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Diverging Development: The Not-So-Invisible Hand of Social Class in the United States

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The advantages and disadvantages associated with social class position build up over time, creating huge developmental differences in the course of growing up. This chapter discusses how development is shaped by social class position and, how the processes associated with class position are either mitigated or amplified over the early part of the life course. By early adulthood, gaping disparities exist between children growing up in disadvantaged and advantaged families. I discuss how these trajectories pose special problems for less advantaged youth making the transition to adulthood due to the need for resources to pay for higher education.

America has never been a class-conscious society by the standards of the rest of the world. The notion that social class determines a person's life chances has always been anathema to this country's democratic ideology. Some of the earliest observers of American society, most notably Alexis de Tocqueville,¹ noted the disdain among American citizens for class distinctions compared with the acceptance of stratification in France or the rest of Europe. Although social class was far more prominent and salient in the United States when Tocqueville visited in the 1830s than it is today, from the country's very inception, the seemingly boundless possibilities of land ownership and the ideology of upward mobility softened its contours. The idea that any American by dint of good character and hard work could rise up the social ladder has long been celebrated, no more clearly than in the great American myth of Horatio Alger. That "rags to riches"

parable instructed young men—and it was men—how to make their fortunes in nineteenth-century America.

Curiously, the United States, long regarded as the land of opportunity, has never entirely lived up to its billing. Studies comparing social mobility in the United States with that in our Western counterparts have failed to demonstrate that social mobility is higher here than in other industrialized nations.² Yet, Americans seem as oblivious to class gradations today as they have ever been. Most of us declare that we are middle class, and finer distinctions such as working class and upper middle class have all but vanished in the popular vernacular and even in social science research. Yet, as the salience of social class has declined during the past several decades, we have witnessed a huge rise in economic inequality.³

When I was entering academic sociology more than four decades ago, the social world was described very differently than it is today. Even while recognizing the muted notions of social class held by most Americans, social scientists were keenly attentive to, if not obsessed with, distinctions in values, lifestyle, and social practices that were inculcated in the family and linked to social mobility.⁴ Indeed, the idea that parents in different social strata deliberately or unintentionally shaped their children's ambitions, goals, and habits, which in turn affected their chances of moving up the social ladder, was widely supported by a large body of literature in psychology, sociology, and economics. These studies showed how families at different rungs on the social ladder held distinctive worldviews and adhered to different ideas of development.⁵ Most of all, social scientists believed that life chances were highly constrained by values and skills acquired in the family and by the structures of opportunity in the child's immediate environment that shaped his (and it usually was his) chances of economic success. Fine gradations of social class could be linked to virtually everything from toilet training to marriage practices.⁶

Social class, not so long ago the most powerful analytic category in the researcher's conceptual toolbox, has now been largely eclipsed by an emphasis on gender, race, and ethnicity. Socioeconomic status has been reduced to a variable, mostly one that is often statistically controlled, to permit researchers to focus on the effect of determinants other than social class. With relatively few exceptions, we have stopped measuring altogether the finer grade distinctions of growing up with differing resources. True, we continue to look at poverty and economic disadvantage with no less interest than before, and we certainly understand that affluence and education make a huge difference. Yet, most developmentalists view economic status as a continuum that defies qualitatively finer breakdowns. Consequently, working-class, lower-middle-class families, or even families in the middle of the income distribution are concealed rather than revealed by combining income, education, and occupation, without regard to the particulars of

status combinations.⁷ In short, the idea of social class has largely been collapsed into rich and poor, marked by education and earnings—above and below the poverty line. Think of the way we currently treat “single-parent families” as an example. They have become almost a proxy for poverty rather than a category of families that experience life differently than their two-parent counterparts do.

The contention that contemporary developmental research downplays the influence of social class in no way is meant to imply that professional attention to gender or race or ethnicity is unwarranted or should be diminished. Without a firm grasp of social class differences in contemporary America and how they affect men and women and people of different races and ethnicities, however, much of the current research on gender and ethnicity may not give us a full understanding of how the two shape social reality and social opportunities. Just as we have come to recognize the hazards of lumping together all Hispanics or Asians, I would suggest we need a more nuanced understanding of how individuals’ levels of education, occupation, and income alter and shape their worldview and life course.

In this essay, I outline a research agenda for examining social class in greater detail. Beginning with a brief discussion of developmental theories, I point to some of the methodological obstacles to studying social class that must be attended to. Then I turn to developmental processes that expose research questions that warrant greater attention by social scientists, particularly developmental sociologists and psychologists. My work nicely complements observations put forth by Sara McLanahan⁸ in her 2004 Presidential Address to the Population Association of America on inequality and children’s development, although my attention is devoted primarily to how developmental *processes* are shaped by stratification. I examine a series of natural occurrences associated with social class that work in tandem to fashion a developmental course for children from birth to maturity that is pervasive, persistent, and far more powerful in the United States than Americans generally like to acknowledge.

SOCIAL CLASS: A PROBLEMATIC CONSTRUCT

One reason why attention to social class has faded can be traced to the academic controversies surrounding the very idea that social classes exist in this country. If what is meant by a social class system is a tightly bounded and largely closed hierarchical set of social strata that determines the life chances of its members, then surely most social scientists would agree that America is a classless society. But social class has been used in a different way to mark the structure of economic and social opportunities affecting individuals’ behaviors and beliefs, networks

and associations, and, ultimately, knowledge about and access to social institutions such as the family, education, and the labor market.

Viewed in this way, social classes are not tightly bounded categories; they are fuzzy sets created by experience and exposure to learning opportunities and selective social contacts that derive from resources that can be marshaled by individuals and their kinship networks. In this respect, the fuzzy nature of social class appears to differ from the constructs of gender or ethnicity, although in truth both of these constructs, too, have been appropriately critiqued as “socially constructed” statuses and are not naturally unambiguous. Still, there are no certain markers that identify individuals as belonging to one class or another; social class is probabilistically constructed and measured by constellations of economic and social opportunities. Thus, we might say that someone who has low education and works at a menial job that pays poorly is lower class, a term that admittedly has become virtually taboo in the United States. Nonetheless, we easily recognize that those possessing these attributes are more socially isolated, excluded from mainstream institutions, and limited in their access to mobility than their better educated and better paid counterparts. Whether we refer to such individuals as lower class, poor, disadvantaged, or socially excluded, we must still admit that their opportunities for advancement during their own lifetime or their ability to confer such opportunities to their children are far more restricted than the opportunities of their more advantaged counterparts—a classic example of a class-based world.

I will dodge the question in this paper of whether it makes sense to identify a particular number of social strata such as was common in social science a generation ago, designating four, five, or seven classes that possessed different family practices, values and beliefs, or lifestyles and cultural habits.⁹ Instead, I merely want to observe how the neglect of social class has created a void in attention by developmentalists to how stratification structures the first several decades of life. I refer to “several decades” because toward the end of this paper, I report on what my colleagues and I on the MacArthur Network on Transitions to Adulthood¹⁰ have learned about how social class shapes the transition to adulthood in myriad ways that have profound implications for the future of American society.

A DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY OF SOCIAL CLASS

Human development involves an ongoing interaction between individual-level biological potential and social processes shaped by children’s multiple and changing social environments. Sometimes developmentalists make distinctions between maturation, regulated in part by biology, and socially arranged learning

through institutions such as the family or school, the process that we generally refer to as socialization. One of the important legacies of late-twentieth-century developmental science was to put an end to the fruitless and misleading debate between nature and nurture. Researchers reoriented theories designed to explore ongoing interactions from birth to maturity in varying and often nested contexts—families, child-care settings, schools, communities, and the like—to investigate how social context afforded or denied opportunities for optimal development. In doing so, they understood that optimal development can vary both by children's innate abilities or biologically influenced capacities and by their varying exposure to learning environments. Indeed, it is the ongoing interaction between biology and environment that shapes the course of a child's development.

No one understood this scheme better or promoted it with more vigor than Urie Bronfenbrenner,¹¹ who, as it happens, was one of the pioneers in psychology to examine the influence of social class on children's development. Bronfenbrenner's theory of development located the individual in an embedded set of contexts that extended from the intimate and direct to distant and indirect as they socially impinged on and shaped the course of human development over the life span. Bronfenbrenner's ideas about development in context loosely parallel a tradition of sociological theory stemming from the work of George Herbert Mead and of Charles Cooley,¹² which has come to be known as "symbolic interaction." Like Bronfenbrenner, both Mead and Cooley conceptualized human development as an ongoing process of engagement and response to social others—that is, social exchange guided by feedback from the surrounding social system. As sociologists applied these ideas in practice, they quickly realized how sensitive children are to varying contexts and cultures, a lesson that is closely aligned with Bronfenbrenner's theory.¹³

It was, and I believe still is, just a short step from this general theory of human development to seeing the pervasive influence of social class in shaping the course of development. That step involves a careful appraisal of how learning environments such as families, schools, and neighborhoods set the stage for a socially orchestrated life course. These more distal social arrangements are carefully regulated in all modern societies by gatekeepers who exercise presumably meritocratic standards based on a combination of talent, performance, and sponsorship.¹⁴ In modern societies, parents cede direct control of their children's fates at increasingly early ages to other agents (for example, teachers), who become instrumental in guiding children through an age-graded system of opportunities. Resourceful parents are able to train and coach their children, select and direct choices in this system, advocate when problems arise, and try to arrange for remediation when their children are not following an optimal path. As I have argued elsewhere,¹⁵ parents' managerial skills have become increasingly important in

modern societies, influencing how adeptly children navigate the institutional arrangements that affect their opportunities in later life.

Of course, parents themselves are also embedded in different opportunity structures; specifically, they are more or less privileged in the knowledge, skills, and resources they can provide to their children. Expressed in currently fashionable parlance, parents possess different amounts of human, social, cultural, and psychological “capital” to invest in their children, and hence their managerial resources and skills reflect their social position. But parents are not the only agents who matter in children’s development. All caregivers of children also possess different levels of resources and, generally, the higher the status of the children, the higher the level of social and cultural resources these caregivers possess.

Of course, children possess different capacities to learn, relate, and procure support and sponsorship during childhood. These capacities influence their access to kin, friends, neighbors, teachers, and peers that can and do promote or diminish their chances of socioeconomic attainment. And even small differences in the abilities of parents and other caregivers to manage children’s development can accumulate over time if they consistently are more positive or negative.

A century ago Max Weber used a powerful metaphor of loaded dice for how history operates.¹⁶ Each throw of the dice, he imagined, is weighted by the result of the previous throw; constraints increase with repeated tosses of the dice, leading to progressively more skewed outcomes. Social class can be conceptualized as just such a mechanism, establishing a set of life chances that become more sharply pronounced as they play out over time. Micro-interactions accumulate in a patterned and successively more consequential pattern, etching a probabilistically preordained trajectory of success.

The outcome of these interactions is always affected by how the child comes to interpret and act in the immediate contexts. This might be an operational definition of resiliency or vulnerability as described by psychologists such as Rutter, Garnezy, and Werner¹⁷—the idea that some children are able to defy the odds. Interestingly, developmentalists in recent years have given at least as much, if not more, attention to research on beating the odds as on developing a careful understanding of how the structure of opportunities creates systematic advantage or disadvantage over time—or, we could say, why and how growing up in a certain social location establishes strong and long odds of departing from an expected pattern of success.

Recent data as shown in Figure 25.1 indicate that 42 percent of children born into the bottom fifth of the income distribution will remain there as adults. Only 7 percent will make it into the top one-fifth of the income distribution. For those born into the top one-fifth of the income distribution, 40 percent will remain there, while just 6 percent will fall into the lowest quintile.¹⁸

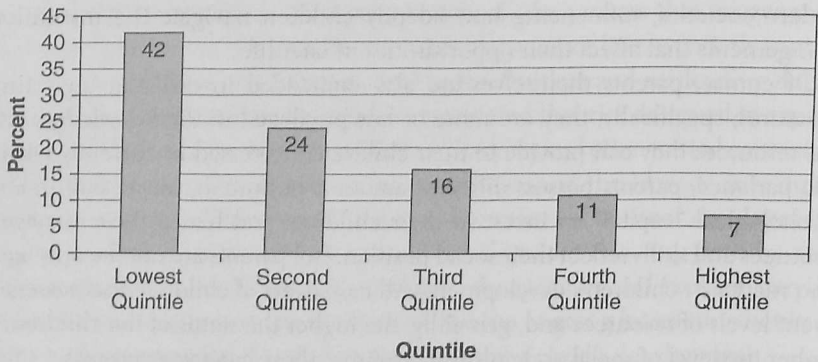


Figure 25.1 | Percent Moving from Lowest Quintile

METHODOLOGICAL OBSTACLES TO STUDY

Until very recently, we lacked the data and the methods to observe how social stratification shapes the course of human development. Longitudinal research really only became widely available in the latter decades of the last century, although pioneering studies were done on relatively small samples, such as Glen Elder's now classic work on the life course of youth in Berkeley and Oakland, California.¹⁹ Not until the introduction of the computer could social scientists thoroughly analyze the large-scale samples necessary to examine variation in children's lives over time. Today, it is a relatively simple matter to merge and analyze multiple waves of interview data, administrative records, blood samples, and the responses to modern surveys of children that allow investigators to explore the numerous contingencies and pathways that constitute the course of children's development from conception to maturity.

Barriers based on disciplinary specialization may also have diverted attention from the potential influence of social class. Psychologists have been actively discouraged in many departments from working on large existing data sets and instructed instead to collect their own data, thus restricting the range of problems that could be examined. Beginning in the 1960s, sociologists turned away from studying children, ceding much work on socialization to psychologists. Disciplines have been organized to encourage work on specific life periods, and younger researchers have been encouraged to become specialists in infancy, early or middle childhood, or adolescence. Exceptions abound of course, and I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge those researchers such as Eleanor Maccoby, John Clausen, Doris Entwisle, Emmy Werner, and others, who broke

out of the mold or, one might say, beat the odds of doing research in disciplines that discouraged such efforts.

Added to the problems stemming from data availability and disciplinary constraints are the methods themselves that are required to examine how trajectories of development unfold over time. Today, a host of novel techniques are packaged in software for analyzing and interpreting longitudinal data. No doubt, many more techniques and tools will be coming in the future as new and more powerful ways of understanding career contingencies, transitions, and the evolution of trajectories of development are invented and refined. The tools are now available to describe and explain how advantage and disadvantage along many dimensions configure and crystallize the developmental pathways from birth to maturity.²⁰ In fact, I would contend that data availability and methods have outpaced our theoretical and substantive understanding of how social class influences human development.

THE ORIGIN OF SOCIAL CLASS DIFFERENCES

More sensitive analytic techniques must take account of several features of social class known to influence development. *First and foremost, once set in place, early patterns of development may be difficult to surmount for several different and perhaps overlapping reasons.* At this stage, we are only beginning to learn about brain development during infancy and early childhood, but it is entirely possible that the architecture of early development could well preclude or, at least, compromise subsequent patterns of development. There is growing evidence that cognitive and emotional capacity formed early in life may be foundational, providing a template or structure for later advances.²¹

Exposure to these developmental influences begins before the child is born and is shaped in no small way by mothers' prenatal experiences—their exposure to toxins, their diet, and the quality of health care received during pregnancy—and then by the neonatal health care provided to the newborn infants. Most mothers experience a normal delivery and their children are born in good health, but steep differences exist across social classes in all of these factors.²² Thus, children enter the world endowed unequally, even if we discount any genetic variation by social class.

The families into which they are born provide vastly different opportunities to build on that endowment. Whether children are planned or unplanned, whether they must compete for limited family resources or have enough, and whether they will receive steady and sufficient attention from parental figures are but a few of the contingencies known to vary by social class.²³ What is less understood is how

these early influences combine and accumulate to create developmental divides with lasting effects on children's prospects later in life. The consequences of social attachment, for example, have not been traced long enough to understand whether or how it affects later transitions in adolescence and early adulthood.

The remarkable research by Charles Nelson and his colleagues on institutional care of children in Romania under the Communist regime provides evidence that a critical period exists for emotional development that, if breached, can lead to permanent impairment.²⁴ Children reared in a collective setting with little or no opportunity to develop attachments with stable emotional figures were emotionally incapacitated. Nelson and his colleagues discovered that if placed in families with emotionally engaging surrogate parents by certain ages, the pattern of emotional disfigurement could be repaired, and perhaps even reversed if the placement occurred early in life. An interesting question, relevant to the discussion here, is whether stimulation and human interaction in early childhood is dichotomous or multi-tiered—that is, whether and how much early interaction sets the parameters for later growth by establishing a critical level or by operating in a more graduated fashion that may still fall below the optimal amount. Few children in American society are impaired by lack of stimulation, but there seems little doubt that many children get less stimulation or fewer opportunities for emotional engagement than is optimal.

A series of experiments in neuropsychology conducted to determine barriers to reading reveals fascinating and perhaps parallel findings on brain development.²⁵ It seems that middle-class and working-class children with reading difficulties may exhibit different neural responses when faced with a task of decoding words. The researchers hypothesize that the amount of exposure to reading and remediation affects neural responses and could account for the differences by social class, suggesting that the causes and the remedies for reading problems might vary for children by social class.

Both these studies bring to mind an impressive qualitative study by Hart and Risley.²⁶ Home observation of family interactions among children and their families revealed gigantic variations in the range of words, expressions, and interaction styles, creating, in effect, a continuous and mounting difference in verbal environments that appeared to be linked to the vocabularies that children acquired early in life.²⁷ These varying cognitive contexts were later linked to reading skills and, accordingly, to school success.

This study leads to a second observation relevant to developmental trajectories of children in different social classes. *Small differences, if persistent, become larger and more consequential over time. A process of psychological and social accretion operates both at an internal and external level as children develop self-concepts, styles of thought, and habits that shape their motivation and social interactions in*

ways that harden over time. If, for example, children are exposed to very modest differences in, say, language, reading practices, or interaction styles over long periods of time, the cumulative effects could be quite striking and large. Thus, if years of education, on average, are linked to small differences in parental skills or practices, they could create significant effects, on average, in children's cognitive and emotional skills. These psychological and social styles create impressions on others that are reinforced and reified in informal and formal social settings. To answer the question of how parents' educational levels affect children's development, we need stable measures of social patterns that have been established inside the home, and these patterns must be measured with sufficient frequency to permit us to examine growth curves of emotional and cognitive development that extend into middle childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood.

The cognitive and behavioral styles that emerge in the home, and which are shaped to a great degree by class differences in child-rearing practices, establish what sociologists once referred to as "anticipatory socialization," advanced training for social roles outside the home, particularly the role of student. These class-related habits of speech, thought, and behavior affect perceptions of the child and entrance into preschool programs that foreshadow and initiate placement and social tracking within the school system. Modest or perhaps not so modest differences within families are unlikely to be offset or compensated for by learning that takes place outside the home. To the contrary, these differences are greatly amplified by parents' capacities to locate, gain access to, and monitor settings outside the home and by institutional practices that selectively recruit children from families with the resources and children who exhibit the capabilities to perform well.

Parents in all social strata are well aware that beginning at an early age, children require and benefit from experiences outside the home, opportunities that can offset or reinforce patterns established in the family. We have rightly paid a good deal of attention to child-care settings,²⁸ but we have much less information on the impact of peer interactions²⁹ or experiences with skill-enhancing facilities such as recreational centers, libraries, museums, and the like. The likelihood of a steady and stable exposure to these social institutions varies tremendously by social class.³⁰ Qualitative studies have demonstrated large differences by social class in children's exposure both to the number and quality of these settings. The reasons why are pretty obvious. Parents with more education are both more knowledgeable of, and therefore usually more discriminating in locating high-quality settings. They also have greater resources to gain access to those settings. Finally, they have the ability to organize and take action on their children's behalf and to monitor ongoing engagements, whether they are with the right kind of peers, better classes, or high-quality teachers, coaches, or caregivers.

The other side of the coin is no less influential in channeling children from different social classes into more or less favorable settings. *Settings find and recruit children from families of different social classes with varying levels of energy and enthusiasm.* In other words, the availability of resources establishes to a large extent the social class distribution of families who participate in social institutions in American society. In many instances, settings regulate their clientele by the cost of services: the most expensive attract mostly or exclusively children from affluent families, whether they are prenatal health programs, child-care facilities, after-school programs, summer camps, or Ivy League colleges. Those who can pay the cost of admission typically can afford better teachers and can attract peers who are more motivated and prepared. We have relatively little research on the social class networks of children that emerge over time, but it is certainly plausible that most children in the United States grow up with little or no exposure to peers outside their social class. Thus, their opportunities to acquire cultural and social capital are tremendously influenced by the social class composition of kinship and peer networks. And we have every reason to believe that money and education are playing an ever larger role in regulating the level of cross-class exposure and the composition of children's social networks.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLACE

Most parents are well aware that where one lives matters. Indeed, the primary way to manage opportunities for children is choice of the neighborhood where children are brought up. Interestingly, we have all too little information on social class and residential decision making. Given that schooling is generally determined by neighborhood, however, parents with more knowledge and resources can select neighborhoods that offer better schools, better peers, and often better recreational facilities. In the study that my colleagues and I did in Philadelphia on how families manage risk and opportunity, we discovered that parents were acutely aware of the opportunities attached to choice of neighborhood, though that awareness did not necessarily mean they were able to exercise much discretion in where to live.³¹

Most working-class families in Philadelphia could not afford to live in affluent sections of the city much less move to the suburbs, where they knew that they would find better schools and more desirable peers. They often resorted to the second-best option: sending their children to parochial schools, where children were monitored more closely, had a longer school day with more after-school activities, and attended school with like-minded peers.³²

Schools in turn were able to select families that enabled them to produce higher test scores and hence greater academic success. A good portion of these outcomes were predetermined by the selection of parents and their children, although clearly more able, prepared, and motivated students may help schools to recruit higher-quality teachers and administrative staff. As I sometimes like to say, economists want to rule out selection as a methodological nuisance, while sociologists regard selection as a fundamental social process that must be studied as a central feature of how things happen. In any event, social life is created by multiple and interacting influences that generally come in packages rather than operating as particular or singular influences, as they are commonly studied in experimental designs.

This package of place-based influences is one of the larger lessons learned from the Moving to Opportunity Program, which gave families in public housing the chance to move to lower-poverty neighborhoods. Moving to these neighborhoods was not an event, as the researchers tended to regard it from the onset, but a succession of adaptations and interpretations. This succession affected family members differently, depending on experiences prior to moving, new and old social networks, and demographic and unmeasured psychological characteristics of the movers and those who chose to remain. The net effects, always important to policy makers, conceal a huge range of varied responses that unfortunately are only dimly understood.

SOCIAL REDUNDANCY IN MULTIPLE CONTEXTS

Perhaps what I have written thus far is leading to the impression that opportunities at the family, school, and neighborhood levels are strongly correlated—that is, that the various contexts of social class operate closely in tandem in shaping the lives of children. But important work by Tom Cook and his colleagues in their study of families in Prince George's County, Maryland, reveals that, at an individual level, most children experience a mixture of social opportunities.³³ They found that there is only a modest correlation between the quality of parental resources, school resources, and neighborhood resources—surely the opposite conclusion from the idea that children grow up in an environment of class-congruent settings.

Yet, the research by Cook and his colleagues reveals that at the population level (when family characteristics, school, and neighborhood quality are considered in the aggregate), there is a much more powerful correlation among these arenas of social stratification. On average, children from better endowed families are very likely to attend better schools and live in better neighborhoods. It is as if the playing field for families is tilted in ways that are barely visible to the naked

eye. Another way of looking at the stratification of social space is to imagine that families with more resources are able to arrange the world so that their children will have to be only ordinarily motivated and talented to succeed. Those with fewer resources must make more effort or have greater talent to succeed. Those with limited or meager resources must be highly gifted and super-motivated to achieve at comparable levels. Developmentalists have often implicitly acknowledged the way the world works by valorizing the families and children who do manage to swim against the current, but we should be measuring the current as well as the swimmer's efforts, particularly when there is every reason to believe that the current has become stronger in recent years.

Opportunity structures, made up of multiple and overlapping environments shaped by social position, are not accurately perceived by individuals from different vantage points in the social system. They can only be understood by examining simultaneously what families see and respond to in their familiar settings, what they do not see but what can be seen by other observers, and most difficult of all, seeing what is *not* there. Take, for example, how much parents or children know about colleges and how they work. Most children in affluent families know more about this topic at age twelve, I would guess, than children in working-class families know when they are ready to enter college. Cultural capital—knowledge of how the world works—is acquired, like vocabulary and speech practices, in the family, schools, and from peers in the community.³⁴ Class differences result from a process of social redundancy that exposes children to information, ideas, expectations, and navigational tools that lead some children to know what they must do to get ahead and others merely to think they know what to do. Developmentalists have surely studied cultural knowledge of how the world works, but we have a long way to go before we have a good map of what is and is not known by parents and children about the stratification system and how this knowledge changes over time as young people's impressions of how things work run up against how they actually work. With relatively few exceptions,³⁵ we lack the kinds of recent cultural studies that have peered inside the family, looking at the operating culture of families.

THE SOCIAL CLASS DISTRIBUTION OF NEGATIVE EVENTS

Social class not only opens or shuts doors for advancement, it also influences the probability of negative events and circumstances in the lives of children and their families. The likelihood of bad things happening to people varies enormously by social class, although we know this more from inference and anecdote than we do from systematic studies of children's experiences in the course of growing up. Take, for example, psychological stressors, including death, poor

health, accidents, family dissolution, residential changes, job loss, and so on. Virtually all of these events occur much more frequently in highly disadvantaged than moderately advantaged families, and least of all among the most privileged. Negative events are more likely to happen to families who lack educational, cultural, and social capital, which are the protective resources associated with social advantage. Lower-income families are more vulnerable than higher-income families to a host of troubles, including credit loss, health problems, transportation breakdown, criminal victimization, divorce, mental health problems, and the list goes on. They also have fewer resources to prevent problems from happening in the first place by anticipating them or nipping them in the bud (preventive and ameliorative interventions). And, when these problems do occur, social class affects a family's ability to cushion their blow.

Anyone who has studied low-income households, as I have for so many decades, cannot help but notice a steady stream of these events that constantly unsettle family functioning, requiring time, energy, and resources that often are in short supply or altogether unavailable. Life is simply harder and more brutish at the bottom, and, I suspect, it is more precarious in the middle than we ordinarily image. As developmentalists, we have not done a very good job in evaluating how such events affect the lives and life chances of children. They create wear and tear on families and often ignite a succession of subsequent difficulties. The problems may begin with job loss, which in turn results in marital strife or dissolution, and finally settles into long-term mental illness or substance abuse. Or this chain of events can just as easily be reversed. The point is that in the ordinary course of life, children at different social strata face vastly different probabilities of bad things happening to them and their parents, and these events often spiral out of control. Social scientists are accustomed to describing these behaviors as “non-normative” events, but they may only be “non-normative,” at least in the statistical sense, in the lives of affluent families.

CLASS DIFFERENCES IN PROBLEM PREVENTION AND REMEDIATION

The distribution of negative events, as I have suggested above, is negatively correlated with social class, just as the distribution of means to prevent and remediate troubles is negatively related to class. Affluent families have access to a tremendous range of strategies for prevention. They purchase and practice preventive health care, they situate themselves in environments free of toxins, and their homes and streets are safer. When and if their children experience problems in school, they can take a range of actions—from changing schools to procuring

help in the form of tutoring, assessments, therapy, medication, and so on. If their children happen to get in trouble in the community, they have means to minimize the consequences by tapping informal contacts or legal interventions. We know much about how families employ these preventive and remedial strategies, but we have yet to put together a comprehensive picture of how troubles are avoided and deflected for children in different social classes. If we examined a sample of problem behaviors among adolescents, what would be the likelihood of adverse outcomes occurring from a series of incidents?

The criminological literature provides ample evidence that social class (and race and ethnicity as well) accounts for much of the variation in delinquency outcomes, for example. It is not that adolescents from affluent families do not commit delinquent acts, use drugs and alcohol, and engage in risky sex. Indeed, the evidence suggests that so-called problem behaviors are fairly evenly distributed by social class. But families with greater assets and social connections can minimize the significance of troubles even when they occur, particularly the more extreme sanctions, such as going to court and being incarcerated.

Social advantage provides a form of cover from negative events when they do occur. It provides for the privileged a social airbrush that conceals mistakes and missteps that invariably occur in the course of growing up. The management of problem behavior by families, and their ability to access and use professional delegates (doctors, lawyers, tutors, social service workers) varies across different social classes and represents a neglected topic in adolescent development.

SOCIAL CLASS, SOCIAL CAPITAL, AND SPONSORSHIP

We would miss much about the use of professional and nonprofessional agents in children's lives among different social classes were we to confine our attention to their role in problem intervention and remediation. It is also important to study the role of adult sponsors in promoting children's positive behaviors, skills, and talents. This topic represents a broader exercise of what has come to be called social capital, the social resources that can be brought to bear by families, to promote children's positive development as well as to prevent or correct negative courses of action. Recently, there has been considerable interest in mentoring and the roles that mentors play in children's development, especially in helping children who have limited access to positive role models, advisers, supporters and advocates, and sponsors.³⁶

Sponsors, of course, can be family members, but we generally think of them as agents outside the family who act on behalf of children. They can be gatekeepers in institutions that allocate resources and access to programs, services, and opportunities. More often, they are individuals who have connections to a range

of different gatekeepers. Students of child and adolescent development should learn more about how sponsorship operates in everyday life because it undoubtedly plays an important part in channeling children into successful pathways.

We know only a little about how various adults help to cultivate skills, talents, and special abilities such as in art, music, theater, sports, and so on, and we know much less about how sponsors promote children's chances of getting ahead by nonacademic means or in combination with formal schooling. This topic merits greater attention because sponsors can play an important role in facilitating social mobility. Less visible, but perhaps equally important, is the role that sponsors play in helping to guarantee that children in the more affluent classes retain their privileged position.

Some research exists on how young people enter the world of work and the role that families play in using contacts and connections to place adolescents in training, service, and work opportunities.³⁷ Privileged parents understand that their children need to build portfolios of experience—résumés—to get ahead. Research in a Philadelphia study on the less advantaged and the disadvantaged suggests much less understanding on the part of these parents as to how to connect their children to select institutions.³⁸ Usually, it appears that sponsors identify children from less-advantaged families by dint of their good efforts in school or perhaps through community organizations. Affluent parents do not passively wait for sponsors to find their children. They actively recruit sponsors or place their children in organizations, programs, and social arenas where sponsors are present and looking for motivated and talented prospects. Schools with well-developed extracurricular programs, after-school classes and activities, summer camps, and advanced educational courses are part of the stock and trade of growing up well off. Children in affluent families become accustomed to relating to adults and appreciating what adult sponsors, mentors, and coaches can do for them in middle childhood and adolescence. Increasingly, the role of sponsors figures prominently in young people's ability to navigate successfully as they move from adolescence into early adulthood.

EARLY ADULTHOOD: THE EXTENSION OF INVESTMENT

Early adulthood, the period of life when youth enter adult roles and assume adult responsibilities (entering the labor force and becoming economically self-sufficient and forming families), has in recent decades become a less orderly and more protracted process than it was a half century ago. The driving force in this extended passage to adulthood has been the perceived need for a college education and, for the more privileged, an advanced degree often accompanied by a

lengthy apprenticeship in a professional career. Related to this trend, but not wholly because of it, young people put off more permanent relationship commitments and, generally, parenthood as well. Commitments to marriage and children, public opinion tells us, have become almost a second stage of the adult transition, often put off until education has been completed and some measure of job security has been attained.³⁹ Social class differences are no less prominent in this new stage of life than they are during childhood or adolescence. The current demands on young adults to attain higher skills, be better prepared to enter the labor force, and postpone family formation play out quite differently in advantaged, middle-class, and disadvantaged families.

Let's begin with the obvious: the costs of higher education have become less affordable as grants and loans have not kept pace with college tuitions, much less the cost of professional education. Among low-income families, the debt taken on by parents and young adults can be crippling, even though the long-term payoff theoretically makes borrowing for education economically rational.⁴⁰ Add to these economic problems the academic liabilities from years in low-performing schools that many, if not most, youth from disadvantaged families face, and it becomes obvious that a very small proportion are academically, much less financially, prepared to tackle a lengthy period of working and attending school (usually beginning with community college). Graduation happens, but relatively rarely. Instead, other events intrude: the lack of support staff and assistance in two-year colleges makes it harder to catch up if they fall behind academically, financial crises siphon off needed resources, parents cannot or will not offer aid or require support themselves, and so on.

These hurdles are one reason for the stark differences in graduation rates by social class. As Figure 25.2 shows, among seniors in high school who are likely

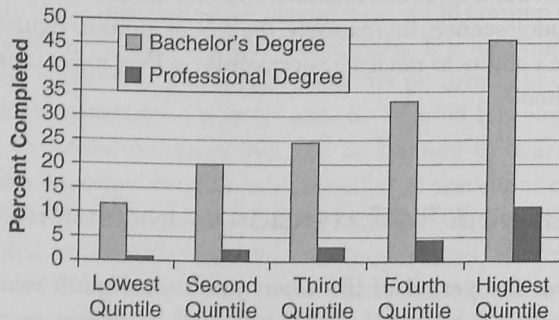


Figure 25.2 | Postsecondary Attainment of 12th Graders (1992) by Income Quintile (2000)

Source: Table 1, Postsecondary Attainment, Attendance, Curriculum and Performance: Selected Results from the NELS:88/2000 Postsecondary Education Transcript Study (PETS), 2000 (NCES 2003-394)

to go to college, approximately one in eight of those from families in the lowest income quintile completed college compared with nearly one in two of those from families in the highest quintile. Only one in four of those in the middle quintile completed college.

Among middle-class families, here the third income quintile from \$43,400 to \$65,832 in 2004,⁴¹ few young adults can afford higher education without working to help pay for it. Balancing school and work commitments in early adulthood is not an easy task, often leading to high rates of school “stop out” and dropout. Thus, even when preparation for college is adequate and grants and loans can be managed, the process can be arduous and lengthy, partially accounting for the exceptionally high rates of college dropout in the United States. Many young people who enter college settle for, willingly or not, what amounts to postsecondary technical training, often restricting their mobility in their adult years.

The financial position of affluent families permits much greater latitude in helping out their children during the long period of college and professional training. The prospect of attaining a high-income job in the future, along with assistance offered by parents, more than likely sustains young adults through college and into professional careers. No doubt, too, young adults from affluent families who are generally better prepared academically are far more likely to qualify for scholarships based on academic merit and accordingly required to take on less debt.

Of course, this class-based profile is stereotypical to some degree. Talented individuals do rise from the bottom and untalented youth drift down. There may even be some disadvantages associated with the high-investment regime of child rearing more common in affluent families if children respond poorly to parental pressures for high achievement. The social class mechanisms that I have described in this paper continue to affect young adults during their twenties and thirties. The accumulation of debt, the likelihood of problematic events, the availability of social capital and sponsorship continue to tilt the playing field as youth enter institutions with different levels of selectivity or work situations that permit or thwart opportunities for attaining further human capital.

I cannot leave the topic of early adulthood without mentioning how social class exposure in childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood affects partnerships and family formation. We have always known that social class is linked to the quality and stability of marriage, though there was a time when divorce (not separation or marital unhappiness) occurred more frequently among the better off. This has not been true for some time. Lower human capital is related to lower social, cultural, and psychological capital—the skills, knowledge of the world, social networks, and sponsorship that play some part in the ability to manage and sustain emotional relationships. Striking differences emerge in marriage, its stability, and in the incidence of nonmarital childbearing by social class.⁴²

These family patterns, so closely linked to class-based experiences in growing up, figure prominently in public discussions about the retreat from marriage among Americans. Curiously, the retreat has not occurred at all among the privileged, and it has occurred less often among the middle class than among the economically disadvantaged. Marriage is increasingly a luxury good attainable only by those with the social, psychological, and material goods that make it happen and make it work.

CONCLUSION

Social scientists have a strong interest in poverty and social disadvantage but have largely ignored gradations of disadvantage that occur beyond the least fortunate in our society. We firmly hold the view that, after all, we share a middle-class status with all but the least and most fortunate. This way of looking at the world is distorted by our own privileged circumstances that lead us to ignore relevant distinctions operating to keep most Americans in positions that are becoming economically and emotionally more precarious with each passing decade.

As social scientists and, especially as developmentalists, we must begin to ask ourselves whether we are accurately describing the social and psychological worlds of most Americans who are far less privileged than we are. Are we adequately portraying this world in our professional writings to show how the social system is arranged to allow a small number to flourish while others with equal talents and motivations never reach their human potential? To put it simply, we are not telling it like it is.

Doing a better job requires that we take advantage of the new data sources and novel techniques for analysis to tell a broader and more in-depth story of class-differentiated childhoods, adolescences, and early adulthoods. Doing a better job requires giving much more attention to opportunity differences in the so-called middle class, where most Americans see themselves. Doing a better job means doing more comparative research on social class differences and examining alternative possibilities of growing up in a less class-skewed society. It requires that we devote more attention to developing policies that restore some measure of balance and equity to our social system.

We must begin to tackle the question of why our children are not doing well (by international standards) in so many important domains of health and education, why our young adults are falling behind in college completion for the first time in American history, and how our families, wanting to do the best for their children, are unable to measure up to the task.

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