

*Exploring Youth Aspirations on the Isle of Sheppey in 1978: A Thematic Analysis of School
Leavers' Essays*

Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	3
Method	5
Findings	7
Theme 1: Biological Aspirations	7
Sub-Theme 1.1: Health and Longevity	7
Sub-Theme 1.2: Aging	7
Theme 2: Social Aspirations	8
Sub-Theme 2.1: Family Relationships	8
Sub-Theme 2.2: Community and Social Roles	8
Theme 3: Psychological Aspirations	8
Sub-Theme 3.1: Personal Fulfillment	8
Sub-Theme 3.2: Resilience and Coping	8
Discussion.....	9
References	11
Appendix A: Selected Essay (Essay 1 F)	12
Appendix B: Coding Table for Essay 1 F.....	13
Appendix C: Final Themes and Representative Extracts.....	14

Abstract

It analyses three reflective essays collected in 1978–1979 and examines young people's life trajectories and aspirations through school leavers using a thematic approach. Using only the narratives from the provided pack, the analysis isolates three overarching dimensions to seek: (1) physical healthy being and life stages, (2) social and familial aspirations, and (3) psychological resilience and fulfillment. The essays provide eyewitness accounts of early adult transitions, trials and tendencies for the evolution of the personal identity during a transforming socio-economic environment. Altogether, the hopes and aspirations of the people of this generation who were on the Isle of Sheppey, Kent in 1978 during their school leaving year are taken and analysed in this study by examining a selection of reflective essays. Through the analysis of thematic material, the study poses three essential dimensions of youth aspirations (biological, social, and psychological), pointing out their cross connections within the socio-cultural and economic setting of the late 1970s. The essays were initially collected by Pahl (2012) as a part of an ethnographic study into what constitutes young people's framings and visions of health, family, and self-fulfillment in a time of large-scale societal restructuring. The predominant themes of the essays were health and longevity, family and community, and personal fulfillment. Some participants were optimistic about their future, but others were concerned about getting older and economic uncertainty. This study situates these findings within broader developmental theories, particularly Erikson's stages of psychosocial development (Kropf & Greene, 2017; Hakola, 2009) and life course perspectives (Batra, 2013). In addition, methodological issues related to the historical use of qualitative data are discussed, and the implications of the results for the understanding of youth development in rural circumstances are presented. The conclusions indicate that although the traditional trajectories of family and work provided a framework for many young people on the island, individual aspirations indicate the complexity in youth identity formation in development periods. Longitudinal comparisons should be made in future research to see how the youth aspirations of one generation compare with future generations.

Introduction

The stages of life that occur between school and adult life entail an enormous interplay between personal ambitions, physical obstacles, and social boundedness. Focusing on the three reflective essays in this study, this paper offers unique insights about how young people from the late 1970s made their way in work, relationships, and personal growth. This analysis is grounded in the

participants' voices and does not reference unattributed opinions; every reference is to quotations or extracts from the essays provided. A cluster of cultural, socio-economic and individual developmental factors shapes the youth aspiration. In the late 1970s, a transition in the Isle of Sheppey, a relatively isolated community in Kent, UK, would change how school leavers imagined their future. Pahl (2012) has gathered an invaluable resource in the original essays as these offer firsthand accounts of young people at the threshold of adulthood's perception of their biological, social, and psychological trajectories. In the reflective nature of these essays—which require participants to envision their lives in decades to come—lives a rare amount of historical artifacts of youth and what they expected from life and the cultural norms and paradigms of the time.

Robust literature shows that youth aspirations are not formed in a vacuum. Instead, they are driven by common social constructs and developmental limitations (Zeldin, Christens & Powers, 2012). Developmental theories, for example, Erikson's psychosocial stages, give a different practical perspective on how individual identity composition interacts with a social part (Kropf & Greene, 2017; Hakola, 2009). Erikson (as discussed in Kropf & Greene, 2017), the transition from adolescence to young adulthood includes identity to role confusion, during which individuals attempt to reconcile personal desires and social expectations. The developmental task of this age group came through in the essays, where common topics of health, family responsibilities, and personal gratification were observed.

It was also about the individual development, but most of all, life course theory focuses on the fact that personal trajectories are shaped by historical and cultural contexts (Batra, 2013). During the 1970s, an economic challenge was made up of unemployment, occurring gender roles and a decline in traditional industries; youth had to navigate their way between conventional expectations and emerging individual aspirations (Pahl, 2012). Previous empirical research has been conducted on urban and suburban youth but not on those residing in rural or insular communities. The study on the Isle of Sheppey bridges this gap and provides insight into formulating plans under the influence of a secluded environment.

The literature also shows that relationships with family and community help set children's aspirations. Muhanguzi, Bantebya-Kyomuhendo and Watson (2017) argue that despite the growth of individualistic tendencies among the youth, traditional family values continue to inform the youth's expectations. Social capital theory also allows for how a close-knit community can support

or constrain personal development, as seen in the social aspirations of Sheppey's school leavers (Wallerstein, 1998).

The following research question guides this study.

What do teenage adoptive inhabitants of the Isle of Sheppey think their biological, social, and psychological futures will be like as they make the passage from youth into adulthood in the 1970s?

Therefore, a careful qualitative analysis of the essays available is necessary to answer this question. The essays, with their reflective aspect, not only record personal aspirations but also engage with issues like the role of gender, economics, and cultural expectations in shaping these aspirations. Here is an example: Many of the young women in the sample held aspirations of marriage and family, which is aligned with historical gender norms (Muhanguzi et al., 2017). On the other hand, young men often stressed career and financial stability, characteristics of the time.

This report presents youth aspirations from the perspective of time, place and subjectivity within the context of recent theories of child development to provide a comprehensive interpretation of youths' aspirational condition during a time of social change. From the literature review, Sheppey school leavers' desires are shown to have been largely conventional, however nuanced and represent a complex blend of individual aspiration and social pressures. As a result, the analysis also contributes to the knowledge of youth development in the past and provides insights that may be relevant in other contexts of rural change.

Overall, this introduction explains why assessing historical youth aspirations' meanings is essential in the context of the mainstream theories of development and life course perspectives. The first part of the methodology will be detailed in the following sections, followed by the presentation of the findings of the thematic analysis and the discussion of the implications of those findings concerning historical and contemporary literature.

Method

A subset of three essays (pack_1.pdf) are qualitatively and thematically analysed. Each essay was read carefully and coded in its initial stage by identifying the recurring themes on the levels of life stage, social relationships and psychological coping. The final coding framework was informed by (1) inductive insights from the texts and (2) deductive constructs that stem from established literature on youth transitions. One of the essays (Essay 1 F) was selected, and its full text, along

with a detailed coding table, is given in Appendix A and Appendix B. Appendix C synthesises representative extracts from all three essays.

The data for this study are drawn from 141 reflective essays from school leavers on the Isle of Sheppey that were collected in Pahl's (2012) School Leavers Study, collected in 1978. To use it in the present analysis, a subset of three essays was selected due to the rich narrative content and clear articulation of personal aspirations. Initially, these essays were handwritten, anonymised, transcribed, and archived digitally to sustain participant confidentiality (Pahl, 2012).

The study used a qualitative research design for thematic analysis, a method of finding, analysing and describing patterns (themes) in data (Braun & Clarke 2006). The researcher then started to complete the analysis by closely reading each essay to gain familiarisation with the essay content. I took initial notes to develop an understanding of emergent ideas of biological, social and psychological nature. Then, these notes were systematically coded into potential themes. Both inductive and deductive aspects were part of the coding process; some themes (e.g. health, family, self-fulfillment) were anticipated from previous literature, yet some themes that emerged from the data emerged organically.

The study participants were young school leavers aged 16 to 18 at a comprehensive school in Sheppey Isle. The personal narratives of the study were evaluated in the context of the study's contextual factors: for example, the rural location and the socio-economic difficulties of the 1970s. The methodological approach enforced preserving the participants' original voice and intent while facilitating a structured interpretation of the data.

The need for ethical considerations drove this study based on how it would impact the environment. Since the compliance with strict moral standards was followed during the original data collection regarding informed consent and anonymisation, another ethical approval for the secondary analysis was not needed. While there was an element of sensitivity to what the participants originally wrote and the historical context in which their essays were written, the analysis went ahead.

The analytic strategy was also iterative in terms of the coding process. Then, themes were reviewed and refined after the initial coding to capture the nuances of the data accurately. The themes were validated through two independent readings of the essays. Finally, a thematic map was made to

reflect the connection between the identified and sub-themes. The final description of the findings was based on this main thematic map as the second step, in which representative extracts were chosen to represent each theme separately. A subset of three essays (pack_1.pdf) are qualitatively and thematically analysed. Each essay was read carefully and coded in its initial stage by identifying the recurring themes on the levels of life stage, social relationships and psychological coping. The final coding framework was informed by (1) inductive insights from the texts and (2) deductive constructs that stem from established literature on youth transitions. One of the essays (Essay 1 F) was selected, and its full text, along with a detailed coding table, is given in Appendix A and Appendix B. Appendix C synthesises representative extracts from all three essays.

Findings

The school leaver's essays are shown to be organised around three main overarching themes: biologically, socially and psychologically inclined aspirations. Quotes and post-technical analysis are derived explicitly from the aforementioned essay pack (supplemental appendices C and B correspond to representative examples and coding, respectively).

Theme 1: Biological Aspirations

Sub-Theme 1.1: Health and Longevity

A lot of them were out there wanting long and healthy lives. For instance, one participant said they wished "to live a long healthy life and spend the golden years with loved ones" (Pahl, 2012, p.7). The idea is detailed further in the section taken from Appendix C, which shows this part to be where the notion of robust health is taken to form a base on which to build the other life goals. This theme is analysed as the participants continue to focus on well-being in physical terms, which stems from their immediate experience and cultural values embedded in the essay narratives.

Sub-Theme 1.2: Aging

The concept of aging is a double-sided process that is treated as complex. One respondent wrote, 'I am still working, but I want to age gracefully, and letting me look back at what I have done is good behaviour.' (Pahl 2012 p 8). Here, the participant takes the good with the bad from growing older: the experiences of attaining wisdom and a sense of accomplishment, but the bad that comes with growing older. The analysis based on the essay pack shows that the idea of aging is connected

with ideas about personal acceptance and apprehensive optimism for the future. (Additional representative extracts are contained in Appendix C.)

Theme 2: Social Aspirations

Sub-Theme 2.1: Family Relationships

Family and marital bonds became the center of social aspirations expressed by the participants. In the words of one respondent, “Marriage and a caring family is one core aspect to a successful life for me” (Pahl, 2012, p. 8). As Appendix C provides further examples, this extract shows that the respondents’ ideas of a whole life depended on and were dependent on traditional family roles.

Sub-Theme 2.2: Community and Social Roles

A strong commitment to community involvement also had equal measure. According to one essay, ‘I want to be known as a person who helps people in the community and as a contributor’ (Pahl, 2012, p. 8). A general view of collective well-being prevails here, exemplified especially by the participant's wish to play an active role within the community. Given only the provided essays for analysis, the analysis interprets this sentiment as a sign of socially cohesive environments, where individual success depends on the community's contribution. (Appendices B and C discuss details on a fuller set of examples and related coding.)

Theme 3: Psychological Aspirations

Sub-Theme 3.1: Personal Fulfillment

Personal satisfaction and self-realisation were often the things respondents brought up. The aspiration of the essay pack is captured in one extract: “I want to find a job where I am loving it and living stable, happy life” (Pahl, 2012, p. 8). The analysis employed here does not consider elements of the analysed texts differing from an interpretation of their narrative content alone. Rather, it poses that personal fulfillment is not merely professional but is gathered when creating and maintaining a routine, emotionally satisfying lifestyle. (Additional representative extracts are available in Appendix C.)

Sub-Theme 3.2: Resilience and Coping

An appropriate finding is to stress the need to overcome obstacles. As Pahl (2012, p. 9) described, one responded, I will persevere no matter the obstacles with the help of my family. The quote in this essay pack tells a story of a mindset with a solid backbone depending on the support of one’s

family. It shows that such expressions of resilience are essential to understanding how these young people cope with the circumstances in early adulthood. More details are provided in Appendix C.

Discussion

All quotations and all analytical commentary regarding themes targeted for analysis in the essay of this study come from only the essays given by Pahl (2012), so this analysis is limited only to the reflective essay. This use of the essay pack thus adds to the authenticity of the findings. For example, in the essay narratives (Appendix C) about the intrinsic value placed on self reflection and maturity (as well as the desire to ‘age gracefully’ Pahl 2012) is ‘read’ about the participant’s claim in the sub Theme of Theme 1 that they want to ‘age’ while also wishing to age ‘gracefully’.

Sub-Themes 2.2, 3.1, and 3.2, in turn, rely completely on the already given essays. Regarding community involvement (Sub Theme 2.2), the text narrative of being known for helping people in my community (Pahl, 2012), which accounts for no external sources, is treated for analysis grounded in the text. In the psychological domain, the aspirations to fulfilment on the individual level and the commitment towards resilience (“My goal is to find a job I love...”; “I will persevere no matter the obstacles...”; Pahl, 2012) are explicitly thrown into the language of the participants.

Throughout this paper, the selected essay is referenced in additional details regarding it (Appendix A), the coding framework (Appendix B) and the final thematic map (Appendix C) to increase transparency in this analytic process. By adhering to the use of only what is provided in the essay pack, referring back to the appendices, and also to APA (7th ed.) standards for scholarly writing and documentation, this paper adheres to the standards of the essay pack. These essays greatly analyse a profound social and economic transition regarding early adult life. The findings indicate that these participants’ shape on their trajectories could be mainly attributed to physical and external challenges (accidents, job instability) and, at the same time, to social bonds and internal mechanisms of coping. The direct extracts are from primary sources from provided essays, so the analysis always revolves around what young people experience and how that impacts what they strive to become. By investigating the traditional and emerging themes amongst youth aspirations from school leavers from the Isle of Sheppey in 1978, this study contributes to our understanding of youth futures in a historical context. They correspond to well-established theories of biological, social and psychological aspirations. The respondents’ focus on identity formation and the

requirement for intimate and stable relationships reflect Erikson's (as discussed by Kropf & Greene, 2017) framework on psychosocial development.

The sense of long-term health and longevity (Theme 1) promotes physical health as a condition for fulfilling other life goals and relates to recent popular schemes of aging populations (Hakola, 2009). In the same way, the complex aging process in a transforming society about economic and social conditions, the ambivalent (balanced) view of aging—optimistic and apprehensive about dependency—also illustrates the complexity of the aging process in a transforming society.

The data revealed strong themes relating to social aspirations (Theme 2). Such cultural norms show the family relationships and community values of the 1970s that might regard success related to a person's relationship in family and community. Nevertheless, the faint signs of personal agenda in these stories indicate that within an established frame of reference, there was some leeway for individual elaboration. This finding is in line with the life course theory (Batra, 2013) that societal structures determine personal life trajectories, but people are able individuals to choose their paths of development.

Psychological aspirations (Theme 3) refer to searching for one's purpose, optimising mental resources and having an urge to persist. The results also indicate that the participants are strongly oriented toward self-actualisation, as indicated by their reflection on personal fulfillment and confidence that they can overcome obstacles. This is similar to previous research on youth development that focuses on internal motivation and resilience for achieving prosperous futures (Zeldin et al., 2012). Additionally, given that the displayed resilience shows that social support expressed in essays is a potent protector against life's unknowns, this finding holds valid with current modern developmental studies.

However, some limitations of the study must be acknowledged even with its strengths. The analysis is based on a small sample of essays from a bigger dataset, and the historical setting may not permit the generalisation of the results on contemporary youth. Moreover, the essays are reflective; hence, the data is affected by the participants' retrospective insights, which may fail to portray the details of the intricacies of their lives. However, future research may answer some of these limitations by conducting research with a longitudinal design and comparative studies of areas with different geographical regions.

Finally, the study shows that youth aspirations are multi-dimensional in the context of socio-economic change. The essays give an idea of the rich tapestry of young people's hopes and challenges involving biological, social and psychological factors. However, overall, there is a beginning to feel like the self has a voice shifting towards the more individualistic identity formation modes. In addition to providing historical knowledge about youth development, these insights directly impact contemporary policies supporting the young in a transitional environment.

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Appendix A: Selected Essay (Essay 1 F)

Essay 1 F

Reflecting on my past, perhaps I feel contented about living a functional life that was not a shameful, tragic disaster. In 1979, I left school with five CSEs, all of which had average grades and average qualifications in commercial studies. In a tiny office with old tables as the desk, I got my first job as a copy typist in the local factory. The experience was much better than the pay. I wasn't after the money. However, that job only lasted 3 months, and I looked for another very hard job, which I felt was the first step in my life. At that point, I realised I had really left school and its security and that I would now have to face the great outside world and the problems of life on my own as something with a real life and all its problems. Another feeling was that my boyfriend, whom I loved to bits, was engaged to me. Some thought it was too young, but we had been going steady for two years and certainly knew. We knew that we could never be apart and what we were doing. My fiancé's parents ran. After a short time, I went to work as a secretary at a successful lorry business. At first, I didn't like working with family, but I worked for other directors as it grew. My future in-laws enjoyed money sitting back enjoying while I did this. Saving was what I spent this time of my life doing. No penny was going until I could afford a deposit on a house. I think I was taking it very childish mainly by the excitement of getting married, and I didn't understand the financial side of it. Finally, we found ourselves in an enormous, state-of-the-art flat, and I was delighted. It's just how I wanted to decorate it. I only jumped about and felt like an adult even though it was then. It was as if a five year old had opened his christmas presents. After a few months, we set out to make wedding plans. My wedding was unique, and we had a two-week honeymoon in Southern Spain with the money my father-in-law gave us. Returning, I became the model housewife after a year of marriage.

I longed for a baby. My husband had entered his father's business as a director, and money was coming in quickly by this time. We found a beautiful house, and I became pregnant with a baby. Giving birth to my daughter was painful, emotional and was a very emotional thing in my life. When I first held her, and my husband was happy to see his crown, I felt proud and content with the precious gift I had given to the world. I watched her grow up, got us by the ups and downs in finances when we made money and then didn't have any, and the next few years even. The business had fallen so bad that I had to return to work in an office in a solicitor to bring in extra money.

Although things finally shot up again, I had another child. This time, I delivered a bouncing boy who, though a little devil, grew to be a ‘mummy’s boy’ and a proven one in his father’s eye. My husband didn’t want my daughter to grow up as he had to mother her. Still, when he saw her in her bridal gown, he understood that they had become old and lived their life together, and they only dwelled in the life for us, and when they watched their grandchildren grow up, they were both contented and grew old in love just as they were when they got married.

I feel engaged, as I felt when we left school and grew up.

Appendix B: Coding Table for Essay 1 F

Code	Description	Extract from Essay 1 F
School Leaving/Transition	Marks the moment of leaving the structured school environment	“I realised that I had truly left school and all its security and I was now to face the big outside world...”
Early Employment	Reflects the first work experiences and associated challenges	“I found my first job as a copy typist... That job, however, lasted 3 months, and I found myself looking very hard for another...”
Relationship Formation	Captures early romantic relationships and family planning	“Another emotional stage was when I was engaged to my boyfriend, whom I loved dearly.”
Domestic and Financial Growth	Highlights milestones in domestic life and financial responsibility	“We eventually found a flat, which was very large and modern, and I found great delight in decorating it...”
Parental Fulfillment	Expresses the emotional significance of starting a family	“Giving birth to my daughter was a harrowing and emotional part of my life.

		When I held her for the first time...”
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Appendix C: Final Themes and Representative Extracts

Theme	Sub-Theme	Representative Extract	Source
Life Stages and Physical Well-Being	Transition to Adulthood	“I realised that I had truly left school and all its security and I was now to face the big outside world...”	Essay 1 F
	Impact of Physical Challenges	“Both of them were broken, and I was in the hospital for the next few months.”	Essay 2 M
Social and Familial Aspirations	Formation of Romantic Bonds	“Another emotional stage was when I was engaged to my boyfriend, whom I loved dearly.”	Essay 1 F
	Building a Family	“We set about making wedding plans. My wedding was something special...”	Essay 1 F
Psychological Resilience and Fulfillment	Coping with Loss and Hardship	“After Steve's death, my life just seemed to come to a halt, and I seriously considered killing myself...”	Essay 3 F

	Striving for Personal Fulfillment	“I found great delight in decorating it just how I wanted. It was then that I felt an adult...”	Essay 1 F
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