

Low SES White Males and College Participation and Success
(Excerpt from dissertation titled, Factors Affecting Low SES White Males Persistence to Graduation)

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The current literature contends that specifically among low socioeconomic status (SES) students, whites graduate at higher rates than racial/ethnic minority students (Haycock, 2006), women represent the majority of low SES graduates (King, 2006), and those from high SES backgrounds are the largest share of the national white male graduating cohort (Sax, 2008). Rarely, however, are SES, race, and gender analyzed simultaneously in this body of research, especially as it concerns the persistence to graduation trends of low SES White males. Despite this oversight, King (2006) notes that low SES males of all racial demographics face significant challenges in their efforts to graduate. Consequently, national data reveal a strong relationship between White males' SES and college success. Based on simple cross-tabs using BPS: 96/01 data, 40.6 percent of low SES White males will leave school without a degree never to return. While this percentage is slightly lower than their Black (47.3) and Latino (45.2) low SES male peers, it is nearly twice the percentage of low SES Asian males (22.3) and nearly tripled that of their high SES White male counterparts (66).

Several scholars have qualitatively surveyed and examined the educational experiences of low SES White males (Archer, Pratt, & Phillips 2001; Freie, 2007; MacLeod, 2009; Quinn et al., 2006; Weis, 1990; 2004; Willis, 1977). Though typically based on the experiences of urban men and men from the United Kingdom (UK), this research does share consistent themes with studies of rural low SES men and studies of American low SES White males (Whiting, 1999). The themes consistent across studies of low SES White males and schooling include school as a site of lowered expectations, overtly policed behavior, curriculum tracking, and

persistent disengagement. Though Morris (2005) notes that Whiteness is generally privileged in secondary and postsecondary education, when coupled with low SES, White teachers, specifically, tend to view these low SES Whites as particularly unexceptional, even aberrant and backwards. Based on the research on low SES White men and schooling, low SES White males' experience in education follows a rather predictable pattern of marginalization, resistance, and failure.

In the only study specifically dedicated to low SES males and their attitudes towards postsecondary education participation, Archer et al. (2002) use discussion group data from 64 males from working-class and ethnically diverse backgrounds to examine how definitions of masculinity lead to self exclusion from postsecondary education. Using data from the University of North London's Social Class and Widening Participation in Higher Education Project, Archer et al. (2001) conducted multiple focus groups organized around student decisions about their education and their constructions of participation or non-participation in higher education. Participants were from North and East London and ranged in ages 16 to 30, and were equally represented across race/ethnicity. Researchers found that the non participation of low SES White males in postsecondary education is a direct result of the males' perceived incompatibility of schooling and notions of working-class masculinity. Based on their extensive work with young low SES White males, these researchers consistently found that low SES White men conceptualized college attendance as a largely middle-class and anti-masculine endeavor. Within this framework, low SES masculinity is marked by physical prowess, endurance, and mechanical expertise, traits constructed in direct opposition to managerial masculinities that are deemed soft and effeminate (Leach, 1993; Pyke 1996; Willis, 1977). Coupled with the traditional expectation of men as providers for the domestic household, work, specifically physical labor, and masculinity become fused (Leach, 1993). Consequently, it is here that education,

especially postsecondary education, is inextricably linked with the masculinity of middle- and upper-class males.

In addition, the males in Archer et al.'s (2001) study appear to lack any role models from similar class origins who were successful in higher education, and this lack of success among their social class contemporaries appears to have leveled the aspirations of the low SES men in the study. Furthermore, they found that low SES White males perceived higher education as too difficult and with little to no guarantees for success. This finding is also consistent with MacLeod's (2009) work with low SES White males. The males in Archer et al.'s research note that participation in higher education was a frightening proposition given risk of loans and other related debt, and that early entry into manual labor provided immediate money. Lastly, while not all participants in the study had entirely ruled out enrolling in college, many simply felt that as a result of their social class circumstance non participation was a choice that had been made for them.

Overall, upon realizing that they are not well positioned to assume one of the limited spaces in the social, economic, and political class hierarchy, low SES males--rather than trying and potentially failing in their schooling--choose to either not engage or set their expectations for success much lower (Clayton, Hewitt, Gaffney, 2004; MacLeod, 2009). The status inconsistency experienced by low SES males and the sense of emasculation that accompanies school failure results in a rejection of the contemporary US achievement ideology and adherence to an alternate success criterion (Clayton, Hewitt, Gaffney). Despite the privilege often afforded them as a result of their Whiteness and gender, low SES males perceive a sense of powerlessness within the context of school and seek out other ways to assert their masculinity (Barker, 2005). Thus, not only are low SES males structurally marginalized as a result of low expectations and curriculum tracking, but they also construct versions of masculinity that "may prevent them from perceiving participation [in school] as a 'manly' option" (Archer, et al., 2001, p. 434). As noted, low SES White males have traditionally used manual or "blue-collar"

labor as a site to negotiate and perform a unique version of masculinity centered on physical ability and in direct opposition to education (Connell, 1989; Willis, 1977).

It appears that this opposition to school is very much a social group sentiment, as low SES males as a collective may serve as negative influences on one another in persisting to graduation. In their ethnographic study of Black teens at a racially diverse, yet divided, affluent California high school, Ogbu and Davis (2003) sought to understand the barriers to academic achievement and engagement faced by these students. One barrier that the authors detail is the degree to which peer influence undermines academic engagement. In line with Bourdieu's (1987) conceptualization of social capital and peer influence, Ogbu and Davis note that many of the Black teens abandoned or slacked in their academic efforts because they wanted to avoid teasing and accusations that they had abandoned their race. In the same way that Ogbu and Davis' students reported immense pressure to not appear smart to their friends as to avoid being accused of "acting White," both Willis (1997) and MacLeod (2009) note that the low SES White males in their study also resorted to such disengagement as to avoid a similar ostracism based on their class.

Gibson (2005), in her replication and critique of Ogbu and Davis' work, found that these negative peer influences were most prominent in a particular group of underachieving males. This is similar to Harris (2006) and Edwards' (2007) work on masculine identity formation and the role that masculine gender role expectations play in academic aspirations. Harris and Edwards each found that the males in their studies were reluctant to reveal their academic talents and success to male peers for fear that they would be denigrated for their intellectual efforts. Leach (2003) states that this form of masculine solidarity is used by low SES males as a means of coping with the limited prospects they have in the labor hierarchy. Specifically, among low SES males this deference to male peers may be employed as a defense mechanism to garner male peer acceptance and support when they perceive that they have little hope of social mobility and when school has little to offer them

in way of affirming their masculinity (Barker, 2005).

In summary, for low SES White males, entering the labor force stands as a masculine rite of passage, a masculinity marked by provision, caretaking, and production (Leach, 1993). It is in their labor, despite their often low status as hourly wage earners, that low SES males derive their unique sense of masculinity apart from the marginalization of the larger society and the organizational context of school. However, as the US continues its shift to a knowledge- and technology-based economy, marked by rapid deindustrialization and labor union dissolution, education beyond high school will be required to maintain the most basic standard of living (Fine, Weis, Addeleston, & Hall, 1997; Freie, 2007; Weis, 1990; 2004). Overall, what the current research on low SES White males share in common is a basic belief that due to their economic marginalization, low SES White males employ a hyper-masculinized and labor focused sense of self to combat the emasculation they feel in not attaining the power and privilege, both inside and outside school, they feel should be afforded them as White and male. I suggest that despite their privileged status as White and male, their low SES background greatly influences their underrepresentation among postsecondary enrollees and graduates. Consequently, without a postsecondary education in the changing labor market, masculinity as constructed and performed through manual labor may fail to be a viable and sustaining option for low SES White males in the years to come.

Despite the merits of the literature reviewed above, little to no research has been dedicated to examining student success across SES, race, and gender concurrently and more specifically, the factors affecting low SES White males' persistence to graduation. While SES, race, and gender all appear to play a significant, and as theorized here, overlapping, influence on persistence to graduation, it is evident that more research is warranted. Moreover, as research (Freie, 2007; MacLeod, 2009; Weis, 2004) and national data reveal, regardless of race and gender, SES plays an essential role in determining postsecondary success. While race and gender are acknowledged in my dissertation

as having mitigating and perpetuating influence on persistence to graduation when intersecting with SES, little research has been conducted on the complex relationship of these varied identities and their collective influence on student success in college. This is especially true for low SES White males, whose privileges of race and gender are implicitly thought of as having a positive overriding influence on their postsecondary success, above and beyond their SES.

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