

Study shows education is not enough to overcome inequality

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Credit: Stanley Morales

A recent study finds that social inequality persists, regardless of educational achievement—particularly for men.

"Education is not the equalizer that many people think it is," says Anna Manzoni, author of the study and an associate professor of sociology at North Carolina State University.

The study aimed to determine the extent to which a parent's [social status](#) gives an advantage to their children. The research used the educational achievements of [parents](#) as a proxy for social status, and looked at the earnings of adult children as a proxy for [professional success](#).

To address the research question, Manzoni examined data from people who were interviewed as part of the National Survey of College Graduates between 2010 and 2017. Specifically, Manzoni focused on United States citizens between 35 and 67 years old who reported on their wages and [parental education](#). The final sample size was 56,819 individuals: 32,337 men and 24,482 women.

The analysis found that if a son gets a degree similar to the degree that a parent had, the son will earn more money than if his parent did not achieve the same level of education.

For example, imagine that Son A becomes a doctor, and he had a parent who was also a doctor. Meanwhile, Son B also becomes a doctor, but his parents only had bachelor's degrees. The study found that, in general, Son A will earn more money than Son B, even though they have the same degree.

This effect also exists for daughters, but it is much weaker.

"The effect we see here essentially preserves social stratification for sons—less so for daughters," Manzoni says. "We like to think that if someone makes it to college, becomes a lawyer, becomes a doctor, they have 'made it.' But what we see is that even earning an advanced degree is unlikely to put you on the same professional footing as someone who earned the same degree but started higher on the social ladder.

"One take-away is that expanding access to education is valuable, but [education](#) alone is not enough to resolve our society's challenges in

regard to inequality," Manzoni says.

"This work shows that social origin matters, but it's not clear what drives this structural inequality," Manzoni adds. "Is it social capital? Access to networks? Differing financial resources? Is parental background becoming more important as a larger percentage of the population is getting a college degree? Is the advantage at the beginning of a child's career? There is still a lot of room for additional research on this subject."

The paper, "Equalizing or Stratifying? Intergenerational Persistence across College Degrees," appears in *The Journal of Higher Education*.

More information: Anna Manzoni. Equalizing or Stratifying? Intergenerational Persistence across College Degrees, *The Journal of Higher Education* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/00221546.2021.1897966](https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2021.1897966)

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