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ABSTRACT

A review of the related literature indicates that research and youths' status projections have been traditionally characterized by a tendency toward psychological and behavioral conceptualizations, interpretations, and action implications. Aspiration and expectation elicitors, however, have primarily measured cultural value orientations. This incongruity in the research process has resulted in: questionable behavioral implications derived from the measurement of essentially normative phenomena; and psychological perspectives in which relatively common value orientations of persons of different life chances are perceived as qualitatively different. (Author)

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A CRITIQUE OF CONCEPTUALIZATION,
MEASUREMENT, AND INTERPRETATION OF YOUTHS'
OCCUPATIONAL AND EDUCATIONAL
STATUS PROJECTIONS¹

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ABSTRACT

Research on youths' status projections has been traditionally characterized by a tendency toward psychological and behavioral conceptualizations, interpretations, and action implications. Aspiration and expectation elicitors, however, have primarily measured cultural value orientations. This incongruity in the research process has resulted in: questionable behavioral implications derived from the measurement of essentially normative phenomena; and, psychological perspectives in which relatively common value orientations of persons of different life chances are perceived as qualitatively different.

INTRODUCTION

In a recent theoretical statement on the dynamics underlying occupational and educational status projections the author comments:

As I reviewed the literature. . . I was struck by the large number and variety of presumed antecedent variables found to have a low degree of association with occupational and educational status projections, and the lack of any observed to have

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a very strong association with these phenomena. (Kuvlesky, 1970:12). The possible explanations for this situation mentioned by Kuvlesky include: complex, multiple causation; inadequate measurement; fuzzy conceptualization; lack of conceptual integration through varying levels of abstraction; and finally "our failure to develop an abstract, inclusive theoretical scheme ordering chains of causal relationships" (Kuvlesky, 1970:12).

The latter, "theoretical-causal relationships" explanation with which Kuvlesky's paper is concerned, has emerged as the prevalent theme in status projection research. This is reflected in a new set of "problems" such as selection and order of variables in path analytic models, elaboration of relationships (direct effects, mediation, spuriousness), and rationalizing the ubiquitous low explained variance. Although this trend and its problems may be more appropriately characterized as empiricism rather than theoretical refinement, increased analytical efforts have been productive. They have revealed considerable spuriousness in numerous correlates of status projections, relatively few variables with direct effect on status projections, and only modest explained variance in the dependent projections.

Interpretation in analytical models, the explanation of "why" things happen, can only be fruitful to the extent they are based on valid description of "what" happened. Derek Phillips, in an article entitled "Sociologists and their knowledge" (1971) contends that sociologists assume that a descriptive account followed by an analytical interpretation constitutes the "complete explanation." But, says Phillips, we are very inadequate in even the first, establishing a social fact. This brings us not to such questions as which independent variables have been left out of our path models, but to the question of conceptualization and measurement of occupational status projections. With the realization that questions concerning the construct validity of occupational and educational status projections are "out-dated" (Duncan, Featherman, and Duncan, 1972: 106-107)- the main contention in this paper is that a re-examination of what we are measuring

with our status projection elicitors is a necessary point of departure in explaining the state of productivity in status projection analysis.

INCONGRUOUS CONCEPTUALIZATION AND MEASUREMENT

An alternative interpretation of the low degree of association between status projections and various correlates is that although theory, conceptualization, and interpretation have been considerably influenced by psychological developmental theory, measurements of status projections have been eliciting primarily normative or cultural phenomena with only weak behavioral implications. For example, Kuvlesky and Bealer (1966) conceptualize aspiration as "the mental processes of a person or persons which serve as channeling of energies toward a status goal." Similarly, Oberle and Campbell (1971) conceptualize occupational choice with the first assumption: "the actor has goals (or aims, or ends); his actions (or behavior) are usually directed toward the pursuit of these". Such conceptualization ignores, or at least obscures, the fact that high status aspirations may be verbalized without individual energies, motivations, and behavior channeled toward pursuit of the status that is designated as either "aspired" or "expected."

This conceptualization may be challenged on the basis of "confusion of cultural and personal levels of analysis" (Yinger, 1965: 21-26, 71-95); "atomistic" assumptions regarding the relationship of individual value orientations to behavior (Cohen, 1965); and failure to distinguish between "ideal culture" and "real culture" (Linton, 1945: 43-54). An individual subscription to major value orientation of secular success and achievement in the United States is, perhaps, a necessary, but certainly not sufficient, personal condition for success striving or overcoming structural inequality.

Not only have the structural and interactional conditions mediating the relationship between culture and behavior been unaccounted for in this incongruity, but also the high success and achievement values of some persons are interpreted

as "naive personal commitments." The behavioral assumptions underlying conceptualization of status projections have been perpetuated by the use of individualized concepts of "plans" and "choice" synonymously with value orientations. This has, in turn, led to the characterization of the high success and achievement orientations of youth as "unrealistic" personal commitments rather than "idealistic" or cultural phenomena.

This is especially apparent in an examination of the extent to which behavioral interpretations of status orientations have been utilized to explain differences between socioeconomic and ethnic categories.

DUALISTIC PERSPECTIVES OF SUCCESS ORIENTATIONS

Although high occupational and educational status projections are generally given by youth regardless of social class, ethnicity, type residence, sex, or age, numerous interpretations have depicted the high aspirations of lower social class persons as having "meanings," "motivational bases," and "behavioral implications" that are different from the aspirations of middle class persons.

For example, lower socioeconomic parents want their children to go to college, however, for them it is seen only as a wish, whereas it is seen as an unquestioned expectation of the middle class parent (Weiner and Murray, 1963). The professional career aspirations of working-class fathers for their sons have been described as vicarious success orientations of immobile workers (Chinoy, 1952). The success value orientations of black parents for their children are seen as motivated primarily by: a desire for "economic security" and the "consumatory aspects of success" (Hyman, 1966); the process of dissociation from inferior cultural status (Antonovsky and Lerner, 1959); and, the desire for prestigious occupations for their children without an understanding of the long, hard years of preparation required for pursuing such careers (Bernard, 1966:112, 137). Furthermore, the "grossly unrealistic" parental aspirations are depicted as a possible source of unbearable frustration.

The unusually high proportion of lower class respondents in general and Negroes in particular who expect their sons to enter professional-managerial occupations suggests that they have either "bought" the American ideology of "equal opportunity" or that an element of "fantasy" is involved in these responses. If the former is the case, this raises the interesting question of how these respondents protect themselves against the frustration and disappointment that must come with eventual failure of their sons to realize their aspirations. It appears that they do not perceive the limitations of their social class and racial status. Perhaps they never will for the distortion of reality is itself a form of protection (Kendling and Elliott, 1968:129).

Likewise, the "professional" and "college" aspiration levels of disadvantaged youth are interpreted as qualitatively different from the same levels of aspiration by middle class youth. For example, Antonovsky and Lerner (1959) characterize black youth's success value orientations as a form of over-compensation for inferior status and acute lack of self-esteem. Girls from the lower social strata with high occupational aspirations have been depicted as motivated by the need to escape from their present environment, while, in contrast, girls from higher socioeconomic status are seen as seeking stimulating work and opportunities for self-expression (Slocum and Empey, 1957:17).

Most recently, a "dualistic" perspective of status projections, which is implicit in the above interpretations, has been articulated.

The occupational choices made by individuals operate in two widely differing ways depending largely on the individuals' occupational chances. If we assume that American youth are characterized by two chance groupings. . . it is quite reasonable to expect that occupational choices. . . would perform different

functions for each. . . In the high attainment group. . . occupational choices would conform to the goal directed developmental model as presented by Ginzberg. . . Choices for the low attainment group, however, may have little direct bearing on attainment. Instead, they provide a psychological crutch, a compensating influence for failure in a success-oriented society (Cosby, Dietrich, & White, 1972:23).

These "dualistic interpretations" of status projections are not too dissimilar from the interpretations that result when investigators discover that lower class persons, especially ethnic minority members, have high self-esteem. McCarthy and Yancey note that some investigators are apparently surprised, while others resort to "mental gymnastics" in order to reinterpret negative evidence into the traditional argument: "high self-esteem on the part of Negroes is a defense mechanism against discrimination" (1971:659). High levels of aspiration are, in fact, incongruent with low socioeconomic status if one assumes that people are in poverty because of low aspirations (Hyman, 1966) or low self-esteem (Shoffner, 1969).

Dualistic perspectives, and perhaps "selective perception of differences", have a legacy in sociology, characterized by: comparison (contrasting?) of social categories; via a repertory of "explanatory" concepts such as "deferred gratification pattern" (Miller, Riessman, and Seagull, 1968); with reliance upon tests of differences of means and proportions. Consequently, differences may be emphasized to the neglect of perception of similarities between comparative categories.

Thus, the "need" for a dualistic perspective of aspiration emerges because aspirations are "supposed" to be directly related to achievement,² consequently

² Kuvlesky and Bealer (1967) contend that the relationship is weak and adolescent aspirations are not good predictors of long-run attainment. Longitudinal studies reveal a low rate of congruence between levels of occupational aspirations and levels of attainment, with congruence varying from 14 to 35 percent (Kuvlesky, 1969:17).

success aspirations are "unrealistic" for those with low chances for achievement. In other words, as the myth of low aspiration was exploded in 1960's as the reason poor people were poor, the "need" to explain inequality in terms of debilitating social psychological characteristics may be retained in such labels as "psychological compensation for anticipated future failure" (Costly, Dietrich, & White, 1972).

CONSTRUCT VALIDITY OF STATUS PROJECTIONS

Having explored some ways in which previous conceptualization has influenced interpretation, a return to the question of "what is being measured" necessitates a discussion of the behavioral implications of status projections.

One way in which construct validity can be approached is in terms of predictability of correlates derived from theoretical assumptions. As previously noted analytical models are typically found lacking in the amount of explained variance in the dependent status projections, especially in occupational projections. In view of the direct relationship of amount of explained variance to socioeconomic characteristics (Ten Houten, et al., 1970) and urbanity (Sewell, Haller, and Ohlendorf, 1970) the state of predictability may often be attributed to "immaturity" of the respondents. One source of measurement error, and hence low explained variance, is rationalized as resulting from "lack of understanding the aspiration expectation elicitors" - as revealed in the fact that all too frequently expectations are congruent with, or even exceed, aspirations.

In an similar vein the largest contribution to explained variance in the dependent status projection is typically from other status projection variables

in analytical models.⁵ This is to say, that "significant others' expectation," "mother's status projection for the youth," or other status projections of the youth are the primary contributors to explained variance, and likewise serve as principle variables mediating indirect effects of other antecedent variables to the dependent projections.

Another issue pertinent to construct validity of measures of status projections is the extent to which change in status projections can be predicted with additional age, intellectual maturity, and education. Although this problem has been relatively ignored in survey research, tentatively:

The recent findings would indicate that youth do not become more realistic in their aspirations and expectations through high school, conversely, many of them become less realistic (Kuvlesky, 1969:18).

This is illustrated by a recent test of Ginsberg's theory in a study of rural black and white Texas high school youth. Changes in their level of occupational expectation between sophomore and senior years were found to be somewhat equally divided between an increase (43 percent) and a decrease (38 percent) in expectation (Cosby, et al., 1972). The impact of psychological developmental theories of occupational choice on sociologists may be seen in the fact that even when occupational expectations are not found to change in accordance with developmental theory, various psychological interpretations

⁵For example, in a nine variable model an $R^2 = .56$ was attained in explaining student's occupational aspiration with only two significant antecedents - "student's educational aspiration" and "significant others' occupational expectation" (Haller & Woelfel, 1972:615).

(as noted earlier) are still rendered by the investigators.

Further questioning of behavioral implications are to be found in: Kuvlesky and Bealer's (1967) contention that occupational aspiration is of questionable importance as a determinant of subsequent occupational attainment; William's (1968:125) finding that educational aspirations have little or no direct effects on academic achievement; Liska's (1971) methodological critique and reinterpretation of data from previous studies, thereby demonstrating that the discrepancy between aspirations and expectations (negative anticipatory deflection) was not related to delinquent behavior; and recent findings that achievement motivation is not highly relevant to status attainment (Duncan, Featherman, and Duncan, 1972; Featherman, 1972). Although these studies are few in number, a point worth noting is the fact that these studies attempted methodological refinements in examining some traditionally held assumptions about the relationship of status orientations to behavior. This is to say, their findings are not merely a selection of contrary findings that randomly occur in any given area of investigation.

CLARIFICATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The criticisms presented in this paper need some clarification. No either-or argument was forwarded concerning the cultural or personal nature of status projections, for in reality they are inseparable. Analytically, however, they are distinct in terms of the level of phenomena being measured. If, however, current measures of youths' status projections do in fact operationalize essentially cultural and normative phenomena then researchers and action agents cannot expect the behavioral implications they often purport them to have. Indeed, proposals to alleviate poverty by enhancing self-concept and thereby raising aspirations of disadvantaged youth (Shoffner, 1969) or by changing significant others' expectations (Haller and Woelfel, 1972) are of questionable nature. Such proposals are suspect not only because of question-

able implications, but also because considerable intergenerational mobility would result if the status expectations of disadvantaged youth were attained.

The criticism of dualistic interpretations of the success orientations of persons of different life chances was not intended to convey the notion that such interpretations are not real alternatives. They are, however, a precedent that researchers may uncritically adhere to.⁴ The finding that high occupational status projections of academically bright, black urban girls are positively related to conversations with anomic mothers and large, husbandless households (Butler, 1973) is suggestive of a "desire to dissociate themselves from an inferior social status" (Antonovsky and Lerner, 1959). This does not necessarily lead to the "speculative" conclusion that they are compensating for anticipated future failure.

Dualistic perspectives are a "testable" alternative in the need to ascertain the extent to which common levels of occupational projections are based

⁴A reminiscent parallel in commitment to aspects of socialization in a profession can be noted in: psychologists' and psychiatrists' commitment to traditional interpretations of projective techniques when confronted with invalidating evidence (Chapman and Chapman, 1971); dualistic interpretations of common symptom profiles of persons of different socioeconomic status and political views (Braginsky and Braginsky, 1973:138-139); definition of some persons' problems as "mental illness" while others are not so labeled (Szasz, 1964) resulting in discriminatory behavior toward clients by the legal and psychiatric professions (Oran, 1975).

on "occupational prestige," "monetary rewards," and "nature of the occupation." This has been suggested by the contentions that for persons of lower social origins, especially persons of ethnic minorities, economic or consumatory aspects of success are most salient (Hyman, 1966; Kohn, 1969), while prestige motivation is generally thought to be a middle-class phenomenon, and nature of the job would, of course, be predicted as the primary characteristic of the "fantasy" stage in the developmental theory of occupational choice (Ginzberg, et al., 1951). Several qualitative measures such as "intensity of aspiration" and "certainty of aspiration" may likewise enhance a more sensitive differentiation of individuals. Even here, however, there is an attempt to elicit a cognitive level that may develop with participation in the attainment process, rather than in anticipation of it.

Dualistic perspectives are also testable by the examination of hypothetical processes underlying the status projections of comparative social categories. This is, of course, recently characterized by the use of regression models to evaluate the relative influence of selected variables on the dependent status projections. Although common sets of significant antecedents are found between some comparative racial-residential categories (Sewell, Haller, Ohlendorf, 1970; Butler, 1973) different sets are found by other comparisons (Picou, et al. 1972).

Any notion that occupational and educational status projections are unrelated to future status attainment was not intended, the idea that is intended is that relatively low coefficients are to be expected if measurements of status projection operationalize normative phenomena. Furthermore, the behavioral implications that are drawn from significant regression coefficients are questionable. As Duncan (1966) points out, most of the variables in sociological research are not such that significant standardized regression coefficients relating variables can be given a "causal" designation. Even when the temporal order is established for two strongly related variables, such as in the direct effect of father's occupation on son's occupational attainment, a causal design-

nation is to imply less than the complexities of social reality. Likewise Wilson (1971:441) contends that such relationships "cannot be taken literally," . . . nevertheless, can be useful in the "interpretation of social phenomena."

The literal interpretation of a significant regression coefficient, and hence a questionable behavioral implication drawn, is to be found in a recent study by Haller and Woelfel (1972). Their finding that student's occupational and educational aspiration is affected only by the corresponding status expectation of significant others leads to the conclusion:

We might reasonably expect to change occupational aspirations by changing SO's occupational expectations but not by changing their educational expectations, and vice versa (616).

Such behavioral interpretations raise the question of possible exaggeration of the extent to which mobility orientations are actually transmitted by parental influence. An alternative explanation is the parent-child agreement is the result of numerous common factors acting upon family members that leads to independent agreement (Furstenberg, 1971:596-602).⁵

Finally, no disparagement of social psychological variables, intervening

⁵This explanation is unacceptable if the standardized partial regression coefficient between mother's status projection for child and child's status projection is taken literally as "influence." It is very easy, on the other hand, to dismiss a significant negative regression coefficient between "no father" and "father's significant other influence" as a fortuitous event.

between social origin and status attainment was intended. However, in view of the contention that personal characteristics are important determinants of variation in mobility among persons sharing similar social positions (Crockett, 1966:281), I am reminded of two mobility trends. First, the "distance" of intergenerational mobility tends to be confined to levels adjacent to father's level (Miller, 1960). Second, "substantial occupational and economic disadvantages accrue to black men, despite their parity with whites in social origins and education, and for constant IQ scores" (Duncan, Featherman, & Duncan, 1972:105).

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