



Family structure and the intergenerational transmission of educational advantage

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ABSTRACT

I examine whether the effect of parents' education on children's educational achievement and attainment varies by family structure and, if so, whether this can be explained by differential parenting practices. Using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, I find that as parents' education increases, children in single mother families experience a lower boost in their achievement test scores, likelihood of attending any post-secondary schooling, likelihood of completing a 4-year college degree, and years of completed schooling relative to children living with both biological parents. Differences in parents' educational expectations, intergenerational closure, and children's involvement in structured leisure activities partially explain these status transmission differences by family structure. The findings imply that, among children with highly educated parents, children of single mothers are less likely to be highly educated themselves relative to children who grow up with both biological parents.

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1. Introduction

Over the last half-century, children's family structures have dramatically transformed as marriage rates have declined and nonmarital fertility, cohabitation, and divorce rates have risen (Bumpass and Lu, 2000; Teachman et al., 2000). Under this new family regime, fewer children are raised by both biological parents in continuously married families. Approximately one-half of children in recent birth cohorts are expected to live in a single parent family at some point during their childhood (Bumpass and Lu, 2000).

These important changes in children's family structure could alter other family functions, such as the transmission of socioeconomic status across generations. Some scholars predict that there will be shifts in social mobility because, they argue, two biological parent families are more effective in transmitting their socioeconomic resources to their children (Biblarz and Raftery, 1993, 1999; Coleman, 1988). Most of what we know about social mobility derives from children raised in two biological parent families. For recent cohorts, however, it is important to query whether social mobility has changed under this new family regime.

These significant family structure changes offer an opportunity to investigate the intersection of economic and social capital for the production of children's educational attainment. Coleman (1988) proffered that family structure is an indicator of social capital and that social capital is essential for the transmission of economic capital from parents to children. To be clear, his theoretical argument and the current study's focus is whether family structure moderates the association between parents' socioeconomic status (SES) and children's educational attainment. Coleman (1988) predicts less mobility among

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children raised in two biological parent families relative to children raised in single parent families. Coleman's theoretical discussion, however, only briefly alludes to possible mechanisms. To understand how this moderation operates, I provide additional theoretical development and incorporate scholarship about parenting practices (Bodviski and Farkas, 2008; Lareau, 2003).

Most prior research focus on differences in children's educational attainment across family structures, finding that children raised in single father and stepparent families have lower educational attainments even after accounting for their lower SES and higher unemployment rates (e.g., Amato and Booth, 1997; McLanahan, 1985; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). Only three studies have examined the question studied here: whether the association between parents' SES and children's education differs across family structures (Battle, 1997, 1998; Teachman et al., 1996). Further, no studies have examined whether this moderation occurs for children's educational attainment after the 10th grade and no study explores the mechanisms by which this moderation unfolds.

This study examines differences in educational mobility for birth cohorts exposed to the first wave of modern family structure change. Born in the mid-1970s, they were primarily at risk for experiencing parental divorce. Relatively few were born to unmarried women (13%; Ventura and Bachrach, 2000) and even fewer lived with cohabitating parents (Casper and Bianchi, 2002). These cohorts are now sufficiently old enough to have completed their educations and, thus, offer the first opportunity to examine this research question.

Children's educational attainment is important because it strongly predicts later occupational status and income (Featherman and Hauser, 1978). Today, there is a greater premium for post-secondary education given declines in manufacturing, globalization, and the addition of computers in the workplace (Mare, 1995). Education also plays a key, though seemingly contradictory, role in intergenerational social mobility. On the one hand, educational attainment facilitates upward mobility, while on the other hand it helps reproduce social classes across generations (Hout and DiPrete, 2006). Thus, children's educational attainment is a linchpin in intergenerational mobility processes.

In sum, this article examines whether the educational mobility differs by family structure using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS). The research questions are (1) does family structure moderate the association between parents' socioeconomic status and children's education? (2) how does that moderation operate? and (3) do family structure differences in parenting practices explain the differential patterns?

2. How the transmission of SES could vary across family structures

The transmission of resources from parents to children has often been framed in investment terms, whereby parents' efforts to socialize, nurture, and financially provide for their children are characterized as investments that are made within a set of opportunities and constraints (Becker and Tomes, 1986). Economists, who most frequently use this investment language, assert that the effectiveness of one parental investment depends on the quantity of other investments (Foster, 2002; Haveman and Wolfe, 1994). Sociological theorists such as Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu (1984) also articulate a contingent relationship amongst different forms of capital for child well-being. Family structure can be considered a parental investment in children (Haveman and Wolfe, 1994) that could modify the influence of other, complimentary investments, like family SES.

Coleman (1988) predicted such a moderation, arguing that families must have strong social capital to transmit parents' human and financial capital for their child's human capital development. Social capital for Coleman (1988) is social organization that facilitates action and is created through exchanges among network members; it can take the form of obligations, expectations, information, or norms accompanied by sanctions. Family social capital is defined as the strength of relations between a parent and child that results from parents' physical presence and the support and attention parents provide (Coleman, 1988). Coleman argues that "[t]he most prominent element of structural deficiency in modern families is the single parent family" (1988: S111). Coleman (1988) hypothesized that the effect of family SES for children's education is weaker among single parent families than two parent families.

A critical, if implicit, piece of this theoretical argument is that single parenthood should moderate the effects of family SES as it existed *prior* to divorce. Given income and labor force participation change dramatically after divorce, particularly for mothers (Duncan and Hoffman, 1985; Hoffman and Duncan, 1988; Rainwater, 1984), one would want to use a relatively exogenous measure of SES, meaning one less affected by divorce itself. The current analysis focuses on parents' education for this reason and because it is strongly correlated with children's education (Sewell et al., 1969). That said, additional checks reveal that results are consistent when parents' occupation and income are included in the measure of family SES.

Evidence for Coleman's ideas, however, is very limited. Teachman and colleagues (1996) applied Coleman's ideas to study children's high school drop out before 10th grade, but found no support for Coleman's theory. Modest support is found, however, in two studies predicting African American's 8th grade academic achievement (Battle, 1997, 1998). Although motivated by other theoretical arguments, Battle finds that African American children raised by single parents (Battle, 1998) or divorced parents (Battle, 1997) receive a lower return to increases in family SES than their peers in two-parent and married-parent families, respectively.

Additional research is needed. Coleman's theory focused on children's human capital development, but his theory has only been applied to study early high school dropout. The current study extends Battle's (1997, 1998) research to study the full population and uses other indicators of educational achievement, namely grades, academic track placement in

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