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Bright Futures in Malawi's New Dawn: Educational Aspirations as Assertions of Identity[1]

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Abstract

Imagined futures, once a vital topic of theoretical inquiry within the sociology of culture, have been sidelined in recent decades. Rational choice models cannot explain the seemingly irrational optimism of youth aspirations, pointing to the need to explore other alternatives. This article incorporates insights from pragmatist theory and cognitive sociology to examine the relationship between imagined futures and present actions and experiences in rural Malawi, where future optimism appears particularly unfounded. Drawing from in-depth interviews and archival sources documenting ideological campaigns promoting schooling, the author shows that four elements are understood to jointly produce educational success: ambitious career goals, sustained effort, unflagging optimism, and resistance to temptation. Aspirations should be interpreted not as rational calculations, but instead as assertions of a virtuous identity, claims to be "one who aspires."

Studies from around the globe have shown disadvantaged youth expressing ambitious educational goals and remaining highly optimistic about their chances of achieving these goals, even when circumstances afford them few realistic opportunities for success (e.g., Little 1978; Saha 1992; Alexander, Entwistle, and Bedinger 1994; Schneider and Stevenson 2000; Rosenbaum 2001; Khattab 2003; Yair, Khattab, and Benavot 2004; Reynolds et al. 2006; Sikora and Saha 2007; Baird, Burge, and Reynolds 2008; Strand and Winston 2008). In recent decades, efforts to explain the persistence of such optimism have been dominated by rational-choice models, which assume that youth strive to choose the goals that will maximize their chances of future success (e.g., Manski 1993, 2004; Breen 1999; Beattie 2002; Lloyd, Leicht, and Sullivan 2008; Morgan 2005; Gabay-Egozi, Shavit, and Yaish 2010). Culturally based approaches to explaining unrealistic optimism have for the most part been sidelined, for both empirical and theoretical reasons. Beginning in the late 1970s, scholars of educational attainment moved from studying goals as key determinants of students' trajectories to examining instead how opportunities and constraints shape students' ability to realize their goals (Morgan 2005). And in the late 1980s, cultural theorists shifted their attention from the selection of *ends* to the availability of *means* (Swidler 1986; Vaisey 2009). Indeed, a recent essay calls upon sociologists of culture to "reclaim the analysis of the future" (Mische 2009, p. 702).

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In this article, I revisit the topic of imagined futures from the perspective of cultural sociology. I advance an alternative approach to studying aspirations and expectations,[2] in which I interpret statements about the future as moral claims rather than as rational choices. Why do imagined futures so often run ahead of objective opportunities? And what can such pervasive optimism tell us about how the present is enacted and experienced? I show that aspirations and expectations should be understood as assertions of identity that are shaped by cultural schemas and shared standards of morality. In my interviews with young Malawian women, aspirations emerge as models for self-transformation; individuals fashion their present selves to cohere with an idealized future. I build upon pragmatist theory and cognitive sociology to argue that rather than using what they know about the present to sharpen their view of the future, youth use visions of a brighter future to refine their narratives about themselves and transcend their present reality. By analyzing the cultural model of "bright futures," espoused by schools, development organizations, government agencies, and media programs, and recapitulated in young women's own statements, I show that four elements are understood by young women in Malawi to jointly produce educational success: ambitious career goals, sustained effort, unflagging optimism, and resistance to (mostly sexual) temptations. All four components are morality-laden and reflect an individual's sense of personal identity, the "type of person" that she is at present.

My empirical case is located in rural Malawi, where ideological campaigns surrounding recent schooling reforms have encouraged youth to construct optimistic future projections, despite severe deficiencies in resources and opportunities. While reforms over the past decade have expanded access to primary school, the dream of completing secondary school and continuing on to college remains elusive. According to 2007 statistics provided by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), only 7% of students in their final year of primary school will graduate from secondary school, if current rates remain constant (UNESCO 2007, 2008*a*, 2008*b*). Yet, recent survey data show that students are highly optimistic about their own educational trajectories. A longitudinal survey conducted in southern Malawi in 2010 asked 269 female students who had not yet completed their last year of primary school to estimate their chances of finishing secondary school; the average response was 78%.[3] Considering that all of these respondents were at least three years behind grade level for their age and most were not yet in their final year of primary school, these women faced even lower probabilities for success than the national estimate of 7%.

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[2]Scholars have previously drawn several different, and to some extent contradictory, distinctions between the terms "aspirations" and "expectations" (Carter 2001; Young 2004). Hearn (1992) describes aspirations as more abstract than expectations, Sewell and Hauser (1980) describe aspirations as "wishes" and expectations as "plans," and Qian and Blair (1999) use the question "As things stand now, how far in school do you think you will get?" to measure aspirations, while others view this question as referring explicitly to expectations (Vaisey 2010, p. 83). Other scholars do not distinguish between the two terms (Plotnick 1992; Schneider and Stevenson 2000; Kao and Thompson 2003). In this article, when discussing other people's work, I adopt the authors' terminology. When discussing my own interviews, I use "expectation" for statements describing concrete plans and probable scenarios, given in response to questions that include the words "plan," "think," and "expect." I use the term "aspiration" for statements related to ideals or desires, responding to prompts including words like "want," "desire," "hope," and "aspire." I make this distinction to clarify for the reader the context within which responses were given. However, from the perspective of respondents themselves, I find that this distinction is fuzzy—for example, Memory combines aspirational and expectational language ("I want" and "I think") when responding to a question about what she *plans* to achieve and *thinks* will happen. I consider all statements about the future to reflect an idealized model of the self and therefore caution the reader against overinterpreting the distinction between these two terms. For more general discussions about the future, I prefer the term "imagined future" (Mische 2009).

[3]These data come from a survey instrument that I designed in 2010, which was administered as part of a longitudinal survey called Tsogolo La Thanzi (TLT). TLT follows a random sample of 2,045 youth ages 15–25, interviewing them every four months for three years. The questions referenced here were asked during wave 5 of the survey, using a scale from zero to 10 (for more information about this method of collecting probabilistic estimates of events, see Trinitapoli and Yeatman 2011). TLT is designed by Jenny Trinitapoli and Sara Yeatman and funded by a grant (R01-HD058366) from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Those interested in obtaining TLT data files should visit https://projects.pop.psu.edu/tlt.

To understand how youth imagine their future in Malawi, I draw upon multiple data sources: 40 in-depth interviews with female secondary school students and archival sources, including school curricula, newspaper articles, and printed materials from nongovernmental organizations. Interview respondents report investing exclusively in goals requiring advanced degrees and communicate a high degree of self-efficacy regarding these ambitious goals. If investment in future goals is determined by a conscious calculation of likelihoods and potential benefits, then their responses indeed appear irrational. If, instead, we consider future aspirations as assertions of personal identity, then these strategies become more comprehensible.

THEORIZING IMAGINED FUTURES

Three developments have left imagined futures undertheorized in recent decades. First, scholars studying educational attainment shifted from the *Wisconsin model*, which posits aspirations as causal mechanisms, to the *allocation model*, which assumes aspirations to be shared and focuses instead on differences in resources. Second, scholars of culture recoiled from the Parsonian view of culture directly determining the *ends* of action and focused instead on how culture shapes the *means* of action. Third, rational-choice scholars have filled the gap that these earlier theorists left behind, advancing a model of aspirations as calculated attempts to maximize future utility based on present circumstances.

I draw upon two sets of intellectual resources to redress the limitations resulting from these developments. First, pragmatist theory allows me to examine imagined futures without resorting to a teleological or instrumental theory of action, to incorporate moral influences on the formation of aspirations, and to deal more realistically with the relationship between ends and means. Second, the concept of cultural models, developed by cognitive sociologists, provides a framework for moving beyond crude models of actors as "cultural dopes" (Garfinkel 1967) while facilitating the examination of how the broader cultural discourse shapes goals and aspirations. At the end of this section, before turning to the empirical case, I specify my use of the terms *identity* and *morality.*

From Choice to Allocation in Educational Attainment Research

During the 1950s and 1960s, sociologists focused considerable attention on youth aspirations, examining how they are both shaped by social context and play a role in shaping outcomes. Hyman (1953) and Parsons (1953) described differences in future ambitions between lower and upper class youth as key indicators of divergent value systems. Sewell, Haller, and Portes (1969) introduced the Wisconsin model of status attainment (fig. 1), which, as originally specified, assumed that aspirations operated as mediators, transmitting anterior factors of social context (specifically, the influence of parents and peers) into subsequent educational and occupational attainment.[4]

Beginning in the 1970s, new evidence that black and white students with similarly ambitious goals achieved dramatically different levels of educational attainment (Portes and Wilson 1976; Kerckhoff and Campbell 1977) led Kerckhoff (1976) to introduce the allocation model, which instead posits that structural constraints intervene between the choice of an aspiration and eventual educational attainment (see fig. 2). Because the allocation model stipulates that outcomes are driven by structural factors rather than by the choice of a future goal, this perspective has pushed aspirations and expectations to the background of scholarly inquiry.[5]

[4]While revisions included other pathways through which socioeconomic status might influence educational outcomes, this model continued to emphasize the effects of early socialization on the formation of aspirations (Sewell, Haller, and Portes 1969; Sewell, Haller, and Ohlendorf 1970; Sewell and Hauser 1980; Haller 1982).

From Ends to Means in the Sociology of Culture

At around the same time that the allocation model was gaining prominence among scholars of educational attainment, scholars of culture began to distance themselves from the view that values and goals directly determine outcomes. Parsons, Hyman, Sewell, and others had begun with the assumption that aspirations play a causal role in action and focused on culture's role in motivating behavior. This new wave of research embraced instead the premise that "the very poor share the values and aspirations of the middle class" (Swidler 1986, p. 275) and focused on how culture shapes the means or "skills, styles, habits, and capacities" (Swidler 2001, p. 86) used to realize these commonly held goals (DiMaggio 1997; Lareau 2003; Harding 2007; Lamont and Small 2008). In other words, rather than concentrating on differences in values or ends, this perspective examines how culture shapes the means through which individuals work to achieve their goals.

Scholars have recently criticized this shift in emphasis from ends to means on theoretical, methodological, and empirical grounds (Kaufman 2004; Vaisey 2008, 2009) and advanced an alternative theory of how culture influences action, which emphasizes how culture shapes the *ends* of action, or the values, goals, and desires that we strive for. I build on the common ground between the two sides of this debate. I find, as Vaisey proposes, that "identities can be thought of—without contradiction—both as motives and as 'cultural tools'" (Vaisey 2009, p. 1707). Further, contemporary Malawi easily fits Swidler's theory of "unsettled times," periods of rapid and wide-ranging societal change during which ideologies can indeed be motivational or provide "blueprints" for action (Swidler 2001, p. 99). In such a context, aspirations both motivate decisions, such as which courses to take in school, and enable particular strategies of action, such as avoiding early marriage. Rather than arguing for the primacy of either ends or means, I instead attempt to remedy a different consequence of the turn from ends to means, namely, the fact that cultural sociologists have "abandoned" and "neglected" what was once a central concept: imagined futures (Mische 2009, p. 702).[6] By exploring how culture shapes both the aspirations that young women strive for as well as the pathways that they imagine leading to their desired goal, my examination of imagined futures borrows crucial insights from both sides of the "ends versus means" debate.[7]

The Ascendance of Rational Choice Theories of Aspirations

While scholars of educational attainment and culture have turned away from imagined futures, rational choice scholars have devoted considerable attention to the subject (e.g., Manski 1993, 2004; Dominitz and Manski 1996; Keane and Wolpin 1997; Breen 1999; Desjardins, Dundar, and Hendel 1999; Eckstein and Wolpin 1999; Cameron and Heckman 2001; Beattie 2002; Leigh and Gill 2004; Lloyd et al. 2008; Gabay-Egozi et al. 2010).[8] A fundamental premise of this literature is that adolescents act as "econometricians" (Manski

[5]Morgan (2005) provides a detailed overview of the shift from choice to allocation; see also Bozick et al. 2010.

[6]In the midst of this widespread retreat, however, a few scholars attempted to preserve a cultural perspective on future aspirations, including Willis (1977) and MacLeod (2009). These studies will be discussed in more detail in later sections of this article. However, it is worth noting here that the authors' discussion of culture remains fuzzy in both cases, and both books fail to discuss specific mechanisms through which culture influences aspirations. Two recent and notable contributions to this line of research are Young (2004) and Harding (2010), both of whom examine how culture shapes the aspirations of poor black boys and young men in urban areas in the United States. While both books have heavily influenced my thinking, this article differs from them in its explicit attempt to link portrayals of the future in the broader cultural discourse to the way that people talk about their futures in the interview setting, as well as in its attempt to advance a theoretical alternative to the rational choice model of future aspirations.

[7]While these two scholarly turns (the shift from choice to allocation within educational attainment research and the shift from ends to means within the sociology of culture) were primarily driven by the separate developments outlined above, it seems prudent to point out that they occurred during the same period of time and that both subfields arrived at a largely similar position—namely, the belief that outcomes are largely shaped by the resources and constraints that a person is exposed to. Both subfields were, to some extent, recoiling from the functionalist positions of Parsonian sociology, and their similar endpoints can be viewed as part of a general shift away from the presumption that values, norms, and desires determine social outcomes.

[8]Mische (2009, p. 696) also notes the increasing prominence of rational choice models of imagined futures in recent decades.

1993), observing the returns to schooling gained by older peers, estimating their probability of accomplishing various goals, and choosing the investment that, according to these calculations, will maximize future utility.

In recent years, rational choice scholars have begun to incorporate subjective beliefs and heterogeneous strategies into their analyses of future aspirations and expectations (Breen 1999; Beattie 2002; Morgan 2005; Lloyd et al. 2008; Gabay-Egozi et al. 2010; see Breen and Johnsson [2005] for a review). In the most sophisticated elaboration of this approach, Morgan (2005) explicitly sets out to integrate a rational choice model of decision making with insights from the early Wisconsin model—specifically, the idea that educational attainment is contingent on contextual factors shaping subjective beliefs about the future. While this model is promising, measurement of contextual factors remains limited to information communicated by "significant others," including parents, peers, and teachers, and Morgan himself points to the need for further investigation into this process (2005, p. 213). Further, this model still constrains aspirations to be rational choices, with subjective beliefs and social influence assumed to alter an individual's process of choosing the goal most likely to maximize utility. The ample evidence that aspirations are often uncorrelated with available opportunities warrants a more radical departure from the rational choice approach.

The Pragmatist Alternative to the Rational Choice Model of Imagined Futures

The American pragmatist tradition, first emerging out of the University of Chicago in the early decades of the 20th century, provides a fertile ground for developing a theoretical alternative to rational choice models of future aspirations, in three respects. First, pragmatists offer an alternative to the rational choice explanation for why the future matters; they theorize the imagined future as a crucial element of both creative action and personal identity. Second, pragmatist theory integrates practical and moral influences on action, positing that standards of morality drive action by shaping models of the self. Third, the pragmatist model of action abandons the Kantian dichotomy between means and ends, allowing goals to be both motivating and enabling and to emerge in the course of action itself.

First, unlike rational choice scholars who view future aspirations as indicative of an individual's ability to accurately predict future outcomes, pragmatists view imagined futures as a core component of human agency, the first step in actively and creatively responding to a situation (Joas 1997; Emirbayer and Mische 1998). As Dewey writes, "We do not use the present to control the future. We use the foresight of the future to refine and expand present activity" (1922, p. 322). Emirbayer and Mische place projectivity, defined as "the imaginative generation … of possible future trajectories," as the second element of their "chordal triad" of human agency (1998, p. 971).[9] Within pragmatist theory, future projectivities are not only recognized as a crucial element of agency; they are also viewed as a key component of a person's sense of identity (see the "Defining Identity and Morality" section for a discussion of the term *identity*). Rather than reflecting a "ruthlessly realistic attitude towards ourselves" in the present, Joas states that our identity is fundamentally oriented toward the future and is more aptly described as a "design of a self to which we aspire" (2001, p. 131).[10] Similarly, Dewey wrote of the "whole self," a unified sense of

[9]The other two elements in the chordal triad are iteration (the reactivation of earlier behavior patterns) and practical evaluation (making judgments based on both practical and normative elements; Emirbayer and Mische 1998, p. 971).

[10]This aspirational element of personal identity is also highlighted in the psychological concept of "possible selves," a person-specific set of mental images of "ideal selves we hope to become, could become, or fear becoming" (Markus and Nurius 1986, p. 954; see also Kao 2000).

identity that he described as "always directed beyond itself" into the not-yet-realized future (1934, p. 19).

Second, pragmatist theory transcends the rational choice preeminence of instrumental interests over normative values, assuming instead that actions and desires are shaped by a common sense of the good (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Joas 2001). This rejection of the distinction between purposive and normative motivations is crucial to examining the moral underpinnings of future aspirations. Moral standards, according to pragmatist theory, are also tightly linked to an individual's sense of personal identity, as "values originate in experiences of self-formation and self-transcendence" (Joas 2001, p. 1).

Third, pragmatists do not differentiate means and ends of action; they conceptualize these terms as "two names for the same reality" (Dewey 1922, p. 36). Means and ends can thus be analyzed as temporal sequences of "ends-in-view," emerging as ends and turning into means as they lead to the formation of new goals at the horizons of the imagination (Whitford 2002, p. 338; see also Gross 2009). This temporal, rather than analytical, distinction between means and ends allows me to examine how aspirations both motivate new lines of action and enable specific decisions or behaviors, combining the "culture as motivations" and "culture as capacities" perspectives (Swidler 1986, 2001; Vaisey 2008, 2009).

While pragmatism offers a fertile ground for theorizing about future aspirations, empirical applications of these concepts are limited. As Emirbayer and Mische write, "Projectivity needs to be rescued from the subjectivist ghetto and put to use in empirical research as an essential element in understanding processes of social reproduction and change" (1998, p. 991). I agree and here seek to explore how the projectivities of female students in Malawi are connected with their present actions and experiences. I use this empirical case to compare the pragmatist model of imagined futures, which posits that youth use idealized visions of their future selves to ascribe significance and moral stature to their present selves, with the rational choice model, which claims that youth use what they know about the present to select optimal future goals.

The Cognitive Approach to Examining How Culture Shapes Imagined Futures

Pragmatist theory provides a promising alternative to the rational choice model of aspirations. This endeavor also requires a wider and sharper lens for studying how culture shapes imagined futures; previous attempts to conceptualize cultural factors have been largely limited to crude measures of the influence of parents and peers (i.e., Picou and Carter 1976; Sewell and Hauser 1980; Morgan 2005).[11] For this purpose, I turn to cognitive sociology, which examines the link between interpersonal structures, including social networks and institutions, and internal mental representations (DiMaggio 1997; Zerubavel 1997; Cerulo 2002; Vaisey 2009). The cognitive approach to cultural meanings is particularly germane to studying future aspirations, which necessarily develop at the nexus of internal mental processes ("What should I be when I grow up?") and social institutions (such as schools and families). As Holland and Quinn state, "Many of our most common and paramount goals are incorporated into cultural understandings and learned as part of this heritage" (1987, p. 22).[12]

Cultural models provide an ideal tool for this purpose, as they integrate collective social dynamics and individual cognition into a single conceptual model. First developed by

[11]My emphasis on the cultural meanings surrounding actions and decisions is also consistent with the pragmatist theoretical perspective. As Gross writes, "Pragmatists insist that problem situations are always interpreted through cultural lenses…. Actors are enmeshed in webs of meaning that indicate the signification of the ends they are trying to pursue [and] constrain the choices they make by setting limits on the thinkability of means" (Gross 2009, p. 367).

cognitive anthropologists, cultural models bridge two opposing definitions of culture: external artifacts *of the world* and internal representations *in the mind* (Shore 1998). Shore describes cultural models as stocks of "shared mental associations [that] constrain attention and guide what is perceived as salient" (1998, p. 46). Based on evidence from cognitive science that the mind uses schemas to simplify and organize perception, the cultural models approach posits that shared experiences and resources durably shape schemas and thereby alter our minds (Holland and Quinn 1987; Strauss and Quinn 1997). In this case, the cultural model of bright futures can be thought of as a "recipe" (Shore 1998, p. 66) or a formula for achieving success.

In theorizing the relationship between institutional-level discourse and individual-level cultural schemas, I also build upon Becker's concept of culture work, which she defines as "the processes by which individuals and groups interpret and deploy parts of their cultural repertoires in changing environments" (1998, p. 467). Becker shows that within religious congregations, individuals actively draw upon cultural materials provided by church leaders as they interpret the shifting racial composition of their community and formulate solutions to problems related to these changes. I examine how young women deploy the bright-futures cultural model in order to frame and solve problems in their lives, both in terms of their educational plans as well as in other domains, including peer social hierarchies and marriage decisions.

Defining Identity and Morality

Identity is understood here not in the collective sense, as an expression of "groupness" (Turner 1999), but rather in the individual sense, as an expression of "self-understanding" (Brubaker and Cooper 2000).[13] Joas defines identity as a "communicative and constructive relationship of a person to himself and to that which does not belong to the self" (2001, p. 160). According to this perspective, identity is a continuously evolving narrative about the self, a "reflexive biography" (Giddens 1991, p. 55) that ascribes meaning to circumstances, experiences, and possibilities and articulates a coherent sense of the kind of person that one is (Taylor 1989; Joas 2001; see also Holstein and Gubrium 1999).

I follow the pragmatist tradition and consider morality as a core component of personal identity (Dewey 1922; Joas 2001; see also Taylor 1989; Hitlin 2003). Two broad definitions of morality currently exist within sociology (Hitlin and Vaisey 2010): first, as the content of standards of conduct and conceptions of "the good life" in a specific social context (Calhoun 1991; Hunter 2000; Smith 2003); second, as the evaluation of whether a certain behavior is right or wrong according to implicit standards of harm or fairness (Schwalbe 1990; Stets and Carter 2006). I use the term *morality* in the former sense and highlight how the aspirational

[12]The cognitive approach offers a scientific vocabulary and a more precise mechanistic framework for an idea that has a long history within both sociological theory and anthropology: that our social surroundings shape us by altering our patterns of thought. For example, Mead wrote of how comprehending the attitudes and beliefs of the "generalized other" and applying these beliefs to the "experiential field" of the individual are vital to developing a "full sense of self" (Mead 1967, p. 155). Boas described how cultural traditions shape people's "mode of thought" (1921, p. 205). Benedict (1934) theorized about how "patterns of culture" shape how people experience universal events such as grief and falling in love. These earlier theorists were heavily influenced by Freudian psychology, in which culture was located in deep recesses of the subconscious. As Shore (1998, p. 22) explains, the cultural models approach is based on an updated understanding of the link between culture and cognition; culture is understood not as a set of ideas that are *contained in* the mind, but as a fundamental *attribute of* the mind, altering the brain's neural networks themselves.

[13]Brubaker and Cooper propose that scholars abandon the term "identity" and instead use "self-understanding" (2000, p. 17). I have chosen to use identity in this article, for two reasons. First, I believe that lexical continuity is crucial in order to be able to build on and engage with other scholars who have used this term (e.g., Taylor 1989; Calhoun 1991; Giddens 1991; Holstein and Gubrium 1999; Smith 2000; Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje 2002; Hitlin 2003; Poulin 2009). Second, the term "self-understanding" connotes a diffuse and pragmatic awareness of one's abilities and traits, rather than a (for the most part) unified and idealized narrative account of the self that shapes decisions and actions, as identity does. As Calhoun writes, "Personal identity is more than just self-consciousness: we are not simply *aware* of ourselves; we *matter* to ourselves in very basic ways" (1991, p. 237). For lack of a better term and due to the clumsiness of writing about "narratives about the self," I use the term "identity."

identities asserted by the women in my study are at their core based on a specific conception of what it means for a young woman in rural Malawi to be virtuous.

In sum, I define *identity* as an individual's ongoing narrative account of who she is at present, modeled on the future self that she imagines becoming. I examine the personal process of constructing and communicating this model of selfhood, and focus particular attention on the extent to which these reflexive narratives are shaped by shared conceptions of future potentiality and standards of morality.

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES IN MALAWI: PROMISE VERSUS REALITY

Malawi is an ideal location for sociologists to recommence theorizing about imagined futures for two reasons. First, due to recent educational reforms and the ideological campaigns accompanying them, shared understandings of education are in a period of rapid and active construction and are thus more visible than would otherwise be the case. Second, the gap between aspirations and objective chances is particularly wide in Malawi, bringing the puzzle of unrealistic aspirations into sharper relief. The rational choice framework posits that those who construct unrealistic aspirations lack sufficient information to reasonably estimate probabilities of success; this is particularly hard to swallow in a context where less than 1% of the population attends college (UNESCO 2008*b*).

In 1992, the Malawian Ministry of Education launched GABLE, or Girls' Attainment of Basic Literacy in Education, which distributed fee waivers for primary school girls (Mundy 2002). Two years later, during the first few months of multiparty democratic rule, Malawi became the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to eliminate primary school fees for all students through the Universal Primary Education (UPE) Initiative (Stasavage 2005). Other countries in the region, including Uganda, Ethiopia, and Tanzania, later followed suit. Following the UPE policy, primary school enrollment exploded from 1.9 million in 1993 to 3.1 million in 1994 (Al-Samarrai and Zaman 2007). GABLE and UPE are also credited with increasing gender parity in primary schools (Kadzamira and Rose 2003). Both policies reflect the fact that Education for All emerged as a key policy goal among the World Bank, the United Nations, and other international nongovernmental organizations during the early 1990s (Chabbott 2003; Mundy 2007). In particular, increasing girls' access to basic education was touted as a panacea for solving various social problems including HIV/AIDS, persistent poverty, and child health outcomes (Vavrus 2003).

The GABLE and UPE policies were accompanied by widespread ideological campaigns emphasizing the "bright futures" now available to Malawian youth (Hau 1997; Wolf and Kainja 1999). As I show below, the benefits of schooling and the factors leading to educational success have been recurrent themes in newspaper articles, radio shows, and other media for at least the past 15 years. Many of these sources placed particular emphasis on expanding the opportunities available to the girl child (Mundy 2002). Schudson (1989, p. 160) states that the retrievability, or accessibility, of a cultural model increases when the model is institutionalized in public discourse or relates to recent dramatic events. Due to the dramatic nature of the GABLE and UPE reforms, and the rose-colored rhetoric surrounding them, cultural models of educational success are likely to be particularly salient in contemporary Malawi.

Despite this expansion of the primary school sector, however, attrition remains high in the later grades (fig. 3). According to recent data from UNESCO, if enrollment rates remain constant, out of 1,000 children who entered primary school in 2007, 309 will attend secondary school, 40 will graduate from secondary school, and only 8 will attend postsecondary education (UNESCO 2007, 2008*a*, 2008*b*). These figures should be viewed with caution, as school enrollment data are likely to be inaccurate, due to the resource-poor

education sector and the absence of widespread computer technology in Malawi. However, the trend that these numbers describe is indisputable: from primary school through to the end of secondary school, Malawian students leave school at alarming rates.[14]

The transition from secondary school to college is particularly unpredictable, due to the large number of eligible students vying for a small number of spots (Bloom, Canning, and Chan 2006; World Bank 2010). Malawi currently has the lowest proportion of the population enrolled in higher educational institutions out of 33 countries in sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank 2010). In 2007, fewer than 8% of students who entered their final year of secondary school later enrolled in a postsecondary education program, and most of that 8% attended a one-year certificate program rather than a university degree program (UNESCO 2008*b*). In order to attend college in Malawi, an applicant must score well above average on two tests: the secondary-school-leaving exam and the college entrance exam. Exemplary performance on both exams is necessary but by no means sufficient to secure access to a university education; in 2009, 5,355 students qualified for acceptance to the University of Malawi but only 1,152 were offered admission (University of Malawi 2010). The proportion of applicants meeting the criteria for acceptance who are denied entrance is considerably higher than the 79% suggested by these statistics, as unsuccessful applicants are encouraged to reapply the following year, creating a growing backlog of deserving students waiting at the university gates (World Bank 2010).

The GABLE and UPE policies, as well as the global Education for All initiative, were directed toward a very specific goal: expanding access to primary schooling among the poor. By increasing the number of students at the expense of the quality of education delivered (Chimombo 2005) and through redirecting funds away from the secondary and tertiary sectors (Bloom et al. 2006), the UPE and GABLE programs likely made a college education more distant for the average student, with more students vying for a relatively fixed number of slots. Despite the programmatic emphasis on primary schooling, however, the bright-futures rhetoric surrounding the reforms evokes images of careers such as medicine, banking, and the law, which are accessible only through university training. These ideological campaigns forged a strong link in the popular culture between expanded access to primary schools and later opportunities to attend college and pursue high-skilled careers, resulting in a wide gap between the actual opportunities provided by the educational reforms and the social imaginary surrounding them.

ANALYTIC STRATEGY

Qualitative Interviews

Forty semistructured interviews were conducted with female secondary students in two sites: a district capital in the central region and a trading center in the southern region. Table 1 displays the characteristics of the two regions, differences between the two secondary schools, and summary statistics of the sample. The bulk of the respondents (34) were currently attending the government secondary school in each site.[15] To gain the perspective of women with more limited educational opportunities, I also included six respondents who were not currently studying at the government schools but expected to return to school in the next few years: three living in the central site and not attending school at all and three from

[14]This high level of attrition can be attributed to three primary causes. First, the rapid implementation of the UPE policy with scant infrastructure in place resulted in a trade-off between quantity and quality: as enrollment swelled, schooling conditions worsened (Chimombo 2005; UNESCO 2008*b*). Second, the financial costs of uniforms, books, and school fees for postprimary education continue to pose a significant barrier for many youth (Munthali et al. 2006; Grant 2009). And third, the UPE policy's focus on the primary level pulled funds directly away from secondary and tertiary school sectors (Bloom et al. 2006; UNESCO 2008*b*).

[15]Formal schooling in Malawi is broken into eight years of primary school (standards 1–8) and four years of secondary school (forms 1–4). Form 1 is comparable to ninth grade in the United States, with form 4 comparable to twelfth grade.

the southern site attending night-school courses, two hours of instruction given after the normal school day. The southern region of Malawi is considerably poorer, with lower levels of educational attainment at all ages (World Bank 2010). The southern school site is a community day secondary school (CDSS), while the central site is a district-level secondary school (DSS). District-level schools are more selective than community day schools and are of considerably higher quality, with boarding facilities, nicer classrooms, and a larger proportion of certified teachers (UNESCO 2008*b*).

All interviews were conducted in Chichewa, the dominant language in both sites. Three interviewers were selected from a pool of applicants with prior experience in qualitative interviewing. To minimize the effects of the interview setting, I hired young women who were as close as possible to the status of the respondents, residing in nearby towns and possessing no postsecondary credentials. The interview guide was the product of several days of intensive training and discussion between the interviewers and myself. The interviews typically lasted between one and two hours, and most of this time was spent discussing imagined futures.

I was present for six of the interviews; analysis of excerpts coded in NVivo shows no notable differences between these six and those conducted by the interviewers alone.[16] We met daily as a team to discuss the interviews, and all interviews were recorded, translated into English, and transcribed soon after they were completed. To ensure consistent translation, five interviews were transcribed by two translators; the transcripts were compared and found to be almost identical in meaning. I reviewed all transcripts with the interviewers at the field site and clarified misunderstandings when necessary. I then read all interviews repeatedly and coded them in NVivo as themes emerged. The quotations chosen here were selected to represent themes present in multiple interviews. To preserve anonymity, each respondent was given a pseudonym from a list of common female Malawian names.

Archival Data

To situate the interview responses within a broader cultural context, I draw from a set of archival records, including nongovernmental organization (NGO) publications given to students to encourage them to attend school ($N = 5$), "life skills" school curricula ($N = 7$),[17] newspaper articles related to education ($N = 43$), and secondary sources discussing the ideological campaigns of the GABLE and UPE policies ($N = 3$). I read every issue of both of Malawi's daily newspapers, the *Nation* and the *Daily Times*, during June and July of 2009, and analyzed all articles having to do with education or offering advice to young people. I also collected all current and previous editions of life skills curricula for secondary school classrooms (seven volumes, totaling 672 pages) as well as NGO manuals disseminated to students during in-school visits (five volumes, 132 pages). To gain a historical perspective, I turned to past editions of the life skills curricula and secondary sources describing the GABLE and UPE ideological campaigns (Wolf 1995; Hau 1997; Wolf and Kainja 1999). Although no combination of sources could provide an exhaustive picture of the ideology to which youth in Malawi have been exposed, the high level of consistency across a number of these diverse sources suggests that they provide an accurate portrayal of national discourse on youth and education.

[16] I looked for differences in the duration of the interview, in the proportion of students admitting to having had sexual experiences, in the educational requirements of the aspirations that were given, and in the number of references to familial hardship.

[17] *Life skills* refers to an approach to HIV/AIDS education that delivers broader messages about interpersonal skills and psychosocial health, in addition to more specific information such as risk factors and methods for preventing infection. These curricula were written by the Ministry of Education in collaboration with USAID.

THE SEEMINGLY IRRATIONAL OPTIMISM OF MALAWIAN SCHOOLGIRLS

In this section, I use interview evidence to show that when viewed through the rational choice framework, the imagined futures of Malawian schoolgirls appear markedly irrational. Despite the immense structural limitations they face, all respondents describe highly ambitious career goals and express a sense of self-efficacy regarding their chances of achieving these goals. These optimistic expectations also lead to trade-offs between education and marriage that appear impractical when examined from the perspective of rational action. While the data presented here provide some insight into shared understandings of educational attainment, the cultural model will be explicitly outlined in the following section.

Ambition and the Role of Agency

All interview respondents imagine their futures in strikingly optimistic terms. Table 2 displays their expected careers; all require years of college-level schooling. There is no notable difference in levels of ambition between students attending the district-level school and those attending the inferior day school, indicating that this disparity in objective opportunities does not lead to variation in imagined futures.[18] No age difference was observed: the goals described by older respondents (those who were 18 or older) do not require a significantly different amount of additional schooling.[19]

These young women also express what appears to be an exaggerated sense of individual agency over their educational trajectories. When asked about potential barriers to achieving their goals, only 11 out of 40 respondents mentioned structural constraints such as lacking money or needing to stay home and help with family responsibilities (see table 3). In contrast, over two-thirds of those who answered this question offered descriptions of personal failures, including succumbing to peer pressure, lacking focus or discipline, and entering sexual relationships.

Considering specific responses in more detail yields additional evidence of this pattern. Often, assertions of self-efficacy directly contrast with statements contained in the same interview about severe financial hardship and other objective constraints. For example, when Memory describes her family, it is clear that they are suffering: both of her parents are dead, she lives with her grandmother, and one of her brothers is living in an orphanage because her grandmother is unable to care for all of Memory's siblings. When describing factors that will determine her likelihood of succeeding, however, she speaks of courage and determination instead of luck or sponsorship.

> *Interviewer*: How much schooling do you ultimately plan to achieve? And tell me why you plan to continue schooling up to this level. And what do you think it will take you to reach this level?
>
> *Memory*: I want to become a lawyer and I think it will take me a lot of courage to reach where I want, if only I will work hard I think I will make it. I will just have to work hard to achieve what I want, I think.
>
> *Interviewer*: If something was to stop you from schooling, what do you think it could be?

[18] I performed a one-tailed *t*-test comparing the two school samples in terms of the number of years of schooling required for each goal, reported in col. 6, table 2 ($P = .39$).

[19] I performed a one-tailed *t*-test comparing respondents age 18 or older to respondents younger than 18, for the number of years of schooling required for each goal, reported in col. 6, table 2 ($P = .32$).

> *Memory*: Only if I can be doing other bad things like having boy lovers, because I think I can be thinking about him instead of listening to what the teacher is saying and also when studying. (DSS: age 17)

Here, we begin to see a key element of the cultural model of educational success: the link between resisting the temptation of relationships and succeeding in school. According to Memory, if she continues to try her hardest and avoid "boy lovers," there is no stopping her from her dreams of law school.

Rebecca provides another example of this pattern. She has experienced three deaths in her immediate family (her sister, her mother, and her stepmother), and she often struggles to "find money for all of her needs." However, when asked what might prevent her from reaching her dream of getting a master's degree in agriculture, she states:

> *Rebecca*: Sometimes it happens that friends whom you can chat with, they can cause your education to be disturbed. You know, there are other people who have bad behaviors like disobeying the school rules, having sexual relationships; these are some of the things that destroy my future. (CDSS: age 17)

When we remember that less than 8% of students entering their final year of secondary school can expect to enroll in a postsecondary education program (fig. 3), these assertions of self-efficacy regarding scholastic trajectories seem even more implausible, if imagined futures are viewed from the rational choice perspective.

Investment in Education versus Marriage

Interview respondents consistently prioritize educational goals in relation to marriage, even while recognizing the drawbacks of delaying marriage. Marriage in early adulthood remains nearly universal in Malawi, and several respondents describe finding a husband as necessary to becoming a respected adult:

> *Alice*: We Malawians, we believe that a person can be respected only if she has married. Because if you don't get married, people can still call your first name, unlike a woman who has married—she is respected by being called her husband's name. (CDSS: age 17)

> *Rebecca*: Women who do not get married they don't get respect from people compared to those who have married in which they are always respected. That is why I will be married after finishing my education.

Continued investment in schooling is perceived as a potential threat to marriage, limiting women's marital prospects in two ways. First, committing to long educational trajectories may lead men to judge women as too old when they are finally ready to marry, and second, educated women are perceived as having too high a status relative to men. Evidence from the region suggests that these concerns are real: as women's levels of education rise relative to men's, the marriage market can be thrown off balance (Lloyd and Mensch 1999; Quisumbing and Hallman 2005; see also Bourdieu [2008] for an analysis of this phenomenon in rural France). Twenty-eight respondents (70% of the sample) mention this concern; several describe how this topic is discussed in newspapers and is the subject of gossip among friends. The following two excerpts echo common themes surrounding this issue:

> *Interviewer*: Do you know some women in your community who completed their education and struggled to find husbands?

> *Charity*: Yes, there are some of those.

> *Interviewer*: Why did they struggle?

> *Charity*: Because most men are fearing that if they can marry them, maybe they will be abusing their rights like shouting at them.
>
> *Interviewer*: What else?
>
> *Charity*: Sometimes men regard these women as older people so they don't propose to them. (CDSS: age 17)
>
> *Interviewer*: Okay, have you ever heard of women or to say girls who are struggling to find someone to marry?
>
> *Elisa*: Yes. Some who are very educated, this can happen.
>
> *Interviewer*: Can you tell me more about this?
>
> *Elisa*: I saw it happening, my friend, men don't ask her out because they say she cannot listen to what they want, and she could have boys saying she cannot say yes to them because they are below her, they just fear her anyway. (DSS: age 22)

Despite widespread recognition that marriage is requisite for successful adulthood in Malawi and that continued education poses a threat to marriage, nearly all of the women in my interview sample speak of delaying marriage for several years in order to pursue their schooling.

While women with postprimary education tend to marry later than their less educated peers, the vast majority continues to marry in their early 20s. According to the 2004 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), a nationally representative household survey, the median age of first marriage is 18 for all women in Malawi and 21 for women who have reached secondary school or higher (National Statistical Office and ORC Macro 2005). Among the women I interviewed, the average age at which they expect to marry is 27. Figure 4 shows the distribution in desired age at marriage reported by interview respondents compared with data from the 2004 DHS, separated into those who have reached secondary school and those who have not. While it is likely that the age at marriage will increase over the next few years (Mensch, Singh, and Casterline 2005), such an abrupt and dramatic shift in age at marriage is extremely improbable.

This passage from the interview with Judith demonstrates the common tendency for interview respondents to relegate marriage to the vague and distant future:

> *Interviewer*: Do you know when you would like to get married?
>
> *Judith*: No, I don't, but maybe 28. Because what is happening with me is that I know people who have finished secondary school and then want to marry, but that is not the case with me. I want to go on to college, have my own home first, and start working. I think that is when I will get married but I don't know when exactly. (DSS: age 17)

For those students who are on track for success in schooling and have the means to pay for further study, such devotion to schooling over marriage might be considered rational. Yet with marriage a near-universal social necessity and the chances of college admission extremely slim, this strategy appears markedly irrational for others. I present two cases for which a rational choice analysis would surely predict a greater level of investment in marriage than is empirically observed.

The first case, Thoko, is 23, and already in the minority as a single woman in her age group. Thoko is not currently in school; she dropped out of form 2 two years before participating in the interview. When asked about her schooling history, Thoko describes her struggles to stay in school despite money shortages and other setbacks:

> *Thoko*: I started at Mzulu Primary from standard 1 to standard 8. Form 1 I attended at [a district level] secondary school, two terms, night classes. Form 2 I started at [this school]. I only learned for a short time, because I did not have enough money. And then I went to [a private secondary school] to start my form 2 classes again…. I learned there but when I wrote my examinations I did not do well…. Since I did not have enough money I could not go back to school. (Out of school: age 23)

Relying on the limited financial support of a brother and an occasional cleaning job, Thoko lacks the resources required to return to school and struggles to feed her family. Achieving her goal of becoming a secondary school teacher appears unlikely: she is 23, is a single mother, and has not yet completed her second year of secondary school. Yet when asked about her expectations for marriage, Thoko replied that she would not consider potential husbands for many years, until she finished school.

> *Interviewer*: Okay, so can you tell me about getting married now? So when do you think you will get married?
>
> *Thoko*: I need to return to school first, only if I can finish schooling, then I will think of marriage.
>
> *Interviewer*: How many years do you think will go before getting married?
>
> *Thoko*: Maybe 5 years or 6 years time.
>
> *Interviewer*: If a man in two years time is there who you really like, who wants to marry you, what can you do?
>
> *Thoko*: I would tell him that I want to go to school first because I have suffered a lot. If I finish then we can get married.

For Thoko, scholastic success is highly improbable. Yet in the passage above, she explicitly rejects the idea of investing in marriage and emphasizes instead her commitment to further schooling.

The case of Mary also demonstrates the strength of young women's exclusive investment in schooling. Mary is 18, in her last year of secondary school, and plans to become a doctor. She is currently in a relationship with a man who is attending college for a degree in accounting. This is quite a catch by the standards of rural Malawi: accounting is one of the most coveted degrees, as it is perceived to more likely lead to stable employment than other university diplomas. Moreover, as Mary describes him, her partner is supportive and caring; she states that he "has never stopped loving me" and "never pressures me at all." However, when describing this relationship, she emphasizes its minimal impact on her life as a student.

> *Interviewer*: You also told me you have a boyfriend. Can you tell me more?
>
> *Mary*: Actually when I am here I don't think of my relationship much. We don't talk often, and he is not on my mind when I am here.
>
> *Interviewer*: So aren't you afraid that some girls might grab him from you?
>
> *Mary*: If that happens then I will be okay, but now is the time to focus on my schooling. (DSS: age 18)

Mary later makes it clear that she is not factoring this boy into her future plans either. When asked at what age she hopes to get married, Mary replies, "28 or 30 years … because I am sure by then that I will be through with my education and settled." Indeed, even though she seems to have an unusually promising prospect for marriage, Mary relegates marriage to the distant future.

Misplaced Ambitions, Irrational Investments?

These two cases show that the pattern of exclusive investment in education over marriage extends even to cases where such a strategy would appear to work against the individual's self-interest. The first is a woman who faces a very low probability of finishing her education and is currently struggling to provide food for her child, who nonetheless intends to delay marriage until a point in the distant future when she will have completed her education. The second is a woman in a relationship with a man who seems, from her description, to be a good candidate for a husband, but who works to keep her relationship on the sidelines in light of her devotion to her educational goals.

These findings are difficult to explain using a rational choice framework. If, as Manski (1993) writes, youth should be thought of as young "econometricians" considering multiple potential future outcomes and investing in the one that they predict will yield the greatest future utility, it seems likely that at least some of the respondents interviewed here would describe intentions to invest in outcomes other than their elusive dreams of high-powered careers. According to this model, youth should base their own chances of success on the experiences of their peers (Manski 1993). Considering that fewer than 10% of form 4 students proceed to universities, students should know that their aspirations are unlikely to be realized. Indeed, nearly all of the interviews reference siblings or friends who failed their exams or were forced to drop out, and many respondents are hard-pressed to think of women who progressed past secondary school. Yet not only do all students profess extremely ambitious educational plans; many also claim efficacy over their futures, which any comparison with the experiences of peers and relatives would quickly disprove. Further, under a model of rational "updating" of preferences, we should expect these unrealistic dreams to break down over time as young women discover the barriers to their success. Yet, no age pattern was evident, and, as Thoko's story demonstrates, even when a college education is all but impossible, respondents grip their educational aspirations as tightly as ever.

The trade-off between investment in marriage and commitment to education, and the fact that these women view sexual relationships as standing in opposition to schooling, is also difficult to understand from the perspective of Western models of educational success. The idea that one would postpone all romantic relationships until after finishing college would likely sound strange even to the most ambitious American youth. In order to understand the ambitions and investments described above, we must turn to an analysis of their cultural underpinnings.

A CULTURAL MODEL OF EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS

From where do these life plans emerge? To address this question, I now describe the cultural model of bright futures, constructed through a content analysis of the documents described above. I show that the cultural model of bright futures, cultivated by years of government policy, public outreach, and NGO programming, has directly affected the educational plans of interview respondents by shaping a powerful cognitive schema equating commitment to education with achievement of goals. Analysis of these documents yields the following formula, or recipe, for educational success:

Career Goal+Sustained Effort+Positive Thinking+Resistance to Temptation=Bright Future.

In the sections that follow, I outline each of these components, using both archival data and material from the interviews, and then examine the implications of this model for how youth

in this context envision and act upon their future goals. I also point to passages where respondents describe discussing the elements of the cultural model with their peers and teachers, demonstrating the extent to which this cultural model is continually renegotiated through social interactions.

Goal Selection: Role Models and the Power of a Career Goal

Youth in Malawi are consistently encouraged to identify specific career goals. These goals ostensibly provide a clear vision of how further education will shape their future lives, arming youth with the determination needed to remain committed to school in the face of challenging circumstances. For example, the first chapter of *Youth Alert Magazine*, a booklet published by Population Services International and disseminated to secondary school students around the country,[20] instructs readers to choose a career goal by completing a series of exercises, from listing their strengths to imagining themselves in 10 years. The *Life Skills Curriculum* for secondary school students also leads students through a set of activities designed to help them select a future goal. This passage concludes: "If you have clear and specific goals you will be less likely to fall into risky behaviors … because you will be focused and determined to reach your goals" (Malawi Institute of Education 2004, p. 38).

With little formal employment in the villages where most Malawians live, exposing youth to examples of careers is crucial to helping them to select future goals. Indeed, "role models" abound in the Malawian media. A weekly radio show that aired throughout the 1990s, called *Tsogolo la Atsikana* (Future of women), profiled women working in various fields (Hau 1997, p. 16). In 1996, a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded project promoting the GABLE policy distributed 100,000 copies of a comic book entitled *Etta Becomes a Nurse* to youth throughout the country (Hau 1997, p. 18). Multiple profiles of role models appear each week in the newspapers, spotlighting journalists, chefs, pilots, and meteorologists (e.g., Mpaso 2009*a*, 2009*b*).

In addition to providing models of adults in high-powered careers, the media also profile students who have clearly articulated goals and are working toward fulfilling them. Each issue of the *Weekend Nation* included at least three such profiles, with the subjects ranging in age from young children to college students. In each case, a picture of a girl is paired with a description of her goals. For example, Ruth Magalanga, a secondary student, writes: "I have an ambition to become a nurse one day and I know education is the only key to open the door into the future" (Mponda 2009). Those who strive, along with those who succeed, are depicted as exemplary.

Interview respondents consistently described their career goals as giving them strength and determination to remain in school. In most cases, the goals listed in table 2 were mentioned spontaneously in response to questions such as "Why do you like school?" or "What do you think is the importance of education?" rather than direct questions about career aspirations. Often, these career goals were also framed in terms of appeals to citizenship; respondents spoke of choosing their goal in order to help others, to contribute to the development of Malawi, and to ease suffering, as in the following interview excerpt:

Interviewer: Do you like school?

Bita: Yes.

Interviewer: Why?

[20]This magazine was published in Blantyre, Malawi, and has no publication date. It can be accessed at http://www.psi.org/sites/default/files/bcc_files/Youth%20Alert1.pdf.

Bita: Because I have a goal; I want to become a nurse.

Interviewer: Why did you choose to become a nurse?

Bita: I want to help other people, I am not happy seeing other people suffering, and I want to help government in increasing the number of nurses. (DSS: age 17)

In explaining the motivations behind their goals, many respondents also mentioned a desire to serve as an example for others in their community. Eritina describes her desire to serve as a "role model for other girls"; Rachel wants "to advise others on the importance of education"; and Bright describes how her family encourages her to go to school, so that she can "be a good example for other people in the village, especially men, who don't wish to send their girls to school." These excerpts emphasize the relational aspect of role models and show how cultural models are adapted and shared through social interactions (Shore 1998).

Sustained Effort: "No Sweet without Sweat"

After selecting a goal, students are encouraged to take full responsibility for realizing their chosen career. Several of the documents examined here emphasize that unwavering focus will eventually lead to success. Successful people profiled in the newspapers describe enduring years of adversity until, refusing to give up, they eventually triumph. Mische (2009, p. 701) writes of the need to consider the genre, or the "discursive mode in which future projections are elaborated." In this case, bright futures are expressed as narrative odysseys, using an oppositional mode of discourse. Those who achieve educational success are described as facing countless obstacles until, at last, through sustained effort, they achieve their goals. Maria Kaitano, a personnel manager at Stockbrokers Malawi, offers the following advice in the *Career of the Week* newspaper column: "When I look at myself I see achievement. Growing up it was not easy. I like to look back and see what I have done, acquired, or achieved…. Focus on God, hard work, seriousness and discipline have contributed to get me where I am today…. My advice to other women is that no one can take education away from you" (Chikungwa 2009). In another *Career of the Week* column, a pilot visits a school and encourages students to continue working hard, despite poor conditions and lack of sufficient food. Catherine Magalasi, a student at the school, is quoted as saying, "As a young girl I have learned a lot and I know that there is no limit to what I can do as long as I put all my energy into it. Life now is hard, but if I keep my focus I know I will succeed" (Mpaso 2009*b*). Meteorologist Elina Kululanga echoes these sentiments: "Life is always challenging and women need to come to terms with this reality and work extra hard. Anything is possible if one has spirit and continues trying" (Mpaso 2009*a*).

The idea that sustained effort and focus will eventually lead to success was a common theme in the interviews. Liness evokes a phrase printed on a sign by the side of the road, "School for me is about working hard, *no sweet without sweat*. When I don't study much, I don't pass. But if I work hard, in the end I will make it." This example shows that familiar slogans can enter into cultural models and shape individual cognition. Data from interviews also demonstrate how this element of the cultural model is discussed during social interactions. Several respondents described hearing advice from teachers or older peers about the link between effort and success:

Agnes: I have a certain teacher, she also advises me that no matter how long I will stay without succeeding, if I continue to try my hardest, one day I will find a way to succeed. (DSS: age 17)

Bita: I know a certain woman who is at Mzuzu University, she always inspires me to work hard, she tells me that a lot of people do not work hard at secondary school but they are just killing themselves … so please my dear, take care, life is what you make. (DSS: age 17)

While it is clear that effort in school increases a student's chance at success, the extent to which this cultural model links persistent effort with certain success is surprising, and helps to contextualize the claims of self-efficacy discussed above. As Holland and Quinn (1987, p. 25) explain, cultural models specify the causal relationships between sets of linked concepts. With phrases like "Anything is possible," "I know I will succeed," and "life is what you make," the bright-futures model establishes sustained effort as a *sufficient* cause of educational success.

Positive Thinking: "Believe in Your Future"

In addition to sustained effort, bright futures require unflagging positivity. Not only do Malawian students need to endure a long sequence of hardships, they must also never doubt that they will reach their dreams. For example, in the *Youth Alert Magazine*, music star Ben Michael is quoted as saying, "You must plan for a positive future, stand firm and don't look back. The road is sometimes rough and rocky but if you are strong and always believe in yourself, you can achieve anything" (p. 17; see note 20). The 2008 *Life Skills and Sexual and Reproductive Health Education* report contains this story: "Mwandida is a brilliant and well-behaved girl. She is ambitious and wants to become a pilot one day. Last year, her father passed away after a long illness. Two months ago, her mother passed away leaving her with her two sisters and a four year old brother. She is still interested in her schoolwork but her uncle insists that she drop out of school to look after her sisters and brothers. She is very worried, she does not know what to do" (Malawi Institute of Education 2008, 1:69–70). In the activity following the story, students are encouraged to offer suggestions for Mwandida and others like her who face stressful situations. A list of tips is provided on the next page and includes "thinking positively," "cultivating a positive mental attitude to problems," "assertiveness," and "planning for the future" (1:71). The implicit message is that if Mwandida could only keep her positive attitude, her trying circumstances would not get the best of her. A cartoon, also published in the 2008 *Life Skills Curriculum*, gives another example of the emphasis placed on positive thinking. The cartoon (1:3) reads:

> *Chikondi*: John, I want to pass the examinations and go to college.
>
> *John*: Impossible! You can't make it.
>
> *Chikondi*: I will work hard and pass the examinations.
>
> *John*: You can't make it even if you study all the time.
>
> *Chikondi*: I am confident I will make it…. All I need is the teacher's encouragement and support to see me through.
>
> *John*: Okay, we'll see.

Through repeatedly asserting her confidence, Chikondi convinces her male peer that she is capable of accomplishing her goal.

The need to maintain a positive attitude about the future was also evident in the interviews. Several respondents mentioned the need to maintain a high self-esteem. When asked why so many of her peers have dropped out of school, Rose replies, "I think it is because of lack of confidence. They don't believe in their future" (DSS: age 16). Describing what might prevent her from becoming an accountant, Chisomo cites "peer pressure." When questioned further, she says, "My peers usually would like to discourage me from pursuing an accounting course, citing reasons like I am just not good at it and it is better if I make a different choice" (DSS: age 18). Later, when Chisomo is asked about her academic performance, she reveals that she regularly struggles to pass her math exams. It is interesting to note that when questioned about what might potentially keep her from achieving a degree in accounting, Chisomo does not initially bring up her academic troubles, but focuses

instead on the discouragement of her peers. It seems that the risk posed by doubt is more potent than that of academic weakness. We can begin to understand Chisomo's reaction when we recall the definition of cultural models discussed earlier, "shared mental associations [that] constrain attention and guide what is perceived as salient" (Shore 1998, p. 47; cf. Gross 2009, note 7). The cultural model of educational success has filtered Chisomo's perception of her schooling experiences and shaped which aspects are perceived as threats. Academic performance, a key element of the American model of educational success, is perceived as less salient in this context, when compared to the risk of losing confidence in her potential.

Resistance to Temptation: "Sex Can Wait, but My Future Cannot"

An odyssey, of course, must have its trials. In the documents reviewed here, bright futures are threatened at every turn, as students struggle to withstand the powerful allure of peer pressure, early sex, drugs, and alcohol. Youth are encouraged to draw strength from their future goals in order to resist these temptations. For example, when *Youth Alert Magazine* introduces the topics of pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV/AIDS, the text repeatedly refers to the goals that students selected in the opening chapter. This passage offers one example: "As you have seen in the previous section, having sex before you are ready can create many barriers to reaching your goals…. These sections will also help you to recognize how dangerous to your bright futures these enemies really are. Think back to when you decided your career goal. Think about the career you put at the end of the bridge, the steps you need to take to reach that career and some of the barriers. If you got pregnant or made a girl pregnant now, what would the extra barriers be?" (p. 63; see note 20).

A poster displayed in the headmaster's office in the District Secondary School also demonstrates the power of future aspirations to deter youth from taking risks in the present. It shows a schoolgirl with her hand up, saying, "Sex can wait, but my future can not," to a trio of boys beckoning in the distance (see fig. 5). *Youth Alert Magazine* includes this statement from a student: "Sometimes I want to be one of the popular girls, but when I think twice about my future I do not take part. Concentrating on my studies is more important than being popular and doing nothing in class" (p. 8; see note 20). These girls are drawing on their future goals to resist peer pressure, a common term in the parlance of youth and, according to the cultural model, one of the most dangerous threats to their bright futures.

This risk of being tempted off the path of educational success looms large in the interviews. Respondents often talk of "peer pressure"; this phrase was used, in English, in nine interviews, and other respondents described the risk of "bad companies" and "popular girls." These influences lead to getting "tied up with simple issues," such as sexual relationships, beer drinking, not working hard at school, and spending money frivolously. Several respondents describe their commitment to education as giving them the strength to resist these temptations, as this example illustrates:

> *Bita*: Some students do not know how to fight peer pressure. They always wish that they should be like other girls who come from rich families, they select whom to associate with wrongly and that's what I always think I should not do. My education matters, in remembering this, I think I will achieve what I want. (DSS: age 17)

In these frequent references to the opposition between romantic relationships and educational achievement, we find evidence of how cultural models link schemas together through mental associations: discussions of schooling success often led respondents to mention peer pressure and sexual relationships, showing that these two concepts are connected in respondents' minds.

Bright Futures: "Education Is Light"

The year 1994 is commonly referred to in Malawi as the country's "New Dawn" (Posner 1995). After decades of autocratic rule, Bakili Maluzi became president, introducing a new era of multiparty democracy. Symbolism surrounding the "dawning" of democracy abounds: the national flag is a rising sun,[21] the currency is the *kwacha* (Chichewa for dawn) broken into 100 *tambala* (roosters). The UPE policy, signed in the first few months of Maluzi's rule, was linked to the new dawn and was said to lead Malawian children to "bright futures."

The metaphor has persisted: in newspapers, in NGO documents, in school curricula, and in the language of the students themselves, education is consistently discussed in relation to images of light and clarity, while the experiences of the less educated are discussed using language such as "bleak," "dim," and "blind." The *Nation*, one of the two national newspapers of Malawi, publishes a section every Sunday entitled Education Is Light. Save the Children, an international NGO dedicated to increasing access to education, runs a program instituting Bright Future Committees to encourage dropouts to return to school. In the Life Skills Curricula and *Youth Alert Magazine*, I found 26 instances of the term "bright futures."

This image was also evoked in the interviews themselves. For example, Liness declares that "knowledge is light" (DSS: age 16). Mary states, "Riches may evaporate while education brings light that will be with you forever. If you just work hard in school, your bright future will be yours" (DSS: age 18). On the other hand, Margaret explains that "if you don't have education, you suffer a lot. You live like a blind person who cannot see anything" (out of school: age 24).

The link between futures and light is an example of an image schema, a specific type of mental model that relates virtual concepts, present in the psychological domain, to actual images, present in the physical domain (Holland and Quinn 1987, p. 27). These image-schematic metaphors "have a special status in human thought" and serve as "organizing anchors" for cognition in various realms (Hampe and Grady 2005, p. 45). By relating an abstract concept to a visual image, image-schematic metaphors cause models to become more accessible and easily activated by the brain (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

WHAT WE LEARN FROM ASPIRATIONAL IDENTITIES

Irrationality Revisited: Aspirational Identities and the Tenacity of Optimism

Above, I presented three ways in which Malawian schoolgirls' imagined futures appear implausible from a rational choice perspective: (1) they choose strikingly ambitious goals while facing a very low probability of achieving them, (2) they view self-efficacy as sufficient to accomplish these goals, and (3) they relegate marriage to the distant future, even in cases where educational success seems extremely unlikely or they are involved in a promising relationship. After examining the cultural model of educational success, it is time to revisit these findings. When aspirations are viewed from the pragmatist perspective as assertions of present identity rather than as rationally calculated choices among an array of potential futures, these empirical findings become more comprehensible.

We cannot understand why Malawian youth construct such optimistic goals without examining the moral connotations of the cultural model described above (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Joas 2001; Smith 2003). As D'Andrade explains, cultural models that resonate with moral intuitions are highly motivational: "[The] cultural shaping of emotions gives

[21] In August 2010, the symbol on the national flag changed from a red rising sun to a white midday sun.

certain cultural representations emotional *force*, in that individuals experience the truth and rightness of certain ideas as emotions *within* themselves" (1995, p. 229). In the context of the Education for All initiative and the "universalization" of primary education, the cultural meaning of educational attainment has been dramatically transformed: it no longer speaks to an individual's inherited social status, but to her moral fortitude (Johnson-Hanks 2006). What is crucial to understand in this context is the extent to which aspirations are also ascribed moral significance. According to the cultural model of bright futures, striving for educational success is understood as choosing the path out of darkness and into the light. Those who have attained a high-status career, as well as those who aspire to do so, are portrayed in the media as role models.

The selection of a future goal is shaped not only by factors related to the outcome, but also by the social meaning of the goal, and what it says about the actor's place in the world. Independent of the ends to be achieved, the goal itself makes a statement about the person aspiring to it, and the zone of possibility in which she finds herself. The bright-futures rhetoric provides these women with a set of instructions for how to achieve their desired futures, and these instructions all hinge on their ability to sustain belief in their ambitious goals, even in the face of evidence to the contrary. By choosing a career requiring long-term investment, and by continuing to express confidence that they will one day achieve these ambitious goals, schoolgirls in Malawi are asserting to others that they have transcended the boundaries of their present lives and occupy an elite place in society where such long-term foresight is possible.

Keeping this concept of educational aspirations as assertions of identity in mind, let us revisit Bita's response to the question of why she likes school: "*Because I have a goal*, I want to become a nurse" (emphasis added). The relationship that Bita draws between enjoying school and having a future goal can now be understood as referring to the fact that by staying in school, Bita can claim the identity of one who aspires. This passage also illuminates how present reality is framed by future projectivities; Bita's vision of the potential future shapes her current attitude about school (Dewey 1922; Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

According to the cultural model of bright futures, a person's level of optimism plays a causal role in determining her chances of success in realizing her goals. Thus, in the minds of Malawian youth, success is linked less to intelligence and exemplary academic performance and more to dedication and perseverance. In this context, asserting self-efficacy is not about a realistic calculation of the probability of success, but a means of securing such success. By refusing to give up hope, according to the cultural model, they are moving a little closer to their dreams. If we consider education as an odyssey, then the experience of hardship does not diminish one's chances of success: it is merely a test of the strength of their will. Recall Thoko, who, when asked whether she would marry someone in the next five years even if she really loved him, replies, "I would tell him that I want to go to school first *because I have suffered a lot*" (emphasis added). According to the cultural model, Thoko's faith in her own ability to achieve her dream of being a teacher does not persist in spite of her suffering, but rather it becomes strengthened through hardship.

Finally, these women do not picture the future as a set of possible outcomes that can be compared through a cost-benefit analysis, but rather as a comprehensive image of the person they might one day become (Joas 2001). Indeed, when asked why she thinks she will get married at age 26 or 27, Joyce states, "Because I know that when I finish everything I want it will take me five or six years, that is when I will think of marrying. I think *my future is more important than marriage*" (emphasis added). The fact that Joyce compares marriage to her future, rather than to education or her career, is illuminating: it indicates that she is not

thinking of her future as a set of all events yet to occur, but rather as a specific sequence of ends in view (Whitford 2002), leading from her mundane reality to a transcendent potentiality.

The Contemporary Consequences of Aspirational Identities

If aspirations and expectations are not rational predictions of future goals, then why do they matter for scholars interested in educational mobility and life-course transitions? What type of "culture work" (Becker 1998) are aspirational identities performing for individual women, particularly in light of the fact that most of these plans will not be realized? Interview evidence reveals that in addition to shaping how they think about their educational chances, aspirational identities affect how these women frame and solve problems in two other domains of their lives: peer social hierarchies and marriage decisions.

First, adopting this identity offers respondents an immediate claim to moral superiority among their nonschooling peers (see also Johnson-Hanks 2006). Due to the limited number of high-skilled jobs in Malawi, only postsecondary credentials consistently lead to formal employment (Swidler and Watkins 2009). While respondents are already more educated than most of their age-mates, partial secondary school attainment delivers few tangible economic benefits due to an "over-supply of the workforce with primary and secondary education and under-supply of college graduates" (Chirwa and Matita 2009, p. 17). However, according to the bright-futures model, sustained striving toward a goal, in addition to eventually achieving a desired end, is morally significant. Because educational aspirations are framed as expressions of personal virtue, through asserting themselves as focused on optimistic career goals, even those with little chance of attaining higher level credentials can derive social benefits from their aspirations.

When respondents describe women their age who are not in school, they often use derogatory language: "lazy," "sitting back and waiting for their husbands to tell them things," "just staying and gossiping," "fighting all the time with others," "lacking understanding," "not able to add good points in conversations," "indulging themselves in immoral acts," and "not caring well for their children." In other words, respondents describe their peers who left school earlier than they did as morally inferior to them and thus establish social distance between themselves and their non-schooling peers. These women are articulating a social hierarchy based on effort and striving, a more finely graded metric than the economic hierarchy of educational credentials used in the workplace.

Second, the future that these women imagine for themselves provides a framework for deliberation about marriage and relationships. Above, I presented evidence showing that most of these women realize that by delaying marriage, they are pursuing a risky strategy that may ultimately make it harder for them to find a husband. They are also well aware of the fact that most of their peers fail to achieve the careers they strive for. Yet, when they are deciding what actions to take regarding marriage, they are not using available information to calculate the optimal route to achieving a desired outcome. Instead, their view of the potential future informs what "makes sense" for them to pursue in the present, in terms of both what seems morally virtuous and what seems practically efficacious (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Their decisions about marriage become imbued with the desire for a "bright future."

Education is an indicator of moral superiority in men as well as women, and most women hope to marry an educated man. Out of 40 interview respondents, 19 offered "educated" as one of the adjectives describing their ideal husband, and eight more mentioned in later discussions that they would like their husband to be educated.[22] Many respondents link their

ideal husbands' educational level to his potential to avoid beer drinking and cheating, and also to the likelihood that their marriages will be egalitarian.

> *Interviewer*: What kind of things do you wish your future husband should have?
>
> *Rose*: Someone who will be educated and loving, one who will not love going to bars to drink beer and sleeping around with other women.
>
> *Patience*: I wish my husband should be well educated, loving and understanding. Someone who will not beat or shout at me for anything that he wants.
>
> *Interviewer*: Why do you want an educated man?
>
> *Patience*: Because we will be helping each other and supporting each other in anything that comes. (DSS: age 16)
>
> *Interviewer*: Is there anything about the importance of school that you can tell me?
>
> *Margaret*: School is very important, for example we women, if we are not educated, we can get married to a less educated man, when he hits you, you still have to stay at home because you have nowhere to go, had it been that you are educated they could not hit you up because they will automatically know that you can rely on yourself.

In the following two passages, Linda and Alice explicitly draw upon their aspirational identities when describing their ideal marriages:

> *Interviewer*: Okay, thanks. Now, you have said that you want to get married someday, what would you like about your future husband?
>
> *Alice*: Because I wish to be nurse, he must communicate well with me.
>
> *Interviewer*: Why do you want your husband to be educated?
>
> *Linda*: We will be helping each other, always making plans together for everything, different from the [man] who did not go to school, he will be doing things ignorantly.
>
> *Interviewer*: I see.
>
> *Linda*: So with the uneducated men it is difficult. Also I need an educated husband because I know I will be educated and so I could not marry an uneducated person. (CDSS: age 17)

The bright-futures model shapes how these women think and act on their marriage prospects —an issue that looms large in their imagined futures yet is conceptually distinct from the ideological campaigns' emphasis on employment prospects. In the archival evidence, I found no discussion of egalitarian marriages; indeed, the only mention of marriage at all occurred in a chapter called "Child Protection" in the 2008 edition of the *Life Skills Curriculum*, which contained a paragraph about the need to "stop child marriages" (Malawi Institute of Education 2008, 1: 79). While gender empowerment is a consistent theme in the documents examined here, cultural models of egalitarian marriage appear to run through separate channels of discourse from models of future aspirations and educational success.

[22]Not all students prioritize educational attainment in their descriptions of their ideal husbands, however. Two respondents—both students at the more elite district-level school in the central region—explicitly stated that educational attainment would not stop them from marrying a man they really loved. For example, Grace states, "Education to me is not all that important but love is. You see you can get married to a very educated man but if there is no love it is very unlikely that you can enjoy your family." These exceptions offer evidence of an opposing cultural model prioritizing romantic love above all practical concerns (Smith 2009; Sølbeck 2010).

Yet, when Linda describes how she yearns for a marriage in which she and her husband will be "always making plans together for everything," she connects this ideal marriage with her unwavering confidence in her own "bright future," saying, "I know I will be educated." Alice again mentions that she wishes to be a nurse when explaining her desire to marry a man who will "communicate well." Here we find evidence for what Becker calls the "second stage of cultural innovation," in which the metaphors deployed to solve one specific problem have "a formative influence on how a host of other issues … [are] interpreted and acted upon" (Becker 1998, p. 467). These women are not just parroting slogans, but are creatively applying elements of the bright-futures model to other domains of their lives (Joas 1997).

In interpreting these statements, it is also crucial to keep in mind the alternative cultural model linking marriage and education discussed above, namely, that too much schooling may threaten a woman's ability to find a husband. Indeed, Linda admitted, "There are some women who struggle to meet men who went to school. It is difficult for an educated woman to marry an uneducated husband. Men may fear that woman because she is independent." Alice said that educated women in her community struggle to marry because "some men think that women who have completed their education and are working, they are grown up, don't need a man; in so doing these women have struggled to get married."

These two models—"educated women are more likely to secure an egalitarian marriage" and "educated women may have more trouble finding a husband because they are older and men may fear them"—are not mutually exclusive but suggest contradictory strategies of action. According to the pragmatist perspective, as women sort through these alternative models, their choice of which to adopt is contingent on the normative associations of the different models, as well as practical evaluations of different possible outcomes (Gross 2009). All of the women I interviewed chose to stay in school and delay investment in marriage; these decisions reveal evidence of deliberation and agency beyond the rational choice model. By distancing themselves from "schemas, habits, and traditions that constrain social identities, [individuals] reconstruct and innovate upon those traditions in accordance with evolving desires and purposes" (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, p. 984).

Contrast and Consensus in Imagined Futures

This study differs from most in that it is deliberately not comparative in the sense of comparing distinct social groups in order to assess and interpret differences in an outcome of interest. I have focused thus far on comparisons in the sense that Weber describes: between an "ideal-type" of instrumentally rational behavior and observed patterns of action (1978, p. 6).[23] In other words, my primary objective has been to compare interview responses with the ideal type offered by rational choice theories of youth as "econometricians." This is not because I think this ideal type is an accurate model of how future goals are constructed, but because it is, as Weber writes, a useful methodological device to detect noninstrumental forms of motivation: "By throwing the discrepancy between the actual course of events and the ideal type into relief, the analysis of the non-economic motives actually involved is facilitated" (Weber 1978, p. 21).

However, some patterned differences did emerge from the interview analysis, which can teach us about how the cultural model of bright futures spreads differently among youth. I examined two indicators of relative status—*family background*, measured as the highest level of educational attainment reached by a parent or current guardian, as reported by the

[23]This type of comparison, between observed behavior and how we would expect *homo economicus* to behave, also forms the theoretical bedrock of the burgeoning field of behavioral economics (Kahneman 2003; Camerer and Lowenstein 2004).

respondent (this family member was male in 39 out of 40 cases), and *schooling history*, measured as the number of years a respondent has repeated in school. Tables 4 and 5 display the results of bivariate analyses comparing these two status indicators with several measures related to imagined futures (a detailed coding scheme is provided in the appendix).[24]

In general, those of higher relative status—either students whose parents have higher levels of education or students who have experienced a smoother and more continuous schooling experience thus far—have richer, more elaborate visions of the future. They use more words when describing their future plans, are more likely to describe a sequence of multiple specific steps leading to their goal, and more frequently justify their aspirations by referencing advice from a friend or relative who has experience with their chosen occupation. In contrast, respondents whose parents have lower levels of educational attainment and those who have repeated several years of schooling are more likely to justify their choice of a career goal by referencing an abstract impression about that job, often in the form of observations made from afar about strangers who work in this field (e.g., admiring the uniform worn by nurses or wanting to be a lawyer in order to solve arguments).

Respondents in the lowest status categories for each measure were also less likely to express criticisms about their current school or teachers. In total, 16 respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their teachers or school facilities; all but two of these critiques were voiced in response to the interviewer specifically asking them whether there was anything about their schools that they would change. These critiques typically focused on one of three topics: teachers not being available for help outside of class, teachers showing favoritism toward male students in class, and limited resources such as books in the libraries or equipment for laboratory science courses. Overall, these criticisms were voiced as exceptions to a generally positive appraisal of their educational experiences. No respondent voiced doubt regarding their schools' potential to lead them to future success or skepticism of the Malawian education system's ability to really offer Education for All.

This lack of criticism of the bright-futures cultural model stands in direct contrast to the work of MacLeod (2009) and Willis (1977), both of which are based around the comparison of two groups of poor youth who hold distinct attitudes toward the educational opportunity structure presented to them. On one hand are those who accept the achievement ideology; on the other are those who reject the idea that education provides opportunities to all and who refuse to conform to school procedures as an expression of critical consciousness. In both cases, the latter group's critical assessment of the opportunity structure is incomplete; both groups ultimately blame themselves for their failure to gain skilled employment. Yet the question remains: Why don't we see this type of "partial penetration" (Willis 1977, p. 119) among female secondary students in Malawi?

One possible answer to this question is that all interview respondents occupy an elite category and that by sampling only those who have attended secondary school, this study includes only those least likely to criticize the opportunity structure. However, this explanation ignores the significant variation within the interview sample regarding current and past experiences in the education system. Six respondents were no longer formally enrolled in school, and 16 more were attending a low-quality community day school. Out of 40 respondents, 22 previously left school for at least a year, mostly due to lack of funds. Twenty-seven were forced to repeat at least one year of school because they failed end-of-year exams. With such variation in past and present schooling opportunities, we would

[24]Because most variables were either ordinal, bivariate, or continuous, polychoric correlation tests were used for all measures except for the categorical variable, indicating respondents' primary reason for dropping out of school, for which Fisher's exact test was used.

expect some women to express at least a partially critical view of the opportunity structure of education in Malawi.

A more convincing explanation for why the interviews contained no opposition to the bright-futures model relates to the recent trajectory of development efforts and educational opportunities in Malawi. Coming of age during the country's "new dawn," respondents were repeatedly exposed to political messages foretelling future prosperity through democratic governance (Posner 1995; Power 2010), and neoliberal policies promised to open the agricultural sector to the outside world and improve the lives of rural families (Khembo 2004). With UPE only 14 years old, these women rode the crest of the surge in enrollment throughout their schooling lives. They were the first to be offered free primary schooling, and the bright-futures campaigns assured them that their scholastic opportunities would be different from previous generations.

In this national context of forward momentum and ever-expanding imaginative horizons, ideological promises like the bright-futures model become more tenable, even if they contrast with present circumstances. Like MacLeod's "Brothers," who viewed the civil rights movement as opening up an unprecedented set of opportunities for black youth in their generation, secondary school students in Malawi "feel that they are part of a collective upward social trajectory" (MacLeod 2009, p. 130).[25] Indeed, Malawi's "new dawn" is an example of Swidler's "unsettled times," periods of social transformation when "ideologies proliferate, influencing action in powerful, direct ways" and offer "unified answers to questions of how humans beings should live" (2001, p. 99). During unsettled times, ideologies provide simplified, overt, and highly scripted models for action, which individuals are less likely to critically appraise.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have outlined a cultural model of educational success operating in Malawi and used this model to account for the unrealistic expectations that schoolgirls have for their futures. I showed that because this model portrays education as an odyssey with strong moral implications, future goals in this context are not selected through comparing benefits and likelihoods of different outcomes. Instead, by striving for such ambitious goals, these women are asserting themselves as forward thinking and morally worthy. Unrealistic expectations are not due to imperfect information—these women are painfully aware of the odds they face. But despite this awareness, they continue to strive for a college education because they associate unwavering ambition with a virtuous identity.

This analysis underscores the need for sociologists to consider alternatives to the rational choice model of future aspirations. I show that a pragmatist approach to studying imagined futures does a better job of explaining persistent optimism than does rational choice theory, and reveals new insights into how future potentialities lend meaning to present reality. Pragmatist theory emphasizes that imagined futures play a crucial role in shaping actions

[25]While this article is not primarily concerned with the institutional perspective of the UPE policy in Malawi, it is worth noting here that the bright-futures model solves a problem for schools and governmental agencies as well: it legitimates sustained belief in Education for All when only the most basic level of education is really available to everyone. Lacking the capacity to provide higher education for all able students, the state has not lived up to its promise of providing a path to a college education or high-status career for all who deserve it. But by portraying educational success as contingent on a student's faith and effort, the bright-futures campaigns shift the responsibility for educational failure from institutional shortages to individual shortcomings. A similar personalization of institutional inequities is well documented in the United States (Clark 1960; Hochschild 1996; Hochschild and Scovronick 2004; Young 2004; MacLeod 2009). MacLeod writes: "The achievement ideology … maintains that individual merit and achievement are the fair and equitable sources of inequality of American society. If merit is the basis for the distribution of awards, then members of the lower classes attribute their subordinate position in the social order to personal deficiencies. In this way, inequality is legitimated" (MacLeod 2009, p. 113).

and decisions in the present and serve as models on which youth fashion their present selves (Dewey 1922; Emirbayer and Mische 1998). An individual's choice of an aspiration is highly contingent on the moral implications of various possibilities, more so than the probability of successfully achieving various goals (Joas 2001). Also consistent with the pragmatist perspective is the finding that imagined futures both enable and motivate actions (Whitford 2002).

I have also demonstrated that it is possible to apply a nuanced understanding of culture to the question of how future goals and plans are constructed. These results suggest that the cultural models approach is a fruitful way to respond to Morgan's (2005, p. 213) call for theoretical models explaining how youth form beliefs regarding their future educational decisions. Indeed, it seems we must go further than the influences of peers, parents, and teachers, and consider how the shared meaning of education is collectively constructed. By examining a set of primary source documents, including NGO materials, school curricula, and newspaper stories, I have shown that rhetorical campaigns following widespread educational reform in Malawi exerted significant and lasting effects on this sort of shared meaning. In this way, state policy and NGO programming directly influenced the construction of the cultural models surrounding educational attainment, as well as schoolgirls' imagined futures.

Despite these theoretical and empirical contributions, this study suffers from some limitations. First, the data offer no way of ascertaining the extent to which aspirational identities offer protection against risks faced by young women in Malawi, including pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. In a context of high HIV prevalence, asserting aspirational identities likely provide women with a socially sanctioned mechanism for warding off unwanted advances from men. Poulin (2007, p. 2391) documents how women who do not wish to have sex "frequently claim being too young, or needing to finish school, as having a chibwenzi [boyfriend] would 'disturb their education.'" It seems probable that the virtuous identity of "one who aspires" offers young women more agency in deciding when and with whom to have sex. However, the data collected for the present study do not allow for an examination of this question, as all women interviewed claim the identity of one who aspires and negotiations within romantic relationships fall largely outside of the scope of the interviews.

Second, because my sample is limited to female respondents, I am not able to examine the gendered nature of aspirational identities. Much of the past work on how culture shapes imagined futures has focused only on young men (Willis 1977; Young 2004; MacLeod 2009; Harding 2010). The contrasts between my findings and those documented by Willis (1977) and MacLeod (2009) may also be due to the fact that MacLeod and Willis talked to young men, while I talked to young women. Past research in social psychology has demonstrated that female students in the United States and Canada are more likely to be motivated by the intrinsic rewards of education, or the personal satisfaction derived from educational achievement, while male students are more likely to be motivated by extrinsic rewards such as incentives or positive feedback (Ryan and Connell 1989; Vallerand and Bisonnette 1992; Vallerand 1997; Ratelle et al. 2004). These findings suggest that female students might be more likely than their male peers to be influenced by moralized models of educational success. A culturally informed empirical examination of differences in how men and women assert their aspirations would make a vital contribution to the sociological study of imagined futures.

Third, the cross-sectional nature of my interview data prohibits me from examining how orientations to the future change over time. Evidence from the United States suggests that failing to enroll immediately in a postsecondary institution, enrolling in low-quality two-

year colleges, and struggling academically in college lead to a "cooling off" or lowering of educational expectations over time among disadvantaged youth (Clark 1960; Brint and Karabel 1989; Hanson 1994; Rosenbaum 2001). Returning to the same site eight years later, MacLeod (2009) shows that the educational optimism espoused by the Brothers while they were in high school diminished as his informants endured years of limited employment opportunities and persistent poverty. However, Alexander, Bozick, and Entwistle (2008) examine changes in aspirations among a sample of predominantly African-American, low-income youth living in Baltimore during the 10 years following high school graduation and show that "holding steady," or consistency in expectations over time, was the modal pattern both 4 years and 10 years after high school graduation. Looking backward in time, Bozick et al. show that almost 40% of the same sample of Baltimore youth had already formed stable educational expectations by age 10, leading the authors to conclude that in the long run, "ongoing academic and interpersonal experiences *do not* modulate expectations" (Bozick et al. 2010, pp. 2046–47). The opportunity to reinterview the same women several years later would allow me to assess the extent to which the bright-futures model fades over time as these women come to terms with the lack of objective opportunities in Malawi, shedding new light on how shared cultural models are molded by individually specific experiences.

Although this research was focused on contemporary Malawi, it is likely that these findings could be extended to other settings. In the United States, we know that low-income students' educational aspirations are unrealistically optimistic and that their educational trajectories are considerably more constrained by resources and opportunities than such optimism would suggest (Schneider and Stevenson 2000; Reynolds et al. 2006; Alexander et al. 2008; Baird et al. 2008). There is also suggestive evidence that low-income students' imagined futures are sites of active cultural construction in the United States, much as they are in Malawi. For at least the past 10 years, government- and school-sponsored programs targeting low-income youth in the United States have placed a strong emphasis on the potential transformative power of optimistic aspirations. For example, High Hopes for College, an initiative introduced in 1998 by the United States Department of Education, worked to create partnerships and mentoring programs between colleges and middle schools, so that, in the words of President Clinton, "[Youth] can get the guidance and hope they need so they can know that they, too, will be able to go on to college" (Clinton 1998; U.S. Department of Education 1998).

More recently, a small but growing collection of charter schools, with names like Aspire, Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), and Think College Now, strive to help low-income students visualize going to college. At Think College Now Elementary School, "hallways, notebooks and T-shirts bear emblems of various colleges. In one fourth-grade classroom students are divided into groups named after Ivy League schools, and there is a sign on the wall that says, 'Am I making college-bound choices today?'" (Hardy 2010).[26] In September 2011, the public school district of New Haven, Connecticut, enacted Pathway to Promise, a comprehensive college-focused curriculum that runs from prekindergarten to the end of high school, with teachers spending six hours of classroom time each month "distilling the college message in their classrooms" and cultivating college and career ambitions in children of all ages (Bailey 2011). And a *New York Times* op-ed entitled "Why College Graduates Are Irrationally Optimistic" describes how as "American college seniors don caps

[26]In 2009, a *Newsweek* article profiling the KIPP schools described the organization's focus on promoting college aspirations for all students as "probably its most noticeable feature" (Matthews 2009). A webpage by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation promoting Aspire Schools stresses the school's "relentless focus—starting in kindergarten—with the idea that students will go to college, no matter the obstacles…. Before students can even diagram a sentence, they attend regular forums on the college experience" (see http://www.gatesfoundation.org/grantee-profiles/Pages/aspire-public-schools-early-college-high-school.aspx). In 2010, the Houston public school system implemented several key components of this "no excuses" charter school model, including "classrooms … festooned with college pennants," in their regular public schools; a similar program began in Denver in 2011 (Dillon 2011).

and gowns, more often than not [the commencement speaker's] message will be 'dreams come true … take chances … if you try hard enough you will succeed'" (Sharot 2011).

By examining the cultural models espoused in these settings and others like them, one could explore whether educational and career aspirations among poor youth in the United States are conceptualized as statements of moral identity. Such an analysis could help to explain why low-income American youth are so often found to be "absurdly ambitious" (Baird et al. 2008). These are empirical questions and would be an excellent place for cultural sociologists to reexamine the sources and consequences of future imaginings. At least in the case explored in this article, it is clear that cultural models shape educational decision making in ways that cannot be captured by frameworks emphasizing instrumental rationality.

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APPENDIX

Coding Scheme for Tables 4 and 5

This section provides a brief explanation, along with examples from the interviews, showing how each attribute of imagined futures in tables 4 and 5 was coded.

List of Specific Steps

Description

This code indicates that the respondent outlined a sequence of three or more actions that she would need to take in order to realize her goal. This includes applying to specific schools or degree programs, taking certain subjects in order to prepare for entrance exams, or attending multiple training courses required to achieve a certain rank within the profession.

Examples

Interviewer: Now, can you tell me about the future of your education, do you think you will be able to finish your studies to the level you aspire to reach?

Loveness: I believe I will reach my goal more especially if I am to improve on mathematics and physical science which I feel are the only obstacles on my way to achieving my goal. I think if I can find a tutor or ask the teacher to give me extra study questions for these subjects, then this will help. Then I will sit for my MSCE exams, then take the entrance exams. If I have a place at Bunda College of Agriculture, I will go and study agricultural science and I will apply for a position at the Ministry of Agriculture, as a crops officer. If I don't make it to Bunda, I think I will repeat the entrance examination, maybe I will go to live with my aunt in Blantyre and study there; there are many good schools in Blantyre.

Interviewer: And how many years ahead of you do you think are left before you accomplish your dream of becoming a soldier?

Lilith: I think I am left with a good number of years since I believe after joining the military you are sent for a training that about 2 years time and upon completion of the training I heard you are also supposed to pursue a professional course which can take 1 or 2 years.

Interviewer: What do you plan to do after next year?

Natasha: I want to apply at St. Marium in Mangochi.

Interviewer: St. Marium, what lessons does that school have?

Natasha: It is all about teaching. It is a teacher's training college.

Interviewer: Okay, where do you want to teach anyway, at secondary school or primary school?

Natasha: I would like much to teach at secondary school. But before teaching secondary level I will get my primary teaching certificate, then I will teach for some time, before going back for the secondary course. I will teach science at the secondary level one day.

Critique about School

Description

This code highlights passages in the interviews where respondents expressed criticism about their current school, related to teachers, or about facilities. The interview questionnaire included a question about what the respondent thought about teachers ("What do you think about your teachers?") and a question about the school resources ("What about the resources at your school?"). The majority of respondents expressed no criticism, either in response to these questions or elsewhere in the interview. Among the 16 respondents who did express a critical opinion about their current school situation, the critiques typically focused on one of three topics: specific teachers not being available for help outside of class (such as Agnes), teachers showing favoritism toward male students in terms of answering their questions in class (such as Thandiwe), and limited resources being available, such as books in the libraries or equipment for laboratory science courses (such as Joyce). In all cases, the criticisms were specific rather than general and were accompanied by positive appraisals of the school overall.

Examples

Interviewer: What about your teachers? Are they good or bad?

Agnes: I like all of them.

Interviewer: Do they treat you equally?

Agnes: Yes, they do.

Interviewer: What about the way they teach?

Agnes: What happens is that sometimes when they are teaching us, when we don't understand, and we ask, they tell us that time is running out, you should go and read on your own, so I find them harsh when they say this.

Interviewer: What about school resources? Is there enough?

Agnes: Yes, the resources for me are enough. Except for sometimes when we go to the library, the librarian tells us to come the next day, but when we go back we find him just playing *bawo* and when we call out to him he says come back tomorrow.

Interviewer: Okay, can you tell me now about your teachers—are they good or bad when they are teaching you, and how do you look at them?

Thandiwe: All the teachers are good, except in social studies we have a certain problem with the teacher who always favors the boys. It happens that we are

learning, and a girl wants to ask a question but the boys laugh at her, talking about her. So we ladies feel shy to ask questions.

Interviewer: So this normally happens in your social studies class?

Thandiwe: Yes.

Interviewer: What does the teacher do about this problem?

Thandiwe: He does nothing. He just sees it.

Interviewer: So what do you do so that you may not fail that subject of social studies?

Thandiwe: We do work hard on our own like going to libraries to borrow notes.

Interviewer: Have you ever told your headmaster about that problem?

Thandiwe: No.

Interviewer: So, what about your teachers, are they good or bad?

Joyce: To me they are good. The fact that there are not enough books should not make me say that the teachers are bad. That is the only problem I see with our, we don't have enough books in the library. The teachers don't lend us their books because they fear that they may get lost.

Reasons for Choosing Specific Occupational Goal

This code describes the justifications that respondents provide during the interviews for choosing their specific occupational goal. Shortly after naming their chosen occupation, respondents were asked, "Why do you want to become [specified career]?" In four cases, respondents were unable to provide a reason; for example, Charity said, "I don't know, I just always chose that job as my dream job." The other responses fell into one of three categories: an abstract impression about the job, a desire to help others or to aid in the development of Malawi, and specific information or advice from a role model, a friend, relative, or adult in the community.

Reason 1: Abstract Impression

Description

The defining feature of justifications that were coded as abstract impressions is that they conveyed a general lack of familiarity with the chosen profession. Abstract impressions emerged in two forms: vague information about the job that the respondent had either read or heard discussed by teachers or others in the community (see the passage below from the interview with Chimwemwe) or observations that the respondent had made about strangers who have that job (see Bright, Judith, and Linda). A uniform appears to be strongly symbolic of career success; a total of five respondents, including Bright below, cited the uniforms or clothing worn by people in their chosen profession.

Examples

Interviewer: Why do you want to become a nurse?

Bright: Because that job it interests me in the way of their dressing because they look smart, that is why I like that job. And they also have a spirit of helping the sick ones so that is why I like the job.

Interviewer: Where do you want to reach with your education?

Chimwemwe: I want to be a professor.

Interviewer: Why do you want to be a professor?

Chimwemwe: Because I know that it is one of the top positions here in Malawi. Here in Malawi it is the best position.

Interviewer: Do you have a professor who you know or do you just see other people doing that job?

Chimwemwe: I don't know anyone who is a professor, but I have heard of other professors.

Interviewer: Which job would you like to work?

Linda: A journalist.

Interviewer: What made you say a journalist?

Linda: It just pleases me if I listen to news bulletins, narratives that it happened like this or that.

Interviewer: Can you tell me exactly whom you admire most if you listen to the presenters?

Linda: It is difficult for me to remember one.

Judith: And then if I will succeed, then I will go to college.

Interviewer: So what course do you want to do at college again?

Judith: I want to do accounting because I envy those who tell me that they are accountants. Especially girls.

Interviewer: Okay, I see.

Judith: So I really want to try that because people say that accounting involves mathematics a lot. I want to try that.

Reason 2: Help Others

Description

The "help others" code identifies respondents who justified their choice of career through discussions of aiding the sick or disadvantaged or assisting the development of Malawi. This justification highlights the moral valence of future aspirations for Malawian adolescents; these respondents describe themselves as having chosen their career because it coheres to their understanding of what it means to be a good person. Careers that were justified in this manner include nursing, teaching, law, and medicine.

Examples

Interviewer: Okay, then if you really want to go back to school, what work or job do you wish to apply?

Thoko: I think a teacher.

Interviewer: What makes you choose to be a teacher?

Thoko: I want to help others in their learning, I think I would also know different behaviors of people who will be my students. I would also like to assist the development of our country, through teaching the youth.

Interviewer: So why did you choose to do nursing?

Agnes: Because I always see that a lot of people suffer when they are sick and I want to help them. Especially those pregnant mothers, they are the ones I target most because they are always treated harshly in the hospitals. I don't feel good, so I want to assist them.

Interviewer: How much schooling do you want to achieve in the end?

Patience: I want to become a well-educated doctor. This is all because I don't like it seeing other people suffering, I want to help them.

Reason 3: Role Model

Description

This code identifies respondents who justified their choice of aspiration by describing a personal relation who had that job, someone who had offered them counsel about their career choice. These role models were most frequently relatives, either cousins, parents, or aunts and uncles. Other respondents describe receiving advice from friends, teachers, and neighbors. As is evident from the examples below, respondents who mention a specific role model who has the career they chose frequently discussed their chosen job in more detail than respondents who justified their choice with abstract impressions or the desire to help others.

Examples

Tiwonge: I want to do Rural and Development Course.

Interviewer: How did you think to do community development?

Tiwonge: I heard that there are good salaries and the job is easy to find.

Interviewer: Is there someone who did this course who you know?

Tiwonge: My friend.

Interviewer: What did your friend tell you about it that made you choose this course?

Tiwonge: You know community and development, you do walk and meet different people. And you learn different things too.

Interviewer: Okay, now where do you dream of reaching with your studies?

Mary: I always dream of obtaining a master's degree in accounting.

Interviewer: What made you dream of pursuing an accounting course?

Mary: In fact I got inspired by my uncle who is an accountant, the way he enjoys his job inspires me a lot and I just can't help it but dream of being just like him upon completion of my studies.

Interviewer: Why do you think you will fail, then?

Edith: Because I might get sick before examinations, so maybe affected with that.

Interviewer: Why do you wish to become a nurse some day?

Edith: Because I envy my cousin who is a nurse right now, her name is also Judith. After secondary school, she went to KCM, Kamuzu College of Nursing, so right now she is a nurse at Malusa Hospital.

Interviewer: Okay, can you tell me anything that nurses do?

Edith: Yes, my cousin tells me a lot about how they treat the sick, especially children, giving them medicines and helping with childbirth and many other things.

Interviewer: What sort of things do you aspire to?

Loveness: I very much would like to work with the Ministry of Agriculture as a crops officer just like my mother.

Interviewer: Has your mother ever narrated to you as to what is involved in her job?

Loveness: Surely she has explained to me [that] her job, it involves studying crops. Whenever an outbreak case on crops comes, she is responsible for dealing with it. She also has the duty of advising farmers on better methods of farming.

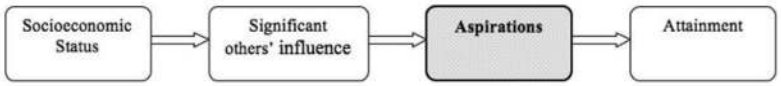

Fig. 1.
Wisconsin model of status attainment

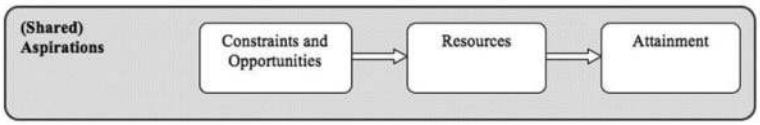

Fig. 2.
Resource allocation model

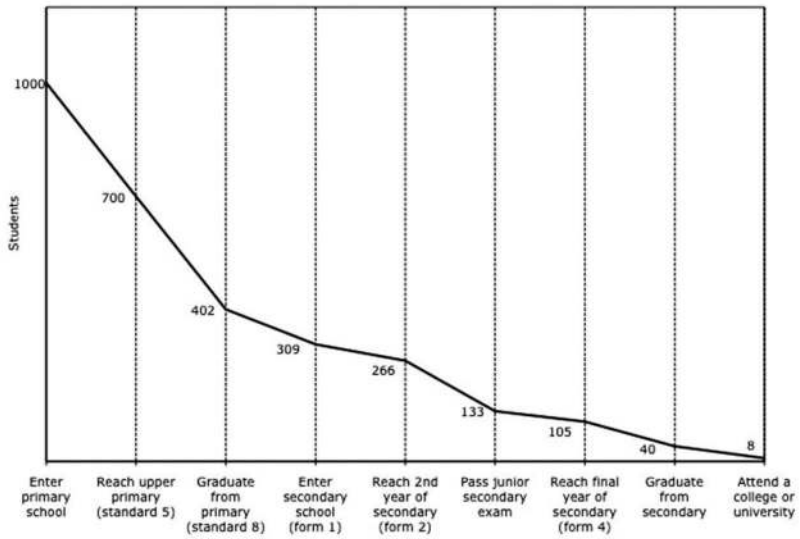

Fig. 3.
School attrition in Malawi. This figure was created using data provided by UNESCO for 2007, the year before the interviews for this project were conducted (UNESCO 2007, 2008*a*, 2008*b*).

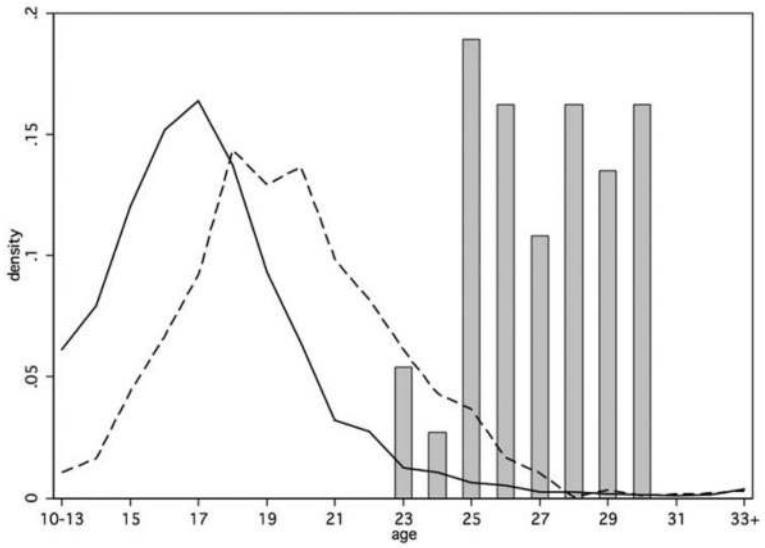

Fig. 4.

Expected age at marriage of qualitative sample compared with nationally representative data from the 2004 Malawi Demographic and Health Survey (DHS). The DHS estimates use weighted samples ranging in age from 15 to 34.

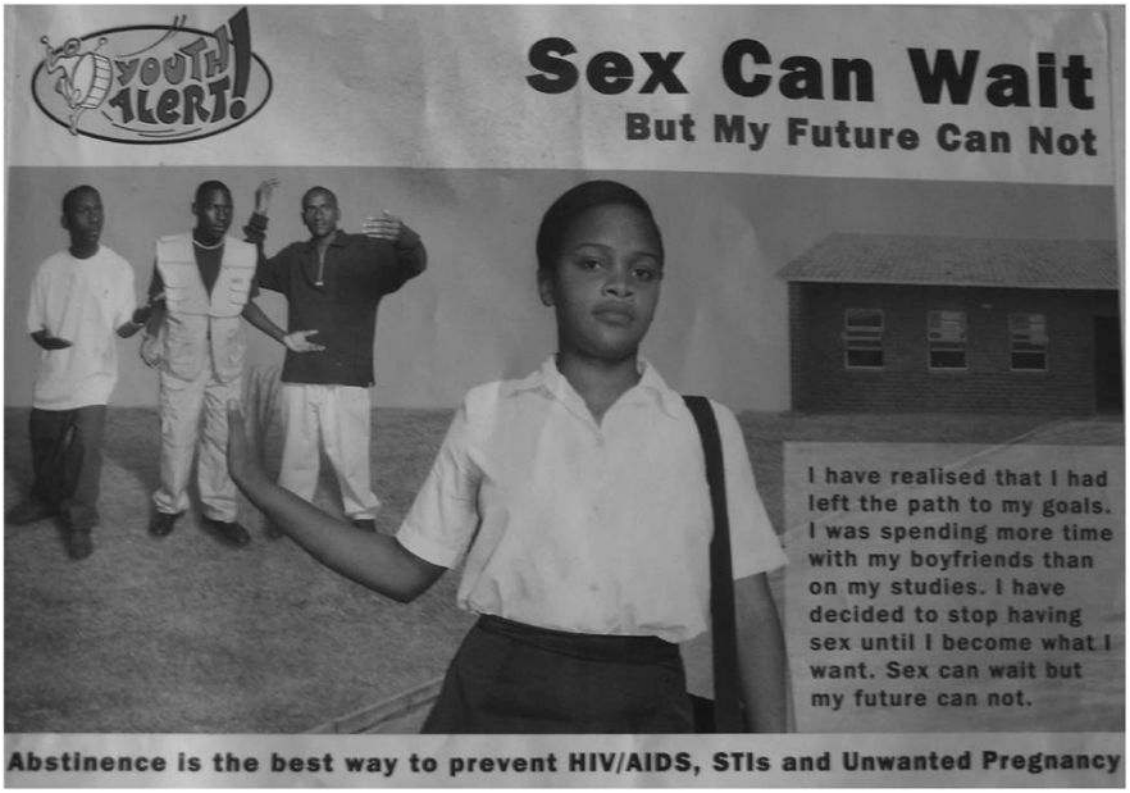

Fig. 5.
Poster showing a student inspired by her future goals to resist temptation. Photograph taken by the author in the main office of the DSS in the central region study site.

TABLE 1

Descriptive Statistics of Interview Sample

Characteristics	Southern Region		Central Region	
Regional:				
Religion	Predominantly Muslim		Predominantly Christian	
Language	Yao, Chichewa		Chichewa	
Marriage system	Matrilocal, Matrilineal		Patrilocal, Parilineal	
Educational attainment	Low		Average	
Poverty	High		Average	
	CDSS		DSS	
School:				
Entrance requirements	Lower		Higher	
No. of classrooms	4		17	
No. of teachers	10		35	
No. of students	256		680	
2007 female graduation rate (%)	16		40	
	CDSS	Night School	DSS	Out of School
Respondent:				
Age:				
16–17	11		11	
18–19	1	3	6	
20+	4		1	3
Average	17.81	18	17.5	22
Year in school:				
Form 2	1	1	2	2
Form 3	3		2	1
Form 4	12	2	14	

Note.—For the “Out of School” sample, “Year in school” reflects the grade that the respondent last attended. CDSS = community day secondary school; DSS = district secondary school.

TABLE 2

Career Goals of Students in Interview Sample

	CDSS (1)	DSS (2)	Night School (3)	Out of School (4)	Row Total (5)	Years of Education Required (6)
Nurse	7	6	2	1	16	2
Accountant	3	5			8	2
Lawyer		2			2	4
Military		1			1	1
Agricultural or rural development officer	1	1			2	1
Banker	1				1	2
Doctor		1			1	5
Journalist	1				1	2
Professor	2				2	6
Teacher			1	1	2	2
Unspecified bachelor's degree	1	2			3	4
No response				1	1	
Column total	16	18	3	3	40	

Note.—Values for years of education required were based on advertisements of certificate programs posted in the newspaper, and the website for the University of Malawi (http://www.unima.mw). For those careers (such as nursing or teaching) for which multiple levels of credentials are available, the lowest level was chosen.

CDSS = community day secondary school; DSS = district secondary school.

TABLE 3

Responses to the Question: What Might Stop You from Achieving Your Goal?

	Personal Failures	Structural Constraints	No Response	Row Total
DSS	11	4	3	18
CDSS	9	5	2	16
Out of school	2		1	3
Night school	1	2		3
Total	23	11	6	40

Note.—Examples of personal failures include being distracted by boyfriends, lack of confidence, insufficient effort, and succumbing to peer pressure. Examples of structural constraints include lack of school fees, death of parent, and inability to study due to family responsibilities.

CDSS = community day secondary school; DSS = district secondary school.

TABLE 4

Attributes of Imagined Futures by Number of Years Respondent Repeated in School

	Number of Years Respondent Repeated in School				
	3 or More	**2**	**1**	**0**	**Statistical Test (Polychoric Correlation)**
N	12	8	7	11	
Mean no. of words about aspirations	571.25	501.375	730.28	753.27	$\rho = -.32$
SD	290.91	162.74	302.76	341.28	(SE = .17^{+})
Mean no. of years required to achieve goal	2.73	2.57	1.89	2.83	$\rho = .07$
SD	1.56	.98	.35	1.33	SE = .23
Described detailed sequence of steps leading to goal (%)	0	25	43	55	$\rho = -.68$ SE = .13**
Critical attitude toward teachers or current school facilities (%)	17	38	57	63	$\rho = -.52$ SE = .18*
Reason for choosing occupational goal:					Fisher's exact test $P < .001^{***}$
Abstract impression (%)	67	25	0	9	
Desire to help others (%)	0	50	71	27	
Influenced by a role model (%)	8	13	29	64	
No reason provided (%)	25	13	0	0	

Note.—See the appendix for a detailed description of the coding scheme used to assign these categories.

$^{+}P = .10$.

$^{*}P = .05$.

$^{**}P = .01$.

$^{***}P = .001$.

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TABLE 5

Attributes of Imagined Futures by Parent or Guardian's Educational Attainment

	Parent or Guardian's Educational Attainment				Statistical Test (Polychoric Correlation)
	0–8 Years	9–10 Years	11–12 Years	12+ Years	
N	14	8	13	4	
Mean no. of words discussing aspirations	560.14	587.50	665.00	1071.5	$\rho = .45$
SD	262.96	198.49	335.97	238.07	SE = .13**
Mean no. of years required to achieve goal	2.57	2.38	2.54	2.75	$\rho = -.12$
SD	.94	1.06	1.33	2.21	SE = .25
Described detailed sequence of steps leading to goal (%)	7	25	38	75	$\rho = .62$ SE = .16**
Critical attitude toward teachers or current school facilities (%)	14	50	62	50	ρ=.47 SE = .18*
Reason for choosing occupational goal:					Fisher's exact test $P = .024$*
Abstract impression (%)	50	25	8	25	
Desire to help others (%)	14	50	46	0	
Influenced by a role model (%)	14	13	46	75	
No reason provided (%)	21	13	0	0	

Note.—See the appendix for a detailed description of the coding scheme used to assign these categories.

*$P = .05$.

**$P = .01$.