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Intra-generational social mobility and educational qualifications[☆]

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Abstract

The relation between intra-generational social class mobility of parents and their children's subsequent educational qualifications, and the implications of this relation for educational stratification, is explored by fitting statistical models to data from two UK longitudinal datasets: one based on the UK Census (ONS LS) and the 1970 birth cohort study (BCS70). Children whose parents are upwardly mobile gain higher educational qualifications than their peers in their class of origin, but obtain lower qualifications than their peers in their class of destination. The reverse pattern is observed for the downwardly mobile. These results mirror those obtained for the relation between adult intra-generational social mobility and a number of widely used measures of health. The implications of the findings for different explanations of the social class gradient in educational attainment are examined. The findings provide greater support for theoretical explanations of educational inequalities that are based on differences in economic circumstances between social classes than they do for explanations based on social class variations in the levels of cultural capital and aspirations. This conclusion is strengthened by the fact that the overall pattern of results from these analyses is unchanged after statistically controlling for levels of parental education. The findings also have methodological implications for measuring the social class gradient in attainment and qualifications.

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Keywords: Educational qualifications; Social class gradient; Intragenerational mobility; Longitudinal data; Cultural capital; Rational action theory

1. Introduction

The association between occupational social class and educational attainment is well-established and robust across societies and over time: on average, children from working (or manual) class backgrounds do less well on school tests and have lower educational

qualifications than their middle class peers (Ball, 2010; Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993). Moreover, there is a social class gradient in that the mean levels of attainment rise with each rung of the social class ladder. What is much less clear is why this gradient exists: which features of class background lead to differences in educational attainment?

One way of exploring the plausibility of different pathways between parental social position and children's educational attainment is to examine the consequences of change in family circumstances. There are very few studies that have done this explicitly. In this paper, we use longitudinal data to examine a young adult's level of educational qualifications in the light of whether they experience a change in their parents'

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social class during their years of schooling. By doing so, we change the focus of research from the mediators of static family circumstances to the comparison of children's attainment between socially mobile and socially stable families. Much sociological investigation has been devoted to inter-generational social mobility (between the social class of parents and adult children). These studies usually assume that social class does not change across the first part of the life course. There is a small body of research (e.g. Akee, Copeland, Keeler, Angold, & Costello, 2010) that has examined the effects of changes in family income (not social class), finding that increases in income have some influence on educational progress at the lower end of the income scale, but the effect is negligible for middle and higher income families (Bratti, 2002; Crosnoe & Cooper, 2010). Changes in parental social class are likely to be associated with changes in family income. We are, however, arguably in a better position to understand the link between family circumstances and educational outcomes if we focus on the broader changes implied by changes in parental social class rather than just on the one dimension of short-term changes in family income.

A potentially important issue arising in studies of intra-generational social mobility is "gradient constraint". Gradient constraint is the tendency found in many health studies for measures of health among the socially mobile to lie between the average levels found in their social classes of 'origin' (i.e. at age a_1) and 'destination' (i.e. at age a_2 ; $a_2 > a_1$) (Bartley & Plewis, 1997, 2007; Blane, Harding, & Rosato, 1999; Langenberg, Hardy, Kuh, Brunner, & Wadsworth, 2003; Power, Manor, & Li, 2002). Can we expect to observe similar effects when investigating educational qualifications rather than health as the outcome? In health studies, the presence of gradient constraint can be interpreted as showing that downward social mobility by those in poor health, and upward mobility by those in good health, is not a cause of the well-known social inequalities in health. On the contrary, if there were no social mobility, health inequalities would in fact be greater than those observed in cross-sectional studies (Sacker, Clarke, Wiggins, & Bartley, 2005).

The paper proceeds as follows: The next two sections discuss the theoretical background on educational stratification, and a methodological issue arising from gradient constraint as it might affect the assessment of educational inequalities. The longitudinal data sources are then introduced along with a description of the extent of intra-generational mobility that they reveal. The statistical approach used to assess the association between social mobility and educational qualifications is then

described followed by the results from the modelling. Implications of these results for understanding social class gradients are presented before the paper concludes with some remarks about the data and methods we use.

2. Theoretical background

The route to attaining educational qualifications of value in the labour market has two stages: the primary stage of reaching a minimum standard on school tests during the compulsory years of schooling and, conditional on that achievement, the secondary stage of choosing to make the transition to post-compulsory schooling. The outcomes for both these stages are socially patterned although not necessarily as a result of the same underlying processes (Jackson, Erikson, Goldthorpe, & Yaish, 2007).

Several explanations have been put forward for the relationship between social position and educational attainment. Goldthorpe and colleagues (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997; Goldthorpe, 1996) have put forward rational action theory as a way of explaining at least some of the persistent social gradient in educational attainment. They argue that there are three factors which determine the choices of families as to where their children should aim academically, particularly after the end of compulsory schooling. The first of these is the beliefs that parents hold about the likelihood that their child will be able to attain a given level. The second is parents' expectations as to the cost of attaining that level. Lower-income families may be fearful of the potential costs of sending children to further or higher education (Destin & Oyserman, 2009). The third is parents' beliefs about the likelihood that a given level of attainment will protect their child from loss of status in comparison to his or her origins. As a result, not all pupils aim for the highest result regardless but instead adopt a course of action that seems realistic and will avoid downward social mobility. For those from more advantaged families, this means going to university. But those whose parents are members of, for example, the skilled working class, will tend to choose an educational pathway such as vocational education which they believe offers the best chance of success rather than the one – a degree, for example – which might lead to higher income and status than their parents (Goldthorpe, 1996; Hansen, 2008; Stocké, 2007).

Another set of explanations focus more directly on resources. Less advantaged social class position of the head of household is closely related to lower household income and wealth, and this may result in a number of outcomes potentially detrimental to educational

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