

SOCIAL CLASS, PARENTAL ROLE, AND TRACK SELECTION

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Abstract

Whereas the literature on educational inequality extensively illustrates how parents shape children's educational experiences, we know little about parental involvement in track selection – even though tracking is a major determinant of educational inequality. This study investigates the impact of social class on parental roles in selecting the best-paid educational tracks among Indian American students in the US. Focusing on Indian Americans, and the best-paid tracks, we explore social class differences in parental roles in track selection. Data from 71 in-depth interviews of Indian American students majoring in engineering and science tracks, employs grounded theory to explore differences in parental strategies across social classes. Findings indicate that while the overall parental encouragement strategies are similar regardless of social class, the methods employed by affluent and less affluent families differ significantly. Affluent families leverage their resources and networks, whereas less affluent families rely on non-familial resources to support their children's educational aspirations. This is because the best-paid tracks hold different meanings to different classes. This further highlights the complex interplay between social class, parental involvement, and track selection while contributing to understanding the broader implications of educational tracking and parental roles in perpetuating or mitigating social inequalities.

Introduction

In this article, we explore the social class differences in parental roles while selecting the best-paid tracks. Examining the intersection of social class, education, and parental influence within the Indian American community sheds light on social justice and inequality regarding access to services, resources, educational advancement and other opportunities (Lareau 2011). In other words, the role of social class shapes educational career outcomes, which further contribute to the discourse on social justice by how institutional structures and family resources reinforce and perpetuate socioeconomic disparities (i.e., poverty). By prioritizing the Indian American community, we provide a diverse perspective to understand how culture and social capital are mobilized across classes, which provides insight into the interplay of education, social class, and justice itself.

Parental role in educational experiences has been a longstanding topic of research, indicating a strong influence of social class. Affluent parents promote educational experiences of their children by determining appropriate schools (Anderson 2010; Lewis and Diamond 2015), providing financial help (Johnson 2013), protecting and enhancing children's mental and emotional well-being (Fingerman et al. 2012; Johnson 2013), and helping them with their end of college experiences such as graduation, internship, and entry into the labor market (Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen 2018). Contrarily, less affluent parents depend primarily on schools for the educational and career achievements of their children (Lareau 2011). Indeed, social class and parental role have a profound influence on achievement gaps (Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen 2018).

Tracking is a process through which students choose specific fields of interest (Batruch et al. 2019). Scholarship on educational inequality documents a strong association between tracking and easy entrance into gainful employment (Brunello and Checchi, 2007; Stephens et al. 2012). A wealth of literature on parental role on tracking also highlights the importance of social class thereby (Batruch, Autin, and Butera 2017; Croizet et al. 2017; Hamilton 2016). Studies show that students from affluent families are more likely to enter a track as compared to those from less affluent families (Chmielewski, 2014; Goudeau, Autin, and Croizet 2017). Although tracking indicates better job opportunities and higher socio-economic status, certain tracks over others help students obtain the best-paid jobs (Winters 2022). Literature on tracking and parental role suggests two lines of thought (Batruch et al. 2019). The first line focuses on tracking and equality. Tracking refers to specialized education. Whereas the main purpose of education is equality of opportunity for all (Croizet et al. 2017; Hamilton 2016), some tracks offer more lucrative job opportunities than others (Winters 2022). The second line highlights the role of educational structure on tracking delineating how schools and parents reproduce social inequalities (Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen 2018). However, this line

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presents a monolithic view of parental role with regards to class without considering the variations of parenting across communities (Goudeau, Autin, and Croizet 2017; Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen 2018). Hence, there is a limited understanding of parental role in the selection of the best-paid tracks and the influence of social class and community thereby. This understanding is important because selection mechanisms like tracking may hinder socio-economic advancement of poor students aggravating the social class achievement gap (Batruch et al. 2019).

From the lens of parental expectations, selecting best-paid tracks, and social class variance, Indian American students in the USA constitute an interesting context for this study because (a) Indian American parents are known to have high educational expectations from their children (Mathew, Zhai, and Gao 2017; Saran 2016), (b) the Indian Americans in the USA have one of the highest rates of college completion (Pew Research Center 2019), (c) this community is also one of those with the highest rate of entering the best paid tracks, and (d) despite being one of the most successful minority communities in the USA, the rate of poverty is also increasing among the Indian Americans (Indiaspora 2020). We define the best paid-tracks as the engineering as science tracks (hereafter, ESTs) because all the best-paid jobs in the USA are offered to students with EST majors (Winters 2022). Obtaining data from in-depth interviews with 71 Indian American students in ESTs, we pose the question - how does social class and parental role influence the selection of best-paid tracks of the Indian American students? Qualitative data analyses using the grounded theory method (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2019) suggest no class difference in parental strategies in motivating children to enter ESTs. Nevertheless, the mechanisms to implement those strategies differ across affluent and less affluent families. Empirically this research is the first study examining the impact of social class of parents on track selection of Indian American students. The implications of its findings may be compared with those drawing upon the theory of social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) focusing on educational inequality. This study contributes to this theory by revealing the class-based parental strategies in influencing students to select best-paid tracks and joining the debate on how to measure tracking in empirical research.

Review of Literature: Social Class, Parental Role, and Educational Inequality

Consolidating the research on K-12 education, Lareau (2011) proposes the concept of “concerted cultivation” – how privileged parents manage their children’s educational activities, whereas working-class parents depend primarily on schools for the educational accomplishments of their children. These separate parental roles, in turn, perpetuate social class differences (Lareau 2011). Students also gain a greater competitive edge from different parental approaches when schools are supportive of such practices. According to the theory of social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), schools consider the practices of privileged parents to be effective. Empirical studies show that privileged parents succeed in creating an internal stratification in schools that benefits their children over those from less privileged backgrounds in form of special attention of teachers, intense course work, and outside-school opportunities (Anderson 2010; Lewis and Diamond 2015). Thus, students from different class backgrounds “hoard” different levels of opportunities even when they go to the same school (Tyson 2011).

Literature on social class and parental role in education also illustrates the extent of parental engagement in higher education and its consequences on career achievements. For example, according to the notion of “helicopter parenting,” parents pay more attention to older children and their college experiences (Hamilton 2016; Schiffrin et al. 2014). This attention is not only limited to financial assistance (Johnson 2013) but also extends to psychological well-being (Fingerman et al. 2012; Johnson 2013) and various college experiences including graduation (Hamilton 2013; Johnson 2013). Additionally, an understanding of class differentiation in parenting towards the end of college, internship, and transition to a professional career is documented (Hamilton 2016; Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen 2018). Following the tenets of social reproduction theory (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), this literature underpins institutional expectations from parents by describing how institutions “outsource” several responsibilities to parents (Anderson 2010; Lewis and Diamond 2015). Indicating a symbiotic relationship, we also learn privileged parents’ expectations from schools, and how schools fulfil those expectations to fortify social class differences (Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen 2018).

What we do not know yet is the extent of parental role in track selection when children prefer certain tracks over others. Tracking offers an important context to study parental roles because, “selection practices in education, such as tracking, may represent a structural obstacle that contributes to the social class achievement gap” (Batruch et al. 2019:477). Affluent parents not only have access to popular schools for their children, but they could also have a profound influence on children’s track

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selection. Therefore, a knowledge of parental role with regard to social class background and tracking is long overdue (Brunello and Checchi, 2007; Stephens et al. 2012).

Tracking and Social Class

It is well-established that tracking is not just a device to segment students in terms of their educational performance, but also a practice that propagates social class inequalities (Chmielewski, 2014; Goudeau, Autin, and Croizet 2017). An extension of the social reproduction theory (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) suggests that school systems actively contribute to class inequality because they are designed and managed by the upper class. In support of this proposition, studies provide evidence that school settings restrict the entrance of less affluent students into tracks, thereby limiting their success (Batruch, Autin, and Butera 2017; Croizet et al. 2017). Studies on cultural differences also demonstrate how schools promote upper-class standards of track selection, hindering the achievements of students from less privileged families (Stephens et al. 2012). Track-related challenges of less privileged students are often attributed to schools perceiving negative stereotypes against them (Croizet and Millet, 2012; Goudeau and Croizet, 2017). Stereotypes leading to social class comparison could also jeopardize the track selection of less affluent students. For example, an experimental study shows that working-class students are less likely to express their track-related aspirations when those goals are in alignment with those of upper-class students (Croizet et al. 2017; Goudeau and Croizet 2017). This line of research indicates that schools are structured to harbour social class differences in track selection and academic achievements, still very little is known about parental role and track selection. This is despite that fact that upper-class parents primarily control the structures of educational institutions (Hamilton 2016; Schiffrin et al. 2014).

Another line of research in tracking and social class shows how the social class of a student is deeply impacted by their success in countries that practice tracking, rather than those with a comprehensive schooling system (Brunello and Checchi 2007; Chmielewski 2014; Schütz, Ursprung, and Wößmann 2008). These studies initiated a debate on whether tracking should be considered as a binary concept (tracking vs. no tracking) or not (Bol et al. 2014). Even when tracking is measured by the age of first track selection, years of tracking, and number of tracks, success rates of affluent students exceed those of less affluent ones (Van de Werfhorst and Mijs 2010). Additionally, a study operationalizing tracking as vocational vs regular tracking shows a similar achievement gap between affluent and less affluent students (Chmielewski, 2014). Although various operationalizations of tracking are presented in the literature, hardly any attention is paid to specific tracks (Batruch et al. 2019) - even when, being best-paid, certain tracks over others aggravate class differences (Winters 2022). Addressing these gaps in the literature, in this study, we explore social class differences in parental role while selecting the best-paid tracks.

Methodology

Sample and Data Collection

Giddens (1984) suggests the importance of a context in increasing visibility of a phenomenon. To gain a better understanding of parental role in contexts of class difference and best-paid tracks, we selected the population of Indian American students in the USA who choose majors from ESTs. We selected ESTs because all the “best-paying college majors” belong to ESTs and most of the “worst-paying college majors” are from non-ESTs. That is, ESTs maintain social class differences in career achievements (Winters 2022). Further, we followed the data from Winters (2022) and operationalized the ESTs as Computer Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Aerospace Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Computer Science, Industrial Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Miscellaneous Engineering, Civil Engineering, and General Engineering. To put things into perspective - the “median salary within five years of graduation” of the worst-paid track in the best-paying category is General Engineering with USD 62K. One of the best-paid tracks in the worst-paying category is Liberal Arts which only gives USD 38K (Winters, 2022).

We selected the Indian American students for four reasons. First, high parental expectations of academic success characterize the educational decisions of Indian American students (Mathew, Zhai, and Gao 2017; Saran 2016). Second, the Indian American community in the USA has the highest rate of college completion and higher education (Pew Research Center 2019). Third, Indian Americans also have one of the highest rates of majoring in ESTs (AIRC Education 2022). And fourth, although economically Indian Americans are more successful than many minority communities in the USA (Pew Research Center 2019), their rate of poverty is also rising. Currently, about 250,000 Indian Americans in the USA live in poverty (Indiaspora 2020). At the confluence of strong parental expectations, social class variance, and rate of entering ESTs, Indian American students constitute an

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Table 1: Profile of the Participants (n=71 Indian American Students)

Class	Parameters	Frequency Distribution	Class	Parameters	Frequency Distribution
Participants from Less Affluent Families (PLA) N=23	Class categories (Annual Family Income)		Participants from Affluent Families (PA) N=48	Class categories (Annual Family Income)	
	Middle (USD80,000-USD125,000)	08		Upper (More than USD\$25,000)	07
	Lower-middle (USD40,000-Less than USD80,000)	09		Upper-middle (USD125,000-USD\$25,000)	41
	Working (less than USD40,000)	06		Mother's Education	
	Mother's Education			PhD	16
	Master's	10		Master's	32
	Bachelor's and less	13		Father's Education	
	Father's Education			PhD	27
	Master's	12		Master's	21
	Bachelor's and less	11		Mother's Occupation	
	Mother's Occupation			Salaried professional (CEO, CFO, VP, Deans, Directors, etc)	29
	Professional (Teachers, Secretarial, Sales positions, etc.)	08		Entrepreneur	17
	Low paid service work, Manual labor, etc.	15		Homemaker	02
	Father's Occupation			Father's Occupation	
	Professional (Teachers, Secretarial, Sales positions, etc.)	14		Salaried professional (CEO, CFO, VP, Deans, Directors, etc)	27
	Low paid service work, Manual labor, etc.	09		Entrepreneur	21
	Age in Years			Age in Years	
	21-25	07		21-25	13
	26-30	10		26-30	24
	31-35	06		31-35	11
	Gender			Gender	
	Female	11		Female	22
	Male	12		Male	26
	Educational Levels			Educational Levels	
	Undergraduate Juniors	08		Undergraduate Junior	17
	Undergraduate Seniors	06		Undergraduate Senior	12
	Masters	07		Masters	10
PhD	02	PhD	09		
Universities		Universities			
Northeast region	05	Northeast region	08		
Midwest region	10	Midwest region	15		
Southern region	04	Southern region	11		
Western region	04	Western region	14		
Residency vis-à-vis Universities		Residency vis-à-vis Universities			
In state	19	In state	17		
Out of state	04	Out of state	31		

interesting population to study social class differences in parental role while selecting the best paid tracks.

To further situate the study in the context of our research objective (Giddens 1984), we added another sampling criteria. To account for similar schooling background (Lareau, 2011; Tyson, 2011) students were required to complete their K-12 education and pursue their higher education in public institutions located in the USA. Using purposive sampling technique, we selected four large public universities in four Census Bureau-designated regions of the USA: Northeast, Midwest, South, and West. These universities have a high percentage of Indian American students. We contacted the Indian Students' Association at each university and provided them with our research details, sampling criteria, consent form, and contact information. A total of 71 students (all US born) responded, confirming that (a) they were of Asian Indian origin, (b) they decided a discipline in ESTs as their final major, and (c) since kindergarten they went only to public institutions in the USA. Upon obtaining participant demographics, following the example of Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen (2018), we divided them into affluent (N=48) and less affluent (N=23) classes. See table 1 for the profile of the participants.

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Primary data were collected in the form of semi-structured interviews. Retaining focus on the research objective, the interview schedule was developed around: (a) parental expectations of educational careers, (b) parental roles in educational journeys, (c) parental attitude towards ESTs, and (d) parental roles in deciding on ESTs. Interviews ranged from 80 to 140 minutes. Those were recorded and transcribed. Each transcript was sent to the respective participant for approval. Only approved versions of transcripts were used for data analyses.

Data Analyses

We used the grounded theory method of data analyses (Glaser and Strauss 1967) because extant literature on social class, parental role, and track selection is potentially incomplete to explain social class differences in parental role when the best-paid tracks are selected (Batruch et al. 2019; Stephens et al. 2012). Grounded theory enables researchers to study a phenomenon that is under-explored and theorize findings “grounded” in real world data. In this method, data collection, data analyses, consultation of literature, and consolidation of findings occur in an iterative way until the data reach theoretical saturation (Charmaz 2006; Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2019). Our data reached saturation after the 46th interview. Still, we conducted successive interviews to ensure that we received no additional insight.

Data analyses were done by the first author and two research associates. Following the tradition of the grounded theory method, data were analysed in three overlapping stages. In stage one, analysts read each interview transcript separately identifying the first-order codes – the statements reflecting parental interests, motivations and/or pressures in selecting ESTs. The team met after reading each transcript to compare codes. Disagreements were resolved via further discussion and consensus. Trustworthiness was established via inter-coder reliability varying from 0.87 to 0.92, much higher than Cohen’s (1960) recommendation of the minimum of 0.70. In stage two, coders worked together to provide meaning to the first-order codes and condense those into second-order ones. For example, the statements that related the loss of ESTs to the loss of family status were coded as indication of punishment and those relating ESTs to a hope for a better future were coded as indication of reward. Any disagreement, in this stage, was also addressed by means of discussion and consensus. To assure trustworthiness in stage two, we used the help of a third research associate. We asked the person to assign statements from raw data to the codes. Average inter-coder agreement in this stage was 0.88.

In stage three, we determined the final theoretical dimensions from the data by identifying what the second-order codes represented. For instance, we found that the indication of punishment characterised one of the approaches of affluent parents and the indication of reward characterised one of the approaches of less affluent parents to persuade their children to enter ESTs. Credibility of these theoretical dimensions was tested through constant member checks (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2012). We randomly selected 30 participants from the affluent group and 15 participants from the less affluent group and presented our findings to them at regular intervals. We decided the final version of findings only when it was approved by all selected participants. We used NVivo12 throughout to manage and analyse the data.

Findings

Substantiating empirical findings on parental role in students’ education (Hamilton 2016; Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen 2018; Schifffrin et al. 2014), our data also revealed that parents in both affluent and less affluent families played a significant role in persuading their children to enter ESTs. Further, parents took four distinct strategies to encourage the selection of ESTs: (a) rewards vs. punishment, (b) alignment of ESTs with self-concept, (c) prioritizing ESTs over other activities, and (d) creation of internal pressure (see table 2 for a summary). Despite the commonality in strategies, the mechanisms of implementing them varied across social classes. This was because ESTs held different meanings for different classes.

Affluent Parents – ESTs were a Part of Family Tradition

In affluent Indian American families, ESTs reflected familial values and interests passed on through generations. They were so deeply embedded as a familial practice; that they became a part of tradition. Not selecting ESTs was not an option in many families, as it would signify the loss of tradition and, therefore viewed as punishment, in three ways.

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Table 2: Summary of Parental Strategies Encouraging Selection of Engineering and Science Tracks (ESTs)

	Parental Strategies	Affluent Parents	Less Affluent Parents
1	Punishment vs. rewards	Punishment perspective – Fear of losing family tradition via: -Weakening of familial bond -Loss of family honor -End of the family legacy	Reward perspective – Hope for a better future via: -Better job opportunities -Improvement of familial economic status -Better parenting skills
2	Alignment of ESTs with self-concept	Familial alignment via: -Parents and other family members as role models -Encouragement to attend seminars and workshops conducted by various family members	Celebrity alignment via: -Examples of EST-related famous personalities -Interaction with EST-related achievers outside the family
3	Prioritizing ESTs over other aspects of life	Making EST topics alluring via: -EST-based familial discussions -EST-based supplementary readings -Family members as EST tutors	Making EST as the only career option via: -Saving money for ESTs -Urging to seek EST-related advice from experts -Encouraging to mix with EST-focused peers
4	Creation of latent pressure	Familial practice via: -One-sided interaction to select ESTs -One-sided encouragement, EST-oriented	Parental attitudes and behaviors such as: -Making sacrifices to encourage children enter ESTs -Analogizing greater sense of autonomy and self-esteem with ESTs

Punishment perspective – Fear of Losing Family Tradition by Weakening of Familial Bond

First, since traditions generally strengthen familial bonds, the selection of non-ESTs denoted a weakening of such bonds:

My parents made it clear that was not an option. Everyone in our families is in [ESTs]. If I select a [non-EST], they won't be able to help me or guide me because they know nothing about it. I felt it would weaken my relationship with them... That seemed like a punishment to me. (PA14, Female, Masters, Northeast Region University)

Punishment perspective – Fear of Losing Family Tradition by Loss of Family Honor

Second, ESTs as a part of tradition also represented familial honor, and the selection of non-ESTs was perceived to taint that honor:

Both my parents are in [ESTs]. It is their pride and honor...pride and honor of the family you see...My elder sister is also in [EST]. They wanted me to have that same pride and honor. [The parents] always encouraged me to protect that... If I did otherwise, I would have damaged that...Other fields were presented as a disgrace with negative consequences. (PA27, Male, Undergraduate Junior, Southern Region University)

Punishment perspective – Fear of Losing Family Tradition by End of the Family Legacy

Third, parents feared that if their children did not select ESTs, then the chances of passing the practice to future generations would reduce, thus, ending the family tradition:

To [the parents], [ESTs] are not just careers, they are the family heritage that they got from their parents. They took it as their duty to pass it on to me and my little sister...If we could not do the same for our children, it is like we would break the age-old practice...and the family will lose the legacy...then you have all kinds of bad consequences like feeling incompetent, to say the least. (PA09, Female, Undergraduate Senior, Western Region University)

Alignment of ESTs with Self-concept - Familial Alignment Via Parents and Other Family Members as Role Models

As a part of family tradition, parents internalized the beliefs and familial practices related to ESTs. In doing so, they not only identified with the tradition but also associated their children's self-concept with those beliefs and practices. This was done primarily via familial alignment where parents acted as role models, and used other family members as role models:

My [parents] very strongly identify [sic] with their [ESTs]...they tried to instil the same in me. Since I was a kid, they told me stories of their [ESTs] interests...how they enjoyed their

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fields...their schools, colleges, jobs etc...how they made their parents proud. It was made very clear that I also identify with [ESTs]...they also used the examples of my grandfather and other aunts and uncles who did well in [ESTs]...to inspire me to choose [an EST] in the future. (PA42, Male, Ph.D., Midwest Region University)

Alignment of ESTs with Self-concept - Familial Alignment Via Encouragement to Attend Seminars and Workshops Conducted by Various Family Members

Many parents also created this self-concept among children by encouraging them to attend several EST-related conferences and seminars – mostly conducted by the parents and/or different family members:

My mother is an [EST] professor...when I was in high school, she often took me with her to conferences and seminars...I loved her studies, the way she presented, how people admired her research...the whole nine yards...[The mother's brother] was also an [EST] professor...he also took me to his conferences, seminars, classrooms...I found those places and the [EST] possibilities and...those environments...very inspiring. I learned how deeply [the parents] and [other family members] identified with their fields and they wanted the same for me. (PA22, Female, Undergraduate Junior, Western Region University)

Prioritizing ESTs over Other Aspects of Life - Making EST Topics Alluring Via EST-based Familial Discussions

Because ESTs were a part of parental (and familial) identities, in affluent families many EST-related activities were prioritized over other aspects of life to make ESTs alluring to children. For example, familial discussions often revolved around EST-related topics.

Our dinner table discussions were mainly about [ESTs]-related talks...not in a boring way at all...my parents made the talks very interesting, and I had a lot of fun talking about the discoveries and innovations. So, you see my interest in [EST] subjects was natural and automatic...When other families discuss how was the day, did the kid make any new friend, or how was the...game etc...we talked mainly about what's new in different [EST] fields. (PA24, Male, Masters, Northeast Region University)

Prioritizing ESTs over Other Aspects of Life - Making EST Topics Alluring Via EST-based Supplementary Readings

In quite a few families, parents prioritized EST-related supplementary readings over other pleasure readings. Children appreciated those efforts because supplementary readings benefitted them in their class activities and assignments, increasing their attraction towards ESTs.

My parents bought tons of [ESTs]-based fun readings for me from the time I was a little kid. Those were their first preference for me. They also encouraged my interest in comics and mystery novels...but many times those were also sci-fi stuff...that I absolutely loved. The readings gave me a lot of ideas about my science projects and homework...It is a good feeling to be a smart kid in the class...That increased my interest and confidence to explore a future in [ESTs]. (PA08, Female, Ph.D., Southern Region University)

Prioritizing ESTs over Other Aspects of Life - Making EST Topics Alluring Via Family Members as EST Tutors

A lot of family members, upon request of parents, often acted as impromptu tutors to students coaching and nurturing their leanings to EST-related fields. The one-on-one educational assistance motivated many students to choose ESTs. However, in the process, the family members gained prominence as EST tutors, over being relatives.

I have an aunt who is very good in her [EST] field...She loves me and used to spend a lot of time with me when I was a kid. My parents asked her to tutor me in different topics...So all of a sudden, she became my [EST] tutor first and aunt second. The talks that we had, the games that we played...all were about some [EST] topics. I liked those...she never got tired of my questions...slowly and gradually she drew my interest towards [that specific EST discipline]. I would say she plays a big role...she helped me to decide on my future tracks. (PA36, Male, Undergraduate Senior, Western Region University)

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Creation of Latent Pressure - Familial Practice Via One-sided Interaction to Select ESTs

As a part of tradition, the familial practice of selection of ESTs dominated the academic choices of children in most affluent families. Many children felt that their parents were exerting a latent pressure to select ESTs. It was latent because sometimes parents pressurized their children even without realizing it. One-sided interaction with hardly any opportunity to disagree was one of the tactics:

Many conversations with [the parents] were one way...my brothers and I hardly got any chance to speak, let alone disagree...choosing a [non-EST]...was treated by [the parents]...like drugs and alcohol (laughing)...you just can't argue on that. I don't think that [the parents] did that consciously all the time...it is a family thing...[other members] also do that to their kids...my parents...also did that naturally without realizing the kind of pressure. (PA19, Female, Masters, Midwest Region University).

Creation of Latent Pressure - Familial Practice Via One-sided Encouragement, EST-oriented

Just like interaction, students also received one-sided encouragement from parents. Since parents had very little knowledge outside the purview of ESTs, their encouragement for hard work, confidence, and excellence was limited primarily to ESTs:

[The parents] are very compassionate...it's not that they don't accept failure or did not teach me to accept failure...they always encouraged me to see failure as the road to search opportunity...But to them, all opportunities lie only in [ESTs]...I was not good at math...[The father] never pushed me to excel in that...instead he encouraged me to take more interest in biology and chemistry...that I loved. He believed that I will excel in some [EST] field...so he always tried to channel my interest and encouraged me to work hard and remain confident...The world outside [ESTs] did not exist to him because he did not know much about it. (PA44, Male, Undergraduate Junior, Southern Region University).

ESTs being a part of tradition, these one-sided practices were common in affluent families that parents learned from other family members. Therefore, to them an exclusive focus on ESTs was neither unnatural nor coercive.

Less Affluent Parents – ESTs Considered as a Hope for a Better Future

Unlike affluent parents, most less affluent parents did not have an EST background that was partially made responsible for their deprived socio-economic status. Thus, less affluent parents presented the selection of ESTs as a reward – a hope for a better future.

Reward perspective – Hope for a Better Future Via Better Job Opportunities

Better job opportunities were identified as one of the rewards:

My parents are not in [ESTs]...that's why they think we are poor... they told me how those fields allow you to be both creative and logical. On the creative side you get to innovate and discover new things...On the logical side you learn to question everything and get organized...So, these qualities make you a good decision maker and a good problem solver...so, [ESTs] will give you more lucrative job offers...if you go into an [EST] your future will be rewarding...(PLA02, Female, Masters, Northeast Region University)

Reward perspective – Hope for a Better Future Via Improvement of Familial Economic Status

Another reward of entering ESTs, and a consequence of better job opportunities, was the improvement of economic status of the family:

A good job results only from [ESTs]. That's what my [parents] taught since when I was a little kid...They explained the incentives of a better job...a relief from poverty...you get a comfortable and secured life for your family...the security of your own home...healthy food...ability to pay all the bills on time...who does not want that?" (PLA18, Male, Undergraduate Junior, Midwest Region University)

Reward perspective – Hope for a Better Future Via Better Parenting Skills

Parents in less affluent families also believed that with an EST background their children would become better parents, because scientific ways of developing and utilizing knowledge could enhance interaction and communication skills. Thus, to some students, better parenting was also offered as a reward for selecting ESTs.

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My father thinks he cannot communicate with [his children] properly because he lacks the analytical mindset that you gain in [ESTs]. He believes...[ESTs] also make [sic] you a better parent...because you can better organize your thoughts by framing them systematically in an all-inclusive way...and you can communicate more efficiently with your kids so that there is less misunderstanding and less conflict. (PLA06, Female, Undergraduate Senior, Southern Region University)

Alignment of ESTs with Self-concept - Celebrity Alignment Via Examples of EST-related Famous Personalities

When less affluent parents realized that upward social mobility required motivating their children to select ESTs in a sustained manner, they strategized to align the self-concepts of children with ESTs. In absence of role models within families, they derived inspiration from EST-related famous personalities, which we call celebrity alignment:

I was always given examples of Einstein and C.V. Raman and Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar...[the parents] made me read all their biographies and achievements...those books were their favorite birthday gift for me...so that I feel inspired to take [ESTs] and hope to have a future like that. (PLA23, Male, Masters, Western Region University)

Alignment of ESTs with Self-concept - Celebrity Alignment Via Interaction with EST-related Achievers Outside the Family

Another mechanism of celebrity alignment was direct interaction with high achievers in ESTs. Parents arranged short meetings between their children and EST professionals who they knew through various channels:

My father often took me to his workplace to meet his boss and boss' boss...all [EST] people so that I could interact with them and feel inspired. I enjoyed talking to them, it was fun...One day my mother invited a neighbor's relative who lived in LA...a computer scientist...to meet me...[the mother] arranged many meetings like that...with different [EST] professionals...those interactions inspired me a lot. (PLA10, Female, Undergraduate Junior, Midwest Region University)

Prioritizing ESTs over Other Aspects of Life - Making EST as the Only Career Option Via Saving Money for ESTs

Because ESTs signified the hope for a better future, less affluent parents presented them as the only career option to children, and prioritized ESTs over other aspects of life. The primary mechanism of prioritizing ESTs was saving money:

[The father] taught early on how to use less water and less electricity...look at cheaper deals while shopping...using things carefully...All because the family needed to save money for my [EST-related] education...all for that better future. (PLA15, Male, Undergraduate Senior, Northeast Region University)

Prioritizing ESTs over Other Aspects of Life - Making EST as the Only Career Option Via Urging to Seek EST-related Advice from Experts

Many parents, without having an EST background, had very little idea about how to guide children to enter an EST. Hence, they persistently urged children to consult with experts seeking EST-related advice:

As if there was no other track...[the parents] encouraged...to concentrate only on [ESTs]...They had very busy schedules but still they closely monitored my track interests...They constantly made me talk to the teachers and guidance counsellor who knew more about [ESTs] and EST-related expectations that I needed to fulfil. (PLA04, Female, PhD, Southern Region University)

Prioritizing ESTs over Other Aspects of Life - Making EST as the Only Career Option Via Encouraging to Mix with EST-focused Peers

Some parents also emphasized the importance of belonging to an "EST-minded" peer group to remain motivated:

My mother was very interested about my friends...especially their tracks and ambitions...If I hanged out with those kids...I would also develop interests for [ESTs]...Having [EST]-minded friends seemed to be more important to her than having just good friends...Luckily, I got both. (PLA12, Male, Undergraduate Junior, Midwest Region University)

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Creation of Latent Pressure - Parental Attitudes and Behaviors such as Making Sacrifices to Encourage Children Enter ESTs

Parents' attitudes and behaviors towards EST-related achievements played a crucial role in children's perceptions of latent pressure. The idea that parents sacrificed a lot of their happiness for the sake of their children's entrance into ESTs emerged as one such pressure:

I had an [EST] fare and exhibition in high school. At the same time there was this wedding of a close family member. [The parents] did not even think for a second to choose...If it was a [non-EST-related] affair, they might have considered going to the wedding...I remember them cancelling so many such events like family get-togethers, office events, [religious festivals]...where they really wanted to go...when they had to choose between my [EST-related] curriculum and what would make them happy. All those sacrifices kind of acted as a pressure for me...in some way I felt obligated to enter [an EST]...to pay back for their sacrifices. (PLA04, Female, Masters, Western Region University)

Creation of Latent Pressure - Parental Attitudes and Behaviors such as Analogizing Greater Sense of Autonomy and Self-esteem with ESTs

As a hope for a better future, parents perceived ESTs as a route to better jobs and comfortable lives. Therefore, they equated a stronger sense of autonomy and self-esteem with ESTs, which in turn, was also perceived as a latent pressure by children to select ESTs:

You can find a well-paid job only if you graduate in [ESTs]...a well-paid job also comes with good positions and power and prestige...So, you get a stronger sense of autonomy and self-esteem...Like that my mother always compared [ESTs] with a stronger future identity...I felt that I had to have that...it was a very subtle way that my mother expressed it...but it was a powerful expression. (PLA20, Male, Undergraduate Senior, Western Region University)

Discussion

We asked how does social class and parental role influence the selection of best-paid tracks of the Indian American students? Our data suggest no class difference in parental strategies to encourage students to select ESTs, but the mechanisms for each strategy vary across classes. This difference represents two different meanings that ESTs have in affluent and less affluent Indian American families. Whereas they are a part of family tradition in affluent families, less affluent families view them as a hope for a better future. The common parental strategies are punishment versus reward perspectives, alignment of students' self-concept with ESTs, the prioritization of ESTs over other aspects of life, and the creation of a latent pressure. Because ESTs are a part of family tradition, affluent parents induce a fear of losing that tradition among children if they don't opt for ESTs (punishment perspective). Similarly, they use various family-oriented mechanisms to deploy other strategies. Less affluent parents see ESTs as a hope for a better future. When applied to the issue of social justice, an attempt to alleviate poverty is done by reducing achievement gaps by all parents, even the poorer parents when they lack the agency to advance their children's educational opportunities and experiences. They present these tracks as offering better job opportunities, improved socio-economic status, and better parenting skills (reward perspective). Their mechanisms for strategies - alignment of students' self-concept with ESTs, and prioritizing ESTs over other aspects of life, mostly include resources outside the family, and they use their attitudes and behaviors to create a latent pressure for students to aspire for ESTs.

The literature on social class, parental roles, and educational inequality based on social reproduction theory (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) extensively details how class differences in parenting lead to differential educational experiences of students. Studies suggest that using class-based privileges, affluent parents support children in various academic, social, and career accomplishments, which less affluent parents cannot even when they want to. Less affluent parents, therefore, depend on schools for this support and feel frustrated by the little (or no) assistance that schools provide (Hamilton 2016; Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen 2018; Schiffrin et al. 2014). However, the role that parents play in track selection, as largely overlooked in the literature (Brunello and Checchi, 2007; Stephens et al. 2012), is revealed in this study. Controlling for ethnicity and the nature of the track, we contribute to this growing school of thought by illustrating how parents encourage students to enter the best-paid tracks. Unlike prevalent understanding, our study shows that less affluent Indian American parents do not necessarily depend on schools to inspire their children to select ESTs. Rather, to do so, they innovate mechanisms using resources available to them. Nonetheless, confirming the findings of already existing studies (Lareau 2011; Lewis and Diamond

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2015; Johnson 2013), our findings indicate that Indian American parenting continues to matter in the educational experiences of students. Tracking is an important context to study parental roles in education because tracks often determine social class differences in educational inequality (Batruch et al. 2019). Thus, it is not a surprise that less affluent parents, in this study, view best-paid tracks as a “hope for a better future.” Further, social reproduction theory (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) underpins affluent parents’ vested interests in children’s educational accomplishments. We extend this idea by showing that while motivating children to select ESTs, affluent Indian American families try to protect “a part of their family tradition.”

Tracking not only signifies selection of a specific educational field, but it also aggravates class differences in educational achievements (Chmielewski, 2014; Goudeau, Autin, and Croizet 2017). Following the fundamentals of social reproduction theory (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990), most empirical studies focus on the influence that upper class has on school systems conferring affluent students a greater chance to enter tracks than their less affluent counterparts (Batruch, Autin, and Butera 2017; Croizet et al. 2017). This body of research also highlights cultural differences in terms of stereotypes restricting less affluent students from aspiring for tracks (Croizet and Millet, 2012; Goudeau and Croizet, 2017). Yet, when the focus is shifted to the best-paid tracks (the ESTs), as this study demonstrates, we find that Indian American parents play a more important role than school systems in terms of encouraging children to go towards specific tracks. Moreover, our data reveal no class difference in parental strategies. Class difference, however, becomes prominent in mechanisms to implement those strategies. While affluent Indian American parents, under their familial and educational privilege, find resources within families, less affluent Indian American parents use many out-of-family resources to motivate children. Less affluent parents also sacrifice their happiness and inculcate the value of saving money among children making them pay serious consideration to the ESTs. This study, therefore, also builds upon the literature on tracking and social class by delineating the importance of parenting over school systems in the contexts of Indian American parents and the ESTs.

How tracking is operationalized is often questioned. A process that reinforces class difference may not be a binary measure (Bol et al. 2014). Interestingly, studies including alternate ways of measuring tracking have similar findings – tracking increases the achievement gap of affluent and less affluent students (Chmielewski, 2014; Van de Werfhorst and Mijs 2010). We extend this part of the literature on tracking and social class by paying attention to a more specific track. As far as career success is concerned, ESTs are more lucrative than others (Winters 2022). We designed this research to focus on the ESTs in the context of one of the communities in the USA (Indian Americans) with the highest rate of entering the ESTs (AIRC Education 2022), and college completion (Pew Research Center 2019). Consequently, our data allowed us to explore class differences in parental roles while selecting the best-paid tracks. Findings suggest irrespective of social class Indian American parents adopt comparable strategies to encourage children. Further, in the absence of familial privileges, parents of less affluent students, in this study, use non-familial resources. Therefore, though tracking continues to determine social class differences, the social class of Indian American students may be a less important factor than parental roles in aiming for the best-paid tracks.

Limitation and Future Research Direction

Keeping the contextual underpinning (Giddens 1984) in mind, this research is based on a particular ethnic community (Indian Americans in the USA), the nature of track (ESTs), and the nature of institute (large public universities). Naturally, the parental role depicted in this study is different in other contexts. For example, in ethnic communities with a longer history of oppression and poverty, parents are more focused on survival and familial sustenance than children’s educational attainments (Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen 2018; Tyson 2011). Although this study is on parental roles, data are collected from students. Thus, findings essentially reflect students’ perceptions of parental roles in EST selection. Data collected from parents would provide a deeper insight into the research problem. For example, the paradox between the higher educational achievements of Indian Americans vis-à-vis their growing rate of poverty could be comprehended if parental perspectives were considered. Research on parental role in education, again, is limited by the paucity of data on parent-children dynamics (Hamilton 2016; Schifffrin et al. 2014). Less affluent students in this study narrated that parents blame the lack of EST background for their socio-economic deprivation. Hence, such research is pertinent to shed light on the extent of post-secondary career success of less affluent students upon entering the ESTs. Our data are also cross-sectional in nature. A comprehensive

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knowledge of parental role before, during, and after certain educational experiences calls for a longitudinal study (Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen 2018).

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