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**Identities and occupational aspirations: A contribution to the project**

The project to bring together sometimes distinct theoretical traditions within the sociology of youth is in full swing. This paper contributes to this project through an engagement with the relationships between occupational aspiration and identity. In the case studies presented within, occupational aspirations and identities were found to be informative of, and embedded within, each other and the social contexts within which they were constructed. Exploiting Gottfredson’s (1981; 1996) conceptual model, in the broadest sense, this paper is a contribution to the discussion about meaningful intersections between the ‘cultural’ and ‘transition’ traditions.

Key words: Youth, identity, occupational aspiration, rural

**Background**

An examination of ways in which the cultural and transitional traditions within sociological youth scholarship might be brought together has been a keen focus across several international conferences and special journal issues during the past 24 months. The 2011 Special Issue of *Journal of Sociology*, which was dedicated to this project, carried the following observation: ‘There has been a long-standing separation (and on occasion a tension) between ‘cultural’ and ‘transition’ perspectives in youth studies which has had a negative impact on our understanding of experiences of youth’ (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, 2011:356). That is, youth scholars have tended to focus either on the stylistic and identity work of young people or on the nature of their progression through a series of normative markers towards ‘adulthood’ (moving from education
and into work, for example). The current paper contributes to this project through highlighting the relationships between identity from within the cultural and occupational aspiration from within the transition tradition.

Identity theories, particularly those employing modern frameworks, have borrowed heavily from the work of Erik Erikson and psychoanalytic theory. This work posits that the development or achievement of identity occurs along a pathway which lends itself to mapping, modelling and prediction. Other schools of identity theory challenge the notion of a singular definitive identity. Chris Weedon (1987), for example, considered that to seek to define an individual in any singular or absolute way is a miscalculation. That is, ‘the various multiplicities that constitute self at a given time are involved in play and dance with each other’ (Hollinger 1994:113). This paper takes the view that identities are ‘constituted by a personal experience and an individual history’ (Raceviskis 1983:21) and are ‘socially embedded’ (Danielsen et al 2000). Identity is therefore conceptualised as ‘one’s view of who one is and who one is not’, based upon ‘views about one’s abilities, interests, personality and ‘place in society’’ (Harvey-Beavis & Robinson 2000:2).

‘Identity’ has been a corner stone of the cultural tradition within the field of youth scholarship.

The transitional tradition has paid considerable attention to concerns about pathways between school and the workforce. Occupational aspirations fit neatly here. In the current paper, a theoretical nexus is underlined by the work of Linda Gottfredson. Whilst a wealth of scholarship points to factors such as ‘gender’, ‘socio-economic status’ and ‘parental aspirations’ in the development of aspirations, the appeal of Gottfredson’s (1981; 1996) thesis is the exploitation of ‘identity’. Gottfredson (1985:160) proposed that ‘people prefer, seek, and are most satisfied in occupations that are consistent with their views of themselves’. Inherent here is the notion that aspirations change with exposure to new appreciations. The theory asserted that children are
Initially attracted to occupations that reflect their understandings of what it means to be ‘big’/‘adult’. Subsequently, and in turn, notions of gender and status shape aspirations before personal interest asserts influence. In sum, when articulating an occupational aspiration, individuals are doing so ‘in large part, on the basis of their beliefs about themselves and their location in the social world’ (Harvey-Beavis and Robinson 2000:2). Gottfredson (1981; 1996) described two underpinning processes: The first, circumscription, resulted in the production of a ‘zone of acceptable alternatives’: a suite of options which represented ‘good fit’; followed by compromise, the narrowing of these alternatives in accordance with an ‘emerging self-concept’.

This paper exploits three case studies in order to highlight an intersection between the cultural and the transitional within the context of young people growing up on their family farm on the outskirts of a small town in rural Victoria.

Methodology

Participants were recruited within secondary colleges at year levels 10, 11 and 12 in four small towns in rural Victoria. Students who self-identified as residing on a ‘family farm’ were invited to complete a survey and potentially an interview. 37 interviews were conducted following purposive sampling for location, gender and year level from amongst the 138 who completed a survey. The analysis of identities in this data was informed by Krysia Yardley’s (1987:216) criteria: ‘1) Descriptions of others and explicit comparisons of self with significant others; 2) Descriptions of specific actions of self and others; and 3) Process statements that describe the self in flow and reflexive in-flow comments upon self’. Aspirations were coded where references were made to post-school possibilities and plans. The three case studies utilised in the following pages provide a vehicle showcasing the intersections of identity and occupational aspiration.
Findings

Unsurprisingly perhaps, this research determined that Gottfredson’s (1981; 1996) stage-based model could not adequately encapsulate the diverse ways in which these young people constructed and renegotiated their occupational aspirations. Modelling assumes a predictability that was not readily found in the data. A broad reading of this theory remained, however, useful.

These young people’s identities and occupational aspirations referenced a range of influences. ‘Knowledge’ and ‘expectations’ in different guises were instrumental. As the following attests, occupational aspirations generally reflected participant’s ‘seeing themselves’ in particular jobs. That is, their ‘beliefs about themselves and their location in the social world’ (Harvey-Beavis and Robinson 2000:2) were keenly aligned with what they thought they might ‘do’ when they finished school.

Declan was in year 10 and had grown up working with the machinery on his family’s farm. He had always been surrounded by cars because his Dad built them ‘in his spare time’: they had ‘heaps of cars’. Whilst they hadn’t built them to make money, they would ‘probably sell them later on’. Declan had been driving since he was ‘six, seven or so’ and he had a ‘racing trail bike’. He spent a lot of time ‘mucking around outside’: he liked getting out in the ‘scrub’: ‘camping’, ‘fishing’, ‘riding bikes’, and driving ‘the buggy’ with his mates. He hated to be inside because he couldn’t ‘sit still’. He didn’t ‘hang around in town’ like others because it was ‘pretty boring’.

Declan got up at five o’clock every morning; it’s not a big deal it’s just become ‘habit’. He had a job on a local beef farm as well as working on his parents' property. He didn’t have regular tasks except for ‘the milking rotations’: he does ‘whatever is happening that day’. Money had always been ‘tight’ and his Mum worked off-farm so that they had ‘a bit more money coming in’: ‘it
sucks! The money that we make goes back into the farm so there is not anyone really making a
wage’. If he had his own land he wouldn’t be in dairy cattle; he’d run beef: ‘with dairy you are
there all the time and you don’t get to go anywhere on holidays and stuff like that’. He wished
that his family had been able to get away more often.

Whilst Declan had his own business ‘raising chooks and selling the eggs’ he had little interest in
becoming a farmer: He wanted to be a mechanic. This interest 'pretty much' came from growing
up and fixing cars with his Dad and because his Mum and Dad didn’t want him to be ‘tied to the
property’ like his Dad had been. His parents were ‘all for’ him getting an apprenticeship. He’d
already had one that 'didn't work out' and if another ‘came up’ he’d 'take it'. He was in his second
year of VET auto – and the certificates would 'take a year off' his apprenticeship. In the coming
year he ‘might leave home, but not live in town’ as he ‘would rather have some room’. He
‘wouldn’t want to leave’ the area: ‘I wouldn’t live in Melbourne…I don’t like city living’.

Declan described his aspirations with confidence and self-assuredness and was intensely proud of
his work ethic. Processes of circumscription and compromise had been established early whilst
working with his father. He was being actively discouraged from staying on the farm and he
knew that farming was a financially precarious pursuit. Taking the VET automotive classes at
school had provided him with further experience and knowledge which were instrumental in
legitimating his interest and sense of ‘fit’. He would not need to relocate to Melbourne in order to
pursue this aspiration and work was available locally which suited his sense of where he was
most comfortable.

Zoë was in year 10 and loved cows. She had ‘pictures of them all around’ her room and she
collected ‘figurines and stuff’. With great pride she related how she ‘looked after’ the ‘orphaned’
calves during winter. She ‘wouldn’t be able to live’ on a farm though because ‘it would be boring’: ‘You have to really love what you do. I know that Dad loves being there, he can’t bear to be away from it for very long’. Whilst she was attached to her area (‘we have got peace and quiet…you can feel safe: Like we don’t lock our doors at night because we know that no-one is going to come and rob us’), she also entertained the idea of living in the city (‘there are things to do, you can go to the footy, you can go to the movies, we don’t have a cinema here so you can’t just go and do things’). Both of her siblings were attending university in the city.

Zoë assumed that all of the adults in her town ‘talk to each other’: Simply, ‘you know everything’ about everyone. This was not a problem for her though, because she was ‘not a bad kid’ and didn’t ‘get in much trouble’. Her parents hadn’t indicated a strong preference for what she should do post-school; they simply wanted her ‘to be happy; to have a good life’. Zoë declared that it was important to ‘have proper schooling’ and planned to continue to year 12 and decide ‘what to do’ afterwards. If she earned ‘good enough marks’ she wanted to be an ‘outdoor education teacher, PE teacher, or police officer’. Asked which she would prefer: ‘I don’t know…I like police because my cousin is a policeman…and I want to help people, but then I love PE; I love being able to boss people around’. The youngest in the family, Zoë was frequently ‘bossed around’. She was also inspired by those around her: ‘I want to be an outdoor ED teacher because I have got a really good teacher who is a PE teacher and he is really nice to me and I think that is part of it…and my cousin is a police officer and he is really good and really nice, I think that has something to do with it’. Zoë did not elaborate about the nature of the jobs, ‘ENTER’ scores or training requirements beyond the need to attend either university or ‘police school’.

Zoë had established a zone of acceptable alternatives: She had identified occupations that engendered a sense of authority and attracted a degree of status. As importantly, these were
occupational roles held by persons with attractive personal qualities: These were ‘nice’ and
‘good’ people. In many ways her depth of consideration was unsophisticated, but entirely
consistent with her self-concept: She was a ‘good kid’, a ‘nice person’; she wanted to ‘help
people’ and be admired. She felt that others saw this in her too. Processes of compromise were, at
this point, actively being set aside until she completed secondary school. She articulated no great
urgency, at the behest of her parents or teachers, to make decisions more urgently. Pursuing these
aspirations would require Zoë to relocate. Moving to a larger city or to Melbourne in order to
pursue tertiary qualifications and/or to access employment was not greeted with concern – Zoë
would be following the lead of her siblings.

Greg was in year 11 and liked living in his area because it was ‘quiet and away from everyone’
and because he could ‘ride motorbikes and drive the ute around’. Like Declan, Greg’s mates
‘came out nearly every weekend’. Unlike Declan, Greg also liked to ‘be away from everyone’.
He played footy ‘every Sunday’ but was not as ‘into it’ as others. He came into town for school,
when his ‘Mum came in for shopping’ and ‘for footy training’ and rarely travelled to larger
towns: ‘maybe three or four times a year’ at most and ‘mainly for Christmas presents and stuff’.

Greg wanted to be ‘a cabinet maker or builder’ because he liked ‘working with wood’. He had
‘done’ woodwork since year seven and did not plan to ‘do year 12’: ‘I might be going at the end
of the year…see if I can get into TAFE and do that for 16 weeks and then might be getting an
apprenticeship for four years as a builder’. There were no TAFE campuses nearby so Greg would
‘probably move down to Ballarat’ where his brother, a builder, lived. His brother had raised the
possibility of taking him on as his apprentice. Was his brother a role model? ‘Yeah, a little bit’.
He had connections in Ballarat: ‘I know a few mates through my brother and the footy team and
my brother’s girlfriend and her brothers are all like my age so I think that they should get me a
few mates’. The town size was also an attraction: ‘I wouldn’t like it in Melbourne, it’s too big for me…Ballarat and Warrnambool are both regional and that suits me’.

Greg had a clear sense of what he would like to do and farming had never entered his zone of acceptable alternatives. Asked what his parents thought about his plans he said: ‘I know Dad wants me to do year 12 but he doesn’t mind if this is what I want to do, [but] he wouldn’t mind me finishing year 11’. If he introduced the possibility of farming, his parents ‘would be a bit shocked’: ‘Ever since I was 12…I have been saying that I wanted to do woodwork or be a builder or something like that so it would be a bit unexpected for them’. He had had relatively little contact with farm work. At most, he feed the ‘chooks’ and ‘checked the cows’ when asked to.

Whilst he played footy, enjoyed it and was reportedly good at it, Greg did not attract attention as the ‘footy guy’ and he did not speak in ways that alluded to constructions of himself as a ‘country boy’ as others had. Greg did not make impressive claims or gestures. Although his brother was a role model, Greg’s interest in becoming a builder or a carpenter had been sparked and maintained thorough exposure at school and, having long touted this occupational pathway, his own and his family’s expectations had been firmly established. He articulated a clear sense of where he felt he ‘fitted’.

**Conclusions**

These three case studies reflect the ways in which participants of this research’s occupational aspirations referenced both beliefs about themselves and their locations within their social worlds. Rather than suggesting that, for example, exposure to dairy farming was related to an interest in dairy farming, this research identified that ‘knowledge’ and ‘expectations’ were fundamental to circumscription and that a number of ‘constraining and enabling’ factors were
evident in relation to compromise. Knowledge was generally gleaned from sources including: personal exposure, work experience and the pursuit of personal interests. Expectations were articulated directly or otherwise by parents, extended families, teachers and others in their communities. The data also revealed that encouragement or otherwise at school, the availability of employment locally and socio-geographic dimensions were constraining and enabling of these young people’s occupational aspirations. To suggest that occupational aspirations are the sum of our understandings of what it means to be ‘adult’, to have a gender, to be located within a status-assigning hierarchy and of our personal interests is simplistic. The reality is more complex and interesting than this.

Unquestionably, though, this research supports the notion that identity, from within the cultural, and occupational aspiration, from within the transition tradition, are inextricably linked. A broad reading of Gottfredson’s (1981; 1996) work assists in explaining how and why these young people developed a sense of who they were and what they aspired to ‘do’ when they completed their secondary education. This paper is a contribution to discussion about the intersections between the cultural and transition traditions in youth scholarship. Whilst the ‘long-standing separation (and on occasion a tension) between ‘cultural’ and ‘transition’ perspectives in youth studies’ (Furlong, Woodman and Wyn, 2011:356) has attracted considerable attention in recent years, it is important to recognise, wherever possible, the uncontroversial ways in which these intersections reside within the contemporary theoretical landscape. This paper represents one contribution.

References


