

Maternal SES, Parental Child-Rearing Approaches and Children's Achievement

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Extended abstract

There is a great deal of agreement among social scientists concerning the importance of the family of origin for a multitude of individual outcomes. Family background factors, especially parental socioeconomic status, are known to affect a range of children's outcomes, from academic performance and achievement test scores to social and economic attainments in adulthood. The systematic and persistent advantages enjoyed by individuals born to socioeconomically successful parents have been thoroughly documented in the sociological and demographic literature over more than a half-century. Although achievement outcomes are malleable over the child's life span, it is important to recognize that the child's early years are almost entirely monopolized by his or her family, and that it is during these early years that basic language, academic and social skills are developed, and these initial opportunities and constraints serve as important factors in the development of the child.

What is less well known are the mechanisms that produce these adult-child linkages, and despite the broad consensus on the importance of family socioeconomic background for children's outcomes, we lack a complete understanding of the processes that promote stratification across generations within the family. In general, the interpretations given these findings have relied on what Herbert Hyman (in 1953) called the "value systems of different classes," or what other researchers have attempted to capture using concepts involving different child-rearing or socialization approaches. And although these are popular interpretations (e.g. see Lareau's recent book, *Unequal Childhoods*, (see Lareau, 2002, 2003), there has been little

research that has tested these explanations using appropriate data (see Morgan, Alwin and Griffin, 1979).

In this paper we investigate two hypotheses that have been proposed for the mediation of the effects of parental socioeconomic status—Kohn and Schooler’s (1983) concept of *parental self-direction vs. conformity values* and Lareau’s (2002, 2003) concept of parental socialization patterns involving *concerted cultivation vs. natural growth* emphases in child-rearing—on children’s achievement test scores. Using data from the Child Development Supplement (Waves I and II) of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (Institute for Social Research, 1997-2003)—focusing specifically on maternal socioeconomic background (educational completion, occupational SEI scores, and household income levels), maternal race-ethnicity, children’s time use (in activities involving *concerted cultivation vs. natural growth*) and parental emphases on *self-direction vs. conformity* in their child-rearing orientations—we investigate patterns of variation in children’s achievement test scores. The latter scores are measured using the Woodcock-Johnson Revised Tests of Math and Reading Achievement.

The CDS asked “primary caregivers” and “other caregivers” in 2,394 households to respond to questions concerning child rearing at the individual target-child level and the household level. We employ a sample of 1,878 children and their maternal caregivers for whom data are present on the critical variables in our analysis to examine the potential mediating effects of parental child-rearing patterns. Structural equation models (we employ Muthén and Muthén’s SEM statistical software *M-plus*), are used to handle the redundancy among our three indicators of maternal SES, and within this framework we employ Tobit specification for censored time use measures, and investigate the mediation of SES effects using a sequence of SEM models.

Our findings provide strong support for reduced-form effects of our maternal SES factor and race-ethnic differences on both the Woodcock-Johnson math and reading scores. The major significant difference among race-ethnic groups involves significantly lower math and reading scores among children from African-American households and higher reading scores among other ethnic (primarily Asian) groups. Hispanic households are not significantly different in their achievement scores relative to non-Hispanic whites on either reading or math. The measures of children's time use (our measure of parental emphasis on concerted cultivation vs. natural growth) in our study have non-significant effects on math and reading scores. By contrast, in the case of the readings scores, the SES and race-ethnicity effects are supplemented by significant effects of parental values on achievement, but there are no detectable effects of parental values on the math scores. The effects of parental values on reading scores mediate less than 10 percent of the effects of maternal SES and race-ethnic effects on reading scores. By virtue of the fact that children's time use has no effects on achievement scores, we can detect no mediational role for parental emphasis on concerted cultivation vs. natural growth. Our discussion of these findings considers the limitations of the present research and future possibilities for research on the role of parental socialization patterns in children's achievement processes.

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