

# Class Origin and Young Adults' Re-Enrollment Decisions

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# Motivation

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- Social selectivity even at entry to tertiary level education  
e.g. children from the lower classes enter higher education less frequently and they are also less likely to progress to postgraduate studies (cf. Alon & Tienda, 2007; Ayalon, Grodsky, Gamoran, & Yogev, 2008; Shavit, Arum, & Gamoran, 2007, Mullen, Goyette, & Soares, 2003).
- Prolonged and complex transitions from higher education to work  
e.g. high participation rate of mature students in higher education (cf. Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Brückner & Mayer, 2005; Coleman, 1984; Jacob & Weiss, 2008)

# Research questions

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**Are there social differences in re-enrollment to education out of an initial phase of work?**

**If yes, can established explanations of social inequality in educational attainment explain these differences?**

# Tertiary education in the US context

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## Core dimensions of higher education

- Stratification and tracking: Sequential
  - Direct and indirect costs of education: High
  - Standardization of educational provisions: Low
  - Occupational specificity: Low
- ⇒ Comparatively strong individualization of postsecondary educational careers, i.e. many non-traditional students re-entering college “late”

# (Micro-)Theoretical background

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Re-enrollment as an educational decision

- Primary and secondary effects (Boudon 1974)
- Mechanisms for secondary effects (Breen & Goldthorpe 1997)
  - Relative risk aversion
  - Expectations of returns and social capital
  - Expectations of educational success

# Re-enrollment and social class

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## Hypothesis 1a

Upper-class children are more likely to re-enroll.

- Status reproduction is more dependent on college graduation for service classes than it is for lower-class children.
- Labor-market outcomes are more secure for upper-class children.
- Upper-class children are more confident about succeeding in higher education
- Their parents can provide more financial resources.

But: Participation in the labour market may change some of these parameters ...

# Re-enrollment after labor market experience (1)

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- Own earnings → savings to bear the costs of enrollment, re-enrollment might have been intentionally planned

## Hypothesis 1b

No (or only minor) class differences in re-enrollment rates

- Lack of financial resources at the time of graduation from high school can be compensated.
- Re-enrollment of students from poor families may even occur faster and more often.

## Re-enrollment after labor market experience (2)

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- Failure to achieve parental class status can be experienced directly  
→ re-enrollment as a reaction to non-achievement of parental class  
(= direct test of Breen-Goldthorpe model)

### Hypothesis 2

Achieving parental (or higher) class status via participation in the labor market reduces the likelihood of re-enrollment

- The *child's relative class* status compared to that of the parents matters
- Re-enrollment as “last resort” to avoid intergenerational downward class mobility (downward class mobility can be directly



# Data and method

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## Data and sample

- National Longitudinal Study of Youth 1979, cohort panel
- Here: birth cohorts 1961 - 1965
- 2140 cases with high school degree or GED in the labor force
- N= 379 900 person-months

## Method

- Time until re-enrollment of students being in the labor force
- Accelerated failure time (AFT) model, log-logistic distribution

# Variables

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- Parents' class position: analogous to EGP class scheme (collapsed to four clearly ordered categories)
- Relative class position: Comparing the children's current class to parents' class (0-1 variable)
- Poverty status of the household at age 18 ("Poverty Income Guidelines" of US Department of Health and Human Services)
- Primary effects: Percentiles of the "Armed Forces Qualification Test" (AFQT), high-school diploma vs. GED, achievement of an A.A.-degree
- Control variables: gender, race, birth cohort, age when left school

## Results: Social Class and Re-Enrollment

	Model 1	Model 2
<b>Max. class of parents</b>		
<i>(Ref. Salarial)</i>		
Intermediate	0.42* (2.1)	0.43* (2.1)
Skilled working class	0.45* (2.3)	0.43* (2.2)
Unskilled working class	0.91*** (4.1)	0.87*** (3.9)
<b>Poor</b>		0.40 (1.9)
Constant	6.29*** (44.4)	6.23*** (43.5)
Ln gamma	0.46*** (12.9)	0.46*** (12.9)

*N* (person months) = 379 900; *N* (persons) = 2131; , Number of failures = 635  
*t* statistics in parentheses; \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

	Model 3
<b>Max. class of parents</b>	
<i>(Ref.: Salariat)</i>	
Intermediate	0.35 (1.8)
Skilled working class	0.23 (1.2)
Unskilled working class	0.53* (2.4)
<b>Poor</b>	0.27 (1.3)
Constant	7.79*** (24.3)
Ln gamma	0.41*** (11.6)

	Model 3
<b>GED</b>	-0.16 (-0.71)
<i>(Ref.: High School diploma)</i>	
<b>A.A. degree obtained</b>	-2.21*** (-8.2)
<b>AFQT score</b>	-0.02*** (-6.9)
<b>Male</b>	0.60*** (4.1)
<b>Race (Ref. White)</b>	
Black	-1.02*** (-3.9)
Hispanic	-1.18*** (-4.2)
<b>Cohort (Ref. 1964)</b>	
<b>1961</b>	-0.18 (-0.8)
<b>1962</b>	-0.29 (-1.4)
<b>1963</b>	-0.14 (-0.6)

*N (person months) = 379 900; N (persons) = 2131;,  
 Number of failures = 635  
 t statistics in parentheses;  
 \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$*

## Results: Relative Class and Re-Enrollment

	Service	Intermediate	Skilled working
<b>Achieved parental class status</b> <i>(time varying)</i>	0.393 (1.19)	0.607* (1.99)	-0.252 (-0.93)
<b>Poor</b>	0.110 (0.27)	0.805 (1.69)	-0.144 (-0.41)
<i>N (persons)</i>	609	493	576
<i>Number of re-entries</i>	213	148	168

Controlling for GED, AFQT, AA. degree, gender, race, birth cohort, age when left school  
 t statistics in parentheses; \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

# Summary of findings

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- Parents' absolute class matters for re-enrollment
- But: class differences are reduced considerably when controlling for performance
- Additionally: Intergenerational downward mobility is avoided by re-enrolling

# Conclusions

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- Long-lasting effects of social origin in education, even in very late educational decisions
- But: minor importance compared to primary effects
- Mechanisms
  - No empirical support for coherent plan of reenrollment to amass savings
  - Moderate support for status reproduction
- Further research:
  - Institutional differentiation and macro-level contexts
  - How do biographical events (family formation, unemployment) change social inequality in re-enrollment over time?