



Jordan Conwell on Parental Income, Race, Gender, and Children's School Readiness

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Jordan Conwell, Sociology and Educational Policy Studies, University of Wisconsin–Madison

Chancellor Hello and thanks for joining us for the February 2019 episode of the Poverty Research and Policy Podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin Madison. I'm Dave Chancellor. For this month's podcast, we're going to be hearing from Jordan Conwell, who is a sociologist here at the University of Wisconsin. He's going to be talking about a study he did that aims to help us understand racial income inequality by looking for differences in how children of different races and genders, but the same family income, fare in early educational measures. To start off, I asked him to tell us about his work and how he thinks about the connections between income, education, race, and gender.

Conwell I am Jordan Conwell. I'm a sociologist by training and an assistant professor here at UW in the departments of sociology and educational policy studies. My work focuses primarily on differences by race and by gender in children and adolescents' developmental outcomes, but comparing kids who have the same income. So really trying to take an intersectional perspective about race and gender and their intersections and kind of using that to engage with research that shows us that, yes, kids who are born in either advantage or disadvantage circumstances have very different developmental outcomes to the advantage of kids from high income or otherwise high SES families. I do a lot of thinking about, ok, if we're comparing black and white kids for example, who have the same income, so similarly high income or similarly middle income or similarly low income, what are some of the differences by race and by gender and by their combinations net of income?

Chancellor And Conwell says that, in sociology at least, this represents a change in how social inequality and the way it's reproduced across generations is thought about.

Conwell So, sociologists, at least in my opinion, operate mostly from what I would call a social reproduction framework, which is that in a given generation, blacks and whites for example are born on average into very different economic circumstances on average to the advantage of whites given some kind of connection across generations between the circumstances of childhood and adulthood, we observe blacks and whites in the adult generation living in very different circumstances. This is kind of social reproduction. I really focus on differences that grow across generations between those who grow up in the same circumstances. So, instead of thinking about, ok, there are average differences in generation one and generation two, what is responsible for differences in generation two between those who actually start in the same circumstances in generation one? And we know in part because of some recent work by Raj Chetty, the economist, and his colleagues that those differences, so these differences in intergenerational mobility for example between those who grew up in the same circumstances are actually now a very big part of the story of average differences that we see by race for example in generation two or in adulthood. So my work is actually kind of turning back the clock on some of those differences that we see among adults who grew up in the same circumstances and thinking about, ok, we observe these differences in adult income between blacks and whites, particularly black and white men who grew up in the same income circumstances. So what do we know about what's going on in k12 schooling in earlier outcomes that's influencing those differences that we see among adults? The medical metaphor is kind of tracking the development of disease.

Chancellor Conwell says that, using this idea of social inequality as a disease, he's really trying to start at the beginning and see how gaps grow throughout the lifecourse. So I asked him how goes about doing this in his study.

Conwell I am adapting a methodology from Sean Reardon at Stanford who's kind of one of the experts in thinking about racial achievement gaps and achievement gaps by income level. And taking the method that he uses to determine achievement gaps between high and low income students and basically interacting race and gender into it. So instead of asking this question of "what is the difference in achievement between a child whose parents are at the 90th income percentile versus the 10th, I'm looking within a given income level, what are differences between black and white boys and black and white girls whose parents are at the 90th percentile for example. And repeating that for middle income level at the 50th percentile and for low income students at the the 10th. The outcomes are school readiness, so as I noted earlier, I'm trying to turn back the clock on these inequalities we see in adult income and look at what are the childhood and adolescent development outcomes that the roots of these inequalities we see among adults. So, I'm looking at school readiness so, when kids begin school in the fall of kindergarten, math scores, reading scores, and teaching ratings of their approaches to learning, things like attention, as well as their behavior. So, to what extent do teachers perceive kids to be exhibiting internalizing problem behavior, externalizing problem behaviors like acting out? Because we know that the scores with which kids begin school are very strongly correlated to the scores that they'll have later on.

Chancellor The measures of school readiness that Conwell is looking at come from a dataset called the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten Cohort. I asked him to tell us more about these measures and how they matter.

Conwell The data is nationally representative of the cohort of kids who began kindergarten in the fall of 2010. We have data on things that I would break down maybe into beliefs, behaviors, and resources. These are all things that the previous literature shows us are related to the skills that kids begin school with. So, beliefs, how much schooling do you expect your child to attain? So that's kind of like a distal or long run kind of belief, as well as a more proximal or short run measure of how important do you think various skills are for your kid to start kindergarten with? How important is it that they begin kindergarten knowing how to hold a pencil, knowing how to count to 20, things like this that we know are related to the kind of developmental -- if parents believe these skills are more important, they're more likely to provide child environments that stimulate these things before kids get into school. Behaviors, frequency with which you're reading to the child, doing things like playing with blocks, trying to do science projects, those kind of things. And resources, so number of children's books in the household is a measure that is used in a lot of the research with this dataset for the 2010 cohort as well as an earlier cohort that began kindergarten in the fall of 1998, which is important in its own right, but also kind of known to be a proxy for other developmental resources in the household that cost money.

Chancellor And Conwell says that he finds big gaps in these measures at school entry between black and white boys and black and white girls at any given income level. He says that one of the first things we can think about when trying to understand this is parental expectations or beliefs and how they connect to other factors.

Conwell I kind of refer to this as the belief-behavior paradox, getting back to these resources that we talked about and these beliefs. At a given income level, compared to same income white parents, black parents generally report stronger educational beliefs, so expecting their kids to attain more schooling, having stronger beliefs about the skills their kids need for kindergarten, but kind of paradoxically, lower levels of some of these developmentally advantageous behaviors and lower access to developmentally advantageous resources like children's books in the household. So, there are a couple reasons for this. A lot of previous research has shown that black families have very strong and positive beliefs about education, its importance, its chances to be a lever for upward mobility. So this is kind of pushing back against these narratives about school disinvestment or lack of value among school for blacks or some kind of cultural explanation. Those have kind of generally been debunked.

Chancellor Conwell says that part of the story behind these differences in school readiness may be related to demographic factors that could be driving differences in resources or behaviors between groups even at the same income level.

Conwell So, at a given income level, black families are more likely to be single parent households than white families are which kind of begs the question of, ok, well how do we get to that income level in the first place? Part of that is more maternal work hours for black families relative to same income white families. So I make this kind of argument that in a home economic sense, there may be fewer units of parental time available to do these things. So again, I'm very cautious to kind of push back against any kind of cultural or deficit narratives about why these things may be and of course the findings in the paper about these higher beliefs about how much schooling you want your kid to attain or the importance of the skills that you think your kids need to start kindergarten kind of push back against that as well. But in terms of the school readiness outcomes so math, reading, teacher rated approaches to learning, teacher rated externalizing problem behaviors, I find that achievement outcomes are generally stratified by race such that white boys and white girls end up across the income distribution starting school with better scores than black boys and black girls do. Whereas behavior, these teacher rated behaviors are more stratified by gender such that black and white girls are doing better than black and white boys across the income distribution. But within those two trends, I also find differences by race. So, for example, on a measure like teacher rated externalizing problem behavior where on average black and white girls enter school doing better than black and white boys, I still find differences between black and white girls to the disadvantage of black girls. And a lot of these kind of intersectional differences interestingly grow, get bigger as parental income increases.

Chancellor I asked Conwell why this might be, and he says when we think about behavioral outcomes, which are rated by a teacher, we should think about the sort of interactions that might be taking place in the classroom.

Conwell We know from other sociological research that's focused only on white kids that high SES advantaged, high income, high education parents kind of teach their kids to use what we might consider aggressive helpseeking behaviors to get teachers' attention in elementary school. This is the 'I need help, I need help, I need help'. Because teacher attention we know is a finite resource in a classroom. And so what this research and other research by folks like Jessica Calarco at Indiana University, finds that while teachers report sometimes being annoyed with high SES students who have these kind of disruptive or aggressive help seeking behaviors, when you observed these teachers in the classroom, those kids actually end up getting more of the teacher's time.

Chancellor And Conwell says that with things like racial gaps in behavioral outcomes between same income students, especially among girls who tend to do better on these measures anyway, there are a couple of ways to think about it.

Conwell One way to think about it is that black and white girls begin school exhibiting very different behaviors even at the same income level. I personally think that's less likely than a second mechanism which would be that they're exhibiting similar behavior, so, high SES black parents are also possibly teaching their kids to use aggressive help seeking behaviors, but as opposed to being coded as by the teacher as annoying, but precocious and promising as it is in the case of a white student, it actually is coded as disruptive for black students. So this is a question for observational research. We also know from other sociological work, teacher race matching is a big part of these differences in evaluation, so black students who are rated by black teachers do not fare as poorly relative to white students on these early childhood behavior measures. But of course as income increases, black students are more likely to be in schools in racially mixed schools and in some cases predominantly white schools where their behavior is being considered relative to a mixed race group of students. So there's a potential for racial biases and things like that to be at play.

Chancellor Professor Conwell says that the gaps between black boys and white boys and between black girls and

Chancellor, white girls at the same income are much larger in math than in reading, and he says this is concerning
continued given what we know about child development.

Conwell So in reading, in many cases, most of these gaps are not significant, which we may find to be encouraging. But at the same time, these gaps are large in math and, among boys, they actually grow as income increases. So, black and white boys whose parents are at the 10th percentile of income begin kindergarten and there's a black/white gap between boys of about a fifth of a standard deviation. This gap actually grows to about a third of a standard deviation when we're considering black and white boys whose parents are at the 90th income percentile. So there are a couple things I think to note there. While we can be encouraged about reading, we should not be as encouraged about math and we're seeing these racial inequalities net of income in math. We know from work by folks like Greg Duncan in child development that of course early reading skills are correlated with later reading skills, and early math skills are correlated with later math skills. But math also has these interesting kind of crossover effects, such that early math is also somewhat predictive of later reading, whereas reading does not have crossover effects for math. So math is a really important early skill and these gaps are very large on that outcome.

Chancellor Given that Conwell has found that, on many outcomes, racial gaps grow as income increases, he says this should lead us to consider other factors outside of income that may be allowing white families to create more developmentally advantageous environments for their kids.

Conwell And of course one of them is wealth. Wealth is primarily held by whites and is primarily held by those of high income. To the extent that white families may be able to use wealth net of income to create these advantageous environments, that's not going to be captured with a lot of our education data sets that only include measures of income and poor proxies for wealth, like value of the home and some of these things that don't tell us -- what we want to know is your assets minus your debts, right? So when we just have your income in a given year, we don't have that. And there are a couple ways to think about wealth in early childhood development. There are things like if you're hiring a nanny and you're in a market in the city where there are nannies who have different kind of credentials where you want somebody who actually has a master's degree for example in early childhood and you're basically paying that person a salary to babysit your kid but you know that during the day that your kid is getting this developmentally stimulating -- basically you've created a private preschool and then as kids age a little bit, private preschool options that sometimes cost in the 10s of thousands of dollars, these are wealth transfers. I thought about this the other day -- we just started a couple of months ago a new school year here and I was filling out my benefits form for UW and you're filling out your death and dismemberment, thinking about yourself in these sad circumstances and they say, if you pass away, your family is going to need -- you're seeing these PowerPoint presentations, your family is going to need the following things... And, for education, there are actually now two bullet points, it's not just higher education, it also includes early childhood education and I thought that was very kind of revealing that early childhood education is now thought of as one of these big kind of wealth transfer moments, kind of in the same way that higher education is. And so, again, racial inequalities net of income in those investments over and above income and families' ability to make those investments may be responsible for some of those differences.

Chancellor In light of this idea that we should be thinking about factors beyond income, I asked Professor Conwell what his study can tell us in terms of future directions for policy and thinking about inequalities.

Conwell I don't know if this study has a direct policy implication in terms of 'we should do x', but I think it does very clearly offer a framing for policies that are seeking to mitigate inequalities based on parental income in early childhood development, which is that we need to be thinking about these inequalities in an intersectional manner, particularly with regard to the intersection of race and income. So, what I find is that at lower income levels, black children are disadvantaged relative to white children in ways that go beyond what would be expected based on income alone. At higher incomes as we've been talking about, black students are disadvantaged relative to white students when this would not be expected at all based on income alone. So we need to keep that in mind when we're thinking about

Conwell, these policies. And that does not necessarily mean that it's going to be the same policy solution across continued the income distribution. What might need to be done for lower income families might be different than what we might think about doing because it's counterintuitive to think about addressing inequalities among advantaged families but they do exist and to the extent that our policies don't consider them, there's going to continue to be disparate impact of things like affirmative action. So that's just kind of the framing of trying to weave in an intersectional understanding into how we're addressing these things. Income is not wealth. And so income does not tell us the whole story.

Chancellor Many thanks to Jordan Conwell for sharing this study with us. The paper is currently under review, but you can contact Professor Conwell if you would like to read a draft version.

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