Social mobility (and higher education)

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Social mobility refers to the movement of individuals between different positions in the social structure over time. Closed societies are characterised by ascription, whereby social position is assigned early in life and is difficult to change. Contemporary notions of the good society instead emphasise openness and a shift from ascription to attainment, whereby social position is not determined by inheritance but rather by ability, effort and disposition. Within sociology, studies of social mobility focus on the association between parental and filial social position across generations, typically employing occupational social class as the key measure.

Globally, the past 150 years has seen expansion of education systems from elite to mass to universal. While this expansion came later to higher education than in schooling, similar patterns of massification are evident. Across the twentieth century, global higher education participation rates rose from fewer than one in 100 young people at its beginning to more than one in five at its end. In many countries a majority of young people now enrol in higher education (Schofer and Meyer, 2005). The post-WWII expansion of higher education coincided with the rise of the sociological study of social mobility. Education, and especially higher education, has become pivotal for entry to certain well-rewarded occupations, notably the professions, meaning that higher education and social mobility are increasingly intertwined. Indeed Baker (2011) argues that education now has the 'whip hand' of social mobility, in that social mobility is effectively mediated by education *and* this situation has widespread political legitimacy.

In this entry, we summarise social scientific evidence on and explanations of the relationship between higher education and social mobility. We review key terms and concepts in the study of social mobility, before examining pertinent trends and patterns across time and place. We finally introduce major sociological theories which seek to explain the mechanisms connecting social mobility and higher education.

Key concepts in social mobility

In conceiving of social mobility, sociologists typically imply a hierarchy of positions in the social structure, focussing on 'vertical' movement. Thus social mobility is usually referred to as either *upward* or *downward*. Horizontal mobility (e.g. between sections of the upper-middle class such as professionals and managers) is rarely considered. As well as investigating the direction of social mobility and calculating the total or *absolute* rate of mobility in a society, sociologists also compare the *relative*

chances of reaching various destinations from different origins, sometimes referred to as the degree of *social fluidity* in a society.

In many Western nations for instance, the expansion of white-collar work in the decades after WWII was accompanied by contraction of frontline jobs in manufacturing and extractive industries. Consequently, there was more 'room at the top' and opportunities for those from blue-collar backgrounds to take white-collar work. This so-called 'golden age' of mobility in the 1950s and 1960s saw substantial rates of absolute social mobility, a process which has now halted and, some suggest, begun to reverse in recent years. However the chances of being socially mobile conditional on background - relative social mobility - appear to have been remarkably stable during the mid-twentieth century in many countries, a pattern Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992) label 'the constant flux'. More recent evidence for the last three decades of the twentieth century, in contrast, suggests that relative social mobility chances equalised somewhat in France, Ireland, Sweden, Poland, Hungary and the Netherlands, though not in Britain or Germany (Breen, 2005)

The notion of 'social mobility' is increasingly visible in public policy on higher education. Over the past half century or so, policy discourse has shifted from simple expansion (more places), through increasing diversity and 'widening participation' to higher education (different people) to explicitly using higher education to engineer social mobility (different outcomes). Despite this, popular notions of social mobility through higher education are fuzzy. In some countries there is widespread use of the term, but imprecision in meaning; elsewhere the term is absent but the concept appears through ideas such as 'positive discrimination'.

Despite such differences in policy and popular discourses, patterns and trends of social mobility in relation to higher education show considerable international comparability. We review these in the next section.

Trends and patterns

There is an enduring connection between social origin, higher education and destination. We concentrate here on post-WWII patterns, coinciding with the take-off in higher education enrolments (Schofer and Meyer, 2005).

The contemporary field of social mobility research comprises both intensive studies focussing on a single national case; and extensive studies which involve numerous countries either through a single study, or alternatively by considering several case-study countries in parallel. Regarding the relationship between social class origin, attainment of higher education and social class destination, broad conclusions approach consensus. That is, social class origins strongly condition entry to higher education; and obtaining higher education is associated with the most lucrative

outcomes. The direct relationship between origin and destination has thus been largely replaced by an indirect effect through (higher) education (Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2008). However there are important between-country variations which continue to generate controversy in the field. Data issues relating both to the form of studies (cross-sectional or longitudinal, sample size, excluding women) and the measurement of key concepts such as socio-economic class (Breen and Jonsson, 2005) confound matters and many larger studies have often used essentially historical data collected prior to the 'take-off' in higher education enrolments. Further, while the major social mobility studies have typically focussed on the origin-destination link, research on inequalities in access to higher education usually omits the education-destination link. Recent higher education research has begun to address this lacuna.

Perhaps the most prominent debate concerns the effect of educational expansion on educational inequalities and hence, by implication, social mobility. We shall describe salient theoretical accounts below, but first we describe the broad empirical patterns. In a classic study, Shavit and Blossfeld (1993) compared changes in the relationship between class background and educational attainment over time in thirteen countries. They found stability, rather than decline in the strength of association between class of origin and education, despite expansion, except in two cases (Sweden and the Netherlands). These findings have been challenged for specific countries and also more generally, particularly in the work of Breen, who sees some increase in social mobility as a result of educational expansion across the twentieth century (Breen, 2010). An alternative take is provided by Jerrim and Macmillan (2015) who point to the 'Great Gatsby Curve' identified lately by economists and policymakers, and which describes the association of high income inequality and high levels of intergenerational transmission. In short, the more unequal societies tend to have lower social/income mobility. Jerrim and Macmillan investigate the place of educational attainment in mediating this association, finding that inequalities in access to education appear more important than differences in outcomes between the highly educated and others. Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2016) propose treating educational attainment as relative rather than absolute – doing so they find, for Britain, that class inequalities in access and educational inequalities in destination emerge as stable over time. The implication is that expansion in higher education is not likely to generate a dividend in terms of greater social mobility.

Looking at higher education specifically, Halsey (1993) reported broad similarities in patterns of access to higher education across Europe by social class. In the British case there was little real change in relative rates of entry by social class despite huge expansion in the absolute participation rate (Boliver, 2011). Shavit *et al*. (2007) repeated Shavit and Blossfeld's comparative case study approach to consider how diversification of institutional types in higher education affected social class inequality in fifteen countries. They concluded that it tends to reduce inequality of access to the tertiary level overall, but inequalities within levels (i.e. between

institution types) tend to increase in parallel. Jerrim and Vignoles (2015) compared rates of entry by social class across major Anglophone countries, finding consistent patterns of class inequality, but clear differences in how pronounced this appears between England and Canada (high), and the USA and Australia (low).

To summarise, there is a general international trend for higher education expansion and continuing social class inequalities in access, but with cross-national variation in the strength and persistence of these inequalities. As higher education systems expand, inequalities between levels within the system begin to emerge.

Theories and empirical tests

The idea that the massification of higher education would increase social mobility in both absolute and relative terms has its roots in modernization theory. Writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, modernization theorists predicted that the technologically dynamic development of industrial societies would require workers to be ever more highly educated and occupational roles to be allocated increasingly on the basis of achieved rather than ascribed characteristics (Kerr et al., 1963; Bell, 1973). These predictions have not been borne out in practice however, prompting new theories to be formulated to explain how socially advantaged groups uses their continued monopolisation of higher education as a means of passing on advantages to the next generation.

The Maximally Maintained Inequality (MMI) hypothesis contends that while higher education expansion has the potential to increase equality of tertiary access and thereby to promote social mobility, in practice those from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds will be quickest to take up new educational opportunities afforded by expansion (Raftery and Hout, 1993; Hout, 2006). According to the MMI hypothesis, it is only once the enrolment rate for the most advantaged socioeconomic group reaches 'saturation point' that enrolment rates for those from lower social class backgrounds will begin to catch up. This prediction has been found to hold for a range of countries, including eleven of the fifteen countries in Shavit et al's comparative study – namely the United States, Ireland, France, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Russia, Japan, and South Korea (Shavit et al., 2007) – as well as Britain (Boliver, 2011).

Modernization theory's prediction that higher education expansion would promote social mobility rests on the assumption that the demand for highly educated workers is continually growing and that supply does not outstrip demand. This notion has been challenged by Collins (1979), whose concept of credential inflation highlights the tendency for higher education expansion to generate a surplus of university graduates who end up in jobs which would historically have been filled by those with only secondary educational qualifications. Credential inflation helps explain

why labour market returns to undergraduate higher education have become more variable in many countries as the number of graduates has increased – with those from lower social class background least likely to enjoy a high graduate earnings premium and least likely to gain a graduate-level job (Wakeling and Savage, 2015; Britton et al., 2016) – and why members of more advantaged groups increasingly continue their educational careers beyond a first degree.

The MMI hypothesis is complemented by the Effectively Maintained Inequality (EMI) hypothesis which contends that as the higher education enrolment rate increases those from more advantaged social backgrounds will increasingly seek to monopolise the more prestigious educational programmes and institutions at that level (Lucas, 2001). In other words, quantitative inequalities in the amount of education people from different social backgrounds acquire are replaced by qualitative inequalities in access to 'better' forms of education at nominally the same level. An allied theory known as the 'diversion hypothesis' states that those from less advantaged backgrounds will be steered towards (by themselves or their advisors) less prestigious forms of education (Brint and Karabel, 1989).

Empirical support for the EMI hypothesis has been found for a range of countries, including the United States where those from more advantaged backgrounds disproportionately enrol in more prestigious four-year (as opposed to two-year) colleges (Roska and Velez, 2010). Advantaged class monopolization of more prestigious higher education institutions was also the predominant finding of Shavit et al's comparative study, including for the United States, Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, Russia, Israel, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan (Shavit et al., 2007). Evidence available for Britain, Australia, and the United States suggests that the predominance of those from more advantaged social backgrounds in the most elite institutions are the result of both "primary" and "secondary" effects of socio-econonomic background (Boudon, 1974): members of more advantaged social groups are more likely to have the necessary qualifications for progression to highly academically selective elite forms of higher education, but they are also more likely to apply – and be admitted – to elite institutions than comparably qualified individuals from less advantaged social backgrounds (Davies and Guppy, 1997; Boliver, 2013; Jerrim et al., 2015).

By implication the EMI hypothesis predicts that higher education expansion is unlikely to be a major driver of social mobility since the kinds of higher education monopolized by those from more advantaged backgrounds are also the kinds of leading to the most favourable labour market outcomes. It is clear from empirical research in countries including the US and UK that there is a significant wage premium associated with attending an elite higher education institution and with studying certain more prestigious subjects at degree level (Arcidiacono, 2004; Wakeling and Savage, 2015; Britton et al., 2016). One influential theory is that, in an

era of mass participation in higher education, the prestige associated with gaining a degree from a more prestigious institution or in a more traditional discipline acts as a 'signal' (Spence, 1973) to employers of the 'quality' of potential employees (Jackson et al., 2005).

In conclusion, higher education has been a prominent feature of the international story of post-WWII social mobility. Those attaining higher education have typically enjoyed access to more prestigious and better-paid occupations. Huge expansion of higher education systems has coincided with the growth of 'service-class' positions, leading to a sustained, but time-limited increase in absolute mobility. Many more children from less privileged backgrounds have been able to enter higher education and use it as a route for upward social mobility. However with some caveats, relative rates of mobility have been stubbornly resistant to change, despite the mass availability of higher education. More privileged social classes continue to dominate access to higher education, especially the highest-status pathways, advantages which are magnified in the transition from higher education to the labour market. As the twenty-first century unfolds, higher education represents both help and hindrance for social mobility.

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