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Ethnicity, Gender, and Social Mobility in 1910

The belief that the social class position an individual inherits at birth is not itself a prime determinant of subsequent personal achievement is a cherished part of American democratic tradition. Social historians attempting to measure whether the mobility opportunities so eagerly sought by immigrants were in fact realized have looked at the occupations of immigrant men and their sons. Evidence from such diverse areas as Boston, Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and New York City indicates that at the turn of the century many men did experience upward occupational mobility; some groups, notably blacks, did not fare as well as did white immigrants, and not all white immigrants experienced the same rates of occupational improvement (Bodnar et al. 1982; Lieberman 1980; Model 1988; Thernstrom 1964, 1973; Zunz 1982). This essay turns to the first decade of the twentieth century to explore some of the factors contributing to socioeconomic mobility.

Even though studies of immigrant adaptation are often framed in terms of family adjustment, little empirical work has examined how gender roles were manipulated by immigrant families to achieve security and success. While there were some practical reasons for restricting previous mobility studies to men, historical work also suggests the need to integrate women into the framework. The scholarly literature does provide evidence of job mobility for women: second-generation women improved their occupational standing over first-generation women (Diner 1983; Glenn 1990). Moreover, research also suggests that daughters influenced the occupational pursuits of their brothers (Goldin 1981; Sassier 1995).

This essay has two objectives. First, we document the degree of status transmission from fathers to their coresident children. Second, we explore the way that gender shaped intergenerational status transmission. To carry out this work we estimate a series of multivariate statistical models. Our analysis makes use of representative microlevel data from the 1910 census Public Use Sample. We introduce several innovations. First, we examine status transmission from fathers to *daughters* as well as sons. Second, we introduce family contextual variables. Third, the analysis compares both “old” and “new” ethnic groups with longer-term white and black residents of the United States, delineating how ethnicity influenced parental transmission of occupational status to sons and daughters and how it varied with increasing generation in the country. Our article concludes with a discussion of how ethnicity, family composition, and gender roles together shaped mobility opportunities for immigrants and their offspring in the early twentieth century.