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**Occupational Aspirations / Expectations**

Young people's career aspirations have historically been robust predictors of their later educational and occupational attainment. Adolescents' aspirations – and expectations for their realization – are not mere personal motivations for particular career fields and lifestyles. Rather, the social worlds and opportunity structures that young people are engaged in can motivate, shape, and constrain these ambitions.

**Socially Stratified Aspirations and Expectations**

Historically, research has examined the degree to which social class background constrains occupational aspirations, expectations, and attainment. Emerging in the late 1950s, status attainment scholarship examines the determinants of movement between socioeconomic levels. Employing the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study of 10,317 primarily white male graduates from Wisconsin high schools, William Sewell, Robert Hauser, and their colleagues developed an influential model of status attainment that focused on understanding the processes by which social psychological factors such as aspirations and the influence of others could promote social mobility.

Other sociological work has more closely examined factors constraining aspirations. This line of research argues that young people tend to pursue the occupations most common in their families and communities. This process of social reproduction is illustrated in Paul Willis's 1977 ethnography of British working class boys, which describes how their peer subcultures, teachers, families, and schools promote behaviors that steer them away from further education, and toward menial jobs. In the 1970s and 80s, Pierre Bourdieu argued that social reproduction is inherent in education because schools reward those who demonstrate the skills and knowledge associated with middle- and upper-class culture (cultural capital). In the 1980s and 90s, scholarship in line with William Julius Wilson's work on the underclass maintained that the compounding effects of racial and socioeconomic segregation in American central cities presented such limited opportunity structures to urban youth that they developed low expectations for employment in the formal labor economy. Current research primarily examines the developmental and contextual conditions that may influence occupational stratification over the life course.

**Social and Developmental Contexts for Aspirations, in Changing Times**

Although adolescents' occupational aspirations and expectations have traditionally been robust indicators of their future careers, this relationship is increasingly recognized as being neither linear nor stable for many young people. The supply of stable jobs for both skilled and unskilled workers in the U.S. and other OECD countries has been diminishing since the 1970s. Scholars such as Glen Elder, Jeylan Mortimer, and Ingrid Schoon have demonstrated the influence of social changes such as these on young people's career pathways. Recent cohorts of young people have been delaying their transition from secondary school to career. More specifically, youth are extending their years of study, engaging in part- and full-time employment in varied career

sectors (frequently during periods of university enrollment), and generally becoming more disordered in the sequencing of their career and personal transitions to adulthood.

Amid these occupational and life course shifts, many adolescents hold high educational and occupational aspirations. Research findings from nationally representative studies suggest that high aspirations are insufficient to help youth transition to college and career however. Rather, Barbara Schneider and colleagues have shown the importance of aligning one's ambitions to behaviors (e.g., course selection and after-school activities) that are instrumental for successful transition to college and careers. Schools are widely understood to be an important social context for youths' career development. In particular, the work of James Coleman and his successors on social capital shows that teachers and other school adults socially exchange norms, skills, and resources that can foster the realization of youths' career goals.

### **Gender and Occupational Aspirations**

Although most contemporary studies of occupational aspirations include females, the foundational work in this field focused almost exclusively on males. Gender plays a clear role in occupational aspirations however, evidenced in part by the sex segregation that continues in many fields. While women now outpace men in secondary school performance and attainment of university degrees, they continue to be underrepresented in high-status and high-paying fields. This pattern is even true in science and engineering fields, as women tend to cluster in the biological and health sciences.

Adolescents' motivation for pursuing particular career tracks seems to differ by gender. Specifically, males seem to be more highly motivated by extrinsic factors such as money and social status, as compared to females who seem more highly motivated by intrinsic and subjective factors such as interest and perceptions of their ability. These subjective orientations towards particular careers appear to be influenced by social and cultural norms. In a series of papers beginning in the 1980s, Eccles and colleagues developed the expectancy-value model, which argues that achievement choices are modulated by socialized experiences that influence their value of particular tasks and expectations for success in these areas (e.g., mathematics). Females may then limit their investment in activities in which their gender is not considered to be successful, thereby pursuing other fields instead.

Researchers continue to find that biological and social life course events (e.g., the timing of the birth of their first child) affect females' realization of their occupational expectations. Interestingly however, recent economic uncertainty has more negatively affected the career trajectories of males. Females' jobs, while less financially rewarding, have been more resilient to the economic pressures and changing labor market. As families have become more dependent on the earnings of working women, females' occupational aspirations and attainment may become particularly important.

### **Future Research Directions**

Research findings clearly show that educational aspirations are rising across gender categories, racial-ethnic groups, and social class backgrounds. Less well understood is the relationship between these rising educational aspirations and aspirations to careers. Although university matriculation has increased among individuals from lower-SES families and minority backgrounds, advantaged youth continue to earn bachelors' degrees and enter professional fields at higher rates. This potential waning in the importance of educational aspirations underscores the need for more research into the development of occupational expectations. Career aspirations

may more strongly motivate the postsecondary educational choices of traditionally underrepresented youth, whose motivation for pursuing college appears more closely associated with attaining a reliable and financially sustainable career. Female and minority youth may also be at greater risk for lowering their occupational aspirations than their peers, a troubling pattern that merits further investigation.

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**Further reading:**

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