

Vague Hopes, Active Aspirations and Equality

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“Every American has...the equal right to develop their talent and their ability and their motivation, to make something of themselves.”

President John F. Kennedy, 1963

“I will confront another form of bias: the soft bigotry of low expectations. [W]e cannot afford to have an America segregated by class, by race, or by aspiration.”

George W. Bush, 2000

I. Capacities to Act, and Reasons to Act

The term human capital describes a set of skills, strengths and know-how that are valuable—both in the narrow sense of being “commercially valuable” (Lindsey, 2013), and the wider one of contributing to a flourishing, deliberate, purposeful life.

As Heckman (2014) puts it: “Skills are *capacities to act* [emphasis added]...They shape expectations, constraints, and information” (p. 6).

The skills—capacities to act, in Heckman’s terms—making up an individual’s stock of human capital are typically divided into two sets:

- i) Cognitive skills: broadly, IQ-type abilities of abstraction, problem-solving and mental planning; and
- ii) Non-cognitive skills: including personality attributes, such as optimism or conscientiousness; character strengths, such as resilience, prudence or grit; and social skills, such as personal presence, manners and appearance. (There is growing unease about the use of the catch-all “non-cognitive” description, and a number of scholars now prefer to talk about character skills or character strengths.¹)

Skills and attributes supply the capacity to act. But they do not provide the reason to act. The springs of action are not attributes, but aspirations: ambitions, hopes, fears, desires, and expectations. Skills determine whether I *can* do something; aspirations determine whether I *will*.

¹ Myself included. James Heckman, the most important figure in the field, now typically adopts the language of character skills.

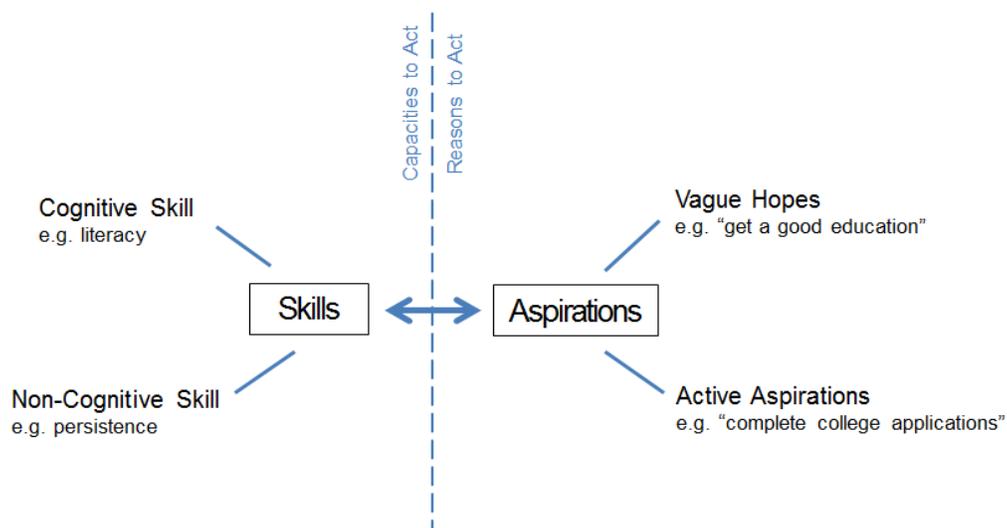
There is an important distinction, however, between a strongly grounded aspiration, one towards which an individual is actively working and planning, and a general aspiration that has little palpable impact on a person’s conduct. I label these two kinds of aspiration *active aspirations* and *vague hopes*.

An **active aspiration** is a goal or set of goals toward which a person is consciously and deliberately working. It likely requires investing time, energy and other resources; but also requires the ability to resist or defer gratification. Getting to college, for example, is likely to require study; this will necessarily reduce the opportunities to party with friends. In other words, both cognitive and non-cognitive skills are likely to be deployed in the service of an active aspiration.

A **vague hope** consists of a loosely-stated goal or set of goals, largely untethered from current activities and decision-making. A teenager may hope for a college degree, but doesn’t really work at school, investigate colleges, research financial aid packages, or in some cases, even apply. A child might like the idea of growing up to be a professional basketball player, but fails to put in any of the requisite effort to practice, or join a community team. Vague hopes, then, are “in the cloud” aspirations, not grounded ones.

The relationship between the different kinds of skills and different kinds of aspiration is set out stylistically in Figure 1.

Figure 1



In practice, of course, the development of skills and aspirations cannot be neatly bisected. For one thing, there are strong inter-relationships between non-cognitive and cognitive skills – a dynamic process Heckman and Mosso (2014) label “cross-productivity.” But there is cross-productivity between skills and aspirations, too. For example:

- i) *Developing an aspiration or goal might stimulate the development of skills.* A teacher may animate the value of college (by raving about his college days in Chicago), leading a student to set her sights on postsecondary education. This aspiration to go to college prompts her to learn better study methods, and master more of the material to improve her GPA.
- ii) *Developing and applying a skill may lead to higher aspirations.* A student who discovers a talent for math - or indeed one who can choose homework over television - learns more. With increased knowledge and better grades, he may develop an active aspiration to go to college.

II. Aspirations: A Very Brief Review

In terms of social mobility, improving a person’s capacity to act is not the whole story. They may also need a stronger reason to act.

Hill et al. (1985) break motivation down into two components: a motive (‘a generalized disposition to approach or avoid a class of incentives’), and an expectancy (‘an individual’s assessment of the chances that his or her own performance will, in fact, lead to the desired outcome’).

Studying hope among schoolchildren, Snyder (1989) highlights the need to formulate a clear goal (‘goals thinking’); develop strategies to reach that goal (‘pathways thinking’); and sustain the motivation for using and sticking with those strategies (‘agency thinking’).

In a study of unintended pregnancies, England et al. (forthcoming) distinguish between having a goal and possessing the efficacy to reach it. They define efficacy as “the ability to organize one’s behavior in the service of one’s goals”. The component parts of efficacy are: the ‘planfulness’ needed to get organized; self-regulation to force oneself to make onerous decisions; assertiveness to impose on others (in this case, sexual partners); and a belief that action will in fact influence

outcomes.” The study concludes what many women want to avoid pregnancy, but lack efficacy around contraception.

While different studies adopt distinct taxonomies, in most, an important distinction is drawn between a distant, untethered goal and a more anchored, specific target: or in my terms, between ‘vague hopes’ and ‘active aspirations.’

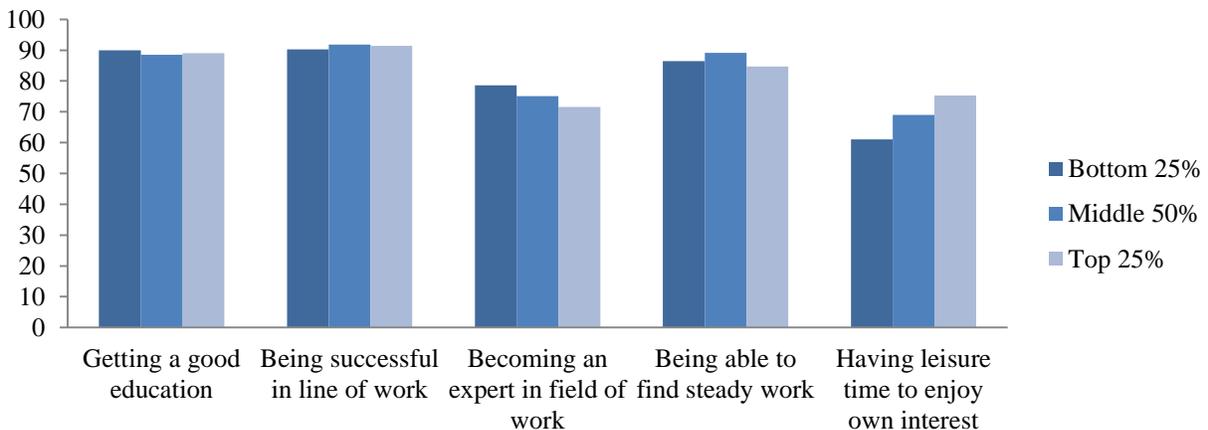
Individuals do not form either kind of aspiration out of thin air. Wider social norms – for example, around marriage, children or education – can strongly influence the development of both vague hopes and active aspirations. The immediate environment, including local social norms, can also have a considerable impact. The growing field of behavioral economics has demonstrated that in many cases, a modest alteration in the ‘choice architecture’ around us can substantially change outcomes. Self-styled ‘libertarian paternalists’ argue that such ‘nudges’ can help individuals better realize their stated long-term goals (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). There is also evidence that resource constraints leading to scarcity can reduce capacities to act, by denuding cognitive and non-cognitive functioning (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013).

III. Vague Hopes versus Active Aspirations: Evidence for Gaps

Most Americans hope for mostly the same things. There is little evidence for gaps between classes, income groups or races in terms of shared hopes, values and dreams:

Figure 2

Percent of high school seniors who reported that various life values were "very important" to them, by socioeconomic status



Source: Ingels, Planty, and Bozick (2005)

Broad-brush political statements about “poverty of aspiration” are therefore wide of the mark. There is little evidence for variation in terms of vague hopes for life in general. The question is how far these are honed and sharpened into active aspirations.

The development of active aspirations, rather than simply vague hopes, is likely to matter a good deal for the chances of upward mobility, since they impact specific choices made in real time by individuals. Vague hopes may create a general sense of aspiring to better things, but they matter barely at all if they are unconnected to actions and decisions. At worst, they may create a false illusion that good things will simply come to those who wait.

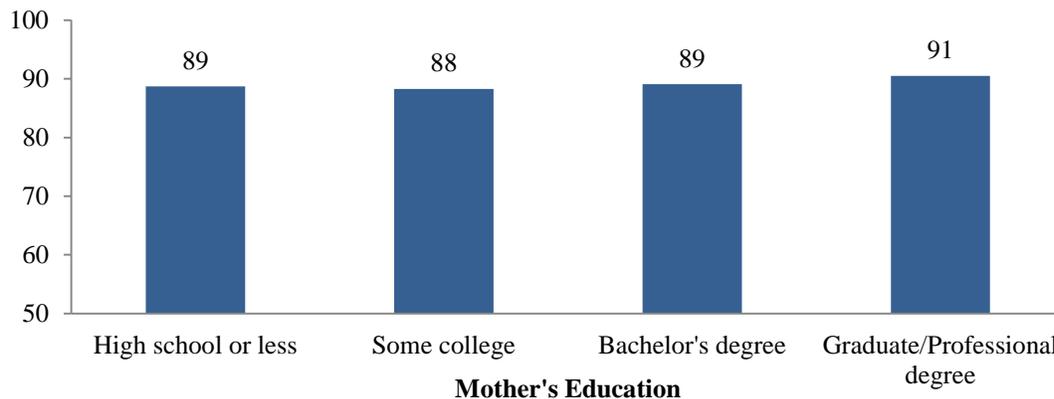
The gap between vague hopes and active aspirations can be illustrated by three examples.

i) “Getting a good education” versus doing homework

There is broad consensus among adolescents from all backgrounds about the importance of ‘getting a good education.’

Figure 3

Percent of high school seniors who reported that getting a good education is "very important" to them, by mother's education



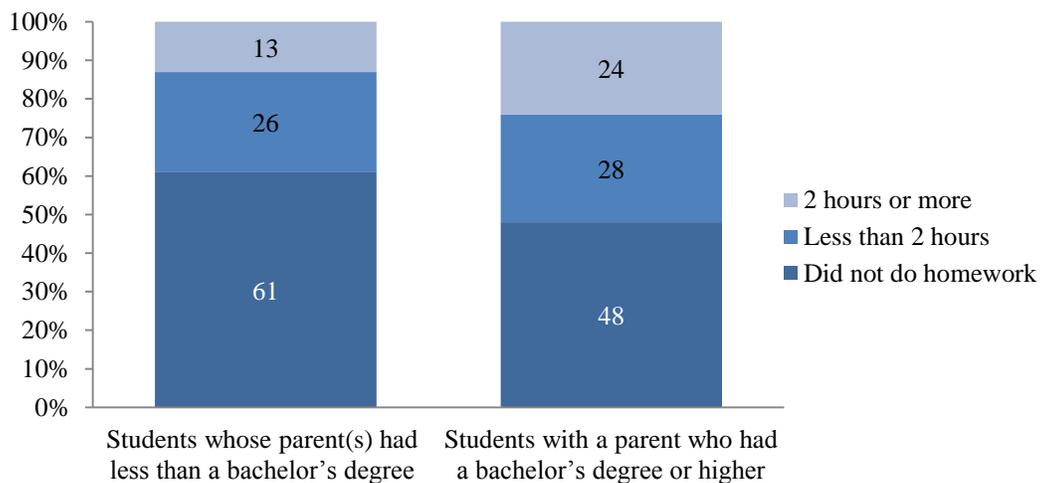
Source: Ingels, Planty, and Bozick (2005)

So, almost 90% of teenage children of parents with less than a bachelor's degree say that getting a good education is very important to them, little different from those with more educated parents.

But ‘getting a good education’ is a vague hope. It becomes an active aspiration when it influences choices and behavior. Here there may be class gaps. There are differences, for example, in the amount of homework being done by adolescents by social background. On an average day, 39% of students with parents with less than a bachelor’s degree report doing homework, compared to 52% of students with a parent with a bachelor’s degree or more. Teens with educated parents are also almost twice as likely to put in two hours or more of homework:

Figure 4

Time spent on homework on an average day, by parent’s educational attainment



Source: Allard (2008)

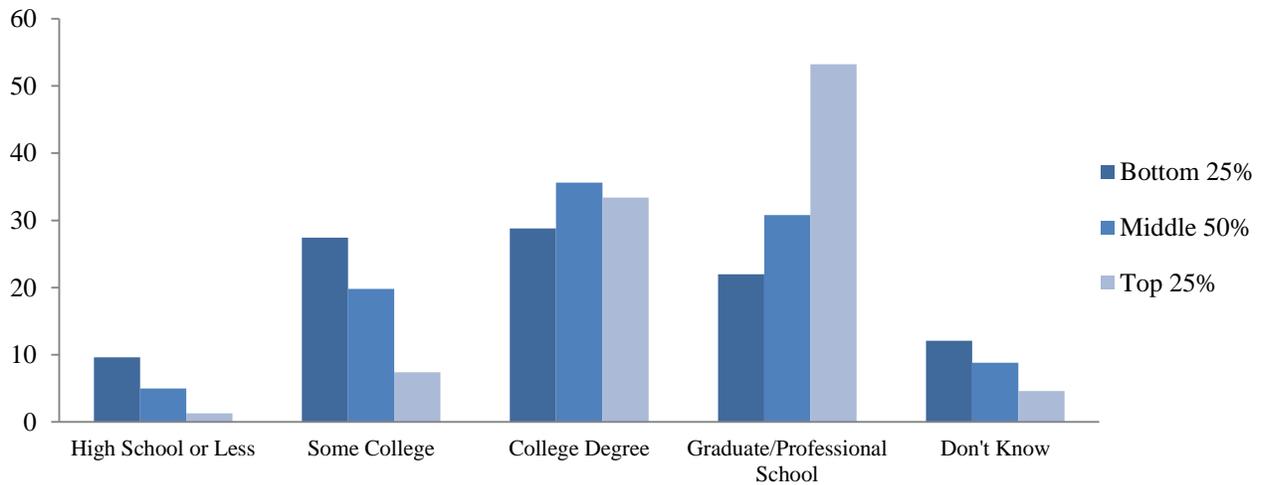
Of course, better-educated parents, determined to ensure their children’s success, may simply be supervising their teenagers more closely than less-educated parents are able – or willing – to do. But it is also likely that by this age (15-19), adolescents are realizing for themselves that any hopes for ‘a good education’ have to be backed up by their own investments of time and energy in schoolwork.

ii) ”Getting a Good Education” versus Planning for College

As we’ve seen, there is general support for the value of a good education. But there are differences in the particular level of education a young person aspires to, depending on their social background:

Figure 5

Percent of high school seniors reporting expected level of educational attainment by family's socioeconomic status



Source: Ingels, Planty, and Bozick (2005)

American teenagers generally have quite high hopes for their education. There is little difference by family income in the proportion expecting to become a college graduate, for instance. But closer inspection shows that this apparent symmetry is misleading: most of the affluent youngsters actually expect to gain a post-graduate qualification, suggesting that they have a clear sense of what college means, as well as a good grasp on the distinctions between getting some college education, a college degree, and a post-graduate qualification.

High school valedictorians from working class backgrounds have been found to be much less likely to apply to a selective private college (50% versus 80%), even though their admission chances, and enrollment ratios if they were accepted, were at least as good (in part because of the provision of financial aid). As the author of the study concludes, “the critical factor that prevented poorer valedictorians from attending a top college was simply failing to fill out an application and click “Submit” (Radford, 2013).

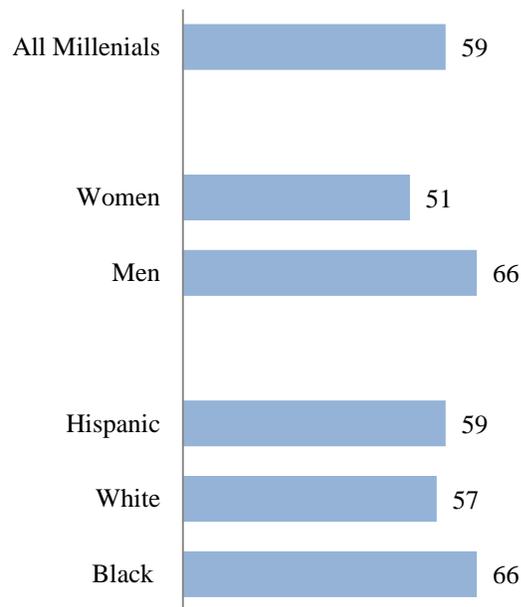
The goal of going to college is so embedded in the American idea of success that it is perhaps unsurprising that even the least affluent report such high levels of expectation around college entry. Whether or not these translate into active aspirations – in terms of the development and execution of a plan for getting to and sticking with college – is another question.

iii) Marital Childbearing versus Contraceptive Use (or Non-Use)

Despite profound changes in family structure and childbearing, the majority of American adults believe that children are better off being raised by both parents. Even among Millennials, disapproval of single motherhood is strong, especially among black respondents:

Figure 6

Percent who disapprove of "single women having children"

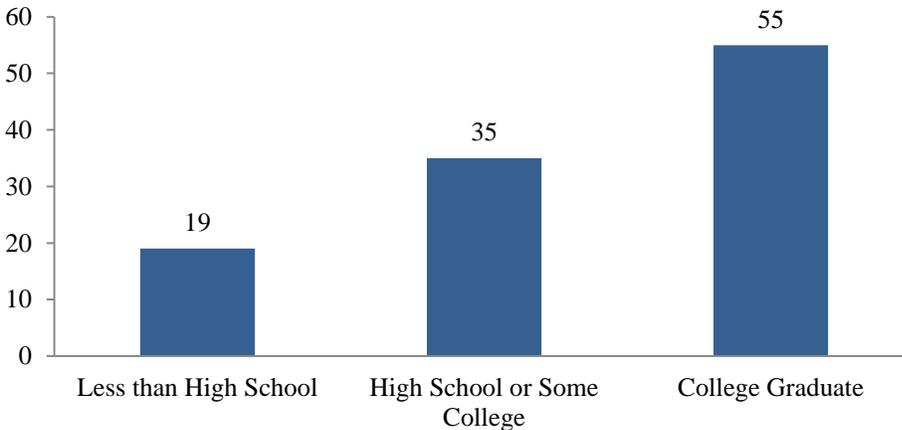


Source: Pew Research Center (2010)

So the hope of having children in a stable partnership remains very much alive among Americans of all ages. But rates of unintended pregnancy remain high. Turning the vague hope of delaying childbearing for marriage into an active aspiration of avoiding pregnancy when unmarried appears to be a challenge, especially for those with lower incomes or less education:

Figure 7

Never-Married Young Adults Using Birth Control "All the Time" with Current or Last Sexual Partner, by Education (%)



Source: Hymowitz, Carroll, Wilcox, and Kaye (2013)

Just over half of never-married college graduates are using contraception all the time. This is not good, by anybody's standard. But those with lower levels of education are even less consistent in their use of contraception (19-35%).

Of course, some of these single adults are trying to get pregnant. Some may live with their partner. But the overall picture is of a serious misalignment between people's vague hopes and their active aspirations, at least when it comes to childbearing and relationships (Sawhill, forthcoming).

These brief examples suggest that while there is widespread agreement in terms of life values and hopes, class gaps may emerge in terms of the conversion of these vague hopes into active aspirations, with potentially damaging implications for inequality of opportunity.

IV. Low Active Aspirations: Why?

Why does one individual end up with lower active aspirations than another? Four broad possible explanations present themselves:

- i) **Don't Want It.** A person might decide entirely autonomously that the accepted optimal path is simply not for them. ('You may think college is important, and I have thought hard about it, and I could go. But I'd honestly rather work as a ranch hand for

- the rest of my life’). Equally, they might adjust their specific aspirations in line with their own objective limitations. (‘There is no point me wanting to be fighter pilot anymore, since I’m 4,8”, afraid of heights, and extremely short-sighted’).²
- ii) **Beyond My Reach.** Individuals might lower their aspirations – or fail to develop active aspirations – because of a mistaken belief that the goal is beyond their reach. (‘I guess I don’t want it that much, since I know I’m not going to get it’).³
 - iii) **Not For People Like Me.** Individuals may inherit or adopt values, preferences and norms from others that place a lower weight on particular goals. (‘I don’t want it, because I’ve inferred that it is not an appropriate goal for me.’)
 - iv) **Never Knew About It.** A person might not have an active aspiration for a particular end simply because of ignorance of the object of the potential aspiration, or of a pathway towards it. (‘I don’t want it because I don’t know about it.’)

The first reason for the absence of a particular active aspiration (Don’t Want It) should not trouble us. Not everybody wants the same things, and life would be pretty dull if they did. So long as our active aspirations are formed autonomously and in full knowledge of the options available to us, so be it. In many cases, one active aspiration can take the place of another: Bill Gates failed to get a college degree because of his active aspiration to form a new company.

The remaining three mechanisms stunting the development of active aspirations are problematic in themselves, since they are corrosive of autonomy, and damaging to equal opportunity. If people shrink their horizons to fit their circumstances, there is an obvious danger of a vicious circle, especially in terms of intergenerational mobility. If a poor black girl does not develop an active aspiration to go to a good college because she sees it (wrongly) as beyond her reach, because of an explicit or implicit norm that a good college is not for ‘somebody like her’, or because she is unaware of the opportunity, or key pathways to it, then we have a problem - as well as an opportunity to do something about it.

² Sometimes referred to as ‘character planning’ in the philosophical literature.

³ Jon Elster (1983), in his work on ‘Sour Grapes’, describes a similar process, by which preferences are unconsciously downgraded, as *adaptive preference formation*. In his influential book *Surplus Powerlessness*, Michael Lerner (1986) argues that activists and leaders in poor communities often downgrade their own agency to change social circumstances, in part because it is less psychologically painful to allocate blame elsewhere than take responsibility oneself.

Active aspirations can be boosted through specific policies, narrowly targeting the aspiration gap; or by increasing opportunities more generally, which fuels the development of aspirations.

V. Active Aspirations and Opportunities

When the development of active aspirations has been stunted by lack of knowledge, or self-limiting biases and opinions, there may be a corrective role for public policy. Interventions have been aimed at each of the three troubling barriers discussed above, with varying degrees of success:

i) Beyond My Reach

Upward Bound: This program, aimed at low-income students or those with parents who did not go to college, provides extra academic tuition as well as mentoring, tutoring and help with college preparation and applications. The program increased enrollment at four-year colleges for students starting with low educational expectations (i.e. expecting less than bachelor's degree) when they applied to the program - from 18 percent to 38 percent - but had no effect on enrollment for those who started with higher educational expectations (U.S. Department of Education, Policy and Program Studies Service, 2004).

Georgia HOPE scholarship: Free attendance at Georgia's public colleges for state residents with at least a B average in high school increased the college attendance rate by more than 7 percentage points (Dynarski, 2000).

ii) Not For People Like Me

Big Brothers, Big Sisters: Children are matched to an adult mentor, based on background. Children who were mentored for 18 months skipped half as many days of school, felt more competent about schoolwork, and missed fewer classes than children who were randomly assigned to remain on the wait list (Tierney & Grossman, 1995).

Changing the environment: Even small cues can carry big signals about whether a particular path is for someone 'like me'. For example, simply changing the objects in a computer science classroom from those considered stereotypical of computer science (e.g., Star Trek poster, video games) to objects not considered stereotypical of computer science (e.g., nature poster, phone

books) was sufficient to boost female undergraduates' reported interest in computer science to the level of their male peers (Cheryan, Plaut, Davies, & Steele, 2009).

iii) *Never Knew About It*

Expanding College Opportunities project: Information packets and fee waivers provided to high-achieving, low income students increased the number of college applications by 19 percent and increased the likelihood of college match by 41 percent (Hoxby & Turner, 2013).

More high school counselors: An additional high school counselor increases four-year college-going rates by approximately 10 percentage points (Hurwitz & Howell, 2013).

Contraceptive CHOICE: Providing free reversible contraceptive methods, with advisement, to women at risk for unintended pregnancy significantly reduced abortions and teen births. Simply making women aware of the option of long-acting contraceptives is an important step; defraying the up-front costs is critical too, especially for women with low incomes (Peipert, Madden, Allsworth, & Secura, 2012).

This handful of examples demonstrates that it may be possible, often with relatively modest cost or effort, to create or alter active aspirations, especially for those from less advantaged backgrounds.

Boosting active aspirations should result in more opportunities being seized. But the causal relationship between opportunities and aspirations runs both ways. As Joseph Fishkin (2014) puts it in *Bottlenecks*: “Opportunities of many kinds throughout life affect the course of a person’s development. The playing field shapes the player, and vice versa – not just at the start, but throughout life” (p. 28).

One way ‘the field shapes the player’ is by altering and sharpening active aspirations. A youngster goes to a better high school and develops different expectations about college; they travel, and form new expectations about education; or go to college, and form new expectations about career paths, and so on.⁴

⁴ In their analysis of the PSID, Hill et al. (1985) find little evidence for causal connections between motivation and economic outcomes (note, however, that their sample consists of individuals who were children in 1968). Most of

The field can also shape the player even before they set foot on it, through perceptions of available life chances. Sight of an opportunity lying in the future may stimulate the development of skills and/or active aspirations. Very often, other people can illuminate these opportunities for us: one reason mentoring can be effective. Retired Navy Admiral J. Paul Reason, who attended a desegregated school as a black student in the 1970s, recalled a critical encounter with a former naval officer-turned physics teacher, who gave him his “first appreciation of the fact that there was a Navy” (Fishkin, 2014, p. 122).

There is some evidence that active aspirations can also be influenced in a downward direction by a perceived lack of opportunity. Teenage girls are more likely to become mothers in areas with a wider gap between the lowest and middle rungs of the income ladder, for example (Kearney & Levine, 2014). Those with least to lose (or who feel they have least to lose) from a failure to develop active aspirations may in fact be least likely to develop them.

VI. Who Are You to Say? Risk of Paternalism

Policies aimed at altering expectations can be criticized for being paternalist. It is not for elite policy-makers, so the argument goes, to prescribe elite values and preferences to others. In debates about opportunity and social mobility, there is clearly a danger of arguing something close to the following: ‘If only these people were more like me, there’d be no problem!’ As the philosopher Adam Swift (2002) reminds us, it is right to provide opportunities; wrong to compel people to take them up.

The risk of preference paternalism – imposing external views about appropriate aspirations on others – is real. But there is at least as big a risk of backing away from hard questions about the processes of formation of values, identities and aspirations, because of an overinflated fear of paternalism. If a person of whatever background comes to an autonomous view about their preferred path in life, based on full information, selecting from a plurality of opportunities, no problem. But it is safe to say that we are some way from that utopia.

VII. Conclusion

the handful of significant associations suggest that improvements in economic circumstances raised motivation levels, and in particular in ‘expectancies,’ rather than the other way around.

A fierce debate is currently raging (in March 2014) over comments made by Rep. Paul Ryan about the way ‘culture’ influences life chances. In a radio interview, he said: “We have got this tailspin of culture, in our inner cities in particular, of men not working and just generations of men not even thinking about working or learning the value and the culture of work, and so there is a real culture problem here that has to be dealt with.”

The Congressman was subsequently accused of racism, lack of compassion, and ‘blaming the victim.’ He was forced to clarify his comments. This is a decades-old argument, containing two straw men: a heartless conservative, who believes that if only poor people adopted the right attitudes towards work, family and study, they would escape; and a brainless liberal, who believes that all that’s needed to fix poverty is more money, and that attitudes, preferences and ambitions are irrelevant.

Of course the two sides share the truth between them. Opportunities and aspirations develop in tandem, interacting with each other in both directions. There is no culture gap in terms of overall aspirations in life. Most people want similar things: a worthwhile job, a stable family, a good education. A class gap is, however, visible in active aspirations: visible, realizable goals animating the formulation of plans and the deployment of time, energy and skills.

This is what JFK was getting at in his inclusion of the “*motivation...to...make something of yourself*” as a good to which we should have “equal rights.” It is also what Bush meant by the “soft bigotry of low expectations.”

In many cases, people may downgrade their active aspirations because they can see no genuine prospect of their achievement. If they are correct in that assessment, the implications for policy are clear. People won’t raise their sights unless we improve their odds. But alongside measures to close gaps in education, health and parenting, policy-makers ought to consider investing in initiatives that close gaps in active aspirations. Skills imbue people with the capacity to act. Active aspirations provide the reason.

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