

ON THE CONCEPT OF ASPIRATION

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To The Editor:

The recent dialogue on occupational choice¹ provides an opportunity to bring out a few often neglected points regarding levels of aspiration. Note that this entire discussion assumes that there are goal structures including continua of difficulty (such as the occupational prestige hierarchy); that people vary in their attainment levels with respect to these goal structures; and that people direct their behavior with respect to a limited range of points on their goal structures—a certain sector (by intent or default) becomes a goal for them.

Aspiration and Expectation

Sociologists interested in stratification have become concerned with goal-orientation variables because such factors promise to help explain educational and occupational attainment. A terminological confusion in this area is growing, probably because many are not trained in social psychology—the field in which such orientational variables have traditionally been studied. One question involves an unfortunate use of the terms "aspiration" and "expectation." Since Lewin, social psychologists have referred to the cognitive orientational aspect of goal-directed behavior as "level of aspiration." Lewin wisely distinguished between what he called "real" and "ideal" aspirations, the former being what the person thought he might really be able to attain, and the latter what he hoped to attain if all went well.² Because Lewin's word "real" seems somewhat more definite than the phenomena to which it refers, I have usually called these "realistic" and "idealistic." The suffixes, though, are not very important. "Real" or "realistic," "ideal" or "idealistic"—the term "aspiration" can serve well to describe ego's own orientation to a goal.

But why not use "aspiration" instead of "idealistic," and "expectation" instead of "realistic"? The main problem arises over "expectation." We are beginning to learn that one's own goal-orientations are in part controlled by the expectations others have for him. It would be far less confusing if the word "expectation" were used only for those things alter wants of ego. Reference group and significant-other influences on goal-orientations are coming to be focuses of research. This work often involves distinction between alter's realistic and idealistic hopes for ego. "Expectations" connoting predictions, obligations, and hopeful anticipations for the other is the term used for this purpose in social psychology and sociology. It is simple and

¹ Communications of Alfred M. Mirande, "Occupational Aspirations and Job Attainments," and Robert C. Bealer and William P. Kuvlesky, "On Occupational Aspirations and Job Attainments: A Reply," *Rural Sociology*, 33 (September, 1968), pp. 349-356. See also, William P. Kuvlesky and Robert C. Bealer, "The Relevance of Adolescents' Occupational Aspirations for Subsequent Job Attainments," *Rural Sociology*, 32 (September, 1967), pp. 290-301.

² Kurt Lewin, "Field Theory and Experiment in Social Psychology," *American Journal of Sociology*, 44 (May, 1939), pp. 868-897.

straightforward to speak of A's expectation for B and B's aspiration for himself. It is easy to modify both terms by referring to A's realistic (or idealistic) expectation levels for B, and B's realistic (or idealistic) aspiration for himself. Surely we should try to anticipate and avoid such ambiguities as A's expectation-level expectation for B, when we could simply say "A's realistic expectation for B."

Realistic and Idealistic Levels of Aspiration

Much has been made of the supposed theoretical differences between realistic and idealistic levels of aspiration. Stephenson³ is probably more responsible than any other for the belief that realistic levels do, but idealistic levels do not, have behavioral relevance. What he showed was merely that of his measures of the two aspiration variables, only the realistic was associated with social status. Because all three measures were probably of low reliability and validity, his findings do not merit serious attention. In all our studies, on the other hand, we have found the four indicators of realistic and idealistic levels which together make up the *Occupational Aspiration Scale* (OAS) to be so highly intercorrelated that they are well-described by only one factor—obviously, level of occupational aspiration.⁴

This does not imply that idealistic and realistic levels are identical. The evidence to date suggests that the following is not far from true: $I = R + C + U$ where I = a person's idealistic level, R = his realistic level, C = a constant, U = unknowns, including unidentified non-random factors as well as random variation. This implies that for any person, $I > R$, which is ordinarily the case. Factor analyses eliminate C because they are based on correlation coefficients which in effect standardize the original variables to a mean of zero and variance of one. Factor analyses of the OAS thus show it to be heavily saturated with one factor underlying both I and R , with a small amount of variation left over for U .

It is to U that we must look, not only for random variations but also for such theoretically important variables as Rodman's "lower-class value stretch"⁵ as it applies to educational and occupational levels of aspiration. U must also include those strange factors accounting for the observation that a few individuals actually have realistic levels exceeding their idealistic levels. It may contain other factors as well. The implication is that the main factor measured by stimulus questions designed to tap realistic and idealistic levels of aspiration regarding a goal structure is simply level of aspiration with respect to it; the search for other behaviorally useful factors in such questions will be arduous and not very fruitful. (Presumably, these comments also apply to alter's expectations for ego, though the necessary research has not yet been conducted.)

³ Richard M. Stephenson, "Mobility Orientation and Stratification of 1,000 Ninth Graders," *American Sociological Review*, 22 (April, 1957), pp. 204-212.

⁴ Archibald O. Haller and Irwin W. Miller, *The Occupational Aspiration Scale: Theory, Structure and Correlates*, East Lansing: Michigan State University Agr. Exp. Sta., Tech. Bull. 288, 1963, pp. 83-87.

⁵ Hyman Rodman, "The Lower-Class Value Stretch," *Social Forces*, 42 (December, 1963), pp. 205-215.

Aspiration and Action

There seems to be an assumption that aspirational levels do not have a very important function in explaining and predicting levels of behavior with respect to their objects. Taken by themselves, the zero-order correlations between males' adolescent level of educational and/or occupational aspiration and their early adult levels of educational and occupational attainment are not especially high, ranging from +.46 to +.69.⁶

However, such early levels of aspiration appear to be more highly correlated with their respective behaviors than other known variables. This is especially impressive when one realizes that in stratification studies several years elapse between the times when aspirations and attainments are measured. Surely people change their aspirations to some extent during this period.

Equally important, it is unthinkable that one's aspiration level alone could determine his attainment level. Lewin long ago insisted that person variables like aspirations are enacted in environments. Remember his famous "equation": $B = f(P, E)$.⁷ More recently Heider has made the point that action is a function of aspiration in relation to ability and circumstances. (In his unusual language, the "outcome" is the result of "try" and "can.")⁸ Heider argues that in their day-to-day behavior men employ a shared, if implicit, theory of action. Because they believe it to be true, they act upon it. The social psychologist can and does make it explicit: in this "naive" but efficient theory, men's actions result from the combination of their aspirations and their "ability."

I prefer to state it this way: level of attainment or actions (A_e) is a nonlinear, accelerating function of a level of aspiration (A) and the level of facilitation (F) offered by the environment of the aspiration (including both intra- and extra-personal elements). That is, low levels of either A or F result in low levels of A_e . As A and F become moderately high, a little increase in either produces a large increase in A_e . If true, this implies that linear combinations of aspirational and facilitational (intelligence, group pressure, resources, etc.) would systematically underestimate the nonlinear combination of the effects of these factors on level of attainment; additive models like most multiple correlation or regression equations would be inappropriate. This argues for adopting more complex statistical techniques which can assess the interaction effects of level of aspiration and level of facilitation. This possibility should be studied. By following this approach we might well greatly increase our explanatory and predictive efficiency.

But why, then, is there any correlation at all between aspiration and attainment levels? This is doubtless due to the fact, again long ago noted by Lewin, that to some extent people adjust their levels of aspiration so that

⁶ Haller and Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 38; William H. Sewell and Vimal P. Shah, "Socioeconomic Status, Intelligence, and the Attainment of Higher Education," *Sociology of Education*, 40 (Winter, 1967), pp. 1-23.

⁷ Lewin, *ibid.*; also see his article in L. Carmichael, *Manual of Child Psychology*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1946.

⁸ Fritz Heider, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1958, pp. 82-86.

they are usually not totally out of line with the prospects for attaining them. In their many attempts, real and imagined, to enact a level of aspiration, people learn something about their chances of success and failure. That is, there is probably a real but imperfect feedback of attainment on aspiration. This feedback probably accounts for the two facts noted above: aspiration levels change over time, and moderate positive zero-order correlations of aspiration and attainment (regarding education and occupation) are the rule.

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