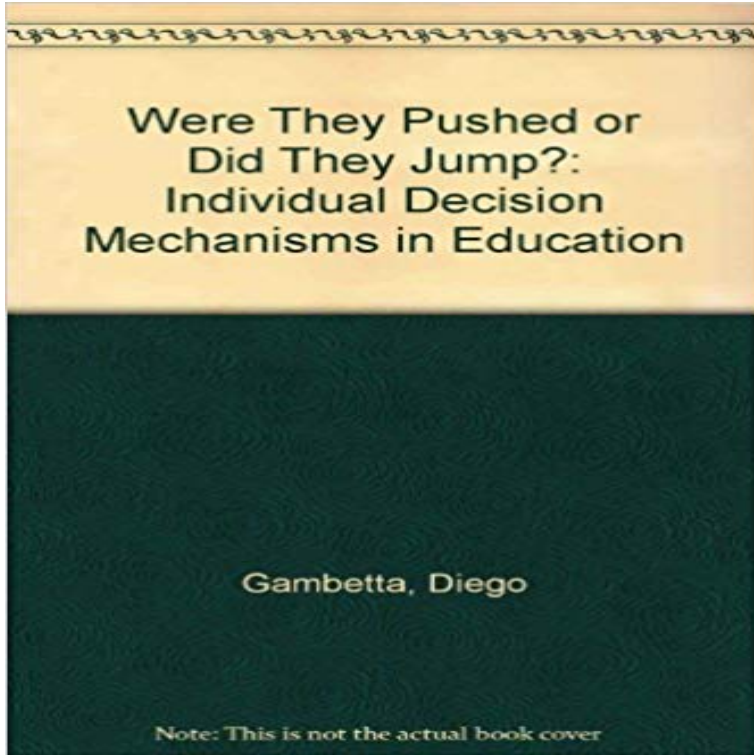


Were They Pushed or Did They Jump?: Individual Decision Mechanisms in Education



Educational choices must be made by virtually everyone growing up in industrial societies. These choices are made during the teen years, at a time when personal preferences are unstable and there is little past experience to draw upon; once they have been made there is no easy going back on these choices. Diego Gambetta offers an exploration of the mechanisms that influence educational decisions between compulsory school and university. Gambetta tests two fundamental and opposed explanations which he applies to the study of educational and other personal choices. One approach holds that individuals are essentially passive, either constrained by a lack of alternatives or pushed by factors the decision-makers are unaware of. The other approach regards individuals as capable of purposive action, able to weigh the available alternatives against the prospect of future rewards. Applying statistical models to two surveys conducted in north-west Italy, Gambetta provides an assessment of the specific effects of a various factors on educational decision-making: family economic and cultural capital, previous academic achievements, labour-market prospects and personal aspirations. From this analysis emerges a more realistic approach to individual decision-making that brushes aside either extreme. The author concludes that rational adaptation is the predominant operating mechanism in making choices, but that it generates different effects depending on class-related values and personal preferences.

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