Social Mobility

Socmob/17/3/97/P.Covington/

Introduction

I will now look at **social mobility** in capitalist societies. It is generally agreed that the **rate of social mobility** - the amount of **movement from one stratum to another** - is significantly **higher** in industrial as compared to pre-industrial societies. Industrial societies are now often described as open, as having a relatively low degree of closure.

In particular is argued that **status in pre-industrial societies** is largely **ascribed**, whereas in **industrial** societies **it is achieved.** As a result **ascribed characteristics** such as class, sex, race, kinship have less and **less influence on an individual's social status**. Status is seen to be increasingly **achieved** on the basis of <u>merit, talent, ability, ambition and hard work</u> are steadily **replacing ascribed characteristics** as the criteria for determining a persons position in the class system.

In post war Britain the opportunities for social mobility have improved for an number of reasons....

✓ **Occupational changes**: the changing occupational structure has created **more room at the top**. With computerisation and automation, there is less demand for manual labour and greater demand for non-manual skills and a better-educated workforce.

✓ **Industrial changes**: there has been a **shift away** from the **older 'smokestack'** industries such as **foundries** to new '**sunrise' industries** (computers). These new industries have a higher proportion of **non manual jobs**. In addition there has been a **shift away** from **manufacturing industries**.

✓ **Ladders**: in the past ambitious people might have <u>relied upon marriage to the boss's daughter</u>, connections, working one's way up from the shop floor, or sheer luck. These **ladders** are still available but **education** is becoming increasingly recognised as the **most important step to a good career**. Of course, middle-class people still tend to be more successful in gaining educational qualifications. But the emphasis on credentials and qualifications is probably more meritocratic than a system where people are appointed simply because of their class origins.

Social Mobility

The Importance of Social Mobility

✓ It has an important effect on **class formation**. For example Giddens suggests that if the rate of social mobility is low, class solidarity will be high.

✓ A study of social mobility can provide an indication of the **life chances of members of society**. For example, it can show the degree to which a person's class of origin influences his or her chances of obtaining a high status occupation.

✓ It is important to know how people **respond to the experience of social mobility**. For example do the downwardly mobile resent their misfortune and form a pool of dissatisfaction, which might threaten the stability of society.

✓ **Mobility is a test of fairness.**

Types of Social Mobility

Sociologists have identified two main types of social mobility.

- **Intragenerational Mobility:** refers to the **social mobility** within a **single generation**. It is measured by comparing the **occupational status** of an individual **at two or more points in time**. Thus is a person begins her or his working life as an unskilled manual worker and ten years later is employed as an accountant, she or she is socially mobile in terms of intergenerational mobility.
- **Intergenerational :** refers to the **social mobility** between **generations**. It is measured by comparing **occupational status of sons** with **that of fathers** (and only rarely the occupational status of fathers or mothers with that of their daughters) Thus, if the son of an unskilled worker becomes an accountant, he is socially mobile in terms of intergenerational mobility.

Exercise One

Go through the following list, writing down for each one

- upward mobility
- downward mobility
- No change
- intergenerational
- intragenerational

1. A nurse who decides to become a labourer on a building site.
2. A daughter of a miner who becomes a bank manager
3. A teacher who decides to retrain as a social worker
4. A doctor's son who becomes a taxi driver
5. An immigrant from a poor farming background in Africa who gets a job in Britain as a farm labourer.
6. The daughter of a skilled manual worker who becomes a routine clerical worker.
7. A postal worker who becomes a traffic warden

8. A pilot whose son becomes a police constable.
9. The owner of a small shops whose daughter becomes an assistant manager in a large supermarket.
10. A sales assistant in a shop who becomes a priest.

Exercise Two

Complete your family tree looking at social mobility among your own family. Use the OPCS classification of Occupations, code each person to a social class, or make your own judgements about which of the six Registrar General's Classes each person might belong to.

- How much evidence is there of downward or upward intergenerational social mobility
- Has there been much movement across large social distances or has most been short range.
- Try pooling your findings with each other.

Problems with Measurement

1. Occupation is used as an **indicator of social class** and researchers **use different criteria** for **ranking occupations**. Many researchers classify occupations in terms of **prestige** associated with them. Others place more emphasis on **economic rewards** attached to them. As a result, occupational classifications differ and the results of **various studies are not strictly comparable.**

2. A further problem arises from the fact that it is not possible to identify many members of the **bourgeoisie** on the **basis of their occupations**; a persons occupation does not necessarily say anything about the extent of their investments in private industry.

3. Furthermore, many studies of social mobility have not included **data on women's mobility** and patterns of **female mobility** tend to be rather **different to men's**. This is largely because women tend to be concentrated in particular parts of the occupational structure.

Studies On Social Mobility
Lockwood and Goldthorpe

In the 1950's some manual workers were earning high wages for jobs, such as **assembly workers**. The increasing affluence of these groups led to media headlines like 'We are Middle Class Now' and 'you have never had it so good' In order to discover whether affluence had really changed the class of this group of workers some sociologists decided to study car assembly workers in Vauxhall Motors in Luton near London. As these were highly paid, Lockwood and Goldthorpe reasoned that if any workers would show a change in social class because of affluence it would be this group. Their study is called **_The Affluent Worker_**.

Lockwood and Goldthorpe found that although the assemblers got high wages, they were **not really middle class in attitudes.** The workers were paid in cash at the end of the week,

not on a salary like most middle class occupations. They **did not have job security** and many **did not have bank accounts**.

The affluent workers **showed working class attitudes towards** unions and politics, most were union members and voted Labour. Their family life too was working class, although their leisure was spent at home like the privatised middle class family.

Lockwood and Goldthorpe concluded that **only two** of the **eighty workers** studied had **become middle class** and were accepted as such **by other middle class people**. The others had become a '**new middle-class'**, affluent and perhaps owning their own homes, but not middle class in outlook, values, norms, sociability, etc.

The Black Coated Worker

While some groups appeared to be showing signs of upwards mobility, others were **moving down the class system.** *Lockwood'* s study of the clerical worker, the **Black Coated Worker**, in 1958, was so called because clerical workers used to **wear black coats** that would not show ink stains. This group of workers **used to be seen** by **themselves** and **by others as middle-class**. A clerk was often to be found in a room next to the manager, and clerical work was seen as a high status job which might lead to management.

However, as **educational qualifications** became more important and management trainees were introduced, there was **little opportunity for the clerk** to become **upwardly mobile**. Even worse, the position of clerk was itself changing. The clerical workers were **not unionised**, because they had always seen themselves as **part of the management**, rather than workers. This meant that their pay and working conditions were not protected, and they suffered downward mobility as aspects of their job changed and became mechanised.

The Oxford Mobility Study, 1972 Goldthorpe and Lockwood

This was based upon interviews with over 1**0,000 men** (aged 20-64) in England And Wales in **1972**. Using this own class scheme, Goldthorpe allocated these men to **seven social classes** which were based upon **market situation** (source and **level of income**, **security of employment**, **promotional aspects**) and work situation (degree of control, and authority in job). For purposes of simplification these classes were usually grouped into **three clusters**. Service Class, Intermediate and Working.

The service class included **experts** and **specialists** who fill important positions in the **dominant institutions** of society. This class acts as sort of bridge between the top decision maker and the mass of people. It consists of a broad range of people and so it is certainly not the same thing as a 'ruling class' or elite(which is more exclusive, more closed to outsiders) Nevertheless, Goldthorpe argued that the service class were **highly privileged group** and so he felt justified in regarding Service class and the working class as representing opposite ends of the hierarchy of privilege. The intermediate class occupies a much more ambiguous position somewhere in the middle of hierarchy.

Patterns of Social Mobility

Goldthorpe's findings **challenge** the **conventional wisdom** of mobility. This conventional view was largely derived from empirical research (e.g. Glass, 1954) and various sociological theories. It consisted of three main statements...

1. The Closure Thesis

This argues that the **service class** is **largely self recruiting**, reserving its privilege positions for its **own offspring**. It does this by **closing ranks** to newcomers from **lower social classes**.

But Goldthorpe found that only a **minority of the service class** had been **born into it**, so this class was **only partly successful** in guarding its privileges.

2. The Buffer Zone Thesis

This argues that the occupations **clustered tightly around the manual/non manual** zone act as a kind of **brake**, which prevents **long range mobility**. People who are mobile across the manual/non manual line are usually 'absorbed' into this zone (e.g. people downwardly mobile from non manual classes often end up in the **skilled manual classes**, while people upwardly mobile from the manual classes usually end up in the lower ranks of the white collar occupations)

In Goldthorpe's survey, however, the newcomers to the **service class** had been drawn from **all the other social classes**. As many as 28.5% of all those currently in class 1 had been born in classes 6 and 7, so long range mobility was not so unusual after all.

3. The Counterbalancing Thesis:

This argues that, in the post war period, the chances of **intergenerational mobility** have **increased** but the chances of **intragenerational mobility have declined**.

Goldthorpe found only limited support for this. Certainly, there were signs that employers were increasingly relying on the **direct recruitment** of highly qualified and educated individuals (rather than recruiting people who had worked their way up through the ranks). But **intergenerational mobility** had been just as **important** as **intergenerational mobility**, for men in the Oxford study sample.

Absolute and Relative Mobility

Absolute mobility refers to total mobility which takes place in a society (Crompton, 1993). It is measured by figures in a **mobility table**, which reveal the numbers of individuals **within each class** who have been **socially mobile**.

 Goldthorpe's survey found **surprisingly high rates of absolute mobility** and the main reason for this was the **transformation of the occupational structure** of post war Britain. There had been an enormous expansion in the number of **service class and intermediate jobs** and this had created more **room at the top**. So compared with previous generations, **working class** people now had a **better chance** of moving **upwards**. For example, in 1900 the sons of miners had a slim chance of becoming middle class but by 1970 their chances of upwards <u>mobility had improved considerably</u>. Thus **absolute rates had increased**.

Relative Mobility rates on the other hand, are calculated by comparing the **mobility prospects** of <u>different social groups at the same point of time</u>.

In the year 1970, for example, there may have been room at the '**top'** but **some social groups** were more likely than others to fill these places. Someone born into the **middle class** had a good chance of getting a **middle class job** but someone born into an **unskilled manual family** had a slimmer **chance** of becoming **middle class**. This can be expressed in terms of the **1:2:4** rule -whatever the chance of a **working class boy** reaching the service class, a boy from the **intermediate class** had **twice the chance** and a **boy** from the **service class** <u>four times the chance</u>. So **relative mobility rates** measure the chance of **one group** *relative* to **other groups**.

And whereas Goldthorpe argued that absolute mobility prospects had improved, he suggested there had been **little change** in *relative mobility rates*. The odds were still weighted in favour of those from the **higher classes** and so **equality of opportunity** had <u>not been achieved</u>. Britain was no more 'fluid or open' than it had been in the inter war period. Goldthorpe concluded that

no significant reduction in class inequalities has in fact been achieved.

Goldthorpe's original study was conducted in **1972** but in a **second edition**, Goldthorpe, 1987 he was able to update it by drawing on data from the *British General Election Survey of 1983*. Goldthorpe concluded that the mobility chances of the working class had become **polarised**. On the one hand, their chances of moving into the **service class** had **improved** (both in absolute and relative terms). On the other hand, the economic recessions since 1972 had created a **higher risk of unemployment**.

<u>**Debates**</u>

<u>**The Scottish Mobility Study**</u>
The **Oxford Mobility Study** sparked off a number of **controversies** and debates. For example, Goldthorpe had been accused of offering an exceptionally **gloomy picture** of Britain. The Scottish Mobility Study by Payne placed more emphasis on **mobility between occupations** rather than **between classes**. This investigation resulted in even **higher estimates of absolute mobility rates**. Also it concluded that relative class inequalities had

been modified to a certain extent. According to Payne, British society is **less, 'closed'** and static than **Goldthorpe believes**.

Likewise **Saunders**, (1990) takes issue with Goldthorpe's view that **nothing has really changed**. Saunders claims that Goldthorpe '*moved the goalposts'* in an unjustifiable way. After discovering that mobility rates were **higher than expected**, Goldthorpe proceeded to **dismiss their significance** by insisting that only <u>relative rates mattered</u>. But Saunders argues that improvements in absolute rates **cannot be dismissed** quite so easily. Capitalism may **not** have eliminated **class inequalities** but it has certainly opened up new

Opportunities for advancement. If this has brought benefits to the **middle class** as well as the **working class**, then this is a matter for **further celebration** (it would be petty to insist that the only gains that count

are where some group loses while another group wins). In addition, **Saunders** challenges Goldthorpe's assumption that **abilities and talents** are **randomly distributed** across **all social groups**. Goldthorpe seems to deny that '**natural' inequalities** play a part in **deciding class destinies**. If, for example, the working class accounts for half of the population, then for Goldthorpe...we should expect half of all doctors, managers, and top civil servants to have originated from the working class. (Saunders, 1990). Against this, Saunders maintains that talents **are unevenly distributed** <u>across social classes</u>. The most talented usually end up in the higher social classes and they tend to pass on some of their genetic advantages to their offspring. So differences in relative mobility rates cannot be totally attributed to 'injustices'.

Elite Self Recruitment

The Oxford Mobility Study and Goldthorpe's later work suggests that there **is not a high degree of social closure at the top of the British stratification system**, but Goldthorpe has been criticised by for ignoring the existence of **small elites**, or in Marxist terms a ruling class. Goldthorpe's class 1 is **relatively large grouping** containing **10-15**% of the male **working population**. Studies, which concentrate on small elite groups within class one, reveal a <u>much higher degree of closure.</u>

This process by which members of wealthy and powerful groups are drawn from children of those who already belong to it is known as **elite self-recruitment**. The following studies indicate a degree of elite self-recruitment in Britain. Willmott and Young conducted a study in 1970 in the London area and found that 8**3% of managing directors were the sons of professionals and managers**. The sample was 174. A survey by Stanworth and Giddens found out of 460 company chairmen, in 1971, **only 1**% had a **manual working class background**, 66% came from the upper class, such as industrialists and landowners.

Sources Used

Sociology Themes and Perspectives: Michael Haralambos
Sociology in Focus: Taylor et al
Sociology A Modular Approach: Glesson

Social Class and Stratification: Peter Saunders