



Neighbourhood, school and family determinants of children's aspirations in primary school



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 November 2014

Available online 27 December 2014

Keywords:

Aspirations

Children

Family socio-economic status

Neighbourhoods

Schools

ABSTRACT

Aspirations can be important for young children as well as adolescents. However, there is little research on the determinants of aspirations in young children. We carried out this study to investigate the early contextual (neighbourhood, school and family) determinants of occupational aspirations in primary school children. Our sample comprised children from the Millennium Cohort Study who lived in England in the beginning of our study period ($n = 10,086$; 5,126 boys). Occupational aspirations were measured at age 7 years, while their contextual determinants were measured in the previous data sweeps, at ages 3 and 5 years. We fitted structural equation models to test the role of family and neighbourhood socio-economic status (SES) and child ethnicity in predicting aspirations both directly and via their associations with parental involvement, household chaos, school-level achievement and child cognitive ability. We found that the only significant determinants of aspirations at age 7 years were family SES and ethnicity, and only in boys. Family SES and ethnicity were also related to parental involvement, household chaos, cognitive ability and school-level achievement, but none of these factors predicted aspirations. Supplementary analysis showed that family SES was a particularly powerful determinant of the aspirations of white compared to non-white boys.

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1. Introduction

Distinct from expectations, aspirations reflect what someone would like to achieve rather than what they think they will achieve. There has been much research on educational and occupational aspirations in adolescence (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2001; Gutman, Schoon, & Sabates, 2012; Hill et al., 2004; Schoon, Martin, & Ross, 2007). However, there is evidence from psychology, education and vocational behaviour that career development begins in childhood (Hartung, Porfeli, & Vondracek, 2005), and that occupational aspirations may be salient for younger children, too. For example, in surveys asking general open-ended questions about aspirations, most children, like adolescents, respond by stating the type of occupation they would like to have rather than general future life states they would hope to achieve (Croll, Attwood, & Fuller, 2010). In children, aspirations tend to be fantastical and unrealistically high but even adolescents' more realistic aspirations tend to be high. For example, most large-scale studies of adolescent aspirations in the UK have identified aspirations as generally higher than parental achievements or than what the labour market might allow (Croll, 2008). Although researchers have pointed to the generally adverse effect of unrealistically high aspirations (Gorard, Huat See, & Davies, 2012), most evidence suggests that high aspirations are, in general, associated with positive traits and outcomes, including self-efficacy (Bandura et al., 2001) and value-expectancy beliefs (Frome, Alfeld, Eccles, & Barber,

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2006). However, there is little research on the determinants of aspirations in young children. Given the lack of research on the matter, we explored the role of contextual (neighbourhood, school and family) influences on the aspirations of a large cohort of 7-year-olds in the UK.

1.1. Factors associated with children's aspirations

According to Gottfredson's (1981) theory of circumscription and compromise, aspirations evolve with age from the fantastical to the concrete, and so, as children grow into adolescents, they revise their aspirations based on their views of their own abilities and interests, as well as on societal and parental expectations. The theory suggests that aspirations typically develop in four stages. In stage 1, which can start as early as 3 years, children's aspirations are focused on size and power. In stage 2 (6–8 years), children become aware of sex differences and begin to eliminate occupations from further consideration if they are not typical for their own sex. A few studies have empirically tested Gottfredson's hypothesis (Helwig, 2001; Miller & Stanford, 1987; Trice, Hughes, Odom, Woods, & McClellan, 1995). There is a fair amount of evidence for the sex-based selection of aspirations by primary school children (Helwig, 2008; Schoon, 2001), and some for the elimination of occupational possibilities in secondary school based on social valuation and that of one's own abilities and skills (Helwig, 2001, 2008). However, the timing of these stages has been questioned; for example, the elimination of occupational possibilities in children may begin to occur at younger ages than Gottfredson originally purported (Miller & Stanford, 1987; Trice et al., 1995).

Research in the UK and US shows clear sex differences, whereby girls tend to have "higher" and more intrinsic aspirations than boys as well as greater motivation for school (Schoon, 2001), whereas boys tend to be more adventurous in their dreams, more confident in their abilities and more likely to aspire to rare jobs (Helwig, 2008). Cognitive ability is another important determinant of aspirations. More masculine aspirations (e.g., for manual and physical occupations) tend to be associated with lower ability (Creed, Conlon, & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007), and aspirations are raised when children are doing well academically (Bond & Saunders, 1999).

Parents are a major influence on children's aspirations (Jodl, Michael, Malanchuk, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2001). It has long been established that children aspire to the careers of their parents at rates significantly above chance (Holland, 1962; Werts & Watley, 1972), particularly at primary school ages (Trice et al., 1995). Parental education, social class and income, all approximating parental socio-economic status (SES), strongly influence young people's career dreams both directly (Croll, 2008; Mau & Bikos, 2000; Schoon & Parsons, 2002) and via their effects on parental involvement and child cognitive ability (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Muller & Kerbow, 1993; Stevenson & Baker, 1987). Ethnicity, associated with both parental SES and involvement, is also related to a range of

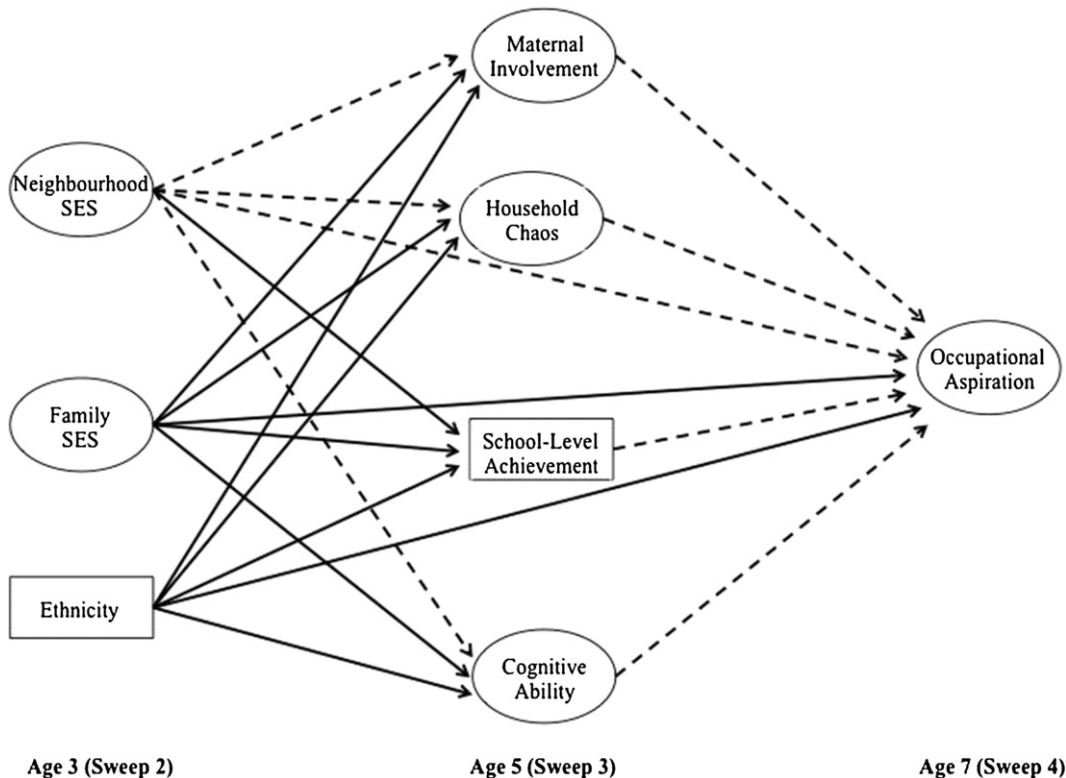


Fig. 1. The hypothesised model. Note: Dashed lines represent paths that were later removed to improve model fit. For illustrative simplicity, the loadings for latent constructs, covariances and area stratum effects are not shown.

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