

ENCOURAGEMENT FOR EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS: THE ROLE OF  
PARENTS, PEERS AND COUNSELORS WHEN EXPLAINING GROUP  
DIFFERENCES

By

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NOTE: Preliminary Draft and Results

Introduction

Upward social mobility is greatly enhanced with the completion of higher education (Duncan and Duncan 1968). Yet, considerable differences persist in the educational attainment of young adults from different family structures, economic backgrounds and racial and ethnic groups. One possible explanation for the continuation of these differences rests not only in the economic resources from the family of origin but also in the preparation for higher education provided to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Not all adolescents' desire or hope for high educational attainment. Yet, these educational aspirations are one of the most important factors contributing to an adolescent's educational achievement and play an important role in explaining group differences in socioeconomic attainment (Stanton-Salazer and Dornbusch, 1995). This study takes advantage of nationally representative, longitudinal data to explore various dimensions of parental involvement and encouragement as well as peer or counselor encouragement that

may influence educational aspirations and in turn influence subsequent educational attainment.

High levels of parental encouragement, mostly referred to parental involvement, measured by knowledge of the child's activities in school and frequent contact with the school, have positive effects on children's academic achievement (Kao, 1995). Furthermore, Sui-Chu and Willims (1996) argue that parental encouragement should also emphasize parents' actions at home, such as the communications with children and supervision at home. Stringent parental monitoring strategies include parents' efforts to closely supervise how and when their adolescents spend their time or who their friends are. It is an attempt on the part of parents to minimize risks and exposure their teenagers might face in neighborhood, school, and other settings (Spencer, Dupree and Swanson, 1996).

Cheng and Starks (2002) argued that parental encouragement varies by racial groups. In general, there exist three competing approaches. First, parents may exert greater influence on minority students' educational aspirations because of the greater social capital support available or because of students' higher reliance on significant others with high aspirations (Kao, 1995). However, Kao (1995) also argued in her study that, compared with Whites, Asian American parents are less likely to be involved in children's schoolwork but students still have higher attainment. Nevertheless, for African American students, Smith-Maddox (1999) argued that the educational aspirations of students from low-income families were positively related to the regular communication with parents. That is to say, "strong ties" (the relationship of parent-child), particularly in lower-income families, are

critical to the formation of the educational aspirations of high school African American students.

*Data and Methods:*

This study uses longitudinal data to explore the impact of parental encouragement in 1988 on students' educational aspirations in 1992. It distinguishes parental encouragement into three types, including parental involvement, communication and family supervision. Understanding how parents' views and behaviors can shape adolescents' views may provide insight into ways to reduce disparities in educational attainment. Of course, adolescents may receive encouragement to pursue higher education from others (i.e. teachers, peers, etc.). While parental influences are among the most important and consistent influences in a child's life, the extent to which children from different groups are encouraged to pursue goals for higher education by significant others is intriguing. If some adolescents receive less encouragement for pursuing higher education at home, can others serve as proxies and fill in this important cheerleading role? This paper takes advantage of information on others besides parents when examining the role of encouragement on subsequent educational aspirations.

This study makes full use of the longitudinal nature of National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 dataset by using base year's family structure, socioeconomic characteristics, parental encouragement, aspirations and GPA as well as 1990 aspirations to study the effects on students' educational plans in 1992. The following measures are included as predictors of these aspirations in 1992:

1). Family background characteristics incorporated in the models include gender of students, parents' educational attainment, and family income.

2.) Family structure is represented using four dummy variables with two biological parent families as the reference group, i.e., living with one parent and one partner, single-mother, single-father, and non-parental households. Number of Siblings is a continuous variable that ranges from 0 to 6 or more.

3). The key measures for this study are those representing parental encouragement. Parental encouragement includes three measures: parental involvement (whether parents often attended a school meeting, spoke to teacher/counselor, visited respondents' classes, and attended a school event), communication (whether students discuss programs at school, school activities and things studied in class with parents) and supervision (whether parents often check on respondent's homework, require chores done, limit time watching TV and limit going out with friends).

4). Educational aspirations of students and parents in 1988, 1990 and 1992 are coded into 5 categories, less than high school, high school graduation, some college, college graduation, and higher than college.

5) Others, including counselors and peers may express their wishes to the adolescent. Thus, I include measures of the respondents' reports of the aspirations expressed by these significant others. These answers are recoded into dummy variables, suggesting whether they hope that the respondent goes to college or not.

6). To control for the respondent's previous performance in school, respondents' GPA in 1988 and 1990 is also included.

*Preliminary Results:*

The regression analyses confirm that economic resources and parental education play significant roles in explaining differential educational aspirations. Racial and ethnic differences are largely explained by these factors but not all groups are influenced in a similar manner. Youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to have lower aspirations. The results from the multiple regression analysis demonstrate that, the lower educational aspirations of Blacks and Hispanics compared to whites are, in large part due to their lower family socioeconomic status. However, differences in SES do not explain Asian's higher aspirations when compared to whites suggesting other factors may be at work. For Asians and Hispanics, parents' education alone has a larger effect than family income, but for Blacks, parents' education and family income have similar explanatory power when predicting educational aspirations.

Family structure, like race/ethnicity is not as powerful a predictor of aspirations once family income and parental education are controlled. With these factors controlled, students living with single-mother family have significant higher aspirations and those living with one-parent-and-one-partner family have significant lower aspirations.

The next step in the analysis is to determine the extent to which parental encouragement, involvement and communication with children influences subsequent educational aspirations. Parental encouragement is significantly

related to children's educational goals. Parental involvement and family communication help motivate children's higher aspirations. As a result, students whose parents have more knowledge of children's school life and attend more school activities have higher educational aspirations. However, strict family discipline does have no help to promote the higher educational aspirations. Family discipline may be associated with poorer parent-child communication, etc. The causal arrow may also be reversed such that those who have strict limitations on their TV watching or time play with friends are problematic students themselves.

Moreover, when interactions are added to the model, the impacts of parental involvement on educational aspirations are found to differ across groups. For example, the influence of involvement is lower but still significant for Asians when compared to whites. The result is consistent with Kao's (1995) finding that Asian parents are less involved in school activities. Family discussions have less impact on educational aspirations for Hispanics. There is not much research showing that Hispanic parents are less likely to communicate studies with their children to motivate their higher aspirations. Asians and Blacks have similarly significant impacts of family communications compared to Whites. On the contrary, home supervision does not help to develop the higher aspirations for any of the racial groups.

The study also addresses the cumulative impact of family background and parental encouragement controlling for previous aspirations and school performance. The result shows that for Asians, each of prior parents' educational

aspirations, individual aspirations and GPA can partly explain Asian's higher aspirations. For Blacks, the important effect is prior individual aspirations but prior GPA almost has little influence. Hispanics' prior higher parental aspirations could explain one-third of the individual aspirations in 1992. At the same time, 1988's individual aspirations have high correlation with the family discussions. The students who tend to have higher prior aspirations are more likely to communicate with their parents about their study.

Counselors' and peers' aspirations are also positively associated with students' own educational plans. From descriptive statistics, respondents believed that counselors were more likely to want them to go to college than their peers. But among these significant others, the effects of parental aspirations are the largest, peers second, and counselors the smallest. There is no significant difference in the effect of peer aspiration across different racial groups, while the effect of counselors' aspiration is significantly lower among blacks.

The results also reveal that Asian's aspirations are higher than youth from all other groups even in the presence of controls for family structure and SES. However, Black's and Hispanic's aspirations vary over time; aspirations in 1988 have no obvious influence while 90's aspirations have much more effects on 92's aspirations.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the further understanding of effects of three kinds of parental encouragement on students' aspirations. It specifies the different influences of parental involvement, family communications and family disciplines across racial groups. It also explores the reasons why lower educational

aspirations of single-mother families and one-parent-and-one-partner families. At the same time, this paper separates the 88's and 90's factor groups to further explore the unique influence of each factor on the educational aspirations in 1992.



Table: Unstandardized Coefficients of 6 models

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
<b>Gender</b>						
Sex	-0.11***	-0.14***	-0.14***	-0.12***	-0.05**	-0.02
<b>Race</b>						
Asian/Pacific Island	0.33***	0.25***	0.25***	0.28***	0.16***	0.10**
Black	0.05	0.26***	0.26***	0.26***	0.19***	0.13***
Hispanic	-0.11***	0.15***	0.17***	0.17***	0.14***	0.10***
<b>Family background</b>						
Yearly Family Income		0.15***	0.16***	0.15***	0.10***	0.07***
Parents' Education		0.24***	0.23***	0.21***	0.11***	0.07***
<b>Family Structure</b>						
Living with one parent and one partner			-0.09***	-0.08***	-0.05*	-0.03
Living with single mother			0.12***	0.13***	0.13***	0.10***
Living with single father			-0.04	-0.03	0.06	0.07
Living with others			-0.06	-0.02	0.00	0.04
Sibling Size			-0.03***	-0.02**	-0.01	0.00
<b>Parental Encouragement</b>						
Parents' Involvement				0.07***	0.03***	0.02**
Family Discussion				0.15***	0.05***	0.03*
Family Discipline				0.01	0.01	0.00
<b>1988 Aspirations and GPA</b>						
1988 Parents' Aspirations					0.09***	0.06***
1988 Children's Aspirations					0.25***	0.12***
1988 GPA					0.28***	0.11***
<b>1990 Aspirations and GPA</b>						
1990 Children's Aspirations						0.33***
1990 GPA						0.14***
1990 Peer's Aspiration						0.06***
1990 Counselor's Aspirations						0.03*
<b>R Square</b>	0.01	0.15	0.15	0.17	0.32	0.42

Source: NELS: 1988 base year, first follow-up and second follow-up surveys (n=11,112).

Note: \* P<. 05, \*\* P<. 01, \*\*\*P<. 001

The sample includes those who participated all of base year, first follow-up and second follow-up surveys. It does not include Native Americans.