

From Parents to Children: The Intergenerational Transmission of Advantage, edited by **John Ermisch, Markus Jäntti, and Timothy Smeeding**. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2012. 520 pp. \$59.95 paper. ISBN: 978-0-87154-045-4.

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Once considered the land of opportunity, ostensibly welcoming tired and poor “huddled masses” from other countries, the United States is now a land of strikingly little opportunity. While recent research provided evidence of relatively low mobility in the U.S., difficulties associated with intergenerational data and cross-national comparisons left some room for doubt. *From Parents to Children*, edited by John Ermish, Markus Jäntti, and Timothy Smeeding, takes a wrecking ball to that doubt. Based on intergenerational data from ten countries, covering children from birth through adulthood, the authors find – over and over again – that U.S. residents have stronger associations between parental socioeconomic status and children’s life chances than residents of the nine other countries studied. While cross-national, intergenerational mobility research is always plagued by data limitations and inconsistencies, this collaborative project provides a rare degree of measurement standardization (particularly for parental socioeconomic status or SES, measured with the International Standard Classification of Education across all countries), which enables more informative and convincing international comparisons. In outcomes ranging from labor market and educational attainment, to health and cognitive measures, youth in the U.S. experience less opportunity than those in other developed countries. The consistency of this finding, across so many countries and outcomes, is remarkable. Only in socio-emotional outcomes is U.S. inequality outstripped (by Sweden). Such low relative mobility belies political claims that higher inequality in the U.S. is justified by

greater mobility. Rather, the authors illustrate that inequality and relative mobility are negatively (though not necessarily causally) related.

Importantly, however, the book makes further contributions to mobility research by addressing questions about the mechanisms involved in intergenerational transmission, how transmission patterns change over the life course, and where policy could have the most power to counteract intergenerational inequality. For example, the authors find that SES differences emerge early in the life course across all countries, resulting in unequal preparation for school. In general, these differences remain fairly stable over the life course and continue into adulthood. Thus, education systems do not shrink the inequalities found among children at entry. In terms of mechanisms, the studies find that SES inequality is greater for cognitive than for sociobehavioral outcomes, which suggests cognitive skills may play a greater role in transmission. However, an intriguing study by Bingley, Corak, and Westergård-Nielsen (Chapter 18) finds that higher earning parents in Canada and Denmark are more often able to secure jobs for their children with their own employer. Not surprisingly, therefore, the results presented in the book suggest that inequality is transmitted between generations through multiple mechanisms, including cognitive skills, neighborhood choice, and social networks.

Policy recommendations include more equal access to high quality, early childhood education (which reduces but does not erase unequal opportunity), increased financial support for families at the low end of the income distribution, and support to improve parenting skills. While effects would undoubtedly be slow to appear, the authors point out that their consistent evidence of cross-national differences suggests that policy changes can improve mobility. With any policy, however, the book notes the importance of considering unintended consequences. For example, Chapter 15 by Massimiliano Bratti and Lorenzo Cappellari supports previous

evidence that increasing equality at one level of education (post-secondary enrollment in Italy in this case) can increase the importance of the type or quality of education received and perversely increase inequality at higher levels as parents work to maintain advantage for their children. The authors' appreciation of parental efforts to provide these advantages provides nuanced and thoughtful policy recommendations that largely – and refreshingly – direct efforts to areas outside the education system.

A particular strength of this volume is that the authors do not shy away from potentially contentious aspects of mobility. Chapter 16 by Silke Anger, for example, explicitly investigates the intergenerational transmission of cognitive and noncognitive skills using German data. Anger finds that cognitive skills are more strongly transmitted than noncognitive skills (i.e. personality measures) and that the education system does not seem to influence the transmission of cognitive skills. She suggests, therefore, that policies could target noncognitive skills to help increase mobility. This study relates to John Roemer's philosophical discussion of mobility (Chapter 20), in which he identifies a society's need to balance equality and comparative advantage (essentially the efficient allocation of individuals to occupations based on merit). As long as a society values families and allows parents to influence their children's preferences and personality, Roemer notes, it is undesirable to have pure equality.

Even beyond the substantive contributions discussed above, the organization of the book provides a conceptual map that could help organize the field of mobility research. Table 1.1 (pp. 20-21) summarizes all of the 16 individual studies that contribute to the overall project, indicating the measures of parental SES, the year of those measures, child outcomes, child age, and country of each study. Extended to include other mobility studies, one could imagine this or

similar tools enabling researchers to locate each study within the field and identify holes in the collective knowledge, thereby encouraging more comparable and productive research.

An impressive collection of mobility studies, by a cadre of respected authors, *From Parents to Children* establishes a high bar and will surely shape the future of mobility research. Particularly coupled with evidence from other recent books, including *Whither Opportunity* edited by Duncan and Murnane (2011) and *The Race Between Education and Technology* by Goldin and Katz (2008), this book sheds light on both the possibilities and limitations of the education system in efforts to counteract inequality. Sadly, the authors note that education systems do not reduce the importance of parental SES, but rather maintain early inequalities. While we may not want pure equality, as Roemer notes, surely the U.S. can do better than dead last in the mobility race. Hopefully such findings will serve as a battle cry to fight rising inequality and the disturbing lack of opportunity before they sentence future generations of children to be fated by their parents' status in the land of inopportunity.

References

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