

# **The Spatial Foundations of Inequality A Conceptual Model**

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# Acknowledgements

*RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation of the Social Sciences*

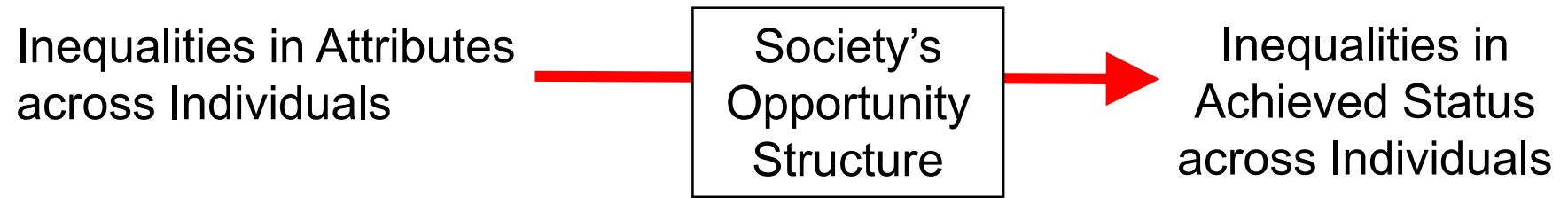
Special issue: “The Spatial Foundations of Inequality”

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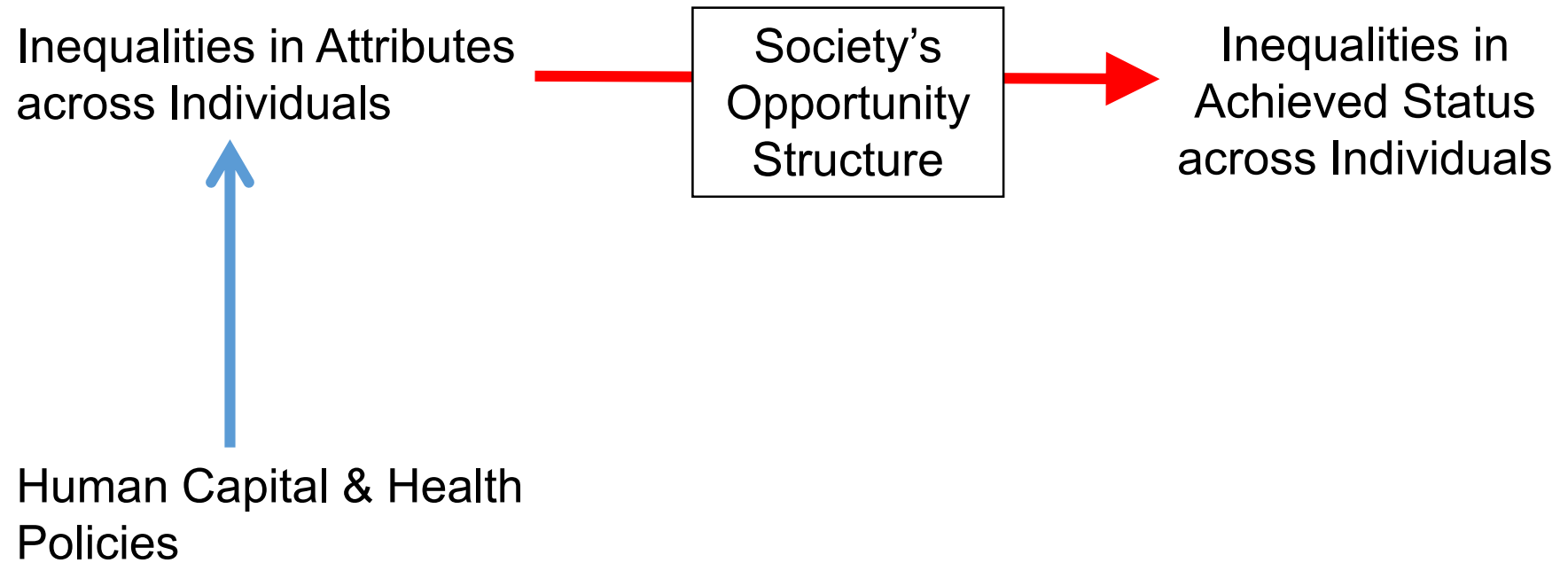
Patrick Sharkey & Maren Toft

Gwilym Pryce / AQMeN

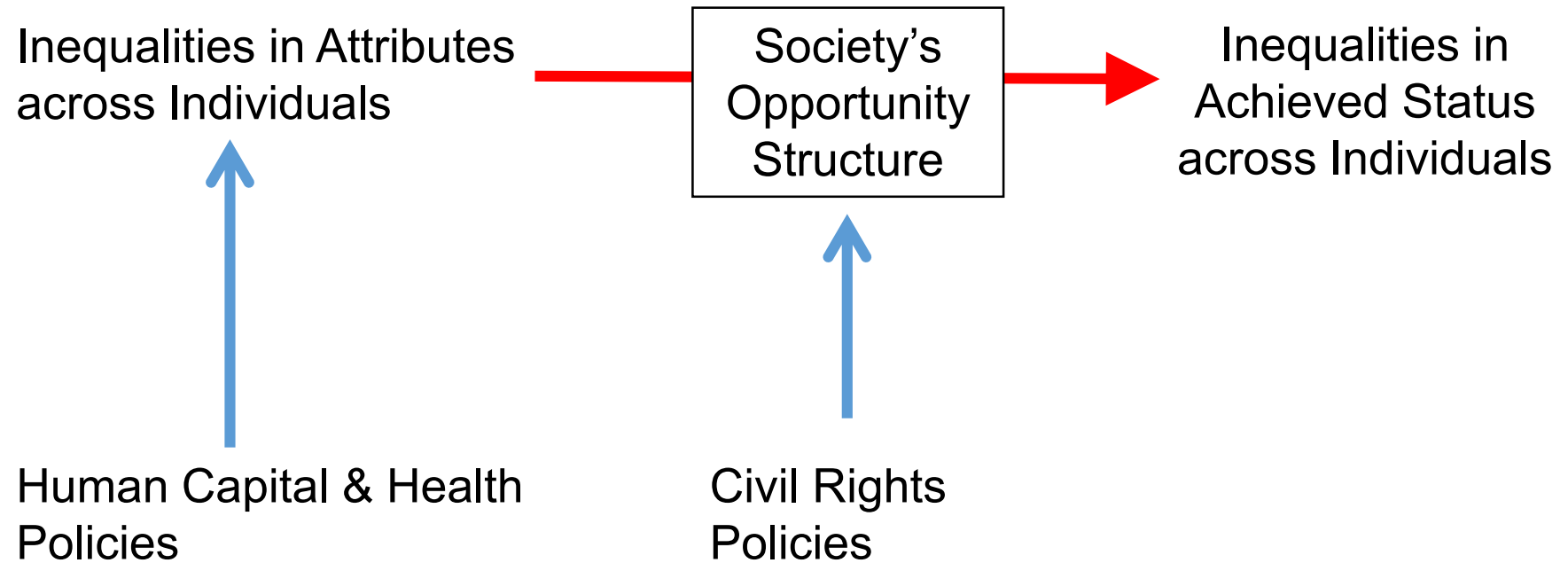
The Conventional Wisdom:  
Mediating Role of Society's Opportunity Structure  
in Generating Inequalities in Achieved SES



## Traditional Policy Responses to Undesirable Inequalities



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## Central Thesis

Variations in geographic context across multiple scales (neighborhood, jurisdiction, metropolitan region)--  
**“spatial opportunity structure”**-- affects the socioeconomic outcomes that individuals can achieve in two ways by altering the:

1. Payoffs that will be gained from attributes individuals possess during any given period (mediator)
2. Bundle of attributes individuals will acquire (both passively and actively) during their lifetimes (moderator)

## Spatial Opportunity Structure

Definition:

markets, institutions, services  
and other natural and human-  
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### Elements:

labor, housing, retail and financial markets;  
criminal justice, education, health, transportation and social service systems;  
natural and built environment;  
public & private institutional resources /services;  
social networks;  
forces of socialization and social control  
(collective norms, role models, peers);  
local political system



## Spatial Opportunity Structure

### Definition:

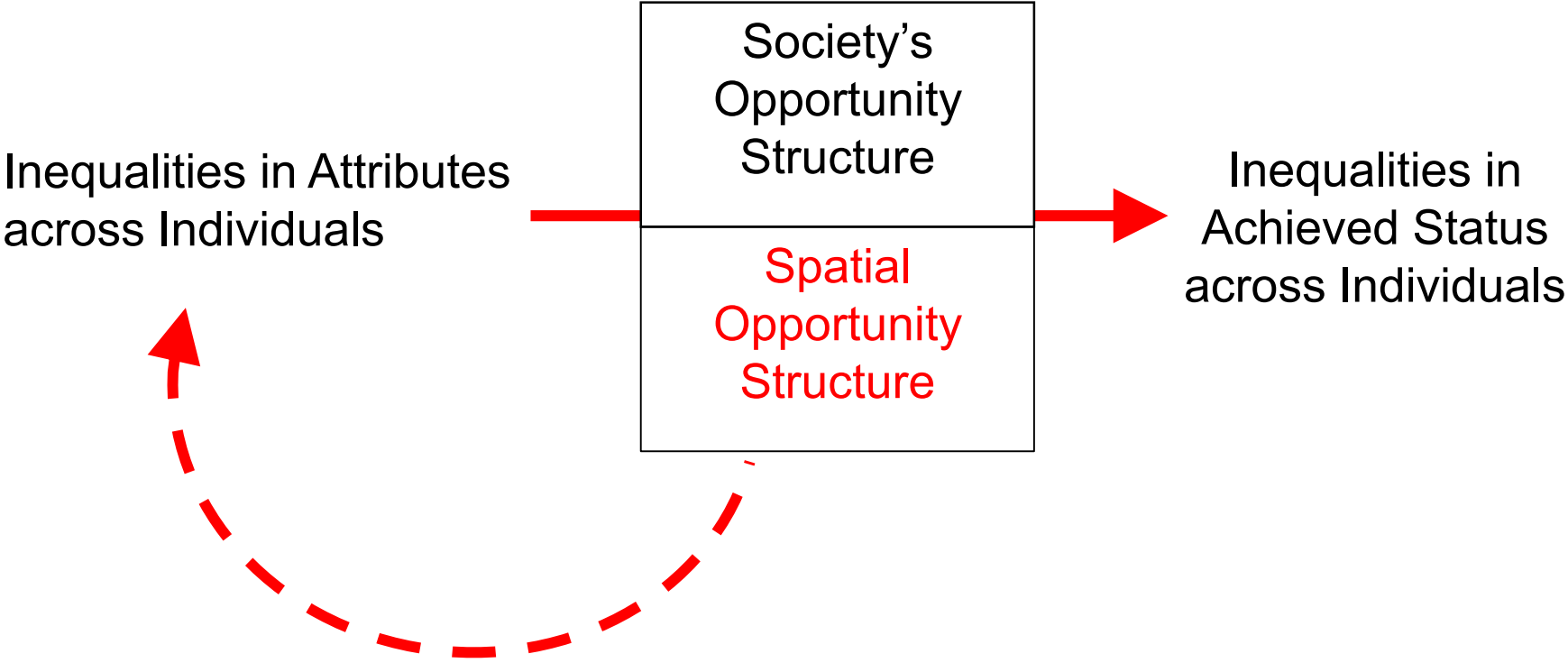
markets, institutions, services and other natural and human-made contexts that have important subnational geographic variations

### Elements:

labor, housing, retail and financial markets; criminal justice, education, health, transportation and social service systems; natural and built environment; public & private institutional resources /services; social networks; forces of socialization and social control (collective norms, role models, peers); local political system

Mechanisms: social interactive; environmental; geographical; institutional

# Overview: Mediating & Moderating Roles of Spatial Opportunity Structure within Society in Generating Inequalities in Achieved SES



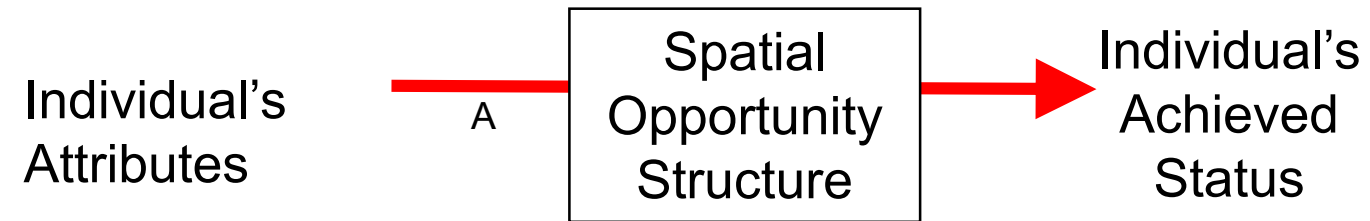
# A Model of How Spatial Opportunity Structure Contributes to Inequality

Individual's  
Attributes

Spatial  
Opportunity  
Structure

Individual's  
Achieved  
Status

## Mediating Role of Spatial Opportunity Structure within a Society



Parents' / Caregivers' Attributes & Behaviors

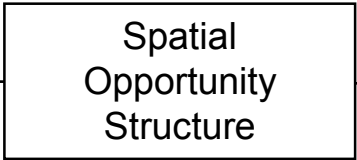
Other Elements of Model

B



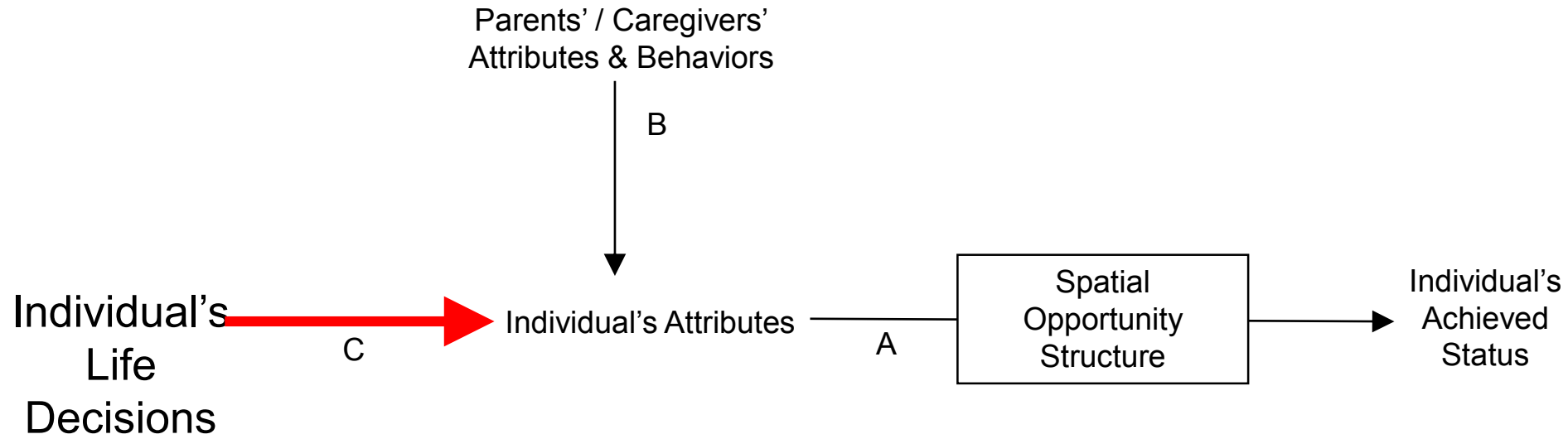
Individual's Attributes

A

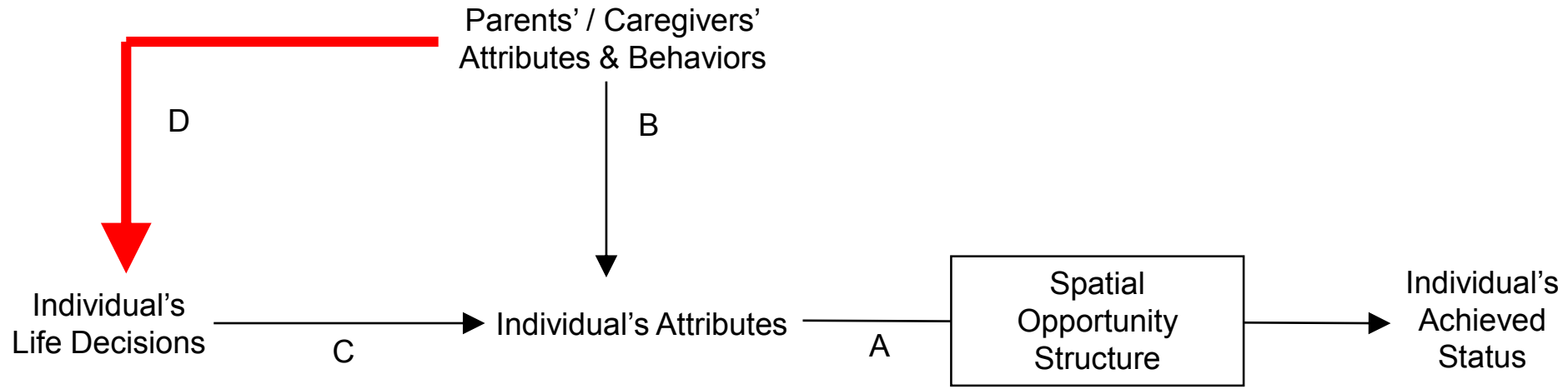


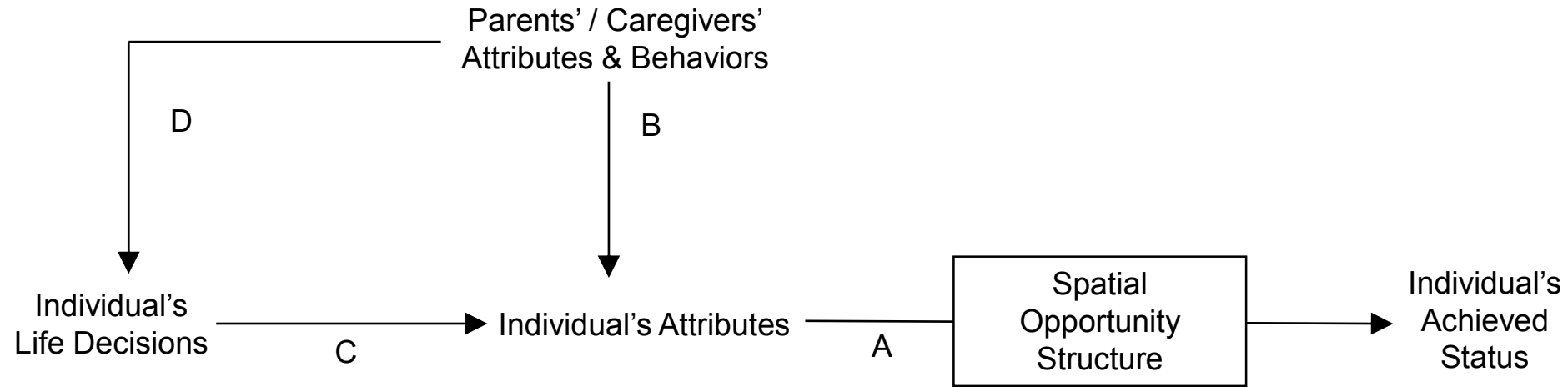
Individual's Achieved Status





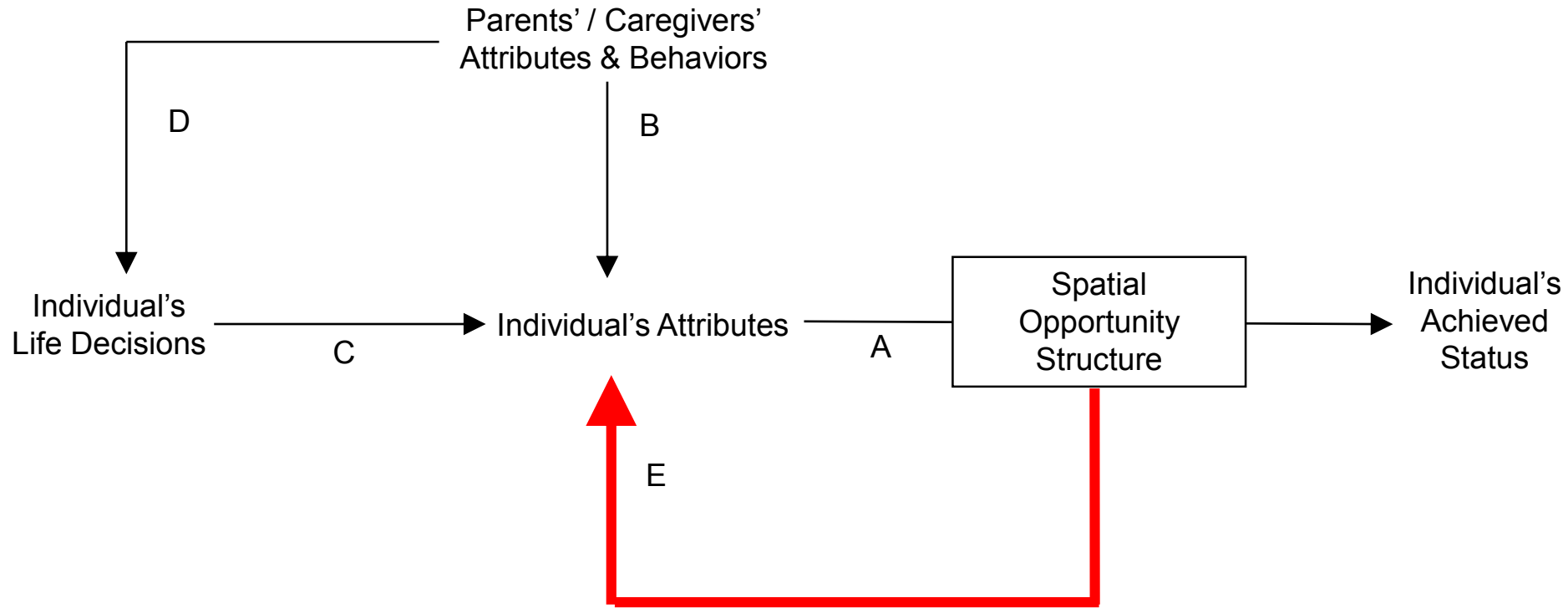
(education, risky behaviors, marriage, fertility, labor force participation, illegal activities, and sociopolitical participation)



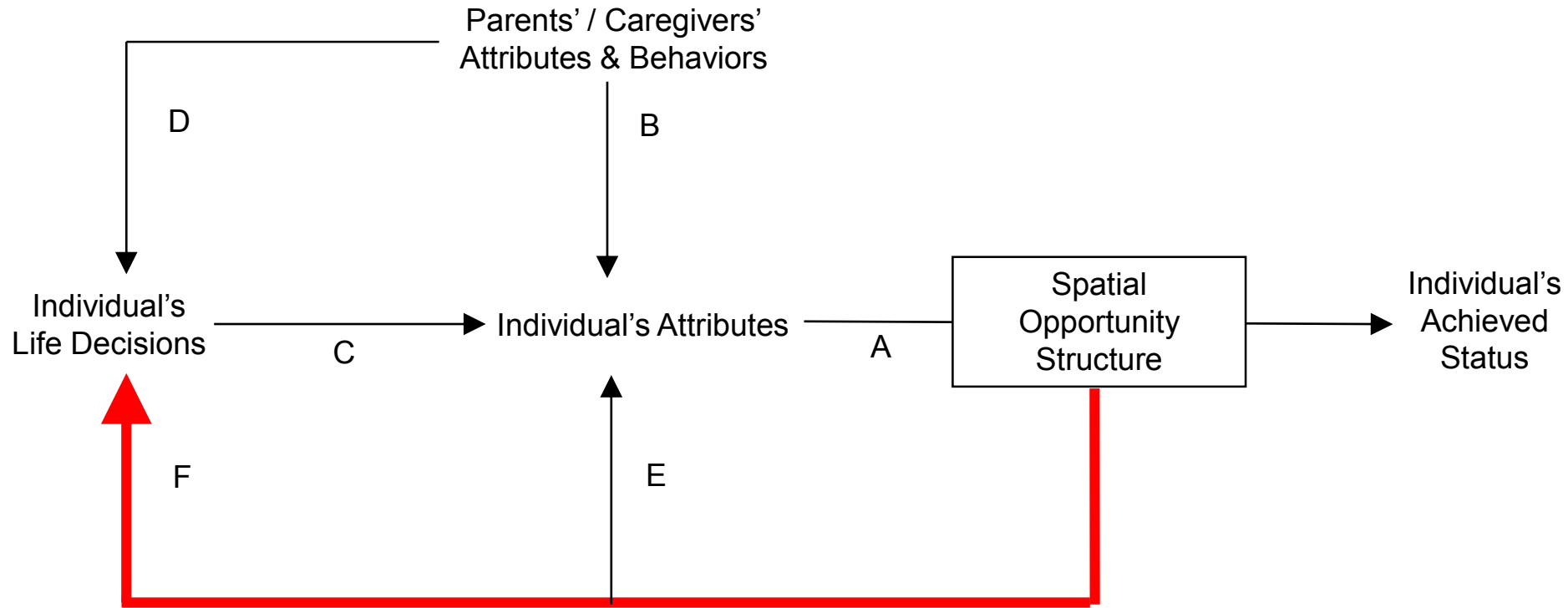


Next: 3 Moderating Roles of Spatial Opportunity Structure

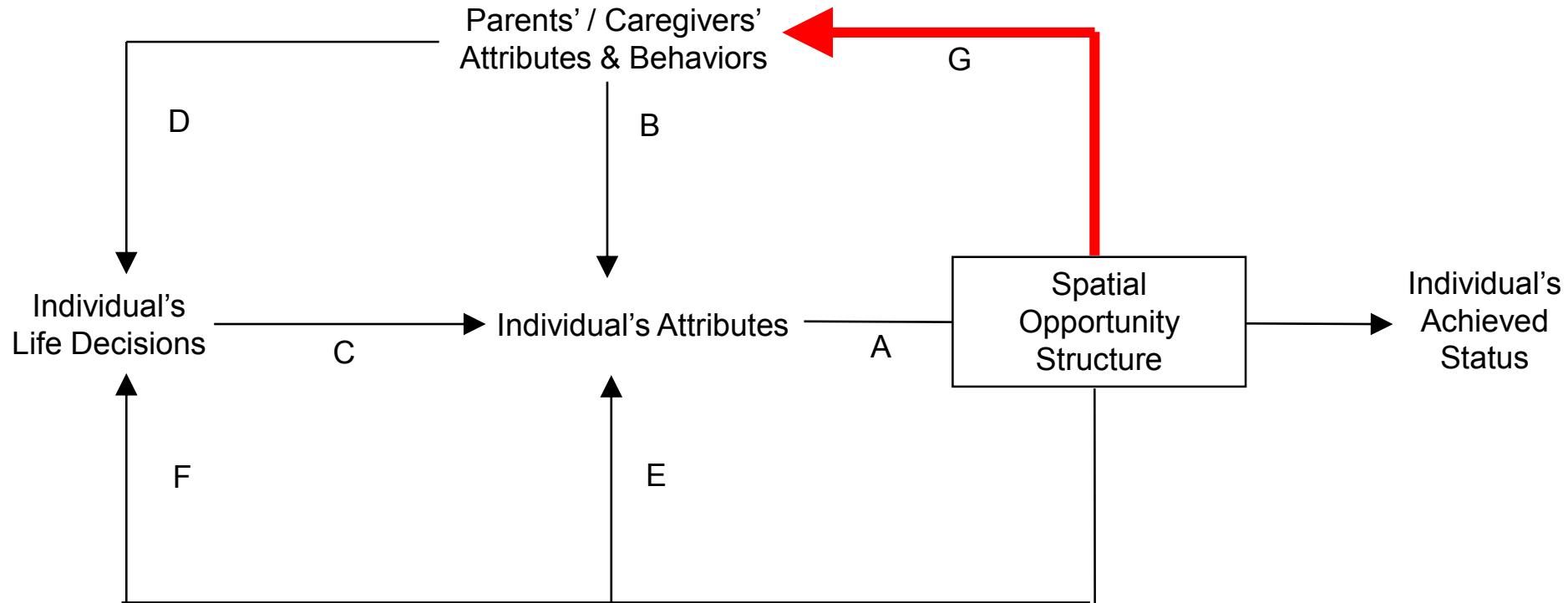




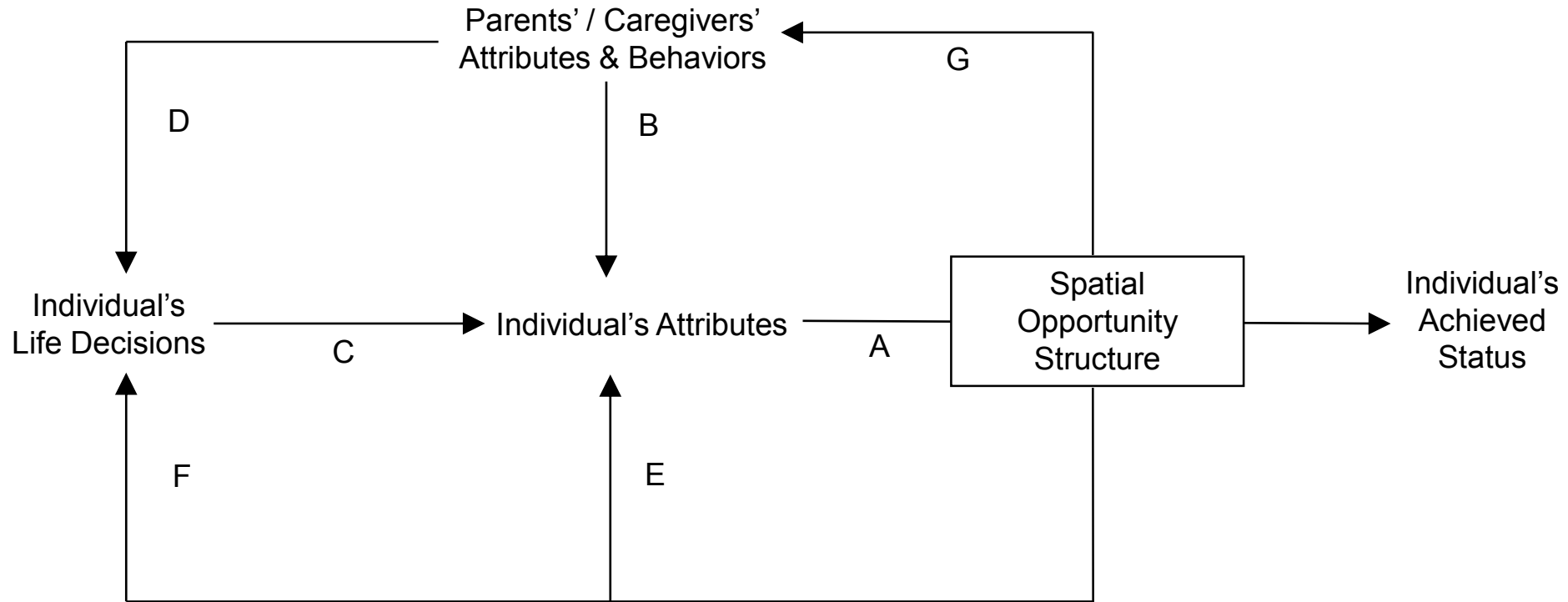
1st Direct Moderating Role of Spatial Opportunity Structure  
(via exposure to context; no volition required)



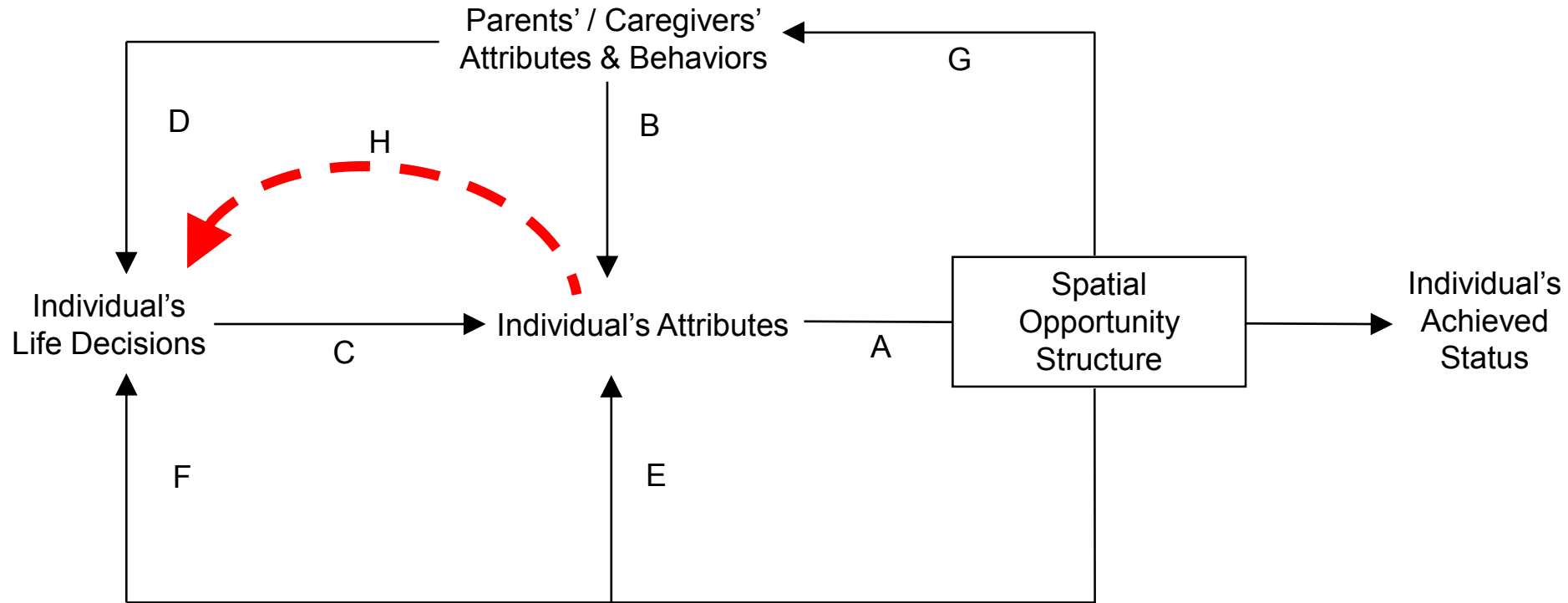
2nd Direct Moderating Role of Spatial Opportunity Structure (shapes decisions via information re: feasible options & their payoffs and how info evaluated )



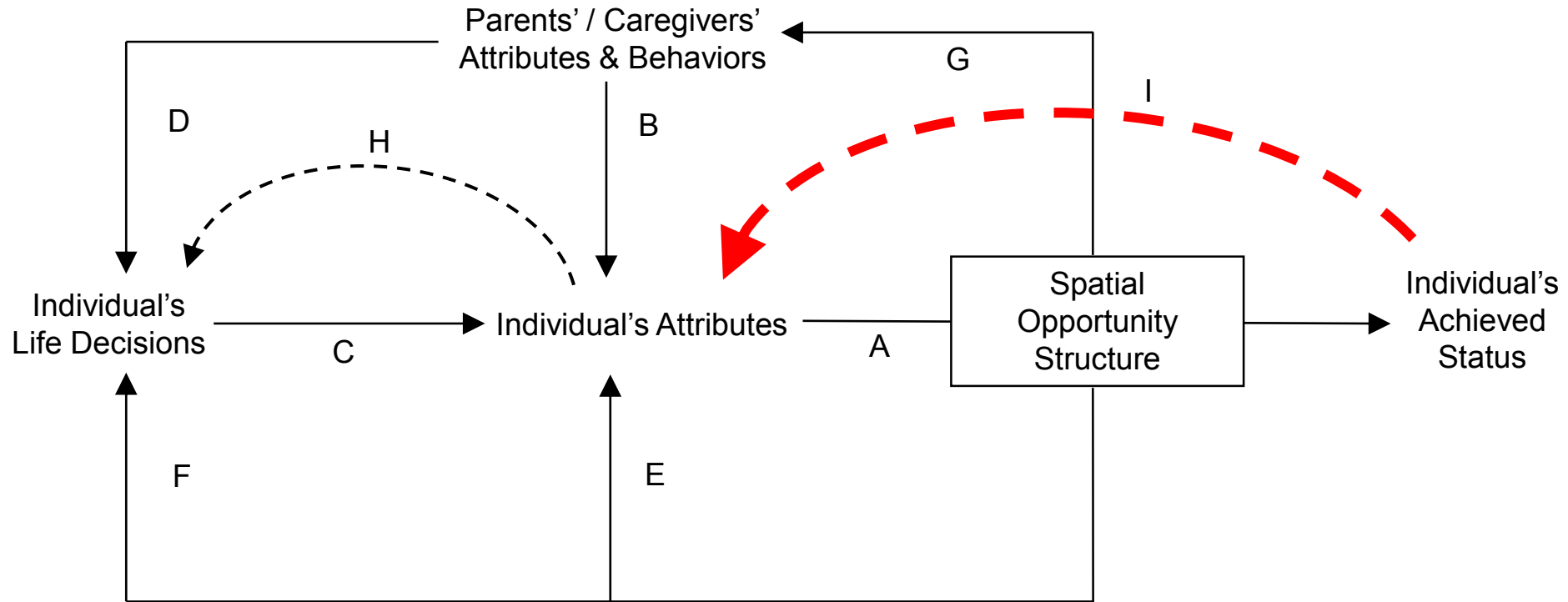
**Indirect Moderating Role of Spatial Opportunity Structure  
(alters parental behaviors, resources, beliefs & health)**



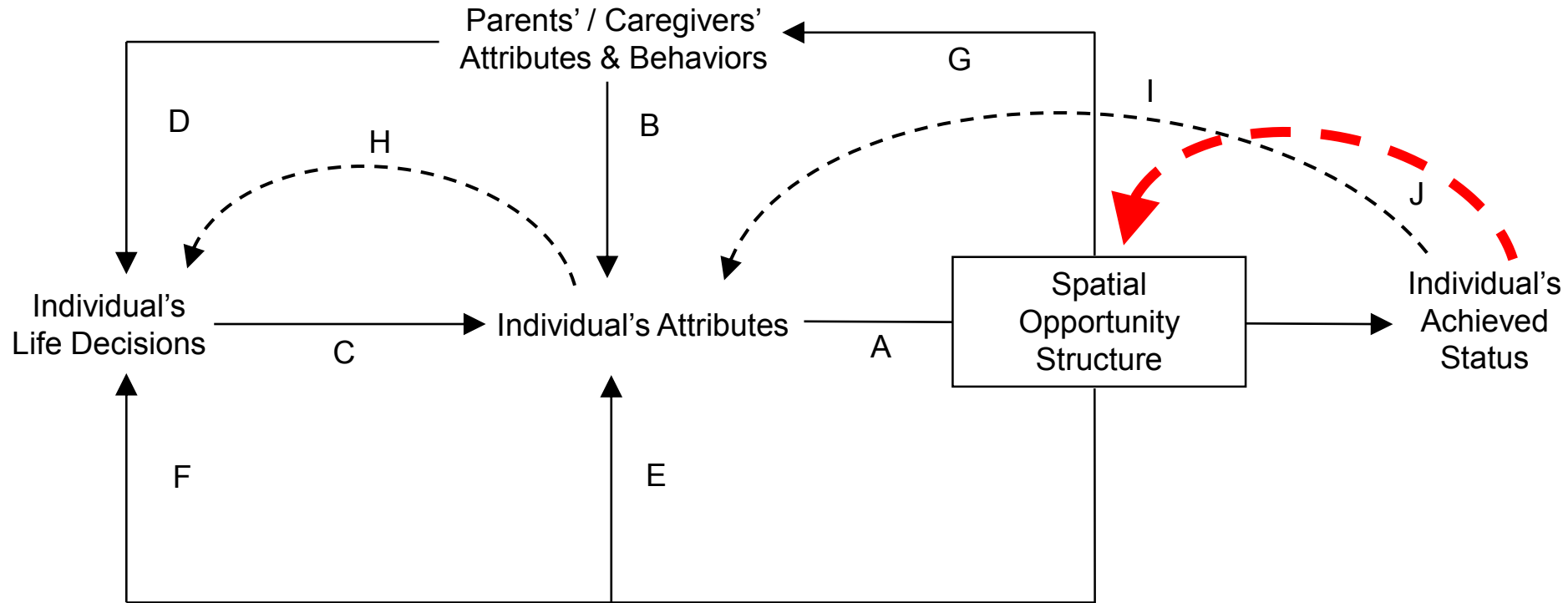
**Next: 3 Feedback Effects**



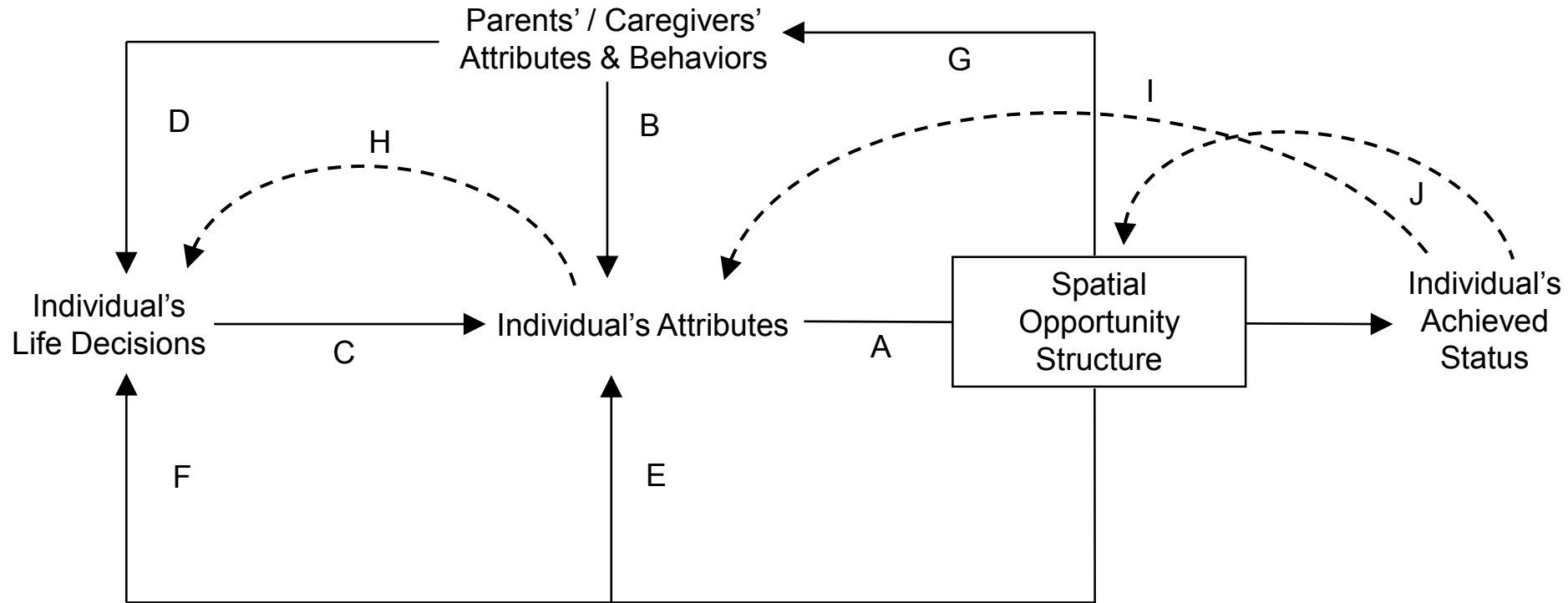
**1<sup>st</sup> Feedback Effect**  
(constraining or enabling attributes)



2<sup>nd</sup> Feedback Effect  
(resource constraints)

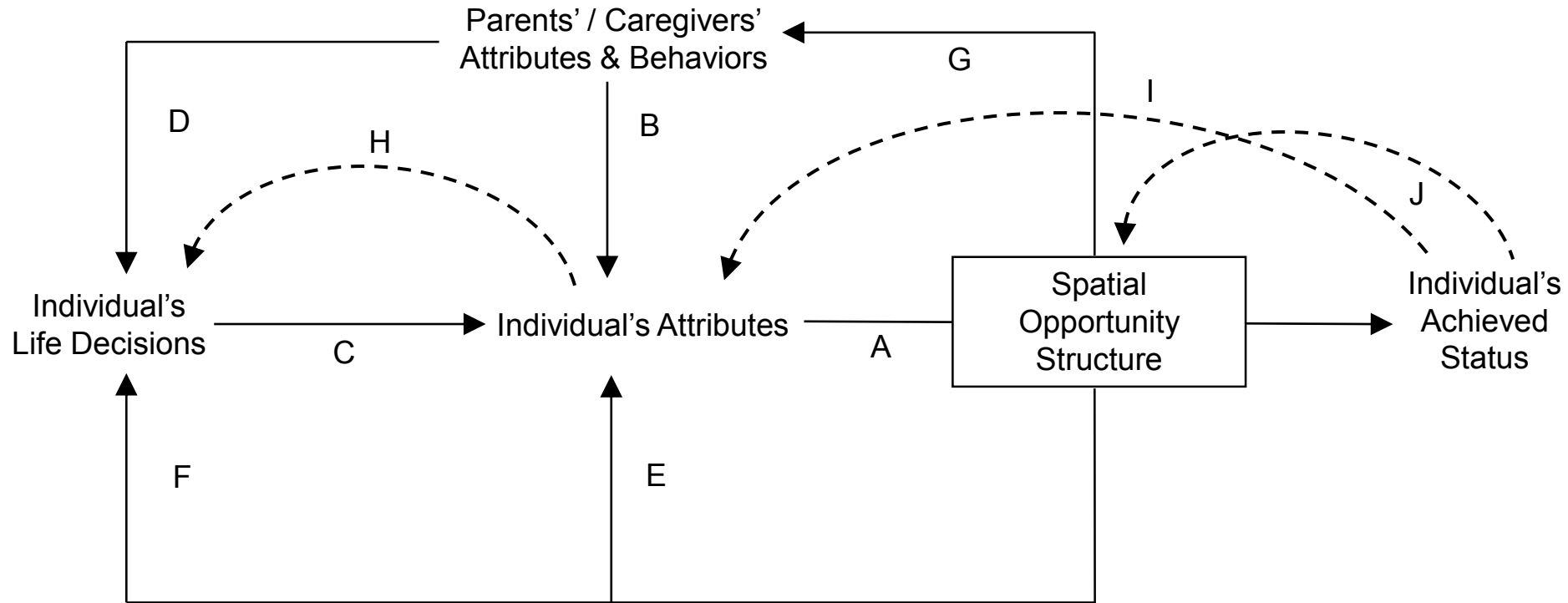


**3<sup>rd</sup> Feedback Effect**  
 (residential and institutional sorting)

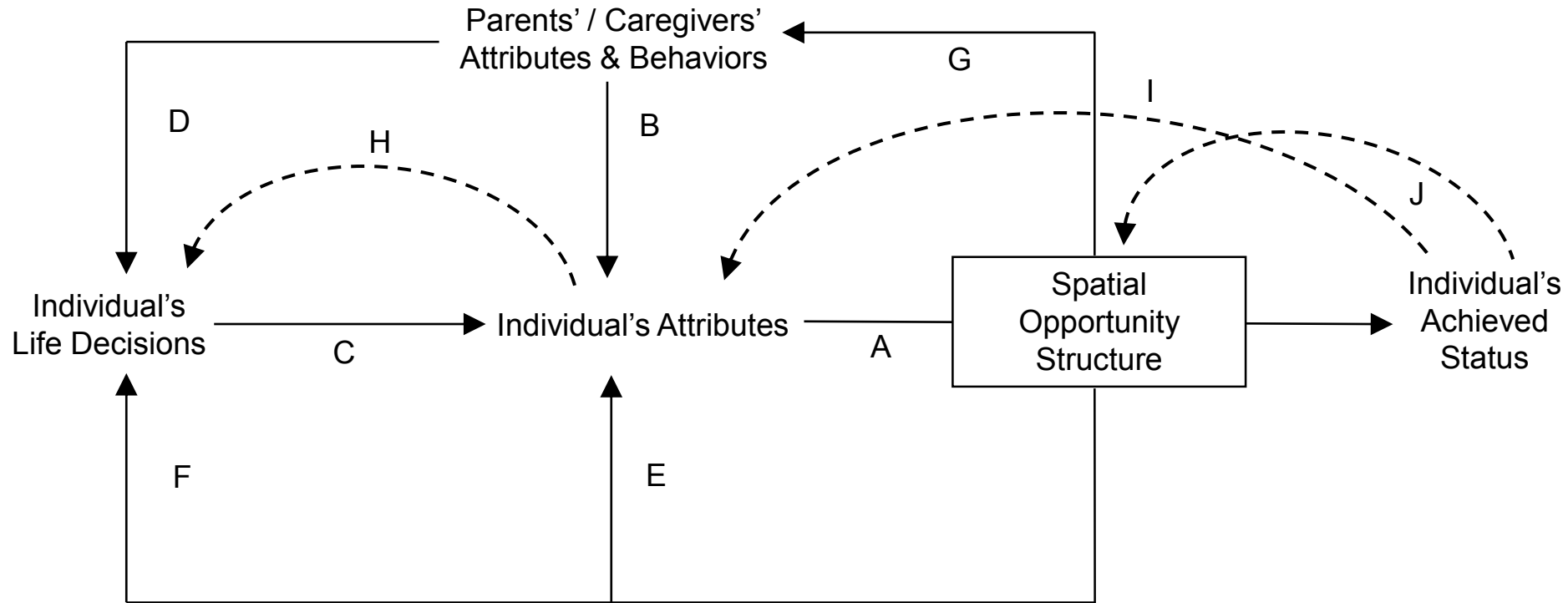


**Lessons from the Holistic Model:**  
**(1) Cumulative, Path-Dependent Causation**





Lessons from the Holistic Model:  
 (2) Evolution of Spatial Opportunity Structure



**Lessons from the Holistic Model:  
 (3) Intensification of Intergenerational Inequality**

# Conclusions

Variations in geographic context across multiple scales (neighborhood, jurisdiction, metropolitan region)--  
**“spatial opportunity structure”**-- affects the socioeconomic outcomes that individuals can achieve in two ways by altering the:

1. Payoffs that will be gained from attributes individuals possess during any given period (mediator)
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# Conclusions re: Spatial Opportunity Structure

**→ Is a foundational determinant of inequality b/c it both shapes inequality of individual attributes & how this translates into inequality of SES (i.e., moderating & mediating influences)**

Moderating influences via: direct context exposures; shaping life decisions; (for children) altering caregiving

Processes are cumulative, path-dependent, reinforcing

Magnifies intra- and inter-generational inequality

**Thank You for Your Attention**