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TITLE: Consuming for an Imagined Future: Middle Class Consumer Lifestyle and Exploratory Experiences in the Transition to Adulthood

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Abstract: This paper analyzes middle-class consumption and lifestyle during the transition to adulthood in the United States. Most research on how class shapes consumption focuses on adults, and more recently, children and adolescents, yet consumption and its underlying sociological drivers during the life course stage that demographers call “emerging adulthood” have been under-examined. Based on our analysis of qualitative data, we argue that middle-class emerging adulthood is marked by a distinctive embodied consumer orientation toward accumulating “exploratory experiences.” These experiences are sought for the knowledge that they provide, which becomes a potential source of cultural capital now and in the future. This orientation is rooted in a habitus developed during entitled childhoods, and is shaped by an anticipated shortage of opportunities for exploration after they marry and have children. Our analysis introduces a forward-looking model of consumption, in which emerging adults consume exploratory experiences for both their current and future selves.

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Most consumer and sociological research on how class shapes consumption focuses on adults (Henry 2005; Holt 1997a; Peterson and Kern 1996; Thompson and Tambyah 1999). There has also been a recent turn to research on children (Cook 2008; Pugh 2011) and adolescents (Allen 2002; Cody 2012). Yet little of that research has focused theoretically on the transition to adulthood as a distinct life stage. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus provides an implicit mechanism connecting childhood to adulthood—dispositions acquired in childhood become taken-for-granted templates for consumption in adulthood (1984). The dearth of studies on this transition implies that both tastes and practices are relatively stable throughout adulthood. We problematize this assumption and argue that while habitus may be relatively stable across the life course, manifestations of the habitus in consumption practices are not.

Our research focuses on the lifestyles of young adults in the middle class who are in the life stage between college and marriage that demographers and psychologists call emerging adulthood. We find that middle-class young adults have a distinctive and theoretically important consumer orientation toward “exploratory experiences,” experiences that are learning oriented and based on socialized dispositions toward the experiential. The consumption of exploratory experiences is driven by a forward-looking consumption process: they imagine and anticipate that in the future their lives will become more settled and their experiences more domestic. While both exploratory and domestic experiences are normatively desired, they are emically viewed as antithetical. To resolve that tension, emerging adults have a distinctive embodied orientation towards hyper-consuming exploratory experiences now to sustain them through their imagined, settled futures.

Through the analysis, we articulate how the findings contribute to consumer and sociological research on consumption, life stage, and status. Beyond detailing what exploratory

experiences are and why they are so valued by the middle classes, we theorize how this consumption creates cultural capital and reinforces inequality. Moreover, we introduce a forward-looking model of consumption where people consume not only for their current selves but for their imagined future selves as well.

## **EMERGING ADULTHOOD AND CONSUMPTION**

Recent scholarship has identified a psychologically and demographically distinct life stage between adolescence and full-fledged adulthood that psychologist Jeffrey Arnett (2006) calls “emerging adulthood,” a time of autonomy and exploration. This characterization best describes the experiences of those in the middle class, who enjoy an elongated period of independence from their parents before they marry and have children of their own. The poor and working class, by contrast, are less likely to marry, more likely to become single parents, and face constraints rather than opportunities. Neither consumer researchers nor sociologists have examined the implications for lifestyle of this classed transition to adulthood. We find that middle-class consumption during this stage has distinctive features that warrant theoretical development. In the following section, we first describe what is known about class differences in emerging adulthood, and then offer our unique consumer lifestyle perspective.

### **A New Stage in the Life Course**

By just about any metric, the transition to adulthood is taking longer than it did a couple of generations ago. Youth in the US and Western Europe are taking longer to achieve the

traditional milestones on the road to adulthood: to leave the parental home, complete school, get a job, marry, and have children. The order in which these transitions are completed—if they are ever completed—has also become more varied. The most significant life course change among Americans under 45 is the rise of living arrangements that involve neither nuclear family nor extended family. An extended term of living independently between leaving the parental home and marriage has emerged (Fischer and Hout 2006, chapter 4; Furstenberg 2010; Furstenberg et al. 2004).

Psychologists describe this new stage of emergent adulthood as a period of exploration, in which self-focused individuals reformulate identities and explore broadened possibilities. In this respect, emerging adulthood shares features of adolescence, as both are periods of identity formation and role confusion (Erikson 1980). However, emerging adulthood is both demographically and experientially distinct (Arnett 2000). Most adolescents have completed none of the traditional milestones on the way to adulthood, whereas most middle-aged adults have accomplished all of them. Emergent adulthood by contrast is fluid, with tremendous variation in family, school, and work transitions. In public opinion polls, young adults tend to view marriage and parenthood as “life choices rather than requirements, as steps that complete the process of becoming an adult rather than start it” (Settersten and Ray 2010, 22). This fluidity opens up extensive arenas for identity exploration, such as work, college, travel, and intimate relationships, in the context of relative independence from parents (Rosenfeld 2007).

Although a prolonged transition to adulthood occurs across social classes, the mechanisms driving it differ. Middle to upper class young adults enjoy a period of exploration and a broad range of possibilities for developing their educations, careers, and identities. Meanwhile, working-class youth experience increased responsibility and constraint. For them,

childhood disadvantages compound into adult liabilities, and their subjective experience is often one of growing up faster (Côté and Bynner, 2008; Furstenberg 2008; Johnson and Mollborn 2009; Silva 2012).

Marital trajectories exemplify the class differences that underlie seemingly similar trends. The traditional “education gap” in marriage has all but disappeared: women with higher educations are now equally as likely as others to marry (Livingston and Cohn 2010) and soon will be more likely to marry (Goldstein and Kenney 2001). The timing of marriage has also converged: about half of Americans are married by age 28, whether or not they have college degrees. The education gap in childlessness is also closing: from 1994-2008, childlessness declined sharply for women with postgraduate degrees, but rose for those with less than a BA (Livingston and Cohn 2010, 2013).

This apparent convergence, however, belies contrasting mechanisms and sequences. For Americans with higher education, marriage almost always comes before children. Very few have a child out of marriage (9%), and most describe their children as planned (71%). By contrast, half of women with a high school diploma have a child outside of marriage, and more than half say their children were unplanned (Edin and Kefalas 2011; Pew 2010). Economic factors in part drive these trends. A new wealth gap has emerged in marriage rates: well-off individuals are more likely to marry; this is especially true for men (Schneider 2011). Although the desire to marry does not vary by class, the premium placed on financial security does: lower-income and less-educated Americans are much more likely to say that ability to support a family is essential to being a good marriage prospect (Pew 2010).

Thus, the typical middle-class young adult, having a higher education and financial resources, is destined for a traditional life course sequence—first leaving the parental home, then

completing education, then marriage, followed by children. These transitions however happen later than they used to, and the period of living apart from parents and before marriage (or cohabitating, which is increasingly common) has gotten longer. Demographers highlight the economic utility of these changes, particularly for high-status women, for whom delayed marriage and childbearing enables advancing their educations and careers (Somers 1993; Vitali et al. 2009). Our work focuses on the implications of these changes for consumer lifestyle.

### A Consumer Lifestyle Perspective

There is strikingly little scholarship in either demography or consumer research on contemporary consumption in relationship to the life course. Demographers have sophisticated methods for studying timing and sequencing of life course transitions such as marriage and childbearing, but rarely consider consumption to be a relevant domain of inquiry. In turn, consumption scholars have developed a robust literature on social position, tastes, lifestyle, and consumption in adulthood (Henry 2005; Holt 1997a; Peterson and Kern 1996; Thompson and Tambyah 1999). Left unexamined and under-theorized are the distinctive drivers, manifestations, and effects of consumer lifestyle during the transition to adulthood. To fill this gap, we draw on Bourdieu's conception of practice. Practices, according to Bourdieu, "can only be accounted for by relating the social conditions in which the habitus that generated them was constituted to the social conditions in which it is implemented" (1990, 56). We conceptualize emergent adulthood as the set of social conditions experienced at a particular stage in the life course, and the orientation of our informants towards exploratory experiences as the manifestation in practice of the middle-class habitus during this stage.

Little consumer research has examined the transition to adulthood, particularly through the lens of lifestyle. One widely cited article by Murphy and Staples (1979) argues that changes in family composition and lifestyle warrant a reexamination of assumptions about the “family lifecycle” in consumer behavior. Their analysis—now nearly 35 years old—does not recognize emerging adulthood as a life course stage, although they do briefly discuss a “bachelor” stage. A recent call for “life course perspectives on consumer behavior” laments that, while “marketing researchers have recognized the importance of prior life experiences in shaping patterns of consumer behavior during later stages in life, they have inadequate theoretical and methodological bases for investigating consumption-related issues over the life course” (Moschis 2007).

Recent research has begun to redress this gap. For instance, substantial research over the past 25 years has focused on understanding child consumers (Johnson and Mollborn 2009), although much still needs to be done (Cook 2008). Focusing on the family unit, Epp and Price (2008) develop a framework for studying the multiple ways in which the marketplace mediates individual, dyadic and family identity projects during the full-nest stages of the family life cycle. And examining later life course stages, Schau, Gilly, and Wolfinbarger (2009) analyze the evolving and dynamic identity projects of retirees and reveal that retirement is a time of renewal and identity renaissance rather than linear decline. Yet few studies focus on consumption practices and dispositions during emerging adulthood, nor have they examined how people might consume with a long-term imagined future in mind.

Our study examines emerging adulthood for the middle class through the lens of consumer lifestyle. The subjects of our study exhibit a distinctive, embodied attraction to exploratory, learning-oriented experiences. Sociologists note that delays in marriage and



childrearing provide opportunities for investing in work or education for a more secure financial future. Our research reveals a lifestyle orientation toward the future that encompasses investing in particular forms of experiential consumption. This disposition produces homologous practices across a broad range of domains—from travel to dining to home furnishings, as well as jobs and even intimate relationships. Seeking out experiences comes naturally to young adults whose well-rounded, middle-class childhoods have been filled with enrichment activities. But hyper-accumulating exploratory experiences in emergent adulthood is not simply a continuity of childhood; it is based on imagined futures of settled domesticity, in which opportunities for exploratory experiences are emically expected to recede. Such perceptions of the future, regardless of their veracity, motivate consumption in the present.

In addition to advancing consumer research on the tastes and practices of this demographic, we also contribute to theories of how consumption reinforces inequality. Building on extant research on class and consumption, we argue that the experiences our informants accumulate during emergent adulthood provide embodied knowledge that could be deployed to their advantage in the future. In other words, exploratory experiences have the potential to become cultural capital transposable to other contexts across the life course.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

Data are drawn from interviews with 18 emergent adults in the middle class. Our selection criteria for “emerging adults” were that respondents should be young (22-33) and have an independent family status: that is, be residentially and financially independent of their parents, but without dependents of their own. All but three were unmarried. Our selection criteria for

“middle class” included having a college degree, and either full-time employment or full-time enrollment in graduate school. This approach yielded a sample of respondents who are middle class in terms of occupation as well. Most of our respondents grew up in households that meet sociologist Annette Lareau’s definition of middle-class children as having “at least one parent employed in a position that either entails substantial managerial authority or that draws upon highly complex, educationally certified skills” (2002, 751). Likewise, our respondents either occupy such positions themselves, or are on a work or educational trajectory that will likely yield such positions in the future.

These demographic and socioeconomic profiles make our respondents useful informants for understanding middle-class consumption during emerging adulthood. Financially and residentially autonomous yet lacking spouses or children, they have fewer responsibilities and community ties than do those at other life course stages and from other social positions. This provides an opportunity to understand consumption choices as individuals are forging their own lives and have the relative freedom to spend time and money as they wish.

Participants were recruited in one medium and one large city to take part in a study on post-college life. They were told that the study’s purpose is to find out what young people are up to in the time between college and marriage. A variety of techniques were employed for recruitment, including electronic postings, requests during face-to-face interactions, and snowball sampling over a three year period between 2005 and 2008. Potential respondents were initially screened based on age, marital status, and social class, but care was taken to find both range and redundancy across age, gender, and experience through the recruitment process.

Interviews were loosely structured and employed a combination of phenomenological (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1990) and long interview techniques (McCracken 1988). The

data set also includes some supplemental observational data and home photographs that were either brought to the interview or requested afterwards. All interviews were conducted by the first author. Interviews started with “Tell me about yourself.” Participants were encouraged to provide a general life history, describing their lives from growing up to the present. They were also asked to imagine their lives in five years. They were not initially asked directly about experiences that they sought; instead, informants brought up things that they do, have, and want in the course of talking about their lives. Follow up questions were asked to probe further on the meanings behind their actions, desires, and goals as well as their material and experiential consumption. Interviews purposefully did not focus on one type of experience, but rather allowed consumers to talk about a broad range of experiences in order to understand the salience of experiential consumption in their lives. This cross-experiential orientation of our research also facilitates a better understanding of the relationships between experiential and material consumption choices.

Data collection was intertwined with analysis over an extended period, allowing emergent themes to guide subsequent interviews. Data analysis began with grounded theory techniques common in the field of consumer culture theory research (Corbin and Strauss 2007; McCracken 1988; Spiggle 1994). Sampling and interview techniques were refined as unexpected categories—namely, future-orientedness and expected experiential shortage—emerged. Once exploratory experience emerged as a core theoretical construct, the three married individuals were included as boundary cases of young adults with more settled lives: both Tammy and William experienced an elongated unmarried period before marriage, while Donald is religious and married shortly after high school. As the future-orientedness of consumption became apparent, questions were added to the end of interviews to probe this orientation. Some

respondents were led through sentence completion tasks, using stems such as “This is the time in my life to...”

Our analysis proceeds as follows. In the first section, we begin at the emic level by describing our informants’ manifest tastes and practices to support our argument that middle-class emerging adults are oriented toward consuming exploratory experiences. In the second section, we move to an etic level of analysis to understand why these experiences are focal; we argue that they are tacitly valued because knowledge from them has cultural capital potential. In the third section, we show how this exploratory orientation rests in tension with settled expectations for their future lives. Finally, in the discussion we introduce a model of future-oriented consumption and reflect on the social implications of this consumer lifestyle.

## **FINDINGS**

The word experience derives from the Latin *experiential*, to try. Both the noun and verb forms signify trial or knowledge gained through participation or observation. Consumer researchers have found that people are attracted to intangible experiences for their psychological benefits, such as feelings of fun (Holbrook et al. 1984), happiness (Nicolao, Irwin, and Goodman 2009; Van Boven 2005), escape (Belk and Costa 1998; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Kozinets 2002; Kozinets et al. 2004), and even productivity (Keinan and Kivetz, 2011). There is also evidence that certain co-consumed experiences provide feelings of communality (Arnould and Price 1993; Holt 1995; Van Boven and Gilovich 2003).

Historically, privileged young adults have been oriented towards experiential consumption. Most emblematic is the eighteenth century European grand tour, standard fare for

single, upper class, young English men and later women, completing their social and cultural educations (Black 2003). Today, researchers also find patterned differences in how people from varying social positions value and consume intangible experiences. Certain types of experiences, such as arts attendance, provide cultural capital, with effects ranging from educational attainment to marital selection to institutional closure and racial exclusion (DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; Ostrower 2004; Shaw and Sullivan 2011). Holt (1997b, 1998), in an application of Bourdieu's theories of taste in an American context, found that the valuation of intangible experiences creates symbolic boundaries between Americans with high cultural capital and other socio-economic groups. The young adults in this study are also drawn to experiences of a particular kind: exploratory experiences. In the next section, we describe the exploratory experiential orientation. We then connect this orientation to the forms of knowledge that are at the core of these experiences and that form the basis for cultural capital accumulation.

### Orientation toward Exploratory Experience

Our informants' lifestyles revolve around what we call exploratory experiences, which are directed towards learning and novelty, and tend to take place away from the home. Thomas is emblematic of this orientation. He is 32 and grew up on the East Coast in a professional middle-class family, with a pediatrician father and psychologist mother. His parents, he reports, encouraged him to learn, to value family, and to pursue a career that suited his interests. He attended a highly ranked public university far from home, graduating with a degree in political science and history. After an extensive job search, he took a position with a tutoring company in a tropical locale, for which he worked in multiple countries. There, he became interested in

nonprofit management and moved to Canada with a girlfriend to obtain an MBA. Subsequently, he moved (single) to a large American west coast city to take a job in publishing. He currently works in development at a large non-profit.

Thomas spends much of his time and money engaging in exploratory experiences outside the home. He participates in sports: he is a member of a running club, rides his bike (finding new routes online), and is learning to surf. He volunteers: as a tutor at an organization for refugees and low-income immigrants, as well as serving on that organization's board. He participates in intellectual endeavors: as a member of a "culture club" that brings in speakers and hosts classes. He dines out: searching for new restaurants with varied types of cuisine through websites. His urban locale (and a steady income) provides ample opportunities to explore, as he notes:

T: It's incredibly easy on foot or on a bike to explore so many different places. I live off of Z Street, and there's an amazing amount of restaurants and things to do. And little things such as my running club or the culture club. It's like a way of feeling as if you have access to college classes, even though you're not in college. They are just little seminars for an hour—I've gone to things on water conservation; they have one on food, security that is very relevant to my job, baseball, just all sorts of things. So it's a little more eclectic and fun than college, but it's just a good way of keeping your mind engaged. Little things like that are easier to come by in the city.

Later Thomas brings up the types of restaurants he frequents:

T: Nothing fancy at all. A basic place where I live is this restaurant called Thai House, but there are a variety of different, different foods. There's just so much to take advantage of here. My running group goes out after every track workout, so we'll do a different place every time, whether that's pizza or crepes or Indian food or whatever.

Thomas' preference for urban living is nested in the variety of exploratory, learning opportunities that city living affords. The cultural club provides an array of educational lectures for him to attend. Similarly, when asked about the types of restaurants he goes to, he enumerates a range of ethnicities and styles, and he describes "do"-ing different places, a verb often used to describe productivity (Keinan and Kivetz 2011), but also a synonym for travel and exploration. This indicates that he seeks more from these restaurants than physical sustenance after a run.

Hillary, age 28, also seeks out exploratory experiences. She grew up in a middle-class family in New England and attended a private university close to home. She moved to Washington DC, without a job, on an ideological quest to "save the world." She struggled to find work she liked, but ultimately lived there for five years. After visiting a friend in a west coast city, she discovered she loved the weather and the lifestyle, and decided to move there "on a whim" (although she lined up a job first). Since she only knew one person there, she started a wine group and a book club through postings on Craigslist. Through these groups, she made friends and learned about the city, hosting events at different retail venues. She also goes on group hikes, belongs to a running club and a relay team, is training to be a tour guide, and is planning to attend the opera with a young professionals group. While she currently works as a contractor for a planning firm, her true passion is history. She is looking for a new position as a museum guide. She too is oriented toward consuming an array of exploratory experiences outside of the home.

While the content of these activities varies, all of our informants seek out experiences that fit our inductively derived category of exploratory experience. These practices are a form of cultural omnivorism, a voracious consumption style among the middle classes that embraces both highbrow and popular activities (Peterson and Kern 1996). Most omnivorism research

focuses on preferences within particular domains of cultural consumption such as music (Bryson 1996), reading (Zavisca 2005), or arts (Sintas and Álvarez 2004). However, preferences tend to manifest in similar ways across domains both within the field of consumption and beyond (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998, 4). The locus of exploratory experiences is consumption; however, the exploratory experiential disposition produces homologous practices across a range of types of market and market-supported activities—including work, residential moves, and romantic relationships, as well as dining, entertainment, and travel.

Consuming exploratory experiences, we argue, is the lifestyle manifestation of the omnivorous habitus during emergent adulthood. Our qualitative data illustrate omnivorism in practice, unlike much of the sociological literature, which is based on quantitative analyses of surveys of preferences. As Holt (1998) notes, high-cultural-capital consumption is distinguished not so much by the categories of goods or genres consumed, as by the consumption practices that embody taste.

When we move from preference to practice, we see that constructing an omnivorous lifestyle based on a broad array of experiences is effortful. More than just expressing likes and dislikes (as in a checklist on survey), developing competences requires planning, juggling, time, and money (Arsel and Bean 2013). Exploratory experience embodies a taste for challenge. While many of the exploratory experiences that informants seek are enjoyable, informants describe the work involved; they often put themselves in challenging positions by seeking exploratory experiences. Linda makes it a goal to leave the country at least once a year despite having the most limited budget of all informants. She discusses the places she would not like to visit:

AU1: What makes [a vacation destination] a ‘no go’ on your list of places to go?

L: I guess it just doesn’t feel like a challenge. I’m kinda done with Europe. I’ve been



there so many times that it doesn't feel like a challenge anymore. Asia feels like a challenge. I mean any place where you have to get inoculated against like crazy deadly diseases, that's the challenge. But, Canada just kinda feels like, having to drive 8 hours to go to Canada. I'll just stay in America.

Sometimes individual exploratory experiences, like the vacation Linda describes seeking, can present a challenge. At other times challenges are met when exploratory experiences are bundled together, for instance moving to a new city, dating someone new, joining a new club, and getting a new job all at once. Hillary describes the challenge of pushing oneself in multiple new domains:

H: ... I mean it's hard moving to a new city; you have to be on all the time... it's hard to relax and have people that you just can be with. In that sense, being home is obviously, your parents like you no matter what you do, so it's easy to relax. But... moving to a new city, it's tough to make it a home and establish the links and friendships and stuff.

Later when discussing her moves she says:

H: ...It was pretty scary. You're kinda out of sorts and you don't really know a lot a people and it's kind of just, oh, what did I do?

AU1: Is that a good scary or is it a bad scary?

H: It's a good scary. It's good to challenge yourself, and there's not a lot a people who do—you understand why people don't move often, why they stay in one place a lot, 'cause it's scary to pick up and go somewhere new where you don't know anybody. But, the same time it's a good scary. I don't know....

Hillary seeks a balance between accumulating experiences and the comforts of familiarity. While she has little contact with the ones who never left her hometown, she compares herself to them

and the comfort she imagines one would feel in foregoing the challenge. This is a problem of privilege, no doubt, but a problem nonetheless perceived by these middle-class young adults.

Exploratory experiences have what Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre (1989) call flow, a balance between ability and challenge. Participants embrace challenges that they perceive as achievable: learning to surf, enrolling in wine classes, attending concerts, or traveling to foreign countries. Activities and bundles sought out are neither outside their abilities, nor so easy that everyone does them. The goal is not simply to check experiences off a checklist. Instead, the focus is on working through and learning through experiential challenges. This finding calls into question the claim that such young adults are in a period of “arrested adulthood,” delaying commitment and just enjoying the hedonic (Côté 2000). While some experiences are fun, our informants’ reflections on these difficult exploratory experiences demonstrate that a deeper form of knowledge cultivation is occurring.

The taste for challenge indicates that not all types of experiences are equally valued. Omnivorism is broad but not democratic: it is a marker of contemporary cultural capital precisely because it is based on distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate styles of consumption (Warde and Gayo-Cal 2009; Savage and Gayo 2011). The rationales our informants do *not* offer for why they like living in cities are telling. They do not offer ideological rationales such as a belief in new urbanism. They do not seek out familiar experiences like going to national chain restaurants around the city. And they do not discuss the vast selection of material goods that are available for purchase in the city’s shopping centers. For emerging adults, the omnivorous orientation does not extend to consuming material objects and is focused mainly on activities outside of the home.

## Orientation Away from Domestic Consumption

For young adults accumulating exploratory experiences, the material only supports the experiential. This orientation is apparent in Nalya's narrative as she describes moving across the country:

N: I had nothing. I just moved there with clothes. So my roommates and I would buy a \$30 couch off Craigslist. We would try to kinda sparsely furnish. We moved into this three-story row house. It was so ideal, like what you would think in your mind, it was just really cool. But we had like no furniture. So I had to buy a few things, a mattress and stuff like that. But, we slowly filled it up through used furniture, like hand-me-downs. Some people were from the area, so they had parents there. So it was a very bachelorette, weird lifestyle.

Linda, a single 25 year old who works in an office, and is a stagehand/set designer at the local theater, also describes moving without things:

L: And then when I moved, I needed more stuff. I mean I didn't have any kitchen stuff, no furniture; I got rid of the bookcase and the futon frame, because my studio has a loft bed with bookcases on the side and everything. It's awesome. And I just happened to be working at a place where my coworker had access to all this leftover furniture. (Laughs) So, I got like a couch and a chair and a little table,...and they're so uncomfortable and they're just so horrible. Pretty much everything is secondhand in my apartment.

AU1: Did you have any of that, had you bought any of that stuff before? Even in your former houses, all your other addresses?

L: No. I've always moved into furnished places. And that was very deliberate, because I

didn't want that stuff. Because it still sort of freaks me out a little bit that I have all this stuff, and that I've been here for so long. I only got here seven months ago, but this is the longest I've lived anywhere since I graduated from college. And... (sigh) it's a little weird. I feel a little settled, and I don't necessarily like that feeling. Although I'm getting used to it. But I think part of the reason that I like the secondhand stuff, not only because it's cheap and I can afford it, but that I can just toss it out if I would need to. Nothing is particularly special. Give it away.

While both respondents see their behavior as “weird,” we observe a pattern of resistance to permanent domestic accumulation and the cultivation of a stylized home. Even respondents who do not move as often as Linda want to feel like they could if they wanted to, and couches, matching dishes, drapery, and bedroom sets could tie them down. Unlike the global nomads that Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould (2012) describe, they do own some material things that ground them. However, instead of buying matching furniture that will last for years, they buy “disposable furniture” either used or from places like IKEA or Target, which they keep until they move and then resell or give away. As a result, few domestic items are accumulated, and furniture often lives in cities longer than people do.

For our informants in the emerging adulthood stage, being ascetic is more than an aesthetic. Buying a couch from a thrift store or having an empty refrigerator signifies experiential opportunity because such things do not appear to tie them down. Holt (1998) observed that consumption of material objects has low salience for those with high cultural capital. In our data, an aesthetic of decommodified, non-mass-market, artisan goods also prevails. However, Holt's high cultural capital informants had thoughtfully curated their homes with durable items that, while not mass market, they imagined to be permanent. Here we see

something quite different. While our informants' underlying tastes might not be far from those of their parents, the things they choose to accumulate and the meanings they assign to them differ. Perhaps this is why they imagine their consumption as "weird." Material objects and domestic activities receive a smaller share of both wallet and heart (Day 1989) than do exploratory experiences.

Some do own or are considering purchasing a home. However, homeownership for this group does not necessarily imply domesticity or a commitment to place. Zach owns a house, yet he described wanting to live in a variety of places during the interview. AU1 asked him about the apparent contradiction:

AU1: You mentioned that you want a job that would send you places internationally.

What would happen if your company says we've got an opening in England...

Z: Uzbekistan?

AU1: Or, Uzbekistan, yeah? What would you do with the house?

Z: Rent it. It's close enough to the university. I plan to hold onto it for a pretty long time, actually.

AU1: Whether you stay here or not?

Z: Yeah. The reason I bought around that area is because there is a viable rental market, and the house is just going to continue to appreciate. I'd really like to get a couple more, but I really don't have the cash flow for that right now. But think about it: I'll always have a place to retire if I want to. And if I need money, I can just flip it and get a couple hundred thousand dollars out of it at any time.

AU1: Wow.

Z: So it's kind of nice like that. It's just an extra layer of security. And while I think some

people look at mortgages as a big ball and chain and shackle that you attach yourself to, well I'm stuck with this crap forever...if you look at it from my standpoint, it's almost like a security blanket. You know I can always sell it, get out from under it and make money, and I can always come back here. It's nice.

For Zach, the house is an economic investment, not a constraining lifestyle commitment. Other informants, in this time just before the 2008 economic downturn, also justify their house purchases as something that can easily be sold or rented if another opportunity comes along.

Owning a house also does not necessarily mean filling it with long-term furnishings. John, a 26-year-old manager who works at a large technology company, bought a large house as both dwelling and investment. While the size of the house suggests a lifestyle commitment, the inside of the house tells a different story. He says, "There are some rooms that I haven't even touched. It's way too big, 2000 square feet. I just never furnished some of my rooms." John has chosen not to make this house a home—it is simply the place where he sleeps and stores his things.

Our informants are not anti-consumption: they are not ideologically committed to a lifestyle that reduces or questions material consumption (Cherrier 2009). Certain items are carried from place to place—clothing, books, photos, gear to facilitate experiential activities, and special personal items. And, they do not anticipate that this orientation will last forever. Still, informants create the opposite of what McCracken (1989) calls homeyness, eschewing the meaning behind the comfort that this cozy, settled aesthetic conveys. Things take up space, making them potential obstacles rather than facilitators of this exploratory, experiential lifestyle.

Accumulating Knowledge through Exploratory Experiences

The exploratory experiences to which our informants are attracted help them to cultivate and embody knowledge that has the potential to become cultural capital. These experiences are not necessarily explicitly sought for these purposes, and their potential as cultural capital may not be realized until later in life. The forms of knowledge gained from exploratory experiences are threefold. First, certain types of intensive exploratory experiences provide our informants with a legitimate claim to an *insider's perspective*. Second, breadth of experience through exploration encourages *adaptability*. Finally, exploratory experiences produce a stock of stories with *narrative potential*. We document each of these types of knowledge in turn.

*Insider's Perspective.* Many exploratory experiences provide an emic sense of an insider's perspective in a domain not previously mastered. Thomas reflects on his time living and working abroad:

T: It was a great experience. Mainly, just getting the opportunity to live in another country, in another culture. It certainly wasn't the Peace Corps, and nothing was altruistic, but it was great just being immersed in three very different cultures. And the nice thing about teaching is that the teachers take you under their wing a little bit, and you really get to see, both from the students' and the parents' view, much more about the society, the pressures that they go through. And just life. It's very different than going on vacation there.

Although mastery produced by prolonged engagement is desirable, more important is seeing as a local, which produces a sense of legitimate knowledge in moving beyond the tourist gaze (MacCannell 1976). As a result, when traveling they seek to go off the (perceived) beaten path, to maximize interaction with and observation of locals and gain a deeper understanding of a

place. They might go on but do not actively seek things like cruises and beach vacations to stereotypical working class or family destinations, because they are not perceived as educational, exploratory, or distinctive (unless ironically, see Ollivier (2008)). Of course, their aversion to typical tourist destinations and taste for an insider's perspective is in itself a typical touristic disposition among experientially oriented consumers (Thompson and Tambyah 1999). As Hedegard (2013, 19) concludes in a study of capoeira tourism in Brazil, "quality of participatory experiences...may be a new means of differentiating and status claiming."

The insider's perspective is most salient in travel experiences, a hallmark of cosmopolitan "willingness to engage with the Other" (Hannerz 1990, 239). However, insider perspectives can also be gained through consumption practices closer to home. Any setting that can be constructed as an Other worth engaging can become a source of insider knowledge. For example, our informants would prefer not to surf just once to say they did it; rather they would try to understand surfing from a surfer's perspective, even if just taking a few lessons at a local beach. Opportunities to acquire insider knowledge are also "spatially embedded" in gentrified neighborhoods (Zukin 1990), in which ethnic restaurants' survival depends on their appeal to gentrifiers' taste for both variety and authenticity. Insider knowledge of music or film can also be "emplaced" via expressions of taste that signify knowledge of local contexts of production. Such experiences are valuable because "elites use place meanings to indicate which objects signal high status cultural capital" (Cheyne and Binder 2010).

*Adaptable Skills.* Our informants seek exploratory experiences that provide them with knowledge that can be adapted and transposed across contexts. At work, for example, internships allow these young people both to learn what a job is like (insider's perspective), and to gain



some knowledge of work environments that they can carry forward to future, different jobs. But this orientation towards learning to be adaptable extends beyond work. Alexa (26), who moved into her older boyfriend's condo but pays him rent and "treads lightly" in making design suggestions, describes developing competencies through her relationship:

A: I think that [helping him shop for furniture] was a learning experience that I never would have predicted, and a great growth for our relationship.

AU1: How was it a learning experience?

A: Looking at houses in general, it's not necessarily the buying the stuff, but just driving around every weekend and walking in and looking at places, and even the frustration of getting lost. Because we were trying to hit so many in a certain amount a time, and, you walk in and there's all these people there, and all this stuff, and it was a lot like teamwork and communication and stuff like that.

Alexa treats living with a boyfriend for the first time as a learning experience from which she can learn important relational skills like teamwork and communication, even in mundane activities with her partner. Notably, in reflecting on what she learned from this experience, she does not focus on the specific domain of setting up house, but on general skills of communication and teamwork. Such skills could be useful beyond intimate relationships, to the extent she can transpose them to other social or work settings.

Challenging experiences are seen as particularly valuable precisely when they produce skills that can be adapted to new situations. This comes through in the narrative of Maria (27). After graduating from a Seven Sisters college, she joined AmeriCorps (a service organization for college graduates) despite her parents' concern about the low pay. She describes why she would recommend the experience:

M: I realized whatever situation I get into, I can figure out how to support myself. And especially when you're working with homeless populations, and, you're like, okay here I am crabbing because I can't go to Starbucks, but I still have a roof over my head, and a lot of people don't necessarily have that. So I think it also helped just kind of appreciate and put things into perspective for me.

For Maria, AmeriCorps could simultaneously be “awful” and a “great experience” because of the contextual knowledge that she uses at her current job doing policy and advocacy for a non-profit focused on food insecurity. As a middle-class young adult with a prestigious education, Maria has not experienced real poverty and most likely never will. Yet her capacity to imagine and appreciate the experience of poverty has potential to become what Bryson (1996) calls “multicultural capital,” from which she can draw on as she builds a career in public service.

*Narrative Potential.* Exploratory experiences provide *narrative potential* through stories whose values are either anticipated or realized later. Maria's extreme experience provides her with another resource: a good story.

M: I had a great experience in AmeriCorps. It's definitely really, really tough living on \$700 a month, and I spent \$350 in rent, and there was not much left over for anything else. At the same time, I was coming out of college and doing a federal work study. The first couple months, I thought I was rich. You know like, oh, this isn't so bad. But it was a really intense experience. You're with like the same group of 12 people, doing some really intense work. I'd go home to a room where we had substandard plumbing and I had an extension cord going from the front of the house to the back, and that was for six months! Later on it was three of us in a very tiny two-bedroom. So that was awful. But it

was a great experience. I really liked it.

Similar to Nalya's stories about her time in DC and Thomas' of his time in the islands, Maria's account of her AmeriCorp experience have the feeling of an often told story. They do not struggle to remember details nor to put together an interpretation; instead these feel like stories that had been previously recounted and polished.

Narrative matters because it is "a fundamental means of making sense of experience" (Ochs and Capps 1996, 19). If narrative is how we make sense of experience, then experience provides the potential for new narratives. In turn, narrative performances legitimate claims to insider's perspectives and adaptable skills. For example, Noy (2004, 82) finds that Israeli backpackers "participation in a touristic practice grants the youths cultural capital (in the form of narrative capital)," by validating their claims to membership in a Western-oriented, upper middle class. Narrative capital also provides social advantage because "differential control over narrative is central to constitution of social hierarchies" (M. R. Somers 1994). Exploratory experiences give emerging adults access to a particular genre of storytelling that signifies and solidifies their class position.

In sum, informants are attracted toward exploratory experiences that help them to cultivate various forms of knowledge. The knowledge our informants accumulate from diverse exploratory experiences in travel, leisure, and at work allow them to develop adaptable thinking skills, as well as a stock of stories and claims to insider perspectives, with a broad range of potential applications—and payoffs. Exploratory experiences can thus enhance the stock of "decontextualized" cultural capital described by Thompson and Tambyah (1999) and Hannerz (1990). Yet this knowledge is only cultural capital to the extent it can be deployed successfully to gain advantage. To do so, individuals must appropriately transpose and extend knowledge

from past experiences to new contexts with analogous properties (Bourdieu 1990; Sewell 1992). Put differently, they must adeptly pull out the right knowledge, at the right time, in the right way in future social, romantic, and work contexts. So while a range of adaptable skills is valued, the ultimate skill derived from accumulating exploratory experiences is adaptability itself. This knowledge, and the disposition to seek it out through accumulating exploratory experiences, is embodied.

### Embodied Disposition toward Consuming Experiences

Our informants sense that the consumption of exploratory experiences is essential during their transition to adulthood. Strategic but not necessarily self-conscious, the exploratory orientation originates in class dispositions acquired in childhood. Experiential exploration seems to come naturally—although not effortlessly—to our informants, who often do not have a good sense of why they seek such experiences or what makes them important. They use a language of luck to describe everything from discovering new restaurants to accepting new job opportunities, experiences that they perceive as a product of whim, happenstance, and spontaneity. However, the places and activities they allow themselves to “fall into” have specific attributes. Cultural centers become focal destinations, as they provide opportunities to participate in the array of consumption experiences sought. Choices in both cities and experiences are guided by an embodied orientation towards what feels right (Allen 2002), and what feels right tends to conform to the aesthetics of high cultural capital (Holt 1998).

For example, Nalya, a 26-year-old law student from a small town, describes moving to DC for an internship “on a whim”: “it was kind of one of those big leaps that you take in your life;” her resultant experience was “kind of crazy, but really fun”; and “it just so happened” that a

job opened up where she was interning, and she happened to get it. These events were not, of course, truly random: they were guided by her interest in politics, but also by her attraction to “fast paced, high visibility environments,” and her aversion to places—like her hometown—that she sees as “closed off” and “boring.” She could take such a leap due to her class-based confidence that things would somehow work out. Like other informants, her luck is made as much as she falls into it, but, as a member of the middle class, she feels fairly confident in her luck (Henry 2005).

This embodied orientation towards accumulating exploratory experiences is a manifestation in young adulthood of a habitus acquired in childhood. Most informants describe childhood involvement in a range of activities such as sports, music, volunteering, and art, in which they often took on leadership roles. Their parents encouraged both diversity and competency, not pressuring them into one specific activity, or later a career, but rather encouraging them to pick things they enjoy and become good at them. For example, Zach, a single, 24-year-old nuclear engineer, rattles off categories of enrichment activities in which he participated as a child—sports, intellectual clubs, and leadership activities—as well as extensive travel on family vacations. Similarly, Hillary was involved in a variety of activities through college; beyond college, she has continued on this path, embracing the challenge of a cross-country move, and starting and joining a variety of social and cultural clubs. Such breadth and depth of involvement helped them to craft strong college applications by broadcasting the signals of “well-roundedness” that are valued in middle class life.

Their emic descriptions of their childhood experiences are consistent with the literature on child rearing and class cultures. Middle-class parenting is governed by what Hays (1996) calls the ideology of “intensive mothering,” “which dictates that the process is to be child-centered,

expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive.” This intensity manifests in the parenting style of “concerted cultivation” identified by Lareau in her book *Unequal Childhoods* (2011): she argues that middle-class parents try to deliberately foster their child’s development through organized activities, whereas working-class parents emphasize natural growth. Likewise, British ethnographers Vincent and Ball (2007, 1065-6) write about the “enthusiasm for ‘enrichment’ activities” that the “professional middle class” has for children under five. These experiences are to be playful, so that children learn to enjoy accumulating culture—key to successful transmission and acquisition of embodied cultural capital.

The parenting practices to which our informants have been exposed, whether in their own childhoods or in observing parents they know now, model the types of adults they might anticipate becoming once they “settle down.” If for children acquiring such experiences feels pleasurable and natural, for parents, there is stridency and stress. As Vincent and Ball (2007, 1071) put it, “Rather than being marked by an apparent ease, as Bourdieu seems to suggest, the process of inculcation is hectic, even frantic.” This is not to argue that parenting is completely depleting—it also carries its rewards, and is itself a type of experience (Silva and Pugh 2010). Nevertheless, time pressure—both objective and subjective—is experienced most intensively by highly educated parents in dual career households (Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Sullivan 2008). This sense of time pressure is exacerbated by the increasing emphasis on consumption of experiences, which by definition unfold in time (Robinson and Godbey 2008). Having grown up in such families, young adults anticipate the transition to parenthood as a period of intensive parenting and an end of self-oriented exploration. Our data will show that this motivates hyper-exploratory behavior in the present.

## Exploratory Orientation versus Settled Expectations

The middle-class young adults in this study often avoid commitment to places, certain types of domestic consumption, and romantic partners, maximizing the possibility for exploratory experiences. Their imagined and ideal futures, however, involve more traditional, domestic experiences: commitment to a partner, a stylized home, and in most cases children. Importantly, our informants view these two orientations as antithetical, and they fear that their imagined settled futures will foreclose opportunities for exploration. We theorize that this imagined scarcity influences their desire to voraciously consume exploratory experiences and their reluctance to commit in the present.

*Aversion to Settling Down.* Just as they hesitate to acquire too many material objects that might tie them down, many of our informants eschewed serious commitment to romantic partners, or even to living in a particular location. Zach (24) explains that getting into a long-term romantic relationship at this point in life is problematic:

Z: Let's say I'm dating someone with a non-transferable job; they own a shop here. And I get this job offer to move somewhere super cool like, Maui or Bali or something, right? Good benefits, good times, yet I'm deeply involved in this person. What do you do? You can't just be like, I've got this cool thing that I've gotta do, so either come with me and drop your life here, or I'll see you later. Or do you make that concession? I guess I'm not ready to make concessions. There's a whole lot of the world I haven't explored, so I'm not ready to start taking other people's thoughts and opinions into account.

For Zach, marriage, a focal sign of the next life course stage, limits opportunities for exploratory

experiences. Many informants date, and experiences of dating help them to understand what they want in a partner and are often a source of stories. However, these emerging adults are wary of the strictures of a committed relationship.

Although the bachelor stereotype features men not committing, this concern recurs across female informants as well. Samantha (22) reflects that she doesn't want anyone "tying her down" quite yet. A bit older, Nalya (26) describes what she would like to tell her grandchildren about her life. Through this narrative, her feelings about commitment and relationships emerge:

N: I'd want [to tell my grandchildren] to be like young, empowered women. I want them to do everything they ever wanted, and not worry about getting married and settling down. I guess I worry about it a little, but I've really focused on my career and travel, and just making sure I've done everything that I've wanted to do thus far. I have never compromised that for anybody or anything. So, I would want to really emphasize I did all these crazy cool things. Like I went to Guatemala and backpacked, and I worked at the White House, and I lived in San Diego, and I traveled to Egypt one summer.

I think the pressure is off women a little. The age that people expect women to get married is a little older, I hope. But I think it's really important people do that. Because I have a lot of friends that did get married at 20, and they don't do anything. They're living in the same town, and the same house, and their lives seem so boring. And I'm like, don't you want more for yourself? Life experiences, or a sense of identity apart from being a mom or a wife or anything? Because I think these are the years when you build up who you are as a person.

Nalya sees exploratory experiences and the resulting stories she accumulates as core to establishing her identity. At least for now, she expects that these will be the stories she will want



to tell her grandchildren and by which she will want to be remembered. Such exploratory experiences, she believes, cannot be accumulated when one is committed to people or place. This puts tremendous pressure on Nalya's and others' actions during this time.

*Expectations of Married, Settled Life.* While Nalya's narrative is evocative of a cosmopolitan or nomadic lifestyle, she and other informants see this as a phase, not a permanent lifestyle. Hillary imagines her future in five years as follows:

H: I'd like to imagine myself in a, with a partner of some kind. Eventually I'd like to have children. I don't know if that's in the next five years or not, but eventually.

Zach echoes this expectation of settling down:

AU1: Where do you see yourself in five years?

Z: I see myself starting to consider marriage, because biologically you've got to start looking around at least somewhat early. I want to be able to retire without kids, you know what I mean? Unlike the people who are retiring but their kids are just turning eighteen—I think there can be some kind of generational disconnect at that point. I mean, my dad was 24 and my mom was 22 when they had my brother. Now they're in their mid-fifties balling it up. They don't have any kids to support; we're self-sufficient. They are doing better in their careers, and they're just having a good time. They party all the time. They have a better social life than I do. So I wait until I'm 35 or 40 when I have kids, I'm going to be 60 before the kids finally get out of the house, which still isn't really that old, but still, what's left at that point? It's nice to have some years afterward.

Zach, Hilary, and almost all of our other informants imagine that in five years they will be married, living in a stylized home with children or getting ready to have children. The details of

how or where this will happen are often sketchy, and they often squirm in their seats when the question is asked, but nonetheless their imagined futures include these signs of settling. Zach hopes to control when exploration and fun occur, but he is certain that neither will occur during childrearing years. He even imagines ahead to his retirement years, anticipating new opportunities for exploration during what Schau et al. (2009) describe as an “identity renaissance.” Before then, however, he expects the time between marriage and an empty-nest retirement to be long and filled predominantly with domestic experiences. His imagined future seems to balance the accumulation of exploratory and domestic experiences not simultaneously, but across the life course.

Consumer researchers have noted the value of the experiential in cosmopolitan lifestyles (Holt 1997a, 1998; Thompson and Tambyah 1999), and identify a subculture for whom cosmopolitan exploration becomes a permanent lifestyle (Bardhi et al. 2012). Yet our informants expect exploration to give way to domesticity. The demographic evidence suggests that for most, this imagined future represents reality. As of 2010, 78% of American women with at least a bachelor's degree had a biological child by age 40-44 and over 90% ultimately marry (Livingston and Cohn 2013). While their socialized disposition towards the experiential will likely continue, they imagine a different set of experiences in the near future.

*Tension between Normative Life Experiences.* Such imagined transitions to domestically oriented experiences do not come without trepidation. Alan is 29 and engaged. He says he is worried not about the commitment of marriage, but about kids:

A: Kids are kinda scary because it's such a big change. In terms of being married, I'm looking forward to it. But just the drastic shift in personal time that kids would bring, or

money. Suddenly you're just responsible for this whole other being, and it's the focus of your life, and it will be at least five years until you have some big experience. Maybe not quite that long. But I guess you have to be a whole lot less selfish. At this point we're still pretty selfish about it. Like, buying a car and drinking wine after work. I still get to go to concerts on the weekend or work late, but once you have kids, it seems like you gotta be really efficient. If you wanna have any free time at all. So, I mean that, I would say that's the only real fear. Kids...the change that kids bring is a general fear.

AU1: It sounds like you want to have kids though at some point, maybe?

A: Yeah, I wanna have kids. I've just sort of always thought, this will sound kind of biased I suppose, I've always sort of felt like life isn't gonna be complete without having kids, because it's such a fundamental biological part of life. And, it's such a major experience that, having talked with some middle-aged folks who don't have kids, in a sense they're glad they didn't, but, they're always sort of wondering, what if.

Getting married, having a family, and living in a stylized home are still normative middle-class experiences in American life, experiences that our informants do not want to miss, but for which most are not ready just yet. During most of the interview, Alan projects a laid back, "go with the flow" attitude and feels that he too has been "lucky" with the experiential opportunities that have presented themselves to him. Within our sample, he is among those that feel almost ready to move onto the next life stage. Now that he has reached the milestone of marriage, he concedes that the commitment of marriage is no longer worrisome. Instead, he anticipates and fears losing the opportunity to accumulate exploratory experiences with his wife once they have children. Nevertheless, childrearing itself is an experience he does not want to miss. Explorative experiences may continue through children, as settled adults become concerted cultivators

(Lareau 2011). But these experiences are likely to be ones that they think their children should have, rather than experiences that are focused on the self.

As a result, domestic and exploratory experiences are in tension with each other, and emically constructed as mutually exclusive. In Nalya's words:

N: I think it's a hard time [now]. It's not necessarily always fun. There are times you step back and wonder if you're doing the right thing. Like, you wonder is it okay that I'm not settling down or putting roots down somewhere? Is it okay that I'm just kind of following whims and moving to different places or focusing so much on myself? Of course, I have those worries too. But I think you just have to go with the flow. And if you're not in the position to settle down, but you have all these other opportunities in front of you to travel or have different internships and do things like that then why should you be miserable worrying about what you don't have, instead of just doing what you can do to make it fun in the process? (Laugh) I don't know. At the end of the day I would rather be one of my single city girlfriends or a *Sex and the City* character than a friend who got married at 20 and lives in my hometown. I would much rather be still fighting it out in the real world than settling.

Nalya frames exploratory and domestic experiences as not only antithetical, but also as the only two options: she lives either like a *Sex and the City* TV character, or like her married, settled friends. Despite this tension, for her the choice is clear. Accumulating exploratory experiences now, even if it means, "fighting it out in the real world," is an essential part of developing her identity. The challenge, as Nalya reflects, is how to settle down, which she eventually wants to do, without settling.

*Ready for the Transition.* Our evidence primarily speaks to informants' contemporaneous lifestyles and current consumption based on their imagined futures. However, our three boundary informants, who are moving from emerging to established adulthood, show that a shift in orientation does indeed happen. They feel that they are ready to move on to a more settled life. This is also apparent at the end of Thomas' interview when he is asked:

AU1: How would you complete this sentence? This is the time in my life to...

T: ... stabilize a little bit. I think it's a time of change. I know for many people that happens younger than 32. But I do feel like I'm sort of learning what I like, I mean career-wise, in a relationship. My friends haven't changed that much in the past few years whereas before I was meeting a lot of people and just enjoying different clubs and everything. So it definitely feels like somewhat of a stabilization.

At another point in the interview:

T: I think my life does look different now that I'm in the relationship. I do a lot more of the same things that I enjoy with her. Whereas when I first moved here, I was definitely in exploration mode, to get to know the area and certainly in a lot of ways to get to know myself. I was in a job that I knew in the back of my mind wasn't for me, but I wanted to give it a chance. So there was that. And then, I quickly didn't like the job, and so I was sort of looking for different outlets. So, I went out more, I just tried a lot of different things. And it's certainly not like that now. So I sort of feel like the settling process has begun. But in a good way. I mean I certainly feel like I know myself better now, and that will probably keep happening more in the future.

Like our other informants, Thomas describes the experiences that he has had as what he wants to tell his grandchildren about. The value he places on exploration is also evident in his description

of his partner as an “incredibly open-minded, fun person,” who “wants a lot of the same things I do,” who “likes to just sort of explore things, restaurants and whatever.” However, he feels like he had his time for exploration and is now comfortable transitioning to a more settled life.

Thomas crinkles his nose less than other informants when discussing the imminent prospect of the commitment milestones; his worries are focused on how to get there rather than on pushing it back. Our other boundary cases also report being “tired,” “full,” “ready” and therefore able to move onto the next life stage now that they are armed with sufficient knowledge from the exploratory experiences in which they have recently engaged.

## DISCUSSION

In the past, before she was married, a single woman would stock a Hope Chest with household items, tablecloths, and dishes that she imagined would provide material resources needed in her married life. While Hope Chests are now uncommon, we see here stockpiling of a different sort: both women and men accumulate, not material household items, but knowledge through experiences that can be drawn upon during a future, settled life. Yet the desire for exploratory experiences lies in tension with the desire for domestic experiences. A particular orientation toward the future enables the accumulation of both.

We theorize that our informants are engaged in a “prospectively retrospective process of consumption,” a tacit, embodied orientation towards the future. In this process, depicted in figure 1, informants during emerging adulthood both desire and fear a domestically oriented future in which they expect exploratory experiences to be scarce. In response, they delay domestic experiences and hyper-consume an array of exploratory experiences, implicitly preparing

themselves for that imagined future scarcity. Imagined futures thus shape consumption in the present.

This exploratory disposition helps emergent adults to navigate the uncertainty and anxiety inherent in a prolonged, liminal stage of life. Hedonic pleasure now and implicit resource potential in the future combine to enable experience accumulators to feel they are living the “good life” (Bellah et al. 1985). While they worry about striking the right balance between exploration and commitment, informants nonetheless feel lucky to have the time, money, and foresight to accumulate these experiences. In short, they feel that they are doing the right thing for themselves.

#### Contemporaneous Effects of Imagined Futures

Scholarship across a range of fields has begun to recognize how an orientation towards the future shapes current behavior. Recent experimental research has focused on how hedonic forecasting, backcasting, hyperopia, and regret influence consumption (Ebert, Gilbert, and Wilson 2009; Gilbert and Wilson 2007; Keinan and Kivetz 2008). These studies show that, while people cannot accurately predict how events will make them feel in the future, perceptions of the future shape behavior in the present. Sociological research on future orientations is also on the rise due to the recent revival of pragmatist social theory. Imagined futures are core to pragmatist understandings of human agency, which is grounded in expectations and experience (Emirbayer and Maynard 2011; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Gross 2009; Schneiderhan 2011).

Yet few studies on cultural aspects of consumption have examined future-orientedness in depth. One notable exception is Sullivan’s account of why high-income, dual career families

accumulate unused, expensive consumer goods. This “temporal strategy of consumption,” “a kind of ‘virtual leisure’ for those with no time,” entails purchasing leisure goods “with an intention to use them at some imagined future time when there will be time” (Sullivan 2008, 20-21). Here, we see consumers doing just the opposite—accumulating experiences now for an imagined future in which there will be no time. Analogous to the anticipated pleasure that motivates consumer purchases (Beckert 2011; Simmel 2011, 261–4), anticipated dearth is a key motivation for voracious exploration and experience accumulation.

We show not only that imagined futures shape current consumption, but how these are shaped by socialized dispositions and why this particular habitus drives the hyper-consumption of exploratory experiences. Similar to knowledge from a college education that is hyper-accumulated over four years, exploratory experiences provide both gratification in the present and a reserve of broad knowledge for imagined future selves. Yet instead of book knowledge, what is accumulated is a particular set of transposable experiences. While the financial value of an experience consumed in the marketplace cannot be reclaimed later, the knowledge accumulated through it may retain future value for the accumulator as a form of multicultural capital.

Regardless of whether imagined futures come true, they contribute to behavior in ways that amplify social advantage and disadvantage. Two recent studies demonstrate how this happens for disadvantaged groups. Frye (2012) finds that young adults in Malawi have overly optimistic images of their futures, leading them to cling to student identities long after their realistic chances of educational achievement have diminished. Silva and Corse (2013) find that many young working class Americans lack the capacity to imagine a future, making it difficult to construct life strategies likely to lead to upward mobility. In the present study, we see the



inverse: clear but anxious imagined futures lead our middle-class informants to take action now to accumulate cultural resources—exploratory experiences—that will help them to maintain their privileged class positions.

### Experiential Consumption and Social Reproduction

Previous research on experiential consumption has focused on hedonic, psychological, and communal motivations. Our work adds a new dimension to this literature by uncovering the cultural capital potential in consuming exploratory experiences that cultivate an insider's perspective, adaptability, and a reservoir of narrative potential. While Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital emphasizes social affiliation through similarities in individuals' regard for and interaction with objects and genres, objects have lost much of their symbolic power (Holt 1995, 5). Our study introduces the process of purposeful shoring up and embodiment of knowledge from consuming exploratory experiences in a particular way that enables experiences to remain a symbolic referent in the future.

Our data speaks most directly to current consumption during emerging adulthood. However, based on previous scholarship about class cultures in both childhood and settled adulthood, it is reasonable to expect long-range effects. Lifestyles during this transitional stage provide the basis for expanded cultural capital, a basis for persistent privilege as this generation ages and reproduces the next generation. Exploratory experiences during emerging adulthood could reinforce class reproduction a bit later in life in at least three domains: work, marriage, and childrearing.

First, exploratory experiences provide advantages in labor markets. Most obviously,

exploratory work experiences build resumes. The breadth of knowledge acquired through exploration could be another basis for expanded social networks and the job opportunities that come with them, as people with diverse cultural tastes have diverse and advantageous network structures (Lizardo 2006). The narrative tools and insider's perspective that exploratory experiences provide can also help: extracurricular and leisure experiences contribute to hiring decisions in elite firms. While candidates' resumes may look similar, those who can deploy knowledge from exploratory experiences to connect with the hiring agent are more likely to land a job (Rivera 2012).

Second, the ability to relate via homophilous experiences also likely contributes to marital homophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). When describing their ideal partners, participants invariably described someone with similar qualities and orientations to themselves, partners who would have accumulated and valued similar types of exploratory experiences. Such a stock of exploratory experiences signals the values, types of knowledge, and dispositions that form the basis for mutual understanding in middle-class married life.

Finally, the exploratory disposition may be deployed in socializing children. While young adults fear an end to personal experiential accumulation, their valorization of the exploratory will remain important (Lareau 2011; Vincent and Ball 2007). As such, through practice, they will tacitly teach their children to value what they value. The particular practices that become important for each generation is not static, yet the underlying orientations of the social position stay the same (Holt 1997b, 1998).

Future Research

Our evidence, which consists of snapshots of our informants at one point in time, speaks most directly to how expectations about the future influence lifestyle in the present.

Contemporaneous perception of the future—not what the future actually holds—is what matters for understanding this particular life course stage. Cross-sectional data of course do not directly reveal how experiential practices shift over time, or how experiential capital converts into other types of resources. The embodied orientation toward exploratory experiences might remain in later life stages, but be expressed differently. Perhaps it means reframing domestic experiences by highlighting their exploratory qualities, by, for example, learning to jar baby food or figuring out how to cook with garam masala; perhaps it means the experience of producing exploratory experiences, such as vacation travel, they can enjoy with their children. How these dispositions actually manifest themselves at other stages of the life course and the socio-cultural drivers of those behaviors remain fodder for future research.

The present study focuses primarily on the distinctive middle-class orientations during emerging adulthood. This research could be extended in a few ways including across classes, societies, or over time. First, little is known about how consumption is implicated in working class and poor young adults experiences of the emerging adulthood stage. A recent study of working class identity during emerging adulthood gives reason to expect differences, but that work did not focus on consumption (Silva 2012). Our research also only addresses urban, middle-class Americans: there are tremendous opportunities for cross-regional or national studies focusing on life stage, social position, and consumption. Finally, our interviews were conducted just before the ongoing “Great Recession” in the United States. It is possible that consumer dispositions have changed with the economy. It is unclear whether financial anxiety has tempered enthusiasm for exploration, or perhaps has produced a heightened sense of urgency and

significance for exploratory experiences that may no longer be taken for granted.

In sum, we have introduced a theory of middle-class consumer lifestyle during the transition to adulthood. Taking a life course perspective, we focused on understanding how childhood dispositions shape the lifestyle of young adults in the transition to adulthood, and how activities in this stage reproduce social divisions. We found that emerging adults in the middle classes are in an extended liminal stage in which they have a distinctive consumer orientation toward accumulating “exploratory experiences.” This disposition is grounded in both entitled childhoods and an anticipated shortage of opportunities for exploration after they marry and have children. Beyond just having fun during this time, we find that these experiences are tacitly sought for their knowledge potential, stored up for their imagined future selves. This knowledge, as potential cultural capital, may become fodder for connections at work and in the marriage market, and can be used for socializing children. Finally, our analysis introduces a forward-looking model of consumption, in which people’s dispositions and imagined futures guide them to consume for both their current and future selves.

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FIGURE 1

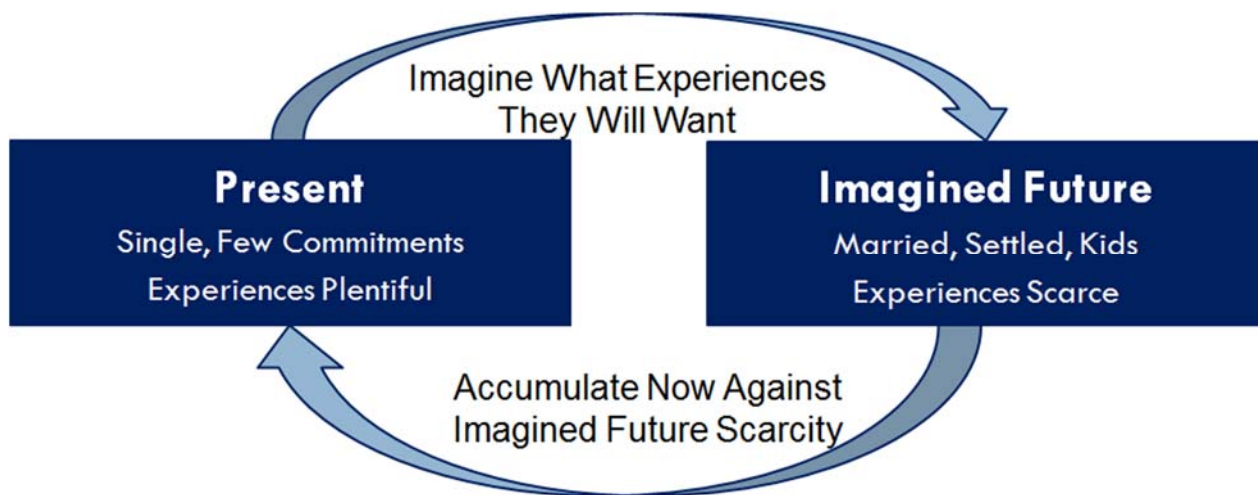


TABLE OF INFORMANTS

Name	Age	Education	Occupation	Relationship	Current Experiential Orientation	Parent Highest Level Education*	Parent Occupation
Samantha	22	UGP, History/ Spanish	family support specialist for non-profit	Single	High	BA	teachers
Zach	24	UGPu, Engineering and Philosophy	nuclear engineer, defense contractor	Single	High	BA	M: hospital administrator/ community relations; D: mortgage banker
Donald	24	UGPu: Business	own business, student	married, child on way	Low	NA	
Linda	25	UGP: Irish Studies	theater/assistant at the university; applying for graduate school	Dating	High/ Decreasing	NA	M: health insurance management; D: probation officer
Eric	26	UGP, Engineering	technology manager, fortune 50 company	Single	High	BA	small business owners
William	26	UGPu, History/Spanish; MBA	recent MBA graduate, in transition	recently married	Decreasing	postgraduate	M & D: run B&B; D: lawyer (past)
Rae	26	UGPu, Interior Design/ Spanish	interior designer	single	Medium	NA	D: contractor and artist (M: deceased)
Alexa	26	HSP; UGP, Psychology/ Photography	development, non-profit organization	living with boyfriend	Medium	NA	M: marketing/design. D: transportation
Nalya	26	UGPu; L	Lawyer	single	High	postgraduate	M: professor; D: surgeon
Kelly	27	UGP, Engineering; MBA	Engineer	single	Medium	BA	D: electrical engineer; M: teacher
Maria	27	UGP, Economics/ Political Science	policy and advocacy, non-profit	newly single	Medium/ Increasing	BA	M: homemaker/volunteer; D: financial advisor
Ellen	28	UGP: French/Spanish	just finished peace corps and AmeriCorps.	committed relationship	Medium	junior college	M: white collar middle management; (D: truck driver)
Hillary	28	UGP: International Relations/ History	contractor with urban planning firm	single	High	BA	M: teacher; D: state employee
Alan	29	HSP; UGP: Chinese; MA	manager, energy company	engaged	Decreasing	BA	M: teacher; D: Senior management, financial services
Jane	30	UGPu: Business; MBA	information technology, fortune 50 company	single	Medium	BA	M: government administrator; D: scientist/university instructor
Tammy	30	UGPu; Envir. Analysis & Design/Criminology & Law; MA; MBA	between professional jobs, works retail/MBA program	married	Medium-Low/ Decreasing	BA	M: social worker, D: own business
Thomas	31	UGPu: Political science/history; MBA	development, non-profit organization	serious committed relationship	Medium/ Decreasing	BA	M: psychologist; D: doctor
Joseph	33	UGP, Accounting; MBA	real estate developer	single	Decreasing	some college	D: sales; M: financial services (middle management)

MBA= Masters in Business Administration; L=Masters in Law; UGP=Private Undergraduate; UGPu=Public Undergraduate; MA=Masters, Other; HSP = Selective Private High School; \* Highest confirmed level of parental education. Respondents were asked to describe parents' backgrounds. In some cases, the type of degree was unclear.