

Theorising young people's aspirations in a global context: an interdisciplinary conference

Brunel University London

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Concept note

This interdisciplinary conference aims to advance conceptual understanding of how children and young people form, experience and deploy aspiration; the global institutions and processes that shape young people's aspirations; and the outcomes of aspiration for young people and for wider society.

Recent empirical research from diverse contexts worldwide has reported on the expressed desires of young people to 'become someone'. Meanwhile, global institutions and national governments represent aspiration as a key to understanding inequality and a motivating force that can inspire social change (World Bank 2014). Aspiration is understood to play a key role in shaping young people's engagement with education, politics and migration. Yet despite the burgeoning attention to aspiration in both research and policy, its theorisation remains relatively neglected.

We welcome papers that address the theorisation of young people's aspirations. These may consider, but need not be confined to, the following themes.

Aspiration as an instrumental discourse

Aspiration has been conceptualised by some as a weapon of the weak and by others as a weapon against the weak (Swartz et al 2012). For some it is a necessary precursor to any social change, inspiring both individual agency, and collective responses to oppression. Appadurai (2004) suggests the poor lack a 'capacity to aspire' and that this limits their capacity to instigate social change. On the other hand, the hegemonic policy discourse around aspiration is perhaps more often viewed as a tool of neoliberal governmentality. Aspiration entails notions of progress, modernisation and development. It casts individuals and social groups as responsible for their own futures, and attributes failure to progress to a 'poverty of aspiration'. Through institutions such as schooling, young people are instructed to view the future as open and their future biographies as dependent upon their own imaginations and will power. Some young people use the discourse to claim a virtuous identity: to be aspirational is merit worthy (Frye 2012); for others it enables them to manage contexts of uncertainty (Jakinow 2016). In structurally constrained contexts, however, calls to optimism may be experienced as cruelty (Berlant 2011), a 'quiet violence of dreams' (Duiker 2001), when aspirations cannot be fulfilled.

Aspiration as an orientation to the future

Analytically, aspiration is understood as a way of orienting to the future, and a mode through which the future expresses itself in the present. As such, it appears relevant to the growing number of scholars interested in youth temporalities. Work on youth transitions often posits a role for aspiration in shaping (gendered) life trajectories. Yet, while policy discourse tends to proffer a simple linear view of aspiration and its relationship to action,

aspiration is a far from straightforward analytical concept. Indeed, it may have little conceptual purchase on the ways in which young people imagine and speak about their futures. Young people express aspirations that are often fluid and contradictory. Moreover, the term is used to refer to phenomena that range from ideas that are concrete and readily articulated to intangible and inarticulable feelings about the future (Appadurai 2004). Aspiration may be a particular way of orienting to future, associated with modernity; it may have very different associations in different societies, and for some it may have no salience. Moreover, the relationship between aspiration and other modes of future orientation (goals, dreams, motivation, hope, desire, expectation) requires closer consideration.

Aspiration as produced and productive

Aspiration is produced relationally, 'in interaction and in the thick of social life' (Appadurai 2004:67). Emotion and affect doubtless play key roles, but precisely how aspiration is generated (and generative) is far from clear. Zipin et al (2015) theorise three ways in which aspiration may be constituted through social-cultural processes. 'Doxic' aspirations are 'dominant norms about worthy futures' (p236) circulating through media and policy discourse. The universal desirability of particular futures and possibility of realising them through hard work are taken as commonsense, yet in practice they are unattainable by most. 'Habituated' aspirations are embodied dispositions grounded in biographic-historical conditions (Bourdieu's notion of habitus): a 'felt sense ... of situated possibility' (Zipin et al 2015:234). Disadvantaged youth generally recognise the impossibility of their doxic aspirations, but this knowledge remains tacit or subconscious. 'Emergent' aspirations are 'future-tending impulses' (p242) 'emerging among young people as their lives apprehend the present-becoming-future' (p236). For Zipin et al these unarticulated feelings that 'entwine with habituated dispositions and populist doxa' (p243) hold the potential for agency and generational transformation, albeit not inherently socially positive change.

Knowing young people's aspirations

Efforts to theorise aspiration raise important epistemological questions. As Zipin et al (2015) have pointed out, different methodological approaches give access to different levels of aspiration. How far is it possible to learn about young people's aspirations through speech-based research methods? Very few children, even in English-speaking contexts, use the term 'aspiration' in everyday speech, but most social science research relies on asking young people about their hopes and expectations for the future. The epistemological status of data produced in this way requires critical interrogation. If key elements of aspiration remain unarticulated, and perhaps inarticulable, these demand other forms of research. The epistemological complexity increases further when focusing how aspirations are formed and how they influence behaviours. These questions are likely to be approached in different ways from different disciplinary perspectives, with potential for cross-disciplinary learning.

Appadurai A 2004 'The capacity to aspire: culture and the terms of recognition' *Culture and Public Action* Stanford University Press, Stanford, pp59-84

Berlant L 2011 *Cruel Optimism* Duke University Press, Durham and London

Duiker KS 2001 *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* Kwela Books, Cape Town

Frye M 2012 'Bright futures in Malawi's new dawn: educational aspirations as assertions of identity' *AJS* 117(6), 1565–1624

Jakimow T 2016 'Clinging to hope through education: the consequences of hope for rural laborers in Telangana, India' *Ethos* 44(1), 11-31

Swartz S, Hamilton Harding J and De Lannoy A 2012 'Ikasi style and the quiet violence of dreams: a critique of youth belonging in post-Apartheid South Africa' *Comparative Education* 48(1), 27-40

World Bank 2014 'Aspiration traps: when poverty stifles hope' *Inequality in Focus* 2(4), 1-4

Zipin L, Sellar S, Brennan M and Gale T 2015 'Educating for futures in marginalized regions: a sociological framework for rethinking and researching aspirations' *Educational Philosophy and Theory: Incorporating ACCESS* 47(3), 227-46.