Socio-Spatial Inequalities and Intergenerational Dependencies

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Introduction (1)

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 have been explored, particularly how and why disadvantage can combine and accumulate over not only a single life course, but also over multiple generations, to influence income, education and occupational status. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (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 given documentation of the long-run impacts of children growing up poor. Although economic growth has done much to improve material conditions across Western post-industrial nations, research has shown the life diminishing effects of prioritizing growth over equality as inequalities develop and serve to reduce access to a broad range of societal resources and opportunities required for upwards mobility. Epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate 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, economist Thomas Piketty's (2014) book *Capital in the Twenty-First 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 chapter 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 existing research documenting how intergenerational relations are exacerbating existing spatial divides between population groups, whilst also forging new factions within population groups (for example, 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 geographic context in which individuals live, the spatial expressions of social inequalities are commonly viewed through the lens of residential segregation. Here, concern is directed at the potential for individuals to live separate lives so that while individuals may live in the same city, their places of residence, schooling and wider everyday life activities may be spatially distinct (see Cantle 2001; Casey 2016). It is important to note that residential segregation has persisted in spite of the fact that, broadly speaking, at a national level, diversity has risen so there is greater potential for individuals from different cultural, religious or ethnic backgrounds to meet in the course of day-to-day life. Moreover, Western cities have become increasingly culturally and racially diverse (Catney 2016; Harris 2017; Zwiers et al. 2018). Therefore, as population-level economic inequality increases, there is a simultaneous macro scale decrease in spatial inequality that is not evident at the neighborhood scale. Despite this, the neighborhood remains a critical site in which groups and individuals can be located and place-based remedies installed. Segregated communities prevent investment; mixed communities allow partnerships and integration. In what follows, we suggest that concern therefore needs to shift away from the cultural towards the economic and its social outcomes. In many Western countries, the gap between the extremes of the income distribution has increased and become embedded in and *through* residential location and inhabitants' daily activity patterns (Ohlsson et al. 2009; Piketty 2014). 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 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 religious or racial characteristics (Kukk et al. 2019). The "class" dynamics of residential segregation are cumulative and self-reinforcing.

We propose that segregation is, at least in part, the spatial expression of wealth and income inequalities. Linking inequalities to intergenerational class mobility, we further suggest that a key concern in terms of understanding individual barriers to upward 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 regardless of their origin class has an equal opportunity to gain access to certain destinations. If, on the other hand, 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 (Manley and van Ham 2011; Hedman and van Ham 2012). In this instance, the continual rise of income and wealth inequalities is of wider interest because of the spatial fixity that appears alongside it. What much of the current literature lacks is a longitudinal connection that integrates into accounts of the relationship between inequalities and mobility the sorting of people into socio-economically distinct neighborhoods over the life course. 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 place connectivity between and through generations has been underplayed. One of the few authors to identify and analyze the intergenerational transmission of advantages and disadvantages is David Willetts (2011) in *The Pinch*. 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 (see also Friedman and Laurison 2019). Building on this, we are particularly concerned with the significance and value of connections forged through place and how increasing disparities between residential groups are generative of economic and social disparities within generations.

We start by charting the macro structures through which individuals access their places of residence and other spaces, which ultimately lock in the "spatial opportunity structures" that they experience (Galster and Sharkey 2017:1). The overarching rationale is to encourage a consideration of a) the structures that govern 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. We then reflect upon the life-diminishing consequences of the resultant spatial differentiation: how the greater ability of advantaged individuals and households to maintain (or improve) their position by setting their superior resources against any perceived threats causes adverse effects for those less able to adapt, as exemplified by the current pandemic. Just like the Spanish Flu pandemic in the early 1900s, the Covid-19 pandemic has been extremely spatialized (Bambra et al. 2020). Not only have the changes it has provoked been experienced in a spatially differentiated way, but they have shed light on the extent to which growing inequalities matter to the health and wellbeing of the collective.

Macro inequalities (1)

At the macro level, the story of household income and wealth is one of divergence. In some of the richest countries, 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 population level inequalities fall—through the drop in financial returns on investments, rather than as a result of wage growth for those at the bottom end of the income distribution—has been superseded by a continuation of earlier increases 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 is to secure a means through which a fairer and more just society can be formed, then the presence of elastic inequalities (that is, inequalities whereby the distribution remains regardless of the stretch) should be of political concern (MacLeavy and Manley 2018). Any action needs to take account of the application of neoliberal policies that have contributed to the destructive structural effects of globalization, for this is also a story set in the context of long-term changes in the global economy. Focusing on the long-term decline of manufacturing, economists Patricia Rice and Anthony Venables (2020) note that patterns of inequality are largely set by social and institutional mechanisms. As such, industry once in decline has struggled to adjust to successive economic shocks, with persistent underdevelopment resulting in spillover effects between firms causing economic activity to cluster elsewhere. As a result, industrial decline has led to entrenched place-based exclusion for almost 60 years: the consequence of this is that, once in decline, it is very difficult to change the course of neighborhoods and current patterns of inequality are persistent.

However, exploring the distribution of income and wealth 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 labor markets. Towards the end of the twentieth century, sociologist 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 years after the publication of the *Global City* thesis, the academic literature has debated the effectiveness of this theory. Early geographical interlocutors such as Chris Hamnett (1994, 1996) found that this polarization had not transpired in London. Two decades later, David Manley and Ron Johnston (2014) followed up this analysis with a demonstration that the "professionalization" of the workforce had still not transpired, and had in fact halted, during the 2000s. However, more recent research has found that in all three of the cities that were the focus of Sassen's work there has been a move towards professionalization, with the changes in New York being the greatest, then London and finally Tokyo. Thus, even in a globalized world where everything appears interconnected and dependent, local contexts influence social relationships and structures (van Ham et al. 2020; Manley et al. 2015).

Expanding out from these case studies, an exploration of Western capital cities has provided a more nuanced picture of contemporary urban dynamics. Although they do not conform perfectly to Sassen's theory, there is evidence of increasing social polarization in many capitals including Madrid, Tallinn, Oslo and Stockholm, which 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 that yield different labor markets and rates of participation for migrant workers (Esping-Andersen 1990, 1993). Even within the same country, cities have their own specific social and economic histories, and within cities there are different types of neighborhoods, both of which lead to differences in their characters and social compositions. Applying this directly to labor markets, we observe relative homogeneity in job opportunities in neighborhoods within the "old" industrial cities and the neighbourhoods around the old factory locations, which contrasts with relative diversity of opportunities in those cities which have regenerated and are more service-sector oriented. Thus, as economic restructuring and labor market differentiation progresses, it alters the social and economic structures and the distribution of the population within cities, albeit at different rates. The impact of this differentiation leads to exclusionary access to employment and these differences both within and between cities can produce differences in outcomes for the residents —the so-called "neighborhood effects" argument (van Ham et al. 2012). This means, then, there is a case for exploring the spatiality of economic transitions on residents and their life courses.

Meso level inequalities (1)

The neighborhood effects literature suggests that the residential context in which individuals live can have a substantial impact on their life course outcomes (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. Successive Western governments have sought to invest in places through area-based regeneration, either through the renewal or mixing of housing stock or through larger-scale labor market interventions. Within the context of this chapter particular interest is paid to the identification of the neighborhood as one of the sites through which the later life success of children can be influenced. The key insight is that if segregation is the spatial expression of societal inequalities and the neighborhood can impact individual outcomes, then the societal inequalities can directly *and* indirectly impact individuals. Through the neighborhood, inequalities can become a (further) barrier to social mobility and later life achievement. Sociologist John 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. Furthermore, recent research in Canada has shown that the neighborhood context in which individuals are born can have a long and lasting impact on their life course outcomes, even if they depart from that neighborhood 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 neighborhood context in which an individual grows up and the subsequent neighborhood career they go on to experience. Geographer Maarten van Ham and colleagues (2014) used Swedish register data to explore the reproduction of neighborhood context in a cohort of home leavers in 1990. Following their subsequent life course, they determined that the neighborhood in which an individual grows up is highly predictive of the type of neighborhood 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 them 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 neighborhoods with fewer resources. This is seen in the relative difficulty with which individuals from the poorest neighborhoods achieve later life access to the wealthiest neighborhoods (van Ham et al. 2014; Manley et al. 2020). van Ham et al's study was 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 analyze the socio-spatial transitions in England, Sweden, Estonia and the Netherlands, Nieuwenhuis and colleagues (2017) also confirm these findings. In the US context, the work of sociologist Patrick Sharkey (2013) has demonstrated that over a long period of time those individuals who grow up in a deprived neighborhood are much more likely to themselves live in a deprived neighborhood as adults. As a result, their children will also grow up in a deprived neighborhood 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 neighborhood 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 (2020) highlight a further influence through research that compares the contribution of the household to the neighborhood of residence. Using data from Sweden and comparing siblings who grow up in the same neighborhood and household, to individuals who grow up in the same neighborhood but in separate households, they demonstrate that the local household environment has a substantial impact on the subsequent spatial career of individuals, relegating the neighborhood to a secondary position. Thus, it is at the micro scale at which we need to investigate the impact of stratification and the interpersonal interactions that write into individual life courses how individuals are affected by inequalities.

Micro inequalities (1)

Moving from the neighborhood to the individual involves a shift in focus from the residential mobility literature to the scaffolding of support that individuals receive and experience from parents, wider family members and friends. This includes the role of money, as well as time or expertise in helping individuals to navigate the labor 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 labor market demands for not only high skilled service workers but also a vast array of unskilled laborers (for example, 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 (for example, McDowell 2003). An empirical focus on the groups employed within different niches of the labor 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 analyzing 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 neighborhood origin and those who are footloose. It demonstrates that while the social networks and cultures pertaining to different neighborhoods can affect the labor 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 global processes of economic restructuring.

Geographer Rory Coulter’s (2016) 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 of financial support (Galster and Wessel 2019). Unable to benefit from the substantial house price inflation resultant from the shift towards pro-market, homeownership-oriented housing policies in this context, low income renters, whose parents were also renters, find their education and job opportunities are restricted by their inability to draw on or build up an asset base (Forrest and Hirayama 2009). The concurrent revival of private landlordism through the growth of precarious financial products intended to induce investment in housing has also shaped the opportunity structures for younger generations by facilitating new intra-generational relationships between landlord and tenant: in the UK it is increasingly common for private renting to involve peer-to-peer arrangements, with payments made by renters to their owner-occupying peers for a room within a mortgaged property (Walker and Jeraj 2016). In Japan, where similar policy orientations have not yielded the same growth in property values, housing also continues to be unaffordable for many renters. Coupled with growing job insecurity, those without access to parental wealth in Japan’s younger generation are unable to afford their own homes (Forrest and Hirayama 2009).

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 more disadvantaged backgrounds can find themselves clustered in areas with greater deprivation where there is a "spatial mismatch" (Kain 1969) between the education or skills of residents and the types of jobs available locally. An immediate response to this problem has often been to suggest that the unemployed should "get on their bike" to find work (see, for example, Ashmore 2017). However, the spatial mismatch highlights the wider problem within more specialized labor markets whereby when large employers or industries shift, the skills of the remaining workforce are not as transferrable as they once were or the distance to the next suitable employer is simply too great. An exemplar here is in the gradual removal of heavy industry in the north of England or the imminent closure of the Honda factory in Swindon, resulting in 3,000 workers directly losing their jobs in manufacturing. This can create an unemployed "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 while 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: it is easier to leverage assistance when individuals can group and pull on their collective experiences. For instance, efforts to protect existing greenbelts from new housing developments tend to be more successful when located in areas of wealth (see Merry et al. 2016). Similarly, it is striking that in the UK, the 2013-14 flooding of the Somerset Levels resulted in substantial investment in flood protection and mitigation measures, whereas more deprived communities in the north of England (notably Doncaster) who have experienced more frequent flood events have not managed to successfully engage government or resources in their defense provisions, despite having a greater population at risk of inundation. The formation of community housing tenure can also shape personal attributes (knowledge, social networks, skills and experience) that can further affect labor 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 processes of sorting within the housing and labor 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 nations where state welfare programs have been retrenched and in their 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 labor, 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 family members. 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—and those of their children—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). Although targeted interventions to break cycles of family poverty have had some success in deprived geographical areas, recent reviews suggest vulnerable populations may benefit more from inclusion in mainstream provisions as mainstreaming reduces the stigma associated with targeting while also increasing coverage.

The intergenerational production of inequalities may be further stratified at the individual level according to gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, age, disability and religion. These axes of social differentiation remain relatively under-examined in debates about intergenerational transmissions owing to a tendency to assume they are socially ascribed characteristics which may enable or constrain individuals in different places in different ways. Yet an intersectional approach provides an important means of examining how class and non-class differences articulate. An intersectional approach is important for both ethnographic and statistical analyses into the households, neighborhoods 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 can illuminate the diversity of embodied inequalities that are implicated in systems of social stratification. Recent studies of work and employment for instance have shown us that men and women experience the post-industrial economy differently, with young men from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds often found to be most at risk of unemployment as a consequence of contemporary labor market transitions (Trust for London 2000). Similarly, state welfare provisions may entrench rather than mitigate forms of gender, race and class inequality. While the post-war consensus was based on the principles of full (male) employment with a package of policies that reinforced traditional gender roles, more recent reforms have divided women on the basis of class, providing support for women from low-income households to enter the labor market, while constraining those with a high-earning husband or partner (MacLeavy 2011). There are also reported Black-white differences in women's welfare-to-work transitions (Brush 2011). 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.

Intergenerational transmission as a geographical process (1)

By linking together research from multiple national contexts, the importance of inequalities for individuals and their ability to achieve successful life course outcomes becomes clear. Inequalities are growing and 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 neighborhoods appear to have stronger buffering so that they are less likely than their poorer cohort partners to be exposed to less well-off neighborhoods later in life. This suggests that inequalities are increasingly manifest in spatial divides which, in turn, yield unequal differentiated access to the means and mechanisms for upward social mobility. In short, the access to and distribution of the social, political, economic and cultural resources available in a society is becoming increasingly uneven over time. In this regard, it is essential to understand the close relationship between economic inequality and residential segregation as spatial fixity is part of the story behind reduced social mobility. Within a meritocratic society, an individual's success, in terms of their employment or social status, should be a function of their abilities, not their background. However, when children grow up without the opportunity for instance to access quality schooling—such as when the school is unable to provide sufficient equipment for learning, or more recently when school closures in response to Covid-19 resulted in unequal access to learning as many families did not have sufficient computing or internet access—the possibility for an individual to realize their potential is restricted and their overall performance lower than it could otherwise have been. In these circumstances, the meritocratic outcomes are no longer a function of ability alone but equally a function of other external influences.

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. Analyzing the relationship between financial hardship, cultural marginalization 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 with which these factors intersect. These intersections 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 labor or housing market, for instance) are able to use them to benefit further is necessary to shift the public and political dialogue around the meritocratic ideal. By underlining the persistence of inherited hierarchies, a longitudinal approach may —for instance—provide support for egalitarian policies. The emerging view of economic status and power as "fortresses of privilege" (Appiah 2018) is driven by a sense that class hierarchies have been resistant to post-war welfare policies that were intended to protect and support members of the working classes and allow some of their offspring to progress in the areas of education, employment or housing. Moreover, while these mechanisms of mobility are being steadily dismantled, the derision and scorn accorded to those that find themselves unable to move up the hierarchy of occupations and income remains (Valentine and Harris 2014). Rather than operating as equalizers, educational institutions from schools to universities continue to support the stratification of society with affluent parents using their financial resources to secure advantages for their children—through extra private tuition or coaching for entrance exams, to work experience only accessible via personal social networks—as a means of ensuring their continued access to society's power and wealth. Although (limited) provisions are made for those from the very poorest backgrounds, as well as to promote diversity through the greater inclusion of minority groups, the opportunity hoarding of the most privileged is disregarded: the focus is on providing ways for (some) individuals to progress without addressing the long-running processes that drive inequality.

Sociologist Charles Tilly's (2000) "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 for social and economic justice or participatory democracy. It is also 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 for equality of opportunity is, in itself, insufficient because the ability to take advantage of the opportunities is not equally spread. Policy focus needs to shift towards explicit interventions to bolster the opportunities for those less able to the exclusion of the advantaged. It also needs to be matched by efforts to alleviate poverty. After all, a more rigorous effort to achieve true meritocracy would still result in a class-based system, with rewards for those at the top in marked contrast to those afforded to persons not in possession of the talents or capacity to succeed.

Conclusion: Covid-19 reflections on intergenerational inheritances (1)

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 discussion above we have sought to recognize the continuum between positive and negative experiences of intergenerational transfer, as well as the possibilities of disenfranchisement and disillusionment related to the shifting labor market demands (based on the observation that opportunities available to some groups in society do not reflect differences in education or training, but rather physical attributes and associated behavioral traits, or to put it differently, forms of discrimination). When uneven development is put into play with ethnic and gender disparities, inequalities become clearer. We have sought to articulate the need to develop a geographical understanding of the intergenerational relations that compound inequalities because there are distinct spatialities to inequalities—to where is and where is not (dis)advantaged—which connect strongly to who is and who is not (dis)advantaged. It is not until this spatial structure of inequalities has been recognized and acknowledged that we will be able to move forward with suitable place-based remedies that may serve to ameliorate some of the greater injustices. In short, just as we recognize there are social biases and injustices so too are there spatial biases and injustices.

In closing, we reflect on the themes we have raised in relation to the social determinants and impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. The health, economic and social challenges it has raised have clearly been experienced in a spatially differentiated way: taking the example of the UK there is a clear macro level geography where regions are experiencing different rates of infection, different versions of the lockdown restrictions, and as a result different short and long-term consequences, which are felt within the four constituent states as well as between them. Within those macro regions, at the meso level, the legacy of deindustrialization and historical underinvestment is apparent (Rice and Venables 2020): while many London residents have been able to work from home and socially distance within parks and as a household unit, in the north of England where there is more contact-intensive industry, where housing is often older or lacks regeneration and reinvestment, and where the co-dependencies between households are larger, efforts to supress the virus have been less successful as a result of structural rather than individual activities.

Turning to the micro level, within the larger macro regions there are populations groups for whom the government restrictions resulting from the pandemic may not have been wholly negative. Indeed, physical distancing and related restrictions may have delivered some short-term positive impacts for those who can work from home, whose occupations are no more precarious now than they were 16 months ago; who can avail themselves of the home delivery networks for food and luxury purchases; and who are able to use their back gardens or who have access to open public spaces where distancing is more easily achieved. For others, some restrictions could be offset—those whose schooling either continued without disruption or were able to access the technological means to learn both online and in person as needed. The groups for whom this was possible predominantly were those who already had advantages, wealth and connectivity. By contrast, those families supplying services, either through precarious employment or secure employment where working from home was not a possibility and therefore experienced the lockdowns and restrictions as a constraint through which they have had to keep going, have been further disadvantaged. Those disadvantages could have been manifest in the home, but the local community was influential in both infection rates and ability to cope with the impacts of the pandemic (Mikolai et al. 2020). If a household did not have access to online resources, or the mode of access was through a phone or tablet, engagement with and access to support became more difficult and inequalities were further amplified. The time lost within the schooling system will in some cases be difficult to make up and leave those already experiencing disadvantages continuously restricted (Burgess and Sievertsen 2020; Major et al. 2020).

What we have seen during this period is an amplification of longer-term trends, with potential increased divergence between those succeeding and others struggling. The differences that have emerged out of the actions taken to ameliorate the pandemic—lockdowns, travel restrictions, working from home and so on—have not themselves instigated new trends, but have amplified those already present, but until now less visible. The increased reliance on food banks (Power et al. 2020), the failure of shops and business, and the cementing of online into the everyday all point to the acceleration of some serious economic structuring. In the residential domain, there are signs that those who can move to more spacious surroundings are leaving the cities. This could be a long-term trend reversing the recent decades of exclusionary inner-city developments and super gentrifications. It is not, however, the death of the city. Urban areas are likely to remain key locations for the super-rich and the well-connected (Atkinson 2020). As archivist Euan Roger (2020) highlights, the Plague in Tudor London resulted in similar, albeit short-term, tendencies. The realization and progression of existing trends into the mainstream and the real consequences of life with limited resources along with the reliance of modern Western society on (key) workers in precarious employment conditions may—we hope—provide the impetuous to reconsider the social relations across society, as the wellbeing of one group depends on the wellbeing of all the others.

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