Study Identifies Psychological Factors That Keep Young Adults Employed

LAS VEGAS — Today’s rapid economic change and labor market turbulence make early careers particularly unstable, but new research to be presented at the 106th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association shows that young workers with certain characteristics may weather turbulent times better than their peers.

“The current ‘Great Recession’ in Europe and America has had particularly severe consequences for young workers,” said University of Minnesota sociology professor Jeylan Mortimer. “They suffer high unemployment rates with lasting consequences for their careers.”

The study identifies three psychological orientations and behaviors that influence employment success during the transition to adulthood: educational aspirations, career goal certainty, and job search activities.

“Although structural factors like industry, region, etc. are undoubtedly important, these three characteristics are found to be particularly significant career transition resources,” said Mike Vuolo, an assistant professor of sociology at Purdue University.

Young adults who maintained high career aspirations and clarity of career goals from age 18 to 30 were more likely to be employed between 2007 and 2009 (when they were 33-36 years old) and also to have higher wages in 2009. Young workers who manifested greater indecision in their career goals were less successful in weathering the economic turmoil in the Great Recession. These trends persisted even when educational attainments were controlled.

“The factors identified in this study are interrelated amongst themselves and also influence longer-term successes and vulnerabilities during difficult economic times,” said Mortimer.

This study relies on data from the Youth Development Study, an ongoing longitudinal study, which began tracking a group of 9th graders from St. Paul, Minn. public schools in 1988. The original sample included 1,010 adolescents. The participants have been surveyed annually since, and now are approximately 37-38 years old. The analysis for the Mortimer/Vuolo study spans the years from when the participants were 18 to 36 years old.

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About the American Sociological Association
The American Sociological Association (www.asanet.org), founded in 1905, is a non-profit membership association dedicated to serving sociologists in their work, advancing sociology as a science and profession, and promoting the contributions to and use of sociology by society.

The paper, “Weathering the Great Recession: Psychological and Behavioral Trajectories in the Transition from School to Work,” will be presented on Monday, Aug. 22, at 8:30 a.m. PDT in Caesars Palace Las Vegas, at the American Sociological Association’s 106th Annual Meeting.
To obtain a copy of the paper; for more information on other ASA presentations; or for assistance reaching the study’s authors, members of the media can contact Daniel Fowler at pubinfo@asanet.org or (202) 527-7885. During the Annual Meeting (Aug. 20-23), ASA’s Public Information Office staff can be reached in the press room, located in the Sorrento Room of Caesars Palace, at (702) 866-1916 or (914) 450-4557 (cell).

For more information about the study, members of the media can also contact Tessa Eagan, University of Minnesota, at teagan@umn.edu or (612) 625-3781.