

ABSTRACT

Beyond Supply and Demand: Networks of Opportunity and Inequality in Health Careers

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American narratives of meritocracy and equal opportunity imply that an individual's ability to succeed in the U.S. labor market is reflective of their level of education, skill, intelligence, and how hard they work. Most workforce development policies are based on these assumptions, prioritizing the development of human capital to meet the needs of employers and the overall economy. Yet recent changes in the structure of work, increasing income and wealth inequality, and the disappearance of middle class jobs are calling these narratives into question. This dissertation demonstrates how under the surface, relational, institutional, and structural factors interact with education and human capital, to determine access to good jobs, economic stability, and upward mobility over the life course.

This mixed-method case study of Southern New Hampshire's healthcare workforce investigates the mechanisms that lead to employment opportunity and advancement for successfully employed health professionals, with special attention to the role of networks and their effects on white professionals and professionals of color. The study is informed by theories of embeddedness, relational inequality, and critical race theory. Findings indicate that many health professionals struggle to construct career paths that result in financial stability, security, and opportunity, reflecting a segmented labor market. People of color are disproportionately overrepresented in career paths that are not well served by the institutional environment. To get ahead, health professionals leverage network resources to construct chains of opportunity, maintain privilege, and access opportunities where institutions have failed. Additional network effects related to segregation, social exclusion, and white privilege provide cumulative advantages for whites over the life course which lead to invisible yet critical career advantages.

These inequalities result in a loss of potential and reduction in well-being for families and communities. Developing effective policies to address and reverse these patterns will require involvement from employers, workforce development programs, educational institutions, city and state governments, and job seekers. Recommendations for policy and practice include strengthening institutional pathways, updating regulations and the structure of healthcare work, leadership development, and network expansion and integration. Together these strategies have the potential to leverage the power of networks in a positive direction and create a more equitable labor market that more accurately approximates the American Dream.

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