

Sociological Forum, 2023

DOI: 10.1111/socf.12935

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Glitches in the Aspirational Discourse: Between Enterprise and Compromise¹

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In recent years, the sociology of culture has turned its gaze to future aspirations. This gaze is in line with contemporary future-oriented culture, which encourages young people to aspire to fulfill their dreams. A leading carrier of future orientation is the aspirational discourse, which has become prominent in the educational field and among youth. Sociological inquiry is conflicted regarding the outcomes of this discourse. While it is criticized for increasing inequality, it has also been shown that aspirations are means for higher achievements. In this article, we shift from a focus on outcomes to a focus on interpretation and ask: How do social actors make sense of aspiring selves despite social limitations and inequality? Based on a qualitative study that tracks the aspirational discourse among school educators and recent high school graduates in Israel, we introduce the concept of “glitches” as articulated detours that rise in response to a mismatch between the discourse and lived experience. We identify three main glitches: deviating from the message “the sky is the limit” by lowering the aspirational sky, pausing future orientation by taking time out and limiting individual accountability by yielding to force majeure. We discuss how each glitch serves a different role in the construction of individuals’ life narratives and argue that the intermittent use of glitches enables individuals to sustain the mythical aspirational discourse, even in moments of mismatch and doubt.

KEYWORDS: aspirations; culture; discourse; education; future-orientation; youth.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the sociology of culture has turned its gaze to the future and along with it, to the field of future aspirations (Cerulo and Ruane 2021, 2022; Frye 2012; Mische 2009; Suckert 2022; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013). This gaze is in line with contemporary future-oriented culture which encourages young people to aspire to fulfill their dreams (Frye 2012). The aspirational discourse is a general term for language and practices which define, describe, and foster the ideal of a future-oriented, employable, and accountable self that strives for self-fulfillment, an ideal that is frequently regarded as serving the neoliberal economy (Freeman 2015;

¹ We would like to thank Ori Schwarz, Dawn Lyon, Eleanor Jupp, Kristiina Brunila and AGORA Centre’s CRISP research group members at the University of Helsinki, the three anonymous reviewers, and Karen Cerulo for their helpful comments.

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Kelly 2006; Spohrer 2016; Spohrer et al. 2018).⁴ This discourse can be seen as an outcome of what Taylor (1992) called the subjective turn in modern Western culture, wedding rational logics of achievement with romantic ideals of self-actualization (Illouz 2008; Pagis 2021).

Research on the cultivation of aspirations seems conflicted regarding the role and effect of cultivating aspirations. Quantitative studies show that aspirations are tied to outcomes and thus the cultivation of aspirations may lead to a better life (e.g., Johnson and Hitlin 2017; Vaisey 2010). Yet, recent research addresses the limits of the aspirational discourse in self-making processes of underprivileged young adults arguing that the aspirational discourse blurs and disregards inequality (e.g., Brunila et al. 2020; Silva 2013). Despite these limits, the aspirational discourse remains an important means through which both educators and youth make sense of their lives. How do social actors make sense of aspiring selves despite social limitations and inequality? What are the discursive tools through which they match future aspirations with everyday experience?

We set out to investigate these questions among Israeli educators and recent high school graduates. We found that Israeli educators and youth from varied socio-economic backgrounds use the aspirational discourse fluently to make sense of future trajectories. Yet, side by side, our informants continually presented glitches in the aspirational discourse, glitches that presented disruptions and inconsistencies.

We introduce the concept of “glitch” as an articulated detour in the discourse that rises in response to a mismatch with lived experience. We adopt the definition of glitch from digital technology as a “noncatastrophic malfunction” (Gualeni 2019:2). In our study, we identify three main categories for these glitches: deviating from the message “the sky is the limit” by lowering the aspirational sky, pausing future orientation by taking time out, and limiting individual accountability by yielding to force majeure.

Glitches, as lexical diversions from the formal logic of the discourse, operate as temporary disruptions (Tavory and Fine 2020) used by educators and youth to sustain the discourse even in moments of mismatches and discrepancies. Glitches introduce “discourse contaminations” (Wagner-Pacifici 2000) and minor modifications, but do not lead to the production of counter-discourse or de-institutionalization. On the contrary, the intermittent use of glitches enables individuals to hold on to the mythical aspirational discourse, even in moments of mismatch and doubt.

ARTICULATING ASPIRATIONS: SHIFTING FROM OUTCOMES TO INTERPRETATIONS

In recent years, the sociology of culture has revived its interest in the field of future aspirations, answering the call to “reclaim the analysis of the future” (Mische 2009:702). Responding to this call, this article examines the articulation of aspirations as “temporal horizons” and as a flexible sense-making mechanism for social actors (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013:918). The articulation of aspirations of

⁴ This body of research draws on Foucault’s notion of governmentality and Rose’s (1998:164) approach that addresses neoliberalism not only as an economic phenomenon of free market, but rather as a political process of subjectification produced by the “neoliberal vocabulary of enterprise.”

contemporary youth and educators takes place in a cultural milieu that is highly future-oriented. In this milieu, people are encouraged to aspire to fulfill their dreams (Pakis 2016, 2021; Rimke 2000). Such encouragement is manifested in the aspirational discourse which is allied with the growing spread of popular psychology and the therapeutic framework (Illouz 2008). The aspirational discourse is anchored in multiple institutions, including the democratic state (Helman 2021), the education system (Ecclestone and Brunila 2015; Mertanen et al. 2022), and the institution of work (Pakis 2021). In these different spheres of inquiry, this discourse has been regarded as pushing people to maximize their “employment potential” (Smith 2010:280).

Central research fields for the study of the aspirational discourse are education and youth (Suckert 2022). Research in these fields seems conflicted regarding the role and effect of future aspirations. A growing body of literature illustrates that aspirations matter, since “future-oriented action” can influence youth life (Johnson and Hitlin 2017:997). For example, the educational aspirations of disadvantaged youth have been proven to be lower than advantaged youth, and these aspirations eventually influence educational achievement (Vaisey 2010). From this perspective, encouraging youth to dream and aspire can lead to higher achievement and a better life.

Yet, others have claimed that the “aspiration-raising activities” that have spread through the education system in different parts of the world do not necessarily help disadvantaged youth change their lives and destinies (Harrison and Waller 2018:914; Zipin et al. 2015). This trend is defined by Drake and Guhin (2021:9) as “achievement ideology,”⁵ comprising of “declarative claims” such as “those who work hard will succeed,” and simplified justifications for social problems and inequality. Following Rose (1998), Kelly (2006) argues that the aspirational discourse is particularly problematic for youth at risk who are regarded as personally accountable for the failure to achieve an “entrepreneurial self”. Likewise, Silva (2013) criticizes the aspirational discourse and demonstrates how it affects working-class young adults in the US. While experiences of instability create hopelessness in their imagined futures, they nonetheless perceive their future obstacles in an individualized manner as “something to be resolved on their own” (ibid:111).

While research connecting aspirations, expectations, and outcomes (e.g., Hitlin and Johnson 2015; Johnson and Hitlin 2017; Vaisey 2010) can promote a view of the aspirational discourse as a tool for a better life, the critical view (e.g., Brunila et al. 2020; Spohrer et al. 2018) understands this discourse as a myth that serves contemporary economic and social structures. These conflicted views, however, are not just an etic sociological problem. These questions that sociologists ask about aspirations are also questions that educators and youth encounter in their everyday life. On the one hand, educators encourage youth to aspire and dream through various aspirational raising activities. On the other hand, both educators and youth are exposed to mismatches between discourse and experience that may lead to discomfort and doubt.

Following Sewell (2004:52), we see the discourse of aspiration as a “system of symbols possessing a real but thin coherence that is continually put at risk in practice and therefore subject to transformation.” To study the practice of the aspirational

⁵ This ideology is linked to the term meritocracy, coined by Michael Young to address a political belief that “the best people get the best jobs, thereby meriting the best lives” (Drake and Guhin 2021:9).

discourse means shifting from a focus on outcomes to a focus on interpretation since, as Mische (2009:702) states, “to examine future projections is not to assume that they come true,” but rather to study the ways in which these projections come about in “possibly contradictory and surprising ways.” We know that when people imagine their future trajectories, such imagination is at least partly constrained by their socio-economic position (Vaisey 2010). In a recent study, Cerulo and Ruane (2021) showed that even dreams, which are “expressed in the freedom of an imagined world” (ibid:1348) and precede any notion of outcome or action are influenced by social and cultural structural conditions. Yet, the aspirational discourse attempts to transcend such constraints claiming that anyone, regardless of socioeconomic status (SES), can aspire, work hard, and succeed. These inherent tensions turn the aspirational discourse into a fertile ground for studying the interpretive tools through which people manage mismatches between an institutionalized, mythic discourse and lived experience.

To bring forward the interpretive work embedded in the articulation of aspirations we draw on Frye’s (2012) insightful research on aspirations in Malawi. Following a puzzle similar to the one we follow in this article, Frye asks how young people in Malawi can hold on to bright and optimistic aspirations in light of the limitations and hardships of reality. She shows that in this context, the aspirational discourse is not necessarily a script for action in the world, but instead a way to transcend present reality and fashion oneself as a moral project. As Frye shows, aspirations are an important part of processes of self-formation, creating “assertions of identity” (ibid:1567). From this perspective, aspirations are interpretive and cultural “statements about the future” which should be examined “as moral claims rather than as rational choices,” or as “assertions of a virtuous identity” (ibid:1565, 1566).

When we entered the Israeli field, we found that Israeli educators and youth, from varied socio-economic backgrounds, use the aspirational discourse fluently to make sense of future trajectories. Yet, side by side, our informants continually presented glitches in the aspirational discourse, glitches that introduced disruptions and inconsistencies. At first, we thought that these glitches were minor interruptions; yet as our study progressed, we realized that these glitches are in fact a powerful interpretive tool that can add to our understanding of how, despite its limitations, the aspirational discourse remains a leading conceptual framework that guides educators’ and youth’s future orientation.

GLITCHES, DISRUPTIONS, AND THE MANAGEMENT OF MISMATCH WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE

We introduce the concept of “glitches” as articulated detours in the discourse that rise in response to a mismatch with lived experience. We borrow the term “glitch” from the language of digital technology. Glitches, as digital technological disruptions, arise through the relationships between technologies and their users (Gualeni 2019). Glitches represent momentary disruptions that while common, do not lead to a complete failure of the code. For our purpose, when people glitch, they articulate a minor disruption to the discursive formal logic, while at the same time,

on the whole, keeping the discourse intact. We use this concept both as a noun—a glitch in—and as a verb—glitching from—to indicate the agents' active role in momentary diverting from, or “hopping off,” the formal discourse.

We are inspired by De Certeau's (1984) work on tactics as divergences from the formal discourse that do not transform the discourse. De Certeau gives the example of a person walking in the city. While the construction of the city creates rigid paths and structures, an individual can nonetheless create detours and shortcuts, and even create new paths, while walking in it. De Certeau explains these detours by distinguishing between a “strategy” and a “tactic.” A strategy is a form of future planning that relies on discursive logic, while a tactic is not based on the institutionalized discourse but instead offers a divergence from it. However, while tactics carry resistance and are the “art of the weak,” (ibid:37) glitches are articulated detours from the formal discursive structure that do not necessarily carry resistance to it.

Put differently, glitches are discursive disruptions that aim to sustain the formal discourse with minor modifications. Tavory and Fine (2020:374) offer the distinction between “disruption of” and “disruption for.” In the context of interactions, when a dramaturgical misalignment is introduced, it can serve as a “moment of disintegration” that leads to rupture (i.e., disruption of), or as a temporary breach that can “be glossed over, or even potentially enrich social relations” (i.e., disruption for). Extending this insight to discourse analysis, when actors introduce a glitch, they do not aim to disintegrate the discourse, but instead, they search for a way to maintain it despite what they see as potential mismatches with daily experience.

The concept of glitch challenges the critical perspectives on the aspirational discourse that tend to see discourses as “subjectivizing” (e.g., Rose 1998). Structuralist approaches inspired by early writings of Foucault portrait discourse as a system that holds a somewhat coherent internal structure (Foucault 1989 [1966]). This internal coherence is not limited to statements but encompasses lived experience, as discourses serve as “serious speech acts” and are not autonomous from materiality (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983). From this perspective, experience is a derivative of the discourse. When disruptions are discussed, if at all, this is mainly under the notion of “resistance,” which leads to the rejection of the discourse in favor of competing ideologies.

Our perspective draws on but also goes beyond, pragmatist approaches that view the use of discourse as creative, adaptive, and selective. From a pragmatic perspective, discourses are a “tool kit” in which elements can be used selectively depending on context (Swidler 1986). A mismatch with lived experience leads people to switch “from one code to the other” (Swidler 2001:184), and substitute one discourse for another. Yet, as Swidler herself argued, institutionally anchored discourses have more power over individuals and thus abandoning these discourses might come at a high cost. By showing how people manage potential mismatches without abandoning the aspirational discourse, we go beyond the passiveness of discursive subjectivization of the critical perspective and the playfulness of code-switching of the pragmatic approach.

Wagner-Pacifici's (1994, 2000) work on interaction between discourses helps us understand the nature and role of glitches. In this work, she introduces two processes: discourse contamination and discourse hybridization. The first deficits a state

in which one discourse seeps into the other and “unanticipated lexical features” borrowed from another discourse become “embedded within a given discourse that promises an intact, whole-cloth worldview” (Wagner-Pacifici 1994:8). Due to the connotation to disease, discourse contamination may sound like it undermines the discourse, but this is not the case. In fact, Wagner-Pacifici shows how the seeping of one discourse into the other actually helps to fill in the gaps while keeping the discursive logic relatively intact. In contrast, discourse hybridization deficits a more radical process that includes “a practical acknowledgment of the incompleteness, the partiality of a given discursive formation” (Wagner-Pacifici 2000:12). Discourse hybridization does undermine the original institutional logic and signifies a significant discursive disintegration as “the constant aim of hybridization is the deinstitutionalization of discourse” (ibid).

Since introduced, discourse hybridization has become the focus of studies interested in the heterogeneity of discourses. For example, research in the field of organizations illustrates how competing institutional logics can merge and produce “hybrid logics” (Pache and Santos 2013). Less is known about processes of discourse contamination and their role in sustaining formal discursive logics by filling in gaps or providing minor modifications. Moreover, while Wagner-Pacifici’s notion of contamination focuses on the interaction between two distinct discourses, we know little about the more messy, varied, and unorganized glitching processes that help people to make sense of their lives. As we will show in the context of the articulation of the aspirational discourse by Israeli educators and youth, glitches actively create disruptions in the discourse, while not actively denying its logics.

METHODOLOGY

This article is part of a larger qualitative research project which was conducted between January 2017 and March 2022. We used a multi-focal approach that included various methodological tools, as well as varied sites of inquiry and points of view of social actors. The data, collected by the first author, included 30 in-depth interviews (28 educators and 2 youth participants); 7 semi-structured focus groups with 30 youth participants; 10 school physical site observations; and content analysis of 40 school websites, 10 teacher blogs, and official ministerial educational programs.

Interviewees included six Israeli ministerial education policymakers, one municipal education policymaker, eight principals (four in elementary schools, one in junior high, and three in high schools), 13 teachers (seven elementary school teachers, one junior high teacher, and five high school teachers), and two recent high school graduates (leaders of regional youth councils). The interviews took between one and two-and-a-half hours and were structured as a conversation with a purpose, with the interviewer asking open-ended questions adapted to the language of the participants and requesting examples. The questions addressed future trajectories for today’s youth (e.g., “How do you see your/today’s students’ future?”) “What is a ‘good’ future aspiration in your opinion?”), as well as questions regarding the ideal school graduate, teacher, and person, from the point of view of the participants.

The seven focus groups included three to six members each and took between one-and-a-half and two-and-a-half hours. This method was chosen as it allows insights from interactive discussions between youths regarding their foreseen futures (as opposed to one-on-one interviews). The number of groups was determined according to factors of geography and social class and following Guest et al. (2017), who found that three to six focus groups can reach up to 90% of the themes coded in 40 focus groups of a specific population. Overall, the groups were composed of 17 female and 13 male (self-defined) recent high school graduates who had not yet begun their mandatory military service. One group was composed of graduates from various schools, participants in a youth leadership program. In all the other groups, all the participants were from the same school. The focus groups were semi-structured, using a guideline of nine open-ended questions, and were conducted using Zoom Video Communications. This part of the research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the youth participants were highly comfortable with this form of communication. This method was chosen as a convenient and cost-effective tool for both researcher and participants, providing the ability to reach participants from various geographical and economic settings (Gray et al. 2020). The data collected from focus groups were analyzed using MAXQDA software.

The observations of schools' physical sites (four elementary schools, two junior high schools, and four high schools) were conducted with the authorization of the principal or in school visits that are open to the public and mostly (7 of 10) included walking interviews with principals, teachers, or the school architect. The observations took between 1 and 3 hours and included photography of the school facilities and walls, as well as field notes. Based on the assumption that while people shape and design the physical space of schools, school spaces in turn can (re)shape human behavior, interactions, and thought, the analysis included an examination of specific linguistic, graphic, and symbolic settings in each school observed.

We used an abductive method of inquiry (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), going back and forth from theory to field, allowing revisions, (re)questioning, and surprises. The data were analyzed in an interpretive thematic analysis through analytical categorization. First, the data from each source was coded in a preliminary encoding, and then additional coding was added to cross-reference data between the various sources. This stage of data analysis revealed themes of the aspirational discourse. The abductive "inferential creative process" (ibid:170) allowed us to go back and forth from theory to data, revealing instances of disruptions in the aspirational discourse, which we later named "glitches." These unexpected disruptions were then examined throughout the data to reveal themes of glitches in the aspirational discourse. We chose the three most dominant themes to be presented in this article.

The research received the Bar-Ilan University IRB approval and followed ethical guidelines for qualitative research. The interviews and focus groups were all recorded and transcribed with the consent of the participants. The collected data and analysis were in Hebrew and excerpts were translated into English by the authors for this article. All the names of participants and schools in this article are pseudonymous.

THE CONTEXT OF ISRAELI EDUCATION AND YOUTH

Israel has a free, mandatory K-12 public education system, in which most students enroll. The system is divided into Hebrew (Jewish) and Arabic (Arab) streams, and the Hebrew schools are further divided into secular and religious public schools. Graduates of the Hebrew schools face mandatory army service. Our research focused on the secular Hebrew public school system (*mamlachti*), as the mainstream branch of schooling in Israel, including more than half of the student population. It is important to note that even though the Israeli education system is a public state system, its social inequalities, intersecting with ethno-nationalism, religion, ethnicity and geography, remain stable over time despite official state strategies to reduce them (Ayalon et al. 2019). In this study, about a third of the educators and the youth participants were from low SES schools, about a quarter from middle-class schools, and the rest (less than half) from middle-upper or upper SES schools.

In recent years, Israeli education has gone through processes of neo-liberalization which include “borrowing” policies (Feniger et al. 2016) as well as discursive practices from global trends. For example, Plotkin Amrami (2021) shows how resilience education in Israel is shaped by “contemporary cultural notions such as the privatization of risks, the emergence of the self-governing subject, and the rise of the therapy culture” (ibid:687). Shoshana (2017) shows how in civic education, teachers in Israel use a psychological discourse to promote individualized explanations of social problems, in a way that “clashed with the discourse of the students from low socioeconomic locations” (ibid:62). In a different study, we illustrate how Israeli education promotes an entrepreneurial ideal self in a way that weaves it with local ethno-national ideologies, generating exclusion (Alfi-Nissan et al. 2021). This study extends the understanding of the influence of such discursive “borrowing” and contextual modification through the examination of the aspirational discourse in the Israeli education system among educators and recent graduates.

FINDINGS

We found that the aspirational discourse is broadly embedded in formal educational programs and in the physical surroundings of schools, in addition to being frequently used by educators and recent graduates. We located three main themes in the manifestation of this discourse: “the sky is the limit,” future orientation, and individual accountability. While we present these themes as distinct, they are in fact interrelated, as the “thin coherence” (Sewell 2004) of the discourse ties them together. Through these themes, the aspirational discourse constructs a linear view of the present as serving to produce an employable future for today’s youth while disregarding socioeconomic factors influencing life trajectories. Nonetheless, we also found that social agents who utilize the aspirational discourse and strongly believe in it, simultaneously create creative detours and produce glitches that deviate from it. We identify three main categories for these glitches each corresponding to the three main discursive themes: (1) glitching from “the sky is the limit” by lowering the aspirational sky, (2) glitching from future orientation by taking time out, and

(3) glitching from individual accountability by yielding to force majeure. In each of the following subsections, we will first present the discursive theme as it emerged from the data and follow with examples of the corresponding glitch.

Lowering the Aspirational Sky

The first glitch in the aspirational discourse compromises on the theme of “the sky is the limit” by lowering the utopic aspirational sky. The aspirational discourse in Israeli education pushes young individuals to follow their dreams and passions in the field of work, turning employment into the main site for self-identity. According to the logic of “the sky is the limit,” anyone from any circumstance can reach employable success if they “dream it.”

A central way in which schools in Israel implement the notion of “the sky is the limit” is through the notion of “empowerment.” This topic echoed throughout our data in various sites. For example, Orit, a teacher of third and fourth grade in a high SES school in central Israel was teaching empowerment classes during the time of her interview. She chose the title “I can do anything” for her series of classes with third-grade students. One way she chose to empower children to believe they can “do anything” was by meeting a teacher and a dancer with a hearing impairment. As she explained, “It’s to show them that anyone can [succeed/ make it] too. Anyone can. It’s just a matter of attitude.”

Similarly, in a low SES high school located in the periphery of Israel, the students met former graduates as role models illustrating the idea that “the sky is the limit.” Varda, a teacher in this school, explained: “We bring them examples of people that come to lecture before them, who were just like them. [...] They [the lecturers] dreamed and accomplished [...] they dreamed and achieved. To achieve the dream, it’s to be doctors, researchers, businessmen, parliament members.” Varda and other educators in our study stated that they encourage students to dream without imposing limits on these dreams. For example, Jasmin, a first and second-grade teacher, thinks that students should be asked from an early age what they aspire to do. She explains how she uses the phrase “the sky is the limit” when talking to her students. For Jasmin, if a student aspires to be a doctor, she wants to empower this wish by promoting a visionary reflective process. She addressed this also when describing a conversation with a child’s mother:

A mother sat in my office. Her daughter is having difficulties [in learning], and she told me [imitates a high-pitched voice]: So what? Today girls who work as nail technicians make a lot of money; cosmeticians make more money than anyone else. I told her: Excuse me?! Who are you to decide for her what she wants to be when she grows up? Our job is to give them the tools so that they will choose what to do. [...] You will not choose her profession! She shouldn’t think that she can’t be a doctor just because she is having trouble in math, or in language. Everything can be overcome. Today [smiles]. Everything.

The mother and Jasmin have different points of view as to the opportunities which “today” holds for a young girl and the futures awaiting today’s youth. While Jasmin wishes to raise aspirations in her students, the mother of this child articulates her more constrained realistic expectations for her child’s future. Jasmin’s school is

located in a highly privileged neighborhood. Nonetheless, there is a significant group of students in the school who come from a disadvantaged local neighborhood. The mother described in the conversation highlights economic security as important for her child's future. Jasmin, on the other hand, stresses freedom of choice and the ability to succeed beyond what the mother might see as the glass ceiling.

Yet, alongside presenting "the sky is the limit" as a relevant ideal for all students in all times and places, the same teachers introduced glitches into the aspirational discourse. For example, Noga is a principal in a high school for low SES communities and youth at risk. According to Noga, the school is a "last resort" for these young individuals to graduate high school. The school advocates the aspirational discourse through various programs including life coaching services for students. Noga, like other educators in our sample, stresses the importance of her students' future employability, encourages them to reach self-fulfillment, and teaches them to "believe in themselves." However, Noga affirms the notion of "the sky is the limit" while at the same time actively creating detours from its logic:

"I want everyone [of my students] to know that there is power within them. You have power, every child can succeed, I tell them. [...] each of you has your own power, you only need to find how to bring this power forward."

Interviewer: And how do you see their future? What do you consider a successful future?

"That they find a profession that they like and succeed in it, even if it's being a nail technician. I have [girl] students that have beauty parlors here in the city and they make more money than me, and they are successful, and they love it, and they enjoy it, and they are creative, and this is their success, they have their own business. [...] I have this awesome [boy] student that builds surfboards, this is his success, it doesn't matter that he is not a doctor, so what? It's not relevant."

Noga, like most educators in our sample, measures personal future success in terms of career success. She ties individuals' agency and passion with occupational accomplishment. She conveyed her argument regarding her students' employable selves while juxtaposing two occupations: a medical doctor and a surfboard builder. Like Jasmin, the teacher presented above, Noga uses the criterion of prestige to distinguish between jobs. However, unlike Jasmin, Noga glitches from the formal aspirational claims that the sky is the limit and produces a solution that fits her students by lowering the aspirational sky.

Noga does not ignore the fact that social factors such as gender or low SES affect her students' future. The effect of social position on future success poses challenges to the statement "the sky is the limit," a challenge that may lead Noga to oppose the aspirational discourse. Instead, Noga introduces a glitch that enables her to hold on to the aspirational discourse with minor modifications. The glitch of lowering the aspirational sky enables her to continue and use empowerment and coaching techniques with her students. The fierce tone in which Noga expressed the glitch when saying "So what?" suggests an awareness of the disruption she introduced to the official logic of the discourse. By lowering the aspirational sky, Noga sustains the aspirational discourse, arguing that "every child can succeed" while at the same time, adapting success to her students' everyday life circumstances.

We found the same phenomenon of simultaneously affirming and glitching the aspirational discourse among youth. Consider Efrat and Hadas who, like other

graduates in our sample, placed a high value on self-fulfillment at work and explained how important it is to “believe in yourself” to achieve your set goals in the upcoming future. When speaking of their dreams, they echoed the theme “the sky is the limit,” expressing the belief that “anyone can do anything.” Nonetheless, when discussing their upcoming military service, they glitched from the mythic discourse. Military service in Israel, which is mandatory for Jewish secular youth, is a major filter for the Israeli job market. In recent years, this service has become less a “rite of passage” that might encourage Israeli recruits to “sacrifice themselves” and more a “constructive step in one’s professional career and daily life” (Jude 2017:86). Accordingly, youth participants in our study approached their mandatory military service as a personal opportunity for future success and integrated it into their future aspirations. As Michael, a high school graduate awaiting his induction, explained: “We are the generation of ‘What do I get out of it?’ when thinking of military service.”

Efrat and Hadas, like other young adults in Israel, hope to use the military as a springboard to a better future, calculating their service options as part of their future employability:

- Efrat: I want to do something in rescue troops. I hope I get it; I think I maybe have a chance.
- Hadas: Why are you talking like that? Remember? Self-fulfillment! [cynical]
- Efrat [cynical]: Fine.
- Hadas: Believe in yourself! [laughs]
- Efrat: I don’t know, usually the good jobs in the military are given to people from the Tel Aviv region and not from the periphery. [. . .] I went to the recruitment try-outs for Galatz [the military radio] and I felt that I was labeled as an Ashkelonian [a native of a city in the social and geographical periphery of Israel] or something like that. I don’t know. It felt a bit like that, and a lot of my friends from the periphery, none of them got in.

In the focus group, Efrat stated several times that if one believes in oneself and articulates goals for the future, one will reach self-fulfillment. Nevertheless, she was concerned by the constraints imposed by her social and geographical background. Other participants living in the periphery of Israel also attributed past failures to discrimination of youth from the periphery which intersects with ethnicity.⁶ The cynical tone in which Efrat refers to “self-fulfillment” in this context exposes her disappointment and doubt regarding the aspirational discourse. Here we see a glimpse of resistance that might eventually lead her to drop the discourse. Yet, at least at this stage, she does not abandon the discourse altogether but instead amends it by lowering her aspirational sky and searching for an alternative achievement. Such a move is described by Clark (1960:574) as the first step in a Goffmanian “cooling out the mark,” in which disappointment is managed by choosing alternatives that “appear not too different from

⁶ In the geographical periphery of Israel, SES tends to be lower and there is a higher percentage of new immigrants and “Mizrachi” Jews whose family origins are from Arab countries (Yiftachel 2000).

what is given up.” From aspiring to serve in a highly prestigious position in a military radio station, Efrat shifted to the still ambitious but less prestigious rescue troops.

In some cases, such as Efrat’s, the glitch was triggered by an actual mismatch that led to disappointment. Yet in other cases, youth spoke of a potential future mismatch that led them to lower their aspirational sky. Take for example Yaniv, who participated in a focus group of middle-class boys from the town of Rehovot where two central university campuses are located. These group members positioned themselves as part of a social group to which they gave the title “the non-scientists of Rehovot,” indicating a distinction from the small yet prestigious community of scientists. Yaniv, addressed his future plans and explained that while he originally aspired to become an engineer, he started doubting if this is a realistic aspiration, and therefore he decided to first become a practical engineer:

I’m now going to start this course to study electronics through the army, the army pays eighty percent and I get a degree, no, not a degree, I get a practical engineer diploma. Now it’s something that I don’t need to be accepted to some kind of a university, it’s a college, it saves me time after the army, it’s like . . . I leave the army service with something that has a relatively high demand and a nice income.

Like his friends in the focus group, Yaniv believed that hard work equals success. Yet, at the same time, in line with their distinction from “the scientists of Rehovot,” this group acknowledged that some people might need to work harder than others. Thus, even though Yaniv did not fail to enter the university, he actively lowered his aspirations. While doing so, he did not completely depart from the aspiration to become an engineer, but he turned this aspiration into a somewhat vague dream that might be followed later in life.

These examples illustrate that while our participants still speak the aspirational discourse when setting a future goal and planning toward it, this discourse is employed under the structural limitations of everyday life circumstances. Glitching from “the sky is the limit” to lowering the aspirational sky allows our participants to feel that they are still on the highway of the aspirational discourse, even when the end goal is modified.

Taking Time Out

The second glitch we found diverted from the theme of future orientation by taking time out. Future orientation is a central theme in the aspirational discourse in Israeli education. It presents itself in various official programs and documents, such as “future-oriented pedagogy,” or the concept of “the graduate of the future.” Today’s students are thought of by ministerial social agents as needing to obtain “skills required to operate in the professions of the twenty-first century.”⁷ Likewise, the “Futuristic Kindergarten,” is a widespread program of the Israeli Ministry of Education aiming to uphold an “entrepreneurial culture.” Miri, a senior executive in the Ministry of Education, explained:

⁷ “Future-Oriented Pedagogy - From Trends to Actions – A Flow Chart,” State of Israel Ministry of Education, RandD, Initiatives and Experiments Division. 2016. https://meyda.education.gov.il/files/Nisuyim/Future_Oriented_Pedagogy.pdf.

“Children who enter first grade today will be employed in seventeen workplaces, will have three different careers, [changing jobs] every two and a half to three years. I want to prepare them! Seventy percent of the professions will disappear or change completely. Fifty percent will be completely new. [. . .] I ask myself: Is the knowledge I give enough?”

Interviewer: Enough for what?

“Enough for my students to thrive in the world after school.”

Miri identifies the ideal future subject as a thriving employable subject. This type of future orientation was highly visible in official ministerial educational programs and school websites and also appeared in schools’ physical sites. For example, in a seventh-grade classroom, the quote: “A goal without a timeline is simply a dream” was written above a drawing of a straight line presenting a “timeline” year by year from 2020 to 2031. Next to the quote the attribution “Robert Herjavec” is written in Hebrew. Robert Herjavec is not a well-known persona in Israel. He is a Canadian businessman, a millionaire, and a “shark” on the American tv show “Shark Tank” where “the sharks give budding entrepreneurs the chance to secure business deals that could make them millionaires.”⁸ According to Herjavec’s Twitter account, the quote is a tweet he wrote in 2015, which was harnessed in this Israeli school to promote future orientation.

Future orientation was also a dominant theme among principals and teachers in our study. For example, Adi, who had worked as a principal for 12 years, spoke of her experience in two different schools. The first is a high school serving one of Israel’s most well-known low SES neighborhoods, working with at-risk youth. The second is a junior high serving students in a renowned high SES neighborhood in the center of Israel. Adi acknowledged that students’ backgrounds in these two schools were different, and their families had, in her view, highly different values. Nonetheless, she stated that in both schools she taught her students to articulate their future “dreams”: “To be able to dream is to ask: Where do I want to be in ten years? What do I dream of becoming when I grow up? Where do I see myself succeeding? We integrate all these questions in various ways: in PTA meetings, in private conversations with students, and in class. [. . .]” She adds that if someone says, “I don’t have a dream, I don’t know, ok?” it signals that there is work to be done, because “when someone doesn’t have a dream, a [future] vision, then they’re just passing the time, and that’s not what we want and hope for them.”

Future orientation was also dominant in our focus groups with young adults regardless of socio-economic background. For example, Ella, a recent high SES public school graduate, described a longstanding future orientation: “I believe that from a very, very early age, I planned the future [. . .] Even if it’s something that changed over time, I always had some sort of a dream and even now my future is very well planned.” Another example is Alex, the son of immigrants from the former Soviet Union and a high school graduate living in a middle-class neighborhood. Like four of his male friends in the focus group, he works in a supermarket while awaiting his induction into military service. Alex contrasted the connection between his present and future self to someone “living in the moment,” giving an example of the typical

⁸ <https://abc.com/shows/shark-tank>.

Israeli teenager backpacking in India for 6 months. He further explained: “If we don’t set goals and targets for ourselves at this age, we will be lost in the future [. . .] You need to set goals, stick with them after the military, that’s what I aspire to do [. . .] Also, my dad said. ‘Listen, after the military you are not going to procrastinate. Set yourself goals.’”

Yet, side by side resisting the logic of “living the moment” our participants detoured from future orientation when claiming that sometimes one needs a “time out” from a focus on the future. Such taking time out did not appear as a counter-discourse that opposes the aspirational discourse but as a glitch that introduces a temporary break in the narrative of future orientation with an expectation to be resumed. For example, Varda, a high school teacher in a low SES city in northern Israel, urges her students to “set goals, say what you want, where you want to go. They [my students] need to set goals for the next month, as well as clear goals for five and ten years from now.” Relying on her motto “Dream it—make it,” she sees the present as a linear path to future success. Nonetheless, when asked about her students’ underprivileged background and if and how does that influence her students’ trajectories, she addresses their present circumstances as creating a need to take time out and pause the theme of future orientation. She explained that as her students sometimes face “difficult homes, difficult socioeconomic situations, problems at home,” they need to “take a break” from progressing toward their future plans in order to deal with these situations. This “taking time out,” she clarifies, is merely a temporary detour in her students’ life paths: “If at that point in time [the present] they have difficulties and they really want to [reach future success], they will do it a little later.”

Varda acknowledges that some of her students are limited in their ability to focus on the future and fulfill the aspirational discourse. Yet, at the same time, Varda interprets this mismatch as a temporary state that is reparable. Understanding the need to take care of present problems as a “time out” allows Varda to glitch from the aspirational discourse while keeping it whole. In her opinion, taking time out does not contradict or eliminate the path of future-orientation; it only puts it on hold with the expectation to be resumed.

The notion of youth taking a temporary break from working on their future plans also appeared in our conversations with high SES youth participants. Yet, in contrast to a short-term survival mechanism of the unprivileged, privileged youth framed their procrastination as a “fun break” or a “contribution to society.” Most of the youth in our study from the middle-upper and upper class chose to volunteer in a premilitary service program that was framed by them as an “experience” and not as an investment in their CVs (in Israel, the military service has much more influence on one’s career than preservice programs). This requires them to request postponement of their military induction for a full year. These young adults are delaying their future entrance into the job market from a highly aware, privileged standpoint, knowing that they can “afford” a “year off” and therefore they can temporarily take a break from their future-orientation. Note that when using the concept “year off” these youth participants signified that life in general is about preparing for the future job market. A year off is a glitch, a detour, that eventually leads one back to the highway.

Since future orientation is a widespread ideal in official Israeli educational discourse and everyday life of educators and youth, we suggest that the taking time out glitch serves as a legitimating tactic to the focus on the present. The discomfort caused by not being future oriented leads social actors to explain their “nonaspirational” actions as merely a pause. By using the taking time out glitch, social actors can present themselves as on the aspirational highway, even though they are temporarily stopping or stuck on the sideway.

Yielding to Force Majeure

The third glitch we found illustrated that while people believe in individual responsibility for future success, they can also detour from this value by invoking the force majeure perceived as affecting all humans’ futures.

The theme of accountability is highly dominant in Israeli education. For instance, in many schools in Israel, students are asked to periodically evaluate themselves alongside the evaluations they receive from teachers. In the schools documented in our research (both elementary and high schools), students were asked to write their goals for upcoming semesters. After articulating their specific goals, they were also asked to specify the ways in which they intend to reach them.

Personal accountability was also portrayed in schools’ physical surroundings. For example, in a small middle-class high school in the Tel Aviv district, on the main wall in the computer and cyber classroom an illustrated sign showed a silhouette of a boy pushing the words written in huge letters in English: “Push Yourself,” and under that in smaller print “No one else will do it for you.” In a high SES junior high school in central Israel, the main wall in one of the classes bore the adage: “Anyone’s dream can come true—if you only stick to it and work hard to achieve it.” In another class in the same school appeared a quote attributed to Tony Robbins, an American self-help writer and coach: “Your past doesn’t determine your future—only your choices”. The word “past” was designed to be scratched out, and the word “future” was highlighted and bolded, while the words “only your choices” were in an enlarged font size, double that of the beginning of the sentence. Similarly, on a wall in a main corridor of a high SES elementary school appeared a quote by former Israeli President Shimon Peres stating: “Each of you has a huge potential that no one will realize in your place. If you invest in self-realization, you will discover the treasures hidden deep in your personality.” This quote stresses self-realization as a future trajectory which linearly and determinately results from an individual’s “investment,” as in the previous quotes, the word “you” is repeated to emphasize individual accountability.

Yet, alongside an affirmation of the belief in one’s agency and self-responsibility, we found our informants glitching the personal accountability statement and diverting to force majeure: an unexpected greater force than one’s own powers. One of these forces is “luck.” For instance, on a wall in a school library, a quote attributed to Roman philosopher Seneca stated: “Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.” Like many other “inspirational” quotes found on school walls, this one’s attribution may not be accurate. Nonetheless, a simple Google search will reveal how this sentence (attributed to various people) is

predominantly shared as an “inspirational” quote for “personal growth,” as part of the self-help discourse of popular psychology. This quote reflects a relatively established discourse contamination, because “luck” is defined as determined not only by uncontrolled forces “outside” the individual creating “opportunities,” but rather as the intersection between the uncontrollable and the individual’s plans for the future.

The potential influence of luck was present in social actors’ articulation of their projected futures. For example, in a high SES focus group that was discussing the importance of future employability, Shir expressed her concerns about the possibility of attaining a job in the future that could answer all her expectations:

“It’s like, you need to find something [a job] that makes money, and you also enjoy it, that promotes you, that you can feel you are doing something good, and also makes you feel comfortable. It’s so many things that need to work out and, like, what are the chances that all of them will work out?”

Interviewer: What does it depend on?

“Choosing the right thing to do with your skills, and, like, to do it through luck.”

Shir affirms the aspirational discourse when addressing individuality, joy, and self-fulfillment in the job market. However, when asked what it depends on, Shir first affirms the theme of personal accountability, but immediately after glitches, yielding to the force majeure, when referring to luck. Interestingly, she uses the notion of luck in a grammatically uncommon way, turning it into an active action—“do it through luck.” While luck can be understood as a force majeure, happening *to* people, Shir here uses verbs of choice and action but attaches to these verbs an acknowledgment of circumstances not under one’s control. This glitch affirms Sauder’s (2020) argument that the notion of luck challenges the common aspirational belief that “the distribution of rewards” depends solely on “individual efforts and achievement” (ibid 2020:193, 209).

The force majeure also appeared with regard to divine power. Nadav, an 18-year-old from a low SES small town in northern Israel, gave a future description that strongly affirmed the theme of accountability. Nadav aspires to be the prime minister of Israel. He has a carefully crafted, detailed plan for reaching that goal. First, he will join the military, as part of his mandatory service. He plans to stay in the military as an officer until about the age of 40 and obtain a BA in political science and history, conceivably with financial support from the IDF. After retiring from the army, Nadav intends to establish a political party, join the Israeli parliament, and serve as minister of finance or education, as milestones to his future “dream job.” Nadav believes his personal actions in the present influence his life trajectories, yet he used the Jewish religious term “God willing” when he addressed the possibility of his actions resulting in his election as Israel’s future head of state. The force of God in helping one to achieve success presents a detour from the belief in one’s ability to singlehandedly design the future. Nadav was the youth participant who, more than others, adopted the formal logic of the aspirational discourse. Nonetheless, he was one of only two participants wearing a yarmulke, which he justified during the focus group conversation as a “just in case” tactic, in the event that his own willpower will need external help.

While referring to God as a force majeure was rare in our sample and should be further investigated with religious youth, COVID-19 appeared as a major force majeure that introduced uncertainty and doubt regarding the future. For example, in a focus group of three girls from various SES backgrounds, graduates of the same high school in central Israel addressed the importance of their actions to their anticipated futures. However, they then expressed glitches in the aspirational discourse which they linked to the effect of the pandemic on their perception of the future:

- Nitzan: It's like, it's really hard to really plan the future. You can say, you can think, but...
- Danielle: No, you can't [plan] for real.
- Nitzan: No, you can't know what will happen because things keep changing.
- Yahli: I think that since the coronavirus [pandemic], the entire life perspective changed. For me at least.
- Danielle: You can plan lots of things but in the end...
- Yahli: Everything about the future... does not come with guarantees.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected every aspect of young people's individual and social lives, as well as their school education (Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021). It introduced the notion of uncertainty and the idea that "things keep changing." At the beginning of the above conversation, it seems that such uncertainty may lead to the disintegration of the aspirational discourse as Danielle stated, "You cannot plan for real." Yet, as the conversation continued, the girls found a way to keep the aspirational discourse by introducing a glitch. You should plan ahead, yet such planning "does not come with guarantees." Like luck, or God, the uncertainty introduced by unexpected events such as the pandemic, reduces one's complete responsibility over the future.

The potential for a greater force interfering in their futures was also apparent when youth participants referred to military service. In the Israeli context, mandatory military service is a major milestone in achieving employability. The motivation to serve in the military has been called a "selfish desire to gain benefits" in the job market (Agbaria and Shmueli 2019:91). Israeli youth thus tend to tie their aspirations for the future to their military service. Yet, despite their talk about how they would use their time in the army in self-serving ways, many young people felt that they had little control over their impending future in the military service. In this sense, they treated the military as a force majeure, and referred to it as a single, unitary entity: "The army decides," "the army does," or "the army thinks." The military, then, was more than an organization; it was a kind of mystical force that controlled their future. Erez, for example, an 18-year-old from a middle-upper SES small town in northern Israel, sees himself as a young entrepreneur. He was the head of a young leadership organization and took part in a prestigious national young leadership program. Erez is highly ambitious and talks about the importance of "taking action" and the ability to choose one's future path. While Erez endorses the notions of agency and choice, he kept referring to the military as a "he" who has a

greater force on his future path creating “uncertainty”. “I mean, like, I know who I am,” he said, “I know what I’ve done in life, I know what I can accomplish [...] I very much feel my ability to choose [my future], and I suddenly realized that the main thing in which I do not feel the ability to choose is the military.” This feeling of lack of choice and uncertainty led Erez to hold two narratives simultaneously. The first stresses his abilities, choices, and actions. The second stresses the uncertainty that results from the army as force majeure.

We met our youth participants at the crossroads between public school under the pandemic restrictions of autonomy, and their military service, which they knew would also significantly limit their autonomy. Therefore, while all the youth participants used the aspirational discourse, stressing personal responsibility for future outcomes, they nonetheless glitched from this ideal when relating to their own life experiences in the present and future. This lack of control over the future was variously attributed to luck, God, COVID-19, and mandatory military service, creating detours in the perception of individual accountability in Israeli youth’s future aspirations. These experiences of risk and uncertainty may lead to a complete withdrawal from the aspirational discourse, as the future becomes blurred and unpredictable. However, we suggest that our participants used this glitch of yielding to force majeure to help preserve the aspirational discourse even when facing uncertainty.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this article, we drew on and extended the interpretive approach to aspirations examining the everyday unexpected negotiations between an “enterprise” self and its compromises, as individuals actively assess their life circumstances in their future trajectories. We introduced the concept of glitches as lexical detours in the discourse which are created when social actors encounter mismatches between a prominent cultural discourse and its practice in everyday life. In this sense, a glitch is not as coherent and organized as an ideology, or a discourse in its own right, but rather a messy and momentary “contamination” (e.g., Wagner-Pacifi *2000*) of the discourse that fills in gaps and sustains it.

We suggest that each of the glitches we introduced serves a different role in the construction of individuals’ life narratives (Fig. 1). The first glitch, “lowering the aspirational sky,” includes an amendment to the aspirational discourse that influences life trajectories and action. Such influence can eventually lead to a more substantial change in the discourse. Our informants were clearly aware of the impact of social factors (i.e., social class, geography, gender, ethnicity, etc.) on achievement, an impact denied by the formal aspirational discourse. This awareness has the potential to expose the partiality of the discourse and lead to discourse hybridization or deinstitutionalization. Yet, in our data, side-by-side flashes of critique, educators and youth sustained the equation hard work equals success by lowering the aspirational sky to match unequal starting points. The overall affirmation of the discourse, and the introduction of the amendment as insignificant (as expressed in the words “so what?”) illustrates how social agents’ awareness of social injustice can co-exist with an acceptance of it.

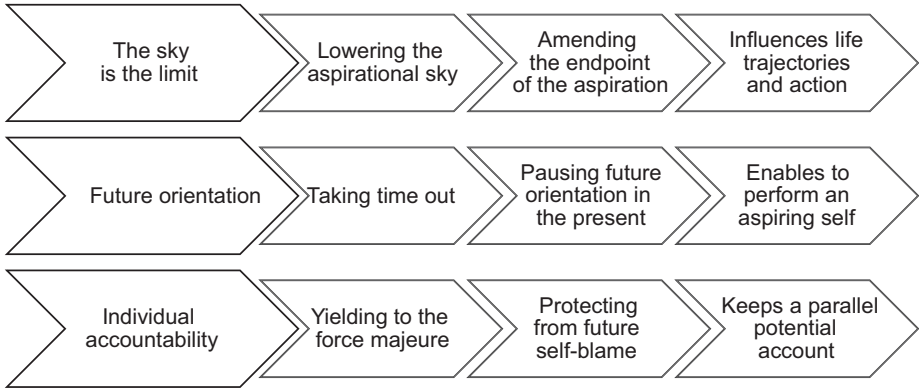


Fig. 1. Glitches in the aspirational discourse—roles and potential action.

The second glitch “taking time out” does not amend the main discourse but instead introduces a temporary pause from employing it in real life. It serves as a legitimating mechanism for the fact that one is not implementing future orientation at the present. Family problems that require attendance, or a desire to acquire an experience or contribute to society, produce periods in life that do not align with the demand of the aspirational discourse to be future-oriented. In these periods, the glitch of taking time out enables youth to perform an aspiring self, even though the aspiration is currently on pause. This glitch strengthens Frye’s (2012) observation that the aspirational discourse is not just about outcomes—it signals an ideal self that must be performed.

The third glitch, the force majeure, serves as a parallel potential narrative that allows social actors to preserve the aspirational discourse while also protecting themselves from future self-blame if things accidentally do not work out as planned. By applying the force majeure glitch, participants keep a safety net over their futures, a safety net that does not save them from failed outcomes but does cover the problem of potential shame. This glitch affirms Sauder’s (2020:9, 10) suggestion that hard work and luck are not necessarily perceived as mutually exclusive as can be seen from the phrase one of our participants used—“do it through luck.” The glitch of force majeure is used by people to “soften the sharpest edges of the meritocratic frame” (ibid) by reducing some of the burdens of personal accountability.

Utilizing the metaphor of the city of De Certeau (1984), we can think of a discourse as a “city plan” in which people usually use the main roads but occasionally encounter an experiential mismatch that leads them to an articulated detour, that is, a glitch, with the aim to eventually return back to the highway. The first glitch of lowering the aspirational sky helps social actors to keep driving on the highway of the “the sky is the limit” theme with some compromise regarding the location of that sky. The second glitch of taking time out serves as a temporal break on the side of the road, with the aim to return to work on the future once the time out ends. The third glitch of yielding to the force majeure keeps social actors driving on the highway of personal accountability, while keeping the possibility of an accident as a potential outcome that is not in their hands.

The glitching processes described in this study go beyond structuralist notions of subjectification as well as pragmatic notions of code-switching. The social actors we encountered are not “docile” and their experiences are not derivative of the aspirational discourse. In fact, they are aware of the limitations of the discourse and its mismatches with lived experience. Yet at the same time, they do not playfully switch to a different discourse or develop a competing ideology. We suggest that this is due to the power of institutions, as forsaking or transforming the aspirational discourse can be costly and painful. This is because “institutional logics are more than strategies or logics of action as they are sources of legitimacy and provide a sense of order and ontological security” (Thornton and Ocasio 2008:108). Social actors are thus pushed to keep the discourse alive and active, even when confronted with an experiential mismatch.

When people glitch, they do not disintegrate the structure but instead, after a momentary detour, return to the same institutionalized path with minor modifications if at all. In Swidler’s (1986) words, a glitch helps people go through “unsettled” moments, without threatening existing cultural logics and without shifting to new ones. Since, as Swidler argued, the experience of unsettled times can be a catalyst of social change, the unintended consequences of glitches may be the maintenance of mythical discourses despite their discrepancies with lived reality. Thus, the use of glitches can eventually lead to the reproduction of macro-social processes such as inequality.

We do not know if and how the glitches introduced changed the actual paths taken by our informants. Will Yaniv’s decision to first aspire to practical engineering block his way to becoming an engineer? Will youth actually return from their time-out or maybe the time out ends in their decision to abandon their aspirations? Such questions require longitude research that follows youth for longer periods tracking continual intersections between life experiences and the articulation of aspirations.

To conclude, through glitching from the aspirational discourse, educators and youth make sense of moments of mismatches and inconsistencies. They use glitches at moments when well-known clichés such as “the sky is the limit” are exposed as ungrounded. Yet, the same glitches that are used in moments when the limitations of the aspirational discourse are exposed may end up reproducing its centrality and the logics that echo within it.

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