



DIVERSITY

On the Edge of Commitment: Educational Attainment and Race in the United States.
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Cornell sociologist Stephen L. Morgan explores a fundamental question that has puzzled sociologists of education for more than three decades: How and why do students decide to enroll in postsecondary education? Morgan's first book is a tour-de-force that purports to explain why previous sociological models attempting to answer this question have fallen short. He asserts, and rightly so, that established explanatory models on educational attainment cannot account for "whether or not students' beliefs about their future prospects are responsive to changes in incentives" (p. 4). Nor do other models factor in the long-term impact of changes in beliefs on both commitment to enrolling in higher education and the end level of educational attainment.

Morgan begins by summarizing the literature on educational attainment, noting that the Black-White postsecondary educational attainment gap has remained the same whereas the college enrollment gap has narrowed since the early 1980s. Although sociologists of education have identified a number of variables that serve as predictors of educational attainment, including income, neighborhood, school district characteristics, and family stability, these variables cannot explain how or why students and their families make certain decisions about higher education (p. 13).

What Morgan does in response is to produce a model that combines the work of economists on rational choice (or cost-benefits analysis at the individual decision level) and a modification of the Wisconsin model of status attainment. The latter has its origins in the Wisconsin Longitudinal Survey of the 1950s and 1960s, a form of status socialization theory. Drawing on a random sample of high school seniors throughout Wisconsin in 1957, and

conducting follow-up surveys in 1964, the scientists tracked students to observe whether they followed their original educational aspirations (p. 36-37). Their findings were that the influence of “significant others” (i.e., parents, teachers, and peers) could help raise the educational expectations—and therefore aspirations—of a student considering higher education.

Morgan uses the end of his second and all of his third chapters to make the case for student beliefs as a form of rational choice. Morgan argues that social scientists should assume that “students’ beliefs about their own future behavior should [not] be ignored” because these beliefs, roughly translated as expectations, have an effect on educational attainment (p. 51).

He then explores the relationship between educational expectations and attainment for African American and White students, finding that both groups have similarly high expectations for attainment, but that an attainment gap for Black students endures. Morgan tests a variety of hypotheses, concluding that some students have expectations that are “persistent and salient enough” to “become self-fulfilling prophecies” (p. 83). Students may be making rational choices, but these choices are based on incomplete knowledge, erroneous beliefs, and overreaching expectations. Morgan’s analysis presents a problem, in that he allows for misplaced beliefs leading to flawed educational expectations on the one hand and rational choices on the road to educational attainment on the other.

Morgan attempts to correct this flaw by introducing the concept of commitment in his fourth chapter as part of his stochastic decision tree model for college entry. Commitment for Morgan comes in two forms: prefigurative commitment (i.e., the formation of a vision for future activities and aspirations) and preparatory commitment (i.e., engagement in present activities in preparation for future ones, reinforcing the prefigurative commitment) (p. 100, 102-103). Morgan asserts that those students who are “not well informed” about their “college entry decision . . . will exhibit less effort in the short run and attain lower levels of the returns expected from a college education in the long run” (p. 101).

Morgan then combines this model with psychologist Claude Steele’s *disidentification* explanation regarding academic success, in which African American students may detach their perceptions of their self-worth and ability from their motivation to achieve (p. 184–187; Steele 1992, 1997). In short, a Black student whose academic performance may not warrant the prerequisite belief and educational expectation of college entry and attainment may nevertheless have high esteem and expectations for higher education completion. Because an African American student may avoid confirming stereotypes of intellectual inferiority—commonly known as “stereotype threat”—by devaluing their academic performance, the motivation to commit by preparing rigorously for college is lower, as is their ability to attain a postsecondary degree.

Although this explanation is a plausible way to balance the error in Morgan's rational choice argument, this explanation has flaws of its own. One is that the disidentification hypothesis, a psychological coping mechanism, is itself both rational and emotional. A rational choice model for postsecondary education is limited at best no matter how optimistic one's view is of disidentification. Another is that there is no accounting for students regardless of race to explore whether this disidentification hypothesis is one that occurs for all students who fail to attain a postsecondary credential or if this is a response unique to Black students. One could easily argue that academic delusions of grandeur based on achievements outside of the classroom are hardly unique to African American students.

Next is the question of what occurs in the cases of African American students who choose a predominantly White institution over a historically Black college or university or choose a two-year institution before transferring to a four-year college. Does the disidentification hypothesis hold regardless of the college or university African American students attend?

Ultimately, the question is whether Morgan's analysis of educational attainment places too much faith in the idea of rational choice to begin with, especially in accounting for the Black-White college education attainment gap. This is not to say that Morgan has not developed a theoretical model that has significant explanatory power beyond the general issues of race, class, and academic preparation for college. His is a model worthy of discussion, revision, and further exploration.

Social scientists interested in educational attainment, however, must keep in mind the potential policy implications of Morgan's work. One is that policy makers could easily conclude that Pell Grants are a waste of money because the majority of poor students and students of color are underprepared for higher education and their decisions to pursue it are ill conceived based on incomplete information and an inadequate analysis of their own academic production.

The other, more insidious implication from *On the Edge of Commitment* is that consumers of education are fundamentally responsible for the quality of their decisions and preparations for postsecondary education. Parents, teachers, counselors—all "significant others" according to Morgan—administrators, and policy makers have little responsibility in Morgan's model for the choices that their children and students make. In the end, let us remember that most students are between 16 and 19 years of age when they make the all-important decision to attend college. Social scientists might want to understand how and why students make their college entry decisions. But treating these choices as independent of variables beyond a student's control is a disservice to them and brings us no closer to understanding attainment gaps based on race or other social constructs than with any other model.

References

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DONALD EARL COLLINS is a freelance writer who has written on the topic of multiculturalism and African American identity for more than a decade. He has published articles in *Black Issues in Higher Education*, *Gannett Suburban Newspapers*, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *History of Education Quarterly*, *The Washington Post*, *Radical Society*, and *Academe*. His book *Fear of a “Black” America* (2004) focuses on multiculturalism, fear, and the African American experience. Outside of his work as a writer, Donald Collins possesses a combination of academic and nonprofit management experience. He is the Deputy Director of Partnerships for College Access and Success with the Center for School and Community Services at Academy for Educational Development in Washington, DC. He had previously served as Assistant Director of the New Voices Fellowship Program at AED, a program for emerging leaders in the social justice field. Dr. Collins has also taught as an adjunct professor in African American History and American Education Reform at Carnegie Mellon University and Duquesne University, and is an adjunct at George Washington University. Dr. Collins has a Ph.D. in History from Carnegie Mellon University.