A Structural Model of Dropout Behavior: A Longitudinal Analysis

DIANE S. KAPLAN
B. MITCHELL PECK
HOWARD B. KAPLAN
Texas A&M University

Using four wave panel data, a theoretically informed structural model of junior high school antecedents of high school dropout behavior is estimated, using LISREL VII. The model specifies a linkage between negative school experiences, both academic and disciplinary, and later dropout behavior that is mediated by self-derogation in a school context and contranormative behavior including both avoidant/withdrawal and deviant acting out behavior. Subjects ($n = 1,714$) were tested three times as junior high school students and were later interviewed as adults. Results provided strong support for the predicted relationship between students' feelings of self-rejection in a school setting, stimulated by negative academic experiences reported during junior high school, and their likelihood of dropping out of high school with truancy behavior during junior high school as a mediating variable. Implications for future research and dropout prevention programs are explored.

In a number of longitudinal and retrospective research studies of the possible correlates and/or causes of school dropout behavior, investigators generally have been consistent in their presentation of *reasons* given by students for their dropping out of school and in their discovery of dropout behavior *correlates* that occur prior to the act of dropping out and that may reasonably be inferred to have precipitated the dropout behavior. Whether the data come from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth Labor Market Experience (Rumberger, 1983) or the High School and Beyond data set (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack & Rock, 1986) the primary reasons

that students have given for dropping out of school, along with personal and family reasons cited by girls are school-related reasons that include not liking school and making poor grades.

Along with socioeconomic status (Bachman, 1972; Elliott & Voss, 1974), school-related variables are also the most often cited correlates of student withdrawal from school. Academic performance as measured by grades (Elliott & Voss, 1974; Bachman, 1972; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986) generally head the list of the variables found to be most highly related to subsequent dropout behavior. However, to what degree these variables are directly related to dropout behavior and to what degree they are related to psychosocial characteristics that may in turn precipitate dropout behavior has yet to be determined.

Level of self-esteem, one of the most often examined psychosocial variables, has been found to be related to the two most cited school-related correlates of high school dropout behavior—academic performance (Piers & Harris, 1964; Rosenberg & Simmons, 1971) and adolescent problem behaviors (Kaplan, 1980)—as well as being directly related to dropping out of high school (Cooley, 1968; Ekstrom et al., 1986). In addition to negative self-feelings there is also some indication that dropouts have negative feelings about and may be alienated from their school environment. In one study both dropouts and non college bound stay-ins demonstrated their perception of the inhospitable nature of the school environment by their negative responses to questions of whether the teachers were interested in the students and whether school discipline was effectively and fairly administered (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). The investigators of that study suggest that "the process of becoming a dropout is complex because the act of rejecting an institution as fundamental to the society as school must also be accompanied by the belief that the institution has rejected the person" (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986, p. 385).

In an attempt to clarify the complex process of dropping out of high school and to work toward developing a needed "systematic understanding of the developmental processes that lead an individual to withdraw from school" (Finn, 1989, p. 118), the present study has been undertaken to attempt to integrate those variables that are frequently described as being related to dropout behavior which include negative academic and disciplinary experiences at school, self-rejection, perception of rejection at school, and avoidant and acting out behaviors, into a theoretically informed causal model that specifies direct and indirect influences upon dropping out before high school graduation. The dropout behavior model presented here is a particularistic application of a widely employed general model of deviant behavior (Kaplan, Johnson & Bailey, 1986), and it is compatible with a frequently postulated paradigm of dropout behavior, namely the frustration—self-esteem model (Finn, 1989) described in a recent review of the dropout literature (Finn, 1989). The hypothesized model, which is theoretically grounded in the existence of the self-esteem motive, is estimated, using LISREL VII, and specifies a linkage between negative school experiences and later dropout behavior that is mediated by self-derogation in a school context and subsequent avoidant and attack behaviors that are used to reduce those self-derogatory feelings.

That this structural model is based on a longitudinal analysis of junior high school predictors of later dropout behavior addresses both the concerns of Barrington and