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Intergenerational accumulation of social disadvantages across generations in young adulthood

Teemu Vauhkonen^{a,*}, Johanna Kallio^a, Timo M. Kauppinen^b, Jani Erola^a^a University of Turku, Assistentinkatu 7, Turku, Finland^b National Institute for Health and Welfare, Mannerheimintie 166, Helsinki, Finland

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ABSTRACT

We analyze the intergenerational transmission of social disadvantages in the context of the Finnish welfare state. Previous research on intergenerational transmission has typically concentrated on educational attainment, income and social class as separate factors. Researchers commonly measure parental standing using single indicators that are very general and do not address social disadvantage; rather, these single indicators only address socioeconomic status in general. Therefore, we measure both parental disadvantage and children's outcomes using three indicators: dropping out of school after completing compulsory education, unemployment, and receipt of social assistance. We assume that there are differences in how strongly different disadvantage indicators are intergenerationally inherited and how they accumulate across generations. We use high-quality register data from Finland ($n = 157\ 135$). Parental information was collected when each child was 15 years old, and the young adulthood outcomes were collected when the child was 22. We analyze data with sibling methods using random-effect linear regression models to study the importance of a disadvantaged background on adulthood outcomes. According to the results, all three social disadvantages are intergenerationally inherited in Finland. Accumulation of disadvantage, receipt of social assistance and dropping out of school after compulsory education are inherited more strongly than unemployment. The lack of economic resources in the family does not explain why other family disadvantages are transferred across generations.

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1. Introduction

This article builds on the long research tradition of intergenerational social mobility, analyzing the associations between parents' and children's social status. Previous studies have shown the persistence of intergenerational transmission of social origin. Regardless of the welfare state in focus, social origin seems to have a strong effect on the social outcomes of children. This applies in the Nordic welfare states as well, even if these countries have rather small income differences and comprehensive welfare benefits, including a free school system and universal high quality day care services for small children (Aaberge et al., 2002; Breen & Luijkx, 2007; Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992). In this article, we focus on the intergenerational transmission of social disadvantages in Finland instead of social status in general.

Previous research on intergenerational transmission has typically concentrated on educational attainment, social class or

income separately instead of on social disadvantage, addressing only the socioeconomic status in general. While these indicators of social status overlap to a large extent, they also refer to different aspects of an individual's family background. Further, previous results show that indicators of parents' social problems are significantly and independently associated with children's outcomes as adults (Kallio, Kauppinen, & Erola, 2016; Larsen, Jensen, & Jensen, 2014). Therefore, it is likely that by using only a single indicator for socioeconomic status, we miss a substantial component of the family backgrounds role (Bukodi, Erikson, & Goldthorpe, 2014; Erola, Jalonen, & Lehti, 2015; Jaeger & Holm, 2007). In other words, when a single indicator is used, the role of social origin is underestimated, while the role of the used indicator is overestimated.

Additionally, previous studies indicate that all family characteristics are not equally decisive. Compared to a wide range of parental factors, some evidence indicates that (long-term) poverty and receipt of social assistance have the most severe consequences (Bäckman & Nilsson, 2011; Hobcraft & Kiernan, 2001; Kallio et al., 2016). Further, it is often argued that the accumulated disadvantages of parents have extensive intergenerational consequences that can be observed in multiple (negative) outcomes (e.g.,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: teemu.vauhkonen@utu.fi (T. Vauhkonen).

Hobcraft, 1998; Kallio et al., 2016; Whelan, Nolan, & Maitre, 2013). Therefore, as much as possible, parental disadvantages should be measured using multiple indicators that are directly related to social disadvantage.

Further, an equally important gap in the research seems to ignore the wide range of possible and sometimes simultaneous outcomes of childhood disadvantages (Davidson, Devaney, & Spratt, 2010; 370). Childhood poverty is the often mentioned example. The low income of parents seems to increase their children's probability of receiving social assistance in adulthood (Kauppinen et al., 2014). Children with poor families also seem to have a higher probability of experiencing unemployment later in life (O'Neill & Sweetman, 1998). In addition, an enormous amount of research has demonstrated that the poorer the family, the higher the likelihood of a child dropping out of school (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2013; Wiborg & Hansen, 2009). In summary, as measured by multiple factors, a strong association exists between parental poverty and adulthood disadvantages of their children (Wiborg & Hansen 2009; 389). However, the role of poverty and the significance of other factors related to poverty are unclear.

In this article, we analyze intergenerational transmission of social disadvantages in Finland, concentrating on those at the bottom of the strata and how their disadvantaged positions are inherited from one generation to another. Many studies have shown how different disadvantages, such as dropping out of school (Carbonaro, 1998; Kallio et al., 2016), unemployment (O'Neill & Sweetman, 1998) and the receipt of social assistance (Kauppinen et al., 2014), are inherited from one generation to another. Nonetheless, we do not know how and how strongly these different disadvantages overlap in regards to intergenerational transmission. Further, the extent to which the aggregation of the first generation's disadvantages enhances the accumulation of disadvantages in the next generation remains a largely unanswered question.

We measure the disadvantaged positions of both parents and children using multiple symmetric indicators, albeit at the different age. In this way, we address both shortcomings of the previous literature, using multiple rather than single measurements, and observe disadvantages directly rather than through general indicators of social status. Therefore, instead of educational attainment, occupational class and income, parents' and children's (adult) disadvantages are measured using the following indicators: *dropout immediately after compulsory school (later shortened as school dropout)*, *unemployment and receipt of social assistance*. We look at both of the single indicators and outcomes as well as their accumulation. We are also interested in how these disadvantages are intertwined between generations.

Our research questions are as follows: 1) *how are social disadvantages associated with parental background, as measured by school dropout, unemployment and receipt of social assistance, associated with children's adulthood outcomes as measured by symmetrical indicators?* and 2) *does the accumulation of parents' social disadvantages increase the accumulation of social disadvantages in the next generation?* In addition, we consider the extent to which the intergenerational associations between disadvantages are mediated by the lack of childhood family economic resources, i.e., childhood poverty. In order to accomplish this, we apply high-quality register data from Finland. Using random-effect linear probability and linear regression models, we analyze these data with sibling methods.

2. Mechanisms behind intergenerational transmission of social disadvantage

To better understand the mechanisms that could lead to the intergenerational transmission of social disadvantages, we should

first consider the social inheritance of economic, social and cultural resources (Jaeger & Holm, 2007; Wiborg & Hansen, 2009). In the simplest terms, it may be argued that greater access to any type of resources is advantageous. For instance, highly educated and high-income upper class parents have more resources to assist, guide, finance and secure their children's status in adulthood. The reverse is also true: the aggregated disadvantages of a child's family should be associated with fewer family resources overall, which, in turn, indicates that there will be an aggregation of disadvantages in the next generation.

However, it may also be true that not all resources are equally important. Lack of material and economic resources has been argued to have more severe intergenerational consequences compared to the lack of other resources (Bäckman & Nilsson, 2011; Hobcraft & Kiernan, 2001). Because of this, we study how the lack of material and economic resources are related to intergenerational processes; we call this the *poverty thesis*. This thesis predicts that a family's lack of material and economic resources is the key factor in intergenerational associations and can work as a mediator between disadvantaged family backgrounds and children's outcomes in young adulthood.

As parents play the most important role in the socialization of children, it is worth asking whether disadvantaged parents simply lack essential resources or whether they transfer something intangible (e.g., values, attitudes, behavior models, future goals and information) to their children that negatively impacts the children's future status? This type of *socio-cultural transmission* appears to be fundamentally different from explanations that emphasize the importance of poverty. The former assumes that parents transmit behavioral patterns, attitudes and values to children that are disadvantageous in the long run, whereas the latter posits that the lack of intergenerational transmission actually explains intergenerational associations. Culture is here understood as a residual category of explanations; it does not assume the active role of parents but includes any factors related to family background that are not covered by economic and material cases, similar to Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural inheritance (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977).

It is also possible that the socio-cultural transmission of social disadvantages occurs because children are left without essential resources. For instance, children who have disadvantaged adults as role models may have lower expectations of themselves (Small & Newman, 2001), which may increase their likelihood of ending up in socially disadvantaged positions as adults. In the socio-cultural transmission of disadvantages, both problems – being left without essential resources and parental transmission of disadvantageous habits and information – may occur.

Information differentials seem to play an important role in explaining educational stratification (Werfhorst & Andersen, 2005). Highly educated parents have more knowledge about the value of additional schooling, such as its importance to achieving a professional career. Information may be passed from parents to children either by intentional communication or unintentionally by example. A lack of this information can be associated with the opposite set of conditions, i.e., the inability to use this information either to further one's own career or to improve a child's attainment.

Furthermore, some have suggested that the culture of poverty is the key factor explaining the socioeconomic inheritance of poverty and other social disadvantages (Lewis, 1966; Small, Harding, & Lamont, 2010). The concept refers to social dependency on welfare support, which, to an extent, can be described as a culture when all the socio-cultural mechanisms mentioned above are true: the individual becomes accustomed to the negative stigma associated with such support, learns to use last-resort income schemes, and has no positive role models in terms of work and education (Dean & Taylor-Gooby, 1992). A similar description is associated with the concept of an underclass (Albrekt Larsen, 2006; Katz 2013; Wilson, 1986).

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