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(Re)discovering the lost middle: intergenerational inheritances and economic inequality in urban and regional research

Julie MacLeavy^a  and David Manley^b 

ABSTRACT

This paper calls for deepening understandings of inequality and the reproduction of inequality across the income distribution. In particular, it brings intergenerational transmissions and place effects, their interaction and progression over time into greater focus. The objective is to understand the implications of increasing inequality for those in the large and under-researched ‘middle group’. The paper makes the case for urban and regional research that uses extensive longitudinal data, both qualitative and quantitative, to reveal the totality of the processes impacting the middle group, from those who are just managing to those who are advancing and flourishing.

KEYWORDS

economic inequality; intergenerational inheritances; social class; social mobility; life-course experiences; longitudinal analysis

JEL D31, D63, I32, J62

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INTRODUCTION

A major issue in modern Western society is rising inequality. Since the 1980s, inequality has increased in all European countries, with the exception of Belgium, France and Greece (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2017; Ohlsson, Roine, & Waldenstrom, 2009; Piketty, 2014), with the greatest level of inequality found in the UK, Spain and Italy (Chesters, 2016; OECD, 2017). For these countries, the magnitude of inequality matches that of the United States and is above the OECD average (OECD, 2017; World Bank, 2016). Comparatively low levels of inequality are found in the Nordic countries, including Denmark, Finland and Sweden, along with Slovenia and the Czech Republic (OECD, 2017). Often the focus of research is the distance between those at the top and at the bottom of the income distribution, the so-called ‘one-per-cent’ elites (Dorling, 2014; Stiglitz, 2011) and the very poorest (who might be termed the bottom one-per-cent; Rosen, 2014) with a specific desire to understand the implications of increasing inequality for those at the bottom (Jarman, 2016). Although important, these parts of the distribution consist of a minority of the population and there is a lacuna of analysis regarding those in between these oft-studied ends. In this context, we propose that there is an imperative

to study the large and under-researched middle group, a group oft-presumed homogeneous but one in which there is substantial variation across a wide range of measures, attitudes and approaches. Critically, an increase in inequality represents a much more complex set of interwoven processes and developments that is likely to stretch out the middle so that a once-concentrated middle increasingly becomes an elongated and separated middle.

Data suggest that the currently high levels of inequality are continuations of longer standing historical trends towards increased inequality in income and wealth in which the income distribution is becoming increasing fractal in nature: the top and bottom of the income distribution has left an elongated middle group itself experiencing substantial fracturing within (Davies, Sandstrom, Shorrocks, & Wolff, 2009; Janetti & Sierminska, 2009; Ohlsson et al., 2009; Piketty, 2014). For some, in what could previously have been considered a ‘protected’ middle (i.e., not the wealthy elite, but the upper end of the middle that once had multiple social and economic buffers protecting them from reliance on the welfare state and associated infrastructure), experiences now include stagnation or a decline in living standards, deindustrialization and the concerted political effort to limit social protections and privatize risk from the state onto individuals (Berry, 2013; Harvey, 2005; 2010; Kollmeyer, 2015; Piketty, 2014).

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For example, the (once) protected middle is now experiencing pension reforms, increased retirement ages and other changes to universal entitlements. As Keynesian welfare and social-collectivist institutions (broadly defined) have been succeeded by neoliberalized state systems, forms of intervention and regulatory reform, economic inequality has risen in the large majority of OECD countries and its effects are being felt by a *majority* of the population (Dorling, 2015).

Under these conditions, snapshots of inequality are undoubtedly important – at any point in time a society with high levels of inequality can be identified as problematic for unequal access to resource, both social and economic, and can lead to political and social instability (Berry, 2013; Van de Werfhorst & Salverda, 2012; Vergolini, 2011). However, the problem of inequality can become greater when viewed from an intergenerational standpoint, where inequalities are reinforced and reproduced over time for individuals, families and social groups. Work by Sharkey (2013) in the United States and Van Ham, Hedman, Manley, Coulter, and Östh (2014) in Sweden has demonstrated that the contextual and household environments in which an individual grows up are highly predictive of the future trajectory of those individuals (spatially and socially) and highly predictive of the spatial and social opportunity structures that will be available to their subsequent children (Galster & Sharkey, 2017). There is, then, a clear need to reread the current literature on social mobility, social opportunities and life-course experiences and adopt a far longer time frame on the ‘causal pathways to inequality’ (Lamont, Beljean, & Clair, 2014). Overall, the wealthier have an increasingly better chance of staying rich, while those in the middle or at the bottom of the social structure have a reduced chance of upward social mobility (Blanden, Gregg, & Machin, 2005; Breen, 2004; Lamont et al., 2014; Nunn, Johnson, Monro, Bickerstaffe, & Kelsey, 2007). A longitudinal approach can thus reveal how social inequality is reproduced over time as the place in which a person grows up, the kind of jobs done by their parents and the other socioeconomic factors to which they are exposed as children exert a substantial impact on their own life course.

By critically assessing the current state of evidence on the intergenerational transmission of inequality, this paper outlines an agenda for urban and regional studies that requires substantial longitudinal data (qualitative and quantitative) to examine how social mobility is facilitated or restricted by ‘intergenerational inheritances’. It starts by outlining a renewed interest in inequality across the social sciences and an emergent shift towards an emphasis on the intergenerational transmission of inequality. Focusing specifically on the relationship between economic inequality and social mobility, the paper demonstrates the importance of looking at inherited disadvantage to understand the impact of recent, steady and substantial increases in inequality on the large and under-researched middle group. It then makes the case for urban and regional research to examine the transmission of societal (dis)advantage between generations. It concludes that there is a need

for well-conceptualized and theoretically informed empirical investigations into the long-run implications of the different life courses experienced by the middle group in order to reveal the significant changes in the class structures of Western society.

INTERGENERATIONAL INHERITANCES: A NEW INEQUALITY PARADIGM

The academic literature, government and wider media outlets have concerned themselves with meta-discussions relating to current levels of economic inequality. In doing so, they have often reported analyses that identify if social mobility is increasing for the *average* citizen, paying little attention the impact of structured inequality such as gender, ethnicity, age and disability (Penn, 2016). However, nobody is average (Rose, 2016), so the pursuit of average outcomes has led to the neglect of the wide range of heterogeneous outcomes that individuals experience as social mobility is governed by a dual interaction between equality of opportunity and equality of outcome (Small & Feldman, 2012). Indeed, any discussion about social mobility that focuses on population average outcomes is necessarily limited. Whilst it may be true that economic growth, liberalization and wider educational opportunities are leading to better outcomes for Western society as a whole, the converse may also be present for individuals within that society. Even with the same available opportunities, some will not achieve mobility, whilst others may not be presented with the opportunities in the first place. Moreover, analyses of inequality must be connected to the idea of intergenerational inheritances (Piketty, 2014). The term ‘intergenerational inheritances’ refers to the societal (dis)advantages that can be transferred between generations and are an important element of any assessment of social mobility. Following Christophers (2017), who explored the concept of financial inheritances of wealth from parents to children for the purchase of housing, we seek to broaden the scope of the inheritances literature to include the more subtle and cultural realms of (dis)advantage. Whilst money may represent the most tangible part of the scaffolding of support that can be bestowed by parents, inheritances can impact educational outcomes (Ballarino & Panichella, 2016; Morris, Dorling, & Davey Smith, 2016; Playford, Vernon, Connelly, & Murray, 2016), occupational attainment (Ralston, Feng, Everington, & Dibben, 2016), well-being (Li, 2016) and prosperity in older age (Blackburn, Jarman, & Racko, 2016). Thus, by moving beyond parental income, we include occupation, education, housing and residential location, health behaviours and other social activities, social preferences and values (see Erikson & Goldthorpe, 2002, for an ethnographic example; also recommended is Vance, 2016). Given the long-run effect of rising inequality is a reduction of equality of opportunity and social mobility owing to the growing differences in the capacities of rich and poor families to invest in their children, a focus on intergenerational inheritances can usefully identify how income inequality expands over time as patterns of

inequality are imprinted from one generation onto the next (Cabinet Office, 2011).

Recent work in the United States (Sharkey, 2013), Sweden (van Ham et al., 2014; Heldman, 2013) and the Netherlands (de Vuijst & van Ham, 2017) has demonstrated the importance of looking at inherited disadvantage to understand the factors underlying the increases in inequality across multiple domains. Focusing on the spatial notion of repeated disadvantage, Sharkey (2013) concluded that '[t]he problem of urban poverty ... is not only that concentrated poverty has intensified and racial segregation has persisted *but that the same families have experienced the consequences of life in the most disadvantaged environments for multiple generations*' (p. 26; original emphasis). This research has identified the intensification of inequality as child-rearing practices are influenced not only by neighbourhood environments but also by the environments in which parents themselves were raised. Children from more privileged backgrounds start and (often) finish further ahead of their less privileged peers, even when the rate of social mobility is unchanged (Putnam, 2015; see also Silva, 2013). This argument does not advance notions of deviance, rather it draws on the acknowledgement that, even in the best neighbourhood circumstances, pressures around the financial, employment or social security of households as a result of poverty can lead to structural stresses within the family where greater time resources must be devoted to securing a basic standard living compared with households with greater overall resources. Such work on intergenerational inheritances extends the literature on neighbourhood effects (Hedman, Manley, Van Ham, & Östh, 2013; van Ham et al., 2014) by exposing the legacy of socioeconomic deprivation. As neighbourhood influences are found to be most damaging when exposure takes place over multiple generations, it illustrates the importance of supplementing single time-period snapshots (cross-sectional analyses) with extensive longitudinal research as a means to understand where and when parental disadvantage is felt by children, and the impact it has throughout the life course.

Building on this intergenerational research field, we suggest that developing a better understanding of the consequences of the transferral of poor socioeconomic conditions from parents to children is important for several reasons. First, it enables social scientists researching inequality to move beyond the inherently politicized debates that have characterized this area of study through a renewed concern to understand how individuals are shaped by their own characteristics, life course and the place(s) in which they live and work (see also Holmwood, 2014).

Second, it contextualizes the increasingly limited possibilities for individuals from middling socioeconomic backgrounds to experience social mobility and the importance and significance of looking at inherited *dis*advantage to understand the increases in inequality demonstrated to be at the heart of problems such as poor health, obesity, mental illness, teenage pregnancy, drug use and crime (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).

Third, it allows for the recognition of the importance of geography, specifically how intergenerational inheritances become spatialized, so that *where* you live, not just *how* you live, is an important factor in determining life chances. Following Piketty (2014), it proceeds to advocate both a technical and a historical approach to the study of inequality to invoke a move away from normative scholarly interventions and establish a platform of evidence on which to reveal the stratification of the middle group (see also Fukuyama, 2012; Piketty, 2014; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). The middle group is not a precisely defined social categorization. Indeed, we suggest here that there is not a 'middle' but rather multiple middles potentially competing and rubbing against each other in the same or similar resource spaces. The denotation of the middle group is thus employed to focus enquiry on the complexity of socio-economic circumstances between the upper and lower limits of the income distribution and, relatedly, the totality of the processes by which society is developing. Single groups in isolation will not provide the necessary insight into the multifaceted changes affecting social constitutions at the current time.

INTERGENERATIONAL INHERITANCES, SOCIAL MOBILITY AND THE FATE OF THE MIDDLE CLASS IN THE UK

In order to exemplify this argument, attention is focused on the relationship between economic inequality and social mobility in the UK. The growth in inequality in the UK has been more rapid than elsewhere in Europe, but not as pronounced as in the United States and some large Asian countries (Ohlsson et al., 2009; Piketty, 2014; Taylor-Gooby, 2013). Whereas the period up to the late 1970s saw a convergence in income levels between relatively higher and lower income groups, the decades since have seen increasing segregation between wealthy and poor households (Davies et al., 2009; Janetti & Sierminska, 2009; Tammaru, Musterd, Van Ham, & Marciničzak, 2016). The reasons for this have been subject to much debate, with explanations tending to attribute rising inequality to processes of globalization and the failure of the neoliberal state to ensure a more equitable distribution of income and wealth (Berry, 2013; Harvey, 2010; Kollmeyer, 2015; Lavery, 2014; 2015). Indeed, reports from think tanks and investment funds (e.g., Resolution Foundation, Pimco, Bank of America, Hermes and Standard Life, reported by Allen, 2016, and Farrell, 2016) point towards decades of deindustrialization and economic restructuring resulting in deteriorating working conditions, a loss of labour power and real wage decline. Elsewhere, scholars note the impact of the Great Recession and the politics of austerity in heightening the consequences of wage stagnation, wealth concentration at the top of society, and financial deregulation precipitating a boom in credit and a rise in household debt (e.g., Dunn, 2014; Krugman, 2015).

Although income inequality fell in the immediate aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) – with the

Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) reporting a reduction in the Gini coefficient from 0.36 in 2007–08 to 0.34 in 2014–15 as non-working households caught up with working households through a combination of benefit rises (between 2007–08 and 2009–10) and unprecedented real wage decline (between 2009–10 and 2011–12) – this is an anomalous moment in an otherwise consistent historical trajectory of rising inequality in the UK (Lavery, 2015). Indeed, during this period the share of income going to the top 1% continued to increase but was masked by a fall in the ratio of incomes at the 90th and 10th percentiles, indicative of a ‘contracting middle’ in which differentiation within the middle group became less marked (Bellfield, Cribb, Hood, & Joyce, 2016). Policies including quantitative easing and interventions in the housing market served to boost the wealth of asset holders at the top end of the income distribution, while those in the middle were required to spend more than they could afford on housing, clothing and food to maintain the lifestyles to which they were accustomed and desired (Frank, 2014). Although the GFC led to a compressed income distribution within the middle group, the rising costs of what is ‘adequate’ rose sharply and set the relative deprivation bar much higher than in the past. As a direct consequence, those in the middle now work longer hours, commute further to work from more ‘affordable’ neighbourhoods and are taking on greater levels of debt. Thus, rather than breaking a trend towards greater levels of income inequality, the GFC led to changes in purchasing and consumption behaviour which rippled through income strata. These ‘expenditure cascades’ have raised the real cost to middle- and lower-income families of achieving many basic goals (Frank, 2007). This is a process being further exacerbated for those at the lowest ends of the income distribution, by reforms to tax and welfare policy which are projected to reverse the reduction in Gini (Onaran & Guschanski, 2016; see also Lavery, 2015; MacLeavy, 2011, 2016).

What is less visible in these analyses is the legacy and likely future impact of increasing inequality, specifically the *intergeneration churning* that occurs whereby movements and transitions occur sideways rather than upwards (or downwards) on the social hierarchy. This circular process serves to restrict the opportunities of future generations to improve their quality of life, particular in the middle- and lower-income deciles. Adopting a focus on the intergenerational transmission of poverty and affluence can usefully highlight the mechanisms through which income inequality becomes embedded over time, as parental resources substantially affect child outcomes (Behrman et al., 2013). Indeed, using econometric analysis and data from both the United States and Sweden, De Nardi (2004) has demonstrated that ‘accidental’ bequests, where wealth has been accumulated by parents to offset retirement expenses and ends up being passed to the next generation of children if unspent at death, have not produced substantial concentrations of wealth over time. Conversely, ‘voluntary’ bequests, which involve the planned transfer of large estates and are usually the preserve of the very wealthy, mobilize differing forms of capital and property and can

thus have a lasting impact over multiple generations (De Nardi, 2004). As many baby boomers will fall into the accidental category, it is likely that much of their accumulation of wealth will dissipate. However, the shorter-term consequences of the initial transmissions of wealth from the baby boomers should not be underplayed. The 1% concentration of wealth is relatively well documented, but the impact of smaller accidental bequests on the middle and lower ends of the distribution is not. The presence of family wealth has a distorting impact on social advancement such that some households will be able to afford to enter the property market earlier or on a higher rung than would otherwise have been possible. Those without familial wealth then find themselves further behind in a society that values property ownership above that of renting.

The literature on generation rent (McKee, Moore, Soaita, & Crawford, 2017) provides some instruction here but it is not directly concerned with the spatiality of inequality, concentrating on the barriers to housing access alone. However, the spatiality is critical for one’s understanding of inequality in conjunction with access to the housing market because residential space remains a substantial gateway to further advantages: the ability to access the ‘best’ neighbourhoods in turn facilitates access to better schooling; security in tenure reduces the need for all adult members of the household to follow rapid upward career trajectories in an effort to gain housing security through ownership; and the increased social and economic capital provided by housing security in the best neighbourhoods delivers a range of associated benefits for the grandchildren of the initial wealth providers. If groups cannot access the stability of residence that ownership has traditionally provided in the UK, then there is further disadvantage accrued through a lack of access to these other gateways. As such, the access to the (social if not financial) means of social mobility for the third generation is already skewed in favour of those receiving the transmission. Even if, by the time grandchildren reach adulthood, there is little of the initial wealth to be passed on, they are likely to be in a stronger position to maintain their lifestyle. This results in the divergence of outcomes for the middle and especially the upper-middle deciles. Coupled with the decline in wages, those occupying the so-called lower middle are potentially falling further behind and becoming (at least financially) closest to those who have already been marginalized and pushed into precarious positions. Intergenerational analyses can therefore reveal the benefits of parental investments in children, as well as the crisis of opportunity that results from socio-economic deprivation as those without the means of transmission are increasingly left behind. As such, intergenerational analyses can illuminate how ‘life chances are narrowed for too many by the circumstances of their birth: the home they are born into, the neighbourhood they grow up in or the jobs their parents do’ (Cabinet Office, 2011, p. 3).

Intergenerational analyses importantly reveal the ongoing effect of social origins on social mobility outcomes. In particular, they can demonstrate the existence of a ‘glass floor’ that protects individuals from more advantaged backgrounds against downward social mobility, as well as a

'glass ceiling' effect preventing upward social mobility from less advantaged origins (Gugushvili, Bukodi, & Goldthorpe, 2017). Disparities at the beginning of working life are driven by intergenerational inheritances such as wealth, education and access to employment networks and have a permanent effect on earnings owing to the focus on cross-sectional inequalities (notably gender and race) within the UK (Brewer, Costa Dias, & Shaw, 2012). Historically, the UK's tax and benefit system has been successful in reducing disparities in household income arising from age-specific inequality, which peaks during the main childbearing years, through a series of provisions to reduce the impact of maternity and paternity leaves, as well as periods of part-time work, and incentivize a return to the labour market. By comparison, the UK has been less successful in mediating permanent differences in income as a result of, for example, education (Bernardi & Ballarino, 2016). Labour market changes including a 'return to skill' necessitate relatively more educational investment for workers seeking to compete in a globalized labour market exacerbating this dynamic (Autor, Katz, & Kearney, 2006; Card & DiNardo, 2002; Murphy, Riddell, & Romer, 1998). Whereas the era of domestic manufacturing saw family-supporting wages, job stability and internal labour markets with broadly shared prosperity, technical advances associated with the rise of the service sector have seen adequate working-class incomes from skilled and semi-skilled manual work replaced with a much broader distribution of jobs ranging from low-paid (retail, personal care, call-centre) posts to high-skilled (financial, legal, education and health service) careers (Dorling, 2014; Goulden, 2010). The movement of women into full-time work has intensified the resultant inequalities in household income owing to a tendency for women to marry men in the same income bracket (Qian, 2017).

Inequalities in household income over the life course are further cemented by the rise in life expectancy and increases in retirement age (Dorling, 2014). What is apparent is that there is a divergence of household income levels that becomes amplified over time. In both the UK and the United States, restricted rates of downward mobility are attributed to a process of 'opportunity hoarding' by families in the higher-income deciles (McKnight, 2015; Reeves & Howard, 2013). By exploiting their advantaged social positions – through access to social circles, knowledge and connections for work experience or introductions, understanding the importance of presenting yourself 'the right way' or simply the knowledge that making contact 'out of the blue' is a legitimate and potentially fruitful approach (e.g., Mohamed, 2017) – wealthier families can safeguard their children's labour market chances mediating better individual outcomes in a wider context of lower and stagnant incomes. UK research suggests that the current generation of young adults are faced with the possibility that they will earn less than their parents (Willetts, 2011). Similarly, in 1950 around 90% of 30-year-olds in the United States earned more than their parents did at the same age. Today the equivalent figure is around 50% (Chetty et al., 2016). While commentators talk of a 'jilted generation'

(Howker & Malik, 2010) and stylized headlines proclaim 'the baby boomers took their children's future' (Willetts, 2011), a focus on intergenerational inheritances reveals the extent to which low levels of income are strongly related to poorer life chances in the longer term (Lansley, 2011a).

Intergenerational research lays bare the dangerous rhetoric of social mobility, which wrongly assumes the existence of a meritocratic society (on the meritocratic myth, see Lawton, 2000; and Payne, 2012). In doing so, it points towards the continuing need for redistributive policies to address the intersectional socioeconomic and cultural dimensions of inequality. Contra to this, anti-poverty strategy in the UK has shifted away from measures aimed at reducing relative poverty (largely through income transfers) to a focus on improving life chances through policy intervention in the early years (with new programmes to improve schooling and parenting, and an expansion of childcare for ages 2–5 years) (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2016). The priority afforded to life chances reflects a Conservative view of poverty and disadvantage as the products of family breakdown, worklessness and welfare dependency (Lansley, 2011a). This was apparent in former Prime Minister David Cameron's references to Broken Britain and now in Theresa May's current Conservative government's vision of a 'shared society' which reworks the traditional rubric of 'strivers and skivers' to infer that the poor themselves are largely to blame for their own situation (England, 2017). As Valentine and Harris (2014) note, the structural causes of inequality are frequently occluded by class prejudice and wider forms of stigma and discrimination. If the structures of society are such that an individual can, through their own ability and hard work, succeed, then the resulting inequality and social structure is often assumed to be more than just the product of individuals receiving privilege through entitlement at birth or through current position. It is deemed to be an outcome of (poor) individual choices and (deviant) behaviours.

With social mobility on a pedestal, individuals within the lower-income deciles can only be residualized. If meritocracy implies that those at the top deserve to be there as a result of their own abilities and efforts, then the coupling with neoliberal rhetoric also implies that those who do not achieve the success fail as a consequence of their own deficiencies. Thus, within the current political agenda, the current discussion of meritocratic success must be connected with a recognition that meritocracy does not work for substantial population groups. Indeed, evidence suggests that whilst family breakdown, periods of worklessness and welfare dependency are more common in poorer households, they are not the primary causes of poverty.¹ It is structural labour market factors driving a 'livelihood crisis' in which a significant and rising proportion of the population is faced with heightened barriers to work and declining rates of pay (Lansley, 2011b). In this context, a focus on intergenerational inheritances reveals the socioeconomic divisions that continue to exist in the UK and are becoming further embedded over time.

Attention to what Galster and Sharkey (2017) have termed the 'spatial opportunity structure' allows for an

empirical focus on the geographical implications of the intergenerational transmission of inequality. This structure records an intersection between the opportunities (and restrictions) available to an individual based on their place of residence and the accessibility to other structures (employment, educational and institutional) that this location imbues. It also references the wider social and cultural contexts that individuals inhabit, which work together not only to shape the development of people but also in feedback loops that further shape territorial outcomes. Within the UK, it reveals how the active deregulation of the labour market has produced geographically uneven employment opportunities, contributing to the well-documented North–South divide² at the meta level, but also region divides at a more macro-level which, coupled with a new migrant division of labour (May et al., 2007; Pykett, 2014), are now manifest in the decline of life chances and levels of upward social mobility in areas where there is a high correlation between low incomes, low educational attainment, poor health, high unemployment and frequent family breakdown.

SPATIALIZING INTERGENERATIONAL RESEARCH: AN AGENDA FOR URBAN AND REGIONAL STUDIES

The constraint, or otherwise, that an individual's background places on their social mobility has long been debated and there is little consensus on the appropriate amount of mobility for an efficient and effective society. Traditional theories of social mobility, whether from a libertarian perspective or a Marxian standpoint, both assume that highly mobile societies are beneficial and that there should be relatively little intergenerational inheritance of position or wealth, although the former states that this is because success should depend upon an individual's abilities whilst the latter points towards the capitalist structures of wider society as the disabler (Jarman, 2016). Conversely, a society with no intergenerational inheritances may be considered an anomaly as well: lack of inheritance points to a society in which ability pays no part in the allocation of employment or jobs and as such may not be using the differences in skills between people sufficiently (Davis & Moore, 1945; Parsons, 1970). Where intergenerational inheritances can become problematic is, first, when the valorization of different modes and types of employment becomes entrenched and explicitly hierarchical, so an individual's position dictates their ability to access full societal participation and, second, when social movement is prevented via structural, geographical or cultural barriers (Alexander, Marx, & Williams, 2004). In other words, social mobility and inequality are inextricably linked both through the obvious tension, but also where one allows the other to persist (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Social mobility without inequality is a very different notion and is not what is currently provided by the principle of meritocracy in neoliberal states.

We suggest there are multiple domains that need to be interlinked explicitly to provide a holistic perspective on the

structures and limitations for individual outcomes, and to understand better the heterogeneity of the middle group. What is of interest is the means through which an individual's position on the socioeconomic spectrum is determined. To explore the determinant processes, four perspectives for research need to be integrated:

- There is a need to recognize that opportunities and outcomes work in tandem and must be explored as an integrated part of a single process not as discrete entities. This requires the literature to shift its attention from investigating states as outcomes and to the progression of individuals through process. As a case in point, the residential mobility literature tends to focus on the act of moving as the key outcome of interest. In the present model, the move is itself the expression of a diverse set of processes (trading residential location or property, moving for employment or for household dissolution) all of which will have differential impacts on the individual. Thus, we need to develop richer data on the processes behind the outcomes (e.g., Morris, Manley, & Sabel, 2016) and analyses (in both the quantitative and qualitative sense) that explore these processes.
- There is a need explicitly to explore and dissect intergenerational inheritances as a default means of understanding how individuals develop through their life course. This means that adult outcomes can only be understood in conjunction with detailed biographies of exposures to contexts throughout childhood. In particular, this requires a movement beyond the average so that we consider the intersections of individual characteristics. Thus, it is insufficient to talk about the impact of gender or the impact of ethnicity: we need to develop languages around the impact of gender *and* ethnicity together. This also requires an acknowledgement that there are differences between and within groups over time and requires one to make more of the sophisticated modelling toolkit available with complex cohort and longitudinal data designs (for instance, see Emmel & Hughes, 2010, on the lived experience of deprivation in households; and Tarrant, 2016, on research design using secondary analysis of qualitative longitudinal data sets).
- There is a need to understand the impact of these intergenerational inheritances in conjunction with the spatialized history of the individual and to explore the spaces and accumulations that each individual has experienced. This requires data sets that connect individuals not only to their location but also to their wider family. Birth cohort studies, such as the Avon Longitudinal Study of Children and Parents (ALSPAC), can provide linkages in which the grandparents and children of children are enrolled to provide a four-generational sample of individuals. Such data sets require long periods of time to create, but innovations in collection techniques can enhance the collection process and it is imperative that data collection is maintained especially under periods of budgetary press (Pearson, 2016).

- There is a need to recognize that spatial opportunity structures influence the opportunities and outcomes that individuals receive and experience. In particular, an explicit empirical acknowledgement these structures operate at multiple scales including the micro (neighbourhood) and macro (regional) scales, and how apparently similar structures will reveal different outcomes for different people in different places. Herein lies the requirement for techniques that embody scales of understanding and an acknowledgement that scales need to be flexible. Clear geocoding and linkages to the data required (see the third point above) are critical here so that when analyses on life-course outcomes (for instance, on employment) are undertaken, they are not implemented in a spatial vacuum but recognize the local street, neighbourhood, urban environment and labour market context, and incorporate the idea that individuals are not solely free actors in these spaces.

Overarching all these perspectives is an explicit recognition that current residential and urban structures prevent equal access to the opportunities necessary for advancement. Moreover, these structures are highly spatialized such that the region in which individuals live matters, and further their location within that the sub-region and neighbourhood matters. At the micro-scale, this is an issue of reputation (Permentier, Van Ham, & Bolt, 2007) and stigma (Tunstall, Green, Lupton, Watmough, & Bates, 2014; Wacquant, 2008). At the meso- and macro-scales it relates more closely to the operation, navigation and availability of opportunities in the local labour market. There has been a substantial increase in the service sector across cities in the Western world, and as a result employment that is classified by many as falling within the traditional middle-class categorizations of occupation. Indeed, work by Manley and Johnston (2014) highlighted the churning of households into different types of employment structures rather than the wholesale displacement of cohorts of class groups.

Within a single urban environment there are multiple groups coexisting, sharing space but inhabiting different worlds: the meaning and level of provision by multiple structures depends on the mode of access and the utility that individuals can gain from them. This is not a new proposition nor is it particularly radical (e.g., Wilson, 1990). As noted, there is a substantial body of work investigating the top 1% and their privileged access to finance, space, travel and globalized engagement (Atkinson, 2016; Birtchnell & Caletrío, 2013). Moreover, the impact on outcomes is not just for the 1% elite or those at the other end of the spectrum (the identification of this group is somewhat less precise, though urban sociology observes an underclass, consisting of the poor and unemployed (the NEETs),³ the lowest social stratum in a country or community; Wilson, 1990, 1996). The focus should also encompass the large middle group extending from those who are just managing⁴ to those who are flourishing and advancing. Within the groups neglected in the literature lying between the two ends of the income distribution

there have been some substantial shifts as old industries have given way to service sector employment and greater precarity in the labour force. This precarity has many manifestations. In the city, there is the increase in self-employment and zero-hour contracts. There has been the rise of the 'self-employed' online services: the delivery driver, the Uber taxi cab driver or the Deliveroo food delivery biker, for instance (Langley & Leyshon, 2017). Outside the larger urban areas, gig-economy opportunities are being generated through online platforms that seek to harness immaterial labour across geographically disparate communities. Thus, whilst job tenures have risen during the last 15 years, there are very visible markers of insecurity for some groups (e.g., zero-hours contracts) resulting from the evolution of the labour process within occupations, as well as shifts of labour among occupations (see Braverman, 1998, on the transformation of work in the modern era).⁵

Similarly, there is a substantial body of work that investigates the impacts of living on the margins of economic sustainability and coexisting in the most deprived neighbourhoods and places in the country (e.g., Nettle, 2015; Power, 2007; Power, Willmot, & Davidson, 2011; for a US comparison, see Weissman & Dickson, 2012). However, it is not these groups with whom we are primarily concerned, not because they are unimportant but because of the need to understand wider social stratification: research has become obsessed by the exceptional not the null and there is often a tacit assumption that there is no effect or no difference occurring within the middle of the social distribution, which we refute. Geodemographic profiling can provide a sophisticated classification of groups within neighbourhoods, and without wishing to advocate a reductionist view of individuals and neighbourhood life courses, it is instructive to note that research in this vein has recognized the diversity of area-based communities and that there are a multitude of different types, whilst the literature remains wedded to investigation of the extremes (e.g., Bauder, 2002; Zwiers, Ham, & Manley, 2017).

Of course, the implications of this are that understanding the barriers to social mobility and the pathways that individuals undertake in their life is more complex than is currently portrayed. The spatiality of disadvantage and access is widely recognized in the popular press. The UK's television schedules are full of programmes that seek to highlight the apparent dysfunctionality of specific streets (Benefits Street, Channel 4; Benefits by the Sea, Channel 5) and even propose that there are some communities where benefit receipt appears excessive (e.g., On Benefits: Britain's Benefit Blackspots, Channel 5) connecting the individual to place outcome even if simplistically. Thus, for many place remains important – even without the ability or need to make causal arguments about the impact or otherwise of place – it *appears* as if it matters. As Slater (2013) notes, it is not so much that where you live defines who and what you are, but what and who you are defines where you live! Yet, as soon as analytical attention moves away from the margins and into those in the middle, place loses its resonance. To date, intergenerational research has been conducted in an aspatial vacuum:

analyses at the national, regional or city level cannot provide sufficient spatial disaggregation. Sharkey (2013) and van Ham et al. (2014) provide the few alternative perspectives; Chetty et al. (2016) whilst purporting to investigate neighbourhood only do so at the state level. However, even these cases have temporal limits in the number of follow-ups over the life course or the period of independent life followed restricting the fullness of the analysis. To address this, we need a more detailed expression of space: the places in which individuals interact, connect and disconnect from opportunities need acknowledging. Realizing that contact with and exposure to (dis)advantage can accumulate throughout the early life course is critical, along with understanding how some individuals will better insulate themselves within structures and circumstances. Thus, intergeneration inheritances come in multiple forms: they must relate not only to the parents, grandparents and other family structures, but also to places.

Opportunities and outcomes must therefore be viewed as part of a single process – one set of outcomes leads to another set of opportunities. Similarly, outcomes should not be studied as (end)point events but as culminations of often long-running processes, and simultaneously starting points that facilitate further developments. This includes childhood experiences and exposures in adult economic outcomes. The inequalities that are currently set in society are likely to be a legacy of class structures experienced in the 1970s and 1980s, now in transition. While we know much about the labour market in general (see Kain, 1968, on the spatial mismatch; and Penn, 2016, for a review of class-based relations), far fewer studies investigate the outcomes conditional on opportunities as a direct relation. In other words, outcome is often linked to opportunity through proxy variables such as at the contextual-level neighbourhood deprivation or at the household-level income. These proxy variables hide a variety of different mechanisms through which individuals may be impacted: they cannot uncover the processes at work that lead to the intervening outcomes. If intergenerational inheritances are becoming increasingly important, then it will become critical to move beyond the current literature where thresholds and take-off points are identified as if they represent clinical diagnoses and adopt an approach that recognizes there is a continuum where individuals travel along a range of interdependent exposures in a variety of contexts. This, then, is likely to be a process of cumulative (dis)advantage where differences are incremental such that rather than one which is identified through the use of single-instance identifiers (such as social group, residential location, cultural identity), the accumulation of exposures is recognized by considering the small (dis)advantages that amass over time as those who can seek to cement their positions. Consider, for example, the residential jostling for positions in the catchments of the best school – a state schooling equivalent to the investments made by the wealthier in their private education – or access to afterschool clubs that require both the time to transport children and the finances to be able to pay. On the face of it, these

advantages may not appear substantial, certainly not in comparison with those enjoyed by the top elite, but for those who are able, the distance from those who cannot is increasing.

CONCLUSIONS

Investigation of the long-run implications of life courses lived in the multitude of middle-class groups churning in places and hierarchies is of paramount importance to understanding the underlying changes that the UK, and Western society more generally, have undergone. In recognizing the need to widen the focus of urban and regional research to excavate societal outcomes within the middle tranche, this paper has outlined a future research agenda in which the complex interactions between individual life courses, societal structures of opportunity and achievement along with the spatial disparities that join together in a nexus of outcomes for individuals are the primary focus. By direct attention towards the vast heterogeneity of the middle and the exploration of life courses within that group, the present agenda is as much epistemological as it is methodological: we recognize the possibilities afforded by the identification of life courses that work and benefit more people. Few people inhabit the upper and lower limits of the income distribution and so research findings and policy responses that are designed to assist those at the margins risk neglecting societal processes and outcomes across the social milieu.

What this means for urban and regional geography is a determined coalition of approaches: adopting techniques from urban spatial analysis in combination with the knowledge of economic and social opportunities structures intersected with the greater depth that qualitative and longitudinal follow-ups can provide gives multiple lenses to unpick a greater diversity of outcomes. Average effects on average people in average places have provided a solid basis for understanding our social structures. But now we need to move beyond this and find the individual, the exceptional and the outlying. This will require combinations of quantitative and qualitative approaches to identify the exceptional and ‘nuance to the null’ (DeLuca, Duncan, Mendenhall, & Keels, 2012), that large middle group that exists between the top and bottom of the distribution where trends can be identified. Moreover, we need to become more comfortable with long-run projects whereby longitudinal and cohort research is pursued to ensure we can follow opportunity to outcome, and an epistemological change that views outcomes and opportunities as transitions along a continuum of experiences and exposures as gained by individuals rather than as discrete points of interest.

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NOTES

1. A recent report by Hick and Lanau (2017) identified the multiple causes and consequences of in-work poverty as far more problematic for families than the long-run period of worklessness that is often cited as critical in popular discourse.
2. For a stylized typology of the North–South divide, see Dorling (2010).
3. NEET is a UK government term referring to individuals ‘not in employment, education or training’. Whilst it is a problematic label covering a diverse set of people and outcomes, it is nevertheless useful as a marker within this conversation.
4. In 2016, the British Prime Minister Theresa May referred to a core group of the electorate as ‘just about managing’, a group that quickly became known as the ‘JAMs’. It is important to acknowledge this term here, although we avoid direct usage (Butler & Syal, 2016).
5. Whilst there are those who argue that insecurity does not appear to be expanding (Gregg & Gardiner, 2015), others suggest that structural inequality has increased and is a threat to social cohesion and stability (Musterd, Marcińczak, van Ham, & Tammaru, 2016).

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