“Oh, of course I’m going to go to college”: Understanding the role of habitus in the college choice process of Black immigrant college students

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“Oh, of Course I’m Going to Go to College”: Understanding How Habitus Shapes the College Choice Process of Black Immigrant Students

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Black students from immigrant backgrounds are a growing population in higher education. However, there is little research exploring their experiences as they make decisions about whether and where they will attend college. This qualitative study of 23 Black immigrants attending a public, selective research university explores how individual *habitus*, or worldview, shapes the predisposition, search, and institutional choice phases of college choice. Findings suggest participants’ habitus is strongly influenced by culture, prestige, and the value parents place on education. These forces pervade the college choice process, establishing students’ decisions to attend college early in their lives, as well as the emphasis placed on balancing prestige with financial accessibility in the search and institutional choice processes.

**Keywords:** access, immigrants, college choice, Black students, habitus

The population of immigrants in the United States has grown exponentially since the 1970s, rising from 9.6 million to over 26.3 million in 1997 (U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Service, 1999) and continuing to increase 57% between 1990 and 2000 (Erisman & Looney, 2007). In 2005, most immigrants to the United States were Hispanic/Latinos (47%) and Asian/Pacific Islanders (24%) (Erisman & Looney, 2007), and these groups have been the focus of research and public discourse about the immigrant experience in higher education. However, it is important to note that 8% of the immigrant population identifies as Black, and Black immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean represent a growing proportion of the immigrant and Black communities in the United States (Erisman & Looney, 2007; Kent, 2007). Roughly one fifth of the growth in the Black community between 2000 and 2005 can be attributed to immigration, and approximately 13% of all college-age Blacks in the United States are the children of African or Caribbean/West Indian immigrants (referred to as second-generation Black immigrants) or are immigrants themselves (referred to as first-generation Black immigrants) (Kent, 2007).

As the Black immigrant population grows and increasingly seeks access to U.S. colleges and universities, education leaders and policymakers must become more aware of how these students are making decisions about attending college. Although some scholars argue that socioeconomic status, parental value of and emphasis on education, and academic preparation make Black immigrants more likely than their peers to gain access to higher education (e.g., Bennett & Lutz, 2009; Massey, Mooney, Torres, & Charles, 2007), others note stark differences in rates of college access for Black students from immigrant backgrounds on the basis of citizenship status, nation of origin, and time of migration (e.g., Erisman & Looney, 2007). Further, much like their U.S. counterparts, financial need and a lack of college preparatory information can present challenges as Black immigrant students seek to engage in the college choice process (Erisman & Looney, 2007). Despite these challenges, we were unable to identify work that has explored the ways in which Black immigrant students perceive and experience college choice, nor whether and how individual-level factors, particularly cultural and immigrant background, influence this process. To address this gap in the literature and

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contribute to an emerging area of scholarship, this study explores factors influencing Black immigrants’ college choice process. Attention is specifically focused on how individual-level factors, such as student worldview, or habitus, shape the ways in which Black students from immigrant backgrounds make decisions about attending college, the colleges to which they consider applying, and where they will ultimately matriculate.

**Literature Review**

Two frameworks are integrated to inform this study: Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) college-choice model and habitus. Hossler and Gallagher’s framework offers an explanation of the college-choice process, or the stages students go through as they decide whether or not they will enroll in college. This is described as a three-phase process: predisposition, search, and choice. During the predisposition phase (kindergarten through eighth grade), students develop an attitude toward postsecondary education. Before making a decision about whether or not to attend college, students weigh the potential benefits and costs of continuing their education and ultimately determine whether they will attend college (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2000). In the search phase (grades 9–10), students develop their choice set, or the group of schools to which they will apply, on the basis of their needs, values, wants, and limitations (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Smith & Fleming, 2006). During this phase, students seek information about and consider the institutions to which they would like to apply (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Choice is the final stage of the process (grades 11–12), which we will refer to throughout this paper as “institutional choice,” during which students apply for admission at one or more colleges and ultimately choose an institution to attend (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Smith & Fleming, 2006).

In addition to accounting for the stages of Black immigrants’ college-choice processes, this study considers the forces that shape how decisions are made within each phase. Rooted in theories of capital (e.g., human, cultural, and social), scholars have considered the ways in which habitus shapes the way that students think about college-going (e.g., McDonough, 1998; Nora, 2004). Although often misunderstood and sometimes challenging to define, habitus represents a person’s view of the world and their place in it, often formed through socialization during childhood and reinforced throughout one’s life (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Dumais, 2002). Habitus shapes the ways in which people make choices, predisposing them toward certain behaviors based on what is deemed appropriate given their social location (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Reay, 2004). Although it has been argued that habitus is too constraining and deterministic, Reay (2004) notes choice is at the heart of the construct. Individuals can choose to engage in a wide range of behaviors, but choices are constrained and viewed as more or less probable on the basis of perceptions of what is most appropriate given personal history, the history of one’s family, and the history of those who share the same class standing (Bourdieu, 1990).

A student’s habitus is not created in a vacuum, and in Bourdieu’s (1977) early conceptualizations, it is presented as being largely shaped by class standing. Human capital in the form of financial resources can certainly shape which choices are perceived as appropriate. In the case of education and college attendance, financial resources provide students with more options, facilitating their ability to fund postsecondary opportunities. Degree aspirations and the desire to attend college are positively correlated with parents’ education and income levels (Dynarski, 2002; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Perna, 2006; Perna & Titus, 2004; Smith & Fleming, 2006). As family income and education level increase, students begin to think more seriously about their postsecondary plans (Hamrick & Stage, 1998).

Although choices may be somewhat reflective of financial resources, they may be more indicative of cultural capital, or the system of attributes (e.g., cultural knowledge, values, behavioral practices, and mannerisms) that are derived from one’s parents and family and are often strongly related to class status (McDonough, 1997; González, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003). Several scholars suggest that one cannot understand habitus without engaging cultural capital, noting that they are similar, although separate constructs (Dumais, 2002; Reay, 2004). A person’s notion of what is appropriate and “normal” develops in relation to their cultural capital. Dumais (2002) describes cultural capital as representing a student’s resources and
habitus as their orientation toward those resources; together they have great influence on how students navigate educational systems. In terms of higher education, cultural capital holds importance because some of the values and attitudes transmitted by parents and family members are focused on education and success, translating to family-mediated values and outlooks that can facilitate (or inhibit) access to higher education (McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2006; Perreira, Mullan Harris, & Lee, 2006). In identifying the relationship between cultural capital and college-going, McDonough (1997) identified two primary components that have significant influence: the value placed on education and college knowledge. Literature on students from immigrant backgrounds suggests that students benefit from cultural capital through the value placed on education within their families and parents’ expectations (Keller & Harker Tillman, 2008; Song & Glick, 2004; Vernez & Abrahams, 1996). This frame of reference appears to translate into the high levels of educational motivation and attainment observed among first- and second-generation immigrants (Ogbu, 1994; Perreira, Mullan Harris, & Lee, 2006; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001); however, few scholars have specifically explored the perspectives of Black immigrants and how this translates to the ways in which they engage in college choice.

Although high aspirations and commitment to higher education can have an influence on college choice, college knowledge is also important. College-educated parents generally have more access to information about college and are better able to help their children (Perna, 2000). Highly educated parents are also more likely to recognize student needs for tutoring, to push for college preparatory classes, and to arrange college visits (Cota-Robles & Gordan, 1999). A lack of college information is framed as challenging for students from several underrepresented groups, but this may be particularly problematic for students from immigrant backgrounds, particularly when their parents have limited exposure to higher education or were not educated in the United States (Erisman & Looney, 2007).

Although Bourdieu’s early framing of habitus suggests that it is largely based on class background, reconceptualizations of the construct incorporate the way membership in other marginalized groups can shape one’s view of the world and their place in it (Dumais, 2002; Reay, 2004). Reay’s (2004) review notes the importance that scholars have placed on considering how race and gender are embodied through and shape habitus, highlighting the different ways in which individuals with similar socioeconomic resources and class backgrounds perceive and experience the world. Gender and race are certainly important identities to address; however, little work has explored how one’s ethnic identity may intersect with class background in shaping habitus. Thus, this study extends Reay’s argument, exploring whether and how cultural background and immigration status can also shape one’s habitus and consequently influence the ways in which they engage in the college-choice process.

Methods

This study addresses the following question: What role does habitus play in the ways in which Black immigrant college students engage in the predisposition, search, and institutional choice phases of the college-choice process? This project was conducted as an interpretive multicase study. Case study is particularly appropriate for gaining a deeper understanding of process, and distinguishing this study as interpretive indicates that data are collected and coded to not only describe but also to support, challenge, or develop theory about events, experiences, and outcomes (Merriam, 1998). Multicase studies also include data collection and analysis of more than one bounded system, which allows for comparison across cases and enhanced external validity of findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Merriam, 1998). Each participant is treated as an individual case, enabling comparisons among participants across generational status, academic year, and country of origin.

Study Site

Data were collected from students enrolled at Central University (pseudonym), a large, public research university consistently ranked among the top 50 national universities by U.S. News and World Report. Central University is classified by the Carnegie Foundation as a full-time, 4-year, more selective (51% admission rate), lower transfer-in institution. The middle 50% of
students offered admission have a combined SAT score between 1750 and 1990, a combined ACT score between 26 and 30, and a high school grade point average (GPA) between 3.52 and 3.97 (4.0 scale). Approximately 45,000 students are enrolled at Central; 38,000 are undergraduates. Black students are 3.5% of the population (1,400 students). Enrollment data are not kept on the number or characteristics of Black students from immigrant backgrounds.

**Participant Recruitment**

All participants were offered $10 for engaging in the study, and several strategies were used to recruit students who were full-time undergraduates at Central University, identified as Black or of African descent, and had at least one parent who was born outside of the United States. First, researchers identified organizations likely to include Black immigrants among their membership (e.g., ethnic/cultural groups for Black, African, or Caribbean students) via an online list of Central University student organizations. Organization presidents were contacted and asked to disseminate a recruitment E-mail. Flyers advertising the study were also posted in academic and frequently visited buildings on the Central University campus. Finally, a snowball sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) strategy was used. Students participating in the study were asked to recruit peers who were eligible based on the study’s criteria.

**Data Collection and Participants**

Upon arriving to participate in the study, students completed a demographic questionnaire, which allowed the research team to collect information on academics (e.g., major, high school GPA), family background (e.g., parents’ countries of origin, parents’ education and occupation), residency status, engagement in work and out-of-class activities, and country of origin. There were no open-ended questions; all questions were multiple choice or required specific fill-in-the-blank responses (i.e., place of birth). In addition to confirming eligibility, the questionnaire allowed the researchers to gather demographic information and to determine how participants self-identified. It revealed that of the 23 participants (18 women, 5 men), 7 students were first-generation immigrants (born abroad) and 16 were second-generation students (born in the United States, parents born abroad). Students represented a wide range of countries, including Chad, Haiti, Jamaica, Nigeria, St. Vincent, and Zambia (see Table 1 for detailed participant demographic information).

Although all of the participants had at least one parent who had completed “some college,” nine students were classified as first-generation college students (neither parent had completed a college degree). The median family income for the sample was between $50,000 and 74,999 per year, with 17.4% \((n = 4)\) of students reporting family incomes below $40,000 and 8.6% \((n = 2)\) above $100,000.

Information in the questionnaire also provided the interviewers with points to follow-up on or clarify during the subsequent one-on-one semi-structured (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) interview. All members of the research team (one faculty member, four graduate students, and one undergraduate student) had an opportunity to conduct at least one interview after completing training and discussing the protocol and data collection procedure with the supervising faculty member. All interviews were audio-recorded for transcription. To ensure confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms. Interviews lasted between 60 and 120 min, depending largely on the participant’s comfort with the conversation and level of disclosure. The interview protocol was designed to capture students’ cultural, familial, and educational experiences. Questions addressed students’ childhood and adolescent experiences, journeys to higher education, perceived cultural influences on their educational experiences, and students’ career goals and aspirations.

**Data Analyses**

The data collected during the interviews were the focus of analysis. After each interview, team members completed memos to capture immediate thoughts and reactions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). These memos were used as a form of data and also served as an early step in the data analysis process to make meaning of the similarities and differences across student narratives. Further, interview transcripts were reviewed and compared to audio files to identify and correct any errors.

Subsequently, data were organized through a systematic coding process. Considering that a re-
search team completed this study and our desire was to examine data through the lens of established theory, the qualitative analytic strategy was developed based on methods used in team-based studies conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (see MacQueen et al., 1998 for details). First, one research team member developed deductive codes that were based on the interview protocol, Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model of college choice, and various interpretations of habitus. A list of inductive codes was developed by another team member on the basis of emerging themes identified through close reviews of students’ narratives and analytic memos. A preliminary definition, rules for usage, and an example were developed for each code. Two members of the research team held an initial meeting to combine the inductive and deductive codes into one comprehensive codebook. Each code was discussed, eliminating duplications, revising definitions, and adding codes to capture missed phenomena.

Members of the research team were then assigned a subset of the codebook to apply to all of the interviews in the dataset, increasing the likelihood of consistent application of codes and making the coding process more manageable (MacQueen et al., 1998). Coders were trained to include the context of the statements rather than going line by line to avoid misinterpretation due to fragmenting (Burla et al., 2008). After coding was completed using ATLAS.ti software, data were sorted by codes and clustered into themes to determine patterns and connections to the conceptual framework. The research team discussed evolving narratives using quotations of data to support interpretations and emerging themes.

### Ensuring Trustworthiness

The researchers acknowledge their identities and how they may intersect with the study and shape our perceptions of students’ narratives. The research team included one faculty member and five students; the faculty member and three of the students identify as either first- or second-generation immigrants. The faculty member and four of the students also identify as Black or African American. Finally, three research team

### Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Academic year</th>
<th>Immigrant generation status</th>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>High school GPA</th>
<th>First-generation college?</th>
<th>Estimated income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>$20,000–$29,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brittany</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>$30,000–$39,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christina</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Zambia</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>$75,000–$99,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daphne</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Haiti</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>$30,000–$39,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earl</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Cameroon</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francine</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Haiti</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>$40,000–$49,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gayle</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>$40,000–$49,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harold</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>St. Vincent</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>$75,000–$99,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabelle</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>$100,000–$150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie</td>
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<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>3.91</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>$50,000–$74,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayla</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Liberia</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>$75,000–$99,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>3.4</td>
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<td>$30,000–$39,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>St. Vincent</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>$40,000–$49,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nester</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Sierra Leone &amp; Nigeria</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>$100,000–$150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olive</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>$75,000–$99,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>$75,000–$99,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quinn</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Jamaica</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>$75,000–$99,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roberta</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Haiti</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>$75,000–$99,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stacy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>$75,000–$99,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiffany</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Eritrea</td>
<td>3.86</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>$10,000–$19,999</td>
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<tr>
<td>Umar</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Chad</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>$75,000–$99,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vivian</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>3.5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wayne</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>3.1</td>
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<td>$50,000–$74,999</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. M = male, F = female.
members (the faculty member and two students) identify specifically as Black immigrants.

Although shared identity may facilitate rapport-building with participants, it also shapes one’s worldview and interpretation of participants’ narratives (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Thus, several steps were taken by the research team to enhance the validity of our findings. First, the research team used a rigorous multistep strategy to construct and validate the consistent use of the codebook. We followed the feedback loop method described by MacQueen and colleagues (1998) that directs researchers to test and refine the codebook by beginning with lead developers and including steps for reviews by the team. Reliability checks were conducted to reexamine or refine codes as well as to create new ones where needed (Weston et al., 2001). Further, the researchers were mindful of establishing a shared perception of a phenomenon among coders, or interpretive validity (Maxwell, 2005). Members of the research team were trained to ensure interpretations of codes and data were consistent across the group.

Efforts to validate data were also a part of the analysis process. Participants’ narratives were triangulated with other forms of data to enhance validity. Collecting demographic information via a brief questionnaire provided opportunities for the research team to confirm participants’ narratives. For example, students recorded their parents’ educational backgrounds and income on the questionnaire, and they shared how socioeconomic resources and educational background shaped their childhood (and at times current) educational experiences during the interviews. The researchers could consider these multiple data points to determine alignment and consistency in the narratives. Further, members of the research team were mindful of recognizing the negative or discrepant evidence, engaging in discussions regarding themes emerging from the data and offering data-based evidence to support interpretations.

Limitations

Although using rigorous qualitative methods enhances confidence in our results, there are limitations of this study that must be acknowledged. Perhaps most importantly is that the sample does not include Black immigrants who do not attend college. Thus, it is unclear whether these findings are true or consistent for Black immigrants of similar age and background who do not enter postsecondary education. Additionally, this study does not compare the habitus or college-choice process of Black immigrants to African Americans or any other student group. The goal of this study is to gain a better understanding of the experiences of Black immigrants; however, we recognize the value of comparing and contrasting the experiences of immigrant and native Blacks. We recommend that researchers conduct further work in this area, and we are in the process of doing such work.

Findings

Although it is challenging to identify clear distinctions among many of these concepts, the findings below attempt to distinguish between various aspects of habitus and the ways in which Black immigrant students engaged in the college-choice process. First, the ways in which participants described their habitus are presented, noting how the overall value they and their families placed on education influenced the ways in which they engaged in the various stages of the college-choice process (predisposition, search, and choice). The following sections highlight the unique ways in which students’ family resources, cultural capital, and culture shape their worldview and beliefs about education as well as how they influence the decisions Black immigrant students make about whether to attend college, institutions to consider, and where to ultimately enroll.

Habitus

Education and its importance was central to the habitus of first- and second-generation Black immigrants participating in our study. In the minds of respondents, success was at least partially defined by one’s level of educational attainment. Our participants uniformly placed high value on education, noting that it had been emphasized throughout their lives as critical to both their success, as well as the ultimate success of their families. For example, Stacy, who lived in Nigeria until she was 10, tightly links her commitment to education to her desire to support her family:
I think it’s cultural... education in Africa, in Nigeria, is very important... It’s like, to me, it’s a form of power, because like you have to work hard to get it... So like when people have the opportunity to have an education in Nigeria or any other parts of any other country in Africa, it’s a privilege... at the end of the day, most likely you’re going to get a good job, which most likely you’re going to get paid more, which most likely you’re going to use some of that money to help your family.

Stacy perceives success as a family accomplishment rather than an individual outcome. The value she places on education is driven by the motivation imparted by family and a duty to the collective family unit. Tiffany, a second-generation immigrant from Eritrea, also described how family connections and responsibilities encouraged her motivation toward a college education:

... if you can come out of this country and, you know, have a good education, have a good job, provide for your family, that’s like the ultimate dream... when you do get a job here in the U.S., you still have to take care of family back home.

Tiffany’s comments reveal the depth of commitment expected from members of her family. She acknowledges her responsibility for supporting immediate and extended family members, with everyone committed to getting “the highest education possible” to provide resources to the family.

This overall emphasis on and commitment to education translated into students’ predisposition to attend college. Narratives suggest that most participants did not have college aspirations; they had college expectations. College was viewed as a requirement and a part of their future from a very young age. Linda, who was born in the United States but raised in Jamaica, recounted that she thought “Oh, of course I’m going to college,” even when she was very young. When asked when she knew that she would be going to college, Christina, who was born in Zambia, noted, “Oh, I always knew.”

Wayne, a second-generation student whose parents were from Nigeria, explained it was “never an option to not go to college,” acknowledging that even as a young child he was thinking about his postsecondary options.

An underlying theme in this emphasis on education was the importance several participants placed on prestige. Although emphasizing the importance of being educated, students acknowledged that it was even more valuable to attend or be associated with institutions that were perceived as elite or prestigious. Patricia, a second-generation immigrant from Nigeria, described an experience she had at 6 years of age that illustrates the importance placed on prestige in her family. When asked about school, Patricia told one of her grandmother’s White coworkers that she did not like it very much. Patricia’s grandmother’s response highlights the hopes and expectations generally held for our participants to attend a “good” college:

I got yelled at when I went home [after] telling this White person that I didn’t like school, [my grandmother said] to tell people I wanted to go to Harvard. “Why don’t you want to go to Harvard? Do you want to go to Princeton? Why can’t you go to Princeton?” And I thought, I don’t know. I had heard of Yale, Harvard, Princeton, and I hadn’t heard of any other school... So, I mean, I think there’s this kind of... like show-off sort of thing, like showing your children are very smart and educated and going somewhere.

Patricia’s narrative speaks to the larger desires of parents and family members to see their children go to prestigious institutions, which would reflect well on the whole family. Patricia’s grandmother did not only want her to say that she was going to college; her grandmother valued Ivy League institutions with prestigious names and high recognition.

Although it certainly would be inaccurate to say that participants only applied to schools that could be considered “prestigious,” the participants did appear to place value on making sure institutions others would consider as elite were part of their choice set, demonstrating the influence of this emphasis on prestige on the search stage of the college-choice process. Although many students explored opportunities at less-competitive schools that were in close proximity to their hometowns, most were also sure to closely examine opportunities at elite and selective schools such as Brown, Cornell, Dartmouth, and the University of California—Berkeley. For those who mentioned an interest in historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), they considered institutions such as Howard, Hampton, Spelman, and Morehouse— institutions that are private and are significantly more selective than many other HBCUs that have open-access admissions (Griffin & Hurtado, 2010). Interest expressed in these specific HBCUs could also be perceived as an indication...
of an interest in colleges that are considered more elite or prestigious.

Prestige also influenced how students engaged in the final stage of the college-choice process, institutional choice, determining where they would apply and enroll. Edith, a first-generation immigrant from Cameroon, highlights the connection between prestige and institutional choice, noting that her father was especially interested in her applying to and attending a school with a strong reputation. Stacy, a first-generation immigrant from Nigeria, discusses the role of institutional prestige in ultimately deciding to which institutions she would ultimately apply, highlighting the importance of attending an elite school for herself and her parents:

Yeah, like I applied to competitive schools . . . I knew I wanted to go to a good school. So I was looking at the Ivy Leagues. My dad was like, “Apply to Harvard.” I applied to U. Penn. U. Penn was my dream school. I wanted to go to U. Penn so bad, because I . . . I went to a top high school, I wanted to go to a . . . top college. I wanted to continue that.

Thus, although Stacy applied to a wide array of institutions, she was particularly interested in applying to and attending a “good school” to continue the legacy she had started by being a good student at a good high school.

Financial Resources

There was a great deal of socioeconomic diversity in our sample. Nineteen students reported family incomes that exceeded $50,000 a year, and four students had family incomes that were less than $40,000 a year. It is interesting to note that there were no significant differences in the reported family incomes between participants who were first- and second-generation immigrants.

More so than their current socioeconomic conditions, students spoke of the influence of financial resources on their habitus in a historical sense. Several participants described the jobs that their parents held in their home countries before immigrating to the United States, noting that their degrees and professional status did not necessarily translate to socioeconomic stability in the United States. For example, Christina’s family, originally from Zambia, immigrated to the United States when she was in the fourth grade. While in Africa, the family lived a comfortable lifestyle because her father’s family was very wealthy. Her father (who is now deceased) had a master’s degree, but when they moved to the United States Christina shared “he had to find a new job, and it’s hard for immigrants to find new jobs, even with the credentials that they have. But my Mom was able to establish a job, so he ended up being like a stay-at-home father.” This change had clear financial implications, and Christina’s family did not have the same level of socioeconomic status in the United States that they had enjoyed in the past.

Kayla’s experiences as her family transitioned to the United States were similar to Christina’s. Kayla was born in Liberia but left the country when she was quite young because of the civil war. Her father moved to the United States before the rest of her family, and although she does not remember their life in Liberia, she described the shift in her family’s affluence on the basis of what she was told about their old life:

Before the war my Dad was the Army Cultural Minister in Liberia, so he was pretty wealthy. And he loves education . . . . he would always like take his brother’s kids or somebody, and tell them to come live in his house, and send them to school or things like that . . . . When I see pictures of it [the house], it was really huge. And I’m just like, “Dang, I missed out” . . . . So when he came here, his degree doesn’t transfer to the United States, so he started like doing work like caregiving and stuff. Like taking care of sick people, so that’s what he’s doing now.

Thus, much like Christina, Kayla’s family was not able to have the same level of financial stability in the United States as in their home country. Students were quite aware of the financial resources within their families, which would ultimately shape their perceptions of what they could afford and the feasibility of their academic plans.

The influence of financial resources was particularly salient as students made choices about where they would ultimately enroll in college, or the institutional choice phase of the college-choice process. Although institutional prestige may play a significant part in defining a choice set, finances often superseded prestige when it came to institutional choice. For example, although Brittany, a second-generation immigrant from Jamaica, knew that Brown was an Ivy League school and thought “Ivy Leagues are great,” the cost of attending weighed heavily, especially when she was offered a full scholarship at Central:
I was really excited [about attending Brown], I really was. And then I got this scholarship to [Central University] and I’m like, “Oh, my goodness, how am I going to give up a full ride?” . . . it crushed my heart to give up, you know . . . I just couldn’t put my Mom through that, you know, the loans and all that other stuff.

For Brittany, the decision to forgo an Ivy League education was centered around cost. Essential to her decision-making process was input from her mother and grandmother, who told her “You’re going to regret taking out loans and stuff like that.” For Brittany, attending Central was more financially responsible and would keep her out of debt, noting that Central was still “a good school” and therefore an acceptable choice.

For Tiffany and her Eritrean parents, the amount of aid received was one of the biggest factors in the choice process. She shared that her family income was between $75,000 and $99,000 per year, but she still addressed her need for financial aid to attend college and the role it played in making the final decisions between institutions: “I did the FAFSA to see which school would give me the most aid, and my dad kind of gave me this, ‘Well, if Central University, or whoever out of state, gives you the most aid, then that’s fine.’” Thus, the prestige of Central was not going to be enough to guarantee that Tiffany would ultimately enroll; she and her family were very mindful of financial aid and which institution would be the most affordable.

Whereas Tiffany’s parents were mindful of the cost of college, other parents were more financially permissive. They told their children to disregard the cost of college, but students were satisfied with Central because it allowed them to not financially burden their parents and it was still an institution with a good reputation. For example, although her mother offered to pay for her education, Kayla described the importance of scholarships and not being an additional burden on her family as high on her list of priorities in her choice of an institution. Kayla’s aversion to loans nearly led her to enroll at an institution other than Central University, although her major (engineering) was not offered at that campus. Thus, although prestige remains an important consideration, for some it was secondary to the amount of aid received and the cost of education.

Cultural Capital

Participants’ parents were repeatedly described as emphasizing the importance of education with their children, and they took many steps to ensure that their children were taking full advantage of every opportunity. Parents were willing to move to new neighborhoods, send their children to live with relatives, or enroll their children in magnet or college preparatory schools that required 2-hour long commutes to provide their children access to better educational opportunities.

The development of an early predisposition to attend college appeared to be driven by the cultural capital of students’ parents and families. Parents were vocal advocates for education, and this often included specific encouragement to attend college. Mary noted that her mother and her mother’s family, who were immigrants from St. Vincent, spoke to her about attending college “from very early . . . that was pushed. Push, push, from the time that I could talk.” Daphne, whose mother was from Haiti, described how her parents encouraged her to voice her intentions to attend college early:

I think like they definitely pushed me to go to college, even when I was younger. Like my Mom would always help me with my homework and be like, “You have to get good grades to go to college.” And like they always said, like, “Go to college so you can do better than I did. And so you can have more stuff.” And like be happy. Well not be happier, but get what you want, to be able to buy what you want.

Jackie, a second-generation immigrant who describes herself as “100% Jamaican,” also talked about the ways in which her family encouraged her to attend college. Again, her mother drove this conversation, and Jackie described her mother as “very big on education. Very, very big.” She went on to describe the messages she received from her mother throughout her education:

. . . I remember the first time she said, like “If you don’t graduate high school you’re not going to get a good job.” So as you’re going through high school, “In a couple years, if you don’t graduate college you’re not going to get a job.” Going through, “If you don’t have a Master’s degree, you’re not going to get a job.” She’s just keeps going and going and going . . . It’s always that push. She’s like “You just have to do better than me.” She was like, “I don’t want to see you on the street suffering . . .” So she tries.
Thus, her mother’s desire to see her have access to opportunity in some ways drove Jackie to set her intentions to attend college. This was generally consistent with a larger trend in the data. Students regularly credited their parents with pushing them to commit to college as a certain way to social mobility, achieving more than their parents were able to achieve.

It is interesting to note that the intense value that parents’ placed on a college education did not vary based on their affluence. For example, on the basis of students’ narratives, parents who had completed doctoral degrees in the United States seemed equally likely to push their children and discuss the importance of education as those who were home care workers or struggling financially. A new theoretical concept began to emerge, highlighting the disconnect among parents’ educational attainment, affluence, and focus on higher education among students in our sample. We refer to this emergent phenomenon as displaced capital. This capital becomes displaced when parents are not able to achieve the same return on investment for their education as those educated here. Although it does not necessarily translate to financial assets in the United States, the previous status and achievements of parents allows them to encourage their children and stress the value of education. Thus, two things remained quite salient for students and their families despite socioeconomic background and appeared to shape students’ habitus: the cultural memory of who their parents were in their respective home countries (important, wealthy, elite, educated) and their parents’ intense value of education.

Displaced capital can be clearly seen when revisiting Christina’s narrative. Although they were less financially stable in the United States, Christina’s parents continued to emphasize the importance of education and learning, and she described the way her parents taught her outside of her classes at school:

“My mom had bought me a red vowel book, to teach me how to enunciate the rules of using ‘i’ and ‘c’ and all that. And then we used to talk about the countries in Africa, their capitals. We talked about many things . . . and then my Dad taught me, like, long division, cause he was a math person. He loved math, that’s why I went into business, I guess. So I knew how to like multiply fractions and long division in first grade.”

Thus, in the face of financial challenges and an economically difficult transition to the United States, Christina’s father and others maintained the value they placed on higher education and tried to prepare their children to be academically successful.

**Culture**

It is interesting to note that participants repeatedly made connections between their parents’ demands and their cultural background, noting that immigrant parents have high expectations about college attendance that, in their minds, African American parents do not enforce. For example, Umar, who is a first-year student from Chad, perceived himself as different from his African American friends because his parents were very strict about academics. Simply stated, Kayla shared, “well, when you have African parents, you’re going to college,” speaking of a larger emphasis she perceived among immigrant parents and how their intentions translated into student aspirations and predisposition to enroll in college. Kayla also described the emphasis that her parents, and African parents more generally, placed on education. Although getting good grades “was never cool” with her peers, her parents drove her to do better in ways different from what she perceived in African American communities:

“You’re not going to get bad grades, you’re not going to be able to slack off. And you know, that’s kind of the problem that I see in a lot of African American communities is that there isn’t that drive to be better. . . . Getting good grades has never been cool. But it was like in my house that was a given, it was a must.

Thus, for several students in our sample, strong grades that would make students eligible for college was the only acceptable option, although it was not necessarily a way to be more popular at school or within one’s peer group. According to Isabelle, a junior who is a second-generation immigrant, her parents specifically used her cultural background to motivate her commitment to academics. Her parents told her:

“You’re not just African American. You are African, you are of Nigerian descent, so you must represent, you must prove to, not just yourself, the people of your ethnic background that . . . that you grew up in a Nigerian home.” You know, “Yes we did raise you here. We did not take you back to Nigeria to learn anymore, cause we knew you are capable of doing well here in the United States. So we need you to prove that, we need you to prove to us that we did not make a mistake.”
Thus, for Isabelle and others, doing well in school was a representation of being raised in a “Nigerian home” and a positive, and necessary, indicator that her parents did not make a mistake bringing her to the United States to be educated. According to Isabelle’s parents, the Nigerian background comes with the pressure of expectation and responsibility to her family, country, and continent.

Discussion

Recent research has identified increases in the number of Black immigrant students on college campuses, suggesting that they are highly represented within the Black college-going community (e.g., Bennett & Lutz, 2009; Kent, 2007; Massey et al., 2007). However, little research has interrogated how Black immigrants perceive and engage in choices about college-going. Using a conceptual framework integrating Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) college-choice model and habitus, this study explores the college-choice process for Black immigrant students. This study specifically examines the forces that shape the habitus, or worldview, of a group of Black immigrant students and how habitus in turn influences the ways in which students think about whether they will attend college (predisposition), how they weigh their college options (search), and how they make decisions about where they will apply and enroll (institutional choice).

For participants in this study, their “system[s] of outlooks and beliefs” (McDonough, 1994, p. 430) established a set of values and expectations: they expected they would attend college from a young age and would ultimately attend a prestigious institution. Valuing and increasing one’s education is often seen as the means to attaining higher levels of success and is consistent with research suggesting that higher education is key to social mobility (Baum & Ma, 2007). It is interesting to note that habitus went beyond including a high value for education; the findings of this study suggest that habitus is intimately intertwined with Black immigrant students’ clear intentions, or predisposition, to attend college. In fact, a commitment to college-going appears to be a fundamental component of participants’ worldviews. Black immigrant students’ narratives suggest that they did not just aspire to go to college, they expected to attend college as part of a family legacy that highly valued education.

Further, college attendance was not simply a means of individual social mobility; it was a way to provide for and support one’s family. This finding appears consistent with the broader literature on immigrant students and may be connected to this dimension of students’ identities. Several studies show that family obligation is a distinctive feature of immigrant families and a motivator for adolescents (Fuligni, Alvarez, Bachman, & Ruble, 2005). Fuligni (1998) suggests that family obligation is one reason immigrant students do better than predicted considering their challenging circumstances. The literature on migration theory also provides a useful framework to consider how students seem to integrate the importance of supporting family in the college-choice process. Stark and Bloom (1985) discuss the economics of labor migration theory, which moves beyond the concept of rational choice to decision-making as a collective strategy households engage in to minimize risk. According to Stark and Bloom, families considering migration view it as a strategy not exclusive to the individual, but a decision potentially beneficial or harmful to the family unit. Immigrant parents often leave homes, family, comforts, and prestigious jobs to provide better opportunities for their children (Kent, 2007; Stark & Bloom, 1985). Knowledge of this choice may translate to how students view the college search process, thus leading them to perceive their education not just as a private good to support their own lives and needs, but as something of value to and beneficial for their entire family.

Students’ broader socioidentities as immigrants also seemed to shape their habitus and commitment to obtaining a college education. Their narratives suggest that their immigration to the United States was far from accidental; leaving one’s home country was based in the educational opportunities available in the United States. Because there is a clear reason for choosing migration, their purpose, values, and expectations are well defined. Ogbu’s (1994) cultural-ecological theory posits that immigrants, especially in the first generation, develop a positive dual frame of reference as they compare opportunities in the United States to the situation “back home.” Understanding that education does not come as easily and is not as accessible in other countries, our participants described education as a privilege. Because ev-
eryone does not perceive access to high levels of education as universal or attainable, education is viewed as power among many of our participants—a status indicator as well as an indication of autonomy.

In addition to their immigrant status driving their and their parents’ commitment to education, cultural background and identity may have an additional or distinct influence on how students see the world and subsequently engage in the college-choice process. Although initially conceptualized as a function of one’s class standing (Bourdieu, 1977), the findings of this study suggest cultural background can also shape students’ habitus around education and college-going in significant ways. Culture is not simply an abstract representation of where students’ families were from; rather, findings of this study suggest that culture is lived and present in our participants’ lives as a series of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors associated with those who share the same ethnic background.

For many of our participants, habitus was shaped explicitly by their ethnic background: Being a good Nigerian or Haitian or Jamaican meant valuing education, having high expectations, and attending a good college. Parents fostered appropriate behavior by encouraging, and in many cases demanding, commitment to academic achievement. These findings are aligned with much of the literature that speaks of the high expectations of immigrant parents and their value on education (Keller & Harker Tillman, 2008; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Song & Glick, 2004; Vernez & Abrahamse, 1996).

However, the findings of this study are discerning in articulating parents’ reminders to students that achievement was in fact a part of their cultural identity and not necessarily part of being an immigrant or simply a way to promote the success and well-being of the family. Students appeared to internalize these messages, describing their cultural and ethnic backgrounds as sources of motivation and pride. Although there certainly could be other identities that students draw upon to motivate their interest in college (e.g., religion, class status, gender), participants in this study continually returned to the importance of their nationality and culture in shaping their commitment to a college education. Thus, although their narratives may be consistent with the larger literature on immigrants, participants seemed to distinguish their commitment to college as being uniquely connected to their cultural values or ethnic background.

The findings of this study also complicate our understanding of the potential differences and similarities between how Black immigrant and Black native students approach college choice. Previous work suggests that high levels of academic motivation and a commitment to education are not unique to Black immigrants. Differences in the values, attitudes, and behaviors of Black immigrants in particular have been examined based on reward systems, socialization, and educational mobility (Model, 2008). However, Model found no empirical evidence to support arguments that Black immigrants possessed a “better” culture or value system. According to Massey and colleagues (2007), much of the success Black immigrants have experienced in the college admissions process relative to their Black American peers is more closely related to their parents’ affluence and level of academic preparation rather than any preference for Black immigrants or culturally based value systems. In addition, previous research suggests that many Black college students have enduring commitments to their educational careers, set high expectations for themselves and their performance, and see their racial background as a source of motivation (e.g., Dorsey & Jackson, 1995; Freeman, 1999; Fries-Britt, 1998; Griffin, 2006).

Although this study does not explicitly compare the two groups and cannot come to any definite conclusions about whether and how the process may differ, it does provide deeper insight into how Black immigrants think of themselves culturally and academically and how this translates to college choice. For example, the findings of this study suggest that for Black immigrants, perhaps the indoctrination linking culture and academic success has successfully created an expectation of academic cultural distinction. Rather than referencing succeeding to disprove racial stereotypes, as found in studies of Black high achievers by Griffin (2006) and Fries-Britt (1998), Black immigrant students participating in this study more often link achievement to their ethnic identities and see it as a part of establishing membership in their respective ethnic communities. Whether and how habitus generally, and its influence on the college-choice process specifically, differs for Black immigrant and native students is an area
ripe for further inquiry and should be explored in future research.

In addition to contributing to understandings of the Black immigrant students and habitus, this study sheds light on how habitus is translated to the college-choice process. Somewhat distinctive from past research that demonstrates the power of cultural capital in providing access to information and facilitating navigation of the entire college-choice process (McDonough, 1997; Perna, 2000), data suggest Black immigrant parents are most likely to engage in various behaviors that largely relate to predisposition to attend college. Contrary to previous research (see Perna, 2006 for a review), financial resources played less of a role in shaping students’ predispositions in attending college. Although there are notable within-group differences that are based on nation of origin (Erisman & Looney, 2007), Black immigrants (particularly from Africa) are more likely to be highly educated, report higher incomes, and less likely to live in poverty (Kent, 2007). However, it is also important to note that the degrees that many Black immigrants have earned in other countries do not necessarily translate to the same level of professional success in the United States (Kent, 2007). Some participants’ narratives are consistent with this experience, indicating the decline in their parents’ professional and socioeconomic status after moving to the United States. Cultural memory and the value parents placed on education were clearly translated to their children in a newly articulated phenomenon we introduce and refer to as displaced capital. Whereas some parents assured their children they would pay regardless of the cost, others encouraged their children to be mindful of the amount of debt they would incur by attending an expensive institution. Rather, parents advised students on the “big picture” issues of college choice, focusing more on fostering their child’s desire to attend college and encouraging proper academic preparation, but less on the specific logistics of choosing from among various institutions or the intricacies of applying to college. In many ways this finding is consistent with research on parental involvement in the college preparatory and choice process for low-income and first-generation college students (Bowen et al., 2005; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Perna, 2006). However, this finding is important in that Black immigrants may not necessarily appear to be from low-income backgrounds or the first in their families to attend college. Although cultural capital and parental expectations are important, they do not always translate to a detailed knowledge of the intricacies of the college-choice process; immigrants may have less familiarity with the U.S. system of higher education and fewer resources to support the costs of attendance. Thus, increasing access to knowledge about different institutions and the important factors to consider as students engage in the search and choice processes could enable students to make better choices that meet their specific needs and interests.

The financial resources to which students had access also appeared to influence the final stage of the college-choice process—institutional choice. Many have written about the influence of cost on college choice, suggesting that expensive price tags dissuade students from attending college generally (e.g., Perna, 2006; Perna & Titus, 2004; Singell, 2001; St. John, 2000; Wilcox, 1991) and elite colleges specifically (Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin, 2005; Carnevale & Rose, 2004). It is interesting to note that participants did not describe the cost of college as having an influence during the predisposition or search phase; however, this should be explored in future studies in which students who do not attend college are included in the sample. Rather, participants emphasized the role of finances in relation to institutional choice.

Although there was variation among students, some strongly considered the cost of college when choosing where they would matriculate. Whereas some parents assured their children they would pay regardless of the cost, others encouraged their children to be mindful of the amount of debt they would incur by attending an expensive institution. Although many of the parents were educated, they were
not high-income earners. In many cases we observed efforts to balance prestige with affordability, with students choosing to attend schools that were “good enough,” highlighting the importance of leaving college with as little debt as possible. This finding reminds us that parents’ educational level is not necessarily synonymous with income, although parents’ education is often used as a proxy measure of socioeconomic status. Our findings also reinforce the importance of intentional efforts to inform students and their families about financial aid opportunities, particularly those who may appear to have a solid foundation of cultural capital.

Conclusion

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, there are nearly 6 million Black immigrants in the United States. As this population grows, an understanding of the how students and families engage in the higher education system generally, and the college search process specifically, is critical for group success. This study shows how Black students’ cultural and immigrant backgrounds may shape their views of education and how they engage in the system and choose colleges accordingly. This study affirms the commitment of many immigrants to obtaining higher education for themselves and their children, often motivating their relocation to the United States. Our participants also conveyed the importance of culture (through historical and familial background and cultural capital) in forming embedded expectations. Their habitus shaped notions about educational choices and options, all focused toward one objective: attending college. A college education was viewed as a critical and necessary component of social mobility for themselves and their families. Participants soon internalized the expectations of academic success in their own educational aspirations and choices.

Further research is needed to detail students’ engagement in this process. For example, our study focuses on the narratives of Black immigrants who have been able to find the financial resources to attend college, but what about those who cannot? Financial resources also certainly shaped how students chose the institution they would ultimately attend, expressing reluctance to burden themselves or their families with heavy loan burdens. Although participants described a habitus that fostered high expectations of college attendance, their limited financial resources affected where they were able to matriculate and could ultimately affect whether they graduate from college. Thus, we highlight the need for policy-makers to continue to consider ways to make college financially accessible generally, but particularly for students from immigrant backgrounds whose parents can encourage their desire to attend college but cannot offer financial support.

Furthermore, recent discussions about immigrants and access to higher education have largely centered on efforts to enhance (or limit) opportunities for those who do not have U.S. citizenship. As lawmakers and citizens debate who should and should not be eligible for federal financial aid and programs that promote access to higher education, this paper provides some insight into how these programs influence the college-going decisions of Black immigrants. Although most of the students participating in this study were U.S. citizens, the findings certainly have implications for this discourse. They also show the importance of understanding the challenges faced by these students and creating the support mechanisms that can benefit all students. With such a large number of Black immigrants and even more immigrants in general entering the U.S educational system, this is certainly a worthy avenue of pursuit.

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