



# Congested credentials: The material and positional economies of schooling



David B. Bills

University of Iowa, United States

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## ABSTRACT

Sociologists have grown increasingly aware that the role of education in systems of stratification is more positional than absolute. The value of one's level of attainment is less a simple function of the amount of schooling one has attained, and more a function of how much schooling one has relative to others in the educational queue. The idea of education as a positional good has far-reaching implications for research on such topics as job matching, educational expansion, and educational credentialism. I assess recent sociological treatments of educational positionality, and offer some directions for future research.

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## 1. Introduction

The massive expansion of educational systems around the world over the past few decades have profoundly changed not only the nature of the credentials produced by those systems, but also the role of credentials in broader systems of stratification. While always more than simply a response to changes in the occupational structure, educational expansion proceeded in rough tandem with changes in the world of work, even as it probably more often out-paced those changes. Even as educational credentials increasingly came to be broadly socially and culturally accepted as information-rich signals of the ability to hold one's own in the workplace, it also became clear that any simple correspondence between the skills that credentials signaled and the skill demands that employers (and parents) associated with those credentials was in many cases wishful thinking.

The logic behind the world educational revolution was essentially a Human Capital one. While always a more subtle theory than many sociologists want to acknowledge, at its core Human Capital theory provides a parsimonious explanation for the association between schooling and income. Schools provide the skills or trainability that employers value and are willing to pay for, and individuals invest in their schooling up to the level that provides them with access to productive work.

The empirical and theoretical flaws in human capital theory are too well known to merit much discussion here. Rather than a tight equilibration between labor supply and labor demand, what

we have seen develop instead is an educational arms race, in which ever greater numbers of potential job seekers invest in their schooling to protect their places in the credential and occupational queues. To an ever-increasing extent, the credentials that job seekers present to the labor market matter less in themselves than how those credentials stack up in the total queue of job seekers. Schooling has, in brief, shifted from being primarily an absolute good to being essentially a positional good.

In this brief essay I try to provide some context for thinking about the place of educational positionality in stratification regimes. I begin with a very selective discussion of some of the roots of positionality, highlighting a couple of contributions that have been too often overlooked. I indicate a few unresolved issues raised by the concept of positionality and offer what I hope are some potentially useful directions in which theory and research on positionality might productively move.

## 2. Some background

It may not be completely surprising that sociologists have often been slow to embrace the idea of educational positionality, given that earlier generations were sometimes hesitant to move from linear to categorical measures of education. Sociologists have always been aware that the distribution of schooling is multimodal, and that the modes are socially consequential. The twelfth year of schooling differs from the eleventh year less because people are a year better informed and potentially more productive and more because they now hold a high school diploma that offers a socially legitimated certification of their capacities and productive potential. Still, researchers long persisted in conceiving of schooling as

E-mail address: [david-bills@uiowa.edu](mailto:david-bills@uiowa.edu)

a linear construct rather than a categorical one, until the empirical evidence became utterly persuasive that we needed to think of schooling in terms of ordinal categories and measure it accordingly (Mare, 1980).

In one sense, educational positionality as a Durkheimian social fact seems obvious. With a number of good jobs that is at times steadily growing but which is ultimately finite combined with a rapidly growing supply of elite credentials that can appear to be almost infinite, it seems clear that the center cannot hold forever. Still, these conceptual shifts, from linear to categorical and from absolute to positional, are not simply shifts of measurement. Both shifts require breaks with theoretical orthodoxy as well.<sup>1</sup> Integrating the concept of educational positionality into stratification research required both a challenge to more restrictive human capital models and a willingness to move beyond linear and even categorical conceptions of schooling.

These conceptual breaks began in earnest in the 1970s with the publication of two very different books. Lester Thurow's Job Competition Model, presented most concisely in his 1975 volume *Generating Inequality*, was a particularly significant breakthrough. Thurow characterized the labor market as consisting of two matched queues, one composed of a ranking of jobs and the other a ranking of individuals with varying levels of educational credentials. For Thurow, employers are primarily interested in hiring workers who can be brought up to speed as quickly as possible with as little investment in their training as possible. The concern of employers is thus with finding a means to rank job applicants. While Thurow was perhaps not overly interested in how educational credentials came to be broadly accepted as an optimal and socially legitimate indicator of trainability (Brown, 1995), he is quite convincing that "job competition differs from wage competition in that an individual's relative position with respect to background characteristics becomes more important than his absolute position" (Thurow, 1975; p. 95). Thurow's analysis inspired the image of educational investments as defensive moves, as efforts to competitively position oneself relative to other job seekers.

In perhaps the most elegant account of the positionality of education of this era, Fred Hirsch characterized these strategic defensive investments as "regrettable necessities." In his classic *Social Limits to Growth* (1978), Hirsch offered what is in many ways an odd and unanticipated source of inspiration for generations of wage equations and attainment models. *Social Limits to Growth* was more about the moral basis of economic growth in a shifting global context of scarcity and distribution than it was a primer for better educational measurement. Still, the conceptualization of educational positionality so brilliantly established by Hirsch laid an important cornerstone in what was to follow. As he stated with exceptional clarity:

"Education enjoyed in its own right is capable of indefinite extension; as an instrument for entrée into top jobs, it is not. In the first case, the private benefit is equally a social benefit. In the second case, the only social benefit is the contribution to improved sorting of people as a whole for jobs that suit them best, a benefit that will normally be well below the private benefit from improving one's own selection chances. Individual

demand for purely private goods can be satisfied by additional supply through the market process. But individual demand for positional goods cannot be satisfied in the same way. Instead, it will tend to evoke additional defensive needs – needs in the sense of regrettable necessities or defensive consumption" (1978, p. 59).

*Social Limits to Growth* has been regularly and rightly cited by sociologists of the labor market since its publication. Still, among empirically oriented sociologists, the shift to conceiving of and measuring education in positional rather than absolute terms has been gradual and episodic. There have been some important signposts along the way. Sørensen's sophisticated and, really, stunning 1979 paper "A Model and a Metric for the Analysis of the Intra-Generational Status Attainment Process" was highly admired but little emulated. Sørensen's "Vacancy Competition Model" explicitly specified both sides of the status attainment process (occupation and education) as positional. In this model, the value of education derived from its "competitive advantage," not its absolute advantage, as human capital theory would have it. Sørensen's empirical findings departed enough from those obtained in more conventionally estimated models to be of considerable interest. Still, nearly four decades after its publication Google Scholar credits this paper with a modest 126 citations and the innovations that it offered did less than might have been expected to advance the positionality agenda.<sup>2</sup>

If Sørensen's paper was not fully exploited by sociologists, this is perhaps even more the case for two other papers that were published several years later. These are Olneck and Kim (1989) and Boylan (1993). Both of these papers followed positional logic (generally inspired by Thurow), but in novel directions that differed from that taken by Sørensen. Sociologists never really took advantage of the insights of these two papers. Each merits a fresh look.

Olneck and Kim questioned why the proliferation of high school diplomas for men in the United States in the 1960s was accompanied by an increase in the economic value of the diploma. They pointed out that the flooding of the market with a given degree should, on a human capital account, have diluted the value of that degree. Olneck and Kim observed that queuing theory too would predict lower incomes for the holders of rapidly expanding credentials, although the resultant displacement of less-educated workers into less remunerative jobs could lead to a widening gap between the educational elite and non-elite.

What distinguished Olneck and Kim's paper was both its creative measurement of educational "competitive non-disadvantage"<sup>3</sup>; as a means to help adjudicate human capital and queuing theories, and its willingness to step outside the interpretive frame of both human capital and queuing theories to make sense of their empirical results. Olneck and Kim accounted for their otherwise anomalous findings (again, findings enabled in large part by their use of a positional measure of schooling) in cultural-institutional terms. Specifically, Olneck and Kim argue that the proliferation of diplomas transforms the social definition of those who lack them. With educational expansion, "high school dropout" becomes a stigmatized and despised category, even when the productive potential of these people is unchanged. Thus, positionality, at least in this admittedly very specific historical context, works to the benefit of those whose credentials have become congested.

<sup>1</sup> While sociologists have come fairly slowly to the realization that education is often best conceptualized positionally, there is some irony that they have readily adopted a positionality understanding for other stratification indicators, even if not explicitly using the language of positionality. Much as current scholars have acknowledged educational inflation, earlier researchers recognized that high school grades had inflated over time. Abandoning measures of high school grade point average (an absolute measure) in favor of a measure of class rank (a positional one) certainly highlights the importance of one's relative standing in a queue (Pattison, Grodsky, & Muller, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Ultee, 1980 Ultee's 1980 paper asking "Is Education a Positional Good?" is in many ways as impressive a work of scholarship as is that of Sørensen, with similarly modest impact. See also Wolbers, de Graaf, and Ultee (2001).

<sup>3</sup> This was "calculated as a decreasing function of the increasing proportion of individuals whose educational attainment falls below any given level" (Olneck & Kim, 1989, p. 194).

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