

**Research Article**

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Attachment, Emotional Intelligence and Career Aspirations in Emerging Adulthood

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Women are underrepresented in senior management and leadership positions in OECD countries. The aim of this study was to explore the relationship between attachment styles, emotional intelligence, and career aspirations of emerging adults with a focus on potential sex differences. An online survey assessed 508 emerging adults (male= 207) and female= 301), aged between 20 and 25 (M= 22.6, Sd= 1.6), on home background demographics, adult attachment, emotional intelligence, and career aspirations. Findings show that SES, parental education, positive attachment, and emotional intelligence are associated with stronger career aspirations. Of note was the finding that while females score higher on educational and achievement aspirations, males scored higher on leadership aspiration. While further exploration is required this difference in emerging adulthood may reflect the impact of occupational stereotypes on female expectations and can inform career advice and guidance.

Key words: Career aspirations; Emotional Intelligence; Attachment; Sex differences**Introduction**

The developmental paths of children and young people are signposted by choices that eventually lead to careers, from choice of school subjects to choices around training and work experience. Along the way there are numerous encounters with career guidance and advice that enable those motivated to find the best career for them. However, to make choices and follow guidance children and young people need to have motivation and aspirations. Less formal attention is focused on developing and enabling aspirations. The aim of the current study was to explore career aspirations and to identify some factors that might contribute to those aspirations.

A particular issue across OECD countries is the underrepresentation of women in senior positions and particularly in leadership roles [1-3]. In terms of academic performance girls generally outperform boys up to lower secondary level though the differences are reduced by the time they reach tertiary level

[4]. The effect is consistent though the size of the difference varies across countries and subjects [5]. At higher levels of education boys tend to outperform girls in mathematics and science subjects. Traditional gender-based stereotypes persist in education and influence what happens in the classroom through the actions and expectations of teachers and parents and ultimately through the self-concepts, decisions, and actions of students [6,7]. These stereotypes may provide an explanation why fewer girls choose science subjects and why ultimately boys overtake and pass girls in their performance largely because of their numerical dominance [5]. Data from the British Youth Panel component of the British Household Panel Survey show that girls consistently report more positive educational attitudes and aspirations [8]. While girls are more positive about education there is some evidence to suggest that girls and boys do not differ substantially in their career aspirations [9,10]. While aspirations may not differ there still

exists a very strong tendency for boys to choose things-orientated jobs and girls to choose people-oriented careers [11-14]. Surveys of occupations show that women are still in the majority in low-status, low paid jobs, despite the fact that some women have made impressive advances in careers [1,2,15]. There are many recognized barriers to women's advancement in careers which can be categorized as cultural, institutional, individual, and family-bound [16]. Cultural barriers include gender stereotypes [17-19], prejudices [17], discrimination [16], harassment [16], and sex-role expectations [20].

Institutional or organizational barriers include lower-level managerial positions [18], blocked promotion [21,22], negative attitudes toward women as managers [23,24], limited access to networks (Ibarra, 1993), and gender inequality in recruitment [25].

Some have contentiously argued that women possess personality traits and behaviors that are inappropriate for key managerial jobs [26,27]. This reflects a failure to recognize that masculine gender roles are confused with success as a manager [28]. Job descriptions for managerial roles are based on previous occupants of the role who are mostly males and there is a confusion between masculine characteristics and the characteristics necessary to perform well. Income levels and promotion are negatively associated with femininity and positively related to masculinity [29,30]. This inbuilt bias leads to erroneous conclusions that women are less likely to possess the skills, knowledge and abilities needed for management than their male counterparts [31]. One area where personal characteristics of women are a barrier is ambition [32]. It appears that women have reduced ambition compared to men in higher levels of organizations. Family-related barriers include responsibility for children and family [33]. Women still take on the caring responsibilities in the home, to the detriment of their career advancement [34].

Because of the masculinity bias coupled with family responsibilities women often fail to go for promotion or fail to apply for management jobs despite the fact that women make very effective leaders [35]. The glass ceiling is the descriptor often used to describe the barriers to women's career progression [36]. More recently the term glass cliff has been coined to describe a situation where women are 'allowed' to break through the glass ceiling when the company is in crisis [37,38]. This situation where any leader is likely to fail helps to perpetuate the myth that women do not have the qualities to be an effective leader.

Those who fail to choose their preferred career often experience career regret, a phenomenon which has been associated with burnout and intentions to leave [39-41]. Career regret is more strongly experienced when choice is forced [42]. This applies particularly to women who because of the barriers outlined above feel they have been forced into a career which they would not have otherwise chosen [43].

Values and aspirations are learned through socialisation and there is extensive evidence that emerging adult career choice is linked to the influence of parents [44,45]. For parents to influence their child's values there needs to be a secure sense of attachment

to parents and there is clear evidence that attachment in childhood is strongly linked to adult attachment [46,47]. Secure attachment enables the exploration of career options and supports choice [48-52].

Secure attachment in students has been linked to career adaptability [53]. Adult attachment has been linked with emotionality and emotional intelligence [54,55]. Emotional intelligence is described as the ability to perform sophisticated information processing about emotions and emotion-relevant stimuli and to use this information as a guide for thoughts and behaviors and is a rudder for feeling, thinking, learning, problem-solving, and decision-making [56]. Emotional intelligence has been linked to career decision-making [57,58].

Gender bias in career opportunities, promotion, and leadership is loaded against females in the workforce and is an issue of concern. While the barriers against women's progression at work must be tackled and removed, there is still a problem in women being reluctant to apply for promotion or to seek leadership positions. In general children and young people do not differ in terms of their career aspirations, a question remains as to whether any differences between the sexes can be observed during emerging adulthood. The aim of the current study was to explore the relationship between family background, attachment, emotional intelligence, and career aspirations with a focus on potential sex differences in emerging adulthood.

Method

Design: This study used a quantitative survey with an online questionnaire for data collection.

Participants: A total of 508 emerging adults (male = 207 and female = 301), aged between 20 and 25 ($M = 22.6$, $Sd = 1.6$) completed the survey.

Materials: The survey included demographic questions on sex, age, and family background and the following measures.

The Career Aspiration Scale-Revised [1] which is a 24-item scale, measuring here dimensions of education (desire to attain the highest levels of education), leadership (desire to become a leader), and achievement (desire to be the best) aspirations. Items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale from not at all true of me to very true of me. The Cronbach Alpha for the overall scale was .94. Cronbach Alphas for the separate dimensions were education ($\alpha = .89$), leadership ($\alpha = .88$), and achievement ($\alpha = .79$).

The Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire – Short Form [59] is a 30-item measure of emotional intelligence. Items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale from totally disagree to totally agree. The scale had a Cronbach Alpha of .89.

The Adult Attachment Style Questionnaire [60,61] is made up of 18 questions containing 3 subscales which measure Close ($\alpha = 0.84$), Depend ($\alpha = 0.72$), and Anxiety ($\alpha = 0.74$). Close refers to the extent to which a person is comfortable with closeness and intimacy, depend refers to whether the person feels they can depend on others to be available when needed, and anxiety measures the extent to which

a person is worried about being abandoned or unloved. Each of the questions is rated on a Likert scale from 1; not at all characteristics of me to 5; very characteristic of me.

Procedure

The survey was uploaded onto Qualtrics Software and an ethics application submitted to the University Research Ethics Committee. When approved a link to the survey was sent out via the student e-mail system and posted on Facebook and Twitter. Participants were required to read the information sheet and complete a consent form before completing the questionnaire. A total of 535 individuals attempted the survey but 27 aborted part way through and these were deleted from the final sample. The majority of the questionnaires were complete, but a few had less than 5% missing data which was replaced by the mean score on the item. A total of 508 participants were analyzed using SPSS 26 and AMOS 26 software.

Data was explored for outliers and missing data as described

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and zero order correlations.

	Mean (Sd)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.Career aspirations total	82.3 (40.2)							
2.Achievement Aspirations	28.0 (15.4)	.89**						
3.Leadership Aspirations	27.9 (14.2)	.51**	.43**					
4.Educational Aspirations	27.3 (16.1)	.84**	.60**	.28**				
5.Comfortable with Close relations	18.3 (8.6)	.76**	.69**	.36**	.63**			
6.Anxious about relations	17.2 (8.1)	-.38**	-.34**	-.18**	-.33**	-.58**		
7.Depend on relations	21.2 (8.4)	.36**	.33**	0.06	.32**	.26**	0.02	
8.Emotional Intelligence	17.6 (3.2)	.75**	.65**	.39**	.60**	.61**	-.28**	.47**
*P<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001								

Given the issue of sex differences the next step involved independent t-tests between males and females as shown in Table 2. There were significant main effects on career aspirations total, on all three of the dimensions of career aspirations, on emotional intelligence, and on the close and dependent on dimensions of attachment. The sexes did not differ on anxious relations. Females scored significantly higher than males on overall career aspirations

above. Initially Zero order correlations and descriptive statistics were calculated. This was followed by hierarchical multiple regression analysis and Path Analysis using Structural Equation Modelling.

Results

The aim of this study was to explore the relationship between attachment styles, emotional intelligence, and career aspirations of emerging adults.

The first step in analysis used Pearson Bivariate correlations to identify significant zero order correlations between pairs of variables as shown in Table 1. Overall career aspirations correlated positively with feeling comfortable with close relations, depending on relations, and emotional intelligence. Anxiety about relations was inversely correlated. There was a similar pattern for the achievement aspiration dimension and the educational aspiration dimension. For the leadership dimension depending on relations did not produce a significant correlation (Table 1).

and on educational and achievement aspirations. However, the effect was reversed on leadership aspirations on which males scored higher. Females also scored higher on emotional intelligence and on the close and depend on dimensions of attachment. In effect females were more comfortable with close relations, were more confident in depending on relations, and were more emotionally intelligent (Table 2).

Table 2: Sex differences on career aspirations, attachment, and emotional intelligence.

	Sex	N	Mean	Sd	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Career Aspirations	Male	207	74.09	39.71	-3.883	506	0.001
	Female	301	87.97	39.53			
Achievement Aspirations	Male	207	23.88	14.43	-5.124	506	0.001
	Female	301	30.83	15.41			
Leadership Aspirations	Male	207	30.84	16.85	3.851	506	0.001
	Female	301	25.97	11.68			
Educational Aspirations	Male	207	25.04	15.32	-2.682	506	0.008
	Female	301	28.92	16.44			
Close relations	Male	207	16.23	8.97	-4.523	506	0.001
	Female	301	19.68	8.06			

Anxious relations	Male	207	17.85	8.67	1.562	506	0.119
	Female	301	16.71	7.67			
Depend on relations	Male	207	19.76	8.43	-3.187	506	0.002
	Female	301	22.17	8.34			
Emotional Intelligence	Male	207	16.68	3.23	-5.331	506	0.001
	Female	301	18.17	2.99			

Predictor stage in analysis used Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis (HMRA) to identify the significant predictors of career aspirations (see Table 3). Total career aspirations were entered as the dependent variable and on the first step age, sex, mother's occupation, father's occupation, mother's education, and father's education were entered as predictors and accounted for 34% of the variance in career aspirations. The individual contributions were

sex ($\beta=.103, p<.01$), mother's occupation ($\beta=.720, p<.001$), father's occupation ($\beta=.147, p<.01$), mother's education ($\beta=.416, p<.001$), and father's education ($\beta=.293, p<.001$). On the second step the dimensions of attachment were added and accounted for 35% of the variance in career aspirations. The individual contributions were feeling comfortable in close relations ($\beta=.693, p<.001$), and depending on relations ($\beta=.095, p<.01$) (Table 3).

Table 3: Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis with career aspirations as dependent variable.

	B	SE B	b
<i>Step1: R²=.34, f(6, 501)=42.24, p<.001</i>			
Sex	8.439	3.555	.103**
Age	0.358	0.789	0.029
Mother's Occupation	17.501	1.903	.720***
Father's Occupation	4.995	2.073	.147**
Mother's Education	12.968	2.789	.416***
Father's Education	10.498	1.884	.293***
<i>Step2: R² Δ =.35, f(3, 498)=187.59, p<.001</i>			
Sex	7.586	2.469	.093**
Age	0.7	0.545	0.057
Mother's Occupation	13.585	1.337	.559***
Father's Occupation	3.443	1.44	.101**
Mother's Education	13.051	1.945	.419***
Father's Education	1.407	1.355	0.039
Close relations	3.237	0.171	.693***
Anxious relations	0.221	0.157	0.045
Depend on relations	0.45	0.13	.095**
<i>Step3: R² Δ =.08, f(1, 497)=170.09, p<.001</i>			
Sex	4.764	2.144	.058*
Age	0.75	0.471	0.061
Mother's Occupation	10.331	1.182	.425***
Father's Occupation	5.48	1.254	.161***
Mother's Education	9.368	1.704	.301***
Father's Education	2.806	1.176	.078**
Close relations	2.358	0.162	.505***
Anxious relations	0.234	0.136	0.047
Depend on relations	0.118	0.121	0.025
Emotional Intelligence	5.095	0.391	.403***
*P<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001 Total R ² =.76			

Emotional intelligence was added on the final step and accounted for a further 8% of the variance ($\beta=.403, p<.001$). On this final step sex ($\beta=.058, p<.05$), mother's occupation ($\beta=.425, p<.001$), father's occupation ($\beta=.161, p<.001$), mother's education ($\beta=.301, p<.001$), and father's education ($\beta=.078, p<.01$), close relations ($\beta=.505, p<.001$), and emotional intelligence ($\beta=.403, p<.001$)

continued to contribute significant partial correlations. Overall, the model explained 76% of the variance in career aspirations.

Based on the results of the HMRA a path model of the predictors of career aspirations was tested using AMOS 26 structural equation modelling (Figure 1).

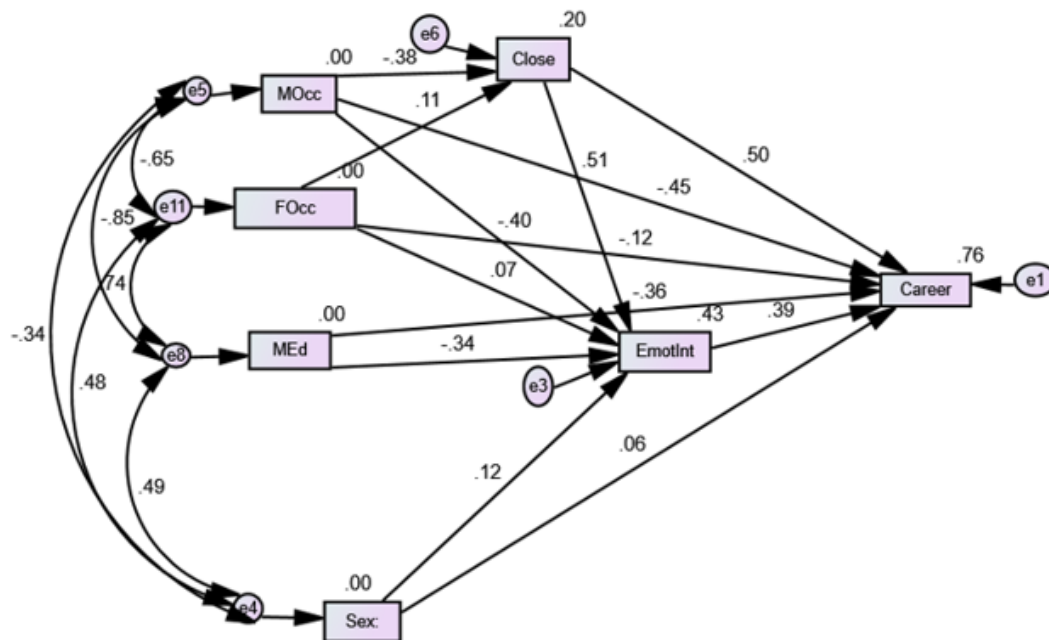


Figure 1:

The model was a very good fit for the data ($\chi^2 = 0.686, DF = 2, p=.710$ and $c^2/\text{degrees of freedom (CMIN/DF)}$ is 0.343. The comparative fit index (CFI) is 1.0, the Incremental Fit Index (IFI) is 1.0. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) is .001 and the probability of a close fit (PCLOSE) is significant (PCLOSE = .900, $p<.001$)).

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to explore the relationship between family background, attachment, emotional intelligence, and career aspirations with a focus on potential sex differences in a sample of emerging adults. The results show that mother's and father's occupations - a proxy for socioeconomic status (SES) - and both father and mother's education are significantly related to career aspirations. Young adults from higher SES backgrounds with more educated parents showed stronger career aspirations. It appears that the strongest relationship is with mothers' occupation and education which accords with previous findings on both educational attainment and occupational status [44,45,62,63]. In terms of attachment, feeling comfortable in close relationships

and feeling confident to depend on relationships were indicative of stronger career aspirations. This accords with previous research which suggests that career aspirations are influenced by secure attachment [48-53].

Emotional intelligence was strongly positively related to career aspirations which corresponds with previous research linking emotional intelligence and career decision-making [57,58]. What is an additional about the current study is that attachment and emotional intelligence were combined. In addition to SES and parental education influence it appears that those with more positive attachment and more emotionally intelligent have stronger career aspirations.

A key aspect of the current study was an exploration of sex differences. Our data suggests that females have stronger career aspirations overall than their male counterparts. This accords with some previous evidence [8] but is contrary to other evidence that suggests boys and girls do not differ on career aspirations [9,10]. On the other hand, there is strong evidence that boys and girls differ in the choices of career they pursue [11-14]. The

current study may shed some light on the issue of women's pursuit of leadership positions in that when we looked at the different dimensions of career aspirations, males actually scored higher than females on leadership aspirations. What is suggested is that females have stronger aspirations to achieve and to attain higher levels of education, they are less likely to aspire to becoming leaders than males. This difference is masked when career aspirations are measured as an overall score.

There are limitations to this study as it was cross-sectional and relied on a self-selecting sample. However, the sample was relatively large which allowed some confidence in the findings. A mixed method approach might have added more in-depth understanding of career aspirations and future research should apply such a method.

The implications of these findings are that a focus on increasing girls' leadership aspirations might help in changing the cultural and organizational barriers to women's career progression. The evidence suggests that women may make more compassionate and supportive leaders. Obviously, efforts need to be made to remove the barriers and to create more equity in the workplace regarding the sexes, but our findings suggest that these barriers may already have influenced the career aspirations of emerging adults [64,65].

Declarations

Funding: No funding was received for this study.

Conflicts of interest/Competing interests: Neither author has any conflict of interest.

Consent to participate: All participants completed a consent to participate form.

Consent for publication: Both authors consent to the paper being published.

Availability of data and material (data transparency): Data can be made available on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Ethics: The study was approved by the University Research Ethics Committee.

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