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Who Gets Ahead: A Review Article

James P. Smith

What distinguishes economically successful American men from those less fortunate? How critical to their success were their parents, their being academically more adept, attending college, or having the right personality? These are the questions asked, and partially answered, in this useful new book by Christopher Jencks and eleven associates. *Who Gets Ahead* also represents a reevaluation of the conclusions presented in an earlier volume, *Inequality*, that had the same senior author. Although the chapters are markedly uneven in quality, we are offered here an impressive collection of well-documented and carefully executed empirical studies. Taken together, they span the main themes that have preoccupied scholarly research on intergenerational mobility and status attainment.

A book with twelve authors based on an analysis of at least eleven distinct data sets[1] is not easy either to critique or to summarize faithfully. This review simply selects a few key themes of more general interest from each chapter. In many instances, the selection was due to the reviewer's compulsion to register skepticism about the way evidence was interpreted, or to a belief that the research fell short of

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The author is Senior Economist and Director, Labor and Population Program, the Rand Corporation, Santa Monica, California. [Manuscript received and accepted for publication December 22, 1980.]

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what was possible. The reader is warned that literally hundreds of more detailed issues on which *Who Gets Ahead* has something to contribute have, of necessity, been ignored here.

The best of *Who Gets Ahead* is contained in Chapters 3 through 6, which trace the main paths of social mobility from the family to the job. In these chapters the analysis focuses most directly on the basic question of why some men get ahead while others do not. Although each chapter has a different author, they share a common analytical framework. Success is measured in two ways: current earnings and occupational status as proxied by Duncan's socioeconomic index. The determinants of success are divided into four broad areas—family background, cognitive skills, noncognitive traits, and years of schooling—each covered by a separate chapter. The empirical search is woven around two basic questions: how much of adult success we can attribute to a specific area, and through what mechanisms each area transmits success.

Ordering these four areas chronologically, Chapter 3 opens the investigation by assessing the effects of family background on occupational and income success. Family background is defined as including "all the potentially predictable consequences of having one set of parents rather than another," or more accurately, what makes brothers appear more similar than randomly selected men.[2] The empirical strategy distinguishes between the influence of demographic background characteristics[3] and all other unmeasured consequences of the family. The demographic variables are measured directly, and sibling correlations are used to estimate the predicted variation in outcomes due to all aspects of the family. Sibling correlations are identical to the proportion of variance explained by measured and unmeasured family background. After leading us through a series of adjustments performed on the simple correlations,[4] *Who Gets Ahead* concludes that 48 percent of the variance in occupational status and between 15 and 35 percent of the dispersion in earnings is due to measured and unmeasured family background. These esti-

2. The data sets used are those that contain brothers: KAL, TAL2, NORC, Taubman's twin samples, and Brittain Cleveland's brothers.

3. The measured background characteristics are race, nationality, father's education and occupation, mother's education, religion, place of residence when young, number of siblings, parents' income, and ethnic group. Individual data sets typically have only a subset of these demographic variables.

4. These adjustments include smaller variation in measured demographic variables among brothers and reliability estimates based on measurement errors in occupational status and earnings. The range presented for earnings is not a range in any statistical sense, since no confidence intervals for estimates are presented. Rather, it is the more heuristic impression of *Who Gets Ahead*.

mates simultaneously inform us that family background has important consequences and that even among men from the same family the variation in adult success, particularly for earnings, is enormous.

Knowing that the family matters naturally leads to the more interesting question of why it matters. The book's unsuccessful struggle to answer this question will prove frustrating to most readers. The difficulty is that correlation between brothers gives us more than we bargained for because it by no means captures only what we normally think of as the role of the family. Genetic and environmental similarities that arise from sharing parents and home certainly contribute to the observed closeness of brothers. But these correlations also reflect the similar outcomes we would expect between two unrelated white men of similar ages, raised and schooled in the same town, and therefore subjected to numerous identical micro- and macro-environmental impacts. So many diverse forces combine to produce the observed correlations, in fact, that it is not surprising that this research is unable to use them to tell us much about the process of transmitting status.

We are on firmer ground with those demographic characteristics that we can directly measure. Two-thirds of the predicted resemblance between brothers was assigned to the combined set of measured demographic variables, with no real surprises produced by the individual items. A significant proportion of the impact of demographic family variables was mediated through test scores and schooling. Those variables that directly affected status, controlling for test scores and schooling, were father's occupation, religion, farm upbringing, and race. With the exception of race, the direct market payment for individual background variables is quite modest.

The story is quite different when we consider all background effects as gleaned through the brothers' correlations. *Who Gets Ahead* shows admirable restraint in not jumping on the genetics bandwagon by relying on simplistic genetic-environmental dichotomies. The authors correctly argue that the boundaries between such divisions become blurred if, as seems likely, the operation of genetic forces depends on the environment they inhabit. Genetic endowments certainly seem to be important, but they are far from the full story. Some clues could be obtained on what these unmeasured background variables are by relating them to future outcomes. Here, however, the research efforts produced largely negative results. In contrast to the measured demographic variables, very little of the influence of these unmeasured variables was mediated through either education or test scores. These unmeasured effects impinge in a basically independent and distinct way on test scores, schooling, personality, and adult suc-

cess. Something appears to be there, but what it is nobody seems to know.

Chapter 4 is an impressivly comprehensive treatment of the influence on adult success of test scores reflecting academic ability, but only two empirical results and the interpretations placed upon them will be spotlighted here. These relate to the predictive stability of test scores over life cycles and across cohorts, and the direct and indirect influence of test scores on a series of life outcomes. While there is little quarrel with the facts presented, there are some reservations on how they are interpreted.[5] These reservations rely on considerations inherent in the design of "good" tests that confound our ability to make behavioral statements about the effects of tests. The quality of a test is judged by a number of criteria, but two of the more frequently cited are its predictive validity (a high correlation with a life outcome) and its stability over time (high correlation in individual scores over the life cycle). Although the arguments made are not new, the status-attainment literature has largely ignored them.

The life-cycle perspective centers on the predictive power of tests administered at different ages. *Who Gets Ahead* reports that test scores recorded as early as the sixth grade correlate as strongly with eventual education, occupation, or earnings as do tests given much later on. This stability is taken as evidence that tests predominantly measure stable aptitudes and, further, that these aptitudes are the ones that affect educational attainment. A more subtle but implicit inference is that what goes on in schools has little effect on ability. Test scores do measure stable factors—but precisely because they do, we cannot conclude that only stable factors are essential. If stability over time is deemed a virtue of tests, there is a clear incentive to overload tests by weighting stable variables more heavily. But then, by imposing stability, we have tests that are geared to stable variables (for instance, home environment) and are less sensitive to more malleable parts of the environment (for instance, schooling). Given this test design, we can hardly conclude that only stable factors affect schooling or that more changeable elements of the environment (including schools) are unimportant.

The internal structure of tests also calls into question the evidence on cohort changes. Correlations of test scores with educational attainment or adult earnings are reported to have remained stable

5. The comments here are based on Welch's recent insightful critique of the use of test scores. (See his "Ability Tests and Measures of Differences Between Black and White Americans.")

over the twentieth century. This stability produces the conjecture that if test scores measure merit,[6] the United States has grown no more "meritocratic" over time. But the pragmatic objectives of test designers make secular speculations of this kind extremely hazardous. To discriminate most effectively among contemporaneous populations (that is, to maximize the correlation of a test score with some selected life outcomes), the unobserved factors that tests attempt to measure depend not only on how important individual traits are in determining an outcome but also the extent to which these unobserved attributes differ in a population.[7] If tests were static and if they originally maximized predictive validity, they would become less useful over time as the distribution of underlying traits changed in the population. It is not surprising, then, that tests are redesigned from time to time to maintain predictive validity by reflecting the new distributional realities in the population. To the extent that they are, secular changes in test correlations probably do not tell us a great deal.

Putting aside these reservations, how important are test scores in predicting education and earnings? The correlations of test scores with schooling typically run between .5 and .6, with somewhere between one-third and one-half of this correlation reflecting family background.[8] Earnings correlations with test scores are considerably smaller. For example, a one standard deviation rise in test scores (moving across 34 percent of the population) increases earnings by only 6 to 7 percent around ages 27-29, and by 15 to 20 percent later in career. This effect becomes even smaller if we control for school completion levels—a standard deviation increase in scores raises earnings by 4 percent for young males and 11 to 15 percent at older ages.[9] The abilities that are rewarded in the market appears to have only a casual relation with the abilities that academic-style tests measure.

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6. This qualification is far from innocuous. As the empirical results from this study as well as most others indicate, the "abilities" measured by market earnings have little more than a passing acquaintance with the abilities measured by test scores.

7. An extreme example illustrates this point. A given trait could be the most important determinant of a life outcome, but if it did not vary in the population, it would be useless in increasing the correlation of the test with this life outcome.

8. Given the previous arguments about the internal design of tests, it is worth noting that the original function of the Binet test was to predict school completion.

9. Although *Who Gets Ahead* does not suggest a reason, scholars in the human capital tradition see this age pattern as an interaction of ability with investments in human capital. During the investment phase, high-ability people—the more efficient investors—have lower earnings (the forgone cost of investment), which are recouped with permanently higher earnings later in the life cycle.

Chapter 5 explores the very difficult subject of identifying those aspects of an individual's personality that significantly alter his future occupational status and earnings. The search is self-admittedly a series of exploratory empirical sorties hoping for a few hits. Since we do not know how to measure personality traits very well, nor have we come anywhere near agreement on even the basics of a widely accepted personality theory, this data-fishing exercise is understandable. Although *Who Gets Ahead* fails to isolate single attributes that are crucial, the three it deems most important are executive ability, industriousness, and leadership. Despite the valiant effort, the main impression is that we have a long way to go before we meld personality theory on status attainment models or empirically identify and measure a few simple personality traits that are essential. This state of affairs is not the fault of *Who Gets Ahead*, which at least moves us a little closer to an elusive goal.

American schools occupy a much smaller part of the research agenda in *Who Gets Ahead* than they did in *Inequality*. The effectiveness and functions of school systems are not examined at all, the research being limited to the size of the education coefficient in an earnings or occupational status regression. The sole aim is to estimate the monetary rewards from schooling and the extent to which family background and test scores account for these apparent benefits. In the regressions[10] three types of controls are included: a vector of measured family background characteristics; "all" family background effects using between-brothers regressions; and ability as indexed by test scores. The novel feature of the empirical estimates is that the schooling coefficient, and the effects of background and ability, are allowed to vary by schooling level. Table 1 provides a representative summary of the estimated increase in earning from four years of high school and from four years of college. The salient message of this table is that the joint influence of family background and academic ability depresses the apparent economic benefits of secondary schooling far more than they do for college graduates.

For high school graduates, the family background variables alone significantly reduce the schooling effect. With the exception of the KAL sample, measured background characteristics lower the benefits from high school by around one-fourth, and controlling for all family background effects reduces it by almost one-half. In contrast, the implied bias in the college coefficient is trivial. Although there

10. Separate analyses are presented for initial and current occupation as well as earnings. This review concentrates on the earnings regressions.

TABLE 1. PERCENTAGE GAIN IN EARNINGS FROM HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE.

	Four Years of High School		*Four Years of College*	
Sample		*Controls Used*		*Controls Used*
OCC1 brothers	52.6	None	35.4	None
	37.9	MB	29.3	MB
	26.1	FB	39.6	FB
1971 PSID	39.7	None	59.5	None
	28.4	MB	57.9	MB
	29.1	TS	50.5	TS
	22.7	MB, TS	46.5	MB, TS
1972 KAL	37.3	None	31.7	None
	34.6	MB	30.4	MB
	25.0	TS	22.4	TS
	20.9	FB	31.3	FB
	9.6	FB, TS	21.6	FB, TS

Note: MB are a set of measured family background characteristics; FB are all family background effects (that is, between brothers' regression); TS are test scores.

appears to be a slight reduction when measured background variables are included, the between-brothers regressions indicate, if anything, a slight rise in the college coefficient. While less extreme, adding the test-score control produces a similar pattern: the reductions in the return to secondary schooling is considerably larger than from college. Combining the two, the joint effects of family background and test scores lower the economic benefits from high school by 40 to 60 percent and that from college by half as much.

Research on brothers has produced an extensive statistical literature of its own, showing that estimation of the "true" schooling coefficient rests on a number of tricky identification restrictions. Since these issues have been nicely exposited in a recent survey by Griliches (1979), I will not dwell on them here.[11] While the differential effects across schooling in *Who Gets Ahead* may well reflect statistical misspecification, the empirical estimates will be taken at face

11. Griliches makes two related points: once we allow for more complex (realistic?) models that include individual as well as family components in ability and environment, it is no longer certain that within-family regressions are less biased. Secondly, the differencing procedure of brothers can substantially intensify the importance of measurement error, imparting a downward bias to the schooling coefficient.

value because they raise interesting questions about conventional interpretations of family background effects.[12] It seems difficult to reconcile these differential effects with conventional interpretations such as family wealth (financing schooling) or the direct transfer of status, both of which would seem to be relatively more important at higher schooling levels. Nor do genetic factors offer an obvious explanation. Perhaps the asymmetric effects reflect the fact that among men who fail to reach the norm of schooling (for most of these samples, the real margin of decision is college), family background and home environment become critical determinants of that failure. But his puzzle does call into question some of the more facile class interpretations of background, especially among high-status jobs.

Because this book offers such a comprehensive treatment, it invites one to assess what we have learned about the inner workings of the family and schools from status-attainment research.[13] If *Who Gets Ahead* is representative, a truthful answer is probably embarrassingly little. We do have more precise estimates of the simple and partial correlations between the major variables, but we have not gained a deeper understanding of the social and economic forces these correlations reflect. One isolated, but representative, quote will illustrate this point. In commenting on the possible reasons why those with higher test scores succeeed economically by attending school longer, we are left with the following:

> This may be because they learn more in school, because they possess other characteristics that lead to educational success, or because they benefit from irrational prejudices on the part of teachers and employers.

We appear not to have limited the range of alternatives much. In addition, two of the more important contributions of the empirical research—the differential effects of family background across schooling levels and the apparently distinct and unrelated effects of unmeasured family background on a series of future outcomes—can only

12. *Who Gets Ahead* is not much help in explaining why background effects operate only at lower schooling levels. It offers only a tentative hypothesis that employers may over-reward men with college degrees, and presumably not those with high school degrees, for reasons unrelated to individual productivity.

13. The main area where this book does not reflect the state of the art is statistical modelling. The statistical approach here ignores most of the controversies and complexities that have concerned many researchers who used brothers data. For a better source on the frontiers of the statistical arguments, see Taubman (1977).

convince us that we know less than we thought about the mechanisms through which the family transmits success.

There are many reasons why we did not learn more, but one of the most important is that the assistance that was asked from and given by theory from this research was miniscule. Since theoretical muscles were not stretched much beyond a simple path diagram, theory does little to structure or inform the research investigation. Within the confines of the standard path analysis, this research is so comprehensive and diligent that it is doubtful whether further efforts along similar lines will yield much intellectual reward. One of the main lessons from this research is that it may be time to abandon such grandiose questions about how much variation in adult success is explained by family background, and to move on to narrower questions that focus directly on what takes place inside the family, with theory and empirics on a more equal footing.

The remaining chapters tackle questions that are peripheral to the main theme of the book in both content and statistical methods. These issues cover a broad range: race differences in earnings; the relationship between male and family income; and the comparability of research studies that rely on different data sets compiled by separate survey organizations and perhaps critically affected by the decisions on detail that researchers make in designing their empirical strategies. Unfortunately, these chapters represent a noticeable lowering of the book's scientific quality.

With one exception, the chapter on race duplicates studies already available in the literature. The exception relates to the changing distribution of economic benefits within the black population; it merits a few brief comments here. Using successive waves of the PSID Panel, the authors report that after 1967 the income returns to black schooling declined for the elementary and secondary levels but rose sharply for blacks who completed college. This new and, to this reviewer, important finding has been confirmed in a recent paper by Finis Welch, which is summarized in Table 2. It lists ratios of black-white male weekly wages by schooling levels for all male workers and also for men who have been in the labor force for less than five years.

Whether we examine the full sample or only men in the early part of their work careers, the largest black gains relative to whites are concentrated among black college graduates. But the most intriguing trend documented in this table is the post-1973 deterioration in relative black incomes among new entrants with a high school diploma or less. This deterioration represents the most significant reversal in the gradual trend toward income convergence between the races that has occurred in the last few decades.

TABLE 2. BLACK-WHITE MALE WAGE RATIOS.

	All Ages			*Those Out of School One to Five Years*		
	Year			*Year*		
Years of Schooling	*'67*	*'73*	*'78*	*'67*	*'73*	*'78*
8-11	.69	.75	.77	.85	.87	.80
12	.73	.76	.81	.83	.90	.85
16 or more	.62	.72	.88	.75	.92	.96

Note: Data reported in Welch, Finis, 1981. "Affirmative Action and Its Enforcement," *American Economic Review* 71 (May 1981): 127-134.

Unfortunately, *Who Gets Ahead* offers few clues about the causes of this reversal, but a number of explanations are possible. The mid-1970s business-cycle deterioration may well be part of it, although the use of weekly wage ratios in Table 2 mitigates the impact of cyclic vagaries. The entry into the labor market of the large baby-boom cohorts in the 1970s clearly carried penalties for its members, and young, less schooled blacks may have felt the brunt most keenly. If true, both explanations suggest that the reversals of Table 2 are probably short-run deviations, to be followed in the next few years by a resumption of the secular movement toward racial income convergence.

Two other possibilities point to long-term effects, however, and are therefore more troubling. First, our empirical geiger counters may be picking up the first signals of problems with the relative quality of Northern inner-city black schools. A substantial part of the well-documented improvement in the quality of black schooling in the twentieth century reflected black migration from the South to the better schools of the North and also the overall rise in the quality of Southern schools. These factors having largely run their course, further improvement in black schooling depends critically on what is taking place in Northern urban black schools. There are obvious reasons to be concerned about this, and the income trends at low schooling levels may be the first signs of trouble to come.

Affirmative action programs may provide an alternative explanation. By attempting to mitigate race differences in existing skill distributions, the principal beneficiaries should be black college graduates, where black representation in the skill distribution is relatively minor. But affirmative action also provides an unintended and perverse incentive to firms not to "overhire" blacks in less skilled jobs.

A firm may be discriminatory not only by not hiring enough skilled blacks but by hiring too many unskilled blacks. Whatever the cause, if the trends documented in Table 2 continue, this may well be the most important research area on race differences during the 1980s.

In Chapter 9, women finally enter in an exploration of the relationship of male income to total family income. Since wives' earnings account for the bulk of the difference between male and family income, the focus quickly centers on the association between male and female earnings, particularly in intact families. The poorly conceived statistical methods employed make this chapter the weakest in the volume. At a descriptive level, what we are told is familiar: adding female earnings to male earnings makes relative inequality in family earnings much smaller than dispersion in male earnings alone. Male and female earnings are negatively correlated, reflecting a negative correlation in spouses' labor supply that offsets the positive correlation in their wages.

This chapter gets into considerable trouble when it goes beyond description and attempts behavioral and statistical modelling. For each spouse, wage and hours equations are initially estimated over a sample of families in which both spouses work. The censoring bias introduced by conditioning on positive hours are by now well known, and some statistical tools have been developed to deal with the problem.[14] Not only are these tools ignored here but the confounding effects of rules for sample inclusion and behavioral functions are extended to male wage and labor supply equations. Matters are not improved when the full sample is used to estimate *ln* earnings and *ln* hours equations with an assignment of one hour of work to nonworkers. Because we are counseled against this procedure at some length two chapters later, we get an added impression that the statistical analysis on this subject was not well thought out.[15] Suffice it to say that the reader can safely skip this chapter.

One of the reasons cited for embarking on the research project that culminated in this book is that even a casual scan of the literature confirms that different researchers asking the same questions often reach wildly different conclusions. This indeed was why so many data sets were used in this project, and the research team was understandably concerned about their comparability. These surveys

14. For a recent description of these procedures, see the essay by Heckman in *Female Labor Supply: Theory and Estimation* (Smith 1980).

15. The work is also marred by some sloppy use of theoretical concepts. In attempting to reconcile positively sloped female with negatively sloped male labor supply functions, the author misdefines an inferior good as one in which demand is reduced when the price rises.

were conducted by separate survey organizations in different calendar years; they sampled distinct populations; and they phrased, coded, and constructed variables in unique ways. In addition, individual researchers, even when using the same data source, often made procedural decisions on empirical details that affected their conclusions. To find out how important all this is, Chapters 10 and 11 imposed as much uniformity as possible on a subset of these surveys to determine whether they produce similar empirical estimates. While *Who Gets Ahead* concludes that, broadly speaking, the range of estimates is ballparkish, the game is being played in a reasonably large stadium.

This is best illustrated by considering the simple income-schooling relationship in two data sets for the same year, the 1970 wave of the Michigan Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) and the 1970 U.S. Census. After restricting these two surveys to a similar population and imposing comparable coding and definitions, the research team found PSID mean income to be 7 percent higher and its standard deviation 10 percent smaller, and that a year of schooling adds $70 more to income than it does according to the census data. Moreover, in a regression of income in schooling, R^2 was .19 in PSID and .13 in the census. A number of possible explanations for these discrepancies were explored: measurement error, response rates, missing value allocations, the treatment of self-employment income, and the interview of different respondents (for instance, a wife answering income questions for her husband). These alternatives were rejected, and the blame was assigned to some intrinsic, but unknown, differences in the survey design.

Who Gets Ahead is to be complimented for cautioning us that different surveys often tell different stories. This is especially true when we limit our attention to the range of estimates over which the debate is really occurring. It also becomes more acute when we begin to ask more subtle questions of our data, as the range of estimates in some chapters of this book aptly demonstrates. But this book is better at pointing out the problem than it is at probing the reasons why surveys differ. For example, the potential importance of missing value allocations was certainly dismissed too quickly. Fully 13 percent of the census males did not report their income; less than 2 percent failed to in PSID. The census assigned nonreporters the income of the last person processed who had identical characteristics for variables included in the census allocation algorithm. The set of variables in the algorithm has changed over time—and before the 1976 Current Population Survey (CPS), it did not include education! Using CPS data, Table 3 illustrates the bias caused by that omission alone.

TABLE 3. RATIO OF IMPUTED TO NON-IMPUTED INCOME BY EDUCATION LEVEL.

Survey Years					
1968-1975			*1976-1978*		
Years of Schooling					
0-8	*9-12*	*13+*	*0-8*	*9-12*	*13+*
1.17	1.04	.95	1.13	1.04	1.13

During the 1968-1975 period when education was not used, the ratio of imputed to nonimputed incomes declines sharply with years of schooling. By ignoring schooling, we overstate the income of nonreporters with little schooling and understate the income of those with high levels of schooling. This pattern is completely absent when we turn to the 1976-1978 data, where education was included in imputing income. The exclusion of education in the allocation algorithm, combined with the fact that higher income individuals are less likely to report, could explain a nonnegligible part of the lower average income and the smaller income benefits from schooling in the 1970 census.[16]

There are many comments scattered throughout this volume on differences in research style and the mechanics of the research process. Much of it is on the mark, but this project itself represents a distinct approach to scholarship that can be labelled large-scale committee research. In many ways, the final product mirrors both the advantages and the limitations of this approach. It is difficult to imagine that the project could have been conducted more competently, and one cannot quarrel with the obvious professionalism of each participant. The massive job of coordinating so many researchers working on such diverse data sets reflects well on the skill of all involved—particularly the senior investigator who supervised the effort. But its disadvantages also seep through. We are constantly being pushed ahead at the extensive rather than intensive margin of research. To this reviewer, at least, the two chapters on race and family income are superfluous to the main theme and are not up to the standards of the rest of the book. The two chapters on research style would have been better placed in a single appendix; they did

16. However, it would not explain the substantially higher variance in income in the census.

not merit individual chapters. Even the other chapters would have benefitted frequently from a narrowing of focus and less eclectic theorizing.

Who Gets Ahead is an intellectual descendant of an earlier controversial book that covered the same terrain: *Inequality*. It is natural, then, that Jencks finishes his new work by contrasting its findings with those of its predecessor. Much of this comparison spotlights specific and quite detailed differences that emerge between the two studies. It is impossible here to summarize adequately all the refinements, but the salient point is that measured personal characteristics and unmeasured family background account for more of the variance in economic success than was claimed in *Inequality*.[17] Contrary to *Inequality*, family background exerts an appreciable influence on later success, both through intervening variables as well as among men with identical test scores and schooling. After controlling for schooling, test scores, and family background, there is less variation in adult occupational status and income than *Inequality* found. In spite of this, it remains true that variation in success among men with the same traits still rivals or exceeds that attributable to family background, test scores, and schooling.

But even a complete list of these refinements would not come close to conveying how differently these two books read. They differ not so much in the adjustments made on how much particular variables explain income or occupational inequality as in their handling of the unknown—what the regressions do not explain. With what admirers saw as boldness and critics took as recklessness, *Inequality* constantly used its analysis to recommend major reform in school systems and the labor market. These reforms ranged from equalization of school resources to wage control, rotation of jobs, and, of course, massive income redistribution. *Inequality* was a literate and passionate call to alter many aspects of the American social structure. These reforms often had a dubious connection with the evidence from the analysis or resulted from misinterpretations of it.[18] This new book is much more cautious in moving from regressions to broad interpretations about the social and economic system, and for the most part consciously avoids policy questions.

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17. To illustrate, *Inequality* reported that family background explained 32 percent of the variance in adult occupational status and 15 to 20 percent of the variance in income. *Who Gets Ahead* finds that family background explained 48 percent of occupational variance and 15 to 35 percent of variance in income.

18. An important exception is a central message of both books. If our aim is to redistribute income, we will make little progress toward that goal by equalizing schooling and test scores. The best hope is the more direct route—redistribute income.

The major exception occurs in the final chapter. In *Inequality*, the residual variance, which dominated much of the observed distribution of income, was attributed largely to luck. It was then but a short step to view much of income inequality in America as capricious, unfair, and unrelated to productive abilities in the labor market. Recommendations for a large-scale income redistribution effort or a radical restructuring of the economic system proceeded with little attention to its implications for aggregate product. While a good deal more cautious, *Who Gets Ahead* falls into the same trap. The word "luck" is abandoned only to be replaced by "labor market imperfections," proving once gain that residuals are dangerous aphrodisiacs for the speculative instincts of social scientists. It is difficult to be content with calling them "what we can't explain," and to resist conjuring up all sorts of facile interpretations; but the inequality generated by family background may well reflect more imperfections—say, in capital markets—than we may be justified in attributing to residuals. The large earnings differences among brothers could be interpreted either as proof of the capriciousness of the labor market or as evidence of its strength and vitality in rewarding individual effort. The ease with which people adopt either conclusion is sufficient warning about the ascientific nature of the game. The world is unfair, luck plays a role in all our lives, and the economic system is riddled with imperfections and inequities. But we are not going to learn much about the relative degree of all this no matter how long we stare at earnings functions and their residuals.

Judged on the criterion of scholarship, *Who Gets Ahead* is a superior book to *Inequality*. It is more carefully thought out, strays less from the evidence in its interpretations, and qualifies its evidence in a more balanced way. Anyone who works on this subject will be consulting it as a reference for many years to come. But because it does not engage in the sweeping statements on social reform that characterizes *Inequality*, this reviewer suspects that *Who Gets Ahead* will be a far less influential and talked-about book.

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