ED3072: Media and youth aspirations
The X-Factor Generation?
Low aspirations, ‘work shy youth’ and celebrity

• ‘Aspiration Nation’ and meritocracy

The mission for this government is to build an aspiration nation... It’s what’s always made our hearts beat faster – aspiration; people rising from the bottom to the top... We get behind people who want to get on in life.

• ‘Aspiration deficits’; ‘Combating worklessness’ and ‘educational failure’; ‘Raising aspirations to break cycle of poverty’; developing ‘resilience’ and ‘character’

• Celebrity: eroding young people’s aspirations and work ethic

X-Factor culture fuelled the UK riots... Kids believe that their stepping stone to massive money is the X Factor. Luck is great, but most of life is hard work. We do not celebrate people who’ve made success out of serious hard work.

David Cameron: too many British children want to be popstars and footballers

David Cameron met with school children in Monrovia today and said that too many children in Britain wanted to be "popstars and footballers" when they grow up.
“When you work hard and still sometimes have to go without the things you want because times are tough it is maddening to know that there are some people who could work but just don’t want to. You know the people I mean. You walk down the road on your way to work and you see the curtains drawn in their house. You know they could work and they chose not to. And just as maddening is the fact that they seem to get away with it.” (David Cameron, 2011)
‘Meritocracy’ as a ‘structure of feeling’

‘In Britain the powerful language of aspiration, social mobility and opportunity for all to rise through the social structure has not become muted, despite a double-dip recession, still growing inequality, and a historically unprecedented drop in living standards for the working majority. On the contrary: it has escalated under the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition Government.’ (Jo Littler, 2013: 65)

Where I excel is ridiculous, sickening work ethic. While the others guy’s sleeping, I’m working … I’m not afraid to die on a treadmill. You might be more talented than me, smarter than me, but if we get on the treadmill, [either] you’re getting off first or I’m gonna die … Whatever goal you want to reach, whatever you want to do in life, your success originates from your attitude.
Images of success/failure: Will Smith

http://youtu.be/2EIBFNsenF4

I think that there's a certain delusional quality that all successful people have to have, you have to believe that something different than what has happened for the past 50 million years can happen.

Being realistic is the most commonly travelled road to mediocrity.

What's the point of being realistic?

It's unrealistic to walk into a room, flip a switch, and have light come on, but fortunately Edison didn't think so.
Images of success/failure: Jenna Marbles

http://youtu.be/h23oPnh1WJM

No one wants to fuckin’ date me. Boo-fuckin’-hoo.
ESRC-funded (2012-14)

Qualitative research project, exploring:

• What discourses of aspiration circulate in celebrity representations?

• How young people use these discourses in constructing their aspirations?

• How are these shaped by class and gender?
Research Design

Six secondary schools (11-18) in England, rural and urban, reflective of local demographics

148 young people participated in total (14-17 years)

24 group interviews with 6 students each (Year 10 and Year 12) about their engagements with celebrity culture

Follow up individual interviews with 8 students per school focused more on their personal biographies and aspirations for the future

Textual analysis of 12 case study celebrities
Young people’s stories of success and failure

51 individual interviews across 6 schools
On locality and family, celebrity, aspirations, gender and class
Narratives of individual responsibility and enterprise

“I’d say the only thing that stops you from achieving your dreams is you...You have to constantly believe in yourself, you have to constantly know that if you wanna do it, you have to put your mindset (sic) to it and do it...Like you need to know where your weaknesses are...I can happily say that my weakness would be writing my Personal Statement, it’s hard. Like I am finding it hard to write a whole page about myself and what I’ve done, and stuff like that. But I am pushing through it, like I’m learning how to do it. I’m learning all my mistakes, learning from them and stuff. ..And there are people would say ‘Yeah. But then what about the people around you? What if they’re pulling you back? Bla bla bla’ The only reason they’re pulling you back is because you’re letting them pull you back. If they were really pulling you back, it’s still on yourself, because you can be smart enough to walk away, or you can just be stupid and just stand there, while they ruin the rest of your life for you, and then end up blaming it all on them. When really it was just yourself. So the only thing that gets in the way of success, is yourself.” (Edward, 16-17)
Affective entanglements

“I remember I was dreading it, I’m holding the little brown paper, [oh] I'm holding the little brown envelope, and I was standing outside the house thinking, what should I say, what should I say?” Edward (16-17)
“I don’t know if I’ll be rich. I want to be but I don’t want to be mega-rich ... [money has to be important] because of the world we live in right now. You kind of need money. So I want enough money to live on and use and some money left over to use for stuff for leisure or something” – Dave, 15

“I think it's my parents, because, erm, my dad said if you work hard you'll become successful, but if you don't you end up struggling to pay bills and stuff. So I think that's what he got, he got me thinking it's about money in life.” – Manjula, 17

“Obviously having enough money to support myself so like for a house and paying bills and stuff.” – Herbert, 15
“A good and steady life”

‘Just having a good and steady life, I don't care about having like millions of pounds and stuff in my bank account. If I have children, just to give my children a normal and stable life, like my mum gave with all, with all of the power give it to us. Because she was a single mum, and she still is, and I want to prove to my father's family like ‘I grew up well without your help’. And I want my children to show a woman can do it, and you don't need help.’

‘Beyonce shows what women can like do a lot without a male ... she fired her father as a manager, and then she decided to manage herself. ... She uses only females on stage. [She’s] a very good person to look up to.”
“Sometimes, “coping with” or “getting by” or “making do” might appear as a way of not attending to structural inequalities, as benefiting from a system by adapting to it, even if you are not privileged by that system, even if you are damaged by that system.

Perhaps we need to ask: who has enough resources not to have to become resourceful? When you have less resources you might have to become more resourceful...You might not be trying to move up, to project yourself forward; you might simply be trying not to be brought down. Heavy, heavy histories. Wearing, worn down.” (Ahmed, 2014)
Person McPerson: Expressing doubt and not knowing

H: So let’s start with can you tell me what it’s like to live round here?
P: To live round here? It’s okay.
H: Yeah.
P: Er, I don’t know. [slight laugh]
H: Do you live in [area round school]?
P: Erm [neighbouring area].
H: Oh okay that’s quite close isn’t it. Yeah. And have you always lived here?
P: Yeah.
H: Okay ... So what would you say to someone like me who doesn’t know the area like the highlights and the lowlights of [area round school]?
P: [pause] I have no idea.
H: So what things about it kind of stand out for you, in the area?
P: Erm. Stand out? [sounds uncertain] It’s okay.
H: Okay. And do you think you kind of want to carry on living here?
P: Maybe, I don’t know.
H: And it’s okay but there are other places that you think you would want to live, more than here?
P: Maybe, I don’t know.
Person McPerson: Refusing to tell her life

H: Okay. So what do you want to do after school?
P: Maybe go university.
H: Okay. Erm, and have you got any idea of where you would want to go?
P: No, I have no idea.
H: Okay do you want a chance to stay in London, would you like to leave London?
P: [exasperated] I don’t know. [both laugh]
H: Okay. Have you figured out what subject you want to do?
P: Nope.
H: Okay.
P: I might do English but I’m not sure.
H: Okay. So why English rather than film or drama?
P: I don’t know.
H: [laughs] Okay, and have you got people to talk to to help you make your choices?
P: Not really. ...
H: Okay. So what is it about university that makes you want to go there?
P: I don’t know, to kind of put off whatever I have to do with my life.
H: So the first question is: Do you think there are things which make it difficult for young people to achieve their dreams?
P: Erm. [pause] Like what type of things?
H: It could be anything. It could be like, I don’t know it could be like money, or it could be like things which happen to some people rather than others. It could be like I don’t know, erm, like where you’re born, where you live. Just some things people have said before.
P: Er, erm. [pause] I’m not sure, it might be difficult to achieve your dreams if you don’t have any. But I don’t know maybe.
H: That’s a really good point no-one’s ever said that. It kind of assumes that you have something you want to end up doing, but if you haven’t got that then actually if you just let things happen, as they happen which is kind of what you do isn’t it?
P: Yeah.
R: I think my mum said it was one year ago, two days ago. I remember it like it was yesterday.
H: Really. So why do you remember it so much?
R: Dunno, I was at my nan’s and my mum like just came knocking on my nan’s door and like said mum and dad had had an argument and then I said ‘Oh why! I leave you two k- two kids alone for two minutes and you squabble’. And then yeah [pause] It was mainly because I left them for a day to sleep around my nan’s because I hadn’t seen her for a long time, and then she just tells me.
H: Yeah. So it sounds like from what you’re saying that you feel a bit responsible for what happened.
R: Yeah I feel like the man in the house now. ...
H: So what kind of things do you feel this role involves, like being the man of the house?
R: Erm. Sometimes it involves getting money, like I have to work with my dad, to get some money. Sometimes it involves like just mowing the grass, or like tidying up sometimes, looking after my little brothers, helping them do things.
Homer: Aspirations

R: I don’t know whether to be a plasterer, a plumber, a electrician or a welder. My granddad is a- My dad’s a plasterer. My granddad’s a welder. But a electrician and plumber I don’t anybody who does it, apart from my dad does. Electricity’s always interested me because it's like dangerous. H: Right. So is there like a first memory that you have of when you became interested in electricity?
R: When I was at work with my dad I touched a plug and I got an electric shock. I stood there like just shaking for like two seconds, it was weird. ... It was good though. I felt all right with it. It doesn’t like hurt, it just makes you like shake and you can’t control your body for it only lasts for like two seconds – and then you just go ‘Oh that’s a weird feeling’. ... It weren’t even that long ago, I don’t think. It's like the other month. ... H: And welding?
R: My granddad does that and he’s quite a successful man. Erm, wife, three kids, grandkids, and he’s still alive at the age of 70 and he smokes. ... He’s got quite a lot of money, he’s got a nice house, car, van, and he’s like kind and stuff so. ... He’s always been a role model. ... And it seems quite fun; you get to play with fire.
Homer: University

H: ... your grandpa’s a really important influence, do you talk to him about what you want to do in the future and stuff?
R: Yeah, he’s always been trying to get me to like colleges and unis and er, yeah I just tell him I want to do an apprenticeship. See how I like that for a couple of weeks, if I don’t like that I’ll try to get to a college or a university.
H: Right. So why would you prefer the apprenticeship to the college?
R: Because I want to like work straight away ... I think ... experience is better than knowledge, because if you’ve experienced it you’ll remember it more than just learning about it in school. And yeah, if I get experience at a young age then I might have potential to be good at that, sort of thing ... My auntie, she tries to convince me to go to university and college as well. ... She, she’s [pause] Yeah. She likes gets me to go to erm- She gets, you know the brochure things for colleges, she gets me them, and then she asks me if I like any of them. I normally just tell her I don’t want to stay in school. [Both laugh]
H: So do you find that that puts pressure on you or do you just like let it go?
R: I think it's just them looking out for me, but it does kind of make you feel pressure, because like, it makes me think how old I am, even though I don’t really feel it. I still feel like I’m like 10.
I would love to be him, but no, I just don’t like him really.

I reckoned he would’ve been on drugs and everything already, but I reckon he would’ve been a laugh.

If I got rich. Like if I got rich, I wouldn’t bother spending the money on me, I would bothered about my family and putting it in a safe place. And then I would probably move my entire family, if I was that rich, and then we got, live in a nice estate, properly nice. Like, like upper London, not upper London, like in central London, busy and stuff. But like not on a highway, so that we can go to like shopping centres a lot. I’d probably be like- I’d probably buy them everything they wanted, because I’d have that much money I suppose. But that won’t happen.
H: So you kind of want something that won’t happen.
R: Yeah. I’ve got used to it, that it’s not going to happen, because I’m not really clever and yeah.
H: So why do you think you are not clever?
R: Because I’ve not got an A in one subject yet.
H: But some people are clever at things which you don’t learn at school.
R: Yeah I know but, I count clever as things as like, things that you learn in school, while we’re at school, until we like get outside of school. Like physics, that’s hard, so people that do that are clever.
H: Right. Sometimes people become clever later on. They’re not clever at school, but they’re clever when they’re like 25. So you might find that you’re clever when you’re 25.
R: I could do, you never know. Yeah, it would be good.
H: So you’d like to be clever.
R: Yeah I would like to be clever, yeah, and then I would like to be rich.
H: What would you like most?
R: To be rich.