

Sacrifice, suffering and hope: education, aspiration and young people's affective orientations to the future¹

Special Theme Editorial

Peggy Froerer (corresponding guest-editor), Brunel University London,

peggy.froerer@brunel.ac.uk

Nicola Ansell, Brunel University London, Brunel University London

Roy Huijsmans, International Institute of Social Studies, Netherlands

Keywords: aspiration, affect, education, sacrifice, youth, ethnography

The motivation behind this Special Theme is to examine the complex relationship between education, aspiration and young people's affective orientations toward a desired future. Research on the concept of aspiration, and young people's aspirations in particular, has increased in recent years (Zipin et al., 2021; Newman 2021; White 2019; Frye 2019; Stahl 2015; cf. Camfield 2011). Described as being 'multidimensional and many-faceted' (Ibrahim 2011, 4), aspiration typically refers to hopes, desires or expectations for a particular kind of future. As Huijsmans, Ansell and Froerer (2021, 3) observe, 'such futures may consist of individual or collective projects or more

¹ This Special Theme was conceived as part of the project 'Education systems, aspiration and learning in remote rural settings', based at Brunel University London and funded through the ESRC-DFID scheme, Raising Learning Outcomes in Education Systems (ES/N01037X/1). For this project, field research was conducted in remote, rural India, Laos and Lesotho. For further details: <https://www.brunel.ac.uk/research/Projects/Education-aspiration>.

immediate or longer-term futures and include both the work of imaginations and affect as well as material practices'. Implicit within this discourse is the idea that aspiration formation is not only an individual or personal process; it is also a social and structural one (see Baker et al. 2014, 526). Constituted relationally (Huijsmans 2016) and formed through interaction with others (Appadurai 2004, 67), much of the discourse around this concept is thus geared toward understanding the tensions between individual aspirations and the broader social relations or structural and institutional conditions that facilitate or constrain them, such as family and peers, poverty and economic status (Marjoribanks 2003; Gutman and Akerman 2008).

A great deal of attention has also been given to the crucial role that education systems play in aspiration formation (Corbett 2007; Davidson 2011; Stahl 2015). Often framed as a fundamental 'social good' (Dreze and Sen 1995), international organisations and national governments alike associate education with the facilitation of important opportunities, and young people's engagement with education has long been understood to be driven, in part, by the promise of a better future. Contemporary research has provided more ethnographically-grounded consideration of the affective expressions and experiences that constitute an intrinsic part of aspiration formation: the sacrifices and suffering, the hope and optimism, the successes and triumphs, coupled with the fears, anxiety, disappointments and despair that underpin and become manifest – often at one and the same time – in young people's experiences of education and in their understanding of the purportedly integral role it plays in facilitating ways of 'getting ahead' (Dost and Froerer 2021; Kaland 2021; Jakimow 2016; Frye 2012). Building upon this work, it is toward a further understanding of young people's affective orientations and how these shape and give meaning to their aspirations and engagement with education that the four papers in this Special Theme are devoted.

We understand affect as something that is characterised by senses and sentiment, desires and anxieties, inclinations and intentions (Skoggard and Waterston 2015). As the papers in this Special Theme attest, it also has outward, social and collective manifestations – in the way that it impacts upon young people’s shared experiences and relations with others (Woodward and Lea 2010; Anderson and Smith 2001; von Scheve 2018), for example. Like aspiration, then, affect has a fundamentally ‘relational dimension’ (Huijsmans 2016), particularly in the way it is manifested and produced through interaction with others, and within broader institutional and situational contexts (cf. Knudsen and Stage 2015, 4-5). Sometimes hailed for its ‘deep interiority’ (Lutz 2017), some theorists argue that affect is inextricably tied to bodily sensations and thus ‘beyond’ language, discourse and representation (von Scheve 2018, 41); others, however, suggest that affect is manifested not only in the body, but also through cognitive forms, thus lending itself to linguistic or textual expression (Knudsen and Stage 2015, 4; cf. Ahmed 2004). Notwithstanding these different perspectives, most researchers agree that apprehending affect – those feelings, emotions, sensations and other qualities that ‘move and matter in human life’ (Lutz 2017, 182) and shape lived experiences – is notoriously challenging (Beatty 2019), not least because, as Seigworth and Gregg (2010, 1) observe, ‘it arises in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon’. As suggested by Knudsen and Stage (2015, 4-5), whose edited volume is devoted to developing methodologies and analytical strategies that characterise affective processes, attention to the social or situational context is a first step in addressing the challenge of understanding the ‘actual affectivity of social life’. Moreover, focusing on affect, as Skoggard and Waterston (2015, 112) acknowledge, provides a space for examining and privileging feelings in social activity and interaction, thereby enhancing our understanding of its relationship to other aspects of social life (ibid., 114). It is precisely this

kind of socially interactive, ‘situational specificity’ called for by these authors that the papers in this Special Theme aim to bring to the broader scholarly endeavour to characterise and understand affective processes.

In addition to affect, each of the four papers in this Special Theme considers, in different ways, the enduring sacrifices that are made or perceived to be necessary to gain access to desired educational qualifications or opportunities. Here, sacrifice refers to the surrendering of something desirable in exchange for something more valued or necessary (Carbonell 2015), and is often experienced in terms of loss, anxiety and suffering in the present, in exchange for an opportunity gained in the future (Yuang and Yeoh 2015). Like affect, sacrifice is intrinsically relational, the product or outcome of negotiation or obligation to different people – family, peers, employers, or society as a whole – and involving different social and structural processes. Such processes, young people learn, can become something of a false promise (Marsh 2011), where the aspirations that underpin young people’s educational engagement give way to a sense of futility about the possibility of achieving the desired outcome. This becomes particularly potent against the backdrop of the structural obstacles or embodied disadvantages that thwart even the most reasonable strategies for pursuing a different kind of future (Zipin et al. 2013). In such contexts, young people (or their parents) may also be driven to engage in further sacrifice, which may see their aspirations altered or abandoned altogether.

But what are the ways in which young people’s aspirations are transformed in relation to the sacrifices and other affective orientations that underpin their pursuit of a better future? And how do young people’s affective orientations, in turn, go on to shape and give meaning to their aspirations and engagement with education? It is these kinds of questions that lie at the heart of

the four papers in this Special Theme. With geographical focus on India, Indonesia, Kenya and Bangladesh, the papers are each situated against a backdrop of comparative precarity and marginality, which is manifested in different ways across the four settings: a large boarding school for disadvantaged indigenous (tribal, or *adivasi*) youth in India (Finnan); through processes of educational migration amongst comparatively disadvantaged youth in Indonesia (Minza and Herlusia); in contexts of extreme poverty and HIV/AIDS-related orphanhood in Kenya (Ngutuku); and a refugee settlement ‘camp’ in Bangladesh (Afroze). Research for each paper draws on a range of ethnographic methods, including participant observation within different educational contexts, conversations and exchanges with young people, parents and teachers, photo diaries and written journals, and formal and informal interviews.

Importantly, all contributors privilege the latter as a most effective tool to elicit insight and reflection on affective experiences. Traditionally considered to be an essential part of the ethnographer’s ‘toolkit’, the contribution that the interview makes to the representation of ethnographic detail has at times been downplayed as a ‘second-rate’ methodological choice compared to participant observation (Staples and Smith 2015, 4; cf. Hockey 2002). As Staples and Smith (2015, 19) point out, however, the interview can give rise to data that is at once ‘specific and generalisable, personal and social, pragmatic and conceptual, extraordinary and insightful of the everyday’. In this way, the interview can become a useful tool that allows ‘past and future to be accessed via the present and create space for what has been left unsaid and what remains invisible’ (Hockey 2002, 214). Notwithstanding the critical role played by participant observation in ethnographic research, then, the interview serves as a ‘special, productive site of ethnographic encounter’ (Staples and Smiths 2015, 4) that lends itself well to the methodological

challenges related to affect, particularly in the way it makes possible an examination of feelings in the context of different social activities and through different forms of social interaction (Skoggard and Waterston 2015, 114). For such reasons it is well-positioned to facilitate access to a more substantive understanding of affective ideas – those feelings, emotions, sensations and other qualities – that, as noted above, are extremely challenging to ‘get at’ (Beatty 2019).

The distinctive ways in which interviews are utilized by contributors to this Special Theme to apprehend these affective dimensions are driven, in part, by the situational specificity of the research context, but also by the needs of the particular research population. More formal individual interviews, for example, which lend themselves well to the India context, are adapted to (small) group discussions in Indonesia. Individual and group interviews that take the form of ‘soft listening’ and ‘continuous conversations’ in Kenya, are further modified with the use of hand puppets in Bangladesh. Through careful analysis of ethnographically-grounded interviews that complement other ethnographic data in different ways, then, the contributors to this Special Theme are able to produce further understanding of the affective orientations that emerge or become visible in the context of young people’s educational experiences, and that shape and give meaning to processes of aspiration formation.

Christine Finnan discusses how young people’s affective expressions and experiences are moulded and constructed in an institutionalized context. Situated in a large boarding school that is home to 22,500 indigenous students in eastern India, ethnographic focus is on the tangible and intangible characteristics that project ‘hopefulness’ and provide the backdrop for students’ affective expressions and experiences of aspiration and sacrifice. Observations and informal interactions within the classroom and school assembly, the playing field and the student hostel,

were complemented by more formal, ethnographically-grounded interviews carried out with students, parents and teachers. Finnan is especially interested in understanding how young people frame their aspirations as a ‘sacrifice worth making’ in relation to this kind of institutionalized educational setting, but also how they justify their aspirations in relation to the perceived sacrifices that they (and their families) must make in order to avail themselves of the opportunities promised by this educational institution.

Wenty Marina Minza and Safura Intan Herlusia focus on the importance of affect and trust in processes of educational migration amongst comparatively disadvantaged young people in peripheral areas of West Kalimantan and Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Attention is given to young people’s shared hopes and aspirations, but also to their anticipation and anxiety as they prepare for the challenges and uncertainties associated with educational migration to an unfamiliar place. Multiple interviews that were carried out with interlocutors – often in the presence of friends – encouraged more detailed reflection on present-day affective experiences and concerns about the future. In the process, we learn how such challenges are mitigated as young people’s anxieties give way to trust and a reliance on the goodwill of others. To this end, Minza and Herlusia also highlight the affective and relational dimension of trust, which is created through existing and imagined future relationships with both known and unknown others and institutions, and manifested in terms of shared hope, reciprocity and support.

Elizabeth Ngutuku’s ethnographic research in rural Kenya is the basis from which she explores children’s education-related aspirations in contexts of extreme deprivation. In this contribution, the word for eating (*onge*) is used as an exemplar for suffering and sacrifices

that children endure as they pursue and frame education as ‘future food’. Drawing on a Deleuzian (1988) understanding of affect as a changing bodily state and therefore a capacity to ‘affect and be affected’, and employing an innovative interview technique called ‘listening softly’ that involved continuous conversations around essays and drawings, Ngutuku explores how children’s aspirations are built upon an ‘assemblage’ of factors, including HIV/AIDS and death, poverty and orphanhood, which serve to fuel young people’s desires for an alternative future. Against the backdrop of these extremely challenging conditions of existence, Ngutuku also charts the ‘messiness’ of young people’s aspirations and educational trajectories as she seeks to understand the ways in which young people’s affective orientations to a better future shift in imaginative and unexpected ways.

Jiniya Afroze turns her attention to the mediating role played by gender and generational expectations in the formation of young people’s aspirations. Drawing on research conducted in a Bihari resettlement camp in Dhaka, Bangladesh, specific focus is on the affective orientations that underpin young people’s desires to ‘become something’, particularly in contexts of everyday precarity. A relational perspective is at the centre of Afroze’s analysis, which utilizes Huijsmans’ (2016) work to understand how young people reorientate their aspirations against the backdrop of generational and gendered obligations that are rooted in traditional relations of power and reciprocity. The use of hand puppets in the course of individual and group interviews helped Afroze to elicit further understanding of everyday affective experiences and feelings. Attention is also given to young people’s affective expressions of frustration, anxiety and even ambivalence, as they negotiate and (re)adjust their education and work-related aspirations in the context of ongoing social and economic vulnerability.

By highlighting the diverse ways in which affective orientations to the future shape and give meaning to young people's aspiration formation, these four papers together demonstrate an effective means to engage with and 'get at' the notoriously challenging issue of affect (Beatty 2019). In the process, this Special Theme responds to the invitation issued by Knudsen and Stage (2015, 5, 19) to contribute more situationally specific, empirically-grounded analyses of affective processes.

Bibliography

Ahmed, S. 2004. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Anderson, K. and Smith, Susan J. 2001. Emotional Geographies. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 26(1): 7-10.

Appadurai, A. 2004. The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition. *Culture and Public Action*, ed. V. Rao and M. Walton, 59–84. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Baker, W., Sammons, P. Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K. Melhuish, E.C. & Taggart, B. (2014) Aspirations, education and inequality in England: insights from the Effective Provision of Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education Project. In *Oxford Review of Education*, 40:5, 525-542

Beatty, A. 2019. *Emotional Words: Beyond the Anthropology of Emotion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Camfield, L. 2011. Editorial: Young Lives in Transition: From School to Adulthood? *European Journal of Development Research* 23(5): 669-678.

Carbonell, V. 2015. 'Sacrifices of self'. *Journal of Ethics* 19: 53-72.

Corbett, M. 2007. Travels in space and place: identity and rural schooling. *Canadian Journal of Education* 30(3): 771-792.

Davidson, E. 2011. *The Burdens of Aspiration: Schools, Youth and Success in the Divided Social Worlds of Silicon Valley*. New York: NYU Press.

Deleuze, G. 1988. *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. San Francisco: City Lights.

Dost, A. and Froerer, P. 2021 "Education, Aspiration and *aage badhna*: The Role of Schooling in Facilitating 'Forward Movement' in Rural Chhattisgarh, India. *European Journal of Development Research* 33(1): 109-129.

Dreze, J. and Sen, A. 1995. *Economic Development and Social Opportunity*. Delhi, India: Oxford University Press.

Frye M. 2012. Bright futures in malawi's new dawn: Educational aspirations as assertions of identity. *American Journal of Sociology* 117(6), pp. 1565-1624.

Frye M. 2019. The myth of agency and the misattribution of blame in collective imaginaries of the future. *The British Journal of Sociology* 70(3), pp. 721-730.

Gutman, L.M. and Akerman, R. 2008. *Determinants of Aspiration: Research Report*. London:

Centre for Research on Wider Benefits of Learning.

Hockey, J. 2002. 'Interviews as ethnography? Disembodied social interaction in Britain,' in N. Rapport (ed.) *British subjects: an anthropological Britain*, 209-222. Oxford: Berg.

Huijsmans, R. (ed.). 2016. *Generationing Development: A Relational Approach to Children, Youth and Development*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Huijsmans, R., N. Ansell, and P. Froerer. 2021. Editorial Introduction: Development, young people, and the social production of aspirations. *European Journal of Development Research*. 33:1–15.

Ibrahim, S. 2011. *Poverty, Aspirations and Wellbeing: Afraid to Aspire and Unable to Reach a Better Life—Voices from Egypt*. Manchester: BWPI Working Paper.

Jakimow T. 2016. Clinging to hope through education: The consequences of hope for rural laborers in Telangana, India. *Ethos* 44(1), pp. 11-31.

Kaland O.J. 2021. "We have many options, but they are all bad options!": Aspirations among internal migrant youths in Shanghai, China. *European Journal of Development Research* 33(1): 35-53.

Knudsen, B.T. and Stage, C. (2015) *Affective Methodologies: Developing cultural research strategies for the study of affect*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lutz, C. 2017. 'What Matters?'. *Cultural Anthropology* 32(2): 181-191.

- Marjoribanks, K. 2003. Family Background, Individual and Environmental Influences, Aspirations and Young Adults' Educational Attainment: a follow-up study. *Educational Studies* 29(2/3): 233-242.
- Marsh, J. 2011. *Class dismissed: Why we cannot teach or learn our way out of inequality*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Newman A. 2021. 'Getting the best of both worlds': Aspirations and agency in relation to marriage and schooling among Haalpulaar women in northern Senegal. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education* 51(8), pp. 1157-1173.
- Seigworth, G.J. and Gregg, M. 2010. 'An Inventory of Shimmers'. In Gregg M and Seigworth GJ (eds) *The Affect Theory Reader*, 1-26. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Skoggard, I. and Waterson, A. 2015. Introduction: toward an anthropology of affect and evocative ethnography. In *Anthropology of Consciousness* 26(2):109-120.
- Stahl, G. 2015. *Identity, Neoliberalism and Aspiration: Educating white working-class boys*. London: Routledge.
- Staples, J. and K. Smith. 2015. *Extraordinary Encounters: Authenticity and the Interview*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- von Scheve, C. 2018 'A Social Relational Account of Affect'. *European Journal of Social Theory* 21(1): 39-59.

White B. 2019. 'Rural youth, today and tomorrow'. IFAD Research Series no 48. Rome: International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).

Woodward, K. and Lea, J. 2010. 'Geographies of Affect', p. 154-175. In (eds) Smith, S.J., Pain, R., Marston, S.A. and Jones, J.P., *The Sage Handbook of Social Geographies*, 154-175. London: Sage.

Yuang, S. and Yeoh, B.S.A. 2005. 'Transnational families and their children's education: China's 'study mothers' in Singapore'. *Global Networks* 5 (4) 379-400.

Zipin, L. (et al) 2013. 'Educating for Futures in Marginalized Regions: A sociological framework for rethinking and researching aspirations'. In *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 47(3): 227–246.

Zipin L., Brennan M. and Sellar S. 2021. Young people pursuing futures: Making identity labors curricular. *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 28(2): 152-168.