

We Won't Be Able to Find Jobs Here: How Growing Up in Rural America Shapes Decisions About Work



ASHLEY R. NICCOLAI, SARAH DAMASKE, AND JASON PARK 

Using data from sixty-eight interviews conducted with men and women raised in rural counties in Pennsylvania, we ask how growing up in rural settings shapes people's aspirations regarding work over three periods. We find that participants' early aspirations during their late teens were shaped by rurality, gender, and class. During the transition to adulthood and again during an unemployment period, searching for work in rural areas with a shrinking economic base, participants adjusted their early aspirations. These adjustments were shaped by their attachment to rural locations, their gender, and class and exacerbated existing structural inequalities in their local labor markets.

Keywords: unemployment, aspirations, expectations, rural youth, inequality

The dominant popular narrative surrounding rural life in the United States is a tale of economic downturn: rural youth, according to popular lore, must either abandon their rural roots or remain tied to the economic peril that has come to define these lands (Gibbs and Cromartie 1994; Schell and Silva 2020; Vazzana and Rudi-Polloska 2019). Indeed, many industries once key for rural communities' vitality—

agriculture, manufacturing, fossil fuel mining, and drilling—experienced industry collapse over the past thirty years (Marcus and Krupnick 2017; Nelson 2016; Schafft and Jackson 2010). Concerned with the human impact of these economic changes, researchers and policymakers alike have decried a rural “brain drain”—an out-migration pattern by which bright, motivated, and educated young people flee their

Ashley R. Niccolai completed her doctoral candidacy exams at The Pennsylvania State University, United States. **Sarah Damaske** is associate professor of sociology and labor and employment relations at The Pennsylvania State University, United States. **Jason Park** is a graduate student in sociology at The Pennsylvania State University, United States.

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small hometowns in the pursuit of education and work (Carr and Kefalas 2010; Petrin, Schafft, and Meece 2014). During this same period, women and men across the economic spectrum increased their levels of educational attainment to weather these changing conditions, and families have come to rely on both women's and men's contributions in the paid labor market and at home (Sherman 2009; DiPrete and Buchmann 2013). Thus, on the one hand, availability of good paying work in communities where rural youth live has declined, but, on the other hand, convergence of the centrality of paid work in these youth's lives has grown. This article asks how the tension between the importance of paid work, family obligations, and community shape rural youth's aspirations during three key periods in their lives—as they finish high school, during their initial transition to adulthood, and during a period of unemployment later in life.

A well-established body of sociological literature examines how gender, race, and social class shape aspirations and preferences for schooling, work, and family (see, for example, Davis and Pearce 2007; Vespa 2009). Normative gender ideologies shape men and women's decisions about workforce participation at various stages in the life course, even though they do not produce singular patterns (Correll 2004). Class also appears to shape “planfulness” or whether young people create roadmaps toward future achievable goals (Schulz and Robinson 2017); this may be partly because of their disappointment with the labor market or because they do not have the necessary financial, cultural, or social capital with which to achieve their plans (Bettie 2003; Willis 1977; Silva 2013; Hardie forthcoming). Although these studies have primarily relied on urban and suburban samples, rurality also shapes expectations about work and family (Sherman 2009; Nelson 2016). Moreover, qualitative work suggests that youth make decisions early in their lives about whether to remain in their rural areas (Carr and Kefalas 2010).

Understanding whether these early aspirations may keep people tied to particular locations even after jobs have left and how these beliefs are intertwined with rurality, gender, and class may help us identify an important

mechanism of inequality. To answer these questions, we draw on analyses of sixty-eight in-depth interviews of men and women who grew up in rural counties of Pennsylvania and who have remained in Pennsylvania (either in their rural communities or in larger metropolitan areas). Our findings suggest early aspirations are connected to the importance of rural place in participants' lives (particularly family ties), are further shaped by gender and class, and change across the life course during transitions into and out of work, particularly when these transitions occur in local labor markets with few opportunities.

RURAL YOUTH, ASPIRATIONS, AND COMMITMENTS TO COMMUNITY

Historically, rural areas have generally experienced greater net losses of young people than of older adults (Cushing 1999). Furthermore, the people who leave rural areas tend to be more educated and highly trained, and those who remain have less education, training, lower incomes, and fewer skills (Cushing 1999; Gibbs and Cromartie 1994; Mills and Hazarika 2001).

Recent statistics show that more rural youth are attending college than ever before—though still at disproportionately lower rates than their suburban and urban peers (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow 2016; Wells et al. 2019). Yet rurality likely shapes aspirations about educational attainment. Rural parents have lower educational expectations for their children and are less likely to have graduated college themselves (Byun, Meece, and Irvin 2012; Byun et al. 2012; Israel, Beaulieu, and Hartless 2001; Khattri, Riley, and Kane 1997; Provasnik et al. 2007). Additionally, because rural schools are geographically isolated from urban centers and generally supported by a smaller tax base, it is not uncommon for them to operate under significant budgetary constraints. As a result, they generally offer fewer classes and extracurricular activities in support of students' post-secondary aspirations (Byun, Meece, and Irvin 2012; Khattri, Riley, and Kane 1997). Rural students may also have concerns about the cost of college and may believe that their academic records are less competitive for college admissions than those of their suburban and urban

peers (Bernsen et al. 2022). Finally, attachment to one's hometown may limit rural students' college options (Turley 2009).

Yet rurality can come with distinct advantages that may increase rural youths' aspirations for educational attainment and professional careers. Rural youth tend to have high levels of family and community capital, and these strong attachments are positively related to academic achievement and college completion (Byun et al. 2012; Petrin, Schafft, and Meece 2014). Smaller schools—typical of rural communities—tend to generate high levels of social capital as they cultivate “feelings of belonging and commitment to education beyond high school” (Nelson 2019, 98). Thus rural youth may be poised to aspire to higher educational attainment and work.

But the distribution of these community resources is unequal; communities often devote significant resources to middle-class youth who will likely leave the area, whereas those most likely to remain may receive fewer of the educational and community resources (Drescher et al. 2022; Carr and Kefalas 2010; Parsons 2022). Aspirations may be shaped by access to these resources. In a qualitative study of rural Iowa, Patrick Carr and Maria Kefalas (2010) identify four primary patterns among rural youth; they find that schools devoted significant time, attention, and resources to the group they labeled *achievers*—college-bound youth from middle-class families thought of as the town's best and brightest. Conversely, rural towns devoted less energy and resources to students from working-class families who were thought to have less academic promise and thus also might stay in the community as *stayers*. But not everyone who lacked resources wanted to stay; like *achievers*, *seekers* were determined to leave their hometown (and did), but they did not have the same academic and economic resources as *achievers* (Carr and Kefalas 2010). Finally, Carr and Kefalas (2010) identify returners who were either *seekers* or *achievers* who eventually circled back to their hometown. This study provides a model of how rurality and class may shape youth's early aspirations and some later moves, as well.

Gendered and Classed Aspirations over the Life Course

A life-course approach considers how people's lives unfold and are shaped by social and historical contexts (Elder 1998; Moen and Han 2001). Moreover, the life-course perspective examines what happens at transition points, such as the end of high school, and how these transitions are shaped by gender (Moen and Han 2001; Williams and Han 2003). The perspective also sheds light on how early life opportunities and constraints shapes the sequencing of their future life trajectories (Dannefer 2003; Willson, Shuey, and Elder 2007; Damaske and Frech 2016).

Nested within the life course approach, the cumulative advantages and disadvantages perspective theorizes that inequalities—such as race, social class, and family structure—build over time, given that one transition into a “good” or “bad” job may lead to a transition into another and yet another with consequences both for future employment, as well as for other aspects across the life course (Elder 1998; Dannefer 2003; Willson, Shuey, and Elder 2007; Frech and Damaske 2019). These aspirations are often classed and gendered (Damaske 2011; Vespa 2009; Cech 2015; Ovink 2014). Importantly, differences in parental advice tend to privilege middle-class children who usually grow up with more cultural capital than working-class children (Lareau 2003; Rohall, Milkie, and Lucas 2011). Sarah Damaske (2011) argues that middle-class girls typically view college as the only next step after high school, thus delaying decisions about work and family until after college—an opportunity that working-class girls seldom have. Working-class men may look toward work instead of college (Holland 2014; Ovink 2014).

Thus the transition from high school to the next phase of life may be a crucial moment for aspirations. Moreover, given the multiple paths toward adulthood that present no clear next step after high school, youth may find themselves struggling to make decisions about what the next right step should be; a decision shaped by gender and class (Lippert and Damaske 2019; Swauger 2010). At multiple transition points in young adulthood, gender shapes aspirations: high school-aged girls and boys an-

ticipate different majors and jobs (Lips 2004; Machung 1989), college-aged students go into different majors depending on their gender (Mullen 2014), young adult men and women engage in different work strategies in anticipation of future goals (Bass 2015), and young adult couples negotiate gendered plans for the future (Wong 2017). Finally, it may also be true that aspirations will continue to change across the life course, as roadblocks or new opportunities provide new lenses through which to see one's potential (Damaske 2011; Vespa 2009).

METHODS

This article focuses on a subset of sixty-eight interviews (see table 1) of people who grew up in rural areas; it is drawn from a larger study conducted from 2013 to 2015 that includes one hundred interviews with unemployed working- and middle-class men and women. For the broader study, participants were recruited from Pennsylvania unemployment centers where the unemployed were invited to fill out a form to indicate participation interest and eligibility. Participation was limited to those born between 1964 and 1985, those who had worked full time, and those who experienced an involuntary job loss. The sample was further restricted to include only those participants who grew up in rural (nonmetropolitan) counties, as determined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget's 2013 definition of *nonmetropolitan* and described in the Pennsylvania Office of Rural Health's report, "Rural Pennsylvania: Where Is It Anyway?" (Center for Rural Pennsylvania 2014). All participants lived in rural Pennsylvania counties in high school; in adulthood some still lived in their counties of birth; others had moved to metropolitan counties, but all remained in Pennsylvania.

The interviews were conducted in person primarily by the second author and a team of graduate students and were an average of 2.5 hours. All interviews were transcribed. Interview transcripts, field notes, and other pieces of data were coded according to categories determined from the literature. We used an iterative process to develop analytic categories, relying on the existing literature and examining the

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Sample (n = 68)

Age (years)	
mean	39.6
Gender (n)	
men	32
women	36
Race-ethnicity (n)	
White	64
Black	3
Latino/a	1
Asian	—
Marital status (n)	
married	40
cohabitating	17
single	11
Children in household (n)	
under twenty-three	56

Source: Authors' tabulations.

findings for unexpected patterns (Gerson and Damaske 2020).¹

The aspirations section of the interview (a focus of this article) centered on participants' aspirations at the end of their high school experience, whenever that took place. Participants were asked a series of questions about their expectations about work and family in the future, as well as about their parents' expectations. The questions included the following: First, think back, growing up, did your mother or father express any expectations or hopes regarding your future? Now, did you have any expectations or hopes for what you wanted to do when you grew up? How did your outlook compare with your parents? Did you want to get a job? Did you expect to get a job? Did you think it would be ok not to work? When you were growing up, did you have any expectations or hopes about having children? Did you ever think how you would combine having children and working outside the home?

The analyses identified two social class constructs, origin and destination (see Conley 2004). Both were determined using the highest

1. For more detailed information about the interview methodology, see Damaske 2020.

status occupation in the household (see Damaske 2021). Social class of origin was determined around high school age because this was when participants often last lived with parents and had the clearest ideas of parent occupation and household finances. For these analyses, we use social class of origin.

FINDINGS

The vast majority of participants had a common goal for their future selves: to remain steadily employed throughout their adult lives. In fact, nearly all stated that not working was not acceptable in adulthood. Both men and women discussed paid work as a nonnegotiable part of the transition to adulthood. Yet participants also spoke of communities undergoing drastic economic changes—labor-market shifts that left their hometowns to languish. Despite the value placed on paid work, they grew up in areas where finding paid work could be difficult.

In the analysis that follows, we examine the ways in which growing up in rural America in the face of these economic changes shaped our participants' preferences for paid work, first in their teenage years, then in their transition to adulthood, and then, again, in midlife. We show that, from a young age, participants recognized the economic changes as a dilemma they would have to navigate and respond to in their search for work. Next we examine participants' early aspirations and expectations in their high school years. We then consider the processes by which these early aspirations and expectations changed, if at all, once participants began to transition into their adult lives. Finally, we look at the relationship between these early aspirations and their job search activities while they were unemployed in midlife.

THE CHANGING ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE DILEMMA

Men and women of both working- and middle-class origins described clear recollections of the economic changes and labor-market shifts that occurred within their respective rural hometowns.² In some cases, like for Julie, who is

white and working-class origins, the decline of industry in her community—a rural town known for coal mining—resulted in parental layoffs: “My father worked in a factory . . . He had solid work. We didn’t want for anything. We had what we needed but we didn’t live by any means an extravagant lifestyle. . . . There were times when he was laid off periodically and I remember there being some stress in the household during those times and him trying to find something to bridge that gap but that was never for long.”

Although Julie generally perceived her family to be financially secure, she remembers her father’s layoffs from factory work as a time of economic uncertainty for her family. Some participants described a realization that economic change could drive them and their peers from their communities. Natalie, who is white and with middle-class origins, recalled seeing people flee her rural community after the local steel manufacturing plant closed: “[My town’s] economy was strongly based on the steel making industry . . . Basically at some point in there, we started importing all our steel . . . And they don’t make steel anymore . . . A lot of people at that point left. And by that time, I was fourteen. By the time I graduated, most of my friends were thinking, ‘We won’t be able to find jobs in [my hometown], we’re gonna have to go someplace else.’ So, my generation was the first one that really left.”

The closing of the local steel mill signaled to Natalie’s peers that remaining in their hometown would make continued work difficult.

Yet, both Julie and Natalie found themselves, at the time of our interviews, living in another small rural town, in the same state, less than two hours away from where they grew up. This was true for many other participants in this study.

RURAL WORKING-CLASS ASPIRATIONS

Working-class women and men described parental aspirations that differed for sons and daughters, unlike middle-class participants). A majority of girls with working-class origins recalled that their parents emphasized the importance of college for girls but not for boys.

2. Names have been changed to protect the identity of participants.

Brandi, who is white with working-class origins, recalled how she (and her sisters) felt more pressure to attend college, whereas she felt that her brother experienced less: "I mean, [my parents] both, they were both very adamant that all of us, well, at least my sisters and I would go to college. It was a little different with our brother, but . . . they did push that all us girls go to college." When asked to explain what was different with her brother, Brandi responded, "I think partially that he had a lot of skills that . . . didn't really require necessary schooling, like he owns his own excavating company, and you know . . . [our parents] figured he'd do something like that where he didn't have to go to college."

Jodi, who is white with working-class origins, shared a similar story, recalling how her parents urged her to "Yes, work hard, go to college please [laughter]. My brother went to military instead [of college] but . . . they just wanted me to have a good job doing something, so they encouraged college." Although working-class daughters heard an emphasis of college for them, they did not see a similar emphasis for their brothers. Heather, also white with working-class origins, explained that she was "the valedictorian of my high school, so [college] was like expected. But, I was the first person, I think, on both sides of my family to go to college." When asked whether she considered other options for her future or whether her parents suggested other plans, Heather replied that college was "I think it was just . . . [pause] expected."

A smaller group of women from rural working-class families described how parents encouraged them to attach their identity to paid work. Unlike prior generations of women, women growing up in rural communities were told to expect that they would need to provide for themselves. Pamela, who is white with working-class origins, recalled, "my mom was like you should always provide; she always told me to take care of myself." Suzanne, also white with working-class origins, explained: "My senior year ended up being my best year, but I think [my parents] kind of knew that I wasn't going to . . . go any further than that, that I was probably going to go right into the workforce. I think I knew that too." Suzanne did not

remember a time when paid work was not expected to be part of her future.

In contrast to the working-class women's parents who encouraged college, the majority of working-class men in our sample reported their parents stressed the importance of a hard-work ethic. Gregory, who is white with working-class origins, said of his parents, "They didn't really tell me what they wanted me to do or be anything, but yeah, they expected me to not be a bum because they didn't raise me that way. I was a hard worker. They always tried to instill working things into me, made us work all the time around the house. I'd earn money that way by doing chores and stuff like that."

Martin, also white with working-class origins, said simply that his parents had one goal for him, that he would "work." Other men discussed how their parents' emphasis on hard work was in support of becoming upwardly mobile and securing a middle-class life. Jeff, also white and from a working-class background, said, "I'm sure that [my parents] wished for a better situation than what they were in." Ken, who has white working-class origins, noted a similar emphasis on hard work that would lead to a better life. He explained, "[My parents] just wanted us kids to have it better than they had."

Some men's parents did not necessarily emphasize either hard work or college. Of the men in our sample who grew up in working-class families, some reported their parents did not emphasize any specific pathway (college or otherwise), but rather the decision would be up to them—it would be "their choice." For example, Wesley, who is white with working-class origins, when asked whether his parents expressed specific expectations of him said, "Not really. They were pretty like go with the flow I guess sort of thing."

Finally, some working-class origin men and women described developing aspirations that were focused on obtaining a middle-class occupation—a job that would require at least a college degree or other specialized, advanced training. For instance, Rita, who is white with working-class origins, recalled, "Well, I wanted to be a librarian, I wanted to be an accountant." Ken's original plan entailed going to school to become "a radiologist," and Vincent, also white with working-class origins, "always thought

[he'd] make decent teacher." For Rita, Ken, and Vincent—among others— aspiring to careers that would propel them into the middle class was central in shaping early plans.

In the 1990s, Anita Garey (1999) interviewed white working-class mothers and found that many "weaved" paid work with motherhood. Looking back, among those working-class women who wanted to have children, a majority reported expecting that they would integrate work and family in their lives. Regina, white with working-class origins, said "I always knew I would have [kids]. And I just knew that I would work." Ruth, also white with working-class origins, was an exception in that she anticipated work and family might conflict, but thought that the timing of children would be critical to combining work and family as seamlessly as possible: "I wanted [kids] later though . . . Because my sister had a baby when she was sixteen—both of my sisters did and I didn't want to do that . . . So, I didn't want to work sixty-five hours a week and have babies at home."

A smaller subset of working-class women who expected work and children to conflict reported they originally planned not to have children. Vanessa, who is white with working-class origins, said, "I didn't want kids [laughter]." When asked why, she explained, "No, I just wanted to go to school." Paula, also white with working-class origins, held high educational aspirations and planned not to have children, because she explained, "Because I knew how hard it is and how much work it is." A small subset of working-class women reported that they planned to leave work after starting a family (none of the middle-class women reported such expectations, nor did any of the men). Rita, who is white with working-class origins, said, "When I was growing up my mom and dad both worked, but I thought I'd want to stay home and take care of my kids."

Most working-class men were united in the lack of thought they gave to combining work and family. Ken, who is white and has working-class origins, explained that he expected to have children, but that he had never given much thought to combining work and children. Once he started working, he explained, "I've always had daylight jobs so it was easy.

Normally you work while they're at school and then home together at night and on the weekends." Yet this discussion failed to consider the time that children were too young to be at school or that school did not cover, suggesting that it was not Ken's responsibility to manage such details. Jay, who is white with working-class origins, repeatedly said "None" when asked whether he had had thoughts about combining work and family one day. Once he married, he explained, he realized that "growing up, my dad worked, my mom took care of us" and that he had, perhaps, anticipated that he and his wife would want a similar traditional relationship. But he did not believe that he had given the matter any thought prior to his marriage.

Rural Middle-Class Aspirations

Few gender differences were evident in the messages that middle-class parents relayed to their children; instead, they emphasized college—sometimes even advanced degrees—for both sons and daughters. For instance, Misty, who is white with middle-class origins, explained how she and her brother were both expected to attend college: "They kind of wanted me to follow in my brother's footsteps because he went to college." Frank, also white with middle-class origins, reported, "I mean that was always the goal, go to college, get a degree and then figure out what I was going to do with it." Middle-class parents viewed college as a matter of fact and wanted to ensure that their sons and daughters would secure a foothold in the middle class.

Like their parents, middle-class origin participants almost universally described a focus on college—a focus that those from working-class backgrounds emphasized less, even when their occupational aspirations would require a college degree (for a similar process in working-poor urban youth, see Ray 2017). For those who grew up middle class, the focus on college was so deeply ingrained that many took college for granted. Christina, who is Latina with middle-class origins, explained: "I always knew I was going to go to college, it wasn't even a second thought for me." Jason, who is white with middle-class origins, remarked, "I think it was just family expectations. Like eight or ten of my

family members went to the University. So yeah. I think it's the normal thing to do." These comments underscore how college was embedded into their future.

Looking back, many of the middle-class women recalled expecting that they would prioritize their work at first and that marriage and children would follow (with their lives somehow seamlessly expanding to encompass it all). Renee, who is white with middle-class origins, described seeing her mother balance full-time work and three kids with very little help from her spouse and expected that she would do the same, "I saw my mother do it, but then again, my mother had three kids that were older. Uh, you know, we helped, when we got home, we would help make dinner, or we'd set the table. My father would come home at five and he would expect dinner to be on the table, and it was." As with most men and a few women with a working-class background, a few middle-class women also said that they had given the matter no thought as a young adult. Nicole, who is white and has middle-class origins, explained that while she planned to have children, she did not consider how that would affect her work plans: "I never really thought about it. . . . I really thought I would be working."

Like the working-class men, most middle-class men anticipated being fathers but did not give any thought to balancing work and family. In fact, Frank, who is white and has middle-class origins, was originally confused by the question: "Having kids and working, what's that mean?" After the second author phrased the question differently: "for example, did you ever think about who would take care of the kids if you worked full time?" Frank replied, "Oh, okay, I see what you're saying. I just assumed there would be a daycare of some kind. . . . Um, that was just my assumption." Although presuming that work and family would balance out was a common expectation during young adulthood, none of the women expected it to happen outside of their purview. Derek, who is white and with middle-class origins, also did not consider the prospect of combining work and family when he was young, even though he expected to have children. He explained, "I knew I wanted to have kids but I'd never really thought about [it]. Just kind of

what happened, happened." Edward, also white with middle-class origins, did think about the prospect of combining work and family, though he expected to do so primarily as his father (the primary breadwinner in his household) had done. Edward expected that he would go to work, then "would come home and work at night, late." In this description, what Edward imagined doing at the home was vague, but the need to work long hours to achieve his goals at a professional career were not.

CLASSED AND GENDERED TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD

As the men and women in the sample described their transitions to adulthood—the time from when they were teenagers through their early twenties—they provided accounts of how their baseline aspirations changed during this time period. Although participants did not identify distinctly rural factors in their accounts of how they formed early aspirations, we find that the ways that participants adjusted their aspirations were, indeed, shaped in part by place. We identified three change processes, *downshifting*, *upshifting*, and *nonshifting*, to describe how participants adjusted their original aspirations.

Downshifting, a term Brooke Bass (2015) uses to describe the process by which women decide to scale back on work to accommodate anticipated family demands, occurred when participants—especially those from working-class backgrounds—scaled back their original aspirations or expectations. Upshifting was primarily undertaken by men from middle-class backgrounds and involved a heightening or leveling-up of their original aspirations. Nonshifting, by contrast, was undertaken primarily by working-class men and women, as well as most middle-class women, and occurred when participants did not report a significant adjustment to their baseline aspirations. Further, we identify how these processes were complicated by their attachment to the rural communities in which they were born and raised.

Downshifting Aspirations and Expectations in the Transition to Adulthood

Downshifting during the transition to adulthood primarily occurred among men and

Table 2. Aspiration Changes During Transition to Adulthood

	Downshift	Upshift	Nonshift	Total
Men				
Working class	10	1	9	20
Middle class	1	4	7	12
Women				
Working class	19	0	11	30
Middle class	2	0	4	6

Source: Authors' tabulations.

women who grew up working class and not among the middle class, as we see in table 2. The process through which this played out was also gendered, even though about as many working-class women as working-class men downshifted. Rural working-class women were more likely to emphasize ties to rural places and their family as a primary reason for why they changed their original plans, whereas working-class men emphasized financial insecurity in their rural economies. Leslie, who is white with working-class origins, originally aspired to be an accountant. She described how being away from her family was something she struggled with after moving away for college: “[Chuckled] You know what . . . I was supposed to go to [University], I got down [there] and I just didn’t like it . . . we grew up in [rural town] and it was—I think part of it was just even, I had never been away—and like we were so very family based, even extensive like, I only have one cousin of my mom’s brothers and sisters . . . that lives out of [my home] county.”

Although Leslie had wanted to attend college, her main source of support was her family, and she found it difficult to be away from them and her rural community. Stacy, who is white with working-class origins, similarly tied downshifting to rural family ties. She explained, “I had dreams, but they were quickly dashed because I knew that I knew I wasn’t going to college.” When asked what those dreams were, she continued, “I wanted to be a forest ranger [chuckles]. Which there are no real big forests around here [chuckles]. So that would have meant traveling and my family wasn’t real big on travel, and we were homebodies, and we felt there was no need to travel outside of my comfort zone.” Both Leslie and Stacy articu-

lated a common dilemma experienced by those who grew up in rural areas: the desire to remain close to family and the home community. Although many young adults express a desire to live near their families, this desire places greater constraints on the aspirations of rural youth, like Leslie and Stacy, whose local communities lack nearby colleges and universities. In fact, the only higher education institution in Leslie’s rural county was a for-profit institution that lacked accounting degrees (for a critique of for-profits, see Cottom 2017). Once women started the transition to adulthood, the reality of leaving their communities and families often led them to temper their original career aspirations.

Men from rural working-class backgrounds also downshifted their aspirations; decisions most often tied to financial insecurity. Jesse, who is white with working-class origins, said, “Well, considering that I did well in high school, my plan was to attend college.” However, Jesse decided to leave college after two semesters, citing financial strain as the rationale for his downshift:

I worked, you know I saved up some of my own money to help pay for college . . . I was fortunate enough to find [a place to live] that was relatively cheap, but what it boiled down to was that I went there and I had to work so that I could eat and pay for gas to go to school and pay my rent, so . . . I ended up working more than I went to class, so I ended up withdrawing before the end of year because it just wasn’t working, like it was just not a well-laid plan, and I just haven’t had the chance to go back yet. I mean I guess I have; I just haven’t made the effort to go back yet.

Ken, a white man from a working-class family, described downshifting for financial reasons (an inability to afford college), though he found an unexpected opportunity in his hometown. Initially, he had enrolled in school to become a radiologist, but this plan changed. He explained, “I went to college for three weeks, and then I got a call for a job at a local factory, so I thought, this was right out of high school, so I figured I’d go for a year and make some money. Put it away so I wouldn’t take out so many loans, ’cause I knew my parents couldn’t afford to send me to college.”

For Jesse and Ken, they downshifted their original aspirations—to attend college—because they did not have the financial resources necessary to do so successfully. National data suggest that men drop out of college sooner than women do when they face debt burdens that are lower than women’s (Dwyer, Hodson, and McCloud 2013), a process often tied to men’s higher earning potential. Our findings suggest that rural working-class men may also do so because they expect fewer returns to their debt in their local communities.

Upshifting Aspirations

Although working-class origin men and women downshifted their aspirations to make a way for themselves in the rural labor market, some participants with middle-class origins (particularly men) upshifted. Upshifting mostly occurred when middle-class aspirations transformed into professional goals, or when educational aspirations were heightened. This process was almost exclusively undertaken by men with middle-class backgrounds. Nathan, white and with middle-class origins, discussed how, from a young age, he “knew [he] wanted to be in construction.” During the transition to adulthood, however, Nathan explained, “I went to an open house at [a university]. . . . architectural engineering was what came up and I really liked that.” Nathan upshifted his aspiration from an occupation that was outside his class upbringing and made his aspirations fit a different social class background.

Phillip, white with middle-class origins, described how he aspired to work in electronics, and initially had planned to join the military for this training, just as his father had. How-

ever, Phillip’s rural labor-market opportunities shaped his decision making, focusing his sights on college instead: “Actually, my first inclination was not to go to college, it was to go into the military and sort of follow in my father’s footsteps and I did pursue that but at that time—I suspect now that it was a similar situation as we’re in now with budgetary cuts and whatnot. There were not a lot opportunities available in the electronics field at that time and so I chose to go to college instead to get that training.”

Phillip assessed his local job market for his desired occupation—electronics—but saw few opportunities like the one that had put his father and his family of origin solidly into the middle class. Rather than following his father’s footsteps or deciding to leave his rural community, he upshifted his educational aspirations (from specialized training via the military to college) to maximize his job prospects at home.

Nonshifting Aspirations

Many men and women experienced no change to their baseline aspirations during the transition to adulthood, a process we refer to as nonshifting. Nonshifting occurred when people had not formed baseline aspirations during their formative high school years, but also when they experienced no changes in their lives. This was common among men and women from working-class backgrounds, as well as nearly all middle-class-origin women in the sample.

It was often the case that nonshifter could not recall having concrete or fully formed aspirations. Tonya, white and with working-class origins, described this of herself when she was in high school:

INT: Okay, did you have any expectations for yourself?

TONYA: No, I was working, and I was in school.

INT: Is there anything you ever wanted to be when you grew up type of thing?

TONYA: No, [chuckles] no.

When asked whether she thought she would continue working after high school, Tonya said, “I think I wanted, I think I’m not sure, I think I wanted a job but not sure. I think, so yeah.” Tonya, after graduating high school, went on to

Table 3. Aspiration Changes After Job Loss in Midlife

	Downshift	Upshift	Nonshift	Total
Men				
Working class	15	2	3	20
Middle class	1	6	5	12
Women				
Working class	17	1	12	30
Middle class	5	0	1	6

Source: Authors' tabulations.

work in food service. Similarly, Randall, white with working-class origins, could not recall having any clear aspirations for himself and described defaulting to his parents' wishes for his future, which was to attend college: "No, I went along with [what my parents wanted for me]." After high school, however, he decided not to attend college and began working instead.

Jacob, one of the few middle-class origin men who nonshifted, also spoke about how he had had no concrete aspiration: "You know, I didn't really think about it as much as I probably could have. But I suppose I did. I just went about life the way, you know that it came at me, so. . . ." Jacob reflected on how his lack of aspirations in his youth did not impede his ability to find a job after high school, and that he could rely on the support of his family in finding paid work. "I was, I was washing cars for a car dealership in high school and went right to work under my mom at the car dealership as a salesperson." Jacob was able to rely on his connections to a local business—a car dealership—to secure employment in his community.

Participants like Tonya, Randall, and Jacob nonshifted because they had no clear baseline aspiration to adjust in the first place. Although they identified a loosely held expectation or even strong professional interests, they generally discussed their early aspirations and expectations in uncertain or even ambiguous terms.

DOWNSHIFTING, UPSHIFTING, AND NONSHIFTING IN MIDLIFE

At the time of their interviews, the participants were unemployed and had to make choices—yet again—about their future working lives. As we see in table 3, planning to downshift was the modal category for most of the unemployed: for

women of both middle-class and working-class origins as well as for men with working-class origins. It was far less common for working-class origin men or women or middle-class origin women to aspire to either upshift or even nonshift during this period of unemployment. In stark contrast, very few middle-class origin men planned to downshift even after experiencing a job loss and period of unemployment. As in their youth, many participants engaged in downshifting, upshifting, and nonshifting in response to living—and trying to remain—in rural places where employment opportunities were slim, although many middle-class origin men expanded their horizons and looked to leave their rural communities.

The majority of women with working-class origins downshifted their expectations yet again after their job loss, reporting that they expected to see a decrease in wages, in job status, in benefits, or an increase in commute time or worsening job conditions, or a combination of these. Vanessa, who is white with working-class origins, explained that she started out looking primarily for certified nursing assistant positions, but that these had been hard to find, so she had expanded her search to include anything she might be qualified for: "I went to a couple restaurants, and the last time I was a waitress, I was sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen, and they want people with fresh experience. And, when I put down that I was in the nursing field, they're like, 'That's great and everything but you don't have the requirements that we need. We need somebody with at least a year's experience, and [your experience] was over fourteen years ago.' So, they don't want somebody off the street. They, they want somebody who's gonna know what they're doing."

Rita, who is white with working-class origins, had also downshifted, but she worried about taking a position that would not pay her enough to cover the cost of childcare for her three-year-old son or that would have erratic hours, making childcare coverage difficult. She said, “If I wanted, I could probably go to Burger King and get a job but I think if I go to Burger King, I’m not even going to be getting close to what I’m doing or what I need. And then that’s time taken away from my little boy.”

Working-class men also reported downshifting as a common response after a job loss and unemployment period. Gregory, who is white with working-class origins, explained that as a truck driver, he could find temporary or “swing” work, but he was unable to find a permanent or a full-time position:

GREGORY: It has its benefits being a swing driver and it doesn’t, you know because there’s never full time and then you’re stuck in a part-time route.

INT: You’d rather be full time?

GREGORY: Oh yeah. I’d rather work nine to five and have a set schedule and do the same thing every day, instead of every week being different.

Marcus reported that he was going to take work that he would not report, because it was all he expected he could find. He explained, “People say ‘We’re just looking for a job, we’re looking for a job.’ There are so many people over there that are getting under-the-table jobs while getting unemployment just so they could scrape by.” Because so many people were competing for the same jobs, Marcus did not expect that he would find comparable work. Ken, who is white with working-class origins, said he could not be picky about what he was looking for.

Although downshifting was the most common response, some working-class origin women and men did not change their expectations, that is, they nonshifted. Unlike in their youth, when nonshifting was predominantly a result of not having a fully formed aspiration, nonshifting in midlife tended to be a strategy to resist leaving their rural area or because of family obligations. For working-class origin non-

shifters, the rural areas where they lived continued to pose labor-market problems in midlife, such as when they decided that they could not accept jobs that meant long commutes. Heidi, who is white with working-class origins, had moved with her husband for his work, but he would not follow her (nor would she ask him) should she be unable to find a job locally. As she said, “So the one [job] is in [one town]. It’s a little bit of a drive but not really. The big thing was the mountain. There’s a mountain that you have to go over. It’s always bad. I really wanted that job, too.” Ultimately, Heidi felt that she could not take a job that would require her to pass over the mountain daily, because she worried about driving in the winter. Leslie, also white with working-class origins, was also tied by family commitments and commuting distance. She explained, “I already drove a half hour drive to work which I don’t mind, I love where I live, but forty-five minutes is kinda that breaker point.” Driving that long made jobs seem untenable to Leslie, who was primarily responsible for her daughter’s extracurricular activities; thus she did not downshift her expectations. Victoria, who is white with working-class origins, actively resisted a downshift during her job search, saying, “I shouldn’t be forced to take a temporary position; then I’m just going to be back on unemployment again in a few months. I shouldn’t be forced to take a part-time position when I’m available to work more hours. So, a lot of it is part-time bartenders, part-time this, or it’s seasonal.” Victoria did not want to settle for a temporary position; one she might easily lose again. In this case, nonshifting enabled Victoria to bide time in her job search and to resist compromises that could present challenges to herself and her family.

Working-class origin men, too, articulated similar sentiments about being unwilling to move or adjust their commutes. Martin, who is white with working-class origins, had previously worked in the gas industry and similarly expressed how he was not willing to adjust his work expectations. He described how he even turned down job offers because they were not in his home area or at his expected pay level, stating, “I’ve had a couple of offers, but they weren’t in line with what I was looking for fi-

nancially. I'm not going to move to a [neighboring state] or something like that." Martin wanted to find a job similar to his prior employment and was unwilling to compromise either of these things in his search for new employment.

Some middle-class women downshifted as well. They tied decisions about jobs and downshifting to their unwillingness to move away from their families and rural areas. Natalie, who is white with middle-class origins, discussed her reluctance in moving to several large cities when her company was reducing jobs.

INT: If you had moved, do you think you would have been able to just, jump right back into career track or . . . ?

NATALIE: Probably. If I'd been down in the [metro] area, yeah.

Here Natalie acknowledges that if she had been willing to move away from her hometown, it might have made it easier for her to find work. But in addition to leaving her hometown, she would also have needed to move her husband and children. Attachment to rural place and family was a significant barrier to finding employment more quickly.

Unlike the modal groups of women and working-class men, the majority of middle-class origin men expected either that they would not have to change their expectations that they could move into an even better job, upshifting after their job loss. Relative to women and working-class origin men, they were also the least concerned about having to leave their rural communities and families in search of work. The middle-class men who hoped to maintain or upshift expected that it was likely that they would increase their commute times. Derek, who is white with middle-class origins, explained: "And obviously in this area that's the major employer and especially with information technology and IT. There's some other decent companies around but I'm looking. I'm willing to drive. I'm looking all the way down to [a different county]. If that's what I have to do to get a job, I will and then if it's a long-term position and we have to address things in future we will. But I'll drive, I don't

care. I need to work." Unlike many of the working-class men, Derek did not consider the possibility of a longer commute or a future move to be a barrier to new employment. Nathan, also white with middle-class origins, spoke similarly of a willingness to move to a more populous area with more jobs. He described his rural hometown as one of the biggest barriers to finding new employment. Discussing finding a job in the years following the Great Recession and companies' newly returned willingness to relocate new employees, he explained, "I think also a lot of the barriers would be location because prior to this no one was offering relocation but now I think they will be offering relocation. It's still kind of touch and go because a lot of people are still worried about a second wave or something like that. So, relocation is a big one."

Further, middle-class origin men who expected to upshift framed their unemployment less as an obstacle and more an opportunity to find a better job, which they defined in terms of better pay, benefits, or an opportunity for them to better use or expand their expertise or skill set. Jason, who is white with middle-class origins, viewed his unemployment as a "blessing in disguise, the whole situation." Similar to how middle-class origin men upshifted in their youth, middle-class men who expected to upshift after job loss saw this period of time as an opportunity to level up or otherwise heighten their job expectations.

CONCLUSION

Our study examines how men and women who grew up during the rural brain drain developed aspirations about work over three periods in their life: their baseline period during their high school years, when they formed aspirations about their future; their transition to adulthood, when many experienced a shift in these plans; and at midlife while unemployed. We find that growing up in a rural location shaped participants' aspirations in each period because many hoped to stay close to home despite their wariness of the economic changes they saw unfolding around them. We also find that rurality intersected with class and gender to shape aspirations at every stage. Both the women and the men (across class) described

themselves as primarily focused on work at a young age. Working-class women often anticipated that work and family would weave together (Garey 1999) whereas some middle-class women anticipated focusing on work and then seamlessly adding in family. Across class, women who anticipated work-family conflict reported that they originally planned to forgo childbearing. Men, on the other hand, did not anticipate (for the most part) how work and family would be managed.

We provide insights for how aspirations change on workforce entrance into a changing rural labor market and during a period of unemployment in rural labor markets that often saw high unemployment rates. During the transition to adulthood, working-class women and men both experienced downshifting more frequently than their middle-class origin peers as they reassessed their entrance into tight labor markets. Working-class origin women described themselves as pulled by ties of home and family, whereas working-class origin men described financial uncertainty as derailing their plans. On the other hand, middle-class origin women were most likely to nonshift during the transition to adulthood, and middle-class origin men reported upshifting their expectations for the future because they expected higher education would be the ticket to maintaining their elite status in their rural communities. Finally, after a job loss and during a period of unemployment, we see rural labor-market prospects, rural roots, family ties, class, and gender shape how men and women assess their future prospects. Working-class origin men and women engaged in downshifting. Notably, middle-class origin women joined them in this process. Commitment to their rural communities were more pointed at this stage than at earlier points, as were discussions of poor labor-market prospects. But middle-class origin men were unique in their willingness to look beyond their rural communities (and, perhaps, to leave them) in order to find positions similar to what they had once held or to position themselves better in the labor market.

Our study shows how (rural) place further complicates aspirations—and how aspirations change—at each life stage. We further find that place attachment was salient in shaping par-

ticipants' shifts in aspirations. Despite acknowledging massive economic changes surrounding them, many working-class origin youth still expressed optimism that either college degrees (for women) or hard work (for men) would be enough to counter the changing labor market. The importance parents placed on college degrees for working-class girls (but not boys) may help explain some of the growing gender divide in education (see DiPrete and Buchmann 2013) and should be explored in future research. Once they begin to transition to adulthood, however, many working-class origin women and men begin to acknowledge a conflict between their aspirations and their rural ties and begin to downshift; this process is repeated at a heightened state during unemployment.

Our analysis adds important complexity to the existing narrative of what it is like to grow up—and remain—in a rural area of the United States. Although Carr and Kefalas (2010) discuss how “stayers” knew early on that they were going to remain in their hometown and were generally resentful of this destiny, for our study participants, this was rarely the case. Instead, we find the men and women took great pains to stay, valuing the ability to remain in their hometowns over seeking better pay and opportunity elsewhere. Similarly, Ryan Parsons (2022) finds that rural youth struggled to imagine themselves leaving their communities and Robert Francis (2022, this issue) finds that under- and unemployed rural working-class men were generally satisfied to stay in their rural communities close to family. There is a tension here, given that working-class origin men and women struggle to remain in communities that place high value on paid labor even as employment leaves these communities.

Our findings add a gender and class lens to other research that finds attachment to rural place shapes explanations of people's intentions for leaving or staying (Fiore, Niehm, and Hurst 2015; Vazanna and Rudi-Poloshka 2019). Other studies that examine who stays in rural communities tend to discuss this group as being primarily working-class people who were left behind because of their lower educational attainment and lack of marketable skills than their middle-class counterparts (Brown and

Schafft 2011; Carr and Kefalas 2010; Cushing 1999). Although our findings lend support to these rural working-class origin realities, they also show that stayers also come from the middle class. Some from the middle-class origins—those in the most advantaged position to find work elsewhere—also preferred to remain close to their hometown. But these preferences did not prevent middle-class origin rural youth from moving away for a time to attend college, nor did it prevent middle-class origin men from making decisions to leave the area once it became clear that staying was incompatible with maintaining their professional career goals.

The aspiration change processes identified contributes to a more general understanding about how people respond to labor-market constraints, and how these responses are tied to one's rurality, gender, and class position. Similar to other qualitative studies of labor-market change in more urban locations (Brown 1996; Johnson 2002; Newman 2006; Swauger 2010), the rural Pennsylvanians included in our study changed their aspirations in response to industry decline in their communities. Our research finds that people change their aspirations when they hit roadblocks that are difficult to surmount, as others have noted (see Vespa 2009; Damaske 2011). Our research also suggests roadblocks may be particularly salient for aspirational change at key transition points, such as the transition to adulthood or after a job loss. Moreover, commitments to rurality meant that long commuting times were considered seriously in order to maintain both standards of living and location. Additionally, during the transition to adulthood, the lack of local universities made it difficult for rural youth to attend college while staying close to home (few local commuter college options were available). Many working-class origin rural youth in our study started and then stopped attending college. That those from middle-class origins were most likely to upshift or make no change to their baseline aspirations is not surprising, given that they grew up in middle-class families that emphasized the importance of attending college and were better advantaged to help their children to weather the structural shifts of the labor market (Lareau 2003).

Although our study provides nuance for what like is life for those who are born, raised, and then stay in rural America, this analysis has several limitations. The data are drawn from a broader study of the unemployed across Pennsylvania and therefore are limited to rural residents who ultimately chose to remain in (or nearby) their rural hometowns (or to relocate to other regions within the state). Therefore, our data cannot address how rurality shaped aspirations for those who moved away from their home communities or for those who might have stayed but did not experience job loss. Moreover, Pennsylvania's rural communities during the period these participants were growing up were whiter than rural communities are nationally today (Cheng, Sun, and Monnat 2020). Thus we are limited in our ability to discuss variation in experiences across race. Additionally, our study was designed to examine unemployment and, as such, does not tell us about the experiences of the stably employed. Future studies on how rurality shapes employment aspirations should consider these factors.

These findings show how rural contexts indeed shapes labor-market choices—and the life trajectories—of the people who are born and raised in these areas. Our data further reveal how class and gender further shaped participants' abilities to move freely in and out of rural spaces, middle-class origin men being most advantaged in this process.

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