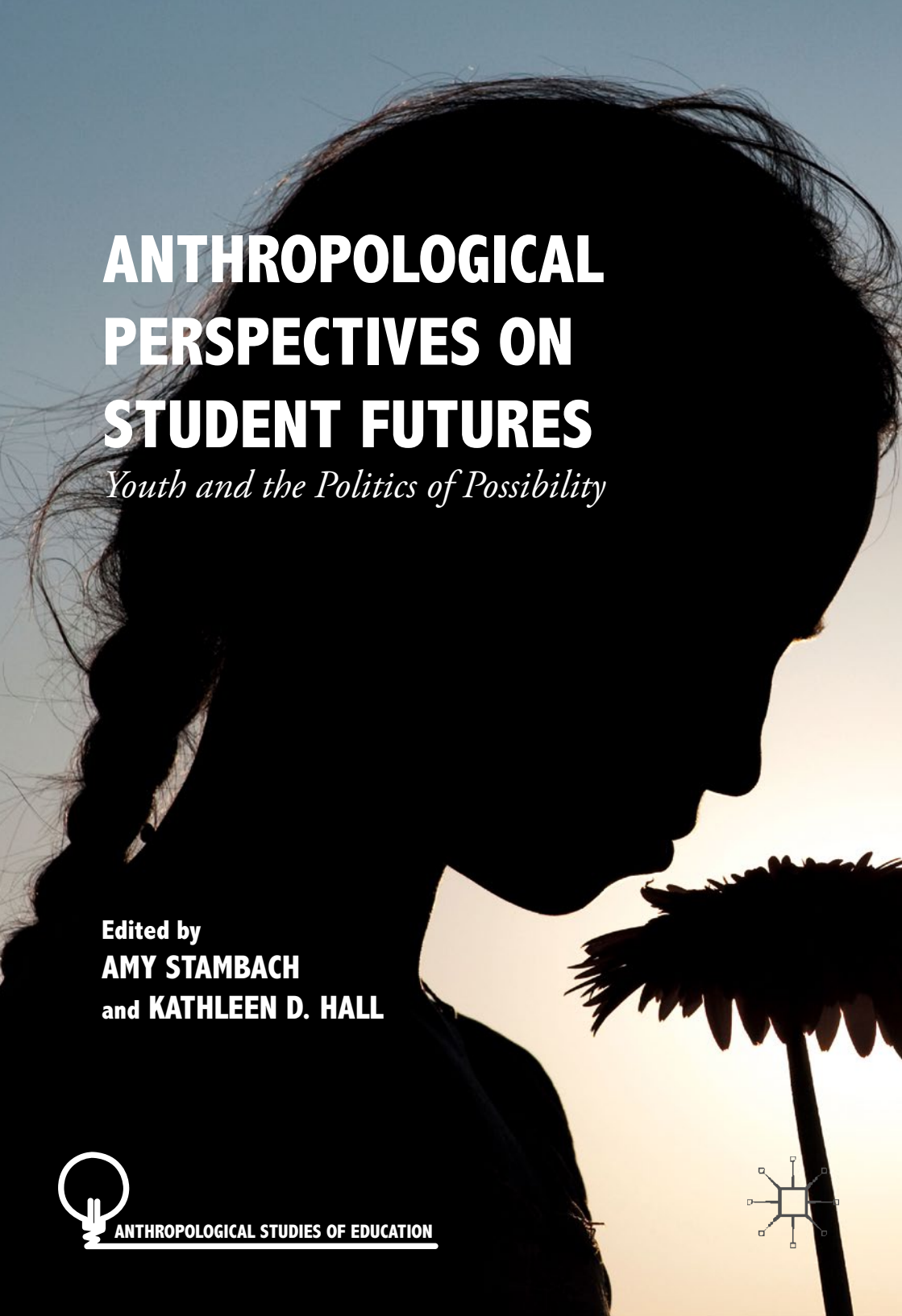

ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON STUDENT FUTURES

Youth and the Politics of Possibility

Edited by
AMY STAMBACH
and KATHLEEN D. HALL

ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDIES OF EDUCATION

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Editors

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Student Futures and the Politics of Possibility: An Introduction

Amy Stambach

Introduction

In a sketch titled *The Future*, cartoonist Frank Odoi ridicules the idea that schooling will improve the world. One student's mother anticipates, "My child will become a doctor one day. She will find a cure for malaria." Another mother hopes, "Mine will be a rainmaker. She will eradicate drought and famine." Set in rural Kenya, Odoi's commentary satirizes education by juxtaposing western medicine with the image of an African rainmaker. Odoi's 2006 reservation about schooling compares with a cartoon by Dr. Jack, published on June 17, 2015, but contrasts in its more expectant view of education. In Dr. Jack's, one of two running students carries a football labeled "aspirations." A grimacing, grabbing, red monstrous creature, sporting "unemployment" on its T-shirt, chases the students. Dr. Jack's message lampoons the idea that education will bring students jobs. It turns youths' aspirations into a political football and unemployment into a grim reality.

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It would be silly to exemplify the main point of this volume through two cartoons published in different sources, but when read together they offer a starting point for introducing one of this book's main arguments: that education is a social field on which the future is imagined, and temporalities concerning youth are emblematic of wider concerns about opportunities and obstacles. The first mother in the first cartoon is hopeful; the second mother appears foolish; the students in the second cartoon are running scared, while the unemployment monster is overwhelming them. Both cartoons orient the time of education toward the future and pair discourses of hope and possibility with discourses of fear and anxiety. The main questions they raise that this book addresses are as follows: How do people see education as framing their fields of social possibilities? How do they imagine and project their hopes and aspirations through education onto a future that, quite obviously, does not yet exist? What political pitfalls and possibilities do people posit and experience through education, and what do their projections indicate about transnational connections and local particularities?

Studies in this book demonstrate that the field of education is full of both hope and uncertainty. They theorize that education is itself a social field or "concatenation of events" (Fortes, 1938, p. 6) through which people express and come to realize their hopes and aspirations, including sometimes to change or to abandon them. Contributors build on Appadurai's notion that the "capacity to aspire" is an unequally distributed "navigational capacity" (2013, p. 289); that human potential exists equally everywhere, but that the poor have fewer resources for activating or realizing it. Accordingly, contributors examine when and how aspirations for a better future through schooling are stopped up or realized. Chapters explore how and when people refashion their aspirations in regard to different coinciding plans, or in relation to what Guyer has called different "emergent horizons of imagination" (Guyer, 2007, p. 413). In examining student futures and the politics of possibility, the authors take seriously the idea that if, indeed, education is about innovation or creativity, about critical thinking or learning beyond simply reproducing the past, then anthropologists must look for the places where that spark flickers, at the places where the imagination of the future is not dismissed as socially unreal because it is not yet materially realized.

In school contexts, the time of education orients continuously forward, toward the immediate and near-term future, sometimes relentlessly. Schooling coordinates schedules. The annual calendar is marked by formative and summative exams, by preliminary and final papers. In contexts where annual testing takes on the quality of rite of passage,

time is punctuated. Activity accrues, merits are earned, and accumulated knolwedge translates into jobs and products—or not. Annual exams and matriculation coordinate with other social calendars, including religious and national holidays, work and agricultural seasons and cycles, and conventions of life cycle development. This future orientation requires an analytic approach that not only accounts for the role of the past in processes of social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) but also theorizes the conjuncture of differently valued and realizable possibilities that transform people into fuller social beings. Johnson-Hanks refers to these moments of realization as "vital conjunctures," moments that are of "particularly critical durations when more than usual is in play, when the futures at stake are significant" (2002, p. 871). Chapters in this book focus on different simultaneous courses of action, contingent on the coincidence or temporal coinciding of social horizons.

By providing ethnographic accounts from various locations where mass schooling is nearly universal though not of equal quality, and by interpreting these settings in the light of diverse histories and logics that inform them, this volume contributes to an anthropology of youth which has been drawn largely to studies of popular culture, consumerism, and resistance. Several recent works, such as Peter Demerath's (2003) on Papua New Guinean high school students and Theresa McGinnis' (2009) work on Khmer youths' visions of the American dream, capture well students' ambivalence about the instrumental value of schooling. Reva Jaffe-Walter and Stacey Lee (2011) discuss programs designed to offer students positive visions of the future. Anthropological research on the lives and experiences of young people advances understanding of how young people plan for the future and experience economic uncertainty (e.g., Batallán & Neufeld, 2011; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Christiansen, Utas, & Vigh, 2006; Herrera, 2014; Honwana, 2013; Milstein, 2006). Writing about how ambitious young men in Ethiopia grapple with an unemployment rate of about 50 %, Daniel Mains (2012) uncovers that young people there look primarily to not only North America but also Europe and South Africa for future economic opportunities. Adeline Masquelier's (2013) research on un(der)employed Niger youth reveals that many pass time planning for a cosmopolitan future that they also expect may never come to pass. These and related studies (e.g., Coe, 2005; Cole & Durham, 2007; Sommers, 2012; Weiss, 2009) indicate that across many settings, young people feel that formal schooling has not prepared them well for a productive life. This failure is sometimes referred to as a "crisis of modernity"—the failure of state systems of education to deliver equally

on the promises of development: jobs, income, health, wealth, and social security. Cohorts of educated but underemployed youth are sometimes seen as a "sacrificed" generation (Sharp, 2002; Trawick, 2007), captured or captivated by conflict or war. Other times they are seen as static or waiting, as among lower-middle-class young men in India who describe social movement through waiting as "timepass," as a matter of generating social potential by holding back, a bit like revving an engine on high power before pulling the choke to drive forward (Jeffrey, 2010).

The above-cited and other works pave the way for posing the related, positively inflected question here, what are students' and others' own hopeful visions and aspirations regarding education? Studies in this volume address how people engage in educational opportunities and produce their lives through education, including how education "occurs as a by-product of the cultural routine" of daily life (Fortes, 1938, p. 5) and involves "highly asymmetrical forms of co-participation" (Hanks, 1991, p. 18) or what Bourdieu has called a "field of play" in which power relations among social agents structure human behavior. Within this field, students' and others' hopeful visions are expressed through plans, wishes, dreams–even through discourses and feelings of boredom (Nicolescu, 2014). Cultural reasoning about time and resources regarding the production of new groups of contemporaries—generationality—is "emblematic of a wider discourse" (Lukose, 2008, p. 134) having to do with social change and transformation (Cooper & Pratten, 2015). What emerges from such conceptualizations is emphasis on how people "position themselves–cognitively, morally, spiritually, and practically--to be open to possibilities" (Cooper & Pratten, 2015, p. 12). In looking at youth in relation to the cultural production of time and possibility, studies herein emphasize how people situate themselves and are situated relationally with regard to calculations about the past and future. Not unlike the cartoons introduced above, youth figure in these chapters as a subject through which to explore conceptualizations of student futures. As Honwana elaborates, youth are a "critical indicator of a state of a nation" (Honwana, 2013, p. 3). They "figure in how change is imagined" (Cole & Durham, 2007, p. 18) and are not necessarily an adolescent, pre-adult stage of life (Bucholtz, 2002).

Aspirations Within a Field of Play

In investigating people's hopeful visions and, and in conceptualizing youth as a signifier of relationships between people (Durham, 2000), this work moves away from a policy-oriented focus on classrooms and students,

and away from thinking about youth as consumers and counter-cultural, toward a framework that theorizes education as an arena through which people express their hopes and aspirations. Authors conceptualize education as a way of doing or perceiving life, a way of being in the world, and of coming to know it. They take the navigational capacity to aspire as an open question, not a starting point, and examine "situations that are consequential to the participants and beyond" (McDermott & Raley, 2011, p. 373).

This turn toward temporality is a critical aspect of this book's intervention. Anthropological studies of education and youth have largely employed the concept of cultural production. Efforts to explain how and why inequality persists despite the liberating language of education have emphasized the hidden or unintended forms of social advantage that are reproduced through cultural resignification, through a slippage in meaning between what schools intend and what they do. They have focused on how the past influences the present and on the unwitting ways in which people produce and reproduce their own circumstances. Willis' (1977) classic study of how 1970s-era working-class youth got working-class jobs in de-industrializing England (by positively embracing working-class signs that schools, supposedly, are to have altered) has served as a major narrative template in this project. That template stresses that people occupy social positions that determine future positions they may take; that positions and "tacit presuppositions" ("doxa" in Bourdieu's lexicon, 1977, p. 168) both enable and limit people's positions and actions; and that positions are determined by habitus or structuring structures that organize practices and perceptions of practices. Social class and past choices partly determine opportunities within a social field. Contributors here build on cultural production and practice theory to analyze people's education-related aspirations, including how the future is riven with risk and high potential for miscalculation. However, studies foreground temporality over production to emphasize that education involves a "temporal concatenation of events in which the significant factor is time, and the significant phenomenon is social change" (Fortes, 1938, p. 6). The marking, making, and re-making of time is a fundamental and characteristic quality of education, whether in domestic spaces, in national systems, or in religious or routinized spheres.

Thus, in conducting research among lower- and middle-class families and students living in Hyderabad, India, Gilbertson observes a certain "compulsion" among students to aspire to life-ways that differ from and improve on their parents'. Students' narratives of their successes differ between lower- and middle-class students. Lower-working-class students embrace

the idea that working hard and obtaining good marks will lead them on a path of upward social mobility, which students from more privileged backgrounds see as dependent on who one knows, not on marks themselves. When middle-class students fail to secure jobs or perform poorly on exams, they are "sheltered" by the social capital and networks that their middle-class friends and families provide. The "cruelty" as Gilbertson points out, drawing on Berlant (2011), is that the meritocratic system into which students are to be socialized places the responsibility on students themselves to work hard and aspire to something better, but the middle-class students who do, in fact, eventually succeed are those who put a value on networks and markets, not on hard work and high marks or grades. These well-off students recognize, themselves, that the field of play is highly variable and that they, as the more privileged, are strategically working it. Education may be a meritocratic system in principle, but the rules of the game implicitly ensure that the socially privileged are safeguarded.

The production and reproduction of hierarchy is also central to Roder's analysis of students' changing aspirations. Learning from students in modern-secular Bhutan, Roder discerns that not all options are desirable. Sometimes investing in education entails narrowing one's range of possibilities to what becomes "the best and only option." Such honing-in and delay of movement may constitute an investment or a gamble; the difference lies, as Roder shows, as much in the redefinition of success in the near term (e.g., redefining a goal one thought to be second best) as in the changing field of options made available. In the case of highly desirable government jobs in Bhutan, the field is notably shrinking—the government is downsizing—and the number of people seeking to enter government jobs is increasing. More and more students are sitting for government employment entrance examinations. These twofold changes—one in opportunity, another in the number of qualified applicants—constitute two coordinates of a multi-dimensional social field in which students' qualifications are increasingly becoming credentials of an uncertain or indefinite kind. To keep their options open and remain reactive to a changing economic and employment environment, students aspire to nothing in particular, and yet they are ready to take on most anything. The one exception, Roder notes, is in their orientation to the teaching profession. Parents and friends discourage students from becoming teachers, arguing the pay and workload are too inversely related: too much work, too little pay. In limiting aspirations and narrowing possibilities, students "wait for something better." Roder's point is

not that students are lazy and uninterested in working. It is not that they have a "poor attitude" as students are sometimes portrayed in this context. Rather, it is that they are exercising the rationality of schooling, weighing benefits and calculating odds. The untapped resource—or at least that which appears to be untapped in these Bhutanese contexts—is an expression of the broader and wider ontologies, the fuller cultural expressions of students' aspirations. "I want to be a sunflower" one student conveys; and yet such is beyond the scope of modern-secular schooling.

Broader ontologies beyond the state system of schooling are also a part of students' experiences in Gülen-inspired school studied by Kristina Dohrn. Here, in these international schools, such aspirations are encouraged within the limits of a particular institutional conceptualization. Students' aspirations are informed by several conjunctural and different visions; these include transnational ideals of connectedness to wider educated and Gülen-inspired communities (whose members might also provide Gülen-schooled graduates with jobs); moral ideals of an ethical person shaped within a Gülen-inspired Islamic religious framework; and self-motivated ideals of accomplishment and responsibility that students are to embrace and express as "their own." Differences between and among students' and teachers' framing of the future brings "the relational nature of youth" (Cole & Durham, 2007, p. 18) into perspective. This relational nature is evident in the ways students are sometimes seen as children and at other times as adult. Regardless, the future of the "golden generation," as Gülen leaders call Gülen students worldwide, is not entirely shared by all members of the Gülen movement. The politics of possibility lie here for students in the conjuncture of their aspirations and the Gülen movement's business-oriented and Turkish-based political priorities, coupled with students' families' visions of the object of schooling. Such student futures are contingent on the coinciding of different horizons, each of which move into play at different times and at different rates. Middle-class families who send their children to Gülen schools are concerned with converting education into economic opportunities. Parents want their children to get jobs. Yet not only is the capacity to aspire, and to navigate a job market, disproportionally more available to these middle-class and professional families and their children than to the average family of, in this case, other students living in Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), the framing of the future extends to a global network institutionally linked to a "distant prophecy." Fetullah Gülen is a Turkish-born, US-based religious leader hoping to educate students with modern knowledge as well as a

capital-market-compatible set of Islamic practices and morals. Economic and moral horizons are conjoined in these Gülen-supported institutions.

Hefner's research shows that for those who are "less keen on or capable of running on the socioeconomic treadmill," the ends of education are not as important as the pursuit of it. In the context of an Indonesian Islamic or *pesantren* boarding school where a new middle class is able to realize a once-future desire to access secondary education, the good life as it is imagined is not the same as that experienced. The school in this case, which is more explicitly religious than are Gülen-inspired schools, advances and signals families' desires to balance religious piety and educational achievement. Girls aspire to become doctors and engineers and when that is not possible, recalibrate what they want. They begin to see education as, like piety, ongoing and life lasting. Thus what might be seen as educational failure for lack of girls' attaining high-status jobs is redefined in relation to young women's pietistic visions of the now and hereafter. This finding broadens an anthropological literature that contrasts hopeful with uncertain futures. As Cooper and Pratten elaborate, the future is always rife with possibility: "Uncertainty is productive," it "produces new social landscapes and horizons" (2015, p. 2). Indonesian *pesantren* students' life-narrative projects build the future—new as it seems—creatively from the past. *Pesantren* students aspire to more than what their parents have; they wish to attend college and to move beyond their families' achievements. But they create the future in relation to an earlier generation of believers whom they have never met and to a sense of the "future here on earth." Thus there is a concatenation of temporalities, of generationality and futurity, of past and future in the present. But instead of blaming themselves or *pesantren* schools for any changes in their life courses, students reframe the value of their schooling as enabling them to refashion their lives as needed and to do so within an overarching religious frame.

Student futures are full of possibility for many people discussed in these cases, but this does not mean that schooling provides the capital or capabilities needed—or even desirable—for the future. Educated graduates in Hyderabad coming from wealthier families know they have been enabled through social networks; students in Bhutan who are waiting for the right moment to take—and succeed on—government exams know that their education alone does not provide all they need to realize their aspirations; Gülen-associated students in Tanzania know that their parents and the Gülen-inspired schools' horizons of expectation for them sometimes