
In Search of Self: A Qualitative Study of the Life-Career Development of Rural Young Women

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ABSTRACT

Little attention has been paid to the life-career development of rural adolescents. The aim of this project is to explore the hopes, beliefs, and fears of eight young women and aspects of their rural environment that act to constrain or enhance their options. Participants constructed life-space maps, possible selves, and photographic displays during two semi-structured interviews. Four themes emerged across the transcripts: (a) just like living under a microscope, (b) empowering and disempowering relationships, (c) opening and limiting conditions, and (d) aspirations and apprehensions. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

RÉSUMÉ

Le cheminement de carrière des adolescent(e)s vivant en milieu rural a fait l'objet de peu d'attention. Ce projet a pour but d'examiner les espoirs, les convictions et les peurs de huit jeunes femmes, ainsi que certains aspects de leur milieu rural qui limitent leurs options ou les augmentent. Les participantes ont conçu des plans de vie et des « soi possibles » et ont créé des montages de photos lors de deux entrevues semi-structurées. Quatre thèmes se dégagent des transcriptions : (a) la vie « sous un microscope », (b) les relations habilitantes et les relations contraignantes, (c) les conditions présentant de bonnes perspectives et les conditions restrictives, et (d) les aspirations et les craintes. Les implications pour la pratique et les recherches futures sont présentées.

Adolescence in contemporary American society is traditionally defined as a time of movement toward adulthood. Adolescent development is characterized by qualitative biological, social, and cognitive changes for the individual (Graber, Brooks-Gunn, & Petersen, 1996). One theme permeating the literature on adolescent development is the problem of self-definition. As adolescents navigate through life, they develop a sense of who they are and how they can best find personal satisfaction in the adult world. Career development theorists as well have struggled to understand how adolescents acquire and make use of their knowledge of self in making decisions about the future. Self-identity has been explicated in career development models with terms such as self-concept (Gottfredson, 1981; Super, 1953), vocational identity (Holland, 1985), self-observation generalizations (Krumboltz & Nichols, 1990), and narrative knowledge (Cochran, 1990).

In recent years, a number of theorists (Blustein, 1994; Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1986; Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996) have explored the immediate (e.g., family, cultural heritage) and distal (e.g., economics, environmental opportunities) contextual factors influencing the meaning-making process for

individuals. Indeed, an individual's culture, gender, socioeconomic situation, and social history are now acknowledged to be vital contributors to one's self-concept. For example, the construct of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) comprises aspects of self that are most sensitive to feedback from the environment. Possible selves represent those aspects of self-knowledge that encompass one's hopes, fears, and beliefs. Possible selves can function as a set of goals that motivate future behaviour and provide a means of understanding current experiences.

Another relevant concept is the notion of the embedded self "that links intrapsychic experience with one's unique interpersonal history and current relational nexus, as well as the broader social network" (Blustein, 1994, p. 147). Blustein cautions that attention must be paid to an individual's dynamic phenomenological role in confirming both positive and negative environmental influences. "Supports, opportunities, and barriers—like beauty—lie at least partly in the eye of the beholder" (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994, p. 106).

In the study of the career psychology of women, there has been growing acknowledgement of the importance of contextual factors to women's life-career planning processes and self-constructions (Patton & McMahon, 1999; Richie et al., 1997). Although a number of studies have undertaken to examine career behaviour in specific cultural contexts (cf. Fassinger, 1991; Morgan & Brown 1991), little attention has been given to rural context and gender (Conrad, 1997; Little, 1997).

Exploration into young women's perspectives can provide valuable insight into how they understand and affect their social environments and how the environment affects them, particularly their life-career development. As young women and the environment interact, development can proceed along many different pathways, depending on how one influences the other (Juntunen & Atkinson, 2002). The current research attempts to explore the hopes, beliefs, and fears of a sample of young rural women and their perceptions of aspects of their rural environment that act to constrain or enhance their options.

RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

Rural areas, where more than half the people live in communities with a population density of fewer than 150 people per square kilometer (Ministry of Rural Affairs, 2000), are undergoing profound social and economic change. The decline in the basis of rural economies—that is forestry, farming, mining, and fishing—has impacted rural community function and viability (Troughton, 1999). Few new jobs in expanding, knowledge-based manufacturing and service industries are being developed.

Rural youth appear to feel the effects of economic hardship more than urban youth (Dehan & Deal, 2001). Rural residents live far from the centre of the nation's distribution networks for goods and services and, therefore, pay more per household for transportation, food, and household operations. Due to the lack of availability of post-secondary institutions in rural areas, the cost of pursuing

post-secondary education is higher for rural students than for urban students (Canadian Rural Partnership, 2000). The number of single-parent families in rural areas is also increasing. Rural youth living in single-parent homes are more likely to be poor, to be poor longer, and to be in deeper poverty than their urban counterparts in single-parent homes (Fitchen, 1995). Non-metropolitan families tend to receive less social assistance than urban families (Phimister, Vera-Toscano, & Weersink, 2001).

In Canada, young people living in rural areas are less educated than urban youth (Canadian Rural Partnership, 2000). For example, in the 25–29 age category, only 31% of rural residents had some post-secondary education in 1996 compared to 46% for those living in urban areas. Jobs obtainable in rural communities may demand lower skills than those required by jobs in urban areas. Approximately 48% of employed rural youth are employed in blue-collared occupations compared to 36% of urban youth. For young adults in the 20–29 age category, labour market conditions appear to be more severe in rural communities as compared to urban centres. The percentage of young adults employed on a full-year, full-time basis is 31% in rural areas as compared to 50% in urban areas.

Traditionally, female employment rates in rural Canadian communities have been significantly below the rates found in urban areas (Phimister et al., 2001). Additionally, rural females tend to be underemployed when compared to their urban counterparts. Lack of childcare facilities and public transportation are factors that reduce female employment opportunities (Shaffer as cited in Phimister et al.). Rural family members have been found to be significantly more traditional in gender role socialization than urban family members (Conrad, 1997; Pratt & Hanson, 1993). Socialization that emphasizes home and family pursuits narrows young women's life-career options. In addition, limited association with other groups and the lack of variety of female role models may lead to a strengthening of already-held values (Pratt & Hanson). Young rural women may, therefore, find the negotiation of multiple life roles and the demands of adulthood particularly difficult (McCracken & Weitzman, 1997).

In thinking about the impact of contexts on female adolescents, growing sociocognitive capabilities and their consequences for the self are important to consider. Young women experiment with possible selves, supported by their increasing awareness of how they can use the latent potential of their environment for their development (Silbereisen & Todt, 1994). Thus, facilitating and constraining factors in the environment have an impact on their goal-directed, intentional behaviours. Education, training, life plans, and work opportunities, as a function of social expectations, developmental experience, and practical constraints, come to have a different significance in the lives of young women. Subjective significance provides direction for what is valued and how effectively it is pursued. An exploration of their experience of these factors could lead to a better understanding of the way in which young rural women interpret, as well as shape, the directions and content of their life-career development. Findings

may have implications for counselling approaches for rural women, the promotion of rural-based career information, and the creation of institutional linkages between urban and rural communities.

This study attributes a powerful formative influence to rurality itself, arguing that young women's experiences and understandings of their rural upbringing are integral parts of their identity. The purpose of the present research was threefold: (a) to understand how young rural women perceive themselves within the context of their rural community, (b) to comprehend their perceptions of constraining and enhancing aspects of their rural community, and (c) to explore their hopes and fears for the future.

METHOD

Research Setting and Participants

Asgard (pop. 1,063), a pseudonym for a village in southern British Columbia (BC), was chosen for the research site because it is the business centre for a number of small towns (area pop. 2,500). The town does not have a strong economy and is not ethnically diverse. Forestry and tourism form the economic base. According to BC Stats (2001), 17.9% of youth aged 19–24 were receiving Basic BC Assistance or social assistance compared to 5.9% in British Columbia as a whole. In comparison, Lumby (pop. 1,794) in the North Okanagan region had a rate of 11.8% and Chase (pop. 2,600) in the Thompson-Nicola region had a rate of 8.8%.

Research participants were recruited through parents that the researcher met at a community barbecue. A pool of 15 young women (out of a possible 18 in the area), aged 17 to 19, indicated an interest in the research project. This age group was targeted because they were transitioning from high school. Eight participants were chosen because they were long-term residents and were willing to take an active part in the project. Seven participants were Euro-Canadian and one participant was Asian-Canadian. In addition, 10 interviews were conducted with community residents who worked with or had influence on young people in *Asgard*. These interviews took place in their homes or workplace and lasted about one hour.

Procedure

Interviews were semi-structured; questions about living in *Asgard*, their hopes and fears for the future, and the benefits and disadvantages of living in the community were asked of each participant, but other questions and probes followed. All participants were asked four key questions: (a) What has it been like for you growing up in this community? (b) Who and what have influenced your current development? (c) What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages of living here? (d) How would you describe your hopes and fears for the future? Interviews lasted about two hours on average.

During the initial interview, participants constructed a life-space map of important influences on their current and anticipated future lives (cf. Shepard, 2000). Participants were asked to describe their future hoped-for and feared selves using Markus and Nurius' (1986) concept of "possible selves." At the end of the interview participants were given disposable cameras to create visual narratives of themselves and their community relationship.

In the second phase of data collection, three weeks after the first interview, participants reviewed the first transcript for inaccuracies, clarified unclear responses, and added additional information. During the 60–90 minute audio-taped interview, participants described their photographic display and summarized their community experiences. Interviews with youth-involved adults were also conducted, focusing on the major issues facing young people in their community, how young people were perceived in Asgard, and what helped and hindered youth's life-career development.

Data Analysis

All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. An inductive analysis was performed using the category-content approach of narrative analysis outlined by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998). The first stage consisted of reading the transcripts to highlight references to the three areas of interest. These sections of the transcript were coded using the NVIVO software package (Richards & Richards, 1999). The second stage involved the processes of categorization and conceptualization in order to identify patterns and themes (Morse & Richards, 2002). An understanding of participants' life-career development was acquired by integrating the perspectives of the young women, including their hopes and fears, with the perspectives of community residents and consideration of the broader social context. Verification strategies that contributed to rigour involved prolonged engagement in the field, participant checks, multiple data collection strategies, reflective journal writing, peer review, and providing an audit trail (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001).

RESULTS

Through the analysis of interview transcripts, four central themes that characterized the young women's perceptions of their rural upbringing, the perceived advantages and disadvantages of rural living, and their hopes and fears for the future, became apparent, including (a) *just like living under a microscope*, (b) *empowering and disempowering relationships*, (c) *opening and limiting conditions*, and (d) *aspirations and apprehensions*. Each of the themes will be discussed revealing both positive and negative attitudes toward Asgard. For example, the young women enjoyed the friendliness, support, and closeness of the community: "Everyone knows everybody." However, all participants also mentioned the lack of social activities: "There's nothing to do and nowhere to go."

Just Like Living Under a Microscope

Participants in this study perceived themselves as highly visible in and connected to their community. In a study of a small community in Alberta, Bonner (1997) observed that the smallness of the community created the effect that an individual's actions were being observed and commented on by community members. The young women in the current study also felt as though they were living under a "microscope." For young people who already assume that other people are as interested in them and their behaviour as they are themselves (Reid & Paludi, 1993), the close eye of the community produced feelings of vulnerability and violation as well as feelings of safety and freedom. Embeddedness in the community implies both surveyability and accountability. In this study, participants felt the tension between the freedom to experiment with a variety of selves and the restrictions created by responsibility for their actions. In particular, those young people who challenged the status quo by trying out new ways of behaving became the centre of gossip and were frequently prevented from finding employment in town. As one community employer explained,

I am not willing to risk my business, the short time we have to make money in the summer, by hiring somebody who looks like they were from MTV ... not when I can hire someone that fits more with what this town is about ... its history and roots.

Each young woman related stories about the experiences of those who diverge. Transforming one's reputation was a painstaking process. Anita explains the process of "trying to get back into the town's good books":

I've been screwed over millions of times and I've been hurt a lot and I've probably hurt a lot of people too, but just from stuff like that, you get a reputation or a name, dirty looks and everything. Now there's days when I'm like, "Hey, I look really good today." And I can say that now, and I never used to be able to. I seriously had zero self-esteem like two years ago because no one wanted to be with me and no one wanted to hire me ... and now I'm extremely confident now ... self-respect is like a big issue that people need to have in this town. I think everywhere, but mostly in this town, because no one's going to pride it for you [have respect for you if you don't have respect for yourself].

The close watch of residents provided a safe community. "I've enjoyed a lot of freedom in my life, being able to go out after dark, being able to go to my friend's house" (Josée).

One way in which participants changed their stature in the community and gained different self-perceptions was through networking with those living beyond the borders of Asgard. As Lyn commented, opportunities outside the community can be a broadening experience. "It just sort of opens me up—like just different people besides just the Asgard [scene], not that it's bad but it's ... just a little wider than Asgard." The experience also opened up new possibilities for Lyn within the community. Lyn petitioned the town council to start a recycling program and received help in finding funds for implementing her plan. Her success led her to approach the principal at her school to develop a school-based

recycling program. Both of these positive experiences gave Lyn the confidence to consider more options. “That’s when I thought, ‘Hey I could go somewhere else and do this kind of work.’ And then that very fall, I saw the poster for Canada World Youth.”

Erikson (1959/1980) identified adolescence as a time of identity formation. Identity formation involves exploration or “trying on” different possibilities (Marcia, 1994). The construction of a variety of possible selves is enhanced in affectively significant relationships (Adams, Dyk, & Bennion, 1990). Positive family, school, and community relationships would seem essential in fostering this exploration process as indicated in the next theme.

Empowering and Disempowering Relationships

Community membership implies commitment toward each other. Important influences essential to the participants’ developmental needs—including family support, other adult relationships, a caring community, and a positive school climate—were noted on their life-space maps. However, participants also pointed out unproductive relationships that involved the formation of cliques and the exclusion of young people.

Family support. All participants named their families as their most supportive relationship. Support in families included emotional and financial support and the transmission of moral values. For many participants, being listened to by their mothers was at the top of their list. “My mom’s always there for me to talk to ... she has been so supportive. All the decisions I’ve made in my life, she’s been there for me” (Suzanne). Participants’ families provided financial support that enabled their daughters to attend school-related activities outside of town.

My parents really struggle in the winter, but they made sure that I had the money to attend a drama clinic in Kelowna. That’s what makes them so special ... they look out for me and make sure that I get opportunities like that. (Grace)

Participants noted how values were transmitted to them by their family. For example, Jessica stated that her family taught her self-respect and responsibility.

And that was a difficult lesson for me, especially when I wanted to go out and party, I wanted to drink and be part of the gang. Having my parents tell me why I couldn’t go was helpful and ... after one terrible event, I learned that I would rather respect myself than get drunk anytime! And being a responsible person has given me a good reputation, like now I have one of the best jobs in town.

According to a report on health behaviours (King, Boyce, & King, 1999), most Canadian youth respect their parents, feel a sense of belonging in the family, and share similar values. Parents who provide standards of behaviour and emotional support encourage healthy development in their children (Jacobson & Crockett, 2000). These young women held their parents in high regard and viewed them as positive role models. The parents possessed attributes that the young women wanted to emulate. “My mom works with special needs children ... she’s incredible ... her patience and everything. That’s something I admire”

(Suzanne). Hamilton and Darling (1996) also found parents listed as mentors, particularly by female respondents. Blustein and Noumair (1996) suggest that emotional support from family members and important others fosters identity exploration by providing a secure base from which to explore. Participants eloquently acknowledged the contribution of their families in the development of their personal values, sense of support, and skill base. Many participants attributed the development of their work ethic and work skills to observing their parents at work and to the fact that they had responsibilities in their families' businesses.

Adult role models. Participants cited the positive consequence of forming relationships with adult residents. For Suzanne, her mentors in two community-based programs provided her with expertise in "working the system." As the president of the Youth Council, she learned to emulate the president of the Restorative Justice Committee.

I try to watch her and try to do the same thing. Try to mimic her. She's just taught me how to speak out more and try to get things going for the youth centre ... she's taught me how to do that more. Making presentations. Writing proposals.

Mentoring can be a powerful means of providing supportive adult contacts for youth. In studying the role of mentors in the lives of American adolescents, Hamilton and Darling (1996) found that unrelated adult mentors tended to complement the important role played by parents. Mentors act as challengers (to their thinking), as teachers, and as supporters. Dondero (1997) discovered that in helping young people enhance their self-esteem, knowledge base, and abilities, mentors gained a sense of personal satisfaction.

A caring community. Lyn and Josée were pleasantly surprised by the concern shown by community members. When Josée planned a mission trip to Fiji through her church, residents gave her \$2,500 in donations. As part of her commitment to the Canada World Youth, Lyn had to fundraise her airfare to Ontario and India.

[I]t's just amazing ... I handed out letters—a lot of letters ... and every single one has been answered. I mean, not necessarily with a whole bunch of money, but just that we're going to try to see what we can do to help you. Like the Chamber of Commerce, like the president ... called my house and we tried to talk about what I could do to raise some funds and stuff. Like letting me use my art show as a fund-raiser.

Positive person-context relations are integral to healthy development (Damon, 1997). Embedding youth in a caring and facilitative community can promote their ability to develop morally and to contribute to society (Damon).

Positive school climate. Positive school climates occurred when students felt challenged and supported. Lyn was impressed when her principal set up evening classes to prepare students for provincial exams. Anita, who aspired to be a journalist, acknowledged the support of her English teacher. The school counsellor found a work placement for Grace at a horse farm where she could board. Although the school was small, the staff provided a number of activities: cross-

country running, basketball, volleyball, drama, band, student parliament, and the yearbook. Participants who were involved seemed to enjoy school more.

In reviewing rural education in the United States, Herzog & Pittman (1995) heard students describe their school experiences as similar to a family. They valued the smallness of the school, the close ties with teachers and students, and the opportunity to have extra activities. Overall, the young women in this study appeared to have similar experiences.

Unproductive relationships. Participants also drew attention to disempowering features of the community. Participants explained how cliques separated young people and excluded some youth from employment and from inclusion in extracurricular activities at school.

People who are considered the geeky group ... people that haven't had a chance to create themselves because everybody else has created them with their negative attitude ... They don't really speak to others ... they sort of keep to themselves. (Grace)

Suzanne noticed how teachers sometimes encouraged factions. "It is the same group of people that belong each year. Like take band. There's no really new joiners. It's kind of like a little clan type of thing. You really can't get in even if you wanted to."

The development of cliques at school appeared to limit the young women's opportunities to try out various selves, for example, the music self, the drama self, or the athletic self. Additionally, the obstacles participants faced in "crossing borders" within the school setting separated them from peers and teachers and made the school environment less inviting. Phelan, Davidson, and Yu (1998) noted that "such borders disrupt or hinder students' ability to focus on classroom tasks, participate fully in learning or establish positive relationships with teachers or peers in school environments" (p. 12).

Participants put the onus on the community to find ways to provide all youth with meaningful roles. Giving back to the community was something that all participants valued. Most participants contributed through the small things done in daily living, such as looking out for the younger generation and giving them advice. Four of the young women took an active part in the community. Lyn started a recycling program, Suzanne represented youth on local committees, Grace volunteered at the library, and Josée helped with church luncheons.

However, participants believed that adults needed to be more aware of young people's needs. For the past five years Asgard's youth had raised funds for a youth centre.

Like everyone talks about getting a youth centre, they've been talking about it for years. It'll never happen, I don't think it ever will. It's just for show—Like for the youth in this town, if they want to be noticed, in a positive way or a negative way, no matter what, no matter how they want to be noticed, they have to do it themselves.

Suzanne noted, "There's no place for us to go. They complain when we are on Main Street, they complain if we are hanging out in stores, they complain

anytime we're anywhere." Anita believed, "They [adults] are missing out on a great resource—there's so much value in all of us [youth]."

Youniss, McLellan, and Mazer (2001) emphasize the benefits of youth making contact with normative adult worlds. When youth are provided with opportunities to use their developing social skills on committees and in social organizations, they experience themselves as having agency to improve conditions, as being part of the larger whole, and as having a safe place to clarify their identities. Adolescents who take part in community and school social services activities tend to have higher educational plans and aspirations, higher academic self-esteem, and higher intrinsic motivation.

Opening and Limiting Conditions

Participants perceived their rural upbringing to be both a valuable experience and a handicap when transferring skills to urban settings. The physical environment provided opportunities for developing special outdoor skills. Catherine, for example, was building her future career in adventure tourism based on skills learned in childhood and adolescence.

Actually, I am interested in going to school ... but there are prerequisites that I need. Basically I need more outdoor experience so that's what I'm doing right now—which is really fun! (laughs) The lake, it's really warm and there's swimming lessons ... I did Bronze Medallion and Bronze Cross, which are the two courses you need for life guarding.

The young women listed many skills that Holland (1985) would classify as realistic. Gardening, brushing (pruning undergrowth), placing boards on the planer, driving heavy machinery, butchering farm animals, shooting game, cutting and splitting wood, fixing machinery, and canning were some of the rural-based skills that were cited. Social skills, particularly the ability to communicate with all age groups, were identified.

Their close relationships with adults provided the young women with useful information. Parents appeared to be an important source of career information. Information available through the Internet or through class handouts was less useful. Participants seemed to be "connected knowers" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986); that is, they preferred knowledge that comes from personal and shared experiences. For example, the school counsellor gave Lyn university calendars, but she was unable to make the connections between her interests, abilities, and choices available. However, when a teacher shared her experiences of travelling after high school, Lyn was then able to see how her people abilities, organizational skills, and love of travel could be implemented with Canada World Youth.

Participants expressed concern about the transferability of their rural skills into social and conventional occupational environments (Holland, 1985). They also questioned the applicability of their rural skills in urban settings. "I just can't imagine working at a fast pace. Here we never have to wait in lines ... It just scares me to work at McDonald's" (Anita).

Participants believed there were limited options available in the community. Asgard's predominantly resource-based industries provided training for a narrow range of occupations. "There are fewer job opportunities and not much variety either—pumping gas, waitressing, working a cash register, or, if you're lucky, tree planting or working in the mill" (Catherine). The process of thinking about future careers was difficult for participants because most lacked exposure to a variety of occupational roles. "I didn't see the different lawyers everywhere and I didn't see the bankers ... I just kind of did what I had to do and now that I'm out of school, I think that's why I'm not as independent" (Jessica).

Without further schooling, most youth who remained in the community lacked skills and financial resources to make the transition out of the community. The distance to larger communities restricted educational and training opportunities. Young women who wished to remain near family found themselves trapped in the community they loved. With predominantly low-paying jobs and limited options, there were few chances to be self-supportive. One option was to move in with a boyfriend in order to obtain economic independence from parents, another option was to have a baby and go on social assistance. Schonert-Reichl, Elliott, and Bills (1993) have suggested that rural youth often struggle to make practical sense out of the pull they feel to leave and the desire to remain in a community that has many valuable features.

Aspirations and Apprehensions

The young women generated nearly half of their hoped-for selves in the domains of personal attributes and relationships. When asked, participants provided full descriptions of their hoped-for selves in their two most important domains. Personal qualities were self-descriptions and included aspiring to "be someone who is generous and caring" (Josée). The relationship category included responses regarding establishing or improving relationships. Jessica hoped to "form an even closer relationship with her mother," while Grace hoped "to meet people with similar plans and interests." Surprisingly, there were few occupational hoped-for selves and descriptions were superficial.

About half of the feared selves generated were also in the domains of personal attributes and relationships. The young women presented detailed, comprehensive descriptions of feared selves in these two domains. Participants feared developing into someone whose qualities were, for example, "cold, uncaring, hardened, and selfish" (Josée). Loss of relationships was an upsetting fear for participants. Suzanne stated, "Most of all I fear being alone and unloved." When asked to describe their occupational fears, responses were again vague and general, for example, "I don't want to be in a job I hate."

Markus and Nurius (1986) have drawn attention to the motivating qualities of possible selves. Since possible selves are unique to each individual, they give personal meaning to goals. Detailed and complete descriptions of possible selves are more motivating than less descriptive selves. While participants provided comprehensive descriptions of selves in personal and relationship domains, their

descriptions of occupational selves were general and vague. For example, when pressed for details, Anita supplied few particulars about the educational requirements and income level of a journalist.

One of the discoveries of this study was the lack of blueprints for action. There are a number of tenable reasons for the lack of well-constructed future plans. Perhaps participants believed that they had plenty of time to make plans once they finished high school, not realizing, for example, that applications to university must be in several months before graduation. Another possible reason for poorly constructed plans was the prevalent belief held by returning graduates. Their view that “nobody was getting jobs anyways” spread through the community to the high school students. Possibly due to recent labour market trends, youth were hearing the message from the media and their older siblings that the lack of jobs for young people rendered planning and thinking about specific career goals irrelevant.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Two main points were highlighted in this study. First, little understanding of the life-career development of young rural women can be gained without an accompanying analysis of the contextual framework. According to Josselson (1987), women’s sense of identity is a “product of these anchors and webs—is a multifaceted synthesis of multiple investments, each important in its own way” (p. 178). Second, participants were not ready to consider career choices, but they were ready to explore their core beliefs, values, and attributes. Participants appeared to fit Super’s (1980) exploration stage or the time at which choices are narrowed but not finalized. Blustein (1997) has noted that youth need to resolve personal identity issues prior to making career choices.

Relational career counselling could provide a framework for incorporating career and personal domains into counselling work. Counsellors could assist clients in gaining insight into the interconnected domains of life and in accessing support and personally relevant information from their relational context. Group counselling could provide a same-gender forum for young women who are “connected knowers” to receive support, to personalize their life-career selves, and to develop vivid descriptions of their possible selves. Information could be supplied about balancing family and career roles, coping with multiple-role conflict and overload, and deciding about geographic mobility.

Consistent with the recent relational focus on one’s career development (Schultheiss, 2003), community-based counsellors could mobilize potential asset-building relationships within the community, including sustained relationships with adults (e.g., mentorship), school-based and community-based programs aimed at nurturing and building skills and competencies (e.g., locally developed co-op programs, job shadows, youth placement on local committees), and community-level resource allocation aimed at youth. Institutional linkages between employers and schools could create tangible, direct, school-based, school-to-work trajectories. Models that facilitate school-to-work transitions by offering

job openings would ensure that students are not forced to enter the impersonal labour market without specific steps. School curriculum that acknowledges local values and views of success may help young people to see the connection between educational activities and future roles. A structured K-12 career exploration program that involves parents and community members could support students in seeking out information locally. Although parents are good resources in terms of their own experiences, they would benefit from exposure to a range of educational and occupational information to assist their children.

The present study has revealed the naturally integrative quality of adolescent development. The qualitative approach allowed the voices of the young women to be heard. However, the information provided did not centre on career exploration and planning. It was obvious during the interviews that the young women were not as interested in that topic as they were in discussing their relationships with others. Perhaps with a more focused approach, more details could be elicited about their life-career exploration. The drawback to such an approach would be the possible loss of detailed narratives.

One area of inquiry needing further investigation is a comparison of the experiences of female youth with male youth to discover any relevant gender differences. McCracken and Weitzman (1997) would suggest that boys would be less affected by relational decisions. A second area for future research would be a follow-up study of the eight participants at ages 23–24 to provide more information about the transition process from high school and the resources most helpful in making that transition. Another area for future research is an examination of individual and contextual factors in the formulation and realization of career aspirations of rural young women. A logistic regression analysis could be conducted to identify the combined impact of the different person- and context-related factors in the formulation of life-career aspirations.

The life-course development of the participants in this study was complex, interactive, and affected by the environmental context of the rural community. This study revealed how the pattern of relationships within a community can enhance and constrain the possible selves of its young people. A holistic, life-course perspective of life-career development widens the focus from the individual to include the social realm. Contexts, values, beliefs, psycho-social factors, and other influences and their interrelatedness constitute the system of young rural women's life-career development.

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