

## PREFACE

**THIS BOOK SEEKS** to offer the general reader a clear and concise introduction to the Matthew effect, one of the least known but most important principles in the social sciences. Matthew effects are said to occur when social advantages lead to further advantages—or disadvantages to further disadvantages—through time, creating widening gaps between those who have more and those who have less. It has been more than forty years since the eminent sociologist Robert K. Merton of Columbia University coined the term to describe circumstances in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, as the saying goes. Matthew effects are not confined to the economic sphere, however; they have been observed across a broad spectrum of social institutions. Thus the principle is essential to understanding the social dynamics of inequality in general.

In the years since Merton coined the term, considerable research on Matthew effects has accumulated in fields ranging from sociology, economics, and political science to educational psychology and even biology. These widely scattered fragments of literature seem to point toward a fundamental principle in the social sciences, and yet they have never been brought together and presented as a coherent whole. This book aims to organize these fragments of research and present their major findings in a way that is readily accessible to social scientists, policy makers, students, and citizens at large as we continue to

confront upward and downward spirals of inequality in the twenty-first century.

As a nontechnical introduction, this book does not require a strong quantitative background on the reader's part. For those interested in the more technical and mathematical aspects of Matthew effects, DiPrete and Eirich (2006) provide a useful review of the available literature and a good starting point for further research.

I gratefully acknowledge all the friends and colleagues who have helped to make this book possible. My dean, Janet Dizinno of St. Mary's University, and my editor, Lauren Dockett of Columbia University Press, have supported the project consistently along the way. I have gained valuable insights from the comments of Harriet Zuckerman, Joe Feagin, Brian Slattery, Richard Machalek, Bill Schweke, Roy Robbins, and several anonymous reviewers. I am grateful to Alejandro Parada for technical support. *Mi esposa*—the historian Alida Metcalf—and our sons Matthew and Benjamin have sustained me through this project with their laughter and love. They are my life support system. Finally, I wish to pay tribute to two luminaries of the past century, Robert Merton and Gunnar Myrdal, whose pathbreaking work continues to inspire thought and scholarship. This book is dedicated to their memories.

## THE MATTHEW EFFECT

