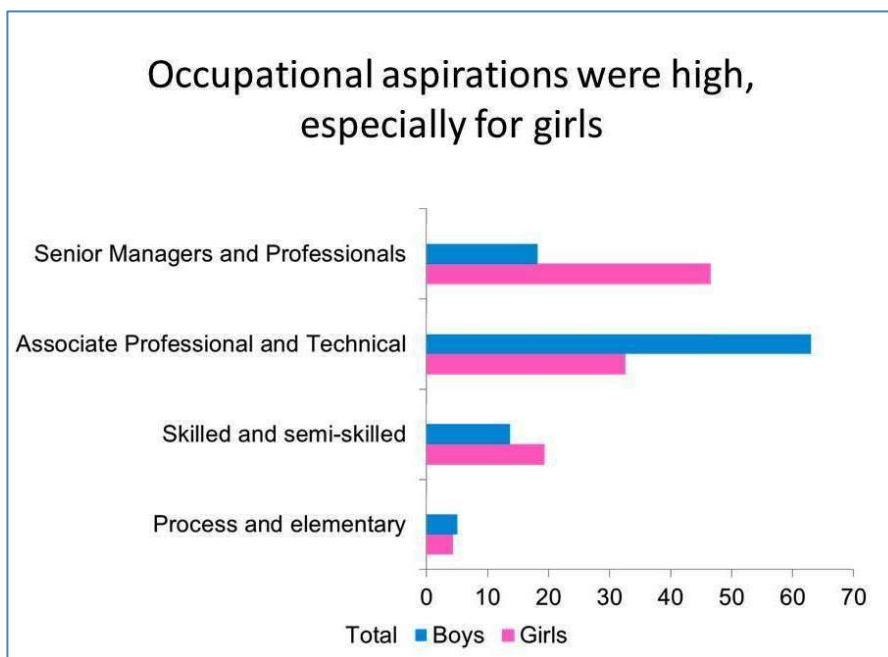




- Lower occupational aspirations (e.g. ‘hairdresser’, animal carer’) in girls were related to more emotional symptoms.
- Compared to children who mentioned relatively common jobs (e.g. ‘teacher’, ‘builder’), those who aspired to rare occupations among adults (e.g. ‘sports player’, ‘veterinarian’) had fewer emotional and peer problems.
- Aspirations played a minor role in pathways to behaviour problems: the association between family poverty and externalising problems, such as hyperactivity and anti-social behaviour, was weaker among children with higher career aspirations.
- Ambitious children from poor backgrounds were less likely to have behaviour problems than equally disadvantaged seven-year-olds with lower career aspirations.

**Figure:** Aspirations of boys and girls at age 7



## What we did

This study is part of a wider research project to investigate how neighbourhood and family poverty, and other adverse circumstances, are associated with children's well-being, as gauged through emotional and behavioural outcomes.

Furthermore, it explores how factors like parental involvement, children's cognitive development, their self-control, and their aspirations, can weaken or strengthen associations.

This particular study was concerned with the relationship between the aspirations expressed by children and their emotional and behavioural adjustment rated by both teachers and parents (i.e. whether different types of aspiration are associated with problematic – such as anti-social, or withdrawn – behaviour).

The study (and the wider research project) is based on the Millennium Cohort, a national survey following up the lives of children born in 2000-1. The Millennium Cohort Study is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and a consortium of government departments. It covers the whole of the United Kingdom and addresses many different topics.

The study is being carried out by a team based in the IOE's Department of Psychology and Human Development and the **Centre for Longitudinal Studies**, and forms the basis of an ESRC funded PhD studentship (for Vanessa Moulton).

## How we did it

As part of the Millennium Cohort Study, the children completed a questionnaire in 2008, alongside surveys of parents and teachers.

Over 13,000 seven-year-olds wrote answers to the question 'When you grow up what would you like to be?' This is the first time so many children of this age attempted such a task.

The children's written free text was carefully classified. Wherever possible, a code reflected the prestige of the corresponding job in today's labour market, and another the degree to which the aspired state was masculine or feminine – this was based on the proportion of men and women among those currently employed in each job or the gender of fantasy roles. We also compared those children who were not able to give codable and realistic answers with those who did to gauge potential bias, for example by cognitive ability.

We related the various types of aspirations to family background and the child's characteristics such as gender, using statistical modelling. We also related assessments of the child's behaviour at age 7, made by both parents and teachers, to their aspirations, on the hypothesis that the formulation of clear and positive aspirations would be reflected in fewer behavioural problems.

We further tested whether having high aspirations might help to overcome the risk of behavioural problems otherwise associated with family poverty.

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## Implications

At age 7 many children already envisage future careers. Being ambitious seems to help protect poor children from risks of disadvantage, but strong prevailing gender stereotypes may be limiting the goals children set for themselves. Teachers and parents should be aware of this stereotyping in early aspirations, and seek to broaden children's horizons.

## Further information

See the [project web page](#):

Publications:

Flouri, E. & Panourgia C. (2012). Do primary school children's career aspirations matter? The relationship between family poverty, career aspirations and emotional and behavioural problems. *Centre for Longitudinal Studies Working Paper 2012/5*. IOE, London

Flouri, E., Moulton, V. & Panourgia, C. (2012). MCS data note: Coding the aspirations of children at age 7 in the Millennium Cohort Study Centre for Longitudinal Studies. London: IOE

## Contact

**Principal Investigator:** Prof. Eirini Flouri, Department of Psychology and Human Development, Institute of Education, University of London

**Email:** [e.flouri@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:e.flouri@ioe.ac.uk)

**Phone:** +44 (0)20 7612 6289

**Other team members:** Prof. Heather Joshi, Dr Alice Sullivan, Vanessa Moulton, Prof. Dick Wiggins and Dr Emily Midouhas (Institute of Education); Dr N. Tzavidis (University of Southampton)

Prof. Heather Joshi, Dr Alice Sullivan and Prof Dick Wiggins are based at the IOE's Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS)