

Raising expectations

MANY of you – maybe all of you – have ‘aspirations’, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘strong hope or wish for achievement or success’. Usually operationalised in the social sciences as ‘planful competence’, ‘personal goals’, ‘strivings’, ‘life plans’, or ‘life tasks’ (see Ritchie *et al.*, 2005, for a review), aspirations are often thought of as what made people famous and societies great. Pick up a biography and you’re bound to find a reference to boundless ambition and drive; read some history or sociology and you’ll come across the conventional notion of meritocracy, that talent and effort – not factors such as class, gender, ethnic group or wealth – determine educational success and therefore positions in society.

But is the path from aspiration via merit to achievement open for all in modern society? Breen and Goldthorpe (1999) showed that while merit does play a part in determining individuals’ class destinations in contemporary British society, the effect of class origins remains strong. Children of less advantaged class origins need to show substantially more ‘merit’ than children from more advantaged origins in order to gain similar class positions.

Psychologists can study how such



EIRINI FLOURI looks at parental aspirations and educational outcomes in socio-economically disadvantaged children.

children develop aspirations, and the role played by their parents’ aspirations for their children. As the linchpin of the meritocratic perspective in the education system, educational psychology has the most to offer in studying meritocracy. Empirical research in educational psychology has shown that parents’ aspirations for their children’s educational attainment are associated with children’s academic achievement. But in what ways can we explain this relationship?

Explanations

The relationship between parental aspirations and children’s educational attainment has been explained by various pathways (see Ritchie *et al.*, 2005, for a discussion):

- parental aspirations predict achievement because they are related to determinants of achievement such as child’s aspirations or child’s psychological adjustment, and parental involvement, parental investment and parental concern or interest;
- parental aspirations are related to high socio-economic status (SES), high parental education and parental mental health (suppressor effects);

- parental aspirations are higher in parents of those children who actually do well in school (endogeneity effects).

There is, however, a significant debate as to whether parental aspirations can act as a protective factor against low educational attainment, especially in those at risk for low educational attainment (such as socio-economically disadvantaged children). Theoretically this approach is within the general framework of investigating resilience (i.e. better than expected outcomes) or prevention (i.e. avoidance of adverse outcomes) in individuals exposed to risk (Luthar *et al.*, 2000). A good example of such a research tradition is a study by Kim-Cohen *et al.* (2004) which showed that maternal warmth, stimulating activities, and children’s outgoing temperament appeared to promote positive adjustment in children exposed to socio-economic deprivation. However, such an approach has been fiercely criticised as being in line with the American preference for indirect rather than direct approaches to poverty reduction, and for using secondary strategies to deal with primary problems (McLoyd, 1998).

WEBLINKS

Centre for Longitudinal Studies: www.cls.ioe.ac.uk

National Family & Parenting Institute: www.nfpi.org

Joseph Rowntree Foundation: www.jrf.org.uk

Ecological models of development, although supporting very different political ideologies from those underlying most resilience research, also emphasise the importance of the social and economic context in the development of child outcomes. Longitudinal data from the 1970 British Birth Cohort has shown that parental aspirations have an independent association with educational attainment and occupational outcomes in both disabled and non-disabled young people (T. Buchardt, personal communication, 16 December 2005).

Perhaps inevitably with psychological theory, there are also those that emphasise a potential overlap which could apply to the parental influence / innate factors relationship. For example, Bronfenbrenner and Ceci's (1994) bio-ecological model predicts that, for outcomes reflecting 'developmental dysfunction', proximal processes and other environmental influences will have greater impact on youth growing up in disadvantaged contexts than on youth in advantaged contexts. In favourable environments – such as a high socioeconomic status family – genetic potential is more likely to be fully realised.

The evidence

Ideology and theory aside, the evidence of whether parental aspirations buffer the effect of socio-economic disadvantage in children's later academic outcomes is mixed at best.

In the UK, Schoon *et al.* (2004) used longitudinal data from the 1970 British Birth Cohort to compare adult attainments

of socio-economically advantaged and socio-economically disadvantaged adolescents. They showed that although socio-economic disadvantage was a significant risk factor for educational failure, poor consequent adjustment in work and poor health-related outcomes, parental aspirations – measured in the Schoon *et al.* study (2002) as when parents hoped their child would leave school – were significantly associated with educational resilience among socio-economically disadvantaged individuals.

In the US, Hill *et al.* (2004) showed that parental aspirations function differently across ethnicity and socio-economic groups (see also Mao, 1995). In low socio-economic groups they increased adolescents' educational/career aspirations but not school behaviour or achievement, whereas in high socio-economic groups, parents' aspirations were related to children's attainment indirectly, via being inversely related to children's behaviour problems. The explanation was that in low SES families high parental aspirations lead adolescents to want to be upwardly mobile, but as low SES parents may not feel comfortable with or capable of assisting their children with their schoolwork, and as they are less efficacious in their interactions with schools and less effective advocates for their children's academic needs, parents' high aspirations lead to children's high aspirations without necessarily improving the prerequisites (i.e. school behaviour and achievement levels) of reaching these career aspirations.

In addition, Hill *et al.* (2004) showed that parental aspirations were more

strongly related to achievement for African American than for European American children. Their explanation was that whereas for European American families there may be many factors that support achievement, for African Americans parental aspirations may be more salient because such children are more likely to grow up in an environment where there are several factors that may detract from achievement.

Research issues

So why this difference, with educational resilience among socio-economically disadvantaged children being associated with parental aspirations in the UK study but not the US one? Partly it must be attributed to the different operationalisations (as well as duration and timing) of socio-economic disadvantage, the lack of specificity in the children's academic outcomes considered, and the lack of clarity in the operational definition of parental aspirations.

Operationalisations of terms

Alongside the conventional measures of socio-economic status, recent studies have started to include proximal indicators of socio-economic disadvantage and measures of deprivation, such as overcrowding (Wardle *et al.*, 2002) and lack of basic household amenities (Schoon *et al.*, 2002), and income poverty. The idea is that although linked to an individual's relative position in society (i.e. socio-economic status), socio-economic disadvantage also encompasses poverty and deprivation and the dynamic aspects of social exclusion (Bradshaw & Finch, 2003).

In turn, the terms poverty, deprivation, and social exclusion are also frequently used interchangeably as synonyms for each other. However, poverty is income-related, deprivation is related to quality of life (and so is to some extent relative poverty), and social exclusion refers to a process whereby individuals become deprived (Pringle & Walsh, 1999). Future research in this area needs to avoid terminological imprecision not only to facilitate public policy discussions but also to develop theory: different aspects of socio-economic disadvantage are differentially associated with different child outcomes. For example, parents' low social class but not income poverty predicts children's academic achievement, after adjustment for controls (DeGarmo *et al.*, 1999).

Duration and timing of socio-economic disadvantage There is increasing awareness that persistent adversity over time might have effects on children's behaviour beyond the effects of intermittent or concurrent adversity (Ackerman *et al.*, 2004). For instance, McLoyd (1998) reviewed the evidence showing that persistent poverty had more detrimental effects on school achievement than transitory poverty (although children experiencing both types of poverty generally did less well than never-poor children). With regards to the timing of socio-economic disadvantage Schoon *et al.* (2002) in Britain, using data collected from both the 1958 birth cohort and the 1970 birth cohort, showed that the influence of concurrent disadvantage on academic achievement and subsequent social class attainment was greatest during early childhood for both cohorts. Also supporting the greater impact on children's academic achievement of poverty in early childhood Duncan *et al.* (1998) showed that for low-income children a \$10,000 increase in mean family income between birth and age five was associated with nearly a one-year increase in completed schooling. Similar increments to family income later in childhood had no statistically significant impact.

Lack of specificity in child academic outcomes Specificity in psychology is increasingly being addressed as an important issue in developmental theory (Luthar *et al.*, 2000; McMahan *et al.*, 2003), although not always in developmental research. Lack of specificity is particularly problematic for generalisability when child outcomes from theoretically dissimilar child adjustment domains are considered, although

generalisability issues arise not only when between-domain but also when within-domain comparisons are made. For example, parental aspirations may be directly related to academic but not mental health outcomes, and in fact to academic motivation but not academic achievement.

Definition of parental aspirations

Aspirations are often confounded with parents' expectations for their children's educational attainment (how much schooling parents expect their children to complete). This vagueness of language is not a lack of pedantry but a failing: imprecision about what parental aspirations are leads to confusion about how parental aspirations are measured which leads to vagueness about what parental aspirations do.

Future research

As well as avoiding slippery terminology, further study needs to explore if parental aspirations are related to specific academic

outcomes of specific groups of socio-economically disadvantaged children, such as children whose families live in poverty, experience deprivation, and are socially excluded; of children born to low socio-economic status families, and of those who fall on hard times later. And more importantly, ask how and why.

This research is vital given that low SES children are at high risk of low academic achievement. Children with parents in higher professional occupations are more than twice as likely to gain five or more A* to C grade GCSEs than children with parents in routine occupations (www.ons.gov.uk, Focus on Social Inequalities): psychologists need to discover the extent to which they are held back by their parents' expectation – perhaps one of the easier factors to change.

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DISCUSS AND DEBATE

How should parental aspirations be measured?

Does the child's gender affect the level and the type of parental aspirations in both socio-economically advantaged and disadvantaged groups?

Does the parent's gender affect the level and the type of parental aspirations in both these groups?

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