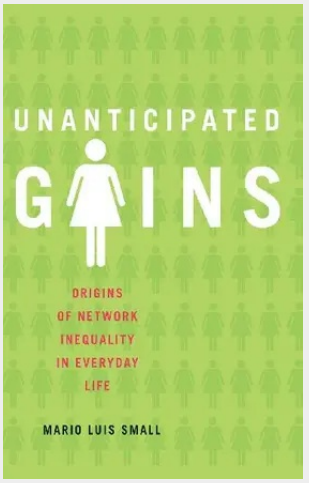
Small

Unanticipated Gains



Social capital theorists have shown that inequality arises in part because some people enjoy larger, more supportive or otherwise more useful networks. But why do some people have better networks than others? Unanticipated Gains argues that the answer lies less in people's deliberate "networking" than in the institutional conditions of the colleges, firms, gyms, and other organizations in which they happen to participate routinely. The book introduces a model of social inequality that takes seriously the embeddedness of networks in formal organizations, proposing that what people gain from their connections depends on where those connections are formed and sustained. It studies an unlikely case: the experiences of mothers whose children were enrolled in New York City childcare centers. As a result of the routine practices and institutional conditions of the centers--from the structure of their parents' associations, to apparently innocuous rules such as pick-up and drop-off times---many of these mothers dramatically increased their social capital and measurably improved their wellbeing. Yet how much they gained depended on how their centers were organized. The daycare centers also brokered connections to other people and organizations, affecting not only the size of mothers' networks but also the resources available through them. Social inequality then arises not merely out of differences in skills or deliberate investments - as the conventional social scientific and political wisdom would have it - but also out of the differences in the routine organizations in which people belong. In addition to childcare centers, Small also identifies the social forces at work in many other organizations, including beauty salons, bath houses, gyms, and churches.

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