

Family and Schooling Determinants of the Changing Gender Gap in Educational Attainment: A Comparison of the U.S. and Germany

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Extended Abstract

We compare trends across recent decades in the gender gap in higher education in the United States and Germany in order to (a) determine the similarities and differences in gender-specific educational trends, (b) compare the potentially changing effects of class background and family structure on the educational gender gap, and (c) measure the extent to which country differences arise from the distinctive structure of educational institutions in Germany and the U.S. The United States results build on the Buchmann and DiPrete (ASR 2006) and DiPrete and Buchmann (Demography, 2006), which were based on the cumulative General Social Surveys, the March Current Population Surveys, and the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS). Research on the German case uses the German Socioeconomic Panel (GSOEP) and the German Life History Studies (GLHS) as well as administrative data on tertiary degrees conferred, by gender. The German data is well-suited for a comparison with the American data because they contain information on the educational background of the parents, the presence of a father in the house while growing up, information about educational performance, and a history of all the important educational transitions for more than 20 years of birth cohorts. Our published results for the U.S. (which rely on various forms of trend and regression analysis) demonstrate that the process by which women overtook men in educational attainment was largely driven by a shifting relationship between family background, gender, and education. In the middle of the 20th century, girls were educationally disadvantaged relative to their brothers when they grew up in a family where the father had a high school education or less, or where the father was absent. This relationship changed during the 1960s and 1970s to become an educational disadvantage for boys. The change was largely expressed in terms of higher transition rates from secondary to post-secondary education for girls. This change has proved decisive for producing a female advantage in college completion because girls in the U.S. have long earned higher grades than boys, and their stronger academic performance in college produces higher

four year completion rates both for those who begin four year college and for those who transfer to four year college from community colleges.

Trend data for Germany from 1975-2005 show that the proportion of all Diplom degrees awarded to women has risen from just under 20% in 1975 to 51% in 2005 and their proportion of all higher education certificates has risen from 32% to 49.5% over these years. Preliminary analysis of the GSOEP finds that – as in the U.S. – the relationship between family background and gender-specific educational attainment has changed over time, but the change takes a different form in Germany, in part because the starting point is different, and in part because there appears to be more same-sex parent role modeling in Germany than in the U.S.. Unlike in the U.S., girls in the earlier cohorts were at an educational disadvantage relative to boys in families where both parents were highly educated as well as in all families where the mother had less than an Abitur. While girls have caught up to boys in families where the parents are highly educated and now exceed male education in families that lack a father, they still lag behind boys in families where the mother lacks an Abitur. We plan to replicate this analysis with the GLHS data. We are currently analyzing both the German and the American data to establish the differences in the specific educational transitions of the children of lower educated mothers in the two countries. Our goal is to determine whether country differences in the structure of post-secondary education (e.g., relatively higher transition rates between lower and higher tertiary institutions in the U.S. relative to Germany) contribute to the different effects of family background on gender-specific educational attainment in the two countries. We also are investigating whether class differences in reported parental interest in the education of sons and daughters plays a role in explaining differences in the educational gender gap in the two countries.

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