



# The impact of neighborhoods and schools on young people's occupational aspirations



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 4 April 2014

Available online 17 August 2014

### Keywords:

Education

Occupational aspirations

Social stratification

Context effects

Social mechanisms

## ABSTRACT

In this paper we examine young Germans' occupational aspirations and the significance of neighborhoods and schools in explaining these aspirations. We aim to show (i) which of the two contexts is more significant in this regard and (ii) by which mechanisms characteristics of these contexts become relevant for youths' actions or, more precisely, anticipated actions. We conduct our analyses by means of multilevel models. Merging data from Germany's National Educational Panel Study on 9th grade students with micro-geographic data on residential quarters allows us to consider characteristics of the micro- as well as the meso- and macro-levels. The results show that the school context is considerably more influential on young people's aspirations than the neighborhoods where they live. This probably reflects the selection of young people into different school types that is characteristic of Germany, a country with a highly stratified school system. Schools do not only shape youths' career expectations; they are also important places of secondary socialization in that they have an impact on youths' preferences for particular occupations. Furthermore, we found evidence that the social pressure to aspire high status occupations varies by social composition of the school as well as of the neighborhood context; the effect of neighborhoods, however, is rather weak.

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## 1. Introduction

Recent life course research has shown that processes of school-to-work transition are characterized not only by structural factors and possibilities, but also by complex relationships between an individual's resources, preferences, and choices. In other words, school-to-work transitions are structured not only by selection but also by self-selection, that is, by *subjective* aspects such as young people's occupational aspirations.

Occupational aspirations are of key importance for psychologists and sociologists alike, as they act as crucial mediators in the processes of career development and occupational attainment (e.g., Schoon & Parsons, 2002; Sewell, Haller, & Straus, 1957; Staff, Harris, Sabates, & Briddell, 2010). These aspirations, of course, do not appear from nowhere, and theory and research from both disciplines highlight the role of social contexts in their formation. Yet much research on contextual influences has been restricted to the analysis of young people's family backgrounds, the decisive importance of which has been firmly established (see Ashby & Schoon, 2010; Bozick, Alexander, Entwisle, Dauber, & Kerr, 2010 or Dupriez, Monseur, van Campenhout, & Lafontaine, 2012 as recent examples). In contrast, even though some researchers point to the enormous influence of schools, next in importance to the family (e.g., Haller & Portes, 1973; Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1986), the school context only rarely features prominently in empirical research on aspirations, and the same goes for neighborhoods. Even more rare are studies that have looked at the influence of families, neighborhoods, and schools together.

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In our view, “putting aspirations into context” should also mean looking at how such contexts may differ between countries. For instance, neighborhoods may tend to be strongly segregated in some countries and very weakly so in others; schools may be highly stratified in some educational systems and hardly so elsewhere. Thus a study focusing on Germany, where there is as yet a paucity of research on neighborhood and school effects on aspirations, ought to be welcome.

The influence of *neighborhoods* on educational outcomes is supported by a number of studies, particularly as regards the United States (e.g., Crane, 1991; Crowder & South, 2003; Duncan, 1994; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). European research on neighborhood effects is certainly less established, but nevertheless provides evidence that the same holds true for several European countries (e.g., Furlong, Biggart, & Cartmel, 1996; Garner & Raudenbush, 1991; Kauppinen, 2008), even though social and ethnic segregation is less pronounced there than in the United States (a fact that can be attributed to more redistributive welfare policies in European countries; see Friedrichs, Galster, & Musterd, 2003; Kauppinen, 2007). In any case, what all these studies have in common is that they regard the social and ethnic composition of neighborhoods as the most important factors in neighborhood effects. In Germany, research on the impact of neighborhoods on educational outcomes is still in its relative infancy. Currently only Helbig (2010) has found that children’s competence development profits from privileged neighborhoods regardless of individual social background. Overall, however, the influence of neighborhoods on young people’s occupational aspirations remains largely unexplored, although Furlong et al. (1996) were able to show at least for Scotland that the neighborhood context is significant for occupational aspirations of young people: youths (particularly young men) in deprived neighborhoods tend to exhibit lower occupational aspirations than those in more prosperous residential areas.

Schools are equally important places to be taken into account, in that they can act as mediators between neighborhoods and youths (Jencks & Mayer, 1990; Kauppinen, 2008; Wilson, 1959, 1987). However, in addition to mediating neighborhood conditions, schools may also exert an influence of their own (Astin, 1997; Lee & Bryk, 1989; Rowan-Kenyon, Perna, & Swan, 2011). Indeed, school effects may be particularly strong in countries like Germany, where at some point typically between 4th and 6th grades, students are selected into one out of two or three strongly stratified school types (Allmendinger, 1989; Kerckhoff, 1995, 1996; for a more detailed description of the German system see the section on Data and methods). The characteristics of school and neighborhood contexts should thus be taken into account together (Ainsworth, 2002; Brännström, 2008; Kauppinen, 2008; Sykes & Musterd, 2010), while the question as to whether neighborhood or school effects are more important can only be answered empirically.

At the center of this study is the concept of occupational aspirations, which we elaborate in the following section. Next, again on a theoretical level, we attempt to disentangle the mechanisms through which neighborhood and school characteristics come into effect, as the ways in which these characteristics are expected to exert influence ultimately depend on the action model adopted. Such a model specifies, on the one hand, how individual and structural characteristics are connected and, on the other, how individuals act (*bridge hypotheses*, Esser, 1998, and *macro–micro–macro relations*, Coleman, 1986). But assumptions about the underlying action rules are often only implicit in models of neighborhood and school effects, and we wish to shed more light on these issues by paying close attention to the possible mechanisms underlying the effects that can be observed. In the section that follows we present our data and the statistical methods we deploy, and then go on to report the results of our modeling steps. The paper concludes with a discussion of our findings.

## 2. Theorizing occupational aspirations

The concept of aspirations originated in social psychology and found its way into the sociology of education thanks to work by members of the Wisconsin School (Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969; Sewell, Haller, & Ohlendorf, 1970). It is not, however, always clearly defined. We consider it useful to distinguish analytically between *idealistic* and *realistic* levels of aspiration, a distinction made explicit for the first time by Haller (1968), following an analogous distinction proposed by Lewin (1939). Realistic occupational aspirations, sometimes called expectations, reflect anticipated career outcomes; they express people’s beliefs about what they can reasonably expect to achieve, bearing in mind both their own resources and external circumstances, i.e., their opportunity structure. In contrast, idealistic occupational aspirations are seen as giving expression to people’s desires, interests, and wishes, which are possibly quite independent, or detached, from existing opportunities or constraints (Stocké, 2012a, 2012b). Nevertheless, idealistic occupational aspirations may contribute to the assessment of an occupational option, so that both kinds of aspirations may be interrelated without being identical (Stocké, 2012a). Indeed, distinct theoretical approaches emphasize one or the other of these two forms of aspiration. Analyzing the relation between idealistic and realistic occupational aspirations can help us identify the underlying action rules and thus also evaluate the explanatory power of the different theories.

Realistic aspirations are at the heart of *rational choice approaches* (Becker, 1978), which look at educational behavior as the result of instrumental choices: utility maximizing individuals select from the institutionally available options the one they expect to entail the most favorable cost–benefit ratio. This assumption lies at the heart of influential *theories of (bounded) rational educational decisions* (Boudon, 1974; Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Erikson & Jonsson, 1996; Esser, 1999), according to which different educational and occupational careers can be traced back to class-specific differences in educational performance and choice (cf. *primary* and *secondary effects* of social class, Boudon, 1974). The expected utility of an educational option is derived from its subjectively assessed benefit (e.g., income, job status) minus the subjectively assessed value of its cost, with the estimated probability of completing a course of education also included in the equation.

According to Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) and Goldthorpe (1996) the educational and occupational ambitions of parents and children—understood as realistic aspirations—play the main role in these calculations. These ambitions are assumed to be characterized by *relative risk aversion*: families, regardless of their social status, are keen to prevent the downward social mobility of their children. Families with different social backgrounds assess various cost items as well as expected educational and occupational

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