




Class Mobility and Reproduction for Black and White Adults in the United States: A Visualization

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Abstract

The relationship between where people start out in life (class origin) and where they are likely to end up (class destination) is central to any question about the fairness of contemporary society. Yet we often don't have a good picture—literally or metaphorically—of the contours of that relationship. Further, work on class mobility in the United States often glosses over the large differences between white and Black Americans' class positions and mobility trajectories. This visualization, based on data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, shows the association between occupational class origin and destination for Black and white employed Americans ages 25 to 69. Stark racial inequality, produced by the legacy and ongoing operation of white supremacy, is evident in each aspect of these figures.

Keywords

class, mobility, stratification, race

Questions of inequality and fairness in society hinge on the relationship between where people start out in life (class origin) and where they are likely to end up (class destination). Yet we often don't have a good picture—literally or metaphorically—of the contours of that relationship. Further, work on class mobility in the United States often glosses over the large differences between white and Black Americans' class positions and trajectories produced by the legacy and ongoing operation of white supremacy.

Scholars examining social mobility frequently use sophisticated models that are difficult for most people to interpret. This can leave researchers (and everyone else) without an intuitive grasp of how much parental occupation and race predict the jobs people get.

This visualization, based on data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (Brady and Kohler 2019; Survey Research Center 2020), shows the association between occupational class origin and destination for Black and white employed adults ages 25 to 69. Details about the construction of the three class-groups, the role of education, cohort differences, and the representativeness of the data are in the supplemental material.

Stark racial inequality is evident in each aspect of these figures.

First, there is a profound difference in the class distributions of Black and white Americans. Overall, Black Americans are twice as likely to be from working-class families or in working-class jobs as are white Americans, and half as likely to be from professional/managerial families or in those positions.

But it is the difference in the rates of class reproduction (the paths from left to right) that Figure 1 really makes clear. For white people, the most common outcome is reproduction of class position: the thickest path for white people from professional/managerial families is into professional/managerial positions themselves. But for Black people from professional/managerial families, the most common outcome is downward mobility into routine/manual jobs. White upward mobility is twice as common as Black upward mobility: Less than 1 out of every 10 Black

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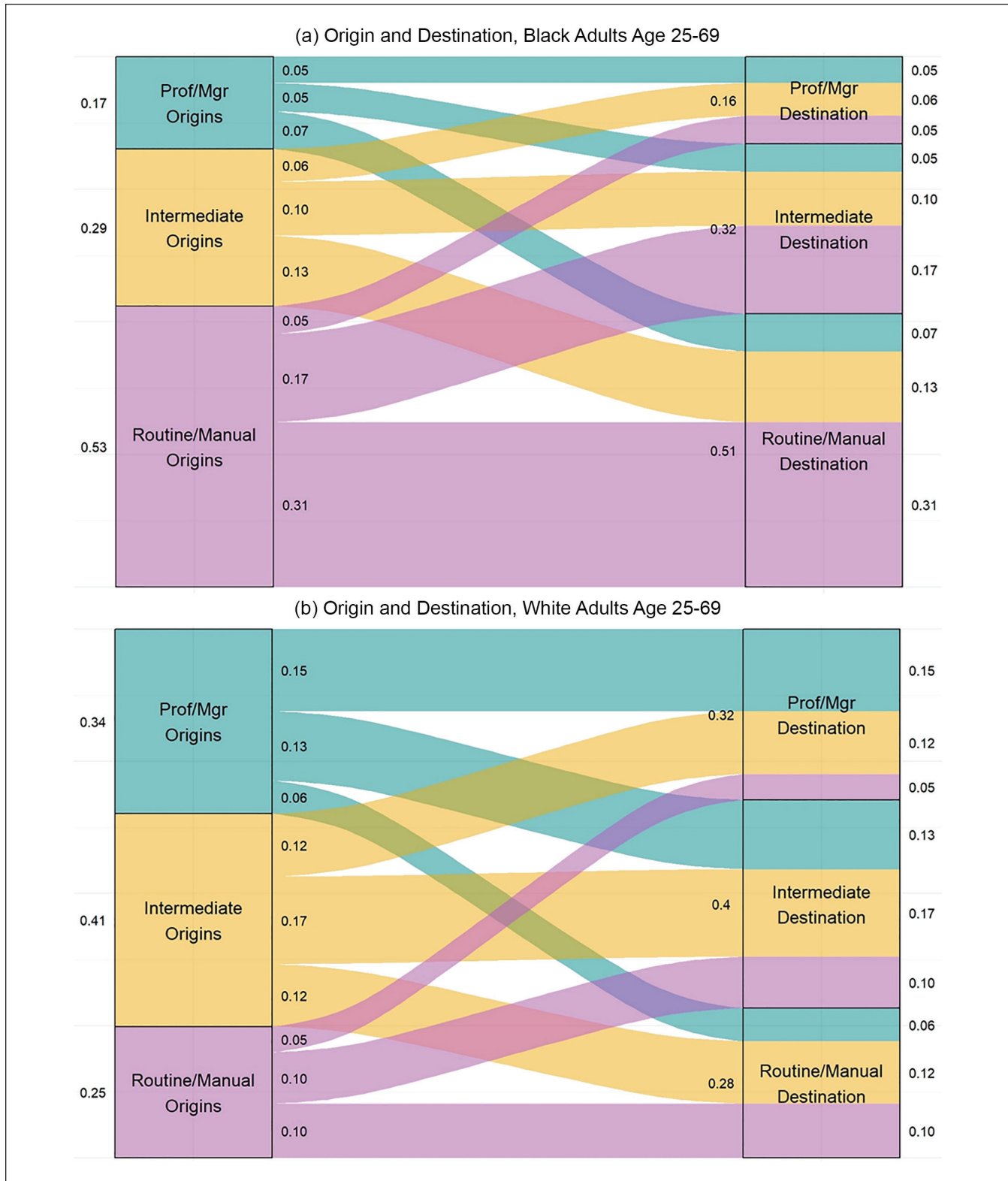


Figure 1. Origin and destination, (a) Black adults ages 25 to 69 and (b) white adults ages 25 to 69.

Source: Data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 2015 wave.

Note: (a) n = 2,745. (b) n = 4,913. All original individual respondents and their family members and descendants are included if they were between the ages of 25 and 69 in 2015, reported a current or recent occupation for themselves, and reported at least one parent's occupation. All figures are based on tables created using cross-sectional weights. Numbers to the left of each origin and destination group indicate the (weighted) proportion of respondents from each origin in each racial group; for example, the .53 on the bottom left corner of Figure 1a indicates that 53 percent of Black

Figure 1. (continued)

employed Americans are from families in routine/manual work; the .25 in the same location in Figure 1b means only a quarter of white employed Americans are from working-class origins. Looking at destinations, 32 percent of white workers have professional or managerial jobs, compared to only 16 percent of Black workers. The numbers to the right of each class origin and destination give the proportion in each flow or trajectory; for example, the .31 at the bottom right corner of Figure 1a indicates that 31 percent of Black Americans have parents in routine/manual occupations and continue to work in similar jobs as adults; the .07 near the turquoise section of routine/manual destinations indicates that 7 percent of Black people experience steep downward mobility; tracing this flow back to the left, we can see that this is the most common destination for Black people whose parents were in professional/managerial occupations.

working-class-origin people end up in professional/managerial jobs, compared to 1 out of every 5 white working-class-origin people.

A full explanation of these differences is beyond the scope of this piece, but numerous studies indicate the influence of systemic and interpersonal racism on Black Americans' trajectories, with older cohorts' having navigated state-enforced racially discriminatory laws and policies. Black Americans are more likely than whites to face police violence, incarceration, and myriad other stressors and traumas (Branch and Jackson 2020). Subtle and overt discrimination suppresses Black achievement throughout the life course, from elementary school through careers and beyond. Black families in each big class-group have on average far less wealth, have lower incomes, and live in poorer neighborhoods than whites in the same group (Oliver and Shapiro 2006; Pattillo 2013).

The research above describes a range of unjust, unfair challenges Black Americans confront and lends empirical support to the belief that as a group they must work twice as hard to get half as far.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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Daniel Laurison is an assistant professor of sociology at Swarthmore College and the associate editor of the *British Journal of Sociology*. His research is on class and inequality, politics, and political participation. He is the coauthor, with Sam Friedman, of *The Class Ceiling: Why It Pays to Be Privileged*, published in 2019 by Policy Press, and has a book due out in 2021 with Beacon Press about the role of campaign professionals in American democracy.

Dawn Dow is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Maryland, College Park; a faculty associate at the Maryland Population Research Center; the faculty director of the Critical Race Initiative; and a deputy editor for the *Journal of Marriage and Family*. Her research examines intersections of race, class, and gender within the context of the family, educational settings, the workplace, the law, and political mobilization. She is the author of *Mothering While Black: Boundaries and Burdens of Middle-Class Parenthood*, published by the University of California Press in 2019.

Carolyn Chernoff is a sociologist of everyday culture and inequality. She has published broadly on intersectional identity, social justice, and art in outlets ranging from Huffington Post and Inside Higher Ed to scholarly journals and edited collections. Most recently, she and Janise Hurtig coedited *Contested Spaces of Teaching and Learning: Practitioner Ethnographies of Adult Education in the United States* (2019, Lexington Press).