson-Newsom, 2000).

Rural young people are faced with unique experiences as they move into adulthood, exacerbating the already complex challenges all young adults face. The current social landscape and lack of understanding about young adults' myriad experiences deserve attention from researchers, including investigations of how youth raised in rural environments deal with these new transitions and diversified lifestyles.

### *Structural and Individual Factors*

Previous research on young adults has primarily focused either on structural dimensions such as traditional sociodemographic transition markers, as mentioned, on the one hand, or individual subjective states related to adulthood, such as feelings of responsibility, independence or feeling adult-like, on the other hand (Molgat, 2007). This research seeks to bridge and expand upon both structural and individual dimensions related to young adult development by studying both aspects simultaneously. Demographers address status changes but less is known about what is going on in the minds of young adults. The 20s is presumably about exploration but not everyone has this luxury. What

characterizes rural young people's experiences and other vulnerable youth who have special needs as they transition to adulthood? Past research indicates the sequence and timing of transitions is different for young adults (i.e., often more delayed) and that young adults do not always think of adulthood in terms of transition and status markers. Research, however, on how young adults from a rural place feel about their progress on adult life domains and markers, not simply whether they have attained them or not, is lacking.

### *Protective Psychological Characteristics*

As young adults more frequently find themselves taking new and individualized paths, psychological skills and capacities become very important (Settersten, 2007). Considering protective factors, such as the ways young adults have been supported as youth, use coping skills, and have a sense of purpose in their transition is vital. Given the uncertainty and stressful young adult transition, knowing where one is headed (e.g., purpose) and how to deal with life along the way (e.g., coping skills) is beneficial. Young adults likely profit during the transition to adulthood from a strong sense of purpose providing them the ability to rise above the hardships of their sociohistorical context and their destandardized developmental phase (i.e., unstable job markets, new relationships, and career changes). As Damon (2008) suggests, purpose provides a rudder for life, allowing young adults to have direction. Moreover, having the coping skills to deal with the novel and sometimes tumultuous transitions and the ability to be proactive about healthy life decisions are important concepts during young adulthood (Schulenberg, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 2005). It is not only important for young adults to know where they are going but to have the skills and wherewithal to get there. According to

Reynolds, Boyd, Burge, Harris, and Robbins (2004), “adolescents with a purposive orientation toward life combined with general and practical knowledge have more ambitious career plans, more stable plans in young adulthood and greater educational and occupational achievements by early midlife” (p. abstract).

### *Theoretical Perspectives*

Drawing on longstanding themes related to the ecological model, life course perspective, and theories of resilience that frame development as both changing lives and changing environments, this study investigates individual and contextual level factors important to young adult development. According to dynamic systems and ecological theories, the interaction of youth and their contexts happen on multiple levels bidirectionally and transactionally. Proximal processes, as explained by the bioecological model, are the vehicle of development and vary as a function of person characteristics and environmental forces near and far. Thus, both individual and contextual variables are necessary for understanding the development of young adults (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). At the macro level, the changes in the economy and social landscape require that, at the micro level, young adults be flexible and, at the same time, afford opportunities for them to take many paths to adulthood.

Similarly, the life course perspective stresses the embeddedness of individuals’ lives with others lives in their sociohistorical contexts (Elder & Johnson, 2002). The factors surrounding young adults’ experiences are greatly impacted by their relationships with others. Relational supports can help identity development throughout adolescence influencing the roles, purpose, and skills a youth will experience and take on – leading to

greater well-being in adulthood. In addition, psychosocial resources play an important role in development so people can successfully meet challenges. Both what is within a person and what surrounds them are highly important throughout the entire course of individuals' lives (Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997).

Finally, theories of resilience in adolescence emphasize adaptation emerging from three sources, within an individual, within a family, and the surrounding community of the adolescent. Protective factors from these sources are thought to lead to increased positive outcomes and decreased negative outcomes (Werner, 1993; Masten, 1994; Masten & Obradović, 2006) This study follows the model of identifying sources and pathways of positive development within individuals and in their contexts (Theokas & Lerner, 2006). The settings, relationships, and attributes of youth are vital to their developmental trajectories into adulthood and necessitate progressive research.

### *Research Questions*

Given the background research and theoretical perspectives, this study was framed with the following questions in mind: do young adults raised in an isolated rural community feel like they are making progress in adulthood and what might foreshadow this feeling? Do objective experiences in young adulthood match and/or lead to subjective experiences? Do young people from a rural community know where they are headed in life (sense of purpose) and do they have the wherewithal (coping skills) to get there? Finally, how did their rural community influence them and prepare them for the transitions they face in young adulthood? Both personal and contextual levels are considered in the study by investigating the effects of sociological contextual influences, including transition

markers, perceived rural community support, family of origin social status, gender, and age and psychological protective factors, including sense of purpose and proactive coping skills on perceived progress toward attaining adult goals.

The study had two interrelated goals 1) to investigate a model of relations between sociological and psychological factors and perceived progress toward adulthood and 2) to investigate perceived progress toward adulthood in terms of interrelated life domains (e.g., work, education, finances, relationships, physical health, leisure activities, involvement in community, personal growth, and spirituality). The proposed constructs in the model are described in further detail in the following discussion. The study tested the proposed model of relations in Figure 1.

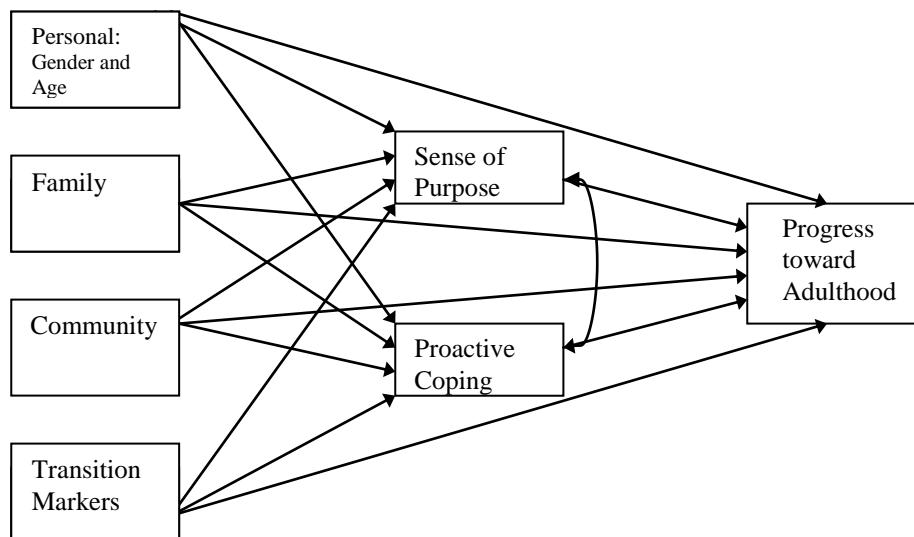


Figure 1. Hypothesized path model leading to progress toward adulthood.

*Note.* Exogenous variables are assumed to correlate; however, these correlational arrows are excluded from the figure for simplicity.

*Coming of Age: Perceived Progress and Transition Markers*

According to Bronfenbrenner, equal emphasis should be placed on objective aspects of context and the subjective experiences of humans as propelling development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) assert, “very few of the external influences significantly affecting human behavior and development can be described solely in objective physical conditions and events” (p. 797). Accordingly, the present study includes both objective and subjective markers of development in young adulthood – young adults’ perceived progress toward adulthood and their transition through sociodemographic markers. As young adults experience excess role changes, it is important to study their mental health; often well-being drops during phases with high rates of changes. According to Gore and colleagues (1997) “this degree of change and the required adjustment, in addition to the normative emphasis placed on the individual’s independent efforts to shape subsequent life course, can be expected to affect young adult mental health” (p. 197). This study investigates both the subjective and structural changes of young adults given the present sociohistorical context.

### *Perceived Progress*

As noted, the bioecological model commends research on subjective states and research to-date has not considered a subjective measure of young adulthood other than the adult status marker and feelings of independence and responsibility. Rather than asking whether or not young adults consider themselves to be adults or feel independent, this study inquires about individuals’ perceived progress toward meeting goals in adulthood and whether they have goals related to specific developmental and societal domains.

Unlike adult status, goal attainment is also known to be associated with positive outcomes. Perceived mastery over personal goals is correlated with life satisfaction and well-being for adolescents and young adults (Krings, Bangerter, Gomez, & Grob, 2008; Haase, Heckhausen, & Kölle, 2008). Research has also shown personal goals that are parallel with an individual's developmental phase and are evaluated positively, are correlated with increased well-being (Shahar, Kalnitzk, Shulman & Blatt, 2006). As such, this positive indicator is important for developmental studies on young adults and is in line with the study's emphasis on positive development.

Accounting for the life course perspective, the sociohistorical context influencing goals for young adults must also be considered. Personal goals are especially important during this destandardized sociohistorical context for young adults (Haase, et al., 2008). The varied pathways of young adults may imply that they are not meeting goals in an age-graded manner, however and more importantly, their goals may simply match the tangible and varied contextual demands, challenges, and successes of the present time. Personal ideals of life do not always correspond to the concrete situations of young adults because of contextual constraints and individual limitations (Nurmi & Salmela-Aro, 2002).

Goal setting and pursuit is influenced by external and internal restraints and opportunities from throughout the microsystem to the macrosystem, such as local economies, temperament, and coping mechanisms (Krings, et al., 2008). The internal attributes of self-efficacy and self-esteem have been shown to associate with goal assessment (Lacković-Grgin, Grgin, Penezić, & Sorić, 2001). It is unknown, however, how psychological mechanisms may mediate external contexts. Psychological mechanisms

as predictors of goal progress, in conjunction with life situations past and present, are lacking in studies for the current population of young adults. Furthermore, if the developmental phase of young adulthood is characterized by the unstable subjectivity around adult status, meeting these age-graded goals in young adulthood may pose a challenge.

Goals are frequently assessed according to life domains and in terms of appraisal (Nurmi, & Salmela-Aro, 2002; Cantor, 1990; Cantor et al., 1987; Little, 1983, 1993). Several psychosocial domains are explored in the present study to measure an overall sense of progress toward adult goals. Sneed, Hamagami, McArdle, Cohen, and Chen (2007) have shown that goals and responsibility in different life domains are interdependent and highly correlated. Thus, in the present study, proposed interrelated domains of perceived progress in adult goals are used as a positive indicator of well-being and the outcome under examination for young adults. This study extends the research to further discover the trends and predictors of goals related to progress for young adults.

### *Transition Markers*

Young adults are experiencing several structural changes; young adulthood is a time with high rates of turning points according to life course theorists (Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997). As discussed previously, young adulthood is in part characterized by the sociodemographic statuses reached throughout a person's 20s. The sociodemographic statuses, often called transition markers are important to regulating goals, as well as goals are important to attaining certain markers (Nurmi & Salmela-Aro, 2002). Individuals try to match their situations and goals. For example, Salmela-Aro, Aunola, and Nurmi (2007)

describe how young adults with more work-related goals find work that matches their educational degree. This interaction is also reciprocal; people adjust their goals to agree with their life situation. The way young adults experience external contexts, such as institutions and demographic transitions, influence their construction of goals and thus, inform this study.

Past research on young adults has primarily focused on certain contextual aspects of the transition to adulthood, including marriage and educational attainment, predicted by background variables, and has not always illuminated the multiple pathways and outcomes of young adulthood. The traditional adult statuses used to gauge the success of young adults are no longer solely appropriate in research on young adults as the traditional statuses do not capture the variability of timing and pathways to adulthood (Osgood et al., 2005). Given the present sociohistorical context, the current young adulthood is represented by various patterns and sequences, often very unpredictable and uncertain patterns, of moving to adult roles. These experiences with adult roles may not even result in young people feeling adult-like, it may be years after such events that young adults actually feel these markers connect to their adulthood (Settersten, in press).

Recent studies on young adults have examined transition markers in several ways. In the past, researchers tended to look at single markers or status changes; more recent studies have considered the importance of looking at markers as a cluster. A clustering of markers likely has more impact on young adults' experience of feeling adult-like compared to any one single marker. Additionally, researchers have investigated when certain transition markers are reached by a certain age and impacts of the aggregate of transition

markers experienced during young adulthood. For example, Schulenberg and colleagues (2005) summed the amount of transition markers young adults experienced based on assumptions from Coleman's Focal Theory (as cited in Schulenberg et al., 2005). The focal theory asserts that adolescents experiencing several transitions simultaneously do not possess the psychological or material resources to handle multiple transitions and are negatively impacted by multiple changes. As opposed to adolescents, young adults who experience more transition markers presumably have the skills and resources to handle such transitions and will be positively impacted by multiple transitions. Indeed, the researchers found young adults who experience more total transition markers exhibited stronger well-being (Schulenberg et al., 2005).

The present study investigated a broad scope and constellation of transition markers, including full-time and part-time statuses, health insurance access, long-term relationships as well as traditional markers in light of domains used in previous research on young adults (Schulenberg et al., 2005; Mouw, 2005). The five domains investigated, include education, work, relationships, finances, and living arrangements. Understanding how the unpredictable transition markers influence young adult's well-being, in terms of progress in young adulthood was a major goal of the study. In particular, the study investigated the link and predictive properties of the objective transition markers on individuals' subjective sense of progress in adulthood by using total transition markers as a predictor of the outcome and mediating variables. Sense of purpose and proactive coping skills likely have developed in individuals at a younger age, but of specific interest to the study was how young adult transition markers would influence these constructs.

*Individual Characteristics: Sense of Purpose*

According to Settersten (2007), “personal characteristics and resources may become increasingly important in determining how young people fare in the face of changing opportunity structures and the absence of institutional support, normative control, and clear life scripts” (p. 253). Individual dispositions and characteristics can help facilitate or inhibit progress and positive outcomes in adulthood. Regarding personal psychological attributes of individuals, the study investigated young adults’ sense of purpose and proactive coping skills. Sense of purpose and proactive coping are considered developmentally generative disposition characteristics of people, as these characteristics are connected with many positive outcomes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003). Sense of purpose and proactive coping are closely connected to individuals’ directive beliefs that they are active agents in their environment. Thus, sense of purpose and proactive coping associate with and propel other developmentally generative person characteristics and align with the study’s positive development model. Consequently, these constructs are main predictors in the present study.

According to Damon et al. (2003), “purpose is a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is both meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self” (p. 121). Individuals’ sense of purpose or the meaning they ascribe to life is fundamentally social and cultural. People make meaning out of relationships, events, personal characteristics, and ultimately interactions with socio-cultural systems. Baumeister (1991) asserts, “a meaning of life can be considered as the outcome of a negotiation between the individual and the social system” (p. 9). Sense of purpose relates

to the human ability to organize life around goals and make order out of varying environments and environmental cues.

The specific purpose in life created by an individual may change. For example, throughout an individual's life a purpose may be to graduate school at one point and at another point to have sustaining relationships or to help others. Sense of purpose, at the same time, is a stable state of being and constant outlook. The state of ascribing meaning is stable even though purpose in life takes on many meanings throughout a person's lifespan. Thus, sense of purpose is a mechanism for individuals to make their unstable and unpredictable lives more controllable by ascribing meaning to life (Baumeister, 1991).

Sense of purpose has typically been studied in older, traumatized or chronically ill populations. Recently, Damon et al. (2003) has promoted the expansion of research regarding sense of purpose in adolescents; the construct is also important and relevant for young adults as they navigate their entry into adulthood. Considering the changing relationships, jobs, and economy for young adults, having a guiding purpose offers stability to this population and interacts with how they assess goals in young adulthood. At the same time, experiencing certain changes in relationships or work (e.g., having a child and new employment) may promote a stronger sense of purpose in young adults. Thus, understanding sense of purpose as it relates to young adults' diverse social landscape informs research on this developmental phase.

As noted, sense of purpose is related to positive outcomes, such as overall well-being, educational and occupational achievement, prosocial behavior, better self-esteem and parenting skills, and improved physical health outcomes (Damon et al., 2003; Keyes,

Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002; Lee, Cohen, Edgar, Laizner, & Gagnon, 2006). Sense of purpose is also negatively associated with psychopathology and depression (Debats, Drost, & Hansen, 1995; Debats, van der Lubbe, & Wezeman, 1993). A person is likely to yield to obstacles if he or she has no sense of purpose in life, thus understanding purpose in young adults facing frequent obstacles is vital.

Predictors of sense of purpose have been cited in varying degrees. Individuals' viewing and assessing their childhood experiences as positive is associated with a firmer sense of purpose. Receiving support and affirmation from adults is related to a stronger sense of purpose in youth. Finally, self-reports of being surrounded by beauty in nature are also associated with a firm sense of purpose (Ishida & Okada, 2006). Related to sociological predictors of sense of purpose, occasional studies have found gender differences in sense of purpose (McAdams, 2001; Schlesinger, Susman & Koenigsberg, 1990). Francis (2000) however, found that gender did not account for variance in sense of purpose for adolescents, similar to other studies indicating that no consensus exists on the role gender plays in this construct for young people (Damon et al., 2003; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006).

Likewise, studies on the influence of age on sense of purpose also remain inconclusive (Meier & Edwards, 1974; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Volanen, Lahelma, Silventoinen, & Suominen, 2004). Related to social status, Morojele and Brook (2004) found higher reports of meaninglessness were correlated with lower SES in South African adolescents. A thorough investigation of ecological and sociological perspectives on predictors of sense of purpose is missing from research (Schnell & Becker, 2006). Thus,

further research on gender, SES, age, and contextual variables is needed to complement existing studies on sense of purpose and to detect its significance in progress for young adults.

#### *Individual Characteristics: Proactive Coping Skills*

Having the coping skills to deal with the novel and unpredictable transitions and the ability to be proactive about healthy life decisions are important concepts during the changing contexts of young adulthood (Schulenberg et al., 2005). Young adults benefit from understanding their life as meaningful but also from having the skills and internal resources to execute their purposes. Related to the ecological model, proactive coping is considered a proximal process in the present study, as it accounts for an individual's interaction with the environment in difficult situations (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Individuals who possess the ability to adjust coping responses to the demands of the environment are able to adapt to various challenges in life (Cheng, 2001). The ways adolescents respond through coping mechanisms plays a mediating role in proximal stressors of adolescents (Lerner & Sternberg, 2004; Kariv & Heiman, 2005). Research specifically on the effects of coping for young adults relating to their demographic changes and progress in adulthood, however, is lacking.

A common approach to conceptualizing coping is to consider two coping forms: problem-focused coping versus emotion-focused coping and/or active coping versus avoidant coping (Lazarus, 1991; Aspinwall, 1997). Proactive coping represents a problem-focused and active type of coping and the positive form of coping investigated in the present study (Schwarzer & Knoll, 2003). Specifically, proactive coping is a regulatory

process where individuals seek to solve problems, anticipate stress, manage emotions, and appraise goal attainment. Proactive coping represents the strategies and resource management undertaken to work toward goals (Aspinwall, 1997). Individuals with proactive coping skills value plasticity, which promotes change and improvement of oneself and one's environment (Greenglass et al., 1999).

Such flexibility and personal resilience in the face of hardship for the current cohort of young adults is vital given their contextual instability (Shahar et al., 2006). The recent changes in the economy and social landscape require that young adults be flexible and, at the same time, affords opportunities for them to take many paths to adulthood (Settersten, 2007). According to Turner and Avison (2003) young adults consistently indicate higher levels of stress compared to older populations.

Coping for the proactive individual is a way of viewing oneself and the world, not simply a one-time response. Such a view of life entails individuals believing that their actions and the responsibility they take in life directly influence their life outcomes. Individuals' sense of their own agency is also closely related to a purposeful outlook. Unlike other coping forms, proactive coping encompasses and uses social and non-social resources including visions about aspirations, positive emotional strategies, and goal setting (Greenglass, 2001). Thus, proactive coping and sense of purpose likely draw upon each other; research linking these constructs is needed.

The role of demographic variables related to proactive coping is indeterminate. Sung, Puskar, and Sereika (2006) found lower levels of seeking guidance coping, a form of proactive coping, in rural male youth. Regarding other forms of coping, studies have

shown that older college students use more task-oriented forms of coping compared to younger students who use more emotion-based coping and avoidance coping (Rawson, Palmer, & Henderson, 1999). Furthermore, some studies indicate women use avoidance coping more than men, but researchers have also found college men use avoidance coping more than college women (Haarr & Morash, 1999; Kariv & Heiman, 2005). Studies have also found that age, gender, and education do not significantly predict proactive coping (Ouwelhand, Ridder, & Bensing, 2006; Albion, Fernie, & Burton, 2005). Consequently, continued research on personal characteristics and contextual variables associated with proactive coping is warranted. Most importantly, examining the intervening role proactive coping skills can play in positive outcomes for young adults, who deal with the stress of changing demographic statuses and status subjectivity, is warranted.

### *Community Context*

The life course connects the past to the present and previous research has shown that childhood experiences are often closely linked with adult outcomes (Elder & Johnson, 2002). Early life events, social connections, and interactions often have magnifying influences on later development. For example, life course theorists assert that trajectories may be defined by stress in childhood compounding over time to maladaptive and other limiting contextual factors later in life (Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997). At the same time, life course trajectories may be defined by support in childhood leading to strong internal generative characteristics and influence well-being in adulthood. Experiences and resources have additive effects from childhood through adulthood, though new influences, turning points, and transitions are interacting on developmental courses as well (Elder &

Johnson, 2002).

Related to the ecological model and life course perspective, the support in the mesosystem obtained from not only the family, but also the schools and surrounding town is evaluated in the study; the lives of individuals are embedded in others lives. At the macro level, the socioeconomic status of the individual's family as relative to other families in the community was appraised, as SES strongly impacts individual and group development. With these concepts in mind, the study considers the strength of past community context and family of origin contexts on young individuals' development into adulthood.

*Youth in a Rural Setting* The unique setting of a rural environment and individuals' interactions with rural living is important for developmental outcomes (Gandara, Gutierrez, & O'Hara, 2001). Based on an ecological framework, different development paths are expected for youth in a rural context as opposed to other environments (Crockett, Shanahan, et al., 2000). Understanding the social institutions and personal attributes of rural youth is vital to helping them develop into healthy adults. The amount of research, however, on people's life experiences in rural areas is discrepantly less than the amount of research conducted on people living in urban areas. Only a limited amount of research exploring the human capital gained by living in a rural area on high school students exists and the impacts of rural living on youths' outcomes beyond high school and into adulthood are even less understood. Moreover, research is inconclusive, weighing both the costs and benefits of the supportive close-knit but sometimes limited resources of rural communities on youth outcomes (Gandara et al., 2001).

The current sociohistorical context is not favorable for most rural communities in the Northwestern United States. Many rural communities are struggling to compete in the global economy. Changes in agriculture, manufacturing, and natural resource management raise several questions about the economic future and changing identities of rural communities. Some rural communities also have high poverty rates, limited resources for schools, including low teacher salaries and declining enrollment. These strains have been made worse by the current recession and pose increased risks for rural youth (e.g., few occupational opportunities). The economic downturn for many rural communities certainly impacts the community members, their schools, the youth, and youth's goals. Given these disadvantages, young adults are the most common age group to migrate out of rural communities in search of social and economic advantages found in larger cities (Johnson, 2006). These rural social changes impact the psychological distress experienced by rural young people. Researchers have found a connection between individuals' depression and the size of their towns – smaller towns being more linked to depression (Crockett, Shanahan, et al., 2000). Examining how and if the assets of rural communities can buffer young people from the effects of these cumulative risks, however, was investigated in this study.

*Rural Community: Adults and Social Supports* In the face of these strains, the assets of rural communities can provide strong support for youth. Related to theories of resiliency and the developmental assets framework, adult support is hailed as beneficial and protective for youth (Benson, Mannes, Pittman, & Ferber, 2004). Strong social supports are often linked to the symbolism of rural living, though these ideals may be

outdated, as argued by MacTavish and Salamon (2003). According to Crockett, Shanahan and colleagues (2000), however, rural communities provide support systems for youth through the larger social networks of non-parent adults and their high value in families. Youth not only need the support of their family but the reinforcement of a larger social system. Children with the largest network of multigenerational kin and unrelated adults are more resilient as grown-ups (Elder & Conger, 2000; Werner & Smith, 1992). Mentors and social networks are known as valuable assets for youth (DuBois & Karcher, 2005). Furthermore, community social capital predicts higher education attendance, a known asset for young adult employment outcomes (Smith et al., 1995).

Research by Gandara and colleagues (2001) on rural communities found that rural parents influenced students' future plans more so than the urban comparison. The same rural youth, however, reported stressful relationships with their parents. Smith et al. (1995) reported that families in rural areas are more likely to have two parents. On the other hand, MacTavish and Salamon (2003) cite that recent family structures in rural areas resemble those of urban families and have a pattern of single-headed households similar to the urban counterpart.

Despite the inconclusive research, the benefits and challenges of youth living in rural areas also depends on the community capacity of the area. Overall, if a community's norms are participatory and community members are committed to the town's well-being, the community will likely move forward in healthy directions and have institutions that create social mobility for youth (Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh & Vidal, 2001). Community progress ensues from communities with substantial agency at the individual and

organizational level; these communities have members and institutions that take action to better their towns for all members. Based on the aforementioned indicators, the research site has strong community capacity.

*Rural Community: Schools* At a more proximal level, schools are an important aspect of community context; schools are a place of investment in youth and an institution of social mobility (Duncan, 1996). The smaller school sizes, often in rural areas, are cited as beneficial for positive and social emotional outcomes for young people (Gandara et al., 2001). These small schools allow teens to be actively involved and play a more prominent role in activities, leading to positive engagement in school (Crockett, Shanahan, et al., 2000). Moreover, how students perceive their school, a sense of school belonging, is associated with positive outcomes for youth, including academic achievement and motivation (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005).

Student-teacher relationships as well as peer relations are referenced as paramount for youth's sense of school belonging. The quality of student-teacher relationships at school is correlated with engagement and academic achievement (Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Wentzel, 1997, 1998). Students' perceptions of teacher support, respect, and care are also related to school affect and academic self-efficacy, motivation, and engagement (Faircloth & Hamm, 2005). In addition, positive peer relationships are consistently related to positive school affect, engagement, and achievement (Ryan, 2001; Nichols & White, 2001; Wentzel, 1998; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). Students' positive connection to their school and relationships with peers and teachers are important to future positive outcomes of young adults.

*Rural Community: Attachment to Place* Another important aspect of environmental context is the attachment an individual feels to place. Most definitions of place attachment cite a connection or bond of people to a specific place in terms of physical, social, and behavioral processes (Stedman, Beckley, Wallace, & Ambard, 2004; Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001; Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974). Place attachment represents not only a physical space but also social relations and human behaviors related to the space (Altman & Low, 1992).

In a rural environment, the connection to the land and natural landscape are significant to people's meaning of where they live and their roles within the environment (Elder & Conger, 2000). Ishida and Okada (2006) found being in a setting surrounded by natural beauty is correlated with increases in individuals' sense of purpose. Moreover, according to Van Horn, Hawkins, Arthur, and Catalano (2007) low ratings of community attachment are related to youth delinquency and substance abuse. These important contexts influence social, familial, and academic interactions and subsequently youth's future outcomes and were considered in the present study (Smith et al., 1995).

#### *Family and Individual Background Variables*

*Family SES* The life course perspective emphasizes past contexts as influencing life trajectories and researchers know natal family SES is associated with myriad developmental outcomes (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Pathways from the teenage years to young adulthood are foreshadowed by individuals' family of origin social status and resources (Osgood et al., 2005). Poverty in early childhood is associated with poor academic outcomes later in life and the accumulation of poverty from childhood through

adolescence is the largest predictor of later negative outcomes related to academic achievement (Dearing, Berry, & Zaslow, 2006). In young adults, attainment of transition markers have been shown to vary by family of origin SES (Sandefur, Eggerling-Boeck, & Park, 2005; Osgood et al., 2005). Thus, understanding the influence of natal family SES on young adults is also imperative.

*Personal Background Variables: Gender and Age* The gender gap of several decades ago has reversed and females are outperforming males on most educational outcomes. The gender gulf is found throughout all levels of education (Gray, Peng, Steward, & Thomas, 2004), however, outcomes in young adulthood also need to be explored. Do males or females experience more or less instability in young adulthood? Considering the influences of the microsystem on transition markers, several studies have indicated the various paths to adulthood are not significantly related or only weakly linked to gender (Schulenberg et al., 2005; Mouw, 2005). Gender does not seem to impact the experience of certain transition markers but more research on gender differences on young adult outcomes is warranted (Schulenberg et al., 2005; Mouw, 2005). In addition, the interaction of gender and age on sense of purpose and proactive coping are inconclusive and this study aims to add to the minimal literature in this area (Damon et al., 2003).

Accordingly, young adults' perception of their progress toward adult goals as predicted by personal psychological attributes (i.e., sense of purpose and coping skills), transitions markers, a community background variable (i.e., rural community support), a family background variable (i.e., ranked social status), and personal background variables (i.e., gender and age) were investigated.

*Analytical Aims and Hypotheses*

In short, the study had two interrelated aims. The main aim was to test a model of relations between sociological and psychological factors and perceived progress toward adulthood of young adults raised in an isolated rural community. A precondition to test the model and a secondary aim was to establish the perceived progress toward adulthood measure in terms of interrelated domains and construct validity. Based on findings from previous research and theory presented above, the following hypotheses were proposed:

**H1:** Perceived progress toward adulthood in one domain will be correlated with perceived progress in all other domains and retain adequate construct validity.

**H2:** The background variables, gender and age (personal variables), family of origin social status (family variable), perceived community support (community variable), and transition markers will predict young adults' sense of purpose and proactive coping skills.

**H3:** Stronger sense of purpose, stronger proactive coping skills, more transition markers, and stronger perceived community support and higher family social status will predict stronger perceived progress in adulthood, controlling for gender and age.

**H4:** Sense of purpose and proactive coping skills will mediate the relationship between transition markers, community, family, and personal variables and perceived progress toward adult goals (see Figure 2).

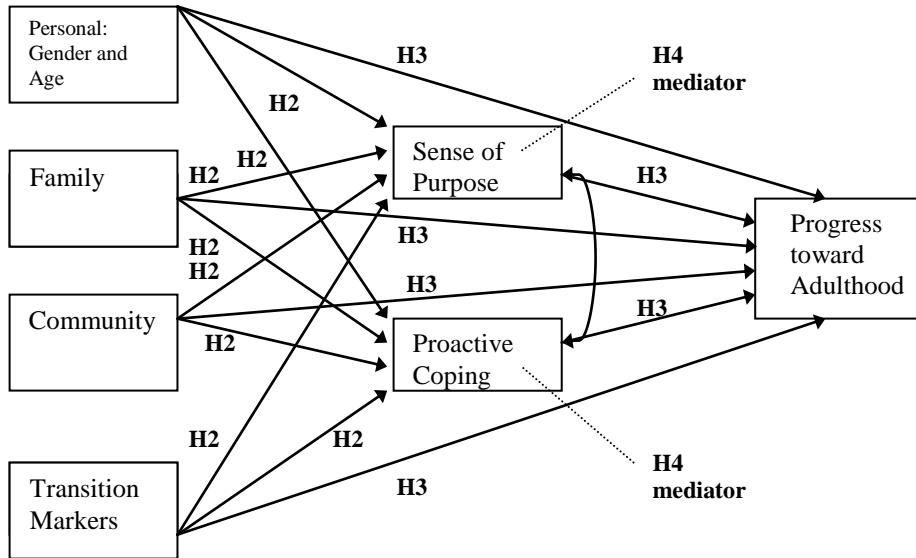


Figure 2. Hypothesized path model with corresponding hypothesized paths denoted.

*Note.* Exogenous variables are assumed to correlate; however, these correlational arrows are excluded from the figure for simplicity.

A correlation between sense of purpose and proactive coping was also expected based on background research and for the specific set of relations to be tested in the model. This correlation, however, was not considered a central hypothesis.

A causal comparative study design was used to ascertain the predictors of young adults' perceived progress in adulthood. This method allowed for the identification of direct and indirect effects of proactive coping skills, sense of purpose, transition markers, and background variables on perceived progress in reaching adult goals and helped illuminate different levels of contextual and individual characteristics important to young adult development. Retrospective data on participants' feelings regarding their rural community experience as a teen was used. Assessing how this past context influenced individuals into adulthood is important and research supports the crucial influence of

young adults' perception about their childhood experiences on their adult behaviors and outcomes (Finley & Schwartz, 2004; Ishida & Okada, 2006).

## Method

### *Study Design*

The study sought to establish predictive patterns between the background variables, transition markers, sense of purpose, proactive coping skills, and perceived progress toward adult goals. The study design allowed the researcher to investigate predictors of young adults' perceived progress in adulthood and to identify direct and indirect effects of the proposed predictors.

### *Sample Recruitment*

The population consisted of young adults who graduated from high school in an isolated rural community in the Northwestern United States. Two hundred and one 18 – 32-year-olds were surveyed. Names of county graduates from the years 1996-2007 were gathered from high school records and annuals resulting in a population of 1,104 graduates. Contact information at the point of graduation was obtained for 697 past graduates of the county.

Letters with an online survey link were sent to graduates with available contact information recruiting them to the study. In addition to letter invitations, supplementary recruitment strategies were employed, including site visits to the community, community flyers, radio announcements, newspaper ads and articles, and information was disseminated at three high school reunions.

### *Sample Characteristics*

The analyzed sample consisted of 201 young adults raised in the rural county. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 32 years ( $M = 23.8$ ,  $SD = 3.36$ ). Sixty-three percent were female and 47% had lived in the county for 18 years or more before graduating high school. Three percent of participants had a graduate degree, 27.5% had graduated from a 4-year college, 5.5% had graduated from a 2-year college, 54.5% had attended some college, and 9.5% had no schooling beyond high school graduation.

#### *Site Characteristics*

The county where the participants were raised is an isolated rural community with 6,759 residents and a population density of 2.3 people per square mile (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). The closest metropolitan airport is 200 miles away. Based on the 2000 census, there were 3,029 households in the county with only 6.90% of the households having a female head of household with no husband present. Racially the county is made up of 96.50% White, 0.03% Black or Africa American, 0.71% Native American, 0.24% Asian, 0.04% Pacific Islander, 0.95% from other races, and 1.54% from mixed races. Less than 2% of the population is Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

The county consists of three prominent communities each with an independent school district and high school. The towns are set back along an extraordinary mountain range; mountains that have provided solitude, adventure, escape, food, shelter, and pure enjoyment of beauty to many residents and travelers. The county is described foremost in terms of its land use and community values, making it a unique study site. In a rural environment, the connection to the land and natural landscape is significant to people's meaning of where they live and their roles within the environment. Native Americans were

once established on this land, followed by white settlers who came to graze their sheep and cattle (Christoffersen, 2005). The land has also been used for its dense forests and agriculture. Similar to other northwest rural areas, the decline of the timber industry has left an economic cavity on the community.

A few social institutions in the county, however, are working to negotiate healthy change in the face of loss. They are helping the community with resources for progress and add to the unique support system of the community. One such nonprofit organization strives for the promotion of new land relationships, natural resource stewardship, and a sustainable family wage economy (Christoffersen, 2005). This organization and other active community members promote norms and expectations of citizens to be involved in bettering their community.

County members are still connected to the idea of banding together, living simply, and persisting in a hard environment. Historically, the county considers itself a hard place to live due to the cold winters, isolation, and tough agricultural land (Christoffersen, 2005). The community is often described as close-knit. The county prides itself on a good neighbor identity and sacrificial living arrangements, such as enduring the harsh weather and taking lower paying jobs. Family is also a prominent value of the county. People report returning to the county for family relationships and staying in the county for family relationships.

The schools are another strong value and identity among the towns. Economically it does not make sense to have three school districts, but the separate districts remain because they are the central focus of the towns. The schools are invested in bettering their

community for all members. The schools and the nonprofit organization are institutions that allow social mobility to the people of the county.

It was the desire of these nonprofit organizations and the schools to track their high school graduates and inquire how the graduates felt the county schools and community prepared them for life after high school that led to the current study. Such research is not unique to the county, as they have many graduate students helping them with research in the community. Researchers are welcomed into the community, often included like family members. A strong sense of finding a place one desires to call home, of not wanting to leave, and where one feels at home fills the air of the county. The land, organizations, schools, and community norms to improve their towns make the county a unique environment and an exemplar study site.

At the time of the survey, the majority of participants were not living in the original rural community. Fifty-six percent of the participants lived in the Northwestern United States (i.e., Oregon, Idaho, and Washington), 24% still resided in the county, and 20% lived in other parts of the United States or in a different country.

### *Questionnaire*

Participants were asked to complete an online survey consisting of 45 questions. The survey consisted of demographic, community experience, and transition marker questions as well as scales on perception of progress toward adult goals, sense of purpose, proactive coping skills, depression, and self-efficacy.

The demographic information collected, included high school attended, high school graduation year, age, years lived in the county before high school graduation, gender,

family of origin ranked social status, and current place of residence. Questions about adult support, school belonging, and community attachment were also included on the survey. Items related to adult support, school belonging, and community attachment were all used for the perceived community support scale. These questions asked for retrospective information on individuals' experiences as a teenager. Research supports the important influence of young adults' perception about their childhood experiences on their adult behaviors and outcomes (Finley & Schwartz, 2004; Ishida & Okada, 2006).

Participants were asked to rate their perceived progress toward adult goals based on different developmental domains. For example, participants were asked to rate their progress toward goals related to relationships, education, work, finances, involvement with community, leisure activities, spirituality, and personal growth. Respondents were also asked about objective transition markers related to five domain categories, including education, work, relationships, living arrangements, and finances. Questions related to objective transition markers were modified from the Youth Development Study and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (Shanahan et al., 2005; Mouw, 2005).

Sense of purpose was measured by the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006), a 10-item questionnaire measuring presence and search for meaning. Proactive coping skills were measured by the 14-item Proactive Coping Skills subscale of the Proactive Coping Inventory (Greenglass, et al., 1999). The 10-item Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale was used to measure depression (Shaver & Brennan, 1991) and was predicted to negatively associate with the outcome variable. The 10-item General Self Efficacy Scale was used to establish validity through a positive

correlation with perceived progress toward adult goals (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995).

#### *Data Analysis Strategy*

The study sought to establish predictive patterns related to personal, family, community, and transition marker variables and the outcome. Addressing the first hypothesis and before predictive patterns were investigated, the perceived progress toward adult goals measure was explored in terms of reliability and construct validity.

Data analysis included descriptive statistics for all variables, including means, standard deviations, tests of normality, and skewness. To test for differences between possible groups within the sample, ANOVA analyses were conducted. No significant differences were found in responses when comparing participants by the high school they attended or their gender (this also reflects no between town differences in the county). The reliability of each scale was calculated and exploratory factor analysis using promax rotation was used to assess the factor structure for the new scale.

The final step in the analysis was modeling relationships between predictor and outcome variables with path analysis using maximum likelihood estimation in Mplus. Goodness-of-fit indices and path coefficients were estimated for the variables. Multiple-group path analysis was also performed for two age groups, 18-23 year-olds and 24-32 year-olds. Specific paths and parameters of the model did differ between the two age groups, however, the overall models across groups were not significantly different and thus, the researchers proceeded with assessing one model for the whole sample.

## Chapter 2: Manuscript

### *Coming of Age: Enduring Change*

Young adults in their 20s experience a more diversified and unreliable social landscape related to career paths, educational attainment, and traditional timing of “adult events” compared to previous cohorts in the last 50 years (Osgood, Ruth, Eccles, Jacobs, & Barber, 2005). Young adulthood is not only different from prior generations but is less uniform. A “typical” route between the teenage years and reaching adult status no longer exists. Young people today take longer to finish school, settle into marriages or partnerships, and begin parenting (Settersten, 2007; Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005). They attend school and work simultaneously and frequently change jobs or hold several part-time positions.

The overarching expectations related to the attainment of traditional adult markers by certain ages and in lockstep patterns (i.e., education, marriage, and career) are not congruent with what actually occurs for contemporary young adults. Out-dated societal expectations of young adults frequently do not match young people’s objective experiences. Local and global job market trends, demands for increased education, and changing views of family, marriage, and childbearing require new skills and resources of young people. The varied paths and required plasticity of young adults is often not supported in archaic social structures, such as a lack of health insurance for the part-time jobs young adults often hold (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005). Young adults endure a great sense of instability because of these new, different, and unclear experiences;

they are taking new pathways into adulthood, and they are doing so in a world that has changed considerably (Settersten, 2007). This new backdrop begs researchers, policy makers, and educators to more clearly understand what is happening in the lives of young adults.

Overall, several gaps in research on young people's transition to adulthood currently exist. According to Frank Furstenberg, "this era from the late teens to the early 30s is a poorly understood period. We don't know what's going on in the minds and hearts of young adults and how their perceptions change, of themselves and others, as they navigate young adulthood" (MacArthur Research Network, 2005, p. 4). In many developed countries, youth express ambivalence about their transition to adulthood and question their preparedness for this transition. In the United States, it is reported that at least 200,000 – 300,000 young people do not effectively transition to independent adulthood by the time they are 25 and remain economically and socially disconnected from society (Wald & Martinez, 2003).

The new social, economic, and cultural experiences of young adults are also exacerbated by the *first time transitions* characteristic of the movement from adolescence into young adulthood, such as moving out of the house, paying bills, graduating from school, purchasing a house or car, and initiating long-term relationships. Similar events help narrate the entire life course, but young adults uniquely experience such transitions rapidly, in volume, and as novices (Berry, 2004; Settersten, 2005). Many young adults are adrift or feel adrift as they endure these new experiences.

Given the internal and external changes, concerns about youth transitioning into

adulthood in a manner that positively engages them with society are well founded. Where are young people headed as they transition to adults? Do they have the skills, resources, and supports to get where they are headed? These questions become even more important as the experiences in young adulthood help form the subsequent life course (Settersten, 2007; Gore, Aseltine, Colten, & Lin, 1997).

### *Schemas on Young Adulthood*

Several researchers have proposed schemas about this changing developmental phase (Berry, 2004). Arnett (2000) has pointed to three aspects of what he labels “emerging adulthood,” including demographic, subjective, and identity changes. Demographically, young adults are experiencing a myriad of markers different from other developmental phases: the ending of school and/or beginning of higher education, first time jobs, and initiation of long-term relationships. The new events, however, are experienced in great diversity by young adults. According to Arnett (2000), young adults have a broad scope of opportunities before them and are less constrained by status roles compared to other life phases.

Subjectively, young adults are ambivalent about their adult status. Often a semantic match to their development phase is hard to articulate, as most individuals report feeling adult-like in some areas and not adult-like in other areas; experiences in young adulthood may feel convoluted for individuals because of this (Molgat, 2007; Arnett, 2007; Shanahan, Porfeli, Mortimer, & Erickson, 2005). The subjective sense of feeling adult-like is often unrelated to the demographic status changes mentioned above (Arnett, 2000). Young adults are more likely to report “responsibility” and “independence” as accounting

for their adult status as opposed to demographic changes.

Heightened identity development is also occurring for young adults in the areas of romantic relationships, work, and worldviews. According to Arnett (2000), young adulthood offers the most varied opportunities related to such domains and the identity exploration usually characteristic of adolescence is an even more serious pursuit for young adults.

Other researchers argue that the variation of experiences in young adulthood is primarily due to institutional and social context changes, including social class, gender, education, and locality. The timing and speed of young adults' new transitions is dependent upon these institutional and structural factors. Several researchers argue that Arnett's concept of "emerging adulthood" does not give legitimate attention to social class, gender, education, and locality influences (Bynner, 2005). Côté and Bynner (2008) emphasize that young people are not necessarily choosing their varied pathways, but their human capital directly restricts and affords their multiple pathways into adulthood. Not all young adults have been given the same opportunities or privileges of exploration during this phase, including more disadvantaged populations of youth, such as foster care, disabled, juvenile offender, homeless, and rural youth (Settersten, 2007).

### *Coming of Age: Growing Up Rural*

Specifically, the opportunities and institutions pertinent to young adults are different for those raised in a rural environment as opposed to other settings. More often than not, youth living in rural areas are at greater risk of societal disconnection (Wald & Martinez, 2003). Rural young people have few options for post secondary schooling and

jobs in their hometowns. To be competitive in today's economy, rural young adults often face the difficult decision of leaving behind the communities and families they have known, migrating to larger towns and cities. According to Oyserman and Fryber (2006), rural youth lack job opportunities and career role models, leaving these youth more vulnerable in terms of school and work transitions. A study by Crockett, Bingham, and Raymond (2000) showed that rural youth have expectations for earlier adult transitions than youth in urban settings. These young people may choose to have families earlier and are restricted to their home towns where higher education and job training opportunities to bolster their chances of economic success are limited.

At the same time, the assets of rural communities can provide a strong buffer to youth in the face of such setbacks. Many rural communities provide strong support systems of adults for youth (Elder & Conger, 2000). Strong social supports and the smaller school sizes, characteristic of rural areas, lead to positive social and emotional outcomes in young people (Crockett, Shanahan, & Jackson-Newsom, 2000).

Rural young people are faced with unique experiences as they move into adulthood, exacerbating the already complex challenges all young adults face. The current social landscape and lack of understanding about young adults' myriad experiences deserve attention from researchers, including investigations of how youth raised in rural environments deal with these new transitions and diversified lifestyles.

What characterizes rural young people's experiences as they transition to adulthood? Past research indicates the sequence and timing of transitions are different for contemporary young adults (i.e., often more delayed) and that young adults do not always

think of adulthood in terms of transition and status markers. Research, however, on how young adults from rural places feel about their progress on adult status domains and markers, not simply whether they have attained them or not, is lacking.

### *Protective Psychological Characteristics*

As young adults more frequently find themselves taking new and individualized paths, psychological skills and capacities become very important (Settersten, 2007). Considering protective factors, such as the ways young adults have been supported as youth, employ coping skills, and have a sense of purpose in their transition is vital. Given the uncertainty and stressful young adult transition, knowing where one is headed (e.g., purpose) and how to deal with life along the way (e.g., coping skills) is beneficial. Such psychological capacities allow young people to rise above the hardships of their sociohistorical context and their destandardized developmental phase (i.e., unstable job markets, new relationships, and career changes). As Damon (2008) suggests, purpose provides a rudder for life, giving young adults direction. Moreover, having the coping skills to deal with the novel and uncertain transitions and the ability to be proactive about healthy life decisions are important strengths during young adulthood (Schulenberg, O’Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 2005). According to Reynolds, Boyd, Burge, Harris, and Robbins (2004), “adolescents with a purposive orientation toward life combined with general and practical knowledge have more ambitious career plans, more stable plans in young adulthood and greater educational and occupational achievements by early midlife” (p. abstract).

### *Theoretical Perspectives*

Drawing on longstanding themes related to the ecological model, life course perspective, and theories of resilience that frame development as both changing lives and changing environments, this study investigates individual and contextual level factors important to young adult development. This study follows the model of identifying sources and pathways of positive development within individuals and in their contexts.

### *Research Questions*

Given this background research, the following questions framed the study: do young adults raised in an isolated rural community feel like they are making progress in adulthood and what might foreshadow this feeling? Do objective experiences in young adulthood match and/or lead to subjective experiences? Do young people from a rural community know where they are headed in life (sense of purpose) and do they have the wherewithal (coping skills) to get there? Finally, how does a rural community influence and prepare young people for the transitions they face in young adulthood? Both personal and contextual levels are considered in the study by investigating the effects of sociological contextual influences, including transition markers, perceived rural community support, family of origin social status, gender, and age and psychological protective factors, including sense of purpose and proactive coping skills on perceived progress toward attaining adult goals.

Hence, a model of relations between sociological and psychological factors and perceived progress toward adulthood was examined. Perceived progress toward adulthood in terms of interrelated life domains (e.g., work, education, finances, relationships, physical health, leisure activities, involvement in community, personal growth, and

spirituality) was also investigated. The proposed constructs in the model are described in further detail in the following discussion and presented in Figure 1.

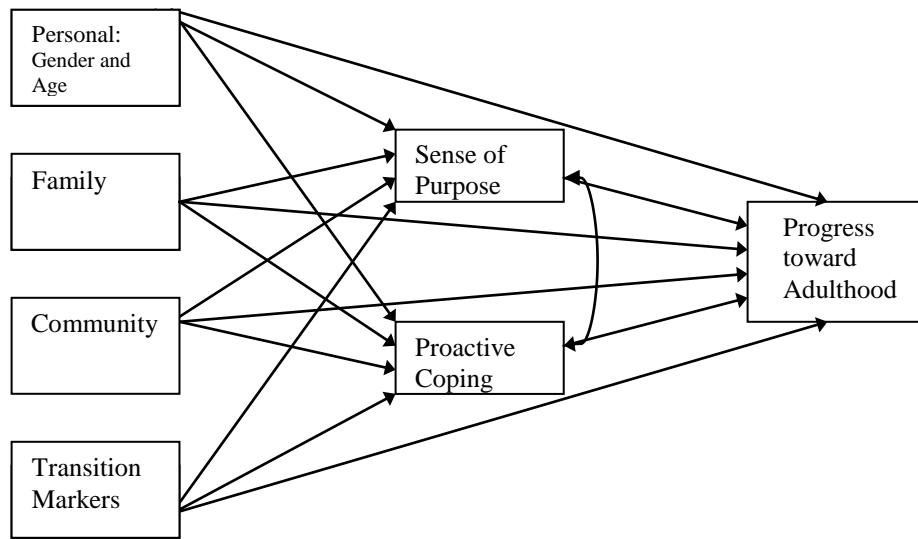


Figure 1. Hypothesized path model leading to progress toward adulthood.

*Note.* Exogenous variables are assumed to correlate; however, these correlational arrows are excluded from the figure for simplicity.

#### *Coming of Age: Perceived Progress and Transition Markers*

The study includes both objective and subjective markers of development in young adulthood – young adults' perceived progress toward adulthood and their transition through sociodemographic markers. As young adults experience excess role changes, it is important to study their mental health as well-being drops during life phases with high rates of changes. According to Gore and colleagues (1997) "this degree of change and the required adjustment, in addition to the normative emphasis placed on the individual's independent efforts to shape subsequent life course, can be expected to affect young adult mental health" (p. 197).

### *Perceived Progress*

Research to-date has not considered a subjective measure of young adulthood other than the adult status marker and feelings of independence and responsibility. Rather than asking whether or not young adults consider themselves to be adults or feel independent, this study explored individuals' perceived progress toward meeting goals in adulthood and whether they have goals related to specific life domains. Unlike adult status, goal attainment is known to be associated with positive outcomes; perceived mastery over personal goals is correlated with life satisfaction and well-being for adolescents and young adults (Krings, Bangerter, Gomez, & Grob, 2008; Haase, Heckhausen, & Kölner, 2008). Personal goals that are parallel with an individual's developmental phase and are evaluated positively also correlate with increased well-being (Shahar, Kalnitzk, Shulman, & Blatt, 2006). As such, goal assessment is important for developmental studies on young adults.

The internal attributes of self-efficacy and self-esteem have been shown to associate with goal assessment (Lacković-Grgin, Grgin, Penezić, & Sorić, 2001). Psychological mechanisms as predictors of goal progress, in conjunction with sociodemographic background predictors, however, are lacking in studies on current young adults. Furthermore, if the developmental phase of young adulthood is characterized by the subjectively nebulous adult status, meeting these age-graded goals in young adulthood may pose a challenge and necessitates further research.

Several psychosocial goal domains are explored in the present study to measure an overall sense of progress toward adult goals. Goals are frequently assessed according to life domains and in terms of appraisal (Nurmi, & Salmela-Aro, 2002; Cantor, 1990; Cantor

et al., 1987; Little, 1983, 1993). Sneed, Hamagami, McArdle, Cohen, and Chen (2007) have shown that goals and responsibility in different life domains are interdependent and highly correlated.

### *Transition Markers*

Young adulthood is in part characterized by the aforementioned sociodemographic statuses reached throughout a person's 20s. The sociodemographic statuses, often called transition markers are important to regulating goals, as well as goals are important to attaining certain markers (Nurmi & Salmela-Aro, 2002). Individuals try to match their situations and goals. For example, Salmela-Aro, Aunola, and Nurmi (2007) describe how young adults with work-related goals find work that matches their educational degree. This interaction is also reciprocal; people adjust their goals to agree with their life situation.

Past research on young adults has primarily focused on certain contextual aspects of the transition to adulthood, including marriage and educational attainment, predicted by background variables, and has not always illuminated the multiple pathways and outcomes of young adulthood. The traditional adult statuses used to gauge the success of young adults are no longer solely appropriate as traditional statuses do not capture the variability of timing and pathways to adulthood (Osgood et al., 2005). Young adults experiences with adult roles do not always result in youth feeling adult-like, it may be years after such events that young people actually feel these markers connect to their adulthood (Settersten, in press).

In the past, researchers tended to look at single markers or status changes; more recent studies have considered the importance of looking at markers as a clustering or an

aggregate. For example, Schulenberg and colleagues (2005) found young adults who experience more total transition markers exhibited stronger well-being and feelings of being adult-like.

The study investigated five sociodemographic domains, including education, work, relationships, finances, and living arrangements. In particular, the study examined the link and predictive properties of the objective transition markers on individuals' subjective sense of progress in adulthood by using total transition markers as a predictor of the outcome and mediating variables.

#### *Individual Characteristics: Sense of Purpose and Proactive Coping*

According to Settersten (2007), "personal characteristics and resources may become increasingly important in determining how young people fare in the face of changing opportunity structures and the absence of institutional support, normative control, and clear life scripts" (p. 253). Individual dispositions and characteristics can help facilitate progress and positive outcomes in adulthood, such as sense of purpose and proactive coping. Sense of purpose and proactive coping are considered developmentally generative characteristics of people. These characteristics are connected with many positive outcomes, including well-being, educational and occupational achievement, prosocial behavior, better self-esteem and parenting skills, and improved physical health outcomes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Damon, Menon, & Bronk, 2003; Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002; Lee, Cohen, Edgar, Laizner, & Gagnon, 2006). Consequently, sense of purpose and proactive coping are main predictors in the present study.

According to Damon et al. (2003), "purpose is a stable and generalized intention to

accomplish something that is both meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self" (p. 121). People make meaning out of relationships, events, personal characteristics, and ultimately interactions with socio-cultural systems. The specific purpose in life pursued by an individual may change. For example, throughout an individual's life a purpose may be to graduate school at one point and at another point to have sustaining relationships. Sense of purpose, at the same time, is a stable state of being and constant outlook. Thus, sense of purpose is a mechanism for individuals to make their unstable and unpredictable lives more controllable by ascribing meaning to life (Baumeister, 1991).

Recently, Damon et al. (2003) has promoted the expansion of research on sense of purpose from older, traumatized or chronically ill populations to adolescents. The construct, however, is also important and relevant for young adults as they navigate their entry into adulthood. Considering the changing relationships, jobs, and economy for young adults, having a guiding purpose offers stability and is associated with how goals in young adulthood are assessed. At the same time, experiencing certain transition markers (e.g., having a child and new employment) may promote a stronger sense of purpose in young adults.

Young adults not only benefit from understanding their life as meaningful but having the skills and internal resources to execute their purposes. Individuals who possess the ability to adjust coping responses to the demands of the environment are able to adapt to various challenges in life (Cheng, 2001). The ways adolescents respond through coping mechanisms plays a mediating role in proximal stressors of adolescents (Lerner &

Sternberg, 2004; Kariv & Heiman, 2005). Research specifically on the effects of coping for young adults relating to their demographic status changes and progress in adulthood, however, is lacking.

Proactive coping represents a problem-focused and active type of coping (Schwarzer & Knoll, 2003). Specifically, proactive coping is a regulatory process where individuals seek to solve problems, anticipate stress, manage emotions, and appraise goal attainment (Aspinwall, 1997). Individuals with proactive coping skills value plasticity, which promotes change and improvement of oneself and one's environment (Greenglass et al., 1999). Proactive coping encompasses and uses social and non-social resources including visions about aspirations, positive emotional strategies, and goal setting (Greenglass, 2001). Thus, proactive coping and sense of purpose likely draw upon each other; more research linking these constructs is needed.

### *Community Context*

Such flexibility and personal resilience in the face of hardship for the current cohort of young adults is vital given their contextual instability (Shahar et al., 2006). The recent changes in the economy and social landscape require that young adults employ such coping skills, and at the same time, afford opportunities for them to take many paths to adulthood (Settersten, 2007).

Early life events, social connections, and interactions have magnifying influences on later development (Elder & Johnson, 2002). Life course trajectories may be defined by stress or support in childhood compounding over time to maladaptive and other limiting contextual factors or leading to strong internal generative characteristics influencing well-

being in adulthood (Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997). The study considers the strength of past community and family of origin contexts on young individuals' development into adulthood.

*Youth in a Rural Setting* Based on an ecological framework, different development paths are expected for young people in a rural context as opposed to other environments (Crockett, Shanahan, et al., 2000). Only a limited amount of research exploring the human capital gained by living in a rural area on high school students exists and the impacts of rural living on youths' outcomes beyond high school and into adulthood are even less understood. Moreover, research is inconclusive, weighing both the costs and benefits of the supportive close-knit but sometimes limited resources of rural communities on youth outcomes (Gandara, Gutierrez, & O'Hara, 2001).

The current sociohistorical context is not favorable for most rural communities in the Northwestern United States as they struggle to compete in the global economy. Changes in agriculture, manufacturing, and natural resource management raise several questions about the economic future and changing identities of rural communities. Some rural communities also have high poverty rates, limited resources for schools, including low teacher salaries and declining enrollment. Given these disadvantages, young adults are the most common age group to migrate out of rural communities in search of social and economic advantages found in larger cities (Johnson, 2006). Examining how and if the assets of rural communities, however, can buffer young people from the effects of these cumulative risks was investigated in the study.

*Rural Community: Adults, Social Supports, and Schools* In the face of these strains,

the assets of rural communities can provide strong supports for youth. In theories of resilience and the developmental assets framework, adult support is hailed as beneficial and protective for youth (Benson, Mannes, Pittman, & Ferber, 2004). Strong social supports are often linked to the symbolism of rural living, though these ideals may be outdated, as argued by MacTavish and Salamon (2003). According to Crockett, Shanahan, and Jackson-Newsom (2000), however, rural communities provide support systems for youth through the larger social networks of non-parent adults and their high value in families. Children with the largest network of multigenerational kin and unrelated adults are more resilient as grown-ups (Elder & Conger, 2000; Werner & Smith, 1992).

At a more proximal level, schools are an important aspect of community context as a place of investment in youth and an institution of social mobility (Duncan, 1996). The smaller school sizes, often in rural areas, are cited as beneficial for positive and social emotional outcomes for young people (Gandara et al., 2001). These small schools allow teens to be actively involved, play a more prominent role in activities, and have a strong sense of school belonging, leading to positive academic engagement (Crockett, Shanahan, et al., 2000; Faircloth & Hamm, 2005).

#### *Family and Individual Background Variables*

Researchers know natal family SES is associated with myriad developmental outcomes (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Pathways from the teenage years to young adulthood are foreshadowed by individuals' family of origin social status and resources (Osgood et al., 2005). Additionally, researchers know developmental outcomes are shaped and influenced by gender and age. For example, females outperform males by most

educational standards (Gray, Peng, Steward, & Thomas, 2004), however, outcomes in young adulthood by gender also need to be explored. Do males or females experience more or less instability in young adulthood? In addition, the interaction of gender and age on sense of purpose and proactive coping are inconclusive and this study aims to add to the minimal literature in this area (Damon et al., 2003; Ouwehand, Ridder, & Bensing, 2006).

Accordingly, young adults' perception of their progress toward adult goals as predicted by personal psychological attributes (i.e., sense of purpose and coping skills), transitions markers, a community background variable (i.e., rural community support), a family background variable (i.e., ranked social status), and personal background variables (i.e., gender and age) were investigated.

#### *Analytical Aims and Hypotheses*

The study had two interrelated aims. The main aim was to test a model of relations between sociological and psychological factors and perceived progress toward adulthood of young adults raised in an isolated rural community. A precondition to test the model and a secondary aim was to establish the perceived progress toward adulthood measure in terms of interrelated domains and construct validity. Based on findings from previous research and theory presented above, the following hypotheses were proposed:

**H1:** Perceived progress toward adulthood in one domain will be correlated with perceived progress in all other domains and retain adequate construct validity.

**H2:** The background variables, gender and age (personal variables), family of origin social status (family variable), perceived community support (community variable), and transition markers will predict young adults' sense of purpose and proactive coping skills.

**H3:** Stronger sense of purpose, stronger proactive coping skills, more transition markers, stronger perceived community support, and higher family social status will predict stronger perceived progress in adulthood, controlling for gender and age.

**H4:** Sense of purpose and proactive coping skills will mediate the relationship between transition markers, community, family, and personal variables and perceived progress toward adult goals.

A correlation between sense of purpose and proactive coping was also expected based on background research and for the specific set of relations to be tested in the model. This correlation, however, was not considered a central hypothesis.

A causal comparative study design was used to ascertain the predictors of young adults' perceived progress in adulthood. This method allowed for the identification of direct and indirect effects in the model and helped illuminate different levels of contextual and individual characteristics important to young adult development. Retrospective data on participants' feelings regarding their rural community experience as a teen was used.

Assessing how this past context influenced individuals in young adulthood is important and research supports the crucial influence of young adults' perception about their childhood experiences on their adult behaviors and outcomes (Finley & Schwartz, 2004; Ishida & Okada, 2006).

## Method

### *Study Design*

The study sought to establish predictive patterns between the background variables,

transition markers, sense of purpose, proactive coping skills, and perceived progress toward adult goals. The study design allowed the researchers to investigate predictors of young adults' perceived progress in adulthood and identify direct and indirect effects of the proposed predictors.

#### *Sample Recruitment*

The population consisted of young adults who graduated from high school in an isolated rural community in the Northwestern United States. Two hundred and one 18 to 32-year-olds were surveyed capturing a population of young adults by Arnett's (2000) standards of emerging adulthood, 18-29. The study recruited participants up to 32-year-olds, however, to reflect the postponed entrance into adulthood and the older participants allowed the study to capture variability in life events for a broader span of individuals. Other researchers have also used this broader age range to represent young adulthood (Furstenberg et al., 2005). Analysis began by preparing two age groups of younger and older young adults to evaluate the differences between age groups and to determine the appropriateness of the age range for analysis.

Names of county graduates from the years 1996-2007 were gathered from high school records and annuals resulting in a population of 1,104 graduates. Contact information at the point of graduation was obtained for 697 past graduates of the county. Letters with an online survey link were sent to graduates with available contact information recruiting them to the study. The letter also informed graduates of the prize drawing incentive. Follow-up postcards and final reminder letters were sent to non-responding people. This multiple contact strategy is recommended by Dillman (2007) for

higher rates of return on surveys. In addition to letter invitations, supplementary recruitment strategies were employed including site visits to the community, community flyers, radio announcements, newspaper ads and articles. Information was also disseminated at three high school reunions.

#### *Sample Characteristics*

The analyzed sample consisted of 201 young adults raised in the rural county. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 32 years ( $M = 23.8$ ,  $SD = 3.36$ ). Sixty-three percent were female and 47% had lived in the county for 18 years or more before graduating high school (see Table 1). Three percent of participants had a graduate degree, 27.5% had graduated from a 4-year college, 5.5% had graduated from a 2-year college, 54.5% had attended some college, and 9.5% had no schooling beyond high school graduation. Education attainment rates of 18-34 year-olds for the state are similar to the education attainment of the sample. These records indicated that 5% of 18-34 year-olds with at least a high school degree had attained a graduate degree, 18% had attained a bachelor's degree, 7% had graduated from a 2-year college, 37% had some college, and 32% had no schooling beyond high school (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The higher education rates of the sample are representative of the county in which the participants attended high school, in that no high school dropouts are recorded for the county in the last 10 years and their schools were rated highest in the state three years prior to the study. The researchers were not able to equate data on the sample with the population as such detailed information was not tracked by the schools. Indeed, this study in part emerged as a request to track the community's high school graduates.

At the time of the survey, the majority of participants were not living in the original rural community. Fifty-six percent of the participants lived in the Northwestern United States (i.e., Oregon, Idaho, and Washington), 24% still resided in the county, and 20% lived in other parts of the United States or in a different country. The community of origin has a population of 6,759 and 2.3 persons per square mile density (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

### *Questionnaire*

Participants were asked to complete an online survey consisting of 45 questions (see Table 2 for sample questions). The survey consisted of demographic, community experience, and transition marker questions as well as scales on sense of purpose, proactive coping skills, depression, self-efficacy, and perception of progress toward adult goals.

*Demographic and Community Questions* The demographic information collected, included high school attended, high school graduation year, age, years lived in the county before high school graduation, gender, family of origin ranked social status, and current place of residence.

Participants were also asked about their families' status within the community, based on the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Alder & Stewart, 2007). The scale is cited as particularly useful in poorer populations and correlates with mental and health indicators (Alder & Stewart, 2007). Participants placed the status of their family of origin, in terms of level of education, jobs and money within their community, on a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being the *worst off* and 10 being the *best off* in their community.

*Community Support* Questions about adult support, school belonging, and

community attachment were also included on the survey. These questions asked for retrospective information on individuals' experiences as a teenager. Research supports the important influence of young adults' perception about their childhood experiences on their adult behaviors and outcomes (Finley & Schwartz, 2004; Ishida & Okada, 2006). Items on adult support and school belonging were modified from the Search Institutes' 40 Developmental Assets questionnaire (i.e., "*In my town, I felt like I mattered to people*"; Search Institute, 1996) and the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (i.e., "*I had close friends at my high school*"; Goodenow, 1993). Community attachment questions were modified from the Communities That Care Youth Survey (i.e., "*My town was a tight-knit community*"; Arthur, Hawkins, Pollard, Catalano, & Baglioni, 2002). Thus, items related to adult support, school belonging, and community attachment were all used for the perceived community support scale. The internal validity alpha coefficient for the scale was .85.

*Perceived Progress Toward Adult Goals* Participants were asked to rate their perceived progress toward adult goals based on different developmental domains. For example, participants were asked to rate their progress toward goals related to relationships, education, work, finances, involvement with community, leisure activities, spirituality, and personal growth. Responses were based on a 4-point scale ranging from *not at all* to *absolutely*. Respondents were also given the answer options *not important to me* and *not part of my goals now*, although these categories were not included as part of the final scale. The scale was assessed for internal validity with an alpha coefficient of .80.

*Transition Markers* Questions related to objective transition markers were modified

from the Youth Development Study and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (Shanahan et al., 2005; Mouw, 2005). Respondents were asked about transition markers related to five domain categories, including education, work, relationships, living arrangements, and finances. The five domains of transition markers are consistent with transition marker domains used in previous studies on young adults (Schulenberg et al., 2005; Mouw, 2005, Settersten, 2007). The respondents were asked whether the transition markers had occurred in their life since high school (i.e., *related to work, since high school have you...been unemployed for more than 2 months, gained employment in a field related to degree, gained employment in an unrelated field, had a stable job with benefits*) and also whether they were currently experiencing a transition marker or not (i.e., *related to finances, what circumstances currently describe you...not able to afford rent or daily expenses, take financial responsibility for self, ask family or friends for financial assistance, have adequate income to meet basic needs, have access to health care*). Participants answered *yes* if they had experienced a marker since high school and *yes* if they were currently experiencing the marker.

The following transition markers were used in the final analysis: education (i.e., *attended a 4-year college*), work (i.e., *employed since high school*), relationships (i.e., *involved in a long term relationship after high school*), living arrangement (i.e., *has not returned to parents home since high school*), and finances (i.e., *able to afford rent or daily expenses*). These markers were used to create a total score of transition markers for each participant.

*Sense of Purpose* Sense of purpose was measured by the Meaning in Life

Questionnaire (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006), a 10-item questionnaire measuring presence and search for meaning. Only the five presence of meaning items were utilized in this study in order to ascertain participants sense of purpose rather than their search for purpose as well. Participants responded to each item based on a 7-point scale ranging from *absolutely untrue* to *absolutely true*. The measure has shown strong validity and reliability, the alpha coefficients for the scale range from .81 - .92 (Steger et al., 2006). The scale was assessed for internal validity in the current study with an alpha coefficient of .90.

*Proactive Coping* Proactive coping skills were measured by the 14-item Proactive Coping Skills subscale of the Proactive Coping Inventory (Greenglass, et al., 1999). Items were rated on a 4-point scale ranging from *not true at all* to *completely true*. The Proactive Coping subscale has shown strong internal consistency in alpha reliability measures of .80 - .85 in Canadian student, Polish-Canadian immigrants, Canadian adults, and U.S. student samples (Greenglass, 2001; Greenglass et al., 1999; Diehl, Semegon, & Schwarzer, 2006). The scale was assessed for internal validity in the current study with an alpha coefficient of .84.

*Depression* The 10-item Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale was used to measure depression (Shaver & Brennan, 1991) and was predicted to negatively associate with the outcome variable. Cronbach's alpha on the depression scale was .78. This scale measures depression at a given time point, *during the past week*, but was the most accessible depression measure for the research purposes.

*Self-efficacy* The 10-item General Self Efficacy Scale was used to establish validity through a positive correlation with perceived progress toward adult goals (Schwarzer &

Jerusalem, 1995). Cronbach's alpha for self-efficacy in the current study was .90.

#### *Data Analysis Strategy*

The study sought to establish predictive patterns related to personal, family, community, and transition marker variables and the outcome. Addressing the first hypothesis and before predictive patterns were investigated, the perceived progress toward adult goals measure was explored in terms of reliability and construct validity. The second hypothesis aimed to establish links between background variables with sense of purpose and proactive coping skills. The third hypothesis focused on the relationships between sense of purpose, proactive coping skills, and perceived progress toward adult goals. The predictive patterns of sense of purpose, proactive coping skills, transitions markers, and background variables, including indirect and direct effects, were investigated for hypothesis four.

Data analysis included descriptive statistics for all variables, including means, standard deviations, tests of normality, and skewness. To test for differences between possible groups within the sample, ANOVA analyses were conducted. No significant differences were found in responses when comparing participants by the high school they attended or their gender (this also reflects no between town differences in the county). The reliability of each scale was calculated and exploratory factor analysis using promax rotation was used to assess the factor structure for the new scale.

The final step in the analysis was modeling relationships between predictor and outcome variables with path analysis using maximum likelihood estimation in Mplus. Goodness-of-fit indices and path coefficients were estimated for the variables. Observed

variables were used as opposed to latent variables due to constraints with  $n$ . Parameter estimates were based on maximum likelihood estimation using a covariance matrix. Model fit was assessed by chi-square statistics, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Robust Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR). A non-significant chi-square statistic indicates a good model fit. CFI values of .90 are adequate and a value above .95 is considered excellent. The RMSEA measures the disruption between observed and predicted covariance structures and a value less than .05 indicates an excellent fit; values between .05 and .08 indicate an adequate fit. An SRMR below .05 implies excellent fit (Kline, 2005).

Multiple-group path analysis was also performed for two age groups, 18-23 year-olds and 24-32 year-olds. Specific paths and parameters of the model did differ between the two age groups, however, the overall models across groups were not significantly different and thus, the researchers proceeded with assessing one model for the whole sample.

## Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations of the predictors and outcome variable are displayed in Table 3. The correlations reveal that progress in adulthood, sense of purpose, proactive coping skills, and transition markers are all positively related, though no correlations posed multicollinearity problems. Of the background variables, rank SES and community support were moderately correlated. Though individuals felt the community was supportive overall and community support was a stronger predictor in the model (rank SES was insignificant in all paths), community support was still stratified by family social

status. Participants who were lower on social status also perceived less social support.

Descriptive statistics for the scale scores and questionnaire items are presented in Table 2.

#### *Young Adults Perceived Progress in Adulthood Measure*

In order to assess the first hypothesis, factor analysis using principal component analysis was used to assess the factor structure of the outcome variable scale. Items loading on one factor above .40 are considered efficient factor loadings (Kline, 2005). After rotation, the Eigenvalues and a scree plot pointed to a three-factor solution. Six items seemed unrelated to the first factor by these standards; the six items all related to the relationship domain and may have measured perceptions in young adulthood distinct from the other domains. The statistical indicators justified the exclusion of these items in the total perceived progress scale; thus, six items were dropped (i.e., progress toward adult goals related to ... *relationships with parents, relationships with other family members, relationships with friends, relationships with co-workers, relationships with intimate partner, and becoming a parent*) from the scale. The principal component analysis, after rotation, on the remaining 8 items (i.e., progress toward adult goals related to...*finances, education, work, physical health, leisure activities, spirituality, involvement with community, and personal growth*) yielded one factor; all the items loaded on one factor above .54. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the final scale was .80.

A model with progress as a latent variable was also analyzed, including the relationship goal domains. The latent variable representing progress was defined by relationship goals (loading = .38) and the original goals (loading = .89) scales. These statistics may indicate that such a latent variable could exist and follow up studies are

certainly necessary. The relationship goals scale loading, however, was substantially smaller than the original goals scale loading. Hence, the two factors are somewhat related, but the underlying construct they measure is captured more accurately by the original progress scale as opposed to the relationship progress scale. Thus, a model with the original perceived progress toward goals scale was pursued in the final model.

As mentioned earlier, the categories *not part of my goals now* and *not important to me* were also included in the original progress scale. Though the factor structure was sufficient based on these domains, the descriptive statistics did reveal that the spirituality and involvement in community domains were often marked as not part of a young adult's goals. Ten percent of the sample rated spirituality as *not important to me* and seven percent rated it as *not part of my goals now*. Men and individuals with higher personal income were significantly more likely to mark the above categories for spirituality. Furthermore, participants rated the involvement with community domain the lowest in terms of making progress compared to other domains. Fifty-eight percent reported they were *not at all* or only *somewhat* making progress in this area. The other domains were rated generally as positive with *mostly* and *absolutely* categories most frequently marked. Percentages of those who marked *mostly* and *absolutely* by domains were as follows: finances, 71%; education, 77%; work, 77%; physical health, 79%; leisure activities, 75%; personal growth, 81%; spirituality, 64%; and involvement with community, 42%. Nonetheless, the statistical indicators pointed to one factor and the alpha coefficient was lowered upon removal of either of these domains; spirituality and involvement in community domains were kept in the perceived progress scale.

Finally, the measure of perceived progress toward adult goals was predicted to correlate with self-efficacy and depression for construct validity. Perceived progress toward adult goals had a significant negative correlation with depression as predicted ( $r = -.28, p < .001$ ). Also as predicted, perceived progress toward adult goals was significantly correlated with the Self-Efficacy Scale ( $r = .31, p < .001$ ).

### *Path Analysis*

Path analysis provides a simultaneous evaluation of a set of relationships among multiple variables (Kline, 2005) and was used to test the three hypotheses for the proposed model, including possible indirect effects using Mplus. The final model with the standardized coefficients for the paths is presented in Figure 2. In the first tested model, all direct and indirect paths were included in the analysis. All direct effects from the background variables to the outcome variable however, were deemed insignificant and excluded from the final model displayed in Figure 2.

In the final model, hypothesis two was partially supported. Transition markers significantly predicted sense of purpose and proactive coping skills (transition markers → sense of purpose:  $\beta = .25, p < .00$ ; transition markers → sense of purpose:  $\beta = .20, p < .01$ ). Community support significantly predicted proactive coping skills (community support → proactive coping skills:  $\beta = .14, p < .05$ ) but not sense of purpose. Gender marginally predicted sense of purpose and had no effect on proactive coping skills. Age and rank SES had no significant impacts on sense of purpose or proactive coping skills.

Hypothesis three was partially supported as well. Sense of purpose and proactive coping skills significantly predicted perceived progress in adulthood (sense of purpose:  $\beta =$

.33,  $p < .001$ ; proactive coping skills:  $\beta = .22, p < .001$ ). As noted earlier however, no direct effects of transition markers, community support, or rank SES were found and these paths were excluded from the final model.

A significant indirect effect was found for transition markers through sense of purpose and proactive coping skills. More transition markers led to stronger perceived progress toward adulthood through sense of purpose ( $\beta = .08, p < .01$ ). In addition, more transition markers led to stronger perceived progress toward adulthood through proactive coping skills ( $\beta = .05, p < .05$ ). Trends for indirect effects were found for gender through sense of purpose to perceived progress toward adulthood (being female led to stronger perceived progress toward adulthood through sense of purpose) and community support through proactive coping to the outcome. Thus, hypothesis four was partially supported as well. Overall, the results indicated the final model explained 8% of the variance in proactive coping skills, 9% of the variance in sense of purpose, and 22% of the variance in perceived progress toward adulthood.

Values of fit indices for the final model were  $\chi^2(5) = 2.48, p < .78$ , CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = .00. The RMSEA in this analysis was excellent, with a 90% confidence interval of .00 - .07 (Kline, 2005). In addition, good model fit was shown by the SRMR of .02. The non-significant chi-square and fit indices all indicated excellent model fit of the data.

## Discussion

Young adults' experiences in their 20s require special attention because of the sociodemographic changes, subjectivity of young adulthood, and the institutional restrictions and opportunities related to this developmental phase. Accordingly, the present

study examined the past and present contexts, experiences, and perceptions of young adults from a rural community influencing their transition to adulthood.

The study's results indicate that feelings of progress in several domains of young adulthood are interrelated, including work, education, finances, physical health, leisure activities, spirituality, involvement with community, and personal growth, as supported by past research on interrelated goals (Sneed et al., 2007). Though more thorough investigations of what leads to progress in relationship domains, which were ultimately excluded from this study, and how relationship domains differ from other life domains in young adulthood, are needed.

The spirituality domain was found to be less important for young adults compared to other goal domains. Previous studies on young adults' spirituality and religiosity also report a decline in religious practice and belief for emerging adults (Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007; Smith, Denton, Faris, & Regnerus, 2002). Young adulthood is a time when many individuals move away from home and are faced with the decision of departing from their natal familial belief systems; as experienced in this study, 76% of the sample was living away from their community and family of origin.

Participants also reported less progress with involvement in their community compared to any other goal domain. As many of the participants do not live in the rural community where they were raised, it is likely they are living in communities where they perceive less support and less tight social connections. Past research indicates a tension between young adults raised in rural environments preference to live in a rural setting and their work related aspirations (Crockett, Shanahan et al., 2000). The more negative report

of involvement with community found in the study may reflect individuals' dissatisfaction with living outside their community of origin due to job opportunity constraints. Seventy-two percent of the sample indicated plans to return to the community before or during retirement. As many young adults are unable to return to their natal community in young adulthood, finding ways for young adults to be involved in their residential communities is vital both for young individuals and their communities (Balsano, 2005). Civic engagement, political involvement, and social contribution are more likely if young adults feel connected to their residential communities.

The study's findings also suggest that sense of purpose and proactive coping skills in young adults are strong predictors of perceived progress in adulthood, as supported by previous research that sense of purpose and proactive coping skills are linked with positive outcomes and well-being (Hammond, 2004; Cheng, 2001). Researchers have conjectured that such psychological constructs are vital for young adults given the structural changes of this developmental phase and the individualized paths young adults take (Settersten, 2007).

As rural young adults are experiencing many changes, a purposeful outlook would seem especially important in guiding their decisions and managing unstable and unpredictable experiences in life. Studies show that people who experience a sense of purpose also describe being well connected to others and experience positive interactions with family, friends, and co-workers. Alternatively those who experience meaninglessness describe alienation from others and society and a preoccupation with discontented areas of life (Debats, Drost, & Hansen, 1995). Thus, individuals' sense of purpose leads to the long-term benefit of being positively engaged in society as young people move into

adulthood.

According to the results and in line with past research, aspirations and purpose may help in the transition to adulthood over and beyond background variables. The Paths of a Generation study also found that educational success and aspirations were stronger predictors of future work and income status compared to family background (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). Damon (2008) has asserted that purpose provides a rudder in life. Missing from discussions on sense of purpose, however, is that youth not only need direction but the skills and support to move in the anticipated direction. Young adults not only need a rudder, but also a sail.

Results suggest that proactive coping skills are also a significant predictor of perceived progress in adulthood for young individuals. The study's findings support the notion that proactive coping skills are associated with positive goal appraisal (Aspinwall, 1997). Young people with proactive coping skills are flexible and likely able to navigate schools, workplaces, and other social settings to find what they need to help them succeed. These skills seem critical for young people in managing new and unpredictable changes associated with the early adult years.

Regarding the sample's natal community, the study's findings parallel and add to the research indicating rural communities can be places of support for youth. Though the participants felt generally supported by their past community, this perceived supportive community is not immune to the influences of SES. Youth with lower social status in the community may not have the same protective ties as other youth and are often excluded from social circles of peers and adults (Crockett, Shanahan et al., 2000). Accordingly,

parents, other adults, and schools in rural communities should be mindful of supporting all youth, especially those who may be marginalized by their peers and do not have strong, supportive connections.

Perceived community support alone did not directly predict the outcome, but had predictive strength through proactive coping skills. Individual characteristics play an important role in well-being for young adults; community support helps lead to such individual strengths such as proactive coping found in this study. It is likely youth who felt supported by the community had adults available to help teach coping and life skills that helped support in their transition to adulthood.

Discovering ways rural youth express their resiliency is beneficial for institutions supporting youth even in other settings (Crockett, Shanahan et al., 2000). Lessons from this research can perhaps be applied to other youth and, in particular, disadvantaged youth. Sense of purpose and proactive coping may be especially beneficial and helpful for vulnerable youth who are not resource rich. If youth have low support, then being high on sense of purpose and proactive coping skills could help them. Though it is likely support adds to such capacities, these psychological protectors can be taught and are a ripe area for intervention with youth.

Findings indicated no direct relationship between transition markers and perceived progress toward adulthood. As previous research suggests, the study's subjective state of progress in adulthood was not predicted by objective transition markers (Arnett, 2000) and begs for further investigations of young adult's subjective and objective states. Certainly, considering other and more transition markers would be important for confirming this

mismatch between objective and subjective states. These results support the notion that society's expectations of these markers as indicators of progress in adulthood for young people may be unbalanced (Settersten et al., 2005).

Past research indicates that role transitions do influence quality of life in young adults; however, a mediational model from transition markers to the study's positive outcome was found (Gore et al., 1997). Understanding the mediators and processes connected with transition markers and mental health outcomes is vital. Although transition markers did not directly predict the outcome, the markers did predict sense of purpose and proactive coping skills. Experiencing status changes and role transitions likely adds purpose to young adults' lives. Sense of purpose is inherently social and cultural (Baumeister, 1991) and as individuals experience more meaningful roles and responsibility in adulthood, a more purposeful orientation may emerge. According to theorists, however, sense of purpose is stable (Damon et al., 2003). Tracking the nuances and changes of purpose throughout young adulthood, a time of rapid role, internal and structural changes is necessary to determine its stability. Most likely, a reciprocal relationship between transition markers and purpose exists and requires further investigations. Several alternative models were run as it is plausible the variables could be reordered in the model. In the restructured models, however, the predictive paths were not as robust as the present model and had poor model fit.

Additionally, more transition markers and changes seem to lead and require youth to determine how to deal with such adjustments hence, leading to stronger proactive coping skills. Allowing youth independence and having them experience transitions in

adulthood is important for them to learn how to deal with changes, rather than someone navigating adult paths for them. As with sense of purpose, however, transition markers and proactive coping likely have a reciprocal relationship. In line with Schulenberg and colleagues (2005) work, those who have strong proactive coping skills are likely to experience more transition markers as they have the internal resources to do so. Again, reordered models were tested but indicated less robust results compared to the final model.

Finally, similar to past inconclusive research on the influences of sociodemographic variables on sense of purpose and proactive coping skills, results indicated that age, gender, and rank SES had no significant impacts on the mediators or final outcome in the study (Ouwehand et al., 2006; Meier & Edwards, 1974; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Volanen, Lahelma, Silventoinen, & Suominen, 2004).

### *Limitations*

This study captures only certain components of progress in young adulthood; many other ways to study progress in young adults certainly exist. Finding new, innovative, and relevant ways to study young adults and measure their objective and subjective development is important given the myriad internal and external changes of this phase. For example, the measurement of young adults' specific goals should be considered in future studies. The present study only captured how young adults were moving along on certain pre-designated goals. Understanding the variation among goals specific to individual young adults would lead to further intriguing studies on young adults' goals and progress in adulthood.

*Why Study Subjective States?* Embedded in this limitation is understanding what

subjective states really tell researchers about individuals' lives, in terms of policy implications. Why should researchers, practitioners, and policy makers care about subjective states? Recording subjective life experience accounts is a longstanding method for studying individuals' lives. Moreover, research indicates that positive, subjective states facilitate adaptation, growth, and attainment of fulfillments (Lopez, Synder, & Rasmussen, 2003). Many people seek a life of well-being, meaningful work, and social connections and the study aimed to capture such positive life processes essential to people. Desired well-being and actual well-being are motivators for individuals "to be productive and ethical citizens" (Keyes & Magyar-Moe, 2003, p. 419).

*Subjective States Matter for Young People* Accordingly, studying a positive subjective state in young adults, such as progress in adulthood, is an important indicator of young people living productive and engaged lives. Although the present model ceases at goals, it is inferred that the measured goals reflect young adults' tendencies toward engagement with society. Integration in society is connected to self-satisfaction and well being. Self-satisfaction and people's sense of well-being is connected to better mental and physical health outcomes (Keyes & Magyar-Moe, 2003). Young adults in the sample predominantly reported they do have goals and these goals have positive effects on self-efficacy and internal locus of control, important psychological dimensions to making progress in education and the labor force.

This study was also site specific with a relatively homogeneous sample. Researchers and community members know that not all rural communities are places of support for youth and making generalizations about rural populations is nebulous because

differences in proximity to larger cities, region, and ethnicity exist between rural communities (Crockett, Shanahan et al., 2000). The value of looking at supportive communities should not be undermined, however, as sociological and psychological understanding can be gained from exemplar cases. Strong communities and satisfied young adults are fruitful ground for looking at what is going well and discerning how these strengths can be tested in broader ways. Follow-up studies with comparison samples and sites are necessary to unravel the variables and paths both under- and overestimated in the study because of the unique sample and rural community.

### *Practical Implications*

Through this study more understanding was gained of how supportive rural communities, certain transitions, sense of purpose, and practical coping skills can help young adults. Community members and adults should strive to be supportive role models and mentors to all youth before young people transition into adulthood. Researchers, educators, and parents should pay attention to youth who are socially isolated, do not have as many supportive relationships around them as other youth, and lack resources.

Adults should strive to have stronger in depth conversations with youth about purpose, discussing what youth value for their futures and how they can contribute to the world. Educational curricula might include more units on how academic work is relevant to the world in which the youth are entering (Damon, 2008). Apprenticeship and internship programs within schools can help youth connect with future meaningful work and also supportive and interested adults.

All youth can benefit from learning how to plan and manage the stress of everyday

life. Adults can be more proactive about guiding youth in accessing resources in their community, so young people can take these skills to their future communities once living on their own. Youth should be rewarded for their flexibility and ability to navigate different systems within schools, communities, and relationships, skills necessary in the global market.

According to Settersten (2005), young adults are currently faced with a “sink or swim” transition to adulthood. Recently, many American youth have tended to sink in the face of this stressful transition. Given the unpredictable experiences of young adults, researchers should be looking for ways to help prepare and stabilize youth moving into adulthood. Evidence from the current study suggests that young people who have a purposeful outlook and proactive coping skills, who feel supported by their community, and have experienced certain transition markers feel they are making progress in adulthood.

Table 1

*Young Adult Demographic Variables: Descriptive Statistics (N = 201)*

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Gender <sup>a</sup>	.63	.48	0 – 1
Age	23.8	3.36	18 – 32
Education <sup>b</sup>	2.6	1.08	1 – 5
Years lived in county	14.40	5.01	1 – 18
Income <sup>c</sup>	2.04	1.16	1 – 5
Predicted return to county <sup>d</sup>	3.23	1.99	1 – 6

*Note.* <sup>a</sup>Gender: 0 = *male*, 1 = *female*. <sup>b</sup>Education: 1 = *high school diploma*, 2 = *some college*, 3 = *2-year college degree*, 4 = *4-year college degree*, 5 = *graduate degree*.

<sup>c</sup>Income: 1 = *under \$14,000*, 2 = *\$15,000 - \$34,999*, 3 = *\$35,000 - \$49,000*, 4 = *\$50,000 - \$74,999*, 5 = *over \$75,000*. <sup>d</sup>Predicted return to county: 1 = *return never*, 2 = *return in 20s*, 3 = *return in 30s*, 4 = *return in 40s*, 5 = *return in 50s*, 6 = *return in retirement*.

Table 2

*Model Variables: Descriptive Statistics and Sample Questions (N = 201)*

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	$\alpha$	Items	Sample Questions
Perceived progress toward adulthood <sup>a</sup>	2.99	.53	1 – 4	.80	8	To what extent do you feel you are on your way to fulfilling your goals regarding personal finances?
Sense of purpose <sup>b</sup>	4.86	.90	1 – 6	.90	5	My life has a clear sense of purpose.
Proactive coping skills <sup>c</sup>	3.18	.40	1 – 4	.84	14	When I experience a problem, I take the initiative in resolving it.
Transition markers <sup>d</sup>	3.44	1.14	0 – 5		5	Related to relationships, what circumstance currently describes you?... Involved in a long term relationship.
Community						
Community support <sup>e</sup>	3.41	.51	1 – 4	.85	9	Adults in my community gave me help and support.

Table 2 *Continued*

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	$\alpha$	Items	Sample Questions
<b>Family</b>						
Social status <sup>f</sup>	7.05	1.65	1 – 10	1		Think of the families in your community that were best and worst off in terms of education, jobs, and money while you grew up. Where would you place your family on the following scale?
<b>Personal</b>						
Age	23.8	3.36	18 – 32	1		
Gender <sup>g</sup>	.63	.48	0 – 1	1		

*Note.* <sup>a</sup>Perceived progress toward adulthood: 1 = *not at all*, 4 = *absolutely*. <sup>b</sup>Sense of Purpose: 1 = *absolutely untrue*, 6 = *absolutely true*. <sup>c</sup>Proactive coping skills: 1 = *not at all true*, 4 = *completely true*. <sup>d</sup>Transition markers: 0 = *no transition markers*, 5 = *all 5 transition markers*. <sup>e</sup>Community Support: 1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*.

<sup>f</sup>Social Status: 1 = *worst off*, 10 = *best off*. <sup>g</sup>Gender: 0 = *male*, 1 = *female*.

Table 3

*Correlations between Background, Predictor, and Outcome Variables*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	M	SD
1. Perceived Progress Toward Adulthood	-								2.99	.53
2. Sense of Purpose	.42***	-							4.86	.90
3. Proactive Coping Skills	.36***	.43***	-						3.18	.40
4. Transition Markers	.18**	.25***	.23**	-					3.44	1.14
5. Community Support	.08	.08	.20**	.22**	-				3.41	.51
6. Rank SES	.10	.04	.10	.09	.18*	-			7.05	1.65
7. Age	-.01	.12	-.05	.08	-.05	-.14†	-		23.8	3.36
8. Gender (Male = 0, Female = 1)	-.03	.09	.00	-.13†	.00	-.09	-.05	-	.63	.48

† $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 4

*Unstandardized Coefficients, Standard Errors, and Standardized Coefficients of Direct and Indirect Paths*

	Sense of Purpose		Skills		Progress Toward Adulthood	
	B(SE)	$\beta$	B(SE)	$\beta$	B(SE)	B
	<i>Direct Paths</i>					
Personal: Age	.03(.02)	.11	−.01(.01)	−.10		
Personal: Gender	.24(.13)	.13 <sup>†</sup>	.02(.06)	.03		
Family: Rank SES	.02(.04)	.04	.01(.02)	.05		
Community: Community Support	.04(.13)	.02	.12(.06)	.14*		
Transition Markers	.19(.06)	.25***	.07(.03)	.20**		
Sense of Purpose					.19(.04)	.33***
Proactive Coping Skills					.29(.09)	.22***

<sup>†</sup> $p \leq .10$ , \*  $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ , and \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

Table 4 *Continued*

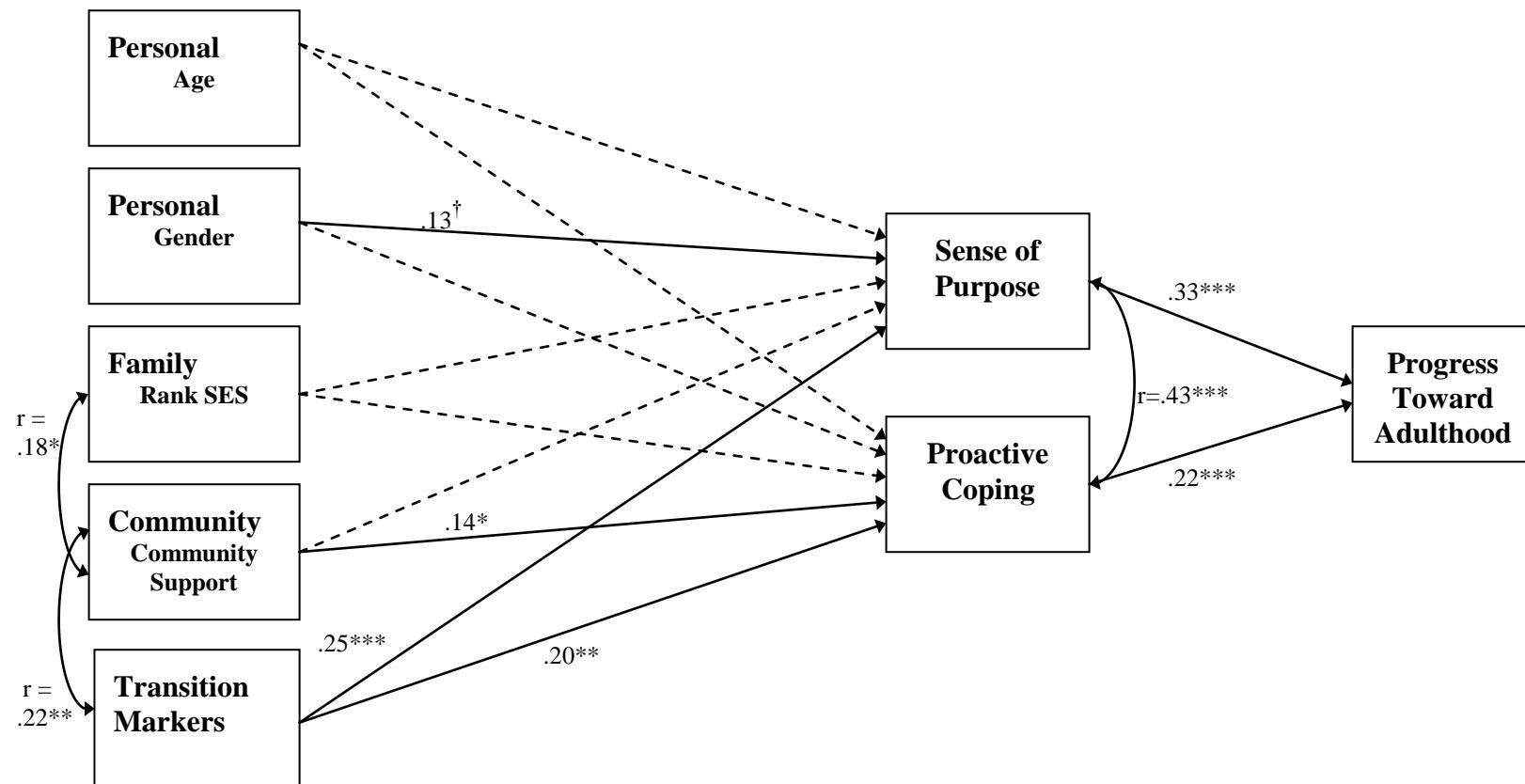
	Sense of	Proactive		Progress Toward	
	Purpose	Coping Skills		Adulthood	
	B(SE)	$\beta$	B(SE)	$\beta$	B(SE)
<i>Indirect Paths</i>					
Personal: Age					
→ Sense of Purpose → Progress				.01(.00)	.04
→ Proactive Coping → Progress				−.00(.00)	−.01
Personal: Gender					
→ Sense of Purpose → Progress				.05(.03)	.04 <sup>†</sup>
→ Proactive Coping → Progress				.01(.02)	.01
Family: Rank SES					
→ Sense of Purpose → Progress				.01(.01)	.01
→ Proactive Coping → Progress				.00(.01)	.01
Community Support					
→ Sense of Purpose → Progress				.01(.02)	.01
→ Proactive Coping → Progress				.03(.02)	.03 <sup>†</sup>
Transition Markers					
→ Sense of Purpose → Progress				.04(.01)	.08**
→ Proactive Coping → Progress				.02(.01)	.05*

<sup>†</sup> $p \leq .10$ , \*  $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ , and \*\*\* $p \leq .001$

### Figure Caption

*Figure 2.* Path model of background variables, transition markers, sense of purpose, and proactive coping skills on perceived progress toward adulthood.

Figure 2



*Note.* Insignificant paths are denoted by a dotted line. Correlations among exogenous variables are assumed; only the significant correlations are included.  $R^2 = .22***$  for Progress;  $R^2 = .09*$  for Sense of Purpose;  $R^2 = .08*$  for Proactive Coping.

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .  $\chi^2(5) = 2.48$ ,  $p < .78$ ; CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = .00, 90% CI = .00 - .07; SRMR = .02.

## References

- Alder, N., & Stewart, J. (2007, March). The MacArthur scale of subjective social status. *John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Research Network on Socioeconomic Status and Health*. Retrieved March 3, 2008, from <http://www.macses.ucsf.edu/Research/Psychosocial/notebook/subjective.html#Measurement>.
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55, 469 – 480.
- Arnett, J. J. (2007). Emerging adulthood: What is it, and what is it good for? *Child Development Perspectives*, 1, 68 – 73.
- Arthur, M.W., Hawkins, J.D., Pollard, J.A., Catalano, R.F., & Baglioni, A.J. (2002). Measuring risk and protective factors for substance use, delinquency, and other adolescent problem behaviors – The communities that care youth survey. *Evaluation Review*, 26, 575 – 601.
- Aspinwall, L. G. (1997). Where planning meets coping: Proactive coping and the detection and management of potential stressors. In S. L. Friedman & E. K. Scholnick (Eds.), *The developmental psychology of planning: Why, how, and when do we plan?* (pp. 285 – 320). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Balsano, A. (2005). Youth civic engagement in the United States: Understanding and addressing the impact of social impediments on positive youth and community development. *Applied Developmental Science*, 9, 188 – 201.
- Baumeister, R. F. (1991). *Meanings of Life*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Benson, P. L., Manne, M., Pittman, K., & Ferber, T. (2004). Youth development, developmental assets, and public policy. In R. M. Lerner & L. Steinberg (Eds.), *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 781 – 814). New York: John Wiley.
- Berry, D. (2004). The relationship between depression and emerging adulthood. *Advances in Nursing Science*, 27, 53 – 69.
- Bradley, R. H., & Corwyn, R. F. (2002). Socioeconomic status and child development. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53, 371 – 400.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (2006). The bioecological model of human development. In W. Damon & R. M. Lerner (Series Eds.) & R. M. Lerner (Vol. Ed.), *Handbook on child psychology: Vol. 1. Theoretical models of human development* (6th ed., chapter 14; pp. 793-828). New York: Wiley.

- Bynner, J. (2005). Rethinking the youth phase of the life-course: The case for emerging adulthood? *Journal of Youth Studies*, 8, 367 – 384.
- Cantor, N. (1990). From thought to behavior: “Having” and “doing” in the study of personality and cognition. *American Psychologist*, 45, 735 – 750.
- Cantor, N., Norem, J., Niedenthal, P., Langston, C., & Brower, A. (1987). Life tasks, self-concept ideals and cognitive strategies in a life transition. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53, 1178–1191.
- Cheng, C. (2001). Assessing coping flexibility in real-life and laboratory settings: A multimethod approach. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 80, 814 – 833.
- Côté, J., & Bynner, J. M. (2008). Changes in the transition to adulthood in the U.K. and Canada: The role of structure and agency in emerging adulthood. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 11, 251 – 268.
- Crockett, J., Bingham, L., & Raymond, C. (2000). Anticipating adulthood: Expected timing of work and family transitions among rural youth. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 10, 151 – 172.
- Crockett, L. J., Shanahan, M. J., & Jackson-Newsom, J. (2000). Rural youth: Ecological and life course perspectives. In R. Montemayor, G. R. Adams, & T. P. Gullotta (Eds.), *Advances in adolescent development, Vol. 10: Adolescent diversity in ethnic, economic, and cultural contexts* (pp. 43–74). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Damon, W. (2008). *The path to purpose: How young people find their calling in life*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Damon, W., Menon, J., & Bronk, K. C. (2003). The development of purpose during adolescence. *Applied Developmental Science* 7(3), 119-128.
- Diehl, M., Semegon, A., & Schwarzer, R. (2006). Assessing attention control in goal pursuit: A component of dispositional self-regulation. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 86, 306 – 317.
- Dillman, D. A. (2007). *Mail and internet surveys: The tailored design*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley.
- Duncan, C. M. (1996). Understanding persistent poverty: Social class context in rural communities. *Rural Sociology*, 61, 103 – 124.
- Elder, G. H., Jr., & Conger, R. D. (2000). *Children of the land: Adversity and success*

- in rural America.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Elder, G. H., Jr., & Johnson, M. K. (2002). The life course and aging: Challenges, lessons, and new directions. In R. Settersten, Jr. (Ed.), *Invitation to the life course: Toward new understandings of later life, Part II*, (pp. 49 – 81). Amityville, NY: Baywood.
- Elder, G. H., Jr., Johnson, M. K., & Crosnoe, R. (2003). The emergence and development of life course theory. In J. T. Mortimer & M. J. Shanahan (Eds.), *Handbook of the life course* (pp. 3 – 21). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.
- Faircloth, B. S., & Hamm, J. V. (2005). Sense of belonging among high school students representing 4 ethnic groups. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 34, 293 – 309.
- Finely, G. E., & Schwartz, S. J. (2004). The father involvement and nurtural fathering scales: Retrospective measures for adolescent and adult children. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 64, 143 – 164.
- Furstenberg, F., Jr., Rumbaut, R. G., & Settersten, R. A., Jr. (2005). On the frontier of adulthood. In R. Settersten Jr., F. Furstenberg Jr., & R. Rumbaut (Eds.), *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy* (pp. 3 – 25). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gandara, P., Gutierrez, D., & O'Hara, S. (2001). Planning for the future in rural and urban high schools. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 6, 73-93.
- Goodenow, C. (1993). Classroom belonging among early adolescent students: Relationships to motivation and achievement. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 13, 21 – 43.
- Gore, S., Aseltine, R., Jr., Colten, M. E., & Lin, B. (1997). Life after high school: Development, stress, and well-being. In I. H. Gotlib (Ed), *Stress and adversity over the life course: Trajectories and turning points* (pp. 197 – 214). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gray, J., Peng, W., Steward, S., & Thomas, S. (2004). Towards a typology of gender-related school effects: Some new perspectives on a familiar problem. *Oxford Review of Education*, 30, 529 – 550.
- Greenglass, E. (2001). Proactive coping. In E. Frydenber (Ed), *Beyond Coping: Meeting Goals, Vision, and Challenge*. London: Oxford Press.
- Greenglass, E., Schwarzer, R., Jakubiec, D., Fiksenbaum, L., & Taubert, St. (1999,

- July). *The proactive coping inventory (PCI): A multidimensional research instrument*. Paper presented at the 20th Internal conference of the Stress and Anxiety Research Society (STAR), Cracow, Poland.
- Hammond, C. (2004). Impacts of lifelong learning upon emotional resilience, psychological and mental health: Fieldwork evidence. *Oxford Review of Education*, 30, 551 – 568.
- Haase, C. M., Heckhausen, J., & Kölle, O. (2008). Goal engagement during the school-work transition: Beneficial for all, particularly for girls. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 18, 671 – 698.
- Ishida, R., & Okada, M. (2006). Effects of a firm purpose in life on anxiety and sympathetic nervous activity caused by emotional stress: Assessment by psychophysiological method. *Stress and Health*, 22, 275 – 281.
- Johnson, K. (2006). Demographic trends in rural and small town America. *A Carsey Institute Report on Rural America*, 1. Retrieved May 18, 2009, from, <http://www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu>.
- Kariv, D., & Heiman, T. (2005). Task-oriented versus emotion-oriented coping strategies: The case of college students. *College Student Journal*, 39, 72 – 84.
- Keyes, C. L. M., & Magyar-Moe, J. L. (2003). The measurement and utility of adult subjective well-being. In S. J. Lopez & C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *Positive psychological assessment: A handbook of models and measures* (pp. 411 – 425). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Keyes, C. L. M., Shmotkin, D., & Ryff, C. D. (2002). Optimizing well-being: The empirical encounter of two traditions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82, 1007–1022.
- Kline, R. B. (2005). *Principles and practice of structural equation modeling* (2nd ed.). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Krings, F., Bangerter, A., Gomez, V., & Grob, A. (2008) Cohort differences in personal goals and life satisfaction in young adulthood: Evidence for historical shifts in developmental tasks. *Adult Development*, 15, 93 – 105.
- Lacković-Grgin, K., Grgin, T., Penezić, Z., & Sorić, I. (2001). Some predictors of primary control of development in three transitional periods of life. *Journal of Adult Development*, 8, 149 – 161.

- Lee, V., Cohen, S. R., Edgar, L. Laizner, A. M., & Gagnon, A. J. (2006). Meaning-making and psychological adjustment to cancer: Development of an intervention and pilot results. *Oncology Nursing Forum*, 33, 291 – 302.
- Lerner, R. M., & Sternberg, L. (2004). *Handbook of adolescent psychology, 2nd edition*. New York: Wiley.
- Little, B. R. (1983). Personal projects: A rationale and method for investigation. *Environment and Behavior*, 15, 273–309.
- Little, B. R. (1993). Personal projects and distributed self: Aspects of cognitive psychology. In J. Suls (Ed.), *Psychological perspectives on the self: The self in social perspective* (Vol. 4, pp. 157–185). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Lopez, S. J., Synder, C. R., & Rasmussen, H. N. (2003). Striking a vital balance: Developing a complementary focus on human weakness and strength through positive psychological assessment. In S. J. Lopez & C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *Positive psychological assessment: A handbook of models and measures* (pp. 3 – 20). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood. (2005, February). *Adolescence and the transition to adulthood: Rethinking public policy for a new century* (Conference Report 2004). Retrieved January 12, 2008, from <http://www.transad.pop.upenn.edu/publications>.
- MacTavish, K., & Salamon, S. (2003). What do rural families look like today? In D.L. Brown and L.E. Swanson, (Eds.). *Challenges for rural America in the twenty-first century* (pp. 73 – 86). University Park PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Meier, A., & Edwards, H. (1974). Purpose-in-life test: Age and sex differences. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 30, 384–386
- Molgat, M. (2007). Do transitions and social structures matter? How ‘emerging adults’ define themselves as adults. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 10, 495-516.
- Mouw, T. (2005). Sequences of early adult transitions: A look at vulnerability and consequences. In R. Settersten Jr., F. Furstenberg Jr., & R. Rumbaut (Eds.), *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy* (pp. 256 – 290). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Nurmi, J. E., & Salmela-Aro, K. (2002). Goal construction, reconstruction and depressive symptoms in a life-span context: The transition from school to work. *Journal of Personality*, 70, 385 – 420.

- Ouwehand, C., De Ridder, D. T., & Bensing, J. M. (2006). Situational aspects are more important in shaping proactive coping behavior than individual characteristics: A vignette study among adults preparing for ageing. *Psychology and Health*, 21, 809–825.
- Osgood, D. W., Ruth, G., Eccles, J. S., Jacobs, J. E., & Barber, B. L. (2005). Six paths to adulthood: Fast starters, parents without careers, educated partners, educated singles, working singles, and slow starters. In R. Settersten Jr., F. Furstenberg Jr., & R. Rumbaut (Eds.). *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy* (pp. 320 – 354). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Oyserman, D., & Fryberg, S. A. (2006). The possible selves of diverse adolescents: Content and function across gender, race, and national origin. In C. Dunkel & J. Kerpelman (Eds.). *Possible selves: Theory, research, and applications* (pp. 17-39). Huntington, NY: Nova.
- Reynolds, J. R., Boyd, E., Burge, S., Harris, B., & Robbins, C. (2004). *Does being planful always pay off? Agency, economics and achievements by midlife*. Working Paper, Department of Sociology, Florida State University, May 2004.
- Ryff, C. D., & Keyes, C. L. M. (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69, 719–727.
- Salmela-Aro, K., Aunola, K., & Nurmi, J. E. (2007). Personal goals during emerging adulthood: A 10-year follow up. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 22, 670 – 715.
- Schulenberg, J., O'Malley, P. M., Bachman, J. G., & Johnston, L. D. (2005). Early adult transitions and their relation to well-being and substance use. In R. Settersten Jr., F. Furstenberg Jr., & R. Rumbaut (Eds.). *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy* (pp. 417 – 452). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Schwarzer, R., & Jerusalem, M. (1995). Generalized Self-efficacy scale. In J. Weinman, S. Wright, & M. Johnston (Eds.), *Measures in health psychology: A user's portfolio. Causal and control beliefs* (pp. 35–37). Windsor, England: Nelson.
- Schwarzer, R., & Knoll, N. (2003). Positive coping: Mastering demands and searching for meaning. In S. J. Lopez & C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *Positive psychological assessment: A handbook of models and measures* (pp. 393 – 409). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Search Institute. (1996). *Survey search institute profiles of student life: Attitudes and behaviors*. Minneapolis, MN.

- Settersten, R. A., Jr. (in press). Becoming adult: Meanings and markers for young Americans. In M. Waters, P. Carr, & M. Kefalas (Eds.). *Coming of Age in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Settersten, R. A., Jr. (2007). Passages to adulthood: Linking demographic change and human development. *European Journal of Population*, 23, 251 – 272.
- Settersten, R. A., Jr. (2005). Social policy and the transition to adulthood: Toward stronger institutions and individual capacities. In R. Settersten Jr., F. Furstenberg Jr., & R. Rumbaut (Eds.). *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy* (pp. 534 – 559). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Settersten, R. A., Jr., Furstenberg, F., Jr., & Rumbaut, R. G. (Eds.). (2005). *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shanahan, M. J., Porfeli, E. J., Mortimer, J. T., & Erickson, L. D. (2005). Subjective age identity and the transition to adulthood: When do adolescents become adults? In R. Settersten Jr., F. Furstenberg Jr., & R. Rumbaut (Eds.). *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy* (pp. 225 – 255). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shahar, G., Kalnitzki, E., Shulman, S., & Blatt, S. (2006). Personality, motivation, and the construction of goals during the transition to adulthood. *Personality & Individual Differences*, 40, 53 – 63.
- Shaver, P. R., & Brennan, K. A. (1991). Measures of depression and loneliness. In J. P. Robinson, P. R. Shaver, & L. S. Wrightsman (Eds.), *Measures of personality and social psychological attitudes* (Vol. 1, pp. 195–289). San Diego, CA: Academic.
- Smith, C., Denton, M. L., Faris, R., & Regnerus, M. (2002). Mapping American adolescent religious participation. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 41, 597 – 612.
- Sneed, J. R., Hamagami, F., McArdle, J. J., Cohen, P., & Chen, H. (2007). The dynamic interdependence of developmental domains across emerging adulthood. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 36, 351 – 362.
- Steger, M. F., Frazier, P., Oishi, S., & Kaler, M. (2006). The meaning in life questionnaire: Assessing the presence of and search for meaning in life. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 53, 80 – 93.
- Uecker, J., Regnerus, M., & Vaaler, M. (2007). Losing my religion: The social sources

- of religious decline in early adulthood. *Social Forces*, 85, 1667 – 1692.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2000). *American Factfinder*. Retrieved November 14, 2008, from <http://factfinder.census.gov>.
- U.S Census Bureau. (2007). *American Factfinder*. Retrieved April 15, 2009, from <http://factfinder.census.gov>.
- Volanen, S. M., Lahelma, E., Silventoinen, K., & Suominen, S. (2004). Factors contributing to sense of coherence among men and women. *European Journal of Public Health*, 14, 322 – 330.
- Wald, M., & Martinez, T. (2003). *Connected by 25: Improving the life chances of the country's most vulnerable 14-24 year olds*. William and Flora Hewlett Foundation Working Paper. Stanford, CA: Stanford University. Retrieved January 22, 2008, from <http://www.youthtransitions.org>
- Werner, E.E., & Smith, R.S. (1992). *Overcoming the odds: High risk children from birth to adulthood*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Wheaton, B., & Gotlib, I. H. (1997). Trajectories and turning points over the life course: Concepts and themes. In I. H. Gotlib & B. Wheaton (Eds.), *Stress and adversity over the life course: Trajectories and turning points* (pp. 1 – 25). New York: Cambridge University Press.

### Chapter 3: Conclusion

Cultural expectations and individual decisions related to historical contexts often conflict, resulting in the diversified timing and experiences of certain life course processes. Such tensions have been observed over the last decades in young adulthood. Young adults' experiences in their 20s require special attention because of the sociodemographic changes, subjectivity of young adulthood, and the institutional restrictions and opportunities related to this developmental phase. Accordingly, the present study examined the past and present contexts, experiences, and perceptions of young adults from a rural community influencing their transition to adulthood.

The study's results indicate that feelings of progress in several domains of young adulthood are interrelated, including work, education, finances, physical health, leisure activities, spirituality, involvement with community, and personal growth, as supported by past research on interrelated goals (Sneed et al., 2007). Though more thorough investigations of what leads to progress in relationship domains, which were ultimately excluded from the study, and how relationship domains differ from other life domains in young adulthood, are needed.

The spirituality domain was found to be less important for young adults compared to other goal domains. This is in line with previous studies on young adults' spirituality and religiosity that report a decline in religious practice and belief for emerging adults (Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007; Smith, Denton, Faris, & Regnerus, 2002). Young adulthood is a time when many individuals move away from home and are faced with the decision of departing from their natal familial belief systems; as

experienced in this study, 76% of the sample was living away from their community and family of origin. These changing contexts are very influential in continued development and the changing goals of young adults.

Conflicting research proposes that worldview and religious belief exploration is an important aspect of young adulthood with high levels of such exploration occurring (Arnett, 2000; Arnett & Jensen, 2002). These conclusions, however, are drawn from homogenous samples of college students. The present study likely garnered differing results due to the variability in higher education attendance (i.e., not all of the sample graduated or attended college) as higher education leads to increased religiosity in young people (Uecker et al., 2007). Comparing these findings to other samples is vital to confirm notions about spirituality in young adults. Also, as found in the present study and other studies, men were more likely to report spirituality as not part of their goals compared to women (Turner & Avison, 2003). the connection between spirituality and sense of purpose has been shown in myriad studies and if sense of purpose and spirituality lead to further positive outcomes for young people, understanding the sense of purpose and spirituality connection in follow-up studies is highly relevant (Ardelt & Koenig, 2007; Francis, 2000; Molcar & Stuempfig, 1988).

Findings also indicate that participants reported less progress with involvement in their community compared to any other goal domain. As many of these young people did not live in the rural community where they were raised, it is likely they are living in communities where they perceive less support and less tight social connections. Relatedly, past research indicates a tension between rural young adults preference to

live in a rural setting and their work related aspirations (Crockett, Shanahan et al., 2000). The more negative report of involvement with community found in the study may reflect individuals' dissatisfaction with living outside their community of origin due to job opportunity constraints. Indeed, 72% of the sample indicated plans to return to the community before or during retirement. As many young adults are unable to return to their natal community in young adulthood, finding ways for young adults to be involved in their residential communities is vital both for young individuals and their communities (Balsano, 2005).

Civic engagement, political involvement, and social contribution are more likely if young adults feel connected to their residential communities. Affiliations with a community would also likely offer stability to young adults in providing social and human capital gains for young adults. Additionally, interactions and involvement in community set the stage for continued development in adulthood, as emphasized by the life course perspective on lifelong development (Elder & Johnson, 2002). From an ecological model the role of community context in development is highly significant and young adults do well when positively engaged with their communities.

The study's findings also suggest that sense of purpose and proactive coping skills in young adults are strong predictors of perceived progress in adulthood, as supported by previous research that sense of purpose and proactive coping skills are linked with positive outcomes and well-being (Hammond, 2004; Cheng, 2001). These internal resources reflect individuals' human capital which is thought to directly influence outcomes in young adulthood (Côté & Bynner, 2008). Furthermore,

researchers have conjectured that psychological constructs are vital for young adults given the structural changes of this developmental phase and the individualized paths young adults take (Settersten, 2007). Sense of purpose and proactive coping skills represent two of these important psychological constructs beneficial for young adults.

As rural young adults are experiencing so many changes, a purposeful outlook would seem especially important in guiding their decisions, interpreting their experiences, and managing instability and unpredictability in life. Having a sense of purpose and hope puts immediate difficulties into a wider perspective, and provides an outlet for stress-inducing areas of life (Hammond, 2004). Studies show that people who experience a sense of purpose also describe being well connected to others and experience positive interactions with family, friends, and co-workers. Alternatively those who experience meaninglessness describe alienation from others and society and a preoccupation with discontented areas of life (Debats, Drost, & Hansen, 1995). Individuals' sense of purpose leads to the long-term benefit of being positively engaged in society as young people move into adulthood. Moreover, society would falter if too many young people only experienced meaninglessness. Society relies on an engaged and dedicated younger generation to carry on and perpetuate communities' livelihoods, values, and freedoms (Damon, 2008).

The Paths of a Generation study also found that educational success and aspirations were stronger predictors of future work and income status compared to family background (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). Having a strong sense of purpose may be more important than family background; investigating this more

thoroughly is necessary as adult support and family background are clearly vital to development as well. Nonetheless, aspirations and purpose may help in the transition to adulthood over and beyond background variables. Damon (2008) has asserted that purpose provides a rudder in life. Missing from discussions on sense of purpose, however, is that youth not only need direction but the skills and support to move in the anticipated direction. Young adults not only need a rudder, but also a sail.

Results suggest that proactive coping skills are also a significant predictor of perceived progress in adulthood for young individuals. Previous research indicates that people with proactive coping can manage their emotions, anticipate stress, and utilize resources to handle situations. The study's findings support the notion that proactive coping skills are associated with positive goal appraisal as well (Aspinwall, 1997). Individuals with proactive coping skills value flexibility, which is essential in today's changing world. Young people with proactive coping skills are likely able to navigate schools, workplaces, and other social settings to find what they need to help them succeed. These skills seem critical for young people in managing the new and unpredictable changes associated with the early adult years. Individuals with proactive coping skills are able to manage multiple roles and responsibilities and deal with the changes they encounter. Furthermore, young adults' aggregate transition markers require them to use these skills and access their rudder propelling them further into adulthood, maturity, and well-being.

Regarding the sample's natal community, the study's findings parallel and add to the research indicating rural communities can be places of support for youth. Though

the participants felt generally supported by their past community, this perceived supportive community is not immune to the influences of SES. Youth with lower social status in the community may not have the same protective ties as other youth and are often excluded from social circles of peers and adults. They are left vulnerable because they have little or no support and often experience years of non acceptance in their communities (Crockett, Shanahan et al., 2000). A holistic approach involving parents and families, schools, non-parent adults and mentors, and attachment to place is likely needed for all youth to feel supported.

Drawing on past research, family support does predict quality of life in young adults however, there was not a direct effect of the community support variable in the present study (Gore et al., 1997). Perceived community support alone did not directly predict the outcome, but had predictive strength through proactive coping skills. Individual characteristics play an important role in well-being for young adults and community support helps lead to such individual strengths such as proactive coping found in this study. It is likely youth who felt supported by the community had adults available to help teach coping and life skills that helped support them in their transition to adulthood.

Discovering ways rural youth express their resiliency is beneficial for institutions supporting youth even in other settings (Crockett, Shanahan et al., 2000). Lessons from this research can perhaps be applied to other youth and, in particular, disadvantaged youth. Sense of purpose and proactive coping may be especially beneficial and helpful for vulnerable youth who are not resource rich. If youth have low

support, then being high on sense of purpose and proactive coping skills could help them. Though it is likely support adds to such capacities, these psychological protectors can be taught and are a ripe area for intervention with youth. As mentioned earlier, other adult mentors and schools should work to provide more support for these youth and particularly enhance their coping skills and purpose.

Researchers should also investigate youth who have no support and are low on sense of purpose and proactive coping; these youth do not have external or internal resources to rely on during the transition into adulthood. Identifying these at-risk populations of young adults is important for further research. Alternatively, some youth may have low sense of purpose and coping skills but high family support, and life may seem ideal for these young individuals. As Elder and Conger (2000) state, “some young people do very little, even with an advantaged situation” (p. 230). These youth may become more at-risk as young adults. For example, what happens if their family support falls away as they move into adulthood? Ensuring these youth also have the internal resources to move through their transitions and adequately connect to the labor force is warranted as well.

This study also sought to bridge investigations of both subjective and objective markers of adulthood. Findings indicated no direct relationship between transition markers and perceived progress toward adulthood. As previous research suggests, the study’s subjective state of progress in adulthood was not predicted by objective transition markers (Arnett, 2000) and begs for further investigations of subjective and objective states. Certainly, considering other transition markers and more traditional

transition markers would be important for confirming this mismatch between objective and subjective states. Society's expectations of these markers as indicators of progress in adulthood for young people may be unbalanced (Settersten et al., 2005).

Past research indicates that role transitions do influence quality of life in young adults; however, a mediational model from transition markers to the study's positive outcome was found (Gore et al., 1997). Understanding the mediators and processes connected with transition markers and mental health outcomes is vital. Rather than only looking for direct links to subjective outcomes in young adulthood, investigations of mediators should have a more prominent role in research on young adults. As research suggests, a range of youth who had or had not experienced the transition markers independent of their age in young adulthood was found. This supports research on the diversity of experiences throughout people's 20s and the changing environments surrounding young adult development (Settersten, 2007; Arnett, 2000).

Although transition markers did not directly predict the outcome, the markers did predict sense of purpose and proactive coping skills. Experiencing status changes and role transitions likely adds to purpose in young adult's lives. Sense of purpose is inherently social and cultural (Baumeister, 1991) and as individual's experience more meaningful roles and responsibility in adulthood, a more purposeful orientation may emerge. According to theorists, however, sense of purpose is stable (Damon et al., 2003). Tracking the nuances and changes of purpose throughout young adulthood, a time of rapid role, internal and structural changes is necessary to determine its stability. Most likely, a reciprocal relationship between transition markers and purpose exists and

requires further investigation. Transition markers could grow out of sense of purpose and proactive coping skills, leading young adults to make better choices about goals, hence leading to even more transition markers and more stable relationships, marriages, and work. This possibility of relations was explored and several alternative models were run as it is plausible the variables could be reordered in the model. In the restructured models, however, the predictive paths were not as robust as the present model and had poor model fit.

Additionally, more transition markers and changes seem to lead and require youth to determine how to deal with such adjustments hence, leading to stronger proactive coping skills. Allowing youth independence and having them experience transitions in adulthood is important for them to learn how to deal with changes, rather than someone navigating adult paths for them. As with sense of purpose, however, transition markers and proactive coping likely have a reciprocal relationship. In line with Schulenberg and colleagues (2005) work, those who have strong proactive coping skills are likely to experience more transition markers as they have the internal resources to do so. Again, reordered models were tested but indicated less robust results compared to the final model.

Finally, similar to past inconclusive research on the influences of sociodemographic variables on sense of purpose and proactive coping skills, results indicated that age, gender, and rank SES had no significant impacts on the mediators or final outcome in the study (Ouwehand et al., 2006; Meier & Edwards, 1974; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Volanen et al., 2004).

### *Limitations*

This study captures only certain components of progress in young adulthood; many other ways to study progress in young adults certainly exist. Finding new, innovative, and relevant ways to study young adults and measure their objective and subjective development is important given the myriad internal and external changes related to this phase.

*Why Study Subjective States?* Embedded in this limitation is understanding what subjective states really tell researchers about individuals' lives, in terms of policy implications. Why should researchers, practitioners, and policy makers care about subjective states? Recording subjective life experience accounts has been used as a longstanding method for studying individuals' lives. Moreover, research indicates that positive, subjective states facilitate adaptation, growth, and attainment of fulfillments (Lopez, Synder, & Rasmussen, 2003). Many people seek a life of well-being, meaningful work, and social connections and the study aimed to capture such positive life processes essential to people. Desired well-being and actual well-being are motivators for individuals "to be productive and ethical citizens" (Keyes & Magyar-Moe, 2003, p. 419). Furthermore, "if the objective of life is the process of living a healthy and productive life, then well-being may unleash human potential in terms of creativity, productivity, and community involvement" (Keyes & Magyar-Moe, 2003, p. 419) and necessitates research related to subjective states and predictors of well-being.

*Subjective States Matter for Young People* Accordingly, studying a positive subjective state in young adults, such as progress in adulthood, is an important indicator

of young people living productive and engaged lives. Although the present model ceases at goals, it is inferred that the measured goals reflect young adults tendencies toward engagement with society. Integration in society is connected to self-satisfaction and well being. Self-satisfaction and people's sense of well-being is connected to better mental and physical health outcomes (Keyes & Magyar-Moe, 2003). Goals effect later life outcomes and are vital for well-being (Haase et al., 2008). Young adults in the sample predominantly reported they do have goals and these goals have positive effects on self-efficacy and internal locus of control, important psychological dimensions to making progress in education and the labor force. Studying such processes are important because if individuals feel they are moving along in education, they are likely actually growing in attainment of education or have met goals for education that will adequately prepare them for the work force.

The importance of psychological goals is well-documented, as goals predict attainment (Haase et al., 2008). As young adults sense they are making progress in adult goals, including work, education, finances, and personal growth this indicates a type of emotional stability leading to stable connections with the labor force, relationships, and finances and reduces people's strain on society.

Follow-up studies, however, should also include how others view young adults' progress, as this is often determinate of how individuals feel about themselves. Researchers should also consider looking at less salient indicators of progress in adulthood and subtle shifts in life important to this phase (Settersten, in press). The measurement of young adults' specific goals should also be considered in future studies.

The present study only captured how young adults were moving along on certain pre-designated goals, though participants could also indicate that goal was not important to them. Understanding the variation among goals specific to individual young adults would lead to further intriguing studies on young adults' perceptions of goals and progress in adulthood. Moreover, disentangling transition markers and subjective states of young adulthood clearly needs more investigations. This study artificially separated these two aspects of adulthood and clearly understanding their relationship to one another requires more attention.

This study was also site specific with a relatively homogeneous sample. Researchers and community members know that not all rural communities are places of support for youth and making generalizations about rural populations is nebulous. Studying and drawing conclusions about rural youth is difficult because variability in proximity to larger cities, region, and ethnicity exist between rural communities (Crockett, Shanahan et al., 2000). The value of looking at supportive communities should not be undermined, however, as sociological and psychological understanding can be gained from exemplar cases. This study allows researchers to take what was learned and carefully consider how communities and schools can provide support and strengthen their purpose and coping skills in youth. If the study has found strong characteristics and contexts that support youth, these strengths are likely important to other environments and groups of young adults as well. Strong communities and satisfied young adults are fruitful ground for looking at what is going well and discerning how these strengths can be tested in broader ways.

Finally, certain predictors and variables could have been over- or underestimated because of the unique sample and site characteristics. Perceived community support may have been a stronger predictor if a community with less support had been tested, allowing for more variability. The high ratings of community support may have masked its impact on other variables. Other aspects of the community including values on family, the natural landscape, investment in youth and schools, and unique nonprofit organizations could have influenced the higher sense of purpose and coping skills in these young adults as well as their strong sense of progress in adulthood. Follow-up studies with comparison samples and sites are necessary to unravel the variables and paths both under- and overestimated in the study.

#### *Practical Implications*

Through this study more understanding was gained of how supportive rural communities, certain transitions, sense of purpose, and practical coping skills can help young adults. Community members and adults should strive to be supportive role models and mentors to youth even before young people transition into adulthood. Researchers, educators, and parents should pay attention to youth who are socially isolated, do not have as many supportive relationships around them as other youth, and lack resources. Accordingly, parents, other adults, and schools in rural communities should be mindful of supporting all youth, especially those who may be marginalized by their peers and do not have strong, supportive connections.

Related to sense of purpose, adults should strive to have stronger in depth conversations with youth about purpose. Helping youth link their educational skills to

meaningful life directions that positively contribute to society, not simply skills to acquire money, will serve youth well. Developing language around meaningful life directions and what youth value for their futures and how they can contribute to the world is important for schools, communities, and adults influencing youth to consider. Educators and parents can have youth discuss examples of people who they think lead meaningful lives. Youth should also be encouraged to learn how to take action on behalf of themselves and others in the world around them. Educational curricula might include more units on how academic work is relevant to the world in which the youth are entering (Damon, 2008). Apprenticeship and internship programs within schools can help youth connect with future meaningful work and also supportive and interested adults.

Applicable to proactive coping skills, all youth can benefit from learning how to plan and manage the stress of everyday life. Adults can be more proactive about guiding youth in accessing resources in their community, so they can take these skills to their future communities once living on their own. Adults can be positive examples of regulating their emotions when they are faced with stressful situations. Youth should be rewarded for their flexibility and ability to navigate different systems within schools, communities, and relationships. Students should not be limited to one path of achievement, but allowed to explore and perhaps achieve in several roles which will be of value in the changing global market.

Finding ways to adequately prepare youth for adulthood is a central function of society. According to Settersten (2005), young adults, however, are currently faced with

a “sink or swim” transition to adulthood. Recently, many American youth have tended to sink in the face of this stressful transition. Given the unpredictable experiences of young adults, researchers should be looking for ways to help prepare and stabilize youth moving into adulthood. Evidence from the current study suggests that young people who have a purposeful outlook and proactive coping skills, who feel supported by their community, and have experienced certain transition markers feel they are making progress in adulthood.

## References

- Albion, M. J., Fernie, K. M., & Burton, L. J. (2005). Individual differences in age and self-efficacy in the unemployed. *Australian Journal of Psychology, 57*, 11 – 19.
- Alder, N., & Stewart, J. (2007, March). The MacArthur scale of subjective social status. *John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Research Network on Socioeconomic Status and Health*. Retrieved March 3, 2008, from <http://www.macsces.ucsf.edu/Research/Psychosocial/notebook/subjective.html#Measurement>.
- Altman, I., & Low, S. M. (Eds.). (1992). *Place attachment*. New York: Plenum.
- Ardelt, M., & Koenig, C. (2007). The Importance of religious orientation and purpose in life for dying well: Evidence from three case studies. *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging, 19*, 61 – 79.
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist, 55*, 469 – 480.
- Arnett, J. J. (2007). Emerging adulthood: What is it, and what is it good for? *Child Development Perspectives, 1*, 68 – 73.
- Arnett, J.J., & Jensen, L.A. (2002). A congregation of one: Individualized religious beliefs among emerging adults. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 17*, 451 – 467.
- Arthur, M.W., Hawkins, J.D., Pollard, J.A., Catalano, R.F., & Baglioni, A.J. (2002). Measuring risk and protective factors for substance use, delinquency, and other adolescent problem behaviors – The communities that care youth survey. *Evaluation Review, 26*, 575 – 601.
- Aspinwall, L. G. (1997). Where planning meets coping: Proactive coping and the detection and management of potential stressors. In S. L. Friedman & E. K. Scholnick (Eds.), *The developmental psychology of planning: Why, how, and when do we plan?* (pp. 285 – 320). New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Balsano, A. (2005). Youth civic engagement in the United States: Understanding and addressing the impact of social impediments on positive youth and community development. *Applied Developmental Science, 9*, 188 – 201.
- Baumeister, R. F. (1991). *Meanings of Life*. New York: Guilford Press.

- Benson, P. L., Mannes, M., Pittman, K., & Ferber, T. (2004). Youth development, developmental assets, and public policy. In R. M. Lerner & L. Steinberg (Eds.), *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 781 – 814). New York: John Wiley.
- Berry, D. (2004). The relationship between depression and emerging adulthood. *Advances in Nursing Science*, 27, 53 – 69.
- Bradley, R. H., & Corwyn, R. F. (2002). Socioeconomic status and child development. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53, 371 – 400.
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. A. (2006). The bioecological model of human development. In W. Damon & R. M. Lerner (Series Eds.) & R. M. Lerner (Vol. Ed.), *Handbook on child psychology: Vol. 1. Theoretical models of human development* (6th ed., chapter 14; pp. 793 – 828). New York: Wiley.
- Bynner, J. (2005). Rethinking the youth phase of the life-course: The case for emerging adulthood? *Journal of Youth Studies*, 8, 367 – 384.
- Cantor, N. (1990). From thought to behavior: “Having” and “doing” in the study of personality and cognition. *American Psychologist*, 45, 735 – 750.
- Cantor, N., Norem, J., Niedenthal, P., Langston, C., & Brower, A. (1987). Life tasks, self-concept ideals and cognitive strategies in a life transition. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 53, 1178 – 1191.
- Chaskin, R., Brown, P., Venkatesh, S., & Vidal, A. (2001). *Building community capacity*, (pp. 7 – 26). Hawthorne, NY: Aldine De Gruyter.
- Cheng, C. (2001). Assessing coping flexibility in real-life and laboratory settings: A multimethod approach. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 80, 814 – 833.
- Christoffersen, N. (2005). Wallowa Resources: Gaining access and adding value to natural resources on public lands. In B. Child & M. W. Lyman (Eds.), *Natural resources as community assets: Lessons from two continents* (pp. 147 – 180). Monona, WI: Sand County Foundation.
- Côté, J., & Bynner, J. M. (2008). Changes in the transition to adulthood in the U.K. and Canada: The role of structure and agency in emerging adulthood. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 11, 251 – 268.

- Crockett, J., Bingham, L., & Raymond, C. (2000). Anticipating adulthood: Expected timing of work and family transitions among rural youth. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 10*, 151 – 172.
- Crockett, L. J., Shanahan, M. J., & Jackson-Newsom, J. (2000). Rural youth: Ecological and life course perspectives. In R. Montemayor, G. R. Adams, & T. P. Gullotta (Eds.), *Advances in adolescent development, Vol. 10: Adolescent diversity in ethnic, economic, and cultural contexts* (pp. 43 – 74). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Damon, W. (2008). *The path to purpose: How young people find their calling in life*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Damon, W., Menon, J., & Bronk, K. C. (2003). The development of purpose during adolescence. *Applied Developmental Science 7*(3), 119 – 128.
- Diehl, M., Semegon, A., & Schwarzer, R. (2006). Assessing attention control in goal pursuit: A component of dispositional self-regulation. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 86*, 306 – 317.
- Dearing, E., Berry, D., & Zaslow, M. (2006). Poverty during early childhood. In K. McCartney & D. Phillips (Eds.), *Blackwell handbook of early childhood development*. (Ch. 20, pp. 399 – 423). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Debats, D. L., Drost, J., & Hansen, P. (1995). Experiences of meaning in life: A combined qualitative and quantitative approach. *British Journal of Psychology, 86*, 359 – 376.
- Debats, D. L., van der Lubbe, P. M., & Wezeman, F. R. A. (1993). On the psychometric properties of the Life Regard Index (LRI): A measure of meaningful life. *Personality and Individual Differences, 14*, 337 – 345.
- Dillman, D. A. (2007). *Mail and internet surveys: The tailored design*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley.
- DuBois, D. L., & Karcher, M. J. (2005). *Handbook of youth mentoring*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Duncan, C. M. (1996). Understanding persistent poverty: Social class context in rural communities. *Rural Sociology, 61*, 103 – 124.
- Elder, G. H., Jr., & Conger, R. D. (2000). *Children of the land: Adversity and success*

- in rural America.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Elder, G. H., Jr., & Johnson, M. K. (2002). The life course and aging: Challenges, lessons, and new directions. In R. Settersten, Jr. (Ed.), *Invitation to the life course: Toward new understandings of later life, Part II*, (pp. 49 – 81). Amityville, NY: Baywood.
- Elder, G. H., Jr., Johnson, M. K., & Crosnoe, R. (2003). The emergence and development of life course theory. In J. T. Mortimer & M. J. Shanahan (Eds.), *Handbook of the life course* (pp. 3 – 21). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.
- Faircloth, B. S., & Hamm, J. V. (2005). Sense of belonging among high school students representing 4 ethnic groups. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 34, 293 – 309.
- Finley, G. E., & Schwartz, S. J. (2004). The father involvement and nurtural fathering scales: Retrospective measures for adolescent and adult children. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 64, 143 – 164.
- Francis, L. J. (2000). The relationship between Bible reading and purpose in life among 13-15-year-olds. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 3, 27 – 36.
- Furstenberg, F., Jr., Rumbaut, R. G. & Settersten, R. A., Jr. (2005). On the frontier of adulthood. In R. Settersten Jr., F. Furstenberg Jr., & R. Rumbaut (Eds.), *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy* (pp. 3 – 25). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gandara, P., Gutierrez, D., & O'Hara, S. (2001). Planning for the future in rural and urban high schools. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 6, 73-93.
- Goodenow, C. (1993). Classroom belonging among early adolescent students: Relationships to motivation and achievement. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 13, 21 – 43.
- Gore, S., Aseltine, R., Jr., Colten, M. E., & Lin, B. (1997). Life after high school: Development, stress, and well-being. In I. H. Gotlib (Ed.), *Stress and adversity over the life course: Trajectories and turning points* (pp. 197 – 214). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gray, J., Peng, W., Steward, S., & Thomas, S. (2004). Towards a typology of gender-related school effects: Some new perspectives on a familiar problem. *Oxford Review of Education*, 30, 529 – 550.

- Greenglass, E. (2001). Proactive coping. In E. Frydenber (Ed.), *Beyond Coping: Meeting Goals, Vision, and Challenge*. London: Oxford Press.
- Greenglass, E., Schwarzer, R., Jakubiec, D., Fiksenbaum, L., & Taubert, St. (1999, July). *The proactive coping inventory (PCI): A multidimensional research instrument*. Paper presented at the 20th Internal conference of the Stress and Anxiety Research Society (STAR), Cracow, Poland.
- Hammond, C. (2004). Impacts of lifelong learning upon emotional resilience, psychological and mental health: Fieldwork evidence. *Oxford Review of Education*, 30, 551 – 568.
- Haarr, R.N., & Morash, M. (1999). Gender, race, and strategies of coping with occupational stress in policing. *Justice Quarterly*, 16, 303 – 336.
- Haase, C. M., Heckhausen, J., & Kölle, O. (2008). Goal engagement during the school-work transition: Beneficial for all, particularly for girls. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 18, 671 – 698.
- Hidalgo, C. M., & Hernández, B. (2001). Place attachment: Conceptual and empirical questions. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 21, 273 – 281.
- Ishida, R., & Okada, M. (2006). Effects of a firm purpose in life on anxiety and sympathetic nervous activity caused by emotional stress: Assessment by psychophysiological method. *Stress and Health*, 22, 275 – 281.
- Johnson, K. (2006). Demographic trends in rural and small town America. *A Carsey Institute Report on Rural America*, 1. Retrieved May 18, 2009, from, <http://www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu>.
- Kariv, D., & Heiman, T. (2005). Task-oriented versus emotion-oriented coping strategies: The case of college students. *College Student Journal*, 39, 72 – 84.
- Kasarda, J. D., & Janowitz, M. (1974). Community attachment in mass society. *American Sociological Review*, 39, 328 – 339.
- Keyes, C. L. M., & Magyar-Moe, J. L. (2003). The measurement and utility of adult subjective well-being. In S. J. Lopez & C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *Positive psychological assessment: A handbook of models and measures* (pp. 411 – 425). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

- Keyes, C. L. M., Shmotkin, D., & Ryff, C. D. (2002). Optimizing well-being: The empirical encounter of two traditions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 82*, 1007 – 1022.
- Kline, R. B. (2005). *Principles and practice of structural equation modeling* (2nd ed.). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Krings, F., Bangerter, A., Gomez, V., & Grob, A. (2008) Cohort differences in personal goals and life satisfaction in young adulthood: Evidence for historical shifts in developmental tasks. *Adult Development, 15*, 93 – 105.
- Lacković-Grgin, K., Grgin, T., Penezić, Z., & Sorić, I. (2001). Some predictors of primary control of development in three transitional periods of life. *Journal of Adult Development, 8*, 149 – 161.
- Lazarus, R. S. (1991). *Emotion and adaptation*. New York: Oxford University press.
- Lee, V., Cohen, S. R., Edgar, L. Laizner, A. M., & Gagnon, A. J. (2006). Meaning-making and psychological adjustment to cancer: Development of an intervention and pilot results. *Oncology Nursing Forum, 33*, 291 – 302.
- Lerner, R. M., & Sternberg, L. (2004). *Handbook of adolescent psychology, 2nd edition*. New York: Wiley.
- Little, B. R. (1983). Personal projects: A rationale and method for investigation. *Environment and Behavior, 15*, 273 – 309.
- Little, B. R. (1993). Personal projects and distributed self: Aspects of cognitive psychology. In J. Suls (Ed.), *Psychological perspectives on the self: The self in social perspective* (Vol. 4, pp. 157 – 185). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Lopez, S. J, Synder, C. R., & Rasmussen, H. N. (2003). Striking a vital balance: Developing a complementary focus on human weakness and strength through positive psychological assessment. In S. J. Lopez & C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *Positive psychological assessment: A handbook of models and measures* (pp. 3 – 20). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood. (2005, February). *Adolescence and the transition to adulthood: Rethinking public policy for a new century* (Conference Report 2004). Retrieved January 12, 2008, from <http://www.transad.pop.upenn.edu/publications>.

- MacTavish, K., & Salamon, S. (2003). What do rural families look like today? In D.L. Brown and L.E. Swanson, (Eds.). *Challenges for rural America in the twenty-first century* (pp. 73 – 86). University Park PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Masten, A. S. (1994). Resilience in individual development:Successful adaptation despite risk and adversity. In M. C. Wang & E. W. Gordon (Eds.), *Educational resilience in innercityAmerica: Challenges and prospects* (pp. 3–25). Hillsdale,NJ: Erlbaum.
- Masten, A. S., & Obradović, J. (2006). Competence and resilience in development. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1094, 13-27.
- McAdams, D. P. (2001). Generativity in midlife. In M. Lachman, (Ed.), *Handbook of midlife development* (pp. 395–443). New York: Wiley.
- Meier, A., & Edwards, H. (1974). Purpose-in-life test: Age and sex differences. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 30, 384–386.
- Molcar, C., & Stuempfig, D. W. (1988). Effects of world view on purpose in life. *Journal of Psychology*, 122, 365 – 372.
- Molgat, M. (2007). Do transitions and social structures matter? How ‘emerging adults’ define themselves as adults. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 10, 495-516.
- Morojele, N. K., & Brook, J. S. (2004). Sociodemographic, sociocultural, and individual predictors of reported feelings of meaninglessness among South African adolescents. *Psychological Reports*, 95, 1271 – 1278.
- Mouw, T. (2005). Sequences of early adult transitions: A look at vulnerability and consequences. In R. Settersten Jr., F. Furstenberg Jr., & R. Rumbaut (Eds.), *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy* (pp. 256 – 290). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Nichols, J. D., & White, J. (2001). Impact of peer networks of achievement of high school algebra students. *Educational Research*, 94, 267 - 274.
- Nurmi, J. E., & Salmela-Aro, K. (2002). Goal construction, reconstruction and depressive symptoms in a life-span context: The transition from school to work. *Journal of Personality*, 70, 385 – 420.

- Ouwehand, C., De Ridder, D. T., & Bensing, J. M. (2006). Situational aspects are more important in shaping proactive coping behavior than individual characteristics: A vignette study among adults preparing for ageing. *Psychology and Health*, 21, 809 – 825.
- Osgood, D. W., Ruth, G., Eccles, J. S., Jacobs, J. E., & Barber, B. L. (2005). Six paths to adulthood: Fast starters, parents without careers, educated partners, educated singles, working singles, and slow starters. In R. Settersten Jr., F. Furstenberg Jr., & R. Rumbaut (Eds.). *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy* (pp. 320 – 354). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Oyserman, D., & Fryberg, S. A. (2006). The possible selves of diverse adolescents: Content and function across gender, race, and national origin. In C. Dunkel & J. Kerpelman (Eds.). *Possible selves: Theory, research, and applications* (pp. 17 – 39). Huntington, NY: Nova.
- Rawson, H. E., Palmer, D. W., & Henderson, J. (1999). Coping resources and self-esteem differences between students selecting large and small colleges. *College Student Affairs Journal*, 18, 72 – 80.
- Reynolds, J. R., Boyd, E., Burge, S., Harris, B., & Robbins, C. (2004). *Does being planful always pay off? Agency, economics and achievements by midlife*. Working Paper, Department of Sociology, Florida State University, May 2004.
- Ryan, A. M. (2001). The peer group as a context for the development of young adolescent motivation and achievement. *Child Development*, 72, 1135 – 1150.
- Ryff, C. D., & Keyes, C. L. (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69, 719 – 727.
- Salmela-Aro, K., Aunola, K., & Nurmi, J. E. (2007). Personal goals during emerging adulthood: A 10-year follow up. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 22, 670 – 715.
- Sandefur, G. D., Eggerling-Boeck, J., & Park, H. (2005). Off to a good start? Postsecondary education and early adult life. In R. Settersten Jr., F. Furstenberg Jr., & R. Rumbaut (Eds.). *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy* (pp. 292 – 319). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Schlesinger, S., Susman, M., & Koenigsberg, J. (1990). Self esteem and purpose in life: A comparative study of women alcoholics. *Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education*, 36, 127 – 141.

- Schnell, T., & Becker, P. (2006). Personality and meaning in life. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 41, 117 – 129.
- Schulenberg, J., O’Malley, P. M., Bachman, J. G., & Johnston, L. D. (2005). Early adult transitions and their relation to well-being and substance use. In R. Settersten Jr., F. Furstenberg Jr., & R. Rumbaut (Eds.). *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy* (pp. 417 – 452). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Schwarzer, R., & Jerusalem, M. (1995). Generalized self-efficacy scale. In J. Weinman, S. Wright, & M. Johnston (Eds.), *Measures in health psychology: A user’s portfolio. Causal and control beliefs* (pp. 35–37). Windsor, England: Nelson.
- Schwarzer, R., & Knoll, N. (2003). Positive coping: Mastering demands and searching for meaning. In S. J. Lopez & C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *Positive psychological assessment: A handbook of models and measures* (pp. 393 – 409). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Search Institute. (1996). *Survey search institute profiles of student life: Attitudes and behaviors*. Minneapolis, MN.
- Settersten, R. A., Jr. (2005). Social policy and the transition to adulthood: Toward stronger institutions and individual capacities. In R. Settersten Jr., F. Furstenberg Jr., & R. Rumbaut (Eds.). *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy* (pp. 534 – 559). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Settersten, R. A., Jr. (2007). Passages to adulthood: Linking demographic change and human development. *European Journal of Population*, 23, 251 – 272.
- Settersten, R. A., Jr. (in press). Becoming adult: Meanings and markers for young Americans. In M. Waters, P. Carr, & M. Kefalas (Eds.). *Coming of Age in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Settersten, R. A., Jr., Furstenberg, F., Jr., & Rumbaut, R. G. (Eds.). (2005). *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shanahan, M. J., Porfeli, E. J., Mortimer, J. T., & Erickson, L. D. (2005). Subjective age identity and the transition to adulthood: When do adolescents become adults? In R. Settersten Jr., F. Furstenberg Jr., & R. Rumbaut (Eds.). *On the frontier of adulthood: Theory, research, and public policy* (pp. 225 – 255). Chicago:

University of Chicago Press.

- Shahar, G., Kalnitzki, E., Shulman, S., & Blatt, S. (2006). Personality, motivation, and the construction of goals during the transition to adulthood. *Personality & Individual Differences*, 40, 53 – 63.
- Shaver, P. R., & Brennan, K. A. (1991). Measures of depression and loneliness. In J. P. Robinson, P. R. Shaver, & L. S. Wrightsman (Eds.), *Measures of personality and social psychological attitudes* (Vol. 1, pp. 195 – 289). San Diego, CA: Academic.
- Skinner, E. A., & Belmont, M. J. (1993). Motivation in the classroom: Reciprocal effects of teacher behavior and student engagement across the school year. *Educational Psychology* 85, 571 – 581.
- Smith, M. H., Beaulieu, L. J., & Seraphine, A. (1995). Social capital, place of residence, and college attendance. *Rural Sociology*, 60, 363 – 380.
- Smith, C., Denton, M. L., Faris, R., & Regnerus, M. (2002). Mapping American adolescent religious participation. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 41, 597 – 612.
- Sneed, J. R., Hamagami, F., McArdle, J. J., Cohen, P., & Chen, H. (2007). The dynamic interdependence of developmental domains across emerging adulthood. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 36, 351 – 362.
- Stedman, R., Beckley, T., Wallace, S., & Ambard, M. (2004). A picture and 1000 words: Using resident-employed photography to understand attachment to high amenity places. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 36, 580 – 606.
- Steger, M. F., Frazier, P., Oishi, S., & Kaler, M. (2006). The meaning in life questionnaire: Assessing the presence of and search for meaning in life. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 53, 80 – 93.
- Sung, K. M., Puskar, K. R., & Sereika, S. (2006). Psychosocial factors and coping strategies of adolescents in a rural Pennsylvania high school. *Public Health Nursing*, 23, 523 – 530.
- Theokas, C. & Lerner, R. M. (2006). Observed ecological assets in families, schools, and neighborhoods: Conceptualization, measurement, and relations with positive and negative developmental outcomes applied developmental science. *Applied Developmental Science*, 10, 61–74.

- Turner, R. J. & Aiston, W. R. (2003). Status variation in stress exposure: Implications for the interpretation of research on race, socioeconomic status, and gender. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 44*, 488 – 505.
- Uecker, J., Regnerus, M., & Vaaler, M. (2007). Losing my religion: The social sources of religious decline in early adulthood. *Social Forces, 85*, 1667 – 1692.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2000). *American Factfinder*. Retrieved November 14, 2008, from <http://factfinder.census.gov>.
- U.S Census Bureau. (2007). *American Factfinder*. Retrieved April 15, 2009, from <http://factfinder.census.gov>.
- Van Horn, M. L., Hawkins, J. D., Arthur, M. W., & Catalano, R. F. (2007). Assessing community effects on adolescent substance use and delinquency. *Journal of Community Psychology, 35*, 925 – 946.
- Volanen, S. M., Lahelma, E., Silventoinen, K., & Suominen, S. (2004). Factors contributing to sense of coherence among men and women. *European Journal of Public Health, 14*, 322 – 330.
- Wald, M., & Martinez, T. (2003). *Connected by 25: Improving the life chances of the country's most vulnerable 14-24 year olds*. William and Flora Hewlett Foundation Working Paper. Stanford, CA: Stanford University. Retrieved January 22, 2008, from <http://www.youthtransitions.org>
- Wentzel, K. R. (1997). Student motivation in middle school: The role of perceived pedagogical caring. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 89*, 411 – 422.
- Wentzel, K. R. (1998). Social relationships and motivation in middle school: The role of parents, teachers, and peers. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 90*, 202 – 210.
- Wentzel, K. R., & Caldwell, K. (1997). Friendships, peer acceptance, and group membership: Relations to academic achievement in middle school. *Child Development, 68*, 1198 – 1210.
- Werner, E. E., & Smith, R.S. (1992). *Overcoming the odds: High risk children from birth to adulthood*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Werner, E. E. (1993). Risk, resilience, and recovery: perspectives from Kauai.

*Developmental Psychopathology*, 5, 503 – 515.

Wheaton, B., & Gotlib, I. H. (1997). Trajectories and turning points over the life course: Concepts and themes. In I. H. Gotlib & B. Wheaton (Eds.), *Stress and adversity over the life course: Trajectories and turning points* (pp. 1 – 25). New York: Cambridge University Press.