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0521433975 - Diverging Pathways: Social Structure and Career Deflections

Alan C. Kerckhoff

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The social arrangements of society's institutions deflect people's achievement patterns. Some schools take only talented students, others take the rest; within schools, students are separated into ability groups. Firms are in different industries and vary in size. During their educational and work careers, people get sorted into these different locations. *Diverging Pathways* examines that sorting process and shows how it affects people's achievements. Some locations accelerate achievements, others depress them – in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary school programs and in the labor force. Most important, some people are consistently in the same kinds of locations, repeatedly advantaged or disadvantaged, especially in school. They end up far apart as adults, due in large part to the cumulative effects of the social arrangements they passed through. *Diverging Pathways* follows the members of a 1958 British birth cohort for the first twenty-three years of their lives. It presents a detailed picture of their family backgrounds and their school and early labor force experiences and achievements. Besides the cumulative effects of institutional locations, it shows major career differences of men and women, and it describes how the interface between postsecondary education and the labor force alters some of the outcomes of elementary and secondary schooling.

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*Social structure and career
deflections*

Alan C. Kerckhoff

Duke University



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521433976

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First published 1993

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Kerckhoff, Alan C.
 Diverging pathways : social structure and career deflections / by
 Alan C. Kerckhoff.
 p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-43397-5 (hc)

1. Educational sociology – Longitudinal studies. 2. Academic achievement – Great Britain – Longitudinal studies. 3. Social mobility – Great Britain – Longitudinal studies. 4. Labor supply – Great Britain – Effect of education on – Longitudinal studies.

I. Title.

LC191.K35 1993

370.19 – dc20

92-34933

CIP

ISBN-13 978-0-521-43397-6 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-43397-5 hardback

Transferred to digital printing 2006

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For
Joseph, Jason, Alex, and Erica

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Foreword

A fascination with inequality in society might be said to be a part of the human condition. All societies contain inequalities, a matter that tends to fix the eyes of those below on those above. Sometimes that fixation generates admiration, sometimes envy, but often a combination of the two. With the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and its most prominent event, the French Revolution, the fixation on inequality became a demand for equality. The legitimacy of that demand was affirmed in both the American and French constitutions, a legitimacy that has grown ever since those constitutions were written.

Contemporary sociology has recognized the force of that demand, and has given the study of inequality a prominent place within the discipline. The breadth of such study includes sources of inequality, its persistence over a lifetime, and its transmission across generations. Two large branches of that study have been, and continue to be, in the study of two institutions: the educational system, within which children and youth are schooled, and the economic system, within which men and women earn their livelihood.

The first of these branches has focused on the way in which the organization of schools affects inequality of outcomes, such as achievement on standardized tests or number of years of school completed. Studies of grouping in elementary schools, of tracking in high schools, of differentiation among vocational and academic high schools, of racial and social segregation in schools, of the racial or ethnic or socioeconomic “gap” in educational outcomes, and of differential treatment by teachers are all part of this focus on inequality and its institutional sources.

The second branch is even more central to social theory and research. The broad rubric is social stratification, aimed at measuring the degree of inequality of economic and social rewards for adults, and at determining the sources of that inequality. This work does not take achievement on standardized tests or numbers of years of school completed as the phenomenon of interest, but instead examines success in the labor force. In this work, educational achievement and attainment are not taken as ends

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in themselves, but as factors affecting labor force success. Work in this area examines both education and other factors within the individual's background that may have an effect on the individual's attainment within the stratification system.

Alan Kerckhoff combines in this book these two branches of the study of inequality. He does so in a unique and powerful way: by studying the fortunes of a sample consisting of all those persons born in Great Britain in the first week of March 1958, who were still alive, still in Britain, and able to be located at five points of data collection: ages seven, eleven, sixteen, twenty, and twenty-three. This sample, a cohort studied through the period of life during which most of the stratifying processes occur, from early school experience into young adulthood, makes possible the study of inequality in both the educational and economic systems. It would have been better if data at an age later than twenty-three were available because those with higher levels of education have had time only barely to enter the labor force, and some movement among occupations occurs for persons from all educational levels after age twenty-three. Nevertheless, this sample, studied over this age span, makes possible a unique focus on the processes through which inequality arises in both educational and economic systems.

As Kerckhoff points out, Great Britain is an especially valuable site for the study of effects of educational classification: The categories of school and the stages between which transitions occur are especially uniform, the types of secondary schools are small in number, and well defined; and altogether the structure of education is more uniform throughout the system than is true in a federal system, like that of the United States.¹ The importance of this is great, for Kerckhoff is not merely engaged in the study of inequality: he is engaged in the study of *structural factors* in the educational system and the occupational system, and the way they affect the level of inequality.

The character of the sample, the longitudinal data set, and the structure of the educational system, taken together, allow Kerckhoff to carry out a penetrating analysis of the effects of these institutional structures on changes in inequality as these children move through the several stages and into young adulthood. I won't give away the results, and the ways they differ for boys and girls, but will turn attention instead to a central issue that Kerckhoff raises in his last chapter. If structural factors in education, such as which type of secondary school a child enters, make important differences in educational outcomes – as Kerckhoff shows they most certainly do – then what is the justification for such structures?

One can conceive of two educational systems, structured in two quite different ways. I will call them type A and type B. In the type A system, there is no differentiation at any stage; all children are exposed to the

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same educational environment. Because all educational environments are alike, there is complete equality of educational opportunity.

In the type B system, there is differentiation at every stage: some children, those who performed best at the preceding stage, are selected into a “high-intensity” environment, and others into a “low-intensity” environment. At the first stage, there is selection as well, dependent on background and initial performance. There is not absolute equality of opportunity, as in the type A system; but in the stage-to-stage selection, there is equality of opportunity. Selection into the succeeding stage is based on performance in the earlier stage.

Here, then, are two quite different systems. What do they produce in educational outcomes? The analysis in this book shows conclusively that in the type B system, the sequence of selections itself, even apart from the initial selection, will result in a cumulative advantage or disadvantage: Selection into a more or less intense educational environment at one stage will affect selection at the next stage. In this way it will augment or diminish the opportunities at that stage and, by so doing, bring about inequality of opportunity at that stage. This in turn leads to differences in outcomes at that stage, which leads to selection favoring those who were exposed to the more demanding intense environment, and compounds the inequality of opportunity at that next stage. This leads, then, to a cumulative disadvantage, which after several stages of selection can be substantial indeed.

England’s educational system has traditionally approximated the type B system. With the post–World War II Labour governments, comprehensive schools were introduced in some local educational authorities (LEAs) in an attempt to move the system toward type A. Some of the children in the sample of this study were in these schools, where there was little or no selection, and little differentiation of educational environment.

What then is the justification of type B systems? The analysis of this book shows conclusively that the English schools patterned on the type B system produce greater inequality of outcome than those patterned on the type A system. Selection into the lower, less intense, educational environment leads cumulatively to educational outcomes considerably lower than outcomes for those selected into the more intense environment. The resulting variation in achievement among children who pass through the type B system is greater than that among those who pass through the type A system. Yet type B systems have continued to exist in Britain as elsewhere. The post–World War II movement in Europe toward comprehensive secondary schools, the most specific manifestation of the movement away from selection, came to a stop at least by 1980.

As this book shows, the type A systems that eliminate selection do not excel according to a criterion different from that of outcome inequality.

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The *average* achievement of children in ungrouped classes or nonselective schools is not higher but is slightly lower than for the type B, selective, systems. What this means in addition, when combined with the greater inequality of outcome in the type B schools, is that the type B systems produce more high achievers. The type A systems compress the distribution toward the mean – they not only bring up the bottom, they also hold down the top.

These results may be relevant to experience in American education in the 1970s and early mid-1980s. Trends in SAT scores showed both a decline in the average SAT score and a disproportionate decline in the numbers of students at very high achievement levels. During the same period, the National Assessment tests showed general declines except among black students (who were scoring at lower levels) in certain age groups. Thus there seems to have been, during this period at least, a compression of the distribution of achievement in American schools, that is, a reduction in inequality of outcome, combined with a reduction in the overall mean.

Thus matters get complex. Inequality is not everything. Average achievement is important as well, but even this is not all. What about achievement levels of the highest performers? Is it better to bring up the bottom 10 percent in mathematics by use of type A systems that hold back the top 10 percent, or to let the bottom 10 percent sag by use of type B systems that push the top 10 percent higher?

Thus we might say the following:

- 1 It is desirable to have low inequality in performance levels.
- 2 It is desirable to have high average performance levels.
- 3 It is desirable to have high performance of the highest-achieving students.

But it seems that these three goals may not be simultaneously achievable. This book shows that at least in Britain, goals 1 and 2 do not go together; and there are logical incompatibilities between goals 1 and 3.

Note that at the first stage, a type B system ignores inequality of opportunity, because children's opportunities at the preschool stage will differ greatly depending upon their parents' cognitive skills and the time the parents spend in transmitting these skills. One might argue that a type B system is socially less desirable than a type A for it not only ignores inequalities of educational outcomes but at the first stage even ignores inequalities of opportunity.

But before too quick a judgment about whether a type B system would be less socially desirable than A, note the effect of a type B system on parental incentives: By making a child's educational opportunity depend upon parental inputs, such a system increases parents' incentives to make

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these inputs. A type A system, which has no selection or grouping at any stage, sharply reduces those incentives.

These matters are more than merely academic debating issues. They constitute some of the ideals around which educational systems are built. For example, the British system has traditionally come closest to a type B system, though Labour governments at the national level and the LEA level have attempted to move toward a type A system. American education, from the early champions of the common school onward, has more nearly approximated a type A system.

It is a major merit of this book that these complexities, these dilemmas of conflicting goals in education and their impact on educational outcomes – at the high, middle, and low ends of the performance distribution – are illuminated. The result is not a guide to “optimal educational policy,” but is instead a guide to the relation between educational policy and educational consequences, a guide that shows the complex of consequences that any educational structure brings.

James S. Coleman
Chicago, Illinois

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Preface

I find it difficult to let this book go to press without commenting on events that preceded it. It is the most recent product of more than twenty years of research and theorizing about the effects schools have on individual achievement and how students' positions in the stratification system both modulate and depend on those effects. A tangible baseline reference point for the beginning of my work on these issues could be 1972, when *Socialization and Social Class* was published, but that appeared several years after the initial work began. Like many others, I had been stimulated by Blau and Duncan's *The American Occupational Structure* (1967) because their "basic status attainment model" provided a means of modeling the attainment process. As they had pointed out, it became possible to introduce additional variables into the model to represent progressively more refined conceptualizations of the process.

My initial attempt to do that involved trying to link together cross-sectional observations of four public school cohorts – sixth graders, ninth graders, twelfth graders, and those six years out of high school. The data were collected in the spring of 1969, although the report did not appear as a Rose Monograph until 1974 (Kerckhoff 1974a). That report included an attempt to construct a synthetic cohort analysis linking together data from the four cohorts, based on some rather heroic methodological assumptions. By the time that report was published, the Wisconsin model had already appeared (Sewell, Haller, and Portes 1969) based on true panel data, albeit using a twelfth-grade baseline.

In the meantime I had become interested in the differences between the British and American educational systems. I had been impressed by Ralph Turner's famous distinction between "sponsored" and "contest" mobility systems (Turner 1960), which had suggested to me (and many others) that there should be less intergenerational social mobility in Great Britain than in the United States and that the social mobility difference could be attributed to the school system differences. I spent the academic year 1971–2 in London learning about the British system and assembling data to compare the two systems' effects on social mobility.

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As it turned out, this was one of those cases where the conventional wisdom was wrong. There was no convincing evidence of significant differences in the social mobility patterns in the two countries (Kerckhoff 1974b). While my early comparative analysis was based on very limited evidence, more recent research using much better data and more sophisticated methods has reached similar conclusions (Winfield et al. 1985).

Was Turner wrong, or had some of us derived the wrong conclusion from his analysis? It was a bit of both but more the latter than the former. The major problem was that we had all ignored the role of further education in Great Britain. As this book makes clear, further education is a major contributor to the educational attainments of British men (especially) and women. At the same time, all of us, including Turner, had overestimated the differences between the two countries' secondary schools, seeing the British schools as highly structured (grammar schools versus secondary modern schools) and the American as undifferentiated. We had paid too little attention to the internal structuring of American secondary education.

As more recent research has shown, we too have our systems of sponsorship. They involve ability groups and secondary school tracks. They consist of encouraging some students more than others, providing some with more and better opportunities to learn, and persisting in separating sheep from goats even when the differences are neither as visible nor as stable as they may at first appear to be. It took me a long time to see the similarities as well as the differences between the British and the American systems.

My stay in London in 1971–2 introduced me to many in the British educational research community. In particular, I got to know some of the professionals at the National Children's Bureau (NCB), where the National Child Development Study (NCDS) was housed. In the spring of 1972, they were planning for the age sixteen sweep eventually carried out in 1974. I sat in on some of those discussions. One person in particular was important to me then and even more so later on. He is Harvey Goldstein, then an NCB statistician, now professor of mathematical statistics at the Institute of Education, London. Many years later, when I inquired about the NCDS, Harvey put me in touch with Ken Fogelman who was then assistant director for research at NCB. It was through Ken (now professor of education, University of Leicester) that I was able to gain access to the NCDS data used in the research reported in this book. I am deeply grateful to Harvey and Ken for making it possible for me to do this research.

By the time I began to analyze the NCDS data, I was convinced that educational systems serve as "the sorting machine" (Spring 1976) in all modern societies, and if we are to understand social mobility processes,

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we must study educational systems. By 1987, when I started work on the research that led to writing this book, the literature on the structural effects of schools on individual achievements had grown greatly, and much more has been added since then. In addition, there is a burgeoning literature on structural effects in the labor force. Although the two sets of writings seldom refer to each other, they are obviously mutually relevant.

I wanted to do two things in this research. One was to examine the extent to which structural effects on achievement could be identified at multiple stages in the educational and early work career. The other was to estimate the overall cumulative effects of structure across those multiple stages. The NCDS is a rare data set that provides the means to do this in ways never before possible. It offers true panel data covering the full educational and early labor force careers of a national sample. It includes a rich assortment of measures relevant to origins, school, and labor force experiences and performances, significant others' attitudes and behaviors, and locations in the educational and labor force structures. No other data set provides such a wealth of information for a longitudinal analysis of individual achievements within structured social settings.

The NCDS made it possible to carry out an actual longitudinal analysis of career achievements of a cohort of young people that is far more comprehensive in both developmental time span and multivariate coverage than anything done previously. What is presented here I could not even dream of doing when I conducted my 1974 synthetic cohort analysis. In particular, it is possible to chart the cumulative effects of institutional structures on achievements, net of an extensive set of other influences.

A critical feature of the analysis presented here is the estimation of those cumulative effects. Although I have received many useful suggestions and much assistance throughout this project, nowhere were they more needed and helpful than in devising the method to be used in that estimation. I wrestled with the problem for a long time, and I got very helpful advice and criticism from friends and colleagues in many places – Tom DiPrete here at Duke; Doug Willms at British Columbia; Lindsay Paterson at Edinburgh. The method I have finally used evolved through an extended exchange with Adam Gamoran and Rob Mare at Wisconsin. While any flaws in the method I have used are my own responsibility, I want to thank all of these scholars for their generous contributions to a stimulating exchange.

I have also been blessed with excellent support within the Duke Department of Sociology. Angie O'Rand, Ken Spenner, and John Wilson offered useful advice and criticism. Betsy Farmer and Jenny Manlove devoted many hours and used much ingenuity in helping with the computational work on the project while still making good progress in their

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own promising research careers. Bob Jackson and Dave Jackson always seemed to be able to solve our frustrating computer problems. Amby Rice was patient and creative in designing and constructing the tables, and Judy Dillon made sure I stayed within budget and still got the work done. Jerry Trott helped design the figures. I thank them all.

The research would not have been possible without financial support from the National Science Foundation through Grant No. SES-8711211. Of course, the analyses and interpretations are mine and don't necessarily reflect the views of NSF.

Somehow, authors always seem to leave a note of thanks to a loving spouse to last. It should be clear, though, that last does not mean least. Rather, especially here, last means most basic. Only Sylvia shared with me the more than two decades of experiences that provided the background to this project. And that made it all possible.

Alan C. Kerckhoff
Durham, North Carolina