ABSTRACT: New cultural approaches to the study of poverty treat “culture” as providing the means for action and neglect the classical concern with motives for action. The author argues that though this paradigm shift has led to many important and interesting discoveries, it has also created blind spots that prevent a more complete understanding of how culture shapes action. After showing that values, attitudes, and other motive concepts have been unfairly excluded from the new cultural pantheon, the author uses the empirical example of educational continuation to show that poor and non-poor youth differ in their educational aspirations and that these differences can predict school continuation six years later. The findings are interpreted with an eye toward synthesizing “old” and “new” approaches to the study of culture and socioeconomic disadvantage.

BIO: Stephen Vaisey is assistant professor of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. He conducts research in the areas of culture, cognition, and action theory. His most recent work aims to integrate dual-process models of cognition into sociological research (“Motivation and Justification: A Dual-Process Model of Culture in Action, American Journal of Sociology, 2009).
What People Want: Poverty, Aspirations, and Educational Attainment

What role, if any, should culture play in explaining poverty? Most contemporary social scientists reject the notion that culture—classically understood as “values” (Parsons and Shils 1951) or “conceptions of the desirable” (Kluckhohn 1951)—plays a significant role in the perpetuation of socioeconomic disadvantage. The primary reason for this objection seems to be an aversion to “blaming the victim” for his or her impoverished state. The tendency of some writers to ignore environmental factors and treat values or attitudes as functions of individual character has made many social scientists shy about examining the role of culture in creating and sustaining disadvantage (Patterson 2006). Thus, for three or more decades, empirical social research has been focused on social-structural factors like macroeconomic conditions, government programs, or the absence of local opportunities for mobility, and has given little sustained attention to the role of patterned differences in the ways people think about and evaluate the world (Patterson 2006; Lamont and Small 2008; Sanchez-Jankowski 2008; Wilson 2009).

In the meantime, however, the way sociologists use the term “culture” has changed significantly. Most of those who call themselves “cultural sociologists” now reject the idea of culture as values or ideals. Instead, they speak of it using terms like “toolkit” or “repertoire” (Swidler 1986, 2001; Lamont 1992; Lamont and Small 2008:79) or, more generally, as “complex rule-like structures that constitute resources that can be put to strategic use” (DiMaggio 1997:265, emphasis added). One way to characterize this change is as a shift from thinking of culture as shaping the ends people pursue to thinking of it as providing a variety of means or “capacities” (Swidler 2001) for action and interaction. Culture is thus often regarded as vocabularies that people “use,” “mobilize,” or “deploy” to draw symbolic boundaries and make sense of their behavior (Mills 1940; Swidler 1986; Lamont 1992; Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; see also Kaufman 2004) or as skills that allow the possessor to do things they otherwise could not (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Swidler 1986, 2001, 2008; Lareau 2003).

These newer cultural concepts differ in many ways, but they have one thing in common—they neglect the question of motives for action (see Smith 2003; Kaufman 2004; Vaisey 2009). This shift from “old culture” to “new culture” on the issue of motive is not simply a change in emphasis, but was based—at least initially—on a conscious rejection and deliberate shift. In what has arguably become the most influential founding statement of the new sociology of culture, Swidler declared that “what people want ... is of little help in explaining their action” (1986:274). Though the “cultural toolkit” approach she introduced to replace the “values paradigm” has undoubtedly been put to many uses she did not intend, the fact that cultural sociologists now “reject the assumption that culture generates values that drive ... action” (Kaufman 2004:340) and think of culture as “resources that can be put to strategic use” (DiMaggio 1997:265) is evidence that the paradigm shift she proposed more than two decades ago has largely taken place.

I want to argue, however, that though this paradigm shift has led to many important and interesting discoveries, it has also created blind spots that keep us from a more complete understanding of how culture shapes action. To illustrate such a blind spot, I examine how one aspect of “what people want”—their educational aspirations—can in fact be of substantial help in explaining at least one of their actions—continuing their schooling—thus leading to a more realistic understanding of the mechanisms that lead to lower school continuation rates among the poor. To be clear, my goal is not to reject the new approach, but rather to move toward a more fruitful synthesis of “old” and “new” ways of thinking about culture’s role in action.

Given the potentially controversial nature of including the words “poverty” and “culture” in the same paper, I would like to offer two caveats before proceeding: first, though the contemporary research relating culture to action is quite heterogeneous, much of it shares a common foil—“the values paradigm” (see e.g., Swidler 1986; Young 2004; Harding 2007; Lamont and Small 2008; Wilson 2009). Since my objective is to reintegrate aspects of this older paradigm into the newer approach, I am hard pressed to avoid the term “values,” which unfortunately can mean very different things to different audiences (see, e.g., Hechter 1994; Hitlin and Piliavin 2003; Baker 2005). It is difficult to maintain conceptual clarity of any kind, however, when the “values paradigm” is regularly critiqued using any and all combinations of the terms “values,” “norms,” “motives,” “attitudes,” “goals,” “ideals,” “morals,” “aspirations,” “preferences,” “wants,” and “desires” (see e.g., Swidler 1986; Small 2002; Harding 2004; Young 2004; Lamont and Small 2008; Wilson 2009). I will attempt to keep terminological diversity to a minimum, but for the purposes of this paper, all such terms can be understood as variations on the broader theme of motivation—that is, on the theme of “what people
want”—and how it might exert causal effects on conduct (Swidler 1986: 274; see Campbell 1996: 69-71; Smith 2003; Vaisey 2009). Second, though discussions of poverty and culture seem to switch without warning between individual or household socioeconomic differences, neighborhood differences, and racial and ethnic group differences, I want to be clear that this paper has very little (perhaps nothing at all) to say about race or neighborhoods per se. My use of the term “poor” means quite simply “members of households currently below the poverty line” and should not be misread as signifying anything else.

Keeping these caveats in mind, this paper ultimately arrives at three main empirical findings: (1) the educational aspirations and expectations of poor youth are lower than those of non-poor youth; (2) net of social structural controls, aspirations and expectations are significant predictors of school enrollment six years later; and (3) although expectations are more important than aspirations on average, aspirations turn out to be substantially more important than expectations for predicting the educational continuation of poor youth. Before turning to the empirics, however, it is first necessary to do some conceptual work that will locate the investigation in more general debates about culture’s relationship to conduct. Following the empirical analysis, I conclude by sketching some implications of the findings with an eye toward improving our understanding of how culture matters and how it can help us better explain the persistence of socioeconomic disadvantage.

The Unwarranted Exile of Motives from the Cultural Pantheon

Though pursuing a “motivational understanding” (Campbell 2006:212) of human action was once of central sociological concern, most sociologists now either ignore the issue of subjective motivation (Smith 2003) or actively assert its unimportance for explaining conduct (e.g., Mills 1940; Swidler 1986; see Kaufman 2004). In cultural sociology, this trend is best exemplified by explicit rejection of the “values paradigm” and the amount of rhetorical work many scholars—especially those studying economic stratification—do to distance themselves from it (Swidler 1986; Young 2004; Harding 2007; Lamont and Small 2008; Wilson 2009; see also Patterson 2006). Small (2002:5-6) echoes a common theme when he concludes that “the notion that people’s actions are driven primarily by their norms and values is dated and simplistic.”

Although, as I noted above, “values” is the word most often used to denote the postwar approach to culture, many other terms are substituted interchangeably, such as “norms,” “attitudes,” “goals,” “ideals,” “preferences,” and “aspirations.” Beyond any individual term, the objects of criticism appear to involve the assertion that “what people want” (Swidler 1986:274) has “exogenous explanatory force” (Small 2002:5) or exists in a “cause-and-effect relationship” to behavior (Lamont and Small 2008:81). In other words, these scholars have rejected the idea that culture operates by shaping motives and instead argue that culture makes some actions possible and others difficult or impossible by constituting one’s repertoire of skills and knowledge (see Campbell 1996, 2006***; Smith 2003; and Vaisey 2008a, 2008b, 2009 for more detailed versions of this argument). I therefore use the general terms motives and motivation to refer to all internal states with “exogenous explanatory force.”

This definitional work, however, does not explain why most sociologists have turned away from culturally shaped motives as possible explanatory factors. Why did this shift occur? Of course, there are better and worse reasons to discard a theoretical approach, and some of both were involved in the rejection of the “values paradigm.” Below, I outline several major objections, and show that—despite frequent assertions to the contrary—the theoretical, methodological, and empirical case against cultural motives is remarkably thin.

An Important Critique

One good reason for rejecting “values” was the objection to the method of “deductive imposition” (Spates 1983). Functionalist theory (à la Parsons and Shils [1951]) began by assuming the motivational importance of values and then proceeded to deduce them from behavior. As critics rightly pointed out, such an approach is fatally flawed because it provides no way to show that values are not playing a role (Wrong 1961; Spates 1983; Swidler 1986; Wilson 2009). Since decision making is presumably shaped by what people want and by the structure of opportunities and constraints (both internal and external), we cannot know if the choices we observe are due mainly to one or the other without either measuring them separately or by creating (experimental) situations in which opportunities are strictly equivalent (Manski 2004). Though the critique of deductive imposition is a useful reminder for those few who might be tempted to
infer motives based solely on observed behavior, it does not rule out measuring motivational constructs directly and using them to predict variations in observed conduct (see, e.g., Hechter et al. 1999; Hitlin and Piliavin 2003).

Principled but Problematic Objections

Another objection is grounded in skepticism about the feasibility of measuring subjective states reliably (e.g., Wuthnow 1987). Though the evidentiary basis for such objections was never very strong (see Campbell 1996), the findings and research programs of contemporary psychology and cognitive science make any such generalized skepticism unwarranted (see e.g., Cervone 2005; Leary 2007; Bower 2008; Weber and Johnson 2009). In any case, such an objection would scarcely be persuasive to the majority of contemporary cultural sociologists, who are turning more and more to cognitive science for insights (e.g., DiMaggio 1997; Cerulo 2002; Bergesen 2004; Ignatow 2007; Lizardo 2007b; Vaisey 2009). “Cognitive cultural concepts” (Harding 2007:361) like repertoires, frames, scripts, and narratives have been at the center of the recent surge of culturally inspired research on poverty and economic disadvantage (Small 2002, 2004; Wilson 2009). It is thus safe to conclude that most cultural sociologists do not object to explanatory frameworks that involve subjective states per se, but rather to explanations involving motivational subjective states.

Lamont and Small (2008) clarify the grounds of this objection in their review of the culture literature. They are much more optimistic about the usefulness of “cognitive” conceptions of culture (e.g., frames, scripts) that shape “how something is perceived as real” than they are about “normative” ones (e.g., values, attitudes) that “focus on how we evaluate good and bad” (80; see also Small 2002: 30, Young 2004: 19, Harding 2007: 352-3, and Wilson 2009: 17 for similar distinctions). Running parallel to the cognitive-normative divide, contemporary cultural sociologists tend to embrace concepts proposed as necessary conditions—those that “enable,” “constrain,” and “make possible” various courses of action—while rejecting concepts that claim some degree of causal sufficiency—that is, those purporting to possess “exogenous causal force” (Small 2002; Lamont and Small 2008; Swidler 1986, 2008; Wilson 2009; see Vaisey 2008b).

These distinctions are difficult to sustain in practice, however. Responding to similar arguments among his fellow anthropologists, Shweder (1992) argues that most cultural statements are inherently evaluative and that our efforts to separate informational “content” from motivational “force” are misguided. Consider, for instance, two possible “framings” of Robin Hood: “dangerous outlaw” or “daring hero.” Though these frames make salient different facts about the target, they also contain evaluative and motivational components. That is, each has different implications for evaluating him as a “good guy” or “bad guy” and different implications about what makes sense to do if he shows up at your door (e.g., call the Sheriff or help him escape). Tversky and Kahneman’s (1981) classic “Asian disease” experiment illustrates the same point: framing mathematically equivalent scenarios in terms of saving lives or letting people die makes a difference precisely because such frames are relevant to people for sorting “good” from “bad” outcomes. This change in framing also turns out to be causally sufficient to motivate different choices. There is thus little justification for concluding that concepts like frames or narratives should be thought of as purely “cognitive” (i.e., informational) or that “cultural models” of this type lack the “exogenous causal force” to motivate those that have internalized them (see also D’Andrade and Strauss 1992; D’Andrade 1995; and Strauss and Quinn 1997 for more on the relationship between models and motives).

A close reading of exemplary works in the new cultural sociology further demonstrates the impossibility of trying to separate “cognitive” cultural models from evaluation and motivation. Young (2004:158-159), for example, considers how many marginalized black men perceive education’s role in attaining the good life. One of his informants, Peter, claims that “education is just cluttering your head with a bunch of stuff,” and he asks rhetorically, “What do I need with this stuff?” Though this is indeed a framing of what education is, and a perception of “how the world works” (Wilson 2009: 17), it also has clear implications for Peter’s estimate of the value or worth of education. If he regards education as objectively useless for achieving the good life, how could this not affect his propensity to trade off schooling-related activities when mutually exclusive opportunities arise? In another recent study, Harding (2007) interprets a teenager’s level of agreement with the survey prompt, “it wouldn’t be all that bad if you got [someone] pregnant at this time in your life,” as a frame, distancing it from “attitudinal measures” even though it contains evaluative language (“bad”) and matches the social psychological definition of attitudes—“favorable or unfavorable evaluations of an object” (Hitlin and Piliavin 2003:361). Though Harding’s finding that one’s individual response is less predictive of sexual behavior as the local heterogeneity of responses increases is fascinating and important, he does not
develop an account of the strong net association between the individual response and behavior in most settings. This finding could be seen as evidence that some teenagers have internalized these cultural models of teenage pregnancy to a degree sufficient to motivate their conduct (see D’Andrade 1995).

My intent here is not to criticize this work—indeed both of these pieces of research are excellent. Nor is it to argue that concepts like frames, scripts, and narratives are nothing but values or attitudes in disguise, since the frame concept does add a great deal to understanding the cognitive mechanisms behind these judgments. Instead, I believe that classical notions of evaluation and motivation are eminently compatible with contemporary cultural sociology and that the main obstacle to synthesis is a tendency to misrepresent the key claims and characteristics of the “values paradigm.” Contemporary cultural sociologists, as I have shown, work hard to exclude values and motives from their work. But why? What underlies this strong refusal?

Unnecessary Objections and Double Standards

Though the “values paradigm,” as we have seen, involves much more than “values,” Kluckhohn’s classic (1951:395) definition of the term provides a good starting place for thinking about its basic elements: “a value is a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable, which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action.” By this account, culture involves cognitive “conceptions” that are also evaluative (i.e., about what is “desirable”) and that shape action by explicitly or implicitly motivating “the selection among the alternatives of orientation which are intrinsically open in a situation” (Parsons 1951: 11-12; see also Swidler 1986: 274). There are thus two major differences between this classical approach and more recent conceptions of culture: (1) the new approach attempts to exclude the notion of preference or evaluation while the classical approach does not and (2) the new approach regards culture’s influence as operating via constraints on the “available modes, means, and ends of action” (i.e., via processes of causal necessity) while the classical approach sees cultural meanings guiding choices—though not necessarily consciously—from among concretely available options (i.e., via processes of causal sufficiency).

Beyond these basic features however, however, the implications of older approaches are sometimes misrepresented in ways that make reconciling them with newer approaches unnecessarily difficult. One primary locus of misunderstanding is around the question of within-group and between-group variation in values, attitudes, and other motivational constructs. Many scholars who champion new approaches to the study of poverty and culture argue against the idea that class or ethnic cultures are “monolithic entities” (Harding 2007: 345) possessing values that are “shared universally” within the group (Lamont and Small 2008: 81). Though the language around this issue can sometimes be exaggerated (since all scholars of course recognize both sources of variation), the real debate is over the importance of between-group variation for explaining outcomes. Lamont and Small (2008: 79), for instance, note the existence of between-group variation but argue against its importance given that “intragroup differences are often larger than intergroup differences.” Their argument appears to rest on the fact that several studies have found “little support for the notion of a collective ghetto culture shared universally by residents in high poverty” and thus “studies of [group] differences in poverty looking for explanations in values are unlikely to find much” (p. 81). But this doesn’t follow. Neither the amount of within-group variation nor the relative size of within- and between-group variation is relevant to assessing the power of between-group differences to account for differences in outcomes. What matter instead are the strength of the relationship between the causal factor and the outcome and the absolute size of the between-group difference. Only research that explicitly compares groups can adjudicate such questions.

Another source of misunderstanding is around the essentialism or mutability of cultural traits. Some reasonably worry that taking group differences seriously might lead some to infer “essential or permanent differences between class norms or attitudes” (Lamont and Small 2008: 97). This, however, is in no way a necessary part of an approach to culture that includes attention to values or other motives. Though there are genuine disagreements about the durability of cultural content in the face of changes in opportunities or other social structures (compare e.g., Anderson 2000, Patterson 2000, and Wilson 2009), very few scholars—perhaps none—would argue that a group’s culture is unaffected by exogenous forces. The degree to which cultures are susceptible to structural changes is ultimately an empirical question, not a metatheoretical one, and this issue deserves further scrutiny.

In assessing the potential importance of values for explaining group differences, some scholars have also pointed to the supposed “weak relationship between attitudes and behavior” (Swidler 1986: 280) or to the fact that
“many people ... constantly act in violation of their values” (Lamont and Small 2008: 95). Though it is true that no single factor can perfectly predict something as complex as human behavior, there is substantial evidence from psychology that attitudes play a significant role in shaping conduct (see e.g., Ajzen 2001). Because this relationship can vary across domains and be influenced by other factors, however, it is important to assess such relationships empirically in the context of other competing explanations.

Finally, one of the more troublesome tendencies is that the standards used to cast doubt on the value of values are not equally applied to “new” concepts like frames, scripts, or narratives. Claims about the role of “shared values,” for instance, are regarded skeptically due to the existence of within-group heterogeneity (e.g., Swidler 1986) while frames—“shared definitions of how the world works”—are not held to the same high standards of sharedness (Wilson 2009: 17, emphasis added; see also Young 2004). Simple claims about mean differences in values, norms, or attitudes across groups lead to concerns about essentialism or permanence while statements about how (all?) “white working class people” (always?) “code” blacks are unproblematic, presumably because they are taken—as intended—as descriptions of observed empirical tendencies at the time of data collection rather than as claims of inviolate patterns (Kefalas 2003; see Lamont and Small 2008: 95). Lastly, attitude-behavior or value-behavior associations that are characterized as weak are rarely compared side-by-side with other associations (e.g., gender-behavior, race-behavior) which would often qualify as weak by the same standards.

I raise these concerns, not in order to criticize the “new approach” to studying poverty and culture, but rather to help pave the way to synthesizing old and new. If empirical generalizations about motive concepts (e.g., values, preferences, aspirations, attitudes) were treated the same way as generalizations about frames, scripts, or narratives, it would help break down the artificial wall that bars motives from the pantheon of contemporary cultural sociology (Smith 2003). With these considerations in mind, I now turn to an empirical case—the relationship between educational aspirations and educational behavior.

**An Empirical Test: The Case of Educational Aspirations**

Swidler (1986) uses the case of poverty, aspirations, and educational attainment to illustrate her critique of the “values paradigm” since, as she notes, it serves as a perfect test case for competing views of culture in action. If poor youth really did aspire to the same things as other youth, it would indeed be a death blow to the notion that group differences in educational aspirations play a role in maintaining inequality. Her argument rests on a key premise—that “the very poor share the values and aspirations of the middle class” (1986: 275), or more generally, that “what people want” is unhelpful for explaining group differences in behavior because wants do not vary strongly (if at all) between groups. The precise meaning of the descriptive language is not entirely clear, however. “Lower class youth ... intend to go to college” could mean a number of things; does it mean literally all of them intend to go, a majority, a super-majority, or something else? Does it mean that there are no differences between “lower class” and “middle class” youth or rather that large majorities of both groups aspire to go to college? Specific numbers are not provided but we are unlikely to find either perfect socioeconomic polarization or perfect homogeneity in any real world comparison. A sensible strategy is therefore to examine empirically the extent of any differences in aspirations and their ability to predict educational behavior before drawing conclusions about their usefulness for explaining socioeconomic differences in school continuation.

A large literature on educational aspirations does exist (e.g., Cheng and Starks 2002; Goyette 2008; Goyette and Xie 1999; Hanson 1994; Morgan 1999, 2002; Qian and Blair 1999; Schneider and Stevenson 1999) but given its important intellectual connection to the new cultural sociology, it has not received the attention it deserves. Though many studies distinguish between “aspirations” and “expectations” (e.g., Hanson 1994) the expectations question—“As things stand now, how far in school do you think you will get?”—is sometimes characterized as a measure of aspirations (Qian and Blair 1999; see also Plotnick 1992 and Kao and Thompson 2003 for examples of how “aspirations” and “expectations” are often used interchangeably). Though some studies distinguish between aspirations and expectations (e.g., Hanson 1994), others do not (e.g., Schneider and Stevenson 1999). The importance of doing so in the context of a debate about culture should be evident. If we went around a hospital asking patients, “As things now stand, how long do you think you will live?” we would not want to use their responses to indicate how long they “aspire” to live, much less how much they “value” living. The desire to continue living might vary for many reasons, but it would be impossible to measure without also taking into account each patient’s estimate of the severity of their condition. Similarly, without using aspirations and expectations simultaneously to predict behavior, we cannot begin to disentangle the extent to
which these self-reports reflect “conceptions of the desirable” versus “report[s] of students’ likelihood of attending college [rather than] a motivating factor per se” (Kao and Thompson 2003: 422).

In the culture literature, Young’s Minds of Marginalized Black Men (2004) provides some tools for putting these distinctions into practice. Young (2004:162) argues that “the concept of aspiration ... is usually applied to a wide array of phenomena, ranging from anything that is slightly more ambitious than an expectation to that which typifies the grandest and boldest of dreams.” He instead distinguishes between “ideals” (goals not necessarily connected to a plan), “aspirations” (goals with some sense of how to realize them), and “expectations” (plans “rooted in a clear sense of how [they] can be attained”[162]). This terminology allows examining (mis)alignment between these orientations in various ways. More important for our purposes, it points to research designs that are clear about what they are measuring and avoid conflating what people want with what they expect to happen.

In drawing links between the sociology of education and cultural sociology, Pierre Bourdieu’s serves as one important point of connection (e.g., Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Unfortunately, his concept of “cultural capital”—which, as its name implies, is best thought of as a resource rather than a motivation—has been much more widely used than his term “habitus,” which may be more relevant for thinking about motives (Dumais 2002). Lizardo (2004: 394) calls the habitus a “cognitive-motivational system” that shapes perception and choice, which is consistent with the arguments above about the inseparability of “cognitive” and “evaluative” aspects of culture. Thus, operationalizing the habitus as future expectations alone (see Dumais 2002) would leave desires and expectations conflated. Though Bourdieu’s use of the term is not always perfectly consistent, he does not define it solely in terms of conceptions of “what is possible” (Dumais 2002: 47) but as also involving both “motivations” and “subjective aspirations” (Bourdieu 1990: 54). Since the habitus is shaped by “experiences [that are] statistically common to members of the same class” (1990: 60), the notion that socioeconomic status might shape “what people want” follows quite naturally from Bourdieu’s work (see also Bourdieu 1984).

If there is no a priori reason to reject investigating poor/non-poor differences in aspirations, what might we reasonably expect to find if we do? Bourdieu’s (1984) model suggests that the poor might have lower socioeconomic aspirations than their more fortunate peers and that these aspirations should have implications for action that will serve to reproduce their social position. Sanchez-Jankowski’s (2008) decade of ethnographic work in poor neighborhoods in New York and Los Angeles supports these predictions empirically. Though he forcefully rejects the notion that the “subculture of scarcity” in poor neighborhoods is “immutable” or that it leads to social disorganization, passivity, or inevitable misery, Sanchez-Jankowski does conclude that this culture “powerfully reinforces values that make life meaningful within the particular structural conditions of poverty, though at the expense of values found in the larger society that would improve a person’s chances for obtaining and maintaining socioeconomic mobility” (348). While cautiously distancing his argument from tendentious readings of Lewis (1959), Sanchez-Jankowski ends by concluding what cultural sociology begins by denying—that the poor do not, in fact, value or aspire to the same things as the middle class.

The remainder of the paper examines empirically whether these predictions and empirical findings can be extended in a very general way to the population of poor adolescents in the U.S. The objective here is not to conduct an exhaustive study of aspirations, school continuation, or poverty, but rather to establish a descriptive baseline that can open the door for future studies of poverty and aspirations by cultural sociologists and others.

Data and Measures

The data for this investigation come from the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). The NSYR began as a nationally-representative telephone survey of 3,290 U.S. English and Spanish speaking teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17, and of their parents. The NSYR was conducted from July 2002 to April 2003 by researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill using a random-digit-dial (RDD) telephone survey method, employing a sample of randomly generated telephone numbers representative of all household telephones in the 50 United States. The NSYR was conducted with members of both English- and Spanish-speaking households. Diagnostic analyses comparing NSYR data with U.S. Census data on comparable households and with comparable adolescent surveys confirm that the NSYR provides a nationally representative sample without identifiable sampling and nonresponse biases of U.S. teenagers ages 13-17 living in households. A weight was also created to adjust for number of teenagers in household, number of household telephone numbers, census region of residence, and household income. The 2002-2003 panel of respondents
was followed up with additional surveys in 2005 (ages 15-20) and 2008 (ages 18-24). The retention rate was approximately 78 percent of the Wave 1 respondents at both Wave 2 (n=2530) and Wave 3 (n=2458). For more information on the study, see youthandreligion.org.

Most studies of culture are not conducted using individual-level survey data, or at the very least they attempt to situate survey respondents within neighborhood or school contexts (e.g., Harding 2007). The focus on individuals here is justified for two main reasons: first, though my ultimate objective is explanatory, at this point there is an absence of descriptive, empirical information about socioeconomic differences in future orientations; thus, one major goal is to document any poor/non-poor differences in future orientations and their relationship to later school continuation. Second, Bourdieus’s (1990: 60) model holds that habitus develops differently for different classes because it is shaped by “experiences [that are] statistically common to members of the same class.” This conception does not require interaction within bounded groups for (sub)cultures to form. In other words, poor adolescents, though not forming a self-conscious, interacting “group,” may develop similar aspirations and expectations due to their experiences in similar social locations.

It is necessary to define a few key measures in advance. I define “poor” as an indicator variable where 1 = in poverty and 0 = not in poverty. This measure was constructed using parent-reported household income and household size, and the 2002 federal poverty thresholds provided by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Because the NSYR household income reports were given in $10,000 ranges, I use the lower bound of the income category to determine poverty status. This means that both strictly poor and near-poor adolescents are included in the poor category. By this definition, 18.8% of the W1 sample are considered to be in poverty. When necessary, I typologize race using a simple white/black/Hispanic scheme. Asians (1.6% of the W1 sample) and those reporting other races (4.6% of the W1 sample) were excluded from this analysis to make interpreting possible race effects as straightforward as possible. Additional variables will be introduced and defined as needed.

Do poor and non-poor adolescents differ in their educational aspirations and expectations? The NSYR asks two relevant questions: “Ideally, how far in school would you LIKE to go?” and “Given realistic limitations, how far in school do you think you actually WILL go?” These two questions map onto Young’s (2004) “ideals” and “expectations” quite well, and given the vagueness I noted earlier in the use of the term “aspirations,” I use the term “ideals” from this point forward for the sake of clarity. Respondents were not given fixed responses unless needed, but the possible answers were—no farther, some high school (grades 9-11), high school graduate, technical or vocational school after high school, some college or AA degree, college graduate, or postgraduate or professional training after college. They could also say “don’t know” (n=48) or refuse to answer the question (n=3). Because less than .1% responded that they either wanted or expected to complete less than a high school degree, and in order to create meaningful and adequately-sized categories, I use a four category classification: high school graduate or less, some college or post-high school training, college graduate, and postgraduate.

Bivariate Results

Tables 1 and 2 show the responses to these questions by poverty status. Since “don’t knows” are an important analytic category (Young 2004), these are also included.

Table 1 shows that poor adolescents do, in fact, report that, “ideally,” they would like to obtain less education than non-poor adolescents. These differences are not trivial. For example, 88.9% of non-poor youth say they would like to graduate from college compared with 73.2% of poor students—a difference of nearly 16 percentage points. Perhaps not surprising—given the greater “realistic limitations” that poor teenagers both face and perceive—Table 2 shows that differences in educational expectations are even greater; 81% of non-poor youth believe they “will” graduate from college compared to 54.8% of poor youth—a 25 percentage point spread. Clearly both groups are overestimating their chances of graduating from college, but the expectations are nonetheless relatively lower for poor youth. Comparing “don’t know” responses yields mixed results. The poor/non-poor difference is not significant for ideals (2.4% vs. 1.6%; p =.311), but is significant for expectations (5.9% vs. 2.7%; p =.018). As one might have expected based on Young’s (2004) analysis, the poor are about twice as likely to be unable to state clear educational expectations.
Table 3 explicitly compares the relationship between ideals and expectations by poverty status. Whereas only 14.1% of non-poor youth expect less than their ideal, 31.4% of poor youth do so. This result is consistent with Lareau’s (2003) finding that lower class youth develop a “sense of constraint” during their formative years (see also Hanson 1994). Thus, the pattern here is neither one of pure polarization nor pure independence. The importance of these observed differences must be judged by their effects.

Do Group Differences in Aspirations Matter?
Are poor/non-poor differences in ideals and expectations consequential for future behavior or are they simply understandings (i.e., “scripts” or “narratives”) that happen to accompany a particular structural position? Is it ultimately true that “what people want ... is of little help in explaining their action” (Swidler 1986:274), or is there evidence that valued future outcomes can shape future behavior?

Because the NSYR has continued to follow respondents through 2008 (Wave 3), it is possible to test links between earlier responses and later behavior. Continuation into higher education is an important and easily measurable outcome with direct relevance to the issue of whether differences in ideals and expectations—beyond the objective condition of being in poverty—have any effect on later behaviors that are relevant for one’s life chances. Of the W3 respondents, only 35% of the W1 poor respondents were in school in Spring 2008 compared to more than 67% of other respondents. Do different ideals play any role in mediating the poverty-continuation relationship?

Using NSYR data, we can test the possible effects of educational ideals and expectations on school continuation. The dependent variable for the analysis is whether or not the respondent was enrolled in school during the Spring semester of 2008 (when W3 was collected). Because the age range (18–24) of the W3 data includes some who are likely to have graduated from college, those who report having completed a BA are excluded from the subsequent analysis. This leaves 2242 W3 respondents, 61% of whom report being enrolled in school. If we further reduce the sample by dropping those missing income data at W1, this leaves 2100 total respondents.

Preliminary bivariate analyses (not shown here) confirm that educational ideals and expectations are all associated with Spring 2008 school enrollment ($p < .0001$). Furthermore, a close look at “don’t know” responses shows that those who answered don’t know to the educational expectations question are somewhat less likely to be enrolled in Spring 2008 ($p = .005$). A dummy variable for this response will therefore be included in the multivariate models.

Estimating a model that uses these factors to predict educational continuation in 2008 is not as simple as it may appear. First, educational ideals and expectations are highly correlated, potentially making it difficult to distinguish their separate effects. Second, it is worth exploring whether a “sense of constraint” (i.e., a discrepancy between ideals and expectations) has effects on behavior above and beyond the ideals and expectations themselves (Hanson 1994; Young 2004). This is not a straightforward task using conventional models. Fortunately, a model has been developed in the context of mobility research that makes both of these objectives much easier. Sobel’s (1981) “diagonal reference model” (DRM) was designed to estimate the separate effects of categorical class membership for both parent and child as well as to estimate the effect of a discrepancy between the two (i.e., mobility). This model therefore happens to be designed to deal with exactly the sort of problem we have here. In essence, it estimates the effects of equivalently measured categories (here, ideals and expectations) using a single vector of coefficients for both along with a weighting parameter to model the relative importance of the two variables.

More precisely, the DRM for a dichotomous dependent variable is specified as follows:

$$\text{logit}(Y) = \alpha + pv_R + qv_C + \beta X$$

where $\alpha$ is the model intercept, $v$ stands for a vector of coefficients related to $R$ and $C$ (i.e., row and column) which, respectively, index two “matched” categorical variables (here, ideals and expectations), $p$ and $q$ are weighting coefficients denoting the relative importance of the row versus column categories, and $\beta X$ is a vector of additional covariates. The model has the following restrictions: first, the matching column and row coefficients (corresponding elements of the vectors $v_R$ and $v_C$) must be equal (i.e., the single “college graduate” coefficient corresponds to both ideals and expectations); second, these identical vectors $v_R$ and $v_C$ must each sum to 0; third, the weights $p$ and $q$ must sum to 1, so that the relative importance of the row variable (ideals) or the column variable (expectations) is given by the relative size of $p$ and $q$. In other words, if $p = .5$ (and therefore $q = .5$), then the row and column variables would have identical predictive weight, whereas if $p = 1$ (and $q = 0$), then the row variable has no independent effect.
The DRM is not as well known as conventional logistic regression but in certain circumstances it provides a number of clear comparative advantages. First, beyond its original intent, which was to allow modeling status-inconsistency and mobility effects (Sobel 1981), its main strength is that the DRM’s weighting parameter allows a clear one-parameter test of the relative strength of two matched categorical variables. Second, the estimation of single coefficients for each value of the matched variables makes these variables much more interpretable in the (usual) context of substantial collinearity between the matched variables. Third, the DRM is significantly more parsimonious than a comparable conventional model. For instance, it can model two matched four-category variables using only four degrees of freedom (four diagonal parameters and two weighting parameters, less the constraints that each set sum to one) while the conventional model would require six degrees of freedom (two sets of three dummy variables) for the same purpose. This parsimony advantage increases as models become more complex, obviating the need to interpret large numbers of additional parameters. For these reasons, the DRM has been used profitably in contexts where inconsistency effects are of little interest (e.g., Kelley and DeGraaf 1997). To further assuage potential concerns about this model, however, I provide a comparison with a more conventional approach in note 18 below.

Because the primary goal here is to assess the role of ideals and expectations in the context of poverty rather than to “explain” educational continuation per se, I do not control for every possible factor than may predict the outcome. That is, even though the objective of the analysis is explanatory, it is not concerned directly with the poverty-related structural mechanisms that lead to different schooling trajectories. Clearly some of the observed “poverty” effect in these models is instead due to differences in family structure, parent education, school or neighborhood context, and so on rather than the income/poverty ratio per se. However, it would not serve the larger purpose of investigating culture’s role in educational behavior by pitting two (highly correlated) “cultural” variables against a score of “structural” variables, since one could—in principle—have variables measuring ideals and expectations about desired college prestige, college GPA, future occupation, future earnings, and so forth. The fact that sociological surveys tend to measure “structure” much more comprehensively than they do “culture” should not be taken as evidence of differences in explanatory power, but rather as an effect of the relative importance accorded to each by sociological theory and practice.15

Before estimating the model, there is one more difficulty to deal with. Of the cases in the sample with W1 poverty data and W3 (Spring 2008) enrollment data, 2.8% lack a valid response to the educational ideals question, and 5.6% lack a valid response to the educational expectations question. Also, those respondents who answered “don’t know” to the educational expectations question (n = 60 in this sample) quite naturally do not have a valid value for educational expectations. This matters because in order to be able to ask whether a “don’t know” response has an effect above and beyond other factors, it is necessary to estimate what the person might have said had they answered the question. To accomplish this latter goal and in order to avoid losing more data, I use multiple imputation to fill in missing values so that the final analytic sample retains all 2100 eligible respondents. Using the Stata program -ice- (Royston 2004), I impute 10 datasets and use -mim- (Carlin, Garlotti, and Royston 2008) to obtain estimates that appropriately combine the information from all 10.16

Results of Multivariate Models

Model 1 in Table 4 shows the results of diagonal reference logit models predicting school enrollment in Spring 2008. To clarify, recall that the education coefficients in the first four rows refer to the effects of ideals and expectations when they are matched or “on the diagonal.” The next two coefficients, p and q, must always sum to 1 and show the relative importance of ideals and expectations when they are not matched (off-diagonal). Looking first at the matched parameters, we see that there are large differences between those who both “ideally would like” and expect to complete different levels of education. Assuming ideals and expectations are matched, looking forward in 2002 to one day completing graduate school increases the odds of being enrolled in 2008 by nearly 9 times compared to those who said they wanted no more education (exp[1.001+1.189] = 8.94). When ideals and expectations differ, however, the value of q (.738) shows that expectations are (on average) a better predictor of future behavior than ideals. In fact, p, the weight for educational ideals, is not significantly different from 0.

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]
Turning to the other coefficients, we can see the effects of other factors on continued enrollment. The coefficient for those who responded “don’t know” to the question about educational expectations barely fails to achieve the conventional level of statistical significance for a two-tailed test (z = 1.95). But since we have a strong basis for a directional hypothesis (Young 2004), the effect is worth interpreting. Those who responded “don’t know” nearly halve their odds of continued enrollment in 2008 (exp[-.612]=.542) even though we used the other information in the model to make our best guess about their expectations. But having a sense of educational constraint—claiming expectations that are lower than one’s ideal—does not appear to have any additional effect beyond the ideals and expectations themselves. Looking at the demographic variables, young women appear more likely to stay in school and older respondents are much more likely to have dropped out of school, at least temporarily. As with all other results in this paper, with the controls in place, there are no net race differences in the likelihood of being enrolled in school in 2008. Finally, poverty status remains a strong predictor of educational continuation; poor respondents’ odds of continuing are only a third as high as those of non-poor respondents.

I explored various interactions between the variables and found that model 1 can be improved by allowing the parameter that weights the relative importance of educational ideals and expectations to vary by poverty status. Specified this way, as shown in model 2 of table 5, the “main effects” of \( p \) and \( q \) now reflect the proper weighting for non-poor respondents and the correct weights can be adduced for poor respondents by adding the interaction coefficient (.662) to \( p \) and subtracting it from \( q \). (The values of \( p \) and \( q \) continue to sum to 1 for each group separately, however, enabling an interpretation of the relative effects of ideals and expectations by poverty status.) The results of this model are significant and surprising—the new weights of \( p \) and \( q \) show that though expectations account for 94.4% of the education effect for non-poor youth (\( q = .944 \)), it is self-reported educational ideals that matter most for poor youth, accounting for 71.8% (.056+.662) of the total education effect. (The other covariates remain essentially unchanged from model 1.) The results suggest that if you want to know if a non-poor teenager will be in school 5-6 years later, ask her what she “expects,” but if you want to know if a poor teenager will be in school 5-6 years later, ask her what she “ideally would like.” Figures 1 and 2 show these differences visually, plotting the predicted probabilities from the model for every combination of ideals and expectations separately by poverty status.17

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]
[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

The figures reinforce the main finding quite dramatically: expectations matter much more for non-poor youth and ideals matter much more for poor youth. For non-poor youth, the average upward shift in ideals is associated with only a 1.6 percentage-point increase in the probability of enrollment, while the average upward shift in expectations for this group is associated with an increase of 15.2 points. Conversely, for poor youth, the average upward shift in ideals leads to a 9.6 percentage-point increase and the average upward shift in expectations to an increase of 3 points. (Equivalently, computed as increases to the relative risk of enrollment, the average respective increases are 4% and 40% for non-poor youth and 54% and 14% for poor youth.) Thus, while there is little evidence that educational ideals matter for non-poor youth, they appear to matter a great deal for the poor.18

Discussion and Conclusions

How can this surprising finding be explained? And what is its significance to the discussion above? It seems to me that there are at least two possibilities. The first is that it is a statistical artifact. As demonstrated above, this result is not an artifact of the particular model, but perhaps it is an artifact of measurement. Since the non-poor category here is larger and thus more socioeconomically heterogeneous than the poor category, perhaps the expectation variable is indirectly “smuggling in” information about unmeasured social context rather than reflecting any particular mental orientation toward schooling (see Kao and Thompson 2003). This would suggest, however, that ideals actually matter significantly for all respondents, and that this fact is distorted by the dichotomous measure of SES. I tested this possibility by re-estimating the model, substituting the income-poverty ratio directly for the dichotomous poverty indicator (not shown). However, even when treated continuously, there is evidence that the balance shifts decisively in favor of ideals as the income-poverty ratio decreases.

A second, more interesting, possibility might be called the “swimming upstream” hypothesis. Though most non-poor youth live in a context that is propelling them in obvious and non-obvious ways toward educational continuation, most poor youth do not. In fact, according to Sanchez-Jankowski (2008: 48), some members of disadvantaged communities actively “shun” those who violate local norms in order to “stigmatize ... deviants as ‘sellouts’ of their
culture.” If, for these and other reasons, poor youth cannot simply “go with the flow” and end up in college, their educational ideals might matter more because they need to be motivated enough to resist such pressure. Perhaps more of their own efforts will be necessary to get them in a position where school continuation becomes a viable option. As I have argued elsewhere (Vaisey 2008b), the repertoire theory of culture has a difficult time explaining “upstream lines of action” since it predicts that people will avoid desiring ends that would “require drastic and costly cultural retooling” (Swidler 1986: 277). Future research will be able to shed more light on the specific processes at work, and examining such processes is a particular strength for cultural sociology (see Lamont and Small 2008).

Though we see empirically that poor youth do, in fact, have substantially different educational ideals and expectations and that these are particularly consequential for the poor, this should not be taken to imply that educational ideals or indeed any cultural motives are somehow more important than structural factors for explaining poor/non-poor differences in educational continuation. Based on the results from model 2, table 4, the predicted poor/non-poor difference in continuation for a 20-year-old white male is 31 percentage points (61% vs. 30%), but if we switched the average ideals and expectations of the poor with those of the non-poor, this difference would shrink to 20 points (53% vs. 33%). Thus group differences in ideals and expectations—though significant—are not large enough to account for all or even most of the observed difference. Yet they do play an important role and should be not be neglected in future research.

The objective of this paper is not to advocate abandoning tools, repertoires, frames, and so on in favor of an exclusive focus on motives, values, preferences, or the like. A much better way forward would be to begin integrating “old” and “new” approaches to culture using empirical evidence to adjudicate between competing models in particular cases. Sanchez-Jankowski’s (2008) work is exemplary in this respect. He argues that the “subculture of scarcity” is composed of a “worldview” and associated “values and norms” that help shape the interests of the poor, but also acknowledges that “once this worldview is established,” the subculture also provides cultural tools that shape the “what, where ... when” and “how” of particular actions (p. 49). I have made similar arguments elsewhere, suggesting that implicit evaluative worldviews form a subjective backdrop for the more strategic, “toolkit-like” use of culture (Vaisey 2008a, 2009).

It is worth noting that although this paper provides evidence consistent with thinking of culture as (among other things) “complex[es] of subjective meaning” that are “adequate ground[s] for the conduct in question” (Weber 1964: 98), it did not directly investigate what these meanings might be. That is, we now have some additional reasons to believe that culture can motivate actions as well as making them possible or “meaningful,” but we can’t know which meanings motivate and how they motivate until we perform the kind of detailed analysis exemplified by the work of Lamont (1992, 2000), Small (2002, 2004), Young (2004), Sanchez-Jankowski (2008) and others. Freed from the constraint of disavowing the existence or importance of values, attitudes, and other possible motives, work in this area would be even more illuminating than it already is.

It should go without saying that the intent here is not to “blame the victim” for his or her future educational ideals and expectations. Bourdieu’s (1990) work and cognitive sociology generally (e.g., Zerubavel 1997) suggests that what gets into people heads and hearts is shaped by socially patterned experiences in ways that leave a durable impact. These internalized dispositions can in turn shape the production of future social structures (see Lizardo forthcoming). The moral and political fear of blaming the poor and the subsequent theoretical overreaction on the part of cultural sociology have prevented asking whether the cultural models and motives that the poor internalize make socioeconomic success less likely. If we leave aside unnecessary ideas about “old” approaches to culture, perhaps we might find it unsurprising that those who grow up poor are more likely to see education as less desirable than mutually-exclusive alternatives, which might motivate them to make choices and pursue life strategies that are socioeconomically disadvantageous (see also Sanchez-Jankowski 2008). To be clear, this does not mean all poor youth will differ from all non-poor youth, but rather that there may be differences in central tendencies in motives that matter for explaining differences in central tendencies in behavior. These are empirical questions.

This is not a call for sociologists to cede the study of poverty to economists or psychologists because they take seriously motives, values, preferences, and the like. Nor is it meant as a blanket condemnation of cultural sociology or a call for theorizing anything like a totalizing “culture of poverty.” On the contrary, my hope is that we can move toward a better understanding of how factors in the social and cultural environment influence the formation of values, desires, and preferences and how these interact with cultural knowledge and skills and structural opportunities to produce
human conduct. At the very least, I hope I have persuaded some readers that, whatever its political or theoretical baggage, thinking of culture as “conceptions of the desirable” will be an important part of understanding poverty.
TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Educational Ideals by Poverty Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Ideal</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HS or less</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College grad</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>58.1</td>
<td>64.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: numbers reflect column percentages and are weighted using the NSYR W1 weight 2. Column differences are significant at p < .0001 with don’t knows included or excluded.

Table 2. Educational Expectations by Poverty Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Expectation</th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HS or less</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College grad</td>
<td>62.4</td>
<td>45.9</td>
<td>59.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: numbers reflect column percentages and are weighted using the NSYR W1 weight 2. Column differences are significant at p < .0001 with don’t knows included or excluded.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideal/Expect Match</th>
<th>Poor 0</th>
<th>Poor 1</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expect 2+ less</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expect 1 less</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matched</td>
<td>82.6</td>
<td>64.6</td>
<td>79.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expect more</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: numbers reflect column percentages and are weighted using the NSYR W1 weight 2. Column differences are significant at $p < .0001$. 
Table 4. Diagonal Reference Logistic Regression Models Predicting School Enrollment, Spring 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coefficients for Matched Ideals/Expectations</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS or less</td>
<td>-1.189*** (6.76)</td>
<td>-1.191*** (6.90)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college or training</td>
<td>-.367* (2.53)</td>
<td>-.373** (2.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College graduate</td>
<td>.555 *** (5.70)</td>
<td>.563 *** (5.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>1.001*** (7.83)</td>
<td>1.001*** (7.74)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weighting Parameters</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight of ideal education ((p))</td>
<td>.262 (1.37)</td>
<td>.056 (0.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty (\times p)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.662** (2.73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight of expected education ((q))*</td>
<td>.738*** (3.84)</td>
<td>.944*** (4.43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty (\times q)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.662** (2.73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other Education Covariates</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educ. Expect: &quot;don't know&quot;</td>
<td>-.612+ (1.95)</td>
<td>-.620+ (1.96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of constraint ((\text{expect} &lt; \text{ideal}=1))</td>
<td>.059 (0.26)</td>
<td>.123 (0.54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demographic Controls</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (20 years = 0)</td>
<td>-.235*** (6.74)</td>
<td>-.238*** (6.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>.343*** (3.54)</td>
<td>.338*** (3.48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>.082 (0.62)</td>
<td>.093 (0.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>.011 (0.07)</td>
<td>.007 (0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In poverty</td>
<td>-1.099*** (7.40)</td>
<td>-1.267*** (7.73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.042 (0.41)</td>
<td>.054 (0.53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted Count (R^2)</td>
<td>.210</td>
<td>.225</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: + \(p<.1\), * \(p<.05\), ** \(p<.01\), *** \(p<.001\) (two-tailed); adjusted count \(R\) computed over all 10 imputed datasets and is the proportion of improvement in the number of cases correctly classified beyond those correctly classified by the intercept-only model (see Long 1997).

\(a\) \(q\) is constrained to be equal to 1 – \(p\).

\(b\) The interaction term between poverty and \(q\) is necessarily identical (except for the sign) to the interaction between poverty and \(p\) since \(p\) and \(q\) are constrained to sum to 1 within each subgroup.
Figure 1. Predicted Probabilities of Spring 2008 Enrollment for Non-Poor Respondents (in %)

NOTE: Y-axis scales are different in Figure 1 and Figure 2 to permit greater detail.

Figure 2. Predicted Probabilities of Spring 2008 Enrollment for Poor Respondents (in %)

NOTE: Y-axis scales are different in Figure 1 and Figure 2 to permit greater detail.
REFERENCES


NOTES

1. This is true, at least, for the Weberian tradition of sociology. Campbell (2006) for instance, points out that the words “motive” or “motivation” are used over 80 times in Weber’s Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. By contrast, recent surveys of sociology textbooks and dictionaries show an almost complete absence of these terms (Campbell 1996, 2006; Smith 2003).

2. Weber (1964: 98, emphasis added) defines motive as “a complex of subjective meaning which seems to the actor himself or to the observer an adequate [i.e., sufficient] ground for the conduct in question.” Note Weber’s use of “or” here—an observer is not a necessary part of Weber’s definition of motive, as Mills (1940) has erroneously, though influentially, argued (see Campbell 1996).

3. Microeconomics and decision theory distinguish between preferences (the basis of the one’s expected utility) and expectations (assessments of the probability of certain outcomes given certain choices; see Manski 2004). Translated into these terms, motivations can be thought of as related to the former rather than the latter, distinguishing what people want from their objective and perceived prospects of attaining it.

4. This is not to say that cultural sociologists do not make use of “evaluative” concepts. Lamont, in particular, has shown how symbolic boundaries are often used to distinguish between “worthy” and “unworthy” persons and groups (e.g., Lamont 1992; see also Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Steensland 2006). In terms of explaining action, however, such definitions of worth are still distinguished from motives with “exogenous causal force”; instead, they are treated as “repertoires of justification” (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006) and as “necessary, but insufficient condition[s]” for particular actions (Lamont and Small 2008: 84).

5. Harding (2007: 353) argues—almost certainly correctly—that this question is capturing something different than General Social Survey (GSS) questions about the extent to which “sex relations before marriage” or “among early teens” are “wrong.” This does not mean, however, that the question he uses is not also evaluative and attitudinal. The relationship between questions like these is ultimately an empirical one.

6. This is not very different from common definitions in social psychology: Rokeach (1973:5), for instance, defines values as “enduring beliefs that a specific mode of conduct is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence” and Marin (2000:2828) defines them as “evaluative beliefs that synthesize affective and cognitive elements to orient people to the world in which they live” (see Hitlin and Piliavin 2003).

7. As I have argued elsewhere (Vaisey 2008a, 2008b, 2009), these two models should be seen as complimentary “dual processes” which rely primarily on different cognitive systems. For any given investigation, the relationship and importance of these types of cultural processes should be determined empirically, not metatheoretically (see Vaisey and Lizardo forthcoming).

8. In the remainder of the paper, I necessarily use the term “aspirations” since educational aspirations are the key motives under investigation. I want to be clear, however, that the arguments in prior sections about “motives” and “values” apply equally to aspirations as a subset of those more general concepts.

9. The maximum possible income/poverty ratio attainable under this definition is 1.68.

10. The emphasis on “like” and “will” is in the original survey instrument. Homeschoolers (n=73) are excluded because they were asked a different version of the question.

11. Further analysis using multinomial logit models shows that race is not a confound here. That is, once poverty status is controlled, race is no longer a significant predictor (p > .376) of either ideals or expectations.

12. Again, race is not a factor here once poverty status is controlled (p = .395).

13. Coding these respondents as if they are in school instead does not change the results.

14. The specific models estimated here rely on a generalization of Sobel’s model developed by Henrickx et al. (1993; see Lizardo [2007a]).

15. Models including many more controls reflecting the local opportunity structure (parents’ education, parents’ self-reported importance that their child go to college, GPA, subjective health, neighborhood disadvantage) are substantively identical to those presented below, though unsurprisingly they find weaker net effects of ideals and expectations.

16. Because -diagref- (the Stata program used to compute the diagonal reference model [Lizardo 2007a]) does not appropriately handle survey weights, these models are estimates from unweighted data. Comparisons between weighted and unweighted estimates of other models using these data and variables strongly suggest that this will not affect the results in any meaningful way.

17. These predictions are for a 20-year-old white male who answered the expectations question (i.e., the model reference category). Note that the y-axis scales for Figures 1 and 2 are different to enable greater visual detail.

18. At this point, a comparison with a more conventional logistic regression model might be reassuring for some readers. The model most comparable to model 2, table 5 is one that replaces the diagonal and weighting coefficients with three dummy variables each for ideals and expectations as well as interactions between these dummies and poverty status. Given the strong association between ideals and expectations, this specification makes interpreting particular coefficients challenging, but does not pose a problem for model fit. The predictions of both models are nearly identical: their linear predictors are correlated at greater than .99 (Spearman’s p) and both yield an adjusted count $R^2$ of .225. Using the conventional logit model to compare changes in predicted probabilities also yields an identical pattern to that seen in figures 1 and 2. For non-poor youth, the average upward shift in ideals and expectations
leads, respectively, to increases of 3.3 and 14.6 percentage points in the probability of the outcome, while for poor youth the predicted increases are 7.1 and 0.9 points. (Computed as increases in relative risk, the average respective increases are 8% and 41% for non-poor youth and 38% and 8% for poor youth.) This confirms that the finding that ideals matter more for poor respondents is not an artifact of the DRM. Given the remarkable similarity in model fit, the DRM’s interpretive advantages make it clearly superior for this application. First, its weighting parameters allow a straightforward comparison of the relative explanatory power of ideals and expectations. Second, it is substantially more parsimonious, using seven fewer degrees of freedom than the comparable logit model. (Because of its parsimony, the DRM is preferred by both Aikake’s Information Criterion [AIC] and the Bayesian Information Criterion [BIC], with BIC differences between 47 and 50 across the 10 imputed datasets [Long 1997].)