
A social psychological examination of factors shaping
career and education aspirations through childhood and
adolescence

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Declarations

Statement of Originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University's Digital Repository¹, subject to the provisions of the *Copyright Act 1968* (Cth).

Statement of Collaboration

I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis has been done in collaboration with other researchers. I have included as part of the thesis a statement outlining the extent of collaboration, with whom and under what auspices.

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¹ Unless an embargo has been approved for a determined period.

For my parents.

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— Nathan

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Abstract

Young people often are asked what they want to be when they grow up. What factors influence their responses to this most common of questions? This study used theoretical perspectives from social and vocational psychology, including Gottfredson's (1981, 2002) career circumscription and compromise theory, to investigate the formation of career aspirations during primary and secondary schooling. A particular emphasis was the relationship between social cognition and socioeconomic status (SES) — is SES associated with young people's thinking about careers-related identity questions? The study drew on data gathered during the first three years (2012-2014) of the Aspirations Longitudinal Study (ALS) in the State of New South Wales, Australia. Students in Years 3-11 were sampled in an accelerated longitudinal design, whereby three cohorts completed a comprehensive career aspirations questionnaire for three years. The sample comprised 7,462 questionnaires from 5,304 students. In addition to the questionnaires, the ALS accessed standardised demographic and literacy/numeracy data held by the state for each student. To examine the influence of students' social-cognitive styles on their career aspirations, they also completed a modified version of Berzonsky et al.'s (2013) Identity Style Index as part of the 2014 questionnaire. The latent class mixture modelling (LCMM) technique was used to analyse the accelerated longitudinal data. LCMM identified four discrete change trajectories in the prestige of career aspirations during nine years of schooling. Students' identity styles were found to differ between SES backgrounds, with high SES students more information-oriented and less diffuse/avoidant when dealing with identity questions compared to low SES students. Identity styles also differed by SES background within the LCMM trajectories, with high aspiring low SES students more information-oriented and less diffuse/avoidant than their low aspiring peers. The implications of these findings for theory, research, and practice are discussed.

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
AIC	Akaike Information Criterion
ALS	Aspirations Longitudinal Study
ANZSCO	Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations
ANOVA	Analysis of Variance
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
ARC	Australian Research Council
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank
AUSEI06	Australian Socioeconomic Index 2006
BCS	British Cohort Study
BIC	Bayesian Information Criterion
CCECS	Context of Career and Education Choices Scale
CFA	Confirmatory Factor Analysis
CI	Confidence Interval
DEC	NSW Department of Education and Communities
GMM	Growth Mixture Modelling
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
HSC	Higher School Certificate
ICSEA	Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage
ISI-5A	Identity Style Index - 5 Abridged
K	Kindergarten
KMO	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy
LCMM	Latent Class Mixture Modelling (rendered as <i>lcm</i> in reference to the software)

LMM	Linear Mixed Model
LSAY	Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth
LSYPE	Longitudinal Study of Young People in England
M	Mean
MLR	Multiple Linear Regression
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy
NSW	The Australian State of New South Wales
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development
PCA	Principal Components Analysis
PISA	Programme for International Assessment
PSP	Psychological Social Psychology
Q_n	SES Quartile n , e.g. Q1 Low
RQ_n	Research Question n , e.g. RQ1
SD	Standard Deviation
SE	Standard Error
SEM	Structural Equation Modelling
SERAP	State Education Research Approval Process
SES	Socioeconomic Status
SPSS	(IBM) Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
SRN	Student Reference Number
SSCE	Senior Secondary Certificate of Education
SSP	Sociological Social Psychology
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
UK-NCDS	United Kingdom National Child Development Study
UON	The University of Newcastle, Australia
USA	United State of America
US-NELS	United States National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988-1994
US-NLSY	United States National Longitudinal Survey of Youth
Y_n	School Year n , e.g. Y1