

December 7, 2020, 4:00 – 5:30 p.m., GoTo-Meeting

Keynote Speaker at 5th NEPS conference

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## **The fundamental causes of educational inequality**

The theory of fundamental causes has had wide influence in the field of health inequality, but its influence in other fields of inequality research has been more limited. This is somewhat surprising, given that many inequality researchers hold views that are wholly consistent with the fundamental causes approach. Indeed, most theories of educational inequality exhibit key properties that Lutfey and Freese (2005) identify as characteristics of a theory of fundamental causes: socioeconomic background is understood to influence educational attainment via multiple causal mechanisms, and improvements in overall levels of educational attainment (i.e. educational expansion) may have only a modest impact on the association between socioeconomic background and attainment.

Researchers in the field of educational inequality would benefit from embracing the fundamental causes approach. The “fundamental causes” lens would offer three main benefits. First, a theory of fundamental causes has a clear set of propositions, is falsifiable, and would expose the extent of theoretical consensus in the field of educational inequality research. Second, a theory of fundamental causes would force us to pay close attention to the quality of our measurement instruments. Finally, and perhaps most important, a fundamental causes approach would help social scientists in predicting the effects of interventions in education. Rather than further expanding our literature on the unintended and unexpected effects of policy interventions on educational inequality, we might rather aim to predict in advance the alternative paths that those of advantaged background could exploit in the event of an existing path being blocked.