

# Understanding educational aspirations and expectations



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It is no longer questioned that high education level and human capital formation promote human well-being and are one of the main preconditions for economic growth (Romer, 1989: 28). Moreover, along with evolving globalization, competition and economic challenges world is facing, returns to academic achievements have become larger than ever (Harmon and Walker, 2001: 39), and low academic achievements can be seen as a constraint for economic independence. It has been observed that during the World financial crisis unemployment has risen exactly among the less educated people[1]. Therefore, it would be just natural if we would see more young adults, from both genders and all ethnic and social groups, reaching for higher educational levels and taking advantage of possibility to gain higher returns. However, evidence shows that educational attainment among youth differs significantly (e. g., Betz and Fitzgerald, 1987). Therefore, the question remains: why equally talented individuals with similar abilities and initial preferences make different academic choices, and why some of them end up in lower paying jobs and occupations?

Economists have tried to explain this phenomenon with the existence of credit market imperfections, which individuals from less advantageous backgrounds might be facing (Loury 1981, Galor and Zeira 1993, Piketty 1997). However, these hypotheses are questioned in a large body of literature. Although in developing countries credit constraints might be a partial explanation for differences in educational attainment, this does not fully explain the differences in the developed world. Evidence shows that in developed word families facing economic constraints, when it comes to education, represent only a small part of the community (Cameron and

Taber 2002). Besides, nowadays there exist many organizations and funds which are providing scholarships and financial help to students from low income families[2]. Therefore, it is essential to look for other, more internal reasons that could explain differences in educational choices and attainment among young adults with equal abilities and preferences.

For being able to understand and change one's educational and career choices, it is crucial to understand what determines his or her aspirations. However, explaining it is not a straight forward task. Aspirations are determined already in early childhood and are prone to changes throughout the life. Moreover, sometimes high educational aspirations are not sufficient to guarantee a better outcome. This phenomenon exists due to aspiration-expectation gap, when one's desired goals do not coincide with the expected outcome due to the disbelief to a successful result. This pattern is especially observed among women and certain ethnic groups. Therefore, it is not only crucial to look at the level of educational aspirations, but it is also essential to ask if one's aspirations are always fulfilled.

Although a considerable amount of literature has examined educational and career aspirations of young adults, the existing literature tends to provide somehow different conclusions; therefore, a comprehensive and critical literature review, overlooking different factor influence one's academic and career aspirations, is still missing. The purpose of this study is to contribute to an understand of how factors like gender, ethnicity, peers, parents, teachers and self-efficacy beliefs influence young adult academic and career aspirations and decision making. This thesis will also explain why sometimes high aspirations for girls and Black students do not lead to higher

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educational outcomes; the existence of an aspiration-expectation gap will be supported by the latest empirical data. Further, this thesis will discuss the existing policy measures aimed to promote and raise children educational attainment. Hence, the research questions of this thesis are:

What are the determinants of educational and career aspirations?

Why high educational aspirations do not always lead to better outcomes?

What are the existing policies and projects in order to raise one's educational and career expectations?

The focus of the thesis will be qualitative studies and will be based on an extensive literature review, covering various study fields, explaining the determinants of educational and career aspirations (Part I). Part II will provide different theories explaining an aspiration-expectation gap for girls and Black students; the existence of it will be supported by the latest quantitative data from U. S. Census Bureau 2010. Further Part III will concentrate on the overview of the policy measures and government projects that have been implemented in order to raise one's expectation level and close the aspiration-expectation gap.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Literature review of the determinants of educational and career aspirations**

This chapter introduces the determinants of educational and career aspirations and expectations. It begins with an introduction of the necessary definitions. Further, it is explained how one's aspirations and expectations

are formed by providing different views and findings from an existing literature.

## **1. 1 Defining educational and career aspirations**

It is believed that student educational and career aspirations are the most relevant factors determining one's future educational attainment (Gottfredson 1981; Trice and King, 1991). Therefore, it is essential to understand the exact meaning of aspirations. However, there has not been reached a consensus of one and certain definition; therefore, various explanations have been provided by different authors.

Markus and Nurius (1986) have reported aspirations as one's ideas and hopes of "possible selves", i. e., what a person would like to and what would not like to become or achieve. In psychology, aspiration level has been defined as the level of quality of a task which one desires to attain. It is a determinant of an individual's performance level in the future. It has been hypothesized that aspiration level varies from persons to person and place to place and is determined by factors that may change and influence aspirations level during the lifetime[3].

Likewise, the Wisconsin model[4], which is a socio-economical model developed by Sewell and his colleagues in 1969 meant to explain one's social mobility and its determinants, provides definitions of educational and career aspirations. The educational aspiration level variable in the model is explained as the level of education one would like to attain, e. g., not continue higher education after high school, finish vocational school or attains college or university degree. Sewell et al. (1969) defines career

aspiration level as one's ambitions and thoughts about their future occupation.

However, some studies have suggested that high educational aspirations do not necessarily lead to high educational attainment (Empson, 1992; Conroy, 1997). Gottfredson (1981) has identified this phenomenon and has provided explanation to it. She suggests the existence of realistic aspirations or expectations and idealistic aspirations. The former is applied when one's educational and career aspirations are "tempered by knowledge of obstacles and opportunities" (Brown, 2002: 91), while the idealistic aspirations are one's desired goals and ideal education and occupation, in other words – best possible life outcome. If there is a difference between these two types of aspirations and one's idealistic aspirations do not reflect one's expectations or realistic aspirations, there exist an "aspiration-expectation gap" (Danziger and Eden, 2006).

Hence, in this thesis Gottfredson's theory about two types of aspirations and Danziger's and Eden's definition of aspiration-expectation gap will be used. Firstly, determinants of idealistic aspirations will be discussed. Later this thesis will elaborate on the external factors that shape one's expectations or realistic aspirations. For the sake of simplicity, in the following text this thesis will refer to realistic aspirations as "expectations" while to idealistic aspirations as "aspirations".

## **1. 2 Determinants of educational and career aspirations and expectations**

Understanding the exact elements that determine one's educational and career aspirations and expectations is a tricky task. Existing evidence shows that there are many factor and circumstances that can shape them in a positive or negative way. Therefore, to contribute to a clearer understanding, in the following sections this thesis will deeply and broadly examine the determinants of aspirations and expectations.

### **1. 2. 1 Initial endowments – determinants of one's aspirations**

We will firstly look at the initial endowment determinants, i. e. gender and ethnicity, which influence one's aspirations. These factors are extremely powerful in shaping one's academic and career aspiration level already in an early childhood.

#### **1. 2. 1. 1 Gender:**

Gender effect has a relevant role in determining one's aspiration level. A considerable amount of literature has focused on gender-related differences in academic and career aspirations (Howard, 1979; Betz and Fitzgerald, 1987; Danziger and Eden, 2007).

Different views exist on the nature of the differences among both gender aspirations. Patton and Creed (2007) has argued that male students tend to hold higher aspirations for education level and position in the labor force, while Mau and Bikos (2000), approaching the same question, found the opposite. They claimed that girls are more likely to hold higher aspirations

than men. Overall, most of the studies have supported Mau and Bikos (2000) view (Figure No. 1) (e. g., Clift and Vaughan 1997; Butlin 1999; Anisef et al., 2001; Perry et al., 2009). Also, during the last decades female educational attainment and workforce has increased rapidly (Schoon, Martin and Ross, 2007); however, it has been observed that not too many women expect to follow careers which are mainly associated with the opposite sex, such as science and technology, despite the fact that these careers usually yield higher salary. This pattern becomes even more compelling as there is no evidence observed of differences in quantitative abilities in tasks related to science and technology between both genders (Betz and Hackett, 1981).

Figure No. 1:

**Source: Looker, D. And Thiessen, V. (2004: Figure 1)**

1. 2. 1. 2 Ethnicity:

Research has shown that educational and career aspirations vary across different ethnic groups. However, the results found in different studies yield different conclusions. It has been wildly assumed that the highest educational aspirations are held by Asian (especially Chinese) students (e. g., Cheng and Stark, 2002; Willitts et al., 2005). Their high aspirations are formed earlier than ones for other ethnic groups and are held constantly high throughout life (Kao and Tienda, 1998). Most of the researches contacted have found that White boys have the lowest aspiration level between all the other ethnic groups (Figure No. 2) (Dillard and Perrin, 1980; Strand, 2007) and their educational achievements during the last years have increased less than for other ethnic groups (Figure No. 3)[5]. White boys were found to hold



lower aspirations than their Black peers in the research conducted by Wilson and Wilson (1992). Contrary, Cook et al. (1996) discovered that middle class White males had higher educational aspirations than low-income African American males. However, this conclusion does not seem straight-forward as the differences might be also explained by the economic factors.

Figure No. 2: Figure No. 3:

Data source: S., Strand (2007: 39) Data source: Department for Children, Schools and Families: Statistical First Release, England (2010: 12)

Although, Strand (2007) has found that Black Caribbean and Black African students might have higher academic aspirations than White students, their higher educational

attainment seems to be much lower (Figure No. 4). Therefore, a question arises: what are the factors that do not allow high aspiration transformation into high achievements? The answer lies in the aspiration-expectation gap on which this thesis will elaborate in chapter 2.

Figure No. 3:

Source: Jusan Ng (2011)

## 1. 2. 2 External factors – determinants of one's expectations

In the next two sub-sections, this thesis will concentrate on external factors, i. e., peers, teachers and parents, which can positively or negatively influence one's academic and career expectations.

### 1. 2. 2. 1 Peer effect:

A variable studied in the literature concerning the determinants of academic and career expectations is the peer effect. The peer effect refers to the positive or negative influence significant others have on one's expectations and level of achievement (e. g., by providing one with feedbacks, models or norms how they should behave, think and act in certain situations). Among their peers young adults develop their identities and self concept; therefore they are essential socialization agents for a young individual (Bandura, 1989; Brown et. al., 1994; Black, 2002). Although, some have argued that children expectations are more likely to be shaped by the characteristics of a family than by the characteristics of peers (Duncan et. al., 2001), relevant amount of the literature shows that peers play a crucial role in influencing one's achievement level and educational expectations (Peterson et al., 1986; Willms 1986; Goldstein et al., 2005).

Ide et al. (1981) examined ten studies published from 1966 to 1978 that concerned the peer effect's influence on one's academic achievements and expectations. In all these studies, they found a significant correlation. This finding is consistent with Downs and Rose (1991) who argue that peer effect is contributing to the construction of one's behavior and academic expectations.

Another, slightly different view is held by Haller and Butterworth (1960) who look more critically on the straight forward correlation between one's academic expectations and peer influence. Although, they do not reject it, they emphasize that the initial factors, like characteristics and family

backgrounds, could play a key role in bringing together similar individuals in that way forming homogeneous groups of peers. According to Jonsson and Mood (2008) children with high academic expectations and achievements are likely to connect with those sharing the same interests and expectations. Oppositely, adolescents, who have worse attitude to school and lower expectations, will most probable be attracted to peers with similar views (Ryan, 2000).

In sum, it has been found that being around a certain group of people will have an effect on a person's future, specifically, it will impact the academic level or career one will expect to achieve. However, the degree of the importance of peers is ambiguous as different studies yield different results.

#### 1. 2. 2. 2 Teachers' and parents' influence:

As discussed earlier peers have a certain influence on shaping one's academic expectations (e. g., Peterson et al., 1986; Willms, 1986; Black, 2002); however, a significant amount of literature points out the importance of family's and teachers' influence on children long term decisions, e. g., occupation considerations (Jurkovic and Ulrici, 1985; O'Brien, 1990; Furman and Buhrmeister, 1992; Wall et al., 1999; Duncan et. al., 2001). It is believed that teachers and parents can positively influence one's confidence and beliefs of his or her abilities, thus, persuading that the person is capable of being successful in further life (Van Auken and Stephens, 2006).

According to Wall et al. (1999) parents as a support and role model have influence on one's conception about educational and career opportunities.

Parents' social support is directly linked with students' school experiences, <https://assignbuster.com/understanding-educational-aspirations-and-expectations/>

achievements and behaviors (Nurmi, 1987). There also exist a positive correlation between parents expectations for their child and child's expectations for himself (e. g., Davies and Kandel, 1981; Hossler and Stage, 1992). Family support can encourage the student to devote bigger effort to learning and school tasks (Gilbert et al., 1993). It is also observed that children who have the highest self-efficacy are the ones with the biggest family social support (Dubow and Ullman, 1989). In contrast, the ones with low family cohesion are more exposed to depression, low self-efficacy and self-esteem (Moran and Eckenrode, 1991; Caucé et al., 1992; Hirsch and DuBois, 1992). Moreover, Wall et al. (1999) has claimed a stronger correlation between young male expectations and the family support than the one for girls. In the research by Roper, (2008) it was shown that parent expectations and student GPA are correlated (Table No. 1). Children with higher grades tended to have parents with higher expectations for them. According to De Coulon et al. (2008) also parents' education level plays a significant role in formation of children expectations. In their research, they found a significant correlation between low literacy rates of parents and low test scores by their children. It was shown that parents with the lowest literacy skills were the least supportive and encouraging in relation to education. As a result, children with such parents were more likely to report dissatisfaction with school and develop low educational expectations.

Table No. 1:

Source: Roper (2008: 2)

A significant amount of literature has discussed parents and family role in shaping one's expectations, however, the body of literature about teachers' expectation influence is rather small. Cheung (1995) found evidence on positive teacher influence on one's academic achievements. Teacher support has shown to have a bigger influence on women, student from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnic minority perceptions of academic and career opportunities (Ellis and Lane, 1963; Wall et al., 1999). However, it is often blamed that teachers have insufficient expectations for their students, especially for students in rural areas and for certain student groups (Bishop, 1989; Hilliard III, 1991). It is shown that teachers tend to establish better contact and attitude toward students with higher ability (Bamburg, 1994). This is seen as a problem because children tend to internalize and adopt teacher perceptions about their abilities, which as a result, in case of low teacher expectations can lead to psychological constraints for self-efficacy and self-esteem (Raffini, 1993).

To sum up, a considerable body of literature has shown that teachers, parents and peers can influence one's academic and career expectations. Young adults tend to internalize expectations that others have about him or her and accordingly adjust their own educational and career expectations.

### 1. 2. 3 Self-efficacy beliefs

As already discussed, all of the beforehand mentioned factors, i. e., gender, ethnicity and social support, have an effect on shaping one's behavior, thoughts and attitudes towards different tasks, education levels and occupations. However, in order to be able to reach the aspired goals it is also

extremely beneficial that one has a high self confidence in what he is doing. It was shown that teachers and parents have the ability to influence one's self-beliefs what in turn leads to higher or lower level of academic expectations of that individual. Therefore, this section will discuss why high self-efficacy beliefs, i. e., one's belief that she or he is capable of producing certain level of performance to attain certain goals (Bandura et al., 2001), are important in determining the outcome.

The importance of self-efficacy on one's educational expectations have been widely studied in the literature (e. g., Bandura, 1994; Lent and Brown, 1996; Nauta et al., 1998; Brown & Lent, 2006); it has been proven that individual's self-efficacy beliefs have a significant importance in promoting positive outcomes and reducing the possibility of negative outcomes (Oyserman et al., 2006; Destin and Oyserman, 2009).

Students who have high self-efficacy are more productive, efficient and confident about their performances than their peers with the same ability but lower self-efficacy. It has been also shown that they put more effort and are more concentrated on the task than others, as well as they are more committed to their goals (Bandura, 1997; Schunk and Pajares, 2005). Therefore, the ones with high self beliefs perform better and based on better outcomes have higher future academic and career expectations (Brown & Lent, 2006) (Figure No. 5)[6].

Figure No. 5:

**Source: Looker, D. And Thiessen, V. (2004: Figure 10)**

## **Chapter 2**

### **Aspiration-expectation gap**

In the previous chapter, determinants of one's academic and career aspirations and expectations were discussed. It was shown by the evidence from the existing literature, that girls are more likely to hold higher aspirations than boys (e. g., Clift and Vaughan 1997; Butlin 1999; Anisef et al., 2001; Perry et al., 2009) and Black adolescents hold higher aspirations than Whites (e. g., Wilson and Wilson, 1992; Strand, 2007). It was also shown that social support has an influence on forming one's expectations.

However, high aspirations do not always lead to high educational attainment and high position in the labor force (Strand, 2007). It has been suggested that the problem lies in the difference between aspirations and expectations. Unfortunately, often academic and career expectations of girls, Black Africans and Black Caribbean students are lower than their aspirations due to some perceptions in the society, perceived barriers or even academic feedback (e. g., Gottfredson, 1981; Armstrong & Crombie, 2000). As a result, this can lead to underachievement and lowered self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura et. al. 2001).

This chapter will approach this phenomenon by providing existing and relevant theories that tend to explain the reasons of an existing aspiration-expectation gap for females and ethnic minorities. Later, empirical data obtained from U. S. Census Bureau results will be provided to help us to

confirm or reject some of the existing theories and hypothesis, therefore, giving the final conclusions.

## 2. 1 Gender:

One of the explanations for different gender-related career expectations is that women career decisions are more complex than those of men. This arises from a bigger involvement in family and children lives or possible early pregnancy (Vonderacek et al., 1986; Lucas et. al., 1997; Eccles, 2005). Even more, women academic and career expectations can be shaped by existing stereotypes or strong gender identity because of social role perceptions (Eagly, 1987; Akerlof and Kranton, 2000; Danziger and Eden, 2007; Gupta et al., 2008).

### 2. 1. 1 Stereotype activation theory:

Gender stereotyping can influence a person's decision making when it comes to academic or career choice (Heilman, 2001; Nosek, Banaji and Greenwald, 2002). Gupta et al. (2008) examined the impact of stereotypes on both gender's intentions to follow traditionally male-related occupations. They found evidence showing that people were likely to internalize stereotypes and act according to them, choosing tasks associated with their own gender. This pattern is more observable if the stereotype is widely accepted in a culture (Heilman, 2001).

According to Day (1990) many women have high aspirations; however, usually they do not expect to be able to have the occupation they would like to in case it is more male-dominated. Wall et al. (1999) was examining the



correlation between career expectations and career aspirations. As a result, they found inconsistency between women career expectations and aspirations, i. e., their expectations were most of the time lower than their aspirations. The phenomenon was explained by stereotypes in the society about gender-related jobs and women beliefs about the limits of what they possibly can achieve.

## 2. 1. 2 Social role and socialization theory:

Another important theory explaining differences in men and women career and academic expectations is the social role theory. The theory, developed by Eagly (1987) is based on the historical division of men and women roles in the society, where women were associated with household responsibilities while men had responsibilities concerning livelihood of the family. Consequently, career expectations started to differ among men and women. Furthermore, the gender-related roles were usually transmitted to future generation making the distinction between appropriate gender roles in the society even stronger (Eagly, 1987).

Moreover, the academic and career expectations are shaped by socialization processes people experience in childhood. Socialization shapes people perceptions of what is appropriate for themselves and for others, including what is expected from both genders (Seymour, 1999). Further, in early childhood children learn these roles associated with their gender, which in turn, shapes later perceptions about different types of jobs and influences their academic and career expectations (Danziger and Eden, 2007).

According to Eagly and Wood (1999) and Franke et al. (1997) both genders

tend to adjust their expectations in accordance with their social roles and expect to have occupations connected with their own gender (Dunne, Elliott and Carlsen, 1981). This leads to men occupying men-related professions and attaining higher educational levels while women tend to enter more female-related studies and jobs and attain lower educational levels (Powell and Butterfield, 2003).

Although, gender stereotyping has been diminishing and the gender gap in education has been decreasing (Power and Wojtkiewicz, 2004), there are still fewer female than male representatives in men-related studies and profession fields (Powell and Butterfield, 2003); this shows that Eagly's (1987) social role theory is a considerable attempt to explain the differences between female and male academic and career expectations.

## 2. 2 Ethnicity:

There are two main views, respectively structuralist and culturalist, that tend to explain differences in educational attainment between ethnic groups.

### 2. 2. 1 Structuralist theory:

According to structuralist perspective, differences in educational choices between ethnic groups can be explained by external factors. The most influential factor, following structuralist theory, shaping one's expectations is the teacher support. This view has been supported by Ellis and Lane (1963) and Wall et al. (1999) who state that teacher support have an influence on ethnic minority students' perceptions about academic and career opportunities. Unfortunately, most of the time teacher expectations are

negatively correlated with ethnic minority group students' expectations (Strand, 2007). In his report, Strand (2007) found evidence that teachers are likely to develop lower expectations for certain ethnic groups, especially for Black students. They also tend to hold unequal attitude towards White and Black student behaviors due to racism and social stereotypes. This, as a result, leads to a situation where ethnic minority students, following teacher beliefs about them, lower their own expectations of the possible outcomes regardless to their initial high aspirations. This, in turn, can explain the differences in educational attainment between Black students and their other ethnicity peers.

However, the hypothesis, that educational expectations and attainment between ethnic groups can be fully explained by racism and social stereotypes have been criticized. Modood (2003) has argued that Asian students tend to face more social pressure and racial harassment than Black Caribbean and Black African students, yet their achievements are outstanding and there is no evidence that Asian students would experience aspiration-expectation discrepancies due to the racism toward their ethnic group.

Although, there exist several problems with the structuralist core assumptions, their ideas present useful and testable information that helps to explain and understand the reasons behind Black African and Caribbean student aspiration-expectation discrepancies.

## 2. 2. 2 Culturalist theory:

According to culturalist point of view, differences in educational choices rise from internal factors, like internalization of historical and social norms or constraints. Therefore, culturalist perspective can partly fill the missing holes in the structuralist theory and explain why, for example, Asian students perform better than their Black peers although are both prone to racial harassment.

Caplan et al. (1991) has argued that Asian performance is significantly better than one for other ethnic groups due to their cultural perceptions and understanding. It is claimed that Asian students tend to hold higher sense of responsibility for their family and prioritize self-reliance more than students from other ethnic groups, especially, Black Africans and Black Caribbeans.

It is observed that Black Caribbean boys on average experience bigger peer pressure than other ethnic groups. They are exposed to the pressure to adopt the lifestyle of street culture, which negatively influences their academic performance (Sewell, 1997). Ogbu and Fordham's (1986) have contributed to the explanation why Black students tend to have low educational attainment despite the fact that they are holding high educational aspirations. They focused on two opposite ways how students are thinking and behaving, i. e., "acting White" and "acting Black". Due to the previously mentioned peer pressure of adopting the street culture, "acting White", i. e., doing well at school, is not seen as "appropriate" behavior for Black students. Therefore, Black students choose to keep their identities and are avoiding "acting White", what results in lower educational achievements and attainment than in case of an absence of this pressure.

Another factor that triggers the low educational attainment for Black African and Caribbean students is the socio-historical factor (Ogbu, 1991). Based on the historical roles in the society for Black population, Black African and Black Caribbean students may under value the necessity of investment in education. This is due to “ job ceiling” they might feel they are facing. It has been suggested that Black people do not have the same economic opportunities as White people in the job market. In a recent study, Fouad and Byars-Winston (2005) found that, despite the high aspiration level among the Black students, they expected fewer job offers and opportunities than their White counterparts. Therefore, it is easy to understand why Black student do not see education as an essential tool for being able to gain a high position in the labor force and their academic attainment is lower than the one for other ethnic groups. This in turn, unfortunately, has resulted in a tendency that Black people are overrepresented in low skilled jobs and are a considerable propo