

CHAPTER 2

FAMILY BACKGROUND, FAMILY STRUCTURE AND STUDENTS' OUTCOMES

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I begin to analyze the relationships suggested by the mediation-moderation model that I presented in Chapter 1. Specifically, I examine relations involving family background, family structure and students' school outcomes. Initially, I refer to the landmark Coleman and Plowden Reports of the 1960s. They are significant examples of large-scale surveys of families that had important impacts on educational and social policies. There is no consistency, however, about how distal family background should be measured in research investigations. After examining a number of different measurement approaches I propose that family background needs to be defined by family social and cultural contexts. I then use quantitative data from one of my own investigations to show that family social and cultural contexts have differential associations with measures of children's school-related outcomes.

In Chapter 1, I proposed that between distal family background and immediate family influences there are intermediate family structures that can influence students' life chances. For this chapter I choose two of these intermediate structures: the sibling structure of families and single-parent families. Sibling structures have been one of the most explored characteristics of families while the possible impact of single-parent families on children's schooling is a major issue of current educational concern.

Throughout the review of sibling and single-parent family research I use data from my analyses of autobiographies to portray the possible complexity of relationships between family structures and children's outcomes. In addition, I use my own quantitative data to investigate associations between sibling variables and outcomes for students from different social and cultural contexts.

I provide this outline of the chapter as I want to emphasize that if we are to understand in a more meaningful manner how families and schools influence students' attainment, then there should be (a) a continual interplay between theoretical and empirical analyses and (b) where possible, qualitative and quantitative approaches should blend together such that the findings from the two orientations naturally enrich each other. From reviews of research and my own analyses I present a set of propositions about the relationships between distal family background, family structure and students' outcomes. These propositions are the initial contribution to my ongoing development of the context theory of students' outcomes. Much of the research that is presented in this chapter belongs to a

tradition known, particularly in Britain and Europe, as political-arithmetic research. In the following section I begin by presenting some exemplars of that tradition.

POLITICAL-ARITHMETIC RESEARCH

One of the longest traditions in educational research has been the investigation of relationships between family social conditions and students' school outcomes, with the intention of possible school reform. Yogev and Shapira (1981) observe that such research has often been labeled as political arithmetic and it reflects the "liberal tradition of combining harsh empirical criticism of social injustices with 'cautious optimism' in respect to their remedy" (p. 102). One of the landmark political-arithmetic investigations was the influential and controversial *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, by Coleman, Hobson, McPartland, Mood, Weinfeld, and York (1966). Spady (1976) indicates, for example, that "No other study of its kind, including the equally formidable Project Talent study has generated so much discussion, controversy, and re-examination of methodologies and data" (p. 188). From their study of some 570,000 children and 60,000 teachers from 4,000 US schools, Coleman et al. (1966) concluded "Differences in school facilities and curriculum which are the major variables by which attempts are made to improve schools, are so little related to differences in achievement levels of students that, with few exceptions, their effects fail to appear in a survey of this magnitude" (p. 316). Instead, the study revealed that family influences were much more important than school characteristics in explaining differences in children's academic achievement.

The nature of the controversy surrounding the Coleman study is reflected in the concern expressed by Karabel and Halsey (1977):

The conclusion that families rather than schools are responsible for the relative failure [in students' academic outcomes] does not necessarily follow from the data. For there may be something characteristic of *all* schools that tends to inhibit the academic achievement of poor and black children; the fact that differences between schools fail to account for such variation would be decisive only if the schools did in fact differ significantly among themselves. (p. 21)

The findings of the Coleman Report had a major impact on policies relating to compensatory education and to racial discrimination in schooling. In England, the Plowden Report had a similar influence on policies for elementary school children. The Plowden (1967) study was a particularly refined large scale survey of the environmental correlates of the school outcomes of three cohorts of children, aged 7, 8 and 11 years. As in the Coleman study, the Plowden Report indicated strong associations between family influences and children's school performance. The Report proposed that a program of positive discrimination should be implemented to make schools in the most economically deprived areas of England as good as the best in the country. As a result, an action-research framework was adopted to guide the development and evaluation of educational programs in designated 'educational priority areas'.

In a review of political-arithmetic research in education, Halsey (1994) concludes that two melancholy propositions have been supported with increasing certainty:

1. That class inequality is stubbornly resistant to social change when properly conceived in terms of relative rather than absolute improvements and equalization of life chances.
2. That educational reform, including reform of secondary schooling... has similarly failed to modify relative class chances though there have been significant improvements in some countries with respect to the relative chances of women and of some ethnic minorities. (p. 443)

Similarly, Goldthorpe (1996) indicates that in economically advanced countries, while the average level of educational attainment has risen substantially over the past 40 years, social class differentials in educational attainment have changed little over that time. He observes:

If one envisages educational careers as comprising a series of transitions, or 'branching points', then, as these successively arise, children of less advantaged class origins have remained, to much the same extent, more likely than children of more advantaged origins to leave the educational system than to continue in it; or, if they do continue, to follow courses that, through the kinds of qualification to which they lead, reduce their chances of continuing further. (p. 487)

Increasingly, research that investigates relationships between social conditions and educational outcomes is adopting more sophisticated statistical approaches such as structural equation modeling, logistic regression and multilevel analyses. Blalock (1989) offers a salutary, if perhaps somewhat overstated caution, when he states "there is nowadays a recognition that mathematical modeling is a form of theorizing, but the dent that such modeling has made on the overall theoretical enterprise in sociology [and in education] is indeed small" (p. 448). He claims "Although there have been substantial increases in the number and quality of sophisticated data analysis, trends in the quality of data collection are much less evident. Perhaps data gaps are not as evident as they used to be, but they are still very substantial" (p. 449).

Such concerns about the use of more sensitive data are addressed later in my own analyses of family and school influences on students' outcomes. In this chapter, political-arithmetic studies are examined that investigate relationships involving measures of distal family background, family structure and school-related outcomes. For ease of presentation the research is grouped under the following headings (a) family socioeconomic and ethnic/race background, (b) sibling structure of families and students' outcomes and (c) children in single-parent families. In addition, a number of autobiographical narratives are presented to complement and emphasize the findings from the political-arithmetic studies.

FAMILY SOCIOECONOMIC AND ETHNIC/RACE BACKGROUND

Rumberger (1995) observes that "family background is widely recognized as the most significant important contributor to success in schools. Research has

consistently found that socioeconomic status, most commonly measured by parental education and income, is a powerful predictor of school achievement and dropout behavior” (p. 587). The nature of such relationships between social background and educational opportunities is reflected in the findings of a national investigation of student entry into Australian higher education. Williams, Long, Carpenter, and Hayden (1993) conclude:

1. Family background (measured by parents’ occupations, parental education, and household possessions) continued to confer the advantage we have come to expect. These differences in participation came about because higher status families promote higher levels of achievement and provide higher levels of psychological support for their offspring to continue on in education.
2. Even after taking into account the advantages of family background, achievement and psychological support, an advantage persists for those from families in which parents are highly educated.
3. It helps to be rich. Year 12 graduates from the wealthiest 25 per cent of families enter higher education at rates from 20 percentage points above those from ‘poor’ families. However, part of the difference is due to wealth and part due to other aspects of family background related to wealth. (pp. 98-99)

Similar findings of family background differences in educational and occupational outcomes are repeated in other national settings. In an analysis in the Republic of Ireland, for example, Breen (1998) examines the relationship between class origins and the occupations of young adults, one year after they left school. The study indicates “Despite educational attainment being closely related to class origins it remains the case that social class effects on young people’s market position are, for the most part, not mediated *via* education” (p. 294). Breen concludes that even if social class inequalities in educational attainment were reduced, social class differences in occupational attainment would remain (also see Breen, 2000). In the United States, Raudenbush and Kasim (1998) state that even after taking into account inequalities in schooling, gender and ethnic differences in economic outcomes remain large. In an analysis of data from the National Adult Literacy Survey, they show that social and cultural group differences in adult literacy and in occupational preference account for part of the inequalities in earnings and unemployment. The results also suggest, however, that “Even when comparisons are confined to persons of similar educational attainment, African Americans and Hispanic Americans earn less than European Americans, women earn less than men, and African Americans suffer a substantially elevated risk of unemployment” (p. 33). Raudenbush and Kasim conclude that labor market discrimination and residential segregation need to be taken into account when attempting to explain gender and minority group inequalities in employment and earnings (also see Kerckhoff, Raudenbush, & Glennie, 2001).

Even in societies that have adopted policies to eliminate class-based inequalities in educational opportunities, there continue to be significant family background differences in individuals’ life chances. In an examination, for example, of the ‘send-down’ policy that operated in China during the Cultural Revolution, Zhou and

Hou (1999) investigate the impact of family background on the life course of students who were sent from cities to live and work in rural communities. Although the average time students stayed in rural regions was six years, the probability of students returning early to cities was related significantly to their family background. The study indicates:

As the political tides subsided, high-rank cadres did have advantages in reducing the adverse impact of state policies by bringing their children back earlier to the cities, compared with children of other occupational groups. An early return was extremely valuable...children of cadres and professionals were especially advantaged in attending college. (p. 31)

Zhou and Hou (1999) conclude that the process of social class reproduction was only temporarily interrupted by the events of the Cultural Revolution. They suggest their findings are a further indication of the enduring significance of social stratification structures in mediating associations between state policies and individual life chances, even in dramatic political situations.

Similarly, Hanley and McKeever (1997) examine relationships between social class and the allocation of secondary and tertiary education places in state-socialist Hungary. Their findings show that parents in two social groups, cadre administrators and professionals, were able to use the educational system to increase the likelihood that their children would enter tertiary institutions. In addition, children of professional families were more likely to go onto higher education than were children of cadre administrators. Hanley and McKeever propose that the social class inequalities in the allocation of education were related primarily to an inequitable distribution of cultural capital, and secondarily to an inequitable distribution of social capital. In an analysis of the allocation of educational opportunities in state-socialist Czechoslovakia, Hanley (2001) concludes that "Party officials typically implemented class-based quotas during periods of rapid educational expansion...these quotas did little to alter the class composition of secondary schools and universities" (p. 39).

Investigations such as those that have been reviewed provide support for the general proposition that differences in family background have strong associations with inequalities in students' school success and in young adults' eventual educational and occupational attainment. As Sieben and de Graaf (2001) conclude in an analysis of survey data from several countries, the background of families has not lost its importance for young adults' educational attainment and occupational status. As I have suggested, there is no agreement on how family background should be assessed in such analyses. In the following section of the chapter a number of approaches to the measurement of distal family background are considered. These approaches include adopting measures of (a) childhood poverty, (b) neighborhood disadvantage and (c) social and cultural contexts.

Measures of Distal Family Background

Childhood Poverty. Quite often measures of childhood poverty are used to assess family economic disadvantage and family background. In an analysis of the

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