

Future aspirations of urban adolescents: a person-in-context model

Selcuk R. Sirin^{1*}, Matthew A. Diemer², Lisa R. Jackson³, Lisa Gonsalves⁴ & Angela Howell²

¹Montclair State University, USA; ²Boston College, USA; ³Boston After-School Enterprise, USA; ⁴University of Massachusetts at Boston, USA

Recognizing the importance future aspirations play in the developmental outcomes of adolescents, this study illuminates the role that individual and contextual factors play in the formation of future aspirations among urban youth. The data for this study were collected prior to the implementation of an intervention program at an urban high school. Focus groups, questionnaires, goal maps and a group identity collage were employed to solicit the perspectives of urban adolescents about their future aspirations and the influences on them. Using a grounded theory methodology, the authors classified the multiple sources of data into a theoretical model of urban adolescents' future aspirations. Participants' voices, which were used to construct the theoretical model, are also provided here to vivify the model. This 'person-in-context' model encompasses both individual/contextual resources and barriers to the future aspirations of urban youth. Limitations and directions for future research are discussed.

Introduction

In industrialized societies, adolescence is the developmental phase during which individuals prepare for their adult lives (Erikson, 1968). Schooling and mentoring opportunities are provided to adolescents by parents and other adults, who help to prepare them for their culturally ascribed adult roles. Each adolescent's goals for his/her future, or future aspirations, are influenced by a number of factors that fall within the domains of individual abilities and social context. These domains are particularly important areas to consider for urban ethnic minority adolescents, the focus of this study. (In this paper, the term 'urban adolescents' refers to the participants of this study, poor and working-class African-American, Cape Verdean and Latino/a adolescents who resided in the inner city.) We believe consideration of

*Corresponding author: Psychology Department, Montclair State University, Upper Montclair, NJ 07043, USA. Email sirins@mail.montclair.edu

both individual and social/structural factors in the study of future aspirations to be particularly important, given that urban adolescents have been found to experience tension between their valuing of education and the (often) limited resources and opportunities they are afforded within their schools and communities (Ogbu, 1981; Rossides, 1990; Kozol, 1991; Steele, 1992). Further, because of the effects of institutional racism and the limited contextual resources urban youth are afforded, we believe that future aspirations (and subsequent educational and occupational attainment) may represent a form of resistance to structural oppression. That is, urban youth who 'dream and attain' resist the tracking into occupational positions that lack meaning and ascribed social power due to structural oppression and the accompanying lack of resources.

Thus, our goal in this study was to learn about urban adolescents' future educational and vocational aspirations and to illuminate the individual and social factors that influence them. We hoped to answer the following questions in this study:

- (1) What do the future aspirations of urban adolescents 'look like'?
- (2) How do these adolescents conceptualize their ability to influence expected future events, such as going to college or obtaining employment?
- (3) What are the major factors in the social context (e.g. school, family, peer group) that influence the future orientation of these adolescents?

Future aspirations

Adolescence is the time when individuals are more concerned about their future than any of the other developmental phases. For adolescents, future aspirations can be conceptualized as the educational and vocational 'dreams' they have for their future work lives. A large body of research indicates that adolescents' future aspirations, in the areas of career, education and family, significantly impact their later life experiences. In an extensive review of the adolescent future orientation and planning literature, Nurmi (1989, 1991) found empirical support for the notion that the level of investment in future plans is predictive of adolescent problem behavior, such as delinquency, problems in school and in the world of work, and drug abuse. Wyman *et al.* (1993) found that future aspirations facilitate adjustment to life stress for students attending urban schools in the USA and suggest that aspirations comprise an important part of the self-concept, which organizes the self in relation to the way one engages with the world.

Relatedly, Constantine *et al.* (1998) and Fouad and Bingham (1995) found that the level of educational and career aspiration is equivalently high for both urban and suburban adolescents in the USA. In contrast, research suggests that the *expectations* of these groups differ. That is, apart from the educational and occupational dreams adolescents have, the expectations of what occupations they will actually *attain* differ for White adolescents and adolescents of Color. A consistent finding in the literature is that urban adolescents have lower expectations than their more privileged peers (Hotchkiss & Borow, 1996; Constantine *et al.*, 1998). Presumably, as youth of Color

become acquainted with racism and structural oppression, they begin to create less lofty expectations for their occupational attainment (Baly, 1989). Although the discrepancy between aspirations and expectations among youth of Color remains an intriguing topic, we believe that future aspirations among urban adolescents (the focus of this paper) represent an understudied and critical aspect of the educational and career development process.

Structural constraints

The literature suggests that a consideration of future aspirations among inner-city youth is also a consideration of external barriers to their future plans. These barriers are the product of institutional racism (Carter & Cook, 1992), institutions (such as schools) that are reflective of a racist, sexist and classist society (Fine, 1991; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Stanton-Salazar, 1997) and inequities in resources that are a product of social class position (Rossides, 1990; Kozol, 1991). These barriers have led to, as Wilson (1996) suggests, the 'disappearance' of work from urban communities, few vocational role models, a paucity of work opportunities and the anticipation of future work-based discrimination as the norm for urban youth. In sum, urban youth lack access to institutional mechanisms of support and power that facilitate educational and occupational attainment (cf. Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Conchas, 2001).

The impact of structural barriers such as poverty, racial discrimination and resource-strapped schools not only directly limit the future opportunities of inner-city youth but they also determine adolescents' individual coping patterns that develop in response to these constraints. According to Coleman (1988), social capital refers to supportive relationships among structural forces and individuals that promote the sharing of societal norms and values. Following Coleman's (1988) social capital analysis, structural constraints prevent urban adolescents from accumulating forms of 'capital' (such as social contacts and supportive relationships) which provide access to resources that facilitate educational and occupational attainment (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). The importance of using social network connections in achieving resources, or social capital, is the key link in obtaining one's educational and occupational objectives (Lin, 1999).

Lareau (1989) applied the notion of social capital in her work on the interactions between schools and parents and found that family-school relationships are shaped by social class. More specifically, her qualitative inquiry showed that working-class parents tend to have a relationship of separateness with the school, while middle-class parents are connected to the school and advocate for their children by using their social resources. These resources include educational values, relative class position, income and material resources, and social networks that provide higher status parents with more opportunities for positive connections to the school. Therefore, Lareau argues that both the cultural and individual aspects of these relations occur within the context of social class, and that individuals may vary in the degree to which they can utilize such social capital.

Relatedly, the adult African-American male participants in the qualitative study conducted by Diemer (2002) gave voice to the expectation that they were and would continue to be subjected to discrimination in their career development processes and in their labor force participation. They also perceived themselves as having fewer career development resources, such as personal networks they could utilize, compared with what they expected their White counterparts to have. In sum, the participants of this study experienced a lifelong 'cold shoulder' from societal institutions, and as a result developed individualistic strategies to cope and ensure educational and vocational attainment.

In her work with Latino/a adolescents, Valenzuela (1999) found that although social capital has some positive effects on their school achievement, the effects of social capital are influenced by social structures. Because of the manner in which school structures often reflect a sexist, classist and racist society (Fine, 1991), minority students encounter difficulties in developing social capital and, as a result, their academic and vocational attainment suffers.

Further, in a study of Mexican-American and European-American high school students, McWhirter (1997) found that Mexican-American students were more likely to perceive future barriers to their educational and career goals than their European-American counterparts. Mexican-American participants were also more likely to feel less confident in their ability to overcome these barriers than European-American students. These results were found while socioeconomic status was being controlled for in the analyses. Relatedly, in a review of the career development literature related to Latino/a populations, Arbona (1990) argued that Latino/a adolescents have the same level of aspirations as European American adolescents, but that they are less confident in their ability to overcome these barriers.

Social class also affects the likelihood of achieving more (financially and personally) rewarding work (Brown *et al.*, 1996) and educational and occupational attainment (McLoyd, 1998). As Blustein *et al.* (2000) argued, 'One of the key ingredients in predicting favorable [career] outcomes is access to the educational and occupational opportunity structure' (p. 459). In sum, the literature reviewed above suggests that, within the USA (and, presumably, within other countries as well), social capital (in terms of both access to and mobilization of embedded resources) has a strong influence on the future aspirations and subsequent occupational attainment of adolescents and, in particular, urban adolescents. Because of these considerations, the future aspirations of urban adolescents must be considered in their social and cultural context (Valenzuela, 1999).

Method

Participants

Before providing information about the participants, we would like to first situate our findings in the context of the high school where we conducted our study. Several years ago, this high school lost its accreditation because the state board judged that teachers

and the curriculum used in the school were failing to provide the education necessary to meet state standards. Local government then intervened and infused money into the school; one of the many changes that have been made was the introduction of a new school principal. The new principal is an African-American educator who appeared to enjoy a close relationship with the students. Another major change that ensued at this school was the firing and hiring of more than half of the school's faculty; the current staff represent more ethnic diversity. These teachers also have participated in voluntary professional training. Finally, there has been an increase in the number of guidance teachers and librarians. Consequently, the school regained its accreditation approximately two years before the beginning of this research.

In terms of the whole school, the ethnic status of the student population was as follows: 87.6% African-American, 6.9% Latino/a, 3.6% Asian-American, and 1.7% White. Participants for our study were 18 adolescents aged 14–15 years of age attending the same inner-city high school. They were each bused in from different urban centers within a major city in the Northeastern USA. During focus groups, students provided the following information about themselves: Eleven of the students were 9th graders; seven were 10th graders. There were 12 males and 6 females in the group. Their current high school had not been their first choice when they applied for school (students rank order their preferences for high school in this area). Further, most of the students woke up around 5 a.m. to attend school, which began at 7 a.m.

In terms of racial/ethnic background, 15 students identified themselves as African-American, while the other 3 identified themselves as Cape Verdean and/or Latino/a background. One interesting point that we noted regarding the Cape Verdean participants was that there was a lack of consensus regarding the racial/ethnic self-identification that they preferred. That is, some of the Cape Verdean participants identified themselves as Black or African-American, some as Latino/a, and some simply as Cape Verdean. Finally, although some participants self-identified only one ethnic/racial group membership, it is plausible that some of the participants were members of more than one ethnic or racial group.

Researcher as instrument

The first and second authors of this study delivered this intervention at the school and collected data from the participants before the intervention began. The third and fourth authors supervised this project and the data-collection process. The fifth author served as an auditor of the data-analysis process. Our research team consisted of two international graduate students, one European American graduate student, one African-American faculty member, and a Cape Verdean American faculty member who was both the parent of a student attending this school and a member of the School-Site Council at this school. We feel that this diversity in backgrounds and perspectives among the researchers enhanced both our ability to experience the data and the rigor of our findings.

However, each researcher recognized the limitations in his or her experience and background and diligently sought to privilege the participants' perspective throughout

all aspects of the study. For example, we employed very open-ended questions during the focus groups to enable participants to navigate us through their worlds. We attempted to ensure that we were really ‘listening’ to students’ words, facial expressions and their use of material culture, without interjecting our personal views. For example, as we explained the instructions for completing goal maps and collages, we asked participants to think of examples of how to complete the exercise, rather than imposing our own ideas. Any probing statements used during the focus groups were always statements derived from the student’s own words (e.g. rephrasing their statements to qualify the meaning of what they had stated). These techniques, and our stance toward the research process, ensured that we remained self-reflexive and aware of our own biases in this research project. In sum, we attempted to ‘understand and capture the points of view of other people without predetermining those points of view’ (Patton, 1990, p. 24).

We used a grounded theory methodology to ground our theoretical analysis and conclusions in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As part of this methodological stance, we decided to collect all data from each participant before analyzing the materials so that we would not form theories from a partial data set. We also completed our literature review after we had collected the data so that we would avoid ‘finding’ our a priori assumptions in the data set. The goal of the researchers was to understand the adolescent’s experience through his or her own words. Through an inductive process, we individually looked for patterns in the data, which we then formulated into a coding schema; this schema was then revised using the constant comparative method. We then met to discuss the patterns that we had found individually. Through a series of discussions (and occasional argument) we reached a conclusion about the validity and meanings of our claims.

Methods of data collection

In an attempt to ‘give back’ to the community in which we were conducting research, the data used in this study were collected before we implemented an intervention program at this high school. The goal of the intervention was to help students to be positively engaged with school (both behaviorally and emotionally) and to develop strategies for future life transitions such as going to college or getting a job after high school. As part of the intervention, students met together as a group with two graduate student facilitators bi-weekly over the course of an academic year. After the introductory meeting, subsequent group sessions took place in a classroom for approximately 60 minutes during a scheduled class period. Classroom teachers generally elected not to participate in the sessions. All of the focus-group sessions were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Prior to the beginning of the intervention program, the data-collection process took place in four separate sessions. To capture the perspectives of urban adolescents concerning their future aspirations, we used four different sources of information: an introductory focus-group session, a questionnaire, goal maps and group identity collages. Researchers also kept detailed field notes during each day of data gathering,

detailing their reactions to the process, analytic memos and interesting statements participants made. The procedures that were used to gather these four sources of information are described in the following sections.

Introductory focus group. In the first session, the facilitators were introduced by the school principal as people interested in talking to students about their experiences in school, their communities and what it was like being an adolescent at this school. After being introduced to students by the school principal and the two coordinators of this project, the facilitators devoted time to answering participants' questions and developing a rapport with the students. After the introductory group meeting in the classroom, facilitators held a series of focus groups (accompanied by an activity) devoted to the issue of students' future aspirations. The data from this study are derived from these four focus groups.

Questionnaire. During the next focus group, we asked students to complete a brief questionnaire that asked them to describe themselves now and five years from now and then tell us what they thought they would be doing five years into the future. More specifically, in a large classroom, the participants were asked to respond individually to the following open-ended written questions: 'What kind of person are you now?'; 'What kind of person will you be in five years?'; and 'What will you be doing in five years?' Following the questionnaire, we held a discussion with participants regarding their responses to the questionnaire.

Goal maps. The third focus group involved creating goal maps outlining future plans for achieving specific academic or personal goals. The goal-mapping activity began with a discussion about dreams and hopes. Students were asked to think about what they hoped for in the future and to consider strategies that they could use to achieve future goals. After students described some of their aspirations, we asked them to choose a goal that they wanted to achieve within the next five years. We then asked them to map out the 'road' that they needed to take to get to their goals, using colored markers and large poster-sized paper. The following instructions were written on a chalkboard and also presented orally to participants:

- (1) Identify where you are now.
- (2) Identify the end point—which is the goal you chose.
- (3) Next, identify the things you need to do to get to the end (your goal).
- (4) Map these out as points between where you are now and your goal.
- (5) For each point on your map, give 3–5 examples of how you will reach that point.

We then gave each student the materials, and remained present to help them or answer any questions. At the end of the activity, students presented their maps to other members of the group and discussed the meaning of their goal maps. We collected the maps and ensured that students had written their names on their completed maps.

Group identity collage. The participants (in groups) completed collages that represented aspects of their group identity during the fourth and final focus-group session. For this activity, we asked students to make (in groups of four) a collage that would tell us about what the people making the collage were like. We suggested that students

could use the ideas that they had expressed during the focus group to make a collage about how they saw themselves, the things they do and the world in which they live. We asked students to ‘tell us what you and your world are like in your collage.’ Students were given materials, such as large poster board, magazines, scissors, glue, scotch tape and markers. One boy chose to not participate in the activity, so he worked independently and drew a picture instead of making a collage. Before the period ended, each group explained their collage to the rest of the group.

Data analysis

We adapted a three-step grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to analyze the data. In the first step, we delved into the data to generate a list of codes that embraced common descriptive and interpretive categories in the data. In the second step, we explored the data further to propose plausible relationships among the codes. Finally, using our findings from the first two steps, we looked for a few ‘conceptually dense’ theories in the limited sense. Throughout the data analysis process, we extensively used the HyperResearch (Hesse-Biber *et al.*, 1991) computer program to code and progressively organize the data.

In the first step, we began by reviewing the data independently to identify codes that emerged from the data. Next, we began a series of comparisons of these codes. A large list of codes (about 35) was then developed. As the first code list was created, once again, two researchers looked back at the data and coded them separately using the HyperResearch program. In the second step, a third researcher, the auditor who had not been to the school, joined the meetings to compare our findings and resolve discrepancies that arose. During this process, many codes were revised and refined. This recursive process enabled us to produce a number of codes that we believe represent the participants’ perspectives. The end result of this second step of our data-analysis process is the results section of this paper.

In the third step, we attempted to develop a conceptual framework that was grounded in our findings to better understand urban adolescents’ future aspirations. Following our development of this framework, we integrated our findings with the literature in this domain. We offer this grounded conceptual model in the discussion section of this paper.

Results

Before we present our results, we offer Table 1 to orient the reader to the major findings of this study. Following this table, we present the results of our analysis, and follow the presentation of participants’ voices with the introduction of a conceptual model of urban adolescents’ future aspirations.

Future goals

The data-collection activities we employed were selected to illuminate patterns in the type of future goals that students were oriented to. All students envisioned attending

Table 1. Coding of focus group/ questionnaire/goal maps/collages

Code	Definition of code
Future goals	Student's expectations for career, professional and educational aspirations
Structure	Awareness of structure of a plan
Process	Awareness of the process involved in achieving one's goals
Self-reliance	Reliance on characteristics, abilities, or strengths of self to achieve goals
Serious	Describing oneself as 'serious' now or in the future
Context	Awareness of one's context e.g. obstacles or support within one's ecological niche
Time orientation	Focus of future plans involves immediate circumstances
College	Including college as a goal of one's plan for the future
Sports	Career goal includes achievement of sports goal

college at some point in their future plans. However, sports played a large role in the views of college the boys held. One-third of the participants, all of whom were boys, indicated that playing in a 'division level college sports team' was an important aspect of their future plans. Among the boys who stated that they wished to play sports, almost all of them had indicated that they planned to receive a scholarship for doing so.

The majority of participants envisioned the type of career that they aspired to beyond graduating from college. Five participants planned to be lawyers, four planned on a business career, and only one person aspired to have a career in music. One boy planned to become a police officer or security guard. Finally, only two students did not indicate a defined career path that they planned to pursue.

Structure and process

These activities helped us to explore with participants what we have labeled the structure and process of their future plans. That is, how students perceived their future and how students went about planning their future goals. We found two patterns that were common to almost all of the students. These patterns involved (1) the *structure* of their future planning and (2) the *processes* that students had considered as they outlined the goals they hoped to achieve within the next five years.

All participants had a basic structural plan that incorporated a beginning and an end point; this structure generally took on a narrative form. This was somewhat expected because students had been given clear instructions to include a beginning and end point and a basic structure. Only two students did not demonstrate a structure in their plans. Their plan did not progress in a logical sequence (e.g. go to law school followed by graduate from high school).

The structure of students' plans was reflected by their awareness of the necessary steps to achieve one's future goals. Within the group, there was significant variability in the level of detail provided by each student's plans. For example, one participant's 'goal map' involved (1) attending high school, college and then starting a law firm,

whereas another student's plan was more specific—(1) get a job, get money and save money, (2) get through high school, avoid bad friends, (3) graduate from high school, apply to colleges, (4) go to New York University, (5) go to law school, (6) open a law firm.

There was also variability in participants' awareness of the process necessary to achieve each step of one's plan. Process was defined as participants' perception of the necessary functional requirements to fulfill the structure of one's plans. Some students' plans had a coherent structure with minimal awareness of process. For example, the structure of one participant's plans was: (1) go to college, (2) study business, (3) save money. Other participants produced elaborate plans that described much of the process necessary to progress through the different steps of the plan. For example, one boy described his plan in three steps: (1) high school, (2) scholarship and (3) college. For each step, he described many details of the process such as 'get good grades, try hard, no foolness, get above grade point average grades, be involved in extracurricular activities, pass the "X-test" [a 'high stakes' test students are required to take], find out what college costs, apply for college.'

Overall, we observed that half of the participants were aware of both the structure and process involved in their plans, whereas the other half included only a basic structure in their plans, with little or no consideration of the processes necessary to progress through the structure they had created.

Self-reliance

Students consistently discussed the theme of 'self-reliance.' Two-thirds of participants expressed the importance of exercising self-control over one's thinking, behavior and body to achieve success. For example, one boy said, 'in order to succeed, I need to keep my act together and stay on the ball.'

During the focus-group session, one boy insisted that, 'If Blacks work hard they will succeed in the long run, no matter what the circumstances are.' He suggested that African-Americans should rely on themselves to succeed despite adverse circumstances. He declared, 'Racism is not over! The only way for Blacks to be chosen over Whites is to work twice as hard ... it is all about your brain; I will make it if I work hard.' However, we should note that the majority of the participants did not share this perspective.

Being serious

The idea of becoming 'more serious' in the future was prevalent among one-third of the statements made by students in their goal maps and questionnaires. One-third of the participants stated that in five years they wanted to 'become a more serious person.' This theme was mentioned in relation to one's maturity, education and level of responsibility. A similar theme also emerged during the focus group.

Other students discussed becoming more serious as a developmental progression toward maturity. For example, one boy stated, 'I am a real honest person and also a funny person. In five years, I will be a serious person,' while another participant stated 'I will still be a responsible person. In five years, I will be a much more serious person.'

Time orientation

Participants also varied in their future orientation. A third of the participants' goal maps were focused on immediate goals. These students' plans reflected goals that involved the 'here and now.' For example, one student's goal map involved learning a 'cross-over' dribble for playing basketball. Another student's goal was to travel to Ireland. A few students were concerned with basic survival needs and indicated that in five years they hoped to be 'still livin' or 'staying alive.'

There were however, other students who focused exclusively on details of long-term plans without consideration of immediate goals or issues involving the 'here and now.' For example, one participant described how he planned to go to college, start a business and make the business successful. The predominant goal of this student's map concerned 'making the business grow' (e.g. have good credit, borrow money from a bank, get people to work with me, negotiate with other companies to work with me, and put products on sale to make a profit).

Context: resources and barriers

An awareness of resources and barriers was reflected in students' perception of their social/structural context. For example, only one-third of students acknowledged environmental obstacles such as passing standardized tests, paying for the cost of college and avoiding violence in the school. One student stated that he had to, 'stay out of trouble and avoid bad friends' in order to succeed in his future goals. This boy also drew pictures of guns on his goal map between symbols of people who he indicated were 'bad friends.' These symbols were placed along his goal path, between his goals of completing high school and entering college. We interpreted these data to reflect students' awareness of the way in which the school context and violence can serve as barriers to the realization of their future aspirations.

Other students indicated an awareness of the need to afford the cost of college. These students discussed strategies for obtaining part-time jobs to save money, having good credit to get a loan to start a business, and getting good grades so that they could obtain scholarships.

Only two students in the study alluded to using resources in their context to achieve their future goals. One girl stated that she could ask for advice from adults in the environment about getting a job. Another girl mentioned that she would 'ask her father for money to buy clothes.' However, two-thirds of the participants did *not* give voice to accessing contextual resources to overcome obstacles and meet their goals.

Racial and ethnic consciousness

All the students in our study indicated that they were proud of their ethnic/racial heritage. The African-American students underlined the fact that they felt Black and proud. For example, one boy described himself as a 'Hard working African American male: Black is beautiful.' Another student summarized the group's feelings concerning this issue: 'I am proud of being Black.' This theme was also evident in many collages where pictures of African-American models were put next to written descriptions such as 'Beauty, style, power, fashion.'

Participants indicated that they believed that they had more opportunities now than had previous generations of racial/ethnic minorities. One student outlined a commonly shared idea in the group session that, 'Now we have more chances, but White people are still thinking the same way as it was in slavery. There is still racism in America.' Another boy supported his friend by noting that 'White people are obstacles for our future. Whenever you apply for a job, you have to fight against a white.' Participants also gave voice to bicultural communication skills. Some of the students in the group made the comparison between 'talking Black vs. talking White.' A girl described how she felt comfortable when she was around her Black friends because she could 'talk Black,' however; she clarified that she 'knew how to talk around White folks.' Another girl seconded this by adding 'you get more results, when you talk proper. In order to get a job, I have to be something like I am not!' She underlined the choices she makes by indicating that 'I feel comfortable around my friends; in front of other people, you talk properly.'

Students were eager to share some of the difficulties that they were aware ethnic minorities face in the USA. Their statements reflected some consciousness of the social inequities in education and in the criminal justice system, noting the high number of African-Americans in jail and out of school. They discussed how both 'the bad history' and the scars of slavery within the USA were two major causes of problems that they felt they experience today. One boy summarized his friends' perception of the future for minorities: 'It's gonna get harder for minorities!'

Discussion

An examination of the above categories and relevant research literature comprised the third step of our data-analysis process. This process enabled us to develop a grounded perspective of urban adolescents' future aspirations. The following 'person-in-context' model illustrates this perspective.

Within education and psychology (and related fields), a growing consensus suggests that there is a dialectical connection between the individual and his or her social and cultural surroundings. A number of theorists and investigators studying human development within a contextual perspective assert the inextricable connectedness between individuals and their social context (Rogoff, 1990; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Their general approach is compatible with our findings in the present study; the dynamic interactions between individuals and their sociocultural contexts

Table 2. Influences on future aspirations

Individual	Structural
<i>Barriers:</i>	<i>Barriers:</i>
Immediate time orientation	Discrimination
Lack of social support	Violence
	Gender socialization
<i>Resources:</i>	<i>Resources:</i>
Self-reliance	Capacity for structural thinking
'Getting serious'	
Future time orientation	
Social support	

has a profound influence on one's future aspirations. This is particularly true for urban adolescents, who are embedded in institutions of society that facilitate (or constrain) access to resources and opportunity (Stanzon-Salazar, 1997; Lin, 1999). Thus, in order to understand the richness at the individual and contextual levels of development, individual and contextual factors that are associated with future aspirations need to be considered in concert. We believe that the model given in Table 2 helps to illustrate some of these forces.

Future aspirations

Our analysis suggested that the main finding of this study was regarding future aspirations, broadly defined as the 'dreams' participants had for their educational and/or vocational future. Overall, students who appeared to have a well-structured future plan (i.e. both short- and long-term goals in a logical order) with a consideration of processes necessary to achieve their goals seemed to have an explicit plan to attend college. Moreover, the majority of these students not only perceived themselves as college-bound but they also wanted to further their education and obtain a professional degree, most commonly in the law field. In sum, most of the urban adolescents in this study had future aspirations in the educational and vocational worlds.

This finding is not surprising, given the literature suggesting that the vocational aspirations or 'dreams' of African-American adolescents are equivalent to or exceed those of their White peers (cf. Baly, 1989; Constantine *et al.*, 1998), although the expectations they hold for their educational and occupational attainment differ (Hotchkiss & Borow, 1996). Further, participants' aspirations seemed to reflect an awareness of the limitations of a high school diploma. That is, none of the participants were interested in non-professional positions, and they appeared to view college as their only viable future option. Although we did not assess participants' academic performance, it is possible that not all of the participants in this study possessed the social, cultural and educational capital needed to attend and negotiate a college environment.

Below, we will explore the nuances within this finding. That is, variation existed within which individual and structural factors constrained or facilitated the future aspirations of these youths. As such, we have labeled these factors as either resources or barriers in relation to their future aspirations.

We should note that the method of data collection seemed to highlight different loci of influence in students' perceptions of their future plans. That is, personality characteristics were highlighted when participants provided information individually, whereas, in the group activities such as the collage and focus groups, elements of the social context were highlighted. Participants consistently mentioned that their personal abilities (i.e. self-reliance) were highly related to what they would or could not do in the future. This finding applied to most of the goal maps and questionnaires. The analysis of collages and focus group, however, provided some insights into how students perceived their environment as an obstacle to their future goals (e.g. violence, racism and discrimination). When students were asked to focus on their future goals individually, they were relatively clear about what they wanted and how they could obtain what they wanted. When they were in a group, however, they were more likely to consider contextual barriers that would impede them from attaining their future goals. In sum, students were more fluent about the role individual factors played in their future aspirations, but to a lesser extent also gave voice to the impact of contextual factors.

Individual level

Resources. Awareness of adverse social circumstances, such as racism and discrimination, did not impede most students from planning for a future involving college attendance and a meaningful career. This finding is consistent with other studies that have demonstrated equivalent levels of aspirations among urban youth and their suburban counterparts (Fouad & Bingham, 1995; Hotchkiss & Borow, 1996; Constantine *et al.*, 1998). Although students were cognizant of the social and structural barriers they faced, most students in this study indicated that they wanted to 'stay on the ball.' Almost all students planned to go to college, and imagined themselves eventually securing a job that pays well. That is, despite an awareness of social and structural barriers, these youth maintained future educational and vocational aspirations.

To cope with these barriers, students suggested mostly individualistic strategies such as 'getting more serious.' Students in this study perceived their social environment as a context where they have to be 'tough' to combat the daily racism and discrimination that they experience. Hence, it appeared that participants felt that they needed to 'get more serious' in the future so that they could cope with future contextual barriers. In sum, as in Diemer (2002), participants tended to endorse more individualistic than communal strategies for coping with oppression. This is not surprising, given the salience of individualism in the culture of the United States (Rossides, 1990).

Another individual-level resource for developing future aspirations was the ability to hypothesize about the structure and process of future-oriented plans. For example,

one participant indicated plans for going to college, starting a business (structure) and 'making the business grow' through developing credit and borrowing money (process). Although this participant incorporated both structural and functional process in his plans, other participants varied in their ability to construct the structure and process of future vocational and educational aspirations.

In summary, despite an awareness of contextual barriers, these participants still flourished at the individual level. That is, they were able to envision future educational and vocational aspirations, and gave voice to individually focused coping strategies such as 'getting serious' as a strategy for coping with barriers such as violence, poverty and discrimination.

Barriers. Another individual-level barrier to future aspirations was a present-focused time orientation. Although this time orientation may be an adaptive coping response to the (at times) violent contexts that participants lived in, this focus on the present may have impeded the development of well-formed future aspirations. For example, the goal map of one participant involved learning a crossover dribble for playing basketball. Although this goal may have reflected a step along the way to playing collegiate or professional sports in the future, this participant reported this as a final goal on his goal map.

Contextual level

Resources. We believe that students' ability to think structurally (Lopez *et al.*, 1998) is a valuable asset to their future aspirations. An awareness of context appeared to be a necessity for dealing with barriers to future goals and using available resources in the environment. Students who indicated an awareness of these aspects of the social context included this as a major part of the process of their goal maps. Students who indicated a well-structured future plan with a focus on the processes required to achieve their plans were more likely to consider environmental circumstances than students without a well-structured plan. In other words, it appeared that students who were more cognizant of contextual challenges were more prepared for their future.

Participants made it clear during the focus group that they wanted to differentiate themselves from stereotypical images of ethnic minorities portrayed by the media, such as people from housing projects, thugs, drug dealers, etc. One student said, 'Black is not ghetto!' Similarly, another student mentioned her disrespect for some rap stars and the manner in which they speak on TV; she indicated that, 'Blacks sound stupid on TV' and described how she felt that this portrayal perpetuated stereotypical images of African-Americans.

One participant indicated that he believed White peers are socialized in ways that perpetuate racism: 'White kids are taught to hate Black people and that makes everything harder for us.' Another boy in the session said, 'Now we have more chances, but White people are still thinking the same way as it was in slavery.' A girl summed up the majority view by stating: 'White people are obstacles for our future.' Despite these views and the students' perception of racism, participants still maintained a

positive attitude toward other races; as one boy stated, 'I don't hate nobody, don't care for their race. It is not about color.' Further, the comments of one participant, 'If Blacks work hard they will succeed in the long run, no matter what the circumstances are,' seemed to spur other participants to reflect more fully on the role that contextual factors played in their own lives. Although this perspective was not shared by all of our participants, this comment does reflect participants' preferences for individualistic strategies for negotiating these barriers, rather than taking a communal orientation or enlisting the support of 'institutional agents' (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Conchas, 2001) to assist them.

Students who demonstrated the capacity for structural thinking also demonstrated a subtle nuance between structural thinking and individual-level responses. Students who had more detailed structural plans with a consideration of required processes more often indicated the importance of self-reliance to achieve their goals, compared with students who did not generate detailed structural plans. Self-reliance and a value placed on cognitive abilities appeared to be a critical component of students' awareness of how to achieve future goals in concert with the ability to conceptualize structural barriers.

Barriers. Most students in this study perceived their social context as more of a barrier than a resource. However, some students gave voice to the importance of interpersonal support as a means of dealing with barriers. In the focus group, only two girls reported receiving support from others to achieve their goals. These girls were among the few participants who viewed interpersonal support as being a valuable asset to achieve their future goals. We have elected to present interpersonal support as a contextual-level barrier because the vast majority of the participants (16 of the 18) did not appear to be able to use supports as a resource in the manner that these two participants did.

In the face of the myriad social and structural barriers urban youth face (cf. Rossides, 1990; Kozol, 1991; Wilson, 1996), we feel that interpersonal and instrumental support may represent one (protective) factor within the control of urban youth that may help them negotiate their risk-factor-laden context. Whether participants perceived their interpersonal context as limiting, or simply were not cognizant of the role adults could play as resources or barriers in relation to their future aspirations, is unclear.

Gender was related to the choice of professional sports as a career. In our sample, none of the girls mentioned professional sports as a future career option. However, all the boys who aspired to be a professional in sports also indicated that they wanted to go to college. Most of these boys indicated that they would like to obtain an athletic scholarship for their efforts. Although the boys did not directly link playing sports to obtaining entrance and financial support to attend college, it was implied in many of their statements, such as in their aspirations to play 'division level college sports.'

We have elected to classify these findings as structural barriers because of the evidence they provide about the constraining effects of gender messages. Theory and research within the study of gender (cf. Majors & Billson, 1992; Mahalik *et al.*, 2001) indicate that societal messages about gender (such as the need for men to control the

display of emotions other than anger) constrain the possibilities that men and women envision for themselves (Freedman & Combs, 1996). In this case, we believe that the discourse surrounding the 'urban black male' led these urban black male adolescents to believe that their entrance to post-secondary education was dependent on their ability to play sports. Further, this discourse likely played a role in many of these boys envisioning professional sports as the (only?) career option for themselves in the future. While it is possible that athletic ability may facilitate much-needed scholarships for some of these boys, the focus on athletics may have closed off exploration and planning in domains other than sports. This is especially saddening considering the very low probabilities of college athletes 'making it' to professional sports leagues.

Almost all of the participants reported discouraging experiences as they attempted to achieve certain goals. The participants shared their frustrations about situations where they felt they had been discriminated against or had been the object of racism. For example, one participant told us about his recent weekend trip to a downtown mall with a group of friends from his neighborhood. He described how he and his friends were using the elevator to go upstairs while having a heated discussion with each other about their favorite music. He described the event as follows: 'There were three White girls in the elevator who were trying to move away from us as much as they could. I could see it in one girl's eyes, how scared they were of us. The girls walked out of the elevator and I heard one say, 'That was close!' The student further explained how it was not the intention of him or his friends to scare the girls.

Summary

Our data led us to construct a person-in-context model, grounded in the data, that captures the influences on urban adolescents' future aspirations. Namely, individual-level factors such as interpersonal skills, 'getting serious,' and self-reliance and contextual-level factors such as structural thinking about barriers and racial/ethnic and gender socialization messages emerged as influences on urban youths' future aspirations. These factors served to either constrain or facilitate youths' aspirations; as such, we labeled them either resources or barriers.

Limitations

Our exploration of urban adolescents' future aspirations was influenced by our collection of data through multiple modalities. We found that group activities and individual activities influenced the data produced by participants. While we perceived the multiple sources and methods of data to be a strength of this study, they could also be interpreted as a limitation. That is, the method of data collection may have impacted the manner in which participants' reported the various influences on their future aspirations. For instance, the individually focused questionnaires may have led participants to give more weight to individual factors than if this study had utilized solely focus-group methodology. It is unclear to what extent the methodology influenced participants' constructions but it highlights the impact that

methodology can have on participants' responses. It also provides direction for future researchers wishing to investigate either individual or contextual factors in the lives of urban adolescents.

It is difficult to know whether the findings of the present study generalize to other urban adolescents from inner-city settings. Although these participants did not give voice to the impact of the school culture on their aspirations, the unique history of the high school—and the recent efforts to improve the curriculum and the school's academic orientation—all serve to make this particular school context unique. Further, the participants in this study were also participants in the intervention program designed to foster their school engagement and future aspirations. Although the data from this study were collected before the implementation of this intervention, the special focus of this intervention may have altered participants' willingness to share their aspirations and perspectives. This alteration may mean that these participants' responses may not be generalizable or germane to other urban adolescents.

Gender appeared to influence data collection as well. The manner in which data were collected appeared to influence participants' responses. That is, there were gender differences in the themes expressed in the group identity collages and during the focus groups. Boys were very restricted in the manner in which they expressed themselves. Most of the boys' collages involved few items that were generally 'status' items, such as a house, a luxury car and female fashion model, or a sports hero. Girls, on the other hand, included more diverse types of pictures in their collages. Their collages frequently included family-oriented images or images that reflected interpersonal relations. For example, pictures of brides and grooms, babies, children, mother and child, mixed groups of teenagers and groups of girls standing together were common in the girls' collages. Girls also included more colorful and artistic items in their collages. For example, there were colorful graphic images, flowers, geographic scenes and pictures of beaches and mountain scenery. We believe that gender discourse may help to explain the manner in which the male participants restricted their self-expression during data collection, while the female participants were more expressive. Gender socialization messages, such as the 'Cool Pose' (Majors & Billson, 1992), may have led these male participants to believe that it would be 'wrong' to allow themselves to be expressive of themselves or their emotions during the data collection process.

Finally, the specifics regarding the neighborhood and the racial/ethnic distribution of the participants in this study may have contributed to the way in which the participants reported their awareness of the contextual factors such as racism and discrimination. We observed that some of the Cape Verdean participants self-identified as 'Black,' and as such, reported issues such as institutional racism from the perspective of a 'Black' person, rather than as a 'Cape Verdean.' Relatedly, although some participants were of Cape Verdean and/or Latino/a background, the issues such as bilingual education, acculturation and immigration laws were not as salient as one would expect. It is possible that the place where the school is located may have explained this phenomenon: a historically African-American community within a Northeastern city of the USA. Regardless of the reason why, it is important to note that our findings

with regard to the contextual issues were mostly limited to the experiences of African-Americans, and failed to capture the Cape Verdean and Latino/a adolescents' unique experiences.

Future directions

Future researchers may consider exploring this domain, and the person-in-context model developed herein, further. For example, the relationship between self-reliance and future aspirations found in this study suggests the need for an intervention strategy that would help urban adolescents cope with the individual and structural barriers identified by participants in this study. One such intervention strategy is assisting youth in 'decoding the system' and helping them in securing institutional support and instrumental assistance from individuals who possess social power (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Also, the role of gender and racial/ethnic background in the development of future aspirations has not been fully identified in this study and warrants further exploration. Finally, the manner in which youth give structure and process to their future aspirations, and the ways in which structure and process may be more fully articulated, are also areas for future study. Regardless, future study is needed to illuminate this area of inquiry and give voice to the future aspirations of urban youth and the influences on them.

Prior research on urban adolescents' perceptions of the future indicate that urban adolescents, particularly African-American students, espouse positive attitudes concerning their educational aspirations in the abstract while they are less likely than their White peers to believe that performing well in school will provide them with future opportunities such as attending college (Ogbu, 1981; Mickelson, 1990). Mickelson (1990) called this phenomenon the 'achievement-attitude paradox,' and showed that while many students in urban schools value education highly, they often do not perceive education as offering them concrete help in achieving their future goals. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1985) concept of cultural capital, it is possible to conceive of urban schools as public institutions which have the potential to generate either positive (i.e. by promoting the cultural capital valued in the broader society and by supporting the welfare of urban students) or negative (i.e. by reproducing the marginality of urban students) cultural capital for their students. This suggests that a higher incidence of failure among urban students as reported by the current statistics (see Department of Education, 2001) may be connected to both contextual barriers as represented by failing public schools in urban cities in the USA and the pessimism regarding future educational opportunities experienced by adolescents in those settings. In the present study, we illuminated only the individual and contextual factors that influence urban adolescents perception of their future, but further research is needed to provide more insight into how these factors may actually contribute to urban adolescents' current school performance, both directly and indirectly.

Our perspective is that it is important for all persons to reflect on and come to understand their place within the social order (cf. Freire, 1973, 1993). However, for people who experience oppression, such as urban youth, we believe this

understanding to be particularly important in order to resist the oppressive social order that they experience. One relatively unexplored method of resistance is, paradoxically, through achievement and attainment within the very social order that is oppressive. That is, future aspirations, and coming to understand the influences on them, may be a means by which urban youth may resist the 'tracking' of the social order into low-paying/low-status jobs through future planning and educational/occupational achievement. In light of the impact of social and structural influences on the future aspirations of the urban youth in this study, we believe it to be important, from a moral and pedagogical standpoint, to facilitate youths' understanding of individual and contextual influence and to facilitate the formation of their future aspirations. We hope that through the presentation of the participants' perspectives, and their reflections on their worlds, readers may more fully understand the influences on urban youths' future aspirations and ways in which the structure and process of future aspirations may be elaborated.

Conclusions

Future aspirations play an important role in the educational and occupational attainment of adolescents (Israelashvili, 1997; Nurmi, 1991; Constantine *et al.*, 1998). Occupational attainment, in turn, may be a means by which urban youth may acquire social power not ascribed to them on the basis of their position within the existing social order. We believe future aspirations to be a particularly important area of exploration, owing to the frequency and salience of structural barriers (such as neighborhood violence, discrimination and unequal access to opportunities) in the lives of urban youth (Rossides, 1990; Kozol, 1991; Wilson, 1996; Constantine *et al.*, 1998). Our findings, and the person-in-context model that we have grounded in the data, illustrate several individual and structural-level influences on the formation of these aspirations among a sample of urban youth.

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Notes on contributors

Selcuk R. Sirin is an Assistant Professor at Montclair State University's Psychology Department. His research focuses on developmental challenges for children who come from underrepresented populations and ways to increase professionals' ethical responsibility to deal with these challenges.

Matthew A. Diemer is a recent graduate of the Counseling Psychology doctoral program at Boston College, and is a post-doctoral fellow at the Counseling and Psychological Services Center at Northwestern University. His research focuses

on social justice and multicultural issues, and he is studying the role critical consciousness plays in human development and access to opportunity.

Lisa R. Jackson received her PhD from Stanford University. From there she went to Boston College as an assistant professor in the Lynch School of Education. Dr Jackson is currently the project director for the Boston After-School Enterprise developing a citywide data system and managing a series of after-school initiatives.

Lisa Gonsalves has been teaching in public urban colleges and universities for 16 years, currently as an Assistant Professor at the University of Massachusetts/Boston in the Graduate College of Education. She received her doctorate in Education from Boston College. Her research includes examining cross-racial and cross-cultural interaction between educators and students in urban settings; high stakes assessments; the achievement gap, and teacher preparation.

Angela Howell is a doctoral candidate in Applied Developmental and Educational Psychology at Boston College.

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