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Towards a conceptual framework for understanding young people's decision-making about participation in higher education

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

This discursive paper aims to disentangle various loosely-defined concepts that vex understanding of young people's choices. In particular, it will critique the widespread use of 'aspirations' as a framing for making decisions about whether, where and how to participate in higher education. It will argue that rather than providing explanatory insight, it over-simplifies complex processes and falls into a neoliberal deficit discourse.

Rather, this paper will contend that the concept of 'expectations' has more explanatory power and utility for policy and practice. Our expectations about our future are shaped, inter alia, by the objective circumstances of our lives and our subjective perceptions of these circumstances, which are, in turn, forged in the sociocultural norms of families, schools and communities. The paper will argue that aspirations can only be understood with reference to expectations, concluding with a proposed conceptual framework and recommendations for how this might be deployed.

Full paper

The concept of 'aspirations' has now been deployed in discussions of access to higher education for several decades. Across policy documents, strategic plans and practitioner materials, aspirations have been positioned as a key component in determining who goes to university and who does not. In the most simplistic configuration, disadvantaged young people are said to have 'low aspirations' for education and/or careers that need to be 'raised' through the intervention of universities and outreach organisations (e.g. Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014). The problem is that empirical evidence does not substantiate this. In general, the aspirations of disadvantaged young people are not significantly lower than for other people (Baker et al., 2014) and more aspire to go to university than actually do (Croll and Attwood, 2013).

This paper seeks to develop a conceptual argument that was first outlined in an earlier empirical article (Harrison and Waller, 2018). At the heart, it argues that while young people clearly do have aspirations about their future, they are less useful in determining their choices than is often asserted and that policy and practice interventions that target aspirations are unlikely to be effective. Rather, they risk placing responsibility for transcending persistent structural barriers on disadvantaged young people, while perpetuating deficit discourses that blame them for inequalities in university participation rates.

This paper works from the premise that it would be more fruitful to focus our academic, policy and practice attentions on the concept of 'expectations'. While aspirations might reflect our desires for the future in an ideal world, these are inevitably tempered by what we believe could plausibly happen in our real, less-than-ideal, world. These expectations influence not only what futures we believe are possible, but which are considered desirable and worthy of attention. We rarely waste our cognitive and emotional resources on unattainable goals.

This paper argues that there are three main influences on a young person's expectations about higher education and their future lives more generally: (a) an objective assessment of personal circumstances, (b) subjective beliefs and preferences about the future, and (c) prevailing sociocultural norms from the family, school and community. While none of these is novel, this paper aims to integrate them into a single conceptual model. They will be briefly outlined in the space available here.

- Firstly, young people will inevitably observe the material circumstances of their lives, even if only tacitly – the financial resources of the family, their own health and/or disabilities, the opportunities in the local labour market, the need to care for others, public transport infrastructures and so on. Appadurai (2004) recognises how these influence a 'capacity to aspire', highlighting how structural constraints and embodied capitals serve to delimit what a young person understands to be possible for them.

- Secondly, they will have subjective beliefs and preferences about the future and their place within it. We all value different outcomes, while visions of ourselves in the future are powerful motivators in the present, both in the positive and negative (Markus and Nurius, 1986). For example, a young person may value family ties or making a social contribution more strongly than personal advancement. Conversely, they may hold beliefs about occupations that are accurate or inaccurate – e.g. the qualifications needed or the financial rewards. Archer (2012) highlights the importance of the 'internal conversations' that we have with ourselves and how different 'modes of reflexivity' shape what we seek to achieve, sometimes stressing the known and sometimes the expansive.

- Finally, it is inevitable that young people are buffeted by the normative beliefs expressed by those around them – parents, peers, teachers and others. These are powerful messages about the world from trusted interlocutors and Ajzen (1991) credits subjective norms with a important role in the choices we make, providing information does not become overwhelming (Simon, 2000). Not only can they influence the beliefs outlined in the previous paragraph, but they can also bring into question the young person's 'locus of control' (e.g. Lefcourt, 1966) – their belief in their own ability to influence their future, in contrast to life chances being governed by luck of the actions of others.

Aspirations are thus merely a visible manifestation of a complex interplay between one's own expectations and those of others. The overarching argument being advanced in this paper is that if we want to influence patterns of unequal participation in higher education, we have many more levers for policy and practice than just aspirations. At the time of writing, the full conceptual framework is still under development.