

Educational Expectations and College Attendance among Ethnic Minorities

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Mickelson (1990) notes that there is an “attitude-achievement paradox among Black adolescents.” The paradox results from the high value placed upon education by Black families, but the low educational levels achieved by Black students. Research has shown that Blacks are likely to get lower grades (Portes and Wilson, 1976; Ogbu, 1978), are more likely to drop out of high school (Kao & Thompson, 2003; Gottfredson, 1981; Kerckhoff and Campbell, 1977), and obtain less years of education (Ogbu, 1978; Mickelson, 1990) than non-Hispanic Whites. Yet, studies show that both Black parents (Ogbu, 1978; Alexander, 1994) and students (Kao & Thompson, 2003) place a very high value on educational achievement.

This paradox is primarily viewed in pathological terms. Black parents and students are labeled as having unrealistic expectations (Trusty, 2002; Hanson, 1994) and Black students are labeled as underachievers (Mickelson, 1990). However, studies have not examined whether having high expectations helps some Black adolescents to achieve greater levels of education than they would attain without such expectations. For example, are Black students with high expectations able to overcome deficits such as low income and low high school GPAs to attend college? If so, then the high expectations of Blacks can be viewed as beneficial for raising the attainments of those least likely to succeed. By better understanding the role that expectations play for the most disadvantaged Black and minority students we make policy recommendations for school counselors, social workers, others who work with minority families.

This study will examine the role that educational expectations play on college achievement of ethnic minority students, paying particular attention to students in poverty

and with low high school GPAs. Research has shown that education is highly valued by Asians, Hispanics and Blacks as a method of overcoming discrimination and achieving economic success (Ogbu, 1978). Thus, minority parents have been found to hold high expectations for their children's educational attainments, even when the parents cannot pay for college and the children do not have high GPAs. (Medley, 1976). However, contrary to previous research which sees this as pathological or paradoxical, we hypothesize the following: (1) Minority students with low high school GPAs but high educational expectations are more likely than non-Hispanic White students with those characteristics to attend college; (2) minority students with low incomes but high educational expectations are more likely than non-Hispanic White students with those characteristics to attend college. Thus, we are hypothesizing that for minority students with the low incomes and GPAs that having high educational expectations motivates them to seek ways to attend college despite their disadvantaged situation.

Methodology and Sample

We use the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health) which consists of a nationally representative sample of 12,105 students from grades 7 - 12. Adolescents were interviewed at home in 1994-1995 (Wave 1) and 75.6% were reinterviewed in 2002 (Wave 3) when they were 18-26 years old. Those not reinterviewed consist of adolescents who had died, moved out of the country, could not be located, or refused to be interviewed (Chantala et al., 2004). In most cases one parent of each student was also interviewed at Wave 1. Because schools were the original sampling unit, respondents are clustered within schools, thus statistical procedures designed for clustered samples are used. We use the `surveyfreq`, `surveymeans`, and

surveylogistic procedures in SAS which correct the sampling errors for the clustered design. We removed students who were 18 in Wave 3 from our sample as most would be unlikely to have completed any college.

Our dependent variable is whether or not the respondent has completed at least one year of college by Wave 3. Since our sample was old enough to have started college, but many would not have had an opportunity to complete college, we focus on whether or not the respondent has *ever attended some college*. All independent variables were measured in Wave 1 which was seven years prior to Wave 3. Our key independent variable is the *educational expectations* of the student. Respondents were asked how likely it was that they would attend college, which was scored from 1 to 5, with 5 indicating higher expectations. Another focal variable is the income of the respondent. Because actual income has a large number of missing cases, we use the variable *pay bills*, which was asked of the parent. This variable is coded as a dummy with 1 = the family has enough money to pay bills, and 0 = does not have enough. Since we are primarily interested in the effect of high educational expectations on those with the lowest incomes, this dichotomy is a satisfactory way of determining families with financial difficulties. We also used an education dummy for *parent's education*, coded 1 if either parent attended some college, and 0 otherwise. *Race/ethnicity* is coded using the respondent's selection of Black, Hispanic, Asian, non-Hispanic White or other as their best racial category (Respondents who refused to select a best racial category were coded as other). *Family structure* was coded as a series of dummies with two biological parents as the reference categories. The dummies were stepparent, single mom, single dad, and other families. The sex of the respondent was coded with 0=female, 1 = male. High school

GPA was averaged from the respondent's self-reports of grades achieved in the last semester in math, English, science and social studies. Students must have had letter grades in at least two of the subjects to be included in the analysis. Table 1 gives the descriptive statistics of our sample, by racial group.

Results

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics by Race

	Non-Hispanic Whites	Blacks	Hispanics	Asians	Others
Respondent Attended College (1=yes)	.56	.40	.39	.70	.53
HS GPA	2.89	2.58	2.62	3.14	2.7
Educational Expectations	4.17	4.07	3.83	4.40	4.18
Family Structure					
% Two bio/adoptive parents	63.43	30.61	57.29	74.26	55.17
% Stepparent families	10.6	7.28	10.1	5.95	9.27
%Single Mom	19.22	48.41	24.39	12.04	23.99
%Single Dad	3.66	3.03	3.19	3.42	5.21
% Other	3.08	10.67	5.03	4.31	3.36
Sex (1=male)	0.5	0.49	0.52	0.55	0.6
Pay Bills (1=yes)	0.87	0.69	0.73	0.84	0.75
Parent attended college (1=yes)	0.57	0.39	0.33	0.68	0.55

As expected, Black and Hispanic students came from the most disadvantaged families in terms of resources. They were most likely to come from families in which neither parent had attended college and in which the parents were having trouble paying their bills. Black students were more likely to come from a single mother family than any other type, while every other group was most likely to be in an intact family. Blacks and Hispanics had the lowest GPAs. Blacks had approximately the same expectations to attend college as non-Hispanic Whites, while Hispanics were only slightly less likely to expect to attend. Asian students had the highest GPAs and were most likely to expect to

attend college. In terms of college attendance, 70% of Asians have attended, followed by 56% of non-Hispanic Whites. By contrast, only 39% of Hispanics and 40% of Blacks have attended college.

Our hypotheses involved three-way interactions. Hypothesis one stated that minority students with low high school GPAs, but high expectations would be more likely to attend college than non-Hispanic White students. Thus, we were hypothesizing a three-way interaction between expectation, race, and high school GPA on college attendance. We found that there was a significant three-way interaction and that race also had significant two-way interactions with expectations and GPA. Figure one shows the plots of predicted college attendance for students with high educational expectations by GPA, separately by race. All other variables have been controlled at their means.

Consistent with our hypothesis Blacks and Hispanics with GPAs at 2.0 and below are more likely to attend college than non-Hispanic Whites. Asians with low GPAs and high expectations were the less likely to attend college than non-Hispanic Whites; however, there were few Asian students with GPAs of 2.0 and below. As Figure 1 shows, as GPA increases the lines indicating the probabilities of college attendance for the racial/ethnic groups cross. For students with high expectations of attending college, with GPAs of 3.0 and above, Asians, followed by non-Hispanic Whites, are most likely to attend and Blacks and Hispanics least likely to attend.

Hypothesis 2 was that minority students with low high school GPAs that came from families with financial problems (inability to pay bills), but who had high expectations, would be more likely to attend college than non-Hispanic White students in that situation. Although the trends were in the direction of the hypothesis, the three-way

interaction of race, GPA, and pay bills was not significant. However, pay bills was significantly related to college attendance of children. Students whose families could pay their bills were 40% more likely to go to college than students whose families could not pay bills, controlling for the other variables and the interaction terms in the model.

Parental education was an even more powerful predictor of student's college attendance than ability to pay bills. Students whose parents had attended college were 165% more likely to attend college than students whose parents had not attended, controlling for the other variables. Family structure was also an important determinant of the probability that students would attend college. Students from single mother, single father, step, and other families were 40, 38, 55, and 64 percent, respectively, less likely to go to college than students from intact families, controlling for parental education, ability to pay bills, race, and all other variables and interactions in the equation. Thus, not coming from an intact family was a huge disadvantage for college attendance even controlling for parental education and ability to pay bills.

Discussion

Blacks, followed by Hispanics were least likely to come from intact two-parent households, and to come from families who could pay their bills. Both of these variables were found to be important predictors of college attendance. Similarly, Hispanics followed by Blacks, were least likely to come from families in which at least one parent had attended college, which is another important predictor of students' college attendance. Thus Blacks and Hispanics were least likely to have the human and financial capital associated with attending college.

By the time that the student has reached high school age, parental income, education and marital status are probably fairly stable. Thus, a Black single mom, who does not have a college education and has trouble paying her bills will be unlikely to be able to change these statuses to help increase her child's chances of attending college. However, if she instills in her child that going to college is important and expected, she may help her child to overcome obstacles, including a low GPA, in order to attend college.

Thus, while the literature has called the high educational expectations for college, but low college attendance paradoxical and unrealistic, we find that high expectations have a positive effect on those minorities who are least likely to attend college, those who have done poorly in high school. Thus, family therapists and school counselors should refrain from discouraging these Black and Hispanic students with low high school GPAs from planning to attend college. Similarly, they should not discourage their parents from instilling in their children an expectation that they will attend college, no matter what their high school situation is. This research has shown that the expectation that they will attend college has helped Black and Hispanic students who were not successful in high school to overcome their deficits and attend college.

Future Research

Many of these Black and Hispanic students with low high school GPAs probably start their college experience at the community college level, since community colleges typically have less strict admissions policies. We plan to track these students with low high school GPAs, but high expectations through their college years to see if students are able to overcome their weak performance in high school and to be successful in college.

We will examine whether their high expectations continue to be a factor in helping them to remain in college and complete their degrees.

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Figure 1. Probability of College Attendance for Students with High Expectations by Race and GPA

