

The Son Also Rises
Gregory Clark

Social status is more highly heritable than we suppose. Be careful blaming inequality on evil intent

The key observation of this book, the thesis, is that social status is much more highly heritable than is widely assumed. About 75% of the social status of a person in the current generation can be explained by the social status of prior generations. In other words, social mobility is not as high as social scientists have believed.

Clark finds this to be true in a significant number of societies throughout the world: Great Britain, United States, Sweden, Japan, Korea, India, China and Chile. These countries are diverse enough in their populations, their geography, and their history to justify a generalization. What is true of them would seem to be true of the whole world.

This contradicts the assumption social mobility, especially in developed democracies such as Sweden, is relatively high. Social policy in most developed countries is based on the assumption that it is. Many countries have official policies of giving preferences to groups that are designated disadvantaged, on the theory that they should be upwardly mobile. The fact that these policies do not lead to measurable improvement leads to charges of residual racism, persistent discrimination, and other forms of blame. Clark says no, that's just the way society works.

He devotes two whole chapters to the mathematics of the differences.. The statisticians who find high levels of social mobility measure the correlation between successive generations, usually on a single variable such as educational attainment and family income. These studies typically result in correlations of 30% or so. Since the magnitude of variance in the children's generation attributable to the parents generation is a function of the square, and 30% squared is only 9%, they conclude that the success of an individual cannot generally be described as inherited.

Clark says there are two things wrong with this assumption. First, social status is a composite of many variables, of which income, wealth and educational attainment are only a few. He proposes the existence of a latent variable – one that cannot be measured directly – that is a composite of all of them.

What is a latent variable? Intelligence is the most widely known of them. Unlike with height or weight, there is no physical instrument to measure it. Intelligence is the composite of measures of a number of types of skills such as verbal, mathematical, logical inference, and spatial relations. Clark does not propose introducing a measure for the latent variable of social status, but he says it can be inferred from observing the relative success of people over many generations. That is his second major observation. That the effects of the genome responsible for social success can be observed in individuals of prior generations.

Discussing prior generations, he uses a mathematical term, describing the process as first order Markov. What he means by this is that an individual's parents are 100% responsible for the child's genome. However, that genome may have been expressed differently in different generations. Father may be a professor and the son a businessman. The measured correlations between them on both income and educational attainment would not be very high, but the latent potential is. Both have high potential for social status.

Clark expresses it mathematically: "The second assumption in this simple theory of all social mobility is that underlying social status in families regresses only slowly toward the mean, with a persistence rate, b , of 0.75. And this high rate of persistence is constant across all societies. Formally,

$$x_{t+1} = bx_t + e_t,$$

where e_t is a second random component.² This is the social law of motion that is tested in the rest of this book." (NB: t in the above formula should appear as a subscript).

Stated mathematically, b is a vector of many elements (wealth, income, education, occupation...) and most analyses of social mobility measure only one, such as income.

Clark's methodology is both very clever and labor-intensive. The records that have survived from past generations are different from society to society. Nonetheless, every society does have registries of people from centuries past. In England they include the students enrolled at Oxford and Cambridge, the probate records of estates of rich people, and various censuses.

In most countries there are relatively rare surnames. China and Korea, in which this is not true, use geographical designations to indicate various branches of the Kim, Lee and Wong families. The combination of name and place of origin may be rare. One way or another, Clark is able to identify groups of people with rare surnames and compare their relative success over many generations. The family he introduces in the introduction is that of Samuel Pepys. Though there are only 18 surviving members of this family as of his writing, they are several times more successful by most metrics than the average Englishman. Moreover, they have been consistently more successful over centuries.

This is true of other families, as Francis Galton wrote in his 19 century book "Hereditary Genius." Galton cited the Darwins, Huxleys, Bernoullis and others. Using multiple case histories, Clark establishes the validity of the assumption that people sharing a rare surname are generally related. Therefore, the relative prominence of for instance, Norman surnamed people like Beauchamp and Montgomery from generation to generation in England is a proxy for the heritability of social success. Though it always diminishes through the statistical process of regression to the mean, the surprise is the percentage that is retained. To repeat the above, it is about 75% in most societies.

Clark does not note that this is approximately the same as the psychometricians' estimate of the heritability of intelligence, about 80%. He does, however, note that

adoptees' social status is much better explained by their birth parents than their adoptive parents.

Regression to the mean is another statistical term. For every observation (x, y pair) in a set of correlated variables, $y = bx + e$. Some fraction of the value of y is a function of x; the rest is random, or error. Let's say I have a (silly) equation to computer annual income from SAT score: $\text{income} = \text{SAT} \times 500$. This (made up) formula would predict that a person with an SAT score of 100 would earn \$50,000. A person scoring 130 would earn \$65,000. The prediction will almost always be off a bit. For a person earning \$75,000, the formula would be $\$75,000 = 500 \times 130 + 10,000$. The error term is \$10,000. The formula is not fully accurate; it simply does the best possible job. The sum of the error terms over all of the (x, y) pairs will be zero.

There is always a luck factor. Bill Gates' and Mark Zuckerberg's SATs were not THAT high. Their kids will be smart, but will not necessarily inherit luck. Therefore, their children's incomes will regress to the mean. They will be closer to what the formula would predict, without the luck factor.

Regression to the mean is observed among gene pools. Endogamous populations, those that marry among themselves, revert to the mean of the particular gene pool. In other words, two smart Jews marrying are more likely to have intelligent children than two Goyim of equal intelligence. The same is unfortunately true of the less capable elements of society: unintelligent begets unintelligent. Among the smart groups that Clark mentions are the Copts of Egypt, Jews, and the Sikhs and Parsees of India. Endogamy, Clark observes, has a lot to do with the perpetuation of caste in India.

The heritability of social status is highly persistent. It has survived the Russian Revolution, the Chinese cultural Revolution, the alternation between Allende and Pinochet in Chile, and other such social perturbations without much measurable change.

Clark concludes with the observation that social policies designed to advance the less advantaged members of society, such as admissions preferences practiced in India and the United States, and programs such as head start, are not likely to be effective. Society would be better off to simply accept that there will be differences among people and implement social policies that accommodate such differences. He writes favorably of Sweden, in which tax and income policies diminish the differences which despite all of the social engineering same as persistent there is everywhere.

This is a powerful piece of social science. It is heartening to discover that it is widely read and accepted. Mankind will be the better if we realistically accept that the differences we observe are functions of real differences among people, stop blaming people and simply make policy to accommodate the differences.