Review of *The Social Genome: The New Science of Nature and Nurture* by Dalton Conley

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In his new book, *The Social Genome*, Dalton Conley provides an exhaustive account of recent developments in sociogenomics and their implications for the social sciences and society at large. The distinction between *blankslaters* and *hereditarians* recurs throughout the book and helps to illuminate its central message. *Blankslaters* (a category in which the vast majority of those reading this review most likely belong) argue that life outcomes are entirely shaped by nurture. *Hereditarians*, conversely, maintain the primacy of genes and nature. The core thesis of Conley's book is that the traditional opposition between *Blankslaters* and *Hereditarians* is now outdated. Sociogenomics, the interdisciplinary study of how genes interact with social environments to shape behavior and life outcomes, has brought a truce in the long-standing nature-versus-nurture debate. The focus is now on how genes and environment jointly shape our lives.

Sociogenomics has identified mechanisms that blur the line between genes and environment: effects typically understood as social are imbued with genetic influences, and genetic effects are highly contingent on context. Conley explains these mechanisms, including gene–environment correlations (active, passive, evocative) and gene–environment interactions, using recent research results. In this short review, however, I will not focus on these mechanisms, which are already discussed in various textbooks and introductory articles on sociogenomics. Nor will I go into detail about Conley's insightful and provocative discussion of the ethical questions raised by sociogenomic research. Suffice it to mention his striking remark that the greatest threat in the use of genetic information for perverse purposes comes not from authoritarian states, but from ourselves, through market forces and assisted reproductive technologies that already let wealthy parents select embryos for specific traits., from the logic of the free market, and the practices of assisted reproductive technologies (ART) offered by corporations that already allow wealthy parents to select embryos based on specific traits. Rather, I will highlight two distinctive features of the book that, in my view, make it a *must-read* for sociologists, and particularly for graduate students.

First, the book challenges us to recognize that our life outcomes are shaped not only by our own genome, but also by the genomes of those around us. Research by Conley and co-authors, for instance, shows that peers' polygenic index or smoking at school is more predictive of a subject's smoking initiation than the subject's own PGI. In this way, the DNA of others, embodied in the social contexts we are exposed, can exert a greater influence on our life outcomes than our own DNA. This is the *social genome* that gives the book its title. Paradoxically, however, the environment emerges even stronger from what might initially seem a fatal blow. Ultimately, we start smoking because of the influence of our peers. The fact that their smoking is shaped by their genetic dispositions does not undermine the crucial social component of our own smoking initiation. Acknowledging the social genoma does not lead us into genetic determinism; rather, it offers new tools to study environmental social effects, address problems of self-selection into treatment, and fully explore the impact of the social context.

Second, while many books introduce sociogenomics, Conley uniquely links it to core sociological questions. He explores debates on college as the great equalizer, couples' careers, and peer effects on behavior. Other phenomena, such as the immigrant optimism paradox or the educational penalties of divorce, could similarly benefit from sociogenomic analysis. The point I want to underline is that the book stimulates sociological imagination in research. I would recommend it for a graduate or PhD class in sociology to help students develop their research questions and study designs. In a methods class, it could also serve as an engaging exercise, having students produce directed acyclic graphs (DAGs) of the many and varied relationships discussed throughout the book.

As a final remark, there is an underlying theme throughout the book that, much like a meandering river, appears and disappears across the pages: the role of chance. Discussing results from twin studies showing that roughly half of the variance in outcomes is due to non-shared environments, and highlighting the large prediction failures in the Fragile Families Challenge, Conley concludes with a suggestive list of factors that sociologists might have overlooked, such as random accidents, infections, which teacher a child has, who they sit next to, just to mention a few. Ultimately, these factors refer to chance events that impact later outcomes. He also refers to encounters with random strangers and, at different points, uses the metaphor of "bumper cars" to explain how the *social genome* (i.e., the genes of others) operates to shape our behavior.

Despite repeated references to chance throughout the book, in the conclusion, Conley formalizes only two "lotteries at birth": a social lottery that determines childhood environment and a genetic lottery that determines genetic makeup. A third type of lotteries, the luck or unluck of life events, remains largely implicit, even though it can have profound effects. Small occurrences, such as an inspiring substitute teacher, a particular dorm assignment, or barely reaching the threshold for a top college, can shape life trajectories. Metaphors like "bumper cars," which describe encounters with random strangers, underscore the pervasive influence of chance in the author's explanatory framework, yet the book offers little systematic treatment of how luck interacts with genes and social structure in determining socioeconomic outcomes.

Recognizing this gap highlights an important direction for future sociological research. Studying luck through the prism of the social genome and social environment might offer a promising path, as genes, social environment, and chance all interact to shape life outcomes. The sociology of luck is now taking its first tentative steps, and Conley's book can serve as an invaluable source of inspiration.

Reference

Dalton Conley, 2025, The Social Genome. The new Science of Nature and Nurture. W.W. Norton & Company, New York.