

AGENTIC PATHWAYS TOWARD FULFILLMENT IN WORK

Jeylan T. Mortimer, University of Minnesota

Mike Vuolo, Purdue University

Jeremy Staff, Pennsylvania State University

International Conference on Success and Well-being in
Education and Employment, Basel, Switzerland, 2011

Work and personal fulfillment

- Classic views:
- Marx: Ideally, work expresses human motivation and is a source of well-being
- Csikszentmihalyi: “flow” as optimal experience
- Herzberg: hygienes and motivators
- Duncan, et al: vertical dimensions of work
- Kohn and Schooler: self-direction & psychological functioning

Kohn and Schooler

- Self-directed work leads to cognitive challenge
- Feelings of accomplishment
- Independence in non-work spheres

- Self-direction explains relationship between social class and psychological outcomes

Self-direction, intrinsic rewards, & fulfillment

- Work autonomy increases job satisfaction & work commitment
- Self-direction and intrinsic rewards enhance physical health, mental health, and well-being

Obtaining fulfilling work

- ❑ Wisconsin Status Attainment School (Sewell & Hauser) adolescent aspirations
- ❑ Vocational psychology (Ginzberg, Super)
importance of crystallized work values, identities, and preferences; “fit”
- ❑ Sociologist, John Clausen: “planful competence”

All focus on adolescence.

Changing Times

- ❑ Longer transition to adulthood (Shanahan)
- ❑ Social change lessens predictability (Buchmann)
- ❑ Increased risk (Beck)
- ❑ Global competition, ICT, organizational restructuring, economic turbulence
- ❑ End of life-long careers (Heinz)
- ❑ More difficult for youth to envision futures
- ❑ No institutional bridges from school to work- US

Is adolescence still a critical phase of vocational development?

- Little attention to *post-adolescent* psychological orientations and behaviors that lead to fulfilling work in the 21st century

Heckhausen & Wrosch, 2010

- Goal oriented action cycles: selection, engagement, disengagement
- Regulatory challenge: select goals consistent with age-graded opportunities & mobilize resources in their pursuit
- Educational opportunities maximized after high school
- High educational aspirations motivate persistence in face of obstacles

Hechhausen & Wrosch 2010

- If, as “developmental deadlines” approach, initial goal is not achieved, shift to more attainable goals

Example: college graduation to intermediate credentials (Associates degree, vocational-technical certification)

Certainty of career goals & job search

- Crystallization of vocational goals motivates continued striving in face of obstacles
- Without certain career goals, youth likely to “flounder”
- Energetic , multifaceted job search

Research Question

- Do trajectories of agentic achievement-related attitudes and behaviors *after* high school matter for the acquisition of extrinsically & intrinsically rewarding work?

Data: St. Paul Youth Development Study (NICHD)

- 1988-present
- 1,000 randomly chosen 9th graders (age 14-15)
- Surveys of parents
- Retention: 93% through high school, 71% by 2005 (age 31-32) & 2007 (age 33-34), 67% by 2009 (age 35-36)

Prior Evidence:

Youth Development Study

Steady work (limited hours) during high school leads to similar combination of schooling and working after high school, promoting BA degree attainment

Staff & Mortimer 2007

- Continuous, highly intensive work during high school leads to community college and vocational school, followed by rapid movement into “careers”

Mortimer, et al., 2008

- “Settling” on a vocational choice by age 23-24 linked to higher educational attainment and more work commitment

Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2007

- Occupational values in early 20’s predict work outcomes ten years later

(occupational values at age 18 not predictive)

Johnson & Mortimer, 2011

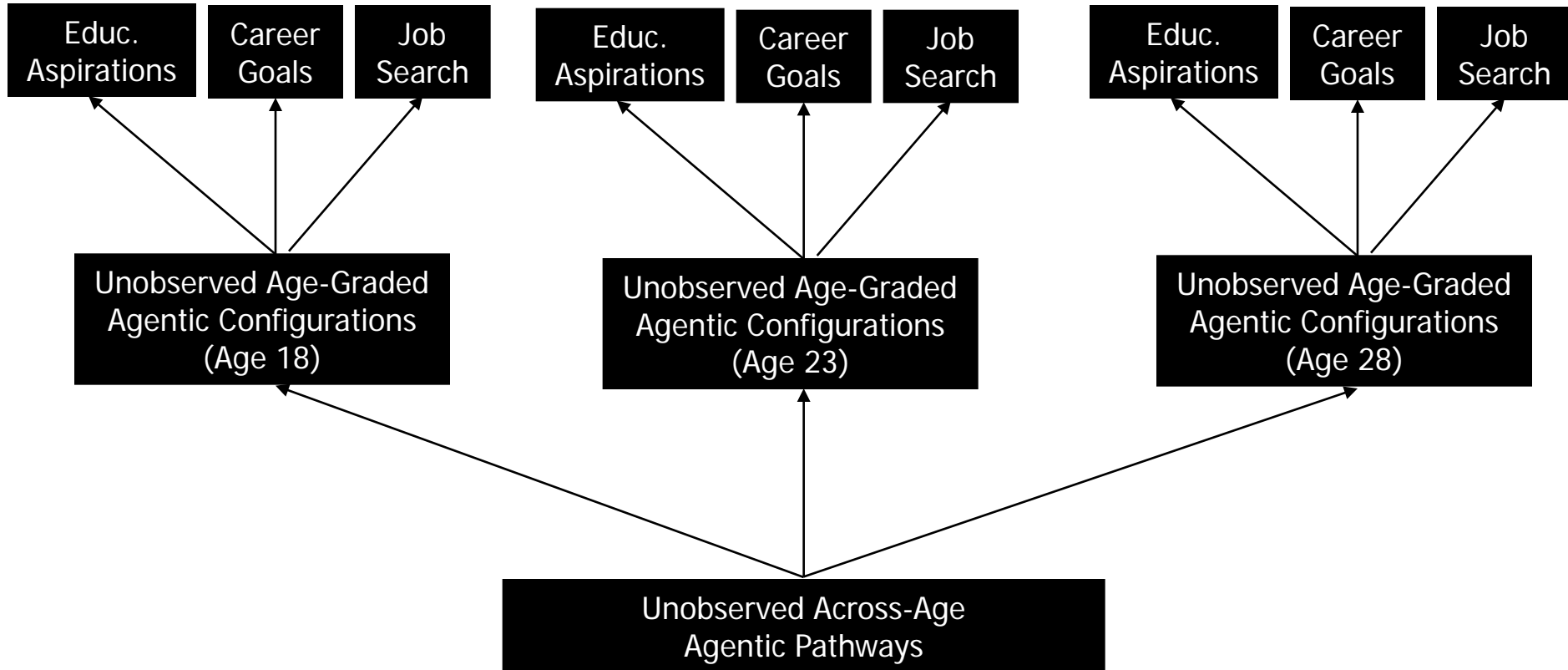
Post-adolescent agentic striving

- 3 variables measured yearly from age 18-31, 1992-2005
- Educational aspirations
 - High school or less
 - Some college (with no degree)
 - Associates or vocational/technical degree
 - Bachelor's degree or higher

Measures of agentic striving

- Certainty of achieving career goal
 - ▣ Already achieved
 - ▣ Very certain
 - ▣ Somewhat certain
 - ▣ Not very certain
- Job search behavior
 - ▣ Informal techniques
 - ▣ Formal techniques
 - ▣ Direct techniques
 - ▣ Not searching

Latent life paths conceptually



First level: Latent class analysis



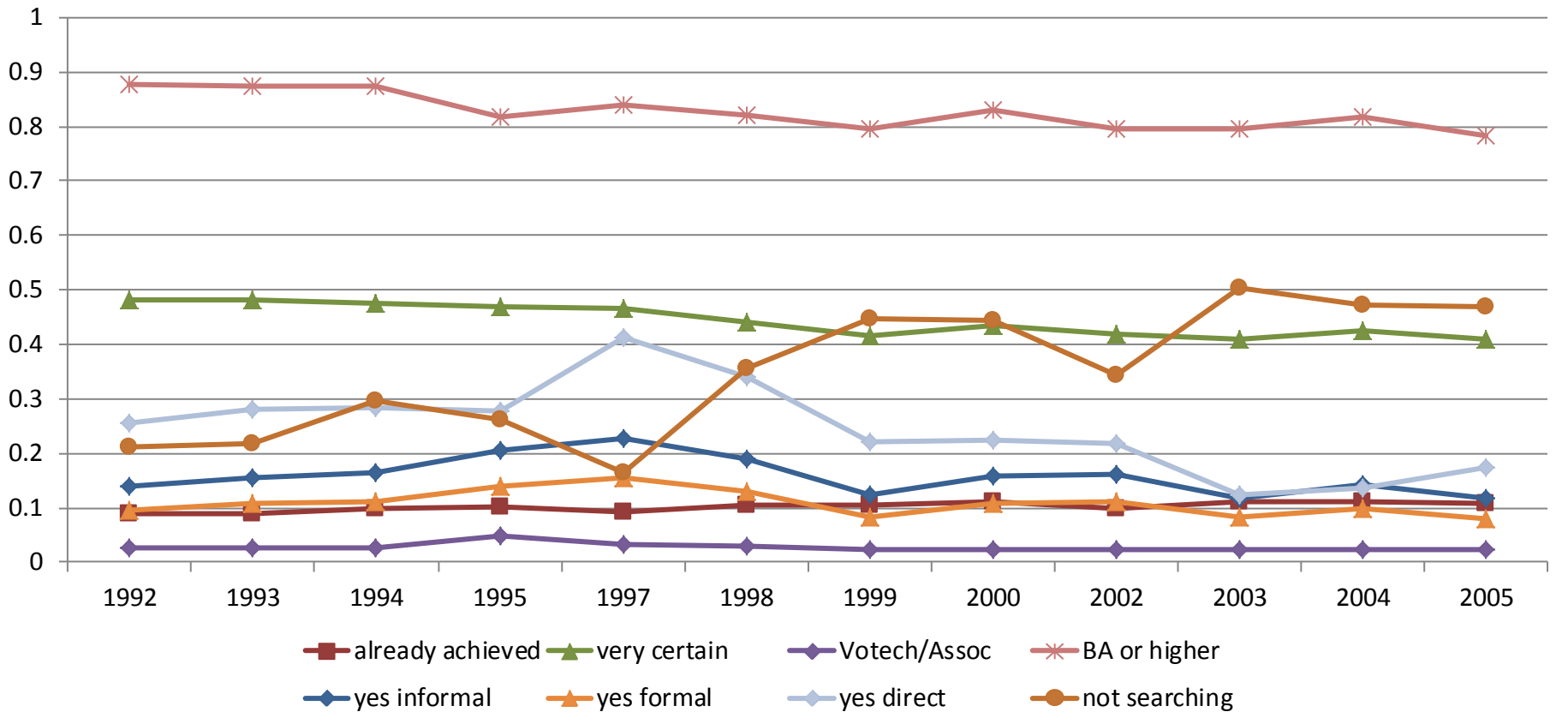
- 8 configurations of educational aspirations, career certainty, and job search
- Early popular configuration: high aspirations, career certainty, and no job search
- Configurations involving direct job search more prevalent early, before respondents gained work contacts

Second level: Agentic Pathways

- Respondents move through configurations of variables in three distinct ways
- High agency (high aspirations, high certainty, multimethod job search)
- Flexible agency (changing aspirations, certainty, short job search)
- Low agency (declining aspirations, declining certainty, little job search)

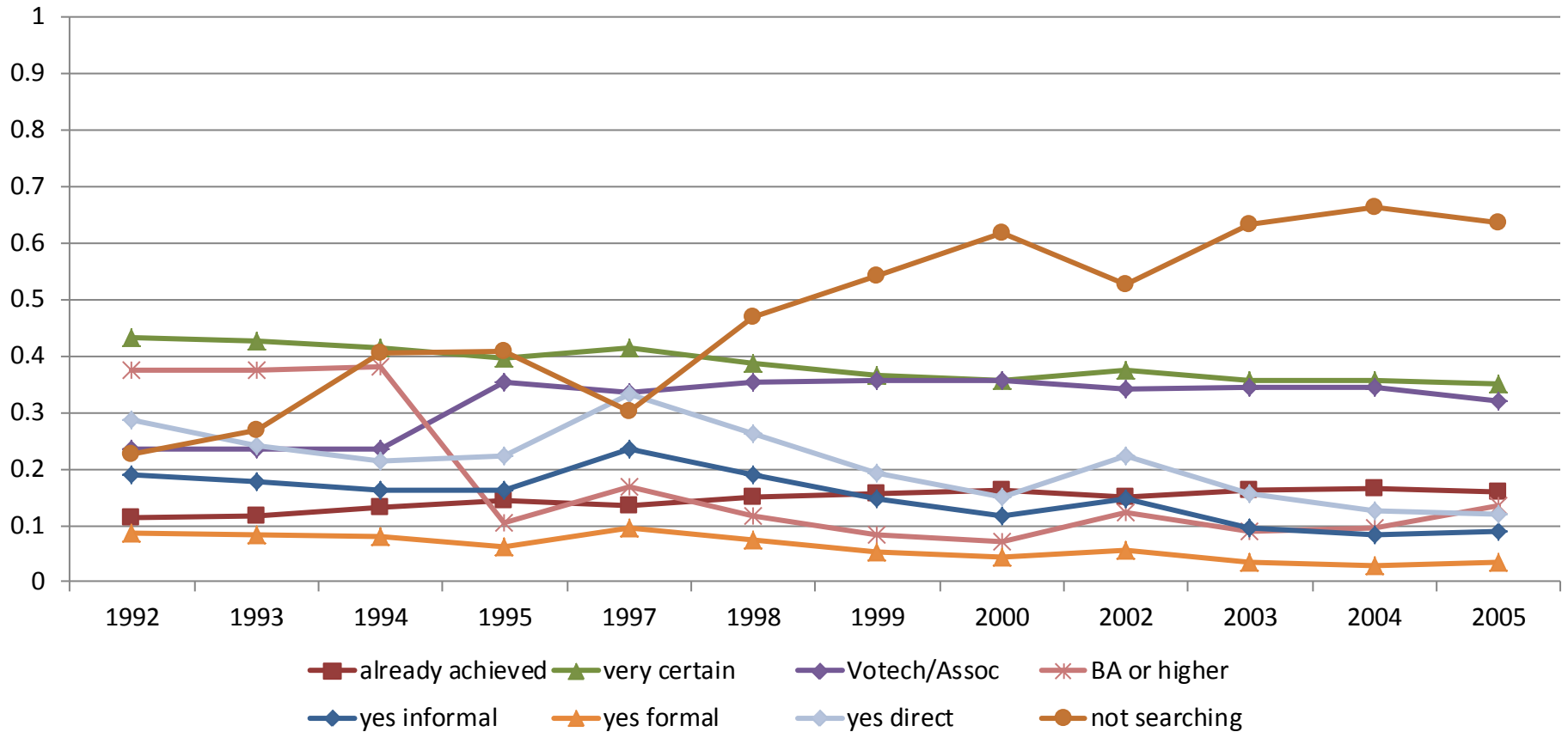
High agency pathway

LLP 1: High agency
(Prob = 0.4797)



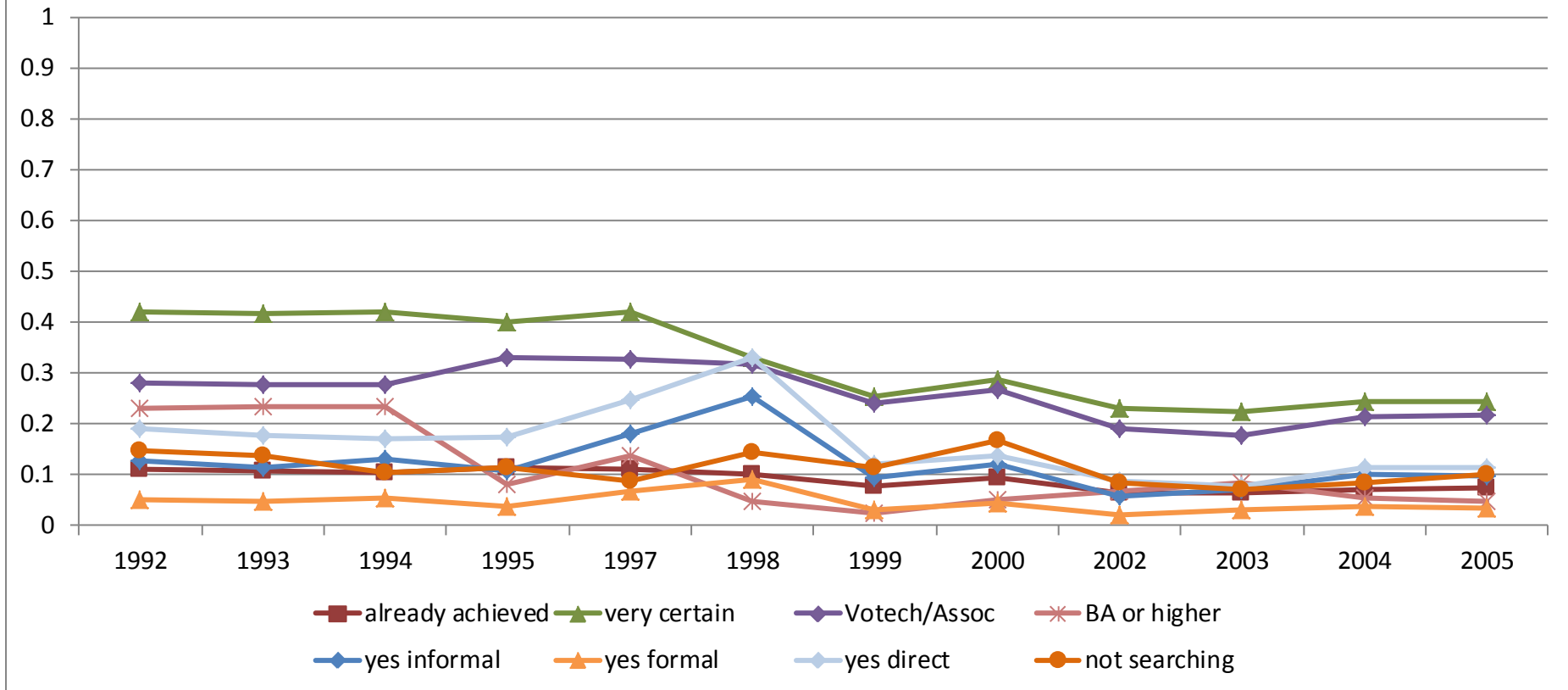
Flexible agency pathway

LLP 2: Flexible agency
(Prob. = 0.3132)



Low agency pathway

LLP 3: Low agency
(Prob. = 0.2071)



Research questions

- Do agentic orientations and behaviors during the transition to adulthood affect occupational status and quality of work?
- Are the effects of agentic pathways mediated by educational attainment?

Other measures

- Outcomes (2005)
 - ▣ Occupational education (SEI score Frederick 2010)
 - ▣ Occupational earnings (SEI score Frederick 2010)
 - ▣ Intrinsic work rewards (latent construct of 7 variables)
 - ▣ Self-direction at work (latent construct of 2 variables)

Intrinsic rewards

- Work is interesting enough to do more work
- Feeling bored (reversed)
- Work is meaningful & important
- Think of new ways of doing things
- Opportunity to learn
- Helpful to others
- Use skills and abilities

Self-direction



- Control over time at work
- Freedom to make important decisions at work

Educational Attainment



- High school or less
- Associates or Votech degree
- Some College
- BA or higher

Agentic Pathways & Educational Attainment

Educational Attainment

Agency	High School or less	Assoc/ Votech	Some College	BA+
High	1	9	23	67
Flexible	36	40	23	1
Low	50	29	19	1

Other variables: sociodemographic

- SES background
- Born in U.S.
- Race
- Gender
- Two parent family

Other variables: adolescent achievement orientations/behaviors

- Economic self-efficacy
- Academic self-esteem
- Overall self-esteem
- Work values
- GPA
- Occupational aspirations (occ ed, occ income)
- High school work patterns
- High school volunteering

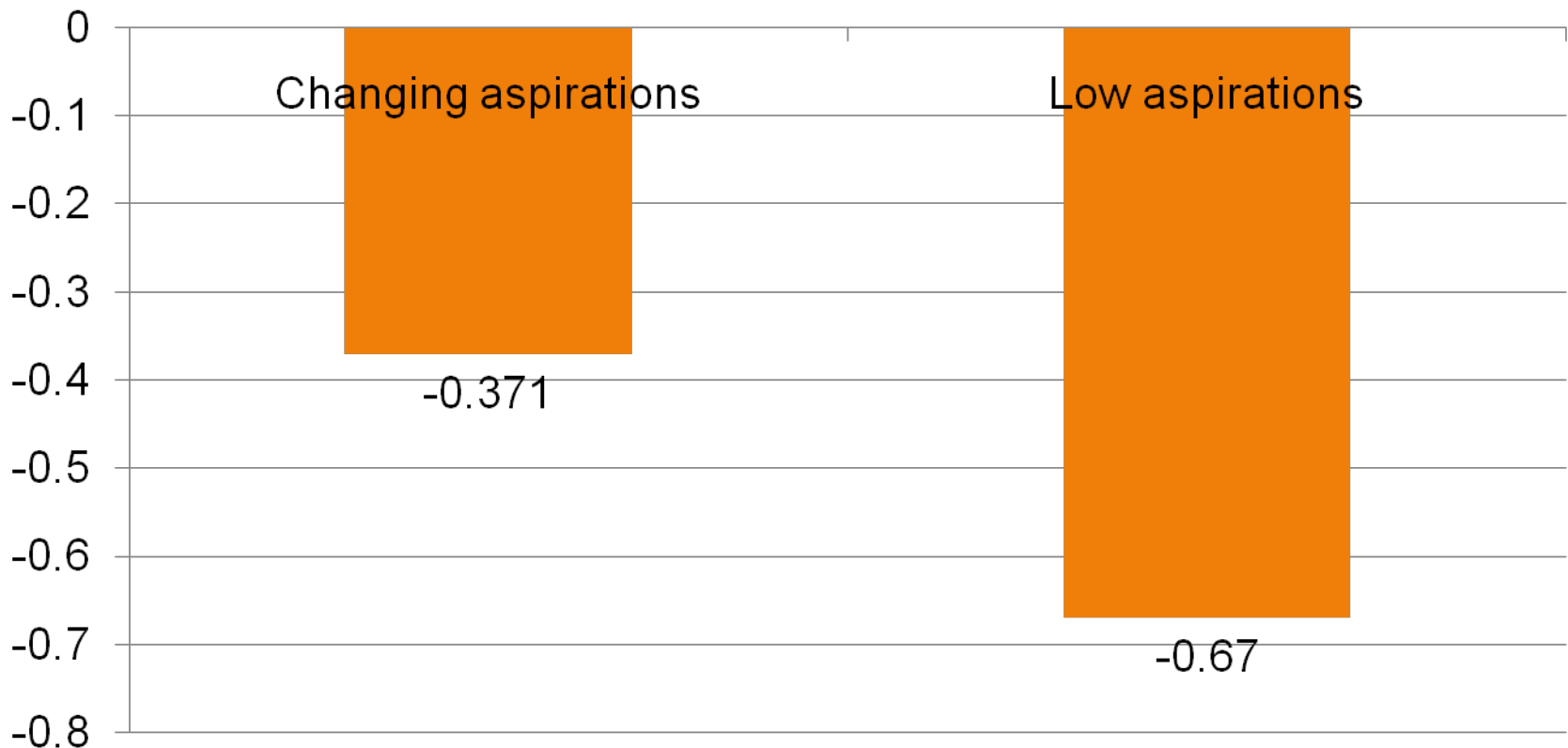
Predicting Fulfillment in Work

- Modeling strategy: nested OLS regression models
 - ▣ Model 1: Sociodemographic background
 - ▣ Model 2: High school work, school, and psychological behaviors/orientations (1988-1991)
 - ▣ Model 3: Agentic striving pathways (1992-2005)
 - ▣ Model 4: Educational and subjective career attainment in adulthood (2005)
 - ▣ Model 5: Test for gender X pathways interaction

Occupational earnings and education: Agentic Pathways

- Flexible agency and Low agency pathways significantly lower than High Agency pathway on both outcomes
- Robust to inclusion of educational attainment

Occupational earnings: agentic pathway effect

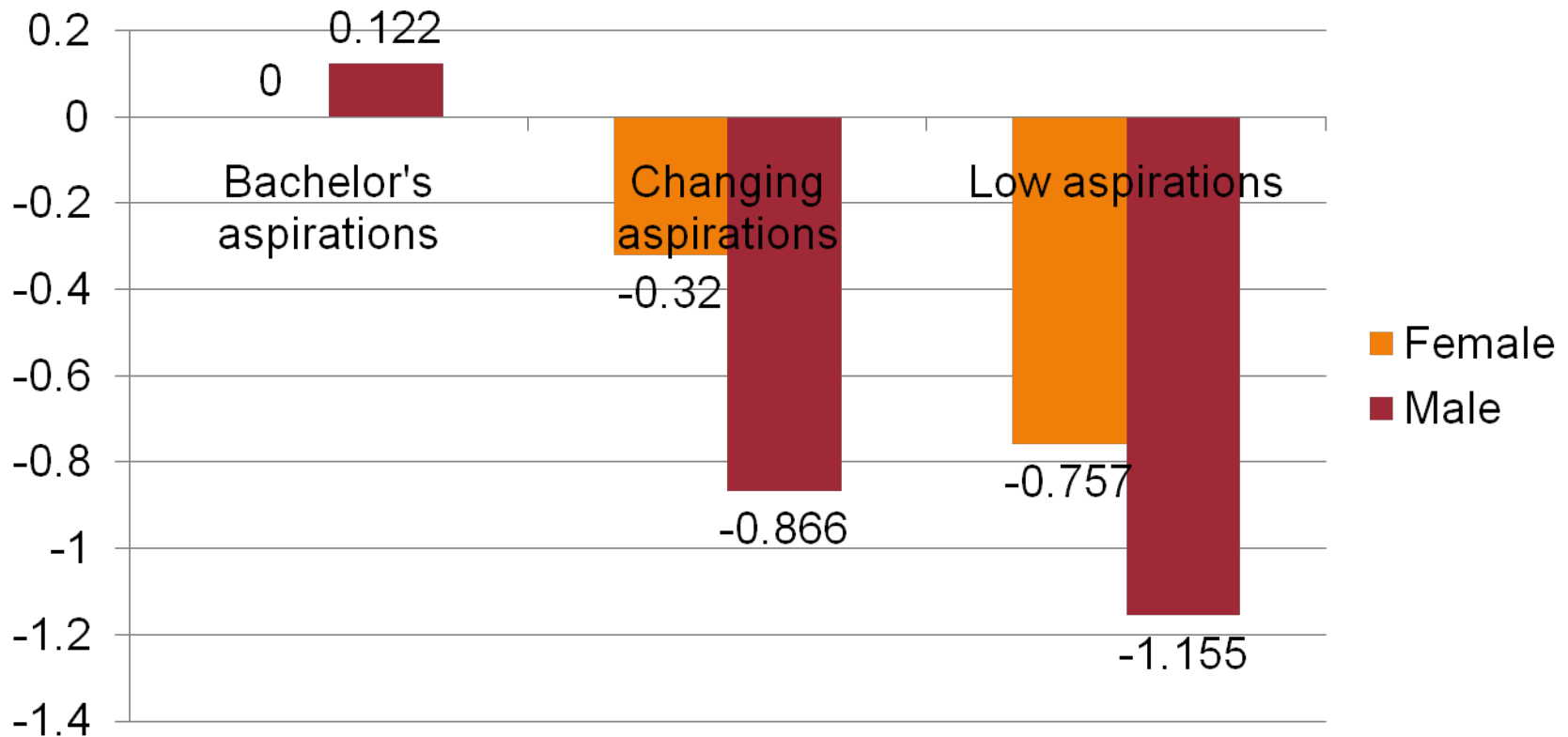


- Note: Bachelor's aspirations is the baseline.
- Note: 1 standard deviation for occupational earnings is 1.01.
- Note: Model shown controls for sociodemographic background, HS work, school, and psychological orientations, and educational attainment

Background and high school variables

- Occupational earnings
 - Effects of parents' education entirely mediated by pathways
 - Gender (males higher), GPA (+), extrinsic work values (+), volunteer work (-), and HS work patterns (occasional less than high intensity) maintain significance

Occupational education: gender and agentive pathway interaction effect



- Note: Female, Bachelor's aspirations is the baseline (so is set to 0).
- Note: 1 standard deviation for occupational education is 1.46.
- Note: Model shown controls for sociodemographic background, HS work, school, and psychological orientations, and educational attainment

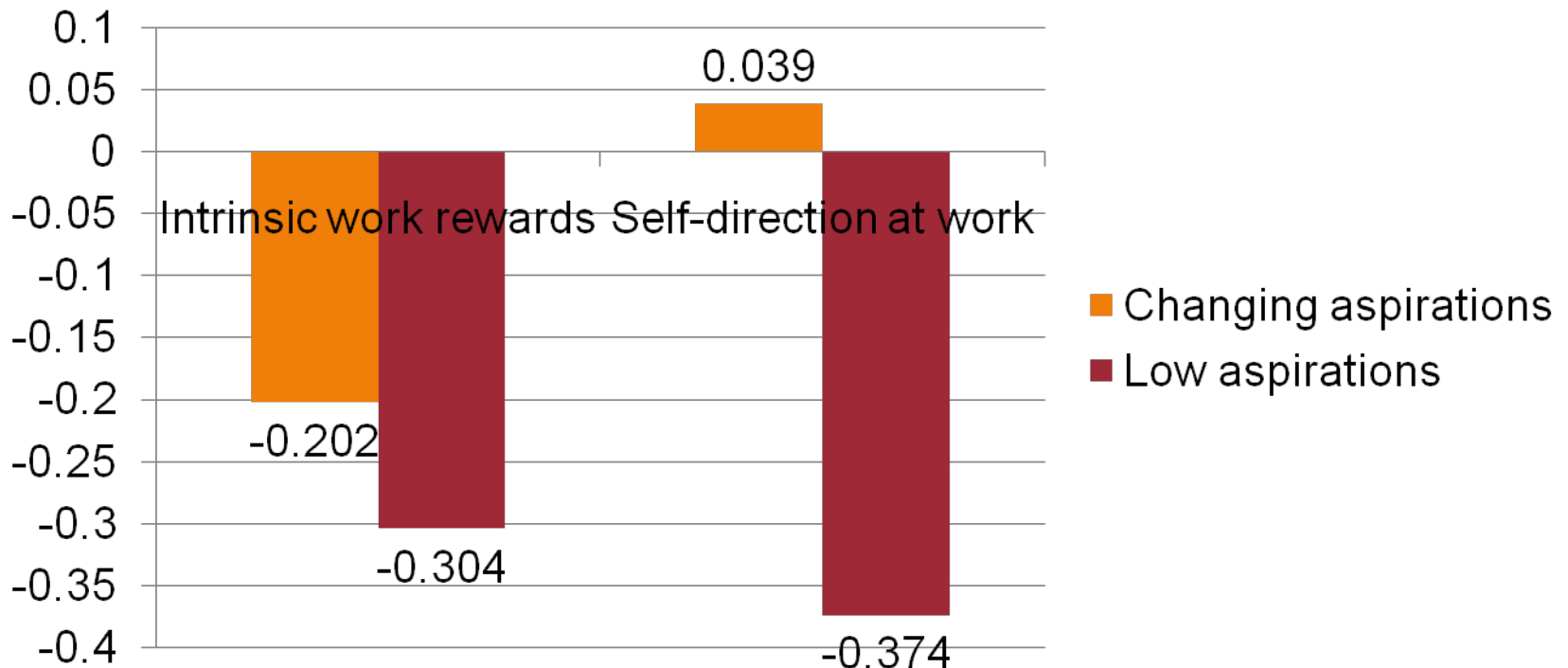
Background & high school

- Occupational education
 - Effects of parents' education (2/3 of effect mediated) ,
and academic self-esteem (+) fully mediated by pathways
 - GPA (+) maintains significant effect

Intrinsic work rewards and self-direction at work

- Changing aspirations and Low aspirations predict less intrinsic work rewards
- Low aspirations predict lower self-direction
- These effects are mediated by educational attainment

Intrinsic work rewards and self-direction at work: agentic pathway effect



- Note: Bachelor's aspirations is the baseline.
- Note: 1 standard deviation for intrinsic work rewards and self-direction are 0.69 and 0.93, respectively.
- Note: Model shown controls for sociodemographic background and HS work, school, and psychological orientations. It does *not* control for educational attainment, which mediates the above shown effect.

Intrinsic rewards & self-direction

- Background and high school variables
 - Whites are significantly higher on both outcomes
 - Positive self-esteem and HS occupational earnings aspirations predict higher self-direction

“Weathering the Great Recession”

- High agentic –
 - fewest months of unemployment 2007-2009 (age 33-36)
 - lowest unemployment in 2009
 - highest wages in 2009
- Least agentic – poorest outcomes
- Changing Agency – ns different from high agentic in 2009 unemployment & wage rates. (longer spells of unemployment)
- Robust to social class origins, high school orientations/behaviors, and educational attainment
- Forthcoming, *Developmental Psychology*

Discussion

- Post-adolescent agentic striving matters for capacity to obtain fulfillment in work
- socioeconomic attainment
- high quality work experiences: intrinsic rewards and self-direction

Most & Least agentic pathways

- Differed clearly, at age 31-32, in
- Acquisition of occupations with highly educated incumbents and higher earning potential
- Intrinsic rewards (interesting & meaningful work, opportunities to learn & help others, etc.)
- Self-direction (control over time & freedom to make decisions)

Most agentic and flexible agentic pathways

- Differences on outcomes smaller than those between most and least agentic
- Not significantly different in self-directed work than most agentic
- Conclusion:
- Better to shift educational goals in the face of “developmental deadlines”

Agentic pathways mediate effects of psychological orientations

- Aspirations to attain occupations with high Occ ed led to higher occ ed
- Academic self-esteem led to higher occ ed
- Both effects disappeared when pathways added to model

Educational Attainments important in understanding effects of agentic pathways

- Most agentic --- BA 67%
- Flexible agentic – most likely to acquire Associates Degrees and Technical certification
- Least agentic – least likely to have degrees beyond high school
- Conclusion:
Post-adolescent agency affects educational attainment, which in turn leads to self-direction and intrinsic rewards

Contribution to studies of occupational attainment

- Prior studies focus on adolescent aspirations, which have increased in recent decades. In the current economic climate, it is important for
- youth to *maintain* high aspirations or to change them when initial goals have not been obtained,
- To maintain strong career goals, and
- To utilize multiple job search strategies

Practical applications

- Educators, counselors, and parents should
- Encourage vocational exploration to enhance career goals
- Encourage youth to use multiple job search strategies and
- Have initially high, and later, more “realistic” educational ambitions

- 
- Thank you for this opportunity to share our research with you today.