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Social Mobility in an Era of Family Instability and Complexity

By
LAURA TACH

Families play a central role in the study of social mobility—they are units of analysis for measuring social class as well as settings that shape the intergenerational transmission of resources. The American family has undergone important changes since the mid-twentieth century. Divorce, nonmarital childbearing, and cohabitation increased dramatically. The rise in divorce and cohabitation made the family a less stable unit of socialization and led to a proliferation of step and blended family arrangements with complex configurations of residential and biological ties. As a result of these changes, less than half of children spend their entire childhood in an intact, two-biological parent household, and families are no longer defined solely by shared residence or biology. The instability and complexity of family life requires stratification scholars to rethink how they measure origin and destination class and to consider how parents in nontraditional families transmit class-specific resources to the next generation.

Keywords: family structure; inequality; intergenerational mobility; parental influence; survey research

Families play a central role in the study of social mobility. They are often the unit of analysis of origin and destination social class position, leading to debates about which family members should be counted in a measure of social class position. Beyond its role in defining social class, family structure is a substantive part of the social mobility process. Individuals in less-advantaged class positions are more

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likely to live in nonintact families, and children from nonintact families tend to achieve lower socioeconomic positions as adults. As such, family structure is a mechanism in the reproduction of inequality across generations (McLanahan and Percheski 2008).

Family Structure in the Study of Social Mobility

A long tradition of stratification research has theorized how parents pass on economic, cultural, and social resources to their children (Blau and Duncan 1967; Kohn 1969; Sewell, Haller, and Portes 1969; Bourdieu 1973; Kerckhoff 1976; Featherman and Hauser 1978; Hout 1984; Lareau 1989). Many of the mechanisms by which parents transmit these attributes to their children require frequent contact and interaction throughout the childhood socialization period (Coleman 1988; Biblarz and Raftery 1993; Beller 2009). The growing prevalence of unstable and diverse family forms, where parents have unstable or infrequent contact with their children, raises questions about the process of intergenerational transmission.

An earlier generation of stratification scholars grappled with how to measure mobility as women entered the labor force. Correlations between fathers and sons were no longer adequate indicators of social mobility because children and adults lived in households with two earners and two occupations. This prompted researchers to begin asking survey questions about the socioeconomic standing of women and mothers. They also developed measures of class position that accounted for the socioeconomic positions of both parents. The conventional view that a family's class was determined by the father's or husband's class position (Goldthorpe 1983; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992) was updated to allow the "dominant" class position to be the parent with the strongest labor force attachment and higher class position, regardless of gender (Erikson 1984).

Some researchers critiqued the use of just one parent to determine the class position of the family and advocated for a "joint approach" that incorporated both parents' class positions. Advocates for this approach argued that each spouse's class position may have an independent and cumulative influence on class resources (Sewell, Hauser, and Wolf 1980; Wright 1989; Sorensen 1994; Beller 2009). Indeed, researchers have found that each parent's occupation and education independently shapes children's educational outcomes (Mare 1981; Kalmijn 1994; Korupp, Ganzeboom, and Van Der Lippe 2002).

If each parent's class position influences children's class positions, the conventional approach that uses just one parent's information generates measurement error. Estimates of father-child associations, for example, will include the correlated but unmeasured effects of mothers' class resources. If the correlation between mothers' and fathers' class positions is greater than zero, using just fathers' class position will lead to an overestimate of the association between fathers and children. And if the correlation between mothers and fathers is less than one, using just fathers' class position will lead to an underestimate of the total origin-destination association. Furthermore, because assortative mating (the

correlation between mothers' and fathers' characteristics) differs across groups and over time (Mare 1991), researchers could erroneously interpret variation in conventional mobility estimates as substantive differences in the extent of mobility rather than as the result of differences in the amount of measurement error across groups or over time (Beller 2009).

The rationale for including information from two parents in measures of class position was developed for intact, two-parent families, but the logic applies to other family configurations as well. How should one incorporate the socioeconomic position of a nonresident parent, stepparent, or other parent-like figure who shares biological or residential ties with children? If parents and parent-like figures from nontraditional family forms pass on at least some of their economic and cultural resources to children—that is, if their intergenerational associations are greater than zero—failure to include them in measures of social class position will bias both individual- and family-based measures of social mobility.

In the past, bias generated by excluding these nontraditional family members was likely small because they constituted a relatively small fraction of all households. This logic no longer holds, due to the growing prevalence of unstable and complex family forms. These families raise measurement questions about which family members to include in a family's class position and theoretical questions about how different types of family members transmit class-specific resources across generations.

The Growing Diversity of Family Forms

The American family has undergone dramatic changes since the mid-twentieth century. Divorce, nonmarital childbearing, and cohabitation have become more common. The rise in divorce and cohabitation has made the family a less stable unit of socialization and led to a proliferation of step and blended family arrangements with complex residential and biological ties. As a result of these changes, less than half of children spend their entire childhood in an intact, two-biological parent household, and families are no longer defined solely by shared residence and biology (Carlson and Meyer 2014). In complex families, relationships tend to be more troubled, and the rights and responsibilities of family members for one another are less certain. This has led some scholars to consider implications for the meaning of marriage in society and others to consider the implications for child well-being (Cherlin 2004; Halpern-Meekin and Tach 2008). For mobility scholars, the instability and complexity of family life raises questions about how to define origin and destination class positions and how parents in nontraditional families transmit class-specific resources to the next generation.

Cohabitation

Nonmarital births accounted for less than 5 percent of all births in the United States in 1950, but by 2009 more than 40 percent of births occurred outside of

marriage (Martin et al. 2011; Ventura and Bachrach 2000; Ventura 2009). This growth occurred unevenly across the socioeconomic spectrum, with rapid growth among less-educated mothers but only slight increases among highly educated mothers (McLanahan 2004). Despite this striking change in the family context of childbearing, most unmarried mothers have their children within romantic relationships. The proportion of nonmarital births occurring within cohabitation has increased sharply since the 1980s, accounting for almost all of the increase in nonmarital childbearing. In the 2000s, about half of nonmarital children were born to cohabiting couples (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008; Manlove et al. 2010) and another third were born to parents who were dating but not living together (McLanahan 2011). Even more children experience cohabitation during the childhood years as their single and divorced mothers enter into cohabiting unions. As a result, two-fifths of children (40 percent) have lived in a cohabiting household by age 16 (Bumpass and Lu 2000).

These cohabitation trends mean that growth in the number of unmarried parents does not necessarily equate to growth in the number of single parents, who are in no romantic or coresidential relationship. This has important implications for stratification scholars, who need to be able to identify the presence and class positions of a respondent's cohabiting parents. Many prospective surveys of households and children (such as the Survey of Income and Program Participation [SIPP], the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youths-1997 cohort [NLSY-97], and the Panel Study of Income Dynamics [PSID]) now identify cohabiting parents directly or indirectly via household rosters, although they do not always collect detailed information on the socioeconomic standing (i.e., income, education, occupation) of cohabiting partners. In surveys of adults that assess mobility by asking retrospective questions about the respondent's origin status (such as the General Social Survey [GSS]), few ask whether a respondent's parents lived together without being married. As a result, traditional mobility studies typically either classified cohabiting-parent families as single-parent families (based on parents' marital status) or lumped them together with married-parent families (based on coresidence or biological relationship to the child).

Should cohabiters be classified as single parents, married parents, or as a distinct family type in the study of mobility? Like married parents, cohabiting parents reside with their children and thus have more frequent contact with their children than nonresident parents do (Berger et al. 2008). Yet the norms and responsibilities governing investments in partners and children are less institutionalized for cohabitation than for marriage (Cherlin 2004; Brown 2004; Brown and Manning 2009). Cohabiting fathers provide less instrumental and social support to mothers and exhibit weaker parenting control than married fathers (Thomson, McLanahan, and Braun-Curtin 1992; Thomson, Hanson, and McLanahan 1994), and cohabiting parents pool their incomes less often than married parents (Kenney 2004). From the child's perspective, teenagers report weaker attachment to their fathers when the fathers are cohabiting rather than married (Furstenberg and Harris 1993). Thus, the intergenerational transmission process may operate differently in cohabiting households than in married-parent or single-parent households because cohabiting parents transfer fewer resources

on average and may be weaker agents of socialization than married parents, but they likely transfer more resources and have more contact with children than do nonresident parents.

The misclassification of cohabiting parents was probably a minor measurement issue for cohorts coming of age in the mid-twentieth century, when cohabitation was an uncommon child-rearing context. Today, it is clearly a major measurement problem because 40 percent of children spend time in cohabiting households (Bumpass and Lu 2000). The failure of many large surveys to identify cohabiting parents and their socioeconomic standing during respondents' childhood limits researchers' ability to study whether patterns of intergenerational transmission differ in cohabiting families compared to married-parent families or single-parent families.

Family disruption

Marital and nonmarital relationships in the United States are uniquely unstable relative to those in other industrialized nations. By age 15, 35 percent of children born to married parents and 78 percent of children born to cohabiting parents have witnessed their parents' unions dissolve (Andersson 2002). Marriages have become slightly more stable since the 1980s, but cohabiting unions have become slightly less stable (Teachman 2002; Kennedy and Bumpass 2008; Lichter, Qian, and Mellott 2006). Half of cohabitations end within one year, and more than 90 percent end within five years; about half of cohabitations end with marriage and the other half end in dissolution (Bumpass and Sweet 1989; Lichter, Qian, and Mellott 2006). Given the growth in childbearing within cohabitation and the relative instability of cohabiting unions compared to marital unions (Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991; Andersson 2002; Lichter, Qian, and Mellott 2006; Manning, Smock, and Majumdar 2004), children's exposure to family instability has likely increased since the mid-twentieth century.

If three-quarters of nonmarital children and one-third of marital children experience a family disruption that results in a parent leaving the home, how should we incorporate information about nonresident parents in the study of mobility? Many mobility studies have simply ignored the nonresident parent (most commonly the father), and used the mother as the head of household; others have combined nonresident fathers with resident fathers into a single measure of father's socioeconomic position; some studies exclude single-parent families from the analytic sample altogether. Each of these approaches make strong but inaccurate assumptions about how parents contribute economic and cultural resources to their nonresident children. Most nonresident fathers invest time and money in their nonresident children, although the extent of these investments varies considerably across men and declines as children get older (Tach, Mincy, and Edin 2010; Cheadle, Amato, and King 2010; Nepomnyaschy and Garfinkel 2010).

If intergenerational transmission is contingent on parent-child contact and interaction, nonresident parents' influence is surely greater than zero but also probably weaker than the influence of resident parents. Indeed, researchers

examining father-son correlations in the 1973 Occupational Changes in a Generation (OCG) dataset found that the associations between father's and son's occupations were present but weaker when fathers were nonresident (Biblarz and Raftery 1993; Biblarz, Raftery, and Bucur 1997). Similarly, in the 1994–2006 GSS correlations between parent's and children's educational attainment were weaker when the parent was nonresident regardless of the gender of the nonresident parent (Beller 2009). This evidence is consistent with the theory that intergenerational transmission is facilitated through parent-child contact, which is less frequent among nonresident parents than among resident parents (Jones and Mosher 2013).

The question, then, is how to include information from nonresident parents in measures of social class position. Studies of the influence of nonresident parents on intergenerational transmission are complicated by data limitations that make identifying nonresident parents difficult. Many of the traditional surveys used to study social mobility either do not identify the residential status of parents or do not collect socioeconomic data about nonresident parents. Some surveys used to study intergenerational transmission include information on nonresident parents' socioeconomic position, including the National Education Longitudinal Survey (which includes information on nonresident parents only if a stepparent is not present) and the NLSY-79 (which includes information on all nonresident parents). Information about the presence of a nonresident parent can be inferred from additional surveys (such as the OCG) by cross-tabulating socioeconomic information collected on fathers with indicators of family intactness (typically, whether the child lived with both parents at a particular age). The limitation with the latter approach is that one does not know which parent is nonresident; it is most often the father, but this has become less likely over time (Livingston 2013). At a minimum, one needs to know the residential status and socioeconomic position of each biological parent during a respondent's childhood.

The duration of nonresidence and the intensity of involvement are two additional factors that could influence the strength of intergenerational transmission from nonresident parents to their children. First, frequent interaction with nonresident children as well as monetary transfers may strengthen parent-child correlations. Potential indicators of these processes include the frequency of nonresident parent-child contact, types of activities during time spent together, and the amount of formal and informal financial resources transferred to nonresident children (directly or indirectly via the custodial parent). Second, some nonresident parents are always nonresident (i.e., children born to unmarried, noncohabiting parents), while others are resident for a period of time and become nonresident after parents' relationships end through divorce or cohabitation dissolution. Information about the presence and timing of a union disruption (such as the retrospective questions asked in the NLSY-79) would allow researchers to measure the proportion of childhood spent living with each parent, which may also influence the strength of intergenerational transmission if resident parents have more intensive interaction with children than nonresident parents (Jones and Mosher 2013).

Serial partnering and stepparents

When relationships end, parents in the United States do not remain single for long. Twenty-one percent of parents enter a new residential partnership within one year after their previous union ends, and 47 percent enter a new residential relationship within three years (Andersson 2002). More than half of divorced women remarry within five years, and 75 percent do so within 10 years (Bramlett and Mosher 2002). As a result of this serial partnering, about 30 percent of children spend time in a marital or nonmarital stepfamily by age 18 (Bumpass, Raley, and Sweet 1995). Most of these stepparents will be stepfathers. Exposure to stepparents is even higher for low-SES parents. The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, which tracks an urban cohort born the late 1990s and their parents, shows that 70 percent of less-educated parents who break up have at least one new romantic relationship (of three months or more) by the child's fifth birthday, and more than a third are involved in multiple new relationships by that time; more than half of these new relationships involve cohabitation (Tach, Edin, and McLanahan 2011).

How does the intergenerational transmission of resources between stepparents and stepchildren operate? Stepparents may contribute financial resources and act as socialization agents by virtue of living in the same households with stepchildren. However, these processes probably operate differently for stepparents than for biological parents. As with cohabitation, the rights and responsibilities of stepparents are less institutionalized than those of biological parents, so stepparents may exert a weaker influence on stepchildren. Indeed, family researchers have found that stepparents invest fewer financial resources, spend less time, and have lower-quality interactions with stepchildren than with biological children (Cherlin 1978; Daly and Wilson 1996; Case, Lin, and McLanahan 1999; Evenhouse and Reilly 2004).

It is difficult to discern the role of stepparents in the mobility process because of a lack of good data. Most surveys either do not distinguish stepparents from biological parents or do not collect detailed socioeconomic data about the characteristics of nonbiological parents. Surveys should distinguish between step and biological parents and collect information on the socioeconomic standing of stepparents in addition to resident and nonresident biological parents. Surveys should also collect information on the duration of the stepfamily relationship and interactions with stepchildren, to determine whether the intensity and duration of interactions explain the strength of associations between the class positions of stepparents and stepchildren. This type of information would allow researchers to determine whether the influence of stepparents is different from that of resident and nonresident biological parents.

Multiple-partner fertility and blended families

Serial partnering creates complex family arrangements because these partnerships often produce children, resulting in multiple-partner fertility (children with more than one partner). Nearly one in five U.S. women has had children with

multiple partners by midlife, and 28 percent of mothers with two or more children have done so (Dorius 2011). Because children tend to reside with their mothers following union dissolutions, the children of parents who engage in multiple-partner fertility typically live in households with half or stepsiblings who have different biological fathers. According to a recent nationally representative survey, three in ten adults reported that they have a step or half sibling (Parker 2011).

The prevalence of multiple-partner fertility for parents and half siblings for children raises questions about how parents in blended families transmit cultural and economic resources to their children. Children in blended families potentially have access to different economic and cultural resources than their half and stepsiblings even though they live in the same household, because they have different biological, step, and nonresident parents. Furthermore, all children in blended families may receive fewer parental resources, if parents make contributions to family members outside the household in the form of alimony, child support, and time spent with nonresidential children. This potentially reduces parental investments in both residential and nonresidential children (Case, Lin, and McLanahan 1999; Hofferth and Anderson 2003).

Blended families can be identified for stepchildren (who are the biological children of one parent) by asking the survey questions about stepparents and nonresident parents described above. These questions do not work for identifying the shared biological children in blended families, however. These children are the biological children of both parents in the household and therefore “look” like children of traditional two-parent families to survey researchers based on questions about their parents’ residential and biological status. Shared children in blended families differ from children in traditional two-parent families, however, because they have half siblings from parents’ previous relationships. This might matter if the intergenerational transmission of economic and cultural resources from parents to biological children differs in blended families and traditional two-parent families. For example, many parents in blended families have resources that leave the household to go to ex-partners and children in other households (Ono 2005), undermining their investments in the current household; in other blended families, the quality of parenting for biological children is lower due to diversions and strains caused by parents’ relationships with past-partners, nonresident children, and stepchildren (Halpern-Meehin and Tach 2008). In other words, blended families face many of the same challenges of resource dilution and less-institutionalized family ties as stepfamilies, and the addition of a shared child does little to cement stepfamily bonds (Stewart 2005). To test whether mobility patterns differ for biological children in blended and traditional two-parent families, researchers need to be able to identify blended families via the presence of a respondent’s half siblings.

Other diverse family forms

Two additional family types warrant special consideration in mobility studies. First, rising life expectancies means that grandparents are more involved than

ever in the lives of their grandchildren. In 2011, 8 percent of all U.S. children were living in three-generational households. Five percent of children living with married parents also lived with a grandparent, and 16 percent of those living with a single mother did so (U.S. Census Bureau 2011; Dunifon, Ziolo-Guest, and Kopko 2014). Another 2 percent of children live in custodial-grandparent households (U.S. Census Bureau 2011). The number of three-generational households has increased rapidly in the wake of the 2007 recession (Dunifon 2013), suggesting that this living arrangement is in part a response to financial hardship. Children's residence with grandparents would be even more common if exposure were measured across the entire childhood instead of at a single point in time.

Second, given the ongoing expansion of legal rights governing marriage and adoption for same-sex couples, same-sex parents are becoming more common, and this trend will likely continue (Manning 2014). Data limitations in most national surveys make it difficult to identify these households, not to mention use them to study social mobility, but recent estimates place the number of children being raised by gay and lesbian parents between 500,000 and 2 million, depending on whether bisexual parents and single parents are included (Miller and Price 2013).

Summary of Data Availability

To account for the growing diversity and instability of family life, social mobility scholars should be able to identify the presence and class positions of cohabiting, nonresident, and stepparents, as well as the presence of half siblings as an indicator of blended families. Nationally representative surveys of family life—such as the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), National Survey of American Families (NSAF), and the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study—have made considerable progress in measuring these more complex family forms, but they typically do not contain the information about respondents' childhood family structure and adult socioeconomic outcomes needed for social mobility analyses.¹

In contrast, the major national surveys used to study social mobility typically do not contain the detailed information on the presence and socioeconomic position of nonresident, cohabiting, and stepparents needed to identify complex and unstable family structures. For example, the SIPP does not collect information on the presence or socioeconomic attributes of nonhousehold members, including nonresident parents or children. The GSS does collect information on the socioeconomic standing of adult respondents' parents but does not report the biological or residential status of that parent; it also does not allow respondents to report the status of multiple parent or parent-like figures (e.g., a biological and a stepparent). Smaller-scale longitudinal surveys, such as the PSID and NLSY, contain more detailed information on family structure but do not always collect the necessary socioeconomic data for multiple parental figures. The questions necessary to delineate childhood family structure and parental socioeconomic

status could be added to supplements of larger surveys (such as the American Community Survey [ACS], Current Population Survey, or SIPP), but the information needed to identify family complexity and stability are not always readily available in these existing surveys or in administrative records (e.g., tax data from the IRS). If, however, data from multiple large surveys (e.g., ACS) and administrative records were linked and combined, it would be possible to make inferences about some of the changes in family structure that were experienced both in childhood and adulthood.

Conclusion

It is unclear how members of complex families should be counted in measures of social class, which is problematic for conventional social mobility estimates given the growing complexity of family life. The key challenge for social mobility studies is that the data required to identify all members of a respondent's family system—who may not live in the household and who may not be biologically related—and their socioeconomic positions are not available in existing population-based surveys. In addition, the instability of family life means that the cast of characters in the family of origin and destination is in flux, especially for less-advantaged families, so information on changes in family structure is also necessary.

In the past, complex family forms were a small fraction of the total population, so excluding nonresidential and nonbiological parents created a small amount of measurement error in mobility estimates. This is no longer the case: 40 percent of children spend time in cohabiting households and one-third spend time in stepfamilies (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Bumpass, Raley, and Sweet 1995). Furthermore, one-third of marital children and three-quarters of nonmarital children will experience a family disruption (Andersson 2002); many of these children will also experience new parental unions, resulting in multiple parental figures over the course of childhood. These experiences of instability and complexity are even more common among children from low-SES backgrounds.

It would be prudent for stratification scholars to incorporate family complexity and instability into the analysis of social mobility. First, if the amount of measurement error generated by excluding family members changes over time as the prevalence of family complexity changes, this could lead to false conclusions about changes in social mobility. Beller (2009) showed that studies using only father's class position missed a recent upturn in the importance of family background that became evident once mother's class position was included. The logic of this argument can be transferred to other family members, including stepparents or nonresident parents, who are excluded or misclassified in many mobility studies.

Information on family instability and complexity will also contribute to substantive debates about the process of intergenerational transmission. First, the strength of intergenerational correlations between nonresident parents and

children, stepparents and children, and biological parents and children in blended families will shed light on how families transmit advantages and disadvantages across generations outside of biological and residential ties. Second, experiences of family instability and complexity during childhood are potential mechanisms in the process of intergenerational mobility—in other words, potential explanations for correlations between origin and destination class positions. The status attainment literature has identified a host of intervening variables to explain this process, and experiences of family instability and complexity should be added to this body of work. A growing literature shows that children exposed to family instability and complexity fare worse on a host of childhood and adolescent outcomes (Hofferth and Anderson 2003; Cavanaugh and Huston 2006; Fomby and Cherlin 2007; Osborne and McLanahan 2007; Halpern-Meekin and Tach 2008; Fomby and Osborne 2010). It would be fruitful to combine the insights of this literature with the methods of stratification research to determine whether these disadvantages persist into adulthood and how much they explain of the intergenerational transmission of (dis)advantage.

Currently, these analyses are precluded by a lack of adequate data, but they are possible with the development of new data sources. Such an investment is worthwhile because family structure is inextricably linked to processes of stratification. Socioeconomic advantages and disadvantages often cause individuals to form or end unions, to accelerate or delay fertility, and to alter living arrangements. As Mare (2001) observes, this means “our units of analysis in the study of stratification [the family] may be created by the very processes that we seek to understand” (p. 478).

Note

1. For more information, consult The National Center for Marriage and Family Research (NCFMR) at Bowling Green State University's crosswalk of questions on family structure asked in large national surveys; see <http://ncfmr.bgsu.edu/page88943.html>.

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