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Upward mobility

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Abstract

Upward mobility refers to the situation where one holds a higher social position than their parents did or what they held in their own previous job. Greater upward mobility in a society indicates that more people from humble origins are moving up the social hierarchy, hence greater social justice. Given this, promoting upward mobility is a highly desirable goal to pursue. Yet as social mobility takes place in a given occupational structure, upward and downward mobility is usually a zero-sum game unless there is increased 'room at the top'. People in higher positions have not only strong motivations but also superior resources to prevent downward mobility. The interplay between upward and downward mobility determines how fluid a society is. In the past two decades or so, there is a heated debate over whether social mobility in Britain is in decline. As limited data were used in previous research, an updated picture is provided here using nearly fifty years of data.

Keywords

Upward mobility, downward mobility, absolute mobility, relative mobility, Goldthorpe

Main text

Upward mobility refers to the situation where people hold a higher position in a hierarchy of privilege than their parents did or what they held in their previous job. The former is termed intergenerational mobility, and the latter is called intra-generational (or work-life) mobility. Social position can be conceptualised in terms of class, education, socio-economic status (SES), prestige, earnings, income, wealth or other socio-economic indicators. Sociological analysis of mobility usually views it as movement between social class positions, with class defined by social relations in economic life, particularly by relations within labour markets and production units. Two levels of differentiation are used in measurement. At the primary level, employers, self-employed workers and employees are distinguished. As around 90 percent of the labour force are employees in contemporary societies, a second level of differentiation further distinguishes employees according to the employment contracts they have with their employers based on difficulty of work monitoring and specificity of skills required in the execution of work tasks. In sociological research, social mobility is usually analysed in terms of movement between parental class when the respondent was around age 14 and respondent's class as indicated by his or her current or last main job. Most class analysis in Britain uses the Goldthorpe class schema or its new instantiation, the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NSSEC).

Opposite to upward mobility is downward mobility where a person is in a lower class position than that held by their family of origin or in his or her previous job. There are also situations of horizontal mobility. For example, whilst there are differences in employment security, income stability or future prospects between NSSEC Classes 3-5 as exemplified by a typist, a shopkeeper and a draftsperson, movement between these positions may entail insubstantial consequences as compared with differences between an office cleaner and a senior manager in a bank. Horizontal movement is not often analysed in mobility research. Of greater theoretical importance is long-range upward or downward mobility, namely, mobility from disadvantaged class origins into professional-managerial (salariat) destinations, or from salariat origins to disadvantaged destinations. Upward and downward mobility constitutes total mobility.

Absolute mobility is directly observable and we can measure it in percentage terms. We can compare total mobility rates and their upward or downward components including those of a long-range kind over time or across societies to assess social change. We can then ask questions such as whether mobility rates are rising or falling in a given society or whether such rates are higher in one country than in another. Is the USA exceptionally mobile? Is Britain particularly sclerotic as Olsen (1968) suggested? Sociologists also frequently talk about relative mobility, which refers to chances of people from different origin classes competing for more advantaged and avoiding more disadvantaged class positions. Relative mobility is opaque and not directly observable, but can be made visible via sophisticated techniques such as odds ratios. The number of odds ratios in a mobility table depends on the number of categories of father's and respondent's class variables used. In a square mobility table with k categories, the total set of odds ratios is $(k^2 - k)^2/4$. An odds ratio with the value of one indicates complete equality, with no association between origins and destinations. The further away an odds ratio rises above one, the more unequal are the mobility chances or the stronger the association between origins and destinations. In similar vein, the further away the odds ratios fall below one, the more equal the mobility chances or the greater social fluidity of a society.

Social mobility is a double-edged concept. Theoretically, having a highly mobile society grounded in principles of equality of opportunity and social justice is an ideal which

most modern states including both liberal-democratic and state socialist societies would profess to uphold and which is enshrined in the laws and constitutions of many countries. While the concept of “meritocracy” was initially coined as a political satire (Young 1958), the unintended consequence of the term is that it has been widely accepted by academics, policy makers and the wider society. In a meritocratic society, those with exceptional ability and diligence should take higher positions in society and be rewarded accordingly, regardless of family origins and other ascriptive factors such as gender and skin colour which are irrelevant to productivity. Social mobility, especially its upward component as an indicator of meritocracy and equal opportunity, is not only a topic of academic research but has become an endearing popular discourse like ‘motherhood and apple pie’ that people find it hard to resist (Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2007). Yet, it often goes unnoticed that mobility takes place in a given social (occupational) structure and that upward mobility tends to be accompanied by downward mobility. Except for periods with a substantial upgrading of the occupational structure such as that witnessed in Britain after the end of the Second World War with a growing room at the top allowing for a sustained period of upward mobility, downward mobility is inevitable. Upward and downward mobility is a zero-sum and yet unbalanced game. Upward mobility depends chiefly on the strong will, hard work and some kind of luck by those from humble origins who have little material support, but downward mobility is heavily resisted. Middle-class parents have not only the strong motivations but also the superior resources of social, economic and cultural kinds to help their children first to attain a good education, and then to succeed in the labour market.

There is a long tradition of social mobility research in Britain, as represented by John H. Goldthorpe (born 1935), arguably the most distinguished scholar in the field of mobility research. For around half a century, he has conducted the most systematic and influential mobility research in Britain and in comparison with other countries. The main findings are that there is a high level of absolute mobility in Britain, and that while absolute mobility rates may vary over time and between countries depending on the socio-political context and levels of economic development, relative mobility rates are fairly constant over time and across societies. Findings of such “social regularities” have led him to develop “the rational action theory” and “the relative risk theory”.

Goldthorpe’s findings were challenged, albeit inadvertently. Some economists from the London School of Economics, mainly Jo Blanden and her colleagues (2004, 2005), used the 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS) and the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS) to show a stronger association in the BCS than in the NCDS between the earnings of the respondents in their early thirties and their family incomes when they were aged 16. They also used the data with the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) for those born in the late 1970s to study the relationship between family incomes and respondents’ degree attainment at age 23. They found that the gaps in degree attainment between children from the top and the bottom quintile families increased from 14 percentage points for the NCDS to 37 points for the BHPS cohorts. These, they claimed, provided robust evidence that social mobility in Britain was in decline. The findings were widely reported in the media claiming that mobility in Britain had “come to a halt”, and these then fed into the main political parties in their policy documents. Yet, there is a crucial weakness in the economists’ challenge: the poor quality of the NCDS family income data provides very weak associations between parental incomes and respondents’ own earnings, undermining their comparisons with the BCS and BHPS data and the claims on mobility trends. Erikson and Goldthorpe (2010) used the same data as the economists had used and compared the economic and the class approaches via the re-iterative adjustment method proposed by Mosteller (1968). They found that the class

approach gave a better representation of the social advantages and disadvantages, particularly with regard to the NCDS data.

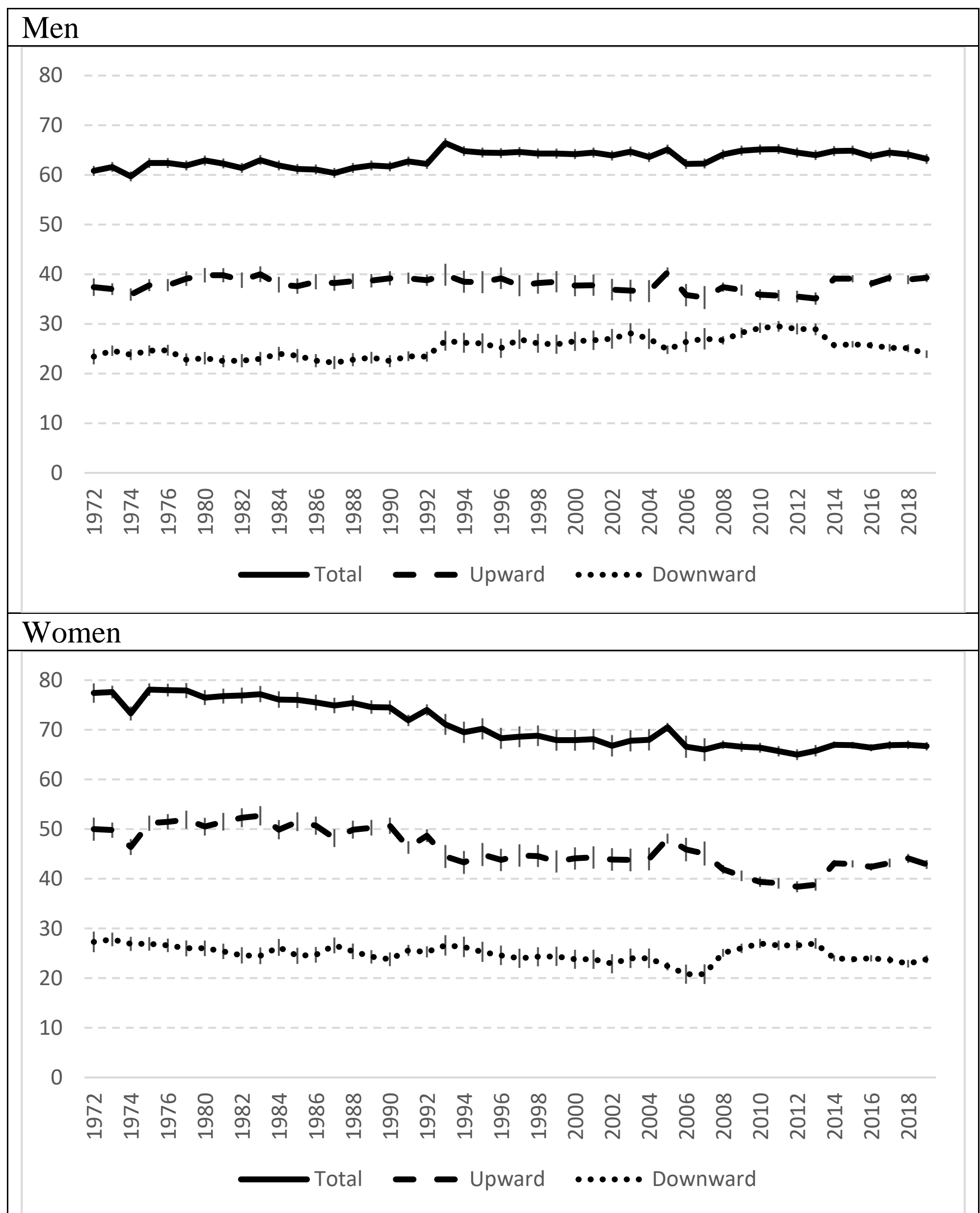
Goldthorpe holds that the economists' research results from a lack of understanding of sociological analysis with regard to the distinction between absolute and relative mobility, and between upward and downward mobility. The quintile approach 'relativises' the whole analysis from the start, constraining upward and downward mobility rates to be equal. Goldthorpe (2013, 2016) illustrated these important differentiations. He first used the Oxford Mobility Survey of 1972 for men and showed that absolute mobility rates were high, that upward mobility rates were rising, and that downward mobility rates were falling from the 1908-17 to the 1938-47 birth-groups. He then used data from the cohort studies and showed that whilst the total mobility rates remained stable and high, upward mobility rates had levelled off and downward mobility rates were rising from the 1946 to the 1970 cohorts at the respondents' age 38.

Goldthorpe also pointed out that the information contained in the cohort studies was not about the whole population but only for the cohorts within the population and that, as the datasets were only twelve years apart, this gives rather limited basis for claims about mobility trends. This limitation applies to all research using the cohort data, including Goldthorpe's own research. In order to ameliorate the situation, Figure 1 shows results from a harmonised dataset using national representative surveys for nearly 50 consecutive years, which provides the most comprehensive coverage of mobility trends in Britain (Li, 2021). The data cover total, upward and downward mobility rates for economically active men and women aged 25-59 from 1972 to 2019 annually except for 1977 and 1978. A five-class schema is used for fathers and respondents: professional-managerial salariat, routine non-manual, own-account, foremen and skilled manual, and unskilled manual.

Figure 1 shows the patterns and trends of upward and downward mobility rates in Britain over the five decades. In sum, men's upward mobility was constant at around 40 percent and women's upward mobility was converging with that of men: it had fallen from around 50 percent at the beginning of the period to around 40 percent at the end of the period. For both sexes, there was more upward than downward mobility throughout the period covered.

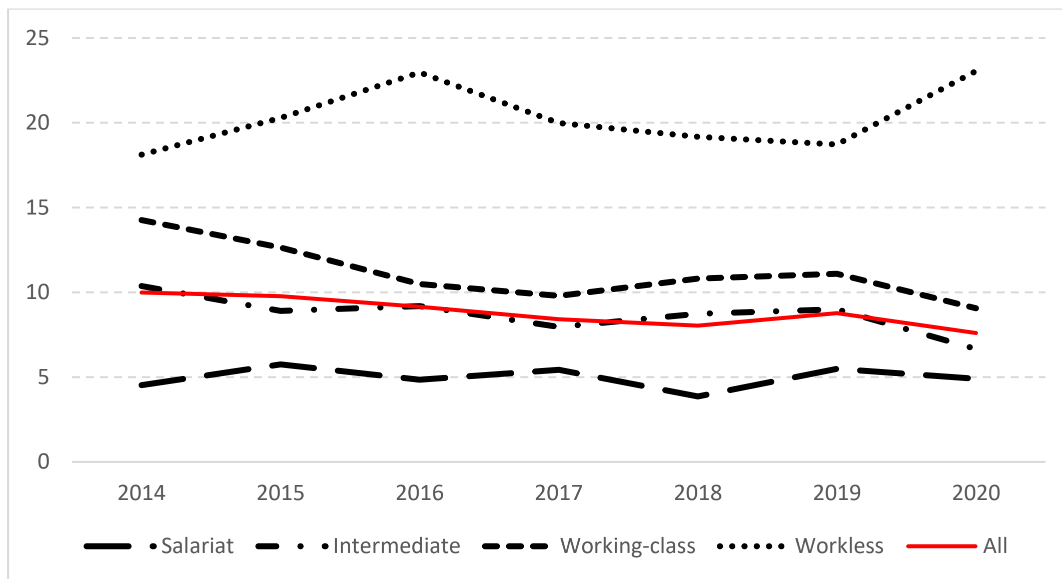
It is difficult to predict future trends as we are in the midst of Covid-19 which may have a serious impact on the socio-economic lives of the population (Heath and Li, 2021). There are signs that the pandemic is hitting the most disadvantaged members of the society the hardest. Figure 2 shows that for young people aged 16-20 in the UK, the probability of being NEET (not in employment, education or training) is increasing for those from workless families from 2019 to 2020 even though the overall situation has been improving in the last seven years.

Figure 1 Absolute mobility for men and women aged 25-59 in Great Britain



Source: The General Household Survey (1972-1992), the BHPS (1991-2008), the Understanding Society (2009-2016); the Labour Force Survey (2014-2019).

Figure 2 The probability of being NEET for people aged 16-20 by family of origin in the UK



Source: The Labour Force Survey (2014-2020).

See also

Social mobility [wbeos0909]; downward mobility [wbeos0715]; absolute mobility []; relative mobility []; Goldthorpe []

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