



**Diverging Development:
The Not-so-Invisible Hand of Social Class in the United States**

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March 2006

**Paper presented at the biennial meetings of the Society for Research on Adolescence,
San Francisco, CA, March 23-26, 2006**

**Network on Transitions to Adulthood Research Network
Working Paper**

These working papers have been posted to stimulate research and policy analysis on issues related to the transition to adulthood. The papers have not been formally reviewed by members of the Network. The papers reflect the views of the authors and do not represent the views of the other members of the network nor of the MacArthur Foundation. This work has been supported by the Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Grant No. 00-00-65719-HCD.

Introduction

America has never been a class conscientious society by the standards of the rest of the world. The notion that social class determines a person's life chances has always been an anathema in this country, flying in the face of our democratic ideology. Centuries ago, some of the earliest observers of American society, most notably Alexis de Tocqueville (1945) remarked upon the disdain for class distinctions in our early history compared to France or the rest of Europe. To be sure, social class was far more prominent and salient in the U.S. at the time of Tocqueville's visit to this country in the 1830s than today; however, the seemingly boundless possibilities of land ownership and the ideology of upward mobility softened the contours of class distinctions in this country from its very inception (Wood 2004). The idea that any hardworking American by dint of good character and hard work could rise up the social ladder has long been celebrated in the great American myth of Horatio Alger who rose from "rags to riches" providing a fictional example instructing young men--- and it was men--- of what they needed to do to make their fortunes in 19th Century America.

Curiously, the United States, long regarded as the land of opportunity, has never entirely lived up to its billing. Comparative studies on social mobility between the U.S. and our Western counterparts have failed to demonstrate that social mobility is especially higher here than in other industrialized nations (Bendix and Lipset 1966, Goldthorpe and Erickson 1993). Yet, Americans seem as oblivious to class gradations today as they have ever been. Most of us declare that we are middle-class and finer distinctions such as working-class and upper-middle class have all but vanished in the popular vernacular and even in social science research. While the salience of social class has declined in American society during the past several decades, we have witnessed a huge rise in economic inequality. (Danziger and Gottschalk 1997; Levy 1999; Wolff 2002, 2004).

When I was entering academic sociology more than four decades ago, the social world was described very differently than it is today. Even while recognizing the muted notions of social class held by most Americans, social scientists were keenly attentive to, if not obsessed with, distinctions in values, life-style, and social practices inculcated in the family that were linked to social mobility (Hollingshead 1949, Lynd and Lynd 1929, Warner 1949). Indeed, the idea that parents in different social strata deliberately or unintentionally shaped their children's ambitions, goals, and habits, affecting the chances of moving up the social ladder was widely accepted, supported by a large body of literature in psychology, sociology, and economics showing how families situated at different rungs on the social ladder held distinctive world views and adhered to different ideas of development (Bernstein and Henderson 1960; Gans 1962; Kamarovsky 1987; Miller and Swanson 1958). Most of all, social scientists believed that life chances were highly constrained by values and skills acquired in the family and structures of opportunity in the child's immediate environment that shaped his (and it usually was his) chances of economic success. Fine gradations of social class could be linked to virtually everything from toilet training to marriage practices (Blood and Wolfe 1960; Mead and Wolfenstein 1955).

Social class, not so long ago the most powerful analytic category in the researcher's conceptual toolbox has now been largely eclipsed by an emphasis on gender, race, and ethnicity. Socio-economic status has been reduced to a variable, mostly one that is often statistically

controlled, to permit researchers to focus on the effect of determinants other than social class. We have stopped measuring altogether the finer grade distinctions of growing up with differential resources. True, we continue to look at poverty and economic disadvantage with no less interest than we ever have, and we certainly understand that affluence and education make a huge difference. Yet, most developmentalists view economic status as a continuum that defies qualitatively finer breakdowns. Consequently, working-class, lower-middle class families or even families in the middle of the income distribution are concealed rather than revealed in combinations of income, education, and occupation. (For exceptions, see Kefalas 2003 and Lareau 2003). In short, the idea of social class has largely been collapsed into rich and poor marked by education and earnings --- above and below the poverty line. Think of the way we currently treat “single-parent families” as an example. They have become almost a proxy for poverty rather than a differentiated category of families that experiences life as differently as their two-parent counterparts.

The contention that contemporary developmental research downplays the influence of social class in no way is meant to imply that professional attention to gender or race/ethnicity is unwarranted or should be diminished. Without a firm grasp of social class differences in contemporary America, however, much of the current research on gender and ethnicity ignores class differences within the analytic categories of gender or ethnicity, blunting an understanding of how they shape social reality and social opportunities among men and women and across different racial and ethnic categories. Just as we have come to recognize the hazards of lumping together all Hispanics or Asians, I would suggest that we need a more nuanced understanding of what differences it makes to possess certain levels of education, occupation, income, and indeed a world view and life patterns attached to these constituent elements of socio-economic stratification.

Beyond a call to action, I want to outline a research agenda for examining social class in greater detail. Beginning with a brief discussion of developmental theories, I allude to some of the methodological obstacles to studying social class that must be attended to, and then turn to developmental processes that expose research questions I believe warrant greater attention by our society of scholars. My work nicely parallels observations recently put forth by Sara McLanahan (2004) in her Presidential Address to the Population Association of America on inequality and children’s development though my attention is devoted more to the operation of stratification than to its implications for public policy. My central aim is to expose a series of developmental processes that work in tandem to fashion a stratification system operating from birth to maturity in this country that is pervasive, persistent, and far more powerful than we generally like to admit.

Social Class: A Problematic Construct

One reason why attention to social class has faded may be traced to the academic controversies surrounding the very idea that social classes exist in this country. If what is meant by social class is a closed set of life chances which people recognize and even affiliate with, then surely most would agree that America is a classless society. However, social class has been used in a different way to mark the structure of economic and social opportunities affecting individuals’ behaviors and beliefs, networks and associations, and, ultimately, knowledge about and access to social institutions such as the family, education, and the labor market.

Viewed in this way, social classes are not tightly bounded categories; they are fuzzy sets created by experience and exposure to learning opportunities and selective social contacts that derive from resources that can be marshaled by individuals and their kinship networks. In this respect, the fuzzy nature of social class appears to differ from gender or ethnicity though both of these constructs have been appropriately critiqued when viewed as “naturally unambiguous” rather than “socially constructed” statuses. Still, there are no certain markers that identify individuals as belonging to one class or another; social class is probabilistically constructed and measured by particular constellations of socio-economic statuses. Thus, we might say that someone who has low education, works at a menial job which pays poorly is lower-class, a term that admittedly has become virtually taboo in the U.S. Nonetheless, we easily recognize that those possessing these attributes are socially isolated, often excluded from mainstream institutions, and limited in their access to mobility. Whether we refer to them as lower-class, poor, disadvantaged, or socially excluded, it really doesn’t change their opportunities or their ability to confer opportunities to their children.

I will dodge the question in this paper of whether it makes sense to identify a particular number of social strata such as was common in social science a generation ago, designating four, five, or seven classes that possessed different family practices, values and beliefs, or lifestyles and cultural habits (Hollingshead 1949; Warner 1949). Instead, I merely want to observe how neglect of social class has created a void in attention by developmentalists in how stratification structures the first decades of the life course. Toward the end of this paper, I will reflect on what I and my colleagues on the MacArthur Network on Adult Transitions are learning about how social class shapes the transition to adulthood in myriad ways that have profound implications for the future of American society.

A Developmental Theory of Social Class

Human development involves an ongoing interaction between individual level biological potentials and social processes shaped by children’s multiple and changing social environments. Sometimes developmentalists make distinctions between maturation, regulated in part by biology, and socially arranged learning, the process that we generally refer to as socialization. One of the important legacies of late 20th Century developmental science was to put an end the useless debate between nature and nurture. Researchers initiated a theoretical re-orientation designed to explore ongoing interactions from birth to maturity in a nest of varying contexts--- families, childcare settings, schools, communities, and the like to investigate how social context afforded or denied opportunities for optimal development, understanding that optimal development can vary according to children’s innate abilities and their exposure to learning environments.

No one understood this scheme better or promoted it with more vigor than Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), who, as it happens, was one of the pioneers in psychology in examining class differences in development. Bronfenbrenner’s theory of development located the individual in an embedded set of contexts that extended from the intimate and direct to distant and indirect as they socially impinged and shaped the course of human development over the life span. Bronfenbrenner’s ideas culled from the legacy of 19th and 20th century psychology closely parallel a tradition of sociological theory stemming from the work of George Herbert Mead (1934) and Charles Cooley (1902) that has come to be known as symbolic interaction. Like

Bronfenbrenner, Mead and Cooley conceptualized human development as an ongoing process of engagement and response to social others--- social exchange guided by feedback from the surrounding social system. As sociologists applied these ideas in practice, they quickly realized how differently it was possible to grow up in varying contexts and cultures, a lesson that is closely aligned with Bronfenbrenner's theory.

It was and, I believe still is, just a short step from this general theory of human development which features the ongoing interaction of children in local environments to seeing the pervasive influence of social class in shaping the course of development. That step involves a careful appraisal of how learning environments themselves are arranged to promote movement from one to the next. These more distal social arrangements are carefully regulated in all modern societies by gatekeepers who exercise presumably meritocratic standards based on a combination of talent, performance, and sponsorship (Buchman 1989; Heinz and Marshall 2003). In all developed societies, parents cede direct control of their children's fates at an increasingly early age to others who become instrumental in guiding children through an age-graded system of opportunities. Parents train and coach their children, select and direct choices in this system, advocate when problems arise, and try to arrange for remediation when their children are not following an optimal path. So, as I have argued elsewhere (Furstenberg, et al. 1999), parents' managerial skills have become increasingly important in how well children navigate the institutional arrangements that affect their opportunities in later life.

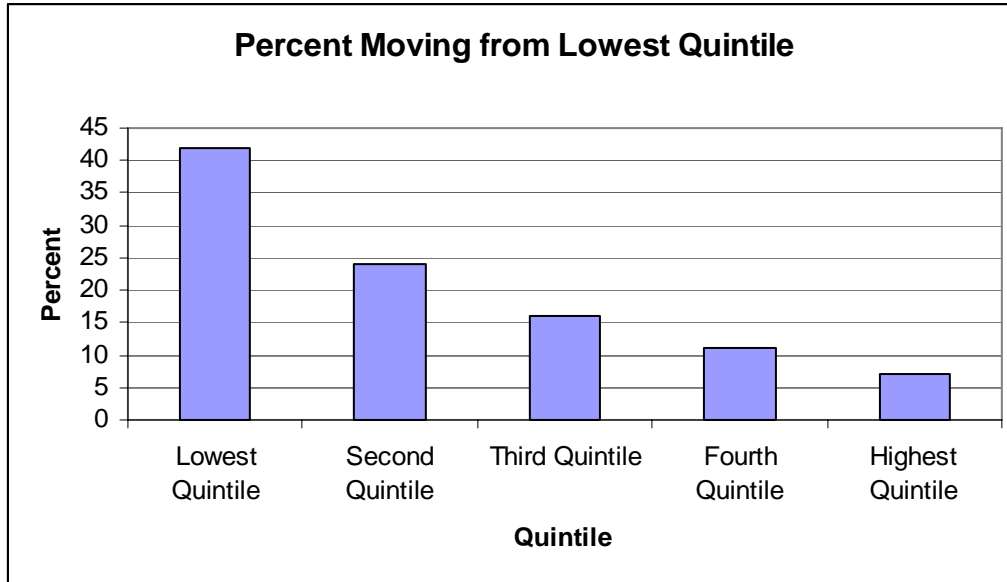
Of course, parents themselves are embedded in very different opportunity systems; specifically they are more or less privileged in the knowledge, skills, and resources that they can provide to their children. Expressed in currently fashionable terms, they have different levels of human, social, cultural and psychological capital to invest in their children. Of course, parents are not the only agents that matter. By virtue of their social position at birth and during childhood, children have differential access to kin, friends, neighbors, teachers, and peers that can and do promote or diminish their chances of socio-economic attainment. So while differences in exposure to class-related opportunities might be relatively small, nonetheless they cumulate if they consistently favor or disadvantage children's life chances. Life chances are compounded positively or negatively as opportunities or their absence play out over time.

A century ago, Max Weber used a powerful metaphor for how history operates. Weber (1949) argued that it is like a pair of loaded dice that are weighted with each throw by the result of the previous one; constraints increase with repeated tosses of the dice, leading to a more and more skewed outcome. Social class can be conceptualized as just such a mechanism, establishing a set of life chances that become more sharply pronounced as they play out over time. Micro-interactions cumulate in a patterned and successively more consequential pattern, etching a probabilistically pre-ordained trajectory of success.

To be sure, when it comes to human development, an actor, let's say a child growing up in the U.S. today, exercises a certain level of discretion or influence by dint of his or her own abilities, talents, or needs facing contexts that may be tilted toward advantage or disadvantage. The outcome is always affected by how the child comes to interpret and act in these contexts. This might be an operational definition of resiliency or vulnerability as psychologists such as Rutter (2000; 1985), Garmezy (1993; 1991), and Werner (1995) have employed, the idea that some children are able to defy the odds. Interestingly, developmentalists in recent years have given at least as much, if not more, attention to research on beating the odds as on developing a careful understanding of how the structure of opportunities operates to create systematic

advantage or disadvantage over time--- or we might say why and how growing up in a certain social location establishes strong and long odds of departing from an expected pattern of success.

I suspect that most of us know just how strong the odds are for rising or falling substantially from the position at birth. Based on retrospective data that understates the amount of social mobility, current estimates suggest that 42 percent of children born into the bottom fifth of the income distribution will remain there as adults. Only 7 percent will make it into the top fifth of the income distribution. For those born into the top fifth of the income distribution, 40 percent remain there while just 6 percent fall into the lowest quintile. (Hertz, 2005) **(I don't have mobility from the top to 2nd, 3rd or 4th quintiles – trying to get that)**



Methodological Obstacles to Study

Until very recently, we lacked the data and the methods to observe how social stratification shapes the course of human development. Longitudinal research really only became widely available in the latter decades of the last century though pioneering studies were done on relatively small samples such as Glen Elder's (1974, 1999) now classic work on the Berkeley and Oakland samples. Not until the introduction of the computer could we ever imagine more than cursory treatment of large-scale samples that might provide the kind of variation over time that permit us to examine the array of experiences that children have in the course of development that necessarily calls for merging of different waves of data collection, administrative records, blood samples, and the like that permit us to understand the numerous contingencies that make up children's lives.

Disciplinary rationale sometimes have steered us away from attention to social class as well. Psychologists have been actively discouraged from working on large existing data sets and instructed to collect their own data, thus restricting the range of problems that could be examined. Sociologists, beginning in the 1960s, turned away from studying children, ceding much work on socialization to psychologists. Disciplines have been organized to encourage work on specific life periods and younger researchers have been encouraged to become specialists in infancy, early or middle-childhood, or adolescence. To be sure, exceptions abound

and I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge those researchers such as Eleanor Maccoby, John Clausen, Doris Entwisle, or Emmy Werner and others who broke out of the mold or, one might say, beat the odds of doing research in disciplines that discouraged such efforts.

Added to the problems stemming from data availability and disciplinary constraints are the methods, themselves, that are required to examine how trajectories of development unfold over time. Anyone who is familiar with my work will immediately know that I am probably the last person to discuss the new methodological frontiers in developmental science. However, even a methodological simpleton like me has become familiar with a host of novel techniques for analyzing and interpreting longitudinal data such as growth curves that are now available in our packaged software. No doubt, many more will be coming in the future as new and more powerful ways of understanding career contingencies, transitions, and the evolution of trajectories of development are invented and refined. The tools are now available to describe and explain how advantage and disadvantage along many dimensions configure and crystallize the developmental pathways from birth to maturity. In fact, I would contend that data availability and methods have outpaced our theoretical and substantive understanding of how social class influences human development.

The Origin of Social Class Differences

More sensitive analytic techniques will have to take account of several features that we already know about the influence of social class on development. *First and foremost, early patterns of development may be difficult to surmount once set in place for several different and perhaps overlapping reasons.* At this stage, we know relatively little about the way that brain development during infancy and early childhood takes place, but it is entirely possible that the architecture of early development could well preclude or, at least, compromise subsequent patterns of development. There is growing evidence that cognitive and emotional capacities that form early in life are foundational, providing a template or structure for later advances (Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 2000; Danziger and Waldfogel 2000; Haggerty, et al. 1994).

Exposure to these developmental influences begins before the child is born and is shaped in no small way by parents' prenatal experiences: their exposure to toxins, their diet, the quality of health care received during pregnancy and the neonatal health provided to them. Most children experience a normal delivery and are born in good health, but steep differences exist across social classes in all of these factors. The probability of pre-natal and neo-natal health problems are sharply structured by socio-economic status. Thus, children enter the world endowed unequally even if we discount any genetic variation by social class.

The families into which they are born provide vastly different opportunities to build on that endowment. Whether children are planned or unplanned, whether they must compete for limited family resources or have enough, and whether they will receive steady and sufficient attention from parent figures are but a few of the contingencies known to vary by social class (AGI on planning, etc.). What is less well understood is how these early influences combine and cumulate creating developmental divides with lasting effects on children's prospects in later lives. Most of the work on the consequences of social attachment, for example, has not been traced for long enough periods to understand whether or how much it affects later transitions in adolescence and early adulthood.

The remarkable research on institutional care of children in Romania under the Communist regime by Charles Nelson and his colleagues provides evidence that something like a critical period exists for emotional development that, if breached, can lead to permanent impairment. Children raised in a collective setting with little or no opportunity to develop attachments with stable emotional figures were emotionally incapacitated. Nelson and his colleagues discovered that if placed in families with emotionally engaging surrogate parents by certain ages, the pattern of emotional disfigurement could be repaired, and perhaps even reversed if the placement occurred early in life. Now, an interesting question, relevant to the discussion here, is whether stimulation and human interaction in early childhood is dichotomous or multi-tiered, that is whether and how much early interaction sets the parameters for later growth by establishing a critical level or in a more graduated fashion that may still fall below the optimal amount. Few children in American society are impaired by lack of stimulation, but there seems little doubt that many children get less stimulation or fewer opportunities for emotional engagement than is optimal.

A series of experiments in neuropsychology conducted on barriers to reading reveal fascinating and perhaps parallel findings on brain development. It seems that middle-class and working-class children with reading difficulties may exhibit neural responses when faced with a task of decoding words. The researchers making this discovery hypothesize that the amount of exposure to reading and remediation could account for the differences by social class, suggesting that the causes for reading problems could differ and the remedies might vary for children by social class.

Both these studies bring to mind the impressive qualitative study by Hart and Risley (1995). Home observation of family interactions among children and their families revealed gigantic variations in the range of words, expressions, and interaction styles creating, in effect, a continuous and mounting difference in verbal environments that appeared to be linked to the vocabularies that children acquired in the early years of life (Bernstein 1971; Bernstein and Henderson 1969; Farkas and Beron, 2004). These varying cognitive contexts were later linked to reading skills and accordingly school success.

This study leads to a second observation relevant to developmental trajectories of children in different social classes. *Small differences, if persistent, become larger and more consequential over time. A process of psychological and social accretion operates both at an internal and external level as children develop self concepts, styles of thought, and habits that shape their motivation and social interactions in ways that harden over time.* If, for example, children are exposed to very modest differences in, let us say, language, reading practices, or interaction styles over long periods of time, the cumulative effects could be quite striking and large. Thus, if on average, years of education are linked to small differences in parental skills or practices, they could create significant effects on average in children's acquisition of cognitive and emotional skills. These psychological and social styles create impressions on others that are reinforced and reified in informal and formal social settings. To answer this question, we need both stable measures of social patterns established inside the home that are taken with sufficient frequency to permit us to examine growth curves of emotional and cognitive development that extend beyond the early years of childhood into middle childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood.

These styles that emerge in the home and are shaped to a great degree by class differences in childrearing practices in the family establish what sociologists used to refer as

“anticipatory socialization,” advanced training for social roles outside the home, especially entrance into pre-school programs that foreshadow and initiate social tracking within the school system. Modest or perhaps not so modest differences that occur within families are unlikely to be offset or compensated for by learning that takes place outside the home. To the contrary, it is easy to demonstrate that they are greatly amplified by differences in parents’ capacities to locate, gain access to, and monitor settings outside the home and by institutional practices that selectively recruit children from families that have the resources and children who appear to exhibit the capabilities to perform well.

Parents, in all social strata, are well aware that beginning at an early age children require and benefit from experiences outside the home that offer opportunities for learning offsetting or reinforcing patterns established in the family. We have rightly given a good deal of attention to childcare settings (Chaudry 2004; Magnuson and Waldfogel 2005), but we have a lot less information on the impact of peer interactions (Cassaro 19XX) or encounters with skill enhancing agencies such as recreational centers, libraries, museums and the like. However, the likelihood of receiving a steady and stable exposure to these sorts of social institutions vary tremendously by social class (Medrich et al. 1982). Qualitative studies have demonstrated large differences by social class in children’s exposure both to the amount and quality of these settings. The reasons why are pretty obvious. Parents with better education are both more knowledgeable and therefore usually more discriminating in locating high quality settings. Second, they have greater resources to gain access to those settings such as time, transportation, and money to pay the cost of admission. Finally, they have the ability to organize and implement on their children’s behalf and to monitor ongoing engagements whether they be with the right kind of peers, better classes, or high quality teachers, coaches or caregivers.

The other side of the coin of what happens to young children as a result of the social class into which they are born is no less influential in channeling children from different social classes into more or less favorable settings. *Settings find and recruit children from families of different social classes with varying levels of energy and enthusiasm.* In many instances, settings regulate their clientele by the cost of services: the least affordable for parents attract mostly or exclusively children from affluent families whether we are talking about prenatal health programs, childcare facilities, after school programs, summer camps or Ivy League colleges. The availability of resources establishes to a large extent the social class distribution of families who participate in social institutions in American society. Those that can pay the cost of admission typically purchase better teachers and peers who are more motivated and prepared. We have relatively little research on the social class networks of children that emerge over time, but it is certainly a plausible hypothesis that most children in the U.S. grow up with little or no exposure to peers outside their social class. Thus, their opportunities to acquire cultural and social capital are tremendously influenced the social class composition of kinship and peer networks. And, we have every reason to believe that money and education are playing an ever larger role in regulating the level of cross-class exposure and the composition of children’s social networks.

The Importance of Place

Most parents are well aware of this fact: this is why the primary mechanism of managing opportunities for children is choice of residence. Interestingly, we have all too little information

on social class and residential decision making. Since schooling is generally determined by neighborhood, parents with more knowledge and resources can select neighborhoods that package together access to better schools, better peers, and, often, better recreational facilities. In the study that my colleagues and I did in Philadelphia on how families manage risk and opportunity, we discovered that parents were acutely aware of the opportunities attached to choice of neighborhood though their awareness of its importance often did not necessarily mean that they were able to exercise much discretion in where to live.

Most working-class families in Philadelphia could not afford to live in affluent sections of the city much less move to the suburbs where they knew that they would find better schools and more desirable peers. They often resorted to the second-best option, sending their children to parochial schools where children were monitored more closely, had a longer school day with more after-school activities, and attended school with like-minded peers.

Schools in turn were able to select families that enabled them to produce higher test-scores and hence greater academic success. A good portion of these outcomes were pre-determined by the selection of parents and their children though clearly more able, prepared, and motivated students may help schools to recruit higher quality teachers and administrative staff. As I sometimes like to say, economists want to rule out selection as a methodological nuisance while sociologists regard selection as a fundamental social process that must be studied as a central feature of how things happen. In any event, social life is created by multiple and interacting influences that generally come in packages rather than operate as particular or singular influences as they are studied in experimental designs.

This is one of the larger lessons learned from the extensive experimental work on Moving to Opportunity, the government research study, that has followed families who participated in a random assignment experiment of public housing recipients who were given the opportunity to move to lower-poverty neighborhoods. Moving to lower poverty neighborhoods was not an event, as the researchers tended to regard it from the onset, but a succession of adaptations and interpretations that influenced its impact on particular family members differently depending on experiences prior to moving, new and old social networks, and demographic and unmeasured psychological characteristics of the movers and stayers. The net effects--- important to policy makers--- conceal a huge range of varied responses that unfortunately are only dimly understood.

Social Redundancy in Multiple Contexts

Perhaps, what I have written thus far might lead to the impression that opportunities at the family, school, and neighborhood levels are strongly correlated. However, important work by Tom Cook and his colleagues in their study of families in Prince Georges County reveals that, at an individual level, most children experience something of a mixture of social opportunities. (Cook et al. 2002). There is only a modest correlation between the quality of parental resources, school resources, and neighborhood resources--- surely the opposite conclusion from the idea that children grow up in an environment of class congruent settings.

However, the research by Cook and his colleagues also reveals that at the population level--- when family characteristics, school, and neighborhood quality are considered in the aggregate --- there is a much more powerful correlation among these arenas of social stratification. On average, children from better endowed families are very likely to attend better

schools and live in better neighborhoods. It is as if the playing field for families is tilted in ways that are barely visible to the naked eye. Another way of looking at the stratification of social space is to imagine that families with more resources are able to arrange the world so that their children will have to be only ordinarily motivated and talented to succeed. Those with fewer resources are called upon to make more effort or have greater talent to succeed. Those with limited or meager resources must be highly gifted and super-motivated to achieve at a comparable levels. Developmentalists have often implicitly acknowledged the way the world works by valorizing the families and children that do manage to swim against the current, but we should be measuring the current as well as the swimmer's efforts, especially because there is every reason to believe that the current has become stronger in recent years.

Opportunity structures, made up of multiple and overlapping environments shaped by social position, are not accurately apprehended by individuals from different vantage points in the social system. They can only be understood by examining simultaneously what families see and respond to in their familiar settings, what they do not see but can be seen by other observers, and--- most difficult of all--- seeing what is *not* there. Take, for example, how much parents or children know about colleges and how they work. Most children in affluent families know more about this topic at age twelve, I would guess, than children in working class families when they are ready to enter college. Cultural capital--- knowledge of how the world works--- is acquired like vocabulary and speech practices in the family, schools, and from peers in the community (Bourdieu 1973, 1986; Lamont 2000; Laureau 1989, 2003). Class differences result from a process of social redundancy that exposes children to information, ideas, expectations, and navigational tools leading some children to know what they must do to get ahead and others merely to think that they know what to do. Cultural knowledge of the way the world works has surely been studied by developmentalists but we have a long way to go before we have a good map of what is and is not known by parents and children about the stratification system and how this knowledge changes over time as young people's impressions of how things work run up against how they actually work. With relatively few exceptions (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Newman 1993; Burton and Stack 1993), we lack the kinds of cultural studies that peered inside the family, looking at the culture of families, that were far more common among past generations of social researchers.

The Social Class Distribution of Obstacles

Social class position not only structures variations in opportunities for advancement, it also greatly influences the probability of untoward events and circumstances in the lives of children and their families. The likelihood of bad things happening to people varies enormously by social class though we know this more from inference and anecdote than we do from systematic studies of children's experiences in the course of growing up. Take, for example, the inventory of life events associated with sources of psychological stressors including mortality, serious morbidity, accidents, family dissolution, residential changes, job loss, and so on. Virtually all of these events occur much more frequently in highly disadvantaged than moderately advantaged families and least of all among the most privileged. Problems are more likely to happen to families who lack the educational, cultural, and social capital that I mentioned earlier. Lower-income families are more vulnerable than higher income-families to a host of troubles from credit loss, health problems, transportation breakdown, criminal victimization, divorce, mental health problems, and the list goes on. They also have fewer resources to

prevent problems from happening in the first place by anticipating them or nipping them in the bud (preventive and ameliorative interventions). And, when they do occur, social class affects a family's ability to cushion their blow.

Anyone who has studied low-income households, as I have for so many decades, cannot help but notice that there is a steady stream of these events which constantly unsettle family functioning, requiring time, energy, and resources that often are in short supply or altogether unavailable. Life is simply harder and more brutish at the bottom, and, I suspect, it is more precarious in the middle than we ordinarily image. As developmentalists, I don't think that we have done a very good job in evaluating how such events affect the lives and life chances of children. They create wear and tear on families and often ignite a succession of subsequent difficulties. The problems may begin with job loss, which in turn results in marital strife or dissolution, and finally settle into long-term mental illness or substance abuse. Or this chain of events can just as easily be reversed. The point is that in the ordinary course of life, children at different social strata face vastly different probabilities of bad things happening to them and their parents and these events not infrequently spiral out of control.

Having spent part of my career examining the impact of marital disruption on children, I know all too well the difficulties of studying even single negative events if only because they are usually preceded and followed by other adversities. It clearly behooves us to give greater attention to the ways that these events are distributed and clustered in the lives of children and families. Social scientists are accustomed to describing these behaviors as "non-normative" events, but they may only be "non-normative"--- at least in the statistical sense--- in the lives of affluent families.

Class Differences in Problem Prevention and Remediation

The distribution of obstacles, as I have suggested above, is negatively correlated with social class just as the distribution of means to prevent and remediate troubles is negatively related to class. Affluent families have access to a tremendous range of strategies for prevention. They purchase and practice preventive healthcare, they situate themselves in environments free of toxins, and their homes and streets are safer; when and if their children experience problems in school, they can exercise a range of actions from changing schools to procuring help in the form of tutoring, assessments, therapy, medication and so on. If their children happen to get in trouble in the community, they have means to minimize the trouble using informal contacts or legal interventions. We know a lot about the employment of these preventive and remedial strategies, but we have yet to put together a comprehensive picture of how troubles are avoided and deflected for children in different social classes. If we examined a sample of problem behaviors among adolescents, what would be the likelihood of adverse outcomes occurring from a series of incidents?

The criminological literature provides ample evidence that class (and race/ethnicity as well) accounts for a huge amount of the variation in outcomes of delinquency, for example. It is not that adolescents from affluent families do not commit delinquent acts, use drugs and alcohol, and engage in risky sex. Indeed, the evidence suggests that so-called problem behaviors are fairly evenly distributed by social class. However, the consequences of similar actions differ greatly by the capacities that families have to avert the negative sanctions that may follow or to avoid their adverse consequences. Families with greater assets and social connections can

minimize the significance of troubles even when they occur, especially the more extreme sanctions such as going to court and being sentenced to incarceration.

Social class then provides a form of cover from negative events when they do occur. It provides a social airbrush for the privileged concealing mistakes and missteps that invariably occur in the course of growing up. The management of problem behavior by families, their access and use of professional delegates (doctors, lawyers, tutors, social service workers) across different social classes represents a neglected topic in adolescent development.

Social Class, Social Capital and Sponsorship

We would miss a lot about the use of professional and non-professional agents in children's lives among different social classes were we to confine our attention to their role in problem intervention and remediation. This topic represents a broader exercise of what has come to be called social capital, the social resources that can be brought to bear by families, to promote positive development as well as prevent or correct negative courses of action. Recently, there has been considerable interest in mentoring and the roles that mentors play in children's development, especially in helping children who have limited access to positive role models, advisors, supporters and advocates, and sponsors.

Sponsors, of course, can be family members, but we generally think of them as agents outside the family who act on the behalf of children. They can be gatekeepers in institutions that allocate resources and access to programs, services and opportunities. More often, they are individuals who have connections to a range of different gatekeepers. Students of child and adolescent development know a lot less about how sponsorship operates in every day life than we should because it undoubtedly plays an important part in channeling children into successful pathways.

We know only a little bit about how various adults help to cultivate skills, talents, and special abilities such as art, music, theater, sports, and so on, but much less how sponsors operate to promote children's chances of getting ahead by non-academic means or in combination with formal schooling. This topic merits greater attention because, as I've said, sponsors can play an important role in facilitating social mobility. Less visible but perhaps equally prominent is the role that sponsors have in helping to guarantee that children in the more affluent classes retain their privileged position.

Some research exists on how young people enter the world of work and the role that families play in using contacts and connections to place adolescents in training, service, and work opportunities. Privileged parents understand that their children need to build portfolios of experience--- resumes--- in order to get ahead. Our research in Philadelphia on the less advantaged and the disadvantaged suggests much less understanding on the part of parents in how to connect their children to select institutions. Usually, it appears that children from less advantaged families are identified by sponsors by dint of their good efforts in school or perhaps community organizations. However, affluent parents do not simply rely on their children to attract sponsors. They actively recruit them or place their children in organizations, programs, and social arenas where sponsors are present and looking for motivated and talented prospects. Schools with well developed extra-curricular programs, after-school classes and activities, summer camps and educational courses are part of the stock and trade of growing up well off.

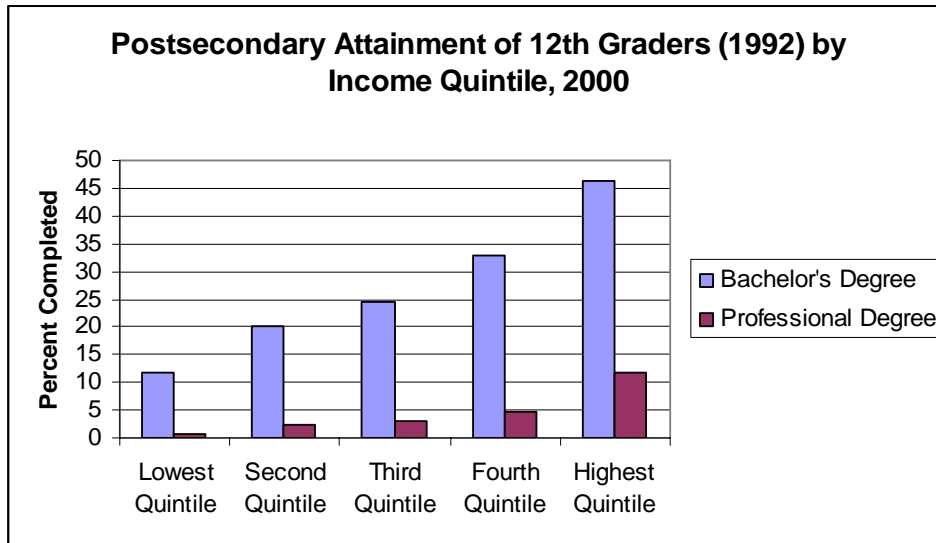
Children in affluent families become practiced in relating to adults and in appreciating what adult sponsors, mentors, and coaches can do for them in middle childhood and adolescence. Increasingly, I would argue, the role of sponsors figures prominently in young people's ability to navigate successfully as they move from adolescence into early adulthood.

Early Adulthood: The Extension of Investment

Early adulthood, the period of life when youth enter adult roles and assume adult responsibilities--- entering the labor force and becoming economically self-sufficient and forming families--- has in recent decades become a less orderly and more protracted process than it was a half century ago. The driving force in the extension of the passage to adulthood has been the perceived need for a college education and, for the more privileged, an advanced degree often accompanied by a lengthy apprenticeship in a professional career. Related to this trend but not wholly because of it, young people put off more permanent relationship commitments and, generally, parenthood as well. Commitments to marriage and children, public opinion tells us, have become almost a second stage of the adult transition, often put off until education has been completed and some measure of job security is attained (Furstenberg et al. 1999; Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2005). Social class differences are no less prominent in this new stage of life than they are during childhood or adolescence. The current demands on young adults to attain more skills, be better prepared to enter the labor force, and postpone family formation play out quite differently in advantaged, middle-class, and disadvantaged families.

Let's begin with the obvious: the costs of higher education have become less and less affordable as grants and loans have not kept pace with college tuitions, much less the cost of professional education. Among families at the bottom of the income distribution, the debt taken on by parents and young adults can be crippling even though the long-term payoff theoretically makes borrowing for education economically rational (Rouse 2004). Add to the economic problems the academic liabilities that many, if not most, youth from disadvantaged families have accumulated in school brings us to the obvious fact that a very small proportion are academically, much less financially prepared to endure a lengthy period of working and attending school (usually beginning with community college) as they work their way through college. It happens, but relatively rarely. Other events intrude: attachment to college is difficult in most community institutions because they lack the supportive staff and assistance offered by four-year institutions; financial crises arise siphoning off needed resources, parents cannot or

will not offer aid or require support themselves, and so on.



Income Quintile	Bachelor's Degree	Professional Degree
Lowest Quintile	11.9	0.6
Second Quintile	20.2	2.4
Third Quintile	24.6	3.0
Fourth Quintile	33.0	4.6
Highest Quintile	46.2	11.9

From Table 1, Postsecondary Attainment, Attendance, Curriculum and Performance: Selected Results from the NELS:88/2000 Postsecondary Education Transcript Study (PETS), 2000 (NCES 2003-394)

Basically, among 12th graders likely to go to college, about 1 in 8 of those from families in the lowest quintile completed college compared to nearly 1 in 2 of those from families in the highest quintile. Only 1 in 4 of those in the middle quintile completed college.

Among middle-class families--- let's say the third income quintile that ranges from \$43,400 to \$65,832 in 2004 (Census Historical Income Tables, Table F-1) few young adults can afford higher education without paying for it by working at the same time. Balancing school and work commitments in early adulthood is not an easy task, leading to high rates of school stop out and dropout. Thus, even when preparation for college is adequate and grants and loans can be managed, the process can be arduous and lengthy, partially accounting for the exceptionally high rates of some college – persons attending but not completing their college education -- in the U.S. Many young people who enter college settle for, willingly or not, what amounts to post-secondary, technical training, often restricting mobility in their adult years.

The situation of the affluent families permits much greater latitude for families to help out during a longer and longer period of training. The prospect of attaining a high income job in the future, along with assistance offered by parents, sustains young adults through college and into professional careers. No doubt, too, young adults from affluent families who are generally better prepared academically are far more likely to qualify for financial aid packages that require taking on less debt.

Of course, this class-based profile is stereotypical to some degree. Talented individuals do rise from the bottom and untalented youth drift down. However, the social class mechanisms that I have described in this paper continue to play out during this period. The accumulation of deficits, the likelihood of problematic events, the availability of social capital and sponsorship continue to tilt the playing field as youth enter institutions with different levels of selectivity or work situations that permit or thwart opportunities for attaining further human capital.

I cannot leave the topic of early adulthood without mentioning how social class exposure in childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood affects partnerships and family formation. We have always known that social class is linked to the quality and stability of marriage though there was a time when divorce (not separation or marital unhappiness) occurred more frequently among the better off. This has not been true for some decades. Lower human capital is related to lower social, cultural, and psychological capital --- the skills, knowledge of the world, social networks, and sponsorship all of which play some part in the ability to manage and sustain emotional relationships. Striking differences emerge in the occurrence of marriage, its stability, and in the incidence of non-marital childbearing by social class (Ellwood and Jencks, 2001; Goldstein and Kenney 2001; Wu and Wolfe 2001).

These family patterns, so closely linked to class-related experiences in growing up, figure prominently in public discussions about the retreat from marriage among Americans. Curiously, the retreat has not occurred at all among the privileged and less so in the middle-class. Marriage, as I've written elsewhere, is increasingly a luxury good attainable only by those with the social, psychological, and material goods that make it happen and make it work.

Conclusion

I will not conclude by issuing a series of policy prescriptions to change the system. That is a topic for another paper and perhaps a different author. Instead, I confine my final observations to just a few summary observations.

Most of us are aware of some or all of the factual data that I have presented in this paper; however, our research treats social class only glancingly if at all. As I remarked earlier, we have a strong interest in poverty and social disadvantage but have largely ignored gradations of disadvantage that occur beyond the least fortunate in our society. We firmly hold the view that, after all, we share a middle-class status with all but the least and most fortunate--- the super rich. This way of looking at the world is distorted by our own privileged circumstances that lead us to ignore relevant distinctions operating to keep most Americans in positions that are becoming economically and emotionally more precarious with each passing decade.

The socially invisibility of class in the U.S. is maintained by a myth that most Americans are in the middle. You and I are there too, but the fact is that most are not middle-class in our education, income, or occupation. Just because one percent of Americans hold 33.4 percent of

all wealth (Wolff, 2004) (note that the top 5% hold 59.2% of wealth; these figures include homeownership) must not blind us to the fact that we, too, are among the haves, benefiting from a system that is skewed in our favor, arranged to keep us and our children among the privileged. We know perfectly well that many hardworking Americans cannot possibly attain the American dream, but we act as if economic and social success is there for those who want it and follow the right path.

As social scientists and, especially, as developmentalists, we must begin to ask ourselves whether we are accurately describing the social and psychological worlds of most Americans who are far less privileged than we are. Are we adequately portraying this world in our professional writings in ways that make it comprehensible and believable to those who cannot see as far or as clearly as we are able to about how the social system is arranged to allow a small number to flourish while others with equal talents and motivations never to reach their human potential. To put it simply, we are not telling it like it is.

Doing a better job requires that we take advantage of the new data sources and novel techniques for analysis to tell a broader and more in-depth story of class differentiated childhoods, adolescences, and early adulthoods. Doing a better job requires giving much more attention to opportunity differences in the so-called middle-class where most Americans reside. Doing a better job means examining alternative possibilities of growing up in a less class-skewed society by engaging in more comparative research. It insists that we devote more attention to the development of policies that restore some measure of balance and equity to our social system.

We must begin to tackle the question of why our children by international standards are not doing well in so many important domains of health and education, why our young adults are falling behind in college completion for the first time in American history, and how our families, wanting to do the best for their children, are unable to measure up to the task.

Our association poised as it is between disciplines and relevant to an ever increasing age span that links childhood to adulthood is uniquely qualified to examine how social class shapes the course of development in the first several decades of life. If we can't do it, who will?

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