Family Capital: How First-Generation Higher-Education Students Break the Intergenerational Cycle

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Abstract

The first children in a family to attain a higher education, referred to as "first-generation students," embody the realization of social mobility. Previous analysis has often portrayed them as succeeding *despite* their family background. This research suggests that although they face many material challenges, their families are often a key resource, rather than a constraint. This research attempts to reveal what enabled the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage to be broken. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from Israeli families in which intergenerational mobility took place (N = 50). Employing a grounded theory approach, the analysis reveals that breaking the intergenerational cycle mostly concerns family day-to-day life, and that it reflects three main components: time horizon, interpersonal relationships, and family values.

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First-generation higher-education students (referred to henceforth as "first-generation students" or sometimes simply "students") embody the realization of the social concept of "equal opportunity," manifested through one's chances to acquire education at any level, independent of his or her background. However, a long tradition of mobility research has demonstrated a strong link between the socioeconomic status (SES) of parents and the SES of their offspring (e.g., Bowles and Gintis, 2002; Crosnoe, Mistry, and Elder, 2002; Hauser, 1998; Sewell, Hauser, Springer, and Hauser, 2002; Haveman and Wolfe, 1995; Mulligan, 1999; Solon, 1992, 2002). Evidence from these studies indicates that to a large extent children inherit their parents' SES. Breaking that intergenerational cycle is not easy to achieve, and families of first-generation students are an exception to the rule. We seem to know much about the persistence of SES, but little about breaking this cycle.

First-generation students have been the focus of a growing body of research primarily because of an increasing demographic diversity in postsecondary education and growth in the number of first-generation college students (see, e.g., Choy, 2001; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1998; Rendon and Hope, 1996). The importance of first-generation students is that their educational mobility leads to social mobility, whereas education is the key for many other aspects of well-being (e.g., Cohen and Geske, 1990; Haveman and Wolfe, 1984; Mortenson, 2000). Prevailing research focuses on comparing first-generation students to their peers (second-generation higher-education students) in various respects: access rates, academic preparation, demographic characteristics, college experience, academic achievements, cognitive development, academic expectations, and responses to intervention programs (e.g., Choy, 2001; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1998; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora, 1996). As a result, we appear to know much about the life of first-generation college students not only during their college years, but also about their life prior to college: demographic characteristics, academic preparation, the college choice process, and the transition from high school to postsecondary education.

Nevertheless, surprisingly little is known about the process that enabled those students to become the first in their families to attend college.

To shed light on the issue of intergenerational inheritance, those families whose offspring succeeded in breaking the intergenerational cycle are examined. These families are exceptional. The more common pattern is for children from low SES families to also have low levels of education. Accordingly, the leading questions asked here are: What is special in these first-generation families? Are there common motives that jointly form a mechanism? Can we identify that mechanism?

A basic hypothesis of this study is that among the families who break the intergenerational cycle, a common mechanism exists with specific identifiable characteristics. Based on the narratives of these students, the study has two purposes: to identify the nature of the mechanism enabling the first-generation students to break the intergenerational cycle; and to investigate this mechanism and reveal its components, and how they operate.

The scarcity of research on this issue emphasizes the importance of understanding first-generation students' life during the years before college. Accordingly, a qualitative approach was chosen, utilizing in-depth, semistructured interviews as the research instrument and a grounded theory to analyze data.

FIRST-GENERATION HIGHER-EDUCATION STUDENTS

The growing number of first-generation students is one of the trends in postsecondary education in the United States (Baker and Velez, 1996; Kojaku and Nunez, 1998; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1998). The National Center for Education Statistics (1998) has concluded that during the years 1993–1996, 47 percent of college students were first-generation students, compared to 43 percent during the years 1989–1990 (Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Comparing access rates of first-generation students to college students whose parents had a college degree indicates that among potential first-generation students 27 percent of 1992 high school graduates went on to college. This rate increased to 75 percent among those whose parents had some college experience, and to 93 percent among those who had at least one parent with an undergraduate education (Choy, 2001).

Most of the research on first-generation students compares them with their peers whose parents attained college. Comparisons indicate that there are major differences between first-generation students and their peers. Examination of demographic characteristics, academic preparation, the college choice process, and college expectations indicate that first-generation students, compared to their peers, tend to be at a distinct disadvantage in several respects: essential knowledge about postsecondary education (e.g., the enrollment process and financial demands), level of family income, family support, educational degree expectations and plans, and academic preparation in high school (e.g., Berkner and Chavez, 1997; Berkner, Horn, and Clune, 2000; Horn and Nunez, 2000; Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper, 1999; Kojaku and Nunez, 1998; Pratt and Skaggs, 1989; Stage and Hossler, 1989; Warburton, Bugarin, and Nunez, 2001; York-Anderson and Bowman, 1991).

Comparing the transition from high school to postsecondary education (e.g., Lara, 1992; London, 1989; Rendon, 1992; Rendon and Hope, 1996; Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, and Jalomo, 1994; Weis, 1992), as well as persistence in college, degree attainment, and early career labor market outcomes (e.g., Attinasi, 1989; Berkner, Horn, and Clune, 2000; Billson and Brooks-Terry, 1982; Horn, 1998; Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Richardson and Skinner, 1992; Warburton, Bugarin, and Nunez, 2001) provides more evidence concerning the disadvantages of first-generation students. They are more likely to leave a four-year institution at the end of the first year, less likely to remain enrolled in a four-year institution or be on a track to a bachelor's degree after three years, and less likely to stay enrolled or attain a bachelor's degree after five years. Four to five years after graduation, first-generation college students are less likely than other students whose parents have college degrees to be enrolled in a graduate or first professional program.

Policy-driven studies have attempted to determine the best ways to help first-generation students before and during college years and to evaluate the contribution of various intervention plans to their success. A number of these studies indicate that programs which help first-generation students also help their peers, but not vice versa (Gullat and Jan, 2003; Schmidt, 2003; Thayer, 2000). Common

interventions include national programs like Upward Bound and countless local programs that offer different services, such as supplemental instruction programs, mentoring programs, culturally conscious programs, etc. However, first-generation students reported that counseling is the most helpful service, compensating for their poor social capital (for example, see Striplin, 1999).

Not only do first-generation students confront the anxieties, dislocations, and difficulties of any college student, their experiences often involve substantial cultural as well as social and academic transitions. After interviewing first-generation students, London (1989) emphasized the difficulty in achieving mobility: "It is only when we see that mobility involves not just gain but loss — most of all the loss of a familiar past, including a past self—that we can begin to understand the attendant periods of confusion, conflict, isolation, and even anguish that first-generation students report" (p. 168).

Evaluating family SES, family background, and parental involvement indicates that first-generation students experience a strong "culture shock" in college (Inman and Mayes, 1999). Not only do they generally come from lower-income homes (Bui, 2002; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora, 1996), where parents lack the knowledge of campus environment and the enrollment process, they also encounter, on average, a lower level of family support and a lower level of importance placed on college by parents (McConnell, 2000; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora, 1996; York-Anderson and Bowman, 1991). Parents of first-generation students, in general, help their children less (Thayer, 2000), particularly with respect to the process of deciding what college to choose, compared to parents having a college degree (Billson and Terry, 1982; Choy, 2001; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora, 1996; York-Anderson and Bowman, 1991).

In contrast, some recent findings tend to contradict the role of the family described above.

McCarron, and Inkelas (2006) found a positive relationship between parental involvement and educational aspirations of first-generation students, building on research regarding the impact of parental involvement during K-12. Their findings are largely consistent with the results of the analysis reported here.

BREAKING THE INTERGENERATIONAL CYCLE

Exploring how families with limited material resources succeeded in creating a better future for their children highlights the importance of the nonmaterial resources of a family. These resources include families' habits, priorities, belief systems, and lifestyle. The family resilience approach focuses on the ability to withstand and rebound from adversity and builds on the growing interest in research on individual resilience (Walsh, 2002). Studies of family resilience have shown that low SES families can rise above their disadvantages and escape the poverty trap (Crosnoe, Erickson, and Dornbusch, 2002; Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, and Sameroff, 1999; Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, and Williamson, 2004). For example, Orthner et al. (2004) concluded that children of poor families could demonstrate an "ability to achieve academically and social-psychologically despite the lack of economic resources in their homes" (p. 160). The core idea underlying the concept of family resilience is that a family can overcome adverse circumstances by utilizing its behavioral, emotional, and relational assets. Simon, Murphy, and Smith (2005) define it as "the ability of a family to respond positively to an adverse situation and emerge from the situation feeling strengthened, more resourceful, and more confident than its prior state" (Simon, Murphy, and Smith, 2005, p. 427). A broader concept of family resilience relates to the processes that evolve over time in response to a family-specific context and stage of development (Conger and Conger, 2002). Resilient families have been found to have clear-cut expectations of their children, shared core values, and shared routines (Seccombe, 2002).

This study follows the proposition of the family resilience approach, that a family has the ability to withstand and rebound from adversity. However, the approach presented here takes this proposition one step further. In general, family resilience addresses families with risk factors such as teenage pregnancy, alcohol abuse, etc., whereas the approach presented here aims at much larger groups of the population, including the families of first-generation students. Second, the family resilience approach views the family more as reacting to unfortunate circumstances rather than initiating action. Usually, it demonstrates how *despite* unfortunate circumstances, a family is able to "withstand and rebound from

adversity" (Walsh, 2002, p. 130). The approach offered here stresses how a family can *utilize* and *channel* its nonmaterial resources, such as priorities, time, and behavior for the accomplishments that are usually achieved by utilizing resources that are not within the family's reach. Third, family resilience is typically concerned with family functioning and the well-being of its members rather than with building toward unusual achievements, such as higher education. Fourth, family resilience is building on a clinical therapeutic perspective, whereas the approach presented here aims towards educational policy.

Many studies of family social capital (sometimes referred to as family-based social capital) investigate the social capital of poor families, emphasizing the value concealed in social relations. Scholars who study social capital view the family as one of the contexts for generating and accumulating social capital (Coleman, 1990; Crosnoe, 2004; Furstenberg, 2005; Furstenberg and Hughes, 1995; Putnam, 1995, 2000). Coleman (1990), one of the originators of the social capital concept, has introduced it into the sociology of education by defining it in the context of the family: "Social capital is the set of resources that inhere in family relations and in community social organizations and that are useful for the cognitive or social development of a child or a young person" (p. 300).

Usually, family social capital is related to what is known as bonding social capital, which enables individuals to "get by" (Briggs, 1998; Holzmann and Jorgensen, 1999), as opposed to bridging social capital, which enables them to "get ahead" (e.g. Barr, 1998; Narayan, 1999).

Research is ambiguous in regard to the products of family social capital among poor families. In most cases, bonding social capital is considered to result in a negative outcome because it prevents mobility within low SES families (Szreter, 2000). On the other hand, it is considered a major contributor to the development of children and the creation of future opportunities for their benefit (Putnam, 2000).

Both family resilience and family social capital emphasize the importance of nonmaterial resources, which are not easily measurable yet have a significant effect on the family's ability to shape the future. In view of changing family structures and relationships in recent decades, understanding this nonmaterial influence of family on the quality of life of its children assumes even greater importance.

METHOD

Exploring first-generation students as representatives of social mobility was the primary motivation for this work. There were two purposes of the study: (a) to identify the nature of the mechanism which enabled first-generation students to break the intergenerational cycle, and (b) to thoroughly investigate this mechanism and reveal its components and their operation. Given the gap in the literature regarding the breakthrough phenomenon, a qualitative approach was used.

The analysis draws on 50 in-depth, semistructured interviews of first-generation higher-education students. Exploring what happened in their lives to enable them to attain higher education, even though their parents only attained at most a high school diploma, was the purpose of the interviews. Following research findings that emphasize the importance of psychological and motivational aspects in first-generation students' educational achievement, this work pursues the paradigm of symbolic interactionism. Whereas the identification of subjective meanings is essential for understanding an individual's behavior (Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1972), consideration must be given to the individual's behavior and to the individual's interpretation of behavior. The way that individuals interpret the behavior of such significant others as parents and siblings is also essential. The data analysis was based on grounded theory in order to (a) conceptualize the process of intergenerational cycle breakthrough, and (b) look for the different components of it.

Sample and Recruitment Strategy

Various academic and social programs operated by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem that target students from middle-low to low SES backgrounds were the primary source for research candidates. During program activities and meetings, the research was introduced to the participants, and candidates were asked to make contact if they would like to participate in the study. The research was described as addressing the intergenerational breakthrough phenomenon: "Many people with parents who do not have higher education do not attain higher education. How do you explain your success? What is

the formula?" It is important to emphasize that while introducing the study, the candidate's family was mentioned only as a "condition" for participation (i.e., that his or her parents had not attained higher education). Other candidates were identified by means of "snowball" sampling, whereby one friend brings another friend, employing purposeful sampling procedures to identify "intensity-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely, but not extremely" (Patton, 1990, p. 343). Out of the 50 interviews, 19 were the product of snowball sampling. Candidates were students with two parents who did not attain higher education, who lived in poor neighborhoods, either urban or rural, during their school years, and whose parents or grandparents were born in North Africa or in Asia (an ethnic group known as "Mizrahim" in Israel). Focusing on this specific ethnic group limits the generalizability of the research. However, this focus (a) addresses a large culturally homogenous population group in Israel; (b) gives a longer time perspective because unlike more recently arrived minorities, these families arrived in Israel during the 1940s and the 1950s; (c) and builds on prior research, as educational inequality in this group has been thoroughly studied (e.g., Cohen, and Haberfeld, 1998; Dahan, Dvir, Mironichev, and Shye, 2003; Friedlander, Larnely, Skau, Hotaling, Cutting, and Schwam, 2000).

Fifty first-generation students were interviewed, 25 men and 25 women. Four of the informants were graduate students, 10 were in the final stages or had completed an M.A. degree, and the rest (36) either had a B.A. degree or were studying for it. Their parents' educational level varied from illiteracy to a high school diploma; the median parental education was less than a high school diploma. During their school years, 24 of them lived in urban poor neighborhoods and 26 in a rural area. The median family size was 3–4 children. In some of the families, most or all of the children had studied or were studying in higher education institutions; in other families only one child had achieved higher education.

See Tables 1, 2, and 3.

Table 1 Birth Order of Interviewees

Place of the Child	Percentage	
Eldest	44	
In between	3 2	
Youngest	2 4	

Table 2 Number of Children in the Family

No. of Children in Family	Percentage	
1–2	18	
3–4	42	
5–6	28	
7 or more	12	

Table 3
Parents' Educational Level

Parents' Educational Level	% Mother	% Father
Illiterate	8	6
Did not complete elementary school	8	12
Completed elementary school	16	16
Did not complete high school	32	22
Completed high school	32	40
Postsecondary professional (not academic)	4	4

Interview Procedure

An in-depth, semistructured interview was employed to collect personal stories concerning what led the subjects to pursue a higher education. This goal made it necessary to choose an interview form that was as open as possible, to avoid the trap of using existing terminology. Each interview began with the following question: "Many people with your starting point did not achieve higher education. How do you explain your success? What is the formula?" Many of the interviewees could provide explanations without additional questions; prompting was needed only when asking for details and specifications. For example, many of the informants used the term "important" to describe their parents' attitude toward education. Follow-up questions were: "How did you know it was important to them? What did they do that made you understand that education is important to them?" Sometimes, respondents were asked to play their parent's role, and to "teach" the interviewer "how to do the right things in order to cause [the interviewer's] offspring to achieve higher education." In some interviews more specific questions were needed. In these cases, the informants were invited to specify and give as many details as they could about meaningful moments in life, statements that were repeated through their life and memorized by them, behaviors of significant others, choices that were made during day-to-day life, and various episodes in their life stories, all in the context of what had happened in their lives that they believed had major influence on their path to higher education. Each time a belief, value, emotion, or cognitive action was mentioned, the informants were asked to link it, as best they could, to a behavior or explicit action. In many ways, the whole interview followed from the informant's answer to the first question.

Analytic Procedures

Grounded theory procedure (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1994) was employed, applying a "constant comparison" series of iterations. During this process, the different components (*categories*, in grounded theory terms) of the mechanism were identified.

The analytical unit was a statement of the informant presenting a saying, an event, a choice, a priority, or any other topic. Following Strauss and Corbin (1994), the first step was "open coding," by which statements in the data were named and constantly compared with one another to decide which belonged together. For example, when an informant talked about "buying every book and school supply, even when not having enough money for food" the response was labeled as "school supply."

Evidence examples include such statements as: "Don't become like us."; "Whoever learns—succeeds."; "You need straight A's. A- is not good enough." Examples of behaviors, such as: "They gave everything to us [the children], everything."; "To make the time for [education] because it is very, very important." And examples of making choices, such as: "Payments for school—the teacher never came to me asking 'why didn't you pay?' Instead, we had the same couch 20 years in the house."

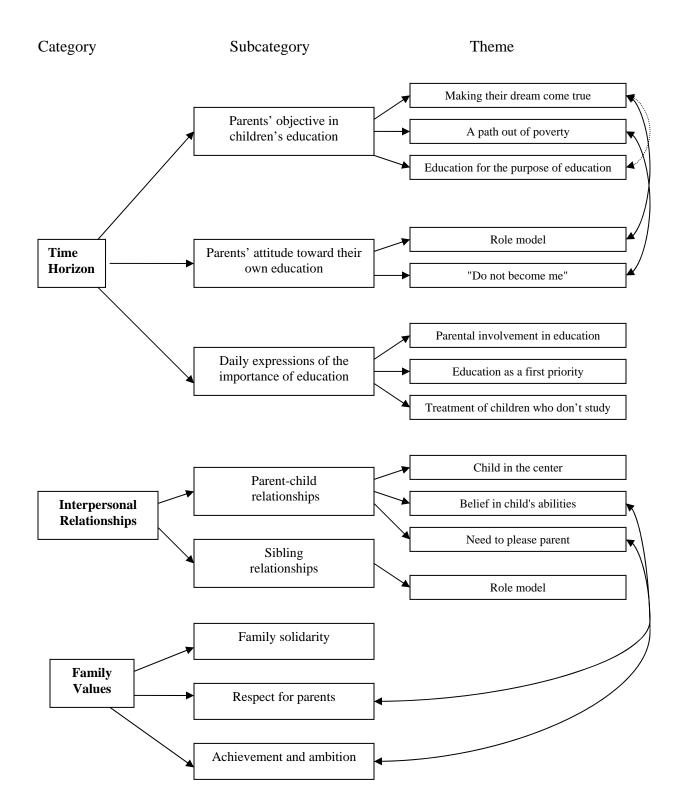
Sometimes explicit words and behavior could be observed. At other times statements were implicit: "It's being in the background. It is not coming directly to me saying 'listen, you must study.' It is not overt at all. It was completely implied, even sophisticated... It was always in the background."

"Axial coding" then took place, grouping discrete codes according to conceptual categories that reflected commonalities among codes. According to Strauss and Corbin (1994) this reflects the idea of clustering open codes around specific "axes" or points of intersection. For example, "school supply" and other categories showing the prioritization of education were grouped to a category of "prioritizing education." Three main categories representing three components were identified. Each main category includes several subcategories, and each subcategory includes several themes (see Figure 1).

FINDINGS

The informants consistently affirmed that the mechanism that enabled them to break the intergenerational cycle and pave the way to social mobility lay in family day-to-day life during their upbringing. All of the informants, without exception, stated that their family or one of their family members was the explanation for their breakthrough. All, with the exception of two, mentioned their family in their first words.

Figure 1
The Intergenerational Breakthrough Mechanism



Interestingly enough, none of the informants mentioned school, teachers, or any other element of the education system as responsible, even in part, for their success. Informants who were driven to distant schools, or were in prestigious boarding schools, mentioned that learning in a "good school" was important. But thinking about that school as an option, choosing the school, paying for it, driving them there, were all parents' initiatives and responsibility. Even though they saw the benefits of learning in these high-achieving schools, many informants mentioned episodes concerning how school, and especially teachers, gave them a hard time, both academically and emotionally. For example, one of them said, trying to hide his tears: "The teacher did not believe I wrote my essay. Because she knew both of my parents are illiterate, she was sure I was bluffing, so she made me write a new one."

Which elements in family life facilitated academic achievements? What behaviors, habits, day-to-day actions, and other elements formed the path to higher education for these students? Three different categories, each containing several subcategories, were identified: time horizon, interpersonal relationships, and family values (see Figure 1). Each of the categories contains complementary subcategories, and each subcategory comprises several themes. Each category expresses a component of family life that the informants believed had a significant part in paving the way to higher education. The categories were usually not mentioned by name during the interviews. For example, informants did not specify that their parents had a long-term perspective. They demonstrated that long-term perspective by citing examples of their parents investing and prioritizing education for the sake of the future: "We did not have money for replacing the sofa for 20 years, but we had money for books"; "My father had to drive me an hour to school. That means, he was driving 4 hours a day just to get me to this 'good school'." Similarly, they did not use the term "sibling relationships," but told how their older brother or sister had served as a role model, or how they served, and still do, as a role model for their younger brothers or sisters.

Each group of statements referring to a specific topic had a theme, for example "do not become me" or "child in the center." Each group of themes that addressed similar issues contained a subcategory,

such as "parents' objective in children's education," or "parent-child relationship." Subcategories relating to the same perspective on family life were grouped in a main category, such as "time horizon." The three main categories represent the components forming the subject of this study: the mechanism that permits breaking the intergenerational cycle.

The first question in the interview invited the informant to try and explain how he or she succeeded in attaining higher education, whereas their parents had not. It should be emphasized that this question was asked in a general manner and did not lead the interviewee to address a specific issue. All interviewees except two answered immediately that either their mother ("Because my mom told us that we must learn, we have to make something out of ourselves"), their father ("It is only thanks to my dad"), their parents ("The push from my parents"), or their family ("Everything starts and finishes at home") was responsible. The other two also gave this answer, but at a later stage in the interview. These statements were the first step in revealing the role of the family in breaking the intergenerational cycle. The following parts of the interview deepened and expanded this perspective on the family as the main cause for the changing circumstances between the generations.

The Components of the Mechanism

After revealing the nature of the mechanism, three categories were identified. First was the *time horizon*, focusing on the time perception of parents. This perception was primarily expressed through the view of the role of education. The second was *interpersonal relationships*, which addressed the issues of parent-child and sibling relationships, and how they sustained the intergenerational breakthrough. The third component dealt with the central *family values*, according to which the students were raised (see Figure 1).

Each category comprises subcategories. Time horizon includes three: parents' objective in children's education; parents' attitude toward their own education; and daily expression of the importance of education. Each of the subcategories contains different themes. These themes can be mutually exclusive or not. For example, three themes appear in the subcategory of parent's objective in children's

education: "making their dream come true"; "a path out of poverty"; and "education for the purpose of education." The first two themes exclude each other; the third theme sometimes accompanies the first theme and sometimes occurs by itself.

Time Horizon

Families of first-generation students act according to a long-term perspective, which is articulated in a consistent effort for the benefit of their offspring's education. In most of the interviews it was the first motive to appear. Evidence indicates that first-generation students were directed to the future far ahead: "You study for the future. We will not travel because we need this money for your informal education"; "My father [showed me] that the goal is for the long term"; "Always with respect to the goal—next, next. You deal with it now because it happens now, at the moment, but it is always considered a leap for the future." Repetition of certain sayings to the children and stated priorities in various aspects in life (such as economic decisions) translated *time horizon* into day-to-day life. Specific evidence included the fact that children were driven to distant schools, received positive feedback when they succeeded in school, and despite difficult financial conditions never lacked books, notebooks, and even tutors.

The time horizon category contains three subcategories: Parents' objective in children's education; Parents' attitude toward their own education; and Daily expressions of the importance of education.

Parents' Objective in Children's Education

Education had diverse objectives, from the parents' point of view, as represented by the students. Some of the parents perceived their children's education as a way to fulfill their own missed opportunity, and thought of it as a way to make *a dream come true*: "My father had lots of ambition, but he could not fulfill it, because his mother did not let him"; "My mom regretted her early marriage with my father and quitting school." Other parents perceived their children's education as a *path out of poverty*, "Don't become like us...don't come back here [to this city]." A small group of parents, all of them religious to

some extent, perceived their children's education as a value in itself. One of the interviewees told about his father, who did not complete elementary school: "You can see the importance of education throughout his [the father's] library. He would not be interested in buying TV or watching movies. He sits here with his back to the TV... He was interested in his books, and in many other subjects. In many ways he wanted to know more and to do other things with his life. Although he couldn't, he knew that this is the most important thing he could give to his children." *Making a dream come true* and *a path out of poverty* appeared to be mutually exclusive — only one of them appeared as a theme for each informant. The third theme, *education for the purpose of education*, appeared rarely, either by itself or in addition to the *making the dream come true* theme.

Parents' Attitude Toward Their Own Education

Another prominent topic is the parents' attitude toward their own education. Two mutually exclusive themes occur in this subcategory: one is *role model*, and the other is *do not become me*. Among the families with the *role model* theme, one parent is more dominant, whereas among the families with the *do not become me* theme, sometimes neither parent is dominant.

Parents who served as a role model for their children acquired informal education and pursued life-long learning. They read books, newspapers, and magazines. They took classes at the neighborhood community center, and they were interested in history, nature, geography, etc. They had general knowledge, and they could help their children with their homework, at least until the high school years. Students who presented their parents as role models mentioned: "It is true. My father completed only two years in school. But you can't call him 'not educated.' He is the most educated person, with much more knowledge than I have, even though I will finish my M.A. this year. He taught himself music, math, everything by himself, with books and encyclopedias." These students admired their parents' love of learning: "My father loved to study. He used to take courses in the community center... and my mother

loves to read, she reads nonstop." These families read the newspaper on a daily basis and discussed current issues at dinnertime.

However, many parents could not serve as a role model for their children. They pointed out time and again that they wanted a different future for their children. They repeated the saying "Do not become me." They continually talked with their children about many aspects of their own life as bad and frustrating: their low income, their daily struggle, getting fired and being unemployed even though they wanted to work, not being able to get ahead, and most of all feeling frustrated at having missed their life opportunity: "See me, at my age, without a stable job, without being able to support you [his son and siblings] as I should."

Daily Expressions of the Importance of Education

Parental involvement in education, education as a first priority, and treatment of children who don't study are the three themes running through this subcategory. The first two indicate that education was one of the most significant elements of family life, and the third theme indirectly indicates its importance. The parents did not neglect the children who did not do well in school. The informants described endless efforts and discussions, arguments, quarrels, and sometimes even punishment, usually with respect to one of their brothers or sisters. The parents struggled both with the children and with the system, endeavoring that their children not drop out.

The informants elaborated after they were asked for more details and specifics in their answers. When such general adjectives as "important," "prioritized," "significant," and "central" were mentioned (mostly attached to "education") informants were asked for more specific information. Sometimes they were asked to link them to daily activities or behavior. Examples of daily habits with respect to homework, the learning environment at home, and parental involvement include: "I remember when I started high school, suddenly I met people who did their homework only in the evening. It surprised me. Homework should be done immediately when we get home from school"; "My mother knew every grade of every test"; "My mom always knew when I had a test…she always made sure that I would be well

prepared"; "Every day she [mom] sat with me and my sisters to help us with homework." Parents who could not help their children by themselves looked for and found other solutions: "He [dad] found a colleague that could help me with algebra and integrals." One expression of parental involvement had to do with choice of school. Religious families sent their children to secular schools because they were academically better. Children were sent to prestigious boarding schools and other children were driven to distant schools: "Every day my father woke me up at 5:00 am, and drove me an hour, so I could catch the bus to school. Then at 17:30 he would come to pick me up again. Day after day for years, and not only with me, he did the same with my younger brother." Most of these schools are semiprivate or private, and parents needed to pay tuition. The informants knew the low income of their parents, and wondered how they managed to pay their tuition: "It cost so much, and still he [father] paid, even though it was almost impossible with the day-to-day expenses."

Expressions indicating that education has been the first priority occurred both implicitly and explicitly. In an interview with a high-achieving young M.A. student, she told of an episode concerning her mother: "I was at 4th grade and it was raining like hell... I started to cry because I needed a book for my school, and my mom asked me to wait a few days for it... She saw my tears, and she doesn't have a car, and even though it was raining heavily, she simply went out and bought me that book." Financial priorities appeared in many of the stories: "I had huge gaps when I started high school. My mom paid a lot of money for tutoring, and believe me, I don't know where she got the money, we were so poor"; "I was never late with school payments and never felt bad—because no teacher used to come to me asking for a payment that was not paid on time"; "We didn't replace our sofa for 20 years and our washing machine for 16 years. But I always had money for school needs"; "For many things my parents told me 'we cannot afford it,' but for school and books there was always enough money." Parents bought books and encyclopedias even if they were illiterate, and sometimes even a computer, which was very expensive.

Some of the expressions were more relevant to the female informants. Many acknowledged the issues of housekeeping and marriage. They reported that they were not asked to help with any household activity, not even "to wash a cup," and that they were not expected to get married early, as most of their friends and neighbors were: "I wasn't pushed to get married young, as all of my friends from the neighborhood were. I was pushed to achieve higher education." All that was expected was that they do well in school. In some cases, the priority of education made parents refuse to accept competing activities, such as working during the afternoons or engaging in sports. Parents were proud of their children's achievements, mentioning it to many people. Students indicated that even today, when they are adults at the university, their parents kept expressing pride and happiness about their educational achievements.

<u>Interpersonal Relationships</u>

This category, which includes issues of relationships among family members, was assessed in all the interviews. It stressed the concept of sacrifice: parents gave up a lot, in many facets of life, for the benefit of their children. From the parents' point of view, the children were the center of attention, and their well-being took precedence over all else. The parents expressed firm belief in their children's abilities, at times opposing the school system. The first child to go out and study (usually the eldest, but not always) served as a role model for the younger siblings and helped the parents inculcate the importance of education. The children sought academic achievement out of respect and appreciation for their parents, and did not want to fail the parents. Interestingly enough is the appearance of sacrifice both from the perspective of *interpersonal relationships* and of *time horizon*, where parents sacrifice in the present for the sake of the future.

The interpersonal relationships category comprised two subcategories: Parent-child relationships and Sibling relationships.

Parent-Child Relationships

Aspects of the parent-child relationships were a significant motive in the data, including expressions of unconditional love, sacrifice, aspirations for the children, and belief in the children's ability. Love was "A frame that can be put on anything...it is a pattern... and it is my parents' triumph." Two complementary themes described the attitude of the parents toward their children: *child in the center* and *belief in child's abilities*. Parental behavior, especially with respect to emotional aspects regarding their children, indicated how much the parents loved, cared, and often sacrificed their own life for the sake of their children: "They [parents] gave everything they had"; "We [the children] have received all the attention in the world from both of them [mom and dad]. We felt that we are their world, and all that they had is us." Financially speaking it was the same: "Both my parents worked two jobs... they did not sleep at night... they borrowed money... and all of that for paying our schools and investing in us"; "I grew up being loved and cared for. A lot of emotional investment"; "All I can say is that my mom madly loved us." The informants experienced such dedicated love and sacrifice that they were not sure if they could love their own children the same way: "I know every parent loves his children, every parent is willing to invest in them, but the question is how much? And to what extent it is on your account... I look at myself; I don't think I will be able to do as much for them."

Parental belief in the child's abilities was expressed: "You will become the most beautiful butterfly, and you will spread your wings, and we will stand down here when you will fly to applause." This effect appeared in almost every student's story: "It was not an expectation, it was a prophecy"; parents repeated time and time again, "You will be...you will achieve." They did not doubt their children's abilities, and made them think that nothing was impossible: "[Mom told us] when you will be a doctor... when you will be an engineer"; "My mom always told me that she knows without a doubt that I will make it"; "To every child they [parents] attached an occupation that requires a higher education—my sister was to be the professor... they did not mention occupations such as policeman, which does not require a higher education." Even if the grades that the students achieved were not good, parents blamed

either the teachers or the system, but not the children: "My teachers in elementary school did not believe in me. But my parents did... they always defended me, helped me and believed in me"; "When I got a bad grade my mom told me that it's because this teacher cannot teach."

Two themes were identified in the children's attitude toward their parents: the desire to please their parents, and the respect the children had for their parents. The latter will be discussed as a theme in the *family values* category. The *need to please parents* is expressed through recognition of their parents' investment. The students felt a duty to fulfill their expectations, and their motivations were out of love and respect: "If my mom did so much for me, then I will change the world for her"; "I was the eldest, I did not want to disappoint them [the parents]"; "I am obligated to my parents, because they did so much for me."

Sibling Relationships

Making sure that the first child in the family will be a "good student" during K-12 and achieve high grades was not always easy. However, this first child (mostly the eldest, but not always) is presented as a role model for the other siblings. "My father was telling my younger brother 'look at your older brother, you will become like him in 10 years'." The students took their siblings' education issues into their own hands and helped their parents: "As the eldest, I am a part of the educational process at home." Even as postsecondary students, they continued to serve as a role model for their siblings: "Until today I support my younger brothers and sisters, I ensure that they study and succeed." In many cases, the first child's success served as a motivation: "I did not leave any choice for my brother, he had to follow my steps"; "My eldest sister broke the path for all of us."

Family Values

The third category in the breakthrough mechanism concerns the *family values* with which the children were raised. Unlike the other two categories, values were usually addressed explicitly by the interviewer, asking them to retrospectively describe the main values with which they were raised. Some

of the values included independence, honesty, responsibility, giving, caring, and having a choice.

However, three values appeared repeatedly in the interviews: *family solidarity, respect for parents*, and *achievement and ambition*.

Family solidarity was the main value ("The family should take care of the family"; "All of us [siblings] are attached to home"). This value touches on the theme of *child in the center*, according to which the children receive attention, love, and care: "We are very connected [family members], we help each other. For example, my brother wanted to travel before starting as an undergraduate, and he did not have the money, so I gave it to him." Parents supported this value: "My mom always said, all we have is one another, and that's it." Expressions of this value also included dinners and meetings on a regular basis. Furthermore, family solidarity enabled the members of the family to take a chance without being afraid of failure: "I feel there is a possibility to talk, to be together, to feel you have a family, to feel you are not detached and that there is always someone to take care of you...the feeling that there is always someone behind you encourages me to go out and try new things."

The second value was respect for parents. Sometimes this was directed to older siblings as well. Along with the warmth and sacrifice of parents, there is a significant sense of parental respect, even though the children top the family's priorities ("We never quarrel with our parents"). This respect was also presented through the *need to please parents* theme. Students mentioned how much they respected their parents for "The ability to make so much when having so little"; "Her [mom's] ability to maneuver with life...this woman [his mom] is like a rock... the whole world is on her shoulders"; "This confidence she inspires"; "I always say I have a very educated mom with 8 years of school."

The third value covers a group of values representing achievement, excellence, and ambition: "To succeed"; "It is important to succeed in everything that you choose to do, not only in school"; "Achievement is an absolute value"; "It is high inner criticism... it is already concealed in you that you have to prove yourself just a little bit more than others." And with all the efforts, the person himself is responsible for success: "If you will succeed, it will be thanks to your efforts, and if you will fail, you are

responsible also." The informants emphasized that they took an example from their parents: "To go to work [his mom], and come back, to clean, to shop...when you witness these things...you see how strong she is, and you can lean on her...that is why despair and giving up are simply not in my lexicon"; "She [his mom] did not have to say anything explicitly. It was expressed in actions...everyday to wake up at 5:00 am, to go to work, for 25 years, she raises 5 children, she falls and stands up and falls again and stands up again, and she never gave up, being consistent and responsible...I learned many things from her." Many times, the parents' ambition is blended with innocence and purity: "There is something in my mom that is so innocent and ambitious, where you do not see a wall, no walls, you do not see them, they simply do not exist... you see a place, you go there."

DISCUSSION

Previous analysis has often portrayed first-generation students as succeeding *despite* their family background. In contrast, the analysis reported here suggests that although they face many material challenges, the families of first-generation students are often a key resource, rather than a constraint. This analysis has investigated both the nature and the components of the underlying mechanism that permits breaking this cycle. The results indicate that the mechanism is contained within various aspects of family life, especially with respect to enormous parental investment during the formative years for the sake of a better future for their children. Another exceptional study found a positive relationship between parental involvement and educational aspirations of first-generation students. Its suggested implications for practice conclude: "The constructive inclusion of parents in the educational process may serve to not only boost students' aspirations but also to diminish the negative effect of college culture shock" (McCarron and Inkelas, 2006, p. 546).

The results also suggest the importance of the concept of family capital. The meaning of *capital* emphasizes the investment that is made for the benefit of future outcomes (Lin, 2001). Parents who invest in their children usually expect that future benefits will follow their investment. Becker and Tomes (1986) specified the underlying assumption of parents who invest in their children: "Parents care about the

economic capabilities and success of their children, and can influence their human capital and earnings by making expenditures on their skills, health, learning, motivation, 'credentials' and many other characteristics" (p. S5). Building on both the meaning of capital as an investment and on the social context of this research, family capital was chosen as the conceptual framework. However, family capital is here presented in a perspective different from its customary use in the literature. Typically, the term family capital appears as family-social capital and is perceived as a subset of the term social capital (e.g. Cohen, Ooms, and Hutchins, 1995; Parcel and Dufur, 2001). Sometimes it expresses the social capital found within the family unit, and in other cases the social capital that a family unit "owns." In other words, family capital may express the social links among family members, sometimes the social relationships of a family, and sometimes the accumulation of human and cultural capital within the family.

The current study offers the following definition of family capital: "The ensemble of means, strategies, and resources embodied in the family's way of life that influences the future of the children. Family capital is implicitly and explicitly reflected through behavior, emotional processes, and core values." This definition implies that each family has family capital. Furthermore, according to this definition, family capital is generic and can be used in a variety of contexts: family capital of immigrants, family capital of single-parent families, family capital of large households, etc. This definition does not refer to the consequences of family capital or to its magnitude. The quality, normative standing, consequences, and magnitude of family capital may only be determined within a well-defined context. In order to determine whether it is positive or negative, one must declare a pursued value according to which an aspect of family capital will be evaluated. In this context, family capital directs the children to acquire a higher education and so gain upward mobility. In this manner, family capital distinguishes these exceptional families from other low SES families who have not succeeded in breaking the intergenerational cycle.

The different categories that compose family capital here, with their subcategories and themes, accord with findings of other research. The importance of time horizon, for example, supports the findings of Banfield's (1947, 1958) studies with respect to poverty and time perspective, which introduced a new dimension to the definition of poverty. Poverty and low SES are usually perceived and measured by means of economic concepts. However, poverty can also be perceived along a psychological dimension. Following Banfield, those who live their life according to a long-term perspective and invest in the future are not poor; only people who are short-term-oriented are poor. Banfield's studies of poor families find that the rule according to which poor families live is: "Maximize the material, short-run advantage of the nuclear family" (Banfield, 1958, p. 83). From one perspective, the findings of the research reported here support his argument by pointing out the central importance of families acting according to a long-term perspective, by exerting a consistent effort to benefit the children's education. Even though their interest is still in the nuclear family and not in the community, it is directed toward the distant future.

The parents' time horizon is strongly attached to their interest in the children's education. They want their children to have a better future, and they are aware of the fact that education, which is a long-term investment, is the key to that future. This accords with the concepts of life story and life scenario. Life story involves the past: "incorporates past events into an organized sequence giving them a personal meaning and a sense of continuity" (Whitbourne, 1985, p. 595). Life scenario, as opposed to life story, involves the future: "Life scenario consists of expectations about the future" (Whitbourne, 1985, p. 595). One of the dominant motives of the parents' life scenario is the higher education of their children and their success. Future vision and future expectations are the main motive in the students' stories regarding their parents.

One of the prominent expressions of the importance of education was the parental effort to send the children to a better school than one in the neighborhood. Those parents understand the importance of "good schools," with respect both to teachers and peer groups. By exposing their offspring to a better

educational environment, parents provided their children with a "bridging" social capital that will help them to get ahead, and moved them away from the poor neighborhood's "bonding" social capital that only enables them to "get by."

Building on Weber's (1949) approach of an ideal type, two different types of families succeed in breaking the intergenerational cycle. One type is *make a dream come true*, where one of the parents perceives his or her life as a missed opportunity and the education of the children as an opportunity to make his or her own dream come true. This parent serves as a role model for the offspring, either by continuous self-learning or by acquiring informal education over the years. The second type of family is *do not become me*, where both parents perceive education as a key path out of poverty. In these families a continuous discourse occurred between parents and siblings with respect to the role of education. Parents did not serve as a role model; however, they shared the wish for their children to have a better life than their own, emphasizing their inferior jobs, their difficulty in earning money and in holding a steady job.

Patterns in both types of families are consistent with the well-studied behavior of parental involvement and its linkage to children's academic achievement. Parental involvement suggests an approach of joint responsibility and calls for cooperation between parents and school with respect to children's academic achievement (Epstein, 1992). This concept is widespread in research regarding the family's influence on the academic achievements of children, relating to a wide range of operative aspects of each one of two variables, parental involvement and academic achievement. It is generally agreed that parental involvement has a positive effect on children's academic achievements (Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, McPartland, Mood, Weinfeld, and York, 1996; Fan and Chen, 2001; Finn, 1993; Haveman, and Wolfe, 1994; Henderson and Berla, 1994). On the other hand, intervention programs to increase family involvement in homework do not result with increasing the academic achievements (e.g., Balli, Demo, and Wedmen, 1998). Parental aspirations and expectations for their children appear to be the most significant factor in children's success in the K-12 years (e.g., Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, and Pastorelli, 1996; Sewell and Hauser, 1980), particularly within minorities and disadvantaged groups

(Buchmann and Dalton, 2002; Hanson, 1994; Hao and Bonstead-Bruns, 1998). The effect of parental aspiration has recently been shown to be linked to the aspiration of postsecondary education students as well (McCarron and Inkelas, 2006).

Education can be viewed as a framing value in these first-generation families. A value is a principle that dictates the order of priorities, and it expresses one's perspective on the worth of an object. Value, according to the common perception, is not objective; nor is it the essence of an object. Value is subjective and is driven by one's circumstances. Family solidarity, respect, and ambition are the three main values according to which these students were raised. Family solidarity and respect relate to the inner life of the family, whereas ambition and aspiration relate to the world outside. Simultaneously, parents put their children first among the family's priorities, and expect them to succeed in their studies. The parents deeply believed in their children's abilities, and intensely expressed their belief. This observation is crucial because aspiration, ambition, and high motivations are known to have an important effect on one's educational achievements (Lipset and Bendix, 1962). Moreover, personal beliefs are "more fundamental than the actual skills and circumstances they represent in the sense that they can motivate people to create opportunities and acquire capabilities they do not yet possess" (Ford, 1992, p. 124).

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND POLICY

Most of the prevailing research on educational mobility focuses on the persistence of the intergenerational cycle and the link between the SES of the parents and the SES of their children. A different perspective is offered by the family resilience approach, which studies the strength of families among those of low SES. However, family resilience research stresses the family's ability to succeed in overcoming adverse circumstances. That approach perceives the family as reacting to circumstances, and does not fully account for the influence of the family's habits, priorities, belief system, and lifestyle, especially with respect to its influence over its children's future. This study takes a different approach by

recognizing the ability of a family to take the future of its members into its own hands and capitalize on nonmaterial resources.

Many policies and intervention programs have been implemented to narrow inequality in education. Whereas most education reform efforts target individuals—students, teachers and parents, or school programs—the findings of this study suggest that these approaches may be misdirected. Whereas the family is the context in which the accumulation and use of capital is most essential for the advancement of young persons, a better strategy might be directed at relations within and among families, between families and schools, and otherwise placing the family at the center of reform efforts.

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