Future Expectations amongst Young People in the United Kingdom: Prevalence and Patterns across Generations and Socioeconomic Groups

Alexander W. O'Donnell[1]

Alexandra Wake[2]

1. Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

2. School of Psychological Sciences, University of Tasmania, Launceston, Australia

Abstract

This study investigates the future expectations of 16-year-olds in the United Kingdom to understand how these aspirations are shaped by socioeconomic factors and predict future life outcomes. Using data from the United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS) Youth Module, adolescents were asked to indicate how likely multiple life events would be, with questions that spanned educational, vocational, and family domains. Applying a latent profile analysis to youth responses, we grouped individuals based on their similarity in future expectations. Our analysis identified four distinct groups of adolescents. The largest two groups expected to pursue further education, get married, and have children. These groups also anticipated potential career disruptions and the possibility of working overseas. The second group, labelled "Career-Focused," showed little interest in parenthood or marriage, prioritising educational and career goals instead. The smallest group, comprising approximately 6% of the sample, had few expectations for future parenthood, work, and study and reported the highest expectation for future unemployment. Subsequent group comparisons using the three-step approach found that every £100 increase in equalized weekly household income increased the likelihood of belonging to the most aspirational class increased by 5% relative to the low expectations group. Additionally, longitudinal follow-ups identified that this low expectation group reported the lowest levels of educational attainment, and the highest levels of both prolonged periods of unemployment and parenthood before the age of 21. Identifying these distinct profiles provides insights for developing policies and interventions that support adolescents in achieving positive outcomes as they transition to adulthood.

Non-Technical Summary

Almost all of us were asked what we wanted to be when we grew up. In this study, we explore the significance of that question and how it can predict what happens as young people transition from being teenagers to adults. We surveyed a large group of 16-year-olds from across the United Kingdom, asking about their hopes and plans for their future. By analysing their answers, we uncovered distinct patterns and diverse aspirations among these adolescents.

Most teenagers expected to continue their studies after school, get married, and have at least one child. Interestingly, this group also anticipated potential career disruptions and the possibility of working overseas, showing a realistic and informed outlook on their future. These adolescents tended to come from more affluent households, with an average weekly income between £200-£400 higher than the rest of our sample.

We also identified a group of young people who showed little interest in becoming parents or getting married. We labelled them "Career-Focused" because they planned to study and pursue fulfilling jobs. This group valued career development over traditional family roles.

Lastly, we found a small group, making up just 6% of the sample, who had low expectations for typical adulthood milestones such as working, studying, and parenting. This group was the least affluent and the most likely to be unemployed between the ages of 17 and 21. Despite stating they had few plans to become parents, they were more likely to have a child before the age of 21 compared to other groups.

Our findings highlight the varied future expectations of young people and how these aspirations are influenced by their socioeconomic background. By understanding these different patterns, we can better support young people in achieving positive outcomes as they move into adulthood.

Future Expectations amongst Young People in the United Kingdom: Prevalence, Patterns, and Life Outcomes across Generations and Socioeconomic Groups

What do you want to do when you grow up? Repeatedly asked of young people while they grow, this question is often raised in separate conversations involving parents, teachers, friends, and sometimes strangers on the street. The ubiquity of this question reflects its importance. Young peoples' capacity to plan for their future ultimately shapes their life course. Future orientated thinking is a prerequisite for personal development at any stage of life, with positive future orientation providing a platform for individuals to set goals, plan for intended eventualities, and cope with setbacks (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider, 2000). Inversely, people who do not hold expectations for future success are more likely to develop depression, helplessness, and reduced problem-solving (Chang & Sanna, 2003).

Most young people believe they have a prosperous and happy future ahead of them (McDonald et al., 2011; Wright & von Stumm, 2024). A high paying job, marriage, and future parenthood are commonly expected amongst adolescents. Yet, current generations of young people are argued to have a greater variety of pathways towards adulthood (Arnett, 2007). Rates of divorce remain high (ONS, 2022), cohabitation without marriage is now common (Guzzo, 2014), and parenthood is both delayed and less prevalent (ONS, 2022). Environmental degradation and the rejection of traditional gender roles are discussed as society-changing forces. To what extent, then, do young people still expect traditional indicators of adulthood? The purpose of the current study is to empirically model the unique expectations of young people and explore how these predict adult outcomes. Using a person-centred approach, future educational, vocational, and family-based expectations of 16-year-olds will be used to identify discrete

groups of young people who share similar expectations about their future. This approach will provide an opportunity to explore the pattern of expectations young people hold, along with the generational and socio-educational factors that drive how expectations develop. Specifically, young peoples' responses will be linked to household data to determine if the socioeconomic environment (measured through household income, financial stress, and region) shape the pattern of expectations that young people hold. Finally, the extent to which these distinct patterns of expectations drive life outcomes will be examined by exploring how membership of these derived groups predicts family and career outcomes up to 21-years-of-age. Accordingly, we will be leveraging the unique properties of the United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Study to identify potential differences across generations (Millennials and Generation Z) and time.

What types of expectations facilitate development and why?

Around the world, scholars have presented young people with various life outcomes and asked them to indicate the likelihood it will occur. The most extensively studied life outcome relates to educational choices. This body of research indicates that adolescents who expect to continue their education past the formal schooling period are more likely to graduate University (Messersmith & Schulenberg, 2008), obtain higher grades (O'Donnell et al., 2022), and report greater school belonging (Wong et al., 2019). Young people who actively envision and plan for tertiary education convey important information to themselves about who they want to be, ensuring their day-to-day activities are more orientated towards academic success (O'Donnell et al., 2022). Consequently, higher educational expectations encourage young people to study, engage in extracurricular activities, and more strategically select subjects that advance their schooling goals (Domina et al., 2011).

Closely related to educational expectations are the career pathways that adolescents envision for themselves. Data from highly individualized nations demonstrate that youth are largely optimistic about their future career (Baird et al., 2008). Occupational expectations at the start of secondary school predict academic attainment during adulthood (i.e., completing a degree, Beal & Crockett, 2010; Guo et al., 2015). Similar to educational expectations, career ambitions encourage behaviours that grow academic or tertiary capacity, providing positive reinforcement to young people that educational advancement is both viable and appealing.

Educational and vocational expectations remain the most widely studied future orientated cognitions. However, young people actively construct their imagined future in a more cohesive way. Across adolescence, romantic and sexual development precipitates a greater focus and emphasis on monogamous relationships with increased significance (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Unsurprisingly, then, adolescents place a greater emphasis on a potential future marriage as they mature (Willoughby, 2010), with marriage seen by many as more important for their life than their career (Willoughby et al., 2015). These marriage expectations are important, as they significantly increase the odds of being married during young adulthood (Arocho, 2019; Beal et al., 2016; Willoughby, 2014). Most adolescents also report a desire for children in their future, albeit within the context of a marriage or long-term partnership (Plotnick, 2007). Again, these expectations are important. Researchers have previously observed that although most pregnancies occur unplanned, intentions to have a child remain the best psychological predictor of subsequent fertility outcomes (Nitsche et al., 2020; Schoen et al., 1999).

Capturing the Complexity of Life Planning: Advocating for a Person-Centred Approach

Thus far, future expectations have been discussed as discrete life domains that young people can think about and plan for. This approach has been underpinned by a general tendency

of scholars to conduct their investigations with a specific focus on the antecedents or consequences of expectations in one or two life domains. Although undoubtedly useful, this approach does not align with the complex task that young people grapple with. Namely, the need to integrate and prioritise alternative goals and life plans. Policy makers, popular media, and young people themselves often discuss the push and pull of navigating modern society.

Recognising that decisions about one life domain may naturally expand or restrict opportunities in others, a smaller number of studies have sought to identify whether expectations across life domains are interconnected. Using factor analytic approaches and variable-centred analyses, researchers have consistently demonstrated that expectations to attend university and successfully develop one's career comprise an underlying concept. Educational attainment provides a pathway for vocational success in many instances, and it is clear from these studies that young people at least partially acknowledge these links. Similarly, a strong desire to marry or form romantic relationships is demonstrated to typically align with expectations surrounding childbearing (see Coscioni et al., 2023 for a review). Dominant social norms surrounding the importance of stable and multiparent households prior to reproduction may explain these associations.

Although distinct, there are reasons to expect high expectations to generalize across domains. Qualitative interviews support a conclusion that the majority of young people leave open multiple life pathways, and have reasonably high expectations across domains (Brooks & Everett, 2008; Woodman, 2011). Quantitative analyses further support this conclusion, demonstrating a strong positive association between family-based expectations and career-based expectations (Sánchez-Sandoval et al., 2019). Thus, it is apparent that most young people value

and hold expectations for both their career and family. Yet, these broad findings may obscure idiosyncratic patterns of future orientated cognitions amongst young people.

Contemporary society is gradually limiting opportunities for young people to pursue career development while planning for an extended family. Increases in the cost-of-living, housing crises, precarious employment, and need for higher education has contributed to a deliberate delay in childrearing (Atalay et al., 2021; Alcaraz et al., 2022; Modena & Sabatini, 2012). Concerns over the welfare of our planet have only further decreased the desire for children amongst many young people (Schneider-Mayerson & Leong, 2020), while widespread access to contraceptives provides greater control over these fertility choices (e.g., Schneider, 2017). At the same time, young people are turning away from traditional institutions like marriage in favour of cohabitation (Guzzo, 2014). Given the disparate wants and needs young people have for their future, it is possible that previous research that relied on averages or trends across a cohort mischaracterises the future expectations of many young people.

The current study advances a variable-centred analytic approach to identify discrete groups of young people based upon their shared future expectations. Clustering participants by their degree of overlap in future expectations (and dissimilarity to young people in other groups) provides an opportunity to map the common mixture of career, educational, marriage, and parenthood expectations reported by young people. Most adolescents are likely to report strong expectations across life domains based upon previous research (e.g., Woodman, 2011). The extent to which young people are disavowing common markers of adulthood, like parenthood and marriage, remains an open question. Identifying the unique pattern of responses and their prevalence is adaptive for public policy and interventions designed to assist young people navigating new phases in their life. These policies could rely on tailored strategies that resonate

with the specific needs, challenges, and strengths of distinct parts of the population. Considering that future orientated expectations drive life outcomes, understanding what young people expect for their future offers important information for educators and parents to shape healthy development. To that end, the current study will also explore the generational and socioeconomic conditions that predict unique patterns of expectations.

Predicting Unique Patterns of Future Expectations for Young People

Typically discussed with reference to educational expectations, young people's expectations are malleable depending on the opportunities in their immediate environment and what their friends and family see as desirable and possible (Carolan, 2018; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; 2024; Kiuru et al., 2007; Kiuru et al., 2012). Importantly, these social influences are highly dependent upon the resources and opportunities in the communities and households where young people reside. Therefore, factors that promote or enhance the availability and visibility of different life outcomes may indirectly influence what young people expect in their future.

Financial resources play a critical role in determining the opportunities available to young people, which may in turn lead to different future expectations. For example, a parent's ability to invest in learning materials, outings, books, and quality housing that support a child's ability to thrive is dependent upon financial resources (Duncan et al. 2017). Young people navigating well-resourced and rich educational systems are more likely to value education and expect to progress through to university (e.g., O'Donnell et al., 2022). Beyond internal motivations and beliefs, higher education is simply more attainable for young people in socioeconomically advantaged households. Demonstrating this, a British study of middle-class families found all the young people's parents contributed towards the cost of their tertiary education (West et al., 2017). Without similar investments, higher education may be seen as more difficult and therefore

undesirable for adolescents in working class families who are more likely to enter the workforce earlier to support themselves and their families (Owens, 1992).

Beyond educational and vocational expectations, there are important demographic differences in the timing and composition of childrearing and marriage conditional on income. Aspiring for tertiary education naturally reduces a desire to have a child earlier during adulthood (Bhrolcháin & Beaujouan 2012; Blossfeld and Huinink 1991; Tavares, 2010). As argued by McLanahan and Percheski (2008), those in a position to pursue higher education have good reason to delay childrearing as parenthood often carries costs. Thus, any impact on young peoples' educational and vocational expectations are likely to also shape their plans for parenthood and coupling.

Although household income can provide or restrict opportunities in life, more specific psychological consequences may be attributed to financial stress. Differentiated from income, financial stress relates to an inability to pay bills and cover one's costs. Thus, household income reflects underlying economic stability whereas financial stress denotes ongoing pressures and challenges that affect a family's day-to-day decision-making. These stressors during day-to-day life reduces one's ability to plan into the future, potentially contributing to earlier entry into the workforce at the expense of higher education. Supporting this assertion is evidence that financial stress reduces career-related optimism (Wake & O'Donnell, 2024) and a sense of control and hope over future career pathways (Thompson et al., 2017). Financial stress may therefore shape future expectations through a different set of psychological processes than household income.

A community factor that could drive disparate expectations for the future is where young people live. Lower educational expectations are reported by young people in rural communities (Kilpatrick et al., 2019; O'Donnell et al., 2022; Rimkute et al., 2012). These differences may

reflect socioeconomic challenges, with young people in rural and regional areas learning in schools with fewer resources (Irvin et al., 2011) and in geographical isolation (Crockett et al. 2000; Duncan 2001). Reid (1989) found rural areas had less diversified job opportunities than in urban areas, thereby limiting the availability of jobs young people may aspire to. University attendance is also made more difficult, with costs associated with moving to a new town and reduced financial support after leaving the family home. With barriers stopping higher education, young people in rural communities often meet traditional adult milestones like entering the workforce, parenthood, and marriage earlier than young people in urban ones (Bingham et al., 1994; Fiori et al., 2014). Reflecting the norms in the world they see, adolescents in regional areas may therefore place a greater emphasis on family-orientated future expectations and see education as less important. As the UK's landscape is predominately rural (Pateman, 2011), it is important to consider how people's future expectations may differ growing up in a rural area, compared to an urban one, as it may support the development of future policies that aim to reduce inequities.

Research Hypotheses

In the current study, we will apply a novel profiling technique to identify discrete patterns among 16-year-olds based on similarities and differences in their future expectations. Simply put, our analytical technique derives groups of individuals from the data based on the similarity of their responses to the same questions. The goal is to maximize the similarity within each group while ensuring that individuals in different groups are as dissimilar as possible. This approach allows us to look beyond what the 'average' 16-year-old expects for their life, to illuminate unique patterns of expectations and divergent wants within a mostly representative sample of adolescents from the United Kingdom. As a largely exploratory and data driven

approach, it is not possible to fully pre-empt the nature of the groups we will identify. Broadly, though, we anticipate that most young people will report high expectations across life domains, with at least one other group that reflects shifting norms and expectations away from parenthood as a universally accepted life outcome.

Having identified unique classes of young people, we will subsequently seek to identify socioeconomic factors that predict membership to these groups. By acknowledging that expectations are not formed in a vacuum independent of social environments and economic constraints, we can identify appropriate policy levers that encourage young people to form an optimistic outlook for their own future lives. We hypothesise that young people who reside in households with higher income, less financial stress, and within an urban area will belong to a group characterised by consistently high expectations across domains. All other comparisons remain exploratory.

Finally, the current study will test whether the profiles of adolescent expectations predict future life outcomes. Specifically, we will compare group differences in the likelihood of reporting long-term unemployment, marriage, parenthood status, and completion of studies up until the age of 21. We anticipate that young people with generally high expectations will be the most likely to complete their studies, and the least likely to report unemployment, marriage, and the birth of a child. All other group comparisons remain exploratory.

Method

Openness and Transparency

The United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS), also known as Understanding Society, was analysed in the current study. The UKHLS data are publicly available to suitably qualified researchers. Researchers can access the data through the UK Data Service, subject to their data access policies and procedures. The analyses were not pre-registered, but all syntax and code have been made available on the Open Science Framework (Link).

Measuring Future Expectations in the UKHLS

The United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Study (Understanding Society) commenced in 2009, with approximately 40,000 households recruited from around the United Kingdom. Stratified sampling approaches ensured generalisability across regions, ethnic groups, and population density (University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research, 2023). Top up samples were recruited across years, with additional households sampled to address attrition and ensure appropriate representation of different ethnic groups (Lynn et al., 2018). Annual household surveys occurred each year. The current study uses the youth module, with questions adapted to life circumstances of adolescents and young adults.

Household respondents between the ages of 16 and 21 were presented with questions related to their future expectations in waves 2, 3, 5, 7, 9 and 11 in the UKHLS. Each question assessed a different potential life outcome in educational, vocational, and family domains. Prior to the presentation of each question, participants were provided with a response scale ranging from 0% to 100%, and informed that 0% means no chance of it happening and 100% means it is

totally likely to happen. Participants were also provided with the option to indicate if the event

had already happened in their life, at which point they would no longer be prompted to respond.

The full list of items can be found in Table 1.

To allow for longitudinal modelling and ensure developmental maturation did not

confound our results, we organised the data by age of participant rather than year of data

collection. Accordingly, we had 4,222 participants who were recruited at the age of 16 in a

concurrent wave when future orientated expectations were measured (Wave 2, $N = 1,020$; Wave

3, $N = 832$, Wave 5, $N = 782$, Wave 7, $N = 668$, Wave 9, $N = 540$, Wave 11, $N = 380$). Of these

participants, 3,785 had valid responses to the future expectations indicators. Participants' birth

year ranged from 1993 to 2004 ($M = 1997$), there were slightly more females in the analytical

sample (51.5%), and approximately three quarters resided in a city (77.8%).

Table 1.
Indicators of Future Orientated Expectations and Average Responses at 16-Years-of-Age

	16 Years of Age Mean (SD)
Gain training or a University place in your preferred field?	90.98% (136.82)
Successfully finish your training or University studies?	96.37% (115.16)
Find a job in your field?	80.96% (77.54)
Be Successful and Get Ahead?	75.38% (19.80)
Become long-term unemployed?	19.11% (45.93)
Be kept back in your job due to family reasons?	34.74% (72.33)
Be self-employed?	38.22% (51.74)
Work abroad at some time?	45.90% (37.95)
Marry at some time?	75.33% (41.36)
Live together unmarried with a partner?	57.09% (51.79)
Have a child?	74.74% (55.86)
Have several children?	57.06% (35.58)

Predictor Variables

Household Income. Responses from the youth module were linked to household level data. Household income was the net income for all persons aged over 16 years in the household, after accounting for household expenses. Three further adjustments were made. First, the OECD-modified scale was used to address unequal household sizes. Second, the consumer price index was used to adjust household data to be equivalent across years considering inflation, with data equalised to 2015 levels. Third, missing data was imputed (Fisher et al., 2019). The equalised household income at the age of 16 amongst our analytical sample was £1,513.61 (SD = £1,010.96).

Region. Participants were coded as living in an urban (1) or rural (2) area based upon the location of their household. Addresses within settlements containing at least a population of 10,000 or more were considered urban.

Financial Stress. One member of each household was asked "are you up to date with all your household bills such as electricity, gas, water rates, telephone and other bills or are you behind with any of them?" Responses were coded from 1 (Up to data with all bills) to 3 (Behind with all bills). Amongst the households where our 16-year-old respondents resided, 89.8% reported no outstanding bills.

Covariates. We conducted our analyses controlling for sex and year of birth. We also controlled for mental health disturbances, with the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ, Gnamb & Staufenbiel, 2018; Goldburg & Williams, 1988). Questions assess broad physiological, behavioural, and emotional responses to experiences of distress (e.g., Have you

recently lost much sleep over worry?). Responses were recorded using a 4-point scale (1 = Not at all to 4 = Much more than usual), with an average score calculated.

Outcome Variables

Perceived Life Outcomes. To determine if and how unique profiles of adolescent expectations contributed to life outcomes, we used the same set of questions assessing expectations at the last wave before participants either dropped out or turned 21. Specifically, we recoded responses to the questions asking participants how likely it is they would 'Successfully finish your training or University studies?', 'Become long-term unemployed?', 'Marry at some time?', and 'Have a child?'. Participants who indicated that these events had already happened at any age after 16 were coded as 1, with all other responses coded as 0, thereby creating a categorical indicator of perceived life outcomes. Of the 16-year-olds included in our analyses, approximately half of the participants responded to at least one more survey containing the expectation questions (17, $N = 693$; 18, $N = 1,541$; 19, $N = 581$; 20, $N = 891$; 21, $N = 399$). In total, we had 2,530 valid responses to conduct follow-up analyses on life outcomes.

Analytical Strategy

A latent profile analysis (LPA) was conducted in Mplus (v8.8, Muthén & Muthén, 2019). to identify latent subgroups within a sample from a series of continuous variables. These latent profiles represent underlying patterns or combinations of characteristics in responses that indicate that members within a profile are more similar to each other than others in the sample (e.g., Pastor et al., 2007). Initially, a one-class solution is derived by exploring the average responses across the sample. In a stepwise manner, the model is subsequently expanded as to add one additional profile with each reiterative analysis. With each additional profile, LPAs classify

participants into increasingly granular profiles based upon the (dis)similarity of participants'

responses (Ferguson et al., 2020). In the absence of any one indicator on the appropriate number

of profiles, several criteria and theoretical reasoning are employed to determine when to cease

the analyses (Nylund, Asparouhov, & Muthén, 2007). The Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC)

and Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) are observed, with smaller numbers indicating better

fitting models. Additionally, the Lo-Mendell-Rubin Adjusted Likelihood Ratio Test (LMR-A-

LRT) is examined. The LMR-LRT conducts null hypothesis testing with a corresponding p-value

that determines if the addition of each new profile significantly improves the model. Third,

entropy is examined. Ranging between 0 and 1, entropy indicates the probability participants

have been correctly classified into profiles, with 0 indicating no certainty and 1 indicating perfect

accuracy. Although higher scores are desired, 0.7 is widely seen as an acceptable cut-off. Finally,

theoretical reasoning is applied. The final composition of profiles should be theoretically

defensible, and the addition of new profiles should not be too similar to other patterns as to be

redundant.

Once the number of profiles are identified, a 3-step process will be conducted to

determine what, if any, of the generational and socioeconomic factors predict belonging to

groups characterized by specific future expectations. After the final number of classes are

determined (Step 1), participants are assigned to a specific latent profile based upon the

probability that the profile reflects their pattern of expectations (Step 2). Subsequent analyses

predict profile membership using multinomial logistic regression. These regression models will

examine how various predictor variables influence the odds of an individual belonging to one

profile compared to a reference profile. To explore group differences in life outcomes, the direct

consistency method was employed, allowing a direct estimation of class-specific effects on a

distal categorical variable without disrupting likely class memberships. In this analysis, equality

tests of category probabilities are evaluated using a series of chi-square comparisons. A

significant chi-square test indicates the proportion of individuals self-reporting a life outcome is

different across the classes. All possible comparisons are reported.

Identifying Discrete Groups of Young People: A Person-Centred Approach

The latent profile analysis revealed four distinct groups of 16-years-olds based upon their

shared expectations for their future. Each additional class decreased the SSBIC and AIC, while

both the VLMR and LMR-LRT was statistically significant, indicating a better fitting model with

one additional class (Table 2). Entropy remained above 0.8 regardless of the number of classes.

These general trends continued with the inclusion of the fifth class, indicating that the additional

class was statistically more appropriate relative to a four-profile solution. However, two latent

classes contained fewer than 5% of the sample lessening the trustworthiness of the final model.

Accordingly, the analyses ceased with a preferred four-profile solution.

Table 2.

Enumeration Indicators of the Most Accurate Number of Classes for the Latent Profile Analysis.

	SSBIC	AIC	VLMR	LMR-LRT	Entropy	Class Proportions (%)
1 Class	401698.55	401625.11	-	-	-	
2 Classes	397109.76	396996.53	61.54**	4611.51**	.84	71.8, 28.2
3 Classes	394824.56	394671.58	131.68**	2329.21**	.87	66.6, 23.1, 10.32
4 Classes	393506.07	393313.28	268.86*	1371.50*	.82	52.7, 22.9, 17.9, 6.4
5 Classes[+]	392210.38	391977.80	-93.14**	1348.88*	.85	50.1, 23.9, 18.2, 3.8, 3.4

*$p < .05$; ** $p < .001$; [+] Two classes accounted for less than 5% of the sample

Adolescents' future expectations can be viewed in Figure 1. Representing slightly over half of all respondents, the *Aspirational* group reported the strongest likelihood of studying, obtaining employment (including being self-employed and working abroad), marrying, and expanding their future family with children. Further, they reported the lowest likelihood of being unemployed. Interestingly, the *Aspirational* group reported the second highest likelihood of being held back in their career for family reasons, likely reflecting their high expectations for future children. Representing the second highest number of respondents, approximately one quarter of participants were allocated to the *Balanced Expectations* group which broadly followed the pattern of the *Aspirational* group, albeit with less strongly expressed likelihood of eventuation.

The reaming two classes exhibited a different pattern of expectations. The third largest class, representing 18% of respondents, had comparable career-related expectations to the *Aspirational* group. However, they were the most likely to report low expectations for marriage, cohabitation, and future children. Accordingly, they are labelled *Career Focused*. Finally, the smallest number of participants were allocated to the *Expectation-less* class, given their low expectations across all domains.

Predicting Class Membership

Subsequent analyses identified psychological, demographic, and socioeconomic factors at 16 that predict class membership. The findings clearly demonstrate the importance of household income in shaping adolescent future expectations. For every £100 increase in equalized weekly household income, the likelihood of belonging to the *Aspirational* class increased by 5% and 2%, relative to the *Expectation-Less* and *Career-Focused* groups, respectively. Similarly, a comparable increase in equalized income increased the likelihood of belonging to the *Balanced*

Expectations by 4%, relative to the *Expectation-Less* group. Income did not significantly differentiate any other classes. Accordingly, young people residing in homes with greater income are significantly more likely to have generally high expectations, relative to groups with low expectations or specific goals for future career success.

Adolescents' sex was also a significant predictor in many comparisons. Relative to the group with low future expectations, females were 35% and 28% more likely to be classified into the *Aspirational* and *Career-Focused* groups, respectively. Similarly, Females were 29% and 42% more likely to belong in the *Career-Focused* and *Aspirational* group, relative to the *Balanced Expectations* class. Indeed, the descriptive statistics provided in Table 3 clearly demonstrate how females were more common in both the *Aspirational* and *Career-Focused* groups and were less well represented in the *Expectation-Less* class.

Finally, participants in the *Balanced Expectation* class had the highest level of mental health disturbances relative to all other groups. In contrast, adolescent mental health did not significantly differentiate any other classes, including the group characterized by consistently low expectations. Date of birth, financial stress, and region did not significantly predict any class membership.

How do these Classes Correspond with Perceived Life Outcomes

Finally, participants' own assessment about the extent to which these life events 'had already happened,' were included as outcome variables in a multigroup model. Initially, we examined whether participants' reported they completed their training or studies. The overall test of group differences was statistically significant, indicating the likelihood of completing studies differed across the classes (χ^2 (3) = 22.47, p < .001). An examination of individual comparisons (Table 4) identified that the *Expectation-Less* group was significantly less likely to report

completing their studies relative to all other groups. Indeed, approximately half the proportion of participants in this class had indicated they finished their studies relative to the *Aspirational* group. Furthermore, the *Aspirational* class was also significantly more likely to report completing their studies relative to the *Career-Focused* and *Balanced Expectations* classes, albeit the differences were less sizeable. Next, we considered participants' assessments of potential long-term unemployment, finding significant group differences overall (χ^2 (3) = 13.16, p = .004). Although many group comparisons approached statistical significance, the only difference that reached our a priori threshold of significance of less than 0.5 was between the *Aspirational* and *Expectation-Less* class. The overall prevalence of self-assessed long-term unemployment was more than 6 times greater in the *Expectation-Less* group, relative to the *Aspirational* group.

Beyond employment and training information, we also explored participants' family outcomes. Our overall test of whether participants had ever been married was not statistically significant (χ^2 (3) = 2.66, p = .447). Indeed, few participants had ever reported being married within this age group (less than 1%). In contrast, we did find significant differences when exploring participants' likelihood of having a child (χ^2 (3) = 16.54, p = .001). Similar group differences were identified to rates of studying. The *Expectation-Less* group were significantly more likely to report having a child relative to all other groups.
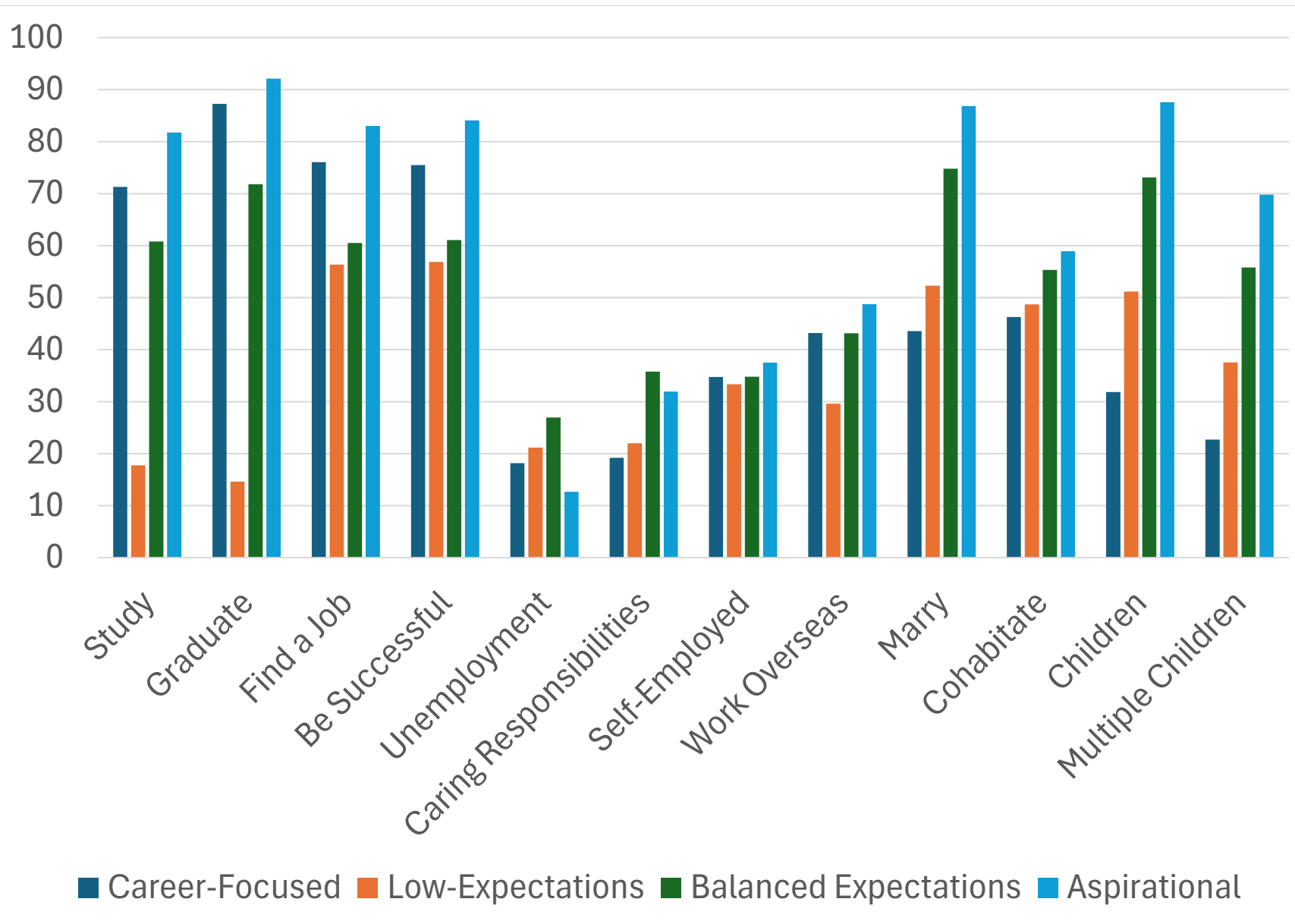
Table 3.

Sample size and demographic information for the groups of young people identified in the latent profile analysis. Numbers represent means (SD) or proportion of the sample.

	Aspirational	Balanced Expectations	Career-Focused	Expectation-Less
Sample Size				
Age 16 Predictors				
Sex (Female)	53.6%	48.0%	52.1%	44.0%
Date of Birth	1997.24 (3.04)	1997.44 (3.13)	1997.23 (3.13)	1997.42 (3.13)
Adolescent Mental Health	1.84 (0.45)	1.95 (0.48)	1.87 (0.48)	1.89 (0.47)
Financial Stress (Yes)	7.6%	10.4%	11.6%	14.5%
Region (City)	76.5%	79.5%	79.5%	81.2%
Household Income	1801.26 (1089.39)	1700.76 (1079.45)	1602.97 (956.64)	1408.96 (720.80)
Life Outcomes				
Successfully finish your training or University studies?	35.8%	29.7%	29.5%	19.2%
Become long-term unemployed?	0.9%	2.5%	2.6%	6.0%
Marry at some time?	0.9%	1.1%	1.6%	2.8%
Have a child?	1.7%	3.2%	3.7%	11.4%

Table 4.

Predictors and Outcomes of Profile Membership following the Three-Step Approach.

	Reference Group:	Expectation-Less			Career-Focused		Aspirational
	Comparison Group:	*Aspirational*	*Balanced Expectations*	*Career-Focused*	*Aspirational*	*Balanced Expectations*	*Balanced Expectations*
Predicting Class Membership from Age 16 Factors (Odds Ratio)							
Sex		0.65* [0.49 to 0.88]	0.93 [0.68 to 1.26]	0.72* [0.52 to 0.99]	0.91 [0.75 to 1.10]	1.29* [1.04 to 1.61]	1.42** [1.19 to 1.69]
Date of Birth		0.97 [0.93 to 1.02]	0.99 [0.94 to 1.04]	0.97 [0.92 to 1.02]	1.00 [0.97 to 1.03]	1.02 [0.98 to 1.05]	1.01 [0.99 to 1.04]
Adolescent Mental Health		0.80 [0.58 to 1.10]	1.45* [1.04 to 2.01]	0.95 [0.67 to 1.35']	0.84 [0.68 to 1.04]	1.53** [1.22 to 1.92]	1.82** [1.52 to 2.17]
Financial Stress		1.52† [0.98 to 2.35]	1.22 [0.77 to 1.93]	1.15 [0.72 to 1.83]	1.33 [0.97 to 1.81]	1.06 [0.75 to 1.51]	0.80 [0.59 to 1.09]
Region		0.93 [0.65 to 1.32]	1.04 [0.71 to 1.52]	1.05 [0.71 to 1.55]	0.88 [0.70 to 1.10]	0.99 [0.76 to 1.29]	1.13 [0.92 to 1.38]
Household Income		1.05** [1.03 to 1.07]	1.04** [1.02 to 1.06]	1.03 [1.01 to 1.05]	1.02** [1.01 to 1.03]	1.01† [1.00 to 1.02]	0.99 [0.98 to 1.00]
Predicting Perceived Life Achievements from Aged 17 to 21 (Chi-Square Comparisons)							
Successfully finish your training or University studies?		19.47**	6.02*	5.79*	5.15*	0.01	4.21*
Become long-term unemployed?		6.29*	2.53	2.38	3.76†	0.01	3.15†
Marry at some time?		1.47	1.00	0.44	0.94	0.26	0.14
Have a child?		11.91**	7.99*	6.50*	3.52†	0.16	2.06

Discussion

In this research, we sought to deepen our understanding of adolescent future expectations in the United Kingdom, with a particular focus on capturing the diversity and complexity of different life outcomes adolescents anticipate. Our person-centred approach facilitated the identification of distinct groups of 16-year-olds based on similarities in their future expectations across domains. This methodological choice was uniquely situated to capture a nuanced picture of adolescents' hopes, ambitions, and perceived challenges. Outlined in more detail below, we found two groups with relatively optimistic outlooks comprising most British 16-year-olds. Of note, the unique characteristics, and social implications of the Career Focused and Expectation-less groups will also be outlined. Throughout, we emphasise the insights gained from our person-centred approach, specifically focusing on the socioeconomic factors predicting group membership and the life outcomes that follow. In doing so, we identify that socioeconomically advantaged youth typically reported the highest expectations, and young people with low expectations were more likely to report caring for a baby and long-term unemployment between the ages of 17 and 21.

Most British 16-Year-Olds Have High Expectations

The findings from our research reveal a strikingly positive outlook among most young people. The two largest groups, encompassing the Aspirational and Balanced-Expectations classes, expect to achieve traditional adult milestones like education, employment, and family formation. Moreover, they also exhibit a willingness to embrace opportunities such as working abroad. Such expectations did not appear to be unrealistic or ignorant of the challenges required to balance work and family. Despite expecting vocational success and low levels of unemployment, these two groups reported the highest expectations that at some point in their

career they will be 'held back' to appropriately meet caregiving or family requirements. These findings highlight two generations of young people that are largely optimistic about their prospects and readily identify the sacrifices often asked of employed parents.

In many respects, the findings align with a small but growing number of studies that actively consider future expectations for family, career, and educational life outcomes. Both qualitative and quantitative investigations have identified that most young people actively envision a future that contains many, if not all, the traditional markers of adulthood including marriage, parenthood, economic success, and a fulfilling career (Sánchez-Sandoval et al., 2019; Willoughby et al., 2015; Woodman, 2011).

Importantly, positive future expectations are generally argued to yield positive life outcomes (Chang & Sanna, 2003). Goal attainment is dependent upon actively constructing an envisioned future, identifying the necessary steps to achieve that future, and subsequently commencing and persisting with these activities. Our investigation of future life outcomes similarly identified the importance of high future expectations. The Aspirational group had the highest likelihood of completing their studies before 21, with approximately one-quarter of young people in this group stating their education was complete. Indeed, the difference between the Aspirational group's rates of education and all other classes were statistically significant. The Aspirational group also reported the lowest levels of long-term unemployment and parenthood relative to the other groups, although most of these differences were not statistically significant. These findings attest to the importance of future-oriented thinking for young people, as an instrumental component of goal setting and attainment. Accordingly, identifying who is most and least likely to report high expectations provides important information for targeted policy and educational intervention.

The Aspirational group, representing the most optimistic cohort, had the highest average household income. This economic advantage likely provided them with access to better educational resources, extracurricular opportunities, and a supportive schooling environment that fostered high aspirations for future educational and vocational success (Duncan et al. 2017). Furthermore, these adolescents simultaneously anticipated a stable family life. Higher household income has likely embedded young people in a family environment that models these life outcomes, whereby parents both explicitly and implicitly convey information that success across domains is both normative and achievable. Taken together, we can conclude that since the turn of the millennium, most adolescents in the United Kingdom expect to achieve 'adulthood' in the traditional sense of the word – especially when young people live in an economically advantaged household. Yet, such a conclusion does not represent all young people in the sample.

Many Young People do not Expect to Marry or Parent

The emergence of the Career Focused group marks a distinctive and significant deviation from traditional patterns of adulthood, highlighting the importance of these person-centred analyses. This group of adolescents have a clear emphasis on career development over other life domains, including marriage and parenthood. Demographers have identified a steep decline in fertility rates across most high-income nations (Burkimsher, 2015; Rotella et al., 2021), with fertility rates in the United Kingdom failing to climb above replacement levels (2.01 children per couple) since the 1970s (ONS, 2024). Such declines are partially attributable to young people delaying childrearing until other lifegoals are achieved in an economic and social environment that makes these milestones more difficult (e.g., home ownership, Atalay et al., 2021). Delays in childrearing naturally decrease the potential number of children people can expect to have in their lifetime, and potentially introduce medical and biological challenges to reproduction. Yet,

as these data suggest, there is also a sizeable portion of the population without strong motivations to reproduce – even at an early age.

In this representative sample, approximately one in five young persons in the United Kingdom reported low expectations for future parenthood. These findings reflect broader changes in society, where diverse life paths are increasingly accepted, emphasising personal and professional growth over more conventional family-oriented milestones (Merz & Liefbroer, 2012). A greater emphasis on climate change has also altered the perspectives of some young people, contributing to a reduction in childrearing intentions (Schneider-Mayerson & Leong, 2020). Although we cannot derive the underlying motivations from the available data, the Career Focused group in our study represents a cohort of young people who can redefine markers of adulthood in ways that differ from previous generations.

A Small, but Economically Disadvantaged Group, Reported the Lowest Expectations

The identification of the Expectation-less group within our study raises concerns for efforts to alleviate socioeconomic gaps in the United Kingdom. This group, characterised by uniformly low expectations across educational, career, and family domains, signals a potential disengagement or disenchantment with traditional pathways of success. Notably, this group did not have markedly different rates of psychological distress relative to the other groups, as denoted by average GHQ scores. Although males were significantly more likely to be in this group relative to those with the highest expectations, household income was the largest and most consistent predictor of membership to this group. These low expectations are therefore unlikely to be attributed to anhedonia or other markers of mental ill health. Rather, these findings attest to the importance of systemic barriers to success in society in the form of socioeconomic disadvantage.

As outlined above, economic resources provide young people with quality education and career guidance. Lower economic resources limit access to these developmentally enriching experiences and highlight the importance of earlier entry into the workforce. In the context of the current study, adolescents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may pragmatically and adaptively lower their expectations in response to limited opportunities, ultimately contributing to the detection of the small but important Expectation-less group. Their low aspirations in areas such as education, career, and family life could reflect a realistic appraisal of their circumstances, rather than a lack of ambition, motivation, or ability.

Importantly, the Expectation-Less group had the most disparate life trajectory relative to the other groups. Despite reporting the second-lowest expectations for future children, this group had the highest percentage of young people who reported becoming a parent by 21. Moreover, members from this group reported the highest rates of long-term unemployment and the lowest rates of attaining qualifications. It's imperative for educators, policymakers, and social workers to recognize and respond to the unique challenges faced by these adolescents, fostering environments that nurture their potential and broaden their horizons. Ignoring the needs of the Expectation-less group could lead to perpetuating cycles of disadvantage and marginalisation.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

The findings from the current study were derived from a large representative sample of households in the United Kingdom across approximately two decades. The large corpus of data ensured young peoples' own responses could be linked to household-level information. The longitudinal design also provided a unique opportunity to explore the long-term outcomes for each of the identified class, demonstrating how future orientated cognitions provides a strong

foundation to predict events during young adulthood. However, the current study was not without limitations.

Most notably, all responses included in our investigation were self-reported. Perceived life outcomes, for example, may not necessarily reflect objectively identified life events. Successfully completing one's education or training is a subjective assessment that may not correspond to academic achievement or graduations. Similarly, what constitutes 'long-term' unemployment was a subjective assessment for each participant. By focusing on individuals' self-reported outcomes, these measures provide valuable insights into how participants view the progress and challenges in their own life, offering a different perspective than objective data. Nevertheless, future corroboration with established thresholds of success using both self-reported and linked data would offer an alternative insight into how these adolescents developed.

A second major limitation is the absence of causal modelling in the current study. We have identified that individuals with low expectations at 16 subsequently were less likely to report finishing their education and were more likely to report having had a child and spending prolonged periods of time unemployed. However, our modelling technique does not allow us to draw a causal link between expectations and life outcomes as several confounding factors are not accounted for. For example, low future-orientated expectations could be a symptom of academic struggles (Gutman et al., 2011), low parental involvement (Benner et al., 2021) and less supportive social networks (Israelashvili, 1997). The various psychological and social factors contributing to low expectations could therefore be driving the divergent life outcomes we observed at 21, independent of expectations. Future research could explore causal modelling techniques to isolate the effects of future orientated thinking on subsequent life outcomes.

Finally, the measures used in this study were developed and then used without youth voices. Although informative, these clustering-based data techniques ultimately reflect the information we input into them. With the inclusion of different questions across life domains, our study arguably provides one of the most diverse quantitative analyses of adolescent expectations. Nevertheless, the inclusion of youth voices would provide confidence that our models are not limited through the omission of important future expectations envisioned by young people. Engaging in co-design with young people to validate these questions could ensure that the measures are relevant and meaningful to their experiences, ultimately increasing our confidence in the findings.

Conclusion

This study shines a light on what young people want and expect for their future. By clustering adolescents based on their academic, vocational, and family expectations, we identified that traditional markers of adulthood – like gainful employment, marriage, and parenthood – are desirable and expected outcomes for most young people. However, this broad generalisation should not obscure the meaningful number of young people explicitly rejecting prospects of future marriage and parenthood and the smaller group who seemingly have few future orientated expectations altogether. Moreover, our findings suggest that young people's perceptions of their future play a crucial role in subsequent educational and employment outcomes, signalling the developmental risks present when young people cannot see their future selves engaging in commonly expected adult behaviours. As people with agency and autonomy, young people are free to build their own future. Adaptively responding to their underlying preferences with educational guidance, career counselling, and economic supports will ensure the diverse expectations of modern youth are not just imaged futures but achievable realities.

References

Alcaraz, M., Hayford, S. R., & Glick, J. E. (2022). Desired fertility and educational aspirations: Adolescent goals in rapidly changing social contexts. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *84*(1), 7-31.

Arnett, J. J. (2007). Emerging adulthood: What is it, and what is it good for?. *Child development perspectives*, *1*(2), 68-73.

Arocho, R. (2019). Do expectations of divorce predict union formation in the transition to adulthood?. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *81*(4), 979-990.

Atalay, K., Li, A., & Whelan, S. (2021). Housing wealth, fertility intentions and fertility. *Journal of Housing Economics*, *54*, 101787.

Baird, C. L., Burge, S. W., & Reynolds, J. R. (2008). Absurdly ambitious? Teenagers' expectations for the future and the realities of social structure. *Sociology compass*, *2*(3), 944-962.

Beal, S. J., & Crockett, L. J. (2010). Adolescents' occupational and educational aspirations and expectations: Links to high school activities and adult educational attainment. *Developmental Psychology, 46*(1), 258–265. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017416

Beal, S. J., Crockett, L. J., & Peugh, J. (2016). Adolescents' changing future expectations predict the timing of adult role transitions. *Developmental Psychology, 52*(10), 1606–1618. https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000189

Plotnick, R. D. (2007). Adolescent expectations and desires about marriage and parenthood. *Journal of Adolescence, 30*(6), 943–963. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2007.01.003

Benner, A. D., Fernandez, C. C., Hou, Y., & Gonzalez, C. S. (2021). Parent and teacher educational expectations and adolescents' academic performance: Mechanisms of influence. *Journal of community psychology*, *49*(7), 2679-2703.

Bingham, C. R., Stemmler, M., Crockett, L. J., & Petersen, A. C. (1994). Community-contextual differences in adolescents' expectations for the timing of adulthood transitions. *Unpublished manuscript*.

Blossfeld, H. P., & Huinink, J. (1991). Human capital investments or norms of role transition? How women's schooling and career affect the process of family formation. *American journal of Sociology*, *97*(1), 143-168. https://doi.org/10.1086/229743

Brooks, R., & Everett, G. (2008). The prevalence of 'life planning': Evidence from UK graduates. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *29*(3), 325-337.

Burkimsher, M. (2015). Europe-wide fertility trends since the 1990s: Turning the corner from declining first birth rates. *Demographic Research*, *32*, 621-656.

Carolan, B. V. (2018). Friends' plans for college and adolescents' educational expectations: an instrumental variable approach. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, *23*(3), 334-346. https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2017.1371615

Chang, E. C., & Sanna, L. J. (2003). Optimism, accumulated life stress, and psychological and physical adjustment: Is it always adaptive to expect the best? *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 22*(1), 97–115. https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.22.1.97.22767

Coscioni, V., de Oliveira, B. C., Marques, G., & da Silva, J. M. T. (2023). Aspirations and expectations measures for adolescents and emerging adults: A scoping review. *Current Psychology*, *42*(28), 24582-24598.

Crockett, L. J., Shanahan, M. J., & Jackson-Newsom, J. (2000). Rural youth: Ecological and life course perspectives. *Adolescent diversity in ethnic, economic, and cultural contexts*, *10*, 43-74.

Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Schneider, B. (2000). *Becoming adult: How teenagers prepare for the world of work.* Basic Books.

Domina, T., Conley, A., & Farkas, G. (2011). The link between educational expectations and effort in the college-for-all era. Sociology of Education, 84(2), 93–112. https://doi.org/10.1177/1941406411401808

Duncan, C. M. (2001). Social capital in America's poor rural communities. *Social capital and poor communities*, 60-86.

Duncan, G. J., Magnuson, K., & Votruba-Drzal, E. (2017). Moving beyond correlations in assessing the consequences of poverty. *Annual review of psychology*, *68*, 413-434. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010416-044224

Eccles, J. S., & Wigfield, A. (2002). Motivational beliefs, values, and goals. Annual Review of Psychology, 53(1), 109–132. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.53.100901.135153

Eccles, J. S., & Wigfield, A. (2024). The Development, Testing, and Refinement of Eccles, Wigfield, and Colleagues' Situated Expectancy-Value Model of Achievement Performance and Choice. *Educational Psychology Review*, *36*(2), 1-29.

Ferguson, S. L., G. Moore, E. W., & Hull, D. M. (2020). Finding latent groups in observed data: A primer on latent profile analysis in Mplus for applied researchers. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, *44*(5), 458-468.

Fiori, F., Graham, E., & Feng, Z. (2014). Geographical variations in fertility and transition to

    second and third birth in Britain. *Advances in life course research*, *21*, 149-167.

    https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2013.11.004

Fisher, P., Fumagalli, L., Buck, N., & Avram, S. (2019). Understanding Society and its income

    data. *Colchester: Understanding Society at the Institute for Social and Economic*

    Research.

Furman, W., & Shaffer, L. (2003). The role of romantic relationships in adolescent development.

    In *Adolescent romantic relations and sexual behavior* (pp. 3-22). Psychology Press.

Gnambs, T., & Staufenbiel, T. (2018). The structure of the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-

    12): two meta-analytic factor analyses. *Health psychology review*, *12*(2), 179-194.

Goldberg, D. P., & Williams, P. (1988). *A users' guide to the general health questionnaire*.

    London: GL Assessment.

Guo, J., Marsh, H. W., Morin, A. J., Parker, P. D., & Kaur, G. (2015). Directionality of the

    associations of high school expectancy-value, aspirations, and attainment: A longitudinal

    study. *American educational research journal*, *52*(2), 371-402.

Guzzo, K. B. (2014). Trends in cohabitation outcomes: Compositional changes and engagement

    among never-married young adults. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *76*(4), 826-842.

Irvin, M. J., Meece, J. L., Byun, S. Y., Farmer, T. W., & Hutchins, B. C. (2011). Relationship of

    school context to rural youth's educational achievement and aspirations. Journal of Youth

    and Adolescence, 40(9), 1225–1242. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-011-9628-8

Israelashvili, M. (1997). School adjustment, school membership and adolescents' future

    expectations. *Journal of Adolescence, 20*(5), 525–

    535. https://doi.org/10.1006/jado.1997.0107

Kilpatrick, S., Katersky Barnes, R., Heath, J., Lovat, A., Kong, W. C., Flittner, N., & Avitaia, S. (2019). Disruptions and bridges in rural Australia: Higher education aspiration to expectation of participation. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *38*(3), 550-564. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1556619

Kiuru, N., Aunola, K., Vuori, J., & Nurmi, J. E. (2007). The role of peer groups in adolescents' educational expectations and adjustment. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 36(8), 995–1009. https://doi.org/10.1007/ s10964-006-9118-6

Kiuru, N., Salmela-Aro, K., Nurmi, J.-E., Zettergren, P., Andersson, H., & Bergman, L. (2012). Best friends in adolescence show similar educational careers in early adulthood. Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 33(2), 102–111. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2011.12 .001

Lynn, P., Nandi, A., Parutis, V., & Platt, L. (2018). Design and implementation of a high-quality probability sample of immigrants and ethnic minorities: Lessons learnt. *Demographic Research*, *38*, 513-548. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26457055

McDonald, P., Pini, B., Bailey, J., & Price, R. (2011). Young people's aspirations for education, work, family and leisure. *Work, employment and society*, *25*(1), 68-84.

McLanahan, S., & Percheski, C. (2008). Family structure and the reproduction of inequalities. *Annual Review of Sociology, 34,* 257–276. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.34.040507.134549

Merz, E. M., & Liefbroer, A. C. (2012). The attitude toward voluntary childlessness in Europe: Cultural and institutional explanations. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *74*(3), 587-600.

Gutman, L. M., Schoon, I., & Sabates, R. (2012). Uncertain aspirations for continuing in

education: Antecedents and associated outcomes. *Developmental Psychology, 48*(6), 1707–1718. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0026547

Messersmith, E. E., & Schulenberg, J. E. (2008). When can we expect the unexpected? Predicting educational attainment when it differs from previous expectations. *Journal of Social Issues*, *64*(1), 195-212.

Modena, F., & Sabatini, F. (2012). I would if I could: Precarious employment and childbearing intentions in Italy. *Review of Economics of the Household*, *10*, 77-97.

Muthén, B., & Muthén, L. (2019). Mplus: A General Latent Variable Modeling Program.

Ní Bhrolcháin, M., & Beaujouan, É. (2012). Fertility postponement is largely due to rising educational enrolment. *Population studies*, *66*(3), 311-327. https://doi.org/10.1080/00324728.2012.697569

Nitsche, N., & Hayford, S. R. (2020). Preferences, partners, and parenthood: Linking early fertility desires, marriage timing, and achieved fertility. *Demography*, *57*(6), 1975-2001.

Nylund, K. L., Asparouhov, T., & Muthén, B. O. (2007). Deciding on the number of classes in latent class analysis and growth mixture modeling: A Monte Carlo simulation study. *Structural Equation Modeling: A Multidisciplinary Journal, 14*(4), 535-569. https://doi.org/10.1080/10705510701575396

O'Donnell, A. W., Redmond, G., Thomson, C., Wang, J. J., & Turkmani, S. (2022). Reducing educational disparities between Australian adolescents in regional and metropolitan communities: The compensatory effects of extracurricular activities. *Developmental Psychology*, *58*(12), 2358. https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0001434s

Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 22 February 2024, ONS website, statistical bulletin, Divorces in England and Wales: 2022

Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 23 February 2024, ONS website, statistical

　　bulletin, Births in England and Wales: 2022 (refreshed populations)

Owens, T. J. (1992). Where do we go from here? Post-high school choices of American men.

　　Youth & Society, 23, 452–477

Pastor, D. A., Barron, K. E., Miller, B. J., & Davis, S. L. (2007). A latent profile analysis of

　　college students' achievement goal orientation. *Contemporary educational*

　　psychology, *32*(1), 8-47

Pateman, T. (2011). Rural and urban areas: comparing lives using rural/urban classifications.

　　Regional trends, *43*, 11-86. https://doi.org/10.1057/rt.2011.2

Reid, J. N. (1989). The Rural Economy and Rural Youth: Challenges for the Future. *Research in*

　　Rural Education, *6*(2), 17-23.

Rimkute, L., Hirvonen, R., Tolvanen, A., Aunola, K., & Nurmi, J. E. (2012). Parents' role in

　　adolescents' educational expectations. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*,

　　56(6), 571-590. https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2011.621133

Rotella, A., Varnum, M. E., Sng, O., & Grossmann, I. (2021). Increasing population densities

　　predict decreasing fertility rates over time: A 174-nation investigation. *American*

　　Psychologist, *76*(6), 933.

Sánchez-Sandoval, Y., Verdugo, L., & del Río, F. J. (2019). Adolescent future expectations scale

　　for parents (AFES-p): Development and validation. *Journal of Child and Family*

　　Studies, *28*, 1481-1489.

Schneider. 2017. "Non-Marital and Teen Fertility and Contraception During the Great

　　Recession." RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences 3(3): 126–

　　144. https://doi.org/10. 7758/RSF.2017.3.3.06.

Schneider-Mayerson, M. & Leong, K.L. (2020). Eco-Reproductive Concerns in the age of

   climate change. *Climatic Change,* 163, 1007-1023.

   https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-020-_02923-y

Schoen, R., Astone, N. M., Kim, Y. J., Nathanson, C. A., & Fields, J. M. (1999). Do fertility

   intentions affect fertility behavior?. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 790-799.

Tavares, L. P. (2010). *Who delays childbearing? The relationships between fertility, education*

   and personality traits (No. 2010-17). ISER working paper series.

Thompson, M. N., Nitzarim, R. S., Her, P., Sampe, M., & Diestelmann, J. (2017). Financial

   stress and work hope beliefs among adolescents. *Journal of Career Assessment*, *25*(2),

   254-267.

University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2023). Understanding Society:

   Waves 1-13, 2009-2022 and Harmonised BHPS: Waves 1-18, 1991-2009. [data

   collection]. 18th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 6614, http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-

   6614-19.

Wake, A., & O'Donnell, A. W. (2024). Longitudinal Relationships Between Financial Stress,

   Career Related Optimism, and Psychological Distress During Emerging Adulthood in

   Australia. *Youth & Society*, 0044118X241232997.

West, A., Lewis, J., Roberts, J., & Noden, P. (2017). Young adult graduates living in the parental

   home: Expectations, negotiations, and parental financial support. *Journal of Family*

   Issues, *38*(17), 2449-2473. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X166437

Willoughby, B. J. (2010). Marital attitude trajectories across adolescence. *Journal of Youth and*

   Adolescence, *39*, 1305-1317.

Willoughby, B. J. (2014). Using marital attitudes in late adolescence to predict later union

transitions. *Youth & Society*, *46*(3), 425-440.

Willoughby, B. J., Hall, S. S., & Goff, S. (2015). Marriage matters but how much? Marital

centrality among young adults. *The Journal of psychology*, *149*(8), 796-817.

Wong, T. K., Parent, A. M., & Konishi, C. (2019). Feeling connected: The roles of student-

teacher relationships and sense of school belonging on future orientation. *International*

Journal of Educational Research, *94*, 150-157.

Woodman, D. (2011). Young people and the future: Multiple temporal orientations shaped in

interaction with significant others. *Young*, *19*(2), 111-128.

Wright, M., & von Stumm, S. (2024). Perceptions of adulthood: What does it mean to be grown-

up?. *Journal of Adult Development*, 1-14.