

How insights into intergenerational transmission can increase social mobility

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While it is known that socioeconomic outcomes are correlated across generations, the mechanisms by which this happens are still poorly understood. The EU-supported project UNITRAN adopted a cross-disciplinary perspective to refresh existing theories and empirical evidence.

Intergenerational transmissions refer to the ways in which parents pass endowments and resources, such as health, abilities and preferences, on to their [children](#). If policies to reduce inequality are to be successful, how disabling transmissions—such as poor educational outcomes – operate, have to be better grasped so that the negative cycles can be broken.

The UNITRAN project set out to develop and apply improved models to investigate the process of intergenerational transmissions, as well as its causes and consequences. The team did so by combining insights from economics theory and practice, along with those from sociology.

The project found that despite each discipline having blind spots, combining their approaches actually yielded unique insights. Using longitudinal data alongside state-of-the-art econometric methods to analyse aspects such as cultural

endowments, educational expectations, the role of the extended family and educational decision making, resulted in knowledge of significant value to [policy makers](#) charged with increasing [social mobility](#).

Like parent, like child

The two principal modes for intergenerational transmission have typically been identified by researchers as being through genetic inheritance and shared environment.

"These mechanisms help explain why children tend to resemble their parents with empirical regularity, when it comes to socioeconomic outcomes such as education, income and health," project coordinator Prof Mads Meier Jæger explains." For example, it has been demonstrated that family background factors shared by siblings account for almost half of all observable differences in educational attainment in the populations studied."

The team started by developing new theories and concepts. From these they proposed a range of hypotheses to test. For example, that children do better in school if their parents provide rich home learning environments and do worse if they have more siblings. They then tested these empirically against large scale data from different countries, using state-of-the-art statistical methods. One interesting finding was that parents' efforts to get their children to read more had two benefits: children read more throughout childhood and they consistently had better academic performance than those who read less.

Enabling everyone to realize their full potential

Understanding how family background affects children's socioeconomic outcomes is important for designing social and family policies that seek to afford children equal opportunities. As Prof Jæger summarises, "For example, our [results](#) could be

used to design early interventions and [health](#) programmes that compensate for a lack of economic, cultural, and social resources in vulnerable families."

One key result of UNITRAN was that, although it is known that family background is very important for children's socioeconomic outcomes, the specific aspects that matter most are not still well-understood.

To reveal these, in a new project the team will seek to identify precisely what constitutes a 'good' learning environment. In other words, to uncover what aspects of routines, time use, parental inputs and social support systems, are particularly conducive to children's intellectual, social, and emotional growth.

In another [project](#) the researchers will collect new data on identical and fraternal twins to study how genetic and environmental aspects of [family](#) background shape children's cultural resources and preferences, which in turn affects their socioeconomic outcomes.

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