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Social inequality and young people in Europe: their capacity to aspire



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35. Social inequality and young people in Europe: their capacity to aspire

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Diverse resources can be used to achieve social position. While we immediately think of material, economic resources in this context, there are others as well, notably aspirations. As a projection of the self in a desirable future, aspirations are inspiring emotions that guide individuals' commitments, whether these relate to work, school, sport or citizenship.

Aspirations draw upon personal characteristics and preferences, but they are also socially constrained. They depend on which opportunities are available, the future that is imagined and desired as a result of these opportunities, and thus, on the choices that can be made. As such, aspirations are affected by social inequality. As aspirations can influence future achievement, differences in aspirations can contribute to deepening social inequality, and can trigger corrosive disadvantage. Endeavours to research social inequality should therefore consider the social processes through which young people's aspirations develop and crystallize.

In our research, we consider the circumstances that lead young people to frame a desirable future, and the role of school, family and community in this process (Baillergeau et al., 2015). We do not measure aspirations, but we do analyse the capacity of young Europeans to aspire and the ways in which this capacity develops. Appadurai (2004, 2013) argues that the capacity to aspire is influenced by culture and social circumstances, and is therefore distributed unevenly in society, and suggests that this hampers the chances of the socially disadvantaged to improve their position.

However, Appadurai reports a case of slum dwellers in Mumbai in which their capacity to aspire is broadened thanks to the commitment of community-based agencies. This broadening of aspiration occurs in collective talks among slum dwellers so as to share, test and discuss their 'local horizons of hope and desire' (2004, p. 75).

This suggests that such community-based organizations are not fatalistic, and means that the capacity of the poor to aspire can develop, which in turn helps them improve their social position.

In our research, we have observed that disadvantaged young people in Europe do get opportunities, provided by schools or job guidance services, to discuss their aspirations. However, these discussions mainly address educational and occupational aspirations, and take the view that such aspirations are to be adjusted, either uplifted when deemed too 'low' or downsized when judged 'unrealistic'. We observe that just like more affluent young people, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds formulate all kinds of aspirations, some reaching beyond work. They are largely in line with what the mainstream projects as respectable aspirations, such as high purchasing power and social recognition.

This is not to claim that social inequality does not affect aspirations in Europe. It definitely does. But it affects the range of aspirations young people can have in different ways. For example, consumption aspirations are little affected by social inequality, influencing young people irrespective of their socio-economic position and their school achievements, while occupational aspirations of older adolescents are impacted by social inequality, so that older adolescents at the lower end of the scale have lower aspirations. As a consequence, it is certainly necessary to discuss occupational aspirations, but it is not sufficient. Leaving influential aspirations such as recognition unaddressed may lead disadvantaged young people to cope alone with highly contradictory aspirations, jeopardizing efforts to improve their social position and damaging attempts to reduce social inequality.

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