The Effect of Neighborhood Context on the College Aspirations of African American Adolescents

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Previous research on educational aspirations has focused almost exclusively on micro-level predictors of educational aspirations. Notably absent from these studies are measures reflecting the neighborhood context in which adolescents live. Drawing on Wilson’s theory of neighborhood effects, the present study examines the extent to which neighborhood structural disadvantage predicts college aspirations among African American adolescents. The results show that concentrated neighborhood disadvantage exerts a significant influence on college aspirations, even when accounting for the micro-level context of adolescents. Overall, the findings suggest that living in a disadvantaged context lowers college aspirations among African American adolescents.

KEYWORDS: African American adolescents, college aspirations, neighborhood context

Past research has established that educational aspirations influence student outcomes such as academic achievement and, eventually, one’s educational and occupational attainment (Campbell, 1983; Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1992; Hill et al., 2004; Sewell, Haller, & Ohlendorf, 1970; Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969). Educational aspirations are a student’s view and perceptions of his or her intention to pursue or obtain additional education (Campbell, 1983). A number of past studies have included measures of student aspirations (Flowers, Milner, & Moore, 2003; Hanson, 1994; Hauser & Anderson, 1991; Hill et al., 2004; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Smith-Maddox, 1999). Findings from this research suggest that most youth report extremely high educational aspirations and that the expectation of the vast majority of these youth is that they will complete college (Kao & Thompson, 2003).

Furthermore, much of the research on educational aspirations has found that individual-level factors such as a student’s personal characteristics, family
socioeconomic background, social class, academic history, curriculum track placement, ability level, peer groups, and teachers, as well as numerous other social and cultural resources found in a youth’s social network, influence the formation of aspirations (Bohon, Johnson, & Gorman, 2006; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Aber, 1997; Campbell, 1983; Davies & Kandel, 1981; Flowers et al., 2003; Floyd, 1996; Freiberg, 1993; Howard, 2003; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Lee & Bryk, 1989; Sewell, 1971; Sewell & Shah, 1968; Smith-Maddox, 1999; Wang & Gordon, 1994).

While this research has generated an impressive set of individual-level results, we know little about how neighborhood characteristics influence educational aspirations beyond individual-level predictors. Studies of educational aspirations often fail to investigate the types of neighborhoods that students live in and the influence that these neighborhoods have on educational aspirations. Community studies have documented that neighborhoods are stratified by race, place, and social and economic inequality and vary drastically along a number of dimensions (Logan & Molotch, 1987; Massey & Denton, 1993; Massey, Gross, & Shibuya, 1994; Wilson, 1987). Some neighborhoods have low poverty and unemployment levels, quality housing, access to good schools, low crime, low population turnover, and offer an abundance of resources and services. Other neighborhoods are overwhelmed with high crime rates, poverty, joblessness, residential instability, and lack of resources (Squires & Kubrin, 2005; Wilson, 1987). Such findings suggest that students’ educational aspirations may be shaped by neighborhood structural characteristics (Flowers et al., 2003). Investigating this possibility is important, as educational trajectories have major implications for social mobility over the life course (Ainsworth, 2002; Brooks-Gunn et al., 1997; Duncan, 1994; Duncan, Yeung, Brooks Gunn, & Smith, 1998; Roscigno, 1998).

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In the present study, we draw on Wilson’s (1987, 1996) theory of neighborhood effects to examine the extent to which neighborhood structural disadvantage influences college aspirations among African American adolescents. Our focus on African American adolescents is important given the paradox that African Americans place high value upon education as a vehicle for upward social and economic mobility (J. D. Anderson, 1988; Hochschild, 1996; Howard, 2003; Marable, 1990; Mickelson, 1990; Rowley, 2000), however, African American students are not faring well in the American educational system (Mickelson, 1990; Smith-Maddox, 1999). On average, African Americans’ academic performance (e.g., performance on standardized tests) is lower than that of their White and Asian American counterparts (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Kao, Tienda, & Schneider, 1996; Miller, 1995). It is important to understand the source of this disconnect. We believe that our focus on African American students’ college aspirations provides a vital starting point, as educational aspirations serve as critical precursors to educational and occupational attainment (Campbell, 1983; Caplan et al., 1992; Hill et al., 2004; Howard, 2003; Sewell et al., 1969, 1970).

Theoretical Background

Wilson’s Theory of Neighborhood Effects

In recent years, the sociological literature on neighborhood effects has focused on explaining why neighborhoods matter (Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002). Neighborhoods and “neighborhood effects” have been important units of analysis for studying social interactions and social problems (Sampson et al., 2002). The term neighborhood effects commonly refers to the study of how the neighborhood-level social context influences an individual outcome in a way that is not reducible to individual-level characteristics (Lee & Bryk, 1989; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Morenoff, 2003). Research on the contribution of neighborhood effects has grown rapidly, especially with respect to youth development (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993; Duncan & Raudenbush, 1999; Garner & Raudenbush, 1991; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Sampson et al., 2002).

The most influential theoretical explanation of how neighborhoods influence adolescent trajectories comes from William J. Wilson’s (1987, 1996) theory of neighborhood effects and his work on the “truly disadvantaged.” Wilson’s (1987) work has focused on the “concentration effects” of neighborhood economic disadvantage and racial isolation on various adolescent outcomes. Wilson (1987, 1996) argued that structural changes in the American economy (e.g., the loss of well-paying manufacturing jobs) have weakened the employment base in many African American inner-city urban neighborhoods. As jobs become increasingly scarce in inner-city neighborhoods, many residents lose access to the formal labor market, resulting in the depopulation of working- and middle-class families from predominantly African
American neighborhoods (Wilson, 1987). These neighborhood structural changes have led to a concentration of the most spatially concentrated and racially segregated disadvantaged populations—especially poor, African American, female-headed families with children—often characterized by acute poverty, joblessness, and a sense of alienation from mainstream society (Massey & Denton, 1993; Sampson & Wilson, 1995; Wilson, 1987, 1996).

According to Wilson (1996), the depopulation of middle-class families influences the collective socialization of adolescents by shaping the types of role models youth are exposed to in their neighborhoods (Ainsworth, 2002). The presence of working- and middle-class neighbors provides varied benefits to the community. As Wilson (1987) argued, middle-class families serve as positive role models and contribute time and money to organizations that operate as social controls and promote conventional behavior. Their presence contributes financial and psychological resources that increase the quality of schools, social ties and networks, and recreational facilities and enhance police protection within a neighborhood. When middle-class families are present, they provide a “social buffer” that deflects the impact of high unemployment and poverty among those who are truly disadvantaged. However, the absence of working- and middle-class neighbors isolates poor families, and it is this concentrated neighborhood disadvantage that is likely to have important implications for adolescents’ socialization, which largely occurs within their neighborhoods. In sum, Wilson’s theory of neighborhood effects indicates that adolescents from disadvantaged neighborhoods are likely to be exposed to a number of risk factors that can derail positive adolescent development and thereby lead to an oppositional culture that tolerates deviant values and behaviors (Sampson & Wilson, 1995).

Wilson’s Theory of Neighborhood Effects and College Aspirations

The high concentration of poverty, racial segregation, unemployment, crime, and social isolation observed in extremely disadvantaged areas has created an environment in which deviance and problem behaviors are tolerated (E. Anderson, 1999; Kubrin, Wadsworth, & DiPietro, 2006; Kubrin & Weitzer, 2003; Sampson & Wilson, 1995, Wilson, 1996). As Wilson (1996) suggested, disadvantaged neighborhoods provide a fertile backdrop in which problem behaviors (e.g., violence, school dropout, and school failure) and oppositional values are allowed to flourish and spread in an epidemic fashion among young adolescents (Crane, 1991). Furthermore, Wilson (1987) argued that these oppositional values in disadvantaged neighborhoods lower future expectations, including educational endeavors.

With the out-migration from inner-city neighborhoods of working- and middle-class African American families who serve as role models, adolescents in high-poverty neighborhoods seldom interact on a sustained basis with individuals that represent mainstream society. According to Wilson (1996), this can be especially troubling for adolescent development. Because adolescents are sporadically interacting with employed and financially secure
neighbors, they are routinely shown that there are few benefits to achieving success in school, and there is no need to hold high educational aspirations (South & Baumer, 2000). These views thereby breed sentiments of fatalism and hopelessness about the benefits of education and what can be accomplished with additional schooling (Anderson, 1999; MacLeod, 1995; Wilson, 1996). As a result, problem behaviors such as dropping out of high school, grade-level failure, and low educational aspirations are normative (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993; Crane, 1991; Crowder & South, 2003; Duncan, 1994). According to Wilson (1996), the increasing social isolation and disorganization of African American inner-city neighborhoods “contributes to the formation and crystallization” (p. 66) of widely transmitted attitudes and behaviors favorable to educational underperformance.

Moreover, adolescents living in these disadvantaged areas have few opportunities for exposure to different mainstream environments. The exception is schooling. While schools are thought of as mainstream institutions, it is possible that schools in neighborhoods characterized by concentrated disadvantage, social disorganization, and racial isolation reflect the social ills found within their neighborhood environment. As Browning and Burrington (2006) pointed out, “the potentially positive effects of school environments are often compromised in disadvantaged neighborhoods and may serve as contexts for the transmission of problem behaviors” (p. 237). Exposure to widespread problem behaviors (e.g., dropout, school failure) in school and in the neighborhood is likely to create a culture of uncertainty for minority adolescents, thereby resulting in educational underperformance and devaluation, as they are unsure of the benefit of educational achievement as a means to status attainment or upward mobility (Crane, 1991; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Massey, 1996; Ogbu, 1991; Wilson, 1987, 1996). In other words, youth have low educational aspirations because they do not expect educational success to equate to economic success (Kao & Tienda, 1998). In turn, the conditions in these neighborhoods lead youth to question the long-term pay-off of schooling and to scale back their educational or occupational aspirations (MacLeod, 1995).

Furthermore, Wilson’s (1987, 1996) arguments have important implications for understanding neighborhood effects on adolescent outcomes. While researchers have rarely focused on how neighborhood context affects educational aspirations, they have focused on other developmental outcomes. Drawing on Wilson’s arguments, researchers have observed that the economic context of a neighborhood appears to affect adolescent development (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993, 1997; Chase-Lansdale & Gordon, 1996; Dornbusch, Ritter, & Steinberg, 1991; Duncan, 1994; Garner & Raudenbush, 1991; Simons, Murry, et al., 2002). These multidisciplinary studies explore the impact of neighborhood characteristics, especially neighborhood socioeconomic status, on adolescents’ developmental trajectories. They have linked neighborhood characteristics to a number of cognitive and behavioral outcomes, such as low academic achievement, educational failure, dropping out of high school, teenage childbearing, and delinquency (Ainsworth, 2002; E. Anderson, 1999;
Neighborhood Context and College Aspirations

Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993, 1997; Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Catsambis & Beveridge, 2001; Crane, 1991; Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994; Simons, Simons, Burt, Brody, & Cutrona, 2005; South & Baumer, 2000; South, Baumer, & Lutz, 2003; Sucoff & Upchurch, 1998). Thus, scholars are increasingly recognizing that neighborhoods matter and that more attention should be focused on understanding why neighborhood context matters for adolescent development (Connell & Halpern-Felsher, 1997; Sampson et al., 2002).

The above discussion highlights Wilson’s (1987, 1996) theory of neighborhood effects across a variety of adolescent domains and points to the continued importance of deciphering neighborhood context on adolescent development, which is a key aspect of the current study. The primary question that motivates this research is whether and to what extent an association exists between neighborhood structural disadvantage and college aspirations among African American adolescents. In particular, guided by Wilson’s theory of neighborhood effects, we hypothesize that living in a disadvantaged neighborhood context lowers African American adolescents’ college aspirations.

Method

Sample

This study is based on data from the Family and Community Health Study (FACHS), a multisite investigation of neighborhood and family effects on health and development (Simons, Lin, Gordon, Brody, & Conger, 2002). FACHS was designed to identify neighborhood and family processes that contribute to school-age African American children’s development in families living in a wide variety of community settings. Data were collected in Georgia and Iowa using similar research procedures. Interviews were conducted with the target children, who were in fifth grade at the time of recruitment; their primary caregivers; and secondary caregivers when present in the home. The first wave of data was collected in 1997, the second in 1999, and the third in 2001, when the target children were in the ninth grade. In Wave 1, the participants were 867 African American children (400 boys, 467 girls; 462 in Iowa, 405 in Georgia) and their primary caregivers. In Waves 2 and 3, 738 of the children and their caregivers were interviewed again. This was a retention rate of 85%. Analyses indicated that the families that did not participate in Wave 3 did not differ significantly from those that participated with regard to caregiver income and education or target child’s age, gender, and school performance. In the current study, we used data from Wave 3 because we were most interested in understanding how students in high school viewed their college aspirations. As Hill et al. (2004) point out, “adolescence is a critical time for forming aspirations for the future” (p. 1491). High school students are more likely than middle school and elementary students to understand their academic ability and assess their understanding of the educational process, thereby influencing their college aspirations. Our final sample consists of 720 participants who had complete data on our variables of interest.
in the models that follow. In Models 3 and 4, we included the effect of neighborhood structural disadvantage on college aspirations, while accounting for individual-level covariates. We observed that neighborhood disadvantage is significantly correlated with college aspirations. This finding suggests that living in a disadvantaged neighborhood context reduced college aspirations for some African American adolescents by about –.099 points for each unit increase in the disadvantage index. The effect of neighborhood socioeconomic status appears to operate independently of the effects of individual characteristics. However, it is unclear whether disadvantage remains a significant predictor of aspirations when other important neighborhood covariates are introduced.

Model 4 in Table 2 includes neighborhood disadvantage, as well as the addition of neighborhood violence, neighborhood stability, and neighborhood cohesion to the predictive equation of college aspirations. Again, the model accounts for the individual-level effects, which remain largely unchanged from Model 2. As shown, neighborhood disadvantage and neighborhood cohesion are the only two neighborhood characteristics to influence college aspirations in the full model. Consistent with our predictions, living in a disadvantaged and resource-poor neighborhood is a risk factor that decreases the chances of viewing college as highly important above and beyond individual-level attributes and key neighborhood controls. In particular, a one-unit increase in the disadvantage index results in a –.091 decrease in college aspirations. This result provides important support for Wilson's (1987, 1996) argument that adolescents who are consistently exposed to concentrated disadvantage are likely to hold or develop limited educational aspirations. In contrast, the regression coefficient for the neighborhood cohesion measure is related to college aspirations, indicating that an adolescent living in a cohesive neighborhood is more likely to have high aspirations. This finding suggests that neighborhoods high in levels of social cohesion serve a critical protective function and increase aspirations.

Moreover, Figure 1 displays the predicted values of college aspirations for adolescents who reside in neighborhoods that differ on levels of disadvantage. The predicted values were computed using the coefficients from Model 4 in Table 2 and assume mean values for all other variables. The predicted values associated with the estimated neighborhood disadvantage effect suggest that college aspirations range from about 2.7 in neighborhoods with high disadvantage (+2σ) to about 3.9 in neighborhoods with low disadvantage (–2σ), assuming mean values for all other variables. This translates into a 31% increase in aspirations going from a high-disadvantage to a low-disadvantage neighborhood. Collectively, the results suggest that neighborhood structural characteristics are important factors for understanding college aspirations and that they vary depending on neighborhood characteristics.

Discussion

Given the importance of students’ academic achievement for their subsequent educational and occupational attainment, understanding the factors
that influence achievement is critical. Researchers have shown a link between educational outcomes, such as academic achievement, and educational aspirations (Campbell, 1983; Caplan et al., 1992; Hill et al., 2004). These studies have focused almost exclusively on individual-level correlates to examine educational aspirations and have generated important findings. However, a consideration of the role of neighborhood context in influencing educational aspirations is noticeably absent. This lack of attention to contextual factors on educational aspirations is surprising given that neighborhood context has been shown to be an important predictor in shaping a variety of adolescent outcomes (Ainsworth, 2002; Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993; Crane, 1991; Crowder & South, 2003; Dornbusch et al., 1991; Duncan, 1994; Sampson et al., 2002; South & Baumer, 2000; Turley, 2003).

In the current study, we expanded on prior research by examining the impact of neighborhood context on college aspirations. Motivated by the work of Wilson (1987, 1996), we sought to determine the extent to which African American adolescents’ college aspirations are influenced by neighborhood structural disadvantage. Wilson’s (1987) work has focused on the effects of neighborhood disadvantage and racial isolation on various outcomes. We hypothesized that living in a disadvantaged neighborhood would lower adolescents’ college aspirations. We expected this neighborhood effect to persist net of individual factors associated with college aspirations, and the results largely supported our expectation.

Figure 1. Predicted values of college aspirations at different levels of neighborhood disadvantage.
On the basis of our findings, neighborhood structural conditions do matter in the formation of college aspirations for African American adolescents. Our investigation shows that the structural characteristics of neighborhoods can indeed negatively shape students’ college aspirations (Flowers et al., 2003). For example, our analysis shows that neighborhood disadvantage had an impact on lowering adolescents’ college aspirations and suggests that these contextual effects operate largely independent of individual-level characteristics. Our findings are consistent with those of ecological researchers, who have shown that neighborhood socioeconomic inequality is a strong correlate of negative attitudes and problem behaviors (Sampson et al., 2002). Thus, neighborhood economic inequality combined with neighborhood racial isolation leads to poor educational and behavioral outcomes (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993; Crane, 1991; Crowder & South, 2003; Dornbusch et al., 1991; Duncan, 1994; South & Baumer, 2000). Some researchers argue that economic deinvestment and inequality lead to a sense of hopelessness that pervades urban life to the point that the meaning of conventional beliefs and behaviors, such as college aspirations, is drastically altered (E. Anderson, 1999; Ogbu, 1991; MacLeod, 1995; Wilson, 1996). Our results lend support to this proposition.

Although a neighborhood control variable, our results support the theoretical argument that neighborhood cohesion is an important protective feature of neighborhoods that could improve adolescent outcomes (Sampson et al., 1999, 2002). Adolescents living in neighborhoods in which high levels of social cohesion exist had higher levels of college aspirations. This underscores the importance of adolescents’ being integrated into social networks in their neighborhood. Neighborhood-level social cohesion appears to exert an important socialization function, possibly through informal social controls that foster communication between parents, neighbors, and adolescents about the importance of education, which influences beliefs and behaviors (Coleman, 1988; Sampson et al., 1999). Moreover, we observed that violence and stability are not directly associated with college aspirations.

Even as we stress the importance of examining neighborhood context, we must also note the importance of accounting for individual-level predictors. Although not the primary focus of this research, we found several individual-level characteristics that influence college aspirations. Consistent with prior research, parental education, parental monitoring of school and homework, class failure, academic ability, school commitment, school attachment, teacher attachment, positive peer network, and school suspension were all significant predictors of college aspirations (Campbell, 1983; Caplan et al., 1992; Hill et al., 2004; MacLeod, 1995). Specifically, those adolescents who perceive themselves to be good students, are committed to school, are attached to school and teachers, associate with positive peers, and have parents with higher levels of education who monitor their schoolwork have high college aspirations. On the contrary, those adolescents who failed classes in the previous year and experienced disciplinary suspensions were more likely to have lower college aspirations. Together, these individual-level characteristics
serve as important social processes that influence aspirations and should be included in any analyses of neighborhood effects.

The larger implications of our results suggest that policies and efforts to improve educational outcomes should not focus solely on individual-level factors but should also incorporate efforts that focus on neighborhood features. Our findings offer evidence of contextual effects influencing educational outcomes, which highlights the need to incorporate neighborhood context for understanding college aspirations (Ainsworth, 2002; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2004). Wilson’s (1987, 1996) theory of neighborhood effects provides an important framework for understanding neighborhood structural disadvantage on adolescent outcomes. The effects of neighborhood disadvantage on college aspirations reinforce the importance of accounting for the social context in which adolescents reside.

One of the most pressing needs for future research on neighborhood effects is to identify the mechanisms through which contextual characteristics influence college aspirations. We were only able to estimate the direct effects of neighborhood influences on college aspirations. It is possible that neighborhood characteristics influence educational outcomes by interacting with individual-level characteristics. Although not significant in our results, future studies could examine whether individual-level characteristics moderate harsh neighborhood conditions on college aspirations. It is possible, for example, that school commitment, school attachment, teacher attachment, academic ability, and positive peer associations serve as social buffers to neighborhood structural disadvantage and increase benefits for neighborhoods high in cohesion. Thus, research that includes the interactions between individual- and neighborhood-level characteristics on college aspirations, as well as other outcomes, may help refine theories of neighborhood effects and enhance our understanding of how social context influences adolescent social behavior. Although the present study was able to identify neighborhood factors that were predictive of college aspirations, it provides only a piece of the larger puzzle. Further research is needed to understand the relationship between neighborhood characteristics and college aspirations.

Notes

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1To assess whether our findings were influenced by the creation of the neighborhood clusters, we replicated all estimated models in Stata (Version 9.2) using the original 259 BGAs and accounted for within-BGA (block group area) clustering of individuals. The results provided an identical set of substantive findings as those presented in the tables.

2As an astute reviewer correctly pointed out to us, estimating neighborhood effects is difficult and always involves some degree of unknown selection factors that may be confounded with neighborhoods; our study is no exception.
Secondary caregiver employment status data were also collected for this study. However, when both primary and secondary caregiver employment status were entered into the model, they were highly collinear. We also estimated a model in which we interchanged primary caregiver employment status with that of secondary caregivers. The variable remained nonsignificant in the model.

We acknowledge that grade point average (GPA) would be a better measure to tap academic performance than academic ability. However, because of data collection restrictions and privacy concerns, we were unable to collect GPA data from the students. To account for some level of academic performance, we used academic ability as a proxy for GPA.

To assess multicollinearity among the predictor variables, we examined the variance inflation factor. In the current study, multicollinearity does not appear to be a problem, as none of the variance inflation factors was greater than 2.0, suggesting that the variables are theoretically and empirically distinct constructs (Fisher & Mason, 1981).

It could be argued that our dependent variable is ordinal in nature and could be biased by treating the outcome as a continuous variable (Long, 1997). We reestimated all models using ordered logistic regressions, which assume proportional effects. The results of the ordered logistic models generated a pattern that was substantively identical to the results we obtained by treating our outcome as continuous in our models presented in this article. We present the results of the continuous outcome variable because the coefficients are easily understood and do not require estimating odds ratios or interpreting threshold estimates.

In preliminary analyses, we explored random-slope models and cross-level interactions. However, the slopes did not vary, and the results reported are based on fixed-slope models. Furthermore, no significant cross-level interactions were observed.

References


