

Socio-Emotional Skills and the Transmission of Economic Advantage

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Lecture abstract

The lecture studies socio-emotional skills (aka soft or non-cognitive skills) as a mechanism for the persistence of economic advantage across generations. We discuss how economists conceptualise and measure these skills, the evidence linking them to education and earnings (including causal evidence), and the extent to which skill gaps by family socioeconomic status emerge and persist over childhood. We then review decomposition/mediation approaches that quantify how much of adult SES differences and intergenerational earnings persistence can be accounted for by socio-emotional skills, directly and indirectly through schooling. The final section highlights open research challenges in identification and measurement.

What the lecture will address

- Definitions and measurement of socio-emotional skills (and why measurement choices matter).
- How socio-emotional skills affect education and labour-market outcomes: correlational and causal evidence.
- SES gradients in socio-emotional skills and links to environments and skill-formation dynamics.
- The contribution of socio-emotional skills to adult SES gaps in outcomes and intergenerational persistence.

Reading list (starting points)

1. Algan, Y. and Huillery, E. (2025). Socio-Emotional Skills and the Future of Education. Annual Review of Economics.
2. Almlund, M., Duckworth, A. L., Heckman, J. J., and Kautz, T. (2011). Personality Psychology and Economics. In Handbook of the Economics of Education (Vol. 4).
3. Attanasio, O. P., Blundell, R., Conti, G., and Mason, G. (2020). Inequality in socio-emotional skills: A cross-cohort comparison. Journal of Public Economics, 191, 104171.
4. Attanasio, O. P., de Paula, Á., and Toppeta, A. (2025). Intergenerational mobility in socio-emotional skills. Journal of Public Economics, 248, 105423.
5. Blanden, J., Gregg, P., and Macmillan, L. (2007). Accounting for Intergenerational Income Persistence: Noncognitive Skills, Ability and Education. The Economic Journal, 117(519), C43–C60.
6. Bolt, U., French, E., Hentall-MacCuish, J., and O'Dea, C. (2024). The intergenerational elasticity of earnings: Exploring the mechanisms. IFS Working Paper W24/25.
7. Borghans, L., Duckworth, A. L., Heckman, J. J., and ter Weel, B. (2008). The economics and psychology of personality traits. Journal of Human Resources, 43(4), 972–1059.
8. Cunha, F. and Heckman, J. J. (2007). The Technology of Skill Formation. American Economic Review, 97(2), 31–47.
9. Del Bono, E., Etheridge, B., and Garcia, P. (2025). The Economic Value of Childhood Socio-Emotional Skills, see 2025 version [here](#).
10. Del Bono, E., Kinsler, J. and Pavan, R. (2025). Skill Formation and the Trouble with Child Non-Cognitive Skill Measures, forthcoming in Quantitative Economics, see [here](#) for the 2024 version.

11. Heckman, J. J., Stixrud, J., and Urzua, S. (2006). The Effects of Cognitive and Noncognitive Abilities on Labor Market Outcomes and Social Behavior. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 24(3), 411–482.
12. Sorrenti, G., Zölitz, U., Ribeaud, D., and Eisner, M. (2025). The Causal Impact of Socio-Emotional Skills Training on Educational Success. *Review of Economic Studies*, 92(1), 506–552.