

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY STUDIES

DISSERTATION DEFENSE FOR

EMILY PRESSLER

**TITLE: MIND OVER MATTER: EXPLORING INTERGENERATIONAL LINKS TO
YOUTH EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND ATTAINMENT**

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ABSTRACT

Literature exploring the development of adolescent educational aspirations, and the impacts these educational aspirations have on youth educational attainment has largely ignored the developmental foundations of parent's educational orientations. Specifically most research exploring parental impacts on youth educational aspirations and attainment have measured

parental influence primarily in adulthood, post-fertility. To address this gap, the current two studies examined a potential intergenerational transmission of adolescent educational aspirations, as well as the impacts this transfer has on youth educational attainment in a multi-generational sample from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 and linked Child and Young Adult Files.

The first study examined whether the educational aspirations women reported during adolescence and adulthood predict the educational aspirations of their offspring above and beyond a host of child and maternal characteristics in a sample of 1,851 mothers and their 3,198 children. Further the potential intergenerational transmission of educational aspirations was explored separately by level of maternal educational attainment at the child's birth as demographic trends suggest greater increases in youth aspirations have occurred for children born to less educated women. Findings indicate that higher maternal aspirations for her children predict the high educational aspirations of their offspring above and beyond youth and parental characteristics. Yet, in one case this relationship varied by maternal educational attainment, suggesting that an intergenerational transmission of adolescent aspirations between women and their children may exist. Specifically, among a sample of youth with the highest educated mothers, maternal aspirations for her children *and* women's aspirations during adolescence predicted her offspring's aspiration to attain a Bachelor's degree or more.

The second study explored whether multiple measures of educational aspirations relate to youth educational attainment and whether these relationships vary by youth race/ethnicity in a sample of 1,192 mothers and their 1,662 children. In addition, the study explored whether youth engagement (i.e. hours spent on homework a week) and disengagement (i.e. truancy) mediated the association between educational aspirations and the likelihood youth earned their high school

credentials on time. Findings indicate that youth and maternal educational aspirations for her child were associated with increases in the odds that youth would earn their high school credentials on time, enroll in college and earn a bachelor's degree or more. While maternal *and* youth aspirations were significant predictors of the educational attainment of white youth, youth aspirations were primarily predictive of the educational attainment of black and Hispanic youth. Further, analyses revealed that neither the time youth spend on homework nor their reports of truancy in high school mediate the associations between measures of educational aspirations and the timeliness of their high school credential attainment for all race/ethnicities.

Taken together findings from this dissertation suggest that the educational aspirations women have for their children are important determinants for the aspirations their offspring will have as adolescents. Further, both maternal and youth educational aspirations are important predictors of later youth educational attainment, and when explored by maternal educational attainment and race/ethnicity more similarities than differences occur. In sum, this dissertation suggests that theories of racial and ethnic deficits, or group supported counter-cultural norms, should be put to rest as positive generational shifts have occurred increasing the educational aspirations of *all* youth. Future interventions and education policies should focus on increasing familial and youth information about higher education through resources and assistance to increase the educational attainment of all youth.