

The Career Aspirations and Expectations of School Students: From Individual to Global Effects

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to summarise and consolidate the current state of knowledge about the aspirations and expectations of school students regarding education and occupational attainments. The article will build on, and update, Saha's previous overview from more than ten years ago (1997). This review not only includes the socialization and stratification literature in sociology, but also the career choice literature in developmental psychology and vocational counselling. Research has documented that adolescent career plans serve to motivate students, and help many of them to eventually attain their goals. We begin by defining the important concepts which are involved in this growing body of research. Next, we briefly review the early literature which establishes the link between aspirations, expectations and actual attainments, and the factors which were commonly thought to explain them. Until recently, this research focused exclusively on individual level explanations. However the availability of new analytic techniques, in particular hierarchical linear modelling, and larger data sets such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), has made possible a new generation of research which has documented the extent to which factors at both school and society levels also have an impact on young people's ambitions. We discuss and summarise these new perspectives in terms of the universalising or globalising of success values, and focus especially on specific sub-groups in a cross-cultural context. Finally we reassess the importance of this topic for understanding the higher level dimensions of aspirations and expectations, and also the implications for career counselling in schools and the career choices of young people. The article concludes by identifying areas for future research.

Keywords: aspirations, expectations, youth, careers, attainment

Introduction

One of the most important areas in the research on young people's path through education and occupational destinations has been the social psychological dimensions of aspirations and expectations. Over

seventy years ago social psychologists began to recognize that strong motivational forces were contained in the aspirations that young people held about various aspects of their future (Frank, 1935a, 1935b). These early studies found that aspirations were indicators of deep drives that motivated young people's striving to achieve future goals. These ambitions were seen as forms of attitudes towards desired or expected goals. As attitudes, these ambitions consisted of affective, cognitive and behavioural dispositions and were linked with the attainment of those goals. By the 1950s, social psychologists began to differentiate between aspirations and expectations, accordingly, as less realistic and more realistic plans for the future (Empey, 1956; Caro & Pihlblad, 1965; Desoran, 1977/1978). These two concepts soon became a regular part of the study of the factors which explained the path to occupational destinations (Haller et al., 1974; Haller, 1982).

A summary discussion of this social psychological field of study is found in Saha (1997) where not only the history of the study of aspirations and expectations is documented, but also issues related to their significance for the attainment process are discussed. However, since that time new theories, larger data sets from a wider number of countries, and more sophisticated statistical techniques to analyse these data, have become available. Recent research has expanded our understanding of these attitudinal phenomena to the point where a new assessment of their significance is necessary. Therefore the purpose of this article is to take stock of the current state of our sociological knowledge and understanding of this research environment, and to broaden it with the inclusion of similar research from the developmental psychology and vocational counselling tradition.

The Power of Aspirations and Expectations

In spite of the earlier criticism of the concepts of aspirations and expectations as being "flights of fancy" (see, for example: Alexander & Cook, 1979), both concepts continue to be regarded as valuable for understanding the ambitions and motivations for future attainments. Studies continue to focus on both the educational and occupational aspirations and expectations of students, and these dispositional states are seen as causal precursors to eventual educational and occupational attainments. A comprehensive body of empirical evidence has made it clear that students who have specific plans while still in school do have a better chance of getting ahead compared to those who do not have plans. This has been found in Canada (Porter et al., 1982), Australia (Carpenter & Fleishman, 1987) and the United States (Haller et al., 1974), as well as Costa Rica (Hansen & Haller, 1973) and Brazil (Hansen, 1973). These patterns were also found for different groups such as immigrant Americans (Feliciano & Rumbaut,

2005), class-differentiated Canadians (Jacobs et al., 2006; Andres et al., 2007), and Australian boys and girls (Saha, 1983). The cumulative empirical research evidence of these motivational social psychological variables does support the existence of a causal link between them and attainment behaviors.

Why are aspirations and expectations predictors of later attainments? They are because adolescents set their goals and pursue them in a largely rational manner within the constraints imposed by their social environment. Early studies considered both the individual and the societal determinants, for example as found in the study of 'ambitions' by Turner (1964),¹ and in societies' levels of 'need for achievement' by McClelland (1961).² But explanations have also included the socialization notions of 'role maps' (Musgrave, 1967), as 'a rough sketch of some course of action' (Alexander & Cook, 1979), or as 'life spans and life spaces' (Super, 1980) through which young people acquire knowledge about occupations and the appropriate credentials needed for their attainment.

More recent sociological studies, especially those based on PISA surveys, focus exclusively on expectations (Buchmann & Park, 2005; Mateju et al., 2007; Sikora & Saha, 2007), simply because the survey instruments that they rely on, only included the one concept. To some extent this is unfortunate because earlier research described by Saha (1997) and the more recent literature in developmental psychology indicate clearly that what students aspire to, and what they expect to achieve in more realistic terms, is often not the same. The distinction between the two is valuable and meaningful, since these two concepts enable researchers to investigate the variations in the gap between perceptions of desired attainment goals, and the realistic assessment of the likelihood of attaining these goals (Goldsmith, 2004; Blackhurst & Auger, 2008). Without simultaneously asking about both aspirations and expectations, measurement of either one or the other alone might be distorted if some students report their aspirations rather than expectations and vice versa.

The Aspiration-Expectation Gap: Value-Stretch and Rational Action

Once we accept the notion that there are disparities between aspirations and expectations, and that the two concepts are empirically distinct, we can pose the question as to whether or not there exists some wider notion of success values towards which members of social groups can aspire to or expect to attain as suggested in the global ideology of education thesis (Schofer & Meyer, 2005). The possibility of culturally-linked success values, or even universal success values,

was implied in the work of Rodman (1963; Rodman et al., 1974) who developed the notion of the 'value-stretch', by which he meant the gap between aspirations and expectations. Furthermore he argued that the 'value-stretch' was greater for members of the lower class than the upper class, and that the idea of a range of aspirations and a range of expectations explains why lower levels of attainment can also be accepted as satisfactory. As Rodman noted:

Without abandoning the values placed upon success, such as high income and high educational and occupational attainment, he *stretches* the values so that lesser degrees of success also become desirable (Rodman, 1963: 209).

Rodman suggests that those with a larger value-stretch do not abandon their goals, but they do adjust them downward to still acceptable levels when it becomes apparent that the higher levels will not be attained. This notion of a range of aspirations and expectations was further tested by Newkirk (1999) on American high school students and she found that the experience of value stretch depended on whether one focused on educational or occupational attainments. Nevertheless, the greater value stretch (that is, greater discrepancies) for both educational aspirations and expectations was found among the poorer adolescents, minorities and males.

The issue of differences in levels of expectations between more and less disadvantaged groups of adolescents has also been addressed recently in the Goldthorpe and Breen's theory of educational decision-making (Breen & Yaish, 2006; Goldthorpe, 2007) which they label a rational action theory. These researchers propose that expectations of children from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those from more privileged families have to always be considered in relative terms. This means that a poorer adolescent, whose parents have little education, must actually be far more ambitious to plan to achieve the same level of educational and occupational attainment as her or his peer who comes from a higher status background. High levels of expectations in this theory are perceived as motivation drivers of which disadvantaged students need more to offset structural obstacles and advance, despite initially a lower starting point, in the educational and occupational hierarchy. In other words, the same amount of ambition advances students from lower socio-economic backgrounds less than it does more privileged students. While this reasoning addresses issues similar to the value stretch approach, here the focus is more clearly on the powerful social structural constraints and their effect on setting and pursuing individual career goals.

In the end, the disparity between aspirations and expectations can be seen as potential forms of lost talent in society. Hanson (1994)

argued that 'lost talent . . . occurs when 1) expectations fall short of aspirations, 2) when expectations decline over time, and 3) when students are not able to realise earlier expectations' (1994: 159). In her own study using High School and Beyond data, Hanson found that 16% of youth in the USA had expectations lower than aspirations, that 27% had reduced expectations between high school and afterwards, and that the 'loss of talent' was higher for students from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds. So clearly, whether one adopts Rodman's 'value-stretch' explanation or Goldthorpe's 'rational action' explanation to explain disparities, the bottom line is that there are potential negative consequences to society when aspirations do not match expectations.

Research Traditions in the Study of Aspirations and Expectations

Earlier we signalled that some categorization of the various approaches in this area of research might be helpful in the review we undertake here. Indeed, the aspirations and expectations of young people have been of interest to researchers in a number of disciplines and research traditions. While our review focuses primarily on research within sociology, the formation of young people's ambitions have been of considerable interest to developmental psychologists, and in particular researchers in the field of student vocational counselling. We will describe three of these traditions, two of which are sociological and the third is primarily associated with developmental psychology and the vocational/career counselling profession.

The Socialization Tradition

The socialization tradition assumes that the attainment of career goals is the result of learned goal-oriented ambitions, and also the learning of the skills necessary to attain the goals (Kerckhoff, 1976). Furthermore, this approach assumes that the society is an open one in which external structural obstacles to the attainment of the goals are at best of secondary importance. In other words, the main determinants of educational and occupational attainments in society are the social psychological variables which are related to motivation, and the innate abilities of the individual.

Thus the early sociological research on educational and occupational attainments focused primarily on the family, and in particular on the different social and economic resources which contributed to the acquisition and development of ambition. It was assumed that the variations in the socialization process gave an advantage or disadvantage to sons and daughters. Agents of socialization beyond the family, such as the school, were also seen as relevant, although not central.

But most importantly, it was assumed that culture, values, motivation, ambition, desires and expectations played an important role in both educational and occupational attainments.

As a result, the research in this tradition often focused on the determinants of educational and occupational aspirations and expectations because it was assumed that knowledge of these variables were directly related to eventual attainments, even if the attainments were not included in the study. Apart from the literature already mentioned, additional examples of this perspective are found in Saha (1987), Hutchings (1996) and Marjoribanks (1997). Also within this tradition are the early studies of contextual or school effects on aspirations and expectations, and examples of these studies are found in the work of Harrison (1967), Alwin and Otto (1977) and Alexander et al., (1979)

However, it was the development of the Wisconsin Model of occupational attainment which established the position of these social psychological variables in more complex analyses of educational and occupational attainments (Sewell et al., 1969). Initially, it was assumed that young people's aspirations and expectations served as intervening variables between home background, school and eventual attainments. In fact, Haller and Portes (1973: 68) regarded these social psychological variables as 'the strategic center of the model'. But it was the same Wisconsin model which gave rise to the debate over the importance of a socialization perspective versus an allocation perspective as a more accurate explanation of how aspirations and expectations lead to career attainments.

The Social Stratification and Allocation Tradition

The second sociological research tradition which related to educational and occupational attainments emerged, most distinctly during the 1960s, among sociologists who were concerned with social stratification and social mobility. Although educational and occupational aspirations and expectations played a role in this research, the primary objective was to explain eventual occupational, career or status attainments, and the ways that parental social stratification was transmitted to children. Because the end-point of the attainment process was upward, downward, or no social mobility, the proliferation of relevant explanatory variables eventually led to the development of elaborate and comprehensive multivariate models.

The first of these models which included education was Blau and Duncan's model of occupational attainment (1967). It was 'only the starting point for a wave of studies in many societies, which elaborated on the importance of education in transmitting the rank in social

stratification systems from one generation to the next' (Dronkers, 1997: 371). Obviously, one direction in the extension of the Blau-Duncan model was to refine measures of family economic resources, as was done in the work of Halsey and his colleagues in the UK (Halsey et al., 1980). But the most comprehensive model, and ultimately the most influential, originated from the 'Wisconsin model', which included educational aspirations (Haller et al., 1974; Sewell & Hauser, 1980; Haller, 1982). It is easy to see how the Wisconsin Model was initially seen as another complex version of a social psychological, socialisation approach to the study of occupational attainments. However Kerckhoff argued that '... the measures of ambition used in most analyses of status attainment do not index motivation so much as they index knowledge of 'the real world'' (1976: 371). Hence, while stratification scholars recognize the 'socialization' tradition, they emphasised and developed a complementing 'allocation' approach to understanding the status attainment process (Kerckhoff, 1976). The allocation perspective focuses on social structural constraints, e.g. race, ethnicity, institutional settings such as features of particular schools or school system or labor market characteristics, as factors shaping occupational plans, along with social psychological variables. Instead of accounting for the full explanation of career attainments, these social psychological variables were seen by the social stratification/allocation tradition as interacting with structural constraints. A more detailed review of the allocation tradition of research is available in Mateju et al., (2007). Most current research which includes aspirations and expectations as explanations for career attainments does so within the stratification or allocation tradition. It is also within this tradition that the gap between aspirations and expectations remains yet to be addressed in a systematic manner.

The Developmental Psychology and Career Development Traditions

Developmental psychologists and those involved with youth career development and the formation of educational plans and occupational choice have argued, that vocational expectations organize young people's behaviour towards general directions in their career development (Super, 1980) and that occupational aspirations and expectations are a cause of eventual educational and occupational attainments (Looker & McNutt, 1989). The research in this tradition has practical implications, and is related to career education and School-to-Work programs. In fact, researchers in this field have probed more deeply into the various types of career aspirations and expectations than have sociologists, for example the six types of aspirations developed by Holland (1997). Some, like Auger, Blackhurst and Wahl have also studied the

formation of career aspirations at earlier ages, ranging from first to fifth-grade children (Auger et al., 2005) and found that younger children's career ambitions were more sex-typed, while older elementary school children aspired to more socially prestigious occupations, but also more 'fantasy occupations'. Furthermore Helwig (2004) has reported a ten-year longitudinal study, from a sample of students from the 2nd to the 12th grade. He used Gottfredson's theory of circumscription and compromise (1981) which suggests that younger children choose an occupation that matches their gender, older children desire an occupation which 'fits their perception of the social value to which they aspire' while adolescents over 14 years of age take into account their own interests and vocational needs as well as 'status differences that exist around them' (Helwig, 2004: 55). Hence, the status of occupational aspirations peaks around ages 9 to 13, and then declines as students approach school leaving age. In short, the aspirations and expectations peak at a time when young people's cognitive development makes them very aware of social hierarchical constraints, and this is reflected in their occupational preferences.

Like researchers in the sociological traditions, those in the field of vocational and career development focus on the influence of parents, and also on the variations by gender (Blackhurst & Auger, 2008), social class and race (Diemer & Hsieh, 2008). But overall their primary concerns are with the process of career development and with the role of school and the career counselling of youth. On the other hand, researchers in the sociological tradition are more concerned with investigating and understanding the existence of inequality in society, and how it is reproduced. They see educational and occupational aspirations and expectations as contributing variables to this process. Therefore sociologists have investigated aspirations and expectations both as independent and dependent variables in the development of models which ultimately are meant to explain unequal attainments. Thus, while both the sociologists and developmental psychologists study the same phenomena, their goals are quite different.

Individual and Social Structural Characteristics That Affect Aspirations and Expectations

There are many factors which exist outside individuals which influence the formation of aspirations and expectations. In recent decades two developments occurred which made it possible to overcome the difficulties of earlier studies in accounting for all relevant factors. First, the statistical techniques began to be developed, particularly with respect to educational issues, which made it possible to analyse three levels simultaneously (Saha & Keeves, 2003). Second, much of the research in the sociological literature which has contributed to this new

direction in the study of aspirations and expectations has resulted from the analysis of new and larger data sets which focus on academic achievement, but which also have collected information about the ambitions of students. Examples are TIMMS and PISA which have included a large number of participating countries. Because of these data sets, the exploration of higher level factors on individual-level ambitions has become possible. The implications are that the aspirations and expectations of individuals can be seen in a more complex manner, and not only as the product of individual dispositions, but also the result of external influences such as the collective value settings of classrooms, schools or of entire societies.

Although, these new survey instruments have only included questions on educational and occupational expectations, the more systematic study of these higher level effects for one dependent variable, i.e. expectations, has demonstrated the significant potential for future research when both concepts are measured. With this in mind, in the following three subsections, we turn to the description of the current state of knowledge regarding the three levels of influences, evident in multi-level research.

The individual social characteristics of students

The earliest studies of educational and occupational aspirations and expectations were restricted to the level of the individual, that is, to the differences between boys and girls, children from higher and lower socio-economic backgrounds, ethnic and racial group, or children of unequal academic ability. If the social context, for example the type of school, were taken into account, the variable was simply nested in other variables and treated as an individual level characteristic. Thus, while the earlier studies provided important information about individual-level effects about aspirations and expectations, the importance of these effects was a little overstated since they did not take into account accurately the effects of the classroom, the school, or the societal level influences.

In contrast to studies dating back to 1980 and earlier, the new and recent research has found that girls, for example, tend to form quite ambitious educational and occupational plans in most countries with the exception of some locations in Asia. Buchman and Dalton (2002) find it surprising that the pattern is so prominent in all PISA based studies, even though in some countries the girls do not differ in their expectations from boys.

Not surprisingly students with higher grades make more ambitious plans regarding both their future educational attainment and entry

into more prestigious, professional occupations. In addition to the strong positive effects of academic ability and performance, home environments created by more educated parents in high prestige jobs also encourage the expectation of working in high status professions. In most countries, students whose parents have higher socio-economic backgrounds designated by more education and higher occupational status, are much more optimistic with regard to their future attainments. In addition to formal educational credentials, and material incentives, differences between household in terms of cultural practices seem also to play a role. For instance, home environments saturated with books facilitate climates in which adolescents expect to have professional careers and corresponding life styles, which further strengthens their commitment to attaining more education. All these factors boost attainment plans just as they boost the actual academic performance at school. Furthermore, these patterns of associations are consistent with the notion of a value-stretch which occurs at the individual level.

As might be expected, these individual level effects are quite powerful, and account for between 70 and 90 percent of the variance explained in the new multi-level models. In spite of the magnitude of these effects, the additional contribution of higher order effects is not trivial, and must be recognized in the overall assessment of aspiration and expectation formation during childhood and adolescence.

School level characteristics

The more recent studies, based on a multilevel methodology which partitions the variation in expectations, have demonstrated that above and beyond individual characteristics, institutional contexts exert a strong influence on the formation of educational and occupational plans. Typical features of schools such as aggregated student and teacher characteristics, and structural characteristics such as selectivity of students, tracking of students, and school type (government or private), are considered at the above-individual level of analysis. For example, in some countries, the average parental socio-economic background within particular schools has been shown to boost students' educational and occupational ambitions beyond the level implied by their own social class and academic achievement levels (Sikora & Saha, 2007). Students in schools located in urban areas, and particularly in schools in which performance-based streaming is in place also have higher expectations of entering professional occupations. The research on the effects of tracking and streaming shows that students in vocational tracks tend to have more 'realistic' and thus modest plans.

These recent research findings collectively indicate that at school levels environments affect the initial formation and evolution of individual plans over and above the social and psychological characteristics of each student. The impact of these higher level effects generally is not as strong as differences at the individual level, which account for at least 70% of variation in students' plans (Sikora & Saha, 2007). Yet these school level effects warrant attention because the educational and occupational aspirations and expectations of individual students can be enhanced or impeded, to some degree, by the characteristics of the schools that they attend.

Global-level effects: national education systems, legal regulations and labor market characteristics

The most recent research in the study of adolescent aspirations and expectations has shifted the main focus to the state or country-level factors. These factors affect school populations and represent both nation-specific and more general trends, which are global in nature. Some examples of the latter include the shift towards more service-oriented economies, or the global ideology of education which calls for minimum education standards to be implemented across the world. These more macro-socially oriented studies have focused on 1) the differences between highly stratified, standardised, and vocationally specific education systems (as defined by Mueller and Shavit, 1998), and more open systems in which tracking decisions are made at later stages of the education process; 2) labour market characteristics which determine returns to education in particular settings (Wells et al., 2007) and 3) the impact of legal regulations such as the Texas Top 10% Law in the USA, which guarantees a university place to all high school graduates in the top 10% of grades distribution, regardless of personal financial circumstances (Lloyd et al., 2008).

For example, in their study of the 2003 PISA survey data, Mateju and colleagues argued that the degree of stratification in secondary education systems is crucial in the formation of educational expectations, and further that the openness of an education system is indicated by expenditure on education as a proportion of GDP, as well as participation rates and the availability of vocational education programs (Mateju et al., 2007). Other factors examined in macro-socially oriented studies, are the overall level of inequality in countries, and national education participation rates. Sikora and Saha (2007) found that the national level of inequality was related to higher educational expectations across societies, that is, higher levels of inequality were related to higher educational expectations. They argued that returns to education are higher in more unequal and less developed nations, and thus students form more ambitious plans in these countries, even

though their actual level of educational achievement is lower than in Western developed nations. Finally Lloyd et al., (2008) showed that the knowledge of the "Top 10% Law" in the State of Texas, which guarantees entry to universities if one is in the top 10% of the graduating class, serves to stimulate academically able students from disadvantaged backgrounds to plan more education than they might have otherwise done.

Interactions between individual and macro-level effects

Studies in the multilevel model tradition emphasize that individual career plans vary systematically depending on broader structural contexts. For example, Buchmann and Dalton (2002) and Buchmann and Park (2005) found that the expectations of students in more open education systems, where all schools are fairly similar, depended more on their significant others such as parents, teachers or peers. On the other hand, in more stratified (tracked) systems, students tended to be streamed into predictable types of educational programs early on, which resulted in "more realistic" expectations in line with the program in which they were enrolled and, thus, their plans were less correlated with the preferences of their significant others. Moreover, these authors also found that, with the exception of Norway, the relationship between parents' education and students' university expectations was stronger in less open systems (Buchmann & Dalton, 2002: 109). Similarly, Mortimer and Krüger (2000) also found that the differentiation of educational institutions within societies, that is their level of standardization, stratified selectivity and vocational specificity (Mueller & Shavit, 1998), served to maintain stratified career pathways. Moreover Mateju and his colleagues (2007) argued that, compared to stratified systems, in open education systems, family origin and type of school attended had less influence on educational aspirations.

The above examples are indicative of a growing body of research which is documenting the effects of factors at the state or country level of analysis which affect individual level success-oriented behaviour. What must be kept in mind is that these higher level affects operate independently of, and in addition to, the individual characteristics of students. The implications underlying this third level are that the structural features of a society can serve to define what are the overarching success values which dominate the career aspirations and expectations of all students.

The researchers in this area suggest that students are rational actors who make choices based on their knowledge of the streaming and tracking practices within their education systems. They are aware of the expected returns to educational qualifications, and are

aware of the legal policy instruments which may target minorities, and who otherwise might be unlikely to consider university education and higher level occupational aspirations and expectations.

These studies also suggest that secondary school is the stage where crucial decisions are made about future studies and careers. This suggests that policy initiatives need to take into account that the formation of students' plans happens early, i.e. in high school or before, and, once formed, these decisions affect students' early and later actual occupational placement (Mateju et al., 2007). This thinking is in sharp contrast with the assumption that the only occupational plans that matter are the ones formed at educational levels immediately preceding entry into the labor force.

Discussion

This review of the literature has demonstrated the continuing importance of the study of young people's educational and occupational aspirations and expectations for the understanding of eventual career attainments. Moreover, in recent years researchers have made important advances in the knowledge of how individual preferences interplay with structural constraints which operate at different levels of societal organization. All the research traditions that we have reviewed have found that gender, social class and race/ethnicity are important determinants in this process, and that school environments, labor markets and structures of education systems create constraints which interact with individual efforts to succeed. In contrast to earlier assumptions, research across both sociology and developmental psychology is based on evidence that early career orientations are crucial for eventual attainments, and the process begins as early as three years of age. Arguably the most important stage in terms of career plan formation is early stages of high school at about 14 or 15 years of age. At the same time, career development is a dynamic process, and many variables intervene along the way so that the relationship between early career orientations and later attainments is not perfect.

The two sociological research traditions reviewed in this article focus on studying the relative effects of family background and other structural constraints. In contrast the school counselors and developmental psychologists place emphasis on changes in the cognitive development processes. A further basic difference between these traditions is the location of aspirations and expectations in explanations of social inequality for the sociologists, and the improvement of counselling and guidance of young people by the developmental psychologists.

Directions for future research

One characteristic of the research traditions into the aspirations and expectations of youth is the extent to which the research literatures apparently are disparate, that is, unknown and uncited outside of their own field. What this means is that each research tradition creates its own literature largely or entirely independently of the others, and in the process duplicates research effort. In terms of future research strategy, it would seem desirable that a greater awareness of all research efforts into the study of the aspirations and expectations of youth might best enhance our understanding of this subject area.

A second suggestion for future research is the further clarification and standardization of concepts. The research literature across all traditions is plagued by a somewhat careless use of, and operationalisation of the concepts of aspiration and expectation. Sometimes these concepts are used interchangeably, and at other times they are carefully defined and measured. Not only do both concepts represent relevant research interests, but the relationship between the two remains to be adequately and completely explored. This can only be achieved when the concepts themselves are defined and operationalised in a manner acceptable in all three research traditions.

Conclusion

In this article we have attempted to present an up-to-date review of the research into the aspirations and expectations of youth. We have found that considerable progress has been made, both by sociologists and developmental psychologists, and that researchers have made considerable inroads in accounting for the complexity of aspirations and expectations formation as well as their dynamics. These concepts at the same time are useful both for the investigation of social inequality and also for the applied field of vocational counselling. With the emergence of new theoretical perspectives, the availability of larger standardized data sets across countries, and more sophisticated statistical techniques, the study of educational and occupational aspirations and expectations will continue to be central in the three research traditions that we have investigated.

Notes

1. Ambition manifests itself, in part, in the expectations that young people have with respect to education and occupational attainment later in life. The research literature contains many debates about the level of relevance of expectations for predicting ultimate behaviour (Saha, 1997), but no one argues that expectations are completely unimportant in long-term career attainments. Although the correlation between educational and occupational expectations and ultimate occupational attainments vary, we also know that as young people approach entry into the workforce the correlations increase.

2. One of the early theories about the difference between developed and less-developed countries was that the former countries were comprised of individuals with higher levels of ambition-based modal personalities than the latter. McClelland (1961) called this characteristic the achievement motive, or the need for achievement. This social-psychological explanation has found its way into a number of theories of development (particularly modernization theory), and during the past 30 years, there has been an assumption that students in less-developed countries lacked ambition, and this was in part, an explanation for the country's underdeveloped condition.

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