



Social reproduction in Vietnam: Educational attainment, employment, and skills usage



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ABSTRACT

Education can be seen as a social structure that reproduces existing levels of social, economic, and cultural distributions. Using Vietnam as a case study, this paper seeks to examine how these theories hold up in a socio-political and socio-economic context that has been less examined, specifically in one of the few remaining single-party socialist countries that advocates Communism. The findings suggest prior levels of social stratification are predictive of educational attainment, and educational attainment is predictive of employment. Higher educational attainment is also predictive of having occupations in economic sectors with less repetitive work and more autonomy.

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1. Introduction

It has been well documented that prior levels of social stratification lead to differential educational attainment and employment opportunities (Bourdieu, 1977; Buchmann and Hannum, 2001; Collins, 1979). The resources and social structures available to middle and upper class families can essentially secure their next generation's future by providing it with social, economic, and cultural capital required to retain its position or to move upward. Parents with more social, economic and cultural capital endow their children with interests, skills and values that are highly desired and rewarded in school, leading to better educational attainment for the next generation than those whose parents have less social, economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; DiMaggio, 1982; Lamont and Lareau, 1988). Thus, there is evidence that education, instead of being the Great Equalizer, confers cultural capital differentially based on the existing level of cultural capital, and rewards students based on the amount of capital they have at each successive level of education. In other words, education can be seen as a social structure that reproduces the existing levels of social, economic, and cultural distributions. Moreover, jobs are then distributed according to the different levels of educational attainment. This leads then to a cycle of intergenerational social reproduction where, on average, the next generation ends up in the same category as those of their parents.

This is further compounded by the changing distribution of job demands in the past 20 years, where there is an increase in low and

high paying jobs but a decrease in middle-income jobs due to job routinization (Autor, 2010; David et al., 2001). This routinization can then potentially lead to further polarization of the “haves” and the “have-nots”, cementing intergenerational social reproduction. Using Vietnam as a case study, this paper seeks to examine how these theories hold up in a socio-political and socio-economic context that has been less studied. In comparison to the works that have been done in the United States and Europe, there has been less work done on social stratification and social reproduction in Asia, particularly for Southeast Asian countries like Vietnam. An additional contextual factor is that Vietnam is one of the few remaining single-party countries that maintain Communism and yet it has been moving towards a more capitalist economy. Moreover, Vietnam has recently transitioned from a low-income to middle-income country, and as it continues to modernize, it will increasingly produce jobs that require more non-routine skills and less manual and repetitive jobs (Bodewig and Badiani-Magnusson, 2014). Thus, in addition to the examination of how social stratification and reproduction theories can be applied to a different context, this paper provides a timely analysis of the current levels of skills usage in Vietnam and how this could potentially impact employment opportunities through changes in the distribution of jobs and acts as a mechanism of social reproduction in a country transitioning from low-income to middle-income status. In particular, the research questions this study will seek to answer are:

1. To what extent do prior levels of social stratification predict educational attainment?
2. To what extent does educational attainment predict employment and earnings?

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3. To what extent are repetitiveness and autonomy distributed across various economic sectors?

2. Literature review

2.1. Social stratification and reproduction

Social stratification is a system of allocating people to different social categories and the institutionalization of practices that then allocate resources differentially based on those categories (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986; Dika and Singh, 2002; Massey, 2007). This system has rules and mechanisms that implicitly and explicitly categorize and rank individuals and groups, and it presumes some form of legitimization of said rankings and of the unequal distribution of goods, services and other economic, social and cultural capital (Kerbo, 2006; Kerckhoff, 2001). Massey (2007) argued that humans are “wired” to categorize, particularly with age, gender, and race/ethnicity. Then based on different socially defined categories, individuals within a society exploit and hoard opportunities to generate and reproduce stratification and inequality. Therefore, stratification is the result of people’s conscious and unconscious decisions; how stratified a society is, and how institutionalized that stratification is, have far reaching intergenerational implications (Aschaffenburg and Mass, 1997; Breen and Jonsson, 2005; Massey, 2007).

Speaking broadly, sustained inequality would lead to reproduction and further polarization of existing conditions. It means that, on average, the individual educational attainment of the next generation would resemble that of their parents (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986; Breen and Jonsson, 2005; de Graaf et al., 2000). While education can confer cultural capital to students, the education process does not distribute it evenly. Family origins and characteristics greatly influence the values and skills, more broadly the social and cultural capital, that students have prior to any formal education. The pre-existing amount of social and cultural capital that students have greatly influences their level of educational attainment, particularly in postsecondary education (Aschaffenburg and Maas, 1997; Blau and Duncan, 1967; Bourdieu, 1977, 1986; de Graaf et al., 2000; Sullivan, 2001). Education then actually provides the most benefit and training for those who already share the linguistic and cultural competence that it is purported to confer equally, and the least benefit for those who do not share the same presumed cultural capital.

Furthermore, education also creates roles and allocates individuals to positions in society based on the existing levels of social and cultural capital (Kerbo, 2006; Meyer, 1977). Meyer (1977) argued that the traditional socialization theory where education socializes students and increases skills is not supported by evidence since it does not explain why there is a lack of differentiated outcomes for students even though there are variations in school. The Coleman Report provided substantial evidence that student background and socioeconomic status are more important for student educational outcomes than the quality of schools and teachers (Coleman et al., 1966). Schools do not “level the playing field” but they solidify pre-existing conditions and legitimize the role of schools as an institution. And as both students and nonstudents participate in the education system, they are taught to accept the legitimacy of education and its power in creating and changing societal roles (Meyer, 1977). In other words, schooling is better thought of as a mechanism of cultural and social reproduction as the “haves” receive the most and the “have-nots” receive the least, rather than “a rising tide that lifts all boats.” It is not the case that everyone who starts at the bottom will remain there, but the chances of success, of improving economic and social outcomes, is much lower for those at the bottom.

However, there have been a number of challenges to the theories of social reproduction, particularly with how social and cultural indicators are measured at only fixed points in time and neglect the active roles of schools and human agency (Aschaffenburg and Mass, 1997; Giroux, 1983; Morrow and Torres, 1995; Willis, 1981). For instance, Sullivan (2002) aptly discussed how Bourdieu’s theory does not provide a place for individual agency or even individual consciousness (see also Collins, 2009; Giroux, 1983). Other scholars have also critiqued the lack of sex and gender roles in Bourdieu’s theory (Ferguson, 2008; Tzanakis, 2011). Moreover, there have also been criticisms of the structuralist Marxism aspect of social reproduction, as well as the role of Bourdieu’s *habitus*, in terms of their specificity and generalizability to other contexts and applicability to empirical research (Liston, 1988; Nash, 1990; Sullivan, 2002; Wexler, 1987). Despite these critiques, social reproduction remains a strong conceptual framework that continues to be studied in social science research (Collins, 2009). Moreover, these critiques generally ignore the functionalist component of social reproduction (Morrow and Torres, 1995), which can play a prominent role in how social reproduction develops in certain context (Collins, 1971; Collins 2009). Consequently, this current study takes the perspective that education acts as a mechanism of social reproduction while using the functionalist lens, in the form of technical-function theory, to study the “how” of said mechanism. With the technical-function framework, education can also be thought of as a mechanism to provide training for individuals to enter the work force (Collins, 1971). In industrialized societies, technical skills increase over time because of technical advancement, and as the level of technical skills increases, so do the educational requirements. Those with innate skills or sufficient training will then fill these positions, and those without skills and training are much less able to compete for those positions (Kerckhoff, 2001). Education then plays an important role in distributing skills and training, but it may favor those who share the social and cultural capital of the dominant class.

Furthermore, there is recent evidence of job polarization, a decrease in middle-income jobs and an increase in low- and high-paying jobs (Autor, 2010; Goos et al., 2009). David et al., (2001) posited the routinization hypothesis that computers would replace workers in performing routine tasks and complement workers in non-routine and complex problem-solving tasks. Since then, there has been evidence that routine manual labor and routine cognitive work are indeed steadily declining while jobs that emphasize non-routine and expert or complex thinking are growing in the 21st century (Levy and Murnane, 2004, 2007; Dede, 2010). This body of literature indicates that as job demands change in the 21st century, middle-income jobs are diminishing, which means that it is only getting harder to get into, and to remain in, the middle class. In other words, sustained inequality would lead this generation to reproduce the existing conditions of the last generation and as job demands change and middle-income jobs dwindle, the inequity will be exacerbated, making it increasingly harder for disadvantaged students and families to stop the cycle of intergenerational social reproduction.

In comparison to what is known about social reproduction in the United States and Europe, much less is known about social reproduction in Southeast Asian countries. Most of the studies on social stratification and reproduction in Asia have been done in China, Vietnam’s nearest geographical, political, and economic neighbor. One of the earliest studies in this area examined and found various levels of inequality and stratification in China as well as continuing conflict over the existing levels of inequalities (Whyte, 1975). Elman (1991) showed that historically political, social, and cultural reproduction happened in China via formal education in the form of the civil service exam. However, relatively

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