High-Poverty Urban High School Students' Plans for Higher Education: Weaving Their Own Safety Nets

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Abstract
This qualitative study investigates high-poverty urban high school students' views of and plans regarding higher education, using Bourdieu's theory of reproduction in education as theoretical framework. Interview data from 76 students from six high-poverty urban schools in a metropolitan area in the Midwestern United States were analyzed using grounded theory. Findings suggest that students (a) viewed higher education as rewarding in many ways, (b) perceived attending college to involve multiple risks, and (c) devised risk-minimizing strategies to facilitate their intended pursuit of higher education.

Keywords
high school, programs, poverty, social reproduction, Bourdieu, college access, urban education

> Rose, a high school senior, one of the students enrolled in a college success strategies course, is a Ward of the Court. She does not live with her parents, as her mother has passed away and her father is incarcerated. Rose lives with her

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sister in one of the poorer sections of the town and attends one of the lowest achieving high schools in a large, urban district. She has moved several times during her K-12 student life and her grades have suffered. She has a grade point average (GPA) of 2.0; she hates math and feels like "the dumbest person in math." With mediocre grades, little income even with her own part-time job, and lack of family support, she resides within a system providing her with limited resources to succeed; however, she is determined to improve her situation and chances for life success by attending a 4-year college.

Rose is a composite character, compiled from experiences of participants in this study, conducted at high-poverty urban high schools. Her condition is by no means unusual in this setting and, central to this study, it embodies by example that socioeconomic status (SES) has remained a strong predictor of educational attainment. Successful attainment of higher education involves two important steps—that is, college enrollment and persistence. Although their early academic aspirations are similar to those of others (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Kao & Tienda, 1998), economically disadvantaged and would-be first-generation students are at risk of failing at both steps. Thus, they are less likely to earn bachelors and graduate degrees because socioeconomic and cultural constraints tend to limit their educational choices. For example, low SES students are less likely to have family members who can help with academic work or know the process of applying for college or for financial aid. They are also more likely to eliminate colleges from consideration based on cost and to enroll in technical training institutions, low-cost for-profit schools, and 2-year community colleges, although this diminishes their chances of earning a bachelor's degree (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Titus, 2006; Vice President's Middle Class Task Force, n.d.). In short, students from low-income families trail their counterparts from high-income families by a wide margin with regard to college enrollment rates, while they are much more likely than those with wealthier and more educated parents to leave higher education once enrolled (Aud et al., 2013; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Lehmann, 2007; Walpole, 2003).

The present study focuses on the first vital step for attaining higher education, that is, the intention of economically disadvantaged students to enroll in college. In doing so, our study builds on Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), which holds that social and cultural constraints are prevalent in educational attainment and are passed through generations by families, thus perpetuating educational disadvantage. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to investigate what higher education means for students from high-poverty urban high schools and what plans these students have for higher education in light of this meaning and their perceptions of the educational landscape ahead of them. A better

understanding of students' perspectives of their circumstances, their concerns about their educational futures, and their resulting plans regarding the pursuit of higher education is vital for educational policy and practice aiming to address economically disadvantaged students' needs and thereby to contribute to more equitable and diverse higher education environments.

Theoretical Background

Structural Constraints in Education

Theories of the sources of inequality in educational attainment have variously emphasized individual agency versus structural conditions (Lee & Burkman, 2002; Lounsbury, Saudargas, & Gibson, 2004; Pidcock, Fischer, & Munsch, 2001; Pike & Kuh, 2005; S. B. Robbins et al., 2004; Walpole, 2003). Theories emphasizing the primacy of agency—that is, individuals' capacity to choose and control their actions, including their ability to act against and overcome constraints constituted by social structures—hold that educational attainment is rooted primarily in individual factors that vary widely within social groups (e.g., intelligence, persistence, ability, and motivation). Studies emphasizing agency tend to attribute educational failure to students' incorrect choices. For example, research in this vein has documented undesirable behaviors and personality traits found in "at risk" populations, including academic and work skills, motivation and adjustment, and lack of commitment to educational pursuits (Marks, 1967); sense of identity, emotional stability, and work drive (Lounsbury et al., 2004); as well as substance abuse and eating disorders (Pidcock et al., 2001; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003).

In contrast, theories emphasizing the primacy of structural constraints—that is, social structures (e.g., social class, SES, level of education) that define an individual's standing in society as well as cultural constraints (i.e., one's cultural schemas, such as interpersonal skills, study habits, leisure interests, taste in art or music; linguistic competence; and attitudes and dispositions toward intellectual pursuits)—hold that these conditions inherently limit an individual's choices, actions, and social mobility. Therefore, they bear on educational outcomes such that students in unfavorable structural conditions face great challenges in pursuing a higher level of education and being successful even if they have favorable individual characteristics, such as ability and motivation. Research emphasizing structural constraints has detailed societal circumstances that present formidable challenges to postsecondary academic pursuits, taking into account factors such as perceived social support, contextual influences, SES, and class-based predispositions and aspirations toward education (e.g., Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001; S. B. Robbins et al., 2004).

In the present study, we build on Bourdieu's theory of the role of education in social reproduction, which has become a significant theoretical contribution to studies of educational inequality (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Greenfell & James, 2004; Nash, 1990). Bourdieu's approach emphasizes that educational success and attainment are shaped primarily by structural constraints, highlighting unequal access to institutional resources based on family SES and class (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Dika & Singh, 2002; Dumais, 2002). Structure has a dual character and is simultaneously composed of material resources and cultural schemas, where "schemas are the effects of resources, just as resources are the effects of schemas" (Sewell, 1992, p. 13). This dual character of social structures is engrained in Bourdieu's work, which maintains that both material and symbolic aspects of structure are vital in guiding and limiting individual action and reproducing structure (Sewell, 1992).

Social reproduction theory argues that social structure is reproduced through social institutions (such as education or family), and this reproduction impedes change, limits social mobility (across social classes), and reinforces class distinctions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). For example, structural conditions limit possible educational outcomes by shaping and limiting the range of educational opportunities available to students based on their sociocultural backgrounds as well as by limiting individual choice through internalized frameworks of recognizing and evaluating opportunities and constraints (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Dika & Singh, 2002; Dumais, 2002; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Nash, 1990; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999).

The cornerstone of Bourdieu's theory is how social reproduction is shaped by the use and exchange of material and symbolic forms of capital—including economic capital as well as access to and accumulation of its symbolic expressions, that is, social and cultural forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Economic capital is directly convertible into money and may be vested in property rights. Social capital denotes the actual or potential resources an individual can access through his or her network of relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition that constitute social obligation and that, in some cases, can be converted into economic or cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Dika & Singh, 2002). Cultural capital refers to widely shared, high-status cultural signals (e.g., knowledge, attitudes) used for social and cultural exclusion; it functions as a resource to control access to scarce rewards, can be monopolized by the group possessing it, can be transmitted intergenerationally, and can be converted into other forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Cultural capital manifests itself in its embodied (e.g., long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body), objectified (e.g., cultural goods such as pictures, books, instruments),

and institutionalized (e.g., objectification in the form of academic qualifications) forms (Bourdieu, 1986).

Education and the Process of Social Reproduction

Different forms of capital are important for educational research because all three of them serve to open (or close) doors to educational opportunities. Access to social networks, including parents with educational credentials and knowledge about educational process, as well as accumulation of cultural tastes and understandings are valuable in the arena of social status and institutions granting such status (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Zimdars, Sullivan, & Heath, 2009). These monetary, social, and cultural forms of capital (or "currencies") can be "exchanged" and used by children throughout their education to accrue more social and cultural capital as well as direct monetary benefits in the future (Bourdieu, 1986; Kingston, 2001). Because "exchange" requires possession of some form(s) of capital, success in education and thereby, access to these forms of capital through schooling are also mediated by existing capital. Thus, schooling is a vehicle for reproducing existing social relations and inequalities through the use of cultural, social, and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Lamont & Lareau, 1988).

Illustrating the functions of different forms of capital throughout a student's educational career, prior studies have highlighted the key role parental involvement plays in students' academic advancement (Davis-Kean, 2005; Lareau, 1987; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; McNeal, 1999) and the ways in which the educational system rewards the culture of the higher socioeconomic classes (Dumais, 2002; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). The knowledge, skills, and ability of children are augmented by the extent of various resources invested by parents (e.g., investing their time, labor, money, and cultural capital), thereby shaping children's success (Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau, 2000). Parents with social advantages such as high-status jobs, educational sophistication, and organizational skills can help their children succeed in school by investing their capital to help their children achieve things such as early mastery of reading or securing high scores on college admissions tests (i.e., SAT) (Wrigley, 2000). Moreover, treating differences in capital as natural ultimately yields "a social system in which merit appears to be an attribute of individuals" (Wrigley, 2000, p. viii). This is illustrated by Lareau and Weininger (2003), who draw on a middle-class research participant who invested her economic, social, and cultural capital to enable her daughter to be admitted to a gifted education program (for which her daughter had initially barely not qualified) and as a result "earned" her daughter the benefits derived from a gifted education program, such as exposure to special curricula.

Furthermore, middle- and upper-class parents socialize children from an early age to develop skills and dispositions that are instrumental for success in educational environments—including effective communication with institutional officials and assertively pursuing interests with people in positions of authority (Lareau, 2011; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). For example, Calarco's (2011) study of help-seeking behavior among elementary school children of different social classes showed that middle-class children request more help from teachers, do so directly, and do not hesitate interrupting the teachers, consequently receiving more help and creating advantages for themselves while contributing to inequalities in the classroom.

On the flipside, students lacking privileged forms of capital are likely to be excluded from opportunities during multiple selection points, which reproduces class differences from generation to generation (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). For example, the cumulative disadvantage first-generation college students face begins with inequalities in childhood (Aronson, 2008; Lee & Burkman, 2002; Pascarella et al., 2004), and lower income students are more likely to already lag academically when they start elementary school (Burney & Beilke, 2008; Lareau, 2011; Rothstein, 2009); this disadvantage is compounded throughout consecutive stages of education as the school subject matter builds on prior coursework. Moreover, students from economically disadvantaged families tend to lack the kind of cultural capital that facilitates success in educational institutions, such as high-status cultural attributes, codes, and signals (Carter, 2003).

Despite ongoing micro-political contests over recognition and acceptance for various groups' cultural assets (Dika & Singh, 2002; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Lareau & Weininger, 2003) and despite efforts for multi-culturalism that strive for acceptance of diverse forms of cultural capital more widely, the lack of a certain kind of capital is likely to be perceived as "absence" of prevailing cultural elements rather than cultural capital of its own (Kingston, 2001; Olneck, 2000). For example, in his research on Gypsy communities' attitudes toward schooling in the United Kingdom, Levinson (2007) found that these communities' culture, valuing group cohesion over formal literacy, worked as a negative asset in their relationship to the government. Therefore, behaviors of students or parents from lower SES and/or minority backgrounds that deviate from standards in educational institutions governed by dominant cultural capital are perceived as not behaving "regularly" or lacking "cultural capital"; are dismissed as unhelpful and difficult; and are marginalized (Blackledge, 2001; Carter, 2003; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). In short, capital functions as a tool for reproduction of the dominant class and education has become a process of social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Dumais, 2002). By the same token, "the achievement process itself has

become the mechanism of reproduction" (Katsillis & Rubinson, 1990, p. 278), leaving most members of the lower classes unable to receive the rewards of education or achieve social mobility (Dumais, 2002).

Weighing the Critiques of Social Reproduction Theory

Social reproduction theory's emphasis on structural constraints has been criticized as being overly deterministic, for not offering an explanation for agent resiliency or innovation, and for overemphasizing the complicity of agents with the conditions that limit their choices (De Graaf, De Graaf, & Kraaykamp, 2000; Katsillis & Rubinson, 1990; D. Robbins, 2004). Critics argue that this theory fails to account for individuals who deviate from their respective class trajectories, suggesting that individual factors such as physical capital and ability may enhance an individual's agency in overcoming structural constraints (Kingston, 2001; Nash, 2001; Shilling, 2004). Others argue that social and cultural capital can be acquired and used to overcome the influence of persistent structural conditions in education (Dika & Singh, 2002; Sullivan, 2001). Similarly, it is argued that families who lack cultural capital can choose to adopt certain attitudes toward education and reading that can positively influence their children (De Graaf et al., 2000; Katsillis & Rubinson, 1990). However, despite its emphasis on the prevalence of structural constraints, social reproduction theory acknowledges that individual choice and action, in certain circumstances, may overcome or even significantly reconfigure social structures (Archer, 2003; Giddens, 1979; Sewell, 1992). In the present study, we utilize Bourdieu's theory not because we assume structural conditions to be deterministic or to disregard the potential for individual action, but because we believe that it is a valuable theoretical lens for understanding how structural constraints may shape the views and potential actions of students from high-poverty urban schools regarding higher education.

The Present Study

Because our study was borne out of a desire to explore higher education related views and plans of students who had been provided with an intervention emphasizing motivation, dedication, and ability, social reproduction theory provided a theoretical alternative to complement skill deficit and human capital theories in explaining unequal academic achievement (Dika & Singh, 2002; Nash, 1990). We appreciate the value of Bourdieu's theory for investigating the views of underprivileged students in a manner that acknowledges their disadvantage in educational attainment. Therefore, in this study, we examined students' aspirations and plans regarding higher education and

how they were shaped by prevalent structural constraints. Specifically, we investigated the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What does higher education mean for students from high-poverty urban high schools?
Research Question 2: How do they perceive the educational landscape they face?
Research Question 3: What are these students' postsecondary educational plans, on the basis of the meaning of higher education and the educational landscape they face?

Methodology

Background of the Study

The data for this study were collected in the context of a psychology-based curriculum intervention; this intervention consisted of a course designed to increase academic success and promote college attendance for high school students deemed "at risk." The course was grounded in educational psychology, based on theories of motivation and self-efficacy, and included such topics as overcoming procrastination, building self-confidence and responsibility, learning from lectures and textbooks, and preparing for exams. It was primarily computer-delivered and involved more than 200 computer-based assignments with strict deadlines to simulate the demands of college.

The second author was the program coordinator who conducted an evaluation of the curriculum intervention, assessing the implementation of the program and students' satisfaction with the intervention (the first author had no involvement in the program). Qualitative data gathered during program evaluation were rich with insights from student experiences, especially those not pertaining to the course itself; however, these were not analyzed as part of the evaluation. Therefore, our goal was to explore students' perspectives on higher education in greater detail, focusing on students' perceptions of higher education and any plans for pursuing higher education. Therefore, after conclusion of the project and its evaluation, we obtained permission from the program director and the institutional review board for analysis of the interview data (consisting of 76 individual interviews with students).

The Setting

The interview data were collected in six of eight schools in which the curriculum intervention took place. These were high-poverty urban high schools

within two urban school districts in a Midwestern metropolitan area, whereas the two remaining schools included a middle school and a high school in a wealthier suburb. These schools provided an appropriate setting for the purposes of this study because quality ratings and other indicators (from the State Department of Education's School Report Card data) showed that these six schools suffered from poverty-related issues. Specifically, their student body designated as "economically disadvantaged" (measured by the percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch) ranged from 53% to 95%; graduation rates ranged from 65% to 96% (four schools below state average); daily attendance rates ranged from 88% to 93% (all below state average); and two of the schools did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), with one being on Academic Watch. While data about students' race or ethnicity were not collected, the percentages of minority students in the two urban districts (30% and 40% respectively) exceeded the state average of 17%. Given the academic and demographic profile of these schools, they are likely to have less spending per student, high concentration of low SES students, and resulting academic consequences, all of which create further disadvantages for the students (Condron & Roscigno, 2003; Palardy, 2013).

Participants and Data Collection

As noted above, the data we analyzed in this study consist of semi-structured interviews with 76 participants that had been collected as part of the evaluation of the original intervention described above. In the six schools, approximately 170 students were enrolled in the course; of which 76 (52 seniors and 24 juniors) were individually interviewed; participant selection was shaped by factors such as students' time limitations, patterns of absenteeism, and scheduling conflicts. Our institution's institutional review board approved the use of this interview data without re-enrolling participants into this study or obtaining their consent. Hence, all existing completed interviews (76) constituted the data for this study.

Data Analysis

This study follows in the tradition of interpretivist research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Acknowledging the reality of objects, events, or processes of human interactions, interpretivism emphasizes the importance of *meanings* given to or interpretations made of these objects, events, or processes; these meanings consequently constitute their arena of investigation of social and behavioral phenomena (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We analyzed the data using *Grounded Theory* (Corbin & Strauss, 2008;

Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which is suitable for interpretivist research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Grounded theory aims to develop substantive theory grounded in the data and therefore emphasizes the discovery of new theory about reality (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Our analysis consisted of three kinds of coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). First, during *open coding*, we examined the data in detail to identify represented concepts and noted their properties. To describe these emerging concepts and to label them, we developed tentative open codes. By constant comparative analysis, we gave the same conceptual label to incidents that were conceptually similar to previously coded data, as well as modifying or elaborating the concepts as the analysis progressed to represent the data more clearly, comprehensively, and fully. During *axial coding*, we examined the data for semantic relationships among codes (e.g., X is a case of Y; X is a condition for Y) and for patterns based on our notes from open coding regarding properties of concepts; we then combined similar codes into categories, determined relationships among categories, and identified key themes. For *selective coding*, we revisited our research questions and reviewed our coding to identify the most salient codes and concepts. As we refined the definitions of codes and categories as well as relationships between categories, themes that were most relevant to the research questions and that had sufficient support were included in the theory.

Although these coding procedures have distinct purposes, they are not sequential stages; grounded theory's constant comparative method involves moving back and forth between the codes and categories, the data, and the developing theory that thereby is grounded in the data. We concluded the iterative process when the analysis reached theoretical saturation, that is, when all concepts, categories, and themes were well-developed in terms of properties, dimensions, and variations, and when further analysis would add little to the theory developed (Bowen, 2008; Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Interpretivist research relies on researchers' interpretations (Lincoln, 1995; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is advised that researchers utilize methods to increase the validity of interpretivist research that are consistent with its own tenets; accordingly, we followed recommendations in the qualitative research literature to address both traditional and alternative notions of validity (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005; Lincoln, 1995; Strauss, 1987). In our analysis and presentation of findings, we provide research process transparency by clearly explaining our steps, seek disconfirming evidence, and include analysis of negative or exceptional cases. Moreover, our findings were checked by collaborative analysis of data as well as by peer review of an experienced educator who reviewed samples of data, codes from our analyses, and our interpretations.

Findings

Below we present detailed interpretations of the findings of our analysis. In our presentation, we have replaced names of all individuals, institutions, and places with pseudonyms to preserve the participants' privacy and confidentiality. Our findings suggest that students predominantly viewed higher education as valuable and rewarding but given their limited resources and support, also perceived pursuing higher education to involve significant risks of failure and economic loss. Furthermore, due to resource limitations, students had few safety nets in place to catch them if they were to fail. Thus, they devised a strategic approach in their plans to pursue higher education, designed to minimize risk and build safety nets for themselves. We elaborate on the three components of the findings—namely, view of college as a challenging prize, view of college as risky, and risk-minimizing strategies developed to pursue their higher education plans—below.

College: A Challenging Reward

Students viewed higher education as rewarding in three ways: economically, symbolically, and personally. However, they also viewed college education as challenging. We first elaborate on students' view of college as challenging, as this relates to their socioeconomic conditions and shapes their views of higher education overall; then we elaborate on the different aspects of their perception of college as reward.

Challenges of attending college. An overarching theme in students' views of higher education was the profound challenge it embodied for them, which was intertwined with the challenges of their daily lives. Their statements about higher education frequently pointed to challenges in their current lives and educational experiences at high school, describing conditions and issues associated with high poverty. For example, many students indicated that they did not have stable domestic lives, with some students having moved as many as four times during their high school years. Many students did not come from two-parent homes, and they shared stories of deceased or divorced parents or of parents who were unable to help them financially or, in some cases, physically. A lack of parental support at home led to educational difficulties. For example, some students were responsible for paying library fines, senior dues, and college admissions application fees themselves; one student relayed that she had to find a distant relative to co-sign her college loan application. Students were also likely to work long hours to make some income; many indicated working 25 or more hours per week, which took time away from

academic work. For some of these participants, making and sustaining a living or completing high school presented serious challenges, which led them to think of higher education as even more challenging. In addition, few students had parents with any college experience or professional/semi-professional work experience; thus, they lacked sources of reliable information or guidance at home about careers and colleges. If they manage to enroll in (and graduate from) college, most of them would be first-generation college students (or graduates).

Students in this study lacked the key resources time, money, and/or information necessary for gaining admission to and enrolling in college, which students from middle-class homes tend to have. They were aware of their conditions, too. One participant explained the differences between her educational resources and those of students in a suburban school:

> Those kids got so much. They have a fast food restaurant right in their school! They say *Westfield High* is similar to us, but those kids' parents have money. They have field trips and things. I don't want to sound bad, but those parents can pay for tutors and we have to use the same old teachers for our tutors.

Unlike their economically more privileged counterparts, these students may be challenged to meet their daily subsistence needs while working on building a better future for themselves. Therefore, completing the path to college enrollment would constitute a serious challenge for them. However, despite challenges they experienced and anticipated, the students generally expressed that they aspired to earn a higher education degree. Although most were drawn to the economic and social benefits of a college education, there were some for whom college carried a meaning beyond economic utility. Students cited various reasons for the purpose and importance of a college degree to explain their aspirations to go to college: economic rewards, social/symbolic rewards, and personal and/or societal betterment. Overall, with regard to the meaning of higher education, a college degree denoted the fulfillment of a dream, "a prize," or an accomplishment. Higher education, described in these terms, was important and rewarding. However, given the limitations and challenges in their lives, admission into, attendance, and graduation from college would be a hard-won struggle.

College education as job preparation and economic security. The vast majority of students aspired a college degree due to its economic benefits. Most believed college was a desirable destination because of the promise of a better economic future; some considered it a necessity if one wanted a secure and decent income. As one student explained, "It's not much of an option. You

can't do anything nowadays without a college degree. Parents are not going to support me. I don't have great technical skills." Another explained, "Without a college education, you can't really do anything. You won't get paid a decent amount. Everybody should go—nobody can take that away from you. Everybody has to go." Students mentioned wanting to go to college for better earning potential, a well-paying job, or to meet career requirements, stating that college was important because "you get more opportunities for jobs" and it was needed "for a better future. To hold a better job."

Some students indicated that college would afford them the economic security and independence they needed. A female student stated, "My mom didn't go . . . She was fortunate to get a good job, but if my dad left and she didn't have a job, we'd be stuck. I don't want to be stuck." Another stated, "My mom didn't go and I see where she is now. It's hard for her to find a job. If something happens to my dad, we'd be screwed." For some students, attending college would provide the economic safeguard needed to pursue other career choices, such as a career in athletics, which is risky. One student who was dreaming of training for the Olympics said, "I'd like to study math or accounting or become a pro boxer. Boxing will be what I do, but college will be something I can fall back on in case I get hurt, like my dad did." Another student who was planning to attend college on a football or a baseball scholarship, explained that his brother had transferred "four or five times" to various colleges on a football scholarship and "my dad told him that he hopes he can at least get a bachelor's out of all the transfers."

College education as a symbol of success. Another major reason for desiring to attend college was view of college as a symbol of success. For these students, from families with little or no college experience, college was not merely a place to get a degree, but it symbolized something more precious. Having a college degree represented family betterment; distance from where one came, up from the bottom, a symbol of having "arrived," having "made it." One student explained that he wanted to earn a college degree "to show them that I'm not a quitter. If I can finish college, I can finish anything. I conquered. I succeeded in life." For another participant, college was important because "only one person in my family ever finished [college], so I think that'd be a good accomplishment." One student sounded determined to succeed, as he stated, "I have my mind set on the prize." Another student, who was having difficulties choosing between different programs, said he was urged by his relatives to continue his education and was encouraged "not to let go of your dreams." In fact, for some participants, college had the function of pleasing family. For example, one student with immigrant parents stated that he planned to go to college, "Because my parents want me to. They need academics."

College education for personal and/or societal betterment. Some students also indicated they wanted to attend college because they had a specific career goal or they wanted to make the world a better place. For example, one student planned to go to college "because I want to be a high school music teacher." Another expressed that she wanted to study medicine to prevent others from suffering the same fate as her father did. She stated, "I don't want to disappoint him. He wanted me to take studies so serious. He wanted me to study business but after his death I thought I can help people."

Risks of College: Economic, Social, and Academic

Although students suggested that they value higher education and believe in its promise of a better future, they were also intimidated by the prospect of attending college. They identified a number of ways in which college would be risky, and these risks would be more pronounced for them than they could be for other students with greater resources of money, free time, and easy access to information about college. Their fears were driven by current challenges they faced in their educational and daily lives. Their high school achievement tended to be low and some had not even passed the high school graduation examination. Some were having difficulty meeting college application deadlines or finding the money to pay for application fees. They did not understand financial aid opportunities or career requirements, nor did they know where and how they could get their questions answered. Moreover, many of them lacked the free time needed to seek answers to their questions, as they had to work to make an income. Specifically, students' concerns about college attendance stemmed from their current conditions and surfaced in three areas. The participants feared that college would be expensive, unfamiliar, and academically challenging, therefore, a risky endeavor to take. Below, we describe three areas of risk that our analysis identified as prevalent in the participants' views of higher education.

College as expensive—economic risks. One of the most important risk factors expressed by the participants was the cost of college. This finding is not surprising, especially with regard to students from high-poverty schools, as college is costlier than ever. The typical cost of books/supplies, on-campus housing, and tuition at a public 4-year institution is estimated at nearly $20,000 a year (Baum & Ma, 2011). After receiving financial aid and taking loans, college students need about $3,600 more to pay for college (Engle & Tinto, 2008); representing as much as *half* of their families' median annual income of $12,100, this would be a significant burden on low-income, first-generation students. In this study, a major concern was the economic risk of

attending college, including both cost of college and earning potential after college. Participants in the study were concerned about whether they would be able to afford their college tuition and still have enough money to cover living expenses during their college years; whether they would be able to find a well-paying job on graduation from college; and whether they would be able to repay college loans.

Many students indicated that they planned to attend college and work at the same time; working full-time or fully providing for themselves was a necessity for some participants, who could not expect any adults in their family to support them while in college. One participant expressed that he was concerned about "living on my own, paying for things, surviving. How to pay for school and rent. How to work and attend school at the same time." Although some participants did not express concerns about having to work to be able to attend college, they feared they may "fail to get a job to pay for college." Some participants even indicated that they may have to provide for others while in college; one student indicated that not only could no one help him, but he also worried "about supporting my family" while attending college. This is consistent with the observation that low SES students are less likely than their middle-class counterparts to be able to rely on their parents to pay for tuition and living expenses (Schoeni & Ross, 2005).

Because most students aspired higher education for its economic benefits, and because they would need to make investments of time and money as well as take on significant risks by going to college, they wanted to be sure it would have economic payoff; however, that in itself was an additional risk. Indeed, some students were concerned about not being able to find a better job after graduating from college; for example, one student stated that her biggest fear was "that I will not get a job right out of college. That I'll have to do something I don't want to do." A different participant was nervous "about the job market shrinking. I think it might be even worse after college." Another expressed, "I worry that the money I make after I'm done . . . will it be worth the cost put into it?" Given the relatively high level of investment, students with limited financial resources found it very important to ensure a reasonable return. Furthermore, they would have to repay college loans after graduating, which made securing a well-paying job after college imperative.

College as unfamiliar—social risks. Another prevalent fear expressed by the participants concerned social life in college. Participants considered college an "unknown" and had concerns about fitting in socially. These fears were exacerbated by the fact that they tended to lack family members or close contacts with college experience. Many of these students did not grow up hearing about parents' college days, nor were they likely to have made

campus visits. Accordingly, they variously described college as "a new box," "something different," and out of their "comfort zone." As students were unable to draw on any prior experiences they or their friends and family had, the transition into a large, diverse college setting was intimidating.

Being on their own, and having difficulty making friends and meeting others were the most common social fears. One student was "terrified . . . about my first day. Orientation is supposed to help you, but 600 [students] in one class!" A student from an immigrant African family said, "I'm scared for freshman year. I want to meet good, respectful friends in college. Not go out with crazy people. When you are a Muslim, you can't drink . . . " Another shared,

> I am nervous about attending college. It will be a completely different situation. Here classes are in the same building and my same middle school friends are here in high school. Chances are that here there will be at least one friend in each of my classes. In college it will be different. I'll be walking in not knowing anybody.

A high school football player expressed concern about starting over socially once enrolled in college. Speaking of life after high school, he stated he was

> super nervous. I don't want to brag or nothin', but I have it good in high school. A lot of friends. Good backers, coaches. People say when you go to college you have to start at the bottom. Like moving to a new city. That never gets easier. Somebody will point and say, "There's the new kid."

College as hard—academic risks. The third area of risks of attending college that students shared was related to academics. Students were concerned about whether they would be able to gain college admission in the first place and whether they would be able to succeed academically once in college.

Many students were unsure whether they would be able to gain admission to college, although they were interested in pursuing higher education. One student stated, "I'm worried about whether my ACT score is good enough to go to *Large City University*'s main campus." More commonly, students worried that college would be difficult and that they might fail, although they were unsure of what to expect in terms of academics. One of the participants relayed fears about "tests in college, math and reading. Everything is higher, taking responsibility for yourself. I have a bad math history. I only started picking it up last year. I failed algebra." Another student was concerned about whether the amount of work needed would be manageable, stating that "the only thing is the homework. How much and will I get it done?" A participant worried, "what if college is too hard and I don't get passed through it?"

whereas another worried about the consequences of failing in college: "I'm really nervous that I won't make it and something will happen and I'll end up working at McDonalds." Students had few adults around them with college experience, and even fewer with positive experiences in college. Having witnessed examples of family members' failed attempts to earn a college degree, some students were cautious and worried about their own chances for success. Thus, fears of academic failure were exacerbated by the fear (and reality) of unfamiliarity with college.

Moreover, fear of academic failure was compounded by its financial consequences. First, students were aware that if they had to drop out of college, they would face opportunity costs; pursuing a college education would preclude them from alternative vocational training opportunities that would be free or less expensive, and failing to excel in college would not only mean that they could not earn "the prize," but they would also have lost income from full-time work and potential career development in another line of work. Second, failing to successfully graduate from college would potentially leave them to be worse off than if they had not started college in the first place, as they would have to repay college loans without the increased earning potential. Thus, the consequences of failure and dropping out of college would potentially be very stark. Furthermore, considering that college was also viewed as a symbol of success, failure to graduate from college could have social consequences as well. This is an example of how these concerns (as well as actual risks) compound each other's effects.

In summary, shaped by their current conditions under scarcity of various resources, students viewed college as being financially costly, socially unfamiliar, and academically challenging, and consequently thought of attending college as being risky. Without family resources to bail them out if they were unable to keep up with tuition and living expenses or to maintain passing grades at some point in their college life, students perceived the pursuit of higher education as precarious. They worried about not completing college due to academic, social, or financial difficulties, and consequently being burdened with loans, while lacking a diploma to get a well-paying job. Coupled with the absence of successful family examples and support, low-income, (would-be) first-generation students were apprehensive about pursuing a college education and thus included strategies to reduce the risk in their plans to attend college.

A Strategic Approach to College Attendance: Devising Risk-Minimizing Strategies

Perceiving college education to be rewarding but at the same time risky led students desiring to pursue higher education to devise strategies to reduce the

risk involved as well as to lessen their fears about attending college. By planning to engage in several risk-minimizing strategies, they attempted to weave their own safety nets. These strategies included attending less expensive schools (irrespective of quality), aiming to transfer to their ultimately desired college sometime down the road, multi-step plans involving working first, and starting with smaller (and manageable) risk.

Cheapest is best. For students whose background imposed significant financial limitations, expense tended to be a greater factor in college choice than quality or even degrees offered. Some students, burdened with the responsibility of paying their own tuition and/or living expenses, planned to attend a community college with lower tuition and/or going to a local school to save living expenses by living with family. One senior who expressed the desire to eventually become a lawyer, begrudgingly planned to enroll at the local community college; he said "I'm accepted at *Selective Liberal Arts College*. But they want $32,000 a year. My dad says that's too expensive. He just recently lost his job. *Large City Community College* is about $2000 a quarter." Another student said she would attend the community college while working because "my dad said if I went anywhere else, I was paying for it." Another said in his decision, " . . . the tuition price is a factor. If I live at home, it will be easier to not have to pay rent."

Plans to transfer. Many students' plans involved transferring to a better college after beginning at a lower tier school. One student explained that he planned to get credit for introductory courses at a less expensive school before transferring to a 4-year college: "It costs $72 a credit hour at *Large City Community College*. I'll go there to get math and English classes done and then transfer." Likewise, when asked where she thought she would be in 1 year, another student said, "Transferring. I want to be able to go anywhere I want. To a prestigious school. I hope to get a 3.8 GPA at least and it's cheaper and easier to take classes at *Large City Community College*." Another said his plan was to "major in sports exercise at *Large City Community College* and then transfer to *Large City University* or *Private College*. I'd be stupid to go anywhere other than *Large City Community College* . . ." A senior considered attending *Nearby State University*,

> Or if I go to the *For-Profit School* [which has a 14-month program] to study business, I'll maybe transfer to a place where I can minor in music. I can then transfer to a four-year college. I don't want to pay high loans.

Multi-stage plans. Several students' plans involved building a quick career first and working full-time to save money for college as well as to have a safe career if they do not succeed at enrolling in or graduating from college. One student, whose family had immigrated from Africa, planned to become a flight attendant first before getting a bachelor's degree. He stated,

> I want to go to a four-year college. Maybe go to airline academy [first] to become a flight attendant. Then go to Daytona Beach or Liberty University in Virginia. I'd like to go there after being a flight attendant. Maybe I can go while working.

Another, who had already been accepted at two 4-year institutions, planned to go to the local community college and transfer to a 4-year college only after finding a job with a good income. One participant planned to become a cosmetologist *and* a nurse, stating "I want to go to cosmetology school for 14 months and then when I'm finished, I'll go to *Large City Community College*. Nursing will be my real job, and I'll cut hair on the side." One student was looking for a job where his employers would pay his tuition; he said, "Everyone's saying go straight to school. I'm thinking of working for a year to have the money for college. I've got a friend who has a job where they pay 80% to 90% of the tuition. He works in a warehouse." Another student, who wished to study mortuary science at the *University of Nearby City*, planned to work at a local medical center first and save money. In sum, the desire to avoid loans, the fear of not qualifying for loans, fear of failing at college, and having to pay loans while having no source of income or qualifications were the key concerns underlying students' multi-step plans, which involved working first before enrolling in college.

Starting small. Negative experiences family members made with attending college as well as the fears of social life in college led some students to cautiously choose to "start small." With starting small, they meant attending lower tier or 2-year colleges (either as a first step to further higher education or as the only higher education) with *smaller rewards (and risk)* rather than more prestigious 4-year colleges or universities. Some students simply tried to avoid repeating negative family experiences (e.g., attending a large university in a different city) and wanted to simply try a different strategy. Others felt intimidated by the size of the student body at the local flagship state university (or similar institutions) and believed they would have an easier adjustment at a smaller school. One student explained that she planned to attend the local community college because "my brother went away and it wasn't good for him. He was so poor and made bad decisions. I want to start

at a smaller school . . . " Another said, "I'll start at *Large City Community College*. I learned from my sister's experience to start off small. Get the flow of studying and don't get lost in a big college." Drawing on lessons learned from limited family experiences, students were planning to move cautiously toward "the promise" of a better future provided by a college degree.

In summary, students were aware of the structural constraints that limited their opportunities; however, they also desired to reach the prize of a college degree, for which they were willing to take some risks. Thus, they created relatively elaborate plans to avoid pitfalls and overcome challenges of attending college. These four strategies, namely, choosing the least expensive option, planned transfers, multi-stage plans, and starting small helped students minimize their fears by lowering their academic, social, and financial risks.

Exceptional Cases

The study's findings represent a grounded theory that reflects views of students who planned to pursue higher education, which suggests that these students perceived successful completion of higher education as a major reward while perceiving enrolling in college to be risky in many ways and consequently devising risk-minimizing strategies in their plans to pursue higher education. Whereas this theory is grounded in and captures the views of the majority of the study participants who intended to pursue higher education (63 of the 76 participants), our data also included 9 students who were undecided or had unclear plans and 4 students who indicated that they had no plans (at least currently) to pursue higher education.

Of those students who did not plan to pursue higher education, three planned to work full-time whereas one wanted to travel to visit her mother abroad. Their reasons for not planning to pursue higher education were varied and included not being interested in further academic pursuits; being content with the rewards of blue-collar work opportunities accessible without a college degree (and relatedly, having low expectations about the rewards of earning a college degree); and eagerness to work full-time and raise a family (i.e., growing up sooner by assuming adult responsibilities). One senior who did not plan to attend college and already had secured a full-time cleaning job with the city to work after graduating from high school stated, "I'm kinda tired of school right now" but still alluded to potentially going to college in the future "to make more money." Another student pointed to positive family experiences with not going to college, noting that, "college isn't made for everyone. My mom didn't go and she do ok. My mom makes about 21 dollars an hour at *State Government Office*."

Just like positive experiences of adults who did not go to college influenced their plans, so did negative experiences of family members. One student who did not plan to pursue a college education immediately after high school expressed, "From growing up and seeing people flunk out of college or just basically wasting money on college and don't stick to it, I know that when I go to college it's going to be for sure." Likewise, the student who planned to start a cleaning job after high school had a parent and a sister who had attended several colleges, but neither had graduated.

Indeed, findings of the study do not imply that the remaining participants (those who clearly indicated they were not planning to attend college as well as those who were unsure about it) were not interested in attending college or reaping its rewards (as they also mentioned similar risks of or expressed fears about attending college). Possible reasons for this include that they perceive the involved risks to be greater or that they are more risk-aversive. It is also possible that their plans differ because they believe earning a college degree is unlikely for them and thus reduce their expectations to match what they perceive to be likely. Elliott (2009) indicates there is an "aspirations–expectations gap" in that minority and low-income students also desire to attend college, yet they are more likely to consider college attendance an elusive goal.

Discussion

The purpose of this article was to build a grounded theory of high-poverty urban high school students' views of and plans for higher education. This grounded theory includes three major findings: (a) Higher education was seen as a reward students aspired to attain; (b) attending college was believed to be challenging and risky in financial, social, and academic terms; and (c) students' plans for pursuing higher education involved building safety nets for themselves that would enable them to pursue their aspiration while minimizing the risks associated.

The study's findings suggest that students saw higher education as a reward and therefore wanted to attain it—primarily to improve their future economic security. In addition to the expected economic returns of higher education, however, reasons for aspiring to attend college also included students' perceptions of symbolic meaning and value of college (i.e., higher education as a symbol of life success) and desire for personal and/or societal betterment. This finding is significant, because non-economic (e.g., symbolic) value for higher education has typically been associated more with the higher social classes, which have the economic and cultural means to prolong education beyond what is necessary to earn income (Bourdieu, 1986).

Pursuit of Higher Education as a Risky Venture

This study shows that in addition to financial cost being a key concern in students' decision to attend college as highlighted previously (Lillis & Tian, 2008; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Vice President's Middle Class Task Force, n.d.), economically disadvantaged students' central concerns regarded social and academic risks of attending college, which appear to stem from students' sociocultural background. Low SES students' views of, and consequently plans for, higher education may be shaped by a perception that they do not belong to higher status environments such as universities and an expectation to be academically and socially excluded (Nash, 1990). Previous research has shown that economically disadvantaged (and first-generation) students at universities face unique challenges and feelings of inadequacy both academically and socially because of their status as social and cultural outsiders (Aries & Seider, 2005; Granfield, 1991).

Students' insecurities and concerns are related to the fact that adjustment to college begins before actually enrolling. Socialization entails a gradual accumulation of experiences (van Maanen & Schein, 1979; Weidman, 1989) and is shaped by students' background characteristics (e.g., values, SES) as well as their experiences in educational organizations (Pascarella, 1980; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Weidman, 1979). Anticipatory socialization refers to the extent to which an individual learned the norms of an institution (i.e., a college) prior to joining it, and it is greatly enhanced by having parents who have college degrees (Tierney, 1997; Weidman, 1989). In this study, students' fears related to lacking anticipatory socialization involved both social concerns about fitting in and academic concerns about succeeding.

Students' perceptions of the risks involved in attending college seem to also be related to a lack of different forms of capital identified by Bourdieu. For example, because students were economically disadvantaged, they saw college attendance as economically risky and as an economic commitment they could not afford to undergo. Similarly, they were insecure about whether the social capital they had would be useful in college and considered college to be socially risky; they were concerned about being outsiders in this new social environment and about having difficulty to gain social acceptance. Likewise, they had concerns regarding their "deficiencies" in cultural capital (with regard to academic knowledge and accumulation); they did not know what to expect of college classes, how much and how they would need to study, or how they would have to choose classes (or majors), so they were afraid of not succeeding in college.

As discussed earlier, benefits derived from investment of any capital depend also on a student's existing endowment with other forms of capital

(Bourdieu, 1986). The importance of considering all forms of capital lies in the fact that individuals who have some form of capital can derive benefits by trading it in for other forms of capital when needed. For example, students in a fraternity house would have access to other students from older classes who can help them with schoolwork; similarly, those who have economic capital can use it to hire a tutor to help overcome academic difficulties. However, students who lack all forms of capital face higher risks to succeed. This study highlights how the interrelation among different forms of capital compounds to create a deep level of disadvantage.

Risk Assessment for Planning the Future

Our analysis revealed that students' assessments of risks involved concerns about failure, cost, and payoff, demonstrating calculated planning for higher education in the face of risk and resource scarcity. For example, they were concerned about whether the resources they would expend would pay off economically in the future and were afraid that they may be overburdened with loans if future payoff would not materialize. Furthermore, economic risks, coupled with students' academic and social concerns about succeeding in college, led them to worry about an opportunity cost of choosing education over full-time work (i.e., the potential lost income and qualifications in another line of work). Therefore, although higher education is generally considered the key path to social mobility, from the vantage point of these underprivileged students, it may be considered luxurious to pursue the "risky" path of college attendance. Because students' concerns are as important in their educational decisions as the actual risks, this finding has implications for universities' outreach programs. In addition to material resources such as scholarships and loans that can mitigate some of the difficulties of economically disadvantaged students in college, the availability of social programs as well as academic support structures in universities is instrumental, as is informing potential students about these resources in advance to address their concerns.

The study's findings also showed that despite having significant concerns, participants made plans to minimize the risks of pursuing higher education and to realize their aspirations *against all odds*. Billson and Terry (1982) noted that first-generation students have to make a bigger leap from the social status of their parents than second-generation students do, and that they have to do so with more limited resources and less support. Therefore, this study suggests that it is important to evaluate the plans economically disadvantaged students make for higher education in the context of their structural constraints. For example, although the risk-minimizing strategies devised by students involved ideas associated with non-completion of 4-year degrees, and these strategies,

such as planned transfers or other multi-stage plans may not be the best course of action for these students objectively, without these risk-minimizing strategies, students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds may not be convinced to try to pursue higher education at all. Therefore, it is important to understand and acknowledge the structural constraints shaping economically disadvantaged students' educational views and plans. Such an understanding can help develop the proper kind of support structures that could facilitate their enrollment in college. By the same token, it is also important to acknowledge the structural constraints and contextual influences that may hold back underprivileged students, leading them to avoid or fail to enroll in college. For many underprivileged students, even staying in high school, graduating from high school, or enrolling in a course on strategies for college success may be considered an achievement in light of their sociocultural background.

Despite its insights into educational plans of urban students, this study is limited to students' perceptions of the challenges to pursue higher education and their plans; it did not include their actual pursuits after high school. Future research could build on the present study by designing a longitudinal study or a study that allows for following up with participants some time after graduating from high school. Such a design, although challenging due to attrition of participants, would enable an assessment of whether there is congruence between students' prior concerns and plans and their actual experiences.

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