



# The Formation of Health Disparities in Comparative and Historical Perspective

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Questions of causality have been central to scholarship on health and health disparities. Recent research has attempted to extend the fundamental cause theory by focusing on power, political institutions, and other macro-level factors that shape the social hierarchies in which fundamental cause relationships are embedded. I argue such efforts represent a level of causal analysis that is “upstream” and distinct from fundamental causes. I refer to these as “formative causes” and the broader processes as the “formation of health disparities.” In short, whereas the fundamental cause framework examines how relative social position within a hierarchy persistently affects health and health disparities, a formative cause refers to the social processes that create, institutionalize, and reproduce such social hierarchies across time and place. I discuss the utility of cross-national and comparative-historical research for studying health disparities formation, and provide examples of existing research that links population health with welfare state regimes, power-resources, and racial formation.



Elyas Bakhtiari is Associate Professor of Sociology and Director of the Schroeder Center for Health Policy at William and Mary. His research examines the social causes of health and health disparities, particularly for racial and ethnic minority groups and international migrants. Utilizing both historical and cross-national comparative analysis, his work considers how social institutions, epidemiological risks, and demographic trends intersect to shape patterns of health and mortality across contexts. His work has appeared in *American Behavioral Scientist*, *Social Science and Medicine*, *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, *Demography*, and other outlets.

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