

CSI 21: Social class mobility in modern Britain: changing structure, constant process

Summary

- The occupational structure has changed shape over the last 60 years from a pyramid to something resembling a rectangle, with an expanding salariat and contracting wage-earning working class
 - During the ‘golden age’ of mobility, up until the 1970s, the increasing size of the salariat meant there was more social ascent than descent – there was net upward mobility as a result of the increasing ‘room at the top’
 - More recently the pattern has reversed; their parents’ upward mobility means that more and more people among recent generations are now starting off from advantaged class origins and are therefore more at risk of social descent
 - The changes in upward and downward mobility have largely cancelled each other out so that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, **total** mobility rates have remained largely constant over time
 - Educational reform has been the major lever for governments attempting to increase social mobility. If we take educational qualifications at face value, it appears that class differences in education have declined. But if we look at people’s **ranking** in the educational hierarchy, we find that class inequalities have remained largely constant over time
 - Class inequalities in the chances of securing advantaged positions, and avoiding disadvantaged ones, have thus remained largely unchanged too. Educational reform has proved ineffective in ameliorating class differences in mobility chances and in increasing rates of relative mobility
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Introduction

Social class is the form of social inequality which is most consequential for individuals’ material well-being and, in turn, for a wide range of their life-chances and life-choices. For example, people in professional and managerial positions (the ‘salariat’), have higher current incomes, greater employment security and better long-term income prospects than those in wage-earning working-class jobs. Their children also tend to have superior chances of obtaining high educational qualifications, which in turn provide a stepping stone to positions in the salariat. Improving educational opportunity for less advantaged groups, and thereby equalizing class chances, has thus come to be seen as a key tool for improving rates of social mobility. The role of educational reform in helping to narrow class inequalities thus remains a central sociological and political concern.

The key questions which we address in this note, are, first, how have chances of social ascent or descent changed over recent decades? And has educational reform been successful in making the process more open and less strongly linked to social class background?

Conceptual issues

Social class is measured using the official measure NS-SEC, which is based on the concept of employment relations. The analyses on which this note is based distinguish seven classes: (1) higher managerial and professional occupations, (2) lower managerial and professional, (3) ancillary professional and administrative, (4) small employers and own-account workers, (5) lower supervisory and technical, (6) semi-routine, and (7) routine occupations. Classes 1 and 2 make up the ‘salariat’, classes 3, 4 and 5 make up the intermediate classes, and 6 and 7 the wage-earning working class.

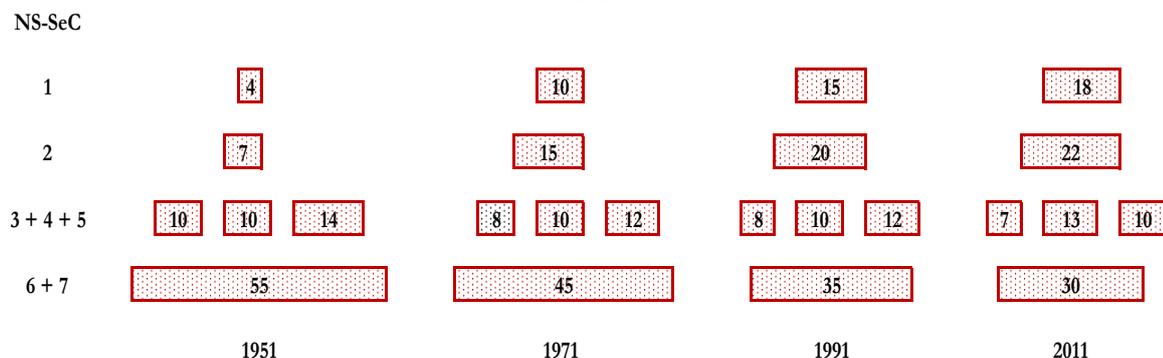
Sociologists make an important distinction between ‘absolute’ and ‘relative’ rates of social mobility. When discussing **absolute** rates, sociologists in essence are asking questions such as ‘what proportion of the adult population is in a different social class from the one they grew up in?’ (the **total** rate of intergenerational mobility) and ‘are there more people upwardly mobile than downwardly mobile?’ (the extent of **net** upward or downward mobility). Sociologists measure absolute rates in terms of straightforward percentages of the population.

When discussing **relative** rates, sociologists are asking ‘how big is the difference in mobility chances of someone from, say, a working-class background relative to someone from a professional/managerial background?’ Relative rates of mobility are a way of telling us how strong is the link between class origins and class destinations, that is how ‘fluid’ or ‘sticky’ class reproduction is. Sociologists measure relative rates using odds ratios, and a suite of statistical techniques developed for analysing odds ratios. Details of these techniques are available elsewhere.¹ In this briefing note we summarize the main findings without going into the technical details.

The changing structure – an expanding salariat and contracting working class

A major determinant of changes in absolute rates of mobility is the changing shape of the class structure itself. As Figure 1 shows, this has moved from something resembling a pyramid in 1951, with a small salariat and a large wage-earning working class, to a more rectangular shape, with salariat, intermediate classes, and working class of more or less similar sizes. Figure 1 covers men, but the trends are broadly similar for women's employment (differing only in a few respects).

Fig 1: An expanding salariat and contracting work class, 1951-2011 (men) *Source: 1951-2011 Censuses*
Figures shown within the boxes are percentages of the working population in each class

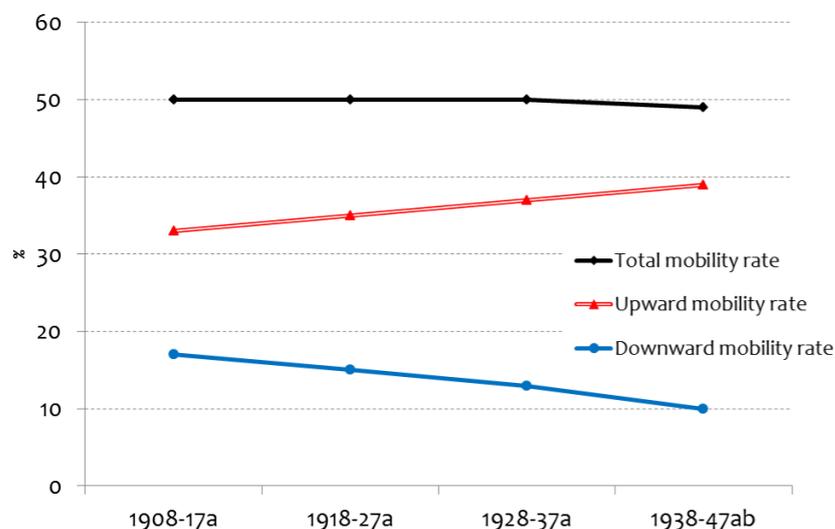


Changing rates of upward and downward mobility, but constant total mobility rates

A crucial point is that, if one is concerned with individuals' actual experience of mobility or immobility, then *it is the class structure, and change in this structure, that is all-important*. Thus the expansion of the salariat and contraction of the working class provided the engine for increasing upward mobility, and decreasing downward mobility, during the first half of the post-war period. This resulted in a 'golden age' of mobility, where people could on average have a realistic expectation of attaining higher positions than their fathers had done. Figure 2 shows increasing rates of upward mobility as a consequence of this increasing 'room at the top'.

Fig 2: Increasing upward and declining downward mobility prior to 1972 (men)

Source: 1972 Oxford social mobility enquiry (a: Rates based on men's years of birth and class positions in 1972. b: Rate adjusted to allow for young age in 1972 on basis of life-course changes in class positions of men in the previous cohort)



However, Figure 3a and 3b show that

this changed in the second half of our period. Here we compare the mobility chances of men and women from four birth cohorts at similar stages of their life-course (age 27). The red line shows that the proportion upwardly mobile – that is who were in a higher position than their fathers had been – declined while the blue line shows an increasing proportion downwardly mobile. The picture was not quite so bleak for women, but even for women rates of downward mobility were increasing too.

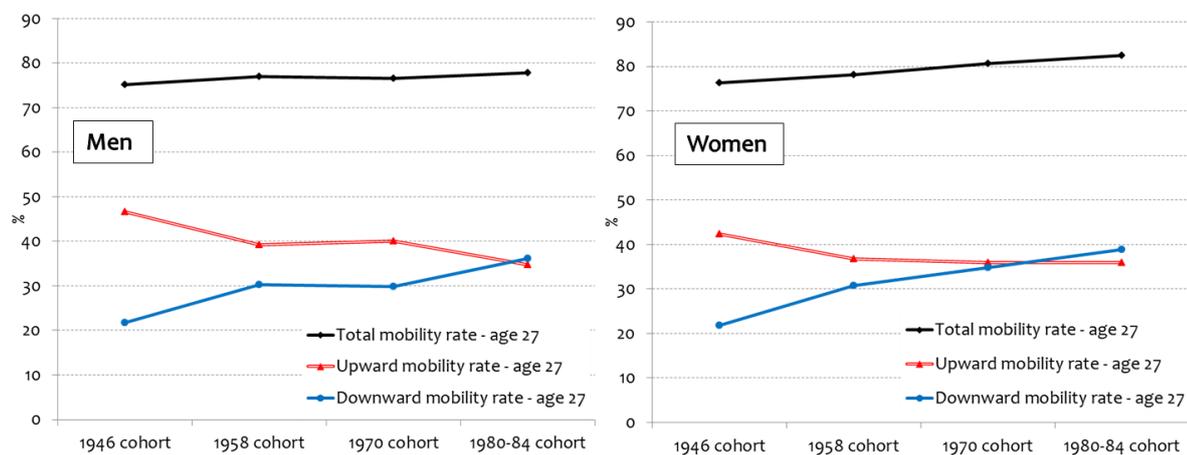
What this means is that a situation is emerging which is quite new in modern British history. *There is no decline in mobility overall* - contrary to what politicians and commentators so often tell us. But what *is* happening - and what has been largely overlooked - is that younger generations of men and women now face less favourable mobility prospects than did their parents - or their grandparents.

This might seem something of a paradox: the size of the salariat continued to increase, as it had done in the first half of the period, but the rate of downward mobility simultaneously increased. How can this be? The solution to the paradox is this. As a result of the expansion of the salariat in the immediate

post-war decades, increasing numbers of individuals are now *starting out in life* from more advantaged class positions. Between the 1946 and 1980-4 cohorts, the proportion of men and women originating in the salariat tripled, while that originating in the working class halved. Thus, the numbers of those 'at risk' of downward mobility are steadily rising, and the numbers with the possibility of upward mobility are steadily falling. There has been *structurally induced change in numbers at risk*. We will go on to explain what this means in terms of relative mobility chances, which have remained essentially unaltered.

Fig 3a and 3b: A reversal of the trends in upward and downward mobility (men and women)

Source: 1946, 1958, 1970, and 1980-4 birth cohort studies

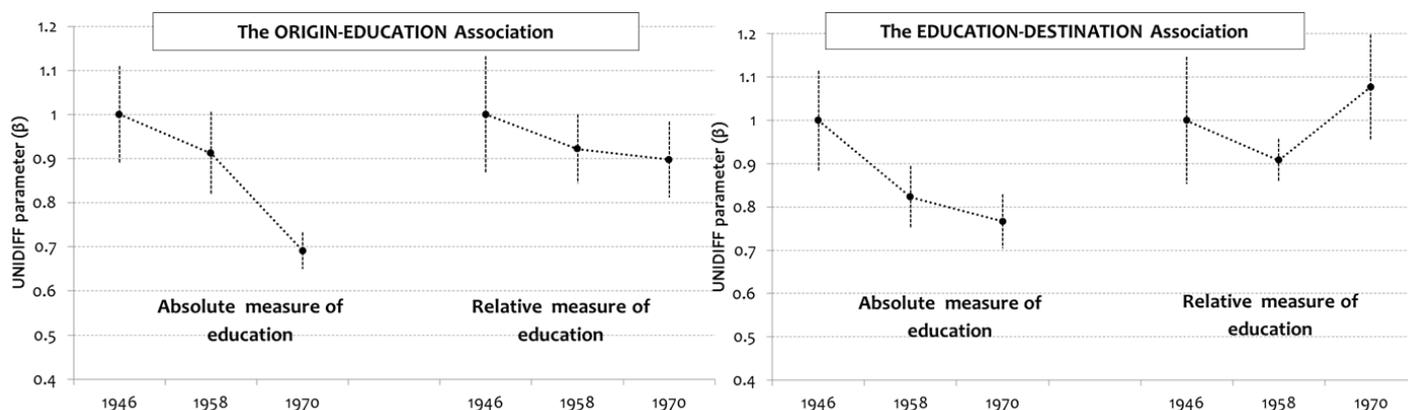


The role of education in the mobility process

It is widely believed that education plays a crucial part in social mobility processes. Successive governments, committed to increasing mobility, have regarded educational policy as their most effective lever. Educational expansion and reform have been continuous - from the Butler Act of 1944, introducing free secondary education for all, through the shift from selective to comprehensive secondary education, to the expansion of tertiary education in the 1960s and 1990s. While one objective of these reforms was to increase the skills of the population, another was to increase equality of opportunity – to level the playing field – so that the competition between advantaged and disadvantaged groups for access to higher education and in turn to higher-level jobs could become more equal.

Fig 4: Relative measures of education do not show the same equalization over time as standard, absolute measures

Source: 1946, 1958, and 1970 birth cohort studies, men only



Education is indeed a major driver of one's chances of accessing professional and managerial jobs, and social class origins are a major driver of one's educational attainment. What the reformers hoped was that the process would become more meritocratic: that the link between educational attainment and occupational destinations would become stronger, while the link between social class origins and children's educational attainment would become weaker. Most investigators have found that the latter link did become weaker: class inequalities in educational attainment narrowed – though mainly at lower

educational levels. But at the same time the education/occupation link, rather than strengthening, *also weakened*. This suggests that the process has become more fluid, although not more meritocratic.

The results shown in Figure 4 take measures of educational attainment at face value, ignoring the fact that more and more people are now obtaining higher-level grades and qualifications. Instead, one could conceive education in a different way and think of qualifications as being ranked, with the people higher up in the ranking being the first in line for higher-level jobs. Thus we can measure people's **relative** position in the ranking – what proportion are in front of them in the queue, and what proportion behind them. On this view, what matters is not how much education an individual has but how much *relative to others* - and especially relative to their competitors in the labour market.

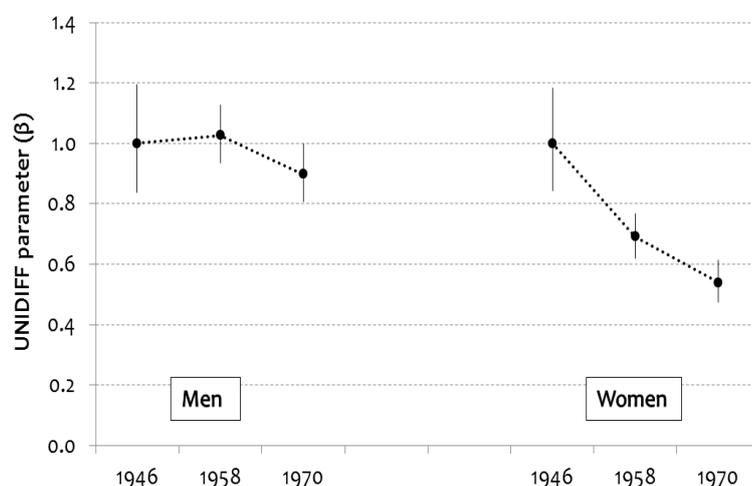
When we take this approach we obtain a radically different picture of trends over time. We find that both the origin/education and the education/destination links have remained more or less constant over time, as shown in Figure 4.

Constant social fluidity

Given the stability over time when we use a relative measure of education, it follows that, if we adopt a relative view of class inequalities, then these are also likely to have remained constant over time. This is indeed what we find for men. Figure 5 shows recent changes in class fluidity, taking the pattern of relative class chances in the earliest cohort as the baseline. For men the picture is clear: there is constant social fluidity with no significant change across the three cohorts. For women, there is evidence that there has been a modest weakening of class inequalities, though this is only found among women who take part-time work. Among those who worked full-time throughout, the story is basically identical to that among men.

Fig 5: Constant fluidity among men, declining stickiness among women

Source: 1946, 1958, 1970 birth cohort studies



Conclusions

How is this stability in relative rates of social mobility (fluidity) to be explained, and why have decades of educational expansion and reform had so little effect? One part of the answer is that parents and their children themselves understand education in relative terms. Parents in more advantaged class positions will then respond to any expansion or reform of the educational system by using their own superior resources - economic, cultural and social - to whatever extent it takes to help their children retain a competitive edge, and thus be protected against the risk of downward mobility.

If the aim is to increase mobility by creating a greater equality in class chances, the implication is that what can be achieved through educational policy alone is limited - far more so than politicians find it convenient to suppose. The basic source of inequality of educational opportunity lies in the inequality of *condition* - the inequality in resources of various kinds - that exists among families with different locations within the class structure. This is what reformers should be tackling.

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Acknowledgements: The findings are based on an ESRC-funded project (ES/I038187/1), entitled 'The role of education in social mobility' (PI: Erzsébet Bukodi, Co-I: John H. Goldthorpe, Heather Joshi and Jouni Kuha).

Publication date: March 2016

1 See E Bukodi, JH Goldthorpe, LWaller and J Kuha (2015) The mobility problem in Britain: new findings from the analysis of birth cohort data, *The British Journal of Sociology* 66: 1 93 – 117 and E Bukodi and JH.Goldthorpe (2015) Educational attainment - relative or absolute - as a mediator of intergenerational class mobility in Britain, *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*.

