# Multigenerational aspects of social stratification: Issues for further research

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## Abstract

The articles in this special issue show the vitality and progress of research on multigenerational aspects of social mobility, stratification, and inequality. The effects of the characteristics and behavior of grandparents and other kin on the statuses, resources, and positions of their descendants are best viewed in a demographic context. Intergenerational effects work through both the intergenerational associations of socioeconomic characteristics and also differential fertility and mortality. A combined socioeconomic and demographic framework informs a research agenda which addresses the following issues: how generational effects combine with variation in age, period, and cohort within each generation; distinguishing causal relationships across generations from statistical associations; how multigenerational effects vary across socioeconomic hierarchies, including the possibility of stronger effects at the extreme top and bottom; distinguishing between endowments and investments in intergenerational effects; multigenerational effects on associated demographic behaviors and outcomes (especially fertility and mortality); optimal tradeoffs among diverse types of data on multigenerational processes; and the variability across time and place in how kin, education, and other institutions affect stratification.
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## 1. Introduction

Research on multigenerational processes in stratification has accelerated in recent years, as reflected in the strong set of articles collected in this special issue. The significance of this research lies on several fronts including: (1) a resurgence of public interest in social mobility, largely a result of a concern with the links between mobility and inequality; (2) a concern with if and how the massive inequalities that have emerged in wealthy nations in recent decades will be sustained across generations (and whether extreme advantages and disadvantages will persist within families across generations); (3) a recognition of the possibility that the configurations of kin that are assumed in traditional mobility studies (typically parent to offspring) may vary in their salience relative to other kin patterns across time

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and place; (4) marked increases in average length of life, creating longer spans of time that individuals are exposed to their grandparents and grandchildren; (5) large changes in the distribution of family structures, patterns of family behavior, and norms about family relationships; (6) the emergence and maturation of high quality data of varying types that permit empirical analyses of multigenerational effects; and (7) new thinking about models for social mobility that take account of related demographic processes (Mare, 2011).

My own interest in this topic has been stimulated by all of these developments, but particularly by the last of these. The possible intergenerational and multigenerational effects of the socioeconomic positions of individuals arise through the mixture of the transmission of socioeconomic position and demographic processes of population renewal (e.g., Mare, 1997; Mare & Maralani, 2006; Matras, 1961, 1967; Preston & Campbell, 1993; Preston, 1974). Put more simply, intergenerational effects involve both the degree to which individuals advantage or disadvantage their offspring and also the degree to which they produce those offspring. Moreover, a full understanding of the effects of "family background" in mobility studies involves not only the effects of the characteristics of one family member on those of another family member, but also how these families in fact are created. When one considers effects further downstream, to grandchildren, great grandchildren, and other progeny, the role of demography becomes even plainer. One influences later generations both by the transmitting of one's economic, social, and cultural resources to one's progeny, and also by having the children and grandchildren who will benefit from those resources. But the birth and survival of these progeny are stratified through socioeconomic differentials in fertility, mortality, and marriage patterns. Multigenerational effects in social mobility, therefore, are inseparable from population renewal and change.

## 2. A multigenerational demographic model of social mobility

One way of representing these ideas is through a model of intergenerational effects that combines differential net fertility (that is numbers of children who survive to adulthood born to families from different socioeconomic groups) with the effects of family socioeconomic characteristics on the life chances of succeeding generations. Mare and Maralani (2006) develop such a model for the two-generation case. Mare and Song (2012) extend this model to take account of grandparent effects. For a one-sex (female) population with a single (categorical) dimension of inequality (such as educational or occupational attainment or income strata), the model can be written as

$$S_{k|j} = F_j \cdot r_j \cdot p_{jk}$$

where $S_{k|j}$ denotes the number of women in the offspring generation who are in position $k$ and whose mothers are in position $j$, $F_j$ denotes the number of women in the maternal generation who are in position $j$, $r_j$ denotes the expected number of daughters born to each woman in position $j$, and $p_{jk}$ denotes the probability that a daughter born to a woman in position $j$ will survive and enter position $k$. The net fertility ($r_j$), and positional mobility ($p_{jk}$) terms are the dependent variables in models of intergenerational influence. For the $i$th woman,

$r_{ij} = H$ (woman's position, mother's position; generation; other controls)
$p_{ijk} = G$ (positions of mother, grandmother; generation; other controls)

where $H$ and $G$ are functions that take account of the effects of mother and grandmother characteristics on both fertility and the socioeconomic position of women in the offspring (third) generation. Under this model the *effect* of being a woman in the $k$th position (relative to the $j$th position) on the number of daughters that she raises who grow up and occupy the $k$th position is $r_k p_{kk} - r_j p_{jk}$. This model can show the separate contributions of intergenerational mobility and differential net fertility to the socioeconomic reproduction and the intergenerational and multigenerational effects of social position on fertility. It allows us to quantify the relative effects of demography and mobility on intergenerational socioeconomic reproduction and to simulate the long run and equilibrium implications of model estimates for the relative reproductive success of high and low status individuals. Mare and Song (2012) present a more elaborate version of this model for male populations that incorporates differential rates of marriage and includes the effects of great-grandparents and more remote kin. Song and Mare (2013a) present a two-sex version of the model that incorporates the marriage market and the distinct effects of male and female parents and grandparents on the outcomes of children and grandchildren, respectively.

This model formalizes some of the ideas discussed in the rest of this essay. Although we can learn much about multigenerational effects and their connection to demographic processes from the articles in this issue (and related work), we should also build upon these studies and address some of the gaps in our understanding