

Geoff: Hello, and welcome to the Inequality Podcast. I'm Geoff Wodtke, Associate Director of the Stone Center for Research on Wealth Inequality and Mobility at the University of Chicago. We've talked on the show before about the large-scale systems that shape inequality: cross-national differences in institutions, labor market policies, and neighborhood segregation. But today we're going to focus on some forces that operate on a smaller, more personal scale. In particular, we're going to talk about the link between inequality, families, parenting practices, and individual psychology. In the first segment, you'll hear a conversation between two of my colleagues, Steven Durlauf and Ariel Kalil. They discuss Ariel's research on family structure and how it can produce different levels of investment in children, with implications for the intergenerational transmission of inequality from one generation to the next. It's a conversation with a wealth of interdisciplinary insights: Steven is an economist, Ariel is a developmental psychologist. We hope you enjoy hearing how their perspectives intersect. After that, Ariel and Steven are joined by Mesmin Destin, a professor of psychology at Northwestern University. In this segment, they discuss identity-based motivation and how young people of all backgrounds can develop positive beliefs that grow out of their unique identities and experiences. But first, here is Steven's conversation with Ariel.

Steven: There's no end to controversies around asking about the role of family structure in the development of children and the consequent implications for inequality. This is an area in which you've made seminal contributions. I was hoping you could give an overview of your thinking, with some focus on the role of extended families and grandparents.

Ariel: As many others have done, I have spent a lot of time descriptively documenting differences across family structures in the investments that children get in their development: time investments, emotional investments, etc. There is no arguing with the fact that children who grow up with two married biological parents have, in a descriptive sense, better developmental outcomes and appear to enjoy more of the things we think produce those outcomes. So there are two questions I've thought about. One is, well, what are you going to do about that if you're someone interested in policy? And a question that deserves both more research and more policy attention is: what is the role of extended family, grandparents in particular? If we look more closely at the data, do we in fact see that these differences are not as wide in multigenerational households, those where a grandparent is living with the parent and child generation? Several of my studies have demonstrated that children who grow up in those living arrangements appear to have just as good developmental outcomes as their counterparts who grow up with two biological married parents. You might at first be puzzled: how can that be so? I think what's really important in the interpretation, and again this is just a descriptive finding; we're looking cross-sectionally in population—

level datasets to observe this correlation. But you have to ask yourself, what is the counterfactual here? We look in the data and see that, on average, the families living in a three-generational arrangement are economically disadvantaged; parents are younger; almost by definition in the data we look at, these are unmarried young mothers living with their own parents. So you have to ask yourself, what is that grandparent bringing to the child's development? And it seems that grandparents have a lot of added value if you make that comparison. I don't know why we're not talking about supporting multigenerational households more than we are. There are a number of studies where we can look even deeper and see what those grandparents are actually doing. They are investing almost as much time in that child's development as the theoretical father of that child would be investing, keeping the right counterfactual in mind. And that grandparent is experienced, wise, very invested in that child's development and brings a lot to the table. Of course, in many different countries and cultures, multigenerational living arrangements are common; it's the expectation that this will be a part of a child's life and experience. It doesn't seem to be part of the bigger policy conversation in the US, or even a very big part of the literature, at least in economics. I think sociologists and developmental psychologists have spent quite a bit more time studying grandparents and what they do, but recent treatises on family structure don't seem to have emphasized this as much as I would like to see.

Steven: I think those points are very well taken, and it seems there are really two dimensions to them. One is the narrower one: within social science, why economists have been less receptive to thinking about broader family structures than other social sciences. I don't think I have any particularly penetrating answer outside of the way in which literatures develop independently in their intellectual traditions. The broader question you raise is really quite fascinating: why, in public policy debates, there seems to be a desire to be censorious toward single mothers as opposed to asking a different question, which is the collective responsibility that societies and broadly defined families have for children. The research actually speaks very directly to constructive ways of thinking about promoting good families, and by that I mean not singling out one particular person and saying you ought to behave differently, but asking whether families collectively ought to be more altruistic toward their children. Perhaps when one talks about strengthening social norms, maybe the social norm that needs to be strengthened is grandparents' norms.

Ariel: I would fully agree, and we can look at examples in Portugal and in the UK that are providing tax incentives and other supports for grandparents who are playing a significant role in the upbringing of a grandchild. At a practical level, I see no reason why that can't be done. I want to say one other thing that I think has maybe misdirected

our thinking. Many fields do study parental investments, my own and economics and sociology, and I think that misses the boat on the child's perspective, because children get invested in from multiple sources. We have taken this approach of one parent making investments toward the child rather than saying, as you said, what is the collection of investments that would help that child thrive, and what is the constellation of family structure, living arrangements, and other public and private supports that are all inputs into the child? I think that would push our thinking forward if we flip that around.

Steven: I think those points are very well taken, but they also suggest to me a need to enrich the conception of family inputs beyond the usual suspects, which are measures of income and measures of time. Classic models of educational inputs are really financial; a parent, as I tease my students, goes to the human capital store and buys something off the shelf and gives it to the child who consumes it. Of course, and this is integral to your work, there are a plethora of things that parents do for children that don't reduce down to saying this is the income of the family and this is the number of hours the non-working parent can spend with the children. There's emotional support, the formation of aspirations, the formation of norms, and all that, then leads to questions of parenting style: how is it that we are translating the financial resources we have and the temporal resources we have into actual molding of children? I thought this is an actual segue to talk about your work on parenting styles.

Ariel: That's great, and I do enjoy your metaphor of going to the ATM of parental inputs and withdrawing time and money. At the heart of that is obviously a data issue: we have good data on parental time and money investment. The canonical saying is we measure the things for which there are good data. But you're absolutely right. My own field of developmental psychology has a huge range of thinking on the emotional relationship between parents and children: how do parents allow children to have input into the decisions made on their behalf, how do parents discipline their children, what are the aspirations and expectations for children's behavior, what kinds of role models are parents, how do they convey those models of themselves, what are the identities that children form about their futures or their present in their families? So there are a whole set of things, and parenting style is the right way to think about them, that developmental psychologists think of as how children develop. The tricky part of that kind of thinking is that it can sometimes devolve into the kinds of people that parents are, as opposed to the things that parents do. So this measurement problem again becomes challenging because we don't have great population-level data on the kinds of identities or aspirations. We have very simple questions: what are your expectations for your kids' educational attainment, what are your aspirations? But beyond that, we're pretty limited. So we have a rich theoretical tradition but a narrow measurement tradition. Developmentalists absolutely believe that the quality of how parents and children

interact is equally important as the quantity of things that parents are purchasing or doing for their kids. I'll say one more thing that arises from developmental psychology that I've seen economists pay attention to but haven't seen make a big impact in the literature: these relationships are bidirectional. Children elicit from their parents the things that they get, and the child's qualities and characteristics are just as important. This is not a one-way relationship where a parent buys good X or spends ten minutes on X and the child is the passive recipient of those inputs. This is a dynamic relationship in which the child is eliciting emotions and other kinds of investments from the parent, and that dynamic relationship changes over time to produce child well-being and development.

Steven: So in talking about the role of family at one level, which is individual, one can also ask the related question about groups. I was hoping you could turn your attention to thinking about different types of inequalities between Blacks, whites, Hispanics, and Asians, and how your findings speak to that level of inequality.

Ariel: I can give you an example on family structure, which as you said, I have spent some time studying. The nature of family structure is different across these groups defined by race and ethnicity. It's far more common among Black and Hispanic families to have a multigenerational family arrangement. Part of that is because of selection into this household: often economic necessity. But there's a huge literature in sociology that has long talked about the importance of grandparents in Black families, and the difference in norms and culture in how relevant that family structure is in Hispanic communities as well. In Melissa Kearney's new book, she reiterates the observation that no matter what the economic status or education level of Asian families, the two-parent household structure, and I would argue even the multigenerational household structure, is far more prevalent. I find that super interesting. What are the family cultures and habits and norms and longstanding traditions that support these different kinds of family structures across groups defined by race and ethnicity, and how can they both shape and support child and youth development?

Steven: May you say something about gender inequalities, the different effects of heterogeneities in family inputs on boys versus girls?

Ariel: Although I haven't produced this original work myself, I am pretty persuaded by the accumulation of evidence across fields that something is really happening for boys that is not happening for girls as a function of growing up in economically disadvantaged or otherwise stressful circumstances. I really am persuaded that the experience of growing up in poverty or in a single-parent household that lacks other supports seems to be more detrimental for boys than for girls. And of course, this is super important when we think about the intergenerational consequences of economic hardship: what do boys

need, what are boys not getting, and what is this going to mean when they are teenagers and making decisions about work, school, and partnerships? We've observed this pattern a lot, and we have to think about what we're going to do to help support boys in particular. And why is it that girls don't seem to have these outcomes? Why are these differences between boys and girls so early in the life course? I don't know the answer to that, but I think this is one of the more important questions we need to be working on now.

Steven: Could we return to the question of norms? Many of the arguments about family structure are reduced to economic arguments: the economist jargon for this is marriage markets, and the pool of desirable marriage partners is somehow diminished in various contexts, and that's led to the increase in single parenthood. The second question has to do with attitudes, in other words, norms: to what extent have social pressures and social approbation of different family choices changed? What is your sense about how to think about the dynamics of family structure in the last 40 years, and what narrative would you give to the rise of high levels of single parenthood compared to half a century ago?

Ariel: One thing I would say on your question of social norms is: what are men's roles in families, whether they're married or not? I think there's a pretty narrow definition in our society of what men's contributions can be. If we just look at the data in terms of time use, whose investing in children: women do the lion's share of child rearing within households, whether married or not. I think Kathryn Edin's work here is super important; she's a sociologist, and I think her qualitative work is just incredibly important. It shows the really narrow gender roles for men at the lower end of the economic ladder and the challenges that women and men have in forming relationships that work when those gender roles are so constrained. I think another really important paper here is one that Marianne Bertrand produced that shows that the role of economic provider is still so salient to men that when men in a married couple household lose their jobs, they in fact reduce the amount of housework and child care they do, because of some sense of feeling emasculated by having lost their job; this is such a threat to their identity that the idea of doing something traditionally seen as a woman's role would just destroy them emotionally. I think that's incredibly interesting. I'm not blaming men or saying that men are not eager to do these things, but why is it that we still have a society where these roles are so rigid, and what role does that rigidity play in the kinds of partners that women in contemporary society want and think will contribute to their own well-being and their child's well-being?

Steven: The other major area of your work has to do with the timing of parental influence: there is thinking about children's trajectories from birth through adolescence and asking about specific influences. Could you give us a sense of your main thinking in this regard?

Ariel: My thinking is evolving. I would say at this point, there has been a reification of early childhood in the sense that everyone just has the same mantra about the importance of early childhood investments. It is true that that is a period of rapid brain development, and the brain is malleable and particularly sensitive to inputs from the environment. But so too is adolescent development. There is a period of development after puberty, and during puberty, when the brain is also very malleable and open to experience. I think across a lot of fields we've gotten a little too hung up on its early childhood or bust, to the neglect of adolescence. There are just a lot of things that go on during adolescence that shape the decisions that kids make, and the views of themselves that they form that really matter. I've also been really inspired and very convinced by a newer set of studies showing very strong treatment effects of mentoring programs for adolescents, showing that relatively inexpensive programs that give a teenager someone to talk to can make huge differences. Adolescence is also shaped by pathways that have a kind of zero-one flavor: choosing one versus zero in terms of graduating from high school or entering the labor market is just as important as the notion that in early childhood, we have this accretion of skills. I think we've gone way too far in our emphasis on early childhood. There's a whole Society for Research on Adolescence that developmental psychologists are participating in, but I think in economics, that hasn't made its way in yet.

Steven: I absolutely agree with you that there's been a neglect of adolescence as a fundamental determinant of adult outcomes. One reason why early childhood may receive so much attention is that it's easier to create a moral consensus around it. If one asks the question, should things be done for newborns or for children age five, it's easier to get agreement than the analogous question for teens. Now, why that would be true is partially the idea that teenagers do have some agency, which obviously doesn't exist for younger children. I also very much appreciated your description of the binary way to think about adolescence. The metaphor I've thought about is that maybe the key thing is to avoid catastrophic choices: the litany of them would be pregnancy at 15, drug addiction, getting arrested and spending time in jail at 16, not graduating from high school. The first order of business is to ask how to structure policies to minimize the probability of adolescents ending up in those traps. I really just want to second the importance of thinking about adolescence as this uniquely sensitive, hazard-filled time of life. So you've done some very interesting recent work on essentially scarcity and inattention: how deprivation affects cognitive energy. Could you tell us a little bit about that?

Ariel: Yeah, this is a project I did with Rohan Shah, one of our PhD students at the Harris School. Something that people always say is that economically disadvantaged parents and kids look different than

their counterparts because parents are stressed. And it's just gotten to where the word stress, in my opinion, has lost all meaning, because it turns out when you interview low- and high-income people in comparison, the higher-income group are also very stressed if you just ask them how stressful is your life right now; they have a higher score than their less educated peers. We wanted to think more deeply about what is this thing that is interfering with attention and decision making and the ability to follow through on the things that you said you wanted to do. We're certainly not the first people to focus on this idea of scarcity, or the lack of the thing that you think you need. Rather than just saying oh people are stressed, and they make suboptimal decisions, or they're unhappy because they're stressed and they don't pay attention to their kids, we wanted to be much more specific about what is the thing people are lacking and how does that shape how they're able to attend to their lives. We found that these are subjective feelings: a subjective feeling that you don't have what you need. In our work we look both at money, so you get to the end of the month, and you don't feel you have enough money to have reached that point, and at social connections; you're lonely basically. Each of these things is equally important. We had a study where we had data from schools and teachers who reported information that they sent home to parents during COVID, and then we had data from those parents asking them what data they received from the schools. It was an interesting opportunity to look at the mismatch between those two things, and we found that both this subjective feeling of not having enough money, and just as importantly a subjective feeling of loneliness, were equally correlated with this measure of inattention. To me, that's interesting from an intervention perspective, because a lot of what we do to change parenting is about providing information. So much of what our interventions do is premised on trying to get people the right information at the right time, and we have to imagine: can we do that better, and what are the things that are making people miss that information?

Steven: Ariel, that was a wonderful conversation. Thank you very very much.

Ariel: Thank you, I appreciate it. I had a lot of fun.

Geoff: Of the many important influences that are passed down through families, the process of identity formation looms large. Our sense of who we are and what that means has profound consequences for individual psychology and for broader patterns of social and economic inequality. This is the focus of our next conversation with developmental psychologist Mesmin Destin. He speaks with Ariel and Steven about his work on identity-based motivation, which explores how young people can develop a belief in the strengths and assets particular to their backgrounds and individual experiences.

Ariel: Our guest today is Mesmin Destin. Mesmin is an academic

research psychologist in social psychology and has done a lot of really terrific work on perceptions of inequality and how subjective perceptions and mechanisms shape inequality and how those subjective mechanisms contribute to the persistence of inequality. We're thrilled to have you here, Mesmin. I'd like to start by having you tell us about what you call identity-based motivation. What does that mean in social psychology? How does it relate to choices and decisions that kids and adults might make?

Mesmin: It's great to be in conversation with you about these topics and how they're connected to inequality. A lot of the work that I do with my group is centering ideas around identity. When we use the term identity-based motivation, we're drawing from a theory developed by Daphna Oyserman, a mentor at the University of Southern California. The idea is that these conceptions that we have about who we are, how we see the person that we are in the world, who we might become, the groups that we belong to: these are all parts of our identity. And those are constantly dynamic and shaped by the experiences that we go through, by the context and environments that we're in. We often think about identity as the stable parts of who we are that we can explain over years, but this conceptualization of identity-based motivation emphasizes how malleable all of that is and how dependent it is upon the circumstances that you encounter on a day-to-day, moment-to-moment basis. That's one part of the equation, and then the other part is the motivation side. This dynamic conception of who you are guides the way that you move through the world. It guides the way that you form different goals and pursue those goals in education, which is where we do a lot of our work, or in health and relationships. All of the ways that your identity has been affirmed, shaped, or challenged determines in a sense, the ways that you then respond when you are running into difficulty pursuing a goal. If your identity has really been bolstered in a certain way, who you are feels connected to achieving in a certain domain, and within that environment, challenges tell you that what you're doing is important and that you can get through it, as opposed to seeing something as impossible and not really part of who you are. So it's a really multifaceted theory that captures many parts of your experience in life, how environments shape those experiences and identities, and then all of that is cyclical in a way that explains the choices and the paths that people find themselves on over years.

Ariel: Could you give us a specific example involving some dimension of inequality, say income or educational inequality? How would that shape identity in this way if you were a teenager making some critical decisions about your next path in life?

Mesmin: I think about inequality along a couple of pathways. There's one that has to do with your absolute level of resources. We've done plenty of work showing how much it matters to know that you have the financial resources and social resources necessary to get somewhere,

to get somewhere like college. If you know that you're in an environment where there aren't a lot of the financial resources that are necessary, it can, in many ways, make that identity feel less accessible to you, and the pathway toward that goal feel less relevant. So that's the absolute resource part of inequality. But then there's also the more core definition of inequality: how far are people at the top from those at the bottom? In that way, we study how that sense that there's an extremely large or a smaller distance between people's economic resources guides your sense of how likely you are to actually move up or down this economic hierarchy. We find in experimental studies and correlational studies that your sense that you can move up or down this hierarchy does make a difference for young people in particular. It makes it all feel more relevant to work towards these goals that everybody says you're supposed to be working towards, compared to when you see the reality that there's a very large distance between where you are and where others may be. Our takeaway is often that understanding that there can be a large level of inequality while also recognizing that there are pathways and opportunities available helps people to navigate in this more balanced way.

Ariel: Where do youth or parents get these facts or ideas, especially the latter example you gave about the distance between groups? What are the various channels through which kids come to understand the world in this way?

Mesmin: From our perspective as social psychologists, we study the ways that it's not necessarily a set belief that doesn't change. It's really something quite sensitive to information that you encounter on a day-to-day basis. There are some colleagues across the field who have studied the ways that people tend to be fairly inaccurate in our perceptions of inequality or perceptions of the amount of mobility in society. It gets important to recognize that, but also to recognize that those perceptions can change based on a conversation we can have right now; they could change based on a show that you watch on TV. I think where we need to improve our understanding is what are the periods of life developmentally where those beliefs might be more malleable, and periods where they might be a little bit more sticky. And how are they transmitted in these more lasting ways? Those are questions that are still open in many ways and have led us to want more collaborations with a wider range of developmental scientists.

Ariel: It's also true that people hold multiple identities at any given time, and the one that is invoked in that moment can shape a choice you make. It sounds like you're saying that identity is very malleable. Is there any dimension that is more stable? I guess I'm interested in the relationship between what you're describing as identity and what personality psychologists would say are personality traits.

Mesmin: We, from my standpoint, focus on where the motion might be, but that is not to say that people have no core base from which they're moving, whether it's around their identities, their personality, their dispositions, or tendencies. People tend to have different starting points, and that's where I think the fields of personality and social psychology work so well together: recognizing what we do learn from studying individual differences on beliefs like optimism or beliefs about opportunity, while still recognizing that although people may differ systematically across individuals or even across groups to some extent, there's often a wider range within groups than between groups. And individuals themselves almost always have some room to move based on the circumstances around them, on these senses of who they are and where they or their kids might end up.

Ariel: Tell us a little about how your work relates to work by Claude Steele on stereotype threat, or the work on acting white or acting Black. What is the lineage between that work and the work you're doing now?

Mesmin: That's an important question. The stereotype threat work has definitely been really foundational in our field and has informed the ways that we approach our research in my lab group. Stereotype threat, as most people know, is focused on the ways that there are ideas in society about people in groups that are sometimes negative and widely held, and that when activated, they can have negative consequences for the targets' own actual performance within a particular domain where they've already shown ability. The stereotype reifies itself despite the person's ability. Identity-based motivation, I think of as slightly broader than stereotype threat, in that identity-based motivation describes the ways that identities are not necessarily set, and that also means that what a particular group membership means to somebody is not necessarily a stable, set thing. So there may be stereotypes in society that certain people are not good at math, but that idea, according to identity-based motivation, is not necessarily a stable, set idea that everybody endorses to the same degree or even recognizes. There may be a stereotype out there about a stigmatized group, but if that person has been socialized in a way through their family and through their community where they have received a wider range of positive ideas about the strengths connected to this identity that is normally seen as marginal, then that positive content around the identity will have a cascade of positive consequences for the ways that they engage in pursuing those goals, just as stereotype threat focuses on how negative ideas about identity can lead to negative consequences. This is the broader notion of background-specific strengths: building from work in ethnic studies and broader education work, the idea that there are a wide range of strengths connected to identities, perspectives, and backgrounds that are normally only seen through a lens of marginalization. When you draw greater attention to the ways that those experiences are connected to unrecognized

strengths and ways of being in the world that can actually contribute to success, and help young people to see that and to see that their teachers recognize that, we find in experiments that that type of new message about an identity has direct consequences for how well young people are able to pursue their goals, how motivated they are, how well they do in school, and how positive their well-being is. So there's a wider way to think about what identities mean and how they're conceptualized, whether it's about stereotypes or acting white or acting Black, that opens the box to think about identities as more than just these set ideas.

Steven: I was particularly fascinated by the work you've done on identity, and it seemed to me that this is actually providing the micro-foundations for ideas associated with stereotype threat. What I mean by that is that one form of stereotype threat could be a test being called high-stakes, causing stress. A different idea would be to say that in a society with blunt racism or prejudices that exist against certain groups, for adolescents or young adults who are at fixed points, there's an active interpretation of the experiences they have or the actions they are going to take. An important idea that comes out of your work is that there isn't a fixed meaning to events and actions; it's an active interpretation that's fundamental. Part of what seems essential is that when one faces adversity, think of it as the first bad test: you take an exam and don't do well in college; what's the interpretation? Did I go to a poor high school, or is it something about me? I put that more as an observation on how I'd like to interpret your work.

Mesmin: Yeah, and I'd take that one step further. Another piece connected to what you just said is that yes, the ways that people respond to situations and conceptualize their identity can make a big difference for moving through an experience or a challenge. It also reaffirms the important reality that the issue or the variable for a lot of these models isn't necessarily race itself or economic status or whatever demographic characteristic itself, but the ways that you experience the world as a result of that. It's racism that's the issue that leads to these consequences. It's a basic reality, but it's important to remind ourselves of, because we often fall into shorthand when we're talking about disparities between groups and forget that the process has to do with the ways that you are treated and experience the world because of that group membership, not just because you're inherently different as a result of being a member of that group.

Ariel: What made you come to this area of study in the first place? What's your intellectual history?

Mesmin: I grew up in Omaha, Nebraska, in a predominantly white, pretty homogenous atmosphere, and my family was originally from Haiti. So I grew up in a place where I didn't really look like anybody, and the

culture didn't have the same cultural background, but I was still navigating that world and was very familiar with it. I think that leads people to feel fairly attuned to the ways that social circumstances are shaping our own identities, our own sense of who we are and where we go in life, in ways that you might not otherwise if you're just fitting in naturally with the rhythm of life of other people. That was always a growing question in my mind. I was also interested in science and biology, and I liked ways of study where you could kind of control and understand the world. When I first learned about the idea of social psychology, I think in a high school AP psychology course, this notion that you could unpack these complex realities of the world in a way that has some artificial sense of control and have something close to knowledge about what leads people to act the way they do was immediately extremely captivating to me. Once college came around, that world became even bigger, and the specific questions became more clear to me, especially around not just distinctions in experience by race, but also how the intersection of a number of characteristics, how social class and socioeconomic circumstances, can make extreme differences for people's orientations in the world, the rhythm of their life, the opportunities that they're exposed to. At that time, there just wasn't a lot in psychology that had taken that into account, and it felt like a wide-open lane to run through.

Ariel: I want to go back to something you said, which I think touches on this idea of culture, which can be a controversial word to use. If I put the words culture and identity together, how would you respond to that?

Mesmin: That feels natural to me only because there's a really important model in our field that is all about the ways that culture and context and microsystems and identity are all constantly in conversation with one another and in mutual constitution with one another. Hazel Markus is really well known for developing and promoting this, along with Shinobu Kitayama, expanding the ways that we understand what culture means and how it is a part of everything that we do, down to the smallest thoughts within our mind, our non-conscious processes. To try to divorce culture from identity, to me, doesn't make any sense. That being said, what people mean when they invoke the lens of culture varies dramatically from person to person and from discipline to discipline. The lens of culture has been used in ways historically in academia that have masked racist ideas, that have tried to explain disparities by denigrating particular groups and their circumstances and their practices. Fortunately, I feel that most reputable areas of scholarship have moved away from that and have recognized the damage that can cause, and have really expanded what culture means and gotten back to a broader lens that makes sense in connection to identity.

Ariel: So far, I hear you talking about the individual child and the

identities that are shaped and that may then shape further decisions. Let's walk that out to think about peer groups, because it seems like they can play a similar role. Peer groups have identities that shape whether you want to join them, and whether the match between who they are and who they think you are results in an invitation to join. Thinking about this concept of identity, can you talk a little more about social groups?

Mesmin: This is one of the enterprises we've really tried to focus on in the past few years: expanding beyond the individual focus of our psychological models and not just saying that it matters at the peer level, at the teacher level, at the institution level, but designing studies that show the processes that happen at this broader interpersonal and beyond level that matter for individuals. For example, we ran a study where we wanted to experimentally manipulate what's happening at the peer group level: what messages you are getting from the peers around you about what it means to be a member of your group and what it means to develop a sense of where you're headed in life. This looks like common mentoring programs, kind of a structure of being assigned to a program or not, but we design specific interactions that peers are having with one another around specific guidance from theories related to identity-based motivation, possible selves, and future identity. What are the types of conversations you can have with peers that can help you to get a sense that there is a pathway to this goal called college, that there are some challenges in our community and some challenges in our environment, but there are ways through them, and there are lots of resources in our environment? We've found it's really effective to have near-peers working with slightly younger students, say eighth graders working with high schoolers, and that when you have those interactions in structured ways, it makes a really big difference for how the younger students start to see who they are and what they do later in life. So it shows us directly that this peer environment and these peer messages are core to how a young person develops their own sense of what they're doing and who they are and where they're going, and that they, in many ways, repeat that with the peers around them.

Steven: I found that near-peer paper extremely interesting. One thing that struck me was that this was actionable: you can think about the social structure in a school as a policy variable. Obviously, you can't control friendships, but you can create mechanisms that enhance the existing peer structure. That struck me as an understudied mechanism design issue: how do you actually construct social networks and relations to facilitate these types of benign interactions? One thing I wanted to ask in conjunction with that is about the effects on the mentors. I was very struck by a lecture I heard by Jacquelynne Eccles many years ago where she talked about how having students tutor people many years younger than them helped the tutors: the first time somebody said you were a good teacher, you know something about reading, you have something to contribute. I was wondering if you

could elaborate on your views on the mentor side of this.

Mesmin: Absolutely. In our particular studies, we haven't had the power to look at that directly, but there are definitely other studies that have shown the beneficial effects of being put in the role of mentor for academic outcomes and even for physical health outcomes. Being in the mentorship role: one way we've been able to leverage that in some of our studies is that if you look closely at a lot of social psychological studies, there'll be maybe some writing prompt as the experimental manipulation, think about this, or think about your identity in this way, and then you see an effect. But if you look really closely, there's another step that's sometimes there to try to really internalize that message, and that step is usually: you just read this information about opportunity in society or about a social group and the value that they have; how would you convey this message to somebody who was younger than you or to a peer? Then, as part of the manipulation, they'll have participants record as if they were going to give this recording to a peer, or write something like a testimonial as if it were going to go to a peer to help them. And that is part of what leads to the positive effect of these manipulations and helps to internalize the message: being put in the role where, one, you're seen as a person with agency who could be helpful; and two, you're actually given the opportunity to do something you believe could help other people. In many ways, that logic has been embedded in a lot of studies.

Ariel: Sounds like you're saying turn the recipient of a message into a messenger themselves, and the act of doing that is something that helps solidify the idea and makes people believe more in the message.

Mesmin: Yeah. Back to culture: especially in our culture, people don't necessarily feel good about being told you are in this position where you need some help, and we're here to help you, and this is going to get you where you need to go because you're just this vulnerable person who needs support. Rather, it's much more effective to recognize the ways that people have agency, that people do have goals, and that they do have something that they can contribute, and to put some action to that by asking them to do something they think will be helpful for others. Putting people in a position to actually exercise the agency that they have is, in and of itself, extremely powerful.

Ariel: Tell me a little more about the messenger in general, or the sources of information. The things that make you believe a message: I guess there must be things like how much do you trust the messenger? How much do you value this source? What are some of the qualities of a message or a messenger that get inside this identity formation process?

Mesmin: Young people in particular are extremely savvy about being manipulated or being thrown a lot of information; everybody wants them

to do something or wants something from them. Who are you, what are you about, can you be trusted, can you be believed, are you credible? That has to be at the center of every design of any study that's bringing in a message or resource. The gold standard is to work closely with communities and trusted community members, and have trusted teachers, mentors, and others be part of the facilitation of whatever resource or message is key to a study, or at least introduce and vouch for that resource. There's also plenty of work about the benefits of a certain level of matching around identity, demographic, and experience. I think that has been shown to be quite important, and in many ways, that type of matching is sometimes a proxy for a shared experience and credibility that can be communicated in a number of ways. It doesn't necessarily have to be by something you look at; if you look at someone you don't know where they're coming from, they do have to communicate in some type of way that they have an understanding and respect for who you are and your community. Because so often young people are right if they have some skepticism that people are coming in with assumptions about them that are not true or that are negative or that are limiting and incomplete. That has to be directly countered.

Ariel: Some of your work talks about this tradeoff between wanting to be inspiring and optimistic and wanting to be realistic in the delivery of messages. A couple of papers on this: how do you think about that tradeoff? The world is unfair in many respects; you don't want to misinform youth or adults. What's your thinking about that tradeoff?

Mesmin: It's tricky, and it's important. One of the reasons why it's so important to make sure to capture nuance when you're talking about opportunities or pathways to goals is that, of course, there are benefits to knowing that something is possible, and we see benefits to that across the board in many ways. But if the only message you get is that everything is possible, here's a pathway, work toward it, everybody can do it no matter what: then even those people who systematically face marginalization, and especially those who don't necessarily have the same barriers, become less likely to recognize the systemic barriers that are in place in society and less likely to support the types of changes at institutions and across society that are necessary to actually promote these pathways in an equitable way. So it's this thin road that is important to walk, to make sure to acknowledge both sides of the equation. Oftentimes, it's easy to walk away from reading an individual psychological study and think you have the key: this is a fact, it's amazing, here's what we can do, it's the end of the story. It is important, but it's almost never the only thing that needs to be done. We isolate particular factors and approaches so that we can understand the ways that they work, but in the real world, there are so many more things to take into account in tandem with one another. That's what we're trying to move some of our studies to look at: what happens when you're getting one message from

one source and another from a different source? How do they interact with one another? How might they amplify or cancel out one another? Models are getting more complex every day, the technology is getting more complex every day, and students are coming in with a better understanding of how we can model complex systems. This is another place where some interdisciplinary expertise can help us to capture the reality of a number of forces and ideas, rather than just thinking about opportunity and thinking that's the only lever we have.

Steven: If you were put on the spot and the Chicago School Board wanted you to give them two or three recommendations that, based on your work, you think would be most efficacious in promoting upward mobility, what would they be?

Mesmin: My first answer is to embed people to work with communities long-term. To create partnerships: that's where we put a lot of our effort, putting researchers and community members together in ways where they have resources to work in a collaborative way over long periods of time and not expect immediate one-off changes. If somebody is trying to put money toward particular challenges and has an opportunity, there are things that can be done, especially in education. There are certainly some approaches that have seemed to matter: having the right number of students per teacher in a classroom, having after-school resources, places where young people can gather and connect and explore together. These are types of things that teachers and school leaders know. I think listening to them is the most important piece, and trying to put the resources in the hands of the people who are working with young people every day.

Steven: Well, thanks so much for joining us today, Mesmin; this was a real pleasure.

Mesmin: Thank you so much. I really enjoyed it.

Geoff: The Inequality Podcast is a production of the Stone Center for Research on Wealth Inequality and Mobility at the University of Chicago. I'm Geoff Wodtke. I'd like to thank our producer and engineer Shane McKeon, our assistant director Gerardo Espinal Franco for production oversight and more, and lastly our executive director Grace Kolavo for her organizational support. You can get in touch with us at stonecenter@uchicago.edu. Thanks for listening.

This transcript has been prepared with the assistance of AI.