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Intergenerational Relations, Socioeconomic Fracturing and Cultural Marginalization

Spatializing the Processes That Compound Inequalities

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Abstract

This paper explores the intergenerational transmission of inequalities from a geographical perspective. Using a multi-scalar approach that is sensitive to the interconnectedness and complexity of intergenerational (dis)continuities across different sites and scales, the paper offers insight into the production and reinforcement of spatial divides between and within population groups. It outlines how transfers of wealth, as well as broader social and cultural factors, enable more advantaged members of society to isolate themselves in the most privileged locations, whilst those from disadvantaged backgrounds are relegated to areas of deprivation. It starts with national level quantitative studies of residential segregation and provides nuance through meso and micro level qualitative research. In doing so, it reveals a series of socio-spatial processes that ensure economic positions are reproduced in circles of inheritances at all levels, with little overall change or chance of betterment. Against this background, the paper explores the role of demographic factors in further stratifying geographical and historical place-specific outcomes. The aim is to compare and link inherited disadvantage to intersectional inequalities based on gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, age, disability and religion. Developing an understanding of the intergenerational processes that refract stratification processes is seen as vital to understanding the continual rise in inequalities across the West.

Keywords

Inequality; Intergenerational Relations; Intersectionality; Residential Segregation; Social Mobility

Bios

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Introduction

There has long been substantial interest in societal inequalities and the extent to which they may result from economic or social and cultural factors. The consequences of a group or individual's unequal access to resources, privilege, power and control in a society can combine and accumulate over a single life course, and more specifically across generations, to influence income, education and occupational status. In turn, these factors serve as important contributors to disparity in exposure to risks and resources linked to living and working conditions. In recent decades, the OECD (2015) has reported work on income inequality and segregation and multiple western governments have sought to identify interventions at various societal levels that will be effective in reducing and ultimately eliminating inequalities. Similarly, academic authors have sought to understand how inequalities develop and serve to reduce access to a broad range of societal resources and opportunities required for upwards mobility. Wilkinson and Pickett's (2009) book *The Spirit Level* highlights the long-term consequences of exposure to adversity including the negative social processes that widening disparities produce for nation states. Similarly, Thomas Piketty's (2014) book *Capital in the 21st Century* considers both how and why nations become unequal as disparities between economic and social classes sustain and reinforce advantage and disadvantage over time.

This paper explores the intergenerational transmission of inequalities from a geographical perspective. In particular, it outlines how intergenerational inheritances, including both wealth transfers – intentional and unintentional – and the transmission of broader social and cultural class dimensions from one generation to the next, are projected across space. Building on research documenting how intergenerational relations are exacerbating existing spatial divides between population groups, whilst also forging new factions within population groups (e.g. Sharkey 2013; van Ham et al. 2014), it explains how inequalities become embedded through a range of processes enacted at multiple sites and scales. Within the spatial context in which individuals live, the spatial expressions of social inequalities are commonly viewed through the lens of residential segregation. Here, concern is levelled at the potential for individuals to live separate lives so that, within a city, individuals may be together, but in terms of their place of residence and the spatial organization of daily life they may exist apart (see, for instance, Cattle 2001; Casey 2016).

There is, however, a paradox at play. While attention on inequalities has grown, and the gap between two ends of the income distribution has increased in the majority of Western nation states (Ohlsson et al. 2009; Picketty 2014), the urban areas in the Western world and in some places the neighbourhoods within Western cities are becoming increasingly culturally and racially diverse (Zwiers et al. 2018). Thus, population-level inequality increases are simultaneously associated at the macro scale with spatial inequality that has decreased. Broadly speaking, at a national level, diversity has risen so that there is more potential for individuals from different cultural, religious or ethnic backgrounds to meet in the course of day-to-day life. We suggest in what follows that social concern therefore needs to shift away from the cultural towards the social and economic, at least in part. Recent reports in the UK provide evidence that ethnic segregation has reduced (see, for instance, Catney 2010; Harris 2017). By contrast, the heralded reduction in the ratio of incomes at the 90th and 10th percentiles that resulted from the 2007-08 financial crisis was short lived (Lavery 2015). Thus, when we view the world at meso and micro scales we see that the concentration of wealth within society and spatially within cities through segregation is increasing within many Western nations such that individuals

within one socio-economic group are less likely to live in proximity to and come into contact with individuals from other socio-economic groups regardless of any shared racial characteristics (Kukk et al. 2018).

It follows that, if segregation is primarily the spatial expression of wealth and income inequalities, then a key concern in terms of understanding individual barriers to social mobility lies in understanding how individuals sort into and out of social and residential spaces. If sorting is a benign, or even random, process without structure, then access to resources and both social and place advantages is not problematic – each individual or household has an equal opportunity to gain access. If, on the other hand, the sorting is even slightly structured then understanding the processes behind that structure and the key determinants that give rise to the outcomes we view is crucial (see, for instance, Manley and van Ham 2011; Hedman and van Ham 2012).

Thus, the continual rise of income and wealth inequalities is of wider interest because of the spatial fixity that appears alongside. What much of the current inequalities literature lacks is a longitudinal connection that integrates the sorting into spatially located neighbourhoods over the life course. Thus, whilst inequalities at any one point in time clearly matter, with an increased distance between the top and bottom ends of the distribution being repeatedly identified as a barrier to mobility in society (Blanden et al. 2005; Breen 2004; Lamont et al. 2014; Nunn et al. 2007), the connectivity between and through generations has been underplayed. One of the few authors to identify and analyse this issue is David Willetts (2011) in *The Pinch*, a popular research monograph, which explores the increasing disparities between generations as generative of the economic and social disparities within generations. Willetts shows how those located towards the upper end of the middle classes are tightening their grip on the opportunities available for the next generation negatively affecting the chances of upward mobility for those without equal access to such parental resources. This is a theme to which we return at the end of this essay. However, we start by charting the macro structures through which individuals access their places of residences and other spaces, which ultimately lock in the ‘spatial opportunity structures’ that they experience (Galster and Sharkey 2017).

The overarching rationale behind the approach presented here is to encourage a consideration of a) the structures that govern the differences in space such that *where* an individual lives conditions many of the opportunities they can access; and, b) the intergenerational structures that govern the spatiality of individual life courses such that who is able to access different spaces is not even. This latter concern necessarily encompasses an interest in the extent to which the intergenerational production of inequalities may be stratified according to gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, age, disability and religion as it is clear that the transmission of advantages and disadvantages from one generation to the next is part of a broader complex of inheritances that can differentiate impacts at the level of the individual.

Macro Inequalities

At the macro level the economic inequalities story is one of divergence. When exploring income and wealth it is clear that, at the population level, the gap between those who are at the top end of the distribution and those who are not has been growing substantially over many decades (Dorling 2014; Stiglitz 2011). A brief hiatus in the initial aftermath of the global financial crisis which saw inequalities fall – through the drop in financial returns on investments rather than a

growth for those at the bottom end of the income distribution – has been superseded by a continuation of earlier growth in inequalities between economic and social classes (Onaran and Guschanski 2016). More critically, the rank order of the population is unchanging. Those at the top of the distribution remain at the top. Those at the bottom of the distribution also remain in position. If one of the overall goals of government policy and academic research is to point to a means through which a fairer and more just society can be formed, then the presence of elastic inequalities – inequalities whereby the distribution remains regardless of the stretch – should be of key concern (MacLeavy and Manley 2018).

However, exploring the distribution of income at the macro level does not provide a nuanced picture of the processes or outcomes that individuals will experience, as institutional, cultural and socio-historical variables can produce different outcomes for different cities and different groups. At the city level, increases in inequalities can be driven by major economic dynamics associated with the shift from industrial to post-industrial labour markets. Indeed, towards the end of the twentieth century, Saskia Sassen (1990; see also 2001) reasoned that an emergent trend in the major cities of the world would be the increased polarization of groups along social and economic lines. The reduction in manufacturing employment and the rise of the post-industrial economy – she predicted – would result in a ‘hollowing out’ of the middle groups, with rises in employment for both the well qualified professionals and managers and the expansion of employment for the low skilled and less well educated as providers of the services underpinning the new economy. In the decades after the publication of the *Global City* thesis, the academic literature has debated the effectiveness of this theory, with some such as Hamnett (1994; 1996) demonstrating that such polarization had not transpired in London. Manley and Johnston (2014) followed up this analysis with a demonstration that the professionalization of the workforce has not transpired, and in fact halted, between the Census dates of 2001 and 2011. Instead, what is happening in London is the reorganization of the spaces in which individuals live so that neighbourhoods at the local level are changing status with working class populations being pushed to the periphery of the capital and replaced in the inner city by greater concentrations of professional workers (Manley et al. 2015).

Expanding out from the case study of London, a recent exploration of capital cities across the globe has provided a more nuanced picture of contemporary urban dynamics (see Tammaru et al. 2015). The experience of London does not conform perfectly to Sassen’s (1990) theory, but it is not an isolated case: increased social polarization in many of the Western capitals including Madrid, Tallinn, Oslo and Stockholm is leading to the increased spatial segregation of different income groups (van Ham et al. 2016). Cross national comparison reveals the extent to which this process is mediated by geographical and historical place-specific factors, including different welfare state structures which yield different labour markets and rates of participation for migrant workers (Esping-Andersen 1990; 1993). Even within the same national context, the particular social and economic history of individual cities can produce differences in the post-industrial character and social composition of the labour market with relative homogeneity in neighbourhoods within the industrial heartlands when compared to the more service-sector orientated cities. Thus, we have a picture whereby the economic restructuring and labour market differentiation is progressing and altering the distribution of the population within cities, albeit at different rates. If the space across the city is not economically, socially and culturally differentiated in terms of the potential for advantages to be accrued to the individuals living there, then this is not necessarily an issue. The debates around the ‘right to the city’ (Lefebvre 1996) are important, but the impact of exclusionary access does not concern. However, if the

space does produce differences in outcomes within the city – the so-called ‘neighbourhood effects’ argument – then there is a spatial case to explore.

Meso Level Inequalities

The neighbourhood effects literature suggests that the residential context in which an individual life can have a substantial impact on their life course outcomes (see van Ham et al. 2012; Manley et al. 2013). Effects have been identified on many dimensions of individual outcomes including health, education, employment and social attitudes. Of particular interest to the current discussion is the identification of the neighbourhood as one of the sites through which later life success of children can be influenced. Thus, if segregation is the spatial expression of societal inequalities and the neighbourhood can impact individual outcomes, then the societal inequalities can directly *and* indirectly impact individuals. Through the neighbourhood they become a (further) barrier to social mobility and later life achievement. Logan’s (1978) analysis of the stratification of place implies that local areas confer a set of advantages and disadvantages to residents that become ever greater over time, while more recent research in Canada has demonstrated that the neighbourhood context in which individuals were born can have a long and lasting impact on their life course outcomes, even when they departed from that neighbourhood relatively early in life (Glass and Bilal 2016).

Similarly, research in Sweden (van Ham et al. 2014), the Netherlands (de Vujist et al. 2017) and the US (Sharkey 2013) has demonstrated that there are spatial inheritances relating to the neighbourhood context in which an individual grows up and the subsequent neighbourhood ‘career’ they go on to experience. Van Ham and colleagues (2014) use Swedish register data to explore the reproduction of neighbourhood context in a cohort of home leavers in 1990. Following their subsequent life course, they determine that the neighbourhood an individual grew up in is highly predictive of the type of neighbourhood that they will go on to live in later in life. Of course, there are many processes that can lead to this outcome and in some cases, it is likely to be driven by homophily – people actively seek out others who are similar to themselves for positive interactions (Dean and Pryce 2017). However, it is likely that some of the reproduction of the ‘truly disadvantaged’ (Wilson 1987) will be a consequence of the negative externalities accrued during childhood in those neighbourhoods with fewer resources. This is seen in the relative difficulty with which individuals from the poorest neighbourhoods achieve later life access to the wealthiest neighbourhoods (van Ham et al. 2014).

These findings were repeated using Dutch register data in The Netherlands where a similar degree of spatial reproduction was identified (de Vujist et al. 2017). Using comparative data and methods to analyse the socio-spatial transitions in England, Sweden, Estonia and The Netherlands, Nieuwenhuis and colleagues (2017) further confirm these findings. In the US context, the work of Sharkey (2013) has demonstrated that over a long period of time those individuals who grow up in a deprived neighbourhood are much more likely to themselves live in a deprived neighbourhood as adults. As a result, their children will also grow up in a deprived neighbourhood reproducing the spatial inequality. Moreover, if the adults had parents who also grew up in poverty then their life chances are further diminished with lower educational success and employment opportunities. What this literature points to is a locking into place of disadvantage so that groups are circulating in different, albeit often similarly located but socially distinct residential locations.

Of course, the neighbourhood is not the only spatial context that individuals experience. Van Ham and Tammaru (2016) suggest there is a multitude of sites at which context can have influence including the workplace, leisure spaces, cultural spaces and the schools that children attend. Manley and colleagues (2018) highlight a further influence through research that compares the contribution of the household compared to the neighbourhood of residence. Using data from Sweden and comparing siblings who grow up in the same neighbourhood and household to individuals who grew up in the same neighbourhood but in separate households, they demonstrate that the local household environment has a substantial impact on the subsequent spatial career of individuals, relegating the neighbourhood to a secondary position. Thus, it is at the micro scale at which we need to investigate the impact of stratification and the smaller scale interactions that write into individual life courses how individuals are affected by inequalities.

Micro Inequalities

Moving from the neighbourhood down to the level of the individual involves a shift focus from the residential mobility literature to the scaffolding of support that individuals receive and experience from their parents, wider family members and friends. This can include the role of money as well as time or expertise in helping individuals to navigate the contemporary labour market, housing market or other significant socio-economic spheres. Many accounts of the post-industrial economy position growing disparities of income and wealth as the consequence of contemporary labour market demands for not only high skilled service workers but also a vast array of unskilled labour (e.g. Holmes and Mayhew 2015). However, work at the micro scale has drawn attention to the supply side processes underlying the socio-spatial patterns that are now emerging between and within cities (e.g. McDowell 2003). An empirical focus on the groups employed within different niches of the labour market can therefore be useful in highlighting the role of social and cultural capital in reproducing and deepening inequalities in comparative life chances of specific urban populations. Building on aforementioned accounts of the importance of place in analysing and explaining inequalities, such research points to the role of community and family networks in mediating the life chances of individuals inhabiting a specific local context, as well as the intergenerational (dis)continuities between those who conform to the 'path' suggested by their neighbourhood origin and those who are 'footloose'. It demonstrates that whilst the social networks and cultures pertaining to different neighbourhoods can affect the labour market positions of residents, intergenerational relations are able to disrupt and alter the trajectories of individuals within these particular social and spatial contexts by creating different capacities to cope with disadvantages being wrought by processes of global economic restructuring.

Coulter's (2018) work in the UK, for instance, details how intergenerational transfers of wealth from parents to children for the purchase of housing can bestow a form of privilege that increases the recipient's chances of upward social mobility when compared those without the equivalent means. Unable to benefit from house price inflation, the opportunities for those who are unable to buy a dwelling are further restricted by the need to pay private rent (limiting an individual's ability to take advantage of unpaid internships as a way of accessing some professions and/or necessitating the need to take on additional supplementary work in order to 'make ends meet'). Furthermore, the stratification of young adults' housing outcomes by parental resource can be exacerbated through the establishment intra-generational relationships

set up between landlord and tenant. It is increasingly common for private renting to involve peer-to-peer arrangements, with payments being made by renters to their owner-occupying peers for a room that is let at market rate (Walker and Jeraj 2016). With housing options becoming more dependent on family background, so too are the life trajectories of young people. While home ownership helps some to insulate themselves in the most privileged locations, those from disadvantaged backgrounds often are relegated to areas of deprivation where there is a 'spatial mismatch' between the education or skills of residents and the types of jobs available locally. This can create an unemployed 'ghetto' underclass, which then serves as an abjectifying category that has a further and lasting effect on individual opportunities and job prospects. Thus, housing operates as a generator of inequalities not only because owner-occupancy typically reduces lifetime housing costs whilst providing security, tax advantages, collateral and the opportunity to accumulate and release equity, but also because those without the means to purchase are more vulnerable to indirect forms of economic, social and cultural disadvantage. Moreover, housing tenure shapes personal attributes (knowledge, skills and experience) that further affect labour market participation and career progression (Ermisch and Halpin 2004).

The point is not (just) that rich and poor people are prone to live in different places through a process of class sorting in the housing and labour markets; nor is it simply that that space and place help to create wealth and poverty in a manner that sustains the cultural reproduction of economic inequalities. It is that the processes and reproductions which result from the uneven fortunes of individuals are the product of intergenerational transfers that intersect with the power of place to produce positive or negative associations. This is particularly evident in the present moment as state welfare is being retrenched and in its place the family framed as the foundation of all social assistance (see, for example, Cameron 2015). Feminist scholars have long highlighted the negative impacts of an emphasis on familial forms of welfare in terms of a reliance on unpaid domestic labour, and its typical performance by women. Yet there are further consequences of assuming that all families are equally well resourced and able to support their kin. While some may be able to secure or even advance the social position of their offspring, there are an increasing number of others that are now finding themselves subject to successive waves of economic and social pressure reducing their capacity to support their family members' advancement. Those in the middle of the income distribution are particularly feeling the 'squeeze' resultant from the neoliberal ethos of meritocratic advancement and finding their prospects are shrinking as a result of their inability to individually counteract the effects of depressed wage levels, decreased job security and a steep rise in the number of hours worked for wages per household (MacLeavy and Manley 2018; see also Fraser 2013).

Moreover, we see that the intergenerational production of inequalities may be further stratified according to gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, age, disability and religion. Axes of social differentiation remain relatively under-examined in debates about intergenerational transmissions owing to a tendency to assume these are non-capitalist social relations. Yet an intersectional approach provides an important means of examining personal experiences of the increase in inequalities in Western nations. An intersectional approach is important for both ethnographic and statistical analyses into the households, neighbourhoods and urban spheres facing the impact of growing disparities of fortune, as well as the feelings of discontent with which these have recently been associated. Building on qualitative research interrogating the interrelationships between class and other forms of social hierarchy and division, recent quantitative work has begun to address the issue of intersectionality and acknowledge that

binary categories of belonging are not sufficient for understanding the complexities of modern society (see, for instance, Green et al. 2017; Wemrell et al. 2017; Jones et al. 2018). By directing attention towards the substantial differences that may exist within families and households, an intersectional framework helps to illuminate the diversity of embodied inequalities that are implicated in systems of social stratification. Recent studies of work and employment, for example, have shown us that men and women experience the post-industrial economy differently, with men often found to be most at risk of unemployment as a consequence of contemporary labour market transitions (Boyer et al. 2017). Similarly, we know that state welfare programmes may entrench rather than mitigate forms of gender inequality (MacLeavy 2011), while forms of familial welfare (most notably support with housing) have been found to be mediated by gender (Coulter 2018). Such work underlines the danger in thinking about various forms of difference in isolation. We need to compare and link inherited disadvantage to intersectional inequalities based on gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, age, disability and religion. It is at the level of the individual that the relations between the macro, meso and micro are established. The dynamics of the post-industrial economy do not impinge in a direct way upon the individual, but rather are brought about by variables that mediate place-specific factors and socio-cultural differences between groups.

Conclusions

By linking together research from multiple national contexts it is clear that inequalities are growing. It is also clear that the reproduction of those inequalities is extending through generations, so that those individuals growing up in less well-off circumstances are more likely to be living in similar, less well-off places when they transition into their own independent life course. By contrast, those who are brought up in wealthier neighbourhoods appear to have stronger buffering such that they are less likely than their poorer cohort partners to be exposed to less well-off neighbourhoods later in life. This suggests that inequalities are increasingly becoming manifest in spatial divides which in turn yield unequal, differentiated access to the means and mechanisms for upward social mobility. Hence the access to and distribution of the social, political, economic and cultural resources available in a society becomes increasingly uneven over time. In this regard it is essential to understand the close relationship between inequality and residential segregation as spatial fixity is part of the story behind reduced social mobility. It is also important to consider how structures are reinforced over generations so that people repeat the spatial exposures in their adult life that they had in their childhood. Analysing the relationship between inequality and residential segregation in a single period gives only a limited perspective on the problem. Individuals need to be followed over time and through space to understand all the influences that act upon them. These include socio-economic factors which can generate spatial divides – work, education and access to material goods, products and services – as well as social and cultural characteristics such as gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, age, disability and religion. These factors show the importance of subjective and intersubjective experiences of disparity demonstrating that inequality is a complex, evolving and multifaceted phenomenon.

Recognition and demonstration of the fact that those who have advantages (in the labour or housing market, for instance) are able to use them to benefit further is necessary to shift the public and political dialogue around inequalities. By underlining the relational nature of inequality, a longitudinal approach may – for instance – provide support for egalitarian policies.

The relational nature of inequality is rooted in understanding the value of adopting an empirical focus that goes beyond the study of people that live in circumstances of poverty and disadvantage. This is not simply because those experiencing economic and other forms of marginality do not always group together, as they may equally be scattered or 'rootless' as a result of life circumstances or unable to coalesce in a virtual or viral movement similar to the middle class Occupy protests around 2011-12. Rather it is because the circumstances of those at the bottom end of the income distribution are produced as the result of the intense and increasing concentrations of wealth that do not 'trickle down' but instead yield further inequalities because the concentration 'floods upwards'. Thus, striving equality of opportunity is, in itself, insufficient because the ability to take advantage of the opportunities is not equally spread: instead policy focus needs to shift towards explicit interventions to bolster the opportunities for those less able to the exclusion of the advantaged.

The need to develop a geographical understanding of the intergenerational relations that compound inequalities is pressing. Social and spatial inequalities remain unaddressed in the context of welfare austerity. Contemporary research suggests people are unequal not simply because of their spatial closeness or proximity, but because extreme disparities lead to structural barriers to prosperity that exacerbate existing spatial divides between groups, whilst also forging new factions within a population inhabiting the same residential space. In the context of growing elite capture of economic and political power, it is important to recognise the continuum between positive and negative experiences of intergenerational transfer, as well as the possibilities of disenfranchisement and disillusionment that relate to the race and gender politics of labour market rejuvenation persistently focusing on the elite service sector and the requirements of global capital. In addition, we must revisit the role of the state in seeking only to ameliorate the problems of poverty and deprivation rather than tackle the dynamics of inequalities that underlie their production (Abrahamian 2018).

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