

## **Aspirations: the moral of the story**

### **Abstract**

This paper argues for the importance of studying the moral meanings that young people attach to their aspirations and plans for the future. Drawing on semi-structured interview data with 29 young people from a Sixth Form College in a disadvantaged area of East London, I show that aspirations are closely connected to the formation of individual and group identities, and the making of inter-group boundaries. I argue that young people develop aspirations as part of a normatively evaluative narrative about who they are and the kind of person they hope to become. Focusing on moral meanings helps us to better understand young peoples' range of motivations for pursuing particular goals, and may help to explain why aspirations can remain high even in the absence of capitals, resources or opportunities.

### **Introduction**

In the UK, policy-makers regularly claim that low aspirations are causally related to a number of social ills, including educational inequality (Cabinet Office 2008, 2009, 2011; Department of Education 2010). It is also frequently asserted that getting young people to raise their aspirations would lead to a reduction in educational attainment gaps, help to break cycles of disadvantage, and increase levels of social mobility. David Cameron (2013) recently claimed that 'You've got to get out there and find people, win them over, get them to raise aspirations, get them to think they can get all the way to the top'. Such statements stress the importance of individual beliefs and attitudes in explaining the persistence of disadvantage rather than broader socioeconomic factors, such as increasing income inequality. Following the 2015 general election, 'aspiration' was also a central motif in debates about how political parties might best appeal to the British electorate. Tony Blair (2015) claimed that if order for the Labour Party to reconnect with voters 'Labour has to be for ambition and aspiration as well as compassion and care'. Although the idea of 'aspiration' is a particularly dominant part of political discourse in the UK, it has analogues elsewhere in the world in debates about the causes and consequences of social inequality.

Given the political and ideological significance of aspirations, understanding more precisely how they are formed, to what extent they motivate action, and what role they play in the educational attainment process, is an issue of fundamental importance for

social scientists. In recent years, researchers in the UK, and internationally, have taken up these intellectual challenges with renewed vigour (Attwood and Croll 2011; Khattab 2015; Schoon and Polek 2011; Stahl 2015; Strand 2014; St Clair and Benjamin 2013). Sociologists of education have been particularly critical of what they see as the excessively individualistic basis of much of the ‘raising aspirations’ rhetoric. Despite this attention, however, important questions remain only partially answered or not asked at all. In particular, I suggest that greater attention still needs to be given to how aspirations are connected to the formation of individual and collective identities, the meaning young people attach to their imagined futures, and how this may in turn influence ‘strategies of action’ over time (Swidler 1986).

The central claim of this paper is that a theoretically and empirically adequate account of aspirations needs to do justice to the moral meaning that young people attach to them. This argument is developed using data from semi-structured interviews with 29 young people at a Sixth Form College in East London. Although the term moral is sometimes used in a narrow sense to refer to interpersonal duties, I use it in a broader and more inclusive way, to refer to the normative significance my interviewees attached to their future plans. This includes their evaluative judgements, beliefs, and attitudes about what they ought to do and the sort of person they hoped to become. My findings suggest that such concerns provided regulative ideals for how my interviewees thought about their futures, and how they came to evaluate the decisions and lives of others. Thus, moral meanings are critical for making sense of my interviewees’ goals for the future. In developing this argument, I draw on ideas from cultural sociology and the resurgence of interest in the sociology of morality (Frye 2012; Lamont 2002; Miles 2015; Nielsen 2015; Hitlin and Vaisey 2013; Sayer 2005, 2011).

By focussing on moral meanings, it is possible to foreground sources of motivation that are routinely neglected in the literature; this analytical framework helps us to better capture the content of young people’s aspirations and the normative significance they attach to their ‘possible selves’ (Oulette et al. 2005). This motivationally richer account of aspirations has the virtue of greater ‘adequacy at the level of meaning’ (Weber 1922/2013). Focusing on the moral meaning of aspirations also provides insights into the making of individual and group identities, which are of fundamental interest to social scientists. It is through the expression of their aspirations, and the commitments that

went with them, that my interviewees went about making their practical identities – they helped to define their sense of self and who they thought they should be. Aspirations, I suggest, are acts of ‘self-constitution’ (Korsgaard 2009). They are related to how we go about constructing our identities as agents. Furthermore, the perspective I advocate helps us to better understand a further phenomenon - why aspirations often run ahead of the chances of them being realised (Vaisey 2010). As Frye (2012) argues, if aspirations are understood to be almost exclusively a reflection of opportunities and resources, then such unrealistically optimistic goals seem puzzling. In this paper, I build directly on her suggestion that such optimism can be made more intelligible by focusing on the moral meaning they have for young people. In particular, I focus on how they use these meanings to forge their identities – their ‘sense of self’ (Akerlof and Kranton 2010).

The moral meaning young people attach to their aspirations is directly related to the dominant role education plays in how we think about opportunity and what it means to be successful. In the UK, and across the globe, education is valorised as the key mechanism through which opportunity for all can be realised and is framed as the primary way in which disadvantaged groups can achieve upward social mobility (Brown and Lauder 2011). The promotion of the ‘gospel’ that education can deliver both economic growth and social justice means that education is increasingly a key point of reference for how people evaluate their lives and the lives of others (Grubb and Lazerson 2007). Bound up with this model of productive youth development are ideals about what young people *should* do and what a good life looks like. As a consequence, those without qualifications and those who do not pursue higher education are regularly positioned as failures, lacking in value, and deserving of contempt (Reay, David and Ball 2005; Skeggs and Loveday 2012). To borrow a phrase, we might call this the ‘moral background’ against which aspirations are formed (Abend 2014). This background, where economic ideas overlap and blend into moral criteria, provides an organising cultural schema for how many young people think about the future and interpret their decisions. Under such conditions, and when people are increasingly expected to be the autonomous authors of their own life projects, it is hardly surprising that aspirations are often highly moralised and connected to young peoples’ sense of self-worth (Giddens 1991; Stahl 2015)

My empirical data are drawn from a socially, economically and ethnically diverse area of east London. This is significant because research suggests that some ethnic minority groups hold higher aspirations than their ‘White-British’ peers (Strand 2011; Modood 2004). Furthermore, Butler and Hamnett (2011) suggest that among many ethnic groups in the ‘new East End’ there exists a strong sense of optimism that social mobility and entry into professional occupations can be achieved through investing heavily in education. Therefore, my analysis should be seen as a starting point for further research on the normative dimensions of young peoples’ aspirations and their lives more generally. The remainder of the paper is structured in three parts. The next section discusses the current literature on aspirations. In the following section, empirical data are drawn upon in support of my argument. In the final part of the paper, future areas for research are identified.

### **Aspirations: an overview**

Social scientists have studied aspirations using a range of methods and theories (Author; 2014; Appadurai 2004; Croll and Attwood 2013; Eccles 2009; Giddens 1991; Goodman and Gregg 2011; Macloed 2009; Moulton et al. 2015; Stahl 2015; Strand and Winston 2008). Typically, aspirations are treated as ‘expressions of young people’s goals for the future’ that reflect ‘how far in the educational system they would like to go’ (Schoon 2009, 14). Thus, they are held to be *preferences* for a particular outcome and are often distinguished from expectations that reflect *beliefs* about the likelihood of an outcome occurring. Much of the current literature attempts to answer two questions: are there between-group differences in aspirations? And, do aspirations and the actions that flow from them help to explain educational and economic outcomes?

With regard to the first question, research shows that important differences between various social, economic and cultural groups exist. Broadly speaking, female students’ hold higher aspirations for attending university than males (Schoon and Eccles 2014) and research has revealed differences in aspirations between social classes and income groups (Author 2014; Gutman and Akerman 2008). Studies also suggest certain ethnic minority students (e.g. Indian and Chinese students) have higher aspirations than their white peers (Strand 2011). Intersectional analyses also highlight the important connections between class, gender, ethnicity, and orientations to the future (Archer DeWitt and Wong 2013; Strand 2014). Family socialisation, distinct cultural values, parental income and

attainment, peer social networks, and teacher expectations have all been identified as pathways through which aspirations are influenced (Butler and Hamnett 2011; Furlong, Biggart and Cartmel 1996; Kao and Tienda 1998; Khattab 2015; Shah, Dwyer and Modood 2010).

With regard to the second question, aspirations appear to be associated with a range of important outcomes such as occupational and educational attainment, adult well-being, and earnings (Goodman and Gregg 2010; Schoon 2001). Ashby and Schoon conclude from their analysis of the 1970 British Cohort Study that ‘Young people with high career aspirations are more likely to enter a professional career in adulthood’ (2010, 350). However, establishing the precise *causal* influence of aspirations is far more challenging and contentious (Gorard, See and Davies 2012).

Although various theoretical approaches have been used to study aspirations, Bourdieusian and rational choice perspectives have been particularly influential, yielding important insights into the relationship between social background, orientations to the future and educational decision-making (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Goldthorpe 2007; Reay et al. 2001; Reay, Crozier and Clayton 2010; Stahl 2012, 2015). Rather than simply stressing the differences between them, a more theoretically illuminating approach is identify areas of consonance: in this case both assume aspirations are strongly related to resources and opportunities. Bourdieusian approaches typically hold that aspirations reflect the opportunities people have for realising them, levels of prior attainment, and the various capitals individuals can draw on in pursuit of their goals. Burke (2015, 3) suggests that working class youth have ‘limited aspirations and expectations’ because they are cognizant of the barriers they face both inside and outside of educational institutions. This is consistent with Bourdieu’s view that ‘Agents shape their aspirations according to concrete indices of the accessible and the inaccessible, of what is and is not ‘for us’ (Bourdieu 1990, 40). Rational choice scholars tend to focus on how young people weigh up the costs and benefits of pursuing particular educational and occupational pathways; on this view, aspirations are ‘purely...rational assessments of students’ economic and social circumstances’, and people choose goals ‘that will maximize their chances of future success’ (Frye 2012, 1566).

### **An alternative approach**

Although these theories have generated a range of important insights, there are significant limitations to their explanatory reach. First, the majority of youth, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have high aspirations (Harris 2011). This is not to deny that important differences in aspirations *do* exist but what is striking is the extent to which students from all social backgrounds express ambitious educational goals. Such empirical regularities seem at least partially at odds with claiming that aspirations are largely a reflection of capitals, resources, and available opportunities. Second, much of the literature pays little attention to actors' normative motivations and concerns; this absence is partly a consequence of Bourdieu's widespread influence and his predominant focus on people's strategies for achieving social reproduction (Sanghera 2015). Bourdieusian analyses of educational decision-making often downplay or dismiss value commitments and normative concerns as rationalisations of class interests (e.g. James et al. 2010). By foregrounding moral meanings, we can develop a fuller understanding of the social, cultural and cognitive processes associated with aspirations.

Focusing on moral meanings also sheds light onto an important question: what do aspirations get used for? Frye's (2012) recent work provides a suggestive answer. In her study of forty young women in Malawi, she argues that her participants used their aspirations to fashion a positive sense of self – one that is morally praiseworthy and virtuous; this helps to explain how they are able to maintain strikingly ambitious education and occupational goals, in a country where very few children finish secondary school, and where women's labour market opportunities are severely restricted. In addition to interview data, she draws on archival sources showing how the Malawian government encourages young people to pursue ambitious educational and occupational goals. The deliberate promotion and influence of this commonly shared 'cultural model of educational success', she argues, partly helps to explain the aspirations of students in her sample (Frye 2012, 1584). Drawing on pragmatist theories of personal identity, Frye argues that 'youth used idealized visions of their future selves to ascribe significance and moral stature to their present selves' (1573). Despite having little realistic chance of achieving their goals, her participants maintained ambitious educational goals because they interpreted education as being part of 'an odyssey with strong moral implications' and believed that holding high aspirations was a way of 'asserting themselves and [being] forward thinking and morally worthy' (1608). This type of 'identity work' may be

particularly important for young people, and for individuals and social groups negatively positioned in prestige and status hierarchies (Wexler 1992). I argue that despite the obvious differences in cultural and economic context, this approach also provides insights into my interviewees' aspirations.

A focus on moral meanings is also instructive when considering how the expression of aspirations can be used to make social distinctions, manage peer social hierarchies, and engage in 'boundary work' – a concept regularly used to explain how people make 'us/them' distinctions and build group identities (Emirbayer 1997; Fiske 2011; Lamont and Molnar 2002). In her study of working class men in the United States and France, Lamont revealed how 'moral criteria' were central to how her interviewees defined and constructed inter-group differences, particularly with regard to social class and race (Lamont 2002). I suggest that the aspirations of my participants served an analogous function: in emphasising that they valued education students distanced themselves from less academically focused peers, who were positioned as morally inferior. Their aspirations helped them define who they were – a 'good' pupil and 'good' individual – and who they were not – a 'bad' pupil and 'bad' individual. Thus, aspirations can be seen as a cultural tool that students used to define the boundaries of group membership.

## **Method**

The data presented in this paper are from the qualitative component of a multi-method study of young peoples' aspirations in England; this strand of the project involved semi-structured interviews with 29 students recruited from a Sixth Form College in an East London borough, an economically deprived part of the capital with a socially and ethnically diverse population. Semi-structured interviews were used to gain insights into students' aspirations, and to explore how they thought about the future and made sense of opportunity and social mobility. Questions were also asked to explore their perspectives on what went into making a 'good life'. This provided insights into students' 'representations, classification systems, boundary work, identity, imagined realities and cultural ideals, as well as emotional states' (Lamont and Swidler 2014, 6). The timing of my data collection was also significant. It took place following a major recession – a period of economic uncertainty and high youth unemployment.

The students came from a range of social and ethnic backgrounds; they were also recruited in order to have different attainment profiles and were taking a range of academic (e.g. A-Level courses) and more vocational courses (e.g. BTEC (Business and Technology Council) Level 1 qualifications). Thus, whilst some students were relatively academically successful and had good prospects for attending university, a significant number did not. A further important point, and one that I return to in the conclusion, is that these are students who remained in rather than exited the education system.

It is worth noting the ethnic and cultural diversity of my sample. Although roughly a quarter of students identified as 'White British' the majority came from cultural and ethnic minority groups (e.g. Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Afro-Caribbean). For some of these students religion also played an important role in their lives. On the one hand, this may suggest that my findings are idiosyncratic and limited to a particular setting. On the other hand, what was striking across my data was that the moral meaning of aspirations appeared to be broadly shared across ethnic, social and cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, it is worth underscoring that given the scope of the project, reliable inferences cannot be made about the wider significance of moral meanings for other groups of young people in other social settings – this remains a question to be explored in future research. The age of the participants (16-18) was also significant; they were selected because they had already taken their GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) and had chosen subjects and qualifications. This important transitional phase placed a certain degree of pressure on them to think about their next steps.

### **Aspirations and identity**

Although many of my interviewees came from highly disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and from families with relatively few financial resources, almost all expressed a commitment to remaining in the education system. This meant going to university. Twenty-two out of the twenty-nine students were clear that this was their main educational goal. Included in this number were students' with relatively poor levels of achievement and whose prospects for transitioning into higher education appeared slim. Only five spoke negatively about higher education and expressed a desire to directly enter the labour market.

A striking feature of my data was the normatively evaluative way in which my



participants defined and justified their goals. They spoke about their aspirations not just in terms of gaining credentials to succeed in the labour market but also in terms of self-development and how their choices reflected a commitment to values that were central to their identity. These ‘projects of the self-realization’ were focused just as much on ideals as on more instrumental outcomes (Power et al. 2013, 583). For example, Rubel, who grew up in a high poverty household and an area known for gang-violence, spoke about the importance of developing character and ‘doing good’:

Rubel: I don’t know exactly what I wanna become, but I know like the kind of like individual I want to be. My mum always emphasised, like drilled into me, ‘You will be a man of character. Be a good person, do good in your life.’  
Parents were reported to not only emphasize the material rewards education could bring; educational achievement and aspirations were also central to their broader accounts of the life they wanted their children to live, and the sort of person they wanted them to become. Rubel and other students explained how these value commitments were regularly part of the day-to-day interactive order in which they participated.

Although Rubel talked quite vaguely about possible jobs - working in teaching or the charity sector were briefly mentioned – he was quickly able to articulate his vision of the sort of person he wanted to become. This involved ‘helping others’, the importance of integrity and being there for his family; these values were central to his vision of the ‘good life’. Such sentiments were widely shared by students in my sample and provided an organizing principle for how they thought and talked about the future. Mina provided a further illustration of these concerns:

Mina: I need to do something that’s gonna make me a better person.

In addition to discussing education as a means to achieve social mobility, the students’ educational and occupational aspirations were closely connected to a broader account about what it meant to be a good person. The moral meanings associated with investing in education helped them to form ‘narrative coherence’ around their lives that assumed ‘larger significance because of their implications about what kind of person one is becoming’ (Hitlin and Vaisey 2013, 10). This doubly important because not only were they presented as being central considerations in decision-making but were also connected to how they tried to claim moral status for themselves.

The imagined experience of attending university was a particularly significant reference

point in the interviews; university was discussed as somewhere important character traits could be developed. Similarly to Nielsen's study of working-class women in America, I found that my respondents' narratives around higher education were not just focused on achieving social mobility and economic security but also on what he calls 'moral self-improvement' (Nielsen 2015, 276). As I suggested above, this may stem from the centrality of education, and particularly attending university, in defining success and self-worth. When asked to describe why they wanted to go to university and what they thought it would be like, students regularly drew on ideas of growth, autonomy, and responsibility:

Hisham: I think it'll just make me grow up even more as a person. Sort of just see what the bigger world is like and being on your own as well, sort of having to take care of yourself.

Rhiannon: At uni maybe it's completely up to you, if you want to do something or not'.

One student particularly stressed the importance of financial independence from her parents:

Deborah: Not dependent on other people. Like right now if I want anything, I'd have to go to my parents.

Another talked about how he would be proud of achieving his career without much financial or social support 'I guess getting the self-satisfaction of knowing you'd worked for it in your life'. Around two-thirds of the interviewees (n=19) talked about education and work as being a means to 'grow as a person', being 'independent', and learning how to 'take care of yourself'. Thus, they appeared to frame higher education as a 'moral as well pragmatic pursuit' (Nielsen 2015, 267). These accounts of the successful subject appeared strikingly similar to the ideal type of the Western democratic citizen often promoted in educational policy discourses: responsible, self-reliant and yet willing to contribute to public goods. The meaning that my respondents attached to attending university may also have stemmed from the fact that they did not, or could not, take university attendance for granted in a way that more privileged students may be able to. The centrality of effort and hard-won successes in defining their sense of self-worth may stand in contrast to more advantaged students whom, it has been suggested, place greater importance on projecting 'effortless achievement' (Bourdieu and Passerson 1977; Mac an Ghail 1994).

### **Careers and the self – professional and respectable caring professions**

When discussing possible careers, many students focused on traditional professional occupations such as medicine, teaching and social work; these, and other jobs in the ‘public-sector’, were perceived as providing pro-social career paths. Jobs in these areas seemed to carry a particular cultural meaning – they were associated not only with economic success and security but also respectability. As Harding (2010) suggest certain careers may carry ‘cultural resonance reinforcing its perceived viability’ (Harding 2010: 208). It seemed that the expression of other regarding choices and a concern with public goods helped the students to build a caring, positive vision of the self. When discussing his career, a high achieving student claimed ‘If someone needs help, you help them’. Summaiyah, a successful A-Level student talked about studying Medicine or Pharmacology, and like other students she emphasized the social status and cultural meaning associated with pursuing a career in the medical professions. In addition, she also stressed the importance of being in a career where she would be ‘helping someone else’. She explained:

Summaiyah: It’s just like basically the satisfaction of hopefully making a good change to someone’s life and changing something that maybe they couldn’t do themselves.

One of the most academically successful male students drew directly on ideas of duty and responsibility when discussing his occupational choices and the sort of person he thought he should be:

Yasser: Not even just in your job but like all the time, you should help other people. It's just morally right. So many people have helped you, and you'd want people to help you if you were stuck so treat someone else how you'd like to be treated.

Almost three-quarters (n=21) of students made at least some reference to the importance of helping others and engaging in socially beneficial behaviours. This was expressed through the choice of careers they were considering (e.g. teacher, nutritionist and doctor); when discussing norms of appropriate behaviour in interpersonal interactions (e.g. ‘helping people when they are down’ or not engaging in conspicuous consumption); and stressing the importance of other-regarding behaviours (e.g. by giving to charity). By stressing the altruistic nature of their aspirations and downplaying the importance of wealth and status, which may be out of reach for many of them, students were able to draw on an alternative definition of success and self-worth (Lamont 2002). I do not want to suggest that somehow these normative concerns somehow dominated or were always more salient than instrumental concerns with

economic advancement. Nor do I want to suggest that expressing these concerns meant that they would straightforwardly translate into actions, or that such stated reasons made them morally praiseworthy, 'good' individuals. What I do want to argue is that these concerns were an important part of how they explained their plans for the future. Therefore, theoretical perspectives that fail to give meaningful weight to these factors tend to give a one-dimensional view of aspirations and, by extension, educational decision-making.

### **Aspirations, respect and status**

The moral meaning that my interviewees attached to their aspirations can usefully be thought of as an overarching cognitive framework within which students organised their potential decisions and actions regarding the future. Of particular significance was the shared perception that status, value and respect is conferred on people who are educationally successful. Numerous students identified siblings, peers, or family acquaintances whose educational success had afforded them social esteem and therefore became 'high status role models' (Archer and Francis 2006). In addition, educational success was discussed as a way of avoiding stigmatizing social judgments that may induce feelings of shame or embarrassment – emotions that are central to how social norms operate (Reay, David and Ball 2005; Sayer 2005). An awareness of rank and status hierarchies helps to explain why some students, despite a lack of various resources, and in some case quite low levels of achievement, still expressed a commitment to investing in education and employment.

A recurring theme in the interviews was how the holders of qualifications were afforded dignity and standing in the eyes of others. Qualifications were discussed as not only signaling the presence of cognitive skills but as making those who held them worthy of respect. These issues were particularly prominent in two of my interviewee's comments:

Kayleigh: I know people look up to you. 'Oh she went to uni, she's got a degree, she's smart.'

Ahsan: Education...it represents you as well. If someone is a doctor, everyone would be like, 'This person, he looks qualified. Obviously he's a doctor, so he must be really smart.' Whereas if you just work as, I don't know, you're just like a bathroom cleaner or something in a local store...some people won't think you're qualified or anything.

Ahsan explained how people without qualifications and who worked in low-paid jobs were more likely to be judged negatively in comparison to those in more well-paid, middle class professional occupations. An awareness of such socially evaluative judgments was common across the interviews. For example, Maryam explained that she wanted to become a pilot because it would mean being responsible for the well-being of others, which carried with it social status:

Maryam: Because if you have respect, then you know that people like you for what you are not for how you look. So whatever you do, for example, I'm a pilot... Because it's a really, really dangerous job, it's a risk.

She saw a willingness to accept responsibility and exposure to risk as a basis for respect. Furthermore, she compared the importance of what she considered genuine respect against more superficial value judgments based on 'how you look'.

The general processes just described carried a local inflection that should be considered: my interviewees were from an ethnically diverse part of east London; Butler and Hamnett (2011) describe this as the 'new East End' due to its changing social composition. They argue that among certain ethnic minority groups there is an increasing sense of optimism about education providing a meritocratic pathway to social mobility. Shah, Dwyer and Modood (2010) also argue that 'ethnic capital', embodied in the shared beliefs and values of certain ethnic minority groups helps to explain commitment to education even in the face of exclusion and a lack of material resources (see also Modood 2004). Part of this package is a set of normative assumptions about the choices young people should make. Some of the students did invoke the idea of cultural norms and values. And, one student stated that this meant, 'I can't not go to university'. Other students focused on the importance parents placed on receiving esteem and recognition of those in the wider community:

Mia: if your daughters or sons are ... doctors or teachers, everyone will think, 'Oh my God, they're really good,' like they're a good family.

Rumina: 'You have to do something that's good, cos then other people, they're gonna be like, "Your daughter's doing this", or "Your daughter's doing that."' A further factor also appeared to be religion – a significant minority of students were religious and attempted to ground their aspirations and attitudes in their faith. In discussing their futures, many students with religious convictions, and particularly

Muslim students, framed their choices in terms of the normative demands of their religion. Thus, being aspirational and a 'good pupil' was connected to their ideas about being a good member of their faith community. In some respects the foregoing discussion seems to offer support for the ethnic capital hypothesis in explaining the optimism and 'high' aspirations in my sample. Indeed, it may be the case that compared to other marginalized groups, particularly white working class students the young people who took part in this study were particularly invested in the pursuit of educational qualifications. Nevertheless, I would maintain that such comments reflect the presence of a broader set of pervasive social and cognitive processes to do with the formation individual and collective identities that are shared across social groups. What is noticeable is that the moral meaning of aspirations, and the general tenor of the reasons, justifications and explanations given for them, appeared highly similar across the interviews and included those who identified as 'White British'.

### **Hard work and hierarchies**

An important function of aspirations for my interviewees was how they were used to create distinctions between individuals and social groups. Investing in education was a way of defining themselves in opposition to those who did not pursue educational qualifications; because of this, they felt justified in claiming moral and as well as intellectual superiority over their less educationally committed peers. This process of social categorization and 'boundary work' had two components (Lamont 2002). First, students stressed both the importance of certain actions and attitudes, such as determination, to achieving ambitious goals and their commitment to traditional ideals about educational achievement and achieving a 'good' job. In a very different setting to Brown et al's study of 'elite' students, I also found that a focus 'on individual character and moral fibre was an important part of their self-legitimation' (Brown et al. 2014, 11). Second, students then contrasted these positive qualities, that they sought to identify with, against negative traits, such as laziness, that they used to explain why people 'fail'.

Hard work and closely related terms such as diligence, focus, persistence and determination were often used. These characteristics were discussed as being particularly important because of the intense competition for good jobs caused by 'labour market congestion' and the effects of the 2008 recession (Brown 2013). Chris, whose father was a mechanic and whose mother worked in retail, talked at length about what he needed to

do in order to be successful on his undergraduate nursing course, 'I need to be very consistent, persistent; it's just gonna be a lot of hard work'. These ideas were central to how he understood what it meant to be a good student. The two examples below are typical of the significance students attached to these ideas:

Fayza: Yeah, to do something you have to work hard. But you can't just give up...To become something you really have to do something.

Kimberley: Keep my head down and stop letting myself get distracted.

Such discussions were striking in the density of adjacent terms relating to how to achieve educational success ('you can't just give up', 'focus' ('don't get distracted')). Similarly to Lamont, I found that hard work was 'associated with other positive traits such as being responsible and caring for others, as if it were part of a package that characterizes "good people"' (Lamont 2002, 25). For the majority of students, and in keeping with much of the literature on youth transitions, explanations for success centered on attitudes and patterns of behaviour rather than innate ability; inequality of outcomes was consequently explained in broadly meritocratic terms where hardworking people were assumed to get the success that they 'deserved' (Ball, Maguire and Macrae 2000). Given that this model of attainment was central to their understanding of how social mobility operated, it is unsurprising that students expressed a strong sense of self-efficacy. As one student put it, 'I think every person has the opportunity to try again, and nothing's impossible'.

Not having high aspirations and failing to work hard was stigmatized: it was presented as a moral failure - a failure to take responsibility for one's life. Michaela discussed her frustration with some of her peers; she expressed particular disdain for people who assumed that they could easily pursue higher education without sustained effort:

Michaela: Everyone seems to think that 'I deserve a university place' - well why? You know, you can't be bothered to work, why do you deserve a uni place?

Like many of the students, she was proud of the fact that she had remained in the education system and worked hard. Michaela contrasted herself as someone who valued 'everything', particularly with regard to education, with those who 'wasted time in school'. A noticeable feature of her response was that she moved from an evaluation of a specific outcome - not being entirely successful at school - to much more general evaluations of character and worth. By defining people as 'time-wasters' or being 'lazy' she positioned herself as being morally superior and as being justified in looking down

on those who did not invest in education.

Such moral evaluations also extended to the world of work. Abby argued that people had a clear duties regarding work and that a failure to work was worthy of condemnation:

Abby: Like if you can't work, you actually can't work...maybe if you're disabled or something, or you just generally can't work. But if it's just laziness, then that's just appalling.

In addition to focusing on notions of laziness, a range of students also drew on ideas of everyone having potential. Whilst in some sense this was egalitarian because they rejected the idea of inherent differences in ability between individuals, a consequence of this assumption was that success was presumed to be almost entirely dependent on traits that individuals could be held accountable for. A relatively low achieving student on a BTEC course claimed, 'I guess some people are lazy... I think everyone can get good marks at school'. These comments were reflective of a broader set of commonly held assumptions about personal responsibility, the role effort played in the educational attainment process, and how to achieve social mobility. As Lamont argues, assumptions such as these relate to how people draw strong boundaries between themselves and others 'below' them in the social structure, and are acts of symbolic and real exclusion (Lamont 2002, 131). Furthermore, by explaining differences in educational outcomes in individualised ways, and drawing on ideas of moral failure, students' thought of educational and social inequality as legitimate and fair. This was a touchstone in how they made sense of their own goals and understood the world around them.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have argued for the importance of studying the moral meanings that young people attach to their aspirations and plans for the future. I have further suggested that young people experience and interpret their educational and occupational aspirations as part of a normatively evaluative narrative about who they are and the sort of person they hope to become. This interpretation of aspirations is important because it helps us to better understand young people's range of motivations for pursuing particular ends, significantly expands our thinking about how they approach decision making, and better tracks the things they say matter in their lives. Furthermore, moral meanings help us to think more clearly about why aspirations can remain high even in the absence of capitals, resources or opportunities. Of course, the focus of the project, and specifically the fact



that only students who remained in education participated, means that the arguments and theoretical framework proposed in this paper need to be assessed in a wider range of settings.

This paper helps to justify the further development of a research agenda for sociologists of education and educational researchers: the study of the moral lives of young people. Such an agenda could fruitfully complement the resurgence of interest in the sociology of values and morality (Miles 2015; Vaisey and Hitlin 2013) and the constitutive role ethical concerns play in social life. The relative neglect of these issues is particularly striking given the central role questions of morality and values played in the intellectual projects of Weber and particularly Durkheim (Abend 2014). This requires going beyond more recent, and undoubtedly important, work into who is denied or given value, and the role normative evaluations play in the construction of group boundaries. For example, sociologists of education and educational researchers could productively contribute to debates about young people's vision of the 'good life', the extent to which moral characteristics are central to their personal and social identities, how young people's value commitments structure social interactions and shape social networks, and how people respond to various moral dilemmas. Research in these areas would shed new light into not only how people forge their individual and collective identities but also one of the paradigmatic concerns of sociologists of education: inequality. Young people's ideas about fairness and responsibility often tell us a great deal about how they understand the world around them, particularly with regard to how they make sense of opportunity. By focusing on these dimensions of young people's worldviews, we can gain fresh insights into their experiences of advantage and disadvantage.

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