



# Understanding transmission of fertility across multiple generations – Socialization or socioeconomics?

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## Abstract

A number of studies have documented consistent patterns in intergenerational transmission of fertility in contemporary societies. However, why children replicate the family size of their parents has received significantly less attention. The goal of this study is to examine whether observed fertility associations across generations are due in part to an intergenerational transmission of socioeconomic status. Swedish registry data on childbearing histories, other demographic events, and socioeconomic traits are used to disentangle possible explanations of intergenerational fertility continuities. Data are collected for the Swedish cohorts born between 1970 and 1982 for whom parents' and grandparents' family size can be observed. The inclusion of data on grandparents gives insights into pathways for multigenerational associations, and allows for comparisons between maternal and paternal characteristics that are otherwise hard to separate. Results show that some of the observed intergenerational continuity in fertility can be explained by continuities in education and socioeconomic status, but that most fertility associations remain and are related to other sources, such as transmission of values and preferred family size.

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## 1. Introduction

Children are more likely to replicate the family size of their parents than of other persons in their parents' generation. While the association is of moderate strength, it has been found consistently in developed countries and seems to be growing in strength over time (Murphy, 1999). While the existence of intergenerational fertility continuity is well established, the causes of fertility continuity are poorly understood. Several theories have been advanced to explain this association, notably childhood

socialization (Anderton, Tsuya, Bean, & Mineau, 1987; Johnson & Stokes, 1976; Preston, 1976), transmission of socioeconomic traits (Barber, 2001; Duncan, Freedman, Coble, & Slesinger, 1965; Jennings & Leslie, 2012) or genetic heritability (Fisher, 1930; Pearson, Lee, & Bramley-Moore, 1899; Rodgers, Hughes, et al., 2001). Numerous theories have been advanced to explain why observed fertility continuities exist, but few empirical studies have compared the relative importance of transmission of socioeconomic position and socialization.

Research has generally focused on two main explanations for observed intergenerational fertility correlations. The first explanation suggests that parents pass on preferences and values regarding ideal life course, family size and fertility timing. A possible competing explanation is

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that intergenerational fertility associations are primarily a consequence of socioeconomic commonalities across generations. Education levels and occupation class are correlated between generations. If socioeconomic traits are associated with fertility, any observed association in fertility could be due to similarities in socioeconomic characteristics across generations.

The aim of this study is to better understand the degree to which fertility continuities are mediated by socioeconomic factors. The quality of the data used in this study makes it possible to study the relationship between intergenerational fertility continuity and socioeconomic characteristics in greater detail than previous research. Data is drawn from the entire population of Sweden, and includes information on childbearing, education level and socioeconomic characteristics for three consecutive generations. Event history analysis is used to analyze the transition to first, second and third birth of the youngest generation in the study. Covariates on parents' and grandparents' completed fertility are used to measure fertility in older generations. Thus, intergenerational transmission of fertility is measured as the effect of parental and grandparental family size on the birth hazard (age-specific fertility rates) of the index population. The youngest generation (cohorts born between 1970 and 1982) will be referred to as the index-generation, and kinship terms will be used in reference to this generation.

This study will expand on the growing awareness of the existence of independent multigenerational associations in socioeconomic and demographic characteristics (Jæger, 2012; Mare, 2011; Stuhler, 2012). The inclusion of grandparents offers several advantages over previous intergenerational fertility studies. The most obvious advantage is that we can examine the role of grandparents, independent of parents, in explaining intergenerational fertility associations. This allows us to distinguish between the influences of a broader family background and the effect of the immediate family of origin. Another advantage of a three-generation research design, is that it also can be interpreted as a two generation parent–child design with additional information on parents' socioeconomic status. By providing information on socioeconomic characteristics in the parents' family of origin, it is also possible to provide additional information on parents' socioeconomic history that would be impossible to measure based on parental SES indicators in adulthood, alone. Additionally, studies on multigenerational continuities in fertility, socioeconomic status, and their interaction, are required in order to extend two-generation studies on the association between fertility and socioeconomic stratification (e.g. de la Croix & Doepke, 2003; Lam, 1986; Mare,

1997; Mare & Maralani, 2006) to three generations or more.

## 2. Previous research on intergenerational transmission of fertility

Intergenerational associations in completed family size exist in contemporary societies. While observed correlations are relatively consistent across studies, they have been interpreted as relatively strong by some scholars (e.g. Murphy, 1999; Murphy & Wang, 2001) and weak by others (Duncan et al., 1965; Johnson & Stokes, 1976). Pearson correlations between parents' and children's family size measure around 0.1–0.2 in most western populations (Bernardi & White, 2010; Dahlberg, 2013; Murphy, 1999). Research has also shown that timing of fertility is consistent across generations (Barber, 2001; Steenhof & Liefbroer, 2008), especially where it pertains to teenage fertility (Kahn & Anderson, 1992). There is also evidence that a sibling's fertility decisions affect other siblings' fertility (Lyngstad & Prskawetz, 2010).

While the existence of intergenerational transmission of fertility is well documented, the causes and mechanisms behind the continuity are largely unexplored. The following section will review different theories that have been used to explain observed fertility continuity. The first part covers theories on the role of socioeconomic continuity, the second section discusses the role of socialization and preferences, and the third section reviews possible genetic heritability of fertility. Finally, previous multigenerational research is discussed.

One possible explanation for observed fertility associations is that an individual's socioeconomic status tends to mirror that of the previous generation. Education, occupational class and income all affect fertility in important ways, and if socioeconomic characteristics persist between generations, they may also have a similar impact on both generations' fertility. Strong intergenerational continuities in socioeconomic status have been found in studies looking at stratification of human societies. Occupational class, education and income of parents and their children are correlated in virtually all societies, though the extent of these correlations may vary considerably across time and space. Sweden has a comparatively high intergenerational social mobility (Breen, 2004). Nevertheless, continuities in class, income and occupational rank are all stronger than associations in fertility between generations.

Researchers studying intergenerational fertility continuity have commonly acknowledged that transmission of socioeconomic characteristics might be a key

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