

WORKING PAPERS COLLECTION | 2

DEVELOPING ASPIRATIONS THROUGH SOCIAL ASSEMBLAGES

TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

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CONNECT2ASPIRE

CULTURAL ENGAGEMENTS AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S PROFESSIONAL ASPIRATIONS

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Prologue

In 2017 I interviewed two young migrants¹ whose families had recently moved to Coventry. I was conducting a research project on migrant integration in the city, and looking in particular at how young people's aspirations and professional dreams are affected by moving in a new country and adapting to a new sociocultural context. The girl was 19 and the boy 18. Their families had moved to Coventry driven by poverty and unemployment in their home countries. By international metrics, their families were living below the poverty line. They were both from big families, and relied on social benefits to survive. The girl's father spoke no English and he was working from 7 am to 7 pm, earning four pounds per day. The boy's father did slightly better as a delivery driver. None of them complained about poverty or difficulties. They spoke optimistically about their dreams and their future, interspersed with stories about how their families made efforts to make ends meet and keep them in school.

The boy and the girl were studying, and were happy with the progress they were making in school. They spoke no English when coming to Coventry less than 5 years before. Now they mastered English, and were training towards professions they liked. They were both bright and beaming with hope and confidence in their own capacities. The boy wanted to go to the university and study business and economics. The girl wanted to make a difference for her community, study and take on a position of responsibility, such as a policewoman. She knew, however, that she needed to get a job quite soon after her studies, as her family could not afford to keep her in school. She felt inspired by a school teacher who remarked how bright she was and encouraged her to go to the university.

Three years later, I interviewed the two young people again. The young boy was making steady steps towards his professional dream. He was preparing to apply to the university to study economics. Further ahead, he was planning to open a car business. The girl had in the meantime graduated from College and got married. She had changed some jobs in the meantime, but now found herself with no prospects of work due to the Covid-19 pandemic. She no longer aspired to become a policewoman. Why? Her mother persuaded her to give up on her dream job, as it was too dangerous. Now she wanted to find a job in the travel industry. She was still hoping to go to the university, but right now, finding a job was the urgent thing to do. I asked her how confident she was feeling about her future and what she wanted to do next. She burst into tears. She was not feeling confident at all. She felt lonely and there was no one to sustain her in her dreams and her aspirations. The boy, on the other hand, was fully confident in his capacity, and was encouraged and supported by his family to continue to study and fulfil his goal of opening a business.

Why did the boy succeed where the girl was apparently about to fail? Was he brighter? Was he better equipped to achieve his goal? Was he just better supported by his family? These are some of the questions raised by these two life stories, whose importance is underscored

¹ The socio-demographic data of the two migrants have been left intentionally generic, to avoid identification through triangulation of information.

by the stories of other young people that shaped this research. These all revolve around the factors and conditions by which young people start developing and then pursuing (or not) their life and professional dreams and aspirations.

1 Introduction

This paper introduces a model for the development of aspirations in young people, and insights from developing and applying it in research conducted for the AHRC Fellowship Connect2Aspire. The model builds on state of the art scholarship on aspirations development and at its core it distinguishes between two stages: forming aspirations and pursuing aspirations. This distinction has been emphasised by other scholars, such as the economist Debraj Ray (2002) and has also been captured in the formulation of the research questions that guided this project. The first research question focuses on the process of developing aspirations:

RQ1: What are the fundamental factors and conditions marking the development of aspirations in young people?

The second research question focuses on the pursuit of aspirations, and the conditions to be met for young people to successfully achieve them:

RQ2: What factors influence the pursuit of young people's self-defined aspirations?

Finally the third one focuses on the interplay between aspirations and competence development:

RQ3: To what extent and under what conditions aspirations can be an inner drive for competence development?

The Connect2Aspire research conducted until now to elucidate these questions confirms previous scholarship (Appadurai 2013; Archer 2010; Ray 2002) arguing that succeeding in the pursuit of aspirations does not boil down to exceptional innate talent. It is, in fact, not a lonely act. Aspirations are social and cultural constructions that build up in time (Appadurai 2013; Archer 2010; Mookherjee, Ray and Napel 2010; Ray 2002). Developing, shaping and bringing them to fulfilment are also social acts, where the agent plays a fundamental role, but also benefitting from social structures that encourage and support them.

In agreement with current scholarship, this study looks at aspirations as “cultural capacities” bred in specific socio-cultural contexts, where the mere capacity to aspire is not a given, and the difference between ‘making it’ and failing boils down to capacity to ‘navigate’ the social system, in addition to the mere aspirational act (Appadurai, 2013). It pays close attention to the role of information in the development of aspirations, and in particular to *how* young people interpret information as ‘for them’ or relevant, and thus what is the relationship between information and identity (Archer 2010). Based on empirical data, it analysed the influence structures that model aspirations (what Debraj Ray, 2002, calls aspirations window) and the support structures that enable young people to develop capacities to actually

advance towards the fulfilment of aspirations. And it looked closely at the role of the aspiration gap (the difference between the current and the aspired condition) as a driver for self-development and skill building (Ray 2002).

As a step further from current scholarship, this research suggests that to advance our thinking about aspirations development and the relationship with competence development and professional success, a different angle of analysis is warranted. **The original perspective that this study brings comes from interpreting aspirations in an ontological and epistemological framework drawing on assemblage theory, as expounded by Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and most recently Manuel DeLanda.** According to assemblage theory, our physical and social worlds are made by assemblages of assemblages, which can be broken down by analysis to ever smaller units. These assemblages are not permanent. They are made and then dismantled and re-assembled by processes of territorialization and de-territorialization, which happen all the time all around us. Thus assemblages that constantly surround us – from our own bodies to communities, and buildings and cities – are never stable, but in constant transformation.

Also the properties of assemblages are subject to change. An assemblage gains properties from the interaction of the parts that compose them. The difference between property and capacity is of interest here and has been elucidated by DeLanda (2006). Properties are inherently stable, they do not depend on external conditions – for instance the length and width of a wooden box. Capacities on the other hand are latent, and may remain inactive until they are activated in interaction with components of an assemblage, or among assemblages. When an entity enters an assemblage, it will enter an active exchange of information and activate some of the interactive capacities of components that may not otherwise be activated if not in interaction with other components.

In human beings, the activation and development of capacities can be seen in terms of competence development. The importance of entering appropriate assemblages in order to develop inner talents or latent capacities thus becomes clear. For example, a child's innate talent of drawing may never be actuated in the absence of drawing and painting classes. Furthermore, being in an assemblage also shapes the identity of components. In fact, activation of innate capacities and identity building are closely connected, as the better we become at something, the more we become identified with that. For example, if a talented child will take drawing and painting classes, she will further develop her painting competences, and may develop an identity as a painter. Examples here are numerous: a long-term manager in a corporation assemblage will develop his skills as manager and may become identified with his role as a manager; a teacher with his teaching position; a young person in a football club with his football hobby; a young boy in a prestigious school with his prestigious position, and so on. The link between capacity activation, skills development and identity building is something that will be further unpacked later in this paper.

To conclude this introductory section, assemblage theory lends important insights for interpreting the formation of aspirations, including: the formation of identity; the relation between being in certain assemblages and competence building; how agency is distributed in an assemblage; and how aspirations are built by making part of different assemblages, under certain conditions. All of these important aspects will be expounded at length in this

working paper, including a theoretical section (#3) and the model of aspirations development described in section #5.

2 Background to the research

The conceptual model of aspirations development described in this paper has been shaped in the AHRC Fellowship Connect2Aspire, building on insights from a series of projects that I have been involved in since 2013. The model is still work in progress, and it continues to be shaped through new data analysis from the Connect2Aspire research. This section gives an overview of the research projects and datasets that have shaped the model to date.

The programme of research for the Connect2Aspire Fellowship has as main research aim to explore new ways of mobilising cultural and creative resources, spaces and networks to support UK's young people to embark on and pursue confidently career pathways that capitalise on their actual and potential talents and skills, and cultivate attitudes open to lifelong learning. The project includes a community ethnography in Coventry and a study on cultural engagements in cultural sites and museums, with a focus on the V&A's Programme for Young People. The development of the model has been shaped by data gathered from both research strands, and in particular by the views of the young people whose views have been consulted through a multi-method approach.

The research strand on the V&A Young People's Programme used datasets gathered over three years, involving young people who have attended one of the two flagship programmes for young people: the careers festival *Making It: Careers in Fashion and Costume* and *Making It: Careers in Art and Design* and a 5-day creative workshop for young people not in education, employment and training. Overall, 265 young people have been consulted through interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, participant observation and analysis of creative artefacts produced by young people.

Data gathered in 2020 as part of the Connect2Aspire project included 83 young people. 67 of them attended the careers festival *Making It: Careers in Fashion and Costume* (Stratford Circus Arts Centre, February 2020) and were consulted via interviews and self-administered questionnaires. 16 young people took part in a creative workshop themed on photography participated in the study via interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, participant observation during sessions and analysis of creative artefacts produced during the workshop.

The 2020 data has been analysed jointly with a dataset gathered during a pilot study conducted with the V&A Young People's Programme, which included 2018 and 2019 editions of the two events. This resulted in an additional number of 171 participants who took part in two editions of the festival *Making It*, themed on fashion and costume (East London, 2019) and *Art and Design* (V&A Museum, South Kensington, 2018). And 11 participants who took part in a creative workshop also themed on photography, offered to young people in East London in December 2018.

The V&A young people dataset (265 young people) covers topical areas related to young people demographic profiles, creative careers interests, influencers and information needs for career choice, as well as motivation patterns, engagement and satisfaction with the V&A events that they attended.

The research strand in Coventry (still on-going) has been conducted remotely, under Covid pandemic conditions. It offered a preliminary dataset gathered between May 2020 and March 2021, which included 5 young people and 13 experts from different areas tackling informal education, arts, culture, public service provision and social integration for young people in Coventry. Young people interviews have been designed following preliminary version of the aspirations model described in this paper, including aspects related to the socio-economic context of life and the factors that affect the formation of aspirations, with a focus on social circles of influence and support and social networking and communication practices.

3 Theoretical framework

The conceptual model of aspirations development described in this paper integrates theoretical insights from anthropology, sociology, communication studies and economics. A few key theoretical ideas have been particularly valuable for the development of the model and the underlying thinking, and they are exposed in section 3.1. Section 3.2 then shows how assemblage theory served to further theorise the formation and pursuit of aspirations.

3.1 Four theoretical angles on aspirations

Aspirations are often thought of as having to do mainly or even exclusively with the future (Appadurai 2013). On the contrary, though, if we wish to understand how young people's aspirations are formed and projected towards the future, we need to first get a sound understanding of the context and experiences that facilitate their emergence in the first place (Appadurai 2013; Archer 2010; Ray 2002). Thus, before being about the future, aspirations are about the past, they are, as anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2013) would have it, shaped and built within a socio-cultural environment whose norms and values dictate how far and how high one is entitled to aspire and reach out to.

The social and cultural nature of aspirations is a first important attribute recognised by this research and previous scholarship. For Appadurai, the aspiration is a **cultural capacity** which is not equally distributed in society and is regulated by socially accepted norms and values. There are two facets to aspirations as cultural capacities. The first is looking at aspirations as capacities in the making, as **capacities to aspire**. This aspect is fundamental when associating aspirations to young people from deprived, poor, marginalised communities where by the norms tacitly accepted, or the lack of better examples from their own milieu, young people may have a low ceiling set over their capacity to formulate achievable dreams and aspirations. Poor people, Appadurai argues, may lack the capacity to aspire because the society in which they function imposes their current status as the normality, by fixing some immutable "terms of recognition", which dictate the boundaries within which certain group are expected to act by their peers and by those outside the group (Taylor 1992). The other

facet of aspirations as cultural capacities has to do with the link between projection and realisation, dreams and horizons of possibility, goals and the capacity to navigate social realities to attain them. Or more simply, between aspirations and the routes to achieving them. Appadurai calls them '**navigational capacities**', and it is in here that the unequal distribution of aspirational resources in society appears all the way stronger. The privileged classes know and impart to their offspring, often tacitly, the social ways and norms that help with navigating complex social realities, thus making aspirations tangible and achievable. The poor, on the other hand, are limited in these capacities. They have little knowledge of opportunities and how to exploit them, and little awareness of how to change or even that they *can* change the social realities they grew so accustomed to.

As argued above, aspirations are formed and shaped in social milieus (Appadurai 2013; Ray 2002). While they do indeed manifest as individual wishes and projections, they are about sociality and connectedness as much as they are about independent thinking. Economist Debraj Ray (2002) captures one of the most important aspects of the sociality of aspirations in the concept of **the aspirations window**. This is "formed from an individual's cognitive world, her zone of "similar", "attainable" individuals" (Ray 2002, p. 3). For a child and then young person to develop an aspiration it means that they will have been exposed to other people who embody that projected condition. The contexts of exposure to such people are very important, and in particular the sort of identification link that exists between the child or the young person and the person that inspires and exemplified the aspired condition. A young person may start thinking they can become like someone, if they already project themselves as being close to that someone, or at least sharing a common condition. For example, an accomplished individual coming from a highly deprived community may inspire other young people in that community and show them that change and ascension are, indeed, possible. A casual visit by a stranger to the community, even though featuring the same accomplished status, is unlikely to trigger the same level of attention and inspiration.

The observation above ties in with a third fundamental insight in the study of aspirations: the role of **information** in the formation of aspirations, and its link to **identity**. It is commonly accepted that access to information is fundamental for shaping aspirations. Yet Louise Archer (2010) observes that this is just one side of the coin. At stake is not the accessibility of information, but also the frameworks by which the agent *interprets* information. The interpretation of information is linked to identity, and influenced by the way the source of the information is perceived. In particular, it is important for the agent to what extent the source is perceived to be within one's reach, or environment, or "like me". Archer gives the example of working class young people who go to taster classes and open days which they may find enjoyable but not necessarily "for me". This goes the same for role models: highly charismatic examples of people who "made it" in a certain profession, even if appealing to young people, won't be inspiring unless those people are perceived to come from the same social milieu. If, on the other hand, young people in a deprived community will see examples of highly achieved professionals who come from their same community, they may be inspired and they may grow in confidence that they, too, can make it. As Archer (xx) observed in her studies, young people from different classes and social environments will interpret and react differently to information they are exposed to. She exemplifies with young people who for example may attend the same open day at a university undergrad course. One of them will

find the information trustworthy and will listen with keen interest; the other will consider it nothing more than marketing for selling the course. The first, coming from a middle-class environment and parents with higher education, accepts this information as being 'for him'. The other, coming from a working class environment, first in his generation to aspire for university studies, will see this information as 'cold', not 'for him', but a lure to attract and spend his parents' money on useless education.

Finally, the fourth idea to which this work on aspirations is indebted comes as well from Debraj Ray, and is an answer to the question: *How do aspirations drive behaviour?* This is an important question when seeking to translate theory into actionable knowledge, and look at how aspirations may become drivers for interest-based training and career development. Ray's research suggests that it is not the aspiration per se that drives behaviour, but **the aspiration gap**, which is the distance between the current and the projected condition. It is the gap that determines behaviour, by driving the individual to attain and thus close the gap. Too high a gap and too low or zero gap are both likely to generate low or no drive or incentive to act. This is why the distance between the current and the desired condition, as perceived by the agent, are so important.

3.2 Aspirations and assemblage theory

Assemblage theory, as expounded by Deleuze, Guattari and DeLanda is helpful to interpret some critical aspects necessary to understand how young people form aspirations, and how they may actually develop a strong inner drive to train and prepare to achieve them. In a nutshell, according to assemblage theory, the communities we are part of, the schools that we attend, the leisure clubs and friends, are all assemblages that may have a longer or a shorter lifespan and presence in our lives. Within these assemblages, we interact with others and through these interactions some of our capacities are activated, shaped and changed, becoming more complex. It is in this way that we gain knowledge and skills. That we cultivate certain likes, dislikes and other attitudes. And that we build an identity. When we exit an assemblage, for instance when we leave school for another education level, or for work, we take with us these qualities. Some may be internalised as features of our personalities and made 'our own', and some may be internalised as capacities that may need other environments to enable us to activate and exercise them.

Aspirations are also built this way. They are constructed, shaped through interactions in various assemblages. In this process, **information** plays a critical part. But not on its own, information makes sense in the making of aspirations in relationship with identity and experience (in agreement with Archer 2010). We first conceive of aspirations because the possibility of becoming something or someone is opened up to us through an example, a piece of information. But the degree to which this may be relevant for us, will depend on our experiences and our identity at that point.

There are two ways to think of **identity** in relation to assemblages. First, the identity of an assemblage will be gradually strengthened in time, for as long as that assemblage is kept together by processes of territorialization, through habitual repetition (DeLanda 2006: 50). For instance, a community will develop an identity in time, through the repetitive interactions among members. The longer the time members interact, the greater the interaction, the

stronger the community identity is likely to be, and shared among members. Second, components in an assemblage also shape their identity through the same process of habitual repetition – that is through constant interaction with the other components of an assemblage. This is, for example, how we may become gradually identified with our roles as teachers, artists, factory workers and so on, by being in constant interaction with scholarly, artistic or factory assemblages.

Thus, there is a mutual relationship of interdependence between **information and identity**. Information exchange is at the basis of the interacting processes within assemblages, which serve to strengthen experience and identity; the latter, in time, come to constitute a framework through which information is interpreted and deemed relevant or irrelevant. The interrelationship between information, experience and identity can tell us when exposure to a certain information is meaningful or not for a person, and when these will be integrated and come to influence the formation of aspirations. For instance, a group of young children may visit an aquarium, and something in this visit will resonate with a little girl and first instil in her a keen interest in learning more about fish and marine biology. Why, from a group of school kids, just one will have this thought? Her experiences up until that point will have provided a fertile ground for making her resonate with these ideas. This is a first examples of how previous experiences provide a framework and filter for the interpretation of current information. If some years later, as a secondary school kid she will learn biology, this experience may breed in her a keen interest in the discipline. And from there, she may start looking for more and more occasions to manifest her interest. The more she will learn about fish and marine biology, the more she may look for information. And as she shares her knowledge, partly start to identify herself with a person knowledgeable in marine biology.

Another area where assemblage theory may lend insight is the relationship between **aspirations, identity and the development of knowledge and competences or skills**. According to DeLanda (2006), the development of skills is initially destabilising for personal identity, as the prospect of being equipped with novel skills means the person may break old routines, leave old assemblages, and open up to enter new ones. The acquisition of skills extends the capacity to enter novel assemblages, for new experiences and interactions. DeLanda (2006) gives the example of a child that learns to swim or ride a bicycle; the child is now ready to experience new things and venture farther away from the habitual routines. This process is initially destabilising, until a new equilibrium is reached with the stabilisation of the new skills. What does this mean for the relationship between skills and aspirations development? In first instance, that aspirational drives may act as catalysers for skills development, calming the reluctance to engage in skill building as a destabilising process.

4 Towards a multidimensional model of aspirations development

The development of aspirations is an enduring and convoluted process, it does not have a beginning and an end, it may swirl, and go back, and pass through many false starts and often feature more than one aspiration at a time. Thus, modelling this process is both a difficult and an inherently limiting endeavour. The complexity of the process of developing aspirations cannot, in reality, be captured in a static model. Still, what is attempted in this

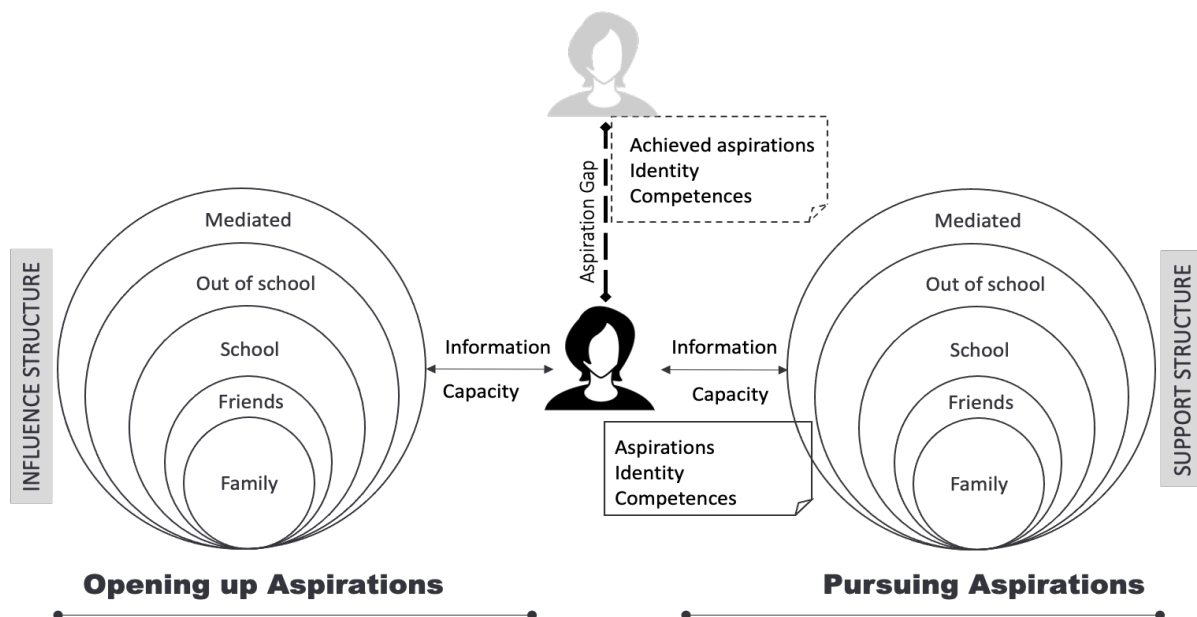
paper is to pinpoint to essential factors and relationships in the making of aspirations, with a very practical goal: enhance ability to support young people in developing aspirations they cherish and train for achieving them, to practice the professions they want to. Of interest then is to understand the fine mechanisms by which 1) aspirations are developed and 2) by which they drive behaviour, and especially the drive to train and gain the necessary competences to achieve them.

At the core of the model (Figure 1) is **the interaction between a young person and the assemblages** that may constitute fertile environments for aspirations development. The relevant assemblages with which a person may interact are indicated concentrically, from Family to Friends, School, Out of school environments and Mediated environments (such as digital and social media), moving from the ones closest to the ones farthest from the young person's inner circle (though the position of school and out of school environments may be easily swapped depending on case).

For the young person to interact with these assemblages means that there will be constant flows of **information** going to and from the young person and the assemblages (two-pointed vertical arrows). There is also a parallel process by which young persons constantly discover, expand and exercise their **capacities**. Becoming part of an assemblage will solicit the exercise of different capacities and also expand on them, from mere communicating with family and friends, to taking violin lessons or learning a new language.

In time, through repeated interactions, these flows of information and constant exercise of capacity may consolidate in the young person a series of constructs and attributes:

- **Interests and passions** that may in time develop into **aspirations**. These are named in the plural, as the model synthesises an enduring process, in which different such interests may be pursued, and even change into aspirations arduously aimed for, but still left to the status of projected thinking in many of their instances.
- A sense of **identity**, such as for example – being part of a football team; being part of an affluent or on the contrary poor family; being a skilled pianist and so on.
- **Competence development**, which is interesting in the model not as an objective measure of how competent the young person has become, but rather as a *subjective* measure – how competent the young person will think they have become in a certain domain. As it will be discussed, this will have a direct influence on the degree to which they are likely to embrace a certain aspiration as fit for them.



These processes can be mapped on two distinguishable though highly overlapping stages in aspirations development:

1. Opening up aspirations
2. Pursuing aspirations

The first stage has to do with the crystallisation of aspirations, which may have different expressions and nuances. In Appadurai's (2013) terms, for some poor classes, it may have to do with developing the **capacity to aspire** in the first place, which may mean coming to terms with even rejecting, previously accepted norms and values about one's own position in society and what one is entitled to. It may also mean that an aspiration is acknowledged as one's own, accepting it as a personal endeavour.

However, simply forming aspirations is not enough. At this stage, they are still constructs, half way between personal and psychological on the one hand, and social and shared on the other. Once acknowledged, there follows the work of making the aspiration attainable. At this stage, in Appadurai's terms, the aspiration becomes a **navigational capacity**.

The two stages in the formation of aspirations are not always sequential. On the contrary, they may intersect and overlap, and at times it takes pursuing an aspiration for it to be crystallised.

The role of assemblages can also be mapped on these stages, with a different part to play in the young person's aspirations development pathway:

1. The influence structure (or what Ray called aspirations window) is made of the examples that a person is exposed to, which can inspire an aspiration to become the same. These may come from the circle of family, friends, school, social media and so on.

2. The support structure is made of assemblages that provide the needed sustenance to move from aspirations as constructs to realised aspirations. Here again, it is important if they come from the inner circle of a person, or farther from it. Yet mediated structures such as online communities can also offer reliable support in some instances.

Finally, the model represents how aspirations development map onto the perceived evolution of the self (identity, competences) when that aspiration is achieved. This is a psychological, subjective process taking place inside the young person's mind, and yet one where the external interactions with assemblages have a significant bearing. In line with Debraj Ray's (2002) thinking, the relationship between one's perceived current condition and the projected one is significant, as it is actually this gap (the aspiration gap) that drives behaviour, the will to act to bridge the gap and achieve that aspired condition. Thus the aspirational drive – which may compel young people to train, seek opportunities and build successful career pathways – is shadowing the aspiration gap.

5 Discussion and conclusion

In this section, the main principles underlying the model are illustrated and discussed through a series of examples from the Connect2Aspire project, and against theory on aspirations as introduced above. Three core ideas represented by the model are discussed herein:

1. The dynamic interplay between information exchange and capacity building
2. Theorising influence structures as assemblages, and implications for the relationship between information and identity in forming aspirations
3. Theorising support structures as assemblages and their importance at different stages in an individual's life

INFORMATION EXCHANGE AND EXERCISE OF CAPACITY IN ASSEMBLAGES

The interaction of young people with assemblages they are part of (from schools to music clubs) is based on two key processes: **firstly, they exchange information**. This is a constant process that happens at each and every interaction, and the information exchanged is not purely verbal, but may include non-verbal communication, digitally mediated, etc. There is also a second exchange: **in each interaction with an assemblage, a young person exercises their capacities**, and also builds or strengthens them. As DeLanda (2006) affirms, entities activate and then shape their capacities on virtue of becoming part of an assemblage. The capacities with which an agent enters the assemblage won't be the same as the capacity of the agent that exits it: capacities get constantly shaped. For example, a child will enter school with the capacity to hold a pen and draw shapes on a piece of paper (capacity shaped in other assemblages such as the family or kindergarten); and the capacity to recognise shapes – such as a circle, a curl, a line. These capacities will be useful for the child to learn how to draw more and more complex shapes, and put them together to form words. But to be able to actually spell, they may have to develop a new intermediary capacity: that of recognising the sounds that make a word when spoken, and which can be reproduced on paper.

The exercise of capacity and the exchange of information will in time build into competences, identity and aspirations. An example from Connect2Aspire fieldwork will illustrate this. Adrian, 26 years old when interviewed, had been married at an early age, and already had three children. He immigrated to Coventry with his family when he was still a teenager, and had several jobs to get by, none of which he really enjoyed. Then he joined a social integration charity and in time he grew in rank to become senior advisor on integration issues. He enjoyed the job that he was doing, and became very good at it. Using social assemblage terminology, he entered the social integration charity with a set of capacities (including his mastery of Romanian, his mother tongue), which enabled him to communicate with Romanian migrants to Coventry who needed assistance, and on this basis he started to master other capacities – such as the complex British socio-economic and legal system on which he was giving advice. These capacities materialised into stronger competences, which in turns built self-confidence in his capability to do more. His aspiration was to open up a car business, something which was not related to his job in the charity, but was rather inspired by a successful care sale business owner he met. With the new competences and confidence gained, even if they were in a different field, he started to study Business at university.

This story illustrates, firstly, the relationship between capacity building and the development of competences. Second, it suggests that there need not be a perfect symmetry between one's aspiration and the assemblage where one cultivates the drive to go realise it. The way assemblages work is rather subsumed to the agent's capacity to order their experience, drawing information from different sources. Yet, the importance of an assemblage such as the social integration NGO in the life of a young person should not be under-estimated. With a family and three young children at 26, Adrian may have easily continued to keep jobs just to get by and support his family. An environment where he could cultivate new competences and confidence in himself was fundamental for inspiring them to make a potentially life changing move, and start studying at university as a mature student.

INFLUENCE STRUCTURES AS ASSEMBLAGES

One of the original contributions of this model to aspirations theory resides in conceiving both influence and support structures as assemblages. Let us focus on influence structures first. What does an assemblage perspective bring? First, as discussed above, young people constantly exchange information and exercise capacity in assemblages. This in turns leads to developing competences and identity. This perspective offers a new angle on the relationship between information and identity in the formation of aspirations as theorised by Archer (2010). Archer argues that the usefulness of information for shaping aspirations depends on the frameworks for interpreting information and on its link to identity. A young person will resonate with information from a source that they accept, feel as 'their own' or 'for them', or that they identify with. This can be explained by how young people develop a relationship with assemblages, environments where they exchange information, which in time contribute to shaping their identity. An aspect to pay attention to in this process is habitual repetition (DeLanda 2006). Not all assemblages a young person interacts with will have this effect on capacity building and identity formation, rather those that they interact with on a relatively frequent basis over longer periods of time. A certain school environment they attended, for example; a club where they attended music lessons for several years;

and of course the family and neighbourhood they grew up within and the people surrounding them.

When looking for role models, when finding inspiration for professions, young people will resonate with assemblages they know, or with others that resemble those they know. They will recognise as viable the life story of a successful professional coming from their own neighbourhood, because this speaks to them in first person. They have been there themselves. They will not likely resonate with the experience of a successful professional who went to a top university after attending a top high school, if they come from a working class school in a working class neighbourhood. Their identity link has been cultivated in the latter, and will continue to guide the frameworks through which they interpret information as relevant for them.

THE ROLE OF SUPPORT STRUCTURES

Young people interviewed in the Connect2Aspire research often revealed situations of bright potential and well-formed aspirations that had to be given up because of lacking support structures. It is also important where exactly support comes from, or lacking, as represented in the concentric social circles (Fig. 1): family support, has most weight in helping young people realise their aspirations; while digital and social media support is likely to be distant and with very little bearing on actually encouraging a young person to actively pursue their aspirations (note on the other hand that social media may be more inspirational as an influence structure, helping a young person to shape their initial aspirations).

Iulia, the young girl referred to in the introduction was extremely talented, dedicated and hard-working. She narrates one of her college experiences:

“When I was studying at the college, we had a class project to build our own business and design an Internet website. So I created my own restaurant. When she saw it, the teacher was amazed, I was given first prize for this project. I am very dedicated, I like being so.”

(F, 22, interviewed 2020)

However, her dream of becoming a policewoman would likely not materialise, chiefly because she received no support in this sense from her family. Despite her capacities, she found herself with no job during the pandemic, in a difficult financial situation. The literature (e.g., Archer 2010) tells about the importance of school in shaping young people’s aspirations. This was verified in this project, in particular with respect to shaping young people’s confidence in their initial choices. However, it is rather less common that the school environment provides adequate support in *realising* aspirations. Iulia herself was hopeful that the school would help with opportunities for jobs. A few of her colleagues had been remarked by her teachers and received openings to internships, which eventually resulted in good jobs for them. This was a life-changing form of support, and Iulia had been hopeful she would also be recommended for an internship, however this did not materialise.

Other two examples of young boys who benefitted from strong support structures illustrate that the role of the family can be crucial over extended periods of time especially since early years, but that social assemblages offered through for example workplaces, can offer support for realising aspirations at later stages of life. Damian, the young boy introduced in the prologue who wanted to study business and eventually to found his own start-up, had received support from his family all along. His aspiration remained steady, and when interviewed he was about to enrol for university studies. His family gave him confidence that he will be supported in his dream. Adrian, 26 years old (also referred to above) had the same aspiration – opening up a business – however his situation and route were quite different. As narrated above, his aspiration was triggered by the successful case of a car sales business owner and his passion for cars. Yet, the support environment that gave him the confidence to continue with higher education studies was his workplace, a social charity. Through that charity work, he became aware of his capacities, self-confident and trustful that he could make a change, even though he has a family with three children to maintain. These different stories illustrate that support structures may sustain young people in very different ways – their support is not as straightforward as helping them realise an aspiration. In different cases they may provide the other necessary factors for moving from projected aspirations to actual steps to realise them – such as confidence, competences or trust. Ultimately, the ordering of experience and decisions reside in the agent.

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