Effectively Maintained Inequality in Education: An Introduction

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A growing literature has investigated socioeconomic inequality in education cross-nationally. One promising theory of inequality is effectively maintained inequality (EMI; Lucas, 2001). EMI observes that all outcomes, including educational attainment, have two dimensions: (1) a quantitative dimension (e.g., the number of years of education obtained) and (2) a qualitative dimension (e.g., the program of study pursued). The contention is that analysts must consider both dimensions to ascertain trends and dynamics of inequality.

Given the multidimensional nature of goods, when applied to education EMI contends that socioeconomically well-off children will receive qualitative educational advantage even if quantitative outcomes are equalized or quantitative advantage is impossible. Thus, EMI contends that equalizing quantity is insufficient to undermine inequality, because inequality in the *types* of education obtained can effectively reproduce patterns of advantage and disadvantage.

Certainly, many analyses have usefully treated the quantitative *or* qualitative dimensions of education. EMI, however, addresses both dimensions simultaneously. As nations expand the quantity (e.g., number of years of study) possible and elaborate the qualitative positions (e.g., types of study) possible, assessing both dimensions simultaneously may greatly illuminate the complex dynamics of inequality.

EMI postulates have been translated into expectations for statistical analyses. Under EMI statistical significance—that is, the difference between the statistical coefficient and zero—is not the focus. Instead, under EMI we should observe effects of socioeconomic status such that our predictions should differ for theoretically focal persons simply on the basis of socioeconomic background.

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EMI is applicable beyond education. For example, complexities of health care provision (Schacht, 1992) suggest another key arena for illuminating consideration of EMI theory. However, EMI has been applied almost exclusively to the study of inequality in education (e.g., Esping-Andersen & Wagner, 2012). Yet, while several scholars studying disparate nations have interpreted results as supporting EMI (e.g., Ayalon & Shavit, 2004, in Israel; Tolsma, Coenders, & Lubbers, 2007, in the Netherlands; Ding, 2007, in China; Reimer & Pollack, 2010, in West Germany; Lucas, in press, in Australia), sometimes analysts have not directly assessed EMI's qualitative postulate or have done so using faulty methods (e.g., Marks, 2013).[1] Thus, questions remain. Is EMI truly evident in multiple nations? And, if so, is EMI actually a nontautological yet inescapable reality of inequality?

The possibility of progress on these questions motivated a 15-nation, European Union–sponsored project. Many of the proposed project works have been (e.g., Katrňák, Simonová, & Fónadová, 2016; Marks, 2013) or will be published elsewhere. Here, five, disparate-context studies of educational inequality are joined to theoretical and methodological reflections to move us closer to cross-national answers.

Lucas (this issue) sketches several features of the theory, notably addressing the issue of EMI's falsifiability. Furthermore, the article traces EMI's theoretical affinities, consequences for policy content, and implications for strategies of reform implementation.

EMI was first proposed on the basis of a study of U.S. high school sophomores of 1980. Megan Andrew (this issue) uses advances in modeling that have developed in the intervening years, and high-quality data up to the methodological demands, to assess whether EMI characterizes a later part of the educational attainment process in a more recent period in the United States.

Delma Byrne and Selina McCoy (this issue) study Ireland, a European case that, like the United States, is classed as an Anglo model welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1990) of relatively limited social support and a concentration on means tested poor relief. Ireland also has high fertility and, through some of the period of study, a booming economy. The former might escalate competition in education; the latter might attenuate competition in education. By standardizing on the Anglo welfare-state model but differing in other sociodemographic factors (e.g., racial/ethnic diversity), study of Ireland allows assessment of a thesis of American exceptionalism (de Tocqueville, 1835/2002) vis-à-vis EMI: Is EMI a feature of societies, or just of U.S. society?

Felix Weiss and Steffen Schindler (this issue) study Germany, extending the exploration of Europe beyond the Anglo welfare state. Germany, a corporatist welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1990), has experienced increasing immigration. Adding to the mix, West Germany and East Germany were reunified after nearly 50 years of forced separation, a development that has caused upheaval in processes of intergenerational transmission (Fuchs-Schündeln, Krueger, & Sommer, 2010). Such developments make Germany a potentially unique case with which to study EMI.

Soo-yong Byun and Hyunjoon Park (this issue) study South Korea, providing a window on whether EMI applies beyond the West. South Korea, commonly viewed as an Asian Tiger economy, has been termed a productivist (Holliday, 2000) or

developmentalist welfare state (Lee & Ku, 2007). Productivist states subordinate all policy to economic development; developmentalist states use social policy, including welfare policy, as an instrument in attaining economic growth. For these and other reasons, education inequality and intergenerational transmission may play out differently in South Korea than elsewhere. Thus, study of the South Korean case will further illuminate the breadth or limits of EMI.

With his study of education in South Africa, Matthew McKeever (this issue) offers the first analysis of EMI on the African continent. The history of South Africa allows test of multiple important issues. One way that McKeever breaks new ground is that all nations that have been studied using EMI, including those studied here, have relatively high median levels of education. But EMI is theorized to apply even if average levels of education are low. The South African case, with median levels of education in the single-digits, allows a contemporary test of the relevance of EMI theory for nations with lower levels of education. Another important contribution of the South African case flows from the powerful political transformation South Africa underwent as the 20th century closed, ending decades of de jure racial oppression. By documenting the educational legacy of decades of racial oppression, the study establishes a baseline by which to judge future change while revealing what could be otherwise hidden impediments to egalitarian efforts. Study of South Africa (just as study of any nation) can be helpful to scholars and citizens interested in that nation, but as nations continue to work to eradicate de jure discrimination, the South African analysis may prove extremely helpful in suggesting possible long-reach complexities any such effort must address to succeed.

In the final article, Samuel R. Lucas and Delma Byrne (this issue) convey key principles for future assessments of EMI as well as how the study of EMI addresses longstanding challenges inherent in studying inequality.

Taken together, these analyses deepen our understanding of the intergenerational transmission of inequality while providing theoretical reflection and methodological guidance for future efforts to assess the applicability of EMI. Drawing analytic attention to the multidimensional nature of goods and services, the articles collectively offer new resources for consideration, thereby advancing the multidisciplinary, policy-relevant, public dialogue on inequality.

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Note

1.   See Lucas (in press) for corrections to Marks' (2013) analysis of education in Australia.

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