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How gendered is ambition? Educational and occupational plans of Indigenous youth in Australia

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ABSTRACT

While educational and occupational expectations of Australian youth are known to differ by gender, its intersectionality with Indigenous status, which shapes these expectations, has received little attention. This analysis of the nationally representative Programme for International Student Assessment data, collected in 2006 and 2009 in Australia, finds similarities in school-related factors that boost ambition of Indigenous and non-Indigenous boys and girls. In contrast, maternal and paternal role models influence Indigenous and non-Indigenous students differently. Compared to boys, girls plan to enter occupations which require higher educational qualifications. Despite that, adolescent girls face lower expected lifetime incomes.

1. Introduction

Educational experiences and pathways into employment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or Indigenous youth have long been of interest to Australian researchers and policymakers (Biddle and Cameron, 2012; Bortoli and Thomson, 2009, 2010; Lester, 2000; Song et al., 2014). Indigenous students continue to lag behind their peers in educational achievement and attainment. A recent governmental report (SCRGSP, 2011) confirms that Indigenous children are less likely to participate in early childhood education but are more likely to be absent from school on a given day and achieve lower levels of literacy and numeracy. By late high school, Indigenous 15-year-olds, who make up about 4.5% of their age cohort, are less likely to attend school compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts. The 2011 census data suggest that only 85.8% of Indigenous boys aged 15 attend school, while, for 16 year olds, this proportion drops to 68.5% (ABS, 2011). Indigenous girls have higher participation rates with 88.3% for 15-year-olds and 71.4% for 16-year-olds. These rates are much lower than the corresponding figures for non-Indigenous boys, standing at 95.9 and 86.6%, and for girls, at 96.8 and 90.4%, respectively. This persistent disadvantage has been dubbed "Australia's greatest educational challenge" or "the Third World outcome in Indigenous education"(Penfold, 2010, p. 1).

Educational and occupational aspirations are key motivational variables considered in a search for means to close this gap. Nevertheless, many studies which consider one type of aspirations usually do not mention the other, because youth are often asked about both at the same time without detailed queries into how either are formed. This makes it hard to conceptualize educational ambitions as determinants of occupational goals or vice versa. Although aspirations of Indigenous youth in Australia have been previously explored using both quantitative and qualitative approaches (Craven et al., 2005), studies in this area tend to focus on youth in selected locations in Australia, rather than on nationally representative samples (Hossain et al., 2008; Miller, 2005). While this literature frequently reports gender disparities in educational outcomes and occupational goals of Indigenous students (Craven et al., 2005), they tend to be noted merely in passing, without engendering specific analytical endeavor or theoretical reflection. It is not clear from this extant literature whether gender differently affects aspirations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, and if so, whether this gap persists over time. Likewise it is not clear to what extent the relationship between aspirations and school experiences or family backgrounds differs for boys and girls.

In this paper we take advantage of two nationally representative surveys to obtain a sample of Indigenous adolescents large enough to undertake a comprehensive investigation of ways in

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which gender intersects with Indigenous status in shaping educational and occupational plans of adolescents. We commence with a brief overview of research on adolescent aspirations and their importance for later attainments. After presenting a summary of research about Indigenous students we identify three theoretical insights into school- and family-based processes that foster a development and systematic pursuit of adolescent career goals. We next pinpoint the challenges that these theories face in accounting for the gendered experiences of Indigenous youth in Australia, and describe our data and methods. Our results follow and we conclude by discussing their implications for policy and future research.

2. Educational and occupational expectations of minority youth

A number of longitudinal studies provide strong evidence that educational and occupational plans[1] of adolescents are accurate predictors of subsequent attainments (Ashby and Schoon, 2010; Reynolds and Burge, 2008; Sikora and Saha, 2011). Although specific estimates for Indigenous Australians are not available, the correlations between educational expectations and attainment for other cohorts of youth in various Western societies have been known to reach between 0.6 and 0.7, while similar correlations for occupational aspirations and attainment exceed 0.5 and 0.6 (Marks, 2010). Expectations mediate a large part of the influence which parental education and occupation exert on students (Barone, 2006). In the USA, adolescents who planned to enter university were over 20 times more likely to do so than those who did not (Johnson and Reynolds, 2013). In Australia, youth plans to enter a high status occupation raised the chances of a corresponding attainment also by a factor of 20 (Gemici et al., 2014). Remarkably, ambitious occupational plans of teenagers boost adult attainment of young Australians in addition to ambitious educational plans and even university completion (Sikora and Saha, 2011).

It is difficult to empirically separate the effects of expectations on achievement from the reverse causal pathways as students form their expectations based on a realistic assessment of their future probabilities of achievement. Recently, Homel and Ryan (2014) went to considerable lengths to control for a wide range of factors that might simultaneously influence expectations and attainment in Australia. While in the absence of experimental data it is not possible to obtain perfect measures, Homel and Ryan (2014) got as close as one could hope to with the data available and still found a large and significant effect of expectations on attainment.

Social stratification theory (Kerckhoff, 2001) suggests that adolescents are aware of structural obstacles related to class, ethnicity and gender which may hinder the attainment of their career goals. Therefore, Indigenous as well as other minority students are often found to have relatively modest aspirations (Craven et al., 2005; McLeod, 2008). Yet, disadvantaged ethnic minority students occasionally have ambitious educational and occupational aspirations, despite lower levels of academic performance (Feliciano and Rumbaut, 2005; Khattab, 2003; Portes et al., 1978; Saha, 1983). This motivation is important because even though minority students might "cool down" their ambitions with time (Alexander et al., 2008), career optimism is known to help disadvantaged students to build up resilience which enables them to adhere to their initial goals despite substantial adversities (Alexander et al., 2008). Overall, educational and occupational ambitions of minority students serve as a buffer against setbacks likely to occur in educational careers of both genders (Feliciano and Rumbaut, 2005).

Most psychological theories conceptualize the process of career goal formation in a longitudinal perspective, as a series of feedback loops between perceptions, plans and experiences (Bandura, 1986; Brown, 2002). Therefore, students with less academic success or parental support, which may be due to specific cultural capital in families of origin, are expected to have modest aspirations as do students who are not encouraged to be academically motivated. Cultural capital comprises non-material resources, or "symbolic wherewithal" within the family, which may facilitate or hinder success in formal education (Collins and Thompson, 1997: 618; Sullivan, 2001). The children of educated parents in professional occupations often take it for granted that they will pursue similar types of employment. In contrast, the offspring of parents unfamiliar with higher education cultures and professional employment may conceptualize university-oriented ambitions as a form of "selling out".

Selling out in this context denotes different and generally higher costs of post-compulsory education for minority groups. Akerlof and Kranton (2002) as well as Austen-Smith et al. (2005) describe situations where particular minority actors faced a trade-off between the pursuit of higher wages versus the social stigma experienced within their own subgroup. This stigma results from expending time in an activity embedded in the majority culture (Fordham and Ogbu, 1986; Hirschman et al., 2004). So ethnic, racial and class identities of individual students may converge to facilitate students' entry into or alienation from particular educational and occupational pathways. Yet, little is known how, if at all, these identities intersect with the gendered character of educational and occupational choices of Australian youth.

3. Survey-based research on Indigenous youth

Indigenous students come predominantly from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (Biddle, 2014), so many are likely to feel that their cultural capital is not valued within formal school settings. The Indigenous disadvantage in Australia has been comprehensively and increasingly documented. With respect to educational outcomes, the most recent insights come from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) surveys which, since 2000, attest to persisting divides in reading, mathematics and science literacy with gaps remaining wide and stable throughout the first decade of the 21st century (Bortoli and Thomson, 2009: 11). In addition, Indigenous students tend to have lower academic self-concept and report being less interested and engaged in school activities related to reading, mathematics and science compared to non-Indigenous students. These findings are consistent with the proposition that a number of Indigenous students experience school settings as culturally alien or even oppressive. This is important as prior research based on PISA surveys indicates that characteristics of particular schools and whole education systems have important implications for student ambition (Buchmann and Park, 2009; Mateju et al., 2007).

Yet, PISA data also show that attitudes toward school among Indigenous students, their relationships with teachers and views of schools' disciplinary climates do not statistically differ from those of their non-Indigenous peers (Bortoli and Thomson, 2010). This is the case even in settings where many Indigenous parents are not highly educated and work in lower status jobs. The question that

[1] In this paper we use interchangeably terms such as aspirations, plans, goals and expectations for stylistic purposes. Nevertheless, we recognize that aspirations refer to life plans which are relatively unaffected by perceived social restraints, while expectations take these restraints into account (Saha, 1983). Plans are often more concrete than expectations as they involve a specific strategy to obtain a desired goal. While up to the 1980s these concepts were often considered equivalent, expectations have been found to be better predictors of actual outcomes than aspirations (Goyette, 2008). The variables we use in this study denote expectations.