

Moving Up and Down the Social Class Ladder in Scotland

by Cristina Iannelli and Lindsay Paterson

No. 33, May 2005

Extensive mobility between class of origin and class of destination has been a characteristic feature of societies in Europe and North America since the middle of the twentieth century. Most mobility has been upward, and most of that has been explicable by occupational change – by the rise in the proportion of the labour force which works in the professions and the decline in the proportion in manual jobs. This *Briefing* draws on the main findings from an ESRC-funded research project which investigates patterns of social mobility in Scotland and the role played by education in the process of social mobility between generations.

- ▶ In Scotland, among adults of working age in 2001, nearly two thirds had moved to a different social class to that in which they were brought up.
- ▶ More than two thirds of the mobile people moved up the social class ladder.
- ▶ In more recent cohorts fewer people have been upwardly mobile than in the older cohorts while the percentages of people who have remained in the same social class as their parents have grown.
- ▶ The fall in upward mobility is driven by changes in the class structure, not by changes in social inequalities in the chances of being mobile. A lower proportion of the total population moves upwards simply because a lower proportion comes from manual-class backgrounds. Likewise, a higher proportion of people are immobile because they are already at the top of the class structure as children.
- ▶ Patterns in social mobility do not appear to be substantially different between men and women. Major gender differences are found in relation to the segmentation of the labour market in which women are more likely to occupy lower non-manual occupations and men skilled-manual occupations.
- ▶ Mobility patterns in Scotland are rather similar to those in other societies in which agricultural employment has become a marginal sector of the economy.

Introduction

Social mobility is the extent to which people are in a different social class from the one in which they were brought up. In Britain much of the sociological research on social mobility was carried out in the 1980s using data from the 1970s, and mainly focused on men (eg Goldthorpe, 1987). Since the late 1990s, a new wave of interest in social mobility has developed and new studies carried out to analyse whether social mobility patterns, within and across countries, may have changed in the younger generations (Breen, 2004). Moreover, since most previous studies related only to men and since the last few decades have also seen radical changes in women's participation in the labour market, the new studies have increasingly addressed the issue of gender differences in social mobility.

The research presented here belongs to this new round of social mobility studies. It aims to update the results of previous analyses in Scotland (which used data from the early 1970s) and to take account of gender differences. The research used several data sources (see 'About This Study'); this *Briefing* reports on the findings from the 2001 Scottish Household Survey (SHS). We used a subset of respondents to the SHS, focusing on those aged 25 to 64 (8,500 cases). Four cohorts were selected to analyse trends during the 20th century, those

- born between 1937 and 1946
- born between 1947 and 1956
- born between 1957 and 1966
- born between 1967 and 1975.

Social mobility in the 1970s and 1980s

The earlier research studies generally found high rates of social mobility among men: it was common for them to be in a different class to that in which they were brought up (ie high rates of *absolute* mobility). Moreover, most of the total mobility had been in an upward direction: people were more likely to move up the social class ladder than to move down. This high social mobility was explained by the changes in the labour market structure between the 1950s and the 1970s. The expansion of professional and semi-professional employment and the contraction of manual occupations opened up new opportunities for men from lower social classes (both lower non-manual and manual) to enter professional employment. Nevertheless, the higher professions remained very successful at self-recruitment: that is, finding opportunities for the sons of professionals to work as professionals. Consequently, although many more men than before were upwardly mobile, the relative advantage of belonging to a middle class family compared with a working class family in gaining a professional occupation did not substantially change over time (ie no change in the *relative* chances of mobility). In terms of broad patterns, Scotland was similar to the rest of Britain (Payne, 1987).

Changes in the class structure

In our study, the majority of people (52%) grew up in a working-class family (table 1). Another 23% of them came from a family with at least one parent in professional or managerial occupations and 15% had a parent in routine non-manual occupations. The remaining 8% belonged to a petty bourgeoisie family and only a negligible percentage, 1%, had both parents unemployed.

Table 1: Percentages of respondents born in 1937 -1975 (aged 25-64) by class of origin and destination

Social class	Parental class when respondent aged 14 (class of origin)	Own class (class of destination)	
		Men	Women
Professional and managerial	23.5	42.4	41.7
Routine non-manual	15.3	9.6	32.2
Petty bourgeoisie	8.5	6.7	3.5
Skilled manual	23.4	24.7	6.3
Unskilled manual	28.2	14.6	15.4
Unemployed	1.1	3.0	1.2
Total no. of cases	8406	3159	3999

Source: 2001 Scottish Household Survey.

Note: The class schema used in this study is a reduced form of the EGP 7-class schema (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992: 38-9). Because of the small number of cases, farmers and agriculture labourers are included in petty bourgeoisie and unskilled manual workers categories respectively.

It is clear that both sons and daughters had, on average, improved their social class: a higher percentage of respondents were in professional or managerial occupations while a lower percentage of respondents were employed in manual occupations. There are striking gender differences in the proportions entering routine non-manual and skilled manual occupations: as pointed out in other research, larger proportions of women are employed in routine non-manual occupations while larger proportions of men are employed in skilled manual occupations.

We also found that the more recent cohorts experienced less social mobility: the distribution of parental class and respondents' own class were more similar in the last two cohorts (people born between 1957 and 1975) than in the earlier ones. People in these two cohorts were aged 14 in the 1970s and 1980s, and their parents at these dates would have experienced some of the effects of a declining manufacturing sector and a growing service sector. This means that both the respondents and their parents experienced the same labour-market structural shifts. The stability which characterised the class structure of respondents of the last two cohorts therefore may be due to the slowing down of the structural shifts which were particularly marked in the previous decades and which resulted in substantial differences in the occupations of parents and those of their children.

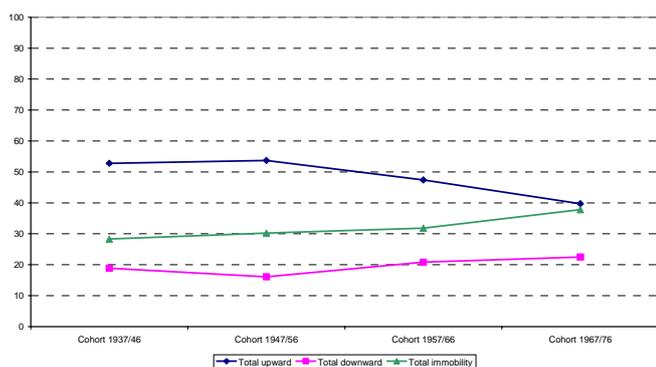
These overall changes in the class structure were quite similar for men and women. The main gender

differences were found in the oldest and youngest cohorts (born 1937 to 1946 and born 1967 to 1976). Thus, in the oldest cohort women were more likely than men to be employed in unskilled manual occupations and less likely to occupy professional level positions. These differences tend to disappear in the second and third cohorts (1947 to 1956 and 1957 to 1966) but gender differences re-appear in a reverse way in the youngest cohort: nowadays women are more likely to occupy a professional position and less likely to be employed in unskilled manual occupations than men.

Trends in social mobility

The majority of our sample (68%) had left the class in which they were brought up and moved to another social class. However, the total proportion of people who remained in the same social class as their parents increased over time (as shown by the line of total immobility rate presented in graph 1). Thus, the percentage of immobile people was 28 in the oldest cohort, 30 in the second birth-cohort, 32 in the third cohort and 38 in the youngest cohort. Moreover, even though upward mobility was always greater than downward mobility, upward mobility declined between the second and the third and fourth cohorts. This is in line with what we have already observed that parents have improved their social position over time and in the last few decades they have become more ‘middle-class’. This means that nowadays the margin for improvements for children is more limited: there is no room for middle-class children to move further upwards.

Graph 1: Absolute mobility rates by birth-cohort



Who has moved to which class and who has remained in the same class of origin? High stability was found among those who came from the professional/managerial class: 66% of men and 63% of women who came from professional class origins ended up in professional class destinations. On the other hand, people who came from the other social classes had usually moved away from their social class of origin. This contrasts to the situation recorded in the 1974 Scottish Mobility Study (of men born between 1910 and 1954) when there was as much stability in working-class groups as in others (Payne, 1987: 72). In our study over

a third of men who moved out of the unskilled working class reached a skilled manual occupation (36%) and a quarter of them entered a professional class (25%). A similar proportion of mobile women from working class origins managed to move into professional class occupations (26%) while 35% achieved routine non-manual occupations. Once again gender differences in occupational destinations mainly reflect labour-market segmentation.

Social inequalities and social mobility

We investigated the extent to which the chances of people from different social backgrounds moving into different social classes varied across the four cohorts (ie the extent of relative mobility). The results showed that there is no statistically reliable evidence that the association between class of origin and class of destination changed across the cohorts. In other words, changing patterns of social mobility cannot be attributed to changing patterns of social inequalities in the chances of being mobile. This was a firm conclusion of earlier mobility studies when upward mobility was probably at its maximum, and it remains true now. Changing patterns of social mobility are due to changes in the occupational structure – to changes in the availability of places at the top of the social class ladder. In fact, we found that the chances of being employed at the top levels of occupations (ie professional occupations and routine non-manual occupations) have grown more in the generations of parents than in those of children.

We did not find gender differences in the relative chances of mobility. However, we found an interesting gender difference in relation to the chances of entering professional/managerial occupational classes: while for men these chances did not substantially change over time, for women a significant increase occurred between the first and second cohorts in the chance of entering the top level classes compared to the chance of entering the bottom level classes (ie unskilled manual occupations).

Conclusions

We can draw three main conclusions from this study. The first is that opportunities for upward movement have been declining, largely because in more recent cohorts parents have improved their position and their children have fewer margins for further improvement. However, this change in mobility patterns has not been accompanied by any change in the relative advantage associated with belonging to any particular social class of origin. The lack of any change in the relative chances of mobility was also the result of the mobility studies of the 1980s: the rise in upward mobility had not brought an equalisation in the chances of being socially mobile, and this was interpreted as a failure to widen opportunity. The consistent interpretation of the recent trends towards a contraction in upward mobility would be that it does not represent a reduction of opportunity.

The second conclusion is that Scotland is rather similar to other modern societies. Mobility patterns (both absolute and relative) vary little across nations, especially among those where – as in Scotland – agricultural employment is not a significant sector of the economy. However, as McCrone (1992: 88-120) explains, the absence of any clear distinguishing features in Scottish social mobility runs counter to a belief in Scottish cultural and ideological debates – recurrent for over a century – that the country does have a notably open social structure compared to many others.

The third conclusion is that the similarity of mobility patterns between Scotland and other countries tends to cast doubt on any strong claims that educational reform can significantly affect patterns of mobility in the absence of wider programmes of egalitarian social reform. (A further *Briefing* will focus on the role played by education in the process of intergenerational social mobility.) By international standards, Scotland adopted a fairly thorough version of comprehensive secondary schooling in the 1970s: since then, there has been no academic selection between schools in the public sector, the independent sector is small and the levels of social segregation among schools are relatively low by international standards (Smith and Gorard (2002); Croxford (2000)). Despite these factors, patterns of social mobility continue to resemble those elsewhere, including in the rest of the UK. Nevertheless, it is probably relevant that social-class inequalities in access to a full secondary education and to higher education have declined in the past 10-15 years, possibly partly as a result of comprehensive schooling (see, for example, Tinklin, 2000). At the same time acquiring educational credentials has become more important than direct inheritance as a means of gaining social status. If these two processes continue, then we might be at just the moment when changes in the relative chances of social mobility could indeed begin to occur.

References

- Breen, R. (2004) **Social Mobility in Europe**, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Croxford, L. (2000), Inequality in Attainment at Age 16: A “Home International” Comparison, *CES Briefing No. 19*, May, Edinburgh: CES, University of Edinburgh.
- Erikson, R. and Goldthorpe, J.H. (1992) **The Constant Flux: A Study of Class Mobility in Industrial Societies**, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Goldthorpe, J.H. (1987) **Second edition, Social Mobility and Class Structure in Modern Britain**, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- McCrone, D. (1992) **Understanding Scotland: The Sociology of a Nation**, London: Routledge.
- Payne, G. (1987) **Employment and Opportunity**, London: MacMillan Press.
- Smith, E. and Gorard, S. (2002), What does PISA tell us about equity in education systems?, *Occasional Paper Series Paper 54*, Cardiff: School of Social Science, Cardiff University
- Tinklin, T. (2000) The influence of social background on application and entry to higher education in Scotland: a multilevel analysis, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 54, pp.367-385.

Further reading

- Iannelli, C. and Paterson, L. (2004) Social Mobility in Scotland since the Middle of the Twentieth Century, *Working Paper 1*, Edinburgh: Centre for Educational Sociology, University of Edinburgh.

Further information

For further details contact Cristina Iannelli, Centre for Educational Sociology, Tel 0131 651 6281, email c.iannelli@ed.ac.uk. The views expressed are those of the authors.

About this study

This research draws on work conducted as part of the ESRC-funded project *Education and Social Mobility in Scotland in the 20th Century* (www.ces.ed.ac.uk/SocMobility/mobility.htm). The project uses the new data on social background collected in the 2001 Scottish Household Survey (funded by the Scottish Executive and the British Academy), and other survey data including the Scottish enhanced sample of the British Household Panel Study (1999), and the Scottish Mobility Survey of 1974. The research analyses trends in the rate and patterns of social mobility, gender and religious differences in these patterns, and the effects of institutional (especially educational) changes on the processes of social mobility during the 20th century.

CES Briefings

All *Briefings* can be downloaded from our website, free of charge. If hard copy or multiple copies are required please contact Carolyn Newton at the address below.