Social Class and Expectations of Rural Adolescents: The Role of Parental Expectations

Sarah Schmitt-Wilson

This study investigated mechanisms involved in the intergenerational transmission of social class, specifically addressing the prediction of career expectations. The results indicated that among rural high school students (N = 200) in Grades 10–12, there was no direct effect of socioeconomic status (SES; as measured by parent education and occupation) on career expectations. However, there was a direct effect of educational expectations on occupational expectations. Building on the importance of educational expectations in the prediction of occupational expectations, the results suggested that perceived parental expectations explain variance in educational expectations. Overall, it seems that the effect of SES on occupational expectations was mediated by educational expectations; therefore, individuals of lower SES who have increased educational expectations are more likely to have occupational expectations similar to those of their higher SES peers. Moreover, increased parental expectations were positively associated with educational expectations among individuals of various SES levels.

When asked what they want to be when they grow up, many times children and adolescents mention careers similar to those of their parents. Even when the occupations differ, individuals tend to select jobs that will allow them to maintain the same level of socioeconomic status (SES) in which they were raised, thus indicating that social class, also referred to as SES, is transmitted from generation to generation. The purpose of this study was to investigate the intergenerational transmission of social class among rural adolescents.

Classical attainment theory, as put forward by Blau and Duncan (1967), suggests a causal model explaining how social class is transmitted directly from parents’ occupations to the occupation of the child. In contrast to direct transmission, indirect transmission occurs when the effects of parents’ occupations on the child’s selected occupation are mediated by educational level, as indicated by results obtained from a cross-sectional sample (Blau & Duncan, 1967). Thus, education is thought to play an essential role in social mobility. Arbona (2000) suggested that without “educational attainment the range of career choices individuals have is very constrained” (p. 270). Recent findings have supported the indirect transmission of social class (de Graaf & Kalmijn, 2001; Hill et al., 2004).

Although the intergenerational transmission of social class has been established, there is a need to understand the process in which this
takes place as adolescents transition into adulthood. Investigating occupational/career expectations, which are predictive of occupational attainment (Schoon, 2001; Schoon & Parsons, 2002), as well as addressing educational expectations, which precede educational attainment (Andres, Adamuti-Trache, Yoon, Pidgeon, & Thomsen, 2007; Dubow, Boxer, & Huesmann, 2009; Hill et al., 2004; Jacobs, Karen, & McClelland, 1991; Ou & Reynolds, 2008; Rojewski & Kim, 2003), allows for researchers to gain insight into the mechanism in which social class is transmitted. With the exception of Sewell, Haller, and Portes (1969), whose original Wisconsin Model of Status Attainment was based on sons of farmers growing up in Wisconsin, few studies have examined the intergenerational transmission of social class among adolescents living in nonurban communities.

Social status is a significant predictor of occupational aspirations (Mau & Bikos, 2000; Rojewski & Yang, 1997; Schoon & Parsons, 2002) and expectations (Mello, 2009). Moreover, it has been proposed that SES is related to educational expectations (Haller & Virkler, 1993; Hill et al., 2004; Rojewski & Kim, 2003). Recognizing the relationship between SES and educational expectations provides a foundation for studying students from rural communities who have been found to have lower educational expectations. For example, a recent study conducted by Byun, Meece, and Irvin (2011) found that rural students obtained bachelor’s degrees at lower rates than their nonrural peers, a finding mostly attributable to lower SES. Furthermore, Haller and Virkler (1993) found that differences in educational aspirations between rural and nonrural students are primarily a result of SES, suggesting that rural students have lower SES than nonrural students. Haller and Virkler’s study demonstrates that, among rural populations, SES is important in predicting educational aspirations.

A deeper understanding of the relationship between SES and expectations for the future requires investigating the role of parents in the transmission of social class. Lareau (2003) found that middle-SES parents primed their children for the future by guiding them through a process of concerted cultivation that prepares them for future careers, whereas working-class and poor parents believe that children develop naturally. Similarly, parents play a vital role in the formation of educational expectations. Rhea and Otto (2001) suggested that parents are instrumental in the transmission of educational values to their children, which occurs most often through the mechanism of parents’ expectations. Research has found that parents’ expectations are strongly associated with the educational expectations of their children (Hossler & Stage, 1992; Rhea & Otto, 2001; Trusty & Niles, 2004).

Parents’ expectations are especially important for individuals of low SES (Elder, 1999). Juang and Vondracek (2001) found that parents who held higher educational expectations for their children had children who were more likely to go on to postsecondary education. Furthermore, Jacobs et al. (1991) suggested that increasing educational aspirations is a possible mechanism for increasing occupational aspirations among individuals of low SES. Therefore, it is of great importance to understand whether parents’ expectations are related to educational expectations of the children, with the goal of developing methods to increase educational expectations among rural adolescents.
Given research suggesting differences in educational attainment among rural students based on SES (Byun et al., 2011; Haller & Virkler, 1993), it is critical to investigate the mechanism in which this process takes place, specifically examining educational and occupational expectations, which predict subsequent attainment. The current study examined the relationship among SES, educational expectations, and occupational expectations of students living in rural communities. Moreover, building on the established relationship between parental expectations and the educational expectations of the child, this study explored whether parental expectations explained educational expectations and mediated the relationship between social class and career expectations among students living in rural communities.

The goal of this study was to aid in the understanding of mechanisms involved in the intergenerational transmission of social class among students living in rural areas in order to assist individuals of lower SES to aspire to and attain education levels and occupations that would allow them to increase their social standing. The study addressed the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What is the degree to which social class (SES) explains variance in adolescents’ career expectations?

Research Question 2: What is the degree to which adolescents’ educational expectations explain variance in adolescents’ career expectations?

Research Question 3: What is the degree to which parental educational expectations explain variance in adolescents’ expected education?

Research Question 4: What is the degree to which adolescents’ expected education mediates the relationship between social class and adolescents’ career expectations?

Research Question 5: What is the degree to which parental educational expectations mediate the relationship between SES and adolescents’ educational expectations?

With answers to these questions, educators will have an enhanced understanding of the mechanisms involved in the intergenerational transmission of social class among rural students. Furthermore, professionals will be better able to inform parents, teachers, and counselors who work with students as to the processes involved in the development of career expectations.

Method

Participants
The sample consisted of 200 students (108 boys and 92 girls) in Grades 10–12 from two schools located in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. Among the participants, 28 were in the 10th grade, 57 were in the 11th grade, and 115 were in the 12th grade. Participants were 15 to 19 years old with an average age of 17.3 years, and the average grade point average (GPA) was 3.36 on a 4-point scale. Ninety-six percent of the adolescents participating in the study were Caucasian. One hundred two of the participants were from a high school of 1,800 students, whereas the other 98 participants were students at a high school.
of 1,500 students. The communities in which the study took place are in rural states, with the closest being 3.5 hours from a metropolitan community of at least 250,000 people. Thus, schools participating in this study are considered rural based on their distance from a metropolitan area (Arnold, Biscoe, Farmer, Robertson, & Shapley, 2007).

**Instruments**

*SES.* Social class was measured by collecting data on parents’ education and occupation based on protocols used by Hitlin (2006). Education was coded on the following 6-point scale: 1 = *high school education or less*, 2 = *some college*, 3 = *two year or technical degree*, 4 = *bachelor’s degree*, 5 = *master’s degree*, and 6 = *PhD or professional degree*. Parents’ occupations were coded for their level of social prestige based on the NORC/GSS (National Opinion Research Center/General Social Survey) Occupational Prestige Scale (Nakao & Treas, 1994). In the current sample, mothers’ and fathers’ education levels ranged from high school or less up to PhD/professional degree, with both mothers’ and fathers’ education levels averaging slightly above a 2-year/technical degree. Mothers’ occupation level ranged from 22 (house cleaner) to 74 (college professor), with an average of 51.32. Fathers’ occupation level ranged from 23 (food service worker) to 87 (surgeon), with an average of 54.49. Parents’ education and occupation levels were converted to *z* scores to form a composite SES variable, a process similar to ones incorporated by Hill et al. (2004). In the current sample, SES scores ranged from –1.63 to 1.76.

*Educational expectations/parental educational expectations.* Educational expectations reflect the intended educational level of the child (Andres et al., 2007). Perceived parental educational expectations represent the level of education children think their parents ideally would like them to earn. In the current study, parents indicated the level of education they would like their children to achieve on a demographic form, whereas adolescents completed a questionnaire answering both their own personal educational expectation and the educational expectation they think that their parents have for them. Parental expectations, perceived parental educational expectations, and children’s educational expectations were coded on a 6-point scale ranging from *high school education or less* to *PhD or professional degree*. In the current sample, the correlation between parents’ expectations and perceived parental expectations (the students’ perceptions of the education their parents would like them to obtain) was *r* = .76. On the basis of the high correlation between perceived parents’ expectations and parents’ reported expectations of the student, perceived parental expectations were used in the current investigation, a procedure similar to ones used by previous researchers (Mau & Bikos, 2000; Trusty & Pirtle, 1998).

*Occupational expectations.* In contrast to occupational aspirations, which represent the occupation that an individual would ideally like to pursue, occupational expectations are the occupations that individuals actually envision themselves pursuing in the future. Questions about occupational expectations were based on protocols previously used by Looft (1971). The following question was used to investigate occupational expectations: What do you really think you will be when you grow up? As with prior research investigating the career expectations of adolescents (Rojewski & Kim, 2003; Schoon, 2001), I coded the occupations
for their level of social prestige (Nakao & Treas, 1994), with potential scores ranging from 11 (panhandler) to 87 (surgeon). Only individuals giving an occupation were coded. Several steps were taken to ensure reliability of scores used in the current study. I, as well as a trained career counselor, coded the participants’ responses. After coding for 10 participants, we verified our consistency, and if the agreement was at least 80%, we continued with the coding. The overall interrater consistency was 91% for career expectations. After all responses had been coded, discrepancies were evaluated by a third party, at which time a final decision about the coding was made.

Procedure
Participants were selected from high schools in two different districts, which allowed me to conduct the study. Parental release forms were sent home to potential participants along with a demographic information sheet consisting of the student’s ID number (given by the school), grade level, gender, ethnicity, mother’s educational status, mother’s occupation, father’s educational status, father’s occupation, and parents’ educational expectations for their children. Parental release forms were sent home to 640 parents, with a response rate of 33%. Only students returning the signed parental consent forms and assent forms were allowed to participate. Students participating in the study at all grade levels were administered a survey consisting of a series of questions designed to understand their educational and career expectations along with their perception of the expectations that their parents have for them.

Data Analysis
Basic descriptive statistics and correlations were computed for the independent and dependent variables of SES, educational expectations, career expectations, and parents’ expectations. Significance level for all correlations was based on a Bonferroni adjustment, with a \( p \) value of .01 indicating significance (Glass & Hopkins, 1996). Prior to the analysis, analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to determine whether there were gender or grade-level differences for each of the outcome variables. If significant differences existed, these variables were controlled, along with academic achievement, in the first step of the hierarchical regression. Multiple linear regression analysis was tested for the following assumptions: linearity, independence, normality of residuals, and equal variances (Montgomery, Peck, & Vining, 2001). For Research Questions 1–3, a Bonferroni adjustment was made by dividing .05 by the number of tests conducted (Glass & Hopkins, 1996). The sample size was adequate to detect medium effect size (Green, 1991).

Mediation analysis was conducted to answer Research Questions 4 and 5, which investigated whether there was an indirect relationship among social class, educational expectations, and career expectations, as well as whether parental expectations mediated the relationship between social class and educational expectations. In order for mediation to take place, the analysis must meet the following three conditions: “(1) the independent variable must affect the mediator in the first equation, (2) the independent variable must affect the dependent variable in the second equation, and (3) the mediator must affect the dependent variable in
the third equation” (Baron & Kenny, 1986, p. 1177). Assumptions of mediation included all the standard regression assumptions, including a lack of substantial measurement error and a lack of a causal relationship between the dependent variable and the mediator (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

**Results**

Career expectations ranged from 28.07 (prep cook) to 87 (surgeon) with a mean of 59.58. Student educational expectations and perceived parental educational expectations ranged from *high school education or less* to *PhD or professional degree*, with a mean for student educational expectations of 4.35 and students’ perceived parental educational expectations of 4.20, indicating that, on average, parents and students expected the participants to obtain at least a bachelor’s degree.

As with protocols incorporated by Goyette (2008) and Mello (2008), the current study attempted to examine the relationship among SES, educational expectations, perceived parental expectations, and occupational expectations after controlling for academic achievement as measured by cumulative GPA. Thus, the resulting partial correlations represent the relationship among variables after controlling for academic achievement; career expectations were positively correlated with the following: educational expectations, r(178) = .48, p < .001, and student perceived parental educational expectations, r(178) = .40, p < .001. Individuals with higher career expectations were more likely to have increased educational expectations, parents’ educational expectations, and student perceived educational expectations. Educational expectations were also positively correlated with the following: student perceived parental educational expectations, r(191) = .76, p < .001, and SES, r(191) = .25, p < .001 (see Table 1).

Two-way ANOVAs were conducted to determine whether there were any gender or grade-level differences in the outcome variables of career and educational expectations. The results of a two-way ANOVA investigating career expectations indicated that there were no significant main effects of gender and grade level, and no interaction effect. For educational expectations, there was a significant main effect of gender, F(1, 193) = 5.71, p = .018 (girls: M = 4.54, SD = 1.12; boys: M = 4.13, SD = 1.08). In the current sample, girls expected to have greater levels of educational attainment than did their male counterparts.

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. CE</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.48**</td>
<td>.40**</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>59.58</td>
<td>11.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. SEE</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.76**</td>
<td>.25**</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. SPPEE</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. SES</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. CE = career expectations; SEE = student educational expectations; SPPEE = student perceived parental educational expectations; SES = socioeconomic status. SES was composed of parents’ education and occupation converted to z scores and averaged. Data displayed represent correlations after controlling for academic achievement. *p < .05. **p < .001.*
Social Class (SES) and Adolescent Career Expectations

A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between SES and adolescents’ career expectations. As with protocols established by Goyette (2008) and Mello (2008), academic achievement was added in the first step, \( F(1, 178) = 18.59, p = .001, R^2 = .10 \). Once SES was added in the second step of the regression analysis, the \( R^2 \) increased by .02 for a once again, statistically significant model, \( F(2, 177) = 11.49, p = .001, R^2 = .12 \), suggesting that adding SES to the model had little effect on the prediction of career expectations. Standardized beta weights suggested that academic achievement (the control variable) was a significant explanatory variable of career expectations (\( \beta = .26, p = .001 \)), In contrast, SES did not significantly explain career expectations (\( \beta = .15, p = .045 \)), suggesting that individuals’ levels of career expectations are not reflective of their social class, after making a Bonferroni adjustment for the three tests investigating career expectations.

Adolescent Educational and Career Expectations

A second hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to determine whether educational expectations explained variability in career expectations. In the first step, academic achievement was added, \( F(1, 179) = 19.80, p = .001, R^2 = .10 \). To investigate whether educational expectations explained career expectations beyond the contribution of academic achievement, I added the career expectations variable in the second step. The overall model was significant, \( F(2, 178) = 38.52, p = .001, R^2 = .30 \), with an \( R^2 \) increase of .20 indicating that educational expectations had a moderate effect on corresponding career expectations. Standardized beta weights suggested that educational expectations was a significant explanatory variable of career expectations (\( \beta = .48, p = .001 \)), with individuals aspiring to higher levels of education expecting to have careers of greater prestige.

Parental Expectations and Adolescent Educational Expectations

Furthermore, a hierarchical regression was performed to examine whether parental expectations explained variance in expected education. On the basis of the results of an ANOVA indicating significant differences in educational expectations based on gender, both gender and academic achievement were controlled for in the regression analyses. After academic achievement and gender were entered in the first step, the overall model was significant, \( F(2, 191) = 13.02, p = .001, R^2 = .12 \). In an attempt to understand whether educational expectations could be explained beyond the contribution of gender and academic achievement, parents’ expectations was entered in the second step, increasing the \( R^2 \) by .52, a large effect as indicated by Cohen (1988), for an overall model of \( F(3, 190) = 111.45, p = .001, R^2 = .64 \). After a Bonferroni adjustment was accounted for, standardized beta weights suggested that gender (\( \beta = -.14, p = .002 \) and perceived parental expectations (\( \beta = .78, p = .001 \)) were significant explanatory variables of educational expectations (see Table 2). The results suggest that being female and having greater perceived parental educational expectations are significant contributors of increased educational expectations for the adolescent.
SES, Adolescent Educational Expectations, and Adolescent Career Expectations

The fourth research question investigated the degree to which expected education mediates the relationship between social class and career expectations. According to Baron and Kenny (1986), in order for mediation to take place, there must be a direct effect of the independent variable (SES) on the dependent variable (occupational expectations). The direct relationship between SES and career expectations was not statistically significant; therefore, mediation analysis was unwarranted.

SES, Parental Expectations, and Adolescent Educational Expectations

Although there was no direct relationship between SES and occupational expectations, there was, however, a direct relationship between SES and educational expectations (\( \beta = .24, p = .001 \)), with individuals of higher SES expecting to obtain increased levels of education. On the basis of this relationship, further analysis was performed to see if parental expectations mediate the relationship between SES and educational expectations. The second step in mediation requires that there be a significant relationship between the independent variable (SES) and the mediator (perceived parental expectations; \( \beta = .33, p = .001 \)). Furthermore, the mediator (perceived parental expectations) was a significant explanatory variable of educational expectations (\( \beta = .77, p = .001 \)). When both SES and perceived educational expectations were entered concurrently to explain educational expectations, SES was no longer significant (\( \beta = -.02, p = .770 \)), whereas perceived parental expectations was a significant explanatory variable (\( \beta = .77, p = .001 \)). Results of the mediation analysis are presented in Figure 1. The bootstrapping method (Preacher & Hayes, 2008; Shroud & Bolger, 2002) was used to measure the significance of the indirect effect of SES on educational expectations, with perceived parental expectations mediating that effect. The 95% confidence intervals, which ranged from .21 to .55, indicated that the mediator was significant because the confidence interval did not include 0 (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

TABLE 2
Hierarchical Regression Explaining Direct Effects of Perceived Parental Expectations on Educational Expectations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step and Variable</th>
<th>( \beta )</th>
<th>( t )</th>
<th>( p )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-1.36</td>
<td>.175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic achievement</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>-3.15</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic achievement</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>.968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived parental expectations</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>16.48</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. For Step 1, \( R^2 = .12, p = .001 \). For Step 2, \( R^2 = .64, p = .001 \). \( R^2 \) for Step 2 increased by .52, a large effect as indicated by Cohen (1988).
A primary objective of the current study was to investigate the direct and indirect effects of social class on the career expectations of rural adolescents. Prior research has suggested that there is a direct relationship between parents’ occupation and children’s occupational aspirations (Hitlin, 2006; Otto, 2000; Trice, Hughes, Odom, & Woods, 1995). The results of the current study indicate that, after controlling for academic achievement, SES is not a significant explanatory variable of career expectations among the students who were sampled. The absence of a direct association between SES and career expectations contrasts with results of previous research examining the aspirations of adolescents (Diemer & Ali, 2009; Mau & Bikos, 2000; Mello, 2009; Rojewski, 2005; Rojewski & Yang, 1997), even though similar measures of SES (parents’ occupations and educational levels) were used.

In contrast, results of the current study suggest that there is a relationship between adolescent educational expectations and occupational aspirations, with educational expectations explaining a significant proportion of the variance in occupational expectations. The results corroborate with previous research demonstrating a relationship between educational expectations and subsequent career aspirations and attainment (Arbona, 2000; Hotchkiss & Borow, 1996; Lent, Brown, & Hackett; 1994; Rojewski & Kim, 2003; Rojewski & Yang, 1997; Schoon & Parsons, 2002).

**Discussion**

**Adolescent Occupational Expectations**

To build on the relationship between educational expectations and career expectations, one must understand the factors predicting educational expectations. The results of the hierarchical regression indicate that perceived parental expectations, along with the control variable of gender, significantly explained educational expectations. The overall model accounted for 52% of the variance in educational expectations. The results also suggest that perceived parental expectations contribute
to the explanation of educational expectations beyond the contributions of academic achievement and gender (Hossler & Stage, 1992).

The findings of the current study highlight the importance of parental expectations such that higher parental expectations are related to increased levels of child educational expectations. It is of interest that, after controlling for academic achievement, the correlation between reported parents’ expectations and perceived parental expectations was .76, supporting the findings of Looker and Pineo (1983). The strength of this correlation demonstrates the importance of parents’ expectations for their children and the accuracy of children’s perceptions of the educational goals that their parents have for them.

**Relationship Among SES, Parental Expectations, and Adolescent Educational Expectations**

Contrary to the lack of a significant relationship between SES and occupational expectations, there was a significant relationship between SES and the educational expectations of the adolescent. The finding that SES is related to educational expectations aligns with findings by Haller and Virkler (1993), who determined that SES accounted for observed differences in educational expectations among a mostly rural sample of high school students. On the basis of the significant relationship between SES and educational expectations, one could speculate that SES may be indirectly related to occupational expectations through the mechanism of educational expectations (de Graaf & Kalmijn, 2001; Dubow et al., 2009; Hill et al., 2004; Jacobs et al., 1991; Marks, 1992; Sewell, Haller, & Ohlendorf, 1970). However, it is important to note that this hypothesized pathway could not be tested in the current study because of the lack of a direct relationship between SES and career expectations.

Furthermore, analyses were conducted to understand whether perceived parental expectations mediate the relationship between SES and educational expectations. There was a significant relationship between SES and perceived parental expectations, with higher levels of SES associated with increased levels of parental expectations. Although SES significantly explains educational expectations when entered into the model alone, when perceived parental expectations were entered into the model explaining educational expectations, SES was no longer significant. This suggests that perceived parental educational expectations may mediate (i.e., intervene) in the relationship between SES and educational expectations. The results of the current study support the notions of Trice (1991), who suggested that direct parental influence might weaken during adolescence, further expanding on the research by suggesting that parental influence may take place indirectly through the mechanism of parental expectations. Nevertheless, students who perceive that their parents have high educational expectations for them are more likely to have increased educational expectations themselves.

**Limitations and Recommendations**

Although the current study has potential implications for the understanding of career development among adolescents, several limitations should