

Social mobility in the UK

David Cameron: “*Britain has the lowest social mobility in the developed world.*” Conservative Party Conference, 2015.

Summary

- Most studies show that social mobility is not in decline. Some show that it is improving.
- “Absolute mobility” (the tendency to move up the scale to the professional classes) increased enormously in the twentieth century as a result in changes to the labour market resulting in the expansion of the middle class. Arithmetically, that phenomenon simply cannot repeat itself.
- “Relative mobility” refers to the fluidity upwards and downwards between classes. This has remained constant or has possibly improved slightly over the last two generations.
- Popular studies published by charities suggesting a fall in mobility rely on a single dataset which has been widely challenged.
- In October 2015, David Cameron said: “Britain has the lowest social mobility in the developed world.” No such conclusion can be derived from the evidence.
- It is notoriously difficult to compare rates of social mobility between countries because different studies use different methodologies. The OECD acknowledges that “comparing cross-country estimates of intergenerational income mobility requires a great deal of caution”. Even Jo Blanden, author of the more pessimistic studies on social mobility in the UK, writes: “While it is tempting to immediately form the estimates into a ‘league table’ we must pay attention to the size of the standard errors” and suggests that it is impossible to distinguish statistically between less and more mobile countries.”
- The study that David Cameron appears to have been referring to only includes 12 countries which is certainly not “the developed world”. It would seem that there are no studies that cover the developed world. There is not enough evidence to make any claims about Britain’s position relative to other rich countries.

Is mobility in decline?

It is often claimed that there is very little social mobility in Britain. In 2011, the ‘social mobility tsar’ Alan Milburn MP said: “Sadly, we still live in a country where, invariably, if you’re born poor, you die poor” (BBC, 2011). This suggestion of total immobility is very far from the truth. There was a social mobility revolution in the twentieth century as the working class shrank and the number of white collar jobs rose. That led to an increase in *absolute mobility* as a result of there being more ‘room at the top’. It was a mathematical certainty that a person’s chances of moving from the working class to the middle class improved as the middle class expanded.

However, sociologists are also interested in *relative mobility*, which refers to fluidity between the classes. Unlike absolute mobility, relative mobility is a zero-sum game. For one person to move up, another must move down. The bulk of academic evidence on social mobility in the UK shows that since the 1960s relative mobility has remained quite constant, or has become slightly more fluid.

However, one dataset suggests that relative mobility has declined and several studies drawing on it have received much more attention than the rest of the literature. Starting in 2001, the economist Jo Blanden and colleagues published a series of papers looking at inter-generational income mobility using two British cohorts, one born in 1958, the other born in 1970. They reported “sharp falls in cross-generation mobility of economic status between the cohorts” and hypothesised that this was due to the middle classes capitalising on the expansion of higher education in the second half of the twentieth century.

This led to an academic debate and Blanden et al.'s findings were challenged by several subsequent studies. Goldthorpe and Jackson (2007) found that relative mobility for both men and women remained "essentially constant" in the post-war era, and when Goldthorpe and Mills (2008) studied data from 1972 and 2005, they again found that social mobility had not declined. Much the same conclusions were drawn by Paterson and Iannelli (2007), Lambert et al. (2007), Li and Devine (2011) and others. Some researchers found that relative mobility had actually improved somewhat, such as Heath and Payne (2000) and Li and Devine (2011: 9). All would have agreed with John Goldthorpe, who stated unequivocally in his most recent article that "no decline in mobility, either absolute or relative, occurred in the late 20th century" (Goldthorpe, 2012: 20).

The reasons for the divergence between Blanden et al.'s studies and the rest revolve around technical aspects of data analysis, but there is no doubt that the claim that (relative) social mobility has declined is based on a much smaller body of evidence than the less pessimistic view that mobility has been steady or rising. Nevertheless, mainstream discussion of social mobility tends to ignore the larger body of evidence. For example, in 2013 the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission flatly asserted that "we know that the link between parental and child income seems to have strengthened between the generations born in 1958 and 1970, suggesting a decline in mobility." The citation for this claim was, as usual in such documents, one of Blanden et al.'s studies. Nowhere in its 348 pages was there any reference to the work of John Goldthorpe, Geoff Payne, Peter Saunders, Yaojun Li, Fiona Devine, Stephen Gorard, Michelle Jackson or Colin Mills.

Is Britain the least mobile country in the developed world?

In a recent speech, David Cameron said: "Britain has the lowest social mobility in the developed world." A similar claim has been made elsewhere, such as in the coalition government's 2011 report on social mobility titled *Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers*, which stated that "We currently have relatively low levels of social mobility, both by international standards and compared with the 'baby boomer' generation born in the immediate post-war period".

No such conclusion can be derived from the evidence. It is notoriously difficult to compare rates of social mobility between countries because different studies use different methodologies. David Cameron may have been referring to an OECD report which looked at twelve countries and used the controversial Blanden et al. study as its datapoint for Britain. But the OECD itself acknowledges that "comparing cross-country estimates of intergenerational income mobility requires a great deal of caution" (d'Addio, 2007: 29). This cautionary note has also been struck by Jo Blanden herself (2009: 15), who writes: "While it is tempting to immediately form the estimates into a 'league table' we must pay attention to the size of the standard errors; these are large in many cases. Although it does seem to be the case that the Nordic nations have higher mobility, it is impossible to statistically distinguish the estimates for Sweden and the US" (nb. the data used by the OECD suggest that Sweden is quite mobile whereas the US is not).

Despite these warnings, the temptation to compare apples with oranges has proven too great for some. Britain may have the lowest social mobility of any of the twelve countries examined by the OECD - or it may not. The data are simply not robust enough for us to say. We can, however, say with certainty that 12 countries does not represent the whole 'developed world'.

Conclusion

No serious academic claims that *class mobility* has declined in the past fifty years, nor does anyone deny that Britain experienced a great expansion in *absolute mobility* which has slowed, but not retreated, in recent years. Jo Blanden has complained that her research has often been misrepresented, writing that it "is certainly not true that mobility has 'ground to a halt' or 'fallen to its lowest level'" (Blanden, 2013). As for comparisons with other countries, there is a shortage of reliable and comparable data with which to make any solid claim.

"The big story," writes Peter Saunders, "is that occupational mobility has become more common, and that many more people today have the opportunity to achieve a middle class lifestyle than was the case in the past" (Saunders, 2010: 22). However, there is no cause for complacency. The weight of evidence indicates that there has been, at most, only a small improvement in fluidity between the classes in recent decades. There is much work to be done to make sure that people are not unduly hindered by accidents of birth.

But the point that politicians often fail to grasp is that the dramatic transformation of the labour market in the post-war period cannot be repeated. Those who call for "a second wave of social mobility" (Shackle, 2009) seem unaware of the fact that the first wave had little, if anything, to do with improvements in relative mobility or the expansion of higher education. It was due to structural changes in the labour market which are unlikely

to happen again. Goldthorpe's view is that future improvements in absolute mobility will continue to be gradual and, insofar as they depend on government action at all, "will need to be through economic rather than educational policy: that is, through policy aimed at economic growth" (Goldthorpe, 2012: 17).

For a more detailed discussion of the evidence on social mobility see Chapter 11 of the IEA monograph [Selfishness, Greed and Capitalism](#), Hobart Paper 177, 2014.

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