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# **Constituting neoliberal subjects? ‘Aspiration’ as technology of government in UK policy discourse**

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## Notes on contributors

Konstanze Spohrer is a lecturer in Education at Liverpool Hope University, specialising in Sociology of Education. Her research interests are in inequalities and social justice in education, education policy and social theory. Her recent publications and research have focussed on widening participation and inequality in higher education, discourses of 'aspiration' and the intersection of gender and social class in young people's subjectivities.

Garth Stahl is a theorist of sociology of education. His research interests lie on the nexus of neoliberalism and socio-cultural studies of education, identity, equity/inequality and social change. Currently, his research projects and publications encompass theoretical and empirical studies of learner identities, gender and youth, sociology of schooling in a neoliberal age, gendered subjectivities, equity and difference, and educational reform. Of particular interest is exploring neoliberal counternarratives and around 'value' and 'respectability' for working-class youth.

Tamsin Bowers-Brown is a Principal Lecturer in Education at Sheffield Hallam University. Her main areas of interest are in the sociology of education and in particular the relationship between societal inequality and educational experience. Her research explores the role of policy in shaping educational practices. Tamsin's work draws on the concepts of Pierre Bourdieu to understand educational inequality.

## **Constituting neoliberal subjects? ‘Aspiration’ as technology of government in UK policy discourse**

Since the 2000s, successive governments in the United Kingdom and elsewhere have embraced the idea of ‘raising aspiration’ among young people as a solution to persisting educational and socio-economic inequalities. Previous analyses have argued that these policies tend to individualise structural disadvantage and promote a ‘deficit’ view of working-class youth. This paper adopts a novel approach to analysing aspiration discourses combining Michel Foucault’s four dimensions of ‘ethics’ and Mitchell Dean’s notion of ‘formation of identities’. Applying Foucault’s and Dean’s work in this way provides a new lens that enables an examination of how policy encourages particular forms of subjectivation, and, therefore, seeks to govern individuals. The findings presented in the paper complicate previous research by showing that raising aspiration strategies portray disadvantaged youth both in terms of ‘deficit’ and ‘potential’, resulting in a requirement for inner transformation and mobility through attitudinal change. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for the identity formation of young people and for conceptualising contemporary forms of governmentality.

Keywords: aspirations; neoliberalism; Michel Foucault; governmentality; subjectivity

### **Introduction**

Raising young people’s aspirations has been portrayed as a solution to persisting social and educational inequalities in the UK and other OECD countries since the early 2000s (Gale and Parker 2015). In UK policy discourse, the idea that low levels of social mobility could be attributed to a ‘poverty of aspiration’<sup>1</sup> among young people from disadvantaged backgrounds gained traction during the 1997–2010 Labour administration and continues to inform the political and wider public imaginary (Reay 2013). While a range of centrally funded Labour government initiatives were discontinued after 2010, ‘aspiration’ continued to feature prominently in the rhetoric of

the ensuing governments under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition (2010–2015) and the Conservatives since 2015.<sup>2</sup> Under the Conservative government, the idea of targeting children's and young people's psychological attributes, including 'aspiration', remains high on the agenda, evident in recent plans to promote character skills in schools (see, for example, DfE 2016b; Paterson, Tyler, and Lexmond 2014).

In this paper, we seek to examine 'raising aspiration' policy by applying Foucault's governmentality approach in a novel way. In our analysis of policy documents published between 2003 and 2011, we mobilise Foucault's (2000) four dimensions of 'ethics' in order to analyse the ways in which policies have called on young people to work on and transform themselves in order to achieve desirable states of being. Previous research has argued that the rhetoric of aspiration individualises responsibility for structural disadvantage and proliferates a 'deficit view' of young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (see, for example, Archer, Hollingworth, and Mendick 2010; Allen 2014; Burke 2012; Zipin et al. 2015). In this article, we complicate this claim by showing that young people are portrayed both as lacking and as having 'potential' (see also Sellar 2015).

The aims of this article are twofold: first, it makes a contribution to the existing literature on 'aspiration' by examining raising aspiration strategies in relation to neoliberal modes of government (Foucault 2008). We argue that, while being part and parcel of a more general shift towards self-governance, raising aspiration policy positions the disadvantaged subject as the agent of social change through inward and outward mobility. Second, the article extends scholarship on governmentality in education. We argue that applying Foucault's notion of 'ethics' as a lens enables us to examine how policy seeks to invite young people to perform particular forms of self-work in order to achieve particular desirable ways of being.

In the following section, we define neoliberalism and its influence on the construction of subjectivities, drawing on Michel Foucault's notion of neoliberal governmentality. We then explain the analytical framework which combines Mitchell Dean's (2010) notion of 'formation of identities' with Foucault's (2000) four dimensions of 'ethics' in order to examine the ways in which young people are called upon as subjects in raising aspiration policy. Subsequently, the findings of the analysis are presented under three headings which draw from the analytical framework. Finally, we discuss the ways in which raising aspiration strategies relate to other manifestations of neoliberal governance and consider the potential implications for the subject formation of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### **Neoliberal governmentality and the subject**

In this article, we mobilise Michel Foucault's work on neoliberal governmentality to examine how the discourse of raising aspirations encourages young people to understand and form themselves as subjects.<sup>3</sup> Neoliberalism is a multifaceted, historically and geographically contingent phenomenon that is best seen as a set of practices (Davies 2014; Gerrard 2015). Drawing on Peck (2010, xiii), neoliberalism can be seen as an 'adaptive, mutating, and contradictory mode of governance' that is constantly made and remade. Acknowledging the difficulty of defining neoliberalism, we assume that neoliberal governmentality is a distinct mode of government that is underpinned by particular rationalities and logics (Foucault 2008; Rose 1999).

Current iterations of neoliberalism function as a political and economic system which structures discourses that give considerable credence to the market as the best, most efficient platform for distributing public resources. Harvey (2005, 3) suggests that neoliberalism can be understood as 'an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade', within which the government is

required to 'create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices'. Within this macro-level structural framework, educational institutions are seen as responsible for increasing productivity and competitiveness through maximising human capital and inculcating the necessary attributes and skills (Weis and Fine 2012; Zipin et al. 2015).

Scholars who draw on Foucault's work have argued that neoliberalism can be understood as a 'mentality of governing' (Rose 1996) which breaks with the liberal notion of the citizen-subject insofar as it 'engineers' the free subject (Burchell 1996). For Foucault, the main shift from liberal to neoliberal governmentality lies not only in the rise of the figure of 'homo economicus' but in a shift from being a partner in exchange to an 'entrepreneur of himself [sic]' (Foucault 2008, 226). As Rose (1996, 154) clarifies, this means the emergence of an active and calculating *self* who 'will maximise its own human capital, project itself a future and seek to shape itself in order to become that it wishes to be'. Freedom, in the sense of a duty self-fulfilment and choice, is hence an integral part of neoliberal governance, expressed in a shift from disciplinary forms of power to 'self-governance' (Cruikshank 1996).

As such, neoliberal governance is exercised in a distant yet all-pervasive manner. It operates by 'infiltrating regulation into the very interior of the experience of subjects' (Edwards 2008, 26) who are required to exercise increased self-control in order to maximise the potential for individual happiness and success. Being 'aspirational', then, becomes the quality *sine qua non* of the ideal citizen-subject as an individual willing to strive towards (socially sanctioned) goals through continual self-improvement.

A number of authors have argued that the preoccupation with 'aspiration' in UK policy discourse over the last two decades reflects the gradual decrease in welfare

provision and the ensuing individualisation of responsibility for life outcomes (Allen and Hollingworth 2013; Berrington, Roberts, and Tammes 2016; Loveday 2014; Raco 2009; Spohrer 2011). As part of this policy trend, disadvantaged groups are deemed irresponsible and unable to perform the self-work demanded of them. According to Francis and Hey:

The pithy sign of ‘aspiration’ is, in the discursive context of neoliberalism and socio-economic inequality, overwhelmed by the moral charge of its reviled signified: that of the feckless, parasitic individual who has failed to grasp the opportunities open to them. (2009, 226)

In this article, we seek to advance previous scholarship on aspiration by examining the complex ways young people are portrayed in policy discourse. Previous research in the field has tended to focus on the ways in which discourses have perpetuated disadvantage by drawing attention to deficit ascriptions to particular groups of young people (see, for example, Atkins 2010; Hart 2012; Jones and Thomas 2005). Our analysis, by contrast, paints a more ambivalent picture: we show that dominant discourses of aspiration position young people both in terms of ‘deficit’ and ‘potential’, resulting in a requirement for inner transformation and mobility through attitudinal change. We argue that Mitchell Dean’s notion of ‘formation of identities’ and Foucault’s (2000) four dimensions of ‘ethics’ are useful analytical lenses as they allow us to distinguish several aspects of this process of subjectivation. In the following section, we explain Foucault’s notion of ethics and how it was mobilised in the analysis of UK policy documents on raising aspiration presented in this article.

### **Analytical framework**

For our analysis of raising aspiration strategies in UK policy, Mitchell Dean’s (2010) framework of an ‘analytics government’ served as a starting point, providing a practical



application of Foucault's work on governmentality. According to Dean (2010, 20), analysing government means to 'analyze those practices that try to shape, sculpt, mobilize and work through the choices, desires, aspirations, needs, wants and lifestyles of individuals and groups'. The task of an analysis of government, therefore, is to examine the 'logic of such practices' (Dean 2010, 41). Dean's four dimensions of analysis – 'fields of visibility'; the 'technical aspect of government' ('*techne*'); 'forms of knowledge' ('*episteme*'); and the 'formation of identities' – allow an examination of different aspects of governmental policies and technologies in contemporary societies. Since the focus of the analysis presented in this paper is on the forms of identity produced through discourses of aspiration, our emphasis is on the 'formation of identities'. Dean explains that undertaking such an analysis means asking:

What statuses, capacities, attributes, and orientations are assumed of those who exercise authority ... and those who are to be governed ...? What forms of conduct are expected of them? What duties and rights do they have? How are these capacities and attributes to be fostered? How are these duties enforced and rights ensured? How are certain aspects of conduct problematized? How are they then to be reformed? How are certain individuals and populations made to identify with certain groups, to become virtuous and active citizens, and so on? (2010, 43)

For this paper, we refined these questions further by drawing on Foucault's notion of 'ethics', which, we argue, provides a useful analytical tool for analysing how young people are incited to work on particular parts of themselves in order to achieve particular states of being. Foucault understood ethics as government of the self, as 'the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself, *rapport à soi*, ... which determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself [sic] as a moral subject of his own actions' (Foucault 2000, 263).

As an element of a neoliberal governmentality that seeks to govern *through* encouraging particular forms of self-governance, the notion of aspiration and its articulation in the self-governance process warrants closer examination. In our analysis, we therefore draw on the four dimensions of ethics distinguished by Foucault (2000): ‘ethical substance’, ‘mode of subjectivation’, ‘technologies of the self’ and ‘telos’. ‘Ethical substance’ can be understood as the ‘the part of ourselves or our behaviour, which is relevant for ethical judgement’ (Foucault 2000, 263); that is, the aspects of our body and mind that we are invited to transform or reform. For the analysis presented in this paper, this meant examining attributes, dispositions and behaviours that young people are encouraged to develop according to policies around aspiration.

The second dimension of ethics, the ‘mode of subjectivation’, is the way in which ‘people are invited or incited to recognize their moral obligations’ (Foucault 2000, 264) and can be understood as the guiding principles or logic according to which individuals are supposed to fashion themselves. For the purposes of the analysis presented in this paper, this meant examining the principles that guide the expected self-work from young people. As a third dimension of ethics, Foucault identified ‘technologies of the self’, defined as ‘the means by which we can change ourselves in order to become ethical subjects’ (Foucault et al. 1988, 18). In this paper, we employ the notion of technologies of the self with a view to identifying how policy documents invite young people to adopt particular techniques in order to transform themselves into aspirational subjects. Applying Foucault’s fourth dimension, ‘telos’, we analysed policy documents for the ‘kind of being’ (Foucault 2000, 265) young people are invited to aspire to. With Dean’s guiding questions at the forefront of our investigation, we asked what kind of person young people are supposed to model themselves on and what this means for their understanding of themselves as subjects.

## **Methodology**

The analysis presented in this paper is based on 10 policy documents published between 2003 and 2011. Seven of these documents were published during the time of the Labour government and three were published during the time of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government. The decision to include documents in the analytic sample was guided by Foucault's notion of 'problematization'. As Bacchi (2012, 1) points out, Foucault understood the term 'problematization' both in relation to a 'method of analysis' and in relation to 'a historical process of producing objects for thought'. With respect to the sample construction in this paper, we draw on the latter meaning of the term and examine documents in which aspiration has been made 'problematic', that is, in Foucault's terms, has entered 'into the play of the true and the false' (Foucault [1984] 1989, 296). Hence, documents that treated aspiration as a matter to be examined and addressed were incorporated in the sample [insert table near here]. Overall, the analysis presented in this paper is also a 'problematization' in the methodological sense. Instead of being concerned with identifying solutions for policy problems, we 'problematize' the production of truth around the notion of 'aspiration' in policy discourse. Hence, the paper can be seen as an instance of a 'policy problematization', with the aim 'to identify conditions and registers in which problems and solutions have been articulated and practiced' (Webb 2014, 369).

During the initial analysis, it emerged that during the early 2000s the term 'aspiration' started to be mobilised in novel ways. The 2003 government White Paper *The Future of Higher Education* (Department for Education and Skills 2003) can be considered a key moment in this process, identifying aspiration as a discrete psychological attribute and a variable mediating between social background characteristics and educational attainment. Having established this demarcation point, subsequent policy texts, including discussion papers, government-commissioned

reports, project evaluations and speeches were included in the sample if they fulfilled and maintained the “conditions of possibility” for the studied phenomenon’ (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine 2008, 100).

In an initial step, we used Dean’s (2010) framework to analyse the documents for the ways in which aspiration is constructed as a policy problem and for how young people and other subjects are characterised and positioned. Secondly, we used Foucault’s (2000) four dimensions of ethics as sensitising concepts with a view to identifying how young people are encouraged to work on themselves in order to achieve particular subjectivities. The following questions, based on Dean (2010) and Foucault (2000), guided the analysis (see also Grimaldi and Barzanò 2014):

- Ethical substance: What forms of subjectivity, attitudes and conduct are problematised?
- Telos: What forms of subjectivity are encouraged? Who are young people supposed to model themselves on?
- Mode of subjectivation: According to which principles and logic is this process of transformation or reformation supposed to happen? What knowledges and discourse are drawn upon?
- Technologies of the self: How are young people expected to work on themselves? What methods and techniques are they expected to adopt?

In this paper, we show that the subject evoked in the analysed policy texts is both characterised by deficit (in terms of attitudes and dispositions) and by potential (in terms of academic ability). In order to fulfil the demand to become academically and economically successful individuals, young people are required to transform their inner selves. Mobility – in its spatial, temporal, social and psychological dimensions – is

posited as the central mode in this process. We argue that this is a variation on a more general notion of the neoliberal subject and indicative of an intensification of governing through self-governance.

In the following section we present the findings of the analysis under three thematic headings, drawing on Dean's framework and Foucault's dimensions of ethics. We examine the formation of identities in these discourses, considering, firstly, how young people are expected to work on themselves (ethical substance); secondly, towards what ends (telos) and by what means (mode of subjectivation) young people are expected to transform themselves; and, thirdly, what techniques they are to adopt in this process (technologies of the self).

## **Findings**

### ***Young people's ethical substance: low aspiration as a barrier to realising potential***

Drawing on Foucault's dimension of ethical substance, we analysed the policy documents for the ways in which they problematise particular attitudes and behaviours among young people and, consequently, require young people to work on particular aspects of themselves.

In the policy texts analysed, a lack of aspiration is commonly ascribed to young people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. This group is often further differentiated, with working-class boys typically seen as the most problematic group (Stahl, 2015). The documents tend to portray a lack of aspiration as presenting a barrier that hinders young people from attaining high educational outcomes:

Children living in deprived communities face a cultural barrier which is in many ways a bigger barrier than material poverty. It is the cultural barrier of low aspirations and scepticism about education, the feeling that education is by and for

other people, and likely to let one down. (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008, 2)

[E]ducational achievement still remains lower in more deprived areas, where limited expectations, low self-confidence and low ambitions can sometimes stop young people from doing as well as they could. (Communities and Local Government 2011, 5)

According to the logic espoused here, young people are portrayed as *potentially* academically successful, but held back by a range of barriers, of which aspiration is a significant one. As can be seen in the first quotation, aspiration is identified as an element of a wider problematic culture. The tendency to portray a lack of aspiration as originating from a problematic culture is evident in most of the documents analysed, which depict (particular) disadvantaged communities as stagnant, fixed and isolated:

Close knit local social networks, low population mobility and a history of economic decline appear to characterise neighbourhoods where young people are less likely to develop high educational aspirations. (Communities and Local Government and Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008, 15)

In some deprived communities, stable populations and close-knit social networks combine with a sense of isolation from broader social connections and economic opportunities. This can limit young people's horizons and aspirations for the future. (HM Government 2009, 95)

Less wealthy, close-knit communities where people don't move in or out can often be places where young people are less likely to develop high educational or employment ambitions. (Communities and Local Government 2011, 6)

These descriptions conjure notions of disadvantaged communities which are immobile in a geographical, social and cognitive sense. This fixity also has a temporal dimension, reflected in the suggested lack of future orientation in working-class communities or ability to pursue goals for the future:

Many of the young people and parents lacked information about how to achieve their goals. A lack of confidence, or sense of fatalism, also seemed to be discouraging some young people from aiming high. (Communities and Local Government and Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008, 10)

What is striking in the descriptions of disadvantaged communities in these policy documents is the notion of deficit, in particular in relation to immaterial resources in the form of attitudes, mentalities and sense of self, which are seen as rooted in particular 'problematic' mentalities. This resonates with previous scholarly arguments which identified in Labour's policies a tendency to 'culturalise' social disadvantage and 'pathologise' the working class (Ball 2008; Bradford and Hey 2007; Gewirtz 2001). However, in contrast with their communities, young people themselves are also portrayed as having 'potential', suggesting innate, yet slumbering, (academic) ability that could be realised in and through academic attainment and for which the prerequisite is attitudinal change. Hence, one of the purposes of raising aspiration is making young people from disadvantaged backgrounds realise – in the double sense of acknowledging and actualising – their inner endowments. While the call for inner transformation means that agency is attributed to young people, it is also associated with particular expectations about where their higher 'aspirations' should be directed and how they should be achieved.

***Telos and mode of subjectivation: educational attainment, (social) mobility and economic success***

The call on young people to change their attitudes and realise their potential raises the question of to what ends (telos) and by what means (mode of subjectivation) young people are supposed to transform themselves. In the policy documents we surveyed and analysed, social mobility is presented as an aim to be pursued both by the society or

nation as a whole and by individual young people. According to this dominant logic, individual aspiration for social mobility will lead to more actual social mobility, which will mean a more economically competitive, prosperous and fair society:

The UK's future success in a globally competitive economy will rely on using all of our country's talent, not just some of it. In a fast moving world the old notion of a single track, single chance in life has to give way to a new notion where opportunities are more widely available throughout life to people regardless of their backgrounds ... Social mobility is not something that can be given to people. It has to be won through their effort and endeavour. Governments can equalise opportunities throughout life but in the end social mobility relies on individual drive and ambition. (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009, 8)

High educational attainment at school level and beyond is presented as the key to being socially mobile at the individual level. The relationship between educational attainment and later life outcomes is exemplified in the following quotations:

We want all young people to reach their potential, regardless of their background, and achieving good results at school is an important step on the way to success in later life. (Communities and Local Government 2011, 5)

Achieving good results at school is an important step on the way to success across a broad range of future life outcomes. (Communities and Local Government and Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008, 5)

The quotations show how aspiration is linked to the ambition to achieve educationally which, again, is depicted as translating into labour market success and a range of 'positive outcomes'. The substance of the 'future outcomes' or 'success' – resulting from and equated with high aspiration – encompasses a range of goods in relation to economic prosperity, health and wellbeing, and social stability *both* for the individual and for society as whole. These outcomes are often set against the negative foil of social ailments such as 'generational poverty' (see, for example, Department for Children,



Schools and Families 2008, 2009) for which social mobility through educational aspiration promises a remedy (see Reay 2013; Stahl, 2015).

Seen through the lens of Foucault's ethics, educational success is rendered the main ethical mode of subjectivation that young people are supposed to adopt in order to lead a better, more successful life – achieved primarily by economic participation. More specifically, the pursuit of higher education and professional occupations is considered both the means and the ends of success. The document *Aspiration and Attainment Amongst Young People in Deprived Communities* presents a range of statistics that measure the aspirations of young people via their reported intentions to enter higher education (see Communities and Local Government and Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008, 8), while other documents present higher education as a means to economic success:

Participating in post-16 education or training can also unlock a young person's potential, by allowing them to go on to higher education. A degree can improve lifetime earnings by, on average, £100,000 compared with the earnings of those with two A-Levels. (Cabinet Office 2011a, 48)

Moreover, in the *Extra Mile* document, higher education is presented as the new norm and the only route to successful labour market participation:

For the old 'working class' security came from work: sons and daughters valued steady money and looked to leave school as soon as possible to find jobs, often through family contacts. In the heyday of industry, this led many children into the same profession as their parents: the shipyard, the factory, the mine; unskilled jobs that still offered security. But all that has changed. The competitive industries of 21st Century England will require higher order academic, personal and vocational skills. A successful education in the sixth form and university will be the norm, not the alternative. (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008, 3)

The language used within this policy document not only depicts previous routes into

employment as outmoded and irrelevant in the present-day labour market, but also calls on young people from working-class backgrounds to follow different aims and paths than their parents. Social mobility through higher levels of education becomes a duty and promise for young working-class people; a demand that is variably presented in the guise of the opportunity to live an economically better life or a threat of remaining condemned to a life in poverty. As Williams (2016, 627) argues, ‘there are considered to be few benefits from HE for non-participants, the emphasis in terms of promoting the public good through HE is placed upon encouraging more individuals, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to participate’.

Labour market success by means of higher educational qualifications is presented as the only way to achieve a good life; this not only individualises social and structural problems, but privileges an instrumental conception of education and an economic notion of the good life. Through the analytical framework we used it became apparent that individual benefits are seen as aggregating into societal gains in the form of increased productivity and prosperity through a more highly skilled population. At the level of the individual, the language of aspiration places a ‘moral obligation’ on young people to invest in their human capital which, when certified through educational credentials, promises the achievement of the telos of success – success that is primarily defined as achieving social mobility, and the related benefits in terms of income and wellbeing.

### ***Technologies of the self: confidence, motivation, and future orientation***

This section identifies the strategies and methods by which young people’s conduct is to be shaped and the technologies of the self that young people are encouraged to apply in order to transform themselves into successful subjects.

Based on portrayals of working-class communities as closed and restricting, raising aspiration strategies aim to ‘free’ young people, or, more precisely, prepare young people to liberate themselves, from the cultural restrictions that obstruct their educational achievement and social mobility. According to this logic, policy documents conjure up images of escape and transgression, captured in their titles such as *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers* (Cabinet Office 2011a) and *Unleashing Aspiration* (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009). The call for transgression is also evidence in the stated intentions to help ‘pupils to break free from these [cultural] limitations’ (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008, 25) or to ‘overcome the barriers that may be preventing them from realising their talents’ (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009, 9). Two significant interlinking strategies are employed: firstly, efforts to incentivise young people to take up the ‘right’ post-16 destinations (which can mainly be identified in the context of widening participation strategies), and, secondly, initiatives which aim to change attitudes and behaviours in schools and communities. Both strategies can be seen as technologies of government/self as they promote particular ways in which young people are encouraged to understand and transform themselves to become educationally successful and socially mobile.

Government-funded initiatives focused on raising aspiration have attempted to encourage young people to study for higher education degrees in a number of ways, including through information and guidance, familiarising young people with the university environment, and providing inspiration through surrogate role models who embody success. An example of the latter can also be found in the Coalition government’s Social Mobility Strategy which pledged to provide 100,000 ‘high profile inspirational speakers’ and to launch an internship programme in order to ‘broaden the

horizons' of young people from under-represented backgrounds and 'raise their aspirations' (Cabinet Office 2011b).

Neoliberal regimes govern individuals 'from within' (Cruikshank 1996) by calling on them to alter their emotions, attitudes and behaviours. The raising aspiration strategies we identified within policy documents not only aim to inspire, incite and inform young people through 'glamorising' higher education destinations (see Archer, Hollingworth, and Mendick 2010; Brown 2011), but set out to achieve more deep-reaching dispositional change. While some of the analysed documents promote initiatives that are explicitly aimed at 'behaviour change' or 'attitude change' (see, for example, Communities and Local Government 2011; Communities and Local Government and Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008), other documents express this intention in a more subtle manner. The evaluation report of the *Inspiring Communities* programme seeks to be a guide to local projects that 'set out to change people's attitudes and the way they think about others and themselves' (Communities and Local Government 2011, 4). This implies a deficit in positive self-image among working-class communities and suggests that young people have to work to transform their inner selves in order to live 'good' or 'successful' lives.

The dispositional attributes that raising aspiration initiatives seek to address can be grouped into three types: dispositions that relate to future orientation (such as 'ambition' or 'optimism'); self-concept (such as 'self-esteem' or 'confidence'); and motivational attributes (such as 'persistence' or 'resilience'). Several documents call for measures to improve young people's self-concept (see, for example, Communities and Local Government 2011; Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008, 2009; HM Government 2009). In the description of the *Extra Mile* project, this emphasis is particularly pronounced; among the expected project outcomes are: 'reduced sense of

deprivation', 'increased expectations of success and self-belief' and 'increased self-esteem' (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008, 10–11). Thus, the project locates the remedy to social disadvantage not in tackling deprivation itself, but in reducing young people's perception of it. By encouraging young people to develop the capacities to cope with and overcome structural disadvantage, the locus and solution for structural problems are firmly anchored in the individual. The focus on mental attributes, such as self-esteem and resilience, are indicative of the demand to adopt technologies which are directed at controlling and changing their psychic state (see also Rose 1999).

While the call for self-management is a general demand on contemporary citizens, it functions slightly differently in raising aspiration strategies; here, the socio-economically disadvantaged subject is depicted as in need of additional help in order to overcome the barriers to achieving her or his full potential and become an active, autonomous, responsible self. Where the ideal neoliberal citizen in general is constructed as adaptable and open to 'change' (Phoenix 2004), the disadvantaged subject needs to become mobile in multiple ways. The strategies associated with raising aspirations seek to induce this change by targeting young people's inner selves in order to instil both the will and the ability to achieve social mobility.

## **Conclusions**

Our analysis in this article shows that raising aspiration discourses position young people from disadvantaged backgrounds as both 'deficient' and as having 'potential' – a finding which complicates previous analyses which conclude that policy frames young people exclusively in terms of deficit. We have shown that while policy documents tend to depict disadvantaged communities as culturally and geographically restricted, young people are encouraged to work on inner dispositions, such as confidence and

motivation, and transform themselves through and towards geographical, social and psychological mobility.

The aspirational subject constructed through these discourses resonates with wider neoliberal conceptions of the flexible, agile individual (Gillies 2011). At the same time, the emphasis on mobility in the sense of a transgression of social and economic boundaries suggests that raising aspiration strategies constitute a particular version of the mobile subject. The preoccupation with raising the aspirations of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds suggests that the population can be divided along class lines into those who can be trusted to exercise their freedom appropriately and those who need to be more tightly governed in order to develop the desired attitudes and behaviours. In this context, raising aspiration can be regarded as a 'technology of agency' (Cruikshank 1999), a mode of governing through augmenting the capacities of disadvantaged groups to help themselves. This happens, as evident in raising aspiration strategies, primarily through efforts to equip individuals with psychological attributes or 'psy' technologies (Rose 1999). These technologies are designed to overcome the material, social and economic hardships young people face, enabling their self-transformation into successful beings.

Raising aspiration strategies could thus be seen as an instance of a 'psychologisation' of governance that seeks to shape the active, entrepreneurial citizens required in neoliberal regimes (Davies and Bansel 2007). While this shift might be experienced as empowering by some young people, it also implies a potential burden; young people are not only expected to actively shape their own lives, but to take responsibility for wider social change by becoming socially mobile. For young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, this is particularly problematic as they are less likely to be able to rely on socially valued social and economic capital than their more

privileged peers. The ‘psychic’ costs of social mobility, which have been documented in previous research, must also be considered (e.g. Allen 2014; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009). Given the dramatic economic upheavals in recent years and the intense positional struggle in the higher ranks of the labour market (Brown 2013), it is questionable whether the promise of social mobility through educational attainment can be realised by the majority of young people. The demand on young people to become mobile by means of ‘escaping’ their communities questions young people’s identities and risks perpetuating the ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant 2011) of keeping people in their place by promoting an unachievable fantasy of the ‘good life’ (Sellar 2013; Spohrer, 2016; Stahl, 2012; Zipin et al. 2015).

At the level of governance, raising aspiration policies can be seen as treading a fine line between empowerment and manipulation. ‘Raising aspiration,’ as a governmental technology, seeks to influence young people at the level of attitudes, dispositions and desires (Brown 2011) – and thus arguably operates below the level of consciousness of individual. In the context of the wider governmental practice of ‘nudging’ particular communities into adopting ‘positive’ behaviour (Bradbury, McGimpsey, and Santori 2013; Davies 2014), the apparent intent of raising aspiration strategies targeted at youth is to shape individuals earlier in life and in a more profound way: by instilling ‘the right’ dispositions and attitudes in children and young people, there is no need for later corrections. For its subtle yet profound invasiveness, raising aspiration can be seen as operating alongside other incarnations of ‘therapeutic governance’ (Ecclestone 2017), following a logic of prevention rather than cure.

As our analysis has shown, the strategies suggested and implemented during the years of Labour government onwards are invasive to different degrees – in the cases of behaviour change programmes, they seek to effect a long-term change in people’s

dispositions, attitudes and behaviours while other initiatives have been less intrusive in their approach. Comparing the discursive mobilisation of aspiration by successive governments, we can observe a move away from a more 'directing' policy approach under Labour (Riddell 2013) to a model in which responsibility is devolved to local institutions.

However, more recent administrations have not entirely retracted from trying to engineer young people's personal characteristics; the government's recent announcement that it intends to promote character education in schools (Department for Education 2016b) suggests raising aspiration is resurging in a (neo-)conservative guise. It appears that, while there is continuity in relation to individualising responsibility for educational and wider social disadvantage, we might observe a move from psychologising to a moralising approach to governing individuals 'from the inside' (Cruikshank 1996). We suggest that an analysis of the 'ethical' demands manifest in policy discourses is one way of bearing witness to these subtle shifts in contemporary governmentality. This endeavour, we argue, is important as it contributes to increasing the capacities of societies to decide how they want to be governed and to widening the scope for how people can imagine and constitute themselves.

## Notes

1. The origin of the term 'poverty of aspiration' is attributed to Aneurin Bevan, Deputy Leader of the Labour Party in the late 1950s (Butler and Hamnett 2011). It was brought back into the debate by Tony Blair, and used by Gordon Brown in his first speech to the Labour Party conference as Party Leader (Brown 2007).
2. This is reflected in the publication of a Social Mobility Strategy in 2011 (Cabinet Office 2011a) and the repeated call by the then Prime Minister and Cabinet members for Britain to become an 'aspiration nation' (see Cameron 2012; Richardson 2010). While the current Prime Minister Theresa May has set out structural reforms of the English education system that diverge from her predecessors, she has continued to employ the rhetoric of



opportunity and ambition, now couched in the goal of making Britain a ‘great meritocracy’ (Department for Education, 2016a).

3. Foucault’s work is often criticised for implying a deterministic notion of official discourses as impacting top-down on individual subjectivities and leaving little room for acting otherwise (Hoy 1986; McNay 1994). While Foucault’s earlier work can be interpreted as privileging discourse over individuals and their agency, he also emphasised the possibility of resistance and counter discourse. As previous research has demonstrated, young people are not fully ‘captured’ by dominant discourse (Trowler 2001), but make sense in relation to and within the boundaries of these discourses (Mendick, Allen, and Harvey 2015). Attention to questions of agency became more pronounced in Foucault’s later work in which he elaborated on ideas such as ethics and technologies of the self, which we draw upon in this paper.

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