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Overlooked insights from mobility instances? Reconsider our understanding of mobility processes

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Abstract

Drawing on some selected cases from a qualitative mobility study, I seek to make use of their insights to reconsider our current understanding of mobility processes derived from studies adopting a snapshot approach. My data demonstrate that viewed in a lifetime perspective the relationship between father's career mobility and son's career mobility and thus inter-generational mobility, especially in relation to the self-employed, is much more complicated than researchers have expected, and that emotion could play a part in processes that generate mobility. These cases, however statistically unrepresentative or even exceptional, still serve to urge us researchers to re-conceptualise processes that link career mobility and inter-generational mobility and to explore the emotive aspect of class and mobility.

Keywords: Career mobility; Inter-generational mobility; Family strategies; Snapshot approach; The selfemployed; Hong Kong

1. Introduction

The last decades have seen significant progress in research on social stratification and mobility. With collective efforts of mobility researchers, nineteen empirical generalisations about industrial societies have been reached (Hout & DiPrete, 2006). For example, a rather striking macro pattern of social mobility is well established for many industrial societies: that is, despite variations industrial-capitalist societies exhibit common patterns of social fluidity over time (e.g. Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992; Featherman, Jones, & Hauser, 1975; Lipset & Bendix, 1959; Lipset & Zetterberg, 1956). In short, but for collective efforts of mobility researchers, findings of this kind concerning macro patterns or social regularities, as opposed to micro processes, especially across countries, would have otherwise been impossible. In pursuit of this collective endeavour, the past decades have witnessed numerous variable-oriented quantitative mobility studies paying overwhelming attention to measuring the amount of mobility, especially that of vertical mobility. What is crucial to the success of this collective endeavour is a compromise, if not a consensus: with the help of advanced statistical techniques, despite severe debates over theoretical issues, practicality, and technicality, mobility researchers finally come to agree to adopt a set of common practices in carrying out mobility studies (cf. Crompton, 1998). Given the observed patterns, it then seems logical to move on to ask how such macro patterns are brought about: how is social mobility generated? Put slightly differently, how should mobility processes be theorised? However, with a view to answering questions of this sort, many mobility researchers continue to conduct variable-oriented quantitative stud-

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ies and thus to follow the so-called common practices. Actually, the so-called common practices are not without disputes. In particular, what is under severe attack is a snapshot approach adopted in many quantitative mobility studies that seek to document mobility patterns: it uses two snapshots to analyze two major types of mobility: the first is inter-generational mobility – measured by the difference between class origin (father's job when son was aged fourteen or fifteen) and class destination (son's current job) – and the second is career mobility – measured by the difference between initial class position (son's first job) and class destination. In doing so, this approach seems to over-simplify the operation of mobility processes underlying the observed mobility patterns. As Sorensen (1986) argues, this practice freezes the class position of both father and son at one point in time; similarly, one's career development is frozen at two points in time. This practice seems to assume that after a certain point there is not much chance for any father or son to develop their career further (cf. Sorensen, 1974). In other words, this practice also implies that the operation of mobility processes is completed at a certain point and thus confines our examination before that certain point.

In fact, in order to provide a better understanding of processes that generate the observed mobility patterns, mobility researchers have made efforts to design new practices and to use alternative approaches. As regards illuminating how career mobility is generated, using a life course approach (e.g. Mayer, 1986; Mayer & Hillmert, 2003) and optimal matching (Abbott & Hrycak, 1990) are two examples. What is of particular relevance here is the potential contributions of qualitative studies, in comparison with variable-oriented quantitative studies, in examining processes that generate social mobility (cf. Goldthorpe, 2000). More specifically, qualitative mobility studies, by design, allow us to focus on instances (as opposed to rates) of social mobility and in their examinations they refer to actors and their actions rather than independent variables and their effects on dependent variables (cf. Coleman, 1986; Elster, 1998); and therefore, it is suggested that qualitative studies be seen as playing a special role in illuminating processes that generate social mobility. In response to this suggestion, I conducted a qualitative mobility study that sought to examine instances of social mobility and thus to illustrate how mobility was generated; its results were published in the form of journal article (Wong, 2004, 2005, 2007a, 2007b). I shall not repeat them here. Rather, what I seek to do in this paper is to refer to some selected cases and make use of their rich details so as to highlight their insights, perhaps overlooked, into theorising mobility processes. Surely, these selected cases could well be regarded as statistically exceptional or simply insignificant. However, as I shall argue below, these cases could well be theoretically significant; at least, they serve to urge us mobility researchers to reconsider our current understanding of mobility processes derived from studies using a snapshot approach. In what follows, first I shall briefly describe the design of the study from which the cases for this paper are selected. I shall then go on to discuss the insights of these cases. And I shall end this paper with a highlight of three issues that I would like researchers to join me to have a rethink.

2. Source of data

Cases reported for this paper are selected from a qualitative mobility study of contemporary Hong Kong. This study sought to examine how mobility was generated by investigating the mobility strategies of individuals of various class origins for getting into a socially desirable class in post-war Hong Kong.[1] Hong Kong was chosen because as an industrial-capitalist society it was found to exhibit a similar mobility pattern to its Western counterparts (Chan, 1994). Occupations are commonly seen as a proxy of class (cf. Crompton, 1998); and, the service class (Classes I and II) of Goldthorpe class scheme (referring to professionals, administrators, and managers) is chosen as a socially desirable class destination (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992: 39–42). In operational terms, two occupational groups of the service class were selected for the study: teachers and managers.[2] They were chosen for the following reason. Given the constraints of time and resources, I could not study every occupational group of the service class but had to be selective. Unlike many specific service-class occupations which could only be found in Class I or Class II of Goldthorpe class scheme, such as doctors or lawyers (Class I) or nurses or social workers (Class II), teachers and managers are two rather broad categories including a wider range of occupations from both Class I (university lecturers or international corporation CEOs) and Class II (school teachers or small firm managers).[3] So, presumably, their mobility experiences are not specific to some occupations but could be used to represent the general mobility experience of the service class. Then, I recruited people who met my selection criteria through

[1] This study was funded in the form of J.K. Swire Memorial Scholarship 1995–1998.

[2] For other reasons, I recruited only teachers and managers with at least one child aged six or above.

[3] For more details on my rationale, please see Wong (2001, chap. 2).