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To cite this article: Thomas Grant (2016): The complexity of aspiration: the role of hope and habitus in shaping working-class young people's aspirations to higher education, Children's Geographies

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2016.1221057

Published online: 30 Aug 2016.
The complexity of aspiration: the role of hope and habitus in shaping working-class young people’s aspirations to higher education

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(Received 19 February 2015; accepted 25 July 2016)

In this paper, I explore how working-class young people in Leicester hope and plan for their futures as they consider the possibility of attending university. I respond to Pimlott-Wilson’s [2011. “The Role of Familial Habitus in Shaping Children’s Views of Their Future Employment.” Children’s Geographies 9 (1): 111–118] call for further research to investigate how individual dispositions and habitus affect how young people hope and aspire towards the future. I do this in three ways. First, I empirically test Webb’s [2007. “Modes of Hoping.” History of the Human Sciences 20 (3): 65–83] hope theory to understand how aspirations are formed on an individual and societal level. In doing so, I critically question what is understood by the term ‘aspiration’. This allows me to question what it means for young people to ‘raise aspirations’ towards university. Second, I explore how a spatial analysis can contribute towards an understanding of how habitus, hope and aspirations interlock to shape young people’s futures. Third, I argue that hope can be regarded as a form of capital which in turn influences habitus.

Keywords: aspiration; hope; widening participation; higher education; social mobility; habitus

Introduction

Progression to higher education (HE) has become a mainstream transitional experience for young people in the UK in the last 20 years; however, there remains a great difference in progression rates to university, particularly amongst those from under-represented groups. This change has had a significant impact on how teenagers learn to imagine, hope and plan for their futures. Despite attempts to normalise and raise aspirations towards HE, such assumptions remain highly problematic for young people from under-represented groups, where a complexity to aspiration emerges.

In the UK, widening participation intervention seeks to address differences in participation rates by using aspiration and attainment raising interventions to help young people to explore HE (Doyle and Griffin 2012). In recent years, most notably under the New Labour Government, intervention tended to target young people’s aspirations by encouraging them to ‘raise aspirations’. This set a precedent where ‘high aspirations’ equate to participating in HE. This asserts a singular and linear form of aspiration to enable young people to achieve social mobility, often at the expense of other ambitions which exist outside of HE (Brown 2011; Watts and Bridges 2006). In light of this, I explore how white working-class young people in Leicester
hope and plan for their futures as they consider the possibility of attending university. I question the assumptions young people held of university and how this affected their future plans.

I begin by providing an overview of the literature on young people’s aspirations and how young people plan and hope for the future. The main analysis part of the paper is split into two sections and follows two groups of young people who took part in the research, but had very different attitudes towards going to university. The first, a Year 10 group, were identified by teachers as being highly capable of going to university but were ‘disengaged’ in education and at risk of underachieving at school. The second, a Year 8 group, were achieving well at school and were ‘engaged’ in education and had the academic ability to attend university.

I highlight three important contributions towards researching young people’s aspirations. First, I use Webb’s (2007) hope theory to critically question the role that hope has in shaping aspirations. Webb highlights that a goal-directed hope, which I argue can be regarded as an aspiration, can take two forms: sound and resolute hope. I explore how adopting one of these two modes of hope might influence how a young person perceives and sets goals towards university. I also explore how hoping in a non-goal-directed mode of hope (e.g. patient hope) affects how young people plan for the future. I argue that hoping in a non-goal-directed way might mean that intervention to ‘raise aspirations’ is problematic for some young people from under-represented groups.

Second, I respond to Pimlott-Wilson’s (2011) call for more research to consider how young people’s habitus influences their hopes and aspirations for the future. I consider how hope and aspiration are positioned in relation to Bourdieu’s (2005, 45) concept of ‘Habitus’, as a ‘set of acquired characteristics which are the products of social conditions’ and I explore how socialisation with family members and others outside of the family unit can shape young people’s habitus and how this can often change and evolve through young people’s own agency (Pimlott-Wilson 2011).

Finally, I argue that hope can be regarded as a form of social capital which shapes a young person’s habitus. Therefore, understanding the mode of hope a young person is hoping in towards university and how this shapes their habitus is vital in gaining an understanding of the decision-making processes which young people experience. I therefore pull these two concepts of ‘hope’ and ‘habitus’ together by considering how a spatial analysis of aspiration can provide further insight into the complexity of setting aspirations for young people from working-class neighbourhoods. The paper continues by providing a brief outline of the literature on young people’s aspirations and how young people plan for the future.

**Researching young people’s aspirations**

Researching young people’s aspirations has become an important part of the sub-discipline of children’s geography. Readers of this journal may remember a special issue in 2011 which looked at the relationship between education and aspirations. This special issue addressed the intersection between children’s everyday experiences and the need for the sub-discipline to explore ‘the importance of wider actors, institutions and processes [e.g. neoliberalism, globalisation and social production] which influence young people’s lives’ (Holloway, Brown, and Pimlott-Wilson 2011, 2). This paper, in part, is a response to this call for research into the ‘wider actors, institutions and processes’ which shape young people’s aspirations, but it also addresses Pimlott-Wilson’s (2011, 112) call for geographers to provide further consideration of ‘children’s hopes for the future and the factors which influence the dispositions of individuals’.

Geographers researching young people’s aspirations have paid particular attention to the effects of neoliberal education policy on young people and their families, but also on how different actors and institutions interpret these policies (Holloway, Brown, and Pimlott-Wilson 2011).
This has included how policy is understood and enacted at a multi-scale level. For example, Purcell’s (2011) critique of the national discourse surrounding the early Academies Programme under New Labour shows how discourse at a national level were replicated or contested at a local level. Brown (2012) also critiques the way in which New Labour’s widening participation policy, at a national level, formed a link between local areas of deprivation and low levels of social mobility. This made having ‘low aspirations’ synonymous with being working class and living in deprived areas of the country.

In researching the spatial influences on young people’s aspirations, Geographers have also revealed the importance of staying connected to one’s local home when young people consider their future educational opportunities, particular in terms of where to study (Hinton 2011). The desire to remain close to home when looking to study for find employment might result in young people developing more modest aspirations which revolve around local support networks, especially if there are few local opportunities (Grant 2016). For other young people, it may lead them to reluctantly conclude that they will have to cut emotional, social and spatial attachments in order to achieve labour market opportunities (Pimlott-Wilson 2015).

For young people from working-class backgrounds who fail to achieve social mobility and high educational outcomes their aspirations have often been represented as being in deficit and labelled as ‘low aspirations’ by those in positions of power (e.g. teachers/politicians). The blame for this failure is often placed on the individual and their family (Bright 2011). However, the label ‘low aspirations’ can often overlook that fact that many of these more modest aspirations, which are often linked to place, do contain positive aspects which are extremely important to young people’s lives (e.g. family ties, security or happiness) (Brown 2011). Such aspirations can create a ‘stickiness of place’ which young people find difficult to leave (Allen and Hollingworth 2013, 514).

The idea of a ‘stickiness of place’ can also have negative connotations. Green and White (2008) have argued that young people may become ‘trapped’ in both real and imagined ways within deprived communities where there are few education and employment opportunities to help them achieve their aspirations. The distance that someone is willing to travel in search of employment can be extremely subjective. One person may only be willing to travel within their local neighbourhood, whereas another may be willing to venture beyond their immediate locality and widening their employment opportunities (Green and White 2008). For those living in neighbourhoods with depressed economies, a willingness to transcend local communities might be the difference between achieving their aspirations or not.

Structural issues of class, gender and ethnicity have also featured heavily in research investigating young people’s educational aspirations, particularly towards attending university (Archer, Hutchings, and Andross 2003). Social class is often regarded as an important factor which contributes towards social exclusion from HE (Archer, Hutchings, and Andross 2003; Reay 2001; Reay, Ball, and David 2002). Class does not determine participation rates to university on its own – it often intersects with other social markers (e.g. gender and ethnicity). This can (re) produce inequality within and between such groups (Burke 2006).

Gender has been found to influence whether young people attend university, with women much more likely to participate in HE. In the UK, between 2013 and 2014, 51% of women entered university compared to 42% of men (DBIS 2015). However, this figure tends to vary greatly when issues of class, ethnicity and place are included – for example, white working-class women living in the most disadvantaged areas of the UK are 44% more likely to go to university than their male counterparts (HEFCE 2011).

The importance of family expectation (Wainwright and Marandet 2011) and habitus in influencing aspirations (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2011; Pimlott-Wilson 2011) has also been researched. The role of families in influencing habitus is often regarded as being something
that occurs subconsciously where young people develop certain dispositions based on their previous experiences which makes them aspire towards lifestyles and careers which are regarded as being feasible and within reach. Pimlott-Wilson (2011) has also argued that habitus might evolve as young people exhibit a level of agency to resist and try new trajectories which differ from the dispositions they have received from family and place-based influences (Pimlott-Wilson 2011). This is because for Bourdieu (2005, 45) habitus is a ‘product of history’ which can be changed through education and social experience; it is not merely fate or destiny. However, Bourdieu does stress that habitus is prone to reproduce itself.

Whilst geographers have investigated effects of social actors, institutions and processes on young people’s lives, I argue that there is a need for more research on how young people formulate their own aspirations. I continue in the rest of this paper to consider this call further by questioning the relationship between hope, aspiration and habitus (dispositions), but first it is important to outline some of the literature which has sought to explain how children plan, aspire and hope towards the future.

Planning for adult life: the role of hope and aspirations

Closely related to debates around aspirations are how young people plan and develop time spans for their lives. This topic has often had conflicting findings, especially around notions of planning and feeling in control of one’s life plans (see Anderson et al. 2005; Brannen and Nilsen 2002, 2007). Anderson et al. argue that the majority of young people in their study did plan over long periods of time and felt in control of their lives. However, this has been contested by Brannen and Nilsen (2007) who argue that such an assertion fails to deal with the complexities of thinking about the future, around issues of making plans, setting goals and the influence of hope and unknown outcomes. For the purposes of this paper, Brannen and Nilsen’s (2007) ideas are more useful.

The relationship between planning and setting goals is important. Brannen and Nilsen (2007, 155) argue that ‘a goal is something that can only be achieved by careful planning’. A goal is therefore something that is ‘concrete and achievable’ and can thus be planned. Plans and goals, which become more long term and abstract turn to hope over time because they are seen as less certain. However, I argue that whilst this gives a greater understanding of the processes which occur in planning, the relationship with hope can be regarded as more complex than defined by Brannen and Nilsen (2002, 2007). Here Webb’s (2007) hope theory is useful. Webb (2007) argues that some modes of hope do engender an element of planning and setting goals and suggests that there are three goal-directed modes of hope: sound (estimative), resolute and utopian hope. For the purposes of this paper, I only discuss sound and resolute hope.

Common to sound and resolute modes of hope is that they require the hoper to set goals towards the future. This forms the basis of an aspiration – the ability to set a goal towards the future. Therefore, whilst an aspiration is a form of hope, not all hope can be classed as an aspiration. Between sound and resolute modes of hope, the level of uncertainty increases. For those who hope in a sound mode, the goal is achievable and the hoper calculates that there is a more than a fair chance of achieving the goal. For those who hope in a resolute mode, however, the goal becomes less certain and it is necessary to (re)develop cognitive resolve and develop new pathways until it is achieved. The focus here is the ability to take control of one’s life and create chances. These goal-directed modes of hope both focus on setting goals to see the object of hope achieved. Depending on the goal being set, people might employ different modes of hope. This forms the basis for the development and creation of a complexity to aspiration.
In considering the role of hope and the relationship it has to young people as they think about their futures, it is important to question what happens when young people hope in non-goal-directed ways. Webb (2007) argues that not all hope involves setting goals. Hope can take the form of open-ended hope such as patient and critical modes. For the open-ended hoper, there exist no concrete goals, but rather hope takes the form of an openness of spirit towards the future, which brings with it the ability to cast a positive glow on life and a sense of possibility, as one travels the path, towards whom one may become. Central to Webb’s (2007) hope theory is the notion that people may experience hope in different ways, at different points in their lives, depending on variations in social relations, opportunities and constraints. To hope, therefore, does not always involve setting goals, but can do so. Individuals might also set a particular mode of goal-directed hope towards one aspect of their lives and yet rely on an open- or other goal-directed mode(s) of hope in another area. Therefore, people might hope in various open- or goal-directed modes at any one time but with different intentions/ends in view.

It is important to question how hope is projected onto young people and the relationship that hope and childhood has within (adult) society. Kraftl (2008, 85) argues that childhood hope ‘exemplifies a generic form of pragmatic hope’ that seeks reform not through naïve utopian means, but rather by hoping and planning in a more realistic and ‘pragmatic’ manner. For Kraftl (2008, 85), ‘pragmatic forms of hope are those that inflect attempts to identify – and sketch out a concrete program to change – contemporary social realities’. I would also argue that neoliberals often promote a pragmatic form of hope in promoting the need to raise aspirations. Neoliberals such as British Prime Minister David Cameron often argue that raising aspirations is a battle for the mind to alter how people think:

\[
\text{You’ve got to get out there and find people, win them over, get them to raise aspirations, get them to think they can get all the way to the top. (BBC 2013)}
\]

For the politician, there is a very pragmatic tone to this statement, where being able to ‘get to the top’ requires a transformation of the mind to begin to set goals towards achieving social mobility. However, for young people, this notion is more than a pragmatic change, it requires them to change how they hope. For young people from under-represented groups, this form of hope is far from pragmatic, but becomes resolute in its requirements.

Brown (2013) argues that the dominant neoliberal hope of ‘aspirations’ has relied on people’s ability to imagine futures which are expansive and capable of perpetual growth. The need to raise aspirations has been rooted in promoting the idea of social mobility and the need for young people to take on greater individual responsibility, of which HE is regarded as the most appropriate way of achieving social mobility. This has seen the creation of policy which promotes a singular linear aspiration towards HE. Indeed, Loveday (2014) argues that HE is often regarded by politicians as being a form of escape for those from working-class backgrounds, where policy considers working-class people from a position of deficit and where HE can help young people become socially upwardly mobile. This creates the conditions by which adults and those in power can promote certain lifestyles (e.g. HE) as being more valuable than others.

I argue that the notion of raising aspirations is not only a pragmatic form of hope, but that it also resonates with Webb’s (2007) resolute mode of hope. First, this is because it is individual and goal directed and second, because it requires the development of cognitive resolve and motivation to change how one thinks and to look beyond the evidence, be they social, cultural or economic barriers and press on until the goal is achieved. Aspiration-raising initiatives are introduced with the object of intervening to raise and alter young people’s hopes by teaching a particular form of
resolute, goal-directed hope. This encourages young people to set goals for the future towards a normative middle class norm to attend university.

**Methods**

In my research, I used a qualitative approach which drew on participatory and creative methods. Participatory and creative methods were used to engage young people in different aspects of the research process (e.g. research design) in fun and engaging ways (e.g. rap, photography) (Pain 2004). This helped young people to take ownership of the research and express themselves in culturally relevant ways. The research focused on participants from white working-class communities who are regarded as coming from under-represented groups. I selected three schools in Leicester which were located in areas of multiple deprivation and served traditionally white working-class communities. I worked with two age groups, Year 8 (12-year-olds) and Year 10 (15-year-olds), in one school (Bradgate High School) which became the main case study school and gained access to undertake research with a further two schools (Lea Wood College and Swithland Wood Community College) who allowed only Year 8 pupils. These became supporting schools. A total of 35 participants were included in the research. Participants were selected by teachers based on the following criteria (Table 1).

Within each School Year, two groups of young people were formed: an engaged group, who were likely to achieve 5 A*-C GCSE grades and a disengaged group who were deemed less likely to achieve 5 A*-C GCSEs. All participants were eligible for free school meals. Teaching staff had freedom to select pupils they felt would benefit from taking part in the research, however, I made it clear that as well as the selection criteria above that teachers should only select pupils they felt had the potential and ability to attend university. It is important to note that schools were asked to select mixed gender groups to reflect the demographic of the school; however, the main case study put forward only male participants. The other two schools had mixed groups of young people with both male and female participants.

Each group consisted of six to eight young people. I undertook four different workshops which used creative methods, including rap, photography, mock radio interviews and neighbourhood mapping, to explore issues affecting young people’s lives and their plans and aspirations for the future.

The research investigated how young people plan, hope and aspire towards the future with particular emphasis on the role that HE might have. I was keen to explore ways in which class and social expectation shape young people’s (early) future aspirations and how these in turn influence their understanding and expectation of HE. Semi-formal interviews were also conducted with teaching staff responsible for careers advice in order to better understand their methods of facilitating young people’s planning for the future, particularly in relation to HE. The final part of this paper looks at the educational aspirations of young people from two different workshop groups that took part in the research. The first section looks at a Year 10 disengaged group with the second looking at a Year 8 engaged group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria (Group 1)</th>
<th>Criteria (Group 2)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Year 8</td>
<td>Year 8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Able and engaged in the education process</td>
<td>Able but at risk of being disengaged from education process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most likely to achieve 5 A*-C GCSEs</td>
<td>Less likely to achieve 5 A*-C GCSEs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free school meals</td>
<td>Free school meals</td>
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Table 1. List of selection criteria (Grant 2016, 90).
Choosing not to participate in HE: the role of patient hope and habitus in shaping attitudes towards university

Case study: Year 10 disengaged group

For many in the Year 10 group, it was clear that university was not something that would benefit them or form part of their future. Perhaps most outspoken about this was Aaron.

TG: Does anyone else know anyone who has gone to uni?
Aaron: My mate goes to Oxford
TG: Do they [Aaron’s mate] enjoy it?
Aaron: I think so – it depends what you want to do in life though don’t it – it depends – like I hate school so why the hell am I going to go to uni! (Aaron, Year 10, Disengaged group)

The prospect of going to university seemed pointless to Aaron as he felt that it would merely replicate his current experience of secondary schooling. Aaron expressed a close attachment to the local community where he lived. For Aaron, rather than aspiring to a successful future away from his neighbourhood, aided by achieving a good education, success was found in remaining on the estate by ‘being there’ for his family.

TG: So you think the main thing that would keep you here would be your family?
Aaron: Yeah family and friends, cos if you have got a perfect life here … well not perfect but a good life, then what’s the point of leaving, cos you might not even have a good life and then you come back and have lost everything and then you have to start all over again …
TG: So why is family so important?
Aaron: Because that’s the main thing that you have to look after in your life- ain’t it really.
Keane: It keeps you happy.
Aaron: You do anything for your family though don’t you. (Year 10, disengaged group)

For Aaron, to move away, be it for education or work, means not only to renge on one’s responsibilities towards family, but also risks losing everything. It could be that Aaron’s sense of responsibility to his family is all encompassing. It is a lifeline which he feels would be foolish to cut. Putnam’s (2000) use of bridging and bonding social capital is useful here. Many of the young people in the group expressed close attachments to their family and friends living in the local community. It is likely therefore that they will have high levels of bonding social capital. Forrest and Kearns (2001, 2141) argue that

close family ties, mutual aid and voluntarism are often strong features of poor areas. It is these qualities which may enable people to cope with poverty, unemployment and wider processes of social exclusion.

It is these strong bonds which enable people to ‘get by’ which help to frame young people’s future choices. When there is such investment in these networks, which act as safety nets, the thought of leaving them might overwhelm young people. Furthermore, if there is a sense of responsibility to help provide for others this may further prevent young people from wanting to leave the local neighbourhood.

Poor local opportunities can also in part explain the group’s rejection of education.
Aaron: What’s the point in learning if you ain’t going to get a job round here because what is there to do round here other than being a shopkeeper …?

TG: What do you guys all think about work?

Aaron: Yeah I would like to get a job but it depends on what it is

Rick: Getting a decent job is hard now these days

Aaron: Yeah not being someone’s flipping bitch

Aaron’s complaint about being someone’s ‘flipping bitch’ might reflect what has been termed a ‘crisis of masculinity’ where changes to the labour market and a loss of manufacturing jobs traditionally favoured by men has particularly affected younger men (McDowell 2002). Aaron’s comments may well suggest that he feels that by taking such a job, this will result in him feeling de-masculinised and lacking power and control over his employment opportunities. Individuals’ perceptions over what might be understood to be a relevant opportunity and the size of the area in which to seek employment can be seen as highly subjective (Green and White 2008). For Aaron the area he wanted to find employment in was small, being ‘round here’ [the estate]. In a later comment Aaron argues that he would not move to a neighbouring estate:

Rick: I wouldn’t move proper far

Aaron: No offence but I will not move to Bradgate Estate

TG: You wouldn’t move to Bradgate?

Aaron: Coz it’s shit …

Keane: I wouldn’t want to stay here all my life!

Aaron: Don’t stay here all your life, no one’s telling you to stay. (Year 10, disengaged group)

The scale to which many of the young people in this workshop group live was to regard the ‘estate’ as being ‘Leicester’. The fact that Aaron would not want to move off the estate and talks about the limited employment opportunities ‘round here’ on the estate, limits his opportunities. These ‘subjective geographies of opportunity’ are shaped by place and, being subjective, will vary from person to person (Green and White 2008). Somewhat differently this might explain why for some, such as Keane, there is a desire to one day leave the estate.

Green and White (2008) argue that social networks can aid or impede young people’s subjective opportunities. Close attachments, whilst being vital and important to young people’s lives, often do not provide the necessary bridging social capital to help them leave their communities and get to university. It may be that Keane has higher levels of bridging social capital which enable him to see alternative ways of leaving his neighbourhood. However, Keane did not have any concrete ideas or plans for how this would be achieved. Keane did, however, also express close connections with family and stressed the importance of ‘being there’ for family. Despite a strong desire to leave, without a concrete plan these close bonds may mean that Keane will remain close to them.

Furthermore, Aaron’s admonishment of Keane’s desire to leave might also reflect a sentiment that he is expressing a hope or desire that is beyond his social standing when coming from a community where numerous generations of family tend to have always lived there. This can be seen as an attempt to discipline behaviour within the group so that they conform to certain expectations and expressions of masculinity to provide for and be there for one’s family. For some young people, this greatly affected their future plans and with limited opportunities in their neighbourhood, this resulted in many having a pessimistic outlook when talking about planning for
employment. This meant that some young people had very vague ideas about their future careers, 
but did offer clear ambitions towards more mundane hopes which revolved around families. The 
limited opportunities combined with a lack of bridging social capital and a close attachment to 
familial networks, which promotes bonding social capital, can lead to a class-based immobility, 
creating a ‘stickiness of place’ (Allen and Hollingworth 2013, 514), which can act to trap young 
people in both real and imagined ways (Green and White 2008). I argue that these different factors 
combined might lead to a rejection of education and with it a belief that it can be a means to 
succeed and ‘escape’ areas of deprivation (Loveday 2014).

A neoliberal political analysis of this might lead to the conclusion that these young people 
have so-called low aspirations. I argue, however, that their comments point to the formation of 
more modest and mundane forms of open hope which revolves around family (Brown 2011). I 
argue that Aaron tended to hope in what Webb (2007) identified as patient hope.

Young people who exhibited patient hope towards the future tended to have fewer ideas about 
their future aspirations and less concrete plans. The influence of social networks, attachment to 
place and limited opportunities all shaped how they hoped and aspired towards the future. For 
those with localised (open) modes of hope, it is likely that aspiration-raising activities which 
require the reorientations of hope towards a form of resolute goal-directed hope will have little 
impact. There are three main reasons for this:

First, to hope in a resolute mode requires valuing the object being hoped for (Webb 2007). If 
HE is regarded as a means to increase one’s chances of social mobility, then it has to be valued and 
seen as important to achieving the goal of social mobility. For young people in this group, this 
tended not to be the case.

Second, resolute hope requires setting goals towards the future and forming a cognitive 
resolve towards achieving the object of hope (Webb 2007). Closely linked to valuing the 
object of hope is the ability to set goals and to continue to do so even when failure occurs, or 
when the evidence suggests that it is unattainable. If the goal is not valued there is going to be 
little impetus or drive to set goals and then develop a cognitive resolve to succeed.

Third, it requires looking beyond the evidence and barriers such as class position and lower 
educational achievement. For many young people, these shaped their expectation and outlook on 
life. This places them at a positional disadvantage to their middle class peers. I argue that the evi-
dence that young people draw on is, at a subconscious level, bound to their habitus which acts like 
a watermark that enables people to know the rules or the ‘feel for the game’ and which informs 
how they come to know their place within society (Bourdieu 2000, 151). To hope in a resolute 
mode towards university therefore means that young people will need to reform their habitus. I 
argue that this in part is what aspiration-raising intervention attempts to do. It can be regarded 
as intervening, through pedagogic means, to encourage young people to alter their habitus to 
include an expectation to attend university.

It is likely, therefore, that young people in this respect are hoping in a patient mode of hope. In 
this case, to hope in a patient mode does not require setting goals to ‘escape’ their neighbourhoods 
by attending university, but to believe that by remaining where one is and being close to friends 
and family, that this will provide the security of a patient mode of hope. By hoping this way, 
young people place their hope in the goodness of people. Webb (2007, 70) argues that patient 
hope is ‘directed primarily in the direction of other human beings and is characterised by an 
extpectation concerning their efficacious agency’.

To hope in a patient mode therefore is to believe that the relationships one has can be trans-
formed and to believe that by remaining in the current situation everything will work out in the 
end. Hope, therefore, does not have explicit goals and outcomes (Webb 2007).

It is the close knit relationships which help to maintain strong bonding capital and it is through 
the goodness of people that support networks are created. Here, there may be a sense of moral
obligation to other people which results in them wanting to remain in their local neighbourhoods. This moral obligation may also be part of the scorn that Aaron poured onto Keane for wanting to leave the neighbourhood.

As this paper continues, it outlines the aspirations of young people, in a Year 8 engaged group, who were considering the HE option, and it explores the tensions young people experience as they negotiate local forms of hope, social realities and the expectation of teachers to raise aspirations.

Choosing to participate in HE: the role of sound hope and habitus in shaping aspirations towards HE

Case study: Year 8, engaged group

For young people in this group, there was an openness towards going to university; however, this also came with a severe scepticism about whether university was indeed a realistic option for them to pursue. For many of the young people in this group, this scepticism led to what I call a ‘complexity of aspiration’, where young people displayed signs of raising their aspirations towards HE, before questioning how realistic such an option was. Some young people were able to imagine futures which included going to university, however, beyond the abstract activity of imagining the future, when talking about setting more concrete goals towards achieving them, young people tended to reveal a complexity to these aspirations, often lowering them and questioning how realistic HE was.

Despite having aspirations to go to university, some young people were concerned about leaving their family, often expressing a sentiment of feeling torn between remaining in their neighbourhood and leaving in search of an independent life. Young people, like Candice, who had aspirations to go to university to do a degree in photography, expressed such concerns.

Written during the field work by Candice:

About my future, I feel
Scared, Happy Worried,
Lucky, Excited, Naïve,
Unrealistic, Unlucky, Hopeful
I need to think of others as well as myself! But I need to think of myself.

Spoken exchange with Candice regarding what she had written

TG: What do you mean about others?
Candice: Meaning that I wouldn’t think about the other parts of my family, I would just be thinking about myself and if they needed help. I just think that my life is more important. (Candice, Year 8, engaged group)

The desire to be there for family is met with the expectation that Candice needs to be responsible for her own independent life. I argue that in this respect, the neoliberal notion of responsibility and individuality is played out here, where traditional collective working-class values problematise what it means to pursue a highly mobile and individualistic life.

It is possible that this tension can be explained by Bourdieu’s (2000) concept of a destabilised habitus, which can be ‘torn by contradictions and internal divisions’ (163). Reay (2015, 14) argues that a divided habitus occurs when people are ‘caught between two very different but equally compelling fields’. Candice clearly shows signs of having internal divisions between the prospect of going to university and remaining close to her family. As such, in terms of
participating in the field of HE, she may be caught between a habitus and set of family expectations which orientate her towards a life she knows and expects to happen and an emerging habitus which includes the prospect of going to university. The result is that young people’s habitus can be pulled in different directions (Ingram 2011).

During the research young people started to question how realistic the aspiration to go to university was:

Blake: I wouldn’t want to get my hopes too high.
TG: Why?
Blake: Because If I don’t, like when I grow up – say if I like … you know the exams you have at the end of university – if I fail, then I would be a bit like – I would have to do them all again.
TG: You may have to re-sit them
Blake: I am excited but … what’s the word where I don’t want to get too excited?
Candice: realistic?
Blake: Yeah that’s it – I don’t want to be unrealistic … ! (Blake and Candice Year 8, Engaged group)

For both Candice and Blake, their ability to instinctively ‘find their place’ and know the ‘right way’ to engage within a given field allows them to work out what is realistic. Such thinking is ‘inscribed like a watermark’ (Bourdieu 2005, 143). Aspiration-raising activities, on the other hand, seek to actively destabilise young people’s habitus, by pedagogic means, by trying to transform young people’s habitus and seeking to place HE within their field of vision (Skeggs 2004). In doing so, aspiration-raising activities seek to create a new watermark by encouraging young people to ‘incorporate the structures of the field’ within their lives so they may start to ‘find their place’ and develop the necessary disposition and habitus to enter university (Bourdieu 2005, 143). For Candice and Blake, who clearly question whether HE is realistic, it is evident that they do have agency within this decision and the conversation quoted earlier suggests that their habitus evolves not only through pedagogic intervention, but also as a result of group discussion amongst peers (Bourdieu 2005; Pimlott-Wilson 2011). However, Bourdieu (2005) does argue that habitus, although not fixed, does often tend to reproduce itself amongst those from less powerful social groups. As such, for young people in this group, the question – is university realistic – might be an example of them drawing on their established habitus.

One factor which young people in this group cited as affecting their thoughts about HE was the level of personal risk they would be subjected to (Archer and Hutchings 2000). For example, Blake was concerned about the risk of failing his exams at university. Webb (2007) argues that the level of risk someone is willing to take on in developing goals towards what is being hoped for is shaped by the belief about whether it is achievable. How risk is perceived can determine the mode of goal-directed hope which is used – either sound or resolute hope. The tension between hoping in sound and hoping in resolute hope is what contributes towards a complexity of aspiration.

For the young people who had clearer plans and aspiration towards the future, in terms of their future careers, it is likely that they were hoping in a goal-directed mode – namely sound or resolute hope (Webb 2007). I argue that many young people in this group, by questioning what was realistic, tended to hope in a sound mode of hope, which has the effect of anchoring hope towards what is realistic and achievable. Sound hope questions the level of risk and if there is a less than fair chance of the goal being achieved the object of hope is rendered unattainable (Webb 2007). It is likely here that the social experience of others (e.g. kinship networks) and habitus will inform and shape the perception of risk and whether a goal can be achieved. This sense of university being ‘not for us’ (Archer and Yamashita 2003) may be grounded in a habitus which does not
include HE. It might be that here young people’s habitus does not include an expectation from their family to attend university, but that through the process of socialisation, pedagogic intervention at school and their own agency to question the status quo that their habitus is starting evolve to include that which was once impossible (Pimlott-Wilson 2011). The process of raising aspirations therefore requires not only encouraging young people to hope in a resolute mode, but also to reshape their habitus so that being able to attend university can be made possible.

I argue that in raising aspirations, intervention not only attempts to transform young people’s habitus but that another central aim is to alter how people hope. In this paper, I argue that the dominant neoliberal hope of ‘aspiration’ requires a resolute mode of hope for those from under-represented groups. Therefore, the process of raising aspirations towards HE requires young people to adopt certain dispositions which aid such hopeful thinking. These include being able to set goals which look beyond the evidence and develop cognitive resolve. For the resolute hoper, setting goals involves looking beyond the evidence (Webb 2007). This evidence base might involve the social experiences of others from their social group. In the case of access to HE, those from under-represented groups are asked to look beyond the fact that they are under-represented and the existence of structural inequalities. To hope in a resolute mode also requires developing a cognitive resolve and the ability to develop alternative pathways towards HE, if failure occurs (Webb 2007). It is worth noting that hope might be shaped by habitus and cultural capital, in that what might be regarded as resoluto hope for one person, might be regarded as sound hope for others. In other words, if someone has a habitus which includes an expectation and set of family values to attend university (Archer, Hollingworth, and Mendick 2010), then it is likely that they will hope in a sound mode because it can be regarded as being more plausible. However, for someone who has a working-class habitus which does not include an expectation to attend HE, the perceived risk increases and therefore setting goals towards HE might require a resolute mode of hoping. Therefore, to hope towards HE, where one’s habitus does not include the expectation to attend university, ultimately requires adopting a more risky strategy.

Conclusion

There were clear differences in the outlook between these two groups of young people. Whilst both groups expressed varying degrees of attachment to the local neighbourhood, there was a clear difference in how they valued education and their abilities to imagine and achieve good educational outcomes. For those in the Year 10 group, they were often unable to make the link between achieving in education and being able to achieve the careers that they wanted. This clearly affected the mode of hope that they used when thinking about the future and largely led to them concluding that they wanted to focus on maintaining close links and relationships with those in their local neighbourhoods.

The Year 8 group on the other hand, although feeling an affinity to their neighbourhood, did regard achieving good educational outcomes as important and part of their plans to achieve their chosen ambitions. Whilst they often had a desire to leave their local communities – there was often an emotional attachment to others that added to the level of risk that they were negotiating when asking the question – is university realistic for people like me? These combined make raising aspiration to university a complex process fraught with emotional and logistical questions (and risks). Yong people could clearly see beyond their local community and were beginning to formulate goals towards achieving them. I argue they were hoping in a different mode to that of the Year 10 – that of a goal-directed mode and there was evidence of an evolving habitus. Understanding the complexity to young people’s goal-directed aspirations, which includes the level of risk, the ability to develop a cognitive resolve against the evidence and to negotiate localised modes of social hope is vital in helping those from under-represented groups to enter HE.
The key question is whether these young people, who are starting to entertain the idea of going to university, will take the plunge by adopting the more risky resolute mode of hope by raising their aspirations towards university, or will they opt for the safer and socially reproduced sound mode of hope? Will the young people allow their habitus to evolve to include the expectation that HE is for them or will it remain socially conservative and merely reproduce itself? Perhaps these questions are too simplistic and are in danger of leading to the same conclusion that neoliberal politicians and policy-makers hold which blames individuals for their own educational failure. However, the purpose of this paper has been to highlight the complexities of raising aspirations. It is not merely something that can just be switched on or decided – it is fraught with risk where young people’s identity and emotional well-being is at stake.

Whilst these questions are important to ask – they still focus on the individual and their personal shortcomings. Recent attempts to raise aspirations and encourage young people to change their habitus and ways of hoping towards university has focused too much on targeting the individual and blaming them for education failure and lack of social mobility. Such intervention is only part of the solution and will not necessary provide the wholesale change needed to help young people achieve their desired outcomes and the social mobility promised to them.

I argue that widening participation intervention needs to help young people to answer the question – is university a realistic opportunity? In doing so this might go some way in taking the focus off the individual and what they lack and instead focus on helping young people to deal with some of the deep rooted questions which cause them to question whether university is realistic. Practitioners and Educators need to help young people to understand and manage the risk and complexities which arise when thinking about going to university. This includes helping young people to deal with their close attachment to their local communities, their fears of failing and concerns about feeling torn between competing demands and expectations from family and school.

Acknowledgements
I would extend a special thanks to my supervisor Gavin Brown and also to Darren Webb for their guidance, feedback and encouragement in writing this paper. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their feedback and suggestions and also to John Horton as Editor. My final thanks go to the young people who took part in this research.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding
This work was supported by the ESRC under [grant number 1013441].

Note
1. When selecting participants, I wanted to ensure that they all had the ability to gain the necessary grades for university. The term disengaged therefore refers to a group who whilst having the potential to succeed were, for whatever reason, struggling in the formal educational setting. Young people were not made aware of this distinction during the research; it was, however, used to help clarify the selection process for their teachers.
References


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