

## **Social Reproduction Strategies: Understanding Compound Inequality in the Intergenerational Transfer of Capital, Assets and Resources**

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### **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the way that households respond to ‘global pressures’ by adapting their social reproduction strategies (SRS). We understand SRS to encapsulate the more or less consciously developed day-to-day and inter-generational responses to the social conditions that households confront and their own motivations and aspirations for the future. Yet, due to a range of extant inequalities of accumulated and dynamic resources – some of which are material and some of which are at once ethereal and embodied in the concrete labouring capacities of individuals – we argue that SRS and capacities to pursue them differ widely. Differences are conditioned by positionality, access to information and the construction of ‘economic imaginaries’ as well as material resources. By looking at these different expressions of SRS we highlight how they reinforce macro-scale socio-economic pressures, creating what we term ‘compound inequality’ into the future. Compound inequalities result from different behavioural responses to socio-economic conditions, inequality and (perceived or real) insecurity, which have the potential to exaggerate inequality and insecurity into the future. Inequalities do not just arise from formal economic markets then but also from the realm of social reproduction.

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How can women understand their particular oppression in a way that can confront the narrowness of Marxist terminology (as used by the men in the movement) which focuses on work and economic relations as the primary (sometimes only) area of importance; and how can they develop a new theory which understands the importance of reproduction, family, and sexuality as central to current analyses and future visions (Hartman 1981: xviii).

## Introduction

This paper focuses on the way that households respond to ‘global pressures’ by adapting their social reproduction strategies (SRS). These pressures are transmitted through national and local scale institutions and felt on the micro-scale as increased inequality and (perceived) insecurity. We understand SRS to encapsulate the more or less consciously developed day-to-day and inter-generational responses to the social conditions that households confront and their own motivations and aspirations for the future. We extend here the notion of households, away from understanding these entities as passive recipients of contextual changes, to acknowledging the agency of households in making active choices, responding and indeed contributing to change (Montgomerie and Tepe-Belfrage, 2018). Furthermore, we claim that understanding the ways that different households adapt their SRS is central to understanding the micro-foundations of larger scale and ever changing processes of social reproduction.

Yet, due to a range of extant inequalities of accumulated and dynamic resources – some of which are material and some of which are at once ethereal and embodied in the concrete labouring capacities of individuals – we argue that SRS differ widely. Differences are conditioned by positionality, access to information and the construction of ‘economic imaginaries’ as well as the differentiated material capacity to respond to changing socio-economic conditions. By looking at these different expressions of SRS we highlight how they reinforce macro-scale socio-economic pressures, creating what we term ‘compound inequality’ into the future. That is; different behavioural responses to socio-economic conditions, inequality and (perceived or real) insecurity exaggerate that inequality and insecurity into the future.

Making these arguments, this paper contributes to three distinct but related literatures which exist on the edges of, and overlap with, the Marxist tradition. The first is the feminist political economy literature on social reproduction. We contribute a case study, connecting several scales to understand how SRS are adopted in the light of inequality and insecurity. The second relates to the policy concern with issues of inter-generational fairness and social mobility. The third is a sociological literature which draws heavily on Bourdieu to illustrate the role of the family in producing and transmitting ‘Capitals, Assets and Resources’ (CARs). All these literatures provide useful insights into the ways that objective inequalities and subjective insecurities are internalised and experienced. When combined, these literatures provide accounts of the dynamics of contemporary capitalism and allow us to theorise the dialectical relations between structure and agency, and in particular the scalar-relations of production and reproduction. Our first core contribution is that a focus on SRS, offers a rich insight into these dynamics and relations.

This paper proceeds by outlining the mainstream literature on social mobility, before going on to identify weaknesses in this and the reasons we prefer to draw on materialist feminist understandings of social reproduction to more fully explore these issues. The paper then moves on to lay out a multi-scalar conceptualisation of social reproduction. This serves the purpose of illustrating tentative evidence of the ways that differential SRS might respond to existing

inequalities to generate ‘compound inequality’ and further provide a framework to structure future empirical research. The concept of compound inequality is our second key contribution.

### **Inequality and Failing Social Mobility as a Social Reproduction Problem**

Widespread concern exists across the OECD (d’ Addio 2007; 2008; OECD 2018) about inequality and low levels of social fluidity; with some even stating that the fundamental promise of modern societies is broken, i.e. climbing up the social ladder through independent effort, regardless of social origin, has become impossible (Sachweh, Lenz, & Sthamer 2018). On closer investigation however, distinct but interrelated political concerns emerge. One concern is the popular perception that limited opportunities for upward mobility and declining life chances are creating political dissatisfaction:

“... there is evidence suggesting that prospects of upward mobility also have a positive influence on life satisfaction and undermine individual self-esteem, social cohesion and people’s feeling that their voice counts, particularly among middle- and lower-income people. This reduces trust in the socio-political system with potential negative consequences on democratic participation. This also strengthens political extremism or populism.” (OECD 2018).

A second concern reflects elite worries that intergenerational inequalities will reduce overall skills, productivity and growth levels, including through behavioural responses to inequality:

“In the context of increased inequalities of income and opportunities, lack of upward mobility at the bottom of the income distribution means that many potential talents are missed out or remain under-developed. It also means that many investment opportunities go unexploited and potential businesses never see the light. This undermines productivity and economic growth...” (OECD 2018: 13).

These concerns have distinct manifestations in different national contexts; the one we are able to illustrate best is the UK. In that context, they have triggered policy responses over a long period of time that aimed at developing increased ‘fairness’: For example, in the latter years of the New Labour governments of the 2000s the findings of a series of high profile (though also contested: see Goldthorpe (2013)) studies (Blanden 2004; Blanden & Gregg 2007) were taken in the public debate to indicate declining opportunities for inter-generational mobility, and ultimately triggered the development of the Equality Act. When the Coalition Government came to power in 2010, it too placed a heavy emphasis on social mobility as ‘fairness’ (Nunn 2012), and the subsequently created Social Mobility Commission shone a light on some institutional processes which act as barriers to mobility. However, there is ongoing consternation about a lack of progress in dealing with these issues (Social Mobility Commission 2017) and the head of the Commission resigned in 2017 in protest at a lack of support from a government distracted by Brexit. His resignation letter is significant:

“In America for 30 years real average earnings have remained flat. Now here the chancellor is predicting that will last for 20 years. That has a consequence for people, but a political consequence as well. It means more anger, more resentment and creates a breeding ground for populism” (Austin 2017).

This echoes the types of concerns that came to the fore, especially in the wake of the Brexit referendum result but which are also visible in Theresa May’s promise when she first came to office to stand up for ‘just about managing families’ (May 2016).

The wider social science literature provides a range of explanations for failing social mobility. From the 1950s onwards, comparative sociological research on social stratification and rational action differentiated between changes in the shape of class structures and changes in the relative chances of moving within them. Put simply, this research showed that urbanisation, industrialisation and the growth of the state and service sectors generated increases in what are measured in Weberian terms as ‘middle class’<sup>1</sup> jobs across the post-war period in Europe and North America (where state administrative structures were sufficient to generate good quality data). This changing occupational structure could be said to be changing the class structure of society. Yet, at the same time, this research also showed that the relative opportunities for mobility within the structure were less obvious. Some research showed slight increases in social fluidity and other research showed a trendless fluctuation. Here, Erikson and Goldthorpe’s (1992) *The Constant Flux*, represented the culmination of several decades of international collaborative empirical work (Sorensen 1992). Toward the end of this volume they conclude that the cause of the persistence of inequality between generations exists “chiefly at the micro level of adaptive individual and family strategies...” and that research should therefore “move down from the level of macro-sociological relationships to ... the social processes that are involved in class mobility or immobility: namely, how middle-class individuals draw on and apply family resources across generations in the reproduction of advantage” (Erikson & Goldthorpe 1992: 397; as quoted in Savage et al 2005). Moving on to seek explanations at this scale, Goldthorpe and other collaborators (e.g. Breen & Goldthorpe 1997) focussed on working class choices to leave school early or to make vocational choices were entirely rational, even if they constrained future opportunities because of immediate cost and benefit calculations and the time horizons over which these calculations could be made. As such, a large part of what explained persistence in inter-generational opportunities was not institutional closure *per se* but the ways in which pre-existing resources shape decision-making differentially. Put simply; pre-existing structural inequalities affect agency in such a way as to reproduce inequalities into the future. It is this idea that we develop below and term ‘compound inequality’.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article we draw on the sociological language of ‘working class’ and ‘middle class’ but we treat these as sections of an objective ‘working class’ in the Marxist sense. That said, as the discussion will make clear, we think that these materially and subjectively hierarchically organised factions of the working class are significant in organising the dynamic social reproduction of inequality and are functional to the reproduction of the capital-labour relation.

The mainstream alternative to the above ‘rational action approach’ to understanding the reproduction of socio-economic status, builds largely on the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieuan understandings of the micro-processes which shape socio-economic reproduction are critical of rational action approaches for being theoretically simplistic, and even descriptive (Savage et al. 2005). Bourdieu argues that individuals compete with one another for status in a series of ‘fields’ in which different types of individualised ‘capital’ offer advantages. Showing how social relationships and networks, on the one hand, and the role of tastes and dispositions, on the other, help to position individuals in a series of lifestyles which correspond to social space, Bourdieu opens up the idea that cultural and social *capital* offer advantages in granting access to particular types of social space, though advantages in one, may not transfer to another. The major contribution of this work is three fold: to illustrate subtle horizontal and vertical forms of social closure which operate in formal and informal social institutions; the significance of culture and networks for granting access to these for individuals; and the role of family and educational institutions in generating social and cultural capital. Often relatively marginal differences (preference and comfort with cultural signifiers or linguistic codes), might grant access to particular social status positions without this being necessarily functional to capital, at least understood in the Marxist sense as being directly productive of surplus value. Bourdieu concludes that these powerful mechanisms act consistently to give a particular understanding of ‘Social Reproduction’ as stasis: the simple reproduction of the status quo (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990: 28f.)

Bourdieu's key concepts of habitus and individualised capitals in the micro-processes of reproduction have been widely taken up in operational research on the reproduction of inequalities and perhaps now provide the dominant explanation for a lack of social mobility (Schiek and Ulrich 2018: 88). One of the most celebrated examples of this application is in the work of Annette Lareau. Her carefully elaborated and exhaustive ethnographic research with 12 families and a wider sample of 88 school children in two US communities was ultimately published in *Unequal Childhoods* (Lareau 2011). The major conclusion from Lareau's study is that parenting strategies are hugely important in transmitting Bourdieu's ‘capitals’ to children. She found that middle class parenting revolved around *concerted cultivation* (Lareau 2002) in which a cult of individualism is generated by a focussed labouring process devoted to the development of a particular form of behaviour, language and reasoning, often aided by numerous organised activities outside of the home. By contrast, among working class and poor families an alternative parenting strategy of *natural growth* predominated in which children are left to their own devices within a stricter application of disciplinary and ethical codes. She suggests that these parenting strategies encourage divergent dispositions in children toward professionals and institutions. According to Lareau, children subjected to concerted cultivation develop a sense of ‘entitlement’ which encourages them to question and intervene to gain support external to the family, in a way that contrasts with the more ‘constrained’ approach of children and parents from working-class backgrounds. Future inequalities are (re)produced through effects of material resources and (class) behavioural differences in parenting.

We suggest that this distinction has much to offer but is becoming outdated. We suggest that many working class parents have adapted strategies of concerted cultivation, even if these differ

materially and qualitatively from some middle class families. Both these types might be thought of as aspirational for a position in the post-war 'New Middle Class' (NMC), even if they were able to manipulate differential resources to realise this. However, as the growth of the NMC has slowed, a third group who are either unable or unwilling even to aspire to a position within it has become increasingly prominent. The state's orientation toward this group has also become increasingly disciplinary and authoritarian as it has sought to impose aspiration upon it (Nunn & Tepe-Belfrage 2017). Furthermore, research on what we will call the 'poverty class faction' suggests other factors of relevance to explain the (absence of) social mobility for people in poverty than for those aspiring NMCs. In contrast to these 'working' and 'middle class' parenting strategies and their role in enabling or undermining social mobility, wider research on poverty still defines parental structures ('single motherhood', 'absent father') and or the number of children in a family (child poverty) as the dominant reason for poverty and for a lack of mobility out of poverty. This is the case 'even though it is foremost individual qualifications, chosen educational tracks and related qualifications that provide socio-economic security for biographies in the working society' (Schiek and Ulrich 2018: 89, translation by authors).

These poorer and more closely surveilled families are even more dependent on supportive state services (e.g. child care, education, health, family and social work support) in their SRS. They are also more subject to disciplinary services to correct their behaviours (including parenting behaviours) which at the extreme involve the state assuming responsibility for parenting in institutional or foster care settings. Care data shows that the numbers of children in state care has increased markedly over recent years, possibly due to increased austerity-influenced poverty and reduced supportive services. Given this, it is notable that there is no national record of the class or educational position of foster-families themselves, and children and young people with care experiences have often had to cope with multiple disruptions in supportive 'parental relationships' once in the care of the state. They still tend to do much worse in terms of educational attainment and long-term social outcomes (criminality, physical and mental health and life expectancy). The cruel irony then is that state action to replace parental influences in these cases does not for many lead to replacing poverty-class faction parenting with the ideal-type middle class experience.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, taken together, mainstream explanations for social (im)mobility provide useful insights into the micro-processes underpinning social reproduction, and in particular the interaction of structure and agency. There is widespread support from research (Carolan & Wasserman 2015; Chin & Phillips 2004; Jaeger 2007; Jaeger & Breen 2016; Jæger & Møllegaard 2017; Martin 2012; Roksa & Potter 2011)<sup>3</sup> in a range of national contexts that the acquisition and transfer of social and cultural capital from parents to children is significant in shaping life chances,

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<sup>2</sup> As Berridge (Berridge 2017) has often noted, this is not to say that state care creates these outcomes, but it certainly does not do enough to mitigate them.

<sup>3</sup> We should also note here the recent contribution of Savage et al.'s (2013; 2014) major survey of class positions in the UK, which they used to propose alternative theories of class positions and reproduction. We do not dwell on it in the narrative because of the widely noted shortcomings in the outcomes of this (e.g. see Special Issue of *Sociology* 48:3).

including as these are mediated *via* the education system. One theme that emerges from research in the UK (Vincent & Ball 2007) and the US (Cooper 2014) is that agency may be particularly affected by structural conditions of increased insecurity. It seems middle class families may be even more determined in their efforts at concerted cultivation, precisely when insecurities increase their fear of children losing status between generations (Irwin & Elley 2011). Rollock (2014) argues that race intersects with class here in such a way that black middle class families have to work harder at displaying and utilising their middle class social and cultural capital in order to access middle class advantaged networks and social spaces. International comparative research also suggests that parental efforts are less strenuous when there is 'less distance to fall' (Nunn 2013).

However, there are also several important shortcomings in this literature. Conceptually, understandings of the ways in which individual 'capitals' relate to institutional settings only take us part of the way to an explanation for the changing class structure and access to positions within it. Without being incorporated within a wider theory of capitalism they ultimately fail to explain how relations of domination and inequality result from the interaction of agency with structure with definite political economy characteristics (Burawoy 2012; 2018). It is significant of course that micro-processes and relations between households, families and institutions produce relative advantage for some and disadvantage for others, but without exploring the structural processes that determine the ends which stratification serves – in terms of a hierarchically organised labour force for example, we lack an understanding of the role and significance of the very inequalities they reproduce. Moreover, while there is widespread operationalisation of Bourdieu's idea of 'capitals'; evidence of precisely how and why households acquire, accumulate, transfer and exploit these resources and especially gendered trade-offs involved between household members are less clearly illuminated (Bradley 2014; Goldthorpe 2007; Jaeger & Breen 2016; Savage et al 2013; Mills 2014). A further interesting corollary of this is that the above research tends to emphasise continuity in the social structure - literally reproduction - as opposed to highlighting the ways that social reproduction is always at the same time a dynamic process of social transformation dialectically linked to inter-capitalist competition and crisis tendencies, state-institutional strategies and formations and technological development. In order to address these shortcomings, we argue for the application of a scalar-relational understanding of social reproduction to understand the interpolation between macro-scale changes associated with the world-wide expanded reproduction of capital and the micro-scale processes of household social reproduction.

### **Scale, Social Reproduction and Household Social Reproduction Strategies**

Marx's understanding of processes of reproduction is inherently multi-scalar; he details the operation of a series of circuits through which value circulates and whose relations to one another comprise the reproduction of capital as a social system, through smaller scale processes (Marx 1956). At its most basic, workers are reproduced through the subsistence wage, determined by the costs of reproduction and capital is reproduced through the realisation of surplus value in the money form. For Marx, reproduction is not a simplistic static process but an expansionary and contested one. The effects of intra-capitalist competition and class

struggle (including the struggle for daily reproduction of labour power) mean that capital must constantly search for a greater volume of inputs of labour in order to valorise the expanded money stock. Crises are frequent and occur at different degrees of severity for the system as a whole, but frequently create further expansionary pressures, including through ‘spatial fixes’ (Harvey 1982).

Underpinning this system though is the reproduction of labour power with particular characteristics and whose reproduction can only be partly attributed to the internal relations of capital. While the wage certainly accounts for some of the reproductive process, it rarely, if ever, accounts for its entirety. Rather, free inputs of time, care work and norm-creation are required to underpin capitalist social relations (Elson 1998; Fraser 2014; Steans & Tepe 2010; Bakker 2007). Feminists have repeatedly shown that the identity of those undertaking this unpaid and undervalued work reveals additional relations of domination and inequality related to patriarchy and racism, outside of the class relation, yet functionally internal to the reproduction of capital (Federici 2005; Mies 2014). To understand contemporary questions about the future of work, the reproduction of inequalities, decreasing social fluidity or the role of anxiety about inter-generational opportunities in driving political polarisation, it is necessary to locate them within the inter-relation of the different scales and circuits of production and reproduction. These circuits and systems of reproduction - of capital, of people and labour power, of communities, of ideology and norms - require distinct explanation and theorisation; but also the dialectical and co-evolutionary interlinkages between them ought to be the focus of theorisation and empirical research. It is here that a scalar-relational approach is of value.

We have already shown that post-war restructuring provided the context for upward absolute mobility in Europe and North America, as the ‘New Middle Class’ expanded relative to the traditional working class. As ‘globalisation’ led to integrated internationalised production and service commodity chains, this process slowed, and in some places possibly stopped (see Nunn & Tepe-Belfrage 2017). To make sense of such change it is necessary to locate the national economy in the wider scale of world market expansion which pressures individual states (and macro regions such as the EU) to pursue greater competitiveness. While, for a time world market expansion could facilitate legitimacy in many EU and North American states by mitigating the effects of declining growth in high status positions, through supporting the expansion of credit and providing cheap consumer goods (Harvey 2010; Chapter 1); the period since the late 1970s has become marked by increased inequality (Piketty 2014). Moreover, since the 2008 crisis, the limits of debt-fuelled consumerism have become increasingly transparent as a means of offsetting that inequality. In turn this has sharpened concerns about political legitimacy and the risk of collapsing consensus (Nunn 2015).

Of course, the dynamics of world market integration and the attendant pressures that this creates on lower scale political communities and institutions to adapt to the systemic characteristic of competition do not just arise but are ‘produced’ (Burnham 2001) in definite social processes generating dynamic patterns of uneven development. Here, the political scalar pressures to compete arise from the desire to use political authority to attract and capture flows of capital to operate through the spatial container of the state, to bring with it growth and

taxation revenues (Burnham 1991; 2001; Clarke 1983). In helping capital to confront the embedded social interests of the post-war consensus, states have removed and restructured employment protections, shifted the orientation of state policy away from welfare provision toward pro-competitiveness, privatisation and so called ‘enabling’ forms of social and industrial policy,<sup>4</sup> enforcing new inequalities of class, gender and race (Grover 2012; Nunn and Tepe-Belfrage 2017; Nunn 2016).

At the macro-scale the empirical observations about the changing *absolute* shape of inequalities are the product of the ‘ecological dominance’ (Jessop 2012: 207–210) of the scale of the world market over other scales. As world market integration proceeds, it creates feedback effects that disrupt domestic social structures (Jessop 2015). In a system where lower scale actors attempt to cope with system scale characteristics by competing, it is inevitable that success will be highly varied and some will fail (Peck & Theodore 2001: 432). Whatever scale below the world market we might take, failure at one point in time is likely to have negative implications for the capacity to compete in the future. Differential success and failure obviously effects small scales, including households, families and individuals as part of aggregate absolute successes and as failures at broader scales (e.g. Cities, regions, states), and relative success and failure within them (for specific communities and households) (Nunn 2019). Where households succeed at adapting to competitive pressures at higher-scales they may gain resources that are useful in facilitating future success. Where they fail, the inverse is clearly true, impeding their ability to cope with competitive pressures on a day to day and inter-generational basis (Hargreaves, Hodgson, Noor-Mohamed, & Nunn 2018; Nunn 2016).

But these lower scale actors and institutions also act in ways that either reshape or consciously challenge higher scale structural pressures (Peck 2002). As Bakker notes, quoting Braudel, these everyday low-level practices can have cumulative system-level implications: ‘The everyday happening is repeated and the more often it is repeated the more likely it is to become a generality or rather a structure ... some structures, because of their long life become stable elements for an infinite number of generations’ (Braudel, quoted in Bakker (2007: 542).

Bakker’s focus here is on the interaction between long-term and durable structures and the everyday rhythms that make up daily life. She particularly poses questions about the ways in which social reproduction processes embed the character of the world wide system of capitalist production (including the processes of dispossession that exist alongside and in dialectical relation to, but formally outside of capitalist social relations (Bonefeld 2011; Glassman 2006; Harvey 2003; Mies 2014) and all its constituent features in everyday life. These include micro-processes such as household behaviour and the ways in which households relate to “subsistence and locality on the one hand, and production and commerce, indeed the mobility and power of capital on the other” (Bakker 2007: 544). These micro-processes are ‘related to how people manage their work and daily lives, especially in the context of a growing climate of inequality in the distribution of resource between households at the local, national and transnational

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<sup>4</sup> As even the OECD - one of the chief cheerleaders for such reforms - now acknowledges (Bassanini & Manfredi 2012; OECD 2011).

levels...the production of home spaces, (the tasks of the day-to-day such as child care and food security), environmental degradation and its unequal spatial toll on childrens' bodies, and the relationships between society, the state (policies and practices) and space..." (551).

To date, the concept of social reproduction in feminist political economy has mainly been employed to theoretically capture the changing interlinkages between care, work and the social economy under neoliberalism and accompanying financialisation (Bakker 2003; Katz 2001; Bakker and Silvey 2008; LeBaron and Roberts 2010). A particular theme has been to highlight the ways that state roll-back under neo-liberalisation and post GFC austerity has placed greater stress on the household, and in particular women, to act as 'shock absorbers for the formal economy, as they continue to provide unpaid reproductive labour but with less support from state services. Some observers have highlighted the ways that this 'depletes' (Rai, Hoskyns, & Thomas 2014) household resources. This line of argument has attracted some criticism however. Kunz (2010) argues that 'privatising social reproduction' is a particular experience present only in those parts of the world system where welfare states temporarily provided the historically exceptional experience of state support for social reproduction; an experience not shared therefore by the vast majority of the world.

While recognising both the initial argument and Kunz's challenge, we want to offer further nuance to the discussion. The extent to which social reproduction is privatised in any particular context, is a largely contingent feature. In fact, in the realm of reproducing labour power across generations it is difficult to think of the state withdrawing from socially reproductive activity. In many respects the state in recent years is more active, has greater capacity and is more controlling in the way that it shapes intergenerational reproduction. For instance, in the UK context, children enter the care of the state for educational purposes younger than they have ever done previously, the hours of this care are longer, investment *in* and sophistication *of* the training of teachers is greater than ever before, children stay in the system longer and must formally pass particular qualifications before they can progress to further levels of education in a way that has never been the case previously. It is also the case that the way that these systems operate is more domineering of household processes of parenting than ever before, due to the governance technologies deployed. A heavy emphasis on auditing, surveillance and performance management means that schools are compelled to engage parents in supporting the education process to a much greater extent than previously. The school curriculum is more centrally regulated by the state than at any previous time. Parents are frequently 'taught to teach' to the tests that the state dictates, to encourage their children to aspire to an ideal of 'middle class' social status and to take concrete steps to help realise this. Furthermore, the surveillance element of institutional oversight is particularly present in the lives of poor families, where disciplinary projects to regulate parenting require schools to monitor the lives of children from poor families ever more closely and intervene where they are judged as not supportive of state objectives of aspiration and behaviour likely to realise this.

Utilising a 'deficit model' and under the (conscious or unconscious) influence of Bourdieuan theory, schools and a wide range of other quasi-state agents (e.g. 'Education Business

Partnerships'<sup>5</sup> often try to provide access to cultural and social capital to correct for what they perceive as the absence of any such capitals in some households. For example, it has become widespread for local chambers of commerce to encourage business interaction with schools and around 40% (and increasing) schools will now have frequent employer visits, designed to raise aspirations and schools are measured against 8 'Gatsby Benchmarks' designed to promote stronger careers guidance and support across schools (Careers and Enterprise Company 2018). Other interventions try to disseminate experiences of high culture to particular groups of children to mimic 'typical' middle class cultural capital transfer. Added to this, at the extremes, parents who fail to engage are more likely than ever before to have their children removed from them (Department for Education 2017a; 2017b) and placed in the full and formal care of the state, with educational attainment being an increasing focus of this formal care system (Berridge 2017; Jackson 1998). In sum, far from withdrawing from supporting social reproduction, the state has expanded, deepened and tightened its control of reproducing the future workforce under conditions of increased global competition.

However, several further general points are important here. First, this is a highly uneven process. Not all households are subject to the same level of state intervention. The state is much more interventionist with those households it deems as less willing or able to play a full part in striving to access higher social status (Nunn & Tepe-Belfrage 2017) and at the other end of the spectrum more affluent households can literally buy themselves partially out of state interference through, for example, independent school fees. Second, while state action to organise social reproduction places additional burdens on households to engage in the process; it is still depleting of household resources.

Third, what has widely been understood as a crisis of social reproduction (Martin 2010) needs also to be understood in a scalar way. At the scale of the national economy and society and many communities, this may in fact be a form of adjustment in SRS rather than a moment of crisis. This is not to suggest that the adjustment of SRS is not a violent process, causing physical and emotional harm. Yet, the term crisis indicates a moment of calamity where a turning point is reached (Gill 2012: 27). We suggest the opposite. SRS adapt to, and even increase, inequality (see section below) without indicating a necessity for wider change. At the micro-scale, some households will certainly experience this as a crisis, but the majority continue to 'cope' with the effects of depletion, harm and ongoing struggle, and at more macro-scales communities and workforces continue to be reproduced in a way that is suitable to capital. Indeed, the need for an expanded state role in this is driven by crisis, understood in the sense of the failure of social reproduction to meet the dynamically changing demands of capital, leading to geographical switching crises (Harvey 2010: 93) for particular communities. So like the idea that social reproduction is being privatised, we treat the idea of crisis as an essentially contingent idea which must again be understood in a scalar-relational form. Crisis pressures (which may remain latent or become material) may manifest at some scales but not others and the aggregate effects of smaller scale crises may manifest at larger scales. Exploring crises in

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://theaebp.co.uk/>.

social reproduction is essentially a matter of utilising the theoretical framework for empirical investigation.

Finally, the role of the state in trying to manage social reproduction directly, and *via* its influence on households, is discharged through “the materialized daily practices of agents who are part of the state apparatus” (Mitchell, Marston, & Katz 2003). This necessitates understanding the performance of state power through “human practice and cultural logics”. The state may operate with a functional logic related to its desire to attract and retain capital, to pursue national competitiveness and manage crisis pressures at the national scale. It may sometimes do this by downloading social risk - and therefore the potential for and experience of crisis - to lower scales. However, it must pursue these objectives through people, whose subjectivities are only partially shaped by the demands and logic of capital. As such, at the scale of frontline practice - the street level bureaucrats (Brodkin 2013; Lipsky 1980) and service workers may actively, unconsciously or inadvertently subvert (Barnes & Prior 2009; Dobson 2015) or partially renegotiate objectives as they also seek to ‘cope’ creatively with the challenges they face. In conditions of neo-liberalisation, welfare retrenchment and expanded state intervention in social reproduction, these frontline workers are often trapped between the social needs of their service users; formal policy routines and budgets; and the reality of competition at lower scales. As they seek to do this, they may not always actively or effectively pursue reproduction as envisaged by policy makers or demanded by capital (Hargreaves et al. 2018). As a result, like crisis and privatisation, state activities in relation to organising social reproduction must always be treated as at least a partially contingent and empirical question, rather than as theoretically pre-determined. A scalar-relational understanding of policy implementation is also important since national policy makers do not always get what they want from lower-scale ‘policy work’.

### **Structure and Household Agency: from Social Reproduction Strategies to Compound Inequality**

Lucas (2001) argues that learner considerations in educational decision making may reflect a strategy of “Effectively Maintained Inequality”, where higher status households respond to changes in average levels of education by either extending their educational engagement, or adjusting in some more nuanced way to accentuate advantages associated with for example, educational institution or the choice of subjects studied. The literature on UK educational investment notes this as a crucial explanation for observed reductions in social fluidity (Blanden & Macmillan 2016). Looking at evidence from the US we suggest that these household SRS may be adjusting to perceived inequalities and uncertainties in ways that generate increased inequality into the future. That is, the relation between insecurities arising from increased competitiveness at the world market scale on the one hand, and household scale agency in consciously and unconsciously developed SRS on the other, may be generating what might be termed ‘Compound Inequalities’.

In a recent contribution, Schneider *et al.* (2018) show that US households may be responding to increased inequalities by adapting their SRS. They show how higher income households are

investing more in their children in response to inequalities, over and above the mechanical effects of having more financial resources to draw on. They conclude that in the context of increased inequalities households with the capacity to do so are strengthening the extent to which they engage in ‘concerted cultivation’. Similarly, based on in-depth research with households in the US, especially women, Cooper (2014) argues that more affluent families are particularly sensitive to contemporary insecurities and display disproportionate anxiety about the future prospects of their children, compared with less affluent households. Other research argues that in response to these insecurities more affluent households are becoming more active in hoarding opportunities (Reeves 2018) or negotiating with services (McCrary Calarco 2018) to lever advantage.

There is also some tentative aggregate evidence that similar dynamics in household strategies might be relevant to the UK case. For example, research (Nunn 2016) shows that households have already adjusted to economic insecurities in ways that are shaped by pre-existing inequalities. This is visible for instance in the housing market where inequalities are often increasingly present in relations of accumulation and disaccumulation between households as mediated *via* housing and credit markets rather than just the labour market. On the one hand, an increasing proportion of outstanding mortgage debt is related to buy-to-let housing as wealthier households use asset-based strategies to safeguard their future wellbeing. On the other hand, home ownership has fallen dramatically, especially for younger generations, corresponding to an increase in private renting. Given that private rents are on average 40% of household income, while mortgage costs are on average 20% of household income, this relates to a direct subsidy by less affluent households of the longer-term welfare strategies of more affluent households (Nunn 2016). This has a cumulative longer-term impact associated with inheritance also. Thus, more affluent households are driven by insecurities toward SRS that accentuate inequalities (Montgomerie 2006; 2009; Seabrooke 2010).

At the same time, behavioural responses to inequality and insecurity may also drive inequalities at the other end of the distribution. Poorer households are driven to adopt SRS which accentuate short-term social status with negative longer-term outcomes. For example, Wilkinson and Pickett (2018) show that status anxiety may drive (debt funded) conspicuous consumption to demonstrate status now. This is one possible explanation for the burgeoning role of new credit products for car purchases in the UK context, which are acknowledged as a status product but it also potentially undermines the capacity of resource constrained households to invest in longer-term welfare and reproduction strategies.

## **Conclusion**

The argument developed in this paper suggests that political economy understandings of social reproduction can learn from some of the outcomes from micro-processes as identified in empirical research operationalising Bourdieuan and rational action concepts, which have become the primary means of exploring the micro-processes of reproduction in the mainstream social science literature. However, we also identify substantial problems in this literature and argue that materialist feminist social reproduction theory offers a useful way of correcting for

these. In particular, social reproduction theory can help to overcome a failure to fully appreciate the multi-scalar and scalar-relational aspects of social reproduction. Most significantly of all, by building on Marx's understanding of the reproduction of capital, feminist social reproduction theory helps to theorise capitalism as a social totality and the relations between distinct but inter-related circuits involved in the dynamic reproduction of that totality. It is one thing to assert that inequalities are reproduced over time and between generations, but it is necessary also to think about how changing patterns within that reproduction are related to the reproduction of capital as a social relation.

We seek to advance this understanding in the context of one aspect of the contemporary reproduction of capitalist social relations and propose two novel contributions; the concepts of household Social Reproduction Strategies and the related contingent outcome arising from these; Compound Inequality. These are significant because they demonstrate the relation between micro-scales and macro-structures, as existing inequalities generate micro-behavioural responses at the scale of the household which themselves contribute to the accumulation of social structure, in the ways that Bakker's understanding of scale and social reproduction suggests.

However, we also suggest two further empirical contributions to knowledge. Our particular empirical frame of reference - the household SRS of less and more affluent households in the UK in the contemporary conjuncture - suggests that the frequently cited dynamics of 'privatising social reproduction' as it usually appears in the social reproduction literature requires some nuanced interpretation. In the case of state interaction with household SRS the evidence suggests that the state exhibits an expansionary remit rather than retrenchment. This is the case in relation to its direct intervention to drive aspiration, career planning and educational decision-making affecting households differentially according to their socio-economic status. It is also the case in its indirect work which is often steered through engagement with households, as it seeks to ensure that parenting behaviour raises aspiration and activity designed to reproduce effective labour power, dynamically adjusting these efforts to meet the changing demands of capital and UK state strategies to capture value in the global economy.

The second empirical contribution relates to our understanding of another prominent theme in the social reproduction literature - the idea that because of state withdrawal and enhanced economic compunction there is some form of crisis in social reproduction. We agree that household resources for SRS are depleted by these dynamics. Indeed, even where the state is not in withdrawal this might also place households under more stress, to live up to the demands placed upon them. However, the deployment of the idea of crisis needs to be carefully understood in scalar-relational terms also. It is indeed true that this may generate crises inside some households. We recognise fully that the duress that households are under generates substantial harm, household collapse, suffering and even death. However, at a more aggregate scale, households continue to support the reproduction of capital, labour and communities that underpin the formal circulation of value. Social reproduction does not need to be nice to continue to function. In this sense we contest the idea that social reproduction is in crisis.

This picture suggests that detailed empirical research is necessary to better understand the contemporary processes by which multi-scalar social reproduction occurs. Our analysis suggests that alongside macro-scale investigations into the nature of the expanding world scale of capitalist social relations, it is necessary to enquire also into local scale processes of adaptation to, and remaking of, these pressures. This involves understanding how global pressures create particular formations of economic production in specific local economies, and how these are related to smaller scale institutional strategies and household SRS. Such a scalar-relational approach is particularly relevant, we argue, at a time when socio-economic and technological change are so rapid that problematics such as ‘the future of work’ become a matter of considerable uncertainty and insecurity. At such times, the ways that households understand and respond to the pressures they face will shape their successes and failures into the future. As such, we suggest that detailed empirical research in different socio-economic and political settings and related to household SRS is a matter of considerable contemporary importance. The discussion above suggests some fruitful methodological pathways through which such research might be undertaken.

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