

Past Themes and Future Prospects for Research on Social and Economic Mobility

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For more than fifty years, edited volumes of original research from leading scholars of mobility have been published regularly—from Lipset and Bendix (1959) to Laumann (1970), Breiger (1990), Birdsall and Graham (2000), Corak (2004), Breen (2004), and Bowles, Gintis, and Osborne Groves (2005). The present volume follows in this tradition and yet is somewhat distinct because (1) it draws contributions from both sociology and economics and (2) it gives substantial explicit attention to the effects of inequality on mobility outcomes. The theme of mobility and inequality is timely, as labor market inequality in many industrialized societies has increased in the past thirty years. The integrative agenda is timely as well, as scholarship in sociology and economics has grown increasingly similar over the same time period. Sociologists and economists now engage similar substantive topics, many of which were formerly confined to their disciplines alone. And, as a result, each discipline has gained an appreciation for some of the differing conceptual and methodological tools that are deployed across the two disciplines.

In this overview chapter, I discuss the common intellectual foundations of mobility research in sociology and economics, connect these to the chapters of this volume, and then identify some unresolved questions that the contributions demonstrate should be engaged in future research. In the process, I argue that mobility research remains important to the social sciences, especially given recent and expected future developments in the structure of inequality.

I thank David B. Grusky and Gary Fields for helpful comments on the first draft of this chapter.

PAST THEMES OF MOBILITY RESEARCH AND
THEIR INTERDISCIPLINARY ORIGINS

Although it would be misleading to claim that the mobility literature has emerged from interdisciplinary dialogue, common themes underlie its development across disciplines. Given the wide availability of excellent reviews of the mobility literature, I will confine my discussion to the most prominent themes and challenges identified by both sociology and economics.¹

Mobility researchers from these two disciplines have explored a variety of related foundational questions on the definition of mobility, often framed by the question: "Mobility between what?" In sociology, this question is answered implicitly by adopting one of two basic approaches. For the first approach, mobility is modeled by accounting for movement between aggregated groupings of occupational titles, generally labeled social classes.² Accordingly, intergenerational mobility is analyzed via inspection of cross-classifications of parent's and their children's occupations. In the early literature, levels of mobility were summarized by alternative indices, often derived while analyzing alternative cross-classifications drawn from different societies or subgroups within a single society.³ The later literature moved away from such representations, giving way to analyses of the fine structure of patterns of mobility. This work is best represented by the cross-national research of Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992), as brought up-to-date by Richard Breen and his team of researchers (see Breen 2004).

With the publication of Blau and Duncan's *American Occupational Structure* in 1967, a second approach to the study of mobility reached maturity, later labeled status attainment research. In this tradition, sociologists focus on the causes and consequences of differences in socioeconomic status (often defined as scores attached to occupational titles, based on the average educational attainment and earnings of incumbents; see Hauser and Warren 1997). In this tradition, levels of social mobility are measured by intergenerational correlations of socioeconomic status (see Hauser 1998; Jencks 1990), and these correlations are then decomposed using intervening variables in structural equation models.

In economics, the mobility literature is somewhat more unified in its implicit answer to the question "Mobility between what?" Much of the early work arose out of labor economics, based on the "unified approach to intergenerational mobility and inequality" (Becker and Tomes 1979:1154), which

brought together human capital theory with dynastic investment models for family behavior. As with the status attainment tradition in sociology, economists working in this tradition sought single-number expressions for levels of mobility, generally intergenerational correlations of income, although usually estimated as elasticities from regressions of log earnings across generations (see Fields and Ok 1996; Solon 1999; Behrman 2000). More recently, however, economists have begun to focus as well on categorical representations of the structure of inequality, examining placement within the distribution of earnings, either using fixed categories across generations or relative ranks within income distributions (see Björklund and Jäntti 1997; Corak and Heisz 1999; Couch and Lillard 2004; Ermisch and Francesconi 2004; Gottschalk and Spolaore 2002; Grawe 2004). When analyzed as cross-classifications of quantiles, these methods are quite similar in spirit to the between-social-class mobility studies of sociology. Indeed, Björklund and Jäntti (1997) refer to income groups as income classes and reference the log-linear tradition of cross-national mobility research in sociology.⁴

No matter how this “Mobility between what?” question has been answered, a prominent concern of both disciplines has been the impact of structural change over time on mobility outcomes. In sociology, the extent to which over-time shifts in occupational distributions generate upward mobility has been studied extensively. Such outcomes were welcomed in the middle of the twentieth century, and elaborated in scholarship from both sociology (see Parsons 1960, 1970) and economics (see Kerr, Dunlop, Harbison, and Myers 1960) where it was argued that the growth of higher status occupations is an inevitable outcome of the process of industrialization (and also, by implication, that Marxist claims of the inevitability of class polarization under capitalism had been exaggerated). Perhaps reflecting the growing pessimism and radicalism of sociology in the 1960s and 1970s, such structurally induced upward mobility was deemed less theoretically meaningful than levels of mobility purged of these effects. The study of what came to be known as pure exchange mobility then became possible with the development of log-linear modeling techniques that could be used to ascertain margin-free measures of mobility (see Goodman 1965, 1968; Hauser 1978; Hauser and Grusky 1988). The resulting decompositions of total mobility into structural and exchange mobility can be regarded as the main triumph of sociological research on social mobility arrays during the last third of the twentieth century. Deploying these techniques, sociologists established conclusively that exchange

mobility patterns are remarkably similar across most industrial societies (see Breen 2004; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992; Grusky and Hauser 1984).⁵

In economics, the consequences of structural change for mobility patterns focused traditionally on the distributional effects of economic growth.⁶ Following the classic conjecture of Kuznets (1955) that inequality rises with entry into industrialization but then moderates thereafter, empirical examination of the relationship between growth and the level of inequality has been a mainstay of the labor and development economics literatures. The types of mobility considered in this tradition, however, centered most commonly on gross distributional shifts in income along with income dynamics over the life course.

More recently, economists have become interested in the extent to which increasing inequalities within the labor markets of industrialized countries between the 1970s and the 1990s can be seen as less consequential to the extent that they have been accompanied by increasing chances of intergenerational mobility (see Welch 1999; Corak 2004). Relatedly, some economists have sought to determine the extent to which increasing chances of upward mobility sustain support for the market reforms in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union that have tended to increase inequality (see Birdsall and Graham 2000). These interests have prompted others to work on the capacity to assess alternative economic systems by evaluating regimes of mobility opportunities alongside more traditional static representations of the distribution of inequality (see Roemer 1998; Stiglitz 2000).

Sociologists and economists have also focused on the process of intergenerational mobility. Both disciplines have intensified their efforts to study the effects of mental ability on educational attainment, the development of cognitive skills in schooling, and subsequent patterns of labor market success. Although these are old topics for both disciplines, the need to respond to *The Bell Curve* of Herrnstein and Murray (1994) served as a unifying event for empirical researchers from both disciplines (see Arrow, Bowles, and Durlauf 2000; Bowles, Gintis, and Osborne Groves 2005; Devlin, Fienberg, Resnick, and Roeder 1997). And, as I have described elsewhere (see Morgan 2005), in part because of this empirical work, economic and sociological research on educational attainment has grown more similar in the past decade. Economists have shown greater interest in long-run disadvantage and belief formation, and sociologists have shown greater interest in models of forward-looking, choice-driven behavior.

Beyond these core concerns of the intergenerational mobility literature, two final themes appear common to both disciplines. Sociologists and economists have considered whether intragenerational mobility should be modeled with the same conceptual and methodological apparatus as intergenerational mobility. On the one hand, if the ultimate destinations for mobility are groups of hierarchically organized social classes or income deciles, it should matter relatively little whether the origin positions of individuals are those of their parents or instead the first occupational positions or income levels secured on completion of educational training. On the other hand, the intervening mechanisms of both types of mobility remain rather distinct (i.e., educational attainment and the accumulation of cognitive skill in adolescence for intergenerational mobility versus labor market dynamics and organizational promotion schemes for intragenerational mobility). In sociology, intragenerational mobility is rarely studied as such anymore (see Sørensen 1975, 1978 for the beginning of the end in sociological research). Within economics, intragenerational income dynamics are still sometimes characterized as income mobility studies (see Fields 2001).

Finally, sociologists and economists have considered whether the mobility literature should focus primarily on descriptive methods and empirical analysis or instead on theoretical models of mobility processes. Between the descriptive focus on total mobility patterns and the turn toward log-linear modeling in sociology (i.e., between Lipset and Bendix 1959 and Grusky and Hauser 1984), a series of formal Markov models for mobility research was advanced in sociology (see Boudon 1973; MacFarland 1970; White 1970). The “Cornell Mobility Model” (McGinnis 1968), for example, elaborated basic first-order Markov processes in order to generate reasonably realistic models for intragenerational mobility patterns. These modelers conceded that they could not predict observed mobility patterns particularly well, but they nonetheless valorized the pursuit of parsimonious and explicit mathematical models. In the end, however, the descriptive tradition, exemplified best by log-linear model fitting, has dominated sociology since the late 1970s.

Economics has seen a similar movement from formal theory toward descriptive modeling. Formal models, such as those advanced by Becker and Tomes (1979, 1986), were subjected to empirical examination (e.g., Behrman and Taubman 1985; Peters 1992) and found less than complete. Formal modeling is still pursued (see Mulligan 1987; Piketty 2000), but the

descriptive agenda has gained relative prominence in economics since the 1980s, in part because it would seem that the growth in inequality between positions in the labor market has brought empirical analysis more centrally to the core of all research in labor economics (see Katz and Autor 1999) and in part because of renewed interest in the effects of such inequality on cross-national mobility patterns (see Atkinson, Bourguignon, and Morrisson 1992; Burkhauser, Holtz-Eakin, and Rhody 1997; Corak 2004; Dearden, Machin, and Reed 1997; Jarvis and Jenkins 1998; Solon 1992). It may be reasonable to expect a movement back to more formal modeling of mobility, now that the descriptive agenda has been so successfully pursued.

THE CURRENT VOLUME

In the Part Two of the volume, two chapters analyze the level of mobility between generations and evaluate competing positions on how much mobility would be ideal. In “Would Equal Opportunity Mean More Mobility?,” Christopher Jencks and Laura Tach consider the recent literature on intergenerational income mobility, building on classic questions that Jencks made famous in his two books from the 1970s—*Inequality* (Jencks 1972) and *Who Gets Ahead?* (Jencks 1979)—but with attention to the distributional justice and economic efficiency literature, in which he engaged in the interim (e.g., Jencks 1990). Jencks and Tach argue that approximately half of the correlation between incomes across generations can be attributed to genes and individual values. When then taking the position (based on the empirical social justice literature) that meritocracy should be understood as allowing for inequalities based only on “productivity enhancing traits,” they argue convincingly that trends in intergenerational correlations of income are a poor reflection of trends toward achieving equality of opportunity. The lack of correspondence results from the “denominator problem” that underlies (literally) associations of this type. Jencks and Tach show that intergenerational correlations are a function of possibly countervailing effects of the advantages conferred by parents as well as all other sources of advantages. Given this indeterminacy, Jencks and Tach conclude by laying out an alternative agenda for how equal opportunity should be measured, arguing for straightforward but fine-grained investigation of the particular effects that establish intergenerational inheritance of economic status but still fall outside agreed on conceptions of what is meritocratic.

In “How Demanding Should Equality of Opportunity Be, and How Much Have We Achieved?,” Valentino Dardanoni, Gary S. Fields, John Roemer, and Maria Laura Sanchez Puerta develop formal tests of equality of opportunity (building in part on Roemer 1998), which they then apply to data from the United States and from Britain (the Wisconsin Longitudinal Survey and the National Child Development Survey, respectively). Dardanoni and colleagues address some of the concerns developed by Jencks and Tach in the preceding chapter, using quantile regression and non-parametric moment comparisons to test finely (but somewhat indirectly) for mobility patterns consistent with four specific channels by which parents affect the income opportunities of their children—social connections, the inculcation of beliefs and investment in skills, genetic inheritance of ability, and the cultivation of preferences and aspirations. They find no support for equality of opportunity in Britain and very weak support in the United States.

In the Part Three of the volume, three chapters reengage the classic “Mobility between what?” question from the sociological literature on intergenerational mobility. In “Does the Sociological Approach to Studying Social Mobility Have a Future?,” David B. Grusky and Kim A. Weeden renew their challenge to “big class” models in sociology (see Grusky and Sørensen 1998 and Grusky and Weeden 2001), arguing for the utility and elegance of studying underlying mechanisms of immobility with reference to smaller aggregations of occupational titles. To the extent that mobility processes are more complex than can be captured by simple 7-by-7 or even 11-by-11 tables of social classes, there is much to be said for this approach (but see Goldthorpe’s comment on Grusky and Weeden 2001 for a rejoinder). In their chapter for this volume, Grusky and Weeden lay out an agenda for settling the debate. First, they specify the three core assumptions of the sociological literature on mobility that they see as matters of convention (and perhaps matters of faith): (1) the inequality space resolves into classes; (2) inequality is transmitted through classes; and (3) classes are big. They then argue that these assumptions are empirical statements, amenable to the empirical tests that they specify. The entailed agenda of such analysis, they contend, may help to further the joint agenda of both sociological and economic research on mobility, by establishing a tractable model of constrained multidimensionalism.

In “The Economic Basis of Social Class,” John Goldthorpe and Abigail McKnight then offer a defense of the social class schema that has become the

dominant classification for cross-national mobility research (following on Goldthorpe 1987 and then Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992), but this time highlighting the economic sensibility of the classification. Extending the arguments of Goldthorpe (2000) and Erikson and Goldthorpe (2002), they regard big classes as having (by and large) already passed the sorts of tests proposed by Grusky and Weeden in the previous chapter. To the extent that the dimensions of most concern in the Grusky-Weeden model can be said to be employment relations, Goldthorpe and McKnight make a case that is convincing.

Finally, in “Mobility: What? When? How?,” Andrew Abbott offers a wide-ranging discussion that challenges the entire enterprise of modeling intergenerational mobility via cross-generational occupational classifications from two arbitrary points in time. Consistent with his research on sequence analysis and task niches in the ecology of professionalization, he argues for alternative forms of aggregation that preserve the essential nature of mobility outcomes as career trajectories in a moving field of changing occupational destinations. His multidimensionalism is of an entirely different sort than the one pitched by Grusky and Weeden, emphasizing contingencies through time rather than across endowments, working conditions, and outcomes (except insofar as his entire schema could be situated within the outcomes space of Grusky and Weeden).

In Part Four of the volume, five contributions investigate specific mechanisms of intergenerational mobility, examining the ways in which educational outcomes are related to cognitive skills, demographic processes, decision-making orientations, and changing levels of inequality. In “Inequality of Conditions and Intergenerational Mobility: Changing Patterns of Educational Attainment in the United States,” I offer, with my coauthor Young-Mi Kim, an empirical analysis that challenges the position that inequality of family background resources necessarily regulates levels of intergenerational mobility. We show that the resource differentials that grew in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s cannot easily account for the accentuation of class differences in patterns of educational attainment.

In “Family Attainment Norms and Educational Stratification in the United States and Taiwan: The Effects of Parents’ School Transitions,” Robert D. Mare and Huey-Chi Chang test for subtle differences across both countries in the nonlinear effects of parental education on children’s educational attainments. Beyond further demonstrating the utility of the educational transitions model that Mare pioneered, Mare and Chang develop the

case that parental education affects children's educational attainments in two distinct ways: (1) by way of total completed education and (2) as a function of whether parents progressed successfully through the particular educational transition being modeled. This proposal formalizes the notion that parents' schooling represents a floor under the attainments of children, with a separable effect on children's own behavior, which is manifest either as rule following or direct socialization. Mare and Chang then show that, for both the United States and Taiwan, this specific nonlinear coding of parents' education fits the data better than alternatives. And, across the two societies, they use the effect sizes to explain important gender differences in educational stratification, noting in particular how the floor effect operates primarily for fathers in Taiwan and is transmitted only to sons. In the United States, where educational stratification has more closely approached a type of gender neutrality in process, the effects of mothers' and fathers' educational histories are similar (and for both boys and girls).

Next, Richard Breen and Meir Yaish offer "Testing the Breen-Goldthorpe Model of Educational Decision Making," which extends and then evaluates favorably the influential model proposed in Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) for the persistence of inequality of educational attainment across generations. Using data from the National Child Development Study (also analyzed by Dardanoni and colleagues in Chapter 3), they offer support for the crucial "relative risk aversion" assumption that generates the model's behavioral predictions. Notably, the chapter is an advance over prior versions of the Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) model itself, resting more solidly on a foundation that should be convincing to those who accept the generality of prospect theory.

In "Mental Ability—Uni or Multidimensional? An Analysis of Effects," David Epstein and Christopher Winship analyze the subscales of intelligence test scores, testing for differential effects on education and labor market outcomes. Building on prior work (see Winship and Korenman 1997), they find considerable reason to question unidimensional assumptions about the nature of intelligence and its effects on lifetime success. They show that quantitative ability and possibly verbal ability are the most important predictors of educational attainment, but that neither has direct effects on economic success. In contrast, they show that "fluent production" is the most important direct predictor of economic success, and yet it has no appreciable effects on educational attainment. Reconciling this set of findings, they speculate that education may serve as a relatively accurate signal to employers of

individuals' quantitative and verbal abilities. Why education does not signal the fluent production that is (seemingly) of interest to employers as well may represent a critique of the U.S. education system, but this is a topic for further investigation.

For the last chapter of the section, Flavio Cunha, James J. Heckman, and Salvador Navarro offer "Counterfactual Analysis of Inequality and Social Mobility," in which they fault the mobility literature for its descriptive focus, arguing for greater attention to the underlying counterfactual causal effects that generate intergenerational correlations of income and socioeconomic status (and with reference to the large literature that Heckman and his many colleagues have developed; see Heckman and Krueger 2003). This chapter, much like the two from the first part of the volume, demonstrates the need to separate systematic and chance determinants of socioeconomic attainments when modeling intergenerational mobility. And, touching more deeply on issues of causality, the chapter demonstrates that the mechanisms that have generated immobility in the past are amenable to change in the future, but that such changes may not necessarily alter levels of mobility.

The volume concludes with three chapters on the contexts of mobility that demonstrate the need to consider macroeconomic conditions when assessing the causes and consequences of income dynamics, vulnerability to poverty, and absolute levels of well-being. In "Estimating Individual Vulnerability to Poverty with Pseudo-Panel Data," François Bourguignon, Chor-ching Goh, and Dae Il Kim present a methodology for estimating the probability of falling below a poverty threshold, conditional on one's current level of earnings, using repeated cross-sectional data. Comparing their estimates to benchmarks from genuine panel data on Korea, they demonstrate the effectiveness of their approach. They thereby contribute a new set of techniques for investigating a crucial set of mobility outcomes: income dynamics in developing countries where only cross-sectional data are available but where the globalization literature suggests macroeconomic dynamics have substantial effects on vulnerable populations of relatively low-skilled workers.

In "Happiness Pays: An Analysis of Well-Being, Income, and Health Based on Russian Panel Data," Carol Graham, Andrew Eggers, and Sandip Sukhtankar estimate the consequences of a different type of shock—the causal pathway between unexplained earnings residuals and future earnings growth. They argue, with evidence from Russia, that individual-level shocks

to earnings levels are directly related to levels of happiness, and happiness in turn is directly related to further wage gains. Their chapter suggests that the recent interest in the behavioral dynamics of the earnings process may yield substantial insight for the economics literature.

In the final chapter of the volume, “The Panel-of-Countries Approach to Explaining Income Inequality: An Interdisciplinary Research Agenda,” Anthony B. Atkinson and Andrea Brandolini draw on more than two-dozen studies from both economics and sociology on the relationship between macroeconomic dynamics and the income distribution. They develop a theoretical framework for understanding the common findings and substantial variation found in the literature. And, especially when considered alongside the common themes developed in the prior two chapters, it is a fitting conclusion to the volume, as it lays out an agenda for further progress in understanding the evolution of inequality around the globe, with full recognition that we may be witnessing a crucial period of development in structures of inequality in advanced industrial, postindustrial, and developing societies.

FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR ENGAGEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT OF THESE THEMES

Mobility research represents one of the oldest areas of empirical research in the social sciences. And, if it is defined broadly to include the empirical literature on inequality and poverty, then it is also one of the largest. However, despite this depth of engagement, many important and well-established questions remain open for investigation. Each of the four parts of this volume focuses on areas that demand further research, and the contributions themselves make clear which specific questions need to be answered. In conclusion, I will discuss three broad areas that demand engagement, before ending the chapter with a discussion of the new frontiers that are opening up for cross-national studies of mobility processes.

First, the contributions to the volume demonstrate that we must refine the methods by which the amount of mobility is measured, not just for descriptive work, but also for tracking changes in mobility in response to policy interventions. As Chapter 11 by Cunha, Heckman, and Navarro demonstrates, refined and sustained attempts to prosecute causal questions on the mechanisms of mobility can clarify why we see the particular patterns of mobility outcomes that we do. And, as Jencks and Tach and then Dardanoni