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0521433975 - Diverging Pathways: Social Structure and Career Deflections

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Excerpt

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# 1 *Institutional structure and achievement*

This book is about the achievements of members of a British birth cohort during the first twenty-three years of their lives. It traces their paths through the educational system and their early years in the labor force. It charts their varied accomplishments both in school and at work – their scores on achievement tests, the major examinations they passed, the educational credentials they obtained, the prestige levels of the jobs they held. At each stage in their careers, the explanatory power of a whole range of factors is assessed. Yet, although detailed analyses of the cohort members' individual achievements are presented, individual variation is not the central focus of the research. And, although the subjects of the study are members of a British birth cohort, the fact that they are British is only of secondary importance.

The primary focus of this research is on the crucial role played by a society's institutional arrangements in determining the nature of the achievements made by individual members of the society. The goal is to illuminate the extent to which individual lives are channeled, deflected, shaped by the structured organizational settings in which they are lived. This is not to deny the great significance of the wide range of individual differences. Rather, it is to highlight the extent to which formal social structures systematically alter individual characteristics as well as the outcomes to which they lead.

The British data set used in this study provides the most detailed information available for the needed analysis. In order to trace the cumulative effects of institutional arrangements on individual attainments, it is necessary to follow a large sample of individuals throughout their careers in schools and into the labor force. Such longitudinal data are very rare. No such data set exists in the United States, and very few are available anywhere. Although British data are used in the analysis, however, I suggest that what is observed in the analysis of these data would be found in at least roughly comparable form in any developed society in which a formal school system has been established and in which adult lives involve work in highly structured organizational settings. Throughout, reference

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is made to other research, especially in the United States, that suggests the validity of that claim.

This research builds on several interrelated themes in contemporary sociology. One is an interest in charting processes of individual continuity and change across segments of the life course. Life course analysis involves a search for regularities and systematic variations in patterns of individual lives. Closely related is a growing emphasis on the specification of ways in which institutional arrangements affect individual experiences and outcomes. A more long-standing emphasis in sociology is on the role of class and the societal distribution of power in the organization and functioning of major social institutions. Both of these last two themes reflect many sociologists' dissatisfaction with an overly individualistic view of human behavior. It is argued that the structure of social institutions both facilitates and impedes individual achievement, irrespective of the personal qualities of the individuals involved, and the society's class structure helps to shape those social institutions.

The analyses presented in the following chapters analyze the effects of societal and institutional structures on the attainments of a British cohort across the years from entry into the school system to early adulthood. They provide estimates of the extent to which institutional arrangements deflect educational and early labor force attainments and how those institutional arrangements serve the purposes of the more powerful elements in the society. To do this, we need to consider both personal and institutional contributions to the observed patterns.

Before turning to the specifics of the present research, I need to put it in the broader framework of the emphases in sociology alluded to already. These emphases tend to produce separate bodies of literature, but their contributions are mutually illuminating, and, together, they provide a stronger basis for further clarification of the issues raised here than each does alone.

### Life course analysis

Current interest in life course analysis has evolved from multiple sources in sociology, psychology, and demography. Studies of human development and the socialization process have pointed up the continued potential for change in individual characteristics beyond childhood (Brim 1966; Goslin 1969; Clausen 1972) leading to a number of developments in both psychology and sociology. In psychology, they led to a burgeoning interest in "life span developmental psychology" (Goulet and Baltes 1970; Baltes and Schaie 1973; Baltes, Reese, and Lipsitt 1980). One major focus in the life span literature has been on stability and change of personal characteristics across the life course (Costa and McCrae 1980;

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Lachman 1985). That literature has served as a corrective to the often implicit assumption that change in, or the evolution of, personal qualities occurs only during childhood, as well as the often explicit assumption that old age always involves functional decrements. It has served as a corrective to teleological explanations of human development, and it has given greater emphasis to the plasticity of personal characteristics and the importance of social contexts in their development and change (Lerner 1984).

Sociologists have analyzed many facets of the life course through reference to social definitions and normative prescriptions. One approach is based on a recognition of age differentiation and stratification in society (Riley, Johnson, and Foner 1972). It shows how age is used to organize social relations and to specify appropriate behaviors and relationships. Viewing social roles in age-specific terms also serves to define a “normal” life course specified as an ordered series of events and relationships (Neugarten, Moore, and Lowe 1965; Hogan 1978). Closely related to this is the emphasis some have given to the ways in which historical events impinge on individual lives, affecting them differentially according to the person’s age at the time of the event, sometimes (as in the event of a war or economic depression) making it difficult for people to follow the “normal” life course (Elder 1975). While the evidence of a normative basis for the observed regularity is not always convincing (Marini 1984), there is considerable consistency in both the timing and the ordering of many life course events in any society.

Demographers have pointed to the ways in which historical events have often served to shape the lives of whole birth cohorts differentially, thereby making the cohort an important unit of analysis in the study of both social change and the individual life course (Ryder 1965). Cohorts follow varied average life course patterns, and individual deviations from the average cohort pattern may present difficulties for the deviant individuals (Winsborough 1978; Hogan 1981). Even the sizes of cohorts, relative to cohorts that precede or follow them, can have significant effects on their members’ experiences (Easterlin 1980).

Two common threads run through the life course literature. First, it defines the individual life course as a single coherent entity in which there are multiple antecedent–consequent linkages that give it shape and substance. This does not mean that the life course of any given individual is a constant, however. All individuals change during their lifetime, but a life course perspective recognizes that there is continuity as well; the changing individual is both the same and different. Part of the challenge of life course analysis is to show how the continuity helps us understand the pattern of association between stages or periods in the life course. Although the state of the individual may be quite different in a later stage,

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we cannot understand the new state nor the process by which it came about without reference to the earlier state.

A second common thread in the various approaches to life course analysis, then, is the assumption that there are regularities in the patterns of individual lives. Although each individual is, to a considerable extent, unique, all lives have common features. Most basic, the universal realities of birth, biological maturation, aging, and death provide some degree of common form to all lives. Beyond that, though, the social settings in which lives are led provide a limited set of possibilities as well as normative prescriptions and sanctions that limit the alternative courses that lives can take. Among the socially defined limitations are those that specify what are “appropriate” connections across stages in the life course. Not all socially provided and approved possibilities are open to all members of a society at all stages in their lives. Thus, to a considerable extent, the connectedness or continuity of individual lives is a social creation.

Each society has its own set of definitions and socially provided and approved possibilities, and these can differ appreciably between societies. For instance, even two societies as similar as Great Britain and the United States provide very different alternatives to adolescents during the years after sixteen, and the patterns of activities, the timing of events, and the available forms of certification of attainment differ greatly (Kerckhoff 1990). Some of those differences will be apparent in the later chapters of this book.

The two features of life course analysis emphasized here – the assumptions of individual continuity and of social specification and delimitation – lead to a search for both regularity and systematic differentiation in the study of lives. Although it is possible to refer to “the life course” in very general terms, the primary purpose of life course analysis is to identify and explain systematic variations in the patterns of individual lives. Reference is made to career lines, trajectories, and pathways as something more than the unique traces of individual lives. These terms refer to common life course patterns followed by significant numbers or proportions of people in a society. They indicate that regularities are to be expected, that continuity is patterned, that later outcomes are predictable from earlier conditions. Not all individual careers follow commonly traveled career lines, but the very existence of career lines affects the experiences of those who deviate from them.

#### The status attainment model

A life course perspective has provided the basis for many different kinds of research, although not all of them have been thought of as part of the

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same intellectual enterprise. They have ranged from analyses of variations in the change in human intelligence associated with aging (Schaie 1983) and patterns of family income across the adult years (Duncan 1984) to the study of specific life course transitions (Simmons et al. 1986; Kerckhoff 1990) and the effects of deviations from the expected order of life course events (Hogan 1978). One particular body of research reflecting the general life course perspective provides an important part of the background for the present study. This is research on what has come to be known as the status attainment process.

Status attainment research was an outgrowth of the study of social mobility. Blau and Duncan's (1967) innovative approach to analyzing social mobility within a multiple regression (path analytic) framework used a basic mobility model that conceptualized social mobility as a process by which individuals moved from origins in the family of orientation to adult positions in a hierarchy of occupations represented by a continuous variable rather than by a set of discrete occupational categories. The regression methodology and continuous variable conceptualization made it possible to combine an analysis of intergenerational mobility with an analysis of career mobility. The model contained measures of both father's and son's educational attainment as well as measures of father's occupation, son's first job, and son's later job. The model was thus intrinsically multistage and multivariate. Rather than a simple picture of the father-son occupation relationship, previously represented in cross-tabular form, it provided a first approximation of an analysis of the *process* by which the son's status was attained.

That reconceptualization of social mobility analysis opened the door to the development of even more elaborate models of status attainment, the most influential being the so-called Wisconsin model developed by William Sewell and his colleagues (1969, 1970). That model acknowledged the important role of education in the status attainment process, and it attempted to explain educational attainment using the methodology proposed by Blau and Duncan. It was an attempt to model some of the social psychological processes involved in educational attainment.

Using mental ability and socioeconomic status as fundamental bases of academic performance, the Wisconsin model introduced measures of aspirations and encouragement from significant others as both mediators and modulators in the educational attainment process. That approach, in turn, was followed by a flood of multiple regression analyses of the status attainment process that took other factors into account such as gender (McClendon 1976) and race (Porter 1974).

The multivariate and multistage methodology used in status attainment research is highly appropriate for use with the emerging conceptualization of the life course as a series of connected moves having a coherent

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internal causal logic. The state of the individual at any given stage is viewed as meaningfully linked to the state of that same individual at earlier and later stages, and measures of potential sources of influence toward change can be introduced into the analysis. The status attainment conceptualization and methodology provide the skeleton of an abstract model of the life course. Status attainment research was focused on particular kinds of outcomes, and it therefore concentrated on particular factors thought to influence those outcomes. But the structure of the model and the multivariate analytic methodology can be adapted to a wide range of substantive interests.

Most of the research using a status attainment conceptualization and methodology has either been limited to the examination of rather circumscribed periods of the life course or to a highly delimited set of measures. There are very few available data sets providing a detailed description of a representative sample across an extended segment of the life course. Thus, although a path analytic approach to life course analysis holds great promise, data limitations have meant that it has not been used as effectively as it will ultimately. The analysis presented in this volume encompasses a broader range of life course stages than most, and it indicates both the value of the approach and the complexities involved in its use.

### The societal context of status attainment

Status attainment research reflected a theoretical position that was often more implicit than openly stated. It focused on individual movements within a set of hierarchically arranged positions and attainments using a uniform conceptualization of the sources of those movements. It at least implicitly assumed that the characteristics of the individual were the sources of movement in the stratification system. Any inequalities in adult outcomes were essentially traced to two sources, social origin and educational and occupational achievement. The Wisconsin model and other elaborations of Blau and Duncan's basic model focused on the processes by which individuals developed personal qualities (abilities and motivation) that led to educational achievement and, ultimately, to positions in the occupational hierarchy. Inequalities of adult position were explained by the combination of family status, personal qualities, and individual achievements.

Theories of inequality can be differentiated into two major approaches, sometimes referred to as the functional and the conflict approaches. Most of the status attainment research was at least implicitly based on functional theory. Functional theory, perhaps most clearly presented by Davis and Moore (1945), views inequality as the result of the distribution of

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societal rewards to individuals who differentially achieve socially valued goals, the basic assumption being that there is unfettered open competition for those goals. To that extent, the sociologists' functionalist approach to inequality closely parallels the economists' human capital theory (Becker 1964).

In contrast, conflict theories of inequality locate the dynamics of inequality in the structure of social relations, in particular focusing on social relations having a dominant–subordinate dimension (Braverman 1974; Wright 1985). Rather than viewing the stratification system as simply the structured distribution of origins and destinations in an open competition for social status, conflict theorists see the achievement process itself as directly influenced by the society's stratification system. A major theme in such theories is that the dominant class both controls the supply of socially valued outcomes and determines the criteria by which they are distributed.

The differences between these two theoretical explanations of social inequality can be most clearly seen in their views of educational attainment. Educational attainment is an important locus of comparison because, at least in contemporary democratic industrial societies, educational institutions are generally viewed as the epitome of "open access" settings in which universalistic criteria of evaluation are supposed to be used. If the very important assumption of open competition for valued outcomes is to be justified anywhere, it should be in the schools.

A persistent question posed by students of social mobility and the sociology of education is whether the schools are actually meritocratic institutions or whether they function in ways that perpetuate inequalities from generation to generation. The functionalist view of the schools is as neutral organizations that provide "equal opportunity" for all students, although that does not necessarily mean "equal results" (Coleman et al. 1966). The implicit assumption is that social origins will not influence the school's treatment of its students. Conflict theorists, in contrast, view the schools as primary loci of class conflict (Weber 1946), as mechanisms that insure the reproduction of the class system (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Bourdieu and Passerow 1977).

Concern over the schools' possible role in perpetuating inequalities is frequently apparent in the political arena. Equal educational opportunity has been a dominant theme in most Western industrial societies, and many post–World War II educational reforms were generated in an attempt to insure equal opportunity. Yet, there are consistent reports that, despite these reforms, educational attainment continues to be correlated with one's origin in the stratification system (Shavit and Blossfeld 1993). Pupils from high-status families generally do better in school and obtain

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higher-level credentials. Although there is little dispute about that correlation, those taking the two approaches to social inequality have different explanations for it.

A functionalist view of the linkage between socioeconomic status and academic success can reflect any one of several different interpretations. Children from higher-status families have more stimulating home environments (books, educational toys), more verbal parents and more parental attention to intellectual development, more opportunity for enlightening out-of-school experiences (such as trips to museums and zoos or vacations in different surroundings). They are thus likely both to enter school “ahead” of other pupils and to continue to grow intellectually at a more rapid rate than their less-fortunate classmates. Equal opportunity in the school cannot be expected to produce undifferentiated outcomes, and there are many reasons to expect *some* association between family background and a student’s grades. The important thing is to insure that there is *no unfair* association. Although few would claim that social class plays *no* role in the way schools function, personal qualities such as ability and ambition are seen as much more important reasons for achievement differences (Rehberg and Rosenthal 1978).

Conflict theorists generally focus on different things and come to different conclusions. They argue that it is not just the more enriched learning experiences that make high-status pupils prosper in school but the fact that the school adopts the culture of the high-status segment of the population as the basis of its pupil evaluations. It is not *how much* pupils know but *what* they know that is important, and the schools are especially responsive to the “cultural capital” of the higher classes (Collins 1971; Bourdieu 1973). In addition, since teachers tend to be middle class, when they make decisions about students, they are almost certain to favor students from high-status families thereby “converting social hierarchies into academic hierarchies” (Bourdieu 1973, p. 80). The greater success of high-status pupils is thus attributed to both the narrow definition of valued culture and the predispositions of school personnel to be biased in favor of those who exhibit it.

Particularly important for the present research is the difference between these two perspectives in their approach to internal organizational features of schools, especially the separation of pupils into different kinds of schools or into “tracks” within schools. A functionalist view of this practice is that it maximizes the potential achievements of pupils from all backgrounds and with all levels of ability and prior preparation if they are taught in homogeneous groups. If, despite such efforts to maximize pupil performance, those from higher-status families do better, it is simply due to influences outside the school’s control (possibly even including genetic differences). A conflict theoretical interpretation, in contrast, sees the



practice as one of the mechanisms by which the schools serve the dominant classes. It is argued that the schools provide different curricula in the different tracks, some offering better learning opportunities than others, and the schools selectively channel students into tracks according to their family status. The schools thus serve to *create* inequalities that would not otherwise occur.

A critical difference between these two views of the stratified grouping of pupils is their assumptions about pupil assignments to groups. The functionalist view is that assignment is almost wholly a function of ability or prior achievement (Heyns 1974), whereas the conflict view is that social status is a significant contributor to the process (Rist 1970). Thus, the latter view calls for a significant effect of social status on assignment even after controlling for ability or prior achievement. It will be important in the present research to examine such relationships carefully.

### The “new structuralism”

Beginning in the 1970s, the early status attainment models received sharp criticism from those who argued that the models ignored (or made unjustified implicit assumptions about) the structured nature of the society within which the attainment process took place (Horan 1978). These critiques reflected the same kind of conflict theoretical position that formed the basis for the views of schools just reviewed, but they were focused more directly on the form of the statistical models used in status attainment research. At the outset, they focused on the linkage between educational and occupational attainment and argued that the organization of the economy into industrial sectors provided different employment and career opportunities and rewards for individuals with the same educational attainments (Beck, Horan, and Tolbert 1978). These critiques also objected that the status attainment analyses dealt wholly with measures of individual characteristics and treated all individuals as if they were living their lives in an “open,” undifferentiated social system. To do so, they argued, distorts both the nature of the society and the varied experiences and opportunities of the individuals.

In effect, the critiques sought to specify in greater detail the nature of the opportunity structure in the society and to emphasize that it was highly differentiated. In addition to noting differentiated labor force sectors, it was also shown that individual firms offer quite varied structures of opportunities and rewards (Stolzenberg 1978; Baron and Bielby 1980). Some firms and industries provide “internal labor markets” (Althauser and Kalleberg 1981) that facilitate career mobility. Internal labor markets consist of job ladders and promotion regimes that favor those who are already part of the organization. In addition, various occupations offer

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quite different career opportunities because several levels or ranks are available in some while there is an essentially flat or undifferentiated structure in others (Spilerman 1977; Spenner, Otto, and Call 1982).

When an opening occurs in an internal labor market, those at lower levels have the opportunity to move up, and thus any opening triggers a “vacancy chain” (Sorensen 1977). Even within the same firm, however, some jobs may be “open” to all comers and others may be “closed” to all but those already in the firm (Sorensen and Tuma 1981). The nature of the competition for open vacancies is thus quite different from the competition for closed vacancies.

The effect of all these discussions has been to emphasize that individual workers are in a highly structured world of work, and where they happen to be in that structure appreciably influences the kinds of opportunities available to them, over and above any effects due to their earlier achievements and personal characteristics. The stratified occupational positions dealt with in the status attainment model are found in highly varied organizational settings, and the nature of those settings significantly affects the outcomes obtained. Two individuals with the same personal characteristics but in different labor force locations may obtain very different outcomes.

Much of the literature emphasizing the significance of labor force structures has paid scant attention to the characteristics of the individuals involved. To that extent, it has been as partial and limited as the initial status attainment approach. Just as the early status attainment research could be criticized for ignoring social structure, many of these more recent discussions can be criticized for not adequately taking into account the role of individual differences in the social mobility process.

The status attainment literature has provided some examples of how individual and structural factors can be combined in the same analysis, however, and they have dealt with both educational and labor force structures. Some of the elaborated models of educational attainment, following the introduction of the Wisconsin model, took account of the effect of tracking on individual achievements (Alexander, Cook, and McDill 1978). Those in the preferred (college preparatory) track make greater achievement gains during their stay in secondary school than those in other tracks. Similarly, some studies of the dual labor market have shown that workers in core industries are better rewarded than those in peripheral industries (Beck et al. 1978).

A particularly important issue for the present research that has not been adequately dealt with, though, is how individual workers get distributed into the various kinds of labor force structural locations. It has been observed that the nature of jobs available in peripheral industries leads to an overrepresentation of women and minorities there, but