

## Book Review

Ardoin, S. (2018). *College aspirations and access in working-class communities: The mixed signals, challenges, and new language first-generation students encounter*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

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To what degree do rural students in the United States aspire to higher education? What barriers do rural students experience in their journey to a four-year degree? How does geography and first-generation status interact during a rural student’s college choice? Sonja Ardoin’s *College Aspirations and Access in Working-Class Rural Communities* provides a new and unique case study to provide some answers to these questions through the voices of high school students and their counselor at MapDot High School (pseudonym).

The book provides a descriptive case study of rural students, specifically first-generation rural students, seeking higher education. Ardoin describes a variety of barriers for rural students, including geographic distance, cultural capital, and university jargon. The focus on university jargon is especially noteworthy, as the current work is one of the first to formally identify university jargon as a barrier to college access for rural students.

In this study, Ardoin interviewed eight 10th-grade students and observed college counseling sessions with two high school counselors. She applied a descriptive case study method, using a multiple case study model. Each individual participant was considered a case to be studied separately and to be compared to other cases. Ardoin presents the analysis with only three participants, however; the identities of the students were synthesized into two new personas to represent the students and one new persona to represent the counselor. The purpose of this synthesis is to conceal the identity of the research participants.

Unfortunately, the choice to combine the identities of participants is a major concern for this book. Ardoin states

that the method used for this study is the comparative case study, but she chooses to combine the identity of the participants into three individuals, which limits the individuality of each participant’s experience. The author combines one White female, two Black females, one biracial female, three White males, and one Black male into two student participants: a 15-year-old Black female and a 16-year-old White male. If this project was to be a multiple case study, the insights brought about by comparing the experiences of these students is lost. Moreover, the methodology for the study that comprises this book consists of only four pages in the introduction. As readers, we need more information about the length of interviews, what a typical observation looked like, and what documents were analyzed during the data analysis process.

The book is divided into seven chapters—excluding the introduction, which provides a brief overview of the study and the methodology. The first chapter serves as an extended introduction to the study, describing the research site and participants. The second and third chapters provide a literature review and an overview of the conceptual framework employed by Ardoin. Chapters four, five, and six present the findings section of the study.

In Chapter Four, Ardoin explores rural attitudes about college by exploring the habitus of the research site through the lens of the research participants. The author’s exploration of the contradictory views of education was particularly interesting, as students were told they should attend college but received communication that if they were to further their education, they would become a cultural “other”: “the rural students were also cognizant that people who did not attend and/or graduate from college often had to deal with the community viewing them as elite or ‘too good’ for their home area” (Ardoin, 2018, p. 35). Indeed, further education beyond high school would likely result in employment beyond the rural community. This phenomenon is well documented in rural education literature (Corbett, 2007; Sherman & Sage, 2011; Ticken, 2016; Wright, 2012).

What separates Ardoin’s (2018) work is the attitude of the community being examined. Sherman and Sage’s

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(2011) piece on brain drain assessed a rural area in Northern California that recently experienced a labor exodus as a result of natural resource extraction. The residents in Sherman and Sage's study were skeptical yet encouraging of higher education with the hope that some would return. Ardoin's (2018) book captures the pessimism of the counselor's view of the area parents: "we have many parents that don't value education at all and won't sacrifice to help their kids get to school" (p. 34). The economic realities of MapDot could help explain this ambivalence towards education, as Ardoin lists typical job paths in the region that include at least five low-skill labor positions. More positive views of education were found in communities with economic difficulties (Corbett, 2009; Tiken, 2016).

The fifth chapter argues that university jargon is an understudied but important barrier to college access for rural students. With less access to adults with a bachelor's degree, Ardoin argues, the cultural capital that rural students leverage does not equate with the cultural capital of colleges and universities. In one example, Ardoin explains that students in her study were overconfident about the information they had about college; the participants believed that non-rural students with whom they were competing with for admission had the same level of understanding of the college-going process as they did. As urban and suburban students have more access to adults with college experience, it is likely that the participants' overconfidence was misguided. The findings of the study conclude in Chapter Six, where the author focuses on the experiences of high school counselors. This chapter briefly discusses the increasing workload of the school counselor position.

Many of the issues discussed in the book would pertain to both rural and non-rural secondary institutions. At the current study's research site, geography poses additional barriers that are specifically rural. In the conclusion of the book, Ardoin discusses one policy decision that made a tremendous impact on rural students: a State Board of Education decision which allowed for the outsourcing of school counseling duties instead of having a full-time school counselor on staff. While not all rural schools have a lower percentage of college-educated adults, fewer rural students complete a bachelor's degree than urban or suburban students nationally (Brown & Schafft, 2011; Byun, Meece, & Irvin, 2012; Byun, Meece, Irvin, & Hutchins, 2012). With fewer school counselors and college-educated adults in the community, a barrier to college emerges for rural students.

The greatest strength of the book is the exhaustive nature of its exploration of rural students in one city in the southeastern United States. The author sought high transferability for her study and was successful by ensuring data triangulation, exploring the culture and demographics of the town, and understanding the experiences of rural students in their own words. Unfortunately, the depth of

the exploration of the specific context of MapDot and its students is hindered by the consolidation of the research participants, the challenge of which is discussed in detail below.

The discussion of university jargon is another strength of Ardoin's book. University jargon is discussed in studies of rural student college access, but often without formally using the term (Means, Clayton, Conzelmann, Baynes, & Umbach, 2016; Nelson, 2016). For example, Nelson's (2016) analysis of rural student social capital found that students were engaging in collaborative or student-driven application processes. Students who collaborated with parents received help with the technical aspects of their application process, such as planning college visits, filling out paperwork, and conducting research. Rural students who engaged in a student-driven process did not receive technical assistance from home and sought out community members, family friends, and peers. Ultimately, rural students who engaged in a student-driven process struggled with understanding the college application process. Although Nelson's piece never mentions jargon by name, it is possible that the participants struggled with university-specific terminology, but its inclusion was omitted from the data collection instrument.

In another example, Means and colleagues (2016) found that African American rural students seeking college had limited knowledge about the financial aid available to them through the government or college financial aid offices. The study mentions terms Ardoin considers "jargon," such as FAFSA, grants, and fees, but does not use the term "jargon" to describe them. New terms, like jargon, can permeate academic discourse; individuals who work in college and university admissions offices might benefit from understanding the need to demystify institutional jargon.

As noted above, the choice to combine the identities of participants was a risk that, unfortunately, did not pay off. Since the election of Donald Trump in 2016, scholars have worked to debunk the myth of the rural monolith and have rejected outright works of popular culture, such as Vance's (2016) *Hillbilly Elegy* (Harkins & McCarroll, 2019; Howley & Howley, 2018; Peine & Schafft, 2018; Sexton, 2017). Today, there is a greater need for multiple rural voices; Ardoin's work reduces the number of those voices, especially minoritized voices. It appears that the methodological decisions were well intentioned, as the design includes thick description of the research site and includes the use of multiple data sources. In addition to interviews, the author conducted observations, engaged in document analysis, reviewed field notes, and kept a self-reflective journal. The study would have benefitted, however, from a further exploration of each of the participants.

Overall, Ardoin's book provides a solid contribution to the field of rural education access. Specifically, the focus on

university jargon as a barrier to college for rural students provides the academy with a new perspective to assess barriers that are difficult for rural scholars and rural students to ascertain. Policymakers, education scholars, and college admissions staff would all benefit from reading this book. This book clearly defines a need for the demystification of university jargon; policymakers could compel public universities to provide more outreach opportunities for prospective rural students. For education scholars, this book provides an additional case study for comparison to other research sites. College admissions representatives should read this book to better understand the unique barriers to higher education for rural students.

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