

COLLEGE DROPOUTS: AN ANALYSIS OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING
AND ATTITUDES OF VARIOUS EDUCATIONAL GROUPS

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Angus Campbell, in The Sense of Well-Being in America (1981) found that those who attended college but did not complete a four-year college program had higher levels of dissatisfaction with their education, their jobs, and themselves than either high school graduates who never attended college or college graduates. He credited this distress to a gap between aspirations and expectations or actual attainments (Campbell, 1981, pp. 60-63, 118-119, 216-217, 242). He observed:

The case of those people who went to college but did not complete a degree is particularly interesting. Many of them must have gone with hopes of completing a four-year degree. Their college experience might be expected to strengthen their aspirations to the occupational, economic, and social goals they see associated with a college degree. When for whatever reason they drop out of college, they are left with a particularly acute sense of falling short of their goal and the attendant feelings of dissatisfaction. (pp. 61-62)

They (those with a partial college education) have been exposed to a long period of formal education which must have broadened their perceptions of occupational options and raised their job aspirations. Relatively few of these men will be able to enter the professions or other prestigious occupations, however, and this is likely to leave them in the situation of achieving considerably less than they aspire to. (p. 119)

Campbell did not single out how college dropouts did on other satisfactions and related items but it appears that he did not find a similar pattern on satisfaction with the United States, marital happiness, or family satisfaction and the associations with happiness and satisfaction with friends are not discussed.

We attempted to replicate and extend Campbell's work on the psychological strain caused by dropping out of college by using the General Social Surveys, 1972-1980. The General Social Surveys are eight independent cross-sections of the adult, noninstitutional population of the contiguous United States. The data were collected by the National Opinion Research Center and funded by the National Science Foundation. The merged or cumulative data set

is employed in this analysis. We created seven educational groups: (1) less than high school education, (2) high school graduates with no college, (3) high school graduates with some college but no college degrees, (4) associate degree holders, (5) bachelor degree holders, (6) bachelor degree holders with five or more years of college but no graduate degree, and (7) graduate degree holders. The third group in our categorization probably corresponds most closely to Campbell's college dropouts although we can not tell how he treated those with associate degrees. Our sixth group, roughly graduate dropouts, are a second group that might be expected to suffer similar psychological distress as the undergraduate dropouts focused on by Campbell. To measure the psychological well-being and socio-psychological attitudes of each educational group, we used one measure of global well-being, general happiness (HAPPY), and one conditional measure, marital happiness (HAPMAR). Satisfaction on six life domains, friends (SATFRND), family (SATFAM), leisure time (SATHOBBY), local community (SATCITY), personal finances (SATFIN), and occupation (SATJOB) were used. In addition, a second measure of job satisfaction, willing to continue working is financially independent (RICHWORK), was also employed. Also, three anomia items from the Srole scale were used: believing the lot of the common man was getting worse (ANOMIA5), concern about having children given state of the world (ANOMIA6), and alienation towards government officials (ANOMIA7). To tap attitudes towards the educational system, we had a rating of confidence in the people running education (CONEDUC) and an item concerning whether educational spending should be increased, decreased, or maintained (NATEDUC). These measures cover approximately the same domains that Campbell reported on, satisfaction with job, self, and own education, and related areas.

The evidence in Table 1 shows little support for Campbell's description of college dropouts as psychologically distressed. In 10 of 15 instances there's a monotonic increase from high school graduates to undergraduate dropouts to holders of four-year degrees. Two satisfaction items, family and friends, show the predicted dip but Campbell had not reported such associations for these domains. Neither of our job satisfaction measures showed lower contentment as reported. Nor is there evidence of lower self-satisfaction from the anomia and well-being measures.

Confidence in educational leaders was less for college dropouts but the differences were quite small. In addition, the data suggest a curvilinear association between confidence and educational level which would mean that the lower level of confidence was not actually out of line. Spending for education also shows some irregularity with support for more spending being higher for college dropouts.¹ Finally, one item, general happiness, showed the same level of happiness for high school graduates and undergraduate dropouts, with higher happiness for those with college degrees. In sum, the data show little support for Campbell's hypothesis of the distressed college dropout. Most items show no disjuncture and where a higher level of distress or dissatisfaction is indicated, the differences are usually quite modest. A one-way analysis of variance showed only four items deviated significantly from linearity (and two of these still have monotonic relationships) and the average percent of explained variance due to non-linearity ($\eta^2 - r^2 / \eta^2$) was only 25 percent. Overall, averaging across the 13 well-being, satisfaction, and socio-psychological items, the mean proportion with positive responses increases steadily from .362 for those with less than high school to .422 for

¹Previous research indicates that those with low confidence tended to consist to two distinct types: those favoring more spending and those favoring less spending (Smith, 1981).

high school graduates, .454 for undergraduate dropouts, .478 for associate degrees, and .511 for bachelor degrees.

Among graduate dropouts, however, we observe a clear disjuncture similar to that which Campbell described for college dropouts. On only two of our 15 measures do monotonic relationships appear between bachelors, graduate dropouts, and graduate degree holders. In addition, many of the decreases are quite pronounced. Job satisfaction is 4.5 percentage points below bachelors and 17.5 percentage points below graduate degree holders. Anomia on two of the three measures is 9 to 17 percentage points higher. Confidence in education is off by 7 to 10 percentage points. The analysis of variance showed seven significant deviations from linearity with the mean explained variance due to non-linearity of 64 percent. Overall, among the 13 social-psychological measures the mean positive responses average .511 for bachelor degrees, .482 for graduate dropouts, and .542 for graduate degree holders.

Even among the graduate dropouts we found variation from Campbell's suggestion that the distress came from the inability of dropouts to achieve as much material and status rewards. It is true that the college and graduate dropouts are not able to obtain as much rewards as those who completed their educational programs, but they do obtain more rewards than those who never entered college or graduate school. Both occupational prestige and family income increases monotonically across educational groups. The mean Hodge-Siegel-Rossi occupational prestige score rises from 30.9 among those with less than a high school education to 37.6, 42.5, 45.6, 51.8, 53.7, and 60.6 among those with graduate degrees. The family income level (gross income coded into 12 categories from less than \$1,000 to \$25,000+) rises from 6.4 to 8.6, 8.8, 9.2, 9.6, 9.7, and 10.2. Psychologically these partial gains may not be enough, of course, if aspirations were raised to the next degree level while

attainment, while increasing, did not match the anticipated level. But we see that there are definite increases in status and income associated with partial college and graduate education.

We are left with the problem of explaining why distress is evident for graduate dropouts but not for their undergraduate counterparts.² We speculate that the sense of failure might be greater and more enduring among graduate dropouts. For many, a bachelor's degree was perhaps only an educational goal with no definite and direct association to a specific career. In addition, most careers open by a bachelor's degree would be obtainable by those with a partial college education. Many of those entering graduate or professional school probably had a very narrow career goal (doctor, lawyer, professor, etc.) that could not be obtained without completion of the graduate program. This failure would cause a permanent career detour. Even years later a person might regret not having been able to follow his original career path and this might well show up in greater dissatisfaction with many domains of life, more anomia, and a lack of confidence in the educational establishment.

While we found little support for Campbell's observation that undergraduate dropouts suffer general distress, we found strong evidence that such a process was operating among graduate dropouts. We believe that this condition prevails among the later because the failure is likely to have a more direct and enduring impact on careers. Aspirations for specific careers were set by the graduate school level and many of these careers could not be followed without completion of a graduate-level program. The result of this career blockage appears to be lower psychological well-being, more anomia, and less confidence in leaders of education.

²We checked to see if many of the dropouts, especially at the graduate level, were still students. Only a few were and the level was similar for each college level education group.

TABLE 1

SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATIONS AND ASSESSMENTS OF EDUCATION BY LEVEL OF SCHOOLING

Item	Level of Schooling						
	Less than High School	High School Graduate	Some College No Degree	Associate Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Bachelor's with 5 or More Years of College; No Graduate Degree	Graduate Degree
<u>Proportion:</u>							
HAPPY (Very) ....	.317	.349	.349	.395	.375	.357	.402
HAPMAR (Very) ...	.629	.684	.697	.693	.714	.754	.694
SATJOB (Very) ...	.474	.493	.500	.550	.510	.465	.640
RICHWORK (Stay) .	.638	.670	.737	.757	.783	.818	.829
SATFIN (Sat.) ...	.307	.304	.305	.297	.388	.330	.416
SATFAM							
(Very great) ..	.375	.447	.415	.430	.481	.414	.467
SATCITY							
(Very great) ..	.232	.198	.187	.185	.171	.167	.198
SATHOBBY							
(Very great) ..	.203	.250	.281	.288	.294	.304	.303
SATFRND							
(Very great) ..	.274	.324	.315	.360	.342	.289	.323
LIFE							
(Exciting) ....	.321	.431	.572	.601	.630	.640	.680
ANOMIA5							
(Disagree) ....	.281	.390	.458	.514	.611	.478	.652
ANOMIA6							
(Disagree) ....	.412	.608	.701	.770	.839	.829	.872
ANOMIA7							
(Disagree) ....	.247	.341	.383	.378	.506	.420	.563
NATEDUC							
(Too little) ..	.476	.519	.571	.633	.540	.620	.581
(About right) .	.407	.388	.338	.275	.344	.290	.319
CONEDUC							
(Great deal) ..	.426	.350	.326	.291	.328	.256	.357
N	2250-4194	2531-4100	971-1830	137-238	539-902	126-230	320-503

SOURCE: Cumulative 1972-1978, 1980 GSS.

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