

Ambitious career aspirations: A balancing act between success and disappointment

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Higher aspirations lead to higher achievements. At least, that is true in the context of educational and occupational aspirations, as shown by a new study co-authored by economist Dr. Reto Odermatt of the

University of Basel. Unrealistically high aspirations as a teenager, however, can have a negative effect on well-being as an adult.

Over the last few years, [social mobility](#) between the generations has become an important topic in [political discourse](#) worldwide. Many possible factors that hinder children in moving further up the social ladder than their parents have already been investigated, such as [financial resources](#), the educational system and genetics. Dr. Reto Odermatt (University of Basel) and Prof. Dr. Warn Lekfuangfu (Universidad Carlos III de Madrid) conducted a study to investigate the relevance of [career](#) aspirations in social mobility and later [life satisfaction](#). The results have now been published in the journal *European Economic Review*.

Educational and occupational aspirations are important predictors of career success

The basis for the study is a dataset that follows the lives of over 17,000 people in the UK who were all born in the same week in 1958, and continues to collect data to this day. Among other things, the dataset gathers together information on each individual's childhood environment, the professional and financial backgrounds of their parents, the participant's abilities, their aspirations in their youth, their occupation and their well-being as an adult.

The authors of the study therefore know not only participants' youthful career aspirations but also their circumstances and occupations later in life. "This database is unique. We don't have anything like it available in Switzerland. And, although the UK has its own idiosyncrasies, when this data is analyzed, the fundamental findings can also be applied to Switzerland," says Odermatt.

The authors are using this database to investigate how the aspirations of children and young people affect their later life. How far did they get in their education? What was their actual labor market outcome, i.e. what was the job with the highest prestige that they held during their working life? They determined that the educational and career aspirations held by participants as teenagers were, along with cognitive skills, among the most important predictors overall for their later success in their education and careers. This indicates that ambitious career goals motivate people to invest more in their future career success.

Social inequality already discernible in career aspirations

The opposite is also the case: unambitious career aspirations can be an important explanation for limited social mobility. The study showed that young people whose parents were less well educated did indeed have less ambitious career goals. "This cannot be explained solely by the differences in family income or in participants' abilities. It is more the case that inequality seems to begin early on, with their very aspirations," reasons Odermatt. So, although social inequality would be less pronounced if young people were to achieve their dreams, it would not disappear.

Parental aspirations concerning their children's school and career performance have a particularly great effect on how far a child aims to go. Less ambitious career goals therefore form part of the explanation for limited social mobility. "We didn't expect parents' aspirations for their children to have such a strong influence," says the economist.

The flip side of "dreaming big"

As well as the potentially positive impact of "dreaming big," however,

ambitious goals can also lead to disappointments. The data show that there is a negative impact on life satisfaction in early adulthood if people achieve less than they aspired to when they were younger. These negative effects subside in their later working lives, however. If they then actually achieve more than what they aspired to, then there is a positive correlation with well-being, which has a greater effect than at a younger age. "The fact that we were able to show how teenage aspirations affect life satisfaction much later in life is one of the strengths of the study," says Odermatt.

The findings relating to the relevance of aspirations for success in both school and working life offer an opportunity to reduce [social inequality](#). Political measures designed to raise expectations, especially among disadvantaged children, could have a considerable influence on their chances for social advancement.

"That means we shouldn't leave it entirely to parents to influence children's career aspirations; schools can intervene here," Odermatt points out. Teaching staff could actively make teenagers aware of careers that suit their abilities. This could encourage them to look beyond their own horizons. After all, as the economist says, a person's view of the world is often strongly defined by their surroundings.

Nevertheless, the results of the study suggest that such measures could be a double-edged sword: ambitious career goals may be motivating, but they can also lead to disappointment. This makes it a key concern not simply to maximize [young people](#)'s dreams, but to optimize them, says the academic.

More information: Warn N. Lekfuangfu et al, All I have to do is dream? The role of aspirations in intergenerational mobility and well-being, *European Economic Review* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.eurocorev.2022.104193](#)

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