

Social stratification and mobility are long-standing subjects of interest in demography, as they reflect processes of status transmission and social reproduction within and between generations. Traditionally, the study of inequality has relied on objective indicators such as education, income, or occupational class. However, a growing body of research suggests that subjective perceptions of social position—how individuals locate themselves within the social hierarchy—is associated to contextual factors, such as parental background and marriage market dynamics.

From a demographic perspective, the mismatch between objective and perceived social position can be viewed as a component of social stratification dynamics: it reflects both intergenerational inheritance and the micro-level interplay of household relations. This study integrates intergenerational and intra-household dimensions of mobility to explain how subjective social class perceptions form and persist across demographic contexts. We rely on the conceptualization of mobility as a demographic process—transmitted through families, shaped by assortative mating, and conditioned by gendered labour markets. Two mechanisms are key: (1) intergenerational mobility, reflecting continuity and change between parental and individual occupational status; and (2) intra-couple mobility, indicating the redistribution of social status within partnerships. Both processes are embedded in demographic structures and life-course trajectories.

By embedding these mechanisms in a demographic framework, we interpret social mobility not only as a marker of inequality, but also as a process that shapes individuals' perceptions, behaviours, and life chances.

**Literature review**

From a theoretical point of view, the reference group framework explains that people compare their material situation with the circle of family and friends. Duesenberry's seminal work highlights the importance of individuals' relative social standing, suggesting that people's perceived social positioning is shaped not only by their absolute economic situation but also by their status within their social group [1]. Recently, scholars have theorized that individuals assess their social positioning based on the household as a whole, rather than solely on their personal standing. According to this perspective, people base their subjective class to a greater extent on their household's socio-economic situation (current or of origin) [2]. When individuals evaluate their own class, they likely consider not only their personal material circumstances but also the economic situation of their entire household. Individuals, the argument follows, take as reference groups of their social positioning their household of origin as well as their household of destination. So, on the one side, intergenerational mobility can shape class identity because it weakens class awareness (see [3], for a review). On the other side, processes of intra-couple mobility are also important because, generally, household members pool their resources, and this influences members' perception of social class [2]. We thus expect that class identities are shaped by processes of social mobility.

Moreover, we identify the gender dimension as salient in this context. Women might base their subjective class to a greater extent on their household's economic situation (because they are more

likely to be inactive or out of the labour market because of family duties), suggesting<sup>2</sup> that household dynamics play a significant role in shaping their perception of social status [4].

Accordingly, two hypotheses are tested on a pool of 38 countries and over a decade.

H1: Class identities are shaped by processes of intergenerational social mobility. H2: Class identities are shaped by processes of intra-couple social mobility.

## **Data and empirical strategy**

We test these hypotheses by assessing how effectively intergenerational and intra-couple mobility class indicators predict individual class identification. Individual-level data from the 2009 and 2019 survey rounds of the ISSP (International Social Survey Program) are employed. Data include a detailed pre-coded question about subjective class in 38 countries. The empirical strategy is a multilevel (random effects) binary logistic model. Individuals are nested in countries. This methodology permits us to control (partly) the correlation of the responses of individuals (first level) that belong to the same economic and cultural context (second level). In other words, it enables the examination of error variances at the country level, allowing us to assess the extent to which class identification differs across countries. The random intercept represents unobserved characteristics that are shared within the individuals of the same second-level unit. The maximum-likelihood estimation with adaptive quadrature is applied.

The outcome variable is a dichotomous one that taps class identification as ‘Working/Lower’ class (coded 0) *versus* ‘Middle/Upper’ class (coded 1). This variable has been recoded from the following survey question: ‘Most people see themselves as belonging to a particular class. Please tell me which social class you would say you belong to?’. This variable collects information related to the individual’s subjective perception of social class.

The ISSP data contains information on the occupation of the respondent, of his/her father, and of his/her partner (if he/she has one). Following Otero et al. 2021 [5], classes are represented by the international socio-economic index of occupational status (ISEI) and has been recoded into the following three categories: higher (ISEI range: 65–88) position, medium (ISEI range: 40–64) position, lower (ISEI range: 16–39) position. We are interested in the interaction between the occupation of the respondent and of the father, and in the interaction between the occupation of the respondent and the occupation of the partner. The variables detect information on objective social position.

Analyses control for age, level of individual education (low, medium or high using the ISCED classification), wave (a dummy that takes the value 0 for 2009 and 1 for 2019) and the respondent’s sex (male or female).

Figure 1 reports the predicted probabilities of subjective social class for the interaction between individual class and class of origin, by sex. Overall, there is a lingering effect of the class of origin on subjective social class that operates the same for all respondent’s occupations. Being a son or a daughter of a high-class father significantly increases the perception of belonging to a high class for those individuals that have a low, medium or high occupation. This finding is consistent for both men and women, even if the size of the effect is higher for men in lower occupations and for women in high occupations.

Figure 1. Predicted probabilities of identification with middle/upper social class by gender, respondent's occupation and father's occupation in 38 countries

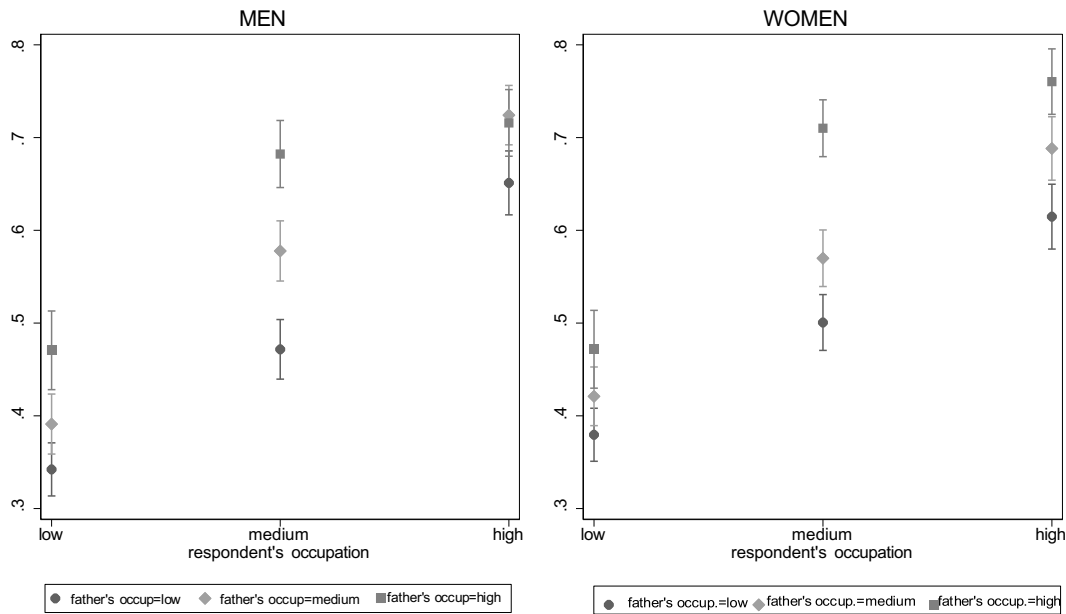
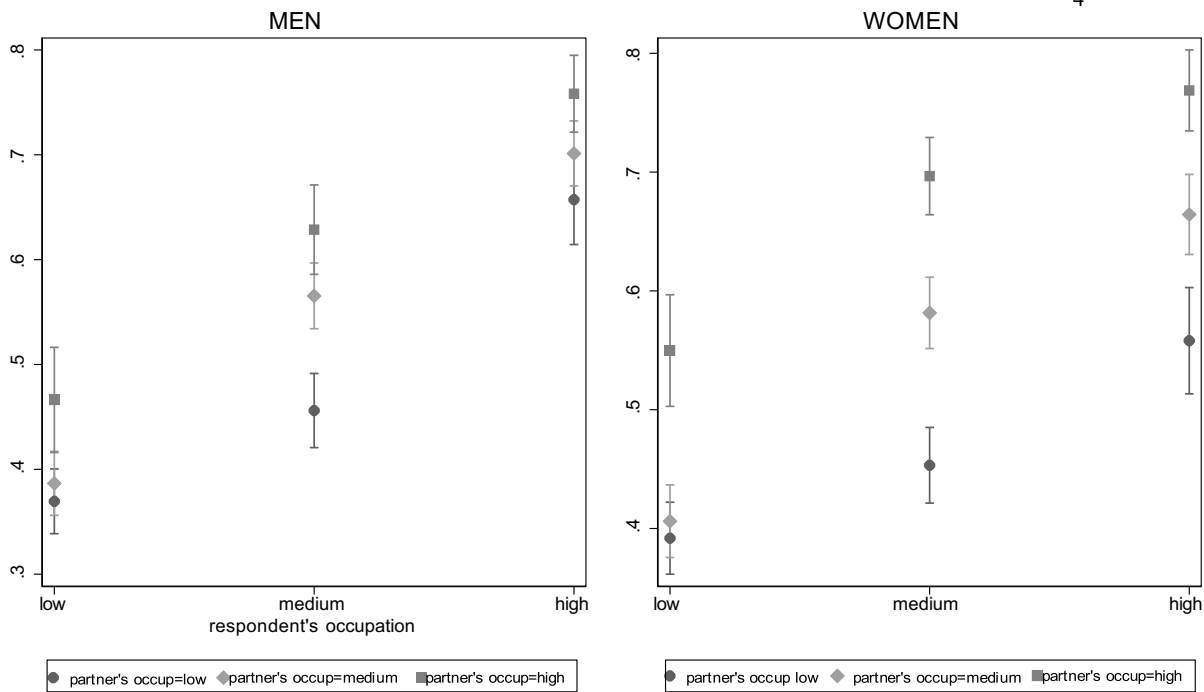


Figure 2 reports the predicted probabilities of subjective social class for the interaction between respondent's occupation and partner's one, by sex. Again, the class of the partner has a persistent impact on both men and women. However, in the case of women, the predicted probability of perceiving oneself as a member of the high class increases significantly when they have a low occupational status but a partner with a high occupation. Experiencing upward mobility through marriage (or cohabitation) influences their class identities, particularly when they hold a lower occupational status. Conversely, in the case of downward mobility, the results highlight that women with a high occupational status perceive their class position as lower when their partner has a lower or medium-status occupation. In this regard, women appear to be more susceptible to their male partner's occupational status.

Figure 2. Predicted probabilities of identification with middle/upper social class by gender, respondent's occupation and partner's occupation in 38 countries



## Conclusions and Limitations

This study reinterprets social mobility as a demographic process linking generations and households. Intergenerational roots of social status persist through the demographic reproduction of advantage, while interpersonal pathways—within partnerships—reveal how gender shapes subjective social identity. These findings demonstrate that perceived inequality is not merely a reflection of objective structures but also an outcome of demographic behaviour: who partners with whom, how resources are shared within families, and how individuals relate to their origins. Our results support theories positing that household dynamics, and not only individual class characteristics, significantly inform personal perceptions of social standing. Such conclusions reinforce the value of considering household composition and inter-generational mobility when analyzing class perceptions, offering a nuanced understanding of how individuals position themselves socially in relation to both their family origins and partnership dynamics.

## References

1. Duesenberry, J. S. (1949). *Income, Saving, and the Theory of Consumer Behavior*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
2. Oesch, D., & Vigna, N. (2023). Subjective social class has a bad name, but predicts life chances well. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 83, 100759
3. Curtis, J. (2016). Social mobility and class identity: The role of economic conditions in 33 societies, 1999–2009. *European Sociological Review*, 32(1), 108-121
4. Weber, N. (2021). Experience of social mobility and support for redistribution: Beating the odds or blaming the system?. Available at SSRN 3928022
5. Otero, G., Volker, B., & Rozer, J. (2021). Open but segregated? Class divisions and the network structure of social capital in Chile. *Social Forces*, 100(2), 649-679