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Social mobility: The potential of a genealogical approach

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This article highlights the potential of taking a genealogical approach to researching social mobility based on empirical insights generated from a qualitative case study in a secondary school located in the South East of England. The study involved interviews with 42 students and the data lead to a deeper understanding of the role of families in inter- and intra-generational social movement. We begin by highlighting some limitations in existing research on social mobility. Next, the role of households and families in conditioning an individual's identity, dispositions, aspirations and choices is emphasised. We then present findings from the analysis of 42 genealogical work histories over three generations and explore the role of education and family background in shaping young people's employment aspirations. We argue that education has had little impact on overall mobility rates and suggest that whilst education has a significant role in mediating social mobility, the importance of family context should not be overlooked.

Keywords: social mobility; policy; genealogy; habitus; dispositions

Introduction

Over the past 20 years, there has been significant expenditure in the UK to improve educational opportunities, yet there is little sign that mobility rates are improving or that low-income groups are making progress relative to their peers (Blanden *et al.*, 2005; Gorard, 2008; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009; Nolan *et al.*, 2014; Atkinson, 2015). Even with an increase in educational qualifications over the last two decades, inequality is worse, lower income groups earn and own less and younger age groups fare worse than those born in the post-war era (Atkinson, 2015).

In England, Coalition government (2010–2015) and Conservative government (2015 to date) policies to improve opportunities and intra-generational mobility have emphasised the importance of enabling students to access good universities and jobs regardless of social background (HM Government, 2011). Despite the increased funding available for economically disadvantaged pupils through, for example, pupil premium,¹ the widespread introduction of academies² and the adoption of a rigorous curriculum and challenging targets for student outcomes, educational success remains closely associated with relative wealth and social class background. The

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positive correlation between disadvantage and underachievement is as strong as ever (Cook, 2012; Hoskins & Barker, 2014). Strikingly similar initiatives, trends and concerns have been reported across OECD member states, the USA and other advanced countries around the world (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009; OECD, 2011; Nolan *et al.*, 2014).

These disappointing trends suggest that successive UK governments have over-estimated the ‘importance of teaching’ (Department for Education, 2010) and the ability for education reform (Barber, 2008) to enhance social mobility. They have also discounted sociological evidence that disadvantaged young people lack the social, economic and family capitals to fulfil their potential, however good their schools (HM Government, 2011; Barker & Hoskins, 2017). Underlying structures, such as those related to status hierarchies, family networks, social class background and relative poverty, appear to have a greater impact on health, opportunity and life chances than reforms believed to encourage mobility (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009; Reay *et al.*, 2011). Recent history confirms the suggestion that education tends to operate as an agent of social reproduction rather than as a catalyst for improving or transforming society (Mills, 2008; Atkinson, 2012). The research evidence cited here suggests the need for an alternative family-centred approach to research design and methods.

The discouraging data reported by the Social Mobility Commission (2016) prompt important questions about the research that informs policy-making in the field:

1. Do official presumptions provide an adequate framework for understanding the processes involved in inter- and intra-generational social mobility?
2. What influences help explain why increases in educational access, opportunity and accreditation have failed to achieve a comparable growth in upward intra-generational mobility?
3. What alternative approaches to researching social mobility have the potential to enhance our understanding of the relationship between education and social mobility and provide secure grounds for interventions to improve life chances?

These questions suggest a research agenda that includes contributions from a variety of perspectives and traditions, especially investigations by qualitative and quantitative researchers that recognise the weight of sociological evidence against individualised, ladder-climbing models of upward mobility.

We review social mobility policy and detail omissions and weaknesses in current research that lead to misleading assumptions about how education reform can increase upward mobility. We emphasise the role of households and families in accumulating and transmitting the social, economic and cultural capital that shapes young people’s sense of themselves, as well as the academic and vocational decisions they make. We present findings from our analysis of 42 genealogical histories that chart changes in family occupations over three generations to provide a qualitative understanding of the influences on social status.

These data suggest that individual intra-generational mobility should be understood as part of a wider pattern of inter-generational change. Our interpretation of the data points towards four propositions that could be investigated through

large-scale qualitative studies of family employment patterns. We argue that a research agenda based on a family-centred understanding of what is involved in social stability and mobility will enable government agencies to devise and recommend effective, evidence-based policy interventions.

Social mobility policy

Social mobility has become a pressing global policy concern. In the UK, Labour (2003–2010), Coalition (2010–2015) and Conservative (2015 to date) governments have commissioned extensive research and articulated a steady determination to improve inter- and intra-generational mobility, apparently stuck after the leap forward enjoyed by many post-Second World War baby-boomers (HM Government, 2009, 2010, 2011). Growing public debate about the global rise of the 1% (Dorling, 2014a), the impact of poverty (Jones, 2011), increased inequality across the global north and south (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009) and persistent differences in school achievement (Cook, 2012; Social Mobility Commission, 2016) has led to policy initiatives that aim to remove barriers to upward mobility. Government interventions have concentrated on institutional obstacles (especially in education, but also in the workplace) that reduce access and opportunity for less advantaged individuals, for those from some ethnic backgrounds and for women and girls constrained by gendered attitudes and practices (Department for Education, 2010; HM Government, 2011).

Successive government reports, including the most recent (Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission, 2014; Social Mobility Commission, 2016) provide a picture of social injustice. State school results continue to reflect the distribution of wealth through the social spectrum, while those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are much less likely than their peers to progress to high-status universities, professional careers or well-rewarded jobs (HM Government, 2009, 2011; Cook, 2012). Research on 9,500 seven-year-olds from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)³ shows that however good or effective they may be, parents struggle to overcome the structural problems caused by poverty (Hartas, 2010). Comparative analysis of the 1946, 1958 and 1970 birth cohorts shows that parental class, status and education continue to exert a strong influence on academic attainment, even when allowance is made for cognitive ability (Bukodi *et al.*, 2014). Working-class and middle-class life patterns remain sharply different, with social class ‘everywhere and nowhere, denied yet continually enacted’ (Reay, 2006, p. 290).

Goldthorpe and Mills (2008) believe that relative rates of class mobility have changed little since the 1940s, and suggest that education’s main impact has been on the incidence of mobility rather than its rate. This is consistent with data indicating that a large and sustained increase in the number and quality of female graduates (Thompson & Bekhradnia, 2009; Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2013) has not yet produced genuinely equal opportunities in the workplace for women and men. Furthermore, a recent measure of the median full-time pay gap between men and women indicates a differential of 9.4% (Business in the Community, 2012), and most female options and careers continue to be limited by gendered constraints (Francis,

2006) or are simply gendered. Sellgren (2017) reports that the class pay gap remains a strong feature of the labour market, and highlights that the class pay gap has not changed significantly despite all the alleged good news.

In what follows, we review three problematic presumptions about existing social mobility research in relation to individualist assumptions informing government policy, the measurements used to identify social mobility and the role of education in improving relative rates of mobility in England.

Individualist assumptions

The most recent mobility studies focus on individual origins and destinations as the appropriate unit for analysis (Millennium Cohort Study, 2000; Goldthorpe, 2013; Bukodi *et al.*, 2015). Families and social background are constructed as obstacles to be overcome, rather than as a realistic context for everyone, and social progress is believed to reward talent and hard work (Gove, 2011). Progress itself is imagined as movement up a ladder of opportunity, powered by educational provision (Gove, 2011). Policy proposals and initiatives have emphasised issues relating to access, opportunity and institutional quality (HM Government, 2011; Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission, 2014). However, numerous sociological studies have shown that family and social class are very powerful predictors of educational success and shape aspirations and choices (Brown, 2013; Francis & Wong, 2013; Gugushvili *et al.*, 2017). People respond differently to apparently equal educational opportunities and apparently similar classroom experiences (Hoskins & Barker, 2014; Barker & Hoskins, 2017).

Bourdieu's (1986) account of habitus and the various forms of capital has been critiqued (Widick, 2003), but they do help explain a tendency to social reproduction rather than social escape, and have informed a renewed, widespread interest in understanding social class inequality. Class cultural analysis examines the interplay between economic, social and cultural capital and so provides greater insight into unequal outcomes, especially in health, education and social mobility, than would a traditional class schema based on an individual's employment position (Savage *et al.*, 2013). Students may be individual agents who adapt to circumstances and make informed decisions, but they are also part of the social world they inhabit, influenced strongly by family and friends and by the conditions of their lives (Bourdieu, 1977, 1979, 1986; Atkinson, 2012).

Measures of class and mobility

Social mobility research has tended to emphasise individual male incomes as an appropriate index of upward and downward movement, with father and son earnings compared at selected census points (Lambert *et al.*, 2007). Economists investigating social movement have employed large-scale quantitative research designs to determine the extent of inter-generational income mobility (Goldthorpe & Jackson, 2007). Sociologists have also adopted quantitative methods to capture changes in occupational status that indicate class mobility (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 2010). Such longitudinal, quantitative research, based on re-examining data from successive birth cohort

studies,⁴ has provided a mixed picture of mobility in Britain (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 2010). Of these studies, 11 have shown growing mobility, 13 have found stability, while 4 have identified decline (Lambert *et al.*, 2007).

The tendency in social mobility research towards quantitative studies of male occupations, or income at fixed points in fathers' and sons' lives, presupposes that individual male earnings, rather than those of women or household incomes (Olsen *et al.*, 2014), are the primary agents of upward and downward movement (Dex *et al.*, 2009). Women's status is said to derive from male heads of household, in other words, from their fathers and husbands (Dyhouse, 2002). As a result, women are deemed to have no independent position (Payne & Abbott, 1990). Welfare dependants and others not currently employed are also excluded from consideration (Lambert *et al.*, 2007). The result is that the role of women and families in social mobility has been underestimated.

This approach also excludes the role played by the various resources (social, cultural, economic) held by individuals but embedded in family structures and transmitted through successive generations (Bourdieu, 1986). Property, unearned income and inheritance are now more important for successful households than they ever have been (e.g. parental support for house purchase, children inheriting houses and capital), and have considerable significance for family members and social status and, more widely, possible mobility (Dorling, 2014a,b; Byrne *et al.*, 2017). The BBC Class Survey (BBC Science, 2013) is unusual amongst large-scale studies in applying Bourdieu's conception of family resources to the understanding of social differentiation and change, and in recognising these wider sources of social difference. Findings from the BBC's national data set suggest that traditional views of class society have become out of date and no longer reflect modern occupations or lifestyles. Despite criticism of the survey data analysis (see e.g. Mills, 2014), the BBC findings do provide a very different view of class, based on respondent self-descriptions within an inductively derived framework (UK Data Service, 2015).

Over 325,000 respondents (the largest social mobility data set in the world) rated themselves for economic capital (property, investments, income), social capital (engagement with a wide range of people) and cultural capital (e.g. music, art, theatre, books). Savage *et al.* (2013) conclude that social structure should be viewed in terms of seven new social classes, reflecting their members' social, economic and cultural resources. Their classification confirms the importance of accumulated, embodied and transmitted capitals, as well as the influence of such resources on people's identity, on their responses to opportunity, on their trajectories through education and work, and even on their health, welfare and effectiveness.

Education

Education is believed by government to have a transformative potential that trumps social background, disadvantage and injustice. School experiences are perceived to operate outside the structures and interactions involved in social reproduction and to offer talented individuals an avenue of advancement, provided they are sufficiently determined (Department for Education, 2010). Yet, the sociology of education points towards schools and colleges that are embedded in social networks, economic

structures and the culture and capital of the families and students attending them (Reay *et al.*, 2005; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2016; Reay, 2017). There are also technical and little understood reasons why education does not function as official presumptions predict.

All examinations measure relative performance for a given cohort of students on a specific set of criteria and questions. This considerably limits their usefulness for other purposes and must inevitably frustrate attempts to measure changes in standards over time. During 29 years of reform since 1988, key stage tests⁵, GCSE⁶ examinations and advanced levels⁷ have become chronically unstable. Frequent changes have undermined any basis for comparison between cohorts (Goldstein, 2001; Stobart, 2008). Marking invariably leads towards a normal distribution curve, with students scattered across the mark range. Boundaries can be adjusted to ensure better grades, but the number of students at the top, in the middle and at the bottom will remain similar (Barker, 2010). Performance criteria are subject to constant change and produce data that are self-referencing, invalid, unreliable and often misleading (Goldstein & Thomas, 1996; Bagnall, 2006; Gorard, 2010; Association of School and College Leaders, 2015).

Policy-makers insist that closing the performance gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students is a realistic enterprise, despite evidence that there has been very little change in the relative performance of advantaged and disadvantaged groups (Social Mobility & Child Poverty Commission, 2014; Social Mobility Commission, 2016). Webber and Butler (2005), for example, added the UK Mosaic Neighbourhood classification system to the records of the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC)⁸ and found that the type of neighbourhood in which a pupil lives is a more reliable predictor of his or her GCSE performance than any other information held about that pupil on the PLASC database. Excellent teaching cannot remove performance differences because students who achieve national average results or above are likely to benefit at least as much from better teaching or increased school effectiveness as their less academically successful peers. The normal distribution curve means that improving school performance is a zero-sum game, with winners and losers inescapably necessary for one another.

These considerations help us understand why there is so little evidence to confirm the supposed link between student outcomes, enhanced career trajectories and greater mobility. Current government thinking provides an inadequate, limited portrait of the social processes involved in intra- and inter-generational changes in occupation, status and income while increases in educational access, opportunity and accreditation have failed to create a comparable growth in upward mobility. This unsettling, but very strong, evidence has convinced us that a different approach is required. We should draw on a wider repertoire of methods than have been deployed in the quantitative, labour-market-inspired studies that have dominated much recent research and need to develop a closer, deeper and more sophisticated understanding of the influences on social movement and change.

Our earlier work involved interviews at South Park and Felix Holt, two highly effective state academies. The data provided empirical evidence that students' attitudes, values, occupational interests and preferences are strongly influenced by family

background, resources and dispositions. There was little to suggest that the case study schools were securing a step-change in mobility, in line with policy expectations (Hoskins & Barker, 2014). We found that:

- Although participants valued examination success and assumed the future was in their own hands if they worked hard, they also emphasised the role of their families in providing cultural, social and economic resources.
- Participants attributed their own values, dispositions and occupational decisions to family examples and role models.
- There was little evidence that the gap between more and less advantaged pupils was closing. Despite excellent teaching at both academies, 36% of Year 11 students failed to obtain five good GCSE results.
- Student aspirations were not consistent with an increase in inter-generational upward mobility. Few expressed a wish for wealth and social advancement. They valued intrinsic job satisfaction and personal and family happiness. Arguments based on an automatic association between strong examination performance and a high career trajectory fail to recognise the extent of latent inertia arising from class-based dispositions.

These findings confirm other studies (Reay *et al.*, 2005; Crozier, 2015) and help explain the persistence of class differentials in school attainment, despite a substantial rise in the average level of achievement (Goldthorpe, 1996; Plewis & Bartley, 2014). Recent evidence suggests that current policy is unlikely to produce the much-desired improvement in life chances and mobility rates. We need, therefore, to scrutinise the weakness of current individualist approaches and examine alternatives that stimulate thinking about more effective ways to improve social justice and opportunity.

Our study of family influences on future aspirations

Our qualitative case study is based on interviews conducted in 2012–2013 with students at Felix Holt, a high-performing 11–18 academy. Participants were also invited to complete an employment history specifying the occupations of their parents and both sets of grandparents, in so far as these were known and remembered. Participants were asked about their hobbies and interests, and we made links between these discussions and their aspirations for future career pathways.

The head of the Sixth Form identified the respondents, and the sample was purposively constructed and comprised 42 students, including 18 students (7 female, 11 male) in Group A and 24 students (13 female, 11 male) in Group B. The sample was designed to capture differences in perception based on the respondents' ability, gender and background influences.

The study was carried out in accordance with the British Educational Research Association (2018) ethical guidelines. Participants were volunteers, interviewed with their parents' consent, and were assured of their right to withdraw at any time. They were advised that data would be held securely and that confidentiality would be protected by the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying factors.

Our qualitative study provides significant evidence about inter-generational change, which confirms an overall picture of complex influences on students and their

choice of education and career pathways. As the students at Felix Holt were in the final stages of their school careers, with vocational trajectories at the forefront of their minds, there was an unusual opportunity during our research to gather information about the students' workplace destinations and the employment history of their family members. We draw on this data and reanalyse our original interviews with 18-year-old students at Felix Holt to capture the varied influences on their career choices. The emerging picture indicates a significant relationship between those choices and the wider pattern of inter-generational change to which they belong. We develop four propositions to make sense of the data and suggest those areas with which future research into social mobility should be concerned:

1. Family occupational genealogies reveal common strands and similarities in educational and occupational decisions and choices.
2. Family members in successive generations remain in similar or related occupations. Upward and downward movement is within and between related occupations.
3. Participants believe strongly in their own agency, but their decisions are closely related to family capitals and influences, with very few seeking to distance themselves from their families, socially or in terms of wealth and upward mobility.
4. Few participants move from relatively low to relatively high employment locations.

In what follows, we draw on data to review each proposition.

Family occupational genealogies reveal common strands and similarities in educational and occupational decisions and choices.

Our data indicate that students draw, to a high degree, on family role models to inspire their occupational choices for the future. Parental role models were an important source of career aspiration and motivation for our participants, as they navigated their post-16 and post-18 choices. For example, Andrew (Group A) shared his mother's belief that hard work is key because '*if you want to be somewhere you have to work to get there*', and recognised a strong connection between his own desire to be a wildlife photographer and her talent as an artist/illustrator. Charlotte's mother was one of three teaching assistants in the cohort whose children planned to become teachers. Colin and Michael both had family members involved in engineering, electronics and electrical work, and both students hoped to work in similar areas. Lance similarly aspired to a future career in electronics; he spent a lot of time at his grandfather's house when he was young and remembered that '*he was always doing electronic stuff and that has led to where I am now*'. At the time of his interview, Lance had decided to become a chartered engineer and acknowledged that his grandfather (an electrician with British Telecom) and parents had helped develop the groundwork for his career. Mary's grandmothers both worked in private businesses, while her father ran his own computer repair company and her mother was an accountant for her husband; Mary hoped to set up her own physiotherapy business in the future.

These students attributed their plans for the future to their family background rather than their school. Their aspirations reflect a desire to achieve careers that are embedded within their family milieu. Bourdieu (1977, p. 72) believes the habitus is derived from family inculcated dispositions that enable the 'generation and

structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively “regulated” and “regular” without in any way being the product of obedience to rules’. The regulation of these practices and representations becomes:

...objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor. (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72)

The young people exemplified above made reference to their own agency in choosing the future. However, they also acknowledged the input and influences received from family members. In all instances, these participants aspired to achieve future employment located within family-related occupations. Our data highlight a close relationship between our participants’ plans for future employment and social reproduction.

Family members in successive generations remain in similar or related occupations. Upward and downward movement is within and between related occupations.

The data support the proposition that family members remain in similar or related occupations and reveal several examples of upward and downward movement in related employment. For example, Rebecca’s grandmother was a nurse and Rebecca wanted to work as a cancer researcher. She felt that her mother was overbearing in her ‘*desperation for me to become a doctor*’, but nevertheless valued her family’s encouragement to pursue a medical career and their practical help with work experience. Daniel was seeking an internship with a music studio as an entry point to the wider music industry. He liked the idea of being creative and trying out different things, and emphasised the importance of music in his life as a source of relaxation and as an inspiration to try hard and achieve. The main influence came from his father, who had ‘*played the guitar since I was born or before*’. Michael also reported that he had picked up a lot of knowledge and understanding for his future career in engineering from family members involved in working in this area. Paul’s mother was a teaching assistant; Paul wished to teach. Tony had extensive work experience with his father’s accountancy firm and was committed to a career in accountancy. Dave was influenced by his father’s career as a police sergeant. Dave recognized that it would be difficult to follow his father into the police: ‘*You can work as hard as you like but if they are not recruiting, they are not recruiting*’. He was sorry that his father’s contacts and service no longer guarantee entry, and said he was reconciled to becoming a special constable and joining the waiting list. Harry had decided to join Tesco, a large supermarket chain, where his mother worked as a manager. Zara said she was applying to study economics at a pre-1992 university and hoped for a career in business. She was strongly influenced by her mother’s ethos of hard work and by her uncle’s success in establishing several businesses before the age of 30. She had ‘*a few ideas for my own business, perhaps a cake shop or selling jewellery*’, but hadn’t yet begun to think about how to acquire the necessary capital. Holly needed to achieve three C grades at A-level to study animal biology at a post-1992 university. She would eventually have liked a job in the zoo industry. Her older sisters had been a major influence on her thinking; both were in careers they loved and had received promotions that had made

them more comfortable in their lives. One worked in children's homes with '*disabled kids that parents can't deal with*' and the other was a drugs counsellor in a high-security prison. These manoeuvres between and within occupations illustrate the ways in which family resources may be deployed to maintain class position, with successful parents and grandparents offering informal guidance and access to ease the path towards highly regarded universities and occupations (Ball *et al.*, 2000).

Participants believe strongly in their own agency, but their decisions are closely related to family capitals and influences, with very few seeking to distance themselves from their families, socially or in terms of wealth and upward mobility.

We have argued elsewhere (Hoskins & Barker, 2014) that our participants emphasised their own agency regarding their future employment plans. For many of our participants it was simply a matter of choosing the future, and any confusion they experienced they related to the myriad choices available rather than any structural constraints. Although many of those interviewed referred to financial hardship, family problems (such as separation, divorce and ill health) and relative disadvantage, they perceived difficulties as challenges to overcome, not obstacles to complain about. Even the less able, less fortunate students who were expected to achieve modest results believed that examinations were important for career success and emphasised their own agency in achieving personal goals.

Across our sample at Felix Holt, we observed a tension between agency and structure. Whilst our participants maintained that they were free to choose from the diverse pathways available to them, there were few examples of participants seeking to secure future employment that would take them beyond the occupational status of their immediate and wider family circle. Rather, in our Felix Holt sample, almost all of the students displayed a clear preference for following in their family's footsteps and achieving future employment in occupations similar to those of their parents or family members.

Indeed, as a business studies teacher noted, many students were reluctant to look beyond their local area and parents' occupations, and were inhibited by a lack of self-belief and self-esteem. She reported that when she wore her '*careers teacher hat*' and asked about the future or their aspirations, '*they don't think they should dream big, and that's what holds them back from going beyond parents and what they could achieve themselves*'. She said that some students chose to stay on in the Sixth Form '*not because it is the best place but because they don't want to venture out, don't want to try something else*'. She wished she could inject them with '*the swagger, the confidence*' of the privately educated students she encountered through extra-curricular activities.

The participants exercised an individual agency that encourages them to believe the future is in their own hands (Archer *et al.*, 2010) but, below the surface, habitus ensures that life and fate are subject to the 'past experiences... deposited in each organism' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 54). Their sense of personal agency contrasts with our parallel awareness that people are embedded in families and family relationships, to which all household members make important if varied contributions. These family influences transmit relative status and access to economic capital (income,

investments, property), social capital (peer group, networks, contacts) and cultural capital (knowledge, skills, dispositions) over time.

Agency and structure seem to intertwine to produce young people whose choices and behaviour are related to their family habitus and dispositions. Our evidence is consistent with Bourdieu's (1977) cultural theory of social reproduction and confirms Brown's (2013) claim that there is little hope of improving social mobility without first tackling the underlying causes of social inequality

Few participants move from relatively low to relatively high employment locations.

There are a few examples of participants who expressed some desire to climb the occupational ladder. Martin was one such example. He is from a Chinese immigrant background and arrived at the Reception stage with no English. He holds higher aspirations for his career than the jobs held by his parents. Martin had applied to study English literature at a Russell Group university. His responses showed the deep influence of a complex blend of Chinese and Western cultural assumptions and ideas. His father came from Hong Kong and runs a food business; his mother was from Malaysia and works as a waitress. Martin explained that although his parents placed a high value on education, they applied no pressure. Instead, they treated him as knowing more about it than them and allowed him *'the freedom to be what I want to be'*. He acknowledged that he was a *'workaholic'*, poised between a *'transcendental, Buddhist view of success as happiness; and the American dream of money and wealth, with five acres and a pool'*. He represented a relatively small minority of participants who expressed a desire to transcend their parents' occupational status.

Adele and Tania are examples of participants who appear to hold aspirations for the future that would move them from relatively low to relatively high employment destinations. Adele's desire to be a lawyer may signify a potential leap forward from her mother's work as a carer, but is less remarkable in the context of her father's profession as an accountant. A similar possible jump for Tania, from her mother's duties as a doctor's receptionist to her own hopes of becoming a veterinary surgeon, seems more predictable when her father's boat-building business and her previous private education are taken into account. These daughters come from skilled, advantaged families, so they are well positioned to exploit the expansion of higher education and changes in the nature of available employment. They remain, nevertheless, within an occupational frame drawn from past family experience.

The four propositions used in the analysis suggest that family is an important influence on individual career and educational trajectories, and help explain the stability of people's choices and the relative absence of social mobility from lower positions. They indicate the extent to which individual agency is constrained or enabled by multiple social and economic contexts, with family background and habitus, education and labour market fluctuations contributing powerfully to outcomes (Hoskins & Barker, 2017). We argue that families accumulate small advantages over time, enabling members to manoeuvre effectively towards other occupations when opportunities occur (Gladwell, 2008). A reverse process can be imagined when the labour market is unfavourable for new arrivals and opportunities are limited by economic downturns, with reduced income and diminished well-being for families and groups whose

habitus and dispositions are ill matched to the available occupations (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996).

The formative role of family background in informing future career aspirations and choices cannot be underestimated. The data reveal the importance of family milieu, in particular employment histories, but also hobbies and personal interests, which are not discussed here in depth. Parents, grandparents and in some instances extended family members helped shape the aspirations and imagined futures of the participants. Our data analysis indicates changes in family and individual assets and dispositions, together with changes in employment environment and the external world, as significant influences that help make sense of the complex mobility ‘carnival through the keyhole’ imagined by Bertaux and Thompson (1997). A deeper understanding of the influence of family on participants’ aspirations for occupational choices and dispositions could enable a targeted policy agenda that works with, rather than against, the grain of all families.

Conclusion

The data suggest the importance of considering individual, group and family employment trajectories as intimately related, and making sense in terms of stratified occupations generated by national and local labour markets over time and across generations. There were few instances of participants aspiring to rise from relatively low to relatively high forms of employment. These data include tangible examples of dispositions operating within families and individuals to condition their choices, confirming that they act as ‘broad parameters and boundaries of what is possible or unlikely for a particular group in a stratified social world’ (Swartz, 1997, p. 103). Our participants inhabit and possess differing dispositions and therefore ‘not all social worlds are equally viable to everyone’ and ‘not all courses of action are equally possible for everyone, only some are plausible, whereas others are unthinkable’ (Swartz, 1997, p. 107). Thus, habitus theory helps explain our participants’ dispositions, which have generated their ‘practices and perceptions’ (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 5).

Our genealogical and interview data show that participants’ agency is mediated and constrained by the influence of their families on their decisions. The policy agenda of ‘overcoming family background’ seems unlikely to succeed, given the extent to which participants are influenced by their families in their choice of future employment direction (HM Government, 2009, 2010, 2011).

In light of the evidence and arguments presented here, we suggest that there is potential for drawing on a genealogical approach to researching social mobility and developing policy interventions to improve employment destinations taken by students of all abilities. We contend that future studies should pay greater attention to households, family inheritance and capital accumulation as these are a more useful and reliable measure of mobility than male income differentials. We suggest that social classifications should follow the example set by the BBC’s Great British Class Survey in drawing on Bourdieu’s concepts to chart education and employment patterns and their significance across generations for individuals and families. Education, perceived as so powerful in mediating opportunity and outcomes, has had little

impact on overall mobility rates and, although education has a significant role in mediating social mobility, it also has an important family context. Without understanding this context, there is little chance of understanding why education has made so little difference to social relativities.

NOTES

- ¹ Pupil premium provides additional funding for state-funded schools in England to help disadvantaged pupils perform better academically, to close the gap between them and their peers.
- ² Academy schools are state-funded schools in England funded by the Department for Education and independent of local authority control.
- ³ The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) is a multi-disciplinary research project following the lives of around 19,000 children born in the UK in 2000–1.
- ⁴ Four major studies have provided much of the data used in social mobility analysis: National Child Development Study (NCDS), from 1958; British Cohort Study (BCS), from 1970; British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), from 1991; MCS, from 2000.
- ⁵ In England each of the four fixed stages of compulsory state education has a prescribed national curriculum with an associated course of study. At the end of each stage, pupils are required to complete standard assessment tasks.
- ⁶ General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is a qualification in a specific subject typically taken by school students aged 14–16 in England.
- ⁷ Advanced Level (A-level) is a qualification in a specific subject typically taken by school students aged 16–18 in England.
- ⁸ The PLASC is mandatory for all school-age sectors of education in England, including nursery, primary, middle, secondary and special. All pupils on roll on the census date must be included in the return.

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