

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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T1 | Beaumaris Lounge

Chaired by Manuel Madriaga

Fri 13 Dec 2019

10:30 - 11:00

A Comparative Study of the Factors Shaping Postsecondary Aspirations for Low-Income Students in Greater Boston and Greater London

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**Research Domain:** Access and widening participation (AWP)

**Abstract:** This project investigated the postsecondary education aspirations of 27 secondary school-aged students living in greater London, England and greater Boston, Massachusetts, USA. An innovative research design was implemented to support a technology-facilitated international focus group allowing for exchanges between the U.S. and English students. Using human ecology theory, the findings show that differences in students' exosystems, specifically the financial aid and loan repayment processes, influence student postsecondary education and career aspirations.

U.S. student concerns about affordability and loan repayment made aspirations lower and more localized. In contrast, English participants felt comforted by their government's deferred loan repayment process, so they did not have as strong constraints on aspirations based on financial considerations. Both English and U.S. students were influenced similarly by the mesosystem when making decisions about which postsecondary institution to attend. In conclusion, altering exosystem policy and influencing mesosystem relationships could impact postsecondary education aspirations for low-income students and enhance their progression into post-secondary education.

**Paper:**

Access to postsecondary education is important because of the economic and non-monetary benefits associated with obtaining an undergraduate degree. Postsecondary education is a mechanism for low-income students to obtain higher prestige careers and increase social mobility, worldwide

(Bathmaker, Ingram, Abrahams, Hoare, Waller, & Bradley, 2016 [\[MA1\]](#) ). Both England and the United States (U.S.) have a national interest in preparing more workers in high-need fields (i.e., medical doctors, engineers, and STEM-related careers) and one of way to do so is to increase participation from low-income students who access postsecondary education at lower rates and choose lower prestige fields [\[MA2\]](#) (e.g. Marginson, 2017). We focus on low-income students rather than students from all backgrounds as higher income students often naturally progress into HE which involves less complex decision making (Archer et al. 2007). There is little scholarship that addresses these phenomenon and concepts from an international comparative and human ecology perspective. This paper will give a brief overview of both the English and U.S. policy perspectives on financial aid and college access, followed by the theoretical framework, methodology, results, discussion, and implications of the study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

First introduced by Bronfenbrenner (1977), human ecology theory (HET) seeks to understand how person-environment interactions influence individuals. This theoretical approach embeds the individual in a nested and mutually influential system that allows for multiple layers of analysis and interaction about the individual. Bronfenbrenner (1993) explains human ecology as, a system of nested, interdependent dynamic structures ranging from the proximal, consisting of immediate face-to-face settings, to the most distal, comprising broader social contexts such as classes and culture' (p. 4) through four systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The microsystem is comprised of interpersonal relationships that happen in the immediate context. For a secondary school student this could be teachers, counselors, family members, work supervisors, or friends. The next embedded system is the mesosystem which represents the collection of connections between microsystems (relationships). The exosystem are the policies, practices, and authorities that influence the individual, but do so through microsystems or indirect exchanges (Patton, Renn, Guido, & Quaye, 2016). Some examples of exosystem actors are institutional culture, national financial aid policy, and immigration legislation. Lastly, macrosystems are the societal influences that effect environments and individuals such as cultural values, social movements, and sociohistorical influences (Patton et al, 2016).

Against this background an international comparative perspective and using HET provide a particularly useful lens to analyze the embedded systems that influence postsecondary education plans in secondary school students. The present study will compare how national financial aid policy (exosystem) and student relationships (mesosystem) impacts college and career aspirations for low-income students in both England and the U.S.

### **Methodology**

#### **Data**

We used focus groups to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of secondary school students through detailed or "thick" (Geertz, 1973) data description. Three individual focus groups (two in the U.S. and one in the England and one combined transatlantic focus group (between

U.S. and English secondary school students) were conducted for this study. All focus groups took place in the spring of 2015. Students were selected based on theoretical sampling both from their geographic location and school context (Mays & Pope, 1995). First Boston, Massachusetts and London, England were identified as cities with an abundance of prestigious universities and a sprawling metropolitan surrounding area with low-income schools and families. Next, we selected non-fee paying, non-selective secondary schools in both countries located within a 50-mile radius outside the city centers and near a range of postsecondary education institutions. Specific secondary schools were selected based on similar ratios of low-income students, based on free and reduced school meal indicators as well as average income levels in the school's local community.

Within the English school, 11 students were identified by being eligible for free school meals which indicates coming from a low-income family. All participating students were in the year group 9 (14-15 years old). In the U.S., 11 students were selected by free and reduced lunch eligibility combined with student participation in special college preparation programs. U.S. students ranged from grades 10-12 (14-18 years old).

### **Discussion and Implications**

Both the exosystem and mesosystem influenced university aspirations in similar and divergent ways.

The English students aspired to more prestigious careers (e.g., medical doctor), while the U.S. students tended to have aspirations of professions that required less education, initial cost, and consequently lower-paying salaries. Through further questioning, both sets of low-income students understood and engaged with financial aid differently. The U.S. students were loan adverse and were not sure if they would be able to pay for postsecondary education, which created lower standards and aspirations. Quite differently, the English students had an understanding of their governmental financial aid system and were confident that they would be able to attend postsecondary education with minimal debt accumulation. National financial aid policy for English students was a social mechanism to develop a wider variety of postsecondary education and career aspirations. In our small comparative study, we found that national policy context was by far more important on evaluating choices than racial origin with all U.S. respondents preferring the English model and the English respondents displaying higher aspirations than their U.S. peers regardless of race.

While the U.S. and England respective financial aid policies impacted low-income students differently, they shared similar relationships (microsystems) that impacted their choices of how to pursue their aspiration. Comparable to previous literature, low-income students relied on secondary school teachers and staff, parents and siblings, peer groups, and access programs to learn, and make decisions, about postsecondary education. While this confirms much of the literature of college choice, it is important to acknowledge the similarities of low-income students in two different national contexts. Researchers are encouraged to continue to use comparative studies to isolate factors like financial aid policies and entrance admissions standards to look for causal and correlating mechanisms.

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