

Making jobs ‘thinkable’: engaging with the complexity of young people’s career aspirations

Louise Archer
King’s College, London

This paper seeks to help increase understanding about the complexity of the processes through which young people come to formulate their aspirations and their ideas about future occupations. In so doing, it argues that there is a potentially important and influential role that might be played by employer engagement with education, not least in terms of helping to make particular areas of work more ‘thinkable’ for young people.

The paper draws across several pieces of funded empirical work, conducted within the field of sociology of education, that the author has been involved with over the past ten years. All are qualitative studies that use a combination of semi-structured interviews and/or discussion groups with young people and/or parents. These include:

- The Social Class and HE study: A study of 118 working class 16-30 year olds and their reasons for not going to university (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Archer, Hutchings, & Ross, 2003; Archer, Pratt, & Phillips, 2001);
- The Urban Youth and Schooling study: a 2 year study of 89 urban pupils (aged 14-17) and their aspirations and educational dis/engagement (e.g. (Archer, Hollingworth, & Mendick, 2010); (Archer, Halsall, & Hollingworth, 2007; Archer, Hollingworth, & Halsall, 2007).
- The British Chinese pupils study: an ESRC funded study of the reasons for the educational success of 80 British Chinese pupils aged 14-16 years e.g. (Archer & Francis, 2005; Archer & Francis, 2007)
- ASPIRES: an ongoing ESRC 5 year longitudinal study of the science aspirations of children aged 10-14 years (L Archer et al., 2010).

It is argued that ‘race’/ethnicity, social class and gender all play a key role in shaping not only the nature and direction of young people’s aspirations, but also the processes through which these aspirations are formed. The impact of these social axes are highlighted and discussed in relation to three key themes that shape the formation of careers aspirations:

- Knowledge and ‘cultural capital’
- Identity and cultural discourses
- Structural factors and ‘horizons of possibility’

Knowledge and cultural capital

Cultural capital, as theorised by the influential French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1984, 1990), refers the knowledge and cultural resources that people possess. It can exist in various forms, for instance in formal qualifications and credentials; as cultural knowledge and ‘taste’; and as the tacit (taken-for-granted) knowledge (and ability to operate strategically) within particular social institutions (the feel one has for the ‘rules of the game’). Bourdieu argues that the middle-classes possess more of the socially sanctioned/ dominant forms of social capital and, as a result, are able to operate more ‘naturally’ and successfully within (for instance) the education system. Indeed, the synchronicity between middle-class values, tastes and knowledge and dominant societal fields (such as education) is likened to their ability to move within such fields like a ‘fish in water’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992)) and this is seen as key to the reproduction of class privilege within the education system.

Undoubtedly, within all the studies drawn on in the present paper, working-class and minority ethnic young people and their families seemed disadvantaged within the education system by their ‘lack’ of

dominant forms of cultural capital (see also Connor & Dewson 2001; (Thomas, 2001) For instance, in the Urban Youth and Schooling study (Archer et al., 2010), the young people rarely had a sense of the educational subject choices and routes that would best help them to realise their career aspirations. Like the young people in the HE and Social Class study, they also had little idea about what higher education 'is', what it might entail, how much it might cost and routes for getting there. It was similarly unsurprising in the ASPIRES (science aspirations) study that those young people who lack a 'scientific habitus' (Archer, 2010) within their families (i.e. a familiarity with/ knowledge of/ cultural capital pertaining to science) are from predominantly working-class backgrounds. This lack of scientific cultural and social capital meant that perceptions of careers from science were often dominated by stereotypical and narrow views of what science 'is' and where it can take you.

Government education policy tends to assume that the possession of information is central to individual decision-making (S. Gewirtz, 2001). Indeed, many initiatives aimed at 'raising' young people's aspirations and widening participation in post-compulsory education are based on a model of trying to provide 'more' and 'better' information to pupils to help them to make more informed choices (Archer et al 2003; Archer & Francis 2007). However, as I shall now discuss, it is not just the (lack of) cultural capital per se that is important. Social inequalities are embedded in the processes through which young people and their families tend to access and interpret information. As I result, it is argued that interventions based on an information-provision model may be of limited success unless they take account of the differential ways in which information may be accessed and processed.

Firstly, aspirations can be multiple and contradictory and can change considerably over time (Archer, Hollingworth & Mendick 2010). Moreover, there is often no single moment of decision with regard to aspirations – no discrete point in time when all information is processed and evaluated and an enduring and finite decision reached. For instance, evidence suggests that for many middle-class families the prospect of higher education has been 'always known', a taken-for-granted (often unarticulated) discourse within family life (Allat, 1996; Reay, 1998; Reay, David, & Ball, 2005). Whereas for the working-classes it may be a more complex process, indeed, for many it may be a 'non-choice', something that simply never entered into their daily horizons of choice (Archer et al 2003).

Secondly, aspirations tend not to be rational calculations of cost-benefit- probability (although some aspects of educational decision-making may draw on this model more than others and it can be found more so among the middle-classes than other social groups). Educational decision-making can be based on hunches, feelings, emotions (S Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1993) and cultural and identity discourses (Archer et al 2003; 2010), as discussed later. The metaphor of 'landscapes of choice' has hence been proposed as a more useful means of capturing the 'amorphous processual, tentative and intuitive' nature of this process (S. Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995): 6).

Finally, information is not neutral. It is often presented from a particular perspective and is also received, selected and interpreted in differently by different audiences (Burr 1995). Evidence suggests that working-class and middle-class families tend to differ in their use of (and their expertise in using) particular types and sources of knowledge when making educational decisions. Whilst middle-class families tend to value and be adept at using versus formal, 'official' ('cold') forms of knowledge (such as prospectuses, websites, league tables, etc) the working-classes tend to privilege direct, interpersonal ('hot'/ grapevine) knowledge (Ball & Vincent, 1998).

For instance, in the Social Class and HE study, young people described choosing FE and HE institutions on the basis of direct, personal experience or interpersonal recommendations rather than through reputation, prospectuses and so forth (Archer et al 2003). As Ball & Vincent (1998: 380)

explain "... the grapevine is seen as more reliable than other 'official' sources of information". It is socially embedded and as such is unevenly distributed across social groups. Families and friends were trusted sources, but also 'word of mouth' and overheard information. For instance, Carmelle (16, Black Caribbean, FE student) chose her college on the basis of overhearing a conversation at a bus stop. Interestingly, even middle-class young people in the British Chinese pupils study tended to make very little use of 'cold' sources of information – as will be discussed later, the family and cultural discourses were more likely to be privileged within the process of negotiating aspirations.

Across the studies, 'cold' information was often viewed with suspicion by working class and/or minority ethnic young people because it was seen as being produced from the interests of providers. E.g University prospectuses were described as 'advertisements'; widening participation initiatives as motivated by money ('more people equals more money', Eve, FE student, Social Class & HE study), with others describing recruitment drives as being about businesses wanting more 'bums on seats'.

Careers advisors were also often viewed in negative terms across the HE and Social Class and Urban Youth studies – being described as 'not useful', 'not interested' or as uninformed themselves. In contrast, the advice provided by some Learning Mentors and/or Connexions personal advisors, in cases where the young people had developed sustained and trusting relationships, was highly valued and acted upon.

Even when information and advice are provided interpersonally, the ways in which it is received and acted upon may vary depending on the identity of the person providing it and those receiving it. For instance, many working-class and minority ethnic respondents across the studies indicated that the extent to which an information-provider is seen to be 'like me' may mitigate the extent to which the route presented is regarded as a realistic option. As found in both the Social Class and HE study and the Urban Youth study, open days and 'taster' sessions can be viewed as highly enjoyable experiences (generating very positive views of the HE 'product' in question) but they do not necessarily translate into views of higher education as 'for me'. This point can also extend to the use of role models. For instance, in one school there was a gulf of (mis)understanding between a middle-class, Black Caribbean male teacher and the working Black Caribbean boys that he was 'meant' to be a role model for – their lives, values and identities were simply poles apart and both sides described their lack of understanding of where the other was coming from.

Identity and Cultural Factors

As noted above, aspirations are also formed within an emotive/ emotional and identity-based landscape. Across all four studies, identity and cultural discourses were found to profoundly shape what young people regard as possible and achievable for 'people like me'. Indeed, 'multiple identities and inequalities of 'race'/ ethnicity, social class and gender (among others) affect the ways in which people construct, experience and negotiate different educational opportunities and routes' (Archer et al p.175).

For instance, for many working class young people in the HE and social class study and the Urban Youth study, going to university was associated with identity 'change' (notably 'becoming middle-class') and was negotiated or resisted on that basis. For instance, some white, working-class men resisted the idea of going to university because they associated it with a loss of identity, status and power. They saw higher education as the domain of middle-class men and associated it with (what they viewed as) an unappealing form of masculinity that was effeminate and infantilised due to its link with 'writing', studying and financial dependency (Archer et al., 2001). This contrasted starkly with their current (highly valued) personal identities as 'wage earners' within the manual trades. Likewise, a number of young men in the Urban Youth study resisted the prospect of continuing into

HE for similar reasons (expressing the desire to be 'earning not learning' and to speed their entry into the highly valued world of male manual work).

In the British Chinese pupils study (Archer & Francis 2007) we sought to understand the reasons for British-Chinese educational 'success' and found evidence of widespread 'high' aspirations across the sample, irrespective of social class background. Whilst many families lacked dominant forms of cultural capital to support their children's educational choices, they did find other ways to foster 'high' aspirations and achievement. For instance, they devoted disproportionate economic capital to support their children's education (even when money was scarce) and they drew on specific cultural discourses to foster high aspirations. The latter was achieved through social capital (notably collective, competitive social concerns with 'face' in which educational attainment functioned as a key currency) and through what we have termed British Chinese diasporic habitus. As one pupil (Heihei) explained, 'its like a competition', in which personal achievement was viewed in collective terms (as a potential source of family pride). In this process of social competition (which ranged from competition over school entry, examination attainment, post-compulsory routes and occupational success), cultural capital was also generated and disseminated within British Chinese social networks. This social practice was also used to draw boundaries between the British Chinese and other ethnic groups – the latter being characterised by a family concern simply to 'do your best', whereas the British Chinese identified themselves with a discourse of 'being the best'. Moreover, a discourse of 'valuing education' (and holding high aspirations) were constructed as defining features of British-Chineseness. As one parent, Hong Wah explained, 'it's a way of life, really'. This aspirational habitus transcended class boundaries and were passed on to and internalised by children.

Indeed, the British-Chinese pupils study found, strikingly, that irrespective of class background, higher education was regarded within families as a 'non-negotiable option' (p.134). Although, as discussed further in the next section, obviously the extent to which particular British Chinese families were able to draw on capitals and resources (economic, social, cultural) to support these ambitions and to operate strategically within the education system to maximise their options, was circumscribed by social class.

The ASPIRES study of the formation of science-related aspirations among the 10-14 age group is also uncovering the powerful influence of cultural discourses within even young children's nascent aspirations. For instance, analysis to date of the qualitative sample indicates that the only real 'rejectors' of the possibility of science at age 10 are a small group of white, working-class girls (Archer 2010). However, whilst the vast majority of children age 10 seem to enjoy their science lessons and find science interesting (with around 80% of the survey sample pursuing it in their leisure time too, to some extent), there is already a schism emerging between an interest in 'doing' science and the possibility of wanting to 'be' a scientist (work in a science-related career), (see Archer et al 2010). Moreover, even where children may have all the 'right' capitals in place to support science-related aspirations (e.g. attending a 'good' school with a positive experience of school science, having a science-knowledgeable and interested family, expressing a personal interest in science and undertaking science-related activities in spare time, etc), this may not translate straight-forwardly into science remaining on young people's aspirational horizons of possibility. In particular, early evidence suggests that this early dissociation from science aspirations may be driven by identity and cultural/family discourses. For instance, Thomas (a 10 year old white, middle-class boy) attends a 'good' school in his home counties home town. Both he and his mother, Katie, describe his science teacher as very good and Thomas is achieving highly in his science classes. Thomas is interested in science and has science books, sets, mobiles and so on at home. His parents are also both interested in, and knowledgeable about, science and read science-related books, watch science-related TV programmes and enjoy family outings to science-related museums. They also have science-related social capital in a close family friend who is a university scientist. However,

even at age 10, Thomas and his mother convey that science is an unlikely and indeed, even 'unthinkable' career aspiration for Thomas. This, I would argue, seems to be because Thomas and his family draw on a collective family identity organised around literacy that produces Thomas as a 'creative' child, in which science and the arts are positioned in opposition to one another (see Archer 2010). Hence, like others in our wider sample, even at this young age, Thomas is part of a sizeable cohort who enjoy 'doing' science but who have already ruled it out from their aspirations for 'being'.

Structural factors and 'horizons of possibility'

Finally, I would like to argue that an important consideration for those working within the field of aspirations is not the need, necessarily, to 'raise' 'low' aspirations (as policy texts to date have tended to suggest, see Archer et al 2010; Archer & Francis 2007), but to address and support and contexts within which of young people's aspirations are produced. As discussed in detail elsewhere:

"Whilst of course young people do exercise a degree of agency in their choices and produce their aspiration narratives as active individual actors, the nature of their aspirations, and the sorts of identity discourses and resources that they are able to draw on to construct these narratives, are inevitably inflected by the social contexts in which they live" (Archer, Hollingworth & Mendick 2010).

Across all four studies, the powerful effects of structural inequalities have been foregrounded as curtailing and suppressing 'higher' aspirations and as promoting 'lower' (and more gender/ class stereotypical) aspirations. Indeed, it was notable within the Urban Youth study that, over the course of the project's two year tracking period, the majority of young people's aspirations lowered and narrowed. As we discuss in our book "As time progressed, it appeared that the young people became increasingly likely to 'learn their (gendered, classed, racialized) place' and brought their aspirational horizons more closely into line with the 'known' routes". Notably for them, higher aspirations were often unsustainable and/or were not linked to greater educational engagement or achievement per se. This contrasts with more privileged, middle-class pupils, who are more likely to engage in a process of refining (high) aspirations (Reay et al 2005) and seeing the world as full of choices. Whilst the causes of these patterns are multiple and complex, an important aspect is the role of structural inequalities.

As discussed earlier, there are inequalities in terms of the possession and distribution of dominant forms of social, cultural and economic capital which all impact on families' perceptions of horizons of possibility and their ability to maximise their opportunities within educational and occupational markets. Moreover, there is also ample research evidence detailing the tendency for teachers to hold lower expectations of particular groups of pupils (notably minority ethnic, working-class and girls), which has been multiply borne out in my own research. For instance, minority ethnic students across the three studies with secondary aged pupils (and older) have described being put off higher education and specific routes by their teachers and/or careers advisors.

As an example, Loretta (18, Black African FE student, Social Class & HE study) described being put off from applying to university by her school:

"On university places, I was told not to apply because, you know, I just wouldn't get the grade and whatever I needed. And the teacher turned round and said to me "well I think £14.50 [the application fee] is a lot" and I said "do you know what? When I go to university, whatever I make, I'm sure it will cover that £14.50, so I'll just spend it ahead". I'm really cheeky when I want to be!"

Likewise Analisa (a 16 year old Black Caribbean girl in the Urban Youth study) described how her teacher had ridiculed her aspiration to attend an elite London university ("he goes yes if you get in there he will dance round this hall in a woman's dress [...] so there's no chance of me going to LSE").

In the British Chinese pupils study (where young people were arguably performing educational 'success'), it was also notable that, irrespective of social class, racial inequalities constituted an important backdrop to the negotiation of aspirations. Across the board, families steered their children towards particular 'known' and 'safe' career routes, as a strategic tool for negotiating inequalities. For instance, medicine, law and accountancy were all promoted as worthwhile routes for social mobility and as ones which were 'known' (by dint of social capital) to be 'achievable' for British Chinese. In contrast, we found instances of parents dissuading their children from wider routes. For instance, Alice recounted how her mother, who is a designer, dissuaded Alice from following in her footsteps (despite Alice's strong desire to become a designer) on account of the racism and difficulties she herself had encountered in the field. Alice lamented that her mother felt so strongly on this issue that she had even threatened not to pay Alice's university fees if she pursued this route.

In other words, it is argued that education is an unequal playing field in which students from disadvantaged social backgrounds tend to have to negotiate greater risks and costs for more uncertain potential rewards (Archer et al 2003). For instance, they are more likely to attend schools with scarce resources, higher teacher turnover and negative reputational issues (Archer et al 2010). Their families are less likely to possess the dominant forms of cultural, social and economic capital that enable middle-class families to operate successfully and strategically within the educational system and are hence less likely to be in a position to know of, and be in a position to maximise their potential in accessing, a wide range of prestigious career routes. Higher education is disproportionately costly and risky prospect for young people from working-class backgrounds and requires more identity negotiation than is the case with their middle-class counterparts. Moreover, continuing social inequalities within fields of employment can also act as barriers to widened participation in particular fields. In other words, I would like to argue that the current dominant policy focus on the *individual* (as the target for aspirations interventions) needs to be balanced by an appreciation of their social locatedness: aspirations are not simply 'in the head', they are produced through social relations and within social fields, which are structured by inequalities. As such, efforts to make careers 'thinkable' need to address both the structural context and the individual (as socially located actor) if they are to engage with the complexity of aspirations.

Conclusion

So how might employer engagement with education help to broaden young people's participation in a range of careers? The following questions are suggested for helping to provoke further thinking and reflection on the relationship – and its potential:

- *What is the motivation for engagement?* The nature, form and outcomes of employer-education engagement will be shaped by both sides' motivations for engagement. For instance, there will be a balance between altruistic motivations versus self-interest. As the research discussed here has suggested, young people are often quite 'canny' with regard to discerning sources of bias and interest and will be sceptical of overt recruitment drives that they see as not in their interest
- *Which schools – which pupils?* Different constituencies may have differing interests in this respect. My focus in this talk has been on widening participation in the sense of looking at how social inequalities are entrenched within the field of aspirations. Hence my primary interest lies in the capacity that employer engagement in education might have for redistributing social and cultural capital among disadvantaged and underrepresented communities.

- *When?* The ASPIRES study suggests that the long process of career aspiration formation starts early and that particular routes can be ruled out (as 'not for me') irrespective of attainment and enjoyment of related school subjects. Early work may help to interrupt the solidification of such views (especially in STEM fields).
- *What form of engagement?* This will undoubtedly be linked to resources and motivations. There is of course a place for one-off interventions but in the case of widening pupils' knowledge and interest in a wider range of careers, the research would suggest a complementary need for longer-term engagement in which meaningful relationships are built up. Research would suggest that interpersonal contact can be particularly effective for 'raising' the aspirations of disadvantaged groups if it is seen to be relevant and achievable for 'people like me'.
- *Where is the focus?* This relates to the extent to which the individual is recognised as socially located and consideration is given to addressing the structural context within which aspirations are formed. Employer- education partnerships might usefully consider, for instance, how the disproportionate risks experienced by disadvantaged young people might be tackled. This may extend beyond the mere provision of 'information and knowledge'. The potential for offering new opportunities for young people to 'start afresh' and to learn within a well-resourced/ supported professional setting are undoubtedly appealing for young people such as those within the Social Class & HE and Urban Youth studies. For instance, there was an example from the Urban Youth study of a school working closely with local businesses to offer work experience placements. These carefully supported placements helped to build the young people's sense of self-worth, transform negative public (and local employer) perceptions of young people from that school and provided young people with highly valuable social capital for their future careers. There may also be scope for increasingly joined up working between schools, employers and other post-compulsory educational providers – for instance to provide families with contextual information (and 'maps') regarding a range of careers routes within a given field. There may also be value in working more broadly, with families, given the powerful role attributed to families in all the four studies in terms of shaping (both constraining, framing and 'raising') young people's aspirations.

Correspondence:

Prof. Louise Archer

Centre for Public Policy Research, Department of Education and Professional Studies

King's College London

Email: louise.archer@kcl.ac.uk

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