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INEQUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Sociological Understandings of Student Success

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Sociological contributions to student success are primarily focused on questions of inequality. Regardless of the theoretical tradition, the primary way that sociologists have examined student success in higher education is by studying how educational opportunities vary across sociodemographic groups. The two dominant sociological traditions reviewed herein—status attainment and social reproduction—have originated from concerns regarding socioeconomic inequality. Thus, much of the literature has centered on examining socioeconomic disparities in college experiences and outcomes. More recently, a growing body of research has also explored racial/ethnic and gender inequities in higher education. The literatures examining these three dimensions of inequality—socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, and gender—however, are rarely integrated. Combining insights across the different dimensions of inequality would amplify their contributions to understanding college student success.

The next distinguishing feature of a sociological approach is that it is fundamentally structural. Sociologists understand students' experiences in college in relation to broader societal structures. Education is not an independent actor—it both reflects and contributes to inequality in society at large. This has several notable implications for how sociologists approach the question of student success. In the status attainment tradition, scholars consider structural features such as educational expansion, examine inequality across institutional types, and study college pathways (i.e., how students travel through college) as central aspects of success. In the social reproduction tradition, education plays a key role in reproducing social inequality, in part by converting family cultural resources into academic success.

These ideas have implications not only for how sociologists study higher education, but also for how they conceptualize implications for practice. The primary goal of policies and practices is to reduce social inequality. Given that education reflects inequalities in society more broadly, that can be quite challenging, often making sociological implications abstract. More importantly, this approach highlights the centrality of intentionality. Because we live in a highly unequal society, the only way colleges and universities can reduce inequality is by being proactive and intentional. Higher education institutions will keep contributing to inequality in students' experiences and outcomes until they explicitly acknowledge and address those issues. In times of increasingly scarce resources, challenging existing social structures that produce large inequities is as difficult as it is crucial.

Socioeconomic Inequality

Socioeconomic inequality is at the core of both the status attainment and social reproduction traditions. Socioeconomic background is often conceptualized as a reflection of parental income, education, and/or occupation. Those various dimensions are frequently combined into a socioeconomic status indicator in the status attainment tradition or into different class categories such as middle versus working class or more versus less affluent in the social reproduction tradition. At times, scholars also examine those dimensions separately, paying particularly close attention to parental occupation and education. Until recently (e.g., Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Haveman & Smeeding, 2006), sociologists have not dedicated as much attention to income as a unique dimension of inequality. In this chapter, the term *socioeconomic background* collectively refers to these different dimensions of inequality. When discussing specific findings, we use the terms preferred by the authors.

Although both the status attainment and the social reproduction traditions focus on questions of inequality, they approach those questions in notably different ways and rely on different methods (primarily quantitative for status attainment and qualitative for social reproduction). These differences emerge in part because of the unique origins of the two traditions. The status attainment tradition began by focusing primarily on social mobility and asking how individuals can obtain more education as a path to desirable labor market outcomes (Blau & Duncan, 1967). The social reproduction tradition emphasized the role of education in reproducing social inequality by rewarding the ways of knowing, being, and acting of socioeconomically advantaged groups (Bourdieu, 1973; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Over time, however,

status attainment scholars have increasingly examined different structural dimensions of educational systems (such as expansion and differentiation), appreciating the constraints placed on mobility. Social reproduction scholars have also begun to consider ways in which cultural resources can be used to foster social mobility. The two traditions, however, remain largely separate and thus will be discussed in turn.

Status Attainment

The question of college success in the status attainment tradition centers on examining the relationship between socioeconomic background and degree completion. In their seminal work, Blau and Duncan (1967) argued that education is the primary mechanism that links family background with labor market outcomes. Subsequently, a number of studies have suggested that there is no association between one's socioeconomic origins and subsequent labor market outcomes among college graduates (Hout, 1988; Karlson, 2019; Torche, 2011).[1] Equalizing educational attainment, especially the completion of college degrees, is thus a key component of reducing socioeconomic inequality. This raises the question that has animated much research in this tradition with respect to student success: Why are students from less socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds less likely to complete college? This focus on degree completion means that status attainment scholars have dedicated limited attention to other outcomes such as grades (Charles et al., 2009) or skill development (Arum & Roksa, 2011).

The first answer offered by the status attainment tradition regarding why students from less socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds are less likely to complete college relates to *vertical stratification* (i.e., inequality in access to different levels of education). Sociologists have long studied educational outcomes as a series of progressions through educational levels (Mare, 1980). According to the Maximally Maintained Inequality argument, socioeconomic inequality at a specific level of education will not decrease until virtually all students from socioeconomically advantaged groups reach that level of education (Raftery & Hout, 1993). By extension, inequality in college completion will not be reduced until virtually all students from socioeconomically advantaged groups complete college. Pfeffer and Hertel (2015), for example, showed that father's occupation has a stable association with son's educational attainment over time, despite dramatic educational expansion.

The second explanation for less socioeconomically advantaged students' lower likelihood of completing college degrees is *horizontal stratification* (i.e., inequalities in educational experiences at a given level of

education). These inequalities include college majors, pathways through higher education, and institutional characteristics such as type and selectivity (for a review, see Gerber & Cheung, 2008).[2] Lucas (2001) argued that socioeconomically advantaged groups are able to get access to qualitatively better education at any given level of education, which he termed *effectively maintained inequality*. This argument implies that students from less socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds will have access to experiences or institutions that are less conducive to degree completion, including attending 2-year institutions or less selective 4-year institutions and pursuing indirect pathways through higher education. The empirical literature corroborates those predictions.

Students from less socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds are less likely to enter more selective 4-year institutions (An, 2010; Davies, 1997). This, in turn, has consequences for degree attainment, as selectivity of 4-year institutions is related to the likelihood of persistence and degree completion (Brand & Halaby, 2006; Zarifa et al., 2018). Adjusting for self-selection, Brand and Halaby (2006) showed that attending an elite college has a causal effect on a higher probability of obtaining a bachelor's degree. Moreover, students from less socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds are more likely to begin their education in community colleges (Lee & Frank, 1990; Milesi, 2010), and students who begin their postsecondary education at community colleges and intend to obtain a bachelor's degree are less likely to do so than those who start in 4-year institutions (Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Milesi, 2010).

To understand the role of community colleges in degree attainment, sociologists have noted their structural location in the system of higher education, and in particular their open admission policy. Community colleges admit all students interested in attending higher education, but then, faced with the reality of limited opportunities, often dampen students' expectations, engaging in what Clark (1960) termed "cooling out." Brint and Karabel (1989) extended this argument by describing the ways in which community colleges divert students from transfer pathways and channel them into short-term and vocational programs. The openness and broad mission of community colleges allows them to enroll a large proportion of disadvantaged populations, but a lack of structured pathways and adequate guidance, often reflecting resource constraints, means that many of those students do not succeed on their path to a degree (Rosenbaum et al., 2009).

Recent research also indicates that for-profit colleges contribute to inequality in college completion between more and less socioeconomically advantaged students. For-profit colleges have experienced a dramatic expansion: Their enrollment increased by 400% between 2000 and 2010, whereas

overall postsecondary enrollment increased by only 35% (Gelbgiser, 2018). Although for-profit colleges provide postsecondary educational opportunities for historically underserved students, including students from less socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds, they may not help these students achieve success (Deming et al., 2012; Gelbgiser, 2018). Gelbgiser (2018), for example, showed that students from low and middle socioeconomic groups are more likely to attend for-profit colleges and less likely to obtain college degrees than comparable peers at other types of institutions.

Horizontal stratification is not just about institutional types but also about students' pathways through college. Sociologists have focused on two areas of divergence in college pathways: delaying college attendance and changing institutions. Students who delay college entry are less likely to complete their degrees (Andrews, 2018; Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Zarifa et al., 2018). Notably, students from less socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds are more likely to delay college entry, which contributes to their lower likelihood of degree completion (Denice, 2019; Roksa & Velez, 2012). Similarly, students from less socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds are more likely to change institutions, which is also related to their lower likelihood of degree completion (Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Goldrick-Rab & Pfeffer, 2009). In addition, how students move across institutions varies by socioeconomic background. Students from less socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds are more likely to interrupt their enrollment when changing institutions (Goldrick-Rab, 2006) as well as experience reverse transfer (moving from 4-year to 2-year institutions; Goldrick-Rab & Pfeffer, 2009), both of which contribute to disparities in college completion.

Roksa (2011) has argued that employment presents another central dimension of horizontal stratification. Students from less socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds are more likely to dedicate longer hours to paid employment, which is negatively related to degree completion (see also Bozick, 2007). Working during college has become more prevalent over time regardless of family background, but the inequality in hours worked between students from more and less advantaged families remained relatively stable and even increased for those attending 4-year institutions full time between the 1980s and 2000s (Weiss & Roksa, 2016). Working during college is thus another potential contributor to socioeconomic disparity in degree completion.

Considering the Mechanisms

The status attainment tradition has overwhelmingly focused on documenting the patterns of socioeconomic inequality, without explaining the mechanisms underlying these disparities. At times, the mechanisms are

not discussed at all, or they remain largely implied but not studied. Some recent work, however, has aimed to be more explicit about the mechanisms underlying the observed patterns of inequality. For example, Alon (2009) proposed that two related mechanisms underlie socioeconomic inequality in access to different types of institutions: social exclusion (educational institutions set up exclusionary criteria that differentially impact students from different socioeconomic backgrounds) and adaptation (when exclusion criteria change, more advantaged groups are better able to adjust). For example, when competition for admission to college is high, the importance of test scores as an exclusion criteria increases, and the advantaged groups have adequate knowledge and resources to adapt to this change. Although focused on college access, these mechanisms could be extended to explain inequalities in degree completion.

The most direct way status attainment scholars have considered what mechanisms link socioeconomic background and degree completion is by examining educational expectations. The Wisconsin model of status attainment, developed as an elaboration of the work by Blau and Duncan (1967), included variables such as educational expectations of students and their significant others (parents, teachers, and friends; Sewell et al., 1969). In addition to showing that educational expectations predict degree attainment (Bozick et al., 2010; Johnson & Reynolds, 2013), sociologists have examined questions related to change over time and congruence in expectations between parents and children. The association between socioeconomic background and educational expectations has weakened in recent decades, signaling decreasing inequality (Goyette, 2008). However, the gap between expecting to earn a college degree and reaching that level of education became more pronounced over time between students whose parents had at most a high school education and those whose parents completed college (Reynolds & Johnson, 2011).

Stability of expectations and the congruence between parents' and children's expectations are also consequential. Long-term, persistent expectations are more efficacious at predicting college attainment than volatile expectations (Bozick et al., 2010; Johnson & Reynolds, 2013). This has implications for inequality, as students from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds tend to have more stable expectations. Moreover, congruence between parents' and students' expectations increases the likelihood of enrollment in 4-year colleges as well as more selective institutions, even net of students' and parents' expectations (Kim & Schneider, 2005). However, it is not clear whether congruence in educational expectations between parents and students is related to degree completion.

Social Reproduction

Whereas the status attainment tradition provides extensive descriptions of the contours of inequality, the social reproduction tradition illuminates the mechanisms that produce that inequality. The central focus of this tradition is on cultural capital, which refers to individuals' familiarity with the dominant culture, encompassing cultural knowledge, information, linguistic skills, and styles of interaction (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Recent conceptions of cultural capital in education have focused on students' familiarity with the norms and expectations of educational institutions, which can facilitate successful interaction with institutional representatives such as teachers and administrators (Lareau & Weininger, 2003).

The social reproduction tradition has illuminated how socioeconomic inequality is reproduced across generations, and in particular the role of schools in this process. Bourdieu (1973) argued that schools expect middle-class knowledge and styles of presentation (i.e., cultural capital), but do not teach them. Students from middle-class families, who understand the norms and expectations of educational institutions, can smoothly navigate school settings and are rewarded with better grades and continuation to higher levels of education. Educational institutions thus effectively convert family cultural capital into educational success, and at the same time hide socioeconomic inequality by implying that the process is meritocratic.

In the higher education context, cultural capital plays an important role in both academic and social realms. Students from different socioeconomic backgrounds begin their college journeys with different understandings of norms and expectations about coursework and engagement with instructors. Collier and Morgan (2008) showed that students with college-educated parents are able to successfully interpret the implicit expectations of faculty members, whereas first-generation students frequently struggle to understand syllabi, anticipate criteria for grading, and communicate with faculty. Without a general familiarity with the norms of higher education, first-generation students encounter a range of barriers to academic achievement.

Students from various socioeconomic backgrounds also enter college with very different conceptions of social engagement, which shapes their adjustment and engagement with peers. Stuber (2011) noted that upper-middle-class students enter college viewing social interaction as a key component of the college experience, whereas working-class students are more inclined to focus on academic engagement and career preparation (see also Mullen, 2010). Middle-class students are thus eager to become engaged in various extracurricular activities, and they have the cultural capital needed to navigate the process of finding and selecting advantageous forms of engagement. Working-class students, however, may focus on academics and miss

out on engaging with their peers, in both formal and informal settings. Less socioeconomically advantaged students thus often come to feel disconnected from their more advantaged peers (Aries & Seider, 2005; Lee, 2016), which can decrease their engagement on campus as well as their sense of belonging—experiences that higher education scholars have shown are related to a range of outcomes, from grades to retention and degree completion (Mayhew et al., 2016).

Even among students who seek to become socially involved in college, socioeconomically advantaged students have greater ease auditioning several groups to find welcoming spaces quickly. Less socioeconomically advantaged students, who have more limited information, frequently enter and leave a number of social groups, engaging in an emotionally taxing trial and error process (Silver, 2020a). Although relationships with peers are complex and can have divergent implications for academic success, students who engage with friends around academic topics often find additional support and resources to facilitate their success (McCabe, 2016). Building friendship networks and participating in extracurricular activities are often conceptualized as social capital—resources that are embedded in relationships with others (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). These relationships can provide access to information, opportunities, financial resources, and socioemotional support. Social capital complements cultural capital in contributing to social reproduction as the two types of capital can be converted from one form to the other and thus amplify inequality.

One of the most extensive studies explicating the ways in which higher education reproduces socioeconomic inequality is *Paying for the Party*, which followed a group of women from the time they moved into their 1st-year residence hall through graduation and early postcollege transitions (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). The authors described three main pathways students followed through the university, the most prominent of which were the "party pathway" (emphasizing social experiences) and the "professional pathway" (focusing on preparation for lucrative careers, often involving graduate school). Both required extensive social, cultural, and financial resources. The professional pathway was "narrow, fast-paced, and zero-sum" (p. 181). Students had to identify this pathway early, often apply to specific majors, and combine academic engagement with valuable out-of-class experiences such as internships. To be successful on the party pathway, students needed extensive financial resources, knowledge of the party scene, and familiarity with majors that were amenable to time-intensive social engagement. Less socioeconomically advantaged students did not fare well on either of these pathways and were disproportionately likely to leave the institution and end up with less desirable postcollege outcomes.

The third pathway—the "mobility pathway"—held the promise of supporting less socioeconomically advantaged students as they sought upward social mobility through higher education. An effective mobility pathway needs institutional support to ensure that tuition is affordable, that students can navigate the university without parental intervention, and that coursework is accessible for students who attended underresourced high schools (as less advantaged students often do). This necessitates extensive resources for financial aid, academic advising, and late entry programs for some majors. Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) found that the mobility pathway lacked these kinds of resources and failed to support the vast majority of less socioeconomically advantaged students, with the exception of a small group of students who were selected to participate in a high-intensity scholarship program that provided academic, social, and financial supports.

Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) also suggested that socioeconomic inequalities in students' experiences and outcomes do not emerge simply because of students' social and cultural capital, but also because of their parents' social, financial, and cultural resources. Hamilton (2016) further explored this line of argument in *Parenting to a Degree*, which described three groups of parents: helicopters, paramedics, and bystanders. Whereas helicopters, who were mostly from affluent backgrounds, were ever-present and worked hard to facilitate their students' social and professional success, bystanders, who were overwhelmingly less affluent, had little to no direct involvement in their students' experiences in higher education, resulting in frequent mistakes and detours.

In subsequent work, Hamilton et al. (2018) described more affluent parents as "college concierges." These parents leveraged their cultural, social, and financial resources to provide students with support. Many called their students frequently, directing them toward resources like tutoring and extracurricular outlets. College concierge parents also intervened in housing situations, ensuring their children were comfortable in residence halls that provided a good fit for their social and/or academic priorities, and relied on their networks to provide internships and other career opportunities. Through these activities, affluent parents facilitated students' social and academic success as well as career preparation. Conversely, less affluent parents often felt like outsiders—given their limited knowledge about the college context, they struggled to provide guidance and often left decision-making to students (see also Roksa & Silver, 2019).

The focus of the social reproduction tradition on inequality, and especially the differential distribution of cultural (and other) resources by socioeconomic status, has often branded it as reflecting "deficit thinking." Although it may appear as such on the surface, the social reproduction

tradition does not blame students or families, but rather the educational system. Sociologists have been explicit that there is nothing inherently "good" or "bad" about different parenting styles or specific cultural understandings, behaviors, and preferences (i.e., cultural capital; Hamilton, 2016; Lareau, 2011). Educational institutions, however, are structured in ways that reward the parenting styles and cultural capital of socioeconomically advantaged groups. For example, higher education institutions reward students who know what office hours are, understand implicit norms and expectations about self-presentation and help-seeking, and know how to engage with faculty and peers (Jack, 2019). Less socioeconomically advantaged parents often provide a great deal of emotional support to their students, which is positively related to academic performance and persistence (Roksa & Kinsley, 2019; Roksa et al., 2021). These parents offer whatever resources they have at their disposal (Roksa, 2019), but their socioeconomically advantaged counterparts can leverage extensive social, cultural, and financial resources to aid student success. In short, it is not the students or families, but the institutions, that bear the responsibility for inequality and the onus for change.

The Prospect of Mobility and Variation Across Institutions

The social reproduction tradition has been critiqued for providing a myopic view of the role of cultural (and social) capital by emphasizing reproduction and not considering the prospect of mobility. Whereas Bourdieu's original work (1973, 1986) argued that cultural capital is developed through socialization in the family and primarily plays a role in social reproduction, DiMaggio (1982) offered an alternative cultural mobility model. In this model, cultural capital can be acquired later in life, especially in schools, and can facilitate the success of less socioeconomically advantaged students. The literature on cultural mobility is not as robust, and most of it focuses on K–12 education (e.g., Dumais, 2006; Kisida et al., 2014; Roksa & Potter, 2011), but a few recent studies highlight how it may be manifested in higher education (e.g., Bueker, 2019; Jack, 2019; Roksa et al., 2020).

Jack (2016, 2019) studied low-income students attending an elite higher education institution. A subsample of these students, whom he referred to as the "privileged poor," attended boarding or preparatory schools before their transition to higher education. Boarding and preparatory schools offer a small number of scholarships to talented students from less privileged backgrounds, and students learn about those opportunities through their high school teachers or recruiters who visited their schools. Through exposure to elite high school settings, the privileged poor acquired cultural capital that facilitated their adjustment to college. These students knew how to engage with peers and "enter[ed] college primed to engage with professors and [were] proactive in doing so" (Jack, 2016, p. 1). Low-income students who attended

their local public high schools, however, experienced formidable challenges transitioning to an elite college. Many of them acquired cultural capital over time, but it was often not until the end of college that they developed some degree of comfort interacting with faculty and peers.

A related critique of the social reproduction tradition is that it assumes that all educational institutions are the same—they all expect students to possess middle-class ways of knowing and doing and thus reproduce social inequality. Although socioeconomic inequality is observed across all institutional types, some researchers have considered how students' experiences may vary across different higher education settings. In a comparative study of an elite private college and a public state college, Aries and Seider (2005) found that lower income students at both institutions struggled with discrepancies between their sense of self before and during college as they gained new forms of cultural capital. However, heightened inequality at the elite private college amplified lower income students' awareness of class-based differences—observed in how the students dressed, spoke, and interacted—between themselves and their wealthier peers. These students reported feeling uncomfortable, intimidated, and inadequate in ways that were not common for lower income students at the state college.

To understand the experiences of students from less socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds at elite institutions, sociologists have often relied on the concept of habitus, which complements that of cultural capital. *Habitus* refers to deeply internalized dispositions—ways of understanding and reacting to the social world as well as understanding one's own location in it (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Transitioning to an elite educational setting may seem natural to students from advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, but it can create a conundrum for less advantaged students as it can generate tensions between working-class habitus (found in their families) and elite habitus (prevalent at their colleges). Working-class students thus often feel like they do not belong either at home or at college (Lehmann, 2014). They may feel the need to create distance from their communities of origin (Hurst, 2010; Lee & Kramer, 2013), or come to view their family members as failures or cautionary tales (Langenkamp & Shifrer, 2018; Rondini, 2016, 2018). Lee and Kramer (2013), for example, described how working-class students perceived that their parents and siblings viewed them as "elitists" or "snobs." This led some students to limit engagement with their families and others from their home communities who were not upwardly mobile. Social mobility thus has a notable price, which sociologists have described as the "hidden injuries of class" (Lehmann, 2014, p. 2).

At the opposite end of the spectrum from elite institutions are community colleges (and arguably broad-access institutions more generally), which overwhelmingly enroll students from less socioeconomically advantaged

backgrounds. Sociologists have dedicated less time to understanding the role of cultural capital in community colleges, although one notable line of inquiry highlights the challenges students face in navigating these institutions. For instance, Deil-Amen and Rosenbaum (2003) noted that community colleges frequently offer an abundance of potentially confusing choices, which pose challenges to student success. By contrast, institutional structures that minimize choices can help prevent students from making mistakes that could jeopardize their success (Person et al., 2006). Scholars in other fields have also recently highlighted the value of providing structured pathways in community colleges (e.g., Bailey et al., 2015). Although less socioeconomically advantaged students face challenges navigating all higher education institutions, some of the challenges may be amplified at community colleges due to limited resources, and thus a limited ability to provide the guidance, advising, and mentoring that could facilitate success of less socioeconomically advantaged students.

Emerging research highlights another institutional context that may play a role in amplifying socioeconomic inequalities in student success. McMillan Cottom (2017) described how for-profit institutions prey upon students who have high aspirations for their careers but lack the cultural capital to successfully navigate higher education. Many less socioeconomically advantaged students struggle to understand differences between what McMillan Cottom described as nonprofit "traditional higher ed" and for-profit "lower ed." She observed, for instance, that students who were unable to name specific academic interests were steered by recruiters toward generic "applied" technology or business programs with low completion rates and poor postgraduate outcomes. For-profit institutions' recruitment and enrollment strategies rely on intentional sales techniques and capitalize on students' anxieties, stress, and fear to draw less socioeconomically advantaged students to their institutions (Campbell & Deil-Amen, 2019). These strategies exploit students' limited knowledge and understanding of higher education, further amplifying socioeconomic inequalities.

Racial/Ethnic and Gender Inequality

Since both the status attainment and social reproduction traditions are rooted in concerns regarding socioeconomic disparities, scholars in both traditions have dedicated less attention to other forms of inequality. That is not to say that sociologists are not concerned with racial/ethnic and gender inequalities in higher education. There is indeed a strong and growing body of

research on racial/ethnic and gender disparities in college, but that research is rarely integrated with research on socioeconomic inequality in a meaningful way (see a review in Arum et al., 2018). The underlying assumptions and approaches may be similar, especially in the status attainment tradition, but the literatures (and corresponding findings) exist in separate domains. The social reproduction tradition is particularly splintered in this regard, with separate literatures as well as distinct concepts and frameworks often being utilized to understand each form of inequality.

Status Attainment

Racial/ethnic disparities in degree completion in national samples largely reflect inequalities in socioeconomic resources and high school opportunities (Ciocca Eller & DiPrete, 2018; Roksa, 2012).[3] Colleges attended, however, also make a difference. Small and Winship (2007) showed that attending a more selective 4-year institution increased college graduation rates more for African American than white students, and that institutional selectivity accounted for more than one-third of the between-institution variance in African American graduation rates. Many of the debates in this literature are related to affirmative action and the mismatch hypothesis, which implies that students who are less academically prepared will perform less well when attending more selective institutions. Research finds no evidence of the mismatch hypothesis for any racial/ethnic group, and instead reveals the opposite pattern, wherein the likelihood of graduation for all groups, including racial/ethnic minority students, is higher at more selective institutions (Alon & Tienda, 2005). Similarly, Fischer and Massey (2007) reported that African American and Latinx students attending selective colleges who had SAT scores below the institutional average had higher GPA and persistence than their peers with SAT scores at or above the institutional average.

Although attending selective institutions may be beneficial, underrepresented racial/ethnic minority groups are still less likely to complete degrees than white students at those institutions (Alon, 2007; Alon et al., 2010). A range of experiences before as well as during college may contribute to these disparities. Charles et al. (2009), for example, reported that African American and Latinx students attending selective institutions were more likely to experience financial stress and various stressful life events within their family and friendship networks, such as unemployment, illness, divorce, homelessness, unplanned pregnancy, and deaths. These adverse life events were related to racial/ethnic minority students growing up in more segregated and impoverished neighborhoods. Both financial stress and exposure to stressful life events were related to academic performance and helped to account for some

of the differences in academic achievement between white students and their African American and Latinx peers at selective institutions.

College major has also received some attention in the literature on racial/ethnic inequality in degree completion, but the findings are more mixed. Goyette and Mullen (2006) reported that African American and Latinx students were less likely to choose arts and sciences majors relative to vocational majors. Focusing on selective institutions, Charles et al. (2009) found no racial differences in choosing math and science courses and majors, net of controls for precollege and college experiences. Gelbgiser and Alon (2016) even reported that African American students were more likely to choose math-oriented majors than white students, controlling for a series of social, academic, and institutional factors. They also showed that math-oriented majors were associated with lower graduation rates, and that this was especially the case for African American students, which contributed to disparities in college completion between the two groups.

College major is a central factor in the discussion of gender inequalities in higher education. Most of the literature has focused on documenting persistent gender segregation across fields of study and subsequent labor market outcomes (see a review in Gerber & Cheung, 2008). At least one study also noted a link between gender segregation across majors and degree completion. Alon and Gelbgiser (2011) showed that different majors provided different immediate learning environments regarding grading norms, academic intensity, and social support. Majors with a greater representation of women, such as those in the humanities and social sciences, were associated with a higher probability of college completion. Recent discussions of gender inequality in graduation rates (which now favors women) have often highlighted women's stronger academic performance (Buchmann & DiPrete, 2006), although the extent of female advantage varies depending on students' college pathways, such as whether they start in 2-year versus 4-year institutions or delay entry into higher education (Carbonaro et al., 2011).

Social Reproduction

Although the social reproduction tradition has focused on understanding socioeconomic inequality, a few recent studies have explored how cultural capital and habitus may contribute to racial/ethnic disparities as well. Some of these efforts have involved distinguishing between two forms of cultural capital: the dominant form described by Bourdieu (1986) and nondominant forms, which include interactional styles used by historically marginalized groups to demonstrate authenticity and membership within a community (Carter, 2005).[4] For instance, Johnson (2019) argued that African American and Latinx students who attended predominantly white high schools drew

on dominant cultural capital acquired in those settings to comfortably navigate majority-white peer groups at their predominantly white university. Meanwhile, other African American and Latinx students relied on nondominant cultural capital to build relationships with same-race peers at the institution. By bonding over racial or ethnic similarity, these students were able to manage some of the stressors of college life at a predominantly white institution (PWI) and find valuable academic support within their social networks.

In addition to shaping peer networks, cultural resources linked to ethnic identity may influence the strategies students use to navigate relationships with family during college. The literature on familism explores how cultural preferences for prioritizing family needs over individual interests shape the experiences of Latinx students. Research indicates that familism can encourage Latinx students to attend college closer to home (Desmond & López Turley, 2009; Ovink & Kalogrides, 2015; Turley, 2006). Although this tendency may lead students to enroll in less selective colleges than they are academically qualified to attend, familism also connects many Latinx students to valuable social and emotional support (Auerbach, 2007; Deutschlander, 2018). Deutschlander (2018) reported that low-income and first-generation Latinx students were more likely to benefit from a cultural capital intervention that enlisted parents as a source of support than other racial/ethnic groups.

These studies expose ways in which cultural resources can at times be used to counteract racial and ethnic inequality in higher education, facilitating student success. However, scholars have also shown that race-based cultural resources can be leveraged to reproduce social inequality. Bonilla-Silva (2018), for example, described how social and geographic segregation shape the ways individuals think about race. In particular, he depicted "white habitus" as "a racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites' racial taste, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters" (p. 121). Although racist attitudes and stereotypes remain common (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; McCabe, 2009; Torres & Charles, 2004), the "white habitus" of many PWI faculty, administrators, and students leads them to minimize racism or claim not to "see [skin] color." This can further marginalize racial and ethnic minority students and have implications for their success (Feagin et al., 1996; Willie, 2003; Winkle-Wagner, 2009).

Although some studies of racial/ethnic disparities have relied on the key concepts used to understand socioeconomic inequality (such as cultural capital and habitus), most of the literature considering the role of culture in racial/ethnic inequality in higher education has emerged apart from those discussions. For example, research shows that many racial and ethnic

minority students describe feeling simultaneously highly visible on campus—where their behaviors are monitored by faculty, other students, and campus law enforcement—and, at the same time, isolated from peers (Byrd, 2017; Hamilton & Nielsen, 2021; Ray & Rosow, 2012). Feeling marginalized on campus impacts student success in notable ways. A hostile racial climate can undermine racial/ethnic minority students' feelings of belonging and eventually lead them to disengage and leave higher education (Feagin et al., 1996; Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

With regard to gender, scholars have developed a set of theoretical explanations that consider how cultural expectations for gendered performances shape students' experiences, but this research remains largely separate from the literature on social reproduction of socioeconomic inequality. Researchers argue that women are held to rigid expectations around the performance of gender and sexual behavior, wherein the dominance of men is reinforced (Armstrong et al., 2010; Hamilton, 2007). For instance, Armstrong et al. (2010) claimed that a "sexual double standard" allows men to engage in hookups outside of romantic relationships but stigmatizes women who do the same. Moreover, Hamilton (2007) showed how the premium placed on women's ability to "acquire men's erotic attention" (p. 145) not only perpetuates sexism on campus, but is also used to subordinate lesbian women in particular. These types of cultural meanings and expectations can marginalize women and undermine their success in higher education.

Intersectionality

Sociological literatures on gender and race/ethnicity in higher education are often disconnected from each other as well as from research on socioeconomic background. Moreover, the conceptual tools used to understand socioeconomic inequality in the social reproduction tradition (primarily cultural capital, but also social capital and habitus) are not commonly employed in studies of race/ethnicity or gender in college.[5] This limits the impact and coherence of sociological contributions to understanding success in higher education. It also precludes more complex analyses that examine how different identities intersect to shape students' experiences and outcomes. Intersectionality presents a way of understanding the complexity of the social world by considering how the mutual constitution of categories of experience—such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on—impacts lived experiences (Collins, 2009). Attempting to isolate the influence of a singular sociodemographic dimension overlooks the ways these dimensions interact to produce unique experiences.

Much research in the status attainment tradition has focused on isolating the extent to which a particular sociodemographic characteristic (e.g., race/

ethnicity) is related to outcomes, net of other factors (such as academic preparation or additional sociodemographic characteristics like socioeconomic background). When considering interactions, status attainment scholars have more often focused on how some groups benefit more than others from a particular educational experience (e.g., interactions between race/ethnicity and college selectivity). Research is slowly moving in the direction of considering interactions across different sociodemographic identities. For example, Buchmann and DiPrete (2006) examined interaction between gender and socioeconomic background and showed that although women across socioeconomic groups, on average, had a higher college completion rate than men, women from less advantaged families (e.g., families with less educated or absent fathers) were more likely to reach parity or surpass their male counterparts in college completion.

The social reproduction tradition has likewise typically focused on examining one dimension of inequality at a time. In addition to being grounded in Bourdieu's work that focused primarily on social class, this is in part a reflection of the data and methods employed. Relying on qualitative methods, scholars rarely have large enough samples to consider the intersections of various identities. However, there are growing calls for intersectional research, such as the recent edited volume *Intersectionality and Higher Education* (Byrd et al., 2019). And indeed, some studies have begun to explore how multiple identities shape students' experiences. For instance, Armstrong et al. (2014) showed how a "slut discourse" was used to create and reinforce socioeconomic boundaries. They found that public shaming of less affluent women was used to contrast more affluent women as "classy," conferring status and dominance over their working- and lower-middle-class peers. The stigmatization of less socioeconomically advantaged women pushed them to the margins of campus social life.

Moreover, McCabe (2016) and Silver (2020b) examined how race/ethnicity and gender intersect with respect to friendship networks and experiences in extracurricular activities. Racial and ethnic minority students tend to have small, tight-knit social networks, which is especially the case for racial/ethnic minority women (McCabe, 2016). Tight-knit networks provide valuable socioemotional support—alleviating some feelings of race-based marginalization—but they can be less effective at providing instrumental and academic support. Focusing on students' social experiences, Silver's (2020b) ethnographic observations and interviews revealed that students relied on intersectional stereotypes to find inclusion. In social groups, women often became "group moms" or "nice girls," racial/ethnic minority men performed as laid back "cool guys" or entertainers, and white men took on identities as group managers and intellectuals. These roles both reflected and reinforced

patterns of social inequality found in society more broadly, amplifying disparities in students' sense of belonging in college.

Race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic background are not the only social identities relevant in the higher education context. Recent research has shown that students' experiences vary notably by sexual and gender identity, with lesbian, gay, bisexual (Beattie et al., 2021; Lee & LaDousa, 2015), and transgender (Garvey et al., 2019) students encountering unique challenges in the academic and social realms of college. Sociological research on various dimensions of inequality, including sexual identity, immigrant generation, and disability, is largely absent in higher education (Arum et al., 2018). In addition to examining intersectionality, expanding the range of social identities considered presents a promising avenue for future research.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Sociological arguments can be perceived as disheartening when examined in relation to policy and practice. Given that inequality in higher education is related to inequalities in society more broadly, as long as we live in an unequal society (and in some respects increasingly so, given growing income inequality), higher education will remain unequal. The status attainment literature shows that socioeconomic inequality persists despite a major expansion of higher education (Pfeffer & Hertel, 2015; Roksa et al., 2007). And even when equality is achieved at one level of education, it often continues at other levels (Torche, 2011) or shifts to differences in students' experiences (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). Moreover, even when explicitly racist and sexist policies are eliminated, the effects of histories of exclusion persist (England & Li, 2006; Hamilton, 2014; Hamilton & Nielsen, 2021), as do the more subtle forms of color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Inequality is pernicious and difficult to eliminate.

That reality notwithstanding, sociological studies often offer implications for policy and practice in their conclusions. In the status attainment tradition, those implications are often abstract. For example, one way to reduce inequality in degree completion is to eliminate inequality in access to different types of institutions, including 2-year versus 4-year colleges and 4-year institutions of various levels of selectivity. That is a tall order. A small number of studies conducted by sociologists address specific policies, such as affirmative action (e.g., Alon & Tienda, 2005; Fischer & Massey, 2007) or financial aid (e.g., Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016), although there is extensive work on both of these topics in other fields.

In the social reproduction tradition, recommendations offered are not small tweaks to existing practices but fundamental reconceptualization of

how institutions are structured and how they provide (or deny) opportunities to different groups of students (e.g., Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Hamilton & Nielsen, 2021). For instance, Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) recommended that universities curtail the party pathway, expand access to the professional pathway, and develop a more robust mobility pathway for less socioeconomically advantaged students. These efforts would require large-scale changes within universities, such as the addition of intensive personalized advising, extensive revision of the curriculum, and serious attention to Greek life (and the party scene more generally). Moreover, they would necessitate profound shifts in government policies, including increased funding for public higher education in order to decrease the pressure on colleges and universities to cater to those who can pay full tuition and instead attend to the needs of less affluent students. Absent those changes, practitioners are urged to be aware of differences in social and cultural resources and how the unequal distribution of those resources shapes students' experiences and outcomes.

Some studies do offer more narrow implications that will not eliminate inequality but can make a difference in students' experiences and outcomes in the present moment. For example, higher education institutions can change how information and resources are offered. When resources are mandatory or integrated within the curriculum, they tend to be more effective at promoting success for students from diverse backgrounds (Person et al., 2006; Roksa & Silver, 2019).[6] Likewise, research shows that building opportunities for faculty-facilitated dialogue into the classroom setting can foster more positive interactions across dimensions of racial/ethnic difference, creating a more welcoming campus environment that supports the success of diverse groups of students (Reyes, 2018; Saenz et al., 2007). Specific changes, such as explaining office hours, keeping dining halls open during breaks, and creating employment opportunities that connect faculty and students, can make a difference for low-income students, even though more extensive structural changes in both college and high school are needed for transformative impact (Jack, 2019).

Perhaps most notably, the sociological literature highlights the role of intentionality. Inequality will not change unless we directly, actively, and continuously work to combat it. Racial/ethnic disparities will not dissipate simply because higher education has more diverse student bodies, nor will gender inequities in fields of study disappear by simply enrolling women in male-dominated fields. Racial/ethnic minorities face ongoing marginalization in higher education (Espenshade & Radford, 2013; Winkle-Wagner, 2009); students from less socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds feel out of place, especially at selective institutions (Aries & Seider, 2005; Jack,

2019; Mullen, 2010); and women encounter exclusion in male-dominated fields (Blickenstaff, 2005; Gayles & Ampaw, 2014). When students are left to their own devices in the social and extracurricular realm, women are pressured to become "group moms" and racial/ethnic minority men are sidelined as "entertainers" (Silver, 2020b). By simply bringing students to campus without directly addressing inequality or providing students with the tools necessary to engage with diversity, higher education will continue to reproduce social disparities.

If not uplifting, the sociological account is sobering and uniquely illuminating given the pronounced inequalities in higher education, which persist despite decades of change and discussions about reducing inequality. Some sociologists have argued that a group's ability to mobilize politically is a necessary—if not always sufficient—condition for altering the patterns of inequality in higher education (Karen, 1991a, 1991b; Okechukwu, 2019). Others have called for collective action by various stakeholders and collaboration across institutions to provide a new vision for higher education (Arum & Roksa, 2011). At the end of the day, although none of us can change structures on our own, we all play a role in maintaining them, unless we are explicitly and directly contesting them. Sociological literature may not prescribe a specific course of action, but it does offer a call to action—a call that each of us can respond to in our own way.

Notes

1. A few recent studies have raised questions about and nuanced that argument (e.g., Manzoni & Streib, 2019; Witteveen & Attewell, 2017; Zhou, 2019).

2. Scholars across other disciplines have explored similar questions about selectivity, institutional type, and college major. We focus herein on reviewing only the sociological literature. Moreover, sociological literature on college major is focused primarily on gender, and thus is discussed in a subsequent section.

3. For consistency, in this section, we use the terms *African American* and *Latinx* to refer to those two traditionally underrepresented racial/ethnic minority groups in higher education, although other terms such as *Black, Latino*, and *Hispanic* may be used across various studies.

4. Scholars in other fields have similarly argued for the importance of considering nondominant forms of cultural capital (e.g., Yosso, 2005).

5. Although this line of inquiry is more prevalent in K–12 education.

6. Although not written by sociologists, *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* makes a compelling argument regarding the importance of structure (Bailey et al., 2015).

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