

A Conceptual Framework for the Study of Aspirations

RICHARD A. SHERWOOD, JR.¹

Aspirations research has pursued four lines of inquiry, all grounded in Lewin's field theory. This locates aspirations studies within that class of theories which presuppose that individuals make efficient choices to maximize their satisfactions and minimize their dissatisfactions.

While prior research has focused upon the goals which are the objects of aspirations, the present paper argues that shifting the focus to what people invest in their aspirations suggests fruitful, new lines of inquiry.

An operational definition of an aspiration as any future goal in which an individual is willing to invest time, effort or money is proposed. This directs attention to the dynamic processes by which individuals assess opportunities, constraints and risks and choose goals and strategies for attaining the goals. This retains the field theoretical perspective which has guided previous research. At the same time, it suggests new ways of quantifying aspiration levels and establishes a metric which permits the comparison of previously incommensurable aspirations.

Since it is not the writer's intent to advance a theory of aspirations, but rather to develop a conceptual framework applicable across different disciplines and different theoretical perspectives, the present paper makes no attempt to develop a theory of aspirations nor to propose hypotheses for testing.

INTRODUCTION

This paper proposes a conceptual framework for aspirations studies. Central to this frame of reference is a definition of aspirations which links the sought-after goals with the investments required to achieve them. This shifts the focus of inquiry from the fixed goals or desired end states to the dynamic strategies individuals adopt to attain their goals. This shift does not supplant, but complements and extends the range of previous research on aspirations. The value of the shift lies in the numerous hypotheses and research questions it suggests.

THE THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Aspirations research has pursued four lines of inquiry. One line has sought to measure individual differences in generalized ambition—in the drive or propensity to achieve. A second has sought to identify the links between internalized, personal values and levels of ambition. A third line has sought to measure the effect upon achievement of the cognitive dissonance created by status inconsistency (the discrepancy between self-image and objective status). And a fourth has sought to account for individual differences in the goals or objects of aspirations.

All four lines of inquiry have been based upon Lewin's field theory which treats aspirations as the choosing of goals within a field (Lewin, 1951). This field (psychological environment) is comprised of an individual's personal values and his or her judgments concerning the comparative likelihood of achieving various, valued ends. The strength (motivational stimulus) of an aspiration is,

according to field theory, directly proportional to the value the individual places upon the goal and to his or her assessment of the probability of attaining the goal. The greater the value assigned to the potential goal or the greater the perceived likelihood of achieving it, the stronger the aspiration will be. The lower the value or the less the perceived likelihood of achieving the goal, the weaker the aspiration will be.

Field theory belongs to a class of theories which have been variously labeled rational-choice, utilitarian, voluntaristic or action theories. These presuppose that individuals make efficient choices to maximize their satisfactions and minimize their dissatisfactions. Perceiving a matrix of opportunities and constraints, the individual chooses the opportunities he or she thinks most likely to lead to desired outcomes and away from unwanted ones.

Since individuals may perceive the matrix of opportunities and constraints differently, they may, even while pursuing the same goals, choose different courses of action. It follows, therefore, that we can understand a person's actions only when we know both the ends sought and how he or she perceives the matrix of opportunities and constraints. Conversely, when we observe actions that do not seem to make sense, we have probably misunderstood either the ends sought or the individual's perception of opportunities and constraints.

A DEFINITION OF ASPIRATIONS

Aspirations have two distinctive aspects. First, they are future oriented. They can only be satisfied at some future time. This distinguishes them from immediate

¹Policy Analyst, Maine State Planning Office, Augusta, Maine 04333.

gratifications. Secondly, aspirations are motivators. They are goals individuals are willing to invest time, effort or money in to attain. This distinguishes them from idle daydreams and wishes.

The frame of reference advanced in this paper incorporates these aspects in its definition of an aspiration: **ANY GOAL AN INDIVIDUAL IS WILLING TO INVEST IN BEFOREHAND.**

Turner and Kerckhoff have employed similar concepts in their aspirations studies; Turner defining "ambition" as the "active pursuit of goals" and Kerckhoff defining it as a "willingness to work to achieve goals" (Turner, 1964; and Kerckhoff, 1974; cited in Spenner and Featherman, 1978).

ASPIRATIONS AS INVESTMENT

Science depends upon the fruitful use of metaphor. The metaphorical equation of aspirations with investments in the proposed definition has been deliberately made for its suggestive connotations.

It emphasizes the active character of aspirations. Individuals must act — must invest time, effort or money — to pursue their goals.

It emphasizes the resources required by aspirations. Individuals must have time, energy or money not consumed in immediate use to invest in their goals.

It emphasizes the rationality implicit in aspirations. Individuals must allocate their resources between current consumption and future goals and then decide upon an investment strategy for pursuing their ends.

It emphasizes the risks inherent in aspirations. Investments do not always yield the desired returns. Hence, aspirations are always risky; committing current resources to uncertain future ends.

Thus, the investment metaphor directs attention to the dynamic processes by which individuals assess opportunities, constraints and risks and choose goals and strategies for attaining the goals. This makes the new definition congruent with the field theoretical perspective which has guided previous research and theory.

ASSESSING INVESTMENTS IN ASPIRATIONS

Figure 1 illustrates how an observer might record information about an individual's investments in his or her aspirations.

It provides for the recording of three sorts of data: (1) the individual's planned, future investments in his or her aspirations; (2) the individual's actual investments so far, and (3) — the observer's assessments of what the individual will ultimately have to invest to achieve the goals.

While monetary investments pose no quantification problems, measuring the investment of time and effort is less straightforward. Investigators in several fields, however, have designed techniques for measuring both time

and effort which can serve as models for quantifying non-monetary investments. The procedures employed by Csikszentmihaly and Larson in their study of adolescent life appear particularly promising in this regard (Csikszentmihaly and Larson, 1984). The budget studies anthropologists and home economists conduct to measure household consumption and allocation of resources, including time and energy, offer additional quantification models.

Figure 1 identifies two potential sources for each investment. The first consists of ego's own, individual resources. The second consists of communal resources. This acknowledges that the successful pursuit of a goal often requires access to resources controlled by others. Buying a home, for example, is likely to require a loan from a bank. Obtaining a better job may require the help of friends. Starting a business may depend upon financial investments by relatives. And attending school after marriage will almost certainly mean contributions of time, effort and money by one's spouse.

EVALUATING ASPIRATION LEVELS

Figure 1 provides for recording the observer's assessments of how much time, effort and money the individual will ultimately have to invest to attain his or her goals. If, for example, aspiration A were to become a physician, the observer would record twenty-three years in the "required" time row of aspiration A for the twenty-three years of education required to become a doctor. If, on the other hand, aspiration A were to become a practical nurse, the observer would record only fourteen years for the required education for that occupation. If aspiration B were to purchase a large home in a popular suburb, the observer might record \$150,000 in the "required" money row of aspiration B; whereas, if aspiration B were to purchase a mobile home on a small rural lot, the observer might record only \$70,000 for the required monetary investment. Assuming ego planned to borrow a part of the money for the purchase, this investment would be divided between ego's individual resources (the down-payment) and communal resources (the mortgage).

The "required" investments establish three common dimensions (time, effort and money) which allow one to assess and compare the aspiration levels of very different sorts of goals. Whatever the goal — a career, a consumer purchase, an education, a leisure activity or self development — it can be evaluated with respect to how much time, effort and money is required to achieve success. Prior studies, deriving their measures of aspiration from the particular goals studied, have been unable to establish a common scale or metric for comparing aspiration levels.

Some prior studies have used the average earnings of occupations to rank career goals. Others have used the social prestige accorded occupations to rank the same goals. Some studies have compared lifestyle aspirations

FIGURE 1
AN ASPIRATIONS SCHEDULE

	Ego's Aspirations				...	Totals	Immediate Consumption
	A	B	C				
Ego's Planned Investments						and Expenditures	
Ego's Own Time					...		

Communal Time					...		
Ego's Own Effort					...		

Communal Effort					...		
Ego's Own Money					...		

Communal Money					...		
Ego's Actual Investments						So Far	
Ego's Own Time					...		

Communal Time					...		
Ego's Own Effort					...		

Communal Effort					...		
Ego's Own Money					...		

Communal Money					...		
Observer's Assessments of						Required Investments	
Ego's Own Time					...		

Communal Time					...		
Ego's Own Effort					...		

Communal Effort					...		
Ego's Own Money					...		

Communal Money					...		

using the social status society accords the lifestyle. Others have ordered lifestyle preferences according to the incomes needed to sustain them. And studies of educational aspirations have used years of schooling to rank educational ambitions. In each case, the index of aspirations has been specific to the particular goal (career, education, lifestyle, etc.) under study. Frequently, it has also been specific to one particular dimension or aspect of the goal. Indexing occupations by their earnings, for example, yields a different rank ordering of career ambitions than does indexing the occupations by their prestige.

This specificity has severely curtailed the generalization of aspirations research findings; creating indices which lack the common measurement scales necessary for comparing and integrating findings. Thus, it is impossible to assimilate the findings of studies of educational aspirations with the findings of studies of occupational aspirations because levels of ambition are measured in totally unrelated ways. The effect, consequently, has been to generate findings which can not be integrated into a broader picture of aspirations.

By focusing upon investments in goals, the definition of aspiration advanced in this paper overcomes their weakness and encourages the integration of research on diverse sorts of goals.

There are two obvious ways of using investments to quantify individuals' aspirations levels or ambition. The first is to measure the absolute height of the investments required by the individuals' goals. The second is to measure the comparative height of the required investments.

ABSOLUTE HEIGHT: The absolute height of an aspiration can be measured by the absolute investment required to achieve it. The greater the required investment, the higher (more ambitious) the aspiration. Becoming a physician requires (an absolutely) greater investment in time, effort and money than becoming a practical nurse. The former, therefore, is (an absolutely) higher aspiration than the latter.

COMPARATIVE HEIGHT: The comparative height of an aspiration can be measured by the share of an individual's resources required to achieve it. This standardizes aspiration levels making them proportional to individuals' resource bases. Thus, the fewer resources an individual has, the more ambitious a given goal is; while the more resources the individual has, the less ambitious the goal is. A single mother, other things being equal, has less time to pursue her aspirations than a married woman without children. Graduating from college is, therefore, a (comparatively) higher ambition for the single mother than it is for the married woman. Similarly if one person, to become an independent trucker, must devote a larger share of his or her resources to the purchase of a truck than another person has to devote to attaining an advanced degree, the former's aspiration is (comparatively) higher than the latter's.

Figure 2 illustrates how an observer might record information about an individual's resources in order to evaluate the comparative (standardized) height of his or her aspirations.

This schedule includes both individual and communal resources and distinguishes between the observer's and ego's perceptions of available resources.

The latter distinction is designed to incorporate the field theoretical premise that it is "perceived" opportunities and constraints, rather than "objective" conditions which shape aspirations. Thus, an individual who thinks it possible to obtain a loan (communal resource) to attend college is likely to evaluate that aspiration differently than another who does not consider the possibility of a loan. One potentially fruitful line of inquiry is likely to occur where ego and the observer differ in their perceptions of available resources (opportunities and constraints).

The schedule provides for separately assessing the resources available for each particular aspiration to take account of those resources which can only be invested in specified aspirations. A scholarship which can be used to attend business school, but not art school, is an example of such a resource.

EVALUATING THE COMMITMENT TO AN ASPIRATION

An individual's commitment to an aspiration has at least two dimensions: intensity and duration.

INTENSITY: Intensity can be measured by the share of an individual's resources he or she is willing to invest in the aspiration. The two constructs discussed above—the absolute and comparative height of aspirations—are based upon objective assessments of how much individuals must invest (either minimally or on average) to attain the goal. Intensity, however, is based not upon what is required to attain the goal, but upon what the individual considers worthwhile devoting to the effort. The greater the share of his or her assets an individual is willing to devote to the goal, the more intense is the aspiration. Among persons aspiring to master a sport, those willing to devote a larger share of their time to practice and drill have the more intense aspirations.

Figure 1 incorporates two measures of commitment: (1) what the individual plans or expects to invest and (2) what he or she has actually invested so far. The two, of course, need not be congruent and, when they are not, the discrepancy itself may be the focus of inquiry.

DURATION: the duration of an aspiration can be measured by the time (whether calendar, event or life cycle intervals) elapsing between an individual's initial investment in the aspiration and his or her achieving or abandoning the goal. If two persons aspire to elective office and one attains the goal after first losing several elections while the other abandons it after losing a single election, the former's aspiration is of greater duration.

EVALUATING GLOBAL LEVELS OF ASPIRATIONS

People usually aspire to several goals simultaneously; a new car, a new home and a better job, for example.

FIGURE 2
A RESOURCE SCHEDULE

	Ego's Aspirations					Totals	Immediate Consumption
	A	B	C	...			
Ego's Time Available for Aspirations and Consumption							
Ego's Assessments				...			

Observer Assessments				...			
Communal Time which Ego Can Invest in Aspirations							
Ego's Assessments				...			

Observer Assessments				...			
Ego's Energy Available for Aspirations and Consumption							
Ego's Assessments				...			

Observer Assessments				...			
Communal Energy which Ego Can Invest in Aspirations							
Ego's Assessments				...			

Observer Assessments				...			
Ego's Money Available for Aspirations and Consumption							
Ego's Assessments				...			

Observer Assessments				...			
Communal Money which Ego can Invest in Aspirations							
Ego's Assessments				...			

Observer Assessments				...			

Hence, it would be desirable to have a quantitative measure of an individual's overall or global level of aspiration which reflects the totality of his or her goals. The three investment dimensions (time, effort and money) common to all goals do, in fact, permit just this. By separately summing the time, effort and money the individual must invest to attain all his or her goals, the investigator can construct three separate measures of the individual's overall aspiration levels. Discriminant and factor analytic techniques, in turn, can be employed to combine the three separate measures into a single global construct where such is desired.

SOME SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR INVESTIGATION

The following are a few of the questions which arise from the conceptual framework advanced in this paper. The reader will undoubtedly think of many more.

- How much do individuals differ in their global aspirations levels (total planned investments in all goals)?
- How much do individuals differ in the number of aspirations they hold (plan to invest in)? Do most individuals hold just a few aspirations or do they frequently aspire simultaneously to many different goals?
- Do global aspirations levels and the number of aspirations change as individuals move through the life cycle?
- How do individuals decide where to invest their resources when they hold competing aspirations? Do their strategies vary with maturity, experience or stage in the life cycle?
- What factors influence how individuals allocate their resources among broad categories of aspirations; for example, among educational, career, personal development and family goals?
- How do perceived risks (the likelihood of success or failure) affect investments in aspirations? Do individuals hedge their investments to minimize risk?
- Under what circumstances do individuals share investments with others to reduce costs and risks?
- How do individuals obtain consent to invest resources to which others such as a spouse, child or friend also have a claim?
- Under what circumstances do individuals substitute one type of investment for another, *e.g.*, substituting time and effort for a lack of money?
- How frequently do individuals make what the observer would consider unwise investments, *e.g.*, continuing to invest in goals which, to the observer, appear clearly unattainable? What accounts for the difference between the actor and observer?
- How frequently do individuals abandon aspirations because they perceive obstacles not apparent to the observer? What accounts for the difference between the actor and observer?
- Are some individuals more adept than others at piggybacking aspirations, making one investment serve the pursuit of two or more goals? What accounts for the difference?
- Are some individuals more adept than others at redirecting investments in blocked aspirations to serve other aspirations? What accounts for the difference?
- What factors other than "objective" circumstances influence individuals' perceptions of opportunities and constraints?
- How much do individuals differ in their perception and use of communal resources?
- How often do individuals hold aspirations for which they have not made any investments? Does this occur more often among some types of individuals than others? Does it occur more often for certain types of goals than others?

CONCLUSION

This paper has proposed a conceptual framework for the study of aspirations grounded in a definition of aspirations as future goals in which people invest time, effort and money. This definition shifts the focus of attention from the goals sought by individuals to the resources they command and the strategies they use to pursue their goals. That, in turn, suggests new ways of measuring ambition (aspiration level) which permit the comparison of previously incommensurable aspirations and raise numerous questions for investigation. At the same time, the proposed framework retains the field theoretical and perspective which has guided previous aspirations research.

No theory of aspirations has been proposed nor have any hypotheses been derived for test. It has not been the intent of this paper to do so. The purpose, rather, has been to develop a frame of reference which theorists and researchers from diverse disciplines and theoretical perspectives will find applicable to their own traditions. The writer hopes this will be the case.

Finally, as the writer is painfully aware, the conceptual framework outlined here is far from fully developed. Much further refinement and elaboration is required. The writer hopes the reader will accept the challenge posed by the unfinished character of this emergent frame of reference and contribute to its further elaboration.

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