

Race Differences in College Attendance in the United States: Two Competing Theories

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Conflict and functionalist explanations of status attainment may each account for whites' and blacks' college attendance. Independent and interactive effects of individual ability and social background factors may show which of these two theoretical perspectives explains the greatest variation in college attendance. Controlling for a wide range of factors associated with differential rates of college attendance, the conflict model of status attainment explains the greatest amount of variance for whites while a functionalist model seems to fit better for blacks. These findings suggest that college attendance for whites is based on factors other than ability; however, for blacks ability is the greatest predictor variable. We interpret this to mean that whites have more resources than blacks and college attendance is stressed for whites regardless of academic ability. Conversely, blacks, with fewer resources, reserve college for only the brightest students.

Deux conceptions de l'atteinte d'un statut, l'une fondée sur la notion de conflit et l'autre tirée du fonctionnalisme, peuvent expliquer la fréquentation du collégial par les Noirs et par les Blancs. Les effets indépendants et interactifs de l'aptitude individuelle et du milieu social peuvent indiquer laquelle de ces deux théories explique les variations les plus importantes dans la fréquentation du collégial. Tenant compte d'un grand nombre de facteurs associés aux différences dans les niveaux de fréquentation du collégial, le modèle conflictuel de l'atteinte d'un statut explique le gros de la variance chez les Blancs alors que le modèle s'inspirant du fonctionnalisme semble mieux convenir dans le cas des Noirs.

The problem of maximizing intellectual development for all has led to considerable social research and to varied educational programs and policy. The question how best to achieve educational equity, especially among cultural and racial minority populations, transcends cultural and national jurisdictions.

Broadly speaking, research on this question comes from the competing theoretical orientations of functionalism and of conflict theory. Our own research is an analysis of data from the United States National Longitudinal Survey of the High School Class of 1972. In it we compare the utility of competing explanations for educational achievement and show the implications of our findings for research and policy in the United States and internationally.

COMPETING THEORIES

Sociologists of education disagree about factors of achievement and school attendance. Most studies fall into either the functionalist or the conflict camp. Functionalists argue that educational outcomes are based largely on past performance and individual ability, whereas proponents of conflict see achievement as influenced by diverse ascribed characteristics. The functional perspective argues that achievement best predicts educational attainment. The best qualified students will succeed. On the other hand, conflict theorists argue that differential opportunities and expenditures in school systems deny some students equal chances of success.

Functionalists maintain that the current educational structure provides the foundation for an open-class society. They see education as a major influence on status attainment regardless of social background or other ascriptive characteristics. This conceptualization of the relation between schooling and achievement relies on four main assumptions: (1) education is linked to economic productivity—individuals with higher levels of education are more valued in the labour market because potential employers think them more competent (Becker, 1964), (2) achievement tests accurately show skill level and subsequent economic productivity (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), (3) education increases opportunities for social and economic mobility (Gordon, 1971, pp. 165–166), (4) education minimizes the gap in economic and social status between minority and non-minority group members (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Coleman *et al.*, 1966). From these assumptions, functionalists assert that the United States public school system is the primary mechanism for recognizing ability and equalizing opportunity within society (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Coleman *et al.*, 1966; Featherman & Hauser, 1978; Jencks *et al.*, 1972). Some students of American society have found two important exceptions to this interpretation of the educational system: first, some

differences in social outcomes do result from racial segregation and discrimination; and second, there are persistent differences in educational provision in different geographical regions and localities (Dreeben & Gamoran, 1986; Kerckhoff, 1976; Williams, 1970).

Conflict theorists believe the educational system is a major social force that helps to preserve the class-based stratification system and to reinforce distribution and consumption patterns. Countering the assertions of the functionalist school, conflict theorists argue that: (1) existing patterns of stratification decrease the potential effect of education on income through institutional or organizational discrimination, (2) tests function as screening devices that ensure conformity to a "capitalist ideology" rather than serve as measures of opportunity, (3) schools assign social rank through curriculum "tracking," and (4) because schools assign ranks, they limit ability (Alexander & McDill, 1976; Becker, 1964; Bowles, 1968; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Kerckhoff, 1976; Meyer, 1977).

It has been difficult to make a research model encompassing the broad range of variables thought to affect a student's decision to enter a college or university. Studies of the question have been limited in scope and size and have not fully explored some underlying assumptions of either the conflict or functionalist perspective.

Several recent large-scale surveys of American high school students encourage studies of factors accounting for differences in educational attainment between whites and blacks. By employing variables traditionally linked to status attainment, and interactions tied to underlying theoretical assumptions, we compare the conflict and functionalist models of achievement for adequacy as explanations of college attendance.

Before considering American evidence, however, it is helpful to put the issue of educational attainment into international perspective.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE

Societies with long-standing or emerging concerns about economic productivity will necessarily seek optimal allocation of human resources. Most nations, furthermore, have ethnic minority populations whose educational opportunities may pose particular challenges to the state. This is true even recognizing that ethnic minority populations vary greatly on such significant variables as political power, degree of cultural integration, circumstances of immigration, and proportion in the larger population.

In South Africa, for instance, Orpen (1976) investigated the relationship between age-personality differences and educational attainment of blacks and whites reared in Western and non-Western cultures. He concluded that students, regardless of racial or cultural background, must develop different

psychological strategies for different levels of educational achievement. In his work, extroverts, blacks and whites, socialized in either Western or non-Western cultures, achieve well in primary school. In higher education, being introverted (that is, reserved, recessive, concerned with fitting in) was highly associated with scholastic attainment. These results conform best with the conflict model of achievement.

Clifton (1981), on the other hand, analyzed the impact of students' ethnicity and teachers' attitudes toward culturally distinct student groups upon the academic achievement of these students. Using a sample of Canadian-German- and Canadian-French-speaking grade 9 students in English-speaking classrooms, Clifton demonstrated that teachers' expectations of student academic potential were based upon past performance and intellectual abilities and not upon ethnicity or other ascribed factors. Here the evidence leads to a functionalist conclusion.

In New Zealand, Harker (1978) investigated the impact of environmental factors such as parents' economic position and attitude toward school upon children's academic achievement. Harker showed that underachievement was not always caused by cultural deprivation. Among Maori students, underachievement held constant over vastly different environmental conditions; environmental deprivations alone did not account for lower levels of academic achievement. On the other hand, there was a very strong environmental effect among Pakeha students. Environmental deprivation led to underachievement among the Pakeha students but not the Maori. These competing explanations of academic achievement among different cultural groups suggest that structural factors can operate differentially for different groups.

As a final illustration of international interest in educational attainment we cite Goldenberg (1976) who attempted to explain the relatively lower levels of educational participation of Canadians when compared to American students. His study, which considered a cross-national sample of college students from three universities in the United States and Canada, demonstrated that lower attendance rates among Canadians may be attributed to belief that professional opportunities are scarce. Both attendance and achievement rates increased in Canada during the 1960s as structural barriers to upward social mobility weakened. But as university graduates were increasingly unable to find suitable professional positions, many became disenchanted with higher education. This particular analysis alerts us to the importance of understanding the socioeconomic context in which educational attainment research takes place, and favours the conflict theory.

The international research, although extensive, does not allow us to conclude firmly either for the functionalist or the conflict theory of educational achievement.

VARIABLES AND PROCESSES AFFECTING INDIVIDUAL EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

The American literature on educational attainment identifies five fundamental sets of variables affecting college attendance. These five variable sets are (1) demographic, (2) attitudinal, (3) background, (4) educational, and (5) ability. Variables in the demographic component usually include sex, race, region of the country and urban or rural residence. Attitudinal factors refer to the pattern of rewards and encouragement given by parents, peers and teachers for work done at the elementary and secondary levels. Family income, father's educational attainment, father's occupation, and socioeconomic level of the family are the most prominent variables in the background category. School enrollment, the absence or presence of specialized programs and resources in the school, and the existence of college preparatory curriculum tracks have been correlated significantly with individual achievement. Students who attend schools with specialized programs that emphasize college attendance are more likely to succeed than students in schools where these features are missing. Although some literature establishes a link between the aforementioned variables and achievement, that link is not always very clear and research findings are not consistent.

The relationship between explanatory variables, and functionalist or conflict theories, may not be apparent. Attitudinal influences may not operationalize either theory. However, we consider how socioeconomic or cultural position informs attitudes, thereby making attitudinal influences intervening variables in the articulation of conflict theory argument. Further, we include other variables that may not operationalize the central arguments of either theory. We include them because they have had considerable explanatory power in earlier studies. They serve as control variables.

Demographic Indicators

Some researchers maintain that a student's minority status, as indicated by race, is more important than academic ability in predicting achievement (Alexander & Eckland, 1974; Bowles, 1968; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Debord, Griffin, & Clark, 1977; Eder, 1981; Hout & Morgan, 1975). Others suggest that ability is the major arbiter of achievement (Coleman et al., 1966; Hauser & Featherman, 1976; Heyns, 1974; Howell & Frese, 1979; Jencks et al., 1972; Kerckhoff, 1977; Kerckhoff & Campbell, 1977; Rehberg & Rosenthal, 1978; Wolfle, 1985). Ability was defined as receiving good grades in school and scoring well on standardized examinations.

Hout and Morgan (1975) examined the effect of sex on achievement and college attendance and found females and blacks were less likely than males and whites to receive encouragement from parents and teachers to continue

their education. However, this study indicated that ability (as measured by high school grades) mitigates the effects of race and sex. Blacks and females from families of high socioeconomic status received higher grades, and thus more encouragement from parents and teachers, than other blacks and females. Ability did not negate the impact of race and sex on expected educational achievement. Blacks and females lessened, but did not close, the gap between themselves and white males.

Geographic location has also been linked to achievement (Hauser & Featherman, 1976). Students from rural locations aspire to college education to a lesser extent than those with similar ability from an urban setting (Hauser & Featherman, 1976; Kerckhoff, 1975; Williams, 1970).

Attitudinal Influences

Several studies of the impact of peer, parental and teacher attitudes upon student decisions to enter college have reported that plans to enter college are positively influenced by encouragement from parents, peers and teachers and by the level of school resources (Alexander & Eckland, 1974; Debord, Griffin, & Clark, 1977; Dreeben & Gamoran, 1986; Hout & Morgan, 1975; Kerckhoff & Huff, 1974; Reitzes & Mutran, 1980; Wolfle, 1985). Parental encouragement had a greater effect on expectations of males regardless of race, although white males and black females showed the greatest reciprocal peer effects and the strongest parental encouragement (Hout & Morgan, 1975).

Attitudes and self-concept also have been linked to one's performance in school. A fundamental principle in social psychology is that an individual develops a sense of self worth through interaction with others (Eshleman, 1988). Since Americans still resist interaction with minorities and since minorities are forced to deal with racial discrimination, the minority child operates in a world that encourages and promotes feelings of low self-esteem. Therefore, it should be expected that many minority children will not only believe but also act on these social messages (Eshleman, 1988).

In a study of culturally disadvantaged children, Soares and Soares (1969) found that children from such environments had internalized negative attitudes. Havighurst and Moorefield (1967) and Tannenbaum (1967) argued that children's views of themselves are highly correlated with their views of school and academic performance. Individuals with low self-concepts have been shown to perform poorly in school (Soares & Soares, 1969). However, we don't know exactly why children with low socioeconomic origins bring low self-esteem into the classroom. Are these children placed in low ability tracks and thereby develop negative images of themselves?

Stinchcombe (1964) and Schafer and Olexa (1971) suggest that part of academic deterioration may result from the "negative" labels associated with

low track students in both the school and the community. Other studies suggest that guidance counsellors give less attention and information to low track students than they do to students in college preparatory classes (Circourel & Kitsuse, 1963; Eder, 1981; Heyns, 1974; Rosenbaum, 1980). Many of the preceding works suggest that curriculum tracking is very subjective and favours children from middle and upper income origins.

Socioeconomic Background

Research on background characteristics tends to be contradictory and not wholly comprehensive. Studies testing the conflict perspective posit that socioeconomic status of origin accounts for differences in ability and subsequent achievement. Although achievement is positively linked to ability, ability is seen as the direct consequence of socioeconomic background. As socioeconomic status of origin increases, so does ability and consequently, and so does the probability of high achievement, as measured by test scores and grades in school. Since various studies have produced contradictory findings, the relationship between socioeconomic origins and ability may be a statistical artifact (Alexander, Cook, & McDill, 1978; Alexander & McDill, 1976; Bowles, 1968; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Kerckhoff, 1976).

Further Background Factors: The Home

Intellectual stimulation is not necessarily limited to the school. The availability of educational resources in the home may influence a student's performance. This conclusion is drawn from research indicating that the type of school, its facilities and differential access, and utilization of school resources were significantly correlated to academic performance and achievement (Dreeben & Gamoran, 1986; Griffin & Alexander, 1978; Kerckhoff, 1975). If such a relation exists in the school, it might also occur within the home. Although conflict theorists argue that additional resources are a concomitant of higher income, this may not necessarily be the case.

Differences in income lead to differences in the family's ability to provide additional in-home educational resources. Differences in ability to provide resources do not, however, necessarily lead to significantly different acquisition and utilization patterns. Thus, income can be used only as a crude measure of ability to provide a better educational environment (Mercy & Steelman, 1982).

Schooling and Educational Factors

According to conflict theorists, a school's enrollment, sources of funding, allocation of resources and available facilities are also related to academic

performance (Dreeben & Gamoran, 1986; Griffin & Alexander, 1978; Kerckhoff, 1975). Further, educational opportunities of students attending the same school are not necessarily the same.

Curriculum track has been associated with academic performance and achievement, although with differing interpretations (Eder, 1981; Wolfle, 1985). The primary area of contention concerns the factors influencing placement in a particular curriculum. Ability has been found to be the primary determinant regardless of socioeconomic background (Heyns, 1974; Jencks *et al.*, 1972; Rehberg & Rosenthal, 1978; Wolfle, 1985). Conversely, several studies have found that track placement is determined by socioeconomic status of origin. The higher the socioeconomic status of a student's parents, the greater the likelihood of being placed in a college preparatory curriculum (Alexander, Cook, & McDill, 1978; Alexander & McDill, 1976; Bowles, 1968; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Rosenbaum, 1980).

EMPIRICAL SPECIFICATION OF TWO COMPETING THEORIES

Independence of social background and ability in accounts of performance or achievement, is implicit in the functionalist model of status attainment. Functionalists argue that ability determines the level of status attainment, independent of social background (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Coleman *et al.*, 1966; Heyns, 1974; Jencks *et al.*, 1972; Wolfle, 1985). These researchers assume that performance or achievement co-varies with ability for any given level of status background. However, interactions between ability and social background in explaining performance or achievement have not been considered in sufficient detail.

In the conflict perspective, background characteristics negate any effect of ability on academic performance (Alexander & McDill, 1976; Bowles, 1968; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Kerckhoff, 1976; Meyer, 1977). Socioeconomic status of origin is thought to co-vary with achievement for given levels of ability.

The integration of research from each of these theoretical viewpoints suggests some interplay between variables in explaining the achievement process. Very rarely do researchers explicitly test interaction terms for their models (Alexander & Eckland, 1974; Debord, Griffin, & Clark, 1977; Hout & Morgan, 1975; Kerckhoff, 1977; Kerckhoff & Campbell, 1977; Rosenbaum, 1980). Two problems arise when only full-form equations are reported: (1) the overall R^2 is inflated and the magnitude of the significant coefficients is artificially inflated, and (2) since constrained models are, in practice, measuring the effect of the interaction between the designated trait (males, females, blacks, white) and those variables contained in the model, non-significant interaction terms are included. Thus, the researcher implicitly assumes the same interaction to be significant for each trait when it may only be linked to achievement for one characteristic. Hence, analysis and interpre-

tations of data are often confounded by comparing the effect of variables between equations when they may have no real meaning. Although interpretation of data may be easier if variables in each equation are the same, this ignores why a particular variable correlates to the dependent variable for one trait and not for another.

Variables in the following analysis are presented in Table 1. They are grouped into sets under the general headings: (1) demographic, (2) attitudinal, (3) educational, (4) ability, and (5) background. The analysis examines interaction between ability and social background variables. If the functionalists are correct, then these terms should not enter into the model, since background has little if any effect on ability and achievement. However, if these interactions do enter the model, then the effect of ability differs within levels of structure and this finding would lend support to the conflict model of achievement.

Data come from the National Longitudinal Survey of the High School Class of 1972, a two-stage national probability sample of individual schools and of students attending these schools. The Survey's baseline questionnaire was administered in 1972 to seniors from 1,318 public, private and church-affiliated high schools in the United States; the first and second follow-up studies were conducted in 1973 and 1974.

Our analyses are in two stages: (1) building the best fit ordinary least squares model of college attendance for blacks and for whites with the variables found in Table 1 and comparing these equations, and (2) partialling out the amount of explained variance for each term in the reduced form model (Alwin & Hauser, 1975). We sum and compare amounts of explained variance for each variable supporting the functionalist approach and compare them to a similar figure computed for the conflict model, holding constant the effect of the other sets of variables.

SPECIFICATION AND ANALYSIS OF COLLEGE ATTENDANCE MODELS

Best-fit models of college attendance for blacks and whites appear in Table 2. The amount of explained variance is less for blacks ($R^2=.33019$) than for whites ($R^2=.41877$). The functionalist explanation of achievement thus has most validity for blacks with very few background variables (father's education less than high school) entering into the model, whereas such variables do enter for whites (father's and mother's education less than or completed high school, prestige, and income). This finding supports the conflict model for whites' college attainment. Additional background variables in the white model not found in the black model account for the major portion of the difference in explanatory power between these equations (.05110 of .08768, 57%).

Holding constant the effects of high school grades and curriculum, ability

TABLE 1
Variable Groupings and Variables

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Categories</i>
<i>Dependent</i>	
Has the student enrolled in a 2- or 4-year college? (Attend)	0 - No, 1 - Yes
<i>Demographic</i>	
Sex	0 - Female, 1 - Male
Region	0 - Non-south, 1 - South
Community	0 - Other, 1 - Rural or town with <2500 residents
<i>Attitudinal</i>	
How important have the following people been in deciding your future:	
Peers	0 - Other, 1 - Very Important
Parents	0 - Other, 1 - Very Important
Teachers	0 - Other, 1 - Very Important
Counselors	0 - Other, 1 - Very Important
Does the student plan to attend college? (Plans)	0 - No, 1 - Yes
<i>Educational</i>	
Size of the student's senior class (Size)	Actual count
Curriculum track (Curriculum)	0 - Other, 1 - College preparatory
High school grades (Grades)	Grades as percentage of the highest possible in the school
High school facilities (Facil)	Sum of the number of times a student uses or is exposed to school resources (i.e., laboratories, field trips, teaching machines, individual instruction, student discussions, required essays, and television lectures)
Number of educational resources in the home (Home ed)	Sum of the number of the following found in the student's home: newspaper, dictionary, encyclopedia, typewriter, and magazines
Does the student have a specific place to study in the home? (Study)	0 - No, 1 - Yes

accounts for 15.35% of the explained variance for blacks' college attendance, while background factors (father less than high school) accounted for only 6.06%. The rationale for not including high school grades and curriculum as part of the ability set of factors is that: (1) we possess a more direct measure of ability (test scores) and, (2) ability is not a good predictor of either grades or track. Considerations other than ability enter into the decision process of curriculum assignment and any subsequent effect on grades (Alexander, Cook, & McDill, 1978; Alexander & McDill, 1976; Bowles, 1968; Bowles &

TABLE 1 (*Continued*)
Variable Groupings and Variables

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Categories</i>
<i>Ability</i>	Sum of Vocabulary, Reading, Mathematics and Mosaic Comparison subtests
<i>Social Background</i>	
<i>Father's education level</i>	
Less than high school (PALTHS)	0 - Other, 1 - Did not complete high school
Completed high school (PAHSC)	0 - Other, 1 - Completed high school
Some schooling beyond high school (PASC)	0 - Other, 1 - Schooling beyond high school but did not complete college
<i>Mother's education level</i>	
Less than high school (MALTHS)	0 - Other, 1 - Did not complete high school
Completed high school (MAHSC)	0 - Other, 1 - Completed high school
Some schooling beyond high school (MASC)	0 - Other, 1 - Schooling beyond high school but did not complete college
<i>Family income (Income)</i>	
	1 - less than \$3000
	2 - \$3000—\$5999
	3 - \$6000—\$7499
	4 - \$7500—\$8999
	5 - \$9000—\$10499
	6 - \$10500—\$11999
	7 - \$12000—\$13499
	8 - \$13500—\$14999
	9 - \$15000—\$17999
	10 - \$18000-plus
<i>Father's occupational prestige score (Prestige)</i>	Actual score
<i>Ability Interactions</i>	
Ability x PALTHS, PAHSC, PASC	
Ability x MALTHS, MAHSC, MASC	
Ability x Income	
Ability x Prestige	

Gintis, 1976; Rosenbaum, 1980). For whites, ability accounts for 6.83% of the explained variance in college attendance, while background variables (father with less than a high school education, father completed high school, mother with less than a high school education, mother completed high school, prestige, income and the interaction of mother's education of less than high school ability) account for 15.83%. These findings offer additional support to separate achievement models for blacks and whites.

Although no background and ability interactions entered the black model,

TABLE 2
Blacks and Whites College Attendance Models, Including Plans to Attend College

<i>Variables</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>Standard error</i>	<i>R²</i>	<i>%R²</i>
<i>Blacks (N=1548)</i>				
Ability	.00188	.00042	.0507	15.35
PALTHS	-.09147	.02130	.0200	6.06
Plans	.24525	.02483	.1113	33.71
Curriculum	.23932	.02622	.1049	31.77
Grades	.00405	.00105	.0316	9.57
Community	-.06914	.02092	.0116	3.51
Constant	-.34477			
R ²	.33019			
<i>Whites (N=7383)</i>				
Ability	.00108	.00021	.0286	6.83
PALTHS	-.06855	.01367	.0155	3.70
PAHSC	-.04602	.01200	.0034	.81
MALTHS	-.10397	.01426	.0211	5.04
MAHSC	-.07155	.01132	.0046	1.10
MALTHS x Ability	-.00124	.00036	.0124	.62
Income	.00821	.00189	.0067	2.96
Prestige	.00104	.00039	.0067	1.60
Curriculum	.18582	.01148	.0919	21.96
Grades	.00468	.00055	.0338	8.07
Study	.02602	.00928	.0025	.60
Plans	.33275	.01092	.1873	44.73
Parents	.02636	.01026	.0015	.36
Sex	.06332	.00929	.0044	1.05
Community	-.01947	.00916	.0024	.57
Constant	-.45486			
R ²	.41877			

one did enter the white (mother's education less than high school, and ability). In assessing the unstandardized coefficient for this interaction and that of ability, a maternal education of less than high school erases the positive effect of ability on college attendance, (ability=.00108, MALTHS x ability=-.00124). Thus, the relation between ability and college attendance is not constant for all levels of maternal education. One possible explanation is that maternal education of "less than high school" reduces the resources available for a child's socialization, thereby inhibiting early intellectual development. However, the preceding data support two varying arguments. First, among the white students, background variables, including maternal education, explain the majority of the variance in the equation, thereby supporting a conflict perspective of achievement. On the other hand, maternal education did not explain nearly as much variance for blacks, thereby supporting a functionalist interpretation.

The data presented in Table 2 indicate that factors influencing college attendance vary by race. Among black students planning to attend college, ability is a stronger predictor than any of the background variables and conversely, among whites with college plans, background considerations outweigh the ability variables. Data in Tables 2 and 3 reveal that plans to attend college is the single best predictor of subsequent college entry. Of the total explained variance ($R^2=.33019$ for blacks, and $R^2=.41877$ for whites), plans to attend college accounted for 33.71% for blacks and 44.73% for whites. The inclusion of this variable almost certainly masks several other important relations. Thus plans to attend college are not independent of high school grades, curriculum, and parental income resources. Given this supposition and that intended and actual behaviour are rarely perfectly correlated, a re-analysis of these data excluding plans for college attendance is required.

As hypothesized, the amount of explained variance drops from .33019 to .2897 for blacks and from .41877 to .34702 for whites (see Table 3). These reductions are far less than the amount of R^2 uniquely attributed to college attendance plans for blacks and whites. Removing this variable from the analysis, the black and white models of college attendance change, not in the variables included but the relative contribution of each. The difference in percentage of explained variance of ability over background characteristics remains for blacks, with ability accounting for 27.13% of the total explained variance and background variables (paternal education of less than high school completed) 8.08%. Background variables still accounted for a greater proportion of explained variance for whites (24.77% versus 16.71%) (see Tables 3 and 4). Again, one interaction term enters the white equation (mother's education of less than high school and ability), whereas none does for blacks. The strength of this interaction is not quite as great as when plans to attend college are included; this now reduces the positive effect of ability on college attendance for those respondents whose mothers did not finish high school by two-thirds rather than eliminating it. The conflict model of attainment still holds for whites and the functionalist perspective for blacks.

DISCUSSION

The theoretical model of college attainment supported by our data is different for blacks and whites. The functionalist perspective explained the greatest amount of variance for blacks, with the effects of ability constant within levels of background variables. Meanwhile, the conflict explanation of attainment fit whites better. Support for this interpretation was found in significant interaction terms between social background and ability. The positive effect of individual ability on college attendance was substantially

TABLE 3
*Blacks and Whites College Attendance Models Re-estimated After
 Excluding Plans to Attend College*

<i>Standard Variables</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>Error</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>%R</i> ²
<i>Blacks (N=1548)</i>				
Ability	.00291	.00042	.0786	27.13
PALTHS	-.10671	.02188	.0234	8.08
Grades	.00478	.00108	.0372	12.84
Curriculum	.29833	.02629	.1307	45.12
Facilities	.00951	.00472	.0069	2.38
Community	-.07610	.02153	.0128	4.42
Constant	-.57036			
R ²	.2897			
<i>Whites (N=7383)</i>				
Ability	.00219	.00022	.0580	16.71
PALTHS	-.09908	.01443	.0224	6.45
PAHSC	-.06406	.01270	.0047	1.35
MALTHS	-.12772	.01515	.0260	7.49
MAHSC	-.08897	.01199	.0057	1.64
MALTHS x Ability	-.00143	.00038	.0030	.86
Income	.01036	.00203	.0157	4.52
Prestige	.00131	.00042	.0085	2.45
Home Education	.01454	.00651	.0039	1.12
Study	.02595	.00991	.0025	.72
Curriculum	.26930	.01188	.1332	38.38
Grades	.00636	.00058	.0456	13.14
Size	.00006	.00002	.0032	.92
Facilities	.00767	.00246	.0057	1.64
Parents	.03992	.01089	.0023	.66
Sex	.09348	.00986	.0065	1.87
Constant	-.85675			
R ²	.34702			

reduced when the student's mother had not completed high school.

The differential impact of ability on college attendance by race supports previous findings that blacks with higher grades and with parents from higher socioeconomic status were more likely to be encouraged to attend college than blacks with average or slightly below average grades (Alexander & Eckland, 1974; Debord, Griffin, & Clark, 1977; Hout & Morgan, 1975; Wolfe, 1985). Our research could be tapping what has been termed the "star effect," where only the brightest of the black student population are encouraged by their teachers, peers, and parents to pursue a college education. An expansion of educational outreach programs at the secondary school level may be needed (Blackwell, 1981, p. 316). The relationship between social background variables and ability on college attendance for whites suggests that they are receiving more support from parents and peers than are blacks. This

TABLE 4
*Blacks and Whites College Attendance Models (Model 1,
 Table 2, Re-estimated Eliminating Plans)*

<i>Variable</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>Standard error</i>	<i>Beta</i>
<i>Blacks (N=1548)</i>			
Ability	.00294	.00042	.18924
PALTHS	-.10732	.02190	-1.09730
Curriculum	.30830	.02617	.29246
Grades	.00496	.00107	.11627
Community	.07601	.02155	-.07700
Constant	-.52402		
R ²	.28780		
<i>Whites (N=7383)</i>			
Ability	.00226	.00022	.13492
PALTHS	-.10179	.01441	-.09288
PAHSC	-.06464	.01271	-.06052
MALTHS	-.13236	.01509	-.11386
MAHSC	-.08976	.01199	-.08980
MALTHS x Ability	-.00140	.00038	-.03537
Income	.01141	.00200	.06281
Prestige	.00132	.00042	.03459
Study	.02994	.00984	.02932
Curriculum	.27447	.01179	.27563
Grades	.00638	.00058	.13372
Parents	.04170	.01087	.03670
Sex	.08924	.00981	.08949
Community	-.02645	.00971	-.02651
Constant	-.72413		
R ²	.34558		

finding may be due, in part, to the greater availability and access to school resources and higher economic position of whites relative to blacks.

Researchers in pluralist societies cannot use one single model to understand or to predict academic performance or achievement. Variables highly correlated with achievement for one group, may not be for another. Further, models must not take on a strictly additive approach, but also examine the interaction among and between variables. Previous researchers have not relied heavily on multiplicative models; they often measured variables at nominal or ordinal level as opposed to interval or ratio, relied on variables suiting only one theoretical orientation, relying too much on constrained models (Alexander & Eckland, 1974; Rosenbaum, 1980).

As for multiplicative models and overuse of full-form models, the present research has shown that full-form models inflate the value and magnitude of significant coefficients; multiplicative models are not prone to such over-inflation. Finally, in earlier research, authors reported constrained models

that invariably contain non-significant interaction terms.

Three issues invite more study. First, ability and social background should not be assumed independent in their effect on college attendance or in the status attainment process. Educational achievement among blacks depends more on personal reliance and ambition and should not be overlooked (Portes & Wilson, 1976). To explain better the effects of social background one must understand and test for individual motives. Researchers should not ignore the possible presence of such interactions.

Second, the effect of home environment should get more theoretical and empirical attention. Emphasis on parental education or some aggregate of family resources distracts from the importance of the mother in rearing and socializing the child. The effect of mother's education on ability and achievement needs further investigation.

Third, the allocation of school resources and how teachers use these resources in the classroom is of utmost importance in understanding the relationship between status attainment and student's performance.

Although this study was not intended to be a definitive comparison of the functionalist and conflict interpretations of college attainment, both theoretical perspectives turned out to have varying degrees of validity depending upon racial group studied. The functionalist explanation is a more appropriate model for black college attendance and the conflict for whites. Both theories need further examination and more rigorous attempts to translate theoretical conceptualizations into empirical models of the underlying processes and assumptions.

Finally, research on school achievement in any country should also take into consideration time-specific political events and policy initiatives, since they can have variable impact on majority and on historically oppressed groups. Our evidence was collected when educational institutions were initiating affirmative action plans for historically underrepresented groups. Thus, background factors were being mitigated through social policy for black students. In the late 1980s in a political climate less amenable to such intervention, we hypothesize that greater support for the conflict argument for blacks than our data did.

The utility of our work for other countries has, of course, yet to be tested. Our evidence may embody race-specific social policies. To the extent this is true, such policies can have positive impact in fostering equal educational opportunities. However, multicultural societies have diverse histories of interracial and interethnic group relationships. They consequently have generated diverse attitudes on the importance of race- and ethnicity-consciousness and the appropriateness of such considerations in the formulation of educational and other social policies. Studies of educational attainment must necessarily take into account the sociocultural and political contexts

from which their data are drawn in order to extract the richest meanings from their empirical findings.

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