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Climbing the Velvet Drainpipe: Class Background and Career Progression within the UK Civil Service

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Abstract

Although the theory of representative bureaucracy originates from concerns about the class composition of the public sector workforce, questions of class background have been notably absent in subsequent scholarship. In this article, I take advantage of new data on the class backgrounds of UK civil servants (*N* = 308, 566) to, first, explore descriptively how class shapes the composition of the civil service, both vertically in terms of occupational grade and horizontally in terms of department, location, and profession. I show that those from working-class backgrounds are not only under-represented in the Civil Service as a whole but also this skew is particularly acute in propulsive departments like the Treasury, locations like London and in the Senior Civil Service. This initial descriptive analysis then acts as the staging point for the central qualitative component of my analysis, drawing on 104 in-depth interviews across 4 case-study departments. Here, I identify three unwritten rules of career progression that tend to act as barriers for those from working-class backgrounds; access to accelerator jobs; organizational ambiguity in promotion processes; and sorting into operational (versus policy) tracks that have progression bottlenecks. This analysis highlights the need for more work on class representation, as well as underlining how representative bureaucracy may be impeded by patterns of horizontal as well as vertical segregation, particularly in work areas that have an outsized influence on policy design.

Introduction

The theory of representative bureaucracy is guided by the basic principle that the public is better served by, and more trusting of, a public workforce that reflects the demographic coordinates of its constituent population (Long 1952; Mosher 1968). In this vein, a range of studies have documented a strong relationship between representation and improved outcomes for marginalized groups in a range of public policy areas (Keiser et al. 2002; Sowa and Selden 2003). To date, the focus of this empirical work has been representation along the dimensions of race, ethnicity, and gender (Kennedy 2014; Selden 1997; Wilkins and Keiser 2006), with some additional work examining inequalities associated with LGBTQ (Lewis and Pitts 2011).

In contrast, we know very little about how those from different class backgrounds are represented in the staff profile of government bureaucracies, or indeed the wider public sector (for a rare exception on US school teachers, see Vinopal 2020). This is surprising because concerns about social mobility were actually central to the original articulation of Kingsley's (1944) theory of representative bureaucracy, and class background was a key empirical focus of early studies into the composition of the state bureaucracy in the United States, United Kingdom, Denmark, France, India, and Turkey (Halsey and Crewe 1969; Long 1952; Meier 1975; Subramaniam 1967). Indeed, a steady stream of sociological literature has demonstrated that, in most high-income countries, class background tends to cast a long shadow over "who gets in" and "who gets on" in the kind of professional and managerial occupations that characterize much public sector work. Yet specific research on the class composition of civil servants is at best outdated and at worst non-existent. Here, despite many discussing class as an important dimension of representative bureaucracy (Kennedy 2014), efforts have been hampered by the fact that class background has only recently emerged on diversity and inclusion agendas, and relevant workforce data is not routinely collected.

In this paper, I attempt to address this gap by asking two key research questions. First, how does class background shape the composition of the UK civil service, both vertically in terms of occupational grade and horizontally in terms of department, location, and profession? And, second, what is the lived experience of career progression in the UK civil service and how does it vary by class background?

Drawing on privileged access to new class background data collected in the 2019 UK Civil Service People Survey (CSPS), my results first show that those from advantaged class backgrounds are not only over-represented in the Civil Service as a whole, but that this skew is particularly acute in work locations such as London and departments like Treasury (that tend to accelerate career progression), and in the top occupational grade of the Senior Civil Service (SCS).

Second, I draw on 104 in-depth interviews to explore the drivers of this progression effect. Here, my analysis suggests that three unwritten rules act as barriers for those from working-class backgrounds and enablers for those from advantaged backgrounds; access to accelerator roles; how to negotiate opportunities in moments of organizational ambiguity; and sorting into policy (versus operational) career tracks that fast-track progression.

This analysis has three important implications for scholars of representative bureaucracy. Most obviously, it underlines

the need for more work on class representation beyond the United Kingdom. It also suggests the importance of a focus on the organizational barriers that impede equal representation in public bureaucracies more generally, especially considering existing literature tends to connect greater demographic diversity with more inclusive policy design. Finally, it also indicates the need for scholars to pay more attention to how representative bureaucracy is impeded by patterns of horizontal segregation within state workforces, particularly in departments or work areas that have an outsized influence on policy design.

Social Class and Representative Bureaucracy

Governments across the world are increasingly concerned that public sector workforces adequately represent the citizens they serve (Pitts and Wise 2010). Two principles tend to undergird these commitments to diversity and inclusion; first, the belief that increasing "passive" demographic diversity will translate into more "active" representation of marginalized groups, particularly if this is achieved among policymakers and more generally those in positions of power; and second, that positioning the state—as an employer—as the exemplar of the meritocratic ideal is central to public confidence in the legitimacy and trustworthiness of government.

The first of these, rooted in the theory of representative bureaucracy, is guided by the notion that the effective operation of government bureaucracies' rests, in significant part, on the discretionary power imparted to those responsible for formulating and shaping public policies (Long 1952; Mosher 1968). One way to ensure that such bureaucratic discretion is considered legitimate and responsible, then, is to make sure bureaucrats are representative of the citizens they serve in terms of a range of demographic characteristics. Through this mechanism, the power of the state bureaucracy can be better reconciled with the principle of democracy (Kingsley 1944).

Many proponents argue, further, that greater demographic diversity, what they call "passive" or "descriptive" representation, tends to have an "active" impact on the way certain traditionally marginalized groups are represented in public policymaking (Sowa and Selden 2003). Such translation from passive to active representation occurs, it is theorized, because bureaucrats share core attitudes, values, and beliefs with the specific social groups from which they are drawn and therefore are more likely to "press for the interests and desires of those [they] are presumed to represent" (Mosher 1968, 11). In other words, bureaucrats respond more effectively and pro-actively to citizens which match their demographic characteristics, and this tends to translate into policy design that better reflects the needs of a diverse range of citizens (Bradbury and Kellough 2011). Although literature on the relationship between passive and active representation is somewhat contested (see Wilkins and Williams 2008), a number of studies have found positive associations between the presence of women and ethnic minority bureaucrats and policy outcomes that are more responsive to the needs of those social groups in a range of contexts, including education, law enforcement, and welfare provision (Andrew and Ashworth 2015; Meier 1993; Selden 1997; Wilkins and Keiser 2006).

Others focus this interest in representation more specifically on those in positions of power. In terms of the state bureaucracy, this means both those at the top of organizational hierarchies but also those situated more horizontally in more prestigious or influential work areas, such as policy professionals or those working in central government departments. This kind of segregation also has clear implications for debates about representative bureaucracy, as such individuals tend to have an outsized influence on policymaking—both directly via policy design and indirectly via the provision of information and advice to politicians (Baekgaard and George 2018). Indeed, some have argued that for passive forms of representative bureaucracy to translate into more active forms of representation, there needs to be a "critical mass" of demographically diverse bureaucrats in *senior* positions (Meier 1993).

The second principle that underpins state commitments to diversity and inclusion relate to wider societal commitments to merit-based career progression. Here, the interest, then, is not so much the demographic representativeness of the state workforce but the idea that the state, as an employer, should act as an exemplar of a wider meritocratic ideal (Selden and Selden 2001). This is seen as pivotal in ensuring the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of its' citizens; both in terms of their overall trust of the government as well as their perceptions of fairness in everyday encounters with the state or civil servants (Vinopal 2020).

Existing empirical work on representative bureaucracy has largely focused on the underrepresentation of women and racial and ethnic minorities, with some additional focus on the LGBTQ community (Lewis and Pitts 2011). The social class backgrounds of public servants, on the other hand, have remained relatively unexplored—particularly in recent decades.

This gap is remarkable for three reasons. First, it exists despite the fact that the theory of representative bureaucracy actually originates from concerns about demographic skews in the social class composition of the UK civil service (Kingsley 1944). Here, Kingsley called for the "liberalization of social class selection for the English bureaucracy," due to the "dominance of social, political, and economic elites within the British bureaucracy" which he claimed resulted in public policy that did not meet the needs of all social classes.

Indeed, following Kingsley, there was a series of studies looking at the class backgrounds of civil servants—both in the United Kingdom (Boyd 1973; Guttsman 1974; Halsey and Crewe 1969; Kelsall 1955) but also in the United States (Long 1952) and comparatively in France, Denmark, India, and Turkey (Subramaniam 1967). This work largely provided empirical confirmation for Kingsley's concerns, demonstrating that 80%–95% of higher senior Civil Servants across all of these countries were from professional and managerial backgrounds (in terms of fathers occupation) and therefore profoundly unrepresentative of their national populations. However, there were some significant between-country differences. Notably, Meier (1975) found that the US civil service was broadly representative of the US population in terms of parental occupation, whereas Subramaniam (1967) found Indian civil servants to be particularly unrepresentative. Other studies showed significant change over time. In the United Kingdom, for example, where this literature was particularly extensive, several studies documented a substantial opening up over time; while in 1929 only 7% of Senior Civil Servants came from working-class backgrounds, this

rose to 17% by 1967 (Boyd 1973; Halsey and Crewe 1969). Yet, both in Britain and beyond this literature came to a curious and abrupt end in the mid 1970s.

The resulting gap is also conspicuous considering the nature of certain types of civil service work, which it is possible to connect to literature on social class. It is widely argued in the public administration literature, for example, that because public organizations operate in a complex political environment characterized by widely disparate and often conflicting interests, they are subject to a heightened degree of organizational "goal ambiguity"—defined "as the extent to which an organizational goal or set of goals allows leeway for interpretation" (Chun and Rainey 2005). This, in turn, is thought to cascade down to the job level in terms of a greater degree of "role ambiguity"—defined in terms of a lack of clarity about what kind of behaviors are appropriate and functional (Rizzo et al. 1970) and where individuals "lack... information concerning the proper definition of the job, its goals, and the permissible means for implementing them" (Kahn et al. 1964, 94).

In the context of the UK civil service, this role ambiguity is arguably particularly salient within the policy profession. Here, in particular, the knowledge that is required is often "tacit" in the sense that practitioners find it hard to identify, communicate, and codify (Kei Law 2014). Instead, it is often rooted in subjective experience, insight, and intuition. Indeed, in a political environment where the evidence is rarely conclusive enough to eliminate uncertainty, persuasion and "arguments" (not "facts") are often the tools used by policy professionals to address ambiguity (Cairney 2016). Moreover, the quality of policy work is difficult to externally evaluate (Alvesson 2001). The success of the "final product"—in terms of policy proposals—is very hard to foretell, and therefore the competence of the policy professional is inherently uncertain.

It is here that the potential connection with social class background comes into focus. In role-ambiguous work areas, like policy work, where expertise is uncertain and where interlocutors find it difficult to judge the relative or absolute quality of work, it may be that what is often used to plug this uncertainty is the "embodied cultural capital" associated with a privileged class background, that is, durable modes of self-presentation and comportment imprinted in early childhood such as accent, pronunciation, vocabulary, posture, and taste (Bourdieu 1984). This is certainly the argument of some sociologists who have found that those from advantaged class backgrounds tend to disproportionately sort into, and progress within, other role-ambiguous work areas, such as television commissioning, financial advisory, and corporate law (Ashley and Empson 2013; Friedman and Laurison 2019).

Finally, the gap in our understanding of class in the civil service is also surprising considering the voluminous social-scientific literature documenting the unequal opportunity chances that exist more generally in modern capitalist societies—usually measured by comparing the absolute and relative rates of social mobility between a person's class of origin (in terms of parental occupation) and their class of destination (in terms of own occupation) within a set of socio-economic classes (Goldthorpe et al. 1980). This work has consistently shown that those from advantaged backgrounds have a much higher chance of entering the kind of professional and managerial employment that characterizes work in the upper echelons of state bureaucracies. Moreover,

recent literature has extended this beyond occupational access to look at career progression. Here, studies in Britain but also more widely in the United States, France, Norway, and Sweden, have all shown that even when those from working-class backgrounds successfully enter professional and managerial occupations they face a significant "class-origin pay gap" (Hallsten 2013; Laurison and Friedman 2016; Torche 2011). So far, the focus in explaining this, both in academic and policy circles, has been the "supply-side" of such inequality—how the careers of those from privileged class backgrounds are propelled by the inherited economic and social capital they bring into the workplace, or the overconfident, narcissistic and entitled self-beliefs they exhibit once there (Cote et al. 2021; Hansen and Toft 2021).

Yet we know much less about the "demand-side" of class pay gaps—how trajectories are also mediated by the particular organizational contexts in which a person's career takes place. Indeed, class background remains underexplored within organizational studies, particularly compared to work on gender and racial inequality. As recently highlighted by Amis et al. (2020, 216), more work is needed to understand how class background shapes career *progression* in different organizational settings, and more broadly "how the structural aspects of organisations influence patterns of promotion."

In this paper, I begin to fill these gaps in representative bureaucracy and organizational studies scholarship. First, I conduct a scoping analysis of the class backgrounds of UK civil servants to ask—how does class background shape the composition of the UK civil service, both vertically in terms of occupational grade and horizontally in terms of department, location, and profession? This initial descriptive analysis then acts as the staging point for the central qualitative component of my analysis. Here, I draw on interviews to inductively explore the lived experience of career progression in the UK civil service, and in particular probe whether those from different class backgrounds face distinct barriers or enablers in their career progression.

Locating Class Background: The Case of the UK Civil Service

Before I move to the analysis, it is important to outline more fully my empirical case. The UK Civil Service represents, I argue, a particularly rich site from which to study questions of representation and inclusion. There are two reasons for this. First, it has a distinctly mixed reputation, with some scholars arguing that it is a "model employer" (Brimelow 1981) and others that it represents the quintessential purveyor of a white male exclusionary culture (Watson 1994).

Certainly, The UK Civil Service has made significant progression in terms of gender and ethnic-minority representation. The percentage of Senior Civil Servants who are women, for example, has grown steadily from 17% in 1996 to 46% in 2020, and the representation of Black and minority ethnic SCS has grown from 4% to 9% from 2006 to 2020 (Civil Service Statistics 2019, 2020). Yet despite these encouraging trends, qualitative research has continued to emphasize concerns about the culture of the UK civil service (Wyatt and Sylvester 2015) and particularly it's normalization of what Puwar (2004) calls the "somatic norm" of the "white, male, upper/middle class body" (2001, 652). Puwar argues that this somatic norm is so naturalized in the bodies of middle-aged,

middle-class, white men, and so closely intertwined with the idealized conception of what it is to be a neutral, rational, objective civil servant, that it acts to deny any conception of this subject as classed, gendered and—particularly—raced (Puwar 2004, 656).

On class background, however, the contemporary representativeness of the UK Civil Service has, until now, remained unknown. Historically, reaching the top of the Civil Service was certainly tied to class background. In the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, for example, several studies documented how the higher Civil Service was dominated by those from private schools and professional and managerial backgrounds (Boyd 1973; Guttsman 1974; Kelsall 1955). Indeed, concerns about social mobility have been central to successive reforms to the UK civil service. For example, The Civil Service Commission, which grew out of the 1854 Northcote-Trevelyan report, and in many ways represents the birth of the modern UK civil service, had social mobility at its core. The Commission was established to oversee recruitment to the Civil Service on the basis of fair and open competitive examinations, rather than via patronage as had been the case previously (Hennessy 1981). A series of reforms introduced after World War 2 also explicitly aimed to open up the route to the top for those from working-class backgrounds. The most prominent of these was the establishment of the Civil Service Selection Board (CSSB) in 1945 which aimed to provide a meritocratic process for selecting senior administrators to the Civil Service Fast Stream—the accelerated graduate development program. It was further reformed in 1983 after an internal review recommended that there should be greater emphasis on attracting candidates from a wider social pool (Hennessy 1981, 512–20).

These reforms were partially successful. As noted above, between 1929 and 1967, the proportion of Senior Civil Servants from working-class backgrounds more than doubled (Halsey and Crewe 1969). Yet, we know little about whether this trend has continued to the present day. Although the Civil Service has retained a strong rhetorical commitment to increasing social mobility (Hancock 2016), no data has been collected on the class backgrounds of Civil Servants since 1967.

Data, Methods, Conceptualization, and Analytic Approach

This research followed a fixed sequential design that utilized a combination of deductive and inductive methods (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018). More specifically, it constituted a "quanti–qualitative (explanatory) design" (Mele and Belardinelli 2019), where I began with an initial descriptive, and significantly restricted,[1] quantitative analysis of how class background impacts the composition of the civil service, both vertically in terms of occupational grade and horizontally in terms of department, location, and profession. I then used this initial deductive analysis as the contextual staging point for a second and more central qualitative component that aimed to

inductively explore civil servants' lived experience of career progression.

Analysis thus took place in two stages. First, I was given privileged access to the 2019 CSPS Data, which for the first-time piloted questions on the class backgrounds of staff. This data include 308,556 respondents (approx. 67% of all civil servants)—the largest organizational data set on class-origin diversity in the world.

The CSPS measures the class backgrounds of civil servants by asking the occupation of the respondent's main income-earning parent when they were 14. The survey also asks two further questions aimed at getting a broader understanding of respondents' socio-economic background: type of secondary school attended and parental educational attainment.

In this article, I focus primarily on the parental occupation question for three reasons. First, this provides a symmetrical view of civil servants' social mobility (comparing their own occupation to that of their parents). Second, it allows me to benchmark results against wider labor force and historical Civil Service data.

Third, and most importantly, I use parental occupation because this is widely considered to be the best single proxy for social class background. Here, I draw on the Neo-Weberian theoretical framing associated with the sociologist John Goldthorpe (Goldthorpe et al. 1980), where class positions are determined by the social relations in which individuals are involved in their economic lives—that is, in labor markets and workplaces; or, in short, by their employment relations. This understanding of class (based on the measurement of parental occupation for class background and own occupation for class destination) informs the main socio-economic classification in use in British official statistics, the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC), and the Erikson Goldthorpe Portacero (EGP) occupational schema, used extensively by class scholars throughout the rest of the world (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). These social class schemas differentiate occupational positions within labor markets in terms of both their income, economic security, and prospects of economic advancement, and their "work situation" (i.e., position in systems of authority and degree of autonomy at work).

Based on answers to the parental occupation question, I group civil servants' class backgrounds into the simplified three-class schema of the NS-SEC. Example occupations in each of these three NS-SEC classes are included in Appendix Part F. I refer to those whose parents did "professional or managerial" occupations (i.e., those on a service contract) as coming from "privileged," "advantaged," or "professional/managerial" class backgrounds. Those whose parents did "intermediate" occupations, I refer to as "short-range socially mobile." Finally, I refer to those whose parents did "routine, semi-routine, lower supervisory and technical" occupations (i.e., on a labor contract) or whose parents "never worked," as coming from "working class" or "disadvantaged" backgrounds.

The second stage of the project involved conducting 104 in-depth semi-structured interviews with civil servants at Grade 7 and above in four departments—HM Treasury (HMT), HM Revenues and Customs (HMRC), Cabinet Office (CO), and Department for Transport (DfT).

Departments were chosen to reflect variations in the class-origin diversity, grade makeup, and occupational specialization across the Civil Service. Notably, as shown in Figure 4,

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[1]Access to the CSPS data was partially restricted due to what Civil Service gatekeeper Jordon Zaman called "privacy and operational concerns," and therefore the quantitative data analysis I was able to undertake consisted of largely basic descriptive analysis. Requests to undertake more detailed or more sophisticated analysis, such as reporting results by age cohort, or conducting regression analysis, were not granted.

HMT is the most class-exclusive department, HMRC is one of the most diverse departments, and DfT and CO sit near the Civil Service average.

It is important to clarify how I conceptualize career progression in this study. Here, I refer specifically to participants' position in, and progression through, civil service "grades," which can be categorized into five categories of seniority; Administrative officer/administrative assistant (AO/AA); Executive officer (EO); Senior executive officer/ higher executive officer (SEO/ HEO); Grades 6 and 7; and the SCS. Within the SCS, there are five further levels of seniority; Deputy Director (DD); Director; Director General; Permanent Secretary; and Cabinet Secretary. I chose to concentrate interviews on Grade 7 and above to keep a focus on progression into and within the SCS, and to keep the scope of the study manageable. The grade structure of the UK civil service is explained in more depth in Appendix Part G.

To recruit interviewees, articles asking for volunteers were placed on each of the four participating departments' intranet page (see Appendix Part D for the advert text). Six hundred and fifty nine civil servants from Grade 7 and above volunteered to be interviewed and from this a purposive interview sample of 104 was constructed that included at least 25 interviews from each department and was broadly representative of each department in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, and region of origin. The demographic contours of the interview sample are included in table 1.

Interviews were conducted online between June and October 2020, and were structured across three sections (the interview topic guide is included in Appendix C). I began with a set of questions that probed interviewees' class background in more depth. Second, I asked interviewees to describe their career trajectories to date, allowing them to narrate the key moments and crucial junctures in their own words. Third, I asked a number of more specific questions about their career, the culture of the Civil Service, and whether they feel their career has been held back in any way.

Analysis of the interview data involved a two-step process of coding (Charmaz 2006, 47–60). Initial coding revolved around reading each transcript in its entirety while also listening to the audio recording, noting speech patterns, and non-verbal expressions (e.g., sighs, laughter, crying), and conducting line-by-line coding whereby codes were given to every segment of the data. The goal here was to stay as open as possible to all analytical directions and stay close to the data. One strategy I used frequently to realize this goal were "in-vivo codes" (Charmaz 2006, 55), such as "you don't want to be a sycophant" or "people have to earn their stripes." These codes not only were phrased used by respondents but also acted to neatly sum a particular opinion or perspective they held. This helped preserve interviewees' meanings of their views, rather than imposing my own labels. Initial coding was then followed by a second step of more focused coding. This involved finding the most significant or frequently occurring initial codes in order to identify the most salient categories in the data. Focused codes often synthesized initial codes and organized them using more conceptual terms (see Appendix Part D for an example of the two-step coding process). Although word-length limitations restrict the depth of the qualitative data I can include in this article, further "exemplar quotes" from the higher-order codes and themes of my analysis can be found in Part E of the Appendix.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Interviewees

Category	Number of interviews
Gender	
Men	50
Women	54
Class background	
Professional/Managerial	46
Intermediate	17
Working-class	41
Occupational grade	
Grade 7	27
Grade 6	38
Deputy Director	22
Director	12
Director-General	5
Permanent Secretary	0
Work location	
East Midlands	3
East of England	2
London	39
North East England	6
North West England	8
South East England	12
South West England	4
West Midlands	7
Yorkshire and the Humber	10
Scotland	7
Wales	4
Northern Ireland	2
Race and ethnicity	
Asian	10
Black	13
Mixed	4

Results

How Representative is the UK Civil Service in Terms of Class Background?

I begin by examining the class composition of the UK Civil Service. Figure 1 shows that over half of Civil Service staff are from advantaged professional/managerial backgrounds, whereas a third are from working class backgrounds. To place this in a comparative context, Figure 1 also shows the class-origin makeup of the UK workforce, the public sector and those working in other professional and managerial occupations—drawing on data from the 2019 ONS Labour Force Survey.

This shows that the Civil Service has significantly more staff from privileged class backgrounds than any of these comparison groups. For example, 54% of civil servants are from professional/managerial backgrounds compared to 37% in the national workforce. The proportion of civil servants from working class backgrounds is also significantly lower than in the UK workforce.

Considering the size and complexity of the Civil Service, it is important to look at how its class composition varies
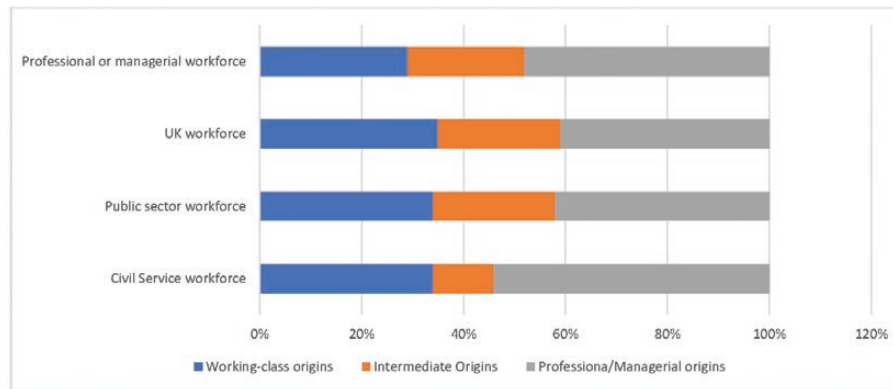
Figure 1 Parental Occupation of Civil Servants, UK Workforce, Professional/Managerial Occupations and Public Sector.

according to region, department, and grade.[2] This more fine-grained analysis is telling. Figure 2 shows, for example, that civil servants from disadvantaged backgrounds are particularly under-represented in London, only 22% are from working class backgrounds compared to 48% in the northeast. There is also a "north-south divide" here, with the three most exclusive work regions located in the south of England and two of the three most open areas located in the north of England.

Next, Figure 3 looks at variations by department. Class-origin diversity is even more marked here; HMT, the (now defunct) Department for Exiting the European Union (DEXEU), and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) have a very low representation of staff from working-class backgrounds—around 1 in 10—whereas in HMRC and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) their representation is similar to those from advantaged backgrounds.

From Getting in to Getting On

The findings so far indicate that those that enter the civil service are not representative of the UK workforce in terms of class background. Yet, there is a danger of reducing social mobility to this issue of access. It assumes that the impact of class background finishes at the point of occupational entry. Yet the reality, outlined in Figure 4, is that the Civil Service gets consistently more exclusive at every grade; at the lowest grade, Administrative stant/Officer (AA/AO), 45% of staff are from advantaged backgrounds, but this rises to 72% among senior civil servants (SCS).

A revealing, albeit limited, historical comparison can be made here, drawing on the last analysis of the class backgrounds of Senior Civil Servants, carried out by Halsey and Crewe (1969) This shows that the proportion of senior civil servants from advantaged backgrounds is higher today than in 1967—when 69% of the SCS were from professional/managerial class backgrounds, 14% were from intermediate backgrounds and 17% were from working-class backgrounds. Changes since 1967 in both the occupational structure of the United Kingdom and the way occupational classes are measured mean this should not be considered a

direct comparison.[3] However, this data nonetheless indicates that the overall class backgrounds of the SCS, and, therefore, the likely class-cultural feel and atmosphere of the SCS, has remained stable over time.

The class progression gap in Figure 4 can also be connected to horizontal segregation by department and location explored in Figures 2 and 3. For example, there are far more top-grade posts located in London than elsewhere; while 20% of civil servants work in London, the capital is home to 66% of all SCS, and 45% of all G6/G7 staff, the grades just below SCS. In contrast, 12% of civil servants are based in the north-west, but it houses only 3% of SCS and 7% of G6/G7 staff servants (Civil Service Statistics 2019). Similarly, less diverse departments such as DCMS and Treasury tend to employ more people at senior grades, whereas those working in departments like DWP and HMRC tend to be mainly in junior roles and outside the capital. In understanding who gets ahead in the Civil Service, then, it is important to consider the propulsive power of being in London and working in prestigious "central" departments.

Finally, it is also worth noting that this progression gradient is also clear when analyzing other socio-economic background measures in the CSPS—such as type of secondary school attended and parental educational attainment. For example, Figure 5 shows the schooling type of civil servants at different grades. The major divide in UK schooling type, in terms of class background, separates the 7% of children who are privately educated during the ages of 11–16 and all other children who are educated in the state sector. Figure 5 shows that while only 4% of AA/AO staff were privately educated, the figure among SCS is 25%. Similarly, Figure 6 shows that while only 25% of AA/AO staff have a parent

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[2]Although it is not the focus of this article, I have also carried out analysis of how civil service class composition varies by gender and ethnicity. Analysis by gender is detailed in Friedman (2022), and results by ethnicity are explored in Appendix Part A.
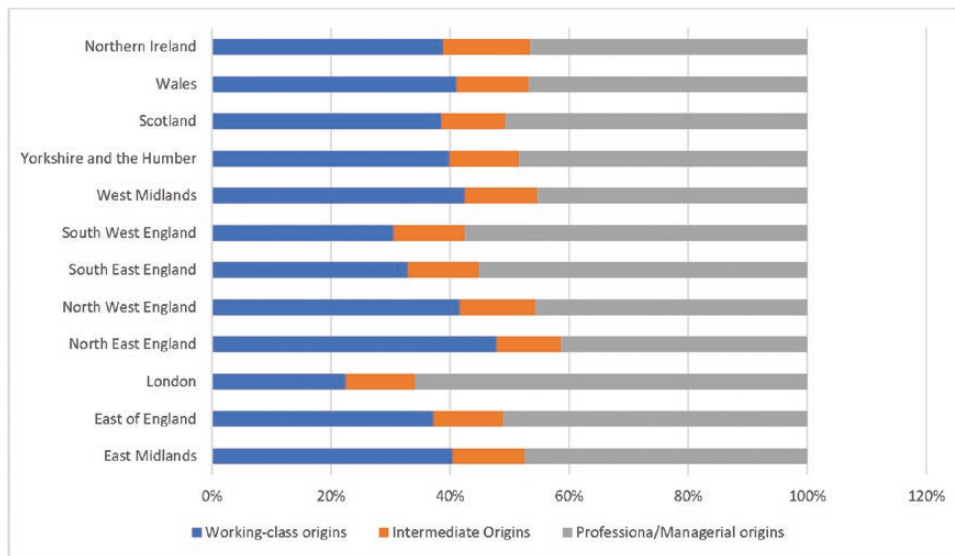
[3]In the last 50 years, there has been a widespread expansion of professional and managerial jobs in the United Kingdom and a contraction of manual working-class jobs. This means that the socioeconomic origins of those in the UK population in 1967, what might be termed the recruiting "pool" for the SCS, included a much higher percentage of those from working-class origins. Indeed, if we estimate the relative rates of mobility into the SCS using occupational class data collected 15–20 years before the Kelsall data (1955) and this data (2002), it seems that the odds ratio of reaching the SCS from professional/ managerial backgrounds as opposed to non-professional/ managerial backgrounds has fallen by ~50%, suggesting that the chances of reaching the SCS for a child born into a non-professional family have increased. Nonetheless, Halsey and Crewe's analysis does indicates that the overall class composition of the SCS has remained broadly stable over time, even if this does not necessarily mean it is as closed or exclusive in terms of recruitment.

Figure 2 Work Location of Civil Servants by Parental Occupation.
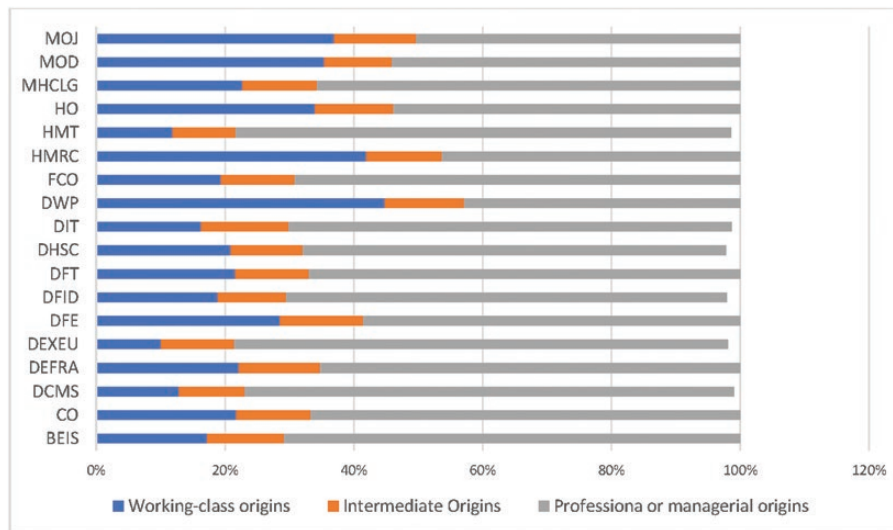

Figure 3 Civil Service Departments by parental occupation.

educated at degree level, this rises to 51% among the SCS (nationally, 33% of people have a parent educated to degree level). Whatever way you measure it, then, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are severely under-represented at the upper echelons of the Civil Service.

From Ceiling to Labyrinth

[Figures 4](#)–6 indicate that the Civil Service becomes more socio-economically exclusive as staff progress through the grades. Significantly, however, this data does not detect a "class ceiling"; even within the SCS nearly one in five are from working-class backgrounds. Ceiling metaphors imply an absolute barrier at the top of organizations, while at the same time suggesting that access to mid-level positions is fair and open. This does not accurately describe the profile of the Civil Service. Not only is there a class background gap at nearly every grade but more generally, a single, unvarying obstacle fails to convey the variety and complexity of challenges that

those from working-class backgrounds face in their career progression.

Instead, drawing on the feminist conceptual framing provided by [Eagly and Carli (2007)](#), my analysis suggests that a more useful metaphor is the idea of the Civil Service as a labyrinth. This captures both the tremendous size and complexity of the Civil Service, where *all* individuals must navigate an elaborate maze to reach the prize at the centre: a leadership position ([Wyatt and Silvester 2015](#)). And like a labyrinth, participants explained that progression within the Civil Service is not simple or direct. Although there is a viable route to the centre, this route is hidden to most. There is thus a formal set of rules around progression and an informal or unwritten set of guidelines:

> Very little of it is explicit, there's a lot of implicit stuff. So, obviously there's formal processes and, you know, the Civil Service bureaucracy is your friend on social mobility to some extent. Like there's a bigger paper trail on promotions
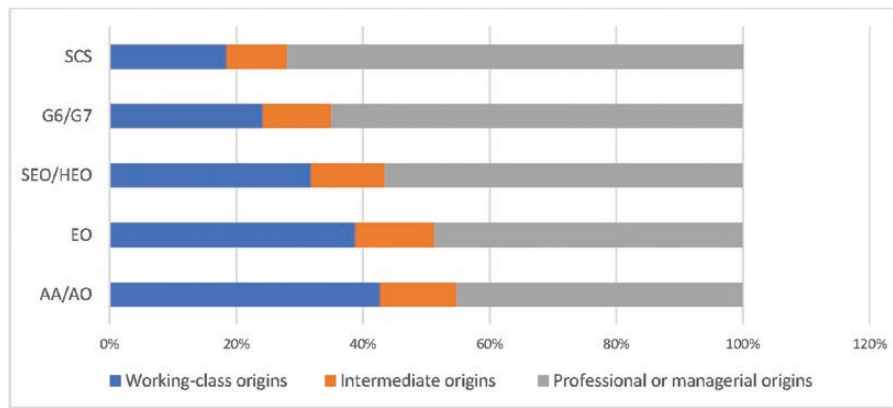
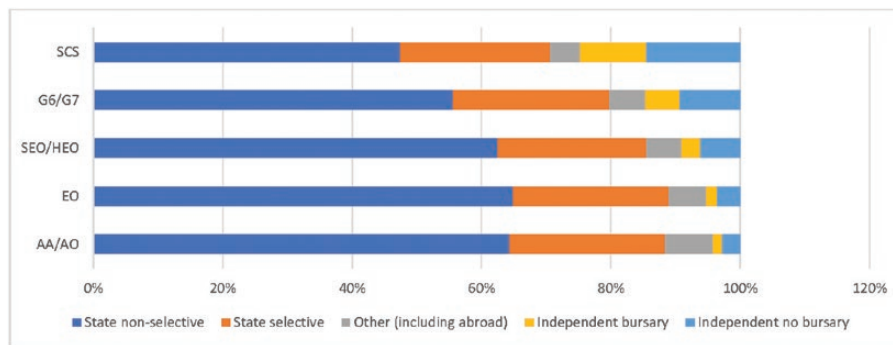**Figure 4** UK Civil Service Grades by Parental Occupation.

Figure 5 UK Civil Service Grades by Type of School Attended Between Ages 11–16.

than I've seen elsewhere. But it's about the extent to which that's actually driving decisions rather than just sort of collecting paper. Because lots of people beaver away doing the competencies, you know, trying to tick each box. And sort of miss the bigger picture of, actually, can you spot the hidden rules? Or do you know people who can help you decode them? *Mark, Director, working-class background*

As Mark underlines here, an important theme that emerged in interviews was that although formal Civil Service processes tend to be highly sensitive to issues of equity, it is the hidden rules that tend to drive promotion decisions. And, as I go on to explore now, it is in unpicking three key hidden rules where those from working-class backgrounds face the strongest barriers, and those from advantaged backgrounds have the greatest advantages.

Accelerator Roles

Career progression in many industries is strongly tied to securing access to valuable work; jobs that provide exposure to senior gatekeepers or high-profile projects (Ashley and Empson 2013; Rivera 2016). The Civil Service is no different. Indeed, one of the most powerful unwritten rules within the CS is that if one can secure access to certain early- or mid-career jobs, this will precipitate fast-track career progression:

So, my sense from quite early on was that there was a secret code as to how to get on. There were these folk that worked in the Treasury, had done certain things … they

knew about 'the velvet drainpipe', as you hear it described. The way up and through.

And they'd clearly done it, and they had a language to speak about it. *Aaron, Director, professional/managerial*

Interviewees pointed to five types of accelerator roles: an early posting in a private office; significant experience in a central department like Treasury or within high-prized areas of Cabinet Office such as the Prime Minister's Office or the Economic and Domestic Affairs Secretariat; experience running a bill team[4]; securing a leading role during a national crisis; and what was often referred to as "ultra pipeline jobs" such as a private secretary for a prominent minister.[5]

These roles, interviewees explained, not only provide experience on high-profile projects, teams, or workstreams but also expose individuals to a range of skills in a short timeframe and ensure "face-time" with ministers, special advisers, and high-ranking SCS staff. These individuals, in turn, often act as gatekeepers for future progression opportunities.

Significantly, accumulating these sorts of accelerator roles was connected to a particular pathway or track through the Civil Service—what Aaron and a number of other interviewees called "the velvet drainpipe." Notably, the concept of a velvet

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[4]All Government Bills originate in departments and have a Bill team of civil servants assigned to oversee the drafting and passage of the Bill, as supervised by the sponsoring Minister.

[5]Each minister typically has a small group (2–6) of civil servants ("private secretaries") who support their daily work.
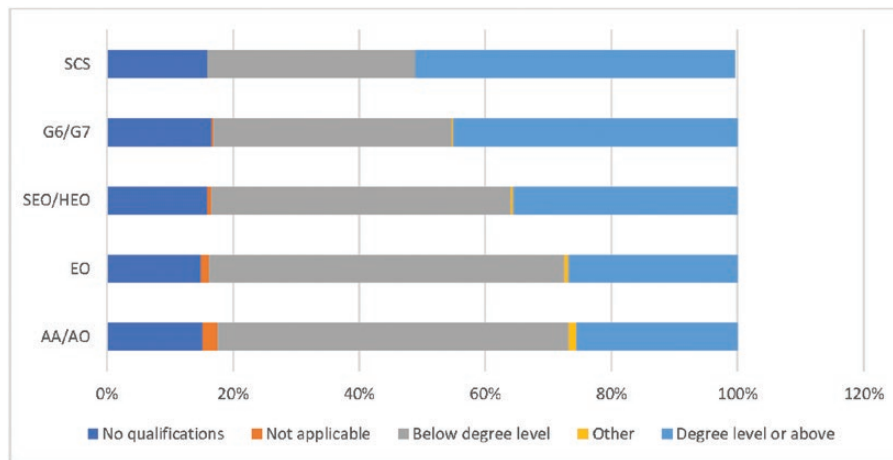
Figure 6 UK Civil Service Grades by Parental Educational Qualification.

drainpipe has been frequently mentioned in commentary and scholarship on the UK Civil Service. It was first discussed by Lord Bernard Donoghue in a television interview in 1987, and described as the "gilded funnel through which a smooth arts-educated elite from the public schools" traditionally moved into the Civil Service Fast Stream and subsequent valuable postings. Hennessy (1981) subsequently referred to the term as a "cloning mechanism" by which the SCS "reproduces itself generation after generation" (Hennessy 1981, 513).

The existence of this velvet drainpipe, and accelerator roles more generally, of course, runs counter to formal guidance on progression in the Civil Service. Here the emphasis is on building what are called "success profiles" by accumulating a wide variety of skills in different areas. To be sure, this is still important for general Civil Service progression, but interviewees stressed that for those aiming to reach the SCS, and particularly the upper grades of SCS, a narrower trajectory was prized:

> There's sort of the official mantra which is, you know, do some operational work, do some policy, do something in a region. But in fact, you look at [mentions three permanent secretaries] and, you know, the sort of greats, and they've all been Cabinet Office, Treasury, private offices and just sort of bounced round a very narrow thing. Peter, DD, professional/managerial

What is striking about discussions of these fast-tracked or back-door trajectories is that they were rarely articulated by those from working-class backgrounds. These interviewees often expressed a vague sense that there were more valuable jobs or departments—an "unofficial tick-box CV," as Laura (Grade 7, working-class) put it—but they were rarely able to elaborate on the details. In contrast, those we interviewed from professional/managerial backgrounds were often not only consciously pursuing such tracks but also talked at length about targeting these roles as part of their career plan. For example, Rina (Grade 6, professional/managerial) explained that her "move into Treasury was very intentional … my plan was always to get more high-profile roles in the department with a view to going into the centre," whereas Tony (DD, professional/managerial) acknowledged that he maneuvered into private office in "a very calculated way"

because it's a "stepping-stone" or, as Roisin (Grade 6, professional/managerial) explained, it provides opportunities to "engineer situations which will help a minister need interaction with me."

But why is awareness and understanding of these hidden career tracks so stratified by class background? My interviews indicated that this is largely about who knows about such pathways: who has access to valuable informal information. This kind of tacit knowledge is rarely written down but acquired through workplace communication with colleagues who have the know-how. Many interviewees explained that one environment where this information circulates, and is widely shared, is the Civil Service Fast Stream—which is dominated by those from privileged class backgrounds (The Bridge Group 2016).

Yet most important were relationships with senior colleagues. These individuals acted as *organizational guides*, imparting informal information and helping civil servants to navigate the hidden rules of the labyrinth. For example, Jim (Director, professional/managerial), explained how a senior colleague had been instrumental in convincing him to take a role in Cabinet Office when he had wanted to continue at the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs. "I was just thinking about the work I enjoyed, but I don't think I quite understood how important that advice was in terms of getting into the centre, and actually … probably getting to where I am now".

Significantly, these guide relationships rarely hinged on work. Instead, they were almost always established in the first instance based on a sense of cultural connection or affinity—shared leisure pursuits, shared tastes, and shared humor. As Jim went on to explain: "Definitely it's the humor. I think that's probably the main thing. So like when we worked together we just really enjoyed each other's company."

Discovering such similarities was often described as a "spark" that helped to forge and then sustain guide relationships, acting as a powerful glue and facilitating a sense of trust and bonding. However, research has long established a clear relationship between class background and such tastes, interests, and lifestyles (Bourdieu 1984). Sociologists call this dynamic homophily, or the tendency for people to be attracted to, and build relationships more easily with, others who are similar in terms of racial identity, gender, and/or class

background (see Rivera 2016; McPherson et al. 2001). In this way, as guides tend to be senior and therefore themselves disproportionately from professional/managerial backgrounds (see figures 4–6), the valuable guidance they impart tends to benefit those from advantaged backgrounds.

Exploiting Organizational Ambiguity

In the pursuit of career progression, civil servants routinely face situations where formal guidance on action or behavior is unclear. These instances represent distinct "interpretative moments," where it is up to the individual to decide what actions are appropriate (Calarco 2018). Examples of such grey areas include interactions with hiring managers, requests for promotion and temporary promotion, threats to leave, and embellishing job applications—all of which, as I explain below, were frequently mentioned during interviews. In these instances, where expectations are unclear, those from different class backgrounds react very differently. Those from advantaged backgrounds tend to use these scenarios to negotiate promotion opportunities, whereas those from working-class backgrounds tend to react more cautiously, expressing either ethical discomfort or rejecting such practices.

The most prevalent interpretative moment that civil servants must negotiate is communication with hiring managers or SCS when applying for a job, or when speculatively enquiring about future job opportunities. Approaches to this varied widely. Among many we spoke to, and particularly among those from professional/managerial backgrounds, the first step is to reach out via email or phone and then organize a time to talk in-person. These are commonly known as "fireside chats" or, as Jim (Director, professional/managerial) put it, "pre-interview interviews." All interviewees who mentioned fireside chats agreed they had an important bearing on progression prospects. This was partly because they give people the opportunity to gain more specific information about what hiring managers are looking for from candidates. But most acknowledged that such exchanges were about more than just information gathering; they were an opportunity to ingratiate, to sell yourself to an important gatekeeper:

> Interviews are so formal, you can't move from the questions, so I do think [fireside chats] sometimes have that self-promotion function. So I would probably find a relatively casual way to mention some relevant previous experience. But it works less well when someone's on sell. Like it's meant to be like a relatively quick, light interaction.
> *Olivia, DD, professional/managerial*

> Yeah, I will certainly be trying to, like, leave that positive impression … be charming … and I would certainly try and agree with as much as, you know, was appropriate, but not too much … you don't want to be a sycophant.
> *Aarash, Grade 6, professional/managerial*

As these accounts demonstrate, ingratiation is the key to fireside chats, but at the same time must be carefully veiled: "You don't want to be a sycophant," as Aarash explains. Similar dynamics were described in other important areas of ambiguity, such as requests for promotion or threats to leave. Here, interviewees would describe lobbying their line manager on

the basis that their current workload or level of responsibility warranted a promotion, or signaling to a line manager that they are a "flight risk" looking for other jobs.

A final interpretative area concerns the application and interview process for new jobs. Here, civil servants are asked to provide detailed examples of previous experience that demonstrate how they align to key behaviors that underpin success profiles. The issue here, according to many, is that hiring managers do not verify the content. This means staff are free to embellish aspects of their application:

> Under the, sort of, standard interview system, you turn up and get asked, like, four questions, and you deliver a long spiel about each and it doesn't need to have any bearing to reality. Like, I'm pretty sure I could walk in, say something completely fictional that happened to somebody else, and it wouldn't matter, so long as I did it convincingly. And you certainly get into a position where somebody like me, who is relatively inexperienced but can massage the narrative, is in a much better position than somebody who's got 10 years of experience but does not talk the talk. *Stuart, DD, professional/managerial*

Again, it was those from advantaged backgrounds who had most often exploited the ambiguity of interpretative moments to broker opportunities. This was typically presented as simply an expression of assertive or strategic thinking:

> I think there is a thing here that, actually, if you don't ask you don't get. And some people sit in the Civil Service and do what they're told. And you know that's fine but you've got to realise you've got to look after yourself and play, a certain amount, play the game. *Owen, Director, professional/managerial*

In contrast, those from working class backgrounds typically approached interpretative moments with caution. They were often confused about what constituted acceptable behavior and expressed discomfort with the ethics of more strategic approaches:

> I find it morally really difficult, because I want to do well because I deserve to do well. And I find the whole idea that someone needs to talk to the right people, and it's not enough that I do a good job, really really hard.
> *Jo, Grade 6, working-class*

As Jo's account illustrates, interviewees from working-class backgrounds tended to register strong objections to maneuvering strategically. First, such actions were seen as interpersonally false and involved hiding calculated, self-interested motives; second, they were seen as unfair, rewarding those willing to circumvent formal procedures and "sell themselves"; and third, there was a strong sense that such behavior did not constitute what one interviewee called "proper work." This finding is supported by social-psychological studies showing those from disadvantaged backgrounds are less willing to "play politics" at work and less likely to put themselves up for promotion unless they perceive it to be in the interests of others (Belmi et al. 2019). Significantly, many traced their objections back to values inculcated during their upbringing:

So it's kind of something that's instilled into you, that hard work pays off; I come from that background of, I'll go in and do my job, do my job exceptionally well, that will get recognised and I will get a promotion on that. But then you get to Grade 7, 6, SCS, up there, and it becomes, 'this will put you on his/her radar', 'let them know your face', 'let them know you're interested in doing this', and I just have to overcome this internal resistance that somehow it's cheating... I mean my dad worked as a mechanic and you don't schmooze as a mechanic, you spend eight hours underneath a massive lorry, come out covered in oil and go home, do you know what I mean? (laughs) Sam, Grade 6, working-class

My intention here is not to adjudicate between these different interpretations of organizational role ambiguity; what I show is simply that how people act in these moments tends to be patterned along class lines. These differing interpretations are significant because, at present, with formal expectations unclear and unwritten, this role ambiguity works to unfairly advantage the career progression of those from more privileged backgrounds. Not only are their actions more strategically orientated toward progression but, according to my interviews, tend to be valued higher by those in gatekeeping positions. Senior SCS staff I interviewed, for example, described such behavior as demonstrating "initiative," "drive," and "ambition." Thus, until the Civil Service is more explicit on what constitutes good practice in these areas, this role ambiguity will continue to act as a significant barrier for many from working-class backgrounds. As Donald observes:

I certainly feel we could be much clearer about how decisions are made and what information is necessary. But I think a lot of it is, people have an interest in keeping these decisions in a grey area because they know how to operate in that grey area. And they sort of figure that other people don't...
Donald, Director, intermediate

Policy Versus Operational

The hidden rules of progression in the UK Civil Service do not just revolve around who you know and how you deal with ambiguity but also the type of work you do. In particular, there is very strong class-origin segregation according to whether civil servants work in policy or operational delivery roles. The policy profession (which represents the work area of approximately 8% of UK civil servants) is notably less diverse, with 70% of staff from professional/managerial backgrounds and only 19% from working class backgrounds. In contrast, only 47% of those in operational roles (who make up approximately 54% of all civil servants) are from advantaged class backgrounds and 40% are from working-class backgrounds. These divisions are strongly connected to the class progression gap, as the proportion of operational versus policy roles reduces considerably at higher grades. For example, policy civil servants are disproportionately located in departments like Treasury and DCMS and in locations like London,[6] which have a greater proportion of staff in top

grades, and policy "generalists" have historically dominated the highest levels of the SCS (Halsey and Crewe 1969). Policy expertise, in other words, remains key to reaching the centre of the labyrinth.

Interviews indicate that this occupational sorting by class background takes place in two ways. First, it is connected to the grade at which people join the Civil Service. For example, although those from professional/managerial backgrounds are more likely to enter via the Fast Stream (equivalent to HEO/SEO), those from working-class backgrounds tend to join at lower grades (The Bridge Group 2016). At these grades, a disproportionate number of jobs are in operational delivery, and therefore, when these individuals begin their career progression, they often do so along an operational track. Yet this often leads to a Catch 22 at higher grades where these individuals must accumulate experience in different work areas in order to progress, but their narrow operational experience puts them at a disadvantage (particularly relative to those on the Fast Stream) in securing such roles. This forces many to continue on operational career tracks that then have bottlenecks or ceilings. Tracey, for example, had worked her way up at HM Revenue and Customs from EO to a G7 operational role. She has been doing the job for over six years and was keen to progress. Yet she explained that her operational skillset precluded her from applying for "90% of G6 roles that come up."

But sorting also takes place among those who enter at higher grades. Among interviewees who had joined via the graduate Fast Stream, for example, those from working class backgrounds had still been much more likely to sort into operational career tracks or explicitly sort out of policy career tracks. Yet such decisions could rarely be described as a simple matter of choice. Indeed most acknowledged the appeal of policy—the greater status, autonomy, and creativity often associated with such work.

Two linked reasons were frequently given for opting not to take this path: (1) That the skillset required for operational roles can be more meritocratically learnt, demonstrated, and evaluated, and (2) Policy skills are vague and progression is dependent on mastering a behavioral code that is not inclusive and tilts in favor those from advantaged backgrounds.

Harriet, now a Director (from a working-class background), provided a useful example. After completing the Fast Stream, she explained that she deliberately turned down a number of policy roles and instead opted "for a big operational role at [the national transport hub]." This, she said, "felt more comfortable" and it was clearer "what the job was about." Later, when she was in Grade 7, she was again offered a high-profile policy job in tax. Again, though, she opted to stay on the operational track, telling us:

Policy work is so ambiguous it's really hard to know who is good and who isn't, and yeah [in Fast Stream policy roles] I learnt the ropes of how you get things done in a central department, but the stuff I've always enjoyed more is where you can see a tangible output, and yeah I think that probably comes to what I was used to as a kid, people did stuff, they made something, produced something.
Harriet, Director, working-class

Others echoed this idea that the skillset was more transparent and demonstrable in operational roles, and that progression

[6]Significantly, 63% of policy civil servants are based in London, whereas only 13% of those working in operational roles are based in the capital (Civil Service Statistics 2020).

was accordingly more meritocratic in large operational departments like HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) or the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP):

> In HMRC—there is no hiding place. You definitely, in terms of operational, if you are getting promotion, it is very unusual to think, well, how did that happen? People have to earn their stripes. *Geoff, Grade 6, intermediate*

In contrast most interviewees agreed, regardless of background, that the knowledge and skills required in policy were more ambiguous. Of course policy work demands many tangible skills—the ability to synthesize information, to interpret evidence, solve problems creatively, work to tight deadlines, and write concisely and coherently. However, it is also an area characterized by heightened "knowledge ambiguity" (Alvesson 2001). This can be attributed to three characteristics of the work. First, despite its prestige, policy work only requires very minimal credentials or training. Policy professionals, for example, learn on the job, and therefore their claims to expertise are arguably more precarious than those on other civil service professions, such as lawyers, social researchers, economists, and so on, where the content of skills can be traced back to specific qualifications and training.

Second, the knowledge that is valued in policy is often tacit in the sense that practitioners find it hard to identify, communicate, and codify (Kei Law 2014). This poses a particular problem for transferability, as knowledge and expertise is difficult to verbalize and explicitly teach. Indeed, most acknowledged that the essence of policy work is demonstrating good judgment in conditions of uncertainty:

> Ambiguity is a really good word, being comfortable with it, being able to exist in it. And it all comes down to good judgement in a way. So, there's judgement in the information you gather. There's judgement in how you put it together and in how you present it. And then at certain times it's a selling point, or a persuading point. There's no point coming up with the best option if no one agrees with you.
> *Bill, Director, professional/managerial*

Third, and most importantly, the quality of policy work is difficult to externally evaluate (Ashley and Empson 2013). As Bill notes above, the inherent uncertainty of policymaking (where no-one can foretell the success of a particular decision) places a heightened emphasis on nurturing an image of competency, of cultivating a belief—especially among Ministers—in one's good judgment and expertise. Thus, there is a particular premium in policy on being able to perform—to conform to what Ministers and SCS expect a policy "mandarin" to look, sound and speak like—because this functions as an act of persuasion, a proxy for good judgment or high-quality advice that is difficult to definitely demonstrate in the moment:

> I think actually distinguishing between perfectly fine performers and excellent performers can be very difficult [in policy]. And you probably do use self-presentation as a proxy, like when I was in that meeting with them, were they pushing? Were they articulating it?
> *Joy, Director, professional/managerial*

In the policy environment, then, the success of the final product is inherently uncertain and, therefore, the expertise of the professional is particularly subjective and contestable. What is often deployed to plug this uncertainty, my interviews suggest, is a certain performance of competence that is strongly connected to self-presentational cues associated with an advantaged class background; what Bourdieu (1984) calls "embodied cultural capital."

The central principle underpinning this self-presentational package in policy work is the idea of neutrality. This, of course, has a clear and legitimate function. Policy professionals answer to the government of the day rather than any one political party and therefore political neutrality is clearly critical to impartial public service. However, behavioral expectations around neutrality extend far beyond political impartiality. Neutrality, instead, is valued more as an overarching disposition, a studied way of being, encompassing particular styles of speech, self-presentation, and communication. First, it involves a certain package of expectations around accent and style of speech. Central here is the idea that Received Pronunciation (RP), synonymous with an advantaged background in the United Kindgom, is routinely read as a signal of neutrality:

> There is a definite style of speaking … that kind of neutral-ish RP accent, like trying to place yourself as from nowhere … so I think most people in the SCS end up having an accent that is quite similar, at least the ones who are in the central teams, and replicate the style, the rhythms … there is a kind of go-to neutrality, same voice, same accent. And it is very like: 'I'm objective, my analysis is objective.'— Isaac, DD, prof/man

What is striking here, as in many similar comments, is how Isaac draws a connection between accent (as well as attendant aspects of speech such as speed, tone, and timbre) and a wider conception of neutrality; of being able to carry out more "objective" policy analysis. Others went further than accent, connecting the idea of neutrality to other self-presentational behaviors; to being softly-spoken, calm, unflappable, emotionally detached, restrained, understated. Mastering this studied neutrality, in terms of looking, sounding and speaking a certain way, was often seen as pivotal in selling uncertainty to ministers:

> The answer may not be perfect, we may not have the evidence, but I feel quite comfortable that we've done the best job we can. And I think that's probably linked to a sort of inherent sense that, you know, a feeling of comfort in the setting. And I think Ministers probably feel more comfortable hearing uncertainty from someone like me than they would from someone who, you know, is a younger, Muslim, working class woman.
> *Miles, DD, professional/managerial*

What sets policy work apart from operational delivery, then, is that role ambiguity is heightened, notions of merit are uncertain, knowledge is contestable, and performance is harder to evaluate. And what is often used to plug this uncertainty, my analysis suggests, is a certain performance of competency that draws heavily on the embodied cultural capital inculcated via a privileged class background.

Discussion and Conclusion

Drawing on the largest workforce data set on class-origin diversity in the world, this article has demonstrated that civil servants from disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly under-represented in the UK Civil Service, and even when they get in they struggle to get on. Specifically, there is a strong class-origin progression gap that gets more pronounced at every grade of seniority.

This does not necessarily represent a "class ceiling." Instead, my analysis suggests that a more apt metaphor is the idea of the Civil Service as a labyrinth. This reflects both the size and complexity of the Civil Service and the fact that the route through it is largely hidden. More specifically, although there is a formal set of guidelines around progression, which are often highly sensitive to issues of diversity and inclusion, it is mastery of the unwritten rules that provides the most effective roadmap through the labyrinth. Moreover, it is in unpacking three of the most important hidden rules where my analysis indicates those from working-class backgrounds face the strongest barriers and those from advantaged backgrounds enjoy the greatest advantages.

The first of these unwritten rules is that securing certain high-profile jobs leads to fast-tracked progression. These roles give exposure to Ministers and senior officials—notably in private office, the "central" departments, running a bill team, securing a leading role during a national crisis, or as a Minister's private secretary. Yet knowledge of these so-called "accelerator roles" is often contingent on access to "organizational guides": senior colleagues who help navigate the hidden rules of the labyrinth. I find that these guide relationships are often forged on the basis of cultural similarity, and, as senior staff are disproportionately from advantaged backgrounds, this tends to benefit; junior staff from similar origins.

Second, in negotiating progression opportunities, civil servants routinely face situations where formal career guidance is unclear. These "grey areas" include interactions with hiring managers, requests for promotion, threats to leave, and embellishing job applications. Although those from privileged backgrounds tend to exploit the ambiguity of these "interpretative moments" and cultivate opportunities, those from working-class backgrounds often report confusion or ethical discomfort.

But the hidden rules do not just revolve around who you know and how you deal with uncertainty, but also where you work. Third, I find that those from working-class backgrounds often opt into operational career tracks, which have clear bottlenecks and therefore limit progression. Some join at lower operational grades and become locked into operational tracks, whereas others join at higher grades but still sort into operational roles as they see the skillset as more transparent, tangible, and meritocratic. A key reason for this occupational sorting is that many from working-class backgrounds see policy work as dependent on mastering a behavioral code—what I call "studied neutrality"—that tilts in favor of those from advantaged backgrounds

It is important to acknowledge that these results raise a number of theoretical and methodological questions that my data does not allow me to fully address. First, due to data restrictions imposed by the UK Civil Service, the quantitative analysis I was able to undertake here is limited. To address this, future work should address how progression by class background may vary by age cohort to understand patterns of change over time. Similarly, analysis of the class progression gap should be extended by looking at the class backgrounds of staff *within* the grades of the SCS, the class backgrounds of those *leaving* the Civil Service at different grades, and by conducting regression and/or sequence analyses on progression rates by class background.

Second, there is clearly an imperfect analytical connection between the quantitative and qualitative methods employed here. In particular, I cannot be sure that the classed barriers to progression identified in my case study departments hold for all Civil Service departments or indeed all civil servants. The aim in this inductive qualitative phase was more exploratory, to garner "trustworthiness and depth" rather than generalizability and replicability (Ashworth et al. 2019).

Despite such limitations, these findings still contain some important implications for public administration scholars, particularly those working with representative bureaucracy theory. First, most work in this area has tended to focus on either how representative public bureaucracies are, or the impact of improved representation on policy outcomes (Atkins et al. 2014; Selden 1997). Here, I shift the focus to understanding the mechanisms that drive underrepresentation. I would argue this represents an important missing link between these two existing areas of enquiry. Indeed, if representative bureaucracy scholars believe that greater demographic diversity tends to lead to more inclusive policy design, as the majority of the literature seems to indicate, it surely follows that the field should also seek to understand the organizational barriers that impede equal representation.

And here my results suggest that "role ambiguity" may be pivotal in understanding the mechanisms that drive inequalities in representative bureaucracy. Although this concept is widely explored in public administration literature (Kahn et al 1964; Pandey and Wright 2006), I know of no work that uses it to explain inequalities in public sector career progression. In contrast, I show that role ambiguity is key to understanding class-stratification in who successfully navigates the unwritten rules of progression in the UK civil service: be this ambiguity in what jobs lead to career progression, ambiguity in organizational expectations in key interpretative moments, or ambiguity in the knowledge and skills that are considered meritorious in valuable policy work. Significantly, in each of these instances, it is those from advantaged backgrounds who tend to exploit this role ambiguity to broker opportunities, whereas those from working-class backgrounds largely report confusion and uncertainty.

Second, and linked to this, my results also indicate the need for scholars to pay more attention to how representative bureaucracy is impeded by patterns of occupational segregation within state workforces. Although some work has examined the importance of vertical segregation, my results illuminate the importance of connecting both vertical and *horizontal* forms of segregation. For example, my results show the notable underrepresentation of civil servants from working-class backgrounds in certain departments such as the Treasury, certain professions like policy, and certain locations like London. Not only are these horizontal divides strongly connected to vertical segregation, in the sense that each is associated with greater progression opportunities, but they also have implications for representative bureaucracy. After all, these are all areas of the UK civil service that provide a particular platform in terms of policymaking power and influence.

Finally, my results underline the need for future work on representative bureaucracy to attend more closely to issues of class background. This remains conspicuously under-researched in most national state bureaucracies, despite robust evidence of low social mobility into the kinds of occupations characteristic of state workforces (Breen 2005). Further, my results suggest that class representation may occupy a distinct position in relation to salient debates within the representative bureaucracy literature. For example, one key question that flows from my results is whether skews in passive representation by class background translate into more active forms of representation (Mosher 1968, 12). This is perhaps particularly pressing in the policy profession, where the workforce—in the United Kingdom at least—is particularly skewed toward the privileged. Future research would be useful to unpick how this skew may or may not be implicated in the design of public services, particularly areas such as welfare service that disproportionately impact working-class communities (Harrits 2019).

Yet my findings also suggest that the relationship between passive and active representation may be more complex in relation to class background. For example, I show that for those from working-class backgrounds to succeed in the UK Civil Service, particularly in domains salient to active representation such as the policy profession or the SCS, they must assimilate to dominant behavioral codes. But such acculturation may have profound implications for individuals' sense of self. Their class identity, in other words, may be defined more by their class destination than their class background. This, in turn, may muddy the presumption that these individuals necessarily "press for" or "actively represent" the interests of working-class communities. After all, as Marx observed: "The more a ruling class is able to assimilate the most prominent men of the dominated classes, the more stable and dangerous its rule" (Marx 1906, 706).

Supplementary Materialc016130359

Supplementary data is available at the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* online.

Data Availability

The data used in this article are available upon request from the UK Civil Service People Survey. More details on the data are available here: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/civil-service-people-surveys

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