Research in Social Stratification and Mobility 42 (2015) 11–19

www.sciencedirect.com

Research in Social Stratification and Mobility

journal homepage: http://www.elsevier.com/locate/rssm

The effect of grandparents' economic, cultural, and social capital on grandchildren's educational success

Stine Møllegaard[a,b,*], Mads Meier Jæger[a,b]

[a] The Danish National Centre for Social Research, Herluf Trolles Gade 11, DK-1052 Copenhagen K, Denmark
[b] Department of Sociology, University of Copenhagen, Øster Farimagsgade 5, Bld. 16, DK-1353 Copenhagen K, Denmark

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 31 August 2014
Received in revised form 19 June 2015
Accepted 23 June 2015
Available online 26 June 2015

Keywords:
Multigenerational effects
Educational success
Economic capital
Cultural capital
Social capital

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the effects of grandparents' economic, cultural, and social capital on grandchildren's educational success. We analyze data from Denmark and hypothesize that grandparents' economic capital should be of little importance in the Scandinavian context, while their cultural and social capital should be relatively more important. Our results partly confirm these hypotheses since, after controlling for parents' capital, we find that grandparents' cultural capital (but not their economic and social capital) has a positive effect on the likelihood that grandchildren choose the academic track in upper secondary education over all other tracks. These results suggest, at least in the Scandinavian context, that the ways in which grandparents affect grandchildren's educational success is via transmission of non-economic resources.

1. Introduction

In recent years research on family background and children's educational and socioeconomic success has begun adopting a multi-generation approach (for example, a recent special issue of *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* focused on inequality across multiple generations). This new approach is motivated by growing empirical evidence that, in addition to parents, other family members such as grandparents and aunts and uncles also affect children's outcomes. This new evidence challenges the traditional two-generation approach (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977; Becker & Tomes, 1986) prevalent in social stratification research, which argues that parents affect children but in which there are no direct transmissions from other family members (Björklund & Salvanes, 2010; Mare, 2011; Pfeffer, 2014; Solon, 2014).

Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of capital, this paper adds to existing multi-generation research by empirically measuring grandparents' economic, cultural, and social capital and by analyzing the effects of these forms of capital on grandchildren's choice of secondary education. We analyze three-generation data from Denmark and argue that, net of parents' capital, grandparents' economic, cultural, and social capital are likely to affect grandchildren's educational choices in different ways in this national context. Grandparents' economic capital should be of comparatively little importance because Denmark is characterized by free education, low income inequality, and universal social security. Grandparents' cultural and social capital, on the other hand, should matter because Danish secondary education is stratified into an academic and a vocational track, and success in each track in contingent upon either familiarity with the dominant cultural codes in this track (the academic track) or having the right social connections (the vocational track). Grandparents' cultural capital, manifest in for example a family culture that valorizes highbrow culture and an academic education, might provide grandchildren with cultural capital over and above that provided by parents which increases the likelihood that they complete the academic track. Similarly, grandparents' social capital, which we argue is only partly overlapping with parents' social capital, might have a positive effect on the likelihood that grandchildren complete the vocational track because successful completion of this track is contingent upon the grandchild finding an apprenticeship position with an employer. In both cases, we argue that cultural and social capital possessed by grandparents has the potential to directly affect grandchildren's educational choices over and above parents' capital.

The main contribution of this paper is that we distinguish the three different types of capital in the grandparent and parent generations and analyze the effects of these capitals on educational outcomes in the grandchild generation. Previous multi-generation research has only to a limited degree distinguished different types

* Corresponding author at: The Danish National Centre for Social Research, Herluf Trolles Gade 11, DK-1052 Copenhagen, Denmark. Tel.: +45 33480834.
E-mail addresses: smp@sfi.dk (S. Møllegaard), mmj@soc.ku.dk (M.M. Jæger).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2015.06.004

of resources in the grandparent generation. Most studies use grandparents' social class as a proxy for the available resources in the grandparent generation (e.g., Goyder & Curtis, 1977; Beck, 1983; Biblarz, Bengtson, & Bucur, 1996; Erola & Moisio, 2007; Chan & Boliver, 2013; Hertel & Groh-Samberg, 2014). Other studies include direct measures of grandparents' socioeconomic resources, for example education and income (e.g., Peters, 1992; Warren & Hauser, 1997; Sacerdote, 2005; Loury, 2006; Sauder, 2006; Lindahl, Palme, Sandgren Massih, & Sjogren, 2011; Piraino, Mullera, Cilliersb, & Fourie, 2014; Wightman & Danziger, 2014; Zeng & Xie, 2014), while a third group of studies uses data on siblings and cousins to infer about the total effect of the extended family (including grandparents) on children's outcomes (e.g., Jæger, 2012; Hällsten, 2014). Our data allow us to measure qualitatively different types of resources in the parent and grandparent generations that have not been included in previous multi-generation research, in particular non-economic resources. Furthermore, because we measure the three types of capital both in the parent and grandparent generations, we are able to control for indirect ("Markovian") transmissions of capital from grandparents to parents and to isolate the direct effects of grandparents' capital on grandchildren's educational choices.

Results from the empirical analysis suggest that, net of parents' capital, grandparents' cultural capital has a positive effect on the likelihood that grandchildren choose academic versus a vocational or no secondary education and, moreover, there are no discernible effects of their economic and social capital. We interpret these findings to suggest that, at least in the Scandinavian context, cultural resources in the extended family may operate across more than two generations while economic and social resources tend to follow a Markov process.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Two-generation models

Most theoretical models of intergenerational transmissions are based on two generations and focus on the effect of parents on children (or on the effect of mothers and fathers, respectively). In economics, the human capital model proposes that, in addition to transmitting innate endowments to children via genes, parents also actively invest resources in fostering skills in children (e.g., Becker & Tomes, 1986; Goldberger, 1989). Thus, parents use economic and other resources to produce human capital in children, for example cognitive and non-cognitive skills, which facilitate long-term success.

Theories in sociology have emphasized that, in addition to economic resources, parents use different types of non-monetary resources to promote children's success (e.g., Bourdieu, 1977; Coleman, 1990). In this paper we use Bourdieu's concepts of economic, cultural, and social capital to conceptualize qualitatively different types of family resources. We use Bourdieu's concepts because, first, they enable us to address a comprehensive range of (economic and non-monetary) family resources that might affect children's educational outcomes, second, we hypothesize that they might work differently in a multi-generation context than in a two-generation context and third, our data allow us to construct empirical approximations of each type of capital both in the parent and grandparent generation.

Economic capital refers to monetary assets such as income, wealth, property, and other material possessions. *Cultural capital* refers to familiarity with dominant cultural codes and to the ability to exploit this familiarity, whether internalized via knowledge and behaviors, institutionalized via educational credentials, or objectified via possession of cultural objects, to one's own advantage. *Social capital* refers to the scope and quality of social networks that can be used to promote one's interests or to convert one form of capital into another (Bourdieu, 1986)[1].

Bourdieu argues that families possess different amounts and compositions of capital and that each type of capital, invested in children, may yield a comparative advantage in the educational system. Economic capital may be used to finance the direct costs of education, for example tuition fees, or indirect costs such as those associated with housing or extracurricular activities. Cultural capital is transmitted from parents to children through investment and socialization, and it contributes to educational success by equipping children with an understanding of the implicit "rules of the game" in the educational system, an appreciation of higher education, and the ability to present an impression of academic brilliance to teachers. Social capital may promote educational success if parents possess social connections that facilitate access to, for example, prestigious educational institutions or educational tracks that require students to find an apprenticeship position with an employer.

Bourdieu's theory provides a multidimensional approach to conceptualizing the different resources that parents possess and which they invest to promote children's educational success. However, like most theories of intergenerational transmissions, Bourdieu's theory focuses on two generations and does not take into account that other family members, for example grandparents, may also possess resources that directly affect children's outcomes. We now discuss this possibility.

2.2. A three-generation approach

In an influential paper Mare (2011) argues that two-generation models may be insufficient for capturing all the different ways in which family background affects children's outcomes (see also Pfeffer, 2014; Solon, 2014). In particular, he argues that most theoretical models of intergenerational transmissions assume a *Markov process* in which resources and endowments are transmitted sequentially from one generation to the next. There is empirical evidence that members of the extended family, and especially grandparents, play an important role in most children's lives (Hirshorn, 1988; Bengtson, 2001). There is also evidence that grandparents' resources have a direct effect on child outcomes that may be consequential for long-term success, for example cognitive development (Tinsley & Parke, 1987; Modin & Fritzell, 2009; Ferguson & Ready, 2011) and academic achievement (Falbo, 1991; Scholl Perry, 1996). Consequently, grandparents' resources may contribute to children's outcomes over and above parents' resources.

In this paper we propose that, in the same way as parents' resources, grandparents' resources may also be conceptualized via Bourdieu's forms of capital. The relative importance of each type of capital in the grandparent generation depends on the institutional setting and on the extent to which the intergenerational transmission of each type of capital follows a Markov process. We illustrate this process in the model in Fig. 1 which includes three generations: grandparents, parents and grandchildren.

Grandparents transmit their economic, cultural, and social capital to parents. This process is illustrated by the dotted arrows in

[1] Bourdieu defined social capital as ". . . the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 119). This definition, which emphasizes that social capital is possessed by individuals and groups, is somewhat different from Coleman's (1988) definition in which social capital is embedded in particular physical and social settings (for example, schools or communities). We rely on Bourdieu's definition in this paper.