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Dissertation Abstract

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Chapter Titles:

Ch. One: Toward the social psychological study of socioeconomic attainment: an introduction.

Ch. Two: Elementary models of the structure of socioeconomic attainment: insights derived from their application to Great Britain.

Ch. Three: The role of personality in socioeconomic attainment.

Ch. Four: An experimental perspective on the microstructure of socioeconomic attainment: the influence of ascribed status and personality upon the placement decisions of personnel administrators.

Ch. Five: The role of socioeconomic attainment in the development of adult personality: the social and psychological origins of depression.

Ch. Six: Implications for the discipline: an epilog.

## ABSTRACT

### Longitudinal and Experimental Perspectives on the Social Psychology of Socioeconomic Attainment

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This research was undertaken to expand our understanding of the role psychological factors play in the process of socioeconomic attainment.

PART I: The first phase of this research used the structural equation models of Blau and Duncan (1967) as a point of departure and attempted to answer four questions: (1) Do such models provide an adequate description of the process of attainment in Great Britain? (2) To what extent is the process of attainment influenced by individual variations in human personality? (3) Do personality variables mediate the transmission of social and economic inequality from generation to generation? (4) And finally, does socioeconomic attainment, itself, have an influence upon the development of adult personality?

Data from a longitudinal study of British males (interviewed at ages 13, 24, 28, and 32) provided the basis for this research. Analyses of these data suggested that past applications of the Blau-Duncan model to Britain have obscured important differences between the U.S.A. and U.K. in the structure of socioeconomic attainment and the functioning of their respective educational systems. In particular, it was found that a technically adequate representation of the process of status attainment in Great Britain required the incorporation of substantively meaningful, non-additive effects of schooling upon subsequent attainment. It is suggested that these non-additive effects reflect a historical adaptation

of the British educational system to the different training requirements of manual and non-manual occupations.

It was also found that inclusion of personality variables in modified Blau-Duncan models significantly increased our ability to account for variations in educational, occupational and income attainment. Of the four personality variables (Neuroticism, Achievement Orientation, Introversion, and Conservatism) included in these analyses, Introversion had the strongest overall influence upon attainment. No evidence was found that personality variables transmitted status inequality from parents to offspring. We did, however, find that socioeconomic attainment had a significant influence upon adult personality development, particularly upon vulnerability to depression.

PART II: Following Heider's dictum that the "naive psychology" of the individual is central to an understanding of social behavior, the second phase of this research attempted to determine whether ascriptive biases in the "naive psychology" of important organizational gatekeepers, e.g., personnel administrators, could account for the findings of our longitudinal study.

An experiment was conducted using representative samples of British and American personnel managers as subjects (N=2024). A computerized procedure was employed to generate bogus resumes describing workers seeking employment; eight variables were experimentally manipulated in the construction of the resumes (ascribed gender, IQ, education, social class of origin, introversion, achievement orientation, social conservatism, and machiavellianism). The univariate distribution of each experimental variable was matched to the variable's actual distribution in the national

labor force. Subjects received resumes describing job seekers and were required to select appropriate occupations and salary levels.

Models of socioeconomic attainment used in the longitudinal analyses were re-estimated using the judgment data generated by the experiment. Several types of complete and partial correspondences in estimates were observed. Most importantly, analyses revealed that: (1) other things being equal, personnel managers' placement decisions are significantly biased against workers from low status (family) backgrounds; this bias was identical in magnitude to estimates of the coefficient representing the intergenerational transmission of status in our longitudinal analyses; (2) the personality characteristics of workers cause them to be placed into different types of occupations and into different levels of occupation within a given type; the magnitude of this influence was modest but consistently significant; and (3) the occupational placement and compensation decisions of personnel managers are subject to significant sex biases; the magnitude of these biases was sufficient to explain, within the limits of sampling error, both the sex segregation of the labor force and a major portion of the income disparity between male and female workers.

At a general level, we argue that the foregoing results demonstrate the need for theories of social and economic attainment to take account of not only individual variations in the psychology of workers but also the social psychology of the organizations and individuals who control access and advancement in the occupational marketplace.

LONGITUDINAL AND EXPERIMENTAL PERSPECTIVES ON  
THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF SOCIOECONOMIC ATTAINMENT

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