

Aligning Ambitions and Competing Ideologies: The Future Plans of the Youth of Gautreaux Two

Abstract

Research finds that youths who are able to align their educational and occupational ambitions are better able to realize both. We explore the alignment of educational, occupational, and family ambitions among a group of youths who may be considered socially marginalized, those who have grown up in urban housing developments. We use qualitative data from the Gautreaux Two Program in Chicago. Our sample includes in-depth qualitative interviews with 93 children in 57 of the families included in the study. Our results show how competing ideologies of success for inner-city children lead to misaligned aspirations and how information about higher education and occupations from families, peers, and schools mediates this process.

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Extended Abstract

Social researchers have long recognized the importance of aspirations and expectations in youths' future outcomes. In particular, researchers have focused primarily on the educational expectations of youths (e.g. Alexander and Cook 1979; Hanson 1994; Hao and Bonstead-Bruns 1998; Kao and Tienda 1998), and, to a lesser extent on their occupational ambitions (e.g. Marini and Greenberger 1978) and family goals (Edin and Kefalas 2005). Considered separately, these three types of expectations – educational, occupational, and family – have been shown to influence young adult outcomes like educational attainment, occupational profiles, and family formation. However, Schneider and Stevenson (1999) in their recent book, *The Ambitious Generation*, suggest that how well expectations are matched also plays an important part in youths' adult outcomes. For example, students who expect to go to college and have some idea of how their college education fits into their future careers fare better in terms of retention and timely graduation than do those who expect to go to college, but do not know how their college educations will serve their occupational goals. Schneider and Stevenson (1999) find that it is the congruence between educational and occupational expectations that enables some students to be more successful in post-secondary education and early careers than others. Those who are able to align expectations earlier are better able to avoid obstacles and disappointments in achieving them, according to Schneider and Stevenson (1999).

In this research, we describe when and how the educational, occupational, and family aspirations and expectations of a subgroup of youth often marginalized in traditional status attainment research are aligned. The youths we describe are from families who participated in the Gautreaux Two program in Chicago, Illinois. Through this program, qualified families in

existing public housing were given special vouchers to move to “opportunity areas,” defined as those areas with poverty rates below 23.49% and the proportion of African Americans under 31%. The youths who participated in the Gautreaux Two study range between 9 and 19 years of age and are household members of the adult respondents in the sample. Families in the Gautreaux study are chosen from public housing dwellers in Chicago; therefore the youths are poor, from urban housing developments, and predominantly black.

While poor, urban, and minority youths are represented in statistics drawn from nationally representative databases, a special focus on this group is warranted. Because traditional avenues for mobility that lead to colleges and universities are less accessible, urban youths may explore other pathways to success and social mobility. Inner-city youth may consider several ideologies of success simultaneously, making the alignment of their ambitions more complex than their peers living in advantaged or suburban or rural areas. On the one hand, these youths aspire to fame or fortune through the sports, fashion, or music industries in the ways they have seen portrayed in the media (Carter 2005, Collins 2004, Solomon 1992). On the other hand, these youths also almost without exception, say they want to go to college even though their career goals do not require a college degree. This aspiration reflects what James Rosenbaum and colleagues have called a “college for all” ideology, pervasive in U.S. high schools and the larger society (Rosenbaum 2001).

Our research describes two conceptual categories that emerge from the Gautreaux Two youth interviews. The first set of responses is from those respondents with aligned educational, career, and family goals, who can articulate a plan to achieve them. A second set describes respondents who may have high educational or occupational goals, but for whom they are not aligned. These students seem to hold separate educational, occupational, and family goals. It is

these students that may reflect competing ideologies of achievement for disadvantaged urban youth. In this research, we also explore how alignment of ambitions is influenced by the youth's age, parental education and employment, involvement of father, siblings, or extended family, peers, schools, and neighborhoods. Finally, even among those with coherent plans for achieving their educational, occupational, and educational goals, there are structural factors that impede their actualization that may be especially relevant in the lives of urban poor youths. Even those with high educational and occupational ambitions that are aligned may face obstacles to achieving them that their middle-class peers may not face. These youths recognize that even these "aligned" ambitions do not easily translate into actual educational and occupational attainment. We explore youths' perceptions of the obstacles to realizing their plans in the last part of our analysis.

Data and Methods

The study from which these data come was conducted at Northwestern University's Institute for Policy Research under principal investigators Kathryn Edin, Greg Duncan, and James Rosenbaum. The data on the families in the program were collected from 2002 to 2005 with 91 of the total 549 families who attended the Gautreaux Two orientation sessions. Researchers conducted four waves of in-depth, focused interviews with the adult respondents in their homes over a three-year period. Starting in 2004, data were collected from 93 (out of 110 eligible) children in 57 of the families. If families had children ages 11-19 living in the home, up to three eligible children were randomly selected to be interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured, open-ended interviews that lasted between an hour and a half to three hours. The interviews covered the topics of family, neighborhood, school, peer networks, health, and future aspirations.

We analyzed the transcripts of the interviews with all of the youth. We constructed a profile for each of the youths regarding the topics covered in the interviews, specifically coding the educational, career, and family expectations that the youth discussed. From these profiles we created categories that emerged from the coding based on the aspirations of the youth, and analyzed the youths' narratives about their aspirations and what influenced these aspirations.

Preliminary Results

There are 93 respondents in our sample, and 88 of these youths specifically discuss their aspirations and expectations for the future. We focus on these youths for our analysis. We categorize the youths based on their educational and career expectations and how well these expectations are aligned, and we find that there are two broad categories. The first category consists of youth who offer a fairly concrete idea of what they would like to do in the future, and their educational, career and family expectations are aligned. There are 34 youths in this category, so over one third (38.6%) of the youths have aligned expectations. The second group of youths has high educational or occupational aspirations or multiple ideas of what they would like to do in the future, but they have only vague ideas about how to achieve these goals. Fifty-four, or 61.4% of the youths are in this category. In our proposed analysis, we focus on each of these categories and discuss the narratives the youths offer about their aspirations and expectations and the factors that influence them. Thus, we analyze the youth's own narratives about what mechanisms influence this process. We do not make causal claims about why some youths have aligned expectations and others do not. For example, one very important characteristic of the youths that heavily influences their future planning is age. The average age of youths who have aligned expectations is 14.4 years. The average age of the youths with unaligned aspirations is 13.0 years. Thus, youth who have aligned expectations for the future are typically older than

youth with unaligned expectations. However, there are young respondents who are in the process of aligning their expectations and older youth who appear to consider educational, occupational, and family goals separately. While age likely influences the ability to plan congruent educational, occupational, and family goals, we describe how the youths arrive at these goals, rather than focus on age as an explanation for why some youths' goals are aligned and others' not.

In our larger manuscript, we describe how youths perceive their future plans and the degree to which they seem to consider educational, occupational, and family goals in congruence or separately. We explore how competing ideologies of success may influence how well students are able to align their future plans, and we examine the influence of information from family, peers, and schools on this process. Finally, we explore the obstacles youths perceive to their future plans.

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