

Review of *Social Mobility and Education in Britain: Research, Politics and Policy*

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Forthcoming in Journal of Social Policy

Social Mobility and Education in Britain: Research, Politics and Policy draws on a substantial body of research conducted by its authors over many years with many collaborators. Given that, one might be concerned that it would struggle to draw out a consistent narrative. However, this is certainly not an issue with a carefully plotted account providing a persuasive account of insights and misunderstandings in the link between social mobility and education, along with how these findings have been interpreted by policymakers.

Its strength in exploring this particular issue is that it builds from strong foundations in the early chapters focusing on social mobility, which could stand alone as an exploration of issues in social mobility, towards its links to education in the latter part of the book. It lucidly explains the differences between concepts of absolute and relative mobility important to the full understanding of changes (or, perhaps, the lack thereof) in relative class mobility at a time when it is often assumed to have declined precipitously. Rather, it documents the end of a “golden age” of social mobility, as we have moved from a situation where social ascent was more common than social descent, to one where upward mobility is less common and downward mobility is more likely, due to the decline in the growth of high-status occupations.

Similarly, while the book’s sub-title rightly captures the book’s engagement with issues of politics and policy, it does not jump straight in here. Instead, the authors build from important conceptual and technical issues, to the practicalities of explaining the implications of these findings in the political and policymaking sphere. It is clearly pitched as, and definitely succeeds in being, an excellent starting point for those interested in this area of sociological research and why it is important. The flip side of this is that it is unlikely to hold many new insights for those familiar with the research literature in this area.

While not shying away from the fact that findings in social mobility research are based on multivariable statistical analysis of large-scale representative, quantitative data of sometimes substantial complexity, the book works hard to demonstrate the potentially dry statistical results. Particularly enjoyable are the compelling illustrative examples, for instance the cases of upward mobility against the odds as told by “Harold”, “Gordon” and “Carol”. These are not fictional but rather draw on the narrative cases collected as part of a recent sweep of the National Child Development Study, which are well chosen. These could be used to great effect by others working with this dataset and I hope this example will spur this on as it brings some of the strong narrative more commonly seen in writing predominantly built around case studies, such as the recent powerful contribution by Duncan Exley (2019).

The book describes and explains important findings about the potential for the education system to strengthen the intergenerational transmission of advantage, rather than weaken it as is frequently assumed by policy makers and, indeed, many researchers. The necessary conditions for education to perform a levelling role require a true weakening of the link between background and educational attainment; educational expansion of the type that has been attempted in recent years, for example widening access to university, does not

necessarily achieve this specific aim if it is cancelled out by emerging inequalities further up, for example in access to postgraduate education. Even where this can be achieved, more direct mechanisms such as “opportunity hoarding” could cancel these out leading to the picture of static mobility painted in this book. Particularly striking are the findings regarding lifelong learning, often a great hope in terms of promoting mobility, which suggest that this is, at least as it currently functions, entrenching rather than weakening social immobility.

I felt in places that the tone used when discussing research on relative income mobility by “economists” (e.g. Blanden et al., 2004), which is frequently used as a stand in for Blanden, Machin and collaborators, is unnecessarily dismissive. The book contends strongly for focusing on class mobility, which is clearly a defensible position. However, I would argue that this doesn’t require the dismissal of research focussing on income mobility. Rather, the divergence of findings points to other interesting dynamics at play, which have increasingly been explored in recent years, such as the increases in within-class income inequality (Blanden, Gregg and Macmillan, 2013) including its manifestation as an earnings “class ceiling” within high-status occupations (Laurison and Friedman, 2016).

It is welcome that the book engages with issues of social mobility among both men and women, as this has often been missing from accounts of intergenerational mobility until rather recently. Indeed, the discussion of changes in patterns of social mobility among women associated with increases in more socially advantaged women working part time (and, in doing so, trading off class position for family life) demonstrates the importance of considering differences in patterning of social mobility among different demographic groups in society.

In summary, this is a relevant read not just for those engaging in research on social mobility and particularly its link with education, but also for policymakers seeking to develop their understanding of the challenges inherent in using only education policy to promote a fairer society. The book’s final chapter makes a strong case that such efforts must be coupled with more radical steps if politicians’ warm words for promoting social mobility are to be anything more than words.

Bibliography

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