Intergenerational Mobility: A Cross-National Comparison

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Abstract

A goal in many societies is to ensure that individuals have the same opportunities for success irrespective of their circumstances at birth. While equality of opportunity is an elusive concept to measure, social science researchers have developed measures of intergenerational mobility to serve as a rough barometer. Presumably, societies in which where there is a high likelihood that families can improve their relative socioeconomic standing over generations are likely to be ones characterized by more widespread opportunity. In recent decades, a large and growing body of research that has used a variety of approaches to study intergenerational mobility with respect to income, education, and occupation has emerged. At this stage, the requisite data to conduct this kind of analysis is not available for all countries. Nevertheless, a few key patterns of results have emerged. First, intergenerational mobility appears to be most rapid in Nordic countries. Second, the United States and by some measures the United Kingdom appear to have lower rates of intergenerational mobility than other industrialized countries. Third, intergenerational mobility seems to be lower in developing countries, particularly those in Latin America. These conclusions are still tentative and may be revised as new and better data and more creative methods arise in future research.

INTRODUCTION

One of the fundamental ways to judge the fairness of a society is to ask whether there is equality of opportunity. Do all children have the same opportunity for success in life irrespective of their family background? Are children in some societies more likely to be condemned to lives of poverty simply because of the circumstances of their birth? If there are differences in equality of opportunity across countries, what accounts for these differences?

While these are pretty weighty questions, it might be surprising to learn just how difficult it is to answer them. One of the key challenges for researchers has been conceptual. How exactly should equality of opportunity be measured? The primary approach that researchers have used is to

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construct measures of "intergenerational mobility," that is, to measure how much families move up or down the distribution of income, education, or occupation over the course of a generation. Although these measures are not likely to perfectly capture equality of opportunity, the idea is that the societies in which there is more fluid movement of families over generations are likely to be the same societies in which the opportunities for advancement are more widespread. With solid measures of intergenerational mobility in hand, one can then see how they compare across countries and perhaps begin to try to understand exactly what characteristics of countries allow them to experience greater or lesser rates of mobility.

As this entry highlights, however, a major limitation to this kind of an analysis has been the lack of adequate data. To study intergenerational mobility, ideally one needs to track a large sample of families over at least two generations with good measures of long-term socioeconomic status in each generation. Access to good longitudinal data on one generation can be challenging enough, collecting data for two generations can be especially daunting. Ensuring that these samples and data sources are reasonably comparable across countries is an even more onerous challenge.

Yet, despite these obstacles, a picture is beginning to emerge of how intergenerational income mobility differs across societies, at least for a set of countries where good income data for multiple generations is readily available. There appears to be pretty compelling evidence that Nordic countries appear to have the most income mobility. There is also fairly strong evidence that the United States and perhaps the United Kingdom have much less income mobility, with countries in Continental Europe somewhere in between. It has been much more challenging to establish how countries in other parts of the world fare on this yardstick because of limitations on collecting multigenerational income data. The studies that do exist seem to provide fairly good evidence that income mobility tends to be lower in developing countries. But it is probably too early to draw strong conclusions about the specific relative rankings of countries with respect to income mobility.

An alternative approach to using income data is to measure intergenerational educational mobility because multigenerational data on completed schooling is accessible for many more countries. Recent work has found that Nordic countries also experience the most rapid intergenerational mobility with respect to education. It also appears that rates of intergenerational educational mobility are particularly low in many Latin American countries.

Over the coming decades, new research from many more countries is expected to build on the existing results in this nascent literature to fill in the gaps in our knowledge. Recent studies are already beginning to consider more innovative methods for inferring rates of intergenerational mobility across the world. This should also allow us to better understand

what it is about some countries that allow them to exhibit greater equality of opportunity and may provide powerful insights to policy makers about what kinds of policies can be used to promote intergenerational mobility.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

How social status is passed down over generations has been a question of interest dating back to at least the pioneering work of the Victorian era social scientist, Sir Francis Galton. Galton, for example, studied how height was transmitted across generations and, in the process, developed statistical tools such as regression analysis and correlations that have formed the building blocks of empirical methods used today.

In the modern era, the study of intergenerational mobility was truly advanced by the seminal work of the sociologists Peter Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan in their 1967 book entitled "The American Occupational Structure." The authors conducted the first large-scale survey of intergenerational mobility among US workers, finding a significant amount of upward occupational mobility. They also showed the importance of intergenerational links in education and occupation, finding that fathers often influenced son's education and occupational trajectory. One negative finding was that Blacks are often stuck in a bad cycle: As education yields fewer career options, they get less education, and remain in low-class jobs.

Building on this work, many studies have used measures based on occupation to understand cross-country differences in intergenerational mobility. Looking at a set of countries with comparable coding of occupations, Emily Beller and Michael Hout have argued that occupational mobility is highest in nations such as Sweden, Canada, and Norway and lower in nations such as Germany, Ireland, and Portugal. They find that occupational mobility in the United States falls squarely in the middle of this set of countries. They also cite other research suggesting that occupational mobility is quite low in Italy, France, and Great Britain.

Economists have developed a largely separate strand of research that has focused on intergenerational mobility with respect to economic outcomes such as wages, earnings, and income. In addition to extending the literature from "social mobility" to "economic mobility," these studies have made important contributions to the measurement of mobility and in the process helped dramatically alter the conventional view that intergenerational mobility was higher in the United States than in other countries.

Economists have primarily focused on measuring the "intergenerational elasticity" in income. The intergenerational elasticity is estimated by running a regression of the log of income of the child on the log of income of parents. The coefficient from that regression expresses what the effect of a 1% change

in income of a parent would be on the income of the child, in percentage terms. For example, a coefficient of 0.4 would mean that a 1% increase in parent's income is associated with a 0.4% increase in the child's income. The elasticity also provides an approximation of how much of the gap in income between any two families, in percentage terms, is expected to persist into the next generation.

One minus the intergenerational elasticity can then be used to infer the rate of intergenerational mobility because it indicates approximately what percentage of the gap in income between families, on average, is wiped away in a generation. The first studies typically used just a single year of income in each generation and estimated the intergenerational elasticity in the United States to be about to 0.2. This led observers to conclude that intergenerational mobility was quite rapid because it implied that most economic differences between families would be wiped out in about three generations.

Subsequent studies by economists, most notably work by Gary Solon using longitudinal data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, showed that the use of a single year of income dramatically overstated the degree of intergenerational mobility in the United States relative to using short-term averages of income. He argued that after correcting for this bias, the intergenerational elasticity in the United States was actually 0.4 or higher. In a paper that further built on this insight, I used confidential social security earnings data containing even longer windows of earnings information to better approximate long-term economic status, and estimated the intergenerational elasticity in earnings in the United States to be about 0.6. This suggested that even using short-term averages of income could still substantially overstate intergenerational income mobility and that income gaps in the United States could take much longer to equalize. Other notable work by Steven Haider and Gary Solon has also highlighted how estimates of the mobility can be prone to a "life cycle" bias. This can occur if income is measured at ages which tend to be a poor reflection of the long-term status of either parents or children.

For countries that have very good longitudinal data on income for multiple generations, researchers have been able to produce estimates of intergenerational income mobility that address these forms of measurement related bias. Some of the best research has used data on Nordic countries where access to population and tax registers are readily available. In one of the first comprehensive reviews of the international evidence, Miles Corak assembled estimates of the intergenerational elasticity for nine countries that were harmonized to address comparability issues. He found the lowest rates of intergenerational earnings mobility in the United States and the United Kingdom, where the estimated intergenerational elasticity was around 0.5. The most rapid rates of mobility were found to be in Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Canada, where the intergenerational elasticity was under 0.2. In between

these two groups of countries were France, Germany, and Sweden, which had intergenerational elasticities of 0.41, 0.32, and 0.27, respectively.

A number of studies have estimated intergenerational income elasticities for a variety of other countries such as Australia, Brazil, Chile, China, Ecuador, Italy, Germany, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, Peru, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, and Switzerland. Unfortunately, owing to many differences in methodology and data quality, it is difficult to accurately rank countries without using very careful procedures. Nevertheless, estimates suggest that intergenerational income mobility tends to be low in China as well as most developing countries, and are in a roughly similar range to estimates produced for the United States. Estimates for Central and Southern European countries tend to fall somewhere between the high rates of mobility found in Nordic countries and the low rates found in the United Kingdom and United States.

A limitation of using the intergenerational elasticity is that it is not informative about how mobility might differ at different points in the income distribution or provide insight about the relative importance of upward versus downward mobility. An alternative approach to studying income mobility that addresses these issues has been to divide the income distribution in each generation into equally sized groups such as quintiles and then calculate a "transition matrix" of movement across the quintiles. For example, if one is concerned about upward mobility from the bottom, then one could focus on the fraction of individuals who start as children in families in the bottom quintile in one generation but who end up in the top quintile as adults. A study by Markus Jantti and coauthors compared patterns in intergenerational mobility using transition matrices for six countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, United States, and United Kingdom). Among the key findings were that the United States had an exceptionally high degree of persistence in the bottom quintile and a low degree of upward mobility out of the bottom quintile. The United States and the United Kingdom also had a low degree of downward mobility out of the top quintile of the income distribution. The authors found a remarkably similar degree of mobility across the middle quintiles of the income distribution.

An alternative approach to estimating intergenerational mobility for a broad range of countries is to use educational outcomes rather than occupation or income. Many countries have multigenerational datasets that collect information on completed schooling for two generations within a family. In a study that was impressive in the sheer breadth of countries examined, Tom Hertz and his coauthors assembled estimates of the intergenerational correlation for 42 countries including 10 countries in Asia, 7 countries in Latin America, 4 countries in Africa, 8 countries in the Eastern bloc, and 13

Western capitalist economies which include the United States, United Kingdom, along with 4 Nordic countries. The authors found the lowest degree of intergenerational educational mobility in Latin American countries, where the correlation averaged 0.60. Next lowest was the Eastern bloc countries, which averaged 0.41. The Asian nations and the group of Western nations both averaged 0.39. Finally, the intergenerational education correlation in the small sample of African countries averaged 0.36. Within the group of Western nations, Nordic countries had lower estimates of intergenerational persistence.

An interesting and powerful conclusion that appears robust to all types of measures of socioeconomic status is that the Nordic countries appear to have the highest rates of intergenerational mobility. There is also suggestive evidence that mobility is lowest in Latin American countries based on high estimates of intergenerational persistence in education and, in some cases, income. However, much more evidence is needed before we can draw especially sharp conclusions. Given the diversity of approaches in the literature an important lesson is that we may wish to consider a variety of estimates that may eventually yield more nuanced conclusions about which countries are more mobile than others.

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

Are Intergenerational Associations Truly Causal

Until recently, most research on intergenerational mobility was purely descriptive in nature and simply presented statistics that could be used to broadly characterize different societies in terms of inequality of opportunity. The measures could be used the same way that broad measures of living standards or inequality are used to compare countries. A major new avenue of research has tried to push further and to try to understand if the intergenerational associations are actually *causal*. In other words, if parents were given additional income or years of schooling, would this actually cause their offspring to also have higher incomes or more schooling? Or, is it merely the case that high-status parents who have certain characteristics (e.g. patience, strong cognitive skills) transfer these characteristics to their children through either nature or nurture (or both), and that it is these characteristics rather than income or years of schooling *per se* that explain intergenerational associations?

Perhaps the most innovative research in this field has focused on the extent to which the intergenerational association in years of schooling is causal. In an excellent review paper, Helena Holmlund, Mikael Lindahl, and Erik Plug describe the three main approaches that have been used

in the literature. They then apply all three methods themselves on an intergenerational sample in Sweden. The first method uses identical twins and compares the difference in their schooling levels with those of their offspring. The second method compares the offspring of natural born siblings with adoptive siblings. Both of these approaches attempt to eliminate genetic factors from influencing the intergenerational association. The third approach uses a compulsory schooling reform that gradually spread across Swedish municipalities starting in 1949 and through the early 1960s. As this reform can be viewed as an "exogenous" source of variation in years of schooling of the parents, the effects on the schooling of the offspring may be viewed as causal. While there are some differences in the estimates across the three methods, all three approaches suggest that some portion of the intergenerational association is causal.

Using Surnames

One of the most creative new approaches to studying intergenerational mobility has been the use of surnames as a way of identifying common lineages. Maia Guell, Jose V. Rodriguez Mora, and Christopher Tellmer have developed a sophisticated model that demonstrates how using population-wide data containing rare surnames along with socioeconomic outcomes can provide insight on rates of intergenerational mobility. This approach overcomes the problem of relying on multigenerational data in order to measure mobility. They apply this approach to studying intergenerational mobility across birth cohorts in Spain and find that mobility has declined over the course of the twenthieth century.

In a series of papers, Gregory Clark has similarly used surnames to study intergenerational mobility in a wide variety of characteristics over long periods of time across a number of societies. Clark's approach does not utilize an elaborate model but instead uses a more simple approach to infer the rate at which differences in socioeconomic status by groups of surnames erode over time. Clark consistently finds that the relative advantages of having a high-status surname erodes only very slowly over time. His results are very provocative and suggest that rates of intergenerational mobility are remarkably slow in all countries and in all time periods.

Models based on surnames essentially use a "group"-based approach to inferring rates of intergenerational mobility and thereby rely on certain assumptions in order for these findings to be strictly comparable to the individual-level estimates typically estimated in past research. Further research is needed both to verify the empirical findings of these early surname studies and to validate the underlying assumptions of the models.

Nevertheless, the use of surnames offers a promising new approach that could potentially allow for cross national comparisons.

Timing of Income

A newer strand of the literature on intergenerational income mobility has focused on when exactly in the lifecycle of children that parental income might matter most. In part, this has been motivated by the growing cross-disciplinary literature that has focused on the importance of early life events in determining long-term success. The highly influential work by the epidemiologist David Barker has shown that birth weight is highly correlated with measures of long-term health such as heart disease. Economists have contributed to the literature by using "natural experiments" such as early life exposure to famines and disease environments to estimate the causal effects.

Economic theory might also suggest that the timing of income could matter particularly if parents are financially constrained and cannot borrow from their anticipated future income (or from their children's future income). A few studies have started to focus on whether income earned when children are particularly young might have a particularly strong effect. While some early studies in this area have found evidence that this might be the case, there are many thorny issues such as life cycle bias that could complicate the interpretation of results and so more work is needed in this area.

Mobility Differences within Societies

In many countries that have a segment of the population that has been disadvantaged for historical reasons, policy makers are concerned about differences in rates of intergenerational mobility across subgroups of the population and the causes of those differences. In the United States, for example, policies such as affirmative action have been motivated by a desire to redress the historical legacy of slavery and segregation of Blacks. Unfortunately, commonly used measures of intergenerational mobility such as the intergenerational elasticity cannot be used to measure group differences in mobility with respect to the overall income distribution. In recent work, Debopam Bhattacharya and I have developed new measures that can be used to study group differences in intergenerational mobility. We have also supplemented existing mobility measures with statistical methods that may allow future researchers to better understand the sources of group differences in both upward and downward intergenerational mobility.

In subsequent research using these methods, I have shown that there would be virtually no further progress in reducing Black–white income differences

in the United States if the especially low rates of intergenerational mobility experienced by recent cohorts of Blacks were to continue into the future. It would be useful for further research to show if similar levels of extreme rigidity exist or have existed in the past for disadvantaged groups in other countries. The ability to take into account group differences, in general, may also provide a richer view of cross-national differences in intergenerational mobility.

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Measuring Inequality of Opportunity

Although studies of intergenerational mobility have been largely motivated by a desire to measure the degree of inequality of opportunity, many researchers have argued that, at best, such measures only imperfectly capture inequality of opportunity. It has also been argued that certain policies that could reduce the intergenerational transmission of advantages may be so intrusive on families as to be clearly undesirable even if they would increase mobility. Given these issues, how should we think about efforts to promote equality of opportunity? Political philosophers such as John Roemer and Adam Swift have argued that a distinction should be drawn between factors that are outside of the control of families and those that are due to choices or effort. It may be more appropriate for policy makers to try to equalize opportunities that are purely due to chance.

A few studies have tried to create empirical analogues to this concept by measuring the degree of intergenerational persistence after accounting for measures of effort. This literature is still at a very early stage and probably requires much more refinement before these alternative measures are more readily accepted. In order to make more progress, however, it is likely that future research will require ongoing feedback loops between the experts in political philosophy and the applied researchers who work on either developing measures or on implementing statistical estimators.

Trends in Intergenerational Mobility and Group-Based Approaches

One very active area of research has been in trying to understand trends in intergenerational mobility. Typically, these studies have looked at one country at a time and have focused primarily on documenting whether there have been any pronounced changes over time. Secondarily, these studies then try to understand the causes of any changes in intergenerational mobility over time. This line of research can be viewed as an alternative approach for trying to understand the underlying drivers of mobility differences by looking at different time periods rather than different countries.

Because it is challenging enough to find satisfactory data to measure mobility at any one point in time, it is even more difficult to measure changes over time. Researchers have attempted to use various strategies to overcome this challenge. For example, in work with Daniel Aaronson, I have tried to use historical Census data for the United States to measure trends in mobility. Although one cannot directly link parents to their adult children across Censuses, we created "synthetic families" by linking children born in a particular state and year to the average income of a group of parents in an earlier Census who had kids born in the same state and in the same year. For example, we can link a 42-year-old in the 2000 Census who was born in Minnesota in 1958 to the average income of parents in Minnesota in the 1960 Census who had children who were two years old. Under some assumptions, this approach of using synthetic families can be used to infer trends in intergenerational economic mobility. The study found that trends in intergenerational mobility in the United States closely matched contemporaneous trends in cross-sectional inequality, a topic to which I return later. It should be noted that other research on trends in the United States using the Panel Study of Income Dynamics have not found evidence of significant changes in intergenerational mobility, but that data is only ideally suited for measuring mobility starting in the 1980s.

Grouping methods such as this approach or the use of surnames hold potential both for measuring trends and cross-national differences in intergenerational mobility. In order for these approaches to reach their full potential, there is also the need for harmonizing large datasets in as many countries as possible. The IPUMS-I database of international censuses developed at the University of Minnesota's population center might be useful in this regard. One could imagine using the synthetic family approach to estimate trends in intergenerational income or educational mobility for a large set of countries. A similar effort to collect large administrative databases containing surnames and socioeconomic outcomes for many countries could be fruitful but will likely require strong cross-country collaborations and efforts to maintain confidentiality and data security. An important caveat is that there is also a need for future research in this area to further explore the possible limitations of these group-based approaches.

Forward-Looking Measures of Mobility

Another challenge for future research studying trends in intergenerational mobility concerns how to interpret an estimate at a given point of time. For example, if we find that the rate of intergenerational mobility is low for individuals who are around 40 years old today, is it because of their family

circumstances in the early 1970s or is it because of their labor market opportunities in the early 2010s? This highlights an important point, which is that measures of intergenerational mobility to some degree are inherently "backwards looking." This is important for forecasting what we might expect intergenerational mobility to look like in the future. It is also relevant to thinking about cross-country differences because what we might think of as big differences today actually reflect factors that were only relevant a generation ago.

One approach that holds promise to produce a more forward-looking indicator of intergenerational mobility is to look at "gradients" in children's outcomes by measures of family socioeconomic status. For example, in a recent provocative study, Sean Reardon has argued that the gap in children's tests scores between families at the 90th percentile of the income distribution and those at 10th percentile has grown sharply since the 1970s and is no higher that the black–white gap in achievement. One recent comparative study has shown that the gradients in child capacities by family background are largest in the United States and the United Kingdom than in Australia and especially Canada. The potential to further develop cross-national research along these lines might provide for a potentially more policy relevant set of findings. Here, efforts to harmonize datasets tracking childhood development information since birth for many countries would be fruitful. This would likely be facilitated by greater cross-disciplinary collaborations between groups such as medical researchers, developmental psychologists, sociologists, and economists.

How Does Inequality Affect Intergenerational Mobility

Perhaps the most intriguing idea that has emerged from the early research on cross-national comparisons is that countries with high inequality also tend have lower rates of intergenerational mobility. Alan Krueger, the Chair of the US Council of Economic Advisors, in 2012 referred to a graph which plots the intergenerational elasticity for a sample of countries against a measure of inequality as the "Great Gatsby" curve. Krueger's drew the inference that further growth in inequality in the United States may imply reduced intergenerational mobility going forward. Some of the research on the United States described in the earlier section on "Trends in Intergenerational Mobility" that used a grouping strategy based on synthetic families also found a remarkable correspondence between increases in inequality in the United States and reductions in intergenerational mobility.

Perhaps the most salient question for future research on cross-national differences in intergenerational mobility is to address whether this relationship between inequality and mobility is robust, and if so, how it should be interpreted. One straightforward argument is that there simply might be a

causal relationship between inequality and mobility. Perhaps, unequal societies tend to create political structures that perpetuate these inequalities and therefore reduce mobility. Alternatively, it could be that broad-based forces such as technological change that create larger economic returns for workers with certain skills tend to create both higher inequality and lower intergenerational mobility.

To make further progress on this topic, it may be useful for researchers to not only consider careful cross-country comparisons but to also gather more historical data to compare time periods within countries and across geographic areas within countries. Unraveling the reasons for the possible relationship between inequality and mobility will also require imaginative thinking and perhaps new methods to carefully tease out which explanations make the most sense.

Biomarkers and Genetic Data

The use of data on biomarkers and genetic data has not yet made its way into the research on intergenerational mobility but may have the potential to have transformative effects. Suppose it was possible for researchers in the future to identify particular sequences of DNA that map into key capabilities on the part of children such as the ability to delay gratification. Such information may be able to help researchers incorporate such information into statistical models of intergenerational persistence of socioeconomic outcomes.

There are at least two reasons to be highly cautious about how fruitful this line of research will be. First, the field of epigenetics has highlighted that important role of environmental factors in influencing the expression of genes, preventing any simple interpretations of statistical decomposition models. Second, initial research has suggested that data mining is a real concern with the use of genetic data and that many initially provocative findings have not held up under closer scrutiny. Nevertheless, it is hard to predict the potential disruptive effects of the growing use of new biological data on this literature.

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