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Date of publication: June 25th, 2015

Edition period: June 2015-October 2015

To cite this article: Liu, H. (2015). Explore Mother's Educational Expectations and Aspirations: A Case from China. *International Journal of Sociology of Education*, 4(2), 128-157. doi: 10.17583/rise.2015.1428

To link this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/rise.2015.1428>

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Explore Mother’s Educational Expectations and Aspirations: A Case from China

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(Received: 17 February 2015; Accepted: 19 May 2015; Published: 25 June 2015)

Abstract

The research presented explores determinants of mother’s educational expectations and aspirations. In contrast to the effects of social economic status (SES) that have been examined in previous research, I have focused on a set of social psychological variables. With the help of data collected from the Gansu Survey of Children and Families, a survey of Chinese 9 to 12-year-old children in rural areas, I have analyzed mothers’ educational expectations and aspirations for their children using multinomial logistic regression. Evidence suggests important effects of personality (specifically confidence) and subjective economic status on mothers’ educational expectations. This lends support to the “pushed-from-behind” theory of attainment in which educational decisions are at least partly driven by opaque (beyond individual consciousness) social psychological mechanisms. The results call for further incorporation of social psychological variables into scholarship on educational decisions, and more generally, into the field of educational stratification. Moreover, the results also shed light on the theoretical and conceptual differentiation between educational expectations and aspirations.

Keywords: social psychological mechanisms, educational expectations, educational aspirations, relative economic status, optimism

Explorar Expectativas y Aspiraciones Educativas de la Madre: Un caso de China

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(Recibido: 17 Febrero 2015; Aceptado: 19 Mayo 2015; Publicado: 25 Junio 2015)

Resumen

La investigación presentada explora los determinantes de las expectativas y las aspiraciones educativas de la madre. En contraste con los efectos de la situación económica y social (SES) que han sido examinados en investigaciones anteriores, me he centrado en un conjunto de variables psico-sociales. Con la ayuda de los datos obtenidos de la Encuesta de Gansu de Niños y Familias, una encuesta a niños chinos de 9 a 12 años de edad en las zonas rurales, he analizado las expectativas educativas y aspiraciones de las madres para sus hijos mediante regresión logística multinomial. La evidencia sugiere efectos importantes de la personalidad (en concreto de confianza) y la situación económica subjetiva en las expectativas educativas de las madres. Esto apoya la teoría "pushed-from-behind" del logro en el que las decisiones educativas son al menos en parte impulsados por opacos (más allá de la conciencia individual) mecanismos psico-sociales. Los resultados llaman a una mayor incorporación de las variables psico-sociales en las decisiones educativas, y más en general, en el campo de la estratificación educativa. Por otra parte, los resultados también arrojan luz sobre la diferenciación teórica y conceptual entre las expectativas y aspiraciones educativas.

Palabras clave: mecanismos psico-sociales, expectativas educativas, aspiraciones educativas, educational expectations, estatus económico familiar, optimismo.

Sewell and Shah (1967) developed the Wisconsin social psychological model based on the classical attainment model (Blau & Duncan, 1967). Their findings suggest that educational aspirations have strong effects on educational attainment. Much has been achieved following this line of research to explore mechanisms linking students’ social background socioeconomic status and educational and occupational achievements (See Sewell & Hauser, 1993 for a more comprehensive review). Earlier efforts by the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study of Social and Psychological Factors in Aspirations and Achievements devoted elaborations and modifications of path causal models. For example, the influence of significant others were taken into account (Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969); contextual effects such as school characteristics were added in the models (Alexander & Eckland, 1975); gender differences in aspirations also drew scholars’ attentions (Rosen & Aneshensel, 1978; Zhang, Kao, & Hannum, 2007). Later on, racial differences in educational aspirations became the central focus of educational stratification, though in the original WLS sample racial differences were not extensively examined because of the racially homogenous sample where only less than 2% were black then. Scholars have tried to explain the racial differences in educational achievement with regards to differences in students and parental educational aspirations and expectations. In general, Asian American children, viewed as the model minority, have the highest educational expectations (Goyette & Xie, 1999) and Hispanic children have the lowest (Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, & Garnier, 2001). Different studies have emphasized research differently, with some identifying the background origins of the racial differences in educational aspirations and achievements (Goyett & Xie, 1999; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998); however, others are more interested in the mechanisms linking the background variables and outcomes (Cheng & Starks, 2002; Goldenberg et al., 2001). In this paper, I focus exclusively on parental educational expectations and aspirations as outcome variables, and incorporate more mediating variables to uncover the mechanisms linking family backgrounds and parental educational aspirations and expectations. Earlier studies demonstrated the complicated racial differences in mechanisms of forming parental educational expectations (Davis-Kean, 2005), in order to keep the results simple this time, I employ a racially homogenous sample from rural China. The three proposed mediating

variables inspired from Gambetta's theoretical framework (1987), subjective economic status, optimism, financial expectations from children in the future, are found to have significant mediating effects linking background family characteristics on the one hand and parental educational expectations on the other hand. However, few significant mediating effects are found for parental aspirations. In light of these findings, this study calls for a more detailed examinations of mechanisms generating parental expectations and aspirations, and also a more serious theoretical and conceptual differentiation between educational expectations and aspirations.

Parental Educational Expectations and Aspirations

Stratification in education has long been a central focus of sociology. Large bodies of work have developed concerning educational stratification with reference to socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, and immigrants. These studies tend to emphasize the importance of the family in understanding stratification through avenues such as parental investment and educational activities. Parental investment and other activities in educating children have been treated as important intervening variables. Parental behavior is not only influenced by socioeconomic status (including parents' education level and the wealth and income of a family), but also contributes independently to students' educational expectations.

Sewell and Shah (1968) examined "parental encouragement", asking students about their perceptions pertaining to parental attitudes toward students' college expectations. In another study, Hao and Bonstead-Bruns (1998) examined families' social capital rather than their human and economic capital to account for the levels of academic achievement experienced by Asian and Mexican immigrant children. Of further relevance, Hao and Bonstead-Bruns (1998) compared within-family social capital and between-family social capital and argued that within-family social capital was most important in explaining Asian immigrants' academic achievement.

Using past educational stratification scholarship as my point of departure, I explore the determinants of mothers' educational expectations and aspirations. There are reasons to treat parental educational expectations and aspirations as dependent variables. First, parental educational expectations

have a strong effect on students’ educational expectations (Goyette & Xie, 1999), and as a result, knowledge about determinants of parents’ educational expectations may help explain students’ educational expectations. Goyette and Xie (1999) examined the effects of parental expectations to help explain the significant Asian-white gap in educational outcomes. However, it is unsatisfactory to simply treat parental expectations as exogenous. Instead, parental expectations should be viewed as endogenous. For example Sewell et al. (1969) argued that parental expectations helped explain the relationship between socioeconomic background and students’ educational expectations. The causal chain identified in Sewell et al.’s work (1969) could be summarized as follows: Socioeconomic status determines children’s educational and occupational aspirations through significant others’ influence, and children’s educational and occupational aspirations further help to explain their educational and occupational achievements. Their work elaborates the classic status-attainment path model (Blau & Duncan, 1967) by showing the effect of parental aspirations in explaining the relationship between socioeconomic status and students’ educational aspirations. By employing perceived parental aspiration, one item that Sewell, et al. (1969) used to operationalize significant others’ influence as a mediating variable, they suggest looking at parental aspirations as an endogenous variable, arguing that socioeconomic status impacts parental aspirations. Research exploring the effect of socioeconomic status on parental aspiration and expectation can elaborate Sewell et al.’s work (1969), and help us better understand the status-attainment path model. Thus, I propose looking at social psychological factors in addition to the traditional socioeconomic and demographic factors, helping explain the effects of socioeconomic background on parental educational expectations and aspirations.

A second reason for treating parental expectations and aspirations as dependent variables is that parents’ educational decisions for children are likely to better reflect their relative positions in society than children’s because young children’s educational plans are still very abstract (Kao & Tienda, 1998), while parental educational expectations and aspirations tend to be more concrete, making them better predictors of actual children achievement. For example, some researchers have considered expectations as a central ingredient in rational choice (Alexander & Cook, 1979). As a result, parents with greater knowledge of the stratification system are

typically more rational than children, which is especially true when children are young, making their expectations and aspirations more reliable reflections of dimensions of the stratification process.

Another gap in research on educational aspiration and expectation was identified by Kao and Tienda (1998). They pointed out that research endeavors should include comparison of expectations and aspirations. Unfortunately, their data lacked measurements on both concepts and little research since then, to my knowledge, has filled this gap. As a result, I look at both educational expectation and aspiration and compare their determinants.

In light of these research gaps, I seek to elaborate new mechanisms of relevance. Much work in educational stratification (e.g., Goyette & Xie, 1999; Sewell et al., 1969) has focused on parents' expectations or aspirations for their children as an explanation for socioeconomic differences in children's educational goals and achievements. There is strong evidence that parents' expectations and aspirations mediate the relationship of family socioeconomic status on children's educational outcomes. However, little research has focused on the determinants of parents' expectations and aspirations, and even less research has looked beyond socioeconomic, demographic, and social capital variables. By concentrating on parental expectations and aspirations as outcomes and proposing social psychological variables to interpret those outcomes, I seek to gauge the possible relevance of new mechanisms of interest to provide more details of the causal chains developed in the status-attainment path model. In this way, it may be possible to further elucidate the interrelationships of social contexts/backgrounds and possible important social psychological processes that underpin the stratification process. Parental educational expectations and aspirations are chosen over those of children because they tend to be more reliable and concrete, thus are better predictors of the actual attainments. Last but not least, with a few exceptions, research has rarely simultaneously studied expectations and aspirations, two related by not identical concepts. In this study, I separate and compare expectations and aspirations to address this gap in literature.

Social Psychological Processes

In contrast to most discussions of parents’ educational expectations and aspirations (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Zhang, Kao, & Hannum, 2007), this study focuses on social psychological variables, rather than only socioeconomic and demographic measurements. There are compelling reasons to examine the impact of social psychological processes on parental expectations and aspirations.

Wilson and Portes (1975, p.359) viewed the educational attainment process in two different ways, emphasizing both “structural” variables and “social psychological” variables. The “structural” theory is an educational attainment process that involves adjusting one’s aspirations to objective socioeconomic background and academic abilities. The “social psychological” perspective suggests that educational aspirations are adjusted in accordance with individual self-assessments of socioeconomic status and scholastic abilities. In this case, social psychological variables function as important intervening variables, mediating an unknown proportion of the effect of socioeconomic status on educational aspirations.

By comparing these two fundamental perspectives, Wilson and Portes (1975) argued that structural variables’ direct effects and social psychological variables’ mediating effects should be empirically examined and case by case. As a result, analysis should include relevant social psychological variables as well as objective structural variables to examine their potential mediating effects.

Another reason for the incorporation of social psychological variables is that considering the social psychological approach helps to shed new light on a theoretical controversy. Gambetta’s study (1987), which analyzed students’ educational plans in Italy, identified three main theoretical views. They are the structuralist view, the pushed-from-behind view, and the pulled-from-front view. The structuralist view leaves little room for individual choice of education plans, which is largely and directly determined by students’ social structural position. The main controversy exists mainly between the alternative pushed-from-behind and pulled-from-front views. The pushed-from-behind view assumes that “a given piece of behavior follows from causes, either social or psychological, that are opaque to individual consciousness” (Gambetta, 1987, p.11). Two perspectives are

suggested as push-from-behind mechanisms: cultural causation (e.g., Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) and economic causation (e.g., Elster, 1983). In contrast, the pulled-from-front view is proposed by Boudon (1981) and emphasizes rational choice.

However, few quantitative studies of educational stratification directly identify variables of relevance to the opaque social psychological causes or to rational choice mechanisms. One exception is Zhang, Kao, and Hannum's study (2007) of gender equality of mothers' educational aspirations. Their study found that mothers' educational aspirations for their children were largely conceptualized as an investment plan with regard to education for their children. Furthermore, mothers' anticipation of returns from children had a significant positive effect on educational aspirations for their children, which provides some support for the rational choice mechanisms. As a supplement to their research, I will examine the alternative perspective, the opaque social psychological causes, using key social psychological variables. This sheds some light on Gambetta's work (1987), who included few direct measurements of social psychological variables.

The first proposed social psychological variable related to the opaque social psychological causes in this study are mothers' self-reported relative economic status. This variable can be viewed as the experiential component of social structure. Aneshensel and Sucoff (1996) suggested that subjective perceptions of the neighborhood mediated between its objective characteristics and adolescents' mental health outcomes. Following the same logic, there is reason to expect parallel mediating effects of the experiential components of structural position with respect to parental educational decisions for their children. This could help to articulate the mechanism of the pushed-from-behind view, particularly for the perspective of economic causation.

Such experiential components of structural position can also be viewed from the relative deprivation theory in order to understand the importance of self-reported economic status compared to others. According to Crosby (1976), the term "relative deprivation" was first used by Stouffer (1949) to study soldiers' morale during World War II. Since then, a number of theoretical and empirical studies have been conducted to elaborate this theory as well as apply it in various fields and contexts to test a variety of outcomes. For example, Crosby (1976) developed a formal model of relative

deprivation. Chester (1976) argued perceived relative deprivation as a cause of property crime. Clark and Oswald (1996) reported the inverse relationship between comparison wage rates and workers’ reported satisfaction level. Kondo et al. (2008) documented that relative deprivation predicted poor self-reported health in Japan. Chuang, Li, Wu, and Chao (2007) examined the effects of relative deprivation on drinking and smoking in Taiwan. Recent developments of relative deprivation extended beyond traditional areas like social movement, deviance, and health outcomes to educational achievements. For example, Wilkinson and Pickett (2007) have documented that among rich countries, levels of relative deprivation, measured by income inequality, is negatively associated with educational achievement at country level. In light of these examples, I conceptualize parents’ self-reported low relative economic status as an indicator of relative deprivation. Following the logic of relative deprivation in other relevant studies that relative deprivation produces resentment, propensity for deviance, and/or low morale, I hypothesize that parents who report low relative economic status also tend to lack motivation for upward mobility due to low morale, or to reject formal routine of upward mobility, e.g., through education. Ultimately, they tend to have low educational expectations and aspirations for their children after controlling for objective measurements of socioeconomic status and other demographic variables.

Another set of proposed variables key to social psychological processes could be personality characteristics. Some work on educational aspirations employs optimism as an *ad hoc* explanation for racial differences (e.g., Kao & Tienda, 1998), suggesting a positive relationship between optimism and educational aspirations. In particular, Diener et al. (1999) described optimism as a “generalized tendency to expect favorable outcomes in one’s life” (p.281). In the context of this study, I expect that parents who are more optimistic are more likely to report higher educational expectations and aspirations for their children. In contrast to the studies mentioned above, I seek to test such a relationship using items directly measuring level of optimism.

Together, then, there are ample reasons to incorporate additional social psychological variables in models of parents’ educational expectations and aspirations for their children. Examining subjective relative economic position and optimism enables new insights into the educational

stratification process. I focus, in particular, on the rural Chinese social context as a useful case study with which to begin a suitable investigation. The data and broader rationale for this case study are discussed below.

Chinese Context

Chinese culture has long placed importance on education. The proverb “Xue Er You Ze Shi (学而优则仕)”, meaning success in education leads the way to power, has deep historical roots. There is a growing body of literature on educational stratification in China (e.g., Zhou, Moen, & Tuma, 1998; Hannum, 2002). With regard to this, knowledge gained from this case study of rural China contributes to our understanding of educational stratification mechanisms in China, and those in developing countries in general (Buchmann & Hannum, 2001). Specifically, Buchmann and Hannum (2001) identified four broad areas common in educational stratification literature in developing countries: (1) macro-structural forces, (2) family background’s impact, (3) school factors, and (4) consequences of educational stratification on social mobility. This study adds to the current literature by bringing the micro and subtle social psychological processes into the picture. In addition, this study speaks directly to Zhang, Kao, and Hannum’s study (2007): From a gender inequality perspective, they show mothers’ gender attitudes and expected returns from children in the future explain differences in mothers’ educational aspirations for boys and girls. To achieve this goal, I use the same data and research context. Another important reason is that China, especially rural China, provides a relatively homogenous population precluding most confounding factors such as race and immigrant status in other studies (e.g., Kao & Tienda, 1998; Goyette & Xie, 1999), making the examination of proposed mechanisms more efficient and straightforward. This research strategy is also adopted by other scholars. For instance, in a study of levels of aspiration and social class, Reissman (1953) limited research subjects to white, male, native-born adults, because “variations in any of these factors could be confounding and would require separate study” (p.235).

Data and Methods

Data Description

The year 2000 data I analyze are part of Gansu Survey of Children and Families (GSCF). Gansu is one of the poorest and most undeveloped provinces in China. Two thousand children from one hundred villages (exactly 20 children per village) were sampled. Target children and their mothers, homeroom teachers, school principals and village leaders were asked questions on health, economic conditions, attitudes, feelings, self-conceptions, jobs, relationships among relatives and other such issues. To be exact, there were 7 types of questionnaires: for children, mothers, households, teachers, homeroom teachers, school principals, and village leaders. There were also available academic test data of children. Due to data limitation, parental educational aspirations and expectations, parents' social psychological variables as well as other relevant variables of interest, are derived for mothers only.

Variable measurement. The primary focus of my paper related to social psychological variable while employing socioeconomic status as an independent variable. Gender, academic ability and the number of siblings and factors denoting mothers' ways of educating children were also controlled.

Dependent variables

Mother's Educational Expectations and Aspirations. Two questions concerning mothers' educational plans were used in this study. The first asked the highest grade a mother wished her child to finish, and the other asked the highest grade a mother thought her child would finish. About 68.1% of mothers wished their children to attend college or higher, and 27.4% of mothers believed that their children would attend college or higher. In this study, I examined the effects of a set of characteristics on expectations and on aspirations. Three response categories were generated from the questionnaires for both dependent variables: attend college or higher, finish senior high school, and finish junior high school or lower. I

noted that finishing junior high school and finishing elementary school, two options in the questionnaires, are collapsed in the analysis because finishing junior high school is compulsory in China (there are only a few whose answer is “finish elementary school”). For these dependent variables with three categories, I used multinomial logistic regression.

Independent variables

Socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic status has long been known to contribute to parental educational expectations (Sewell & Shah, 1968). Previous research has found parental educational expectations to be a powerful intervening variable between socioeconomic background and children’s educational aspirations. In light of this, if we try to focus on the contribution of other variables to mother’s educational expectations, socioeconomic status must be controlled. When measuring socioeconomic status, I followed previous work using this dataset (Zhang, Kao, & Hannum, 2007) and conceptualized it as mothers’ years of education and total household value (as multiples of 10000 yuan).

Measured academic ability. The math and verbal scores of children’s previous semester on a 100-point scale were used to measure children’s academic achievement. Previous studies have found that parental expectations influence child school performance, as measured by tested academic ability. As a result, tested academic ability must be controlled when considering other related determinants (for detailed reasons to include tested academic ability, also see Zhang, Kao, & Hannum, 2007). Here, the score is standardized by centering on the mean and rescaling with standard deviation.

Number of siblings. Research using the dilution-perspective concludes that having more children will tend to dilute family resources. Thus with fixed family resources, having more children means less resources for each child (Buchmann, 2000). From this perspective, I employed the number of siblings as a relevant control variable.

Mother’s ways of educating children. Zhang, Kao, and Hannum (2007) argued that “A mother’s educational aspirations for her child may influence parenting practices at home” (p.135). As a result, parents’ ways of educating children should be included in the analysis as covariates. In Hao and

Bonstead-Bruns’ study (1998, p.182), parental interactions with their children or involvement in their children’s activities were synthesized into three factors using factor analysis. Their factors are: 1) parents' involvement in children's school learning at home; 2) parents taking children to extracurricular classes and activities; 3) parents' involvement with the child in other learning activities. Following similar methods described in their paper for generating factors representing parent’s interaction with children or involvement in children’s study activities, I first selected 20 items, and then based on the results from both exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis, I identified 5 factors. From an *ad hoc* perspective, I concluded that they are: 1) familiarity with children’s routine life; 2) involvement in learning activities in schools (analogous to the 1st factor in Hao and Bonstead-Bruns’ work); 3) other (learning) activities at homes (analogous to the 2nd factor in Hao and Bonstead-Bruns’ work); 4) not beating and scolding children; 5) affection and encouragement. For further details, see Appendix A.

Social psychological variables. The first social psychological variable I considered was subjective economic status. Respondents were asked, “How would you rate your family's economic situation in the context of your village?” Answers of “good” and “above the average” were collapsed as one category, and the other two categories are the answers of “below the average” and “very bad,” respectively.

The second social psychological variable I considered was optimism. This was measured by a question asking mothers “do you have confidence in your future life”, leading to answer categories: “fully agree” (conceptualized as very optimistic), “agree” (conceptualized as optimistic), and either “disagree” or “totally disagree” (conceptualized as not optimistic).

Mother’s Expectation of Financial Return from Children. Mother’s future financial return expected from children was measured by a question asking mothers “how much financial aid do you expect from your children”, leading to answer categories: “a lot”, “some”, and “very little or none”. This variable provided the opportunity to test the alternative pulled-from-front mechanism and rational choice theory in particular. The same item was used by Zhang, Kao, and Hannum (2007). Descriptive statistics are presented in table 1.

Table 1
Characteristics of the Study Sample (N = 1882)

Variables	Percentage %	Mean (std. dev.)	Minimum	Maximum
Mother's Aspiration				
Finish junior high school	9.40			
Finish senior high school	22.48			
Attend college or up	68.12			
Mother's Expectation				
Finish junior high school	30.23			
Finish senior high school	42.35			
Attend college or up	27.42			
Gender of Child				
Male	54.41			
Female	45.59			
Household Value (in 10k)		1.14(1.84)	0.01	31.29
Number of Siblings		1.31(0.72)	0.00	5.00
Mother's Years of Education		7.02(3.49)	0.00	15.00
Standardized Test Score		0.00(1.00)	-1.54	2.75
Subjective Economic Status				
Above Average	42.19			
Below Average	42.35			
Very Bad	15.46			
Confident in Future				
Very Confident	18.81			
Confident	70.24			
Not Confident	10.95			
Financial Aid Expected from Child				
A lot	18.12			
Some	66.21			
Very little or None	14.35			

Results

(1) Traditional View

I first examined the traditional views of the origin of mothers' educational expectations and aspirations which looked at typical SES independent variables. For this analysis, I considered the baseline model. Coefficients and standard errors are presented in table 2.

For objective economic status, measured as total household value, there are significant positive effects on both aspirations and expectations. For every one 10000 yuan increase in total household value: the odds of having an aspiration of college and up over an aspiration of finishing junior school or lower increases significantly ($p=0.009$) by a factor of 1.328^1 , and the odds of having an expectation of college and up over an expectation of finishing junior school or lower also increases significantly ($p=0.034$) by a factor of 1.094^2 , holding all other variables in the baseline model constant. Mother's years of education, the gender of the child, and the test score of the child also have significant effects on both educational expectations and aspirations. For example, for a male child, the odds of his mother having educational expectations of college and up over an expectation of finishing junior school or lower is 1.622^3 ($p=0.000$) times of that for a female child, other variables in the model held constant. Having more siblings is associated with decreasing educational expectations, which is consistent with the dilution perspective. However, the number of siblings has no effect on educational aspirations.

Table 2

Multinomial Regression of Mothers' Educational Expectations and Aspirations for Child: Baseline Model (N=1882)

<u>Independent Variables</u>	Model 1(expectations)		Model 2(aspirations)	
	Coefficients (SE)	Coefficients (SE)	Coefficients (SE)	Coefficients (SE)
Comparison	College&up vs. Junior	Senior vs. Junior	College&up vs. Junior	Senior vs. Junior
<i>Controls</i>				
Household Value (by 10000 yuan)	0.090* (.042)	0.064 (.041)	0.284** (.108)	0.154 (.114)
Male Child (1,0)	0.484*** (.129)	0.595*** (.115)	0.958*** (.175)	0.735*** (.190)
# of Sibings	-0.315** (.093)	-0.080 (.079)	-0.061 (.114)	-0.036 (.124)
Mother's years of education	0.027 (.019)	0.078*** (.017)	0.098*** (.024)	0.065* (.026)
Standardized test score of child	0.267*** (.065)	0.172** (.059)	0.216* (.088)	0.094 (.095)
<i>Ways of Educating Child</i>				
Familiar with Children's Routine Life	0.001 (.090)	0.029 (.080)	0.110 (.115)	0.031 (.125)
Involvement in Learning Activities in School	0.193 (.116)	0.108 (.104)	0.200 (.153)	0.068 (.167)
Other (learning) Activities at Home	0.120 (.166)	0.069 (.148)	-0.054 (.219)	0.247 (.238)
Not Beat and Scold Child	0.462*** (.095)	0.206* (.083)	0.364** (.119)	0.267* (.129)
Affection & Encouragement	0.291* (.141)	0.124 (.125)	0.348 (.185)	-0.174 (.202)
<i>-2Log Likelihood</i>	3859.153		2902.575	

Notes: *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001 (two-tailed tests)

(2) Social Psychological Models

In model 3 (see table 3), subjective economic status has a significant effect on expectations and a non-significant effect on aspirations when included in the model. Since the objective measurement of economic status as total household value ceases to bear any significant effects on educational expectations in social psychological models compared to the baseline model 1, there is evidence that those effects identified in traditional view are now mediated by this social psychological factor. For example, for those mothers reporting economic status as very good and above average in the village compared to those reporting very bad, the odds of expectations of attending college (and above) over finishing junior school (or lower) increases significantly ($p=0.000$) by a factor of 2.075⁴. However, while subjective perceptions of economic status appear to influence educational expectations, it’s not the case for educational aspirations: as shown in model 5 (see table 4), subjective economic status does not have any significant effect anymore, while coefficients of object economic status remain significant after controlling for subjective economic status.

When optimism, conceptualized as “confidence in your future” is included in model 4 (see table 3), it too has effects on expectations. For example, mothers with full confidence in the future are more likely to have expectations of attending college and above.

Optimism also mediates the effects of objective economic status on mothers’ expectation compared with baseline model 1. Here too, then, a second psychological factor appears critical to the formation of parental educational expectations.

Optimism also affects aspirations in model 6 (see table 4), but neither of the two social psychological factors mediates influences of objective economic status on educational aspirations.

Table 3

Multinomial Regression of Mothers' Educational Expectations for Child: Social Psychological Model (N=1882)

Independent Variables	Model 3		Model 4	
	Coefficients (SE)	Coefficients (SE)	Coefficients (SE)	Coefficients (SE)
Comparison	College&up vs. Junior	Senior vs. Junior	College&up vs. Junior	Senior vs. Junior
<i>Controls</i>				
Household Value (by 10000 yuan)	0.050 (.041)	0.040 (.039)	0.082 (.042)	0.061 (.040)
Male Child (1,0)	0.454*** (.130)	0.570*** (.116)	0.455*** (.130)	0.587*** (.116)
# of Siblings	-0.305** (.094)	-0.080 (.080)	-0.311** (.094)	-0.077 (.079)
Mother's years of education	0.025 (.019)	0.076*** (.017)	0.026 (.019)	0.078*** (.017)
Standardized test score of child	0.250*** (.065)	0.158** (.059)	0.264*** (.065)	0.172** (.059)
<i>Ways of Educating Child</i>				
Familiar with Children's Routine Life	-0.010 (.091)	0.005 (.081)	-0.015 (.091)	0.023 (.080)
Involvement in Learning Activities in School	0.186 (.116)	0.102 (.104)	0.160 (.117)	0.097 (.104)
Other (learning) Activities at Home	0.084 (.167)	0.057 (.149)	0.122 (.167)	0.070 (.148)
Not Beat and Scold Child	0.444*** (.096)	0.203* (.084)	0.469*** (.096)	0.207* (.083)
Affection & Encouragement	0.301* (.142)	0.127 (.126)	0.285* (.142)	0.120 (.125)
<i>Social Psychological Variables</i>				
Family Economy Good in Village (very bad as omitted category)				
Very Good or Above Average	0.730*** (.194)	0.578** (.173)		
Below Average	0.263 (.191)	0.513** (.164)		
Confident in Future Life(disagree as omitted category)				
Fully Agree			0.794** (.262)	0.246 (.219)
Agree Somewhat			0.572* (.221)	0.125 (.173)
<i>-2Log Likelihood</i>		3832.182		3848.967

Table 4

Multinomial Regression of Mothers’ Educational Aspirations for Child: Social Psychological Model (N=1882)

Independent Variables	Model 5		Model 6	
	Coefficients (SE)	Coefficients (SE)	Coefficients (SE)	Coefficients (SE)
Comparison	College&up vs. Junior	Senior vs. Junior	College&up vs. Junior	Senior vs. Junior
<i>Controls</i>				
Household Value (by 10000 yuan)	0.238* (.108)	0.127 (.114)	0.271** (.107)	0.144 (.114)
Male	0.933*** (.175)	0.715*** (.190)	0.949 (.175)	0.736*** (.190)
# of Sibings	-0.063 (.114)	-0.046 (.124)	-0.067 (.114)	-0.043 (.124)
Mother’s years of education	0.098*** (.024)	0.066* (.026)	0.102*** (.024)	0.069** (.026)
Standardized test score	0.199* (.088)	0.081 (.096)	0.212** (.088)	0.092 (.096)
<i>Ways of Educating Child</i>				
Familiar with Children’s Routine Life	0.093 (.116)	0.005 (.126)	0.097 (.115)	0.025 (.125)
Involvement in Learning Activities in School	0.192 (.153)	0.061 (.167)	0.185 (.154)	0.064 (.167)
Other (learning) Activities at Home	-0.069 (.218)	0.248 (.238)	-0.034 (.219)	0.264 (.239)
Not Beat and Scold Child	0.359** (.119)	0.273* (.129)	0.376** (.119)	0.276* (.129)
Affection & Encouragement	0.357 (.185)	-0.168 (.201)	0.335 (.186)	-0.184 (.202)
<i>Social Psychological Variables</i>				
Family Economy Good in Village (very bad as omitted category)				
Very Good or Above Average	0.447 (.237)	0.274 (.262)		
Below Average	0.334 (.218)	0.467 (.240)		
Confident in Future Life(disagree as omitted category)				
Fully Agree			0.405 (.306)	0.151 (.335)
Agree Somewhat			0.589** (.231)	0.391 (.252)
-2Log Likelihood		2893.166		2895.751

Notes: *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001 (two-tailed tests)

In table 5, full models for mothers' educational expectations and aspirations are presented. In the full models, two proposed social psychological variables are included as independent variables simultaneously as well as mothers' expectation of financial return from children, an indicator for testing rational choice theory. For the two proposed social psychological variables, the full models have similar patterns as those shown in table 3 and table 4: both subjective economic status and optimism have significant effects on mothers' educational expectations, but few significant effects could be identified for aspirations⁵. Similarly, there are significant effects of mothers' expectations of financial return from children on mothers' educational expectations, while none could be found on aspirations⁶.

Table 5

Multinomial Regression of Mothers’ Educational Expectations and Aspirations for Child: Full Model (N=1857)

Independent Variables		Model 7 (expectation)		Model 8 (aspiration)	
		Coefficients (SE)	Coefficients (SE)	Coefficients (SE)	Coefficients (SE)
Comparison		College&cup vs. Junior	Senior vs. Junior	College&cup vs. Junior	Senior vs. Junior
<i>Controls</i>					
	Household Value (by 10000 yuan)	0.047 (.041)	0.039 (.039)	0.222* (.106)	0.115 (.112)
	Male Child (1,0)	0.419** (.132)	0.548*** (.117)	0.925*** (.177)	0.747*** (.193)
	# of Sibings	-0.291** (.095)	-0.063 (.080)	-0.059 (.116)	-0.032 (.126)
	Mother’s years of education	0.023 (.019)	0.076*** (.017)	0.106*** (.025)	0.071** (.027)
	Standardized test score	0.243*** (.066)	0.145* (.060)	0.213* (.089)	0.096 (.097)
<i>Ways of Educating Child</i>					
	Familiar with Children’s Routine Life	-0.041 (.093)	-0.019 (.082)	0.094 (.117)	0.022 (.128)
	Involvement in Learning Activities in School	0.163 (.118)	0.102 (.106)	0.164 (.155)	0.045 (.169)
	Other (learning) Activities at Home	0.090 (.168)	0.058 (.151)	-0.011 (.222)	0.304 (.242)
	Not Beat and Scold Child	0.421*** (.097)	0.183* (.085)	0.371** (.121)	0.287* (.132)
	Affection & Encouragement	0.277 (.143)	0.116 (.128)	0.327 (.188)	-0.190 (.204)
<i>Social Psychological Variables</i>					
Family Economy Good in Village (very bad as omitted category)					
	Very Good or Above Average	0.657** (.198)	0.529** (.176)	0.378 (.241)	0.222 (.266)
	Below Average	0.211 (.194)	0.473** (.116)	0.292 (.223)	0.425 (.245)
Confident in Future Life(disagree as omitted category)					
	Fully Agree	0.743** (.266)	0.191 (.225)	0.313 (.312)	-0.000 (.341)
	Agree Somewhat	0.452* (.226)	-0.009 (.178)	0.496* (.238)	0.265 (.259)
<i>Rational Choice Indicator</i>					
Financial Return from Children (little as omitted category)					
	A lot	0.494* (.224)	0.525* (.205)	0.436 (.296)	0.292 (.319)
	Some	0.246 (.184)	0.483** (.163)	0.301 (.227)	0.109 (.246)
<i>-2Log Likelihood</i>		3768.998		2837.766	

Notes: *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001 (two-tailed tests)

Discussion and Conclusion

How might social psychological factors advance scholarly understanding of the formation of educational expectations and aspirations? Sewell et al. (1969) first incorporated educational and occupational expectations and aspirations into the stratification process. Since then, the approach has developed into two traditions of employing aspirations as explanatory or mediating variables to account for other stratification outcomes (e.g., [Hao and Bonstead-Bruns, 1998](#)) as Sewell et al. originally did (1969), or alternatively, as a means of explaining expectations and aspirations with reference to demographic and social economic factors (e.g., [Goyette & Xie, 1999](#)). Both traditions are viable, yet underdeveloped. I have sought to incorporate social psychological mechanisms implicated in other sociological or psychological literature. One such focus is subjective economic status compared to others, suggested in relative deprivation theory, which could also be viewed as the experiential component of structure implicated in the mental health literature ([Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996](#)). The other is on optimism which I have incorporated from the personality literature ([Diener et al., 1999](#)). Although my examination is only an initial attempt to push stratification theory to further engage social psychological concepts and processes, the preliminary positive results call for future studies. More generally, the social psychological approach to stratification may have much more to offer.

These findings also shed some light on the theoretical differences between expectations and aspirations. Test score and the number of siblings have stronger influences on expectations than on aspirations. Gender of children, social economic status and mothers' years of education are important for educational aspirations. These results are informative concerning the complexity of the influence of social structural and demographic processes.

The influence of the two proposed social psychological variables also have different patterns. Both subjective economic status and optimism examined in the models show mediating effects on expectations. However, the results are different for aspirations. The two proposed social psychological variables show few if any mediating effects. Nevertheless, optimism still bears significant impact on aspirations, while subjective

economic status does not. Of further relevance, those effects of optimism on aspirations appear to be independent of factors identified in traditional models of status attainment. Thus, the novel measure of optimism adds new perspective and findings with respect to the traditional theory of status attainment.

In light of the different patterns revealed for parental expectations and aspirations, future research should examine which is the better predictor of children’s final educational and occupational achievements. This is helpful for understanding the importance of different mechanisms identified in the study presented here.

Consider again, the controversy between pushed-from-behind and pulled-from-front views identified by Gambetta (1987). This study does not preclude the relevance of pulled-from-front view which assumes rational behaviors of decision-makers, as the indicator of rational choice theory also shows significant effects on mothers’ educational expectations. However, my analyses also identify social psychological mechanisms which appear to make educational decision-making a far from purely rational process. With respect to the subjective economic status, an indicator of relative deprivation, its mediating effects show evidence of linking structural position to decision-making. This helps to begin identifying the opaque social psychological causes of pushed-from-behind view derived from the economic causation perspective.

It should be emphasized that such a process may be context specific (Wilson & Portes, 1975). The empirical results from a Chinese rural context may not necessarily apply to another context characterized by a different social structure or culture. It points to the importance of research extension: Only when evidence from a variety of societal contexts has accumulated can scholars begin to have a better understanding of the theoretical controversy between the pushed-from-behind and pulled-from-front views.

Notes

¹ $e^{0.284}=1.328$

² $e^{0.090}=1.094$

³ $e^{0.484}=1.623$

⁴ $e^{(0.730)}=2.075$.

⁵ Chi-square test of subjective economic status for aspirations: $p=0.100$; Chi-square test of optimism: $p=0.235$.

⁶ Chi-square test of mothers' expectations of financial return from children: $p=0.515$.

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Appendix

In Hao and Bonstead-Bruns' study (1998, p.182), parental interactions with children or involvement in their study activities were synthesized into three factors using factor analysis: 1) parents' involvement in children's school learning at home; 2) parents taking children to extracurricular classes and activities; 3) parents' involvement with the child in other learning activities. Following similar methods described in their paper for generating factors representing parent's interaction with children or involvement in children's study activities, I selected 20 items. They are listed as follows:

- X1: Do you or your husband know who your child's friends are?
- X2: Do you or your husband know where your child goes after school?
- X3: Do you or your husband know what your child does after school?
- Y1: Parents' meeting held by teacher or the school principal.
- Y2: Talk with the homeroom teacher or school principal.
- Y3: Work as a volunteer in the school.
- Y4: Attend school's activities, such as artistic performance, sports meetings.
- Y5: Observe classes.
- Y6: Inquire about the child's performance from the teacher.
- Z1: Accompany the child to read storybooks.
- Z2: Help the child to do his assignments.
- Z3: Do family chores with the child, such as washing clothes, dishes, cooking etc.
- Z4: Do activities that the child likes with the child, such as playing cards, playing hide-and-seek, playing ball etc.
- Z5: Take the child to bookstores or shops.
- Z6: Praise the child.
- Z7: Show affection to the child, such as hugging, patting etc.
- Z8: Scold the child. (Reverse the order)
- Z9: Beat the child. (Reverse the order)
- Z10: Highly praise the child in front of others.
- Z11: Discuss with the child on the topic of his/her interest.

I reversed the order of question Z8 and Z9, making all 20 questions in unified theoretical order. With the exploratory factor analysis (EFA) for

ordered variables at first (see table 6) I chose to use the 5-factor model. I then used the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and again quite clearly found that the 5-factor model was more desirable. (The comparison of 4-factor CFA model and 5-factor CFA model is presented in table 7.)

With this decision, I further studied the wording of the questionnaires to see how to name the groups in an ad hoc perspective. The ad hoc explanations of groups are listed as follows:

f1 (X1-X3): familiar with children’s routine life.

f2 (Y1-Y6): involvement in learning activities in schools, analogous to the 1st factor in Hao and Bonstead-Bruns’ work.

f3 (Z1-Z5): other (learning) activities at homes, analogous to the 2nd factor in Hao and Bonstead-Bruns’ work.

f4 (Z8 and Z9): Not beat and scold children.

f5 (Z6, Z7, Z10, Z11): Affection, encouragement.

Table 6
Exploratory Factor Analysis Model Selection Statistics

	EFA:1 factor	EFA:2 factor	EFA:3 factor	EFA:4 factor	EFA:5 factor	EFA:6 factor
CFI	0.669	0.818	0.888	0.938	0.968	0.970
TLI	0.630	0.771	0.839	0.898	0.939	0.954
RMSEA	0.096	0.076	0.063	0.051	0.039	0.034
SRMR	0.192	0.133	0.102	0.062	0.041	0.033
Grouping results	N.A.	(X, Z8, Z9)/ (Y, other Z questions)	(X)/(Z8, Z9)/ (Y, other Z questions)	(X)/(Z8, Z9)/ (Y)/ (other Z questions)	(X)/(Z8, Z9)/ (Y)/ (Z1-Z5)/ (Z6, Z7, Z10, Z11)	(X)/(Z8, Z9)/ (Y)/ (Z1-Z5)/ (Z6, Z7, Z10, Z11)

Table 7

Confirmatory Factor Analysis Model Selection Statistics

	CFA: 4 factor	CFA: 5 factor
CFI	0.895	0.921
TLI	0.929	0.946
RMSEA	0.062	0.054
WRMR	2.089	1.802