Failure in Emerging Adulthood: Narrative Agency in Career, Practice, and Care Institutions among Poor and Working-Class Women

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ABSTRACT

Emerging adulthood is a period of high ambition and a high likelihood of failure. The process of managing failure in the transition to adulthood requires narrative work. Normative expectations for ambition make failure a cultural problem for emerging adults to solve. For poor and working-class emerging adults, popular narratives of failure often pathologize them as youth-gone-bad or youth-gone-sad and undermine their ability to produce narratives of ambition. Nevertheless, they will respond to the pressure to tell an ambitious story. Drawing on four waves of life history interviews over a three-and-a-half year period with 23 poor and working-class emerging adult women, I show how they tell life stories using available institutional resources to narratively manage failure by responding to popular explanations for their failure and attempting to maintain claims to ambition. I distinguish between career, practice, and care institutions, which shape the possibilities for overcoming failure through narrative agency. This narrative institutionalism contributes to a better understanding of emerging adulthood and the cultural demands that poor and working-class youth must contend with over time.

One period of life that is increasingly characterized by both ambition and failure is emerging adulthood (Waters et al. 2011). Scholars have identified several widely available explanations for failure among today's middle class 18- to 34-year-olds. They include lengthy periods of self-exploration (Smith 2009), economically-motivated returns to their parents' home (Newman 2012), and extended exposure to a higher education system that leaves graduates temporarily adrift and unprepared for independence (Arum and Roksa 2014; Clydesdale 2015). These "standard stories" (Tilly 1999) provide middle-class emerging adults with a normative framework to make sense of failure without minimizing their ambitious status; it is "helicopter parents" who have failed to let their children grow up, or the economic downturn that has cost the labor sector jobs, or a higher education system that has run amok—not the young adults boomeranging and drifting—who are to blame (Newman 2012). By contrast, poor and working-class men and women who struggle to successfully enter adulthood encounter pathologizing narratives to explain their failure (Newman 1999b).

As scholars have begun to examine more closely how today's 18- to 34-year-olds experience emerging adulthood, they have shown that coming-of-age experiences, and how young people interpret them often vary according to race, class, and gender. Whereas middle class millennials have access to standard stories of delayed ambition, poor and working-class young adults often adopt, respond to, and manage narratives of deviance, disability, and disorder when they account for their own and their peers' failure to achieve normative adulthood. These include stories of personal irresponsibility, criminal behavior, mental illness, and emotional trauma (Edin and Lein 1997; Gowan 2010; Hays 2003; Levine 2013; Sanchez-Jankowski 2008; Silva 2013), passed on through families or taught by schools and media.

Marginalized young adults—like their more affluent peers—nevertheless remain ambitious and hopeful in the futures they imagine for themselves (DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin 2016; Deterding 2015; Nielsen 2015; Young 2004). Facing normative expectations for ambition as well as narratives of pathological shortcoming, how do poor and working-class young adults manage failure over time? How do they respond to socially available explanations for their failure and social pressures to maintain high aspirations as they tell and retell their life stories? Previous research that relies on a single narrative gathered at a particular moment has missed the *ongoing effort* that poor emerging adults make as they negotiate these opposing ways of understanding their lives.

Drawing on an analysis of the life history interviews with 23 poor and working-class young adult women gathered at four points in time over a three-and-a-half-year period, I explore how these women in young adulthood attempt to maintain a biography of ambition as they experience failure: giving up a goal pursued for the accomplishment of normative adulthood. I argue that because life stories bring together 1) broad cultural frameworks of social identity, 2) institutionalized life paths, and 3) individual biographical detail, failure involves narrative work on all three levels: the cultural, institutional, and personal. My data reveal that the low-income women laboring at the margins of educational and occupational attainment use two main types of institutions—*career institutions* and *practice institutions*—to revise their life stories in ways that present them as ambitious. While career institutions such as health care and teaching allow poor emerging adults to forge narrative ties to highly valued jobs, practice institutions such as athletics or religion offer a way out of the ambitious worker identity that is so difficult to fulfill. Practice institutions provide alternative means of displaying ambition with a greater likelihood of achievement. Yet because Americans value careers so highly, displays of ambition through

practice are often a limited source of self-worth. Like practice institutions, *care institutions*, particularly the family, offer an alternative moral system. However, care institutions are an even paltrier source of ambition or encourage the displacement of ambition to others, such as children.

As they make and remake their life stories, young adults express narrative agency in dealing with structural obstacles and cultural pressures. They create new stories, in part, to find a way forward when opportunities for social mobility are blocked and to generate resilience in a society that values ambition so highly but which provides poor youth struggling to enter adulthood with few positive sources of identity. While telling new stories is possible, it also takes time. Commitments to failed projects are often rooted deeply in biography and bound to institutional knowledge that may be difficult to replace. To tell a convincing story of redirected ambition requires new institutional knowledge and a personal history that makes the new pathway appear sensible or even inevitable.

FAILURE AND AMBITION IN POOR AND WORKING-CLASS EMERGING ADULTHOOD

Sociologists have a long history of documenting the moral framework of poverty confronting the poor. In a classic example, Liebow (1967:29-30) depicts a “labor scavenger” whose offer of work is repeatedly turned down by what he believes to be “lazy, irresponsible men.” In the nearby suburbs, Howell (1973) describes poor white men and women labeled by their working-class neighbors and local preachers as “reckless” and “irresponsible” “sinners.” The people around them understood their attachment to hard living as a moral failing rather than as a response to declining opportunities. Liebow’s (1993) study of homeless women in the 1980s

shows them confronting social service providers, potential employers, and others who see them as “unreasonable,” “mentally ill,” “diseased,” or “drug addicted.” In each case, talk about the poor foregrounds culture and individual pathos while ignoring structural explanations.

These images continue to be part of the narrative material available to poor people. They provide the characters, plots, causal relationships, and moral judgements for giving an account of oneself and imagining the future (Butler 2005; Frank 2010; Polletta et al. 2011; Somers 1994). For poor emerging adults, I divide these narratives into tales of *youth-gone-bad* and *youth-gone-sad*. As Young (2004:9) points out, we expect poor and working-class young adults to react to their life situations and future goals “either with anger, conflict, and animosity, or with hopelessness and despair.” Underlying these expectations are beliefs about responsibility and irresponsibility, which not only function as guiding moral concepts in popular discourse and poor communities alike (Sanchez-Jankowski 2008), but are also part of the institutional management of marginalized populations. The welfare, health care, and criminal justice systems along with family and media expose youth to stories of irresponsibility, deviance, illness, and trauma that they use to make sense of failure (Block and Somers 2014; Collins 2009; Edin and Lein 1997; Gowan 2010; Harding 2010; Hays 2003; Levine 2013; Newman 1999a, 1999b). Narratives of poor people and their families are often tales of bad, broken, and unambitious men and women.¹

The broad cultural appropriation of therapeutic language and practice in recent decades (Illouz 2008) has contributed to the rise of a youth-gone-sad narrative. Focusing specifically on emerging adulthood, Silva (2012) argues that the failure of working-class young adults to achieve traditional markers of working-class adulthood is accompanied by the adoption of a therapeutic narrative that involves overcoming their painful pasts. Silva argues that the language of therapy courses through institutions that poor and working-class people encounter, from

rehabilitation programs to the courts, low-wage jobs, and mass media. Unlike discourses of deviance and sickness, self-help and psychological improvement offer working-class young adults a way to imagine themselves as successful adults. Yet for poor and working-class emerging adults, neither the languages of sin and sickness nor therapy—not youth-gone-bad nor youth-gone-sad—provide a way to assert an ambitious path forward since they ultimately direct them toward a focus on overcoming past shortcomings in the present rather than anticipating a successful future.

Like their wealthier peers, poor and working-class emerging adults are under pressure to strive for more in their future. They, like everybody else, are exposed to a culturally broad imperative to be ambitious and anticipate the future (Adams, Murphy, and Clarke 2009; Nielsen 2015), which cuts across class in ways that narratives of failure do not. Central to the American worldview is the idea that individual well-being and social progress are bound to personal ambition, the poor included (Bellah et al. 1996; Grubb and Lazerson 2005; Hochschild 1995; Katz 2013; Mitchell 2011; Newman 1999a). However, this belief that ambition is a personal and social good can be difficult for poor young adults to uphold. Comparing the United States and less-developed countries in the 1960s, for example, Lewis (1966:25) argued that the technological and educational advancement of the U.S. along with the spread of generally high aspirations through mass media meant that even the poorest Americans had to be ambitious about their futures. Lewis found that where obstacles to ambition were greatest, people developed beliefs and practices—a culture of poverty—that were inimical to thinking about the future and acting ambitiously. Since then, American youth have only gotten more ambitious while social mobility has declined (Newman 2012; Reynolds et al. 2006; Schneider and Stevenson 1999).

Rising ambition and declining mobility make failure an especially important cultural problem because socially valued ambition in the United States is most clearly articulated through work. For poor and working-class emerging adults, low-wage work simultaneously promises and limits access to the ideals of independence and autonomy that make work a source of moral value. On the one hand, low-wage work allows poor youth to distinguish themselves from the “do-nothing” unemployed (Newman 199b). And although low-wage work is stigmatized for its place at the bottom of the labor hierarchy and the few opportunities for advancement it provides, employers demand some commitment to the ambitions of the organization, which may include raising the level of education of the employees (Newman 1999b). This means that low-wage work is a source of idealized performance of a moral value (Goffman 1959) for poor and working-class emerging adults despite the stigma and limits to personal achievement.

On the other hand, because low-wage work offers little in the way of individual mobility while exposing low-wage workers to stigma, poor and working-class emerging adults must find other ways of expressing their desire for greater attainment. Caught between the identity of the unemployed do-nothing and the stigmatized status of low-wage workers, these young men and women must express socially required ambition through alternative means. People’s ability to tell different kinds of stories about themselves makes the expression of ambition possible even when structural conditions make ambitious career-oriented action difficult.

NARRATIVE INSTITUTIONALISM AND NARRATIVE AGENCY

Institutions are critical for individual narratives. Not only do institutions transmit shared stories such as youth-gone-bad, they also help structure individual storytelling by routinizing roles,

statuses, and stages of progression. That is, there are institutionalized stories, on the one hand, and stories that people tell using institutional resources in flexible ways, on the other. Attention to both processes of individual narrative formation I refer to as *narrative institutionalism*.

Narrative institutionalism refers to the socially-patterned process of producing life stories aimed at generating a recognizable past and a predictable future within a present set of social relations.

It is the means by which people identify meaningful life projects (such as a career) and make sense of their past (such as youth-gone-bad) in terms of a particular future (such as the successful transition to adulthood). The narratives people produce not only help them to identify courses of action, but also to understand their place within the institutions they inhabit and to coordinate future action (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013).

Self-understanding through narrative requires validation—either directly from an authority or indirectly through comparison with others—corroboration by successful action, and resonance with existing stories; institutions are the stable, habitual understandings that validation, corroboration, and resonance produce *over time* as people act and react (Glaeser 2014). Yet because people's lives intersect with multiple institutions, and because institutions allow for multiple understandings, gaps may emerge between personal stories and institutions. These gaps may lead to pathological interpretations, such as youth-gone-bad, or a sense of alienation when a person is unable to recognize himself or herself in the institutions they take part in (Rosa 2004). Alternatively, ambiguity, ambivalence, and contradiction can motivate narrative change.

While popular discourse and institutions provide material for young adults' life stories, people forge distinctive narratives out of their individual experiences. The stories people tell to explain their place in the world “are often in deep and ambiguous conflict with the official

interpretative devices of a culture” (Steedman 1987:6). Not only do new events and characters emerge that people must incorporate into existing stories, they are actively engaged in interpreting experiences (Butler 2005; Frank 2010; Somers 1994). As Sennett (2006) argues, they have narrative agency.

Emerging adults may work to revise a narrative; they can move between dominant stories or reinterpret them, reorganize and retell their subjective experiences, or do both simultaneously since different narratives involve different plots, characters, and moral frameworks. Failure and people’s efforts to overcome it can be heightened periods of revision. When people cannot integrate events into an intelligible plot, or when a story of the broader social context is lacking—as in unsettled cultural periods (Swidler 1986)—they tend to become confused and may struggle to produce coherent stories about their lives (Steinmetz 1992). To deal with this confusion, people attempt to reconstruct the past to fit with the emergent present and make some revised prediction of the future (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). In Mead’s terms (1932), the emergent present causes the past to become a different past. People may adopt new narratives or modify old ones in an act of bringing separate and distant aspects of a story together until it makes “a new and pertinent sense” (Steedman 1987:138). Moving between institutions can structure this logical movement: either as a person reconstructs herself in preparation for a life in an institution or once a person enters a new institution and looks backward (Goffman 1961).

Rather than revise, emerging adults may engage in considerable work to maintain a narrative in the face of disconfirming evidence that their life is likely to continue along the trajectory of that story (Nielsen 2015). They can extend the same goals into the future and engage in co-narration, accounting for personal experiences that do not fit within the dominant narrative (O’Connor 1999). In order to hold onto a pre-existing narrative that does not align with

experience, actors must simultaneously make sense of the dominant narrative they hold onto and their subjective failure to align their life with that narrative. In other words, they have to narrate a trajectory they are on but also not on. This process can involve contradiction and revision and may take time to work out, if it is ever fully resolved.

Eventually, people who maintain their aspirations and fail will be faced with the task of telling a new story. Narratives rely on a listener to hear them who will question an account that does not fit, or resonant, with who they believe is telling the story (Polletta et al. 2013). There may be an apparent discrepancy between the character and the narrative that is being performed (Goffman 1959). In this case, there is pressure for the narrator to revise his or her story. Yet as Steedman (1987) points out, revision depends on listeners and readers who accept the new order of events and entities within the plot of a revised story. The interactional styles of different groups a storyteller belongs to can impose limits on how they retell their story (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). Telling a convincing story takes work, and this work can take time, particularly with listeners familiar with an older version. In what follows, I uncover young adults' work in this area and the cultural and institutional resources that make it possible. I show how poor and working-class emerging adult women explain failure as they abandon their goals and how they manage their aspirations once they have failed in their pursuit of a particular goal.

DATA AND METHODS

Generally, studies of poor and working-class emerging adulthood capture narratives of ambition or failed transitions at a single point in time (Waters et al. 2011). By contrast, I utilize four waves of interviews to give a moving picture of emerging adulthood.

Longitudinal qualitative interviewing (LQI) involves gathering interview data from the same people at two or more points in time (Hermanowicz 2013). LQI data allow researchers to analyze meanings and interpretations as conditions change and people move from one status to another. They also provide a developmental history that researchers can use to contextualize particular outcomes. As Clausen (1993) points out in his examination of the longitudinal interview study of children born in the late-1920s and early-1930s, even “scoundrels” appear as “victims” when the full course of their life is revealed. Changing fortunes and changing selves require that we incorporate time into our evaluative framework.

The process of longitudinal interviewing also allows research participants to reflect on their understanding of their own story over time as each interview becomes an event, or a past performance, in the narrative (Goffman 1959). Giele (2009) contends that the life story method allows us to better understand the twists and turns that constitute a person’s life path. Yet stories themselves undergo twists and turns as people tell and retell them. The meanings and purposes for action at one telling may change in a different telling while some details may disappear and new ones emerge. The “structured self-image” that constitutes the life story is a dynamic mediator between the self and an objective social identity.

Three other researchers and I gathered life stories from 23 poor and working-class young adult women attending community college in Riverside, California, a large metropolitan area east of Los Angeles.² Participation in the study was based on eligibility for income-based support to attend community college in California. Support for low-income students included CalWORKS, a program to support welfare recipients attending college, and a state-sponsored fee waiver from the California Community Colleges Board of Governors, commonly referred to as the BOG waiver. Of the 23 women in the study, 13 had one or more children and three reported

being married in September 2010. The women represented a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds: nine women identified as Latinas, seven as black, three as white, two as Asian-American, and two as multiracial. They averaged 23 years of age at the first interview and 25 years of age at the fourth interview. The ages of the women ranged from 18 to 29 years old at the start of the study and 22 to 31 years old at the last interview. Finally, the average time between the first and fourth interviews was 2.75 years. While just under three years is not an exceptionally long period in the pursuit of a career, it may appear very long to emerging adults who are making little or no progress and who feel tremendous pressure to get ahead. Regardless, it was sufficient time for some women to give up on a career goal that they had been committed to from at least the beginning of the study.

By focusing on women who were enrolled in community college at the outset of the study, I am well positioned to study the management of ambition and failure. Poor and working-class women in community colleges often link college-going to ambition as a way to claim a virtuous social identity (Deterding 2015; Nielsen 2015). The vocational character of community colleges links college attainment to particular career trajectories, which helps disadvantaged students imagine futures of high status work (Brint 2002; Brint and Karabel 1989). At the same time, relatively low rates of degree attainment mean that failure is commonplace (Brand et al. 2014). Community college students, who are disproportionately poor and working-class, are more likely to fall short in the pursuit of their goals.

Poor emerging adult women also face some of the steepest barriers to independent, autonomous, and stable living (Desmond 2012; Edin and Lein 1997). They are more often tasked with caring for children on their own or caring for other family members, which positions them in structurally difficult positions to act on their ambitions. Often attempting to balance school,

work, family, and welfare, poor young adult women encounter tremendous obstacles to achieving their goals, setting them up for failure. They also face specific challenges, and possible alternatives, to forming ambitious narratives when they fail. While including men or middle-class emerging adults would be useful for uncovering narrative processes of failure, the particular experiences of poor women deserve being explored in close detail. In this approach, I follow scholars who aim to understand variation within a group that can teach us a great deal precisely because they are on the margins (e.g., Binder and Wood 2013; Young 2004).

On four separate occasions between fall 2010 and spring 2014, each of the women shared their aspirations for the future and explained the origins of those aspirations as well as the events that affected their goal attainment. The final result was 92 interviews, 56 of which I gathered personally, including all 23 interviews collected in the fourth wave. Interviews lasted from one-and-a-half to three-and-a-half hours and took place in a location chosen by the respondent. Research team members inquired about interviewee's work and school experiences; what their lives were like growing up and their aspirations for the future; and their perceptions of opportunity, sense of barriers, and recognition of supports. At each interview we asked the women to tell us again what their goals were and how they had arrived at those goals. When their goals changed from one interview to the next, we followed up with questions about past aspirations.

To analyze the data, I first constructed a timeline of events and plans for each participant at each point in time. Comparing timelines across all four waves, I looked for changes to participants' key events and plans described by the participants. In particular, I looked for the disappearance or rejection of previously held aspirations over the course of the study. I found that the respondents exhibited three main trajectories. The first included nine women who made

progress toward their original goals over the course of the study and told stories that described incremental steps in a consistent direction (citation redacted). The second included seven women who made little or no progress toward their original goals but did not abandon them (citation redacted). The last trajectory included seven women who failed to reach their original goals and revised their aspirations.

I focus on this last group of interviewees in this paper. For these women, I used the timelines and interview transcripts to produce a narrative for each wave. While the timelines show how events and respondents' aspirations changed or remained stable over time, the narratives captured change and stability in the way the women interpreted these events and aspirations, or their narrative reasoning (Pugh 2013). I employed a situational analysis approach (Clarke 2003), which involved identifying the range of human, institutional, and discursive elements that constituted these women's experiences at each point in time. I distinguished between popular discourses, institutional trajectories (such as educational pathways), and personal biographical details to see how these three narrative dimensions were organized and reorganized. Because of the central role that institutions play in channeling both popular discourses and personal biographies, I looked for the institutions that were prominent in each of the narratives. This approach is consistent with life course research, which has focused on the intervening role that social institutions play as youth undertake the passage into and through young adulthood (Elder and Giele 2009).

I identified three main institutional categories: 1) institutions related to work and the attainment of a career, such as health care and higher education, which I call *career institutions*; 2) institutions related to self-improvement and personal development, such as athletics and religion, which I call *practice institutions*; and 3) institutions related to improving the lives of

others, such as family and social services, which I call *care institutions*. Below I discuss six women who managed failure, how they drew on these three types of institutions in the process, and what kinds of stories they were—or were not—able to tell with them.

FINDINGS

Narrative Agency through Career Institutions: Linda and June

Linda and June had aspirations for careers in the medical field: one to be a doctor and the other a registered nurse. Both failed to get into the competitive degree programs they needed to make progress and then gave up. Whereas June described a completely new career path, Linda narrated a path to a supposedly truer version of herself within the medical field, but at a lower level. Failure in a career does not cut off the possibility of a new career narrative, but it is contingent upon access to alternative career institutions or trajectories within a career institution such as health care.

When I met her in June 2011, Linda, a 24-year-old Latina with a bachelor's degree from the University of California, was an unusual community college student. Her low grade point average and particularly bad grades in science courses disqualified her from applying to medical school. Linda was retaking classes at the community college and preparing to apply to a program aimed at helping underrepresented students reach medical school. Her backup plan was a master's in nursing and a career as a nurse practitioner, which, she said, was basically like being a doctor.

When I asked her where the goal of becoming a doctor came from, she told a story about her parents receiving their United States residence cards after immigrating from rural Mexico:

Ever since I was little, I always knew that I wanted to be a doctor. I remember when I was in front of the judge that gave my parents their residence cards...and he asked me what is it that you want to do when you grow up? I told him I wanted to be a doctor, and as soon as I said that he said, 'ok well then I hope that you come back in...20 years, and you see me, you treat me.' And I turned around and I saw my parents smiling and I'm like what's going on? I didn't know what was going on, but they had gotten their residence cards. The judge had granted them. Ever since then I remember I said I wanted to be a doctor.

In the years following this encounter, academic success in high school gave her the sense that she could go to medical school and become a doctor, and she described a process of mutual reinforcement between her aspirations and her attitude toward school. Once in college, however, Linda struggled both academically and emotionally. She described college as "the worst time of my life" and explained her difficulties not solely as the failure of the institution to support a first-generation college student, but also as a consequence of her damaged self-esteem.

By the second interview, Linda was not admitted to either the post-baccalaureate pre-medical or nursing programs. One possibility would have been for Linda to return to the therapeutic narrative and turn away from her aspirations to focus on overcoming the traumatic experience of college. Instead, over the second and third interviews, she extended the time frame and number of steps to reach her goals. She said, "I'm gonna keep trying, but I think I'm gonna wait a year." She also imagined a new trajectory into the profession. "I think I'm gonna do a short phlebotomy course or something small to just get my foot wet in the hospital or in a doctor's office and that way get a stronger recommendation from them." Linda completed a certificate to become a certified nursing assistant and had been admitted to the licensed

vocational nursing program at the community college. The certificate allowed her to find work as a nursing assistant in an assisted living facility making around \$8 an hour. She still held onto the goal of earning a master's degree in nursing, but now she "figured I'd start from the bottom since I didn't get accepted at the top." The community college's wide range of health care training programs and links to health care professions allowed Linda to reimagine a career path.

In November 2013, when I last met with Linda, she was 26 years old. When I asked her what goals she had accomplished and what goals she had not accomplished at that point in her life, she responded that she had not yet earned a master's degree, gotten a steady job, left her parents' house, or had children by the age of 26. Moreover, she had given up her goal of becoming a doctor. When I asked how she had dealt with failing in her pursuit of becoming a doctor, she replied, "I'm good about it because I have that goal of the ideal job that I want: public health nursing." Linda had learned about public health nursing and key figures in the history of public health in a class at the community college. As Frank (2010) argues, stories have the power to interpellate people into new identities, that is, call on them to assume a new role, an experience Linda described as a revelation.

When I read about it, it just gave me that epiphany of, this is where I am, I'm going in the right direction, just keep trying. I guess it was a sign from God, like, you know what, this is where you belong, you should continue to strive for it.

Not only did Linda ground her revised ambitions in the divine, she also tied them to a narrative of collective uplift. She had begun reading about pioneers in public health and talked about the ambitious end of helping her semi-rural, largely Latino community.

After eight-and-a-half years of postsecondary education, her imagined future was now in public health nursing. Linda had revised the plot of her life story and made working as a public health nurse her passion as well as a means of finding a new identity. The original goal of being a doctor had been transformed from an assertion of childhood dreams to a goal imposed by others.

I don't know how I grew out of pleasing people and trying to be a doctor, 'cause I feel like I was just striving for it to please others instead of myself...but, I just don't see myself doing that kind of stuff, that's not where my passion lies. So, I've been okay about it. I've been happy.

Drawing on the career institutions linked to health care, Linda had narratively transformed failure into discovery of the apparently correct and true path. When I asked if she'd consider pursuing another career she couldn't think of anything else she would be willing and able to do. The narrative work that made nursing newly central to her identity made other work impossible for her to imagine. It also led her to focus on the well-being of her community rather than turn inward to deal with her damaged self-esteem or her hostility toward the university. The range of possible trajectories and identities still available to her made it possible to reconstruct a narrative within the imagined future of a career in health care.

For June, the field of health care was a dead end. A Korean-American woman who was 19 years old at the start of the study, she had always aspired to earn a bachelor's degree but decided to focus on nursing once she began attending community college. According to June, nurses were "guaranteed" jobs, unlike other professionals such as teachers. Her plan to become a nurse was rooted in a pragmatic narrative of attaining a stable, well-paying job that would allow her to "make a lot of money, go travel everywhere," and work part time. The experience of her

father's kidney transplant reinforced her positive view of nursing and her sister, a nursing assistant, taught her about the pros and cons of the profession.

June held onto the aspiration of becoming a nurse and was enrolled at the community college through the third interview, but by the fourth interview she had dropped out of community college. Over the course of the study, June had steadily revised the narrative of her life trajectory until nursing—and careers that require any type of college education generally—was undesirable. As she failed to take the steps necessary for becoming a nurse she distanced herself from nursing as incompatible with her character, rejected the role of higher education in social mobility, and identified alternative career institutions.

First, June explained that she was “not patient” enough for nursing and incapable of doing the hard and dirty work that nursing required. She then turned to the example of her immigrant parents to revise her aspirations. She described them as successful entrepreneurs and explained that her mom was “learning biology and chemistry” as she sold beauty products through Amway. Using popular images such as Steve Jobs and Oprah Winfrey as examples, June affirmed that it was possible to forego college and still be successful. In order to downplay the risks of entrepreneurship, she described Harvard graduates who had become “bums” and complained that the hiring process for most jobs relied on social networks rather than qualifications. By the fourth interview she asked, “Why go through all that money to study and apply for jobs when people who have friends in the corporation already have the upper hand to get hired?”

During the final interview, June was living at home and selling Amway with her mother. According to June, it was the first step on the way to successful business ownership and great wealth. She would eventually help people, not through nursing but through philanthropy enabled

by the wealth she aspired to. June managed her failure to finish college—like she had always planned—by revising the plot of her life around ambition in an entrepreneurial career institution.

Both Linda and June relied on career institutions to manage failure. Linda used the different certificate and degree programs of the community college to imagine different trajectories into nursing, eventually discovering a career that she could substitute for her original dream of becoming a doctor. In the process, she revised her biography to make sense of her newfound passion—what DeLuca and her colleagues (2016) refer to as an “identity project”—and move past the dominant youth-gone-sad discourse she associated with her undergraduate struggles. Conversely, June developed a narrative that invalidated her long-held plans to earn a bachelor’s degree in nursing and legitimate an entrepreneurial pathway into the institution of self-employment. She made sense of her failure to finish college by rejecting the legitimacy of college as an institution of social mobility. Unlike Linda, June did not draw on a narrative of therapy, perhaps because as a Korean-American she contended more with model minority and Korean immigrant entrepreneurship discourses (Lew 2004). In both cases, their capacity for retelling their life stories in line with available career institutions allowed them to project ambition in the domain of work.

From Career to Practice Institutions: Mae and Kimberly

Whereas Linda and June were able to find a renewed source of worth in career aspirations, Mae and Kimberly responded to career failure through practice institutions. When I met Mae, a black 20 year-old woman, in spring 2011 she was finishing her final semester of community college. She decided she wanted to be a makeup artist when she was a senior in high school. As a “lazy”

honors student who described herself as “a nerdy loner in a cowboy school,” she wasn’t sure what she wanted to do after graduation. But after earning an associate’s degree in cosmetology she said, “I love makeup. I just love the art of transforming things and people into something else that’s not even recognizable.” Five months later, she had an internship with a special effects studio. She worked a few days a week at McDonald’s and dedicated the rest of her time to her fledgling career, waking up at a quarter-to-five in the morning to begin her commute by train, subway, and bus. She “took to heart” the insistence of her community college professors that she “take initiative” and “always strive to be above” average.

By the third interview, she was a regular employee at the special effects lab, which meant she was “the first one on the payroll” when work came in. Yet work was inconsistent and Mae began to see the challenges to making it as a makeup artist. She said, “it’s really not too much about what you know, it’s more about who you know.” Facing obstacles to making it as a makeup artist, Mae began to revise her story from one of encouragement to one of discouragement. “I’ve been told, and it’s been hammered into my head since I started, don’t become a makeup artist unless you really want to fight, unless that is your absolute passion.” By adding details like this, Mae changed the basic plot of the narrative: Her ambition was not enough to avoid failure. She blamed the recession for a lack of jobs and low pay, saying “It’s just recession everywhere and people don’t want to pay people what they’re worth. They’ll find people fresh out of school who just want the job and want the credit and they’ll take the little pay.” She also began to see her lack of training in a traditional makeup school as a liability. “What you know” mattered when describing failure, even if “who you know” was her strategy for success. As she worked to forge a new narrative to explain her struggle to get ahead, contradictory strands of the story emerged, complicating the narrative work that Mae had to do.

Mae described success as getting away from McDonald's, where she had worked for nearly six years. "The second that I can officially quit McDonald's, that is my first feel of success." She also wanted to move out of the house she shared with her mother, brother, sister, and cousin. Reacting against the discourse of youth-gone-bad, Mae said, "Responsibility and independence, that's success to me right now." At the same time, Mae described herself as "more ambitious now" and working in Hollywood was still her "dream" and her "goal." Considering her chances of making a career she said, "if I want to make it a reality, not only do I have to know I'm dedicated, I need to let other people know because they're my ticket to meeting other people and getting more work." She added, "I never stop dreaming. I never stop trying to achieve. I don't think I'll ever get to a point and be like, I made it, I want to stop, this is it. I don't think I'd ever get to that point.... You just have to be determined, believe, and just never give up." Mae was caught between the looming discourse of failure, the demand for ambition, and a career institution that provided few resources for developing a clear narrative of successful adulthood.

It was over a year-and-a-half later when I met Mae for the fourth time in March 2014. She had finally left McDonald's, but she had also quit working at the special effects studio. She explained that "it got too expensive" and she "didn't really see a lot of growth doing that." Mae decided to leave the studio after "a couple of incidents where they overlooked me." Revising her narrative, she described her work as a waste of time and money. "I was basically waking up five o'clock in the morning, spending money on the train ticket, subway ticket, bus ticket, travelling for hours just to go somewhere and clean and sit around for like five hours." She added, "I figured I'd learn a bunch, work on some good stuff, then, I don't know. I think I had fairytale hopes for that."

For the past four months she had been working at a car dealership part-time as a cashier and part-time doing “everything you would think a receptionist would do.” When I asked her where she saw herself in five years, Mae said, “I have no idea. I have absolutely no idea. If five years from now, if my life were the same, if I’m working at the same job doing the same things, I wouldn’t be disappointed.” She was in a better job than McDonald’s but was no longer on a career path. Yet the drive she had organized her narrative around in the first three interviews was not gone.

Mae described it as a “crazy year” since the third interview but incorporated the different challenges she had faced into her narrative by turning to religion. She explained that her Christian background had “always been there” but that she had really focused on it “during the trial parts and then the struggling parts.” She recalled learning from the church that “you go through things that’ll either get you closer to God or push you far away from God.” Religion had “really helped me to stand firm and to start seeing things from a different perspective.” Although she had practiced the Christian faith since she was a child, now she was “stepping up and living it, living what I preach.” Having failed in a career, Mae revised the plot of her narrative to be less about hard work on the studio floor and more about the work of God and her religious *practice*.

As Mae developed a revised narrative around religion to account for the shift from a passionate pursuit of a career in special effects makeup to stability without much chance for mobility in a car dealership, she focused her ambition on her religious practice. She explained:

The most important thing that I’m basically worried about as far as time is concerned, more than my financial growth or where I’m working, what I’m doing, is mostly my spiritual growth. Because I know with my spiritual growth, all the good things follow, being disciplined and me really chasing after God. That’s

mostly my goal: spiritual growth. Then all the good things, all what I'm supposed to do, all that follows. So what I will be doing, I don't know, it's wherever God leads me to do in five years from now, I really don't, honestly don't have an answer.

Religion, rather than a career institution, provided Mae with a source of practice and meaning that she could rely on to change her life course as she failed as a makeup artist. Like June, Mae generally viewed college as a defunct institutional trajectory. She said, "honestly, I know this sounds terrible, but I know people who have bachelor's and stuff and they're still struggling, like people don't even look at your qualifications anymore." While Mae could no longer narrate a career in Hollywood, she had revised her narrative in a way that closed off the possibility of returning to school or relying on the narrative resources it provides. By rejecting schooling in this way, Mae was free to be ambitious through religious practice.

On top of soul craft, Mae was immersed in body craft. Like religion, martial arts was a source of practice and self-improvement for her. She said, "You're just learning and training, you're learning about getting better at what you're doing." Mae described "a group of people who love doing the same thing you do and it feels great." She continued,

We all love this, we all talk about it, we all have one goal in mind which is to get better, to work hard, to go to the next level, you know, we push each other, we sweat together, we hurt together, and it's just really great just to have a group of people who have the same goals in mind as you and have the same drive as you do and want the same things.

Because of the practice character of martial arts and the moral force of the community, Mae could substitute dedication to the martial arts for dedication in the career of studio makeup.

In spite of the challenges Mae faced between the third and fourth interview, she said she felt like an adult because she had “so many responsibilities” and she was “taking care of them on my own” even though she still lived at home. She was also confident, saying “If things get thrown at you where you either sink or you swim and, I’m still swimming, I’m still here, and I’m still doing stuff, and I’ve seen, you know, this is a part where I feel successful right now.” Mae failed to make it in Hollywood, but had succeeded in telling an ambitious story of practice and responsibility through religion and sport.

Kimberly engaged in a similar pattern of narrative work using practice institutions as she failed in her aspiration to become a social worker. She was a 21 year-old single mother of an infant daughter when we first met. A black woman who moved to Moreno Valley from Los Angeles when she was in middle school, Kimberly felt like “the ghetto is following us...because when the black people start coming the white people started going.” Kimberly was working toward a bachelor’s degree in social work so she could open a non-profit “to help the community.” Expressing her ambivalence, she said, “I hate Moreno Valley. But really, I would like to be a part of people who help Moreno Valley become better.”

By choosing social work, Kimberly followed the paths laid out by her social worker mother and “self-proclaimed pastor” aunt whose “intentions were to target troubled kids, like gang bangers or crack babies or parents or kids whose parents are doing bad and to uplift them and bring them up and make them think or give them hope so they can do better.” Together, the city and her family provided the narrative material for Kimberly to make social work a meaningful career trajectory. Helping others was central to how she understood herself and her future. “I’m very determined and I have to succeed. I cannot be a failure.... Whenever I see

somebody in need...and I have enough to give, even if it's my last, you can have it because that's just how I am."

After the first interview, Kimberly's car broke down so she stopped attending class. Although her progress was delayed and she still expected to be at the community college for three more years, Kimberly was still pursuing social work, the narrative stretching ahead unchanged. She not only continued to see it as a way to "help people and hopefully mentor kids" but also as a source of stability, "benefits, and 401K, retirement." She said that as a social worker, "I'll be able to pay my own life insurance." Altogether, Kimberly still imagined a responsible life in a career institution. She was "really determined" and felt "like education is my ticket to furthering my career goals and furthering my career."

Eight months later, during the third interview, Kimberly explained again that she had once more stopped out of college. She said, "Since we've talked my car got impounded twice, two different cars, and I had to drop out of school because it was so hard trying to get to school with a baby sitter, with no car." Kimberly had moved out at one point but lived with her mother again and several other roommates. "We all have food stamps," she declared. She was "broke" and "doing bad" as opposed to boomeranging like her middle-class peers. Although she expressed some satisfaction that her daughter had "a smile on her face," she struggled to describe her life in terms other than the pathologizing language of the criminal justice and welfare systems that she routinely encountered. Kimberly planned to return to school and finish the associate's degree "regardless" of any obstacles because "there's so many things I can do with my education if I finish my education." But she had to get enough financial stability to get back on the path to a career in social work.

A year-and-a-half later, during the fourth interview, Kimberly's story was very different. Kimberly was 24 years old and worked for Riverside County "maintaining the chart room" in a hospital after a long period of unemployment. She didn't "really love it," she said, "It's just something for financial stability" that would allow her "to put my game plan together for my business ventures." No longer interested in pursuing social work, Kimberly planned "to go back to school for business."

Similar to the way June had turned to entrepreneurship, Kimberly revised the plot of her life around a business empire but without the models that June relied on to imagine a way forward in a career institution. And like Linda, she attributed her earlier aspiration for social work to the desires of others. When I asked her about her previous aspiration to become a social worker, she said, "I really think that that was because my mom did social work. I mean, I do have a compassion for people, and I do want to help people, I always have." But now helping others was limited to sharing the youth-gone-sad narrative with those closest to her:

My roommate, he has a daughter who's 19...I encourage her to live right with these boys and to live right, just pray for herself, you know, 'cause for a long time I had very low self-esteem, and her and all her little friends they come over here and I talk to 'em about empowering themselves.

Rather than relying on a therapeutic narrative as a way to focus on herself, she used it as a way to focus on others and maintain her aspiration to care for others in a limited form while she developed new career goals.

Although Kimberly imagined a new career trajectory, she felt like she was failing before she had really begun. She said, "I haven't started my businesses...I'm not going to school now, I

haven't gotten a teacher's training program finished, I haven't got my business licenses."

Instead, Kimberly told a different story of overcoming deviance and sin through practice in the church.

Before I started going to church, I just found myself being wild again. I wasn't a wild teenager anymore, I was a mother. Not like I was going out every night because I didn't have money to go out every night but I would go out sometimes a lot more than I should have as a single mom...and I would go out with boys and do stuff you wasn't supposed to be doing with boys and go out to the club and drink and wasn't doing like heavy drugs, cocaine or nothing, but marijuana, and it was no point, I didn't have no purpose for life 'cause I was just partying my life away. I wasn't being the best mom I could have been and I started to see that and I started to feel self-pity on myself and feeling condemned for my actions.

This story of youth-gone-bad not only put her delayed progress in context, it served as a basis for initiating a life of practice. Going to church made Kimberly feel better and she started feeling like her "life had purpose again."

This purpose emerged from two directions. One was the study of how to "live a life that's pleasing to God without all the drinking." She discovered that you could "read the Bible and identify with people who are in the bible and you know what your purpose is." Like Linda who found strong characters in the history of public health, Kimberly found a new identity through religious tales. She encountered figures like Abraham who "had so much faith in stuff that he did not see," and she identified new narratives to interpret her own life through. The other direction was through practicing celibacy with her fiancé. She had been "committing so many sexual sins" before they met but together, they were "trying to live our lives as godly as possible" even

though it was “hard sometimes.” Through challenging religious practice and the adoption of Christian narratives of purposeful living, Kimberly revised the plot of her life further through the church. She managed being “kind of depressed” by overcoming sin through stories of faith and practice in interaction. As a consequence, she felt like “a real full-grown adult” and no longer like she was “stuck in a standstill.”

Whereas Mae fully abandoned career institutions and resorted purely to the practice institutions of church and martial arts as a means of narrating a future, Kimberly attempted to draw from both career and practice institutions as she failed to make headway toward a life as a social worker. Yet it was only through religious practice that Kimberly could tell a story of overcoming failure. Both women revised their life stories to minimize the importance and worth of career trajectories that they had previously been determined to pursue. In their place, stories of practice in religion and sport provided the ground for successfully overcoming failed aspirations. As Silva (2012) found, religion was an especially prominent institutional resource for black women and may be a limited source of narrative material for different groups. Sports, however, may be prominent across poor and working-class youth who turn to practice institutions when careers are out of reach. With neither career nor practice institutions, the women are left with caring for others as a source of virtue.

From Career to Care Institutions: Hannah and Christine

Hannah had “always had big dreams” of being a clothing buyer for a big department store and Christine had wanted to be a nurse, she said, “all my life.” Both women faced major obstacles to finishing community college and left before finishing the degrees they needed to pursue the

careers they had long been committed to. While both did narrative work to overcome failure, they struggled to imagine a way forward and turned to caring for others to forge identities of worth. Yet because caring for others offered less narrative space to be ambitious, their failures were harder to manage.

Hannah did not entirely abandon her original goal of a career in fashion. Yet she was disconnected from career institutions that would allow her to tell any sort of story of progress. After five years of community college, Hannah said in the first interview that she was on the verge of earning an associate's degree and transferring to a nearby university. She was "really proud" and was now considering studying law after taking a class that she liked. Although she only recently imagined a career in law, she quickly embedded it more fully in her narrative.

Well, just recently, I found out that my grandmother...had an affair with some guy, had their child and that was my dad. And he was a lawyer, and he was, like, part of a, I don't know, I'm just gonna assume it's through the blood, but I really got interested in it.

Hannah found a tale to support her pursuit of a law degree and a career in law embedded in her family history and genetic code.

After the first interview, however, Hannah left college without completing her associate's degree or the university transfer requirements. Detached from higher education, Hannah felt "like it's a domino effect, just like everything around me is going down" and she did not "want to go down with it." Hannah could not afford to attend college but she still planned to major in apparel merchandizing and management and aspired to go to law school, suggesting Baylor,

USC, and UCLA as possibilities. Hannah had extended these goals in time so that she could get the conditions right to start over, but she had not abandoned them.

Hannah did not return to school before the final interview and she struggled to reimagine a way forward. Hannah harbored doubts about ever finishing college, saying “Deep down inside that is something I really want to do but I feel like it’s so unrealistic financially.” She compared looking for schools to attend to window shopping, which left her discouraged and frustrated. Leaning more toward the idea that school was unattainable required Hannah to look for ways to revise the plot of her life. She no longer aspired to work as a buyer for a major department store and instead imagined something smaller and more immediately available: an online store of her own. Rather than make major changes to global supply chains, as she had dreamed of before, she now imagined “trendsetting” and “being able to help out the community a little bit” by not having “these trashy clothes out there.” Hannah revised the plot in a less ambitious but possibly more attainable direction. Still, there was very little specificity in her imagined future apart from returning to school.

Like Kimberly, Hannah had few resources for imagining a trajectory into this entrepreneurial career but wanted to try it because, she explained, “I’m tired of someone telling me that I can’t. So that’s why I’m really open to running my own business or something that isn’t gonna be too costly.” She was “more than willing” to teach herself, nevertheless, she concluded,

Just all these different ideas I feel like they’re desperate ideas but, I mean, there’s no other option I have, it almost feels like. It’s like a cause and effect: I want to go to school but I can’t until I make this money and then I can’t start this internet business until I have money or overhead.

With her aspirations and plans to achieve them seeming further out of reach, Hannah turned to her emotional needs, her “need to be happy,” and toward her significant others. In particular, she wanted to care for her mother.

I felt because my mom’s Asian, the older child always has that burden on them to like take care of their parents. I haven’t been able to do that yet and I feel like because she’s getting older, I see that, but I forget that I’m getting older, too. And it’s like, I’m growing up and not doing what I want to do. I want to take care of my mom.

Her friends were also more like “family” and, she said, “I kind of feel like that’s what anchors me here.” The plot of her life was increasingly tied to successful relationships. Family, both nuclear and fraternal, emerged in the final interview as the only institution she could use to narrate a successful future. Yet she was unable to do the care work that met her obligations. As a result, Hannah was largely left to learn from her past experiences and focus on emotional recovery along the logic of youth-gone-sad (Silva 2012).

Lastly, at 28 years old when I first interviewed her, Christine lived in her parents’ garage with her two children. She described herself as Hispanic and white and, like Hannah, she dreamed of becoming a nurse. However, she was unable to continue with college for financial reasons that included a defaulted student loan from a medical assisting program at a for-profit college and an unpaid fine for shoplifting. Paying off her loan and her fine were difficult because she was unable to work after suffering back-to-back seizures. She quit her job, she said, because she said she didn’t want her employer to be liable in the event she had another seizure and got injured. The only financial support she received was about \$500 from the state for her children and food stamps. She said, “I have my kids to think of, their needs, and then by the time their

needs are taken care of, I have nothing left.” Even if she could afford school, Christine said her criminal record would disqualify her from a job as a nurse.

Christine had neither returned to the community college nor found a job by the fourth interview. To make sense of this she altered her past. She explained that prior to the first interview she had been diagnosed with depression and that it had never really gone away. More recently, she believed she had been suffering from anxiety. Employing the language of sickness and still living in her parents’ garage, she did not feel like an adult because she was not taking care of things and had no money, even though she believed that adulthood was more about maturity than income. When I asked her what goals she felt like she had accomplished up to that point, she replied in a barely audible voice, “Uh, nothing.” Getting a job, she said, would have given her “a sense of pride” because she would be able to pay her “own way.” At the same time, she insisted, “I work around here, I don’t just lay around or anything. I clean.”

For Christine, a “good job” was working as a “housekeeper, like a maid.” This was consistent, she said, with her history of doing cleaning work that began when she cleaned RVs after high school. She recalled, “It’s mostly what I’ve done my whole life, the majority of my life. I liked that job.” While cleaning RVs had been a small detail in her work history at the outset of the study, it now became the core of her work identity. She said she tried to get a job at an upscale hotel but was told she needed experience as a maid. By the final interview, caring for the household by cleaning was way to reject the image of laziness and irresponsibility that unemployment and dependence suggested.

Yet cleaning the house was a limited source of virtue for Christine. Nursing was still something she “would love to do” but at this point, she said, “I’m not sure if I’m going to be one.” She now wanted to move away because of “no jobs” and “the economy.” She felt “like it’s

a prison here” and “sort of trapped.” She still planned to re-enroll in school and imagined herself in ten years working in the medical field, having more children, owning a car, and “just living, having my own life.” Yet she had few narrative resources to describe a path forward and Christine had begun to introduce a narrative of escape and renewal. In the end, she made a claim for self-worth through caring for her children and working to take care of her family but held out hope for an ambitious future.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In a society that elevates ambition to a dominant source of ethical social membership, managing failure is a serious challenge. This is particularly important for poor and working-class emerging adults who are transitioning to adulthood with high aspirations, declining life chances, and culture-wide pathologizing explanations for their failure to get ahead. In this study, I examine the important role that different types of institutions play for low-income women to tell life narratives and deal with obstacles to reaching their goals. I distinguish between career institutions, practice institutions, and care institutions to explain the different ways that the women I interviewed narrated ambitious and worthy lives. Career institutions offer the clearest narrative material to tell an ambitious story in American society. When telling a plausible story in a career is too difficult, practice institutions provide an alternative source of ambitious display, if only temporarily. Care institutions such as the family, by contrast, offer a source of worth but little in the way of ambition. In the absence of career or practice institutions, people have few cultural resources to express ambition and reject stereotypes of the poor as lazy, irresponsible, and incapable.

Narrating one's life in career, practice, and care institutions to generate social worth in a society fixated on ambition and work is a significant accomplishment for poor and working-class emerging adults. I have argued that failure takes narrative work, and poor and working-class young adults will respond to the pressure to tell an ambitious story. Since ambition requires commitment to an institutionalized narrative to garner recognition, it is consequential for our sense of self. Our capacity for narrative agency makes this work possible. Over time, the women in this study variously revised their narratives, extended their plans in time, and worked to resolve contradictions. We cannot appreciate this level of work with a snapshot approach to studying emerging adulthood. With these findings, I have contributed to a better understanding of how poor and working-class emerging adults navigate the challenges of becoming adults in an increasingly unequal society, one that nevertheless demands extraordinary ambition.

My findings contribute to research on the role of institutions in the lives of emerging adults by DeLuca and her colleagues (2016) among others by showing how they use industry, religion, family and other domains to form identities and imagine future trajectories. Sennett (2003) adopts the concept *Lebensführung*, which he translates as a "life narrative in an institution." Stable institutions help resolve "the experience of freefall, of moving jerkily or aimlessly forward in time"; they give a person "a sustained place in the world," and satisfy "a basic need for organizing one's life narrative" (pp. 165-166). Although a return to instability in capitalist institutions since the 1960s has destabilized this narrative source of self and virtue (Sennett 1998), today's emerging adults continue to imagine futures in churches, martial arts dojos, families, and, above all, careers.

Hughes (1937:409-410) defined a career as "the moving perspective in which the person sees his life as a whole and interprets the meaning of his various attributes, actions, and the

things which happen to him.” Careers are typically thought in terms of jobs that connect individuals to institutional structures (Hughes 1997). However, Goffman (1961) recognized that the concept of career has come to indicate both the trajectory through professional stages and the course of self-image and felt identity among members of a social category. Career is a particularly useful concept, then, for institutional approaches to studying the self. It helps us connect structured stages in the life of work with the life of the self. Career institutions not only allow people to define career stages and anticipate achievement, they give people a sense of social worth and may even function as symbolic statements (Newman 1999a). Linda’s decision to pursue public health nursing or June’s desire for entrepreneurship, for example, were more than simply blueprints for advancement in a job. They were statements about their social worth.

A practice institution allows for what Sennett (2003:13-14) describes as “an element of craft, of doing something well for its own sake” and “provides the individual with an inner sense of self-respect” and “becoming inside.” Smith (2009:85) suggests that religion offers models for healthy living and accountability that help failing emerging adults move past self-described “stupid and self-destructive choices” (see also, Howell 1973; Silva 2012). Kimberly’s use of religiously-motivated abstinence was a response to a period of deviant sexual sins. For some, religion serves as an institutionalized form of practice similar to other institutionalized forms of practice such as athletics (Sloterdijk 2013). Mae’s narrative of overcoming failure in Hollywood demonstrates how both religion and sport can be sources of ambitious practice. Illouz (2008) similarly describes the development of modern therapy in near-athletic terms, as professional men and women work on their inner-selves, in part, to be more productive and capable adults. For middle-class adults, therapy can be part of an ambitious lifestyle. Poor and working-class emerging adults, by contrast, may not be able to use therapeutic narratives in similarly ambitious

ways because of how they encounter and adopt therapeutic narratives in the institutions that they rely on such as welfare. The women in this study regularly drew on youth-gone-sad discourse, but only as a way to explain past failure and not as a means of charting a way forward.

Institutions that allow for goal-directed, rule-bound self-improvement efforts function in similar ways. Work, education, religion, athletics, therapy, and other institutions may be sites of career attainment and practice, and therefore resources for the expression of ambition. Care institutions, by contrast, hold fewer possibilities for ambitious storytelling while providing people with a source of moral worth. Whether oriented toward caring for oneself or others, care institutions involve the displacement of personal ambition in favor of a narrative of sacrifice and what Sorokin (1950) called “good neighborliness” and “altruistic love.” Care work such as low-status health care may provide little in the way of career prospects, but it can make a statement about one’s virtue. For poor emerging adults, the family is an especially important site for engaging in care (Edin and Lein 1997; Hays 2003). Taking care of aging parents, as Hannah hoped to do, or small children, as Christine did, can impact one’s ability to pursue or imagine ambitious trajectories. At the same time, family provides poor emerging adults with an institution that is socially valued and worthy of commitment even when it interferes with career and practice. People may create a family out of friends, as Hannah demonstrates, or even pets to give their narratives a sense of purpose and direction (Irvine 2013). In the process, people may forego their own ambitions for those of other family members like children or spouses in the same way low-wage workers may embrace the ambitions of their employers (Newman 1999b).

There may be considerable overlap in the use of career, practice, and care institutions (Bourdieu 2000). Life in an institution such as the church, for example, can accommodate all three types of narrative. In managing failure, people can move among and within career, practice,

and care institutions. Yet ambition and virtue in an institution requires commitment that makes disengagement from trajectories a narrative accomplishment. Telling a life narrative in an institution produces a recognizable self and a durable identity that must be managed through failure.

This study also contributes to the literature on emerging adulthood by making failure a central concept. Focusing on failure is important because it emphasizes the emotional and biographical commitments that some emerging adults make to their aspirations rather than treating them as flirtations. Treating their aspirations as unserious obscures the problem of managing failure in emerging adulthood. Moreover, taking the aspirations of emerging adults more seriously helps us to make sense of a topic that is anathema to how we understand ourselves as Americans. As Newman (1999a:8) notes, “Our optimistic heritage stands in the way of recognizing how frequently economic failure occurs.” The promise of achievement is central to our national faith, which makes failure a challenging topic for Americans to face. We have a much less developed symbolic vocabulary for failure than we do for celebrating success. Yet as I have shown, this is less true for the poor and working-class than it is for the failing middle-class. Although failure in middle-class emerging adulthood can be described in terms that obscure failure and uphold ambition, failure for the poor and working-class is richly described through a wide range of pathologies. For this reason, focusing on failure among poor and working-class emerging adults is necessary, since their experience and possibilities for presentation are distinct from their wealthier peers. It also shifts attention from the discourse of these youth as failures to their *successful management of failure*.

If institutions are so important for the narration of failure, how might institutions support failing emerging adults. In the absence of better career opportunities, institutions may be able to

provide more narratives of socially valued adulthood. Frank (2010) provides the concept of “narrative habitus” to describe the collection of stories that identify a person and give shape to their life. In particular, more and better stories of failure leading to care as a worthy trajectory may be the most important for a couple of reasons. For one, the greatest consequences of failure appear to be most likely among emerging adults who cannot revise their life stories through either career or practice institutions. The women in this study who relied on care institutions—Hannah and Christine—were also the women who struggled most to manage the youth-gone-bad and youth-gone-sad explanations for their failure to reach their goals. Stories of mental illness or self-blame due to irresponsibility likely have very real consequences for their well-being. More effective care narratives may help them to manage pathologizing stories.

For another reason, caring may have benefits beyond managing pathology. Sorokin (1950:213) discovered that unselfish love and sanctity led to “a remarkable vitality, a long duration of life, an unperturbable peace of mind, and an ineffably rich happiness.” After examining the lives of men and women born around the Great Depression and followed for a half-century, Clausen (1993) found that a life well-lived involved career, practice, and care. Today, practice and, especially, care are secondary to ambition in a career. Family members, welfare caseworkers, drug and alcohol counselors, and other institutional actors can and should help failing emerging adults tell narratives of care that can challenge the demand for ambition in a career when structural barriers continually emerge.

Beyond care, social movement narratives can help poor and working-class emerging adults challenge youth-gone-bad and youth-gone-sad stories by bringing personal biographies in line with narratives of collective identity and structural barriers (Gowan 2010; Polletta 1998). Linda appears well on her way to a narrative of communal struggle that will place her failure to

become a doctor in a radically different light, one that elides problems of self-esteem or false-consciousness. Kimberly had the beginnings of a collective struggle narrative when she aspired to be a social worker. But without a social movement to link her story to or a viable career path to do social work, she limited her care for others to spreading a warning of youth-gone-sad to those nearest to her. Institutions that tie care and collective identity together for poor and working-class emerging adults will likely have a powerful effect on their lives.

ENDNOTES

1 Poor youth are not only exposed to stories of deviance, illness, or trauma, many directly experience these problems (DeLuca et al. 2016). Still, there are standard stories to make sense of and share these experiences. For example, Sered and Norton-Hawk (2014:27), after describing severe sexual abuse, drug addiction, and incarceration, write that “the dominant model for explaining these connections singles out childhood abuse as causing lasting psychological damage that in turn leads to drug use and victimization. While the causal chain fits the American narrative of individual responsibility, connections between gender violence and incarceration are far more structural.”

2 Redacted statement about the broader project that this study comes from.

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