HAS SOCIAL MOBILITY IN BRITAIN DECLINED? NEW FINDINGS FROM CROSS-COHORT ANALYSES

Erzsébet Bukodi, John H. Goldthorpe and Lorraine Waller

Oxford Institute of Social Policy and Nuffield College, University of Oxford

Contact:

Erzsébet Bukodi

Department of Social Policy and Intervention
University of Oxford
32 Wellington Square
Oxford OX1 2ER
United Kingdom
erzsebet.bukodi@spi.ox.ac.uk
erzsebet.bukodi@nuffield.ox.ac.uk

Introduction

Social mobility has of late become a central political issue in many countries and would appear to have particular prominence in Britain and the US. However, in the British case at least, much uncertainty and indeed confusion persists about actual trends in social mobility over recent decades. Three main sources of this problematic situation can be identified.

1. *The differing conceptual contexts within which mobility is defined*. For example, economists typically analyse mobility in the context of the distribution of income or earnings, but sociologists analyse mobility in the context of a class structure or a 'socio-economic status' hierarchy - with differing classifications and scales, of varying validity, being applied.

2. *The differing kinds of dataset that are utilised*. Almost all analyses of mobility today are secondary analyses: i.e. are carried out on datasets not primarily constituted for the purposes of mobility research. Thus, some analyses of mobility trends are based on data taken from repeated (usually 'general purpose') population surveys, others on data from successive - though not necessarily continuous - birth cohort studies, while others still take a hybrid form in being based on data for quasi-cohorts defined within a limited number of population surveys. Differing advantages and disadvantages are involved.

3. *A failure to recognise the distinction between absolute and relative mobility rates*. This distinction is now well established in the sociological literature but scarcely so in the economics literature. Until recently (see e.g. Isaacs, Sawhill and Haskins, 2008), economists have in fact given rather little attention to absolute income mobility and insofar as they have focussed on mobility occurring between income quantiles, they have in effect 'relativised' their analyses from the outset - without, however, always making the implications of this clear.

In the present paper we aim, substantively, to contribute to the debate currently in train in Britain over whether social mobility is in decline. At the same time, though, we address the general methodological issues that underlie the difficulties experienced in establishing mobility trends.

Data and general methodological approach

Our main data sources are the three longest established British birth cohort studies - the MRC National Survey of Health and Development, the National Child Development Study, and the British Cohort Study - which follow through their life-courses individuals born in Britain in one week in 1946, 1958 and 1970, respectively. However, in order to cover more recent developments, we have constructed a further cohort of individuals born in the five years centred around 1982 from the data of the UK Household Longitudinal Study.

On the basis of these data, we focus our attention, at this stage, on *intergenerational class mobility*, following the conceptualisation of social class in terms of employment relations that is made operational, with a demonstrated high degree of validity, in the British National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC; Rose, Pevalin and O'Reilly, 2005). It has been indicated elsewhere (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 2010) that a focus on class, thus understood, tends more

fully to capture the degree of the intergenerational transmission of economic advantage and disadvantage than does a focus on income or earnings.

Our prime motivation in basing our analyses of mobility trends on the birth cohort studies is to be able later to use the rich data that they contain of relevance to our larger research interests in the part played by individuals' psychological characteristics, their educational careers, and their worklife mobility in intergenerational mobility processes. However, we are aware that relying on such studies could give rise to difficulties in inferring long-term mobility trends insofar as *cohort-specific* effects arise - as indeed we already know that they do in certain respects with the 1958 cohort (Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2011). Thus, to the extent that temporal overlaps occur, we pay particular attention to the consistency of the results we obtain on mobility trends with those of studies based on cross-sectional surveys of the complete adult British population.

Results: absolute mobility rates

In Figures 1, we graph, for men and women in our four cohorts, different rates of *absolute mobility* expressed in simple percentage terms.

In the case of men (upper panel of Figure 1), perhaps the most striking feature is the constancy of the *total* mobility rate: i.e. the proportion found in a different NS-SEC class to that of their father. In all four cohorts alike this rate stands at a little over 75%. In this sense, then, the claim, repeatedly advanced in political and media circles, that in Britain intergenerational social mobility is in decline is clearly contradicted. However, what appears often to be meant by this claim is that *upward* mobility is in decline - a tendency which Figure 1 does in fact reveal, together with a tendency for downward mobility to increase.

In the case of women, there is again no support for the idea of a decline in the total mobility rate, with Figure 1 (lower panel) showing, if anything, a slight upward trend across the cohorts. As with men, some increase in downward mobility goes together with a decrease in upward mobility, at least as between the 1946 and the later cohorts. But a notable difference is that among women the rate of upward mobility into Classes 1 and 2, the higher and lower segments of the professional and managerial salariat, does actually rise across the cohorts while among men it is quite flat.

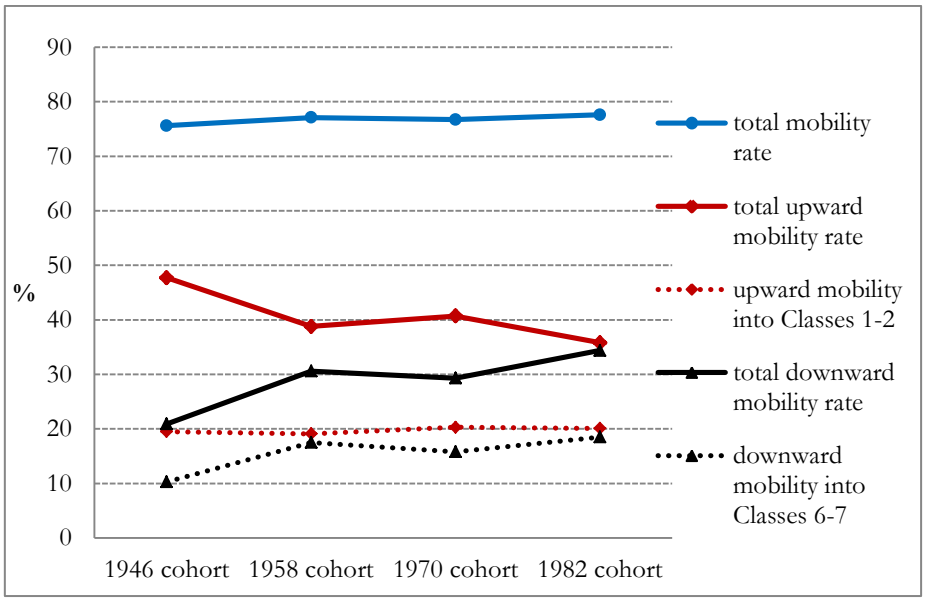
As indicated, these results derive from analyses in which the class position of cohort members is taken at age 27. For our first three cohorts, we can produce comparable results where class position is taken at age 38. These results show essentially the same trends but, since worklife mobility between these ages predominantly reflects career advancement, rates of upward mobility tend to be higher - up to 10 percentage points - and rates of downward mobility correspondingly lower.

The findings displayed in Figures 1 are in fact largely consistent with, and at the same time complementary to, those produced through comparisons of successive population surveys or of quasi-cohorts defined within such surveys (Goldthorpe and Mills, 2004, 2008; Paterson and Iannelli, 2007). These latter studies retrospectively cover twentieth-century experience and thus

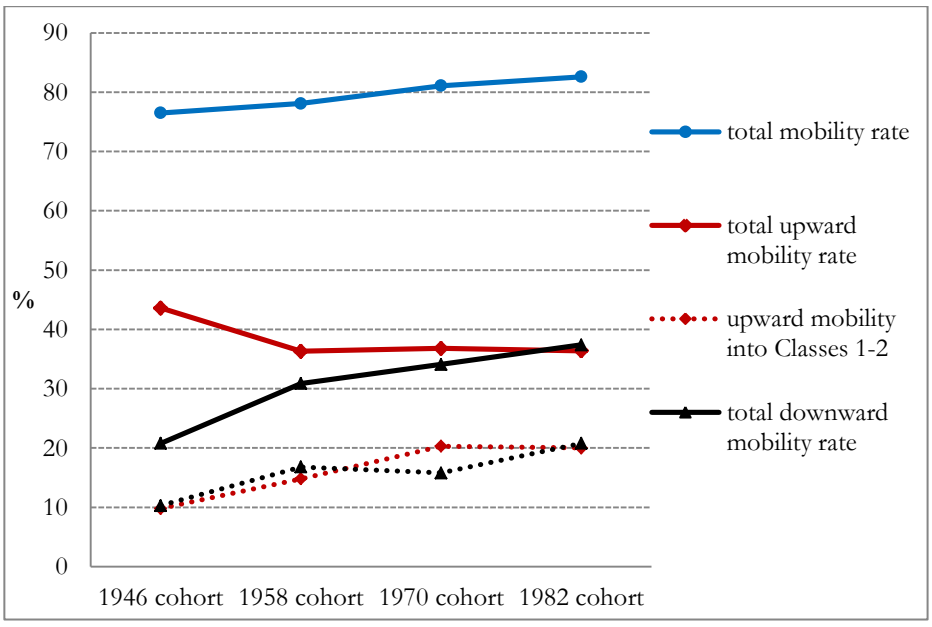
provide a historical context for our cohort-based results which allow us to extend our knowledge of mobility trends prospectively into the twenty-first century. It is, for example, important to be aware that the situation referred to above in which women's, but not men's, chances of upward mobility into the professional and managerial salariat are rising is in marked contrast to that prevailing in the middle decades of the last century when men's chances of such mobility were rising steadily while women's chances changed little from a relatively low level.

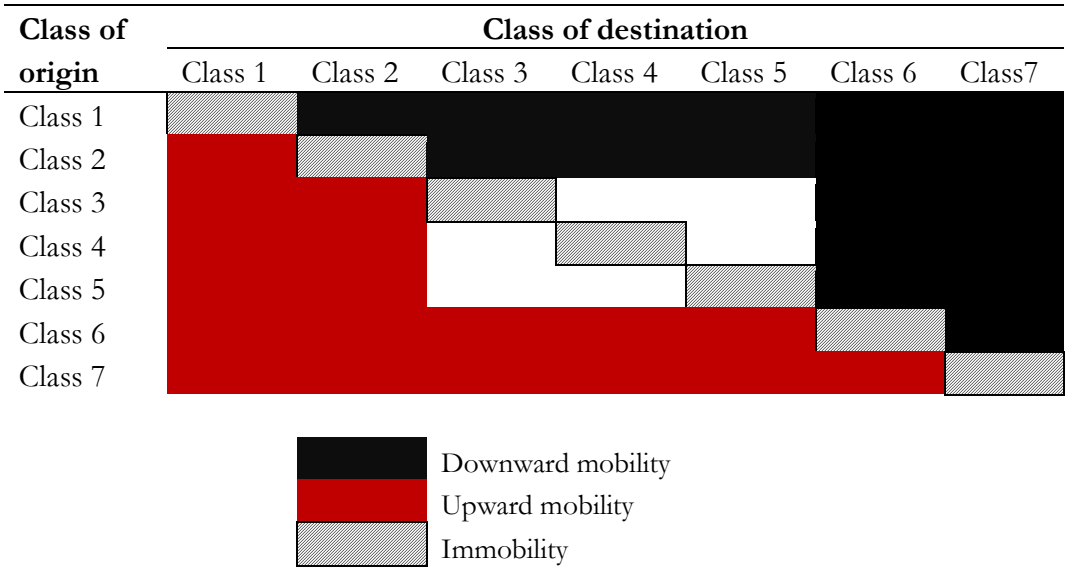
Figure 1: Absolute mobility rates based on father's class position at cohort member's age 10/11 and cohort member's class position at age 27 (NS-SEC)

Men



Women





Class 1: Higher managerial and professional occupations

Class 2: Lower managerial and professional occupations

Class 3: Intermediate occupations

Class 4: Small employers and own account workers

Class 5: Lower supervisory and technical occupations

Class 6: Semi-routine occupations

Class 7: Routine occupations

Results: relative mobility rates

Absolute mobility rates, as expressed in percentage form, are conditioned by the marginal distributions of mobility tables which in turn reflect - in the case of class mobility tables - the historical development of the class structure. *Relative mobility* rates refer to mobility considered *net of* such marginal effects and are treated via loglinear and logmultiplicative modelling in which odds ratios serve as a 'margin insensitive' measure of the net association between individuals' classes of origin and destination - or, in other words, of the prevailing degree of social fluidity.

In Figures 2 and 3 we show the results of fitting to mobility tables for men and women in our four birth cohorts the logmultiplicative UNIDIFF model (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992; cf. Xie, 1992). This model proposes that an improvement in fit can be gained over the loglinear model of 'constant social fluidity' across cohorts by applying a multiplicative factor to all odds ratios implicit in successive cohort mobility tables. With the factor for the first, 1946, cohort set at 1, subsequent factors of <1 will imply a uniformly weakening association between classes of origin and destination - i.e. increased relative rates of mobility or greater social fluidity - and factors of > 1, a strengthening association. In Figures 2 and 3 these factors - UNIDIFF parameters - are shown together with confidence intervals around the point estimates based on

'quasi-variances' (Firth and De Menezes, 2004), which allow valid comparisons to be made between arbitrarily chosen pairs.

In the case of men, results based on their class positions at age 27 might be taken to indicate a steady increase in social fluidity. But while as between the 1946 and 1958 cohorts such an increase could clearly be claimed, a horizontal line could be readily drawn through the confidence intervals surrounding the point estimates for the three later cohorts. And, further, with results based on men's class positions at age 38, evidence of a decline between the 1946 and 1958 cohorts is not entirely conclusive. Studies of class mobility based on population surveys have generally supported the idea of merely 'trendless fluctuation' in relative rates rather than any sustained increase. The results here reported could well fit into a pattern of trendless fluctuation; but if they do in fact point, rather, to a newly emergent secular trend towards greater fluidity, then this should fairly soon be confirmed by population-based analyses. Changes in relative rates are known to be typically driven by cohort replacement effects rather than by general period effects (Breen and Jonsson, 2007). At all events, what can be said as regards current debates in Britain is that no support at all is provided for the view that social mobility, understood in relative terms, is in decline - contrary to claims made by economists studying income mobility (Blanden et al., 2004).

In the case of women, the situation is much clearer. Results referring to their class positions at age 27 and age 38 alike indicate a steady increase in social fluidity across the first three cohorts, and the age 27 results suggest a continuation of this trend through to the fourth cohort. In earlier analyses of women's mobility based on population surveys, evidence of increasing fluidity was sometimes, but not always, found. Our results serve then to confirm that such a trend is indeed in train and thus provide further grounds for rejecting the idea that social mobility in Britain is in decline.

It is, however, in this connection of further interest to see how levels of social fluidity compare as between women and men. To this end, we apply the UNIDIFF model to the mobility tables for men and women *within the same cohort*, and in Figure 4 we show the UNIDIFF parameters for women with those for men set at 1. It can be seen that while in the 1946 cohort the mobility regime for women is, if anything, characterised by less social fluidity than that for men, this situation changes in that fluidity in the women's regime increases relative to that in the men's regime and by the later cohorts becomes perhaps greater. In other words, the rising rates of relative class mobility for women shown in Figures 2 and 3 reflect the fact that women's experience of class mobility over recent decades has become more like that of men, suggesting in turn that in this change factors relating to gender rather than to class inequalities *per se* have been of greatest importance.

Figure 2: Relative mobility rates based on father's class position at cohort member's age 10/11 and cohort member's class position at age 27/ 38 – Men

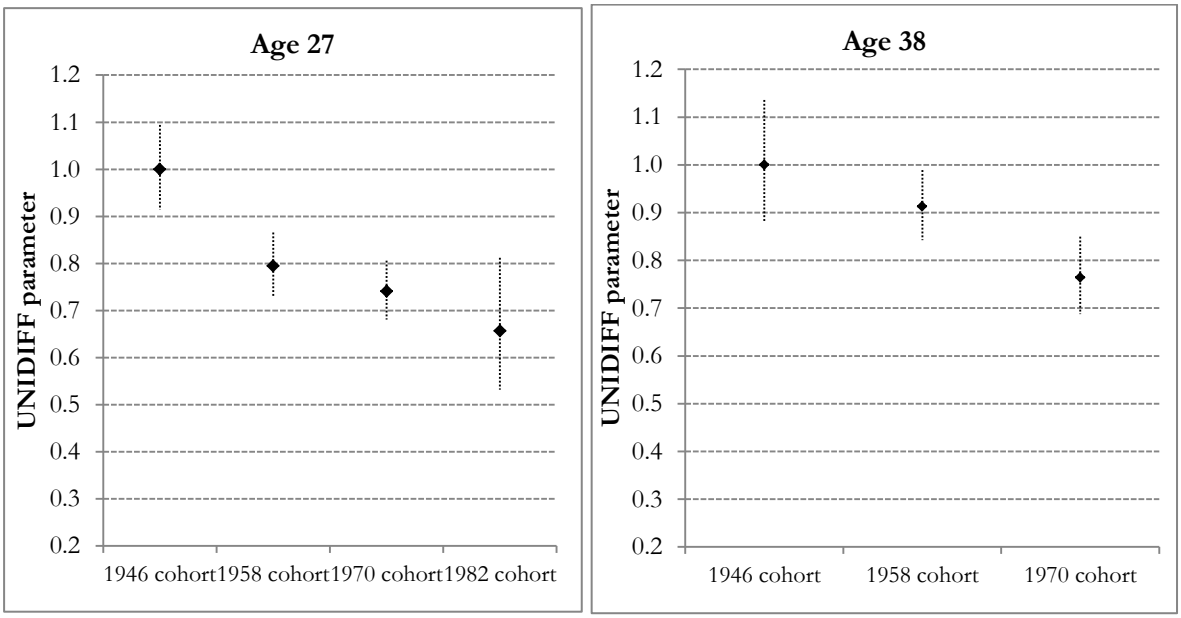


Figure 3: Relative mobility rates based on father's class position at cohort member's age 10/11 and cohort member's class position at age 27/38 – Women

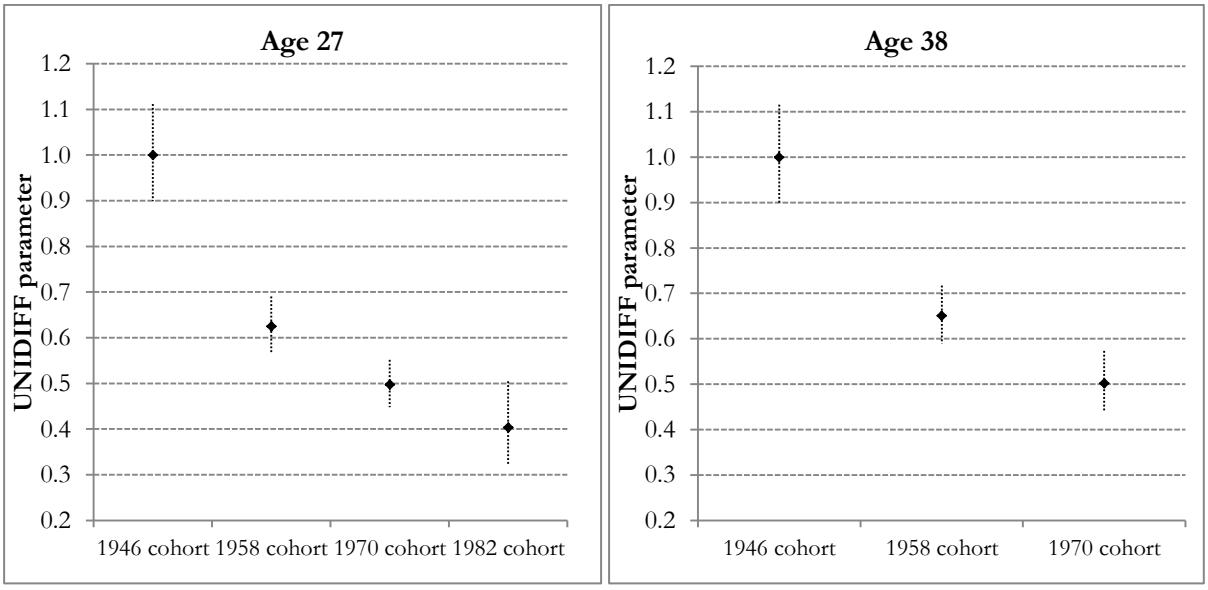
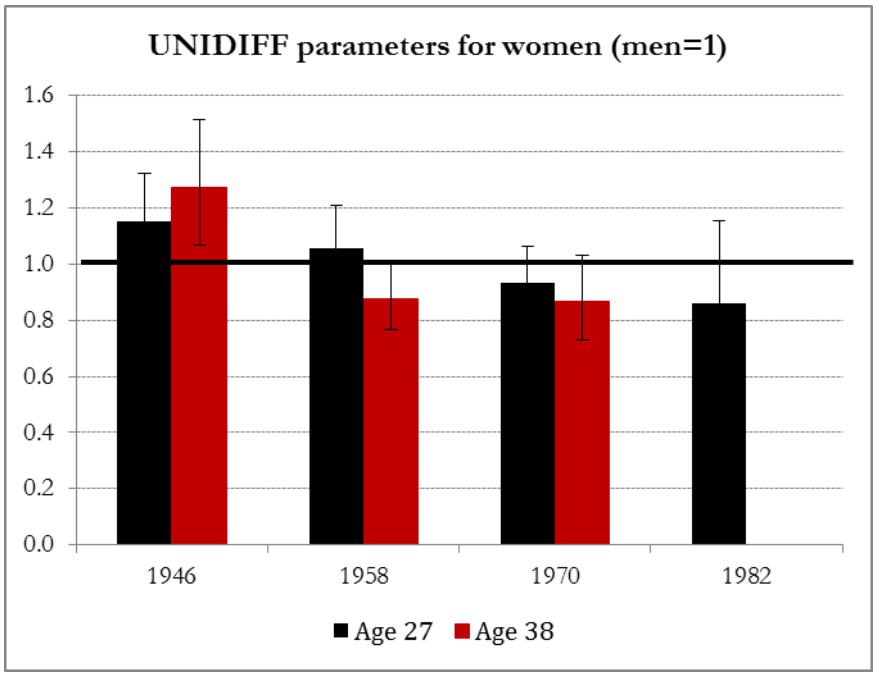


Figure 4: Relative mobility rates based on father's class position at cohort member's age 10/11 and cohort member's class position at age 27/38 – Gender comparison within cohorts



Conclusions

Attempts at determining trends in rates of social mobility give rise to a range of methodological issues which have in the British case resulted in much uncertainty and confusion.

In this paper we attempt to take account of these issues in the following ways. First, we focus on social mobility as understood in terms of intergenerational class mobility, using an established and well validated class schema - NS-SEC. We can in this way capture to a relatively high degree the transmission of economic advantage and disadvantage that occurs from generation to generation. Second, we base our analyses on data for four birth cohorts, the experience of whose members allows us to extend our knowledge of class mobility from the twentieth into the twenty-first century. At the same time, though, we are able to show that our results have a large measure of continuity with those from studies of mobility trends based on samples of the complete adult British population, which then provide us with a valuable historical context. Thirdly, we maintain throughout the distinction between absolute and relative rates of mobility which in the economics literature is often not explicitly and systematically recognised.

Proceeding thus, we produce results to show that claims of declining social mobility in Britain, generally accepted in political and media circles, have in fact little foundation. As regards absolute mobility, total mobility rates show little change, and while some decline is revealed in upward mobility, this does not extend to upward mobility into the professional and managerial

salariat which, among women, is actually increasing. As regards relative rates, there are no indications of any decline, and among women there is clear evidence of an increase over recent decades - i.e. of the mobility regime experienced by women becoming more fluid, and, perhaps, more fluid than that prevailing among men.

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