



Do mothers' educational expectations differ by race and ethnicity, or socioeconomic status?

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ABSTRACT

Research has linked parents' educational expectations to children's educational attainment, but findings are inconsistent regarding differences in educational expectations by race and ethnicity. In addition, existing studies have focused on school-age children and their parents. In this study, we use a state representative sample to examine educational expectations among mothers of newborn children. Bivariate association tests for individual racial groups and logistic regressions for the full sample are conducted (weighted $N = 2567$). These investigate variation in mothers' educational expectations by race and ethnicity and socioeconomic status. The study finds that non-Hispanic Whites hold higher educational expectations for their children than do African Americans, American Indians, and Hispanics. However, these differences by race and ethnicity disappear when the models control for demographic and socioeconomic measures. Among the economic measures, financial assets and health insurance coverage are significantly associated with maternal educational expectations. Implications for research and policy are discussed.

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1. Introduction³

Education is a significant channel to socioeconomic success. Postsecondary college education, in particular, is generally believed to promote upward mobility in society. Disparities in educational attainment persist across socioeconomic groups, however, and racial/ethnic gaps in educational outcomes have been consistently reported. According to recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau (Crissey, 2011), non-Hispanic Whites have higher educational attainment than do African Americans and Hispanics.

Nativity may also influence educational outcomes. On average, the share of U.S.-born adults who report having at least a high school diploma is larger than the share of foreign-born adults who report this; across all groups by race/ethnicity and nativity status, foreign-born Hispanics show the lowest educational attainment level (Crissey, 2011).

Similar to educational attainment, the educational expectations of parents and children vary by socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity. Over the past couple decades, educational expectations for college have increased and the differences across socioeconomic groups appear to have diminished (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Yet, secure jobs and earnings in the new economy require higher education and training (Schiller, 2003). Thus, growing proportions of parents and children adapt to these requirements, aspiring to obtain a college education (Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, & Moeller, 2008). Recent statistics from the U.S. Department of Education (DeVoe

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³ In this paper, CDAs indicates Child Development Accounts, and NCHS does National Center for Health Statistics.

& Darling-Churchill, 2008) report that Hispanic and American Indian high school students have the lowest level of expectations, or have uncertain expectations about attaining a college degree. Another source of data (Child Trends, 2010) identifies differences across racial and ethnic groups; the expectation that their child will earn at least a bachelor's degree is higher among non-Hispanic White parents (72.2%) than among African American (62.4%) and Hispanic parents (66.55%). The same source suggests that differences in parental expectations are large between parents with the lowest household income (\$25,000 or less) and those with the highest income (more than \$75,000); 49.9% of those in the lowest income group expect their child to attend college, but 86.5% expect this in the highest-income group. It may be possible that differences in educational expectations by race and ethnicity are transmitted from parents to children via socioeconomic status and, through this mechanism, remain persistent over time.

Although a variety of factors account for educational attainment, there is considerable agreement among scholars that parents exercise substantial influence over children's development and education. Parents' monetary resources and time investment play critical roles in supporting and planning for their children's education (Leibowitz, 1974; Oliver & Shapiro, 1996). In addition to their economic investments, parents contribute to a child's educational attainment via involvement in a wide range of activities, through the frequency and quality of interactions between parent and children, and by socializing children to particular career and educational paths (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Kan & Tsai, 2005; Mayer, 1997; Orr, 2003; Totsika & Sylva, 2004).

Parents' educational expectations stand out among these influences because they appear to have a significant impact on children's educational expectations and achievement. A large body of research demonstrates the positive connections among parents' educational expectations, children's educational expectations, educational achievement, and educational attainment. However, few studies have investigated how parental expectations are formed and developed. Raising parental expectations concerning their children's educational attainment may be an important step in promoting children's educational success and improving their chances for long-term economic mobility.

Financial constraints, lack of information on college costs, and inadequate preparation may limit parents' postsecondary expectations for their children. If parents pass on these expectations to their children, the children are likely to adjust their college expectations and academic achievement accordingly. Low educational expectations may be prevalent among children whose parents never experienced postsecondary education, have low levels of economic resources, rely on limited networks for information on the educational system, or are racial and ethnic minorities (Kim & Schneider, 2005; Roderick et al., 2008).

To our best knowledge, no study has examined these expectations for an infant child or determined what explains racial and ethnic differences in parental expectations at the very early stages of a child's development.

Instead, existing studies examining expectations across racial and ethnic groups have focused on parents of school-age children. Because parental expectations lead to parents' involvement in their child's education, both at home and school (Englund, Luckner, Whaley, & Egeland, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992), parents with high education expectations may be motivated to provide a cognitively stimulating and emotionally supportive home environment for the child's development. They also may be motivated to access school-related information early. This motivation helps parents connect their child's abilities with the best educational resources and support. It is important to identify facilitators of and barriers to parental educational expectations at the early stages of a child's development. Doing so will allow researchers to investigate ways to foster parental educational expectations, give parents confidence in their expectations, and encourage parents develop a long-term plan for realizing those expectations. This study addresses the identified gaps by examining variations in the educational expectations of parents of newborn children by race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

2. Background and literature

Parents transmit their values and preferences to children, and in turn, children tend to learn and adopt their parents' behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs, especially those regarding educational and occupational success (Kerckhoff, 1989; Smith, 1982). In the socialization process, parents define what is desirable and act as role models, whether implicitly or explicitly (Cohen, 1987). Accordingly, parents' educational expectations contribute to shaping children's educational expectations, which in turn affect children's academic outcomes. Numerous studies have found that educational expectations of parents and children have a direct or mediating impact on school performance and college education (e.g., Kim & Sherraden, 2011; Cheng & Starks, 2002; Cowan, 2011; Zhan & Sherraden, 2003).⁴ The impact is likely to be larger if there is an agreement in expectations between parents and children (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Kao & Tienda, 1998).

Research has posited several key determinants to explain educational expectations. The status-attainment model suggests that parents' socioeconomic status, measured by parents' income, education level, and occupation, exerts strong influences on a child's educational expectations and later educational attainment (Alexander & Eckland, 1975; Chevalier, Gibbons, Thorpe, Snell, & Hoskins, 2009; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Qian & Blair, 1999; Sewell & Shah, 1968). According to this model, more advantaged socioeconomic status promotes higher educational expectations of parents while providing a favorable home environment for the child's cognitive development

⁴ Almost every study cited here collected the information from the main caregiver, which was typically the mother. Thus, the reported parental educational expectations generally indicate mothers' educational expectations.

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