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Measuring and Understanding Intergenerational Social Mobility: Policy, Technology and Education Perspectives Literature Review

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Abstract

Drawing on three dimensions—policy, technology and education—this paper systematically examines the key factors and mechanisms influencing research on intergenerational social mobility. The study finds that, at the policy level, measures such as compulsory education, the allocation of teaching resources and fiscal transfers generally exhibit a 'bottom-up' orientation, thereby playing a more significant role in promoting intergenerational mobility among disadvantaged groups;at the technological level, digital finance and internet usage provide new pathways for intergenerational mobility by alleviating liquidity constraints and expanding information channels, although the distribution of technological dividends is uneven across different groups; at the educational level, education serves as a key mediator for achieving upward intergenerational mobility, yet may also become a tool for class reproduction under conditions of unequal resource distribution, with its effects moderated by factors such as educational level, gender and family background.Current research suffers from limitations such as relatively isolated perspectives, insufficient attention to the internal structure of education, and a need for more in-depth examination of the digital divide. Future research could construct an integrated analytical framework, deepen studies on the heterogeneity within the internal structure of education, and broaden the research perspective on the digital divide.

Keywords

Intergenerational Social Mobility; Policy Effects; Technological Change; Educational Mechanisms

1. Introduction

Intergenerational social mobility is a key indicator for measuring social equity and the openness of social structures, reflecting the degree of correlation between economic, social and political factors across generations. The importance of studying intergenerational issues lies not only in reflecting vertical

intergenerational equity—the capacity of parents to pass on socio-economic resources to their children—but also in its potential to influence socio-economic development by altering the efficiency of human capital allocation.Currently, with the continuous optimisation of education and public policies, as well as profound technological advancements, numerous scholars have conducted research on intergenerational social mobility, yielding a wealth of findings. Intergenerational social mobility encompasses multiple dimensions, including educational mobility, occupational status mobility, income mobility and human capital mobility. Building upon existing empirical research, this paper examines the key factors and mechanisms influencing intergenerational social mobility from three dimensions: policy, technology and education.These three dimensions were selected because: policy represents the state's external intervention in intergenerational mobility at the institutional level; technology represents the potential impacts and opportunities arising from socio-economic transformation; and education is widely regarded as a core factor influencing intergenerational mobility, as well as the most direct pathway through which the first two factors affect individuals when they change. This paper reviews the literature relating to these three dimensions, providing a reference for further research into the mechanisms influencing intergenerational mobility.

2. Measurement and Mechanisms of Intergenerational Social Mobility: A Literature Review Across Three Dimensions

2.1. Characterising Intergenerational Effects within a Policy Context

2.1.1. Compulsory Education and University Enrolment Expansion Policies

As a fundamental and quintessential public education service, compulsory education has a significant impact on intergenerational mobility through its policy effects. Chen Binkai et al. (2021) found that compulsory education policies significantly enhanced intergenerational educational mobility, primarily by reducing the cost of education and alleviating household constraints, thereby enabling children from disadvantaged families to gain greater access to educational opportunities and thus promoting intergenerational mobility. Furthermore, compared to females, these policies had a greater impact on enhancing intergenerational mobility among males. Peng Jun and Zhao Xiliang (2022) distinguished between higher education expansion policies and compulsory education, finding that the implementation of the Compulsory Education Law significantly improved educational intergenerational mobility for low-educational-attainment households in both urban and rural areas, whilst higher education expansion policies had a more pronounced effect on promoting educational intergenerational mobility for low-educational-attainment rural households. Both policies significantly enhance educational intergenerational mobility for rural households, but their impact on urban households is relatively limited. Furthermore, the policy effects are more

pronounced in households with low educational attainment and in regions with limited access to higher education. Duan et al. (2022) further found that, following the expansion of university enrolment, undergraduate and higher education continued to significantly promote upward intergenerational mobility among rural residents; however, among urban residents, higher education shifted from promoting mobility to reinforcing intergenerational transmission.

2.1.2. Policies on the Allocation of Teaching Resources

The quality of rural teachers is of great significance for achieving upward intergenerational mobility in human capital levels in underdeveloped rural areas. Song Hong and Luo Jigang (2024) conducted a study on the impact of China's Rural Special Post Programme on intergenerational mobility. They found that the programme significantly promotes upward intergenerational mobility in human capital, and that this policy effect increases with the number of teachers recruited under the scheme. The policy's effects are more pronounced among male students, low-income households and in western regions. This finding explains the chain reaction mechanism through which improvements in educational quality drive intergenerational mobility. Chetty et al. (2014), drawing on US administrative data, further confirmed that teacher quality (measured by 'value-added') has a significant causal impact on students' long-term outcomes in adulthood, including income, university enrolment rates and the quality of higher education. For every one standard deviation increase in a teacher's 'value-added', their students' income at age 28 increases by approximately 1.34 per cent, and the university enrolment rate rises by approximately 0.8 percentage points; moreover, this effect is more pronounced among students from low-income families. From an international comparative perspective, this study reveals that the allocation of teaching resources not only influences current academic performance but can also alter the trajectory of intergenerational mobility through long-term human capital accumulation.

2.1.3. Fiscal and Public Service Policies

The equalisation of fiscal resources and basic public services represents a novel perspective for studying intergenerational social mobility and is deeply linked to the realisation of common prosperity. Ping Weiying and Chen Jingyu (2025) found that the equalisation of basic public services can significantly reduce intergenerational income elasticity among rural households and promote intergenerational income mobility. This policy exhibits a 'downward targeting' characteristic, meaning that its promotional effect is more pronounced in households where the father has a low level of education, low income and belongs to a lower occupational class. From the perspective of fiscal transfer payments, Fan Ziying (2020) found that such payments can significantly reduce the intergenerational stickiness of human capital and promote intergenerational mobility. The impact of transfer payments is particularly

pronounced during the latter stages of compulsory education (Years 4 to 6 and Years 8 to 9), helping to compensate for the lack of developmental opportunities faced by disadvantaged groups. Furthermore, transfer payments have a greater effect on enhancing intergenerational mobility for females than for males, reflecting their role in promoting gender equality in education. Biasi (2023), drawing on research into school district fiscal reforms in the United States, also found that fiscal equalisation can significantly promote intergenerational upward mobility for children from low-income families, primarily by narrowing the gaps between affluent and disadvantaged school districts in terms of teacher allocation and university enrolment rates.

2.2. Characterising Intergenerational Effects in the Context of Technological Change

2.2.1. Digital Finance and Income Mobility

Digital finance has flourished in recent years. Research by Guo Feng et al. (2020) found that, compared with traditional financial services, digital finance can effectively lower the barriers to access and transaction costs, thereby expanding the breadth and depth of financial services available to the household sector. Zhou Guangsu and Ding Xiangyuan (2023) investigated the impact of regional financial development on intergenerational mobility and found that the development of digital finance can significantly reduce intergenerational income elasticity and promote intergenerational income mobility. This promotional effect is primarily evident in low-income households, whilst it is not significant in middle- and high-income households; furthermore, the effect is more pronounced in households where the father holds rural household registration and has a junior secondary school education or below. Wu Xianrong and Luo Xiaofeng (2025) found that digital inclusive finance helps to reduce constraints and limitations on access to credit, better embodies the principles of financial inclusion, and alleviates the difficulties faced by households in underdeveloped regions in accessing information. Chen (2025), drawing on microdata, found that fintech (digital finance) significantly enhanced absolute intergenerational mobility, increasing the income growth of children from poor households by 67.76 per cent. Analysis indicates that fintech, by alleviating liquidity constraints and enhancing 'market luck', lowers the barriers to entry for economically disadvantaged groups wishing to start their own businesses; furthermore, it helps to narrow the gender gap and provides tangible support for low-income households to achieve upward mobility. By expanding access to financial resources, fintech is becoming a key driver in bridging the class divide and promoting intergenerational mobility.

2.1.2. Internet Use and Social Mobility

Research literature on the impact of the internet on social class falls into two main

categories. The first examines the effect of internet use on social mobility; Tian Yanping and Xiang Xuefeng (2023), utilising data from the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS), found that the digital economy can promote upward income mobility among low-income groups through household entrepreneurship, participation in financial management, and improved employment levels. The other category examines the impact of internet usage on expected class identity. For instance, Zhou Baohua (2010) argues that the use of internet-enabled mobile phones influences residents' perceptions of their class status to varying degrees; such usage may alter an individual's assessment of their current position, thereby affecting their judgement of where they might reach in the future and raising their expectations for the future. Building on these two categories, Wang Heyu, Guo Kaimin et al. (2025) investigated whether and how internet usage affects social class mobility and subjective class identity. They found that internet usage significantly promotes upward social mobility and enhances individuals' expectations of future class advancement. the 'Matthew effect' triggered by parental social capital weakens the promotional effect of internet use on upward social mobility, but has no significant impact on expected class identity; furthermore, the promotional effect of internet use is more pronounced among men, urban residents and those in the eastern regions.

2.3. Characterisation of Intergenerational Effects under the Educational Mechanism

2.3.1. The Effect of Educational Heterogeneity

Currently, research on the impact of education on intergenerational mobility has identified two distinct perspectives. The first perspective holds that education plays a facilitating role in intergenerational mobility, albeit with structural differences. In terms of the mechanism of action, Chen Lin and Yuan Zhigang (2012) found that the parent generation can enhance their children's ability to earn income through investment in their human capital, or directly increase their children's income by engaging in rent-seeking and accumulating wealth, thereby boosting their children's social and financial capital. However, this facilitating effect varies across different groups. Zhu Yi and Zhang Shun (2024) found that higher education has a strong effect on enhancing intergenerational social mobility among those with high educational attainment, whilst its role in promoting such mobility is relatively weaker among those with low to medium educational attainment. Hou Yuna (2020) found that education is more effective in preventing the intergenerational transmission of the wealth gap among men than among women; whilst both men and women experienced improvements in the demand-side effects of education, the extent of improvement for men far exceeded that for women. In poor households, male offspring fared better than female offspring in terms of both access to higher education and the returns derived from it.

A second school of thought holds that education does not significantly promote upward intergenerational social mobility in China, but rather serves to maintain current levels of intergenerational mobility; however, there is relatively little research supporting this view. For instance, Zhang Nan and Chi Jingming (2022) found that although the policy of expanding university enrolment increased opportunities to attend university, it did not significantly alter the level of relative intergenerational mobility; on the contrary, the influence of family background became even more pronounced following the expansion. Yang Zhongchao (2016) found that there is insufficient evidence to prove that the expansion of educational enrolment has promoted intergenerational mobility; whilst educational expansion has increased the proportion of university graduates within the total population and raised the absolute rate of social mobility across society, this is largely attributable to China's rapid socio-economic development and industrial restructuring following the Reform and Opening-up. Liu, Yue and Zhu (2025) found that, although the expansion of university enrolment has generally broadened access to higher education, upward intergenerational mobility among disadvantaged families has not improved significantly due to structural constraints in their ability to access information, mobilise resources and implement strategies; Conversely, families with parents who are better educated, those living in urban areas, or those with more abundant economic resources have been better able to capitalise on the new opportunities brought about by the expansion of higher education, thereby further exacerbating socio-economic inequality.

These two perspectives are not mutually exclusive; together, they reveal the complexity of education in intergenerational mobility. The first perspective emphasises that education can have a catalytic effect at the level of human capital, but this effect is not uniform; rather, it is influenced by factors such as educational level, gender and family background. The second perspective argues that if the distribution of educational resources is inequitable and the labour market is not fully equitable, then educational expansion may not necessarily lead to social advancement.

2.3.2. The Transmission of Occupational Status Mediated by Education

Education plays a crucial mediating role between family background and the occupational status of the next generation. Existing research generally holds that the influence of family capital on the occupational status of the next generation is largely realised through the channel of education; however, the effects of education are not uniform, and their direction and intensity are influenced by a variety of factors. Yang Shengli, Yao Jian et al. (2020), drawing on data from the 2015 China General Social Survey and employing the Bootstrap mediation analysis method, examined the mediating role of education between family capital and the occupational status of the next generation. They found that family economic capital,

cultural capital and social capital were significantly and positively correlated with the occupational status attained by the next generation; that is, the higher a family's income, the higher the father's educational attainment and the higher the father's occupational status, the higher the occupational status attained by the next generation. Furthermore, the influence of family economic capital, cultural capital and social capital on the occupational status of the next generation is almost entirely realised through the channel of the next generation's education. This implies that the advantages derived from family background must be transformed into educational advantages for the offspring in order to ultimately enhance their occupational status. In their study, Xu Changqing and Li Junyu (2025) introduced an interaction term between parental occupational status and the offspring's educational attainment. They found that whilst an increase in educational attainment can raise an individual's occupational status, it also strengthens the intergenerational link between occupational status; thus, whilst education enhances an individual's human capital and facilitates the attainment of occupational status, it may also serve as a channel for amplifying the parental occupational advantage. Li Xiangyun and Tong Zefeng (2022) found that the strength of education's mediating role varies significantly across different groups. There is a marked phenomenon of intergenerational transmission of higher education in China: children of parents with a higher education background have significantly greater opportunities to pursue higher education themselves. Furthermore, this transmission is more pronounced in rural areas, among groups affected by the expansion of university enrolment, and among those receiving formal higher education. which indirectly confirms the stability of education as a mediating variable; the educational advantages of the parental generation are more likely to be transmitted to the offspring through educational channels, thereby influencing the offspring's opportunities to attain occupational status.

3. Conclusions and Outlook

3.1. Research Conclusions

This paper systematically reviews the main findings and core mechanisms of research on intergenerational social mobility from three dimensions—policy, technology and education—and draws the following conclusions.

First, at the policy level. Public policies, exemplified by compulsory education, the expansion of university enrolment, the allocation of teaching resources and fiscal transfers, generally exhibit a 'downward targeting' effect. That is, these policies have a more pronounced promotional effect on the upward intergenerational mobility of children from families where the parents have low educational attainment, low income and low occupational status. This is particularly evident in terms of educational and human capital mobility, and the effect varies across genders, urban and rural areas, and regions. By reducing the cost of education, improving

educational quality and optimising the environment for human capital accumulation, these policies alleviate resource constraints faced by disadvantaged families, thereby providing institutional support for breaking down class solidification. Overall, policy interventions have played a positive role in promoting intergenerational mobility, though the conditions, scope and limits under which they operate warrant attention.

Secondly, at the technological level. The proliferation of digital finance and the widespread use of the internet have opened up new channels for intergenerational social mobility. Digital finance has significantly promoted intergenerational income mobility among low-income households by lowering barriers to financial services, alleviating credit constraints and expanding access to information; internet use, meanwhile, has driven upward social mobility and enhanced individuals' subjective class identity by stimulating household entrepreneurship, promoting participation in financial management and improving employment levels. However, the benefits of technological change are unevenly distributed across different groups. The promotional effects of digital finance and internet usage are more pronounced among middle- and high-income households, urban residents and those in the eastern regions. Furthermore, the 'Matthew effect' of parental social capital may weaken the role of technology in facilitating upward social mobility, highlighting new challenges posed by the digital divide in the context of intergenerational mobility. Whilst technological change creates opportunities for mobility, it may also give rise to new forms of inequality.

Third, at the level of educational mechanisms. Education can serve as both a key mediator for achieving intergenerational upward mobility and a tool for the reproduction of social class. On the one hand, improvements in the educational attainment of the younger generation can significantly enhance their occupational status and income levels; moreover, the advantages derived from family economic, cultural and social capital largely require the channel of the younger generation's education to be transformed into improved occupational status. On the other hand, the impact of education on intergenerational mobility is moderated by factors such as educational level, gender and family background. Higher education has a stronger effect on enhancing intergenerational mobility for families with high educational attainment, whilst its promotional effect is relatively weaker for those with low to medium educational attainment; in most contexts, men's educational returns and the effect on intergenerational mobility are superior to those of women; following the expansion of university enrolment, higher education among urban residents has even shifted from promoting mobility to reinforcing intergenerational transmission; educational expansion has not fundamentally altered the pattern of relative intergenerational mobility, and the role of family background has, in some contexts, become even more pronounced. This suggests that, as a core variable in the mechanism of intergenerational mobility, the ultimate impact of education is highly

dependent on the fairness of educational resource allocation and the structure of opportunities in the labour market.

3.2. Limitations of the Study

Judging by the existing literature, research across the three dimensions—policy, technology and education—is often conducted in relative isolation, with little examination of the interactions between them. For example, studies on compulsory education and higher education expansion policies primarily focus on the intergenerational effects of the policies themselves, with little exploration of whether the outcomes of these policies have changed following the widespread adoption of digital technology. Conversely, research on digital finance tends to focus on the intergenerational mobility effects of the technology itself, with little connection drawn to specific education policies.

Second, insufficient attention is paid to the internal structure of education

Existing research predominantly measures education in terms of years of schooling or academic qualifications, with little attention paid to internal structures such as institutional tier, subject specialisation, educational quality and teaching staff. When discussing differences between educational levels, the focus is mainly on the distinction between higher education and lower-to-middle levels of education; when examining intergenerational transmission in higher education, a binary variable of 'whether or not one has received higher education' is typically employed. In fact, even among those who have received higher education, there may be significant differences in the impact on intergenerational mobility between '985' universities and ordinary institutions, as well as between science and engineering disciplines and the humanities and social sciences.

Third, research into the intergenerational mobility effects of the digital divide requires further exploration.

Existing research has largely focused on the positive effects of internet usage, but has paid insufficient attention to differences among various groups in terms of internet access, information retrieval capabilities and digital skills. Previous studies have found that internet usage can promote upward social mobility, whilst also pointing out that the 'Matthew effect' triggered by parental social capital can weaken this promotional effect, thereby highlighting the issue of unequal benefits derived from technology across different groups. However, there has been little extensive research into whether differences among various groups in terms of internet access conditions, information retrieval capabilities and digital skills might lead to technological change creating new inequalities whilst simultaneously promoting intergenerational mobility.

3.3. Future Prospects

Firstly, constructing an integrated analytical framework to examine the interplay

between policy, technology and education

Existing research largely treats policy, technology and education as relatively independent dimensions, with little exploration of the intrinsic links between them. Future research could attempt to construct an integrated analytical framework to examine the intertwined effects of factors across different dimensions. Subsequent studies could adopt a multidimensional perspective; for example: do policy interventions amplify or weaken the mediating effect of education through technological means? Has technological change altered the strength of education's role as a mediating variable? Cross-dimensional research will help to transcend the limitations of a single perspective and reveal the mechanisms underlying intergenerational mobility more comprehensively.

Secondly, deepening research into the heterogeneity of the internal structure of education

Existing research predominantly measures education in terms of years of schooling or academic qualifications, with relatively limited attention paid to the internal structure of education. Future research could further distinguish between dimensions such as institutional tier (e.g. '985' universities versus ordinary institutions), discipline type (e.g. science and engineering versus humanities and social sciences), and educational quality (e.g. teaching staff and research standards), to examine their heterogeneous impacts on intergenerational mobility. Scholars have already made a preliminary distinction between the effects of undergraduate and vocational education, as well as between ministries-affiliated institutions and ordinary institutions. Subsequent research could build on this foundation to refine the analysis further, revealing the true disparities underlying 'attending university' and providing more nuanced evidence for the formulation of education policy.

Thirdly, broadening the scope of research on the digital divide to focus on the unequal distribution of technological dividends

Future research could extend the analytical dimensions to include 'whether or not to use' and 'how to use' the internet. Significant differences exist among different groups in terms of internet access, information retrieval capabilities and digital skills, These disparities influence the extent to which individuals benefit from technological change. Even when using the internet, employing it for learning and job-seeking versus for entertainment and socialising may have entirely different impacts on intergenerational mobility. Compared to simply having internet access, the level of digital literacy may be a more decisive factor in determining whether an individual can seize the opportunities for mobility brought about by technology, thereby facilitating upward intergenerational social mobility.

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