

Jeremy Fiel (2015). **Different Sides of the Track, or Different Tracks? Socioeconomic Disparities in Processes of Development and Educational Attainment**

Abstract

Most educational stratification research treats social background as an indirect influence operating through disparities in factors that more directly affect educational outcomes. Children from disparate backgrounds are born on “different sides of the track,” with unequal opportunities to acquire what it takes to succeed. I argue that social background also modifies the attainment process, as the contexts of children from disparate backgrounds alter the ways they develop important skills and transform them into educational success. Children from unequal backgrounds are thus born on “different tracks,” facing distinct routes to educational success.

Analyses of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Child and Young Adult cohorts (NLSCYA) indicate that early skill development has stronger effects on long-term educational achievements such as high school grades and college completion among more socioeconomically advantaged youth. This appears due to the fact that early skills are better reinforced by complementary investments in more advantaged homes.

Additional analyses link these differences to ways SES modifies within-family developmental dynamics. Disadvantaged families invest more in developmentally advanced than less advanced children in early childhood, while advantaged families invest more equally across children. Such dynamics may exacerbate socioeconomic inequality among children who face early developmentally challenges. As children mature, these differences either disappear or reverse, reinforcing socioeconomic disparities among more skilled children.

Decomposition analyses using these same data trace a substantial degree of inequality in educational outcomes to the fact that high-SES children not only have more of the skills, resources, and experiences that promote educational success, but also derive greater benefits from these factors. The same holds in an experimental analysis of a social capital-building developmental intervention, which primarily benefitted the most socioeconomically advantaged families and children in the study.

In sum, efforts to understand and address intergenerational inequality must account for the fact that socioeconomic disparities between families alter integral aspects of the processes that shape children’s developmental and educational trajectories. Whether the goal is to promote upward mobility, reduce inequality, or make educational and developmental interventions more efficient or effective, it is important to consider how socioeconomic background modifies children’s environments and experiences.