

McCarty, Alyn. (2014). **Parent Social Networks, Mental Health, and Educational Disadvantage of Children in Poverty**

Abstract

This dissertation evaluates the promise of parent social networks and the social capital within them for reducing social class inequality in early child development. I use quasi-experimental and experimental methods to estimate the effect of enriching parent social networks via family engagement programs on child outcomes. First, I estimate a multi-level model of the causal effect of one property of parent social networks, intergenerational closure, on child development for a nationally representative sample of 1st graders. To address potential confounding and selection bias, I develop a theoretically motivated propensity score model predicting parents' levels of intergenerational closure, operationalized as how many of their child's classmates' parents that they know. I find that intergenerational closure has a causal effect on some aspects of child development. Second, I explore whether family engagement programs promote parent social capital, including intergenerational closure, for parents of first graders in a sample of 52 high poverty, majority Hispanic schools enrolled in a randomized field experiment of Families and Schools Together (FAST), a popular family engagement program. I show that FAST successfully builds social capital, though a complex pattern emerges that has contradictory implications for the distribution of social capital: on the one hand, the program successfully engages and builds social capital the most for families that are initially socially isolated. However, the program effects are largest in school communities that have large, strong parent networks to draw upon. Finally, I combine statistical parameters to simulate alternative counterfactual scenarios involving the potential effects of family engagement programs on social class inequality in children's early mental health and academic skills. I show that implementing FAST in schools would do little to improve child outcomes generally and its impact on social class inequality would be negligible, even if the program targeted high poverty schools. Although the impact of FAST on intergenerational closure is larger than average differences between middle class, working class, and poor families in levels of intergenerational closure, the impact is not large enough to benefit children in a meaningful way. However, a larger increase in intergenerational closure could have significant benefits for children.