

National Patterns of Social Mobility, 1970-1995: Divergence or Convergence ? Project Outline

Objectives

The aim of this project is to analyze change in social mobility regimes in a number of advanced nations using survey data from the period between the early 1970s and the early 1990s. The main questions to be addressed are:

- (i) How have the class structures of these nations changed over this period?
- (ii) How, if at all, have patterns of social mobility and social class differences in intergenerational mobility chances changed? In particular, has there been a trend towards increased equality (with respect to class origins) in mobility chances, as some hypotheses suggest, or has there been growing inequality (as has been the case in many, though not all, countries in other aspects of social inequality, such as income inequality)?
- (iii) For a subset of countries we can also ask how differences between men and women in mobility patterns have changed over the 1970s – 1990s period. We can only do this for some nations because many of the earlier mobility surveys only sampled men. But for all nations we can ask how *current* patterns of mobility for women differ from those of men.
- (iv) How can change, or the absence of it, in mobility patterns be explained by institutional and broader societal features of the nation in question?
- (v) Comparing the countries, is there evidence that class structures or mobility regimes have converged over this period, or that convergence has occurred among some, but not all, countries? Are there any cross-nationally common patterns in the differences and similarities in the mobility of men and women?
- (vi) What characteristics of nations, and of transnational processes, might explain any such convergence or persistent differences?

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Purpose

Social mobility has long been a central topic in sociological research. In recent years the paradigm for mobility research makes an important distinction between *absolute mobility*, which refers to the amount and rates of movement between different class positions; and *relative mobility* (sometimes called social fluidity) which is the degree of inequality, according to class origins, in a person's chances of acquiring a better, rather than a poorer, class position.

Hypotheses explaining cross-national variation or similarity in either or both absolute and relative mobility, are of two main types. There are many sociological theses that argue for a convergence in levels and patterns of social mobility over time. Many of these assume that increased economic competition will cause employers to recruit on increasingly meritocratic bases, with the result that the social advantages attached to ascriptive features (such as class origins, sex or ethnic group membership) will decline in importance as resources for upward social mobility. The result of such a process would then be international convergence in relative mobility patterns. These arguments are often brought together under the title 'the liberal theory of industrialism' whose proponents include Parsons (1960; 1964); Kerr and his collaborators (Kerr, Dunlop, Harbison and Myers 1960/73); Treiman (1970) and Bell (1972; 1973). A similar implication of convergence in mobility patterns can also be derived from the recent 'social individualisation' school (for example, Beck, 1992).

Within the field of social mobility research *per se* there are two well-known theories claiming that a high level of cross-national similarity in mobility patterns is already evident. The Lipset-Zetterburg (1959) thesis argued that absolute patterns of social mobility would be much the same in all industrialized nations. This has been shown to be empirically incorrect; furthermore, class structures, which help to shape absolute mobility patterns, themselves differ widely between nations. The FJH hypothesis (Featherman, Jones and Hauser, 1975) which argues that class origin inequalities in mobility chances (i.e. relative mobility chances) will be roughly constant across nations, has proved much more robust (e.g. Grusky and Hauser 1984). Many studies have shown that although differences between nations in relative mobility patterns do exist, these are nevertheless quite small in comparison with the broad similarities between them.

These rather ambitious theories of convergence pay little attention to the institutional context of social mobility, assuming, for the most part, the operation of free markets. In contrast there are those approaches which would lead one to expect persistent variation between nations in class structures and mobility regimes. These mainly focus on the relationship between historical, cultural, political and institutional features, on the one hand, and patterns of social mobility on the other. Arguments about American (and, later, Australian) 'exceptionalism' are of this kind (cf. Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1985), while authors such as Parkin (1971) and Stephens (1979) have argued that state policy – in the form of state socialism in the one case, and Swedish social democracy in the other – can indeed lead to distinctive mobility regimes.

State of the Art

The two most recent major comparative studies of social mobility are those of Ganzeboom, Luijkx and Treiman (1989) and Erikson and Goldthorpe's (1992) *The Constant Flux*. The former use 149 data sets from 35 countries and find that 'there are significant between-country differences [in relative mobility patterns]' and that 'within countries the extent of inequality in mobility chances is on average decreasing at about one per cent per year'. In contrast, Erikson and Goldthorpe, focusing on nine European countries plus Australia, Japan and the United States, find that, as far as relative mobility is concerned, there has been little change over time, as distinct from what, following Sorokin, they call 'trendless fluctuation'. As for variation between countries their conclusion supports the FJH hypothesis but modifies it in a small, but possibly crucial way:

... a basic similarity will be found in patterns of social fluidity ... across all nations with market economics and nuclear family systems where no sustained attempt has been made to use the power of the modern state apparatus in order to modify the processes, or the outcomes of the processes, through which class inequalities are intergenerationally reproduced.

Thus, Erikson and Goldthorpe, although largely concurring with the FJH hypothesis, nevertheless leave open the possibility that state intervention in appropriate areas (notably in areas which affect equality of condition and of opportunity) will be able to influence relative mobility.

Why, then, should we want to focus on comparative social mobility now? There are three main reasons. First, the study by Ganzeboom, Luijkx and Treiman pays no attention to those historical, cultural, political and institutional features that some researchers have argued are likely to shape mobility patterns. Furthermore, the data they use is of very variable quality. So, even if we accept the validity of their results, we have no mechanism for explaining them. Second, the study by Erikson and Goldthorpe, although it is based on a much smaller number of nations, and thus more attention can be paid to the national context within which mobility occurs, uses data from the early 1970s (notwithstanding the fact that their book was published in 1992). It is far from clear that data from the 1990s would lend such support to a modified version of the FJH hypothesis. As Breen and Rottman (1998:16) have recently noted, '(t)he major comparative findings of class analysis still rest on data from core national states collected during the Golden Age of Capitalism (1947-73)'. This was a period not only of general economic growth, but also one in which socio-economic policy (manifested in Keynesian economic policy and the growth of welfare state provisions) showed much less international variation (at any rate among the 'core national states') than has subsequently been the case. Furthermore, the differential results of cross-national policy variation are, in any case, likely to be rather less marked in a period of continuous economic growth than in one of slower and more volatile growth.

The period after 1970 was one in which the Keynesian consensus broke down, countries which had hitherto been rather similar began to pursue sometimes radically different policies in the labour market, in taxation, in government spending on welfare and so on.

Perhaps the most well known example is the trend in income inequality. Whereas in the period from the end of the Second World War until the 1970s all industrialised nations showed declining income inequality, there has since been a clear divergence, with particularly marked increases in the UK, US, Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden and Australia. Other OECD countries have recorded more modest increases or no change (Gottschalk and Smeeding 1997).

A third reason for undertaking this analysis is that we know, from a handful of studies, some unpublished, that mobility regimes have changed over this period. Class structures have changed; patterns of mobility, particularly for women, have changed; and relative mobility chances are known to altered. In the USA, for example, recent (and as yet unpublished) research by Hout has shown that trends towards increasing social fluidity in the 1970s and early 1980s have been halted in the 1990s, while in Northern Ireland class inequalities in mobility chances (as well as differences between Protestants and Catholics) have diminished over this period (Breen, 1998).

Methodology

In *stage 1* a team of collaborators will each write a paper addressing the issue of changes in the mobility regime in his or her own country. Each paper will present common data and common analyses, but there will also be country specific analysis as required. The focus will be on how economic, institutional, political and demographic change helps shape change in patterns of mobility. There will also be scope for nationally specific analyses devoted to issues that are not common to all countries – e.g. ethnic variation in mobility patterns.

Stage 2 will be a comparative analysis. Participants will provide a basic mobility data set for their country and these will be merged into a common data set. This will then be analyzed with a view to testing whether national differences in absolute and relative mobility can be related to transnational processes (such as the differential effects of globalisation) and to national variation in institutional, economic, political and demographic factors.

The point of the two stage strategy is to be able to anchor comparative analyses in institutional factors. Thus, it is hoped, it will be possible to reach an understanding of what factors have led to changes in mobility patterns in a given society, without losing the comparative focus. Equally, the comparative focus will be able to draw on the insights of the country-specific chapters, and, to some extent, test the explanations that they have advanced.

The data for each country covers a period from the 1970s to the 1990s, with the exception of Italy, which has data for 1985 and 1996. In some countries annual data are available, in others two, three or four data points are used spanning the entire period.

Outcomes

The major envisioned output from the project is a book. This will comprise an introductory chapter; a chapter on the methodology of mobility research; eleven country chapters and the comparative analysis chapter.

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