

Climbing the social ladder is strongly influenced by your grandparents' class

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For the first time, a study has suggested that the position of grandparents in the British class system has a direct effect on which class their grandchildren belong to. It has long been accepted that parents' social standing has a strong influence on children's education, job prospects, and earning power. However, this study by researchers from the University of Oxford and Durham University shows that even when the influence of parents has been taken into account, the odds of grandchildren going into professional or managerial occupations rather than unskilled manual occupations are at least two and a half times better if their grandparents were themselves in professional-managerial positions rather than unskilled manual occupations.

This latest research, published in the *American Sociological Review*, finds that the social advantages and disadvantages that are transmitted across generations are a lot more durable and persistent than previously thought. It establishes a statistically significant association between grandparents' and grandchildren's class positions, even after the parents' education, income, and wealth (such as whether they are home-owners) are taken into account.

The researchers analyzed data collected in three nationally representative surveys of over 17,000 Britons born in 1946, 1958, and 1970 respectively. For the studies, cohort members were asked to reveal their occupation as well as the occupation of their father and grandfather. The researchers found that among men with both parents and grandparents in the professional-managerial class, 80% stayed in those advantaged

positions. But among men with long-range upwardly mobile parents (i.e., grandparents in unskilled manual occupations and parents in professional-managerial occupations), only 61% managed to stay there. For women, this "grandparents effect" was less strong at 66% and 51% respectively.

Where grandparents were from a high social class and the parents experienced downward [social mobility](#), the "grandparents effect" appeared stronger, pushing the grandchild back up the social ladder. The study says in such cases there was "a higher level of counter mobility" as though grandparents' class background is correcting the "mobility mistake" made by the parents.

Researcher Dr. Tak Wing Chan, from the Department of Sociology at the University of Oxford, said: "The 'grandparents effect' in social mobility is found to operate throughout society and is not restricted to the top or bottom of the social class structure in Britain. It may work through a number of channels including the inheritance of wealth and property, and may be aided by durable social institutions such as generation-skipping trusts, residential segregation, and other demographic processes. Further investigation needs to be done to establish the precise mechanisms by which the grandparents effect endures, but our study of 17,000 Britons reveals that grandparents have a substantial effect on where their grandchildren end up in the British [class](#) system."

Researcher Dr. Vikki Boliver, from the School of Applied Social Sciences at Durham University, said: "Numerous studies have demonstrated that social origins strongly predict social destinations, but almost all social mobility studies to date have only examined two generations, parents and children. Although a handful of studies have looked at social mobility patterns of three generations, this is the first time that researchers have found that an individual's fortunes may depend on the attributes and experiences of more distant ancestors such

as grandparents."

The researchers say cross-national comparative research is under way to explore whether the grandparents effect in social mobility is also found in other countries.

More information: "The Grandparents Effect in Social Mobility: Evidence from British Birth Cohort Studies" by Tak Wing Chan and Vikki Boliver is published in the online early edition of the *American Sociological Review*. It will appear in the August print edition of the journal.

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