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Multigenerational approaches to social mobility. A multifaceted research agenda☆

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1. Introduction

Empirical research on social mobility has an arguably proud and – in the case of sociology – long tradition (Black & Devereux, 2010; Bowles, Gintis, & Groves, 2005; Ganzeboom, Treiman, & Ultee, 1991; Hout & DiPrete, 2006; Morgan, Grusky, & Fields, 2006; Solon, 1999). For decades, scholars have debated the main determinants of intergenerational mobility (e.g. Blau & Duncan, 1967), its changing levels (e.g. Breen, 2004), cross-national differences and their explanations (e.g. Corak, 2004; Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992), and – from time to time – the theoretical underpinnings of the models used to assess it (e.g. Becker & Tomes, 1986). And yet, one main assumption that has gone largely untested for all this time has been the idea that intergenerational social mobility should be measured as the similarity in socio-economic outcomes between parents and their offspring, that is, between *two* generations. This two-generation paradigm has most recently and forcefully been challenged by Robert Mare in his presidential address to the Population Association of America (Mare, 2011). Mare notes that thanks to the preponderance of mobility research that either implicitly or explicitly assumes that the intergenerational transmission of status does not extend beyond that from parents to their children, "[i]t is likely that we have overstated intergenerational mobility [. . .] or, at the very least, have misunderstood the pathways through which it occurs" (Mare, 2011, pp. 19–20).

This special issue brings together new work from sociologists, economists, and demographers as a response to Mare's call for more research on multigenerational mobility processes. The hope is that the issue will serve – alongside important recent and ongoing work (e.g. Chan & Boliver, 2013; Jaeger, 2012; Lindahl, Palme, Massih, & Sjögren, 2012; Mare & Song, 2012; Modin, Erikson, & Vå gerö, 2012; Roksa & Potter, 2011; Sharkey & Elwert, 2011; Warren & Hauser, 1997; Zeng & Xie, forthcoming) – to significantly advance this relatively young field of research. Naturally, the contributions assembled here provide many "first ever" pieces of evidence. For instance, we did not have direct cross-nationally comparative evidence on multigenerational associations in social class (Hertel and Groh-Samberg,

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2014), we did not know how similar first and even second cousins were to each other (Hällsten, 2014; Jaeger, 2012), and we did not relate individual outcomes to their grandparents' fertility outcomes (Fomby et al., 2014; Kolk, 2014).

Although the contributions assembled here provide answers to numerous new questions that have not received any prior empirical attention, they by no means address all of the new challenges brought about by a multigenerational approach. Mare did not simply suggest the addition of socio-economic indicators for grandparents and earlier ancestors to our existing empirical models, but instead argued for a much broader expansion of our view of mobility process, including a consideration of the influence of the extended family, such as non-resident contemporary kin (also see Jaeger, 2012), the study of the role of social institutions in shaping multigenerational processes – which, ultimately, amounts to a call for comparative research across time and place – and, finally and perhaps most importantly, the joint consideration of demographic and mobility processes (Duncan, 1966; Mare & Maralani, 2006), which I also briefly discuss below. In the next section, I discuss selected aspects of this broader multigenerational research agenda in an effort to provide an overview of some of the central unanswered questions lying ahead. In the following section, I point out some of the data sources available for multigenerational research and then focus on the Panel Study of Income Dynamics. I illustrate its use with a brief, original analysis of multigenerational educational mobility in the United States. The final section provides a brief summary of each contribution included here.

2. The road ahead

Early contributions to the literature on multigenerational processes necessarily focused on establishing baseline evidence on the degree of status transmission beyond two succeeding generations. The first major contribution to this literature by Warren and Hauser (1997) asked a seemingly simply question: "Are there direct three-generational socio-economic background effects?" The answer, based on evidence from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS), was mostly no. There are nevertheless good arguments to revisit this question. I would summarize the core of those arguments as the possibility of significant heterogeneity in multigenerational mobility processes. Below, I consider how our evidence for and understanding of multigenerational processes may differ across (1) demographic groups and populations, (2) dimensions and strata of socio-economic status, (3) analytic approaches and theoretical perspectives. To be sure, many of these conceptual issues have been acknowledged by Mare (2011) and researchers are beginning to address them, including some of the contributors to this special issue. The list assembled here simply maps out the range of potential questions that this young field of research will need to address to flourish further.

2.1. Heterogeneity across groups and populations

It is likely that the importance of multigenerational processes differs across groups. For instance, one of the reasons why Mare calls to go beyond the existing evidence on three-generational effects from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS) is that "mid-twentieth century Wisconsin families may be a population in which multigenerational effects are unusually weak" (Mare, 2011). In particular, there should also be a great deal of interest in multigenerational processes among *minority groups*, of which there are very few in the population covered by the WLS. The question whether upwardly mobile minorities are able to "pass the torch" is often acknowledged as one of high social importance and policy interest – and yet, empirical evidence is quite scarce (see Attewell & Lavin, 2009). An important exception, however, is the research on immigrant minorities, where the distinction of generational status (first, second, third, and various shades in-between) is well established (Alba & Nee, 2003; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Multigenerational research would be well served to critically assess where this literature can and where it cannot help us understand the transmission of inequality across multiple generations of non-immigrant minorities.

Patterns and levels of multigenerational mobility may also differ across *gender*. While mobility research has long distinguished the different mobility experiences of men and women (Hout & DiPrete, 2006), it has only recently begun to fully appreciate the importance of mobility experiences as they differ by the gender of parents. For instance, we now know that trends in two-generational mobility differ depending on whether we estimate them based on the status of fathers only or that of both parents (Beller, 2009). The logical next question for multigenerational research is whether grandfathers and grandmothers matter differently (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986)? And, also going beyond three generations, whether the influence of paternal and maternal lineages are distinct from each other and how these differences may have changed in relation to long-term historical trends in gender inequality. In addition, if research that assesses the independent impacts of