

# GeNet

## ESRC funded Gender and Equality Network

### Project 2

#### Biographical agency and developmental outcomes<sup>1</sup>

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#### Introduction

The aim of this project is to investigate the role of young people's aspirations in shaping their transitions from adolescence into adult life. In particular, we will examine gender differences in the aspirations and life plans young people have for the future, as well as their antecedents and outcomes. The study draws on data collected for two large scale longitudinal studies, the 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS) and the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70), as well as a contemporary survey of young people aged 14-19. The data sets capture the changing socio-historical context experienced by young men and women born in 1958, 1970 and during the 1980's respectively. All three studies provide data on educational and occupational aspirations during adolescence. In addition it is possible to identify precursors and concurrent factors influencing biographical agency processes, covering individual factors, family-, and school influences, as well as aspects of the wider socio-historical context. Developmental outcomes including educational and occupational attainment, family status, physical and psychological well-being in early and mid adulthood are measured in NCDS and BCS70 and can be linked to earlier experiences during childhood and adolescence.

Key research questions to be addressed are: How have men's and women's aspirations regarding education and occupation changed in the last 30 years? How do socio-economic factors and other socio-cultural influences within the family and school context (as for example parental involvement in education and teacher expectations) combine with gender to shape biographical agency processes? How are individual aspirations matched to previous and concurrent academic attainments (avoiding over- or underaspiring), and does this matching process differ for men and women? How are men's and women's educational and occupational aspirations influenced by plans and attitudes towards family formation? To what extent are men's and women's transition patterns from school to work (relating to experiences in training, education, and work) influenced by biographical agency processes, by structural constraints, or by the interaction of both, and have these influences changed over time? Are there gender specific pathways and processes by which biographical agency shapes adult attainments (i.e. linked outcomes in education, work, family status, physical and psychological well-being), and have these changed over time?

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## **Background to the Project**

This project builds on previous ESRC funded research on risk and resilience in the life course in which individual aspirations were identified as a key factor stimulating long-term positive adjustment despite the experience of adversity during childhood.

Aspirations can act like a compass to help chart a life course and provide direction for spending time and energy. Teenage aspirations have shown to influence educational and occupational attainment, family status, and are associated with upward social mobility (Clausen, 1993, 1995; Elder, 1968, 1999; Pilling, 1990; Schoon & Parsons, 2002). Human motivation plays a key role in the ways in which behaviour is directed, and has variously been described as ‘planful competence’ (Clausen, 1993); ‘personal projects’ (Little 1983); ‘strivings’ (Emmons 1986); ‘life tasks’ (Cantor et al 1987); and ‘developmental goals’ (Heckhausen 1998). Nurmi et al. (2002) suggest that these are all in effect ‘personal goals’. The focus of these goals can be on work, academic-related topics, self, and social relationships.

While the nature and characteristics of such personal goals are well studied, the developmental dynamics, such as the long-term consequences of early life plans, or the changes in individual motivations over time are not yet fully understood. A number of studies have confirmed that adolescents, even before reaching high school level, have detailed knowledge about jobs and the social context in which these jobs are embedded (Nurmi, 1991; Vondracek et al, 1999). It has been argued that by adolescence most youngsters have established a set or range of occupations that they consider as acceptable alternatives, and which reflect their view of where they fit into society (Gottfredson, 1981). Career aspirations expressed by adolescents are, however, generally believed to be unstable and likely to change many times before adulthood (Phipps, 1995; Super, 1980; Trice & McClellan, 1993). The stability of occupational choice during school and college years has been extensively studied, but very few longitudinal studies have investigated the antecedents and correlates of teenage aspirations, as well as their role in shaping consequent adult occupational attainment. Still fewer longitudinal studies have studied gendered pathways of occupational development in a changing socio-historical context.

## **A changing socio-historical context**

During the last three decades Britain has witnessed far-reaching changes in the labour market and educational policies. Between 1979 and 1986, and again between 1989 and 1993, the UK witnessed the sharpest rises in unemployment since the 2nd World War (ONS, 1998). Youth unemployment rates in particular, soared to record levels (Hart, 1988; White & Smith, 1994). Increasing deindustrialisation led to fewer jobs in manufacturing and more jobs in the lower paid service industry, rendering the concept of a family wage earned by one breadwinner (sufficient to support a family) a thing of the past, especially for working-class families (Flangan, 1993). While twenty years ago young people were able to formulate relatively clear ideas about their likely destination in the labour market, today they have to face more uncertainties about the possible outcomes (Lightfoot, 1997). As a consequence of the changes in labour market opportunities and increasing unemployment, young people in all industrialised countries are under increasing pressure to continue full-time education beyond the age

of 16 years, and to acquire formal qualifications (Bynner et al. 1999; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). Most young people born in 1958 who left school in 1974 could expect to obtain employment regardless of their educational credentials, whereas for young people born in 1970 who left school in 1986 school attainment became a key prerequisite (Bynner, 2001).

Not only has there been an increasing participation in further and higher education (Bynner & Parsons, 1997), there was also a significant rise in educational and occupational aspirations. More and more young people, especially young women, want further education and aim for professional careers (Schoon, 2003, forthcoming). On the other hand, there is also increasing concern about young people showing poor motivation to learn and progress and consequent under-achievement (DfES, 1997, 2001, 2002). These students have been described as ‘disengaged from learning’, and can be found across the spectrum of school achievement (Steedman & Stoney, 2004).

While in the 1970 the underachievement of girls in the educational system was a major concern for social research, today it is male underachievement (Ofsted, 1996). By the early 1980s the situation had started to change and girls were more likely than boys to have obtained school-leaving qualifications, and were increasingly participating in higher education. During the 1990’s these gains in educational attainment have consolidated. Girls are now more successful than boys in terms of achieving GCSE grades A\* to C, and at A-level and AS (Advanced Supplementary) boys either gain very low or very high point scores more often than girls (Ofsted, 1996). In the labour market, however, women continue to be disadvantaged and remain to congregate in occupations, which offer inferior rewards and prospects.

The reasons for these changes and continuities in the relative performance of males and females are not yet fully understood. Possible explanations refer to either changes in the labour market, increased diversification of transition pathways, persisting inequalities, as well as gendered differences in attitudes and values.

Changes in the labour market, characterised by increasing instability and insecurity in combination with an increased demand for a highly qualified and well-educated work force are likely to have affected the educational and occupational aspirations of young men and women, but also those of their parents and teachers, and are likely to have had an impact on patterns of gender socialisation. In the past few decades there has been a significant increase in girls’ plans to work outside the home, aspirations that are consistent with the increased participation of women in the work force. However, these aspirations are influenced by the fact that girls also expect to balance work with family roles (Aneshensel & Rosen, 1980; Francis, 2002).

Possible pathways out of school have diversified, and transitions into employment now tend to take longer to complete (Bynner, 2001; Schoon et al., 2002). Instead of following a prescribed path, young people have to navigate their way to adulthood, choosing from the many alternatives on offer. Issues of human agency are central to life course studies, as men and women are planful and make choices in circumstances that enable them to shape their life course. There is, however, no completely

individualised choice, and life chances and opportunities are distributed unequally according to social origin, gender, and age.

Women who equalled or excelled men in school achievement, cease to compete with men in the world of work, not due to lack of ability or motivation, but due to lack of opportunity and persisting contextual constraints (Affleck, Morgan & Hayes, 1989; Arnold, 1993). Women's careers are buffeted by social and societal forces, with their husbands', children's, and even parents' needs taking precedence over their own plans (Eccles & Hoffman, 1984; Francis, 2002). The double burden of having to combine work and family life might also contribute in many women to the increased levels of depression in comparison with men, especially among women who due to lack of educational qualifications are stuck in poorly paid jobs without security or social status (Schoon & Ross, 2004). On the other extreme, we find an increasing number of young women, especially those with good academic attainments and degree level education, who delay or avoid family formation and motherhood.

### **Gender and social class: intersecting issues shaping individual development**

Motivation and achievement are psychosocial issues for young people and adults alike. In order to better comprehend gender differences in motivation and attainment we also have to consider the socio-economic circumstances in which development takes place. Accomplishments are generally presumed to reflect individual attainments, despite the fact that they vary considerably by social class and gender. There is a persistent positive association between parents' educational and occupational attainments and the achievement of their children (Bynner, Tsatsas & Joshi, 2002). Aspirations are one mechanism that mediates this relationship. Parental socio-economic status is a crucial influence shaping occupational preferences (Gottfredson, 1981; Schoon & Parsons, 2002), and socially advantaged young people generally have higher aspirations for the future than their less privileged peers. These differences are not only the result of simple differences in exposure. Even when adolescents are aware of multiple occupational possibilities, gender and class constrain their aspirations (Flanagan, 1993).

Social class has been a stronger predictor of male than of female educational and occupational aspirations (Schulenberg, Vondracek & Crouter, 1984), but there is also evidence suggesting that this gender difference has disappeared (Marjoribanks, 1986). Furthermore, it appears that the Women's Movement had made an impact on the aspirations of girls. There is evidence that girls from advantaged backgrounds are now more likely to aspire to higher prestige occupations than their peers from less privileged families (Hannah & Kahn, 1989), and in the cohort studies there is evidence that adolescent girls have higher expectations regarding further education and occupational ambitions than boys, especially girls from socially disadvantaged backgrounds (Schoon, forthcoming). In the long run, however, there are more men than women pursuing a professional career, and more women than men remain out of the labour market. There is furthermore evidence to suggest that young men and women from less privileged backgrounds, who showed above average academic attainment and high aspirations at age 16, are not achieving to the same extent as their more privileged peers (Schoon & Parsons, 2002; Schoon, et al., 2004). Popular beliefs in equal opportunities and being rewarded for demonstrating abilities and competences

might easily evaporate when young people begin to believe that their training or schooling is not leading to a career.

Although gender and socio-economic position often have an interactive effect on achievement and motivation, gender and social class are often studied in isolation. Studies on the influence of gender or class on individual achievement and motivation can reflect disciplinary biases. Sociologists often focus on social class as a key predictor of achievement, thereby paying little attention to the processes that mediate the transmission of socio-economic disadvantage across generations. Psychologists on the other hand, adopt a more individualistic perspective, emphasising issues related to active agency and the importance of self-perceptions, motivation, and family processes, ignoring the fact that individual choices are affected by opportunities and experiences that vary by socio-economic constraints. Thus, the present study will adopt a theoretical approach allowing us to integrate the two perspectives conceptualising the individual as an active decision maker and by recognising that individual choices are based on perceptions of opportunities and real-life constraints. Furthermore, the adopted approach enables us to conceptualise the dynamic interactions between individual and environment in a changing socio-historical context.

#### **A developmental-contextual model of biographical agency**

To investigate how the lives of men and women are shaped by the interactions between individual and contextual factors this study adopts a developmental-contextual systems model (Schoon, forthcoming). The model is guided by assumptions formulated within life course theories of human development, emphasising the embeddedness of human development in social structures and historical change (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elder, 1985, 1998; Lerner, 1984, 1996; Sameroff, 1983). It is argued that human development has to be understood as the dynamic interaction of a changing individual in a changing context, whereby individuals are not passively exposed to external factors, but are agents of their own development, i.e. they affect the context that affects them. Life course transitions and developmental sequences require decisions between pathways, which correspond to one's past experiences and aspirations for the future. Yet, life chances are not equally distributed and vary by social origin and gender. There is no completely individualised choice in life-course transitions, and social relationships, role expectations, and opportunity structures create openings and constraints that the individual has to take into consideration. According to the notion of structured agency (Heinz, 2002a) the exercise of individuality never happens out of context, and individuality, in turn, is the result of psychosocial development, which includes gender, class (and race) specific socialisation processes. Social origin and gender circumscribe the range of options that shape biographical agency processes, which can be understood as cumulative reinterpretations of experiences (Heinz, 2002b). Life course transitions require decisions that correspond to one's past experiences. These modes of experiences in turn are resources of individual actions and decisions that structure and restructure a person's place and identity across the life course.

The model accounts for different spheres of influence in shaping individual development, differentiating between proximal and distal context factors and processes. Proximal processes reflect the immediate day-to-day experiences that most directly shape individual development, as for example in the family or the school

environment. While the proximal context is directly experienced by the individual, the distal context reflects the cultural and social value systems that have an indirect effect on the individual, often mediated by the more proximal context (Bronfenbrenner; 1979). Furthermore, the different spheres of influence do not exist in isolation, but are rather inter-related and mutually interdependent. The form, power, content, and direction of the proximal processes effecting development vary systematically as a joint function of the person, the environmental context, and the nature of the developmental outcome under consideration.

The model is an explicit developmental model, allowing us to assess the timing and the duration of the interactions between individual and context. The developmental approach is based on the assumption that knowing the past allows us to understand the present and to predict the future. Any point in the life span has to be understood dynamically as the consequence of past experience and as the launch pad for subsequent experiences and conditions. In the following I will discuss the role of individual, family, and social influences on the formation and development of individual aspirations and attainments.

### **Individual Characteristics**

Adolescent planning for the future reflects where the young person expects to fit in the larger social system. It also reflects individual beliefs in one's own ability and aptitudes, specific interests and preferences, as well as more general differences in values. Previous research has demonstrated that girls have higher competence beliefs than boys regarding their reading abilities, and boys hold higher competence beliefs than girls for math and sports, even after all relevant skill-level differences are controlled (Eccles et al., 1989; Wigfield et al., 1997), and although achievement differences in these areas either are diminishing or have disappeared (Golombok & Fivush, 1994). Consideration of differences in competence-related beliefs are important for this study, insofar that they are strong predictors of performance and task choice (Bandura, 1997). For example, doubts about competence in math are likely to influence performance in maths as well as decisions about whether to continue doing math-related activities and studies. Competence beliefs are also associated with the value young people attach to academic achievement, with their expectations for success, or their disengagement with education, which in turn influence their achievement and academic motivation (Brooks-Gunn & Klebanov, 1994; Wigfield & Eccles, 2001).

Another issue to be considered here are persisting gender differences in the choice of study subjects. Girls are generally more likely to opt for domains that are perceived as person-oriented, affectionate and compassionate, involving interaction with people, while males prefer areas that have an image of being forceful, analytic, ambitious, individualistic and competitive, dealing with things rather than people (Colley, 1995; Francis, 2002). For example, engineering and technology, pure or basic sciences, such as mathematics, astronomy, physics, and chemistry are less attractive to females than applied sciences that deal with human beings, such as medicine or biology (Schoon, 2001). Furthermore, although there has been a substantial shift in perceptions of appropriate gender roles and occupations, women's aspirations continue to be conditioned by the fact that girls expect to balance work with family roles, and to

marry and have children at earlier ages compared to men (Eccles & Hoffman, 1984; Almquist & Angrist, 1993). Previous studies have shown that intimacy is as central to women's live plans as achievement is to men's lives (Arnold, 1993a; Gilligan, 1982; Tomlinson-Keasey, 1998), and Eccles (1987) has inspired a number of researchers to rethink definitions of striving and aspirations from a female perspective that is substantially different from men.

We also have to consider that ambition without substance will lead nowhere. In order to succeed in taking up a specific career, relevant skills and knowledge have to be acquired, not at least in order to pass all the necessary exams. Although aspirations for future careers are generally associated with actual educational attainment, it is not uncommon to find incongruence between adolescent's competence-related beliefs, their aspirations and their actual academic performance (Schunk, 1995). Not only can young people either under- or overestimate their capabilities, they also often lack knowledge about how much education is required for the occupations they desire. The project will therefore aim to identify alignment of ambitions (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999) reflecting adolescent capabilities as well as their knowledge of the world of work and the educational pathways to different occupations. We will compare what occupations have been aspired to with the actual academic attainments, as well as the academic qualifications the young person expects to obtain. It will thus be possible to assess whether occupational choices either underestimate or overestimate own capabilities, as well as the amount of education required for the job in question. It will also enable us to investigate whether aspirations for the future, whether realistic or not, can help young people to make sense of their lives and their futures, and can provide direction for spending their time and energy effectively.

### **Family influences**

The notion of social determination or 'occupational inheritance' has been tested in numerous studies, and a positive relationship between professional background and occupational attainment has been generally found, particularly for males. Furthermore, in a number of studies the importance of parents as role models has been demonstrated. Maternal employment, in particular, has been identified as an important moderator in female career development (Vondracek, Lerner, and Schulenberg, 1986). Daughters of employed mothers formulate higher prestige vocational aspirations, often in more traditionally masculine professions. Not only the mother but also the father can play an important role in determining vocational outcomes for females. For example, fathers can be influential in exposing their daughters to career fields, sometimes their own, or indirectly provide a counter-model to a more stereotypical 'male attitude' (Schulenberg, Vondracek and Crouter, 1984).

Young people from working-class families, however, have lower aspirations than their more privileged peers, regardless of ability, parent's aspirations, or family socialisation (Marjoribanks, 1986; Schoon, 2003). Furthermore occupational aspirations of adolescents from less privileged backgrounds are more gender typed than those of peers from more privileged families (Hesketh, Elmslie & Kaldor, 1990). Educational background of the parents, a closely related area, has been shown to be a good indicator for the kind of intellectual interests encouraged in the child as well as for educational achievement and occupational attainment (Tomlinson-Keasy and Little,

1990; Trost and Sieglen, 1992). Parental orientation, their attitudes toward the child and their interest in the child's education have been identified as critical dimensions influencing the kinds of occupations to which the child then turns (Schoon & Parsons, 2002). If working-class families hold more 'traditional gender stereotypes', this may be explained partly by the fact their aspirations for career and family role are circumscribed by more limited options and greater pressures to get to work and earn an income. While young people from more privileged families expect to take time to explore their options, especially by extending years of education (Bynner, 1998), their peers from less privileged families generally have lower educational and occupational aspirations, are making decisions about work earlier, and are more likely to start full-time work at an earlier time point in their careers (Schoon et al, 2001).

### **School influences**

The school can be either a powerful shaper or a deterrent to the development of aspirations and achievement. It has been argued that schools legitimate inequalities by cultivating attitude differences in students and by tracking them into groups that reflect their social origins (Useem, 1991). There is evidence to suggest that teacher's expectations for students are influenced by a student's placement, and it has been shown that teachers pay less attention, provide less feedback, and require less work from students who are presumed to be low achievers (Eccles & Wigfield, 1985).

On the other hand, there is also evidence to suggest that the type of school attended can compensate for disadvantage caused by an unsupportive family environment, lack of opportunities in the community, or prevalent gender stereotypes (Ofsted, 1996). For example, research in educational settings has compared the performance of girls and boys in single sex and coeducational teaching environments. It could consistently be shown that girls in single sex schools are more likely to show a stronger performance in science than their peers in co-educational schools (Cooley, 1995). Furthermore the Ofsted report (1996) suggests that in all areas covered by the *Framework for Inspection*, girls' schools were generally found to perform best, mixed schools next, and boys' schools least effectively. There were, however, marked variations in the positions of individual schools, whether mixed or single-sex, depending on the socio-economic context of the school and the ability profile of its intake.

### **Methodology**

To assess the relative influence of these different spheres on the formation and development of individual aspirations for the future, a variety of methods will be used. The cohort data will be analysed using descriptive statistics, multivariate analysis, longitudinal analysis, structural equation modelling (SEM), as well as latent class modelling. The project will carry forward methodological advances for the analysis of cumulative continuities and transition patterns considering linked developmental outcomes across time (Schoon et al., 2001, 2002). The problem of missing data due to survey loss and incomplete response will be tackled by using the statistical packages AMOS which uses maximum likelihood estimations based on incomplete data, known as the full information maximum likelihood approach (Arbuckle, 1996), as well as Mplus which provides maximum likelihood (ML) estimations for continuous, censored, binary, categorical data, or counts (Little & Rubin, 1987).

In addition to the variable-based approach describing the ‘average’ person, a person-based approach will be adopted, analysing how variables combine in individuals, addressing the multitudinous factors that influence individual development, and implying a holistic view on individual functioning (Cairns, Bergman & Kagan, 1998). The person-centered approach is based on classification of individuals, either by theoretical distinctions, by classificatory or categorical analyses, by empirical groupings, and by identification of extreme cases. The aim of this approach is to discover distinctive configurations or patterns of operating factors, thereby preserving the coherence of individual experiences in context. The person-centered approach will be used to identify gender specific typologies of biographical agency modes, transition patterns from school to work, and patterns of adult adjustment.

### **Key Project Milestones and outputs**

- A gendered typology of modes of biographical agency will be developed
- Models to explain the influence of family background, family experiences, parental support, educational experiences, biological factors, and the changing socio-historical context on men and women’s goals concerning future work and family life will be examined
- A map of male and female transition patterns into mid adulthood will be established, taking into account linked outcomes in education, work, and family formation in both cohorts
- Gender specific transition patterns will be examined in light of the modes of biographical agency, family background, educational attainment, family experiences, and socio-historical context

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