

Place, space and imagined futures: how young people's occupational aspirations are shaped by the areas they live in

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Since the mid-2000s, the Labour and Coalition governments in the UK have placed young people's aspirations at the core of their attempts to explain poor outcomes within the education system and the labour market. Policymakers have become increasingly concerned that young people suffer from 'low aspirations', and that these are implicated in producing low attainment at school and poor transitions into the world of work. The focus on aspirations as a determinant of important outcomes for young people, and the concern that many young people's aspirations are presently too low, has led to the formulation of policies designed to 'raise aspirations' and, subsequently, to a renewed research focus on their determinants. An area-based approach has come to the fore, linking 'low aspirations' with community- and neighbourhood-level factors, culminating in 2009 in the Inspiring Communities programme. The analysis underpinning this policy programme draws two specific conclusions about the relationship between aspirations and area: aspirations are lower in deprived areas, and they are particularly low in particular types of deprived area – namely large, isolated areas of social housing on the outskirts of provincial cities. This research sets out to examine the validity of these two claims, as part of a broader exploration of the relationship between young people's occupational aspirations and the areas they live in.

Firstly, the research will examine whether young people's occupational aspirations are lower in deprived areas, and whether they are particularly low in isolated, peripheral areas of social housing on the outskirts of provincial cities. This phase of the research will consider the role of area as 'space' – the objectively defined characteristics of areas such as their Index of Multiple Deprivation score and their Output Area Classification grouping. The empirical work for this first phase of the research will be extensive in nature, consisting of secondary analysis of geocoded data from the Youth Questionnaire of the British Household Panel Survey and Understanding Society. The aim of this first phase of the research is to examine the spatial distribution of aspirations in the UK, alongside analysis of whether, and how, aspirations are affected by deprivation and area type. At present the literature is deeply divided in this area. Some studies, such as that by Furlong et al. (1996) and the review of aspirations conducted by the Cabinet Office (2008) conclude that area-level deprivation does impact on young people's occupational aspirations, while other studies find no difference between the occupational aspirations of young people from deprived areas and those of their peers from less deprived areas (Turok et al. 2009; St Clair and Benjamin 2011; McKendrick, Scott and Sinclair 2007; Calder and Cope 2005; Furlong and Biggart 1999). However, there is evidence that aspirations vary between different areas, even if these variations are not attributable to deprivation (Kintrea et al. 2011; Turok et al. 2009). Case studies have produced evidence that localised histories of particular forms of employment, traditions and institutions can exert a significant influence on young people's occupational aspirations (McDowell 2000; Bright 2011), and that aspirations are shaped by local opportunity structures (Green & White 2007; Roberts 2009). There is value, then, in exploring the role of area type in shaping aspirations, using typologies such as the Output Area Classification, rather than focusing exclusively on narrower measures of deprivation –

although these will also be considered here. Moreover, the literature to date has not made use of the particular datasets that will be explored here, which are the largest and most up-to-date panel studies currently available in the UK.

Secondly, the research will examine the mechanisms through which areas shape young people's occupational aspirations. This phase of the research will consider the role of area as 'place' – the way in which young people themselves interpret and define the areas they live in. The empirical work for this second phase of the research will be intensive in nature, based on a phenomenographic analysis of filmed interviews with young people in a deprived, isolated area of social housing on the periphery of Manchester. The aim of this second phase of the research is to explore in detail how area shapes young people's aspirations in precisely the type of deprived area where, according to existing analysis, we would expect aspirations to be lowest. This phase of the research will not only allow the role of young people's *understandings* of their local areas to come to the fore, but will also allow in-depth considerations of aspirations that go beyond their content (i.e. the particular jobs young people state they want to do) to explore the ways in which they *talk about and understand* their aspirations – their *conceptions* of their aspirations, to use the language of phenomenographic analysis. This 'second order' consideration of aspirations (Marton 1981) has seldom been considered in the literature and is a crucial object of study. It may be that the way in which young people talk about their aspirations varies by area, even if the specific jobs they refer to do not. Finally, this second phase of the research addresses the absence of young people's own voices from academic research in this area (Hollingworth and Archer 2010: 585).

The research will be underpinned by a critical realist methodology (Bhaskar 1978) which holds that social scientific explanations ultimately rely on postulating, and identifying, mechanisms which are capable of producing the empirical patterns and associations we observe (Sayer 1992: 107), and that mixed-methods research designs which incorporate 'extensive' elements geared towards the observation of empirical regularities, alongside 'intensive' elements geared towards the identification of the causal mechanisms behind these regularities, are the most fruitful way of conducting social science (Danermark et al. 2002). Hence the adoption here of both quantitative/extensive survey analysis to identify the relative role that area plays in shaping young people's aspirations, alongside qualitative/intensive phenomenographic analysis to identify the mechanisms through which this role is realised.

As well as producing findings on the relationship between aspirations and area that directly address the validity of current government policy, the research endeavours to make three original contributions to knowledge. Firstly, the research will argue that young people's occupational aspirations are an important object of study, but that their value should not be derived exclusively from their capacity to indicate future trajectories, as is presently the norm. Secondly, the research will construct a new framework of the relationship between aspirations and expectations which respects the fundamental distinction between beliefs and desires and delivers a range of explanatory benefits over existing models. Finally, the research will demonstrate the value of young people's understandings of the areas they live in, making the case for an extension of the current scope of area-based studies of aspirations to consider the role of 'place' as well as 'space'.

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