

NAME OF PRESENTING AUTHOR: Tobias Wolfram

EMAIL ADDRESS OF PRESENTING AUTHOR: twolfram.eisenach@gmail.com

The Heritability of Educational Attainment – Shared Environment, Genetic Nurture and Psychological Mediators

Tobias Wolfram¹

¹Department of Sociology, University of Bielefeld, Bielefeld, Niedersachsen, Germany

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ABSTRACT: Variation in educational attainment is caused by both genetic and environmental factors. Environmental influences might either be the result of resources shared between children in the same family or due to unsystematic, nonshared factors. We leverage a nuclear twin family design and analyze educational attainment of German twins, their siblings and parents to disentangle different mechanisms of the shared environment. In line with past findings, genetic effects explain half, the shared environment a quarter of the observed variation. Effects strongly differ for different sources of the shared environment: In contrast to recent molecular-genetic findings concerning genetic nurture, vertical transmission from parent to offspring is weak and nonsignificant. Instead, proximal (shared between twins) and distal (shared between all siblings) factors dominate. By controlling for measured psychological covariates we show that both proximal and distal effects affect educational attainment by influencing (among other things) noncognitive traits, indicating socially mediated skill-transfer in addition to genetic pathways.

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