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

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School of Education
Faculty of Education and Arts

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE
AUSTRALIA
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 Repository\(^1\), subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth).

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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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Finally, a nod of proud relief to my parents and brothers. You know that “research thingy” I was doing? The one that defied explanation to anyone who asked? This bit, at least, is done.

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