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Dreamless futures: a micro-sociological framework for studying how aspirations develop and wither

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ABSTRACT

For some youth, thinking about the future – let alone expressing aspirations for the future – is a daunting task. This incapacity to aspire is problematic in itself, but particularly as neoliberal societies widely expect young people from adolescence onwards to *have a plan* for their own future. In our research among disadvantaged youth in Europe, we observed such dreamless predicaments countless times, prompting us to wonder: how and when do aspirations emerge? Why do they flourish or wither away over time? Why do youth from similar backgrounds, facing comparable levels of adversity, relate so differently to their future potential? Although the *capacity to aspire* is largely conditioned by one's social, economic and cultural background, it is not a given: its development depends on how individual life trajectories and the accumulated experience of social interactions become resources to explore the future in a productive way. Examining the micro-sociological processes through which the capacity to aspire unfolds is critical for understanding how young people learn to aspire and act on their aspirations in the long run. Building on insights from Appadurai, Bourdieu and research in continental Europe, this article proposes a conceptual framework for understanding how aspirations develop and wither.

1. Introduction

First I wanted to become a social worker. I took it over an internship and it was great! But I figured that it wasn't exactly what I wanted, and I changed my mind to become a detention worker ... You work in prison with young and old people. Together you talk about their problems and about how they could improve their lives. And you carry out activities with them while they are in detention ... (Mirjam, age 15, Amsterdam)

Listening to young people talk about their future aspirations is usually an uplifting experience: they are often bubbling with ideas about their *future selves*, replete with appealing goals and some idea of the small and large steps they intend to take towards realising these goals. Listening to youth talk about the future is also gratifying because we

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know that when one has a clear picture of one's aims, one is more likely to achieve them (Andres, Anisef, Krahn, Looker, & Thiessen, 1999, p. 262; St Clair & Benjamin, 2011, p. 502). But for some youth, thinking about the future – let alone expressing their aspirations for the future – is a daunting task. This in itself is problematic as these young people are deprived of the experience of being inspired as they imagine their future selves; in addition, it becomes socially problematic as neoliberal societies widely expect young people from adolescence onwards to *have a plan* for their own future. In our research among disadvantaged youth in Europe (chiefly in the Netherlands, Belgium and France), we often encountered such dreamless-future situations, prompting our interest in the following questions: How and why do aspirations emerge and flourish? How and why do they sometimes wither away? What contributes to the development of the *capacity to aspire*?

The extant literature on aspirations often assumes that young people – whether or not they live in disadvantaged circumstances – have aspirations for the future, thereby suggesting that aspiring is a largely natural undertaking (e.g. Morrison Gutman & Akerman, 2008, cited by St Clair & Benjamin, 2011, p. 503). Nevertheless, numerous scholars have convincingly shown that aspirations are not only the result of personal preferences but are shaped by habitus and constrained by the possession of economic and cultural capital (e.g. Archer, DeWitt, & Wong, 2014; Brown, 2011; Hart, 2012). But although habitus and access to resources go a long way to explain the impact of social inequality on how aspirations develop, we observe that even when facing comparable levels of adversity, young people relate quite differently to their potential futures. Some are determined to break away from what they have known and are keen to embrace new horizons and opportunities. Some opt for the status quo, while others seem to aspire to nothing at all, or are unable to articulate any future dreams. Why do young people relate to their future potential in such different ways?

Although they offer valuable clues, theories that privilege the reproduction of social and economic capital (e.g. Doob, 2013) are hard-pressed to explain how and why young people from comparable backgrounds relate to their future potential in such different ways. Towards this end, and inspired by Appadurai (2004), we focus our analysis on the *capacity to aspire* – the ability of individuals to generate an idea/picture of a desirable future for themselves and to commit to its realisation – and on the conditions under which it develops. We argue that: (1) these conditions are more complex than differences in social and economic capital; that (2) we need to focus on the *micro-sociological processes* through which young people learn to aspire and act on their aspirations; and (3) offer a parsimonious framework – to be tested through further empirical research – to explain how and why adolescent aspirations blossom or wither away.

Our contribution – building on the ideas of Bourdieu and Appadurai in the sociology of youth and education – is primarily conceptual, although ultimately we seek to explain variation within groups subjected to similar social-economic conditions. Our interest in aspirations grew out of our participation in the European research project SocIEtY which ran from 2013 to 2015. Searching for the experiences through which the capacity to aspire blossoms, we examined policies and practices targeting secondary school students as well as policies and projects seeking to reduce or prevent school dropout in the Netherlands, and how these initiatives were experienced by their target audiences. We asked young people in qualitative semi-structured interviews about what they would like to do/be

when they are older and about the occasions they have had to think about the future. Also in qualitative semi-structured interviews, we asked teachers and youth/social workers about the opportunities young people have to talk explicitly about the future – to learn about desirable options as well as opportunities to discuss them. Our interest in 'dreamless futures' was further inspired by our previous and subsequent research, drawing on in-depth interviews and observations involving secondary school students and young people engaged in mentoring projects, teachers, social workers, probation officers, counsellors and coaches who have had longitudinal engagement with adolescents in several European countries, most prominently the Netherlands (Baillergeau, 2008; Baillergeau & Duyvendak, 2016), Belgium and France (Baillergeau, 2020). Our discussion culminates in a theoretical framework to explain how aspirations develop and wither, to be empirically tested through further research. It points to three micro-sociological processes through which aspirations develop and wither.

2. Unthinkable futures?

Aspiring is not always easy. Mirjam's cheerful narrative cited above contrasts strikingly with those of some of her schoolmates at a vocational secondary school in a socially disadvantaged Amsterdam neighbourhood. When asked whether they had any idea of what they wanted to do or be in the future, some were silent, others became dismissive or cynical, and many expressed unease about the future. Indeed, the aspiration question can be a painful and confronting experience (cf. Haidinger, Vero, & López Fogués, 2015; Stam, 2016). Similar unease about the future has been observed by front-line professionals working with youth, among them secondary school teachers running career education classes and youth workers involved in programmes to bring high school dropouts (and youth seen as at risk of dropping out) back into the fold of formal education. Some professionals involved in the research project SocIEtY reported that, in contrast to older children aged 10–14 who are often keen to dream and share their dreams, many 14–18-year olds do not disclose any occupational aspirations whatsoever – although some did when they were younger. It may be that occupational aspirations are difficult to articulate, particularly in conversations with adults. An alternative explanation is that their dreams have withered away.

The point here is not to blame youth who do not show any ambition or intentions of continuing on to higher education, as often happens in popular and media representations of 'urban youth' who suffer manifold 'deficits' (Archer, Hollingworth, & Mendick, 2010, p. 79; Gale & Parker, 2015b); nor is it to claim that they don't have any aspirations at all. Rather, the fact that many youths struggle to respond when asked about their educational and/or occupational aspirations prompts us to better understand – against the backdrop of highly touted policies to curb school dropout rates and widen participation in higher education (Becquet, Loncle, & Van de Velde 2012; Vieira, Pappámikail, & Resende, 2013) – this troubled relationship with the future. The difficulties of certain youth to entertain or express aspirations mirrors the inability to project oneself purposively into the future reported by Dubet (1987) among urban youth, Dubet and Martucelli (1996) among secondary school students (cf. Martucelli, 2006), and Coutant (2005) among delinquent youth (cf. Mucchielli, 2012). For some youth, awareness of the gap between their current situation and society's expectations

of them is such that they see their inability to project themselves into the future as 'abnormal' (Coutant, 2005, p. 283).

These blocked situations involving unthinkable futures have been interpreted in various ways. Some have argued that young people tend to care less about the future as they inhabit the 'here and now', their focus on the present being the natural outgrowth of the cognitive development of adolescents (cf. Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Others argue that the extent of adversity some youth face in their daily lives – their lack of control over their current circumstances – means that they are constantly in survival mode and hard-pressed to think of the future as something malleable, let alone desirable (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 262; cf. Coutant, 2005; Wacquant, 1993).[1] But these interpretations do not help to explain the diversity of aspirations (or the lack thereof) expressed by youth growing up in similar environments facing comparable levels of adversity. While some young people earnestly prefer not to think about the future, some are devising concrete plans to escape their current situations. To better understand this diversity, we begin with the premise that the development of aspirations cannot be reduced to a narrowly individualist psychological register of taste (Gale & Parker, 2015a; Zipin, Sellar, Brennan, & Gale, 2015). Just as importantly, individuals cannot be reduced to the sum of their social characteristics such as family income, place of residence, and so on, as they are the holders of unique *trajectories* in which *opportunities* have been made available and *decisions* have been made. In sum, our approach privileges the interactions of daily life and the role of power in these interactions – the *micro-sociological processes* through which the capacity to aspire develops or withers away.

3. Going beyond the habitual

In their discussion of aspirations, social scientists often refer to Bourdieu's early works, including those in which he collaborated with Passeron (1964, 1970) and others (1965). In particular, Bourdieu's theorising of the nexus between socialization and individual action provides insight into the reproduction of the structure and distribution of cultural capital and hence the preferences of young people regarding their futures (e.g. Archer et al., 2014; Brown, 2011). As Zipin et al. (2015) put it, even when young people have comparable 'doxic' aspirations – typically of upward social mobility – their aspirations tend, over time, to adapt to their habitus and turn into 'habituated' aspirations, fitting the 'latently felt estimations of probable futures' (2015, p. 234).

The influence of habitus on the aspirations of young people is supported by a wealth of empirical research comparing the social and economic resources available to students, their expressed aspirations at different stages in their lives, and their educational and career achievements. For example, Gale and Parker's observations in rural Australia (2015a) confirm a socially constrained reproduction of a hierarchy of taste (cf. Bourdieu, 1979) in which higher education, even when inaccessible, is widely desired. Despite narratives of unbounded possibility conveyed by the politics of aspiration, these studies confirm the power of reproductive forces in society (e.g. Croll, 2008). Nevertheless, this research is unable to explain why youth in comparable contexts have such a diversity of aspirations, or why their aspirations change over time.

Bourdieu's work on education seeks to understand how, beyond simply reproducing social inequalities, education teaches young people to aspire. First of all, Bourdieu

encouraged different methods to study social inequality in education: in particular, he invited scholars to analyse *interactions* – for example interactions in the classroom, as he did with Passeron in *Reproduction* (1970). Examining how a variety of stakeholders relate to each other in a given context and negotiate their views enables the analysis of *processes* through which social relations and positions are not only reproduced but evolve over time (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. viii-ix). Second, regarding the diversity of trajectories, Bourdieu argued – as a response to accusations of social determinism – that the habitus not only tends to *reproduction* but also, to a certain extent, *transformation* and *invention* (Bourdieu, 1984).

> Habitus is a kind of transforming machine that leads us to 'reproduce' the social conditions of our own production, but in a relatively unpredictable way, in such a way that one cannot move simply and mechanically from knowledge of the conditions of production to knowledge of the products (Bourdieu, 1990b, p. 87).[2]

The above passage suggests that the reproductive power of habitus does not obliterate situations in which social transformations occur (cf. Wacquant, 2016). Indeed, we saw in our research how youth in comparable settings express wildly divergent aspirations, some bubbling with ideas and others struggling to express aspirations altogether. How can this diversity be understood given the reproductive power of habitus? In Bourdieu's rendering, the transformative power of habitus remains a mystery, as Bourdieu himself admits: 'The "transforming machine" functions in an "unpredictable way"'. Wacquant's (1989, 2010) opening up of this black box, however, suggests that habitus is 'not necessarily coherent and unified' and there can be both 'cohesive habitus' and 'broken or splintered habitus' [...] wont to generate irregular and inconsistent lines of action' (2016, p. 68–69). This prompted us to wonder: are there social circumstances in which individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds are less prone to conform to 'systems of dispositions'?

In his seminal essay, Appadurai (2004) invites us to consider the *capacity to aspire* as a 'navigational capacity' that enables individuals to project themselves into the future, form aspirations and commit themselves to their realisation. His understanding of aspirations is thus *holistic*, as they bear on the 'good life' and unfold in manifold directions according to people's local, situated understandings of well-being (cf. Sen, 1999 on well-being in human development). While aspirations encompass 'wants, preferences, choices and calculations', they also

> Form parts of wider ethical and metaphysical ideas which derive from larger cultural norms. Aspirations are never simply individual (as the language of wants and choice inclines us to think). They are always formed in interaction and in the thick of social life (Appadurai, 2004, p. 67).

Appadurai further contends that the capacity to aspire is unevenly distributed in society. Based on his observations in urban India, he argues that the rich and powerful have a 'more fully developed capacity to aspire' as they have at their disposal a more dense 'archive of concrete experiments' with the 'good life' (2004, p. 69; cf. Appadurai, 2003). Power to impact one's future position in society thus derives from experience of success.

Gale (2015) and colleagues (Gale & Parker, 2015a, 2015b; Sellar & Gale, 2011; Sellar, 2013a, 2013b; Zipin et al., 2015) have applied Appadurai's insights to the study of formal

education, especially how young people from different class backgrounds in Australia approach university/higher education (cf. Bok, 2010; Smith, 2011). In particular, they found that although youths from socially disadvantaged backgrounds have educational and occupational aspirations, their capacity to aspire is more brittle than young people from privileged backgrounds; their diminished capacity to navigate their options results from structural differences in their 'archives of experience' (Gale, 2015). In contrast, youths with

> Map knowledge [of higher education] have greater familiarity with the social terrain and an appreciation of the whole route they need to take to reach their destination from their point of origin. They have not just been given the map; they are the cartographers, able to create new routes and to improvise alternatives if obstacles appear in their way (Gale & Parker, 2015b, p. 148).

However convincing, this does not explain the differences between how youths from *similar* backgrounds see their future selves: why can some youths from disadvantaged backgrounds, like Mirjam, master cartography? Appadurai (2001, 2004) provides clues, especially through his work on situations in which the capacity to aspire of disadvantaged groups was enhanced. He details initiatives carried out by a pro-poor coalition in Mumbai, where slum dwellers of all ages shared, discussed and tested their 'local horizons of hope and desire' (2004, p. 75). The case of groups discussing the topic of saving is telling. The talks were designed to 'find out what the future truly means for different individuals and groups who are trying to think ahead and struggle for secure tenure; for government loans; for permits for water or electricity or for the right to police their own communities' (2004, p. 75). These talks led participants to 'practice the arts of aspiration, lending immediacy and materiality to abstract wishes and desires, and struggling to reconcile the demands of the moment against the disciplines of patience' (2004, p. 76). Similarly, Zipin et al. (2015), building on action research in an Australian secondary school, show that aspirations inspired by lived problems can unfold through the critical assessment of one's situation and reflection exercises in order to look for alternatives at the community level, thereby allowing the development of 'emergent aspirations' that – unlike 'doxic' and 'habituated' aspirations (Zipin et al., 2015) – not only draw on the past.

That the capacity to aspire is dynamic and can develop thanks to productive interactions with others clearly speak to our aim. But if the capacity to aspire can change through interactions, there is no guarantee that the change is in the desired direction. Interactions can encourage a person's capacity to aspire to blossom, but also to wither away. Why are some interactions productive while others are not? To answer this question, we need to analyse the 'archives of experience' *from the inside* – as a matrix of accumulated learning (life experiences) that in the right circumstances can become resources to navigate aspirations. We thus analyse the micro-sociological processes through which individual trajectories unfold in light of the power relations in which individuals are engaged, which may change over time depending on opportunities.

4. Inside the 'archives of experience'

Our research in the SocIEtY project revealed that youths from socially disadvantaged backgrounds can be exposed to a variety of opportunities to explore the future in ways that can mitigate the impact of social economic disparities on their capacity to aspire.

First, in European countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium and France, trends highlighted in Appadurai's earlier work on cultural globalisation – 'more persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before' (Appadurai, 1996, p. 53) – can blur the impact of socio-economic disparities (cf. Sellar, 2013a). Some European youths of economic migrant descent travel more often and further than their counterparts of comparable socio-economic status, thanks to their parents keeping in contact with their extended families overseas. This exposure to differences may furnish these youths with a wider set of experiences from which to draw inspiration. For example, Dutch youths of Moroccan descent who visit Morocco during the summer school recess can observe firsthand the contrasting levels of affluence of Dutch city life and rural Morocco where their parents are from. Such experiences can inspire them to, for example, support humanitarian and educational initiatives in Morocco and to translate concealed aspirations – in this case, helping others – into commitments towards their realization.

Second, our research reveals that school-based career education can, in certain circumstances, impact on the formation of aspirations. In the Netherlands, school-based career education comes in various forms, ranging from organised visits to open days at universities and vocational colleges to software that enables students to learn about the breadth of occupations out there. These classes are provided by mentor teachers and the content of career education classes rely on the personality and skills of the teacher in question: some seem content to pass on accepted platitudes about education and career fulfilment while others encourage young people to critically assess their strengths and weaknesses and investigate options beyond their most obvious prospects, thereby providing opportunities for their aspirations to mature.

Third, social policy at times succeeds to blur the lines between social classes. In the Netherlands, weekend school programmes help children and adolescents from disadvantaged neighbourhoods broaden their horizons on future possibilities. These projects entail guest lectures by experienced professionals – medical doctors, pilots, politicians, and many others – who come to talk about their jobs and how they got where they are today. For students from disadvantaged backgrounds, these sessions provide otherwise improbable opportunities to be exposed to occupations beyond those of people in their immediate family and social networks. Face-to-face encounters with successful professionals may also contribute to blurring the frontier between 'hot' and 'cold' knowledge about future possibilities (Smith, 2011; drawing on Ball & Vincent, 1998) – cold knowledge being formal knowledge provided by educational institutions and hot knowledge being 'word-of-mouth' information gained from one's social network. 'Hot' knowledge, while more likely to contribute to social reproduction, is generally more accessible and has greater impact on low socio-economic status students. In addition, whereas some weekend school activities focus on the most promising students from disadvantaged areas (Rusinovic, 2019), some target students seen as most likely to drop out of school without qualifications (De Vos, 2017).

Alongside weekend schools, there are projects run by youth workers for 'youth at risk' (Baillergeau & Hoijtink, 2010) and extracurricular initiatives that pair youth with mentors whom they are likely to see as 'positive role models' (De Jong, 2013; Baillergeau & Duyvendak, 2016). Although these projects are generally geared towards getting high school dropouts back into formal education and/or the labour market, they are likely to touch on the aspirations of young people by inviting them to reflect on what they don't like about their present lives and on what a desirable future would be (Baillergeau, Duyvendak and Abdallah, 2015; Abdallah, 2017). For example, some programmes targeting youth temporarily suspended from secondary school due to behaviour issues in France include opportunities for them to discuss what they consider 'respect' – to which they obviously aspire but of which they often feel deprived (Tabib & Dollé, 2010; cf. Baillergeau, 2020 on community-based projects to prevent 'violent radicalisation' among socially disadvantaged youths in Belgium). With their participation in social policy- or community-based initiatives, at least some disadvantaged youths are exposed to opportunities where their capacity to aspire can develop, especially when school-based career education proves disappointing. Like the teachers who take time to encourage their pupils to reflect on what a desirable future means to them, these mentors contribute to broaden the horizons of young people. Such contributions may not be obvious at first sight: when asked how she was inspired to become a detention worker, Mirjam mentioned a TV show on 'getting people on the right track'. But upon further probing, it turned out that her ideas matured by family members, peers and youth workers at the community centre repeatedly telling her that she 'has talent to work with others', and by pursuing a student internship at this community centre. While it remains generally true that youth from well-off backgrounds are exposed to a wider diversity of sources of inspiration than young people from working class backgrounds, some disadvantaged youth are exposed to a wider set of opportunities to explore the future than their counterparts who are not engaged in such projects.

Through their interactions with youth workers, mentors, parents, teachers and peers, youths become able to contemplate a wider set of options for the future. However, these interactions are not always conducive to a more developed capacity to aspire. For example, an art teacher may encourage a talented student to consider an artistic curriculum, but if this is not supported by her parents out of their desire to spare their daughter the uncertain income they faced in their own lives, the student may feel torn. Likewise, a young man who has dropped out of school and who is now participating in a mentoring project where he has to develop a transition-to-work plan may be guided towards a job that is 'realistic' in the eyes of the counsellor. But by talking to peers who have experience with such work, he may learn that it is very poorly regarded in his own circle. The young person may then see himself doomed to scorn by his peers, whereas he has a concealed but robust aspiration to be socially recognised. In such cases, there is a tangible contradiction between two distinct aspirations: between fulfilling an artistic vocation or pleasing one's parents; between achieving stable employment or obtaining social recognition from one's reference group, 'the group to which individuals compare themselves, which is not necessarily a group to which those individuals belong' (Merton, 1968; cf. Holton, 2004, p. 514). If such contradictory aspirations are equally powerful, youths may feel *powerless* to forge a plan for themselves; the interactions conveying these

contradictory messages would have been counterproductive, undermining the development of their capacity to aspire.

In the European contexts we studied, contradictory messages were common. Mass media, advertising, and schools expose youths to a broad range of life possibilities and contradictory representations of success. In many continental European countries, educational streaming often explicitly channels disadvantaged youths towards vocational education, thereby contradicting the meritocratic ideal that most youths from socially disadvantaged backgrounds espouse (Van den Bulk, 2011; cf. Vieira et al., 2013; Berthet, 2016). The contradictions play out in different ways than in countries such as Australia, where educational policy appeals to all youths to pursue 'higher education to gain positional advantage in the global labour market' (Sellar, 2013b, p. 250)–although those who achieve social mobility are despised in popular culture and media as 'cashed-up bogans' (Sellar, 2013b, p. 253), thereby discouraging working class youth to actually pursue this trajectory.

But these contradictions need not be fatal. In the case of the art student above, if some of her peers supported the teacher's efforts, the student may become more motivated to explore artistic curricular options, to develop her artistic practice and eventually to try to convince her parents of its worth. Likewise, if the young person involved in the mentoring project is able to express his doubts to a counsellor or peer, he may find some inspiration to resolve the contradiction, either by looking for another type of job that would be realistic but more highly regarded by his peers, or find ways to change the mind-set of his reference group regarding the considered job, thereby overcoming obstacles and becoming an (almost autodidactic) cartographer. In both situations, the interactions turn out to be productive by reducing constraints and creating space for agency (Elias, 1969/1985; Pagès, 2017), thereby supporting the individual's attempts to emancipate himself from inhibiting contradictions.

Young people's capacity to aspire is thus influenced by social position and status as well as by exposure to daily interactions that broaden their horizon of future possibilities, provided by parents and other adult role models, educational and social policies, extra-curricular activities and community initiatives. These interactions become opportunities which, when seized, can contribute to the development of a plan. But at other times, interactions may not provide such opportunities, or at least opportunities that can be seized. In such cases, social interactions can *undermine* the development of the capacity to aspire, due to the emergence of tensions.

In sum, there are different micro-sociological processes through which the capacity to aspire can wither, consigning youths to the 'dreamless' situations highlighted in section 2. Youths may have been deprived of opportunities to contemplate and articulate the 'idealistic aspirations' (St Clair & Benjamin, 2011) that have crossed their minds, making them despair about imagining a desirable future that fits with what they are deemed able to do. Or they may have been unable to seize those opportunities that were present, for example because they contradicted another important aspiration, making them feel powerless to resolve the contradiction.

5. A micro-sociological framework for understanding how aspirations develop and wither

To understand how 'archives of experience' impact the ways in which young people *learn to aspire* and act on their aspirations in the long run, we need to consider three essential dimensions of the capacity to aspire. In this we take *aspirations* to be inspiring thoughts that guide individual commitments in various areas of life: at school, in extra-curricular activities, within communities, and elsewhere.

First of all, it is important to acknowledge that aspirations are usually not solitary and that young people most commonly develop a set of aspirations, all reflecting a partial vision of the 'good life'. All together, these aspirations constitute an *aspirational repertoire*. Although much of the social science literature on young people's aspirations focuses on educational and career goals (Kao & Tienda, 1998; Khattab, 2015; MacLeod, 1987; Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969) – understandably since educational and/or occupational aspirations are central to society's expectations of adolescents – we advocate adopting Appadurai's holistic understanding of the capacity to aspire, reaching beyond the spheres of education and the labour market to embrace what people see as a 'good life'. A fulfilling occupation or profession is but one among many aspirations young people may have, for example starting one's own family or being active and respected in one's community (Grant, 2017; Reay, 2003). Occupational aspirations also often stand in for other masked aspirations. In a study of the meaning granted to work experience, Mercure, Vultur, and Fleury (2012) found that young people may privilege earning money and acquiring status, or values such as self-realisation or being helpful to others/society, all of which are not mutually exclusive. Some of these aspirations may be 'concealed' (Hart, 2012) and hence imperceptible to outsiders, even if they are meaningful and inspiring for young people. For example, social recognition is an often overlooked aspiration that is highly valued by many disadvantaged youth (Coutant, 2005; Bourdieu, 1997; Whyte, 1943) who hope to 'be somebody' in the eyes of those meaningful to them (Garcia, 2008). Last but not least, aspirations are not necessarily individual, for example collective political aspirations (Chombart de Lauwe, 1964).

Eventually, the 'good life' envisioned by Appadurai spans a varied aspirational repertoire, within which there may be diverse and competing aspirations, some expressed and some concealed. Parts of the whole are not equally visible to outsiders and even to the individuals themselves (expressed aspirations may be the tip of the iceberg) and their parts may be in tension. We thus need to study how expressed and concealed aspirations can be complementary or contradictory, when and where youth prioritise certain goals, and how they deal with contradictions.

Second, aspirations develop through exposure to external messages that convey representations of success and taste (Bourdieu, 1979; cf. Gale & Parker, 2015a) which push young people to adapt their views of the good life in certain directions. While views about university and/or vocational education are important, there are many more messages directed towards youths by powerful public institutions such as schools (e.g. the desirability of a more sustainable/environment-friendly society). Others are promoted by media, popular culture and the business world (e.g. the desirability of high purchasing power). All such messages can affect how young people imagine their future selves and their attitudes towards education, influencing their decision-making towards

the future. To understand how social contexts influence the development of the capacity to aspire, we need to carefully consider how young people perceive these messages conveyed by schools, media, family members, peer groups, teachers, social workers, counsellors, coaches and media. Do some messages resonate more powerfully than others? How and why? To what extent are these messages compatible?

Third, the development of the capacity to aspire is generally seen as an incremental process, typically associated with the transition from childhood to adulthood in which dreams turn into concrete plans and achievements (e.g. St Clair & Benjamin, 2011). But a person's views about what constitutes a desirable future can keep developing well after adolescence. Appadurai has shown how the capacity to aspire can be enhanced among disadvantaged adults, while we have observed young adults – following far from inspired starts in their transitions to adulthood – benefitting from experiences that clarified their visions for the future and refined their plans on how to get there. Indeed, learning to aspire is often not a straight-forward path; depending on individual circumstances, it can be a winding saga that spans a lifetime. The key question is whether the fluidity of aspirations leads *aspirational trajectories* towards the achievement of a life deemed valuable. How and to what extent are individuals empowered to formulate, articulate and fulfil their understandings of the good life? To answer these questions, we need to look at the availability of different forms of interactions and how they are navigated by individuals:

- Interactions that inspire, i.e. by providing ideas about desirable futures through the 'cultivation of imagination' (Nussbaum, 2016), possibly based on critical reflection of what is problematic in their lives, as suggested by Appadurai (2004) and Zipin et al. (2015).
- Interactions that help ideas to mature, by discussing and translating them into plans and commitments.
- Interactions that teach individuals to overcome obstacles, including contradictions and relationships that constrain their agency.

In sum, we need to analyse the availability of *resources* for youths to become productive cartographers, in Gale and Parker's (2015b) rendering. While some adolescents seem to be autodidactic cartographers, many others benefit from the commitment of peers and/or dedicated adults, be they parents, teachers or youth workers, to acquire navigating capacity.

The development of these abilities is not only contingent on the availability of interactions with teachers, mentors, peers, parents and other role models, but on whether these interactions affect the power differentials in which young people are embedded and that curtail their agency. Individuals are linked to others through relationships that grant them resources – e.g. protection, recognition, knowledge (Elias, 1969/1985; Weenink et al., 2017) – but which, more often than not, also constrain their agency, especially when these relationships are suffused with power differentials. But as Elias argues, power relationships can change when, for example, the function of the relationship or the value the individual attaches to the relationship changes. Certain interactions are likely to impact the value individuals attach to certain prospects – e.g. those that have hitherto been unknown or unattractive within their social circle – as well as their enthusiasm for

realising them. If interactions are conducive to meaningful relationships – e.g. they generate trust or mutual support with peers, coaches, and teachers – they will likely make individuals less dependent on a previously limited set of others (e.g. family members). This opens the door to engaging in commitments other than those that prevail in their own social circles.

Along the way, young people may develop robust aspirations that differ from those common in their peer groups, which explain the differences among youth with similar backgrounds. This may happen when young people make trade-offs between contradictory aspirations, for example when they decide to privilege the satisfaction of a fulfilling hobby over prestige and purchasing power. In contrast, the absence of such resources to handle contradictions may lead some youths to flee from thinking about their own future. The capacity to aspire is thus always tied to specific concrete circumstances and the availability of opportunities to learn – which also suggests where we should look when the capacity to aspire does not develop or withers away over time.

6. Conclusion

Over the course of time, young people develop the *capacity to aspire* – a repository of resources which they draw on to guide their commitments to prepare themselves for the future. Drawing on our own observations in Europe, we have argued that the development of the capacity to aspire is not only influenced by personal taste and one's class and cultural background, but by exposure to socially sanctioned representations of success and taste and by myriad, accumulating experiences, all of which constitute 'archives of experience', which we must delve into in order to understand how the capacity to aspire changes over time. Towards this end, we need to analyse how young people are exposed to socially sanctioned representations of success and how they respond to such exposure; the breadth and coherence of their aspirational *repertoires*; and the social interactions that hinder and/or provide resources for their aspirational *trajectories*. Focusing on these dimensions, we argue, will further our understanding of the vicissitudes of learning to aspire, and especially why this capacity differs so greatly within groups subjected to more or less the same socio-economic conditions. Studying aspirational trajectories along these dimensions will also allow us to fine-tune hypotheses about why the capacity to aspire among some youths has seemingly withered away – namely various forms of mismatch between youths and the opportunities they need, to be tested in situations where youths encounter dreamless futures.

Our framework also speaks to career education policies. While social inequality certainly impacts on how young people look to the future, its impact largely depends on the specific opportunities young people are given to learn about and appraise different possibilities for the future. Whereas some youth are offered a variety of desirable options and are actively invited to compare and reflect on them, others are offered a very limited set of options that they have to (or feel they have to) accept without further questioning. Mitigating opportunities may thus go some way to softening the impact of social inequality by intervening in the habitus of youth – possibly

even rendering Bourdieu's 'transformative machine', if not less unpredictable, at least a bit less mysterious.

Notes

1. Discussing 'urban youth' in the late 1980s, Dubet (1987, p. 21) related their situation to the crisis of the industrial age which apparently cannot provide the working class with desirable representations of the future.
2. Bourdieu (1979, p. 176) likewise suggested that despite the continuing reproduction of educational hierarchies, aspirations can still adjust within a given habitus. See also Reay (2004).

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