Chapter 4
Diverging Destinies Revisited: The Threat to Child Development and Social Mobility

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Abstract Constantly increasing family social and economic inequality has a large tangible cost—that of diverging destinies for children as witnessed by trends toward lower social mobility and less equal life chances for children. In a society that prides itself on equality of opportunity, this is indeed an unfortunate development. In this commentary, I begin with a simple socioeconomic dichotomy of how babies are brought into the world depending on parents' life course. I then discuss recent inequality-related trends that are producing different outcomes for families at the bottom and the top of the economic and social hierarchy, as well as what these patterns mean for intergenerational mobility (IGM). The commentary closes with some reflections on parenting, opportunity, mobility, policy, and diverging destinies.

Introduction

Sarah McLanahan and Wade Jacobsen (Chap. 1) have vividly shown why her diverging destinies hypothesis is even more important a decade after it was first proposed (McLanahan 2004). In this reaction to McLanahan and Jacobsen, I comment on the general notion of diverging destinies and how it applies to equality of opportunity and intergenerational mobility (IGM). I begin with a simple socioeconomic dichotomy of how babies are brought into the world depending on parents' life course. I then move to some recent inequality-related trends that are producing different outcomes for families that are at the bottom and the top of the economic and social hierarchy, as well as what these patterns mean for IGM. I close with some reflections on parenting, opportunity, mobility, policy, and diverging destinies.

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Having a Baby—The End Posts

In social science, it is often useful to illustrate the middle ground of an issue by looking at its endpoints. If we examine both what is considered to be the best process by which to become a parent and the worst process, we can better understand the point of diverging destinies. The so-called best way to become a parent is through living the American dream. The process is the same for men and women alike: Finish your schooling, find a decent job, find a partner you can rely on, make plans for a future together including marriage as a commitment device (see Lundberg and Pollak 2013), and then have a baby. Following this process will likely mean that parents are close to the age of 30. Parents who follow this process are (in some ways by definition) older, more educated, and more likely to have a stable marriage. They have better parenting skills, smaller families, and more income, benefits, and assets to support their children. These characteristics translate into more stability and more opportunities for their children.

At the other end of the spectrum, following the worst process to become a parent, one simply moves the step of having a baby (between the ages of 16 and 22) to the top of the list, preceding all of the other steps. These parents typically have not finished schooling, do not have a steady or well-paying job, do not have a stable marriage or steady partnership, and likely never had a plan. They have less education (high school or less), are younger and less-skilled, have lower wages and fewer benefits, far less marriage experience, and more multi-partner fertility. The result is less social and economic stability and fewer resources and opportunities for their children (Smeeding et al. 2011).

In the famous words of Quinn (1987), "beware of the mean" when describing children, as the greater the dispersion, the less meaningful is the description of a child as average. There is ample evidence of this divergence in the economic, sociological, social policy, demography, child well-being, and education literatures (e.g., Duncan and Murnane 2011; Ermisch et al. 2012; Smeeding et al. 2011). The costs of diverging destinies for the next generation are many, as the chapters in this volume demonstrate. None of these costs are higher than the costs of reduced social and economic IGM, which follow from highly unequal parent endowments of both money and skills. The amount of income available to high- and low-income families with children is important in determining life opportunities. Fewer parental economic resources mean higher child poverty and vice versa for high parental economic resources. For example, income inequality is such that in the USA in 2010, a family at the 90th percentile of income had $55,000 of family-size-adjusted disposable income per year to spend on each child, in adjusted income terms compared to $9,000 per child for families at the 10th percentile of income. The difference between these amounts widened from 2000 to 2010 (Rainwater and Smeeding 2003; values from LIS key figures at http://www.lisdatacenter.org/lis-ikf-webapp/app/search-ikf-figures).

The Effects of Diverging Destinies on Social Mobility

The usual way to examine IGM is to compare the relative economic status of adults, age 35–45, to that of their families at the time they were children. Longitudinal datasets such as panel study of income dynamics (PSID) and National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) have been used by economists and policy analysts to examine this change (Winship 2011, 2013; Lee and Solon 2009). These datasets observe parents incomes and place in the income distribution in the 1960s or early 1970s and children's incomes and place in the distribution 30–40 years later. The closer the rank of children to the rank of parents, the less mobility there is in a given society. Studies using these data show a fairly small amount of overall mobility in any given comparison and no change in overall trend for overall relative mobility for children born between 1965 and 1979. However, the studies do show less relative mobility from the bottom–up or the top–down compared to the middle of the distribution in any given comparison year.

Given the age of these datasets, the major problem with this entire line of adult-to-adult research is using a cohort of 38–40-year-olds observed in 1998–2010. Adults in this cohort were born in the late 1960s or early 1970s before inequality exploded and before destinies diverged more widely in the last two decades of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century. Hence, the datasets cannot answer the question: How was IGM affected for youth born in the period 1980–2013 during the US inequality boom, a time when destinies diverged most broadly. Another limitation of the datasets is that about 40 million immigrants to the USA since the late 1970s are not included.

It is more reasonable to take the life cycle approach to study the influence of parental education and income on child outcomes from birth to age 30 (Smeeding 2013; Ermisch et al. 2012). While observing different cohorts at different times, these studies suggest a powerful effect of parental socioeconomic status, education, and/or income (SES) on child outcomes in health, cognitive testing, socio-behavioral realms, school achievement, and adult SES. Examination of standardized outputs finds a definite and universal pattern in that the higher the parent's SES, the higher the children's outcome, and vice versa for lower SES parents and their children. These effects were observed from birth onward and did not diminish as children aged. Moreover, the slopes of the relationships between parental SES and child outcomes were most steep in the USA. In order to grasp the implications of diverging destinies on social mobility, it makes sense to look at various outcomes that are developmentally important in younger generations and ask how they will be affected by growing gaps in parental SES, instead of starting with older generations and following their children.

Capturing Diverging Destinies

We can examine how parental SES (education or income differences) affects various levels and patterns of child development for children that are directly or indirectly predictive of later life success. In other words, we can assess how current patterns across the early- and middle-childhood life course compare to the patterns of 30 years ago in terms of what it takes to reach at minimum the middle class. I begin with the life cycle stage markers employed in the Brookings Institute's Social Genome project (http://www.brookings.edu/about/centers/ccf/social-genome-project). The project uses a dynamic micro simulation model of the life stages and attributes of children moving from birth to adulthood to measure whether or not one achieves various markers which predict attainment of the American dream of having a middle-class lifestyle (family income of at least 300 % of poverty level). (Sawhill et al. 2012; see also Kenworthy 2012; Smeeding 2013). The life cycle stage markers are:

1. Normal birth weight; born to a non-poor, married mother with at least a high school education
2. Have acceptable preschool reading and math skills and general school-appropriate behavior when formal schooling begins
3. Acquire basic learned skills: reading, math, and socioemotional abilities are at acceptable levels in middle and secondary school
4. Graduate from high school with a 2.5 GPA and not be convicted of a crime
5. Reach middle class or better: live independently, have a college degree, and/or family income above 250/300 % poverty level (slightly above the median measured by after tax and benefit income).

The question I pose is simply how well have we done in reaching these goals? Have any of the outcomes listed shown gains, suggesting progress toward equality of opportunity, or have outcomes spread further apart, suggesting diverging destinies? Let us look step by step.

Life cycle stage marker 1 states that one should be born at normal birth weight to a non-poor, married mother with at least a high school degree. In actuality, 40 % of all US births today are out of wedlock (vs. 11 % in 1970), and half of births to women under the age of 30 are out of wedlock (Hamilton et al. 2013). Marriage rates are lower than 30 years ago for all but the college educated, and rates have been falling—especially for whites in their 20s (Murray 2012; Lundberg and Pollak 2013; Cherlin 2009). Childbearing is higher for the mothers who are youngest at first births, mainly the lowest-educated mothers with a high school degree or less, and most of whom are poor or near poor. Moreover, these mothers have more children per woman than average. In contrast, well-educated parents have fewer children and later (in marriage) under much better economic circumstances (Smeeding et al. 2011). Time spent with young children is much more developmentally oriented in high-SES families than in low-SES families (Kalil et al. 2012; Phillips 2011).

In order to successfully complete stage 2, a child must have acceptable preschool reading and math skills, meaning above a given cutoff (see Sawhill et al. 2012) and have general school-appropriate behaviors when entering first grade. In reality, there are large gaps in early childhood education (ECE) and in school readiness as a function of parental education and income (Cunha and Heckman 2008; Duncan et al. 2012, 2013). These differences are most pronounced in the USA compared to other Anglo nations (Bradbury et al. 2012). Furthermore, these gaps are larger now than in past, in part because parents at the top spend more time and money on developmentally oriented goods and activities than parents at the bottom (Kaushal et al. 2011). Efforts to improve ECE for disadvantaged children are aimed at overcoming these gaps. Cross-national research in Denmark and France, where universal ECE is the norm, shows that while the differences in child outcomes between high- and low-educated parents has lessened, it is still significant (Bingley and Westergaard-Nielsen 2012; Dumas and Lefranc 2012). This finding suggests that while high-quality ECE can improve mobility from the bottom, it is not by itself a magic bullet to achieving desirable levels of IGM (Duncan and Magnuson 2013).

Once a child arrives at middle school, the success marker is to possess grade-appropriate skills in reading, math, and socioemotional abilities. Again, the evidence from Brookings itself is that 38 % of children cannot cross this bar by 5th grade (Sawhill et al. 2012). Differences in skills by SES (e.g., test scores and reading attainment of youth, by parents' incomes) have increased over the past 40 years (Reardon 2011). Moreover, there are large gaps in self-regulation and externalizing behavior by SES dating as far back as to the 1980s or earlier (Cunha and Heckman 2008). Given that parents with higher income and education levels choose better schools, and poorer parents must often choose worse schools, the achievement gap between the highest and lowest income percentiles has widened. The rise in incomes at the top of the distribution has propelled the children of the highest income parents to increase the achievement gap between those children at the 90th percentile of parental income and the middle children at the 50th percentile, as well as the 10th percentile children at the bottom of the income distribution (Reardon 2013; Duncan and Murnane 2011).

The fourth life cycle stage marker predictive of later life success is marked by a child who graduates from high school with at least a 2.5 GPA and is not convicted of a crime. If you do not count GED as a high school degree, high school graduation rates remained flat from 1980 to 2007, and only slightly increased if GED is counted. It is not until 2010 when school outcomes finally start to change for the better, and we begin to see rising graduation rates from secondary schools (Murnane 2013). In addition, crime has risen, especially for minority men, over the past 30 years with serious consequences for their lives, their dreams, and for their children (Western and Pettit 2010). Finally, SAT scores continuously increase in lock step with parental income, as measured by critical reading, writing, and especially mathematics. SAT scores of children at the top end of the distribution have a steeper slope than those at the bottom or middle (College Board 2013) reinforcing Reardon's (2013) findings.

Middle-class success is within reach at stage 5 if one lives independently post-school completion, and with a college degree. Most college attainment gains increasingly go to upper income classes. The gap in the fraction of children entering college has steadily expanded from a 19 to 29 % gap for the 1961–1964 cohort versus the 1979–1982 cohort in the lowest parental income quintile, to a 58–80 % gap in the highest income quartile (Bailey and Dynarski 2011). Similar patterns are evident for college graduation with only 9 % of the lowest quartile college attendees graduating within 6 years of entering, compared to 58 % of top income children in the most recent (1979–1982) cohort. Indeed, the children of the highest income parents are increasingly likely to graduate within 5 years of starting college, most likely to receive family support while attending college and most likely to graduate without college debt. At the same time, overall post-secondary degree attainment in the USA has been nearly flat for the last four generations especially for men (Ermisch et al. 2012).

The Brookings model suggests that if a child follows most of these steps, they have an excellent chance of reaching middle-class (family income of at least 300 % of poverty level, as defined by Brookings). Unfortunately, the overall patterns of divergence in child outcomes reviewed above predict that most undereducated and young parents do not reach this stage. By age thirty, 70 % of men with a high school degree or less in 2007 were fathers, with only 40 % of these fathers making more than $20,000 per year, and less than half living with all of their children (Smeeding et al. 2011). Along with the rapid decline in marriage for all races in their 20s, the evidence suggests that a large pool of Wilson's workless and unmarriageable men is holding back the fulfillment of the American dream for many younger families (Wilson 1996; Lundberg and Pollak 2013).

The Great Recession of 2008 has made differences in child destinies and IGM much more stark. There are increasingly widespread gaps in employment and wages by education and age. Income gains occur mainly above the level of possessing a bachelor's degree where the IGM correlation of parents' and kids' education is highest (Torche 2011). Cross-national research suggests that premiums in pay for the highest educated are largest in the USA, meaning the minority who reach college graduation and beyond do best in the US labor market compared to their lesser-educated countrymen (Blanden et al. 2013; Ermisch et al. 2012).

In summary, research finds considerable differences in destinies for younger generations linked to the economic and social divergence of their parents: less child mobility, less equality of opportunity, and less social progress. We know from McLanahan and Jacobsen (Chap. 1) as well as from others cited above that these differences are widening. Public policy may be effective in improving the destinies of the disadvantaged, but it most likely will be challenged by parent differences that are much harder to equalize, as mentioned below.

Parents: The Policy Challenge

Researchers find that the role of parents is important at each stage of the life course (Smeeding et al. 2011; Duncan and Murnane 2011; Ermisch et al. 2012). Ideally, most parents will at least say that they will do everything they can for their children, but some parents are more able in terms of both skills and money than others. The role of policy vis-á-vis parents is a difficult one, as James Fishkin's (1983) trilemma suggests. Fishkin argues that an ideal society should operate according to three widely accepted and interrelated principles:

1. *Principle of merit*: There should be widespread procedural fairness in the evaluation of qualifications and competencies for positions in society (a true meritocracy, free from nepotism, and related unfair influences on jobs and school entry, for example).
2. *Equality of life chances*: The prospects of children for eventual positions in society should not vary in any systematic and significant manner with their arbitrary native characteristics, including parental heritage, a statement about nepotism.
3. *Autonomy of the family*: Consensual relations within a given family governing the development of its children should not be coercively interfered with except to ensure for the children the essential prerequisites for adult participation in society.

In reality, these three principles are in conflict as far as most public policies are concerned. It is likely impolitic and inefficient for society to try to limit parental autonomy. It is almost impossible for society to enforce the principle of merit when the SES of parents has positive or negative influence on key life choices, as well as access to resources and opportunities. For example, promoting integrated schools with low- and high-SES children being instructed together might lead the rich to set up their own system of private and exclusive schools as in the United Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, in the USA, thus perpetuating inequality of life chances (see also Blanden et al. 2013).

In short, the parental role is embedded in each and every child outcome gradient, and it is highly unequal. Most parents will do everything they can to give their children better outcomes—but not everyone is born to equally talented, equally educated, or equally well off parents. Nor are all mothers and fathers equal with respect to the capacity to parent their children in healthy ways. Because of the advantages of affluence, it is in the personal interest of high-SES parents to maintain the status quo, and to even enhance their children's opportunities by making the income and education gradient steeper at each life course stage. This is where policy reaches its limits unless we develop clever ways to limit parental autonomy

Policy

Perhaps sensing the issues of hard to change parental differences and parental autonomy McLanahan and Jacobsen (Chap. 1) suggest two policy directions. The first is providing incentives for young women to postpone motherhood, with the intended outcome that children are born into more stable circumstances. Stable circumstances would mean older married parents at first birth and reduced rates of childbirth at younger ages. Indeed, recent years have found some evidence that the latter is being achieved, as teen and young 20-something birth rates have fallen (Hamilton et al. 2013). However, it is not clear whether these changes are cyclical, owing to the Great Recession or structural due to changes in behavior that reduce childbearing at younger ages. It is too soon to tell. Further, while preventing out of wedlock births to youths not ready for parenting is an important policy response to diverging destinies, we have just recently begun to make some headway (Sawhill and Venator 2014). In any case, we must treat what we have not yet learned how to prevent.

Making young men more marriageable by improving their economic prospects is a second and likewise commendable policy goal recommended by McLanahan and Jacobsen (Chap. 1). It remains to be seen what strategies can raise men's earnings and incomes at ages 24–30 if they have not yet done well in school. America's policy efforts to date have not produced demand for low and medium skill workers. Nor have policies increased much needed skills among young men who do not have them. I believe it may take the better part of a decade to reach a point where demand for workers helps raise wages and increase job quality among younger low-skill men (Hamilton et al. 2013).

Finally, since parents are important to child outcomes, one should try to make better parents, too. In this new policy realm of parental improvement, ideas and efforts so far outstrip evidence of success, with a few exceptions (King et al. 2013; but then see Haskins et al. 2009).

It seems that rising family social and economic inequality has a large tangible cost—that of diverging destinies for children as witnessed by trends toward lower social mobility and less equal life chances for children. In a society that prides itself on equality of opportunity, this is indeed bad news.

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