

Early-life exposure to Mao-era rural collective labor persistently reshapes how people invest in social capital

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Abstract

People can invest in social capital in different ways, but whether life experiences shape such choices remains unclear. Leveraging the Mao-era sent-down movement, which temporarily relocated millions of urban youths to rural areas for collective labor, we determine whether formative experiences durably reshape social capital investment and related outcomes later in life. Drawing on historical accounts, together with psychological and neuroscientific insights, we use a fuzzy regression discontinuity design and China Family Panel Studies data. We find that being sent down reduced money-based investments while increasing communication-based social capital investments. Contrastingly, multiple social capital-related outcomes were unchanged, including perceived relationship quality and access to help, implying that exposed and unexposed individuals maintained similarly strong social ties through different investment strategies, regardless of differences in later-life demographic or socioeconomic characteristics. Our findings provide evidence on experience effects in social behavior; differences in life experiences are a potential source of social-behavioral heterogeneity.