



# Multiple dimensions of social background and horizontal educational attainment in Sweden<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

We follow Swedish cohorts born between 1976 and 1984 through their educational career and analyze how different dimensions of parents' socio-economic standing (SES) in education, occupation, income, and wealth structure horizontal attainment in secondary tracks and tertiary fields. Our results show that there is strong horizontal segregation by parents' SES. However, the influence of social background dimensions on educational attainment is not uniform, but differ by combination of dimension and track or field. We identify a main contrast between parents' education, and to some extent occupation, on the one hand, and the economic dimensions of income and wealth on the other. When we assess the total contribution of all dimensions, we find that net of previous achievement about 35% of the attainment of different upper-secondary tracks, and 25% of attainment of different tertiary fields is due to social background. Despite the non-uniform pattern, this segregation is also linked to future inequality, i.e. in chances of tertiary graduation linked to upper-secondary tracks and in expected earnings linked to tertiary field choices.

## 1. Introduction

It is well established that individuals' social background structures both the vertical level of educational attainment and the horizontal dimension (which we define broadly to include fields, tracks, programs, majors etc., but not including other aspects such as type of institution or institutional prestige). The strength of the vertical relation is rather well described (Hertz et al., 2007). However, when it comes to educational choice of field of study, which is of a qualitative nature, a long array of studies document social background effects (Ayalon & Yogeve, 2005; Boliver, 2011, e.g., Davies & Guppy, 1997; Hällsten, 2010; Ichou & Vallet, 2011; Lucas, 2001; Reimer & Pollak, 2010; Thomsen, 2015; Triventi, 2013a, 2013b) but there is no unified mode of measurement, and effect sizes are difficult to compare. It is still unclear in the literature if horizontal segregation is small or large, important or more marginal. In addition, previous literature typically use different indicators of social background, making comparisons difficult. In this paper, we include multiple dimensions of social background in terms of education, occupation, income and wealth. First, we analyze horizontal segregation at the upper-secondary and tertiary levels for cohorts born between 1976 and 1984 in Sweden following their entire educational career. Second, we study how this segregation is consequential for

future outcomes. Finally, we also quantify the segregation produced by social background to achieve a metric comparable across studies.

## 2. Horizontal educational segregation

The focus on the role horizontal segregation in education for social reproduction largely began in the 1990s, with the works of Davies and Guppy (1997) and Lucas (2001), even though gender scholars since long had identified horizontal segregation as a driver of inequality (Daymont & Andrisani, 1984). Lucas (2001) proposed the idea that the privileged classes sought advantage for their children in the horizontal dimensions when the huge increase in overall educational enrolment had led to increased equality in the levels of educational attainment. There is now thorough evidence of socio-economic segregation across horizontal fields for a large number of countries, for example Denmark (Thomsen, 2015), France (Ichou & Vallet, 2011), Germany (Reimer & Pollak, 2010), Israel (Ayalon & Yogeve, 2005), Sweden (Hällsten, 2010), the UK (Boliver, 2011), and the US (Davies & Guppy, 1997; Lucas, 2001). These findings are also replicated in comparative research (Triventi, 2013a, 2013b). Findings for some countries suggest that this segregation has increased over time (Israel and Denmark: Ayalon & Yogeve, 2005; Thomsen, 2015), while other suggest it to be persistent

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(Germany and the UK: Boliver, 2011; Reimer & Pollak, 2010). Andrade and Thomsen (2017) report high micro-educational immobility rates that are stable over time, particularly for sons. Accordingly, field of study is not only segregated by social background but also important for intergenerational reproduction of inequality (Hällsten, 2013; Kraaykamp, Tolsma, & Wolbers, 2013), even though some prior research have failed to identify any substantive role of field of study (Jackson, Luijckx, Pollak, Vallet, & van de Werfhorst, 2008; Mastekaasa, 2011).

In the previous literature, there is no single measure of the intensity of socio-economic segregation across fields. First, the categorical nature of the data renders a simple summary measure like a regression  $b$  or a correlation coefficient  $r_{xy}$  hard to achieve. Due to the lack of a common well known scale, interpretation is often defensive, limited to commenting on statistical significance and on the direction of effects.<sup>1</sup> Second, previous literature have also tended to focus on single dimensions of social background, most often parents' education. However, we argue that social background is of a multi-rather than unidimensional structure that typically includes education, occupation/class, income, and in more recent studies also wealth. This idea rests on Weber (1946) conceptual split between an economic and a social order, which indicate the distribution of two different kinds of resources (economic goods versus social honor) in society. The multidimensional idea is also prominent in the writings of Bourdieu (1984), where a distinction is made between the economic and the cultural capital dimensions. A central idea is that these two types of capital predict different trajectories for children, and thus do not substitute for each other.

Some previous research has engaged in assessing how different background dimensions contribute to educational inequality. Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2013), Bukodi, Erikson, and Goldthorpe (2014) as well as Erikson (2016) examine the cases of Britain and Sweden and unanimously find independent associations of parents' class, status and education with educational attainment. Erikson (2016) finds an independent effect for parents' earnings as well. Hällsten and Pfeffer (2017) identifies an independent influence of wealth on educational achievement in Sweden. To what extent this applies to horizontal segregation is, nevertheless, a largely open question. Inspired by Bourdieu, Broady et al. (2000) show a dividing line in Swedish upper-secondary track enrolment between students from advantaged economic origin in contrast to students of a cultural elite background. Economically privileged students display higher propensities of choosing the natural science track with a technical orientation or the economic social sciences track. In contrast, students with parents that are advantaged in educational or cultural capital rather prefer enrollment in the aesthetics track or the social science track with an orientation towards humanities. However, few, if any, studies have assessed whether or not the segregation caused by different social background dimensions follows the same or a different pattern. For example, high family income might increase the probability of completing a business degree, while high parental education background instead decreases this probability. In essence, Bourdieu's approach predicts that economic background dimensions (income and wealth) is associated with a different choice of tracks and field compared to more cultural ones (education, and to some extent occupation). However, this distinction may not be as clear cut as wealth may also reflect non-economic factors, such as a normative commitment to education (Hällsten & Pfeffer, 2017).

<sup>1</sup> Another problem in this line of research is the operationalization of fields, which is typically done with large variations in the level of detail. Gerber and Cheung (2008) suggest that aggregation biases can be large. Unfortunately, very few data sources allow detailed analyses of very specific fields (but see Hällsten, 2010).

### 3. Segregation and inequality

Education is in itself a final outcome, and in this respect, so is segregation across fields. Any socio-economic segregation across fields shows how individuals of different origins end up with different types of education. This means that children of different backgrounds will acquire different types of skills and perspectives, but also that they are differently exposed to individuals of other backgrounds during their education.

However, education also serves as a mean to secure labor market rewards, and here segregation contributes to reproducing inequality in labor market opportunities. This is because degrees from different fields display large earnings inequalities. Daymont and Andrisani (1984) observed large variation in earnings across college majors, and recent literature suggest that these differences are causal and do not only reflect differential selection by ability across fields (Arcidiacono, 2004; Kirkeboen, Leuven, & Mogstad, 2016). Moreover, the level of inequality in future earnings across fields is often very large. As Kirkeboen et al. (2016) summarizes: "For many fields the payoffs rival the college wage premium, suggesting that the choice of field is potentially as important as the decision to enroll in college (p. 1060)." More substantively, according to Gerber and Cheung (2008), studies that examine the labor market effects of field of study generally converge on two main findings: engineering yield high rewards and a degree in education translate into the opposite. Arcidiacono (2004) also found higher than average rewards for natural science and business majors.

According to some general notion of social reproduction, one can expect that the students from the most privileged strata will chose the most rewarding fields (similar to the argument made by Lucas, 2001). Hence, our broad expectation is that individuals of privileged social background tend to favor the most rewarding fields.

### 4. The Swedish context

Sweden is a well-developed welfare state where life course risks are collectively shared to a comparatively large extent since the state provides extensive social insurance and redistribution. Economic inequality is low by international standards (Gottschalk & Smeeding, 1997). However, in terms of intergenerational associations in education, Sweden is not extremely equal, but rather average in comparison to other industrialized countries (Hertz et al., 2007; Hout & Dohan, 1996; Müller, 1996; Pfeffer, 2008). Education is free and the educational system is standardized from compulsory to tertiary level with comparatively little branching and without dead ends. This means that essential educational decisions are taken relatively late, the first at age 15.

In the compulsory school from the 1970s and onwards, the only form of differentiation was tracking in English and Math. Throughout the 1970s, tracking was mandatory, but became voluntary for schools in 1980, and it was abolished altogether in 1998. The tracking had no practical consequence on eligibility for further education at the secondary level after the late 80s (Wallby, Carlsson, & Nyström, 2001), and had no effects on educational outcomes, except that pupils from low-educated families performed less good in tracked schools (Sund, 2007).

*Upper secondary education* At the upper secondary level, the tracks have a fixed curricula and are preparatory in character, either three year tracks training for further academic studies or two/three year tracks preparing for a vocation. Among the two preparatory tracks, the natural science tracks stand out as the most prestigious (Broady et al., 2000). The vocational tracks are general in character and have only a loose coupling to the labor market, as opposed to two tier systems (e.g., as in Germany). Formalized corporative apprenticeships are absent, even though at least 15% of the education must take place as practice at firms in the trade. Most firms recruiting practically skilled labor thus have to rely on training on-the-job. In effect, the transition into full-time employment for lower skilled individuals is a drawn-out process

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