Second Generation Australians and their Aspirations: Do gender and ethnic background matter?

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Abstract

Occupational and educational aspirations can influence socioeconomic outcomes but they are impacted by social change. Aspirations can also reflect current social norms, expectations and the barriers individuals perceive to socioeconomic attainment. This paper examines the role of gender and ethnic background on the future aspirations of children of migrants. Data are derived from a large sample of Grade 8 students in Queensland. Preliminary analyses suggest that ethnicity is associated with only some of migrant children’s aspirations, while gender affects occupational but not educational aspirations.

Introduction

Today, more women than ever before participate in education and employment opportunities that usually lead to upward social mobility and higher social status. However, despite major institutional reforms in the Australian labour market and social policy to eliminate gender discrimination, differences between male and female educational and occupational attainment continue. While women currently comprise a majority of tertiary students, they still earn less than men and are less likely to attain managerial and professional occupations (Hillman and Rothman 2003). Evidently, gender is still an important factor in status attainment.

Other characteristics of individuals, such as migrant generational status, ethnicity and language, also shape the social mobility and status attainment of individuals. The labour market outcomes of migrants and their children differ significantly from that of the general population and are generally
patterned by country of origin groups. In 2008, 50 percent of Australia’s population was either born overseas or had at least one parent born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008: 209-210). Twenty four percent of the population are children of migrants, indicating that this segment of Australian society is likely to play an influential and important role in the shaping of this country’s future (Giorgas 2000; Khoo, McDonald, Giorgas and Birrell 2002; Le and Miller 2002; Liebig 2007; Skrbis et al 2007). Moreover, children of migrants are an important transitional group between their parents as migrants and the general population of the host country. Their success or failure in status attainment is therefore, a good indicator of the social outcomes of migration.

While it is well established that social outcomes differ by gender and ethnicity, much less is known about which factors mediate the influence of gender and ethnic characteristics on social outcomes. One such factor is aspirations – a concept first used in status attainment theories of socioeconomic attainment (see Sewell, Haller and Straus 1957). According to status attainment theory, aspirations help explain why some individuals are socially mobile and why others are not (Sewell 1988:134-135). They can also reflect current social norms, and the perceived opportunities or barriers individuals encounter (Hill, Ramirez and Dumka 2003). Aspirations are also shaped by social change and historical events (Shu and Marini 2008).

From the perspective of migration research, the social outcomes of migrants are important for understanding the determinants of successful or unsuccessful migration. Drawing upon the status attainment tradition, Portes and associates have developed segmented assimilation theory to explain cross generational migration outcomes (see Portes and Borocz 1989; Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Individual level factors, such as aspirations are included in this model and are considered to interact with other structural level factors and personal characteristics (Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 2001).
In this paper, we bring together these two different research traditions: status attainment literature and migration research. In doing so, we utilise status attainment theory’s understanding of the role of aspirations in social mobility, and immigration research on the processes and outcomes of migration. Using a representative Queensland sample of Grade 8 students, we explore whether there are gender and ethnic differences in the future aspirations of second generation Australians. Specifically, we examine whether the aspirations of children of migrants are associated with gender and ethnic background. In the following section we briefly discuss, background literature relating to our research questions. We then outline our research design and describe our results. Finally, we present some suggestions for future research.

**Aspirations and the study of the children of immigrants**

Within social stratification research, family and parental characteristics (such as parents’ social background or education), personal characteristics and socio-psychological factors (such as motivation, confidence and aspirations) have been used to explain educational and occupational outcomes (Sewell, Haller and Straus 1957; Saha 1997; Khoo and Ainley 2005). In research specifically concerned with migrants it is also well established that gender, migrant generational status and ethnic background all play important roles in determining individual’s educational and socioeconomic outcomes (e.g. Marjoribanks 2002; Khoo et al 2002; Feliciano and Rumbaut 2005; Coates 2007).

From 1950s onwards, U.S. status attainment research typically informed the analysis of American migrants’ aspirations and socioeconomic outcomes (e.g. Portes, McLeod and Parker 1978). In contrast research into aspirations and socioeconomic outcomes of Australian migrants and their children is relatively limited. American research can thus offer some valuable insights into the social processes of migrant settlement and also the intergenerational attainment and transmission of status and resources.
Social structures and institutions such as socioeconomic status, schooling, gender, ethnicity and language all have strong influences on individual’s educational and occupational attainment. However, other individual characteristics such as aspirations, academic ability or intelligence and motivation may also influence socioeconomic attainment and social mobility (Sewell 1988: 134-135), and may help explain how individuals from the same social background have different outcomes. The concept of aspirations attempts to capture future hopes and plans of individuals without considering possible barriers (such as economic, geographic or perceived discrimination barriers) and expectations. Aspirations are commonly studied under the rubric of ‘attitudes and behaviours’ and used interchangeably with expectations, despite their different meanings (Saha 1997). Aspirations are ‘idealistic goals’ while expectations are ‘realistic goals’ (Morgan 2006: 1529).

Early Australian research found that gender and ethnicity were important factors in children’s educational and occupational aspirations. Meade and Martin (1979) conducted a comprehensive study of the relationship between social demographic factors, schooling experience and performance and future aspirations of Sydney High School students. They focused on migrant children and found that their aspirations differed between language background (English or non-English), ethnicity and gender.

Other research conducted during the 1970s suggests that gender was a major limitation for an individual’s aspirations and achievement. Edgar (1974) argued that gender delimited girls’ self-perceptions and influenced their setting of realistic goals and achievements. Following this, Sinclair, Crouch and Miller (1977) argued that females have limited acceptable social roles and thus have lower and fewer aspirations, perhaps explaining gendered occupational choices.
The above patterns at least partly reflect Australian gender relations in the 1970s. However, later research by Saha (1982) showed that gender continued to be an important determinant of educational and occupational outcomes, with males having higher career goals than females. More recent research on adolescents’ aspirations, however, found that females had higher aspirations than males (Majoribanks 2002). Further, in a longitudinal study on the educational expectations of high school students, Andres et al (2007) found that gender was still critical for aspirations and educational and occupational outcomes. Evidently, in the last few decades, the role of gender in aspirations and socioeconomic outcomes has changed, but it still remains significant.

The role of gender in aspirations is further clarified by considering ethnicity. Par and Mok (1995) found that the relationship between aspirations and gender differed by ethnic background and birthplace. Students from Asian background had the highest aspirations, while students of New Zealand background had the lowest. However, in contrast to the current general trend males of Middle Eastern background had higher educational aspirations and plans than Middle Eastern females (Parr and Mok 1995). Majoribanks (2002:116) also identified similar research outcomes, finding that adolescents from Asia, the Middle East and Southern Europe had higher aspirations than general population Australians. This research suggests that ethnicity will not only predict educational aspirations, it will also potentially interact with gender.

International research confirms that while the interaction between gender, ethnicity and aspirations has been subject to change over time, it remains important. Andres et al (2007: 138) found that higher education plans and participation are increasingly less gendered, but remain critical for occupational pathways. Research by Feliciano and Rumbaut (2005) on children of immigrants in the U.S. found that socioeconomic outcomes for children of immigrants are segmented by social background, ethnicity and gender. Australian research on second generation Australians education and occupational outcomes across a number of age cohorts supports this finding (Khoo et al 2002).
This brief literature review has demonstrated that gender and ethnicity are associated with, and may predict, aspirations. More specifically, the pattern of these associations may be different for migrant children. Thus, the research presented here aims to answer the following research questions:

1. Are the educational aspirations of young second generation Australians associated with their gender?
2. Are the educational aspirations of young second generation Australians associated with their ethnic backgrounds?

**Research Design**

**Data**

We use the Social Futures and Life Pathways\(^2\) (‘Our Lives’) longitudinal dataset. The Our Lives project aims to investigate the attitudes, expectations and beliefs of young Queenslanders in the face of a changing and increasingly uncertain social world. Given the longitudinal nature of the project, the dataset is ideal for capturing and tracking immigrant children’s aspirations and how they influence their school performance, future outlooks and achievements. The state-wide nature of the Our Lives project and the substantial total sample size (N=7031) contributes to its suitability to the study of sub-population groups. In this analysis we focus on a sub-sample of children of migrants (N=1783).

The data used in this paper were collected in the first wave of data collection (2006) which involved Grade 8 students (12-13 years old) across 202 State (50 percent), Independent (34 percent) and Catholic (15 percent) High Schools. Students were asked questions about their future, issues and interests, friends and personal networks and about themselves, including some demographic details. The survey sample contains 10 percent first generation Australians, 26 percent second generation Australians, and 64 percent third generation Australians.
Methods

We used cross-tabulations and chi-square tests of association to examine simple relationships between the dependent and independent variables (data not shown). Descriptive summary statistical tests were also carried out. To address the research questions we use multinomial logistic regression which analyses the possible effects of a number of independent variables on a single nominal dependent variable. Because our dependent variable is categorical and unordered, multinomial regression is the most appropriate statistical method. Two models were constructed for this paper. The first model measures the effect of gender on after school plans of second generation Australians. The second model examines this same relationship, and includes the added effect of parental ethnic background. This allows us to analyse the amount of variance that is explained just by gender, in comparison to the second model, which also includes ethnic background.

Dependent Variable

The key dependent variable used in this paper is post-high school plans. This variable is a partial operationalisation of the concept of aspirations. The survey asked “In the year after high school, what do you plan to do”, with students offered a number of choices, including going to university, TAFE, getting a job, getting an apprenticeship, joining the army/air force/navy, travelling or taking time off. The options “other” and “don’t know” were collapsed into one ‘other’ category for the multinomial regressions.

Independent Variables

The key independent variable in the first model is gender. Ethnic background was included in the second model. Ethnic background is based on a variable that measures students’ own and their mother’s and father’s country of birth. Students were asked where their parents were born. Country categories were then collapsed into “overseas born, English speaking background”, “overseas born,
non-English speaking background’ and “Australian born”. As this paper focuses on the second generation, only parental ethnic background of mothers and fathers is included in the regression.

**Results**

Descriptive summary statistics are presented in Table 1 (Table 1 about here) for all variables used in the analysis. Chi-squared tests of association were also conducted to check the variables’ suitability for the model (data not shown). Each of the independent variables was cross-tabulated with the dependent variable. Gender (chi-squared (7) = 126.6817, p value <0.001) and mother’s ethnicity (chi-squared (21) = 69.6070, p value <0.001) were strongly associated with post-high school plans. Father’s ethnic background was not as strongly associated (chi-squared (21) = 38.6204, p value <0.01). The chi-squared tests of association indicate that gender and parental ethnic background are all significantly associated with second generation Australians post-high school plans, suggesting that these independent variables have considerable influence on the development of students’ aspirations for the future.

**Multinomial Regression Models**

The first multinomial regression has a Pseudo R-squared of 0.0218, the Wald chi-squared is 130.03 with an associated p-value of <0.001 (data not shown). These statistics suggest that the model is a good fit.

Overall, the model suggests that relative to attending university after high school, gender affects the likelihood of planning to get a job, or an apprenticeship/traineeship, or to travel, or joining the Defence Forces. Compared to going to university, gender did not significantly affect the likelihood of children of immigrants’ planning to go to TAFE, taking a year off, or selecting ‘other’. When the model was displayed in terms of testing the odds of an outcome occurring, gender seemed to positively increase the effect. The categories of getting a job, apprenticeship/traineeship, and
joining the defence forces all had z scores <0.001. TAFE, travel and joining the defence forces, all had higher odds values, but the TAFE z-score was not significant. This relative risk assessment suggests and confirms that gender effects the aspirations of second generation Australians.

The second multinomial regression is displayed in table two (Table 2 about here). This model has a Pseudo R-Squared of 0.0326 and a Wald chi-squared statistic of 194.18, with an associated p-value of <0.001. This statistic suggests that gender and ethnicity are associated with post-school planes.

Overall, a preliminary interpretation of the model suggests that gender and mothers’ ethnicity most strongly affect aspirations. Relative to going to university, being female is associated with significantly lower odds of planning to get a job, an apprenticeship or joining the defence forces, and significantly higher odds of planning to travel. Mother’s and father’s ethnicity are similarly associated with lower odds of getting a job or apprenticeship, joining the defence forces, taking a year off, and travelling. The odds ratios from the relative risk assessment seemed to indicate, that being female negatively affected the likelihood of all aspirations occurring. The odds values for the effect of ethnicity were generally moderate to high, indicating that the risk likelihood of ethnicity effecting students’ aspirations is considerable.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This paper has aimed to investigate the affect of gender and ethnic background on children of immigrants’ aspirations. Overall, we found that gender and ethnicity affect some types of aspirations. Mother’s ethnicity, in general, affected aspirations more significantly than father’s ethnicity. Interestingly, gender did not significantly affect students’ educational aspirations (to TAFE or university) occurring, though gender did affect the likelihood of occupational aspirations occurring. This may be symptomatic of current education trends in Australia, that show similar levels of males and females enrolling in university level courses (Hillman and Rothman 2003).
Further, this result is reflective of research that shows gendered occupational attainment of young Australians (Hillman and Rothman 2003).

Our results that demonstrate an effect of ethnicity on aspirations is broadly consistent with the literature that argues for the important mediating role of ethnicity in the formation of aspirations (e.g. Parr and Mok 1995; Marjoribanks 2002). Given the preliminary nature of these results it is difficult to provide authoritative suggestions on the consequences of these findings.

The study has reported a preliminary interpretation of the multinomial regression conducted. Further interpretation and post-estimation tests between the models, and an extension of the independent variables used are likely to increase the strength of the model and our understanding of the role of gender and ethnic background on the aspirations of children of immigrants. In particular, the expansion of the ethnicity measure to include language background and country of origin, of parents is likely to illuminate the nuances of the role of ethnic background on aspirations. Socioeconomic background variables, such as parental education and occupation would provide valuable insight into the other important influences of migrant children’s’ aspirations.

**Endnotes:**

1 Whilst other factors, such as academic performance, parental support and school engagement have also been found to influence aspirations (references) it is beyond the scope of this study, as thus we focus on ethnic background, religiosity and sex role belief.

2 Our Lives ([http://www.uq.edu.au/ourlives/](http://www.uq.edu.au/ourlives/)) is administered by the School of Social Science and the University of Queensland Social Research Centre, with Chief Investigators Professor Zlatko Skrbis and Professor Mark Western and is funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Project Grant (DP0878781) until 2011.
3 Research has shown that measuring the impact of ethnicity with broad measures can hide important observations. However, for the purpose of this preliminary interpretation a broad measure of ethnicity is used.

References Cited:


Table 1: Summary Descriptive Statistics of Second Generation Australians in Our Lives sample, 2006.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>Year After School Plans</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Get a Job</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get an Apprenticeship/Traineeship</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go to TAFE</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go to University</td>
<td>43</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Join the Army/Navy or Air Force</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take a Year Off</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (includes don’t know)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Independent Variables**

**Gender (%)**
- Males: 42
- Females: 58

**Mother’s Ethnic Background (%)**
- Australian: 37
- Overseas Born (English Speaking Background): 32
- Overseas Born (Non-English Speaking Background): 31

**Father’s Ethnic Background (%)**
- Australian: 31
- Overseas Born (English Speaking Background): 65
- Overseas Born (Non-English Speaking Background): 34

**Total Children of Immigrants in sample**: 1783
Table 2: Multinomial Regression Predicting After School Plans of Year Eight Children of Immigrants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Job</th>
<th>Apprenticeship/Traineeship</th>
<th>TAFE</th>
<th>Travel</th>
<th>Defence Forces</th>
<th>Year Off</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>.558***</td>
<td>.161</td>
<td>-1.408***</td>
<td>.221</td>
<td>.158</td>
<td>.266</td>
<td>.606**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother's Ethnicity</td>
<td>.455***</td>
<td>.105</td>
<td>-1.391***</td>
<td>.135</td>
<td>-2.66</td>
<td>.155</td>
<td>-3.49**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father's Ethnicity</td>
<td>-.352***</td>
<td>.105</td>
<td>-.382**</td>
<td>.135</td>
<td>-.127</td>
<td>.158</td>
<td>-.094</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of Observations: 1721

Wald chi2 (21): 194.18
Prob > chi2: 0.0000
Pseudo R2: 0.0326

*p<0.05  **p<0.01  ***p<0.001
Go to University is the reference category

1= Coefficient
2= Standard Error