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## **Unexamined Assumptions and Neglected Questions in Social Mobility Research**

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### **Abstract**

Research on social mobility, not just in Britain, has come to mean the increasingly sophisticated measurement of social fluidity, i.e. the continuing inequalities of relative mobility chances. This narrow focus has not only been at the expense of contributing to wider sociological debates, but has also led to the neglect of the individual and structural impact of actual mobility trends as well as their implications for general sociological theory. This could be remedied by closer attention to absolute rates of upward and downward mobility and their effects upon the homogeneity of social strata. It is argued that research should be directed to the cultural context of mobility as well as the economic and political.

### **The Maturing of Mobility Studies**

More than any other topic in sociology the literature on intergenerational occupational mobility, over the past half century, has demonstrated the growing professionalism of sociological research. Unsubstantiated generalisation and critically unexamined data will no longer do. The methodological rigour and mathematical sophistication of analysis which is now taken for granted, as well as the range and quality of the evidence which has become available, signal the arrival of the standard bearers of sociology among the ranks of the mature social sciences, alongside academic economics and research-based psychology (e.g. the references in Miller 1960, compared to those cited in, for example, Erikson and Goldthorpe 1993, or Vallet 1999).

But, just as there was for those earlier thoroughly scientific social sciences, there has been a price to pay for entry to this exclusive club. Each new monograph or journal article serves to demonstrate the intensification of the technical requirements of research and the concomitant increase in the inaccessibility of the arguments and published results for any would-be readers lacking the relevant postgraduate training. But such is serious research; this is no place for the dilettante browser or glib pundit. These rising scholarly standards reflect not only growing academic specialisation, with its accompanying development of field-specific concepts and technical terminology, but major advances in the critical statistical and methodological apparatus deployed. Along with any advance in our substantive knowledge, they constitute the chief achievement of professional development in this field of sociological research. Besides the increasingly demanding expectations of those engaged in this research, perhaps equally inevitable, but in my view much more regrettable, there has also been a simultaneous narrowing of focus upon a very limited range of issues, at the expense of an interest in the broader theoretical significance and practical consequences of the social processes under consideration.

Within social mobility research there has been a serious neglect of investigation into a great many important issues: these include intragenerational or career mobility, sectoral differences in mobility paths and rates, the direct and indirect impact of mobility experience on the lives of individuals, and the composition, culture and coherence of the groups it impinges on, to mention only some of the more obvious. As for wider concerns, and leaving aside those hypercritical exercises which undertake yet another manipulation of an esoteric mathematical notation, the narrowness of vision is apparent even in the most substantial contributions to the subject. Their absence of engagement with more general sociological theorisation about the contemporary world has been to the detriment of that larger vision and has led to a degree of marginalisation for the more specific concerns of mobility studies.

How does social mobility, upwards and downwards, relate to the accelerating social, economic and cultural changes in public and private conduct? Both Lyotard and Sennett have argued that the decline of the lifetime career in one employment has transformed the sense of the job defining a lifestyle and a lifetime of meaning, personal identity and collective solidarity (Lyotard 1979, 1984; Sennett 1998). Does that change

the context and the significance of mobility in the large scale as well as at the personal level? Where is the discussion of, let alone research into, the relationship between social mobility and post modernisation or post modernist theory, feminist perspectives, structure and agency problems, globalisation or the risk society, or any of the issues and debates that have occupied the centre-stage of recent sociological attention? Would the quality of those debates not benefit from what we have learned from the study of social mobility over the last fifty years? Or, if we are to more fully understand the significance of social mobility in present day society, are not those relevant questions to discuss ?

The study of social mobility, and not just in Britain, nowadays seems to have become overwhelmingly preoccupied with a critique of Industrial Society Theory as it was proposed thirty or forty years ago. Where Kerr and his colleagues argued that the logic of industrial society entailed a continuous increase in mobility as industrialisation progressed (Kerr *et al.* 1960, 1973; and see Aron 1967; Galbraith 1967), Goldthorpe was of the opinion that, in the capitalist countries at least, mobility would tend to decline (Goldthorpe 1964, 1968: 654). The high levels of mobility apparent in many western societies were held to support the first view (Grusky and Hauser 1984; Lipset and Zetterberg 1966). Featherman, Jones and Hauser (1975) pointed out that there was in fact a great deal of diversity in the mobility rates of industrialised countries as a result of the differences in their occupational structures. Discounting the effects of occupational structure, however, they argued that these societies were characterised by very similar relative mobility chances (fluidity). For the U.S.A., Hauser (1975) also showed that relative mobility had not declined but remained more or less stable and Goldthorpe *et al.* found the same to be true of men in England and Wales, though they emphasised the absence of any increase in relative mobility (1980, 1987; and see Goldthorpe and Payne 1986). While Ganzeboom *et al.*, after examining data from thirty-five countries, claimed to have found an overall increase in relative mobility chances (1989), Erikson and Goldthorpe's magisterial comparison of nine countries came to the conclusion, which now seems to have become established as the orthodox view, that social fluidity in general was neither increasing nor decreasing (1993). More recent independent analyses of French data by Goux and Maurin (1997) and by Forsé (1998) confirmed this result, and in a searching re-analysis of some of the same data

used by Ganzeboom and his colleagues, Wong showed that one could not infer an increase in fluidity for Britain, Japan and the United States (1994). However, still more recently, in a thorough and ingenious examination of relative mobility in France, based on material from six separate surveys spread over forty years, Vallet confirmed the view that this was a period of steady change, demonstrating a sustained trend (at about 0.5 per cent per annum) towards greater fluidity (1999).

This preoccupation with stability or change in relative mobility chances - the fluidity paradigm - has come to absorb even the long-standing discussion of class and educational opportunity<sup>1</sup> recently reanimated by Saunders' evidence that in Britain the fetters placed by class upon ability had largely been replaced by meritocracy (Saunders 1996, 1997). The now orthodox view has been stoutly defended (Breen and Goldthorpe 1999; Marshall and Swift 1996).

The weight of numbers among the participants in the discussion of fluidity at the present time appears to be heavily one-sided. But the debate is likely to continue, as the critical re-examination of existing mathematical models and imaginative alternative measures are explored (e.g. Lampard 2000; Vallet 1999). However, though I have no real inclination to disparage the valuable contributions that methodological critique and statistical innovation have made, to both our knowledge of the subject and to the maturity of sociology as a discipline, I would like to suggest that further mathematical refinement of fluidity or inequality indices is not all that is required to take the discussion further. To do that we need, in addition, to question, from within a sociological perspective, the meaning and relevance of the measurement of occupational mobility, both absolute and relative. What is it for and what does it tell us?

### **Unexamined Assumptions**

If occupation remains the best easily-identifiable index of class position and life-style differentiation (Goldthorpe and Marshall 1992; Prandy and Blackburn 1997) - though it would be as well to check on that assumption from time to time - then occupational mobility must remain a central concern for the analysis of social structure. Of course, other, more readily accessible, ways of assessing the degree of inequality in society are available: measures of income and lifestyle, or political empowerment, for instance. They seem to suggest some degree of blurring of class and status boundaries in

Britain and the other advanced industrial countries (Lash and Urry 1987; Noble 1981; Scott 2000).

Fuzzy boundaries would not by themselves imply that class divisions have become less important as a structural feature of industrial society. Like the elephant in the mist, just because their outlines are not sharply distinct does not necessarily mean that the entities themselves are not real. On the other hand, blurred outlines may in fact, on closer inspection, dissolve in the realisation of the illusory nature of what had seemed to be so. If classes or status distinctions are still real and important features of the social structure, so is the possibility of mobility between them, however fuzzy the boundaries may be. Recurrent studies of mobility or the lack of mobility, between classes should be an essential part of ascertaining the continuing strength and character of social divisions.

Any single investigation may, of course, provide indispensable data for its time, but we also need to know the direction and degree of change. A temporal dimension is essential for methodological and substantive reasons, and because an understanding of social structure as a process involves a larger and longer perspective than that contained in the marginal distributions of origins and destinations in a singly mobility matrix. A single snapshot survey is able to show neither the extent of structural change nor the degree to which structural change may have affected mobility rates. If, on the other hand, we were to find that mobility trends were able to tell us little or nothing, either quantitatively or qualitatively, about the shaping of social experience, then class divisions would in fact have become no more than shadows of a vanishing past or the conceptual debris of a defunct ideology, no longer useful in arriving at a genuine understanding of our present predicament or a helpful appreciation of our future prospects. That does seem rather doubtful, but we need the evidence.

Even then, it may be that relative mobility chances or fluidity are less revealing sociologically, culturally, or politically than measures of the actual (absolute) amount of mobility up and down the class hierarchy. Fluidity is a property of the social system as a whole, rather than anything directly encountered by individuals in their own personal experience. People may have a fair idea of whether there is a lot or very little mobility across class lines (Harrop 1980), but only in very unusual circumstances are they likely to have much notion about how their chances of rising or falling compare with those of

others, and then only in the prevailing conditions of their time, not regardless of the changes going around them.

Fluidity is a measure of mobility net of changes in the occupational structure across the generations. No individual career is ever unaffected by such circumstances; people enjoy opportunities to rise, or alternatively find themselves confined to more limited prospects, precisely in a world shaped by just such changes. Absolute rates of upward and downward mobility, the movement of people between stratified social positions, unlike fluidity are largely determined by demand-side factors, such as the changing occupational structure. They reflect the personal experiences of numbers of real people. This is what, we may suppose, affects the individuals directly or indirectly concerned and has direct and indirect consequences for the larger society (Erikson 1976; Goldthorpe *et al.* 1980: 121).

Notwithstanding the apparent statistical robustness of fluidity measures, then, the concept of fluidity poses a number of problems for sociological theory which deserve more extensive consideration than they have so far received. The first, as I have suggested, is merely the matter of the ontological assumptions implicit in proposing that a social system has autonomous characteristics that *can* be net of changes in the occupational structure. The second difficulty is more specific. It is now well recognised that the marginal distributions in a mobility table are not independent and do not describe occupational distributions at two separate points in time, They show only the distributions of present and original social positions of the survey respondents as indicated by their current occupations and, usually, their fathers' occupations at some common point in the respondents' early lives. Present occupations all refer to the time when the survey was carried out, but origins (fathers' occupations) may be spread backwards over a span of thirty or forty years or more (Duncan 1966; Sorenson 1986). It is doubtfully meaningful to compare relative chances for these origin positions, located as they must be in different times and different circumstances with possibly quite different labour market conditions.

Reported social origins, furthermore, do not reflect the whole gamut of employment, as, in a satisfactorily representative sample, current occupations should. Some types of jobs tend to be early or late steps in a working lifetime, some mainly casual or temporary and only rarely filled by heads of households with children. Survey respondents' origins are, therefore, confined to the narrower occupational range of the

heads of households in whose families they were raised. That means we can never read off mobility trends directly from historical data on occupational distributions: firstly because any given occupied population will have entered the labour force at different times over the preceding forty years or so; and secondly because of the occupational differential in the likelihood of having any descendants. At the same time it also means that, within the limitations of the occupational classification used, all the mobility from origin to destination indicated in the table will be real mobility. Consequently it is hard to see why any of it should be minimised or explained away (Hellevik 1997). Thirdly, since fluidity is measured by the relative chances of people originating in different classes gaining access to one of them (simple disparity ratios: DR) as against their relative chances of access to the other ( $DR \times DR$ , or odds ratios; see Erikson and Goldthorpe 1993: 55), it pits upward and downward mobility rates against one another. As a result there will clearly be some implicit tendency to minimise mobility flows and to equate low mobility regimes with situations where there are larger upward and downward flows, or where, in over-time comparisons, upward and downward mobility trends are moving in opposite directions. Thus, in a fictional example, Vallet shows how fluidity measured by odds ratios remained the same even though, from  $T_1$  to  $T_2$ , total mobility increased by 25 per cent because of differences in the marginal distributions and the related change to rates of upward and downward mobility (Vallet 1999: 19-20). In the same way, a proportional decline in the size of the manual working class could lead to a subsequent reduction in the social heterogeneity of the professional and managerial strata resulting from upward mobility, even if manual workers' children's relative recruitment chances were to improve and fluidity remained unchanged. But all upward mobility represents some gain in social advantage for somebody; all downward mobility entails some loss of advantage for the person concerned. It is therefore questionable whether upward and downward mobility should ever be compounded together within a single index.

A class of things and a null class are not logically comparable categories. Social inheritance and non-heritance are situations that can be differentiated but membership of the latter group requires no common distinguishing characteristic save non-membership of the former. Indeed it may include a diversity of very dissimilar members. Thus it is a simple matter to calculate the total mobility rate by counting all those not inheriting their social position, the proportion of cases, that is to say, not lying

along the diagonal of the familiar mobility matrix. That, however, does not make it a sociologically sensible thing to do. For the son and daughter of a pipe-fitter, or a machinist in the garment industry, to become an orthopaedic surgeon, a judge, or a securities broker are different sorts of cultural and psychological experience from those of the child of the chartered architect or senior civil servant who grows up to become a van driver's mate or a catering assistant in a fast food outlet. At a structural level, too, the comparative frequency of one sort of move or the other would tell us very different things about the nature of society in which they occurred. To ignore the differences between upward and downward mobility, to treat them as equivalent is not only a far cry from a Weberian kind of *verstehende* sociology; it is to employ an implausibly Euclidean concept of social space. If not for any other reason, for the sake of arithmetic simplicity it imposes upon us a geometrical notion of social structure which would be hard to reconcile, if anyone were seriously to make the effort, with most of the known ways of theorising about how societies work. It is a model of social structure not only independent of the understanding of the people it encompasses, but indifferent to changing historical circumstances and incapable of rational justification.

### **Neglected Questions**

Earlier I identified a number of neglected or recently unfashionable issues relating to mobility and its consequences, as well as some more general debates which might be better informed by a greater awareness of mobility trends and their wider implications. These included, at a very general level:

- ◆ post-modernity,
- ◆ feminist perspectives,
- ◆ structure and agency questions,
- ◆ globalisation, and
- ◆ perceived risk.

More concretely, there was also:

- ◆ the direct and indirect effects of upward and downward mobility on individuals,
- ◆ the direct and indirect effects of upward and downward mobility on the composition, culture and coherence of the groups into and out of which mobility occurs,
- ◆ the qualitative implications for the experience of mobility of the decline of lifetime job continuity, and
- ◆ sectoral variations in mobility rates.

Of course, information about mobility rates and trends in the large-scale is a necessary framework for such investigations. It is now a very long time since there was any study to discover the amount of upward and downward mobility in Britain: seventeen years since Marshall *et al.*'s fairly modestly sized sample of men and women, and almost thirty since the major Nuffield College investigation of men in England and Wales and the parallel inquiries in Scotland and Ireland. While other countries, notably France, are more fortunate in this respect, in Britain we need to know how much things may have changed over the past thirty years or so and why. However, in addition to establishing general trends and providing for further explorations of equalities and inequalities of opportunity, it would be timely and at least as important to know more about their impact on those who become mobile and their wider aggregate effects upon all of us.

In the 1960's and earlier, in, for example, functionalist theory or the convergence theory of industrial society, mobility was seen as a response to system needs. As I have argued, the emphasis then shifted to the issue of inequality of opportunities and in particular to the lack of apparent change in relative mobility chances in spite of continuing and economic change. This much more thoroughly researched concern has, with the exception of a small number of Marxist commentators, been less explicitly theorised than the earlier, less empirically substantiated arguments. Thus social mobility has been dealt with chiefly for what it tells us about other social processes or system properties. Besides the stability of relative mobility chances, the main thrust of social mobility research has been to identify factors which foster or impede movements between occupational classes. Thus it was initially regarded as the outcome or measure of the success of education, of occupational change, of structural shifts in the economy, of inequalities of social or cultural capital, or, more recently, as an index in one way or another of the intrinsic rigidity of social divisions. These questions all relate to rates of outflow from differentiated social origins. On the whole they treat mobility, or

the lack of it, as a dependant variable. Research on social mobility here is located in the context of the economic and political analysis of industrial society.

At the same time there has been comparatively little discussion of the consequences of mobility, either at the individual or at the collective level. The effects of mobility as a phenomenon in its own right have scarcely been explored, either as far as the individuals directly or indirectly experiencing it are concerned, or in relation to the aggregate consequences for the social formations within which it occurs. This, one might think, was a particularly significant omission in a period when actual rates of upward mobility have been increasing while downward mobility declined. The personal effects of mobility relate to overall rates of mobility only to the extent that the impact on the individual could be proportional to the rarity of the experience. Earlier studies suggest that, for the most part, these effects can be accounted for by the additive effect of influences from origin and destination statuses without any discernible augmentation specifically from the experience of mobility itself (Duncan 1966). In the exceptional cases, furthermore, it is difficult unambiguously to attribute the correlates of personal mobility either to antecedent causes or consequent effects (Noble 1975). Less still is known about how mobility trends impinge upon our collective socio-cultural experience through their effects upon the homogeneity or heterogeneity of recruitment to different social strata. Individual mobility and mobility rates would be the independent variables in such studies. In both cases, individual or socio-cultural, the primary measures would be the inflows into each given social destination class.

Perhaps we need empirical verification of the assumptions that the cultural diversity and the non-prescriptive character of cultural norms will be greater in a heterogeneously-recruited occupational group than in one the membership of which is more homogenous in background. A difficulty here would be that the cultural character of a heterogeneous stratum would be the same for the socially self-recruited as for the externally recruited. Uncertainty among equals would affect the stable as well as the incomers. Nevertheless it would be interesting to pursue Goldthorpe *et al.*'s observation that, 'mobile individuals tend to be involved in less connected, or, one might better say, more segmented social networks than do those who form part of either the working class or service class cores' (1980: 165). Social network analysis and theory have developed a good deal since then (Scott 1991; Wasserman and Faust 1995; Wellman and Berkowitz 1988), but the consequences of low network density are

still not much more than hypothesised. In so far as they are thought to have normative consequences, then, it seems probable that absolute upward and downward mobility trends would have significant cultural effects for the destination classes and for society as a whole.

How can we account for the relative neglect of such questions ? At a time when sociology, and sociological theory in particular, seems to be obsessed with cultural issues, it makes no sense to attribute this to the hardware-driven professionalisation of the subject and the exigencies of its academic labour market. Nor can it be construed as inherently ideological in the usual sense, though the preoccupations I outlined above - the fluidity paradigm - represent a particular way of approaching mobility so that only some issues are foregrounded as open to investigation.

I believe that Bell's concept of the 'disjunction of realms' (Bell 1979: 14) may be helpful in understanding this. Daniel Bell proposed that there were three, more or less autonomous, 'social realms': the productive economy, the political system, and the cultural realm of moral, ethical and aesthetic values, beliefs and customs. These are ruled by contrary axial principles (*ibid.*: xxxi). The axial principle, or fundamental rationale, of the economy is efficiency. In the politics of western industrial societies, in modern times, the issue of equality has been the governing principle. It may be therefore, that because social mobility has been seen by sociologists as an issue in the economic and, more recently, especially the political realm, that the issues of efficiency and equality of opportunity have been those to be highlighted.

What I have been arguing for in this paper is that social mobility should also be set in the context of the cultural realm, where its relation to our values, beliefs and customs can be examined. Though Bell goes on to argue that the predominant cultural value of the past 150 years or so has been self-realisation, I believe that through the examination of stratum heterogeneity, and with the help of social network theory, we can bridge the apparent gap between structural processes and cultural experiences, the qualitative consequences of quantitative social change. Social mobility research needs to return to where it began with Sorokin, back to the centre of sociological discussion.

## Notes

1. In an enormous literature: see, for example, Boudon 1974: 168-9, 195-6; Halsey *et al.* 1980; Hout 1988; Wong 1994.

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