



Review Article

How Intersectionality Influences Career Aspirations and Decision-Making Among Ghanaian Youth

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Abstract

The rate of unemployment among the youth in Ghana is continuously high, with persistent gender disparities across various sectors of the economy. A situation of this sort justifies exploring the complex interactions among identity, context, and opportunity in the global south, including Ghana. The study examined the influences of some dimensions on the youth's career aspirations and decision-making process in Ghana. Drawing on intersectionality, aspiration, and social cognitive career theories, an integrated theoretical framework was used to explore how interactions among the youth's gender, socio-economic status, and cultural background influence the formation and maturation of career aspirations. The researchers asserted that career aspirations stem from complex interactions between structural limitations and personal or solitary decision-making competence, with sex serving as the main narrative shaping the perspective of what lies ahead. The study, therefore, reinforces the role of intersectionality theory in appreciating the inequalities in aspirations, confirming how diverse power structures generally determine or affect the youth's ability to aspire or pursue their dreams. The study also contributes to the scope of the social cognitive career theory by illustrating how contextual hurdles act as both endogenous (internal) and exogenous (external) impediments in the development of future or potential self-awareness. Ultimately, the paper accentuates the implications of the social cognitive career theory for policy relevant to education, career interventions, and future research within the context of developing countries.

Keywords

Career Decision-Making, Identity Dimensions, Aspirations, Aspiration Barriers, Intersectionality

1. Introduction

Career aspirations shape young people's educational and economic decisions during critical developmental stages [3]. Yet these aspirations do not emerge in isolation. They arise from complex interactions between personal traits, societal

expectations, and family influences that determine what futures appear both desirable and achievable [1]. To understand the dynamics of aspiration formation, we need to combine multiple, supportive theoretical perspectives, as this offers a

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sturdy lens for scrutinising the interrelated elements of identity, such as ethnicity, gender, social class, and geographical location, and their influence on the career aspirations of young people. In this regard, the scope of intersectionality theory is expanded by capitalising on the key presuppositions of aspiration theory and social cognitive career theory (SCCT) to provide an in-depth understanding of the complex identity dimensions that shape the career aspirations of young people [2] in Ghana. Intersectionality theory highlights the cumulative effects of individuals' collective identities and social ranking on decision-making and experiences [1]. Despite its potential, research on career aspirations has received limited scholarly attention in recent years, particularly in the Global South, where structural barriers and socio-cultural norms shape the aspirations of young people [18].

Studies in Ghana have examined factors influencing youth career aspirations, including family expectations [6], educational access [27], and economic constraints [3]. However, these studies examine factors in isolation, family expectations here, educational access there, and economic constraints elsewhere. This fragmented approach misses how these dimensions intersect and compound. A rural girl from a low-income family does not experience poverty separately from her gender or location; these identities converge to create unique barriers that single-factor analyses cannot capture. This study, therefore, addresses this theoretical gap by developing an integrated framework that combines intersectionality theory, aspiration theory, and social cognitive career theory to examine the formation and development of career aspirations among young people in Ghana. Drawing on literature, we argue that intersectionality provides a robust theoretical lens for understanding how different parts of a person's identity interact to undermine or strengthen youth's capacity to aspire in Ghana. Specifically, attention was given to the combined influence of gender, socio-economic status, and socio-cultural background on career aspirations.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This section presents the theoretical framework that guided the study. The section also provides our integrated theoretical framework, which combines intersectionality theory, aspiration theory, and social cognitive career theory (SCCT) to understand the formation of career aspirations among young people.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This work draws on insights from intersectionality, aspiration, and social cognitive career theories to understand the formation of career aspirations among young people in Ghana. Ultimately, this research builds on intersectionality theory to understand the formation of career aspirations in the specific

cultural context of Ghana. Black Feminist researchers, particularly [15], came up with the word "intersectionality" to explain how race and gender influence Black women's experiences of discrimination at work. Since then, intersectionality has evolved into a broader theoretical framework for understanding how multiple dimensions of identity interact to produce qualitatively distinct experiences of privilege and oppression [34].

The core assumption of intersectionality is that social categories such as gender, race, class, and ethnicity do not operate independently but are mutually constitutive and interlocking [14]. As [11] explains, intersectionality is "a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences that are shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways." This perspective is premised on the idea that categories of identities do not function independently; they rather intersect in distinct ways to create new experiences that cannot be understood by treating them separately. This paper contextualises intersectionality theory within Ghana's socio-cultural environment. Unlike Western contexts where intersectionality originated, Ghana's collectivist values shape how gender, class, and ethnicity interact. For instance, family expectations weigh heavily on career decisions; young women negotiate their aspirations not only against gender norms but also against responsibilities to extended kin networks. As [39] recommends, incorporating intersectionality theory into educational research in Africa requires sensitivity to local understandings of social patterns and power relations, which often differ from Western perspectives.

Connected to the intersectionality theory in understanding the career decision-making among the youth of Ghana is the aspiration theory. Aspiration theory helps explain how people set objectives and hopes for their futures [37]. [4] argue that the capacity to aspire is the "navigational capacity which increases the horizon of credible hopes." This capacity is unevenly distributed; it is more developed among individuals with greater resources and opportunities to explore and express their aspirations. [37] builds on this concept of aspiration in career decision-making with the idea of the "aspiration window", that is, the range of achievable goals that an individual can perceive based on how they observe people who are similar to them. An individual's social environment and the evident achievements of people in their reference group shape this window. Conversely, an "aspiration gap" emerges when aspirations exceed what seems practically attainable within individuals' current circumstances [20].

In resource-constrained contexts, the aspiration theory has proven to be highly suitable for aspiration research. For instance, in a study by [29, 22], the aspiration theory was applied to examine how the aspirations of adolescent girls in Tanzania are influenced by educational programmes [28]. [30] also used the theory to examine how adolescents from deprived homes maintain higher educational aspirations. In Ghana, similar studies such as [40] were grounded in the aspiration theory. Propounded by [42], assumptions from the social cognitive

career theory contributed to developing the integrated theoretical framework, aiding the expansion of intersectionality theory. Influenced by [9] social cognitive theory, the social cognitive career theory shows that individuals' self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals influence their career interests [42]. [23] assert that these three fundamental elements interact with individual traits such as race and gender, educational experiences, and contextual factors to shape career development. This shows the interrelatedness of cognitive and identity factors in shaping career aspirations.

The theory supports the argument that people are interested in the things that make them feel effective and hope for a positive outcome. This drive leads them to set their goals and adjust their behaviours to help them advance in their career choices. Different groups from diverse backgrounds have used the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) to work on career development. For example, [38] used the social cognitive career theory to examine how Black American high school students' ethnic identity and attitudes towards gender roles have affected their self-efficacy in making career decisions. In Ghana, [43] used SCCT to examine how self-efficacy and outcome expectations affect university students' career aspirations in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). The social cognitive theory of career development has not fully integrated perspectives that vividly explain the dimensional influence of identity on professional cognition and conduct. Through this paper, the scope of SCCT has been expanded to incorporate elements of intersectionality theory, offering a more nuanced interpretation of how identity factors collectively shape the career development process of young Ghanaians.

2.2. An Integrated Theoretical Framework

We advocate for an integrated framework that combines intersectionality theory, aspiration theory, and social cognitive career theory (SCCT) to understand the formation of career aspirations among young people. This framework posits that career-driven aspirations are achieved through a holistic negotiation process between structural constraints and individual agency, where multiple identity dimensions are interconnected in a form of opportunity structure, alongside cognitive processes involved in the formation of aspirations. It situates itself within the concept of "intersectional positionality," where the complex formation of identity dimensions position individuals within interconnected systems of privilege and oppression. Synthesising the core tenets of these three theoretical frameworks, the career aspirations of an individual is/are influenced by the iterative interactions of the following three key domains:

The Aspiration Window: Building on the perspectives of [37], we argue that aspirers' perception of the attainable future is shaped by the intersection of identity dimensions. For example, a young woman from a low-income family in rural northern Ghana may have a narrower range of aspirations than

a young man from a middle-class family in a Ghanaian city like Accra, due to the intersection of gender, class, and geographic location.

Career-Related Cognitions: Based on Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), we further argue that intersectional positionality influences self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals through its effects on learning experiences and access to resources. For example, the intersection of gender and socioeconomic status can condition exposure to role models, opportunities for skills development, and perceived barriers, which in turn affect career-related cognitions.

Narrative Construction of Possible Selves: We incorporate insights from narrative identity theory to argue that intersectional positionality influences how individuals construct narratives about their possible selves. These narratives are shaped by cultural scripts, master narratives, and available discursive resources, which vary across different intersectional positions.

3. Materials and Methods

This study adopted a qualitative desk-based research design, relying exclusively on secondary data sources to examine how intersecting identity dimensions shape the career aspirations of Ghanaian youth. Guided by intersectionality theory, aspiration theory, and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), the study systematically reviewed peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, theoretical papers, and empirical studies focusing on youth aspirations, gender dynamics, socio-economic influences, and cultural norms within Ghana and comparable contexts. The adoption of a qualitative desk-based research design, relying exclusively on secondary data sources, is a deliberate and methodologically sound choice for this study.

Previous studies on career aspirations in Ghana have examined influencing factors in isolation, family expectations here, educational access there, and economic constraints elsewhere [3, 6, 27]. This fragmented approach fails to capture how multiple identity dimensions intersect and compound to shape aspiration formation. A literature review enables the systematic synthesis of these dispersed findings, allowing the identification of patterns and gaps that single-factor analyses cannot reveal. By synthesising literature across gender, socioeconomic status, and cultural dimensions, this study develops an integrated framework that addresses the acknowledged theoretical gap in Ghanaian career aspiration research. Again, Given the need to (a) address the fragmented nature of existing research on Ghanaian youth career aspirations, (b) develop an integrated theoretical framework combining intersectionality, aspiration, and SCCT, (c) contextualise Western-origin theories within Ghana's socio-cultural environment, and (d) meet the methodological standards expected in academic publishing, a literature-review-based approach is the most appropriate and defensible method for this study. This methodology enables the development of a nuanced, intersectional understanding of how multiple identity dimensions collectively shape the career

aspirations of young people in Ghana, thereby filling a significant gap in the existing literature.

We conducted systematic searches in Google Scholar, JSTOR, and African Journals Online between October and November 2024, using combinations of search terms: 'career aspirations,' 'youth Ghana,' 'gender career choice,' 'socioeconomic status education,' and 'intersectionality Africa.' We prioritised peer-reviewed articles published since 2010, focusing on Ghana or comparable Sub-Saharan African contexts. Studies that were included in the review were those that primarily focused on studies examining career aspirations, career development, career decision-making, or vocational choices among youth (typically ages 15-35) because they directly aligned with the research objective of understanding aspiration formation among young people. Due to the focus on intersectional analysis of how multiple identity dimensions shape career aspirations, studies addressing one or more of the following: gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, cultural background, religious affiliation, or geographic location were included.

Studies examining single factors without acknowledging intersecting identities were excluded. A thematic content analysis approach was employed to extract and synthesise themes. Relevant literature was further identified through reference list searches and citations. Texts were screened for conceptual relevance and analysed to extract themes related to aspiration formation, identity intersections, structural barriers, and cognitive processes influencing career decision-making. Themes were then synthesised within the integrated theoretical framework to illustrate how gender, socio-economic status, and cultural background collectively shape youths' capacity to aspire.

Because the study used only secondary data, issues of consent and participant protection did not arise. However, ethical scholarship principles, including accurate citation, proper representation of authors' arguments, and avoidance of plagiarism, were strictly upheld.

4. Results and Discussion, Implications, Conclusion

The results and discussion from the study is presented in the various sub-themes as follows.

4.1. Intersectionality and Career Aspiration Formation

The various identity dimensions that intersect to influence career aspiration formation are examined as follows:

4.1.1. Intersectionality in Career Aspiration Formation in Ghana: Gender as a Master Narrative

Gender is one of the most influential factors shaping young

people's career goals and decisions in Ghana. The distinct gender norms, roles, and socialisation mechanisms of Ghanaian society significantly influence the career interests and choices of young people in the country. Studies such as [5] show that female students align closely to professions such as nursing, which sustain feminine roles of caring for people, whilst male students aspire to careers with greater intellectual prestige and professional status. According to [30], Ghanaian gender roles put females in charge of domestic chores and caring for children, whilst males are seen as providers and holders of power.

The gendered influence is particularly evident in how young women in Northern Ghana construct aspirational narratives. [25, 26] found that female students interweave professional ambitions with domestic responsibilities, internalising expectations of a future 'double burden'. This reflects an internalised expectation they may face. In contrast, male students construct narratives that position domestic work as optional, reflecting cultural schemas where women's household labour is obligatory whilst men's is discretionary [8]. This gender-related difference illustrates what [8] describes as "cultural schemas". Looking at it from the intersectional perspective, it can be deduced that gender does not function independently of other dimensions of identity but rather intersects with them to establish unique opportunities and challenges. In Ghana, like many other African countries, gender intersects with socio-economic status to compound the situation of young women from disadvantaged backgrounds, leading to pressure to prioritise marriage and motherhood over education [7].

4.1.2. Socioeconomic Status, Educational Access, and Career Aspiration Formation

Learners may have the vision and the passion to pursue higher education, but the hindrance in achieving this future educational ambition may be curtailed when the student pass examination and may not get money to pay the fees. This anxiety reflects how financial constraints directly limit educational opportunities by restricting access to quality schools, learning resources, and higher education [12]. Financial challenges have a significant effect on the educational progress of young people in Ghana. As a result of these obstacles, the formation of aspirations is negatively affected [10]. There are multiple ways through which socioeconomic status can affect aspirations.

Secondly, socio-economic status shapes exposure to role models and information about different career paths, influencing "navigational capacity," the ability to plan pathways towards desired futures [41]. Youth from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds often do not have a wide range of professional role models, which limits their aspiration window [22].

Additionally, socio-economic status influences self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations, which are important cognitive factors in SCCT. Students from low-income backgrounds may develop lower self-efficacy for certain careers due to limited opportunities for skill development and mastery

experiences [23]. In the same way, their outcome expectations may be tempered by observations of the limited returns to education experienced by others in their reference group [12].

When gender and socioeconomic status intersect, they produce unique patterns of constraints and opportunities. For instance, in the not-too-distant past in some families in northern Ghana, resource-constraints resulted in the prioritisation of boys' education over girls', reflecting gender biases in educational investment [17]. Similarly, the financial pressure to marry early falls more heavily on girls from low-income families, creating an additional barrier to educational advancement [17], and subsequently limiting career prospects and aspirations. It is very important to mention that the youth in rural areas of Ghana face additional barriers related to educational infrastructure, proximity, and limited access to information about career opportunities [35]. The geographical location of low-income rural youth puts them at a disadvantage, limiting their ability to aspire.

4.1.3. Cultural Context and Collectivist Values

Another key area to examine is how the cultural background of youth in Ghana influences their career aspirations. In Ghana, collectivist values prioritise group welfare and interests over individual desires and personal autonomy. Collectivism influences how young people construct their aspirational narratives and career choices. Research in the northern part of Ghana suggests that young people often incorporate family expectations into the formation of their career aspirations and that their career achievements are celebrated by families and communities, not as merely a form of self-actualisation [26]. This corroborates [33] description of "interdependent self-construal", a situation where identity is primarily defined through connections with others. In a collectivist setting, young individuals must balance their own aspirations with those of their family or society, which makes it difficult to build their own aspirations. A student might want to work in a certain field, but they might feel that they must follow a different path that will provide more money to support their family [12]. As [44] argues, the capability to aspire includes the capacity to balance personal desires with social norms.

This contextual variation is crucial: collectivist beliefs have varied effects in different social settings. This is true especially when it comes to gender, since females are typically expected to subordinate their own aspirations for the sake of their families [17]. The combination of gender and collectivist cultural beliefs converges to constrain young females' aspirations in Ghana. Critical to the discussions of intersectionality and career aspiration formation in Ghana are religion and ethnic grouping. Religion makes this interaction even more complex because religious beliefs and practices influence gender norms and family expectations [17], which also influences career aspiration and formation. Literature demonstrates that Islamic, Christian, and African Traditional religious teachings significantly influence Ghanaian youth's decisions regarding future work and family life across different regions. Research

shows that these religious institutions serve as powerful transmitters of values in a "multi-ethnic society with both common and diverse cultural practices, beliefs, values and norms" [13], directly shaping career choices through religious education and family socialisation. Studies indicate that, while religious education often reinforces traditional gender expectations, young Ghanaians actively negotiate between religious teachings and their contemporary career aspirations [36]. This negotiation makes the decision-making process complex, as the youth navigate between religious values and modern opportunities. Similarly, different ethnic groups in Ghana have varied traditions and expectations about education, career paths, and family roles, which influence collectivist beliefs and how they align with individual preferences and interests [31].

4.2. Theoretical Implications for Understanding Career Decision-Making

The intersectional framework presented in this paper has important implications for the understanding of the barriers in career development theories.

4.2.1. Reconceptualising Barriers in SCCT

Traditionally, SCCT has mostly seen contextual barriers as external factors that influence career development processes [21]. However, in this work, we argue that barriers are not only external problems; there can also be significant factors emanating from the effects of how people think about their possible selves. For instance, the gendered division of domestic labour in Ghanaian homes is not just an external problem that young females have to deal with; it also shapes how they think about their future selves and how they plan to balance work and family responsibilities [15]. Financial difficulties are also not merely external problems; they affect how youth from low-income families think about what futures are viable and attainable [10].

This reconceptualisation demands a dual approach to intervention. Expanding scholarship opportunities addresses external barriers; equally critical is curriculum reform that challenges internalised gender norms shaping what young women consider 'appropriate' careers. Structural change without narrative transformation leaves aspirations constrained by invisible limits. In the same way, education must be seen as an important way to make progress, where individual identities are often influenced by both internal and external factors. This reinforces the argument that education can foster aspirations. It is not enough to remove structural barriers; equally important is transforming career education to challenge limiting narratives.

4.2.2. Integrating Narrative Identity in Career Theory

The second theoretical implication concerns how narrative identity affects career development. SCCT mainly looks at

cognitive factors like self-efficacy and outcome expectations, but our work highlights how important narrative processes are in building aspirations [26]. We argue that youth formulate narratives about their possible future selves based on the confluence of varied aspects of their identities. These narratives are influenced by cultural scripts, master narratives, and discursive resources that are available for imagining futures [26]. For example, the intersection of gender and socioeconomic status affects the narrative options available to a young woman from a low-income family in Northern Ghana. She has to formulate a narrative that makes sense of her professional goals and her many household responsibilities while navigating her financial constraints.

Integrating narrative identity theory with SCCT and intersectionality provides a more comprehensive way to understand how professional goals are formed in specific sociocultural contexts, particularly in Ghana. This integration shows how cognitive processes, narrative formation, and intersectional positionality all work together to shape professional aspirations.

4.2.3. Theorising Agency and Resistance

A third theoretical implication has to do with how agency and resistance in career development are conceived. Studies in Northern Ghana have revealed that youth devise several methods to keep their aspirational narratives alive even when they encounter significant problems [33]. For instance, students incorporate strategic adaptations in their narratives, like getting a temporary job to save money for school or choosing a different path to university, to keep moving toward their chosen futures even when money is tight. According to [17] these strategic adaptations represent what she calls "aspirational capabilities" [19]. This can be explained as being able to navigate constraints but still maintaining hope for the future you desire. From an intersectional perspective, the ways that youth might act and resist are differentiated depending on their intersectional positions. For example, young women and men may adopt different strategies to deal with gender constraints since they are in different positions within systems of power [15].

Using an intersectional framework to think about agency and resistance offers a nuanced understanding of how youth actively shape their career goals instead of passively accepting the limits that society places on them. This perspective does not overemphasise structural determinism or naively praise individual agency. Instead, it examines the complex interplay between structure and agency in the formation of aspirations.

4.3. Implications of the Study's Findings

Our argument on intersectionality, as drawn from theories previously advanced, holds implications for policy, practice and research in Ghana. These implications are career counselling and educational policy and practice are highlighted.

4.3.1. Career Counselling and Guidance

Current career counselling in Ghana typically follows individualistic Western models that assume students have autonomous choice-making capacity [14, 16]. Counsellors ask, 'What do you want to be?' without recognising that for many students, particularly young women from rural, low-income families, the question itself is culturally foreign. Their aspirations are necessarily negotiated within family expectations and economic realities. An intersectional approach to career counselling would need to recognise how different aspects of a person's identity influence their career development, helping youth navigate these intersections effectively. This demands a paradigm shift in how career counselling has been practised in Ghana to enable counsellors to become culturally sensitive and responsive to the unique situations of young people in Ghana [3]. Specifically, career counsellors need to offer the following services to young people:

- 1) Systematic sessions to help them think critically about the cultural scripts and master narratives that define their goals, especially those that concern gender roles and career paths. This could mean showing students counter-narratives that challenge traditional gender roles and showing them, how other people have dealt with similar challenges successfully.
- 2) Information and support to develop their navigational capacities. This can be achieved by helping students plan realistic paths to the futures they want while still aiming high. This includes providing them with information about educational options, financial aid, and pathways to careers, with a focus on the specific challenges that students at different intersectional positions face.
- 3) Interventions to promote critical consciousness among them. Career counsellors ought to help students, particularly adolescents in school, to grasp how structural issues such as gender inequality and economic stratification affect career prospects and outcomes [29], are of the view that critical consciousness can empower marginalised youth to challenge constraining circumstances instead of seeing them as personal failures.
- 4) Thoughtful integration of collectivist values. Instead of imposing individualistic models of professional development, counsellors should recognise how important family and community are in career decisions. This requires helping students articulate how their career goals align with collective values and can benefit their families and communities.
- 5) Targeted interventions. Career counsellors need to identify and address intersectional barriers. They ought to recognise that students at diverse intersectional positions, such as girls from low-income rural families, face a unique set of challenges and should create appropriate interventions to help them navigate these challenges.

4.3.2. Educational Policy and Practice

The intersectional framework on how aspirations form also

has implications for educational practice and policy in Ghana. Schools play a significant part in shaping career goals and possibilities; thus, educational interventions could help address the unequal distribution of aspirations that stem from different systems of disadvantage. These interventions may include setting up targeted educational programmes that focus on encouraging both males and females to rethink normative gender roles. This implies that addressing gender biases in curriculum design, teaching methods, career counselling, and critical pedagogy should be prioritised in schools. Financial aid programmes must target students from low-income families, with particular attention to young women. This could include scholarships, loans, and stipends that cover more than just tuition, but also basic needs such as transportation and study materials [23, 24].

Educational institutions should also make mentorship programmes available for young people; this means that students should gain access to role models who can help them make informed career choices. One way to do this is to establish mentoring programs that pair students with professionals from different fields to learn from their professional experiences. Schools also need to develop interventions that will encourage parents to support their children's career aspirations whilst also respecting family expectations. This is important because family expectations have a significant impact on how young people set career goals. Unexamined family expectations may limit what they envision for themselves.

4.3.3. Research Implications

The integration of this proposed theoretical framework has clear implications for future research regarding the development of career aspirations among youth in Ghana and other culturally diverse contexts. The framework emphasises that future research should approach career aspirations holistically, using intersectional methodologies to examine the various intersecting dimensions of identity that influence career aspirations and the choices people make in their lives. The framework also acknowledges time as an important dimension of career aspirations, as individuals' goals can change over time. In this regard, subsequent research should incorporate time as a significant variable. It would be beneficial to track youths' career aspirations over time as they transition through education and life; this would help gain more insights about how aspirations are developed and evolve over time. As the framework examines how geographical location influences career aspirations and choices, it becomes important to consider how young people in different parts of Ghana set their goals, given the differences in culture, educational infrastructure, and career opportunities. This would allow for a more nuanced analysis of how geographic contexts affect aspirations by examining how they interact with other dimensions of identity. These research implications would deepen our understanding of how intersectionality shapes career aspirations among Ghanaian youth and provide an empirical foundation for developing

more effective interventions to address disparities and challenges in aspiration formation.

5. Conclusions

This paper offers a comprehensive and theoretically grounded framework for understanding the role that intersectionality plays in shaping the formation of career aspirations among youth in resource-constrained environments. Drawing from the intersectionality theory, aspiration theory, and social cognitive career theory (SCCT), it can be said that career aspirations arise from the interaction between structural constraints and individual capabilities. Different dimensions of identity converge to shape the opportunity structure and the aspiration formation through cognitive processes. The analysis reveals that in the Ghanaian context, identity dimensions particularly gender, socio-economic status, and cultural factors affect how young people navigate the tensions between individual aspirations and family expectations.

The theoretical framework developed in this paper makes a valuable contribution to career development scholarships in several ways. First, it extends SCCT by reconceptualising barriers to career development. The paper demonstrates that these barriers are not merely external obstacles but also shape how individuals think about their potential selves. Second, it incorporates narrative identity theory into career development frameworks by showing how cultural and master narratives shape aspirational narratives. Third, it theorises agency and resistance within structural constraints, showing how youth construct aspirational narratives even when facing significant challenges.

These theoretical insights have significant implications for educational policy, career guidance, and future research. This paper recommends that career guidance should be culturally sensitive, help individuals address internal narrative constraints, and help them improve their navigational capacities. It advocates for critical consciousness-raising, integration of collectivist principles, and targeted interventions that address barriers affecting different groups. It also proposes educational policy changes to address aspirational inequalities, including gender-transformative education, targeted financial support, expanded access to role models and mentors, family and community engagement, and recognition of the differentiated needs of diverse populations. In conclusion, an intersectional perspective on career aspirations offers a richer understanding of the complex ways multiple identity dimensions interact to shape career choices. Understanding how socioeconomic status, cultural background, gender, and other factors converge to create diverse sets of opportunities and constraints is essential for promoting equitable career opportunities for Ghanaian youth.

Abbreviations

SCCT Social Cognitive Career Theory

JSTOR Journal Storage
STEM Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics

Author Contributions

Victoria Akolbila: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Validation, Writing – original draft

Eric Daniel Ananga: Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing

Mohammed Adam: Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

David Naya Zuure: Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing

Clarke Ebow Yalley: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Validation, Writing – original draft

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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