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# ASPIRATIONS MAPPING AND COMMUNICATIVE ECOLOGIES

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CONNECT2ASPIRE. CULTURAL ENGAGEMENTS AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S PROFESSIONAL ASPIRATIONS

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# 1 Introduction

This working paper contextualises a methodological approach for engaging young people in a self-reflective exercise on their life and career aspirations, by highlighting the role of communication and social networking in their development. This method is outlined in the Connect2Aspire toolkit strand ‘Aspirations mapping and communicative ecologies’, which has been designed based on a thorough mapping of available theoretical literature on the role of communication in aspirations development; interweaved with empirical research conducted in the Connect2Aspire study. This paper provides an overview of the theoretical framework underpinning the relationship between communication and aspirations in the first part; and in the second part follows the integration of these insights in the workshop-based format for aspirations mapping, with its three steps: *Explore, Envision, Connect*.

## 1.1 Methods and data

Connect2Aspire (Cultural engagements and young people’s professional aspirations) is an AHRC-funded ECR Leadership Fellowship that explored new ways of mobilising cultural and creative resources, spaces and networks to support young people to crystallise and pursue career aspirations aligned to their interests and talents. The project included 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 Connect2Aspire aspirations mapping toolkit has been shaped by data gathered from both research strands, focusing on the insights of young people from all walks of life: from regular museum goers that attend V&A events; to NEET young people who have been offered creative skills workshops by the V&A Young People’s Programme outreach efforts in East London; to first generation Roma migrants in Coventry. Overall, 285 young people have been involved through data generation methods including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, analysis of creative artefacts and creative research workshops.

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. The views of 265 young people have been elicited 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 gathered the views of young people (n=20) and local professionals in the fields of youth development, culture and museums, informal education public service provision and social integration (n=20). A first wave of data collection has been conducted through remote interviews, conditioned by the Covid-19 pandemic. Young people interviews have been designed following preliminary versions 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. A second wave of data collection has been conducted by means of workshop-based participatory and creative research workshops. These included two participatory photography workshops and a communicative ecologies and aspirations mapping workshop with young people with a Roma ethnic background. And a further participatory photography workshop with middle aged and elderly members of the Indian diaspora in Coventry.

### *Communicative ecologies and aspirations mapping workshop*

The most insightful for the purposes of this working paper was the communicative ecologies and aspirations mapping workshop conducted in July 2022. This was the first of the creative research workshops conducted in the project and was designed to test elements of engagement that would later be included in the Connect2Aspire aspirations mapping toolkit; as well as examining in practice some essential theoretical claims regarding connections between communication practices and the development of life and career aspirations. The one-day workshop included two sessions: A pre-lunch 2 hour session explored young people's interest-based activities online and offline. The afternoon session brought young people around a career aspirations map where they

were guided by the facilitator to examine career goals and expected outcomes, as well as challenges and support available or needed to reach out to prefigured career targets. Seven participants took part in the workshop, all members of the Romani ethnic minority in Coventry, aged 18 to 35 years old.

## 2 Communication and the development of aspirations

### 2.1 The role of communications in developing aspirations

Aspirations are studied in a variety of disciplines ranging from psychology and sociology to economics and communication. The role of information and communication in aspirations development is of fundamental importance in this multi-disciplinary scholarship and several studies agree that access to reliable information, inspiration and social networks are critical for developing career aspirations (e.g., Ray 2006, 2016; Archer et al., 2014; Turock et al. 2008). Despite considerable interest in the study of aspirations across social science disciplines, there is no systematic body of theory that considers the advances in information and communication technology (ICT) in contemporary societies. While scholars agree on the role of access to information and relevant social contacts in the development of aspirations, the way mediation in information access and communication may affect the development of aspirations, and links to media and information literacy have not been the object of systematic studies.

A second gap addressed by this research is around the importance of generating aspirations awareness in young people and of the links between life goals or aspirations and occupational aspirations. Research conducted within Self-Determination Theory (SDT) suggests that the way young people relate to their *life* (rather than purely occupational) aspirations may be a reliable predictor of well-being and fulfilment in later life (Kasser & Ryan 2001). Yet, many children and young people are not themselves aware of the aspirations they nurture, until their choices make these evident. For instance, the UK Cabinet Office's former Social Exclusion Task Force (2008) points to the difficulty of generating reliable data for measuring life aspirations, citing Young People's Social Attitudes Survey (2003), where half of young people's main ambition in life was a generic "to be happy". Yet, despite varied types of interventions for raising aspirations in the UK, there is remarkably little done to enable young people to become aware of their life goals and aspirations in conjunction with their education and career choices.

In addressing these two research gaps, Connect2Aspire research placed in a central position the role of information, communication and social networking practices at two levels in the development of aspirations (drawing on Ray 2006;2016):

1. Crystallisation of aspirations
2. Pursuit of aspirations

An integrative assemblage theory framework (DeLanda 2006, 2016) was used to give context and nuance to the process by which a young person (the agent) crystallises aspirations under the influence of the surrounding context; and how the relationship between life goals and career aspirations evolves throughout one's lifetime influenced by information exchanges and meaningful social encounters. As outlined in Sabiescu (2021b), aspirations develop through interactions in social (DeLanda 2006) and communicative assemblages (Sabiescu 2021a) where three interrelated processes are highlighted: 1) a constant exchange of **information** between the agent and the other components of the assemblage; 2) a corresponding process of **capability** development by the agent; and 3) a crystallisation of **identity** on the basis of the perceived capabilities developed. Within this framework, **aspirations and literacies** are theorised as capabilities developed in strong interdependence with the interacting context (social assemblages), from potential capacities honed through repeated interactions. For example, a child's innate talent of drawing (potential capacity) may never be actuated in the absence of drawing and painting classes (social assemblage) and the informative and interactional context around them (communicative assemblage). Repeated interactions in an assemblage also shape 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 (Sabiescu 2021b).

## 2.2 Communicative ecologies mapping

The practical and action-orientated component of the ecological framework endorsed by this study is provided by communicative ecologies mapping. Developed in the early 2000 (Slater, Tacchi and Lewis, 2002; Lennie and Tacchi, 2013), 'communicative ecologies' and 'communicative ecologies mapping' indicate a conceptual and a methodological framework pivoted on the essential role of communication and information exchange practices in day to day life. As defined by Slater (2013:42) a communicative ecology is:

- "The whole structure of communication and information flows in the people's ways of life," and
- "The complete ensemble of (symbolic and material) resources for communication in a locality, and the social networks which organize and mediate them."

Connect2Aspire employed a communicative ecologies analytical framework firstly to make sense of the role of information and communication in young people's lives. True to its holistic approach (Tacchi et al. 2003), the methodology located the young person in a rich socio-cultural and economic context that provides opportunities as well as constraints for personal meaning making, information exchange and social networking practices. Thus, to understand in depth the determination of the local context on young people's lives, choices and communication practices, data was collected through a

holistic ethnographic approach, centred on the young person but eliciting as well the views and opinions of key stakeholders in the locality, spanning education, culture, leisure, sports and social care areas.

Secondly, the suitability of the communicative ecologies framework for this study is pivoted on its central concern with 'actionable knowledge' – referring to capturing and analysing processes of change; as well as using this insight for devising practical interventions for positive social change (Tacchi, Sabiescu and Gordano 2019). In Connect2Aspire, this was achieved by devising a practical methodological approach for involving young people in mapping their communication practices embedding the formation of interests and aspirations; and then envisioning needed connections they can cherish in order to support the future achievement of their aspirations. This is described in detail in the next section of this paper.

### 3 Mapping aspirations and communicative practices

A workshop-based experience is proposed for engaging young people in a process of exploring the connection between communication and the development of aspirations. The process is supported by a large board with hotspots along which the facilitator guides the participants, clustered around three areas: **Explore** (focused on a self-analytical, reflective process); **Envision** (future-orientated formulation of career goals) and **Connect** (enacting the power of social connections).

#### *Explore*

As argued above, the central tenet underpinning this study is that information, communication and socialisation practices embed the process of shaping aspirations. This is a slow, enduring and highly complex process that goes unnoticed by most young people. This area of the board synthesises some of the elements identified as fundamentally important for the formation of life and career aspirations.

The first cluster to explore includes highly personal values, aspirations and ideals. The very first question young people are asked (which is probed throughout the rest of the workshop) is meant to focus their attention on what they wish to achieve in life independent of specific professions or working remits. The Connect2Aspire research suggested that young people may give very different responses when asked about what they aspire to, depending on whether they start from what they wish, prefer or cherish; or if they first consider realistic possibilities of achievement. Thus, in the first part, they are encouraged to express their aspirations thinking only of how these align and resonate with their deeply held beliefs and values.

Next, young people are asked to reflect on the roles that they play in their social milieu. These are critically important, according to Super (1980), as the roles people play as for example a student, worker, daughter/son, sibling, spouse or parent come to define

one's lifestyle. Super's research also proposes that social roles determine the degree of satisfaction and well-being in an individual, depending on the balance between the time dedicated to each role and the degree of personal meaning and importance. Thus, in here young people are asked firstly to rank roles according to the time they invest; and second rank them again according to personal importance. They are then encouraged to reflect on the alignment or tension between the two rankings.

The final cluster to explore regards young people's favourite pastimes, online and offline. Drawing on insights from communicative ecologies mapping (Tacchi, Sabiescu & Gordano 2019), they are asked to think of the informative content of these activities, the media and platforms they use, as well as the social networks (people) involved in these practices.

### *Envision*

This part of the board makes a transition firstly from life aspirations to career aspirations; and from exploring self and interest-based present activities to looking at and prefiguring the future. A fundamental feature of this engagement approach is the attempt to draw novel connections between life and career aspirations. While the multidisciplinary scholarship on aspirations is abundant, research on life goals or aspirations on the one hand, and occupational or career aspirations on the other tend to happen in distinctive streams, with the latter getting the bulk of research (Gutman & Akerman 2008). Connect2Aspire seeks to bridge the streams of research on life and career aspirations, building on the insight that rather than career aspirations alone, it is the dynamics between young people's life goals and career aspirations that acts as a compass to give direction and influence educational and career choice and the likelihood of finding meaning and fulfilment in these choices (Ryan & Deci 2017).

The reflective spots in the Envision column are clustered around three areas: First, young people are encouraged to think of their **dream profession** and the outcomes and rewards they associate with this. The focus on outcomes and rewards is based on insights from social cognitive career theory (SCCT - Lent, Brown & Hackett 2002); furthermore, they are asked about the role-models that inspire them, which according to Ray (2006; 2016) define the window for the development of aspirations. The second cluster **Professional goal** focuses young people's attention on realistic targets; they are encouraged to relate the goal to themselves and their skills - the ones they possess and the ones they need to cultivate to profess. Finally, they are asked about **Support** and sustenance they have, challenges and what they need in order to overcome challenges (Support I need).

### *Connect*

When reaching the third column, young people already have surfaced and discussed essential elements regarding dream/ideal and realistic goals and aspirations, how these have been shaped by their socialisation and information exchange practices, and the



sort of support they have or they need to get closer to achieving these goals. In this last column, young people are encouraged and supported by the facilitator(s) to explore avenues for realising their aspirations by using their existing and forging new, essential connections. The hotspots in this last column are explored by each young person closely supported by facilitators who initially ask each person to locate themselves at the hotspot that best represents the sort of support they need, whether related to choice/inspiration; getting close mentorship; enhancing skills; or access to professional roles they target. The role of the facilitator is extremely important at this stage. First, it is essential that young people synthesise and use the rich information they explored in the other column – including existing connections they can nurture. Second, the facilitator should be able to offer advice about supporting networks in the locality for each of the key needs or guide the discussion so that new ideas are generated by the entire group.

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