

## Thesis abstract

# A social psychological examination of factors shaping career and education aspirations through childhood and adolescence

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Young people often are asked what they want to be when they grow up. What factors influence their responses to this most common of questions? This study used theoretical perspectives from social and vocational psychology, including Gottfredson's (1981, 2002) career circumscription and compromise theory, to investigate the formation of career aspirations during primary and secondary schooling. A particular emphasis was the relationship between social cognition and socioeconomic status (SES) — is SES associated with young people's thinking about careers-related identity questions? The study drew on data gathered during the first three years (2012-2014) of the Aspirations Longitudinal Study (ALS) in the State of New South Wales, Australia. Students in Years 3-11 were sampled in an accelerated longitudinal design, whereby three cohorts completed a comprehensive career aspirations questionnaire for three years. The sample comprised 7,462 questionnaires from 5,304 students. In addition to the questionnaires, the ALS accessed standardised demographic and literacy/numeracy data held by the state for each student. To examine the influence of students' social-cognitive styles on their career aspirations, they also completed a

modified version of Berzonsky et al.'s (2013) Identity Style Index as part of the 2014 questionnaire. The latent class mixture modelling (LCMM) technique was used to analyse the accelerated longitudinal data. LCMM identified four discrete change trajectories in the prestige of career aspirations during nine years of schooling. Students' identity styles were found to differ between SES backgrounds, with high SES students more information-oriented and less diffuse/avoidant when dealing with identity questions compared to low SES students. Identity styles also differed by SES background within the LCMM trajectories, with high aspiring low SES students more information-oriented and less diffuse/avoidant than their low aspiring peers. The implications of these findings for theory, research, and practice are discussed.

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