A MORE COMPREHENSIVE THEORY OF EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF THE DETERMINANTS OF RACIAL AND ETHNIC INEQUALITY IN THE COLLEGE COMPLETION PROCESS


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The Civil Rights movement and the Great Society legislation of the 1960s and early 1970s resulted in numerous initiatives designed to bring race/ethnic minorities into mainstream American society. Many of these initiatives were implemented in the educational system, as educational attainment is an important determinant of social mobility. The numerous programs intended to integrate race/ethnic minorities into mainstream society via increased educational attainment have been somewhat successful, as the proportion of racial/ethnic minorities completing college has increased since the 1970s. However, the racial/ethnic gap in college completion has minimally changed, as the proportion of white students completing college has also increased. In an attempt to understand the determinants of educational inequality numerous theories of educational attainment have been developed. A handful of these perspectives, the Wisconsin Model, Oppositional Culture, Capital Deficiency, and Segmented Assimilation have gained prominence. However they can not consistently explain the race/ethnic achievement gap. To better understand racial/ethnic inequality this dissertation engages the leading theories of educational attainment. Initially, it uses the University of Washington Beyond High School Project data to independently examine each theory and assess whether it operates as hypothesized. After the independent assessment, a cumulative integrated theory of educational attainment is constructed, utilizing the key explanatory mechanisms from the leading theories of educational attainment, such as family context and encouragement from significant others. The integrated theory of attainment is advantageous as it best explains the racial/ethnic achievement gap and the educational attainment process. This dissertation also examines whether a cumulative integrated theory explains the racial/ethnic variation that exists across the educational transitions in the college completion process. Lastly, encouragement from significant others is examined as it is a central explanatory mechanism in the college completion process. The results illustrate that a less advantaged family context is the main obstacle for traditionally disadvantaged minority youth, while the advantage displayed youth from Asian ethnic groups is largely a function of their increased receipt of significant others college encouragement. Also, the results reveal that significant others encouragement, not only attenuates race/ethnic variation, it is also a key explanatory variable in the college completion process.