Intergenerational Occupational Mobility in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam

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Received 19 January 2021; published 5 July 2021

Abstract: *The paper presents how the theory of intergenerational occupational mobility has been applied to explain the process of class renewal in contemporary Vietnam in general, and in the Mekong Delta in particular. It thereby highlights the rules and the regularity of the transfer process of social advantages and disadvantages*[1].

Keywords: Intergenerational Occupational Mobility, Occupational Status, Occupational Stratification System, Mekong Delta, Vietnam

Introduction

Intergenerational occupational/career mobility is often described through a comparison of occupational status between children and their fathers (Endruweit and Trommsdorff, 2002: 120). In a narrower sense, it is comprehended as the change in occupational status of a son in association with that of his father, or in other words, how the son's occupation is influenced by his father's (Do Thien Kinh, 2007). However, this conception often receives theoretical criticism for not being able to translate fully the gender aspects in intergenerational mobility. Therefore, article adopts the concept of intergenerational occupational mobility for the implication of changes in career status between parents and their offspring (regardless of their gender).

There are different ways to calculate the rate of intergenerational occupational mobility. The author applies the transition matrix, proposed by Japanese sociologist Saburo Yasuda, to describe the relations between parents and children in their job status and to identify determinants of multigenerational mobility in terms of occupation. The matrix allows us to fathom the probability that a child with parent(s) from the lowest class could advance to the highest class and vice versa (Clark, 2017: 367). The matrix is

[1] The survey was part of the research project "Occupational mobility upon climate change in the Mekong delta: A case study in Can Tho city" conducted by the author in 2020 with the sample size of 784 people, aged from 15 to 55 for female and up to 60 for male. Study areas concentrated in the localities most affected by climate change and were categorized into two clusters, including two urban districts and one rural district where wards and communes were also selected by purpose following block sampling. The study employed semi-structured interviews with 30 people of working age.

also useful for estimating the mobility and succession rates in terms occupational status and the open coefficients for the whole model as well as for each job group. This is a practical tool for understanding to what degree the offspring's job status dependent on that of their father or mother, or eventually for anticipating the social status of children through that of their parents.

1. Tendency of occupational succession from parents

Literature on intergenerational occupational mobility often seeks to answer questions such as how parents' career status influences their children's, how many and for what reasons people continue and discontinue their parents' occupational status, and what process and mechanism that enables the occupational succession and mobility.

Our research results indicate that rapid changes in economic structures and impacts of climate change as well as technology transformation have facilitated the occupational mobility. In previous societies, there was little chance for children of lower-class people to climb up the social hierarchy of occupations; children of peasants continued to become cultivators and herders; and social transitions were slowly to occur[1]. In today's settings, the shift in occupational status has become a popular social phenomenon. Vietnam is no longer a society in which intergenerational succession of occupational status was a fundamental inclination, but rather a society with the prevalence of intergenerational career mobility. Only a minority of people succeeded their parents' jobs, as evidenced by the results of our survey in Can Tho city (Tables 1 and 2)[2].

There were 296 out of 784 respondents (37.75%) who pursued the same careers with their fathers. Among those, people with fathers obtaining leadership positions or high-level professions had the highest rates of occupational succession, 35/52 people (67.3%) and 29/75 people (38.7%) respectively. The succession rates were 38.1% for respondents with fathers working skilled jobs and 34.7% for those with fathers working less-skilled jobs and in agriculture (Table 1).

We also recognize the increasing role that mothers play in educational and professional success of their offspring. Thus, it is important to understand the influence of the mothers' job status over their children's. Survey results reveal 246 people (31.37%) out of 784 respondents inherited their mothers' occupational status. The succession rates were 88.5% for those with mothers working at leadership or senior levels; 38.2% for mid-level

[1] Trinh Van Thao (2013: 130), when investigating the origins of Vietnamese intellectuals who were born in 1862, 1907 and 1925, discovered that most of the scholars came from intellectual families. Accordingly, there was a recreation, rather than creation, of social classes in the former Vietnamese societies. In other words, during the process of social restructuring, the descendants of the intelligentsia obtained certain advantages to become a new generation of intellectuals in a new society. Meanwhile, individuals whose parents were peasants or craftsmen would have lower possibility to join higher or intellectual classes.

[2] Table 1 and Table 2: Succession rate is defined by the number of people who inherit their fathers/mothers job status; Overall mobility rate is computed on the total number of people who do not have the same occupational status as their fathers/mothers; Structural mobility rate is associated with social structure, not with the increase or decrease in demand for certain occupational status; Net mobility rate is dependent on personal preferences in switching between occupations of different status.

Table 1. Matrix of father-and-child occupational mobility

		Child's first occupational status				Total pairs of father and child
		Leaders and senior professionals	Mid-level experts /staff	Industrial and skilled workers	Less-skilled and farming workers	
Father's occupational status	Leaders and senior professionals	35 67.3%	17 32.7%	0 0%	0 0%	52 100%
	Mid-level experts /staff	6 8.0%	29 38.7%	28 37.3%	12 10.6%	75 100%
	Industrial and skilled workers	19 16.8%	49 43.4%	43 38.1%	2 1.8%	113 100%
	Less-skilled and farming workers	30 5.5%	141 25.9%	184 33.8%	189 34.7%	544 100%
Total pairs of father and child		90 11.5%	236 30.1%	255 32.5%	203 25.9%	784 100%
Occupational succession rate				37.75%		
Overall mobility rate				62.25%		
Structural mobility rate				43.49%		
Net mobility rate				18.76%		

Source: Derived from survey results, 2020.

expertise; 22.2% for skilled jobs; and over 30% for less-skilled jobs and farming (Table 2).

In general, for the occupational inspiration of both fathers and mothers, the highest succession rates were for leadership or high-level expertise while the lowest succession rates found in farming or less-skilled employment. These results allow us to conclude that we are living in a society where social classes are created rather than being recreated.

2. Intergenerational occupational mobility rates and directions

Our survey results show a majority among 784 respondents did not follow their parents' career paths, with 62.25% for fathers' and 68.63% for mothers' (Tables 1 and 2). Regarding the direction of father-and-child occupational mobility, there were 429 respondents (54.72%) moving upwards and 59 respondents (7.53%) moving downwards on the social hierarchy of occupations.

The probability of an advancement to the leadership and senior-level class was 5.5% for respondents with farming or less-skilled fathers; 16.8% for those with skilled or industrially-employed fathers; and 8% for those with mid-level expertise fathers. The chance to join the mid-level expertise class was 25.9% for respondents with farming or less-skilled fathers and 43.3% for those with skilled or industrially-employed fathers. People with farming or less-skilled fathers had a 33.8% chance to become skilled or industrial workers.

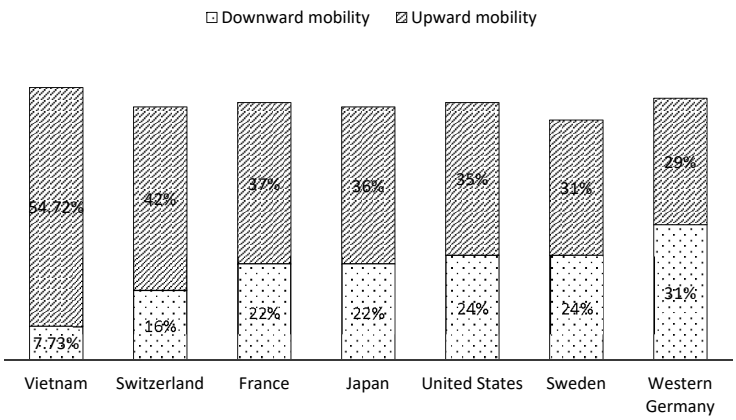
Moving in the reverse direction, industrial or skilled workers whose have fathers with mid-level expertise were the dominant group (37.3%). The second-largest group includes people who obtain mid-level expertise but their fathers work at the leadership or senior level.

Table 2. Matrix of mother-and-child occupational mobility

		Child's first occupational status				Total pairs of mother and child
		Leaders and senior professionals	Mid-level experts / staff	Industrial and skilled workers	Less-skilled and farming workers	
Mother's occupational status	Leaders and senior professionals	23 88.5%	2 7.7%	1 3.8%	0 0%	26 100%
	Mid-level experts /staff	3 8.8%	13 38.2%	5 14.7%	13 38.2%	34 100%
	Industrial and skilled workers	20 22.2%	50 55.6%	20 22.2%	0 0%	90 100%
	Less-skilled and farming workers	44 6.9%	171 27.0%	229 36.1%	190 30.0%	634 100%
Total pairs of mother and child		90 11.5%	236 30.1%	255 32.5%	203 25.9%	784 100%
Occupational succession rate				31.37%		
Overall mobility rate				68.63%		
Structural mobility rate				54.97%		
Net mobility rate				13.66%		

Source: Derived from survey results, 2020.

Figure 1. Intergenerational occupational mobility in selected countries



Source: Derived from Stark (1997: 140).

The directions of father-and-son occupational status shift in today's Vietnam resemble those in several developed countries of their 1950s, like Switzerland, France, and Japan. The overall mobility rate in Vietnam (62.25%) also corresponds with that of previously West Germany (61%) and the United States (59%) (Stark, 1997: 140). However, the overall rate of upward movement in our model is much higher than that of West Germany, Sweden, or the United States, which indicates more opportunities available for Vietnamese people to advance to higher levels on the occupational pyramid compared to the job status of their parents (Figure 1).

The same patterns are observed in mother-and-child occupational mobility. The overall upward movement rate (65.7%) completely overwhelms the overall downward movement rate (2.7%). The upward mobility is characterized with two main features: One is the advancement

of respondents having less-skilled or farming mothers to become skilled or industrial workers (36.1%), mid-level professionals or staff (27%), and leaders or senior professionals (6.9%). The other is the movement of people, whose mothers are skilled or industrial workers, into the mid-level experts (55.6%) and leaders and senior professionals (22.2%) (Table 2).

For those who move downward, 7.7% of them obtain mid-level expertise and 3.8% of them are skilled or industrial workers while their mothers working at leadership or senior level. In addition, a large proportion of people who have mothers of mid-level expertise have become farming and less-skilled workers (38.2%) and skilled or industrial workers (14.7%).

In brief, the upward occupational mobility is the prominent in both models related to mothers and fathers. The probabilities for entering higher social classes vary, however.

4. Causes of intergenerational occupational mobility

Research signifies three main groups of causes leading to intergenerational occupational mobility: (1) objective changes in the structure of social classes; (2) changes in population size of different social classes (induced by births, deaths, immigration, migration); and (3) reciprocal displacement of individuals among social classes in relation to their personal interests or professional qualification (Do Thien Kinh, 2018: 65).

When investigating the career choices of individuals in Can Tho city, we found that their decisions were affected by socio-economic situations and personal preferences and capacity more than their family background (Table 3). The implications are useful for us to direct our attention to the first and third groups of causes as above mentioned.

Our data analysis reveals the main cause of intergenerational occupational mobility in the study area is the changes in the local socio-economic structure. Mekong delta's provinces and particularly Can Tho city in recent years have experienced rapid changes in science and technology as well as climate and environmental issues. The dual process of industrialization and modernization also contributes significantly to the local alteration of occupational structure. Results from the Labor Force Survey by the General Statistical Office of Vietnam (GSO) show that there were positive changes in the Mekong delta's employment structure in 2010-2018. While the employment rate in agriculture, forestry and fishery decreased by 4 percentage points, those in leadership, technical and senior-level occupations increased.

Higher labor demand for top-tier jobs on the occupational pyramid has facilitated the upward movement of people from lower classes.

The structural mobility rates in our two models (Tables 1 and 2) demonstrate further the strong impact of the local economic and structural transformation on intergenerational occupational mobility. These rates are much higher than the net mobility rates, implying that the upward occupational mobility is attributed largely to "objective changes in the structure of social classes and changes in population size of different social classes (induced by births, deaths, immigration, migration)". The movement due to reciprocal displacement between upper and lower classes accounts for a small proportion in both models. It signifies that the process of industrialization

Table 3. Reasons for first occupational selection
(*Response scale 1-5:*
1-Completely false; 2-False; 3-Partly true, partly false;
4-True; 5-Completely true)

Reason for first occupational selection	Mean	Median	Stand. Dev.
1. Associated with personal preferences	2.96	3	0.026
2. Associated with family	2.05	2	0.035
3. Associated with socio-economic circumstances	3.01	3	0.055

Source: Derived from survey results, 2020.

Table 4. Occupational structure in the Mekong delta in 2010 and 2018 (%)

Group of occupations	2010	2018
1. Leadership	0.6	0.8
2. Senior-level expertise	2.5	4.3
3. Mid-level expertise	2.6	2.1
4. Staff	1.0	1.5
5. Personal protection services and sales	17.1	19.3
6. Works in agriculture, forestry and fishery	19.9	15.9
7. Craftwork and other related jobs	10.3	11.8
8. Assembling and operating machinery and equipment	4.8	6.7
9. Less-skilled work	41.6	37.4
10. Others	-	0.1

Source: General Statistics Office of Vietnam (2011; 2019).

and modernization along with higher accessibility to education and health care has enabled relatively high degree of occupational mobility in the society. A large number of people have moved upward to fill higher-class job vacancies on the labor market. This proves that socio-economic structural change has entailed an increase in high-status occupations on the social hierarchy and opportunities for a majority of people to move upward.

The impacts of economic structural transformation on the degree of occupational mobility, however, differ between urban and rural areas. Our study confirms a lower degree of mobility in rural areas due to slower occurrence of structural transformation. In the model of father-and-child occupational status shift, the immobility rate in rural areas (55.8%) is more than two times higher than that in urban areas (26.9%). The same situation is observed in the model of mother-and-child occupational status shift, with 51.4% in rural areas versus 19.4% in urban areas.

The upward mobility rates are higher in urban areas than those in rural areas in both studied models. The rates in urban and rural areas are respectively 62% against 42.5% for the father-and-child model and 76.5% against 48.3% for the mother-and-child model (Table 5).

In general, the rapid socio-economic development and structural changes in urban areas have contributed to higher degrees of both occupational mobility and upward occupational mobility compared to rural areas, demonstrating positive impacts of economic structural transformation in the Mekong delta in recent years.

Conclusion

Our study results indicate the recent socio-economic development process under the leadership of Vietnam's Communist Party has characterized a new Vietnamese society

Table 5. Intergenerational occupational mobility in rural and urban areas

Area	Mobility compared to the father				Mobility compared to the mother			
	Immobility	*Downward mobility*	*Upward mobility*	*Total*	*Immobility*	*Downward mobility*	*Upward mobility*	*Total*
Rural	164 55.8%	5 1.7%	125 42.5%	294 100%	151 51.4%	1 0.3%	142 48.3%	294 100%
Urban	132 26.9%	54 11.0%	304 62.0%	490 100%	95 19.4%	20 4.1%	375 76.5%	490 100%
Total	296 37.8%	59 7.5%	429 54.7%	784 100%	246 31.4%	21 2.7%	517 65.9%	784 100%

Source: Derived from survey results, 2020.

that differs from its previous selves. We are living in a society where social classes are created rather than being created. Structural change enabled through industrialization and modernization has increased the demand for highly skilled labor, opening up opportunities for the majority of people to advance in their career. In other words, this is a society with an open stratification system and highly social mobility. The high rate of social mobility is a fundamental factor for the formation of a better society (Clark, 2017: 15), where higher equality of opportunity is ensured and career success is no longer the prerogative of those who born into high-status families (Stark, 1997: 141). In addition, changes in the structure of social classes which promote upward occupational mobility will certainly transform people's mindsets towards more openness and nourishment of talents ❑

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