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# A Summary of What We Know about Social Mobility

By  
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Academic research on social mobility from the 1960s until now has made several facts clear. First, and most important, it is better to ask how the conditions and circumstances of early life constrain adult success than to ask who is moving up and who is not. The focus on origins keeps the substantive issues of opportunity and fairness in focus, while the mobility question leads to confusing side issues. Second, mobility is intrinsically symmetrical; each upward move is offset by a downward move in the absence of growth, expansion, or immigration. Third, social origins are not a single dimension of inequality that can be paired with the outcome of interest (without significant excluded variable bias); they are a comprehensive set of conditions describing the circumstances of youth. Fourth, the constraints of social origins vary by time, place, and subpopulation. These four “knowns” should inform any attempt to collect new data on mobility.

*Keywords:* social mobility; opportunity; social origins; life chances

Discussions in public media show that Americans now worry that the engine of social mobility has stalled. Worry abounds where pride once held sway. Generations of Americans took for granted that each succeeding generation did better than the last. No more. Stagnant wages, insufficient employment opportunity, and rising inequality stand in the way of young people’s aspirations. Scholars would like to join the conversation with facts to confirm or allay the public’s worries. But the United States has not conducted a large-scale social mobility study since 1973. Small-scale

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surveys of the adult population, most notably the General Social Survey (GSS) (Smith et al. 2013), provide some information, but the samples are so small that the estimates are too imprecise to be useful. Data on specific cohorts, most notably the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID; 2013), are crucial sources of information for the cohorts they cover but limited for estimating changes over time. Anticipating a new large-scale initiative to monitor mobility, this article summarizes the academic consensus regarding social mobility and draws out the implications for data collection and statistical modeling.

## The Wrong Question

“Who is moving up in America?” is an intuitive and appealing question to ask. Unfortunately, it is also the wrong question. That is because, in seeking an answer to it, we must confront complicated side issues that distract attention from the fundamentals that make it interesting. We ask about mobility because we care about opportunity and fairness and think if society provides opportunity and does so fairly, then more people will move up as time goes on. Academic research since the 1960s has shown that moving up depends more on growth than either opportunity or fairness (Duncan 1966; Jencks 2002). The correct question is: “To what extent do the conditions and circumstances of early life constrain success in adulthood?”

Focusing on the conditions and circumstances of early life—routinely referred to as “social origins”—accomplishes three things that get us closer to the ultimate questions of whether society offers opportunity and whether it does so fairly. First, the reorientation to social origins reassigns attributes of parents and neighborhoods to the person of interest. We are not intrinsically interested in the father or mother of a person who is part of our mobility study. We only care about those people as a means for figuring out the subject before us. By thinking of the parents’ attributes as part of our subject’s social origins, we can think about them more clearly as something that helps or hinders our subject (Duncan 1966).

If we fail to make the conceptual shift, we can get distracted by trying (vainly) to tie data collected on subjects’ fathers to the period when those fathers earned their degrees, held their jobs, and earned their incomes. Tying fathers to specific dates tells us little about contemporary opportunity and fairness (Duncan 1969), but the attempt to do so consumed much scholarly attention in the 1950s and 1960s. There are important questions of demography and inequality to be addressed (Mare 1997; Mare and Maralani 2006; Mare 2011), but not in the pursuit of answers to the mobility question.

Second, asking about social origins broadens the scope of inquiry beyond the parent’s attribute—educational attainment, occupational status, earnings, and so forth—that matches the subject’s attribute that is the dependent variable in the study. Instead of focusing entirely on, say, father’s and son’s occupation or mother’s and daughter’s education, focusing on social origins invites us to characterize as fully as possible the conditions and circumstances of early life. Intellectually this

gets us to the heart of the matter, enumerating the social facts that block opportunity and create unfairness. Practically it avoids the risk of attributing the effects of one variable to another—known in the technical literature as “excluded variable bias.” The full list of conditions and circumstances in early life include attributes of the person, the family, the neighborhood, or the historical era (e.g., birth weight, mother’s earnings, family size, neighborhood poverty, cut-off age for compulsory schooling in the state where the subject was in secondary school). This approach is exemplified in classics of the sociological literature by Blau and Duncan (1967) and Featherman and Hauser (1978) and much of the work of recent years.

Finally, focusing on social origins avoids confusion about whether mobility is progress. Most people seem to think it is. Popular culture is full of references like “rags-to-riches” and “every child had a pretty good shot to get at least as far as their old man got.”<sup>21</sup> Colloquial use implies “upward” when “mobility” is unmodified. But many people experience downward mobility. There is no mobility table in the literature in which all the cases are found in cells pertaining to upward mobility and immobility. They all record substantial downward mobility. Dropping the fixation on difference and focusing on constraints avoids all these side issues.

## Mobility is Symmetrical in the Absence of Growth or Immigration

Mobility occurs when the correlation between origins and destinations is less than perfect. An imperfect correlation implies movement down as well as up. If there is neither economic growth nor immigration, mobility is symmetrical in the sense that each upward move is offset by a downward one; upwardly mobile people exchange positions in the social structure with downwardly mobile people (Sobel, Hout, and Duncan 1985).

Mobility tables never exhibit identical marginals across generations, except by construction; if the researcher takes out the trend by norming the categories to time-specific quintiles, for example, then upward and downward moves appear to be equally prevalent. Upward moves typically outnumber downward moves in reality. Most common mobility measures (except the simple mobility rate itself) miss this. The correlation, for example, removes the mean in each generation and gauges mobility relative to the average person in each generation. The net upward flow can be measured in a bivariate mobility table using the measures proposed by Sobel, Hout, and Duncan (1985). It is a function of the intercept in a regression model, though it is clearest if the first generation and second generation are both measured relative to the first generation’s mean.

Thinking about correlations and the symmetry of mobility keeps us out of the trap of thinking only of upward mobility when looking at evidence of mobility that combines upward and downward moves. Noting that growth pushes upward also invites us to think about ways in which growth might promote the upward mobility we value.

## The Circumstances of Birth and Upbringing—"Social Origins"—Meld Several Factors

The square table of income or occupational categories and the mobility rate that we can easily calculate from a square table have great intuitive appeal. But they are misleading. We need to measure the complexity of people's backgrounds to adequately assess the degree to which those circumstances constrain success.

Economic resources such as family income and wealth are self-evidently important. But it is equally evident that knowing just one year's income or wealth is hardly adequate. Dozens of studies (e.g., Solon 1992; Mazumder 2005) show that averaging or otherwise accumulating income (at least first-generation income) yields higher estimates of the intergenerational correlation and elasticity than we get from single-year calculations. It is also increasingly clear that total family income is a better marker for origins than father's income, as mothers play a greater role in family fortunes more or less continuously over time.

The employment status and quality of employment of family members are also important. The men covered in past big mobility studies grew up in households dominated by the father's economic fortunes; that is no longer descriptive of the American experience. Not only must mothers' labor force participation be accounted for, we cannot assume that men work consistently throughout their children's formative years. The employment to population ratio among prime-working-age men has been falling since 1980 (Hout, Levanon, and Cumberworth 2011).

Social scientists have been trying to assess the heritable part of intergenerational persistence since the late 1960s (e.g., Jencks et al. 1972). Because it is correlated with parental education and probably occupations and income, genetic endowment is an essential part of social origins. Measuring it through the resemblance of twins or other siblings is one way to address it. A more directly biological approach would be hard to implement at this time.

Cultural endowment, particularly parents' education, is even more crucial for educational attainment than economic resources and employment. Given education's mediating role in the process of adult attainment, both parents' educations (part of the 1973 mobility study) are the minimum needed. In the GSS, missing data on fathers are substantial, more than 20 percent in recent cohorts.<sup>2</sup> An additional possibility, shown to affect inequality of educational opportunity net of standard social origin variables, is the number of books at home when the subject was growing up (Evans et al. 2010).

Family structure is a major factor in inequality of opportunity. The gap between two-earner families and single-parent families is large and getting larger (Fischer and Hout 2006). Family disruption can be a factor in achievement, independent of other variables, and it can also alter the effects of other variables (McLanahan and Percheski 2008). It may well be part of the pattern of changing father-son mobility in the United States in the 1980s compared with the 1970s (Biblarz and Raftery 1999). Excluding mother's occupation can lead to serious bias in estimating the effects of other variables (Beller 2009).

Family structure itself is a complex of advantages, disadvantages, and relationships. Economic resources are part of the package. More adults implies more potential earners and more economic security. Even if one of the adults chooses not to work, that choice often reflects the freedom to remove oneself from the labor force because the other adult(s) can support the family. Of course it is not always true, especially when unemployment is high. More adults in the home also can mean more time and attention in child care and socialization. Grandparents can, but do not always, compensate for the absence of one of the adults.

Nonresident relatives may also matter for opportunity (Mare 2011). Extended family members can take active and passive roles as caregivers, sources of informal credit for the family, potential employers, or just role models. They do not even have to be alive, as Mare points out. A male relative from a past generation who attended an elite college confers a legacy advantage on the admissions prospects of all who come later.

Family locations ranging from neighborhood to nation form social, economic, and cultural contexts that can amplify or mute the effects of personal and family characteristics. In addition, neighborhoods themselves appear to be inheritable (Sharkey 2008, 2013).

Race, ancestry, nativity, and citizenship are all major factors in opportunity (Massey 2010). African Americans faced substantial discrimination from their arrival as slaves into the present day. The residual difference in their lower educational, occupational, and earnings almost certainly reflects the legacy of that discrimination and may reflect ongoing discrimination. Similarly, Mexican Americans faced legal discrimination and still encounter substantial prejudice. Foreign-born people, almost regardless of country of origin, face at least some additional scrutiny if not outright prejudice and exclusion. And citizens have rights to financial aid and hiring preferences that can block noncitizens from these benefits.

Life chances can even depend on the year in which a person was born. Avoiding a war or depression early in life or early in one's career can help advancement compared with the obstacles faced by those whose lives are disrupted. More subtle shifts in social policy or social norms might also affect a person's opportunities. Women born prior to 1950 had no chance of being admitted to an Ivy League university; women born in 1951 or later had ever increasing chances (DiPrete and Buchmann 2013). It is likely that gay or lesbian professionals have more opportunity in recent years than 50 years ago.

## Social Origins Constrain Success to Varying Degrees

No single coefficient can represent the constraint of social origins on all Americans, because it varies. The interest in the subject swells now precisely because many people think it has changed; inequality of opportunity varies over time. Featherman and Hauser (1978) showed a significant decrease in the father-son correlation between 1962 and 1973, and the association for both men and

women decreased from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s (Hout 1988; DiPrete and Grusky 1990).

I already mentioned a number of important interactions between origins and family structure in explaining achievement. Education acts as a social leveler in the sense that the association between origins and destinations is weaker for college graduates than for less educated Americans (Hout 1984b, 1988). Torche (2011) has recently discovered, though, that origins reemerge as a factor among Americans with advanced degrees.

Some theories of inequality of opportunity imply that the association between origins and destinations will vary across labor markets of different size and complexity, by gender, and by race (e.g., McCall 2001). Yet there is only limited evidence that they do. For example, Curtis and Jackson (1977) compared six local labor markets that varied from major metropolis to small town and found no significant differences, a null finding that stood until the very recent research of Chetty et al. (2014). Similarly, numerous attempts to discover gender differences failed until Beller (2009) discovered same-sex persistence in data from the 1990s and early 2000s. That is, more sons than otherwise would be expected, all else being equal, work in the occupation their father had, and more daughters than would be expected, all else being equal, work in the occupation their mother had.

Racial patterns are more complicated. In the original Blau-Duncan study, black men from relatively privileged origins were no more likely to work in better-than-average occupations than were other black men. The heavy hand of racial discrimination relegated all men to a uniformly low set of opportunities (Blau and Duncan 1967). By 1973 a number of black men had experienced significant upward mobility. The upwardly mobile were disproportionately drawn from relatively privileged backgrounds; men whose first employment came after 1962 experienced a pattern of association between their origins and destinations that was indistinguishable from that of white men (Hout 1984a). The father-son correlation for blacks came to be the same as that for all other men (Featherman and Hauser 1978).

## Implications for Data Collection

If the relevant social origins are more complex than one parent's value on a single variable, data collection will be more complex in proportion to how complicated we think origins really are. At a minimum we need information on both parents' education and occupation at the time that the respondent was facing major educational transitions. Family income in those years is also a must. People report their parents' education and occupation with acceptable reliability (Bielby, Hauser, and Featherman 1978; Hout and Hastings 2011). Income is much harder. The sum or average of earnings over several years correlates with second-generation income more strongly than earnings from any one year (Mazumder 2005). People cannot be expected to remember that kind of detail about their parents' finances. Most studies that pool parents' information over time interview the parents directly, as in the PSID or the Wisconsin Longitudinal Survey (WLS).

Administrative records are far more promising for the kind of broad mobility study we have in mind. Information from tax records is both more accurate and more complete. But while we can certainly ask adults to provide information about their parents without obtaining permission from the parents, we may—if the parents are still living—need the parents' permission to access their administrative records. Contacting living parents will add considerably to the cost of collecting data. The expense is well-justified, however, as conjectures about the growing importance of income as a stratifying factor in American life are among the central questions, if not the central question, to be addressed by this study.

In addition to the data needed to compare education, occupation, and income across generations, we need data on family structure. The presence or absence of the biological parents, stepparents, and grandparents in or near the household defines the context of the other components of origin. Absent parents almost certainly have less influence than ones who lived with respondents during childhood and adolescence. Many researchers will want to identify differences in the stratification process among families with different composition. Others will want to standardize the family structure before making comparisons over time. Both of these kinds of comparisons require good data on family structure, perhaps at different stages of the respondent's childhood and adolescence.

## Implications for Modeling and Estimation

The classic mobility table cross-classifies a parent's attributes—education, occupation, or income—by the corresponding attribute of the person who was interviewed. The output is simple and direct. The descriptive results—"X percent of persons of middle origins moved up to the top destination"—are powerful and often easily memorized. Unfortunately the simple, direct, and powerful number we memorize overstates the impact of the origin variable being discussed while hiding variation crucial to understanding the social process of social mobility. It is a two-edged kind of misplaced concreteness.

The problem with measuring one facet and leaving out others is well understood within the standard statistical literature on excluded variable bias and discussed in introductory textbooks. Alwin and Hauser (1975) gave it a particularly cogent discussion in the context of mobility studies. In short the bivariate correlation between parent and offspring is the sum of all actual effects of the parental status, direct and indirect, and the spurious component that arises because the parental attribute of interest is correlated with other parental attributes. While the discussion in Alwin and Hauser pertains to linear regression models, their conclusions generalize perfectly well to the categorical data analysis typically used in mobility table research (Hout 1984b).

The most obvious statistical solution is the one used in other kinds of studies: adding statistical controls for observable social background variables. Only factors that contribute to the spurious part need to be included. Intervening variables, like education in a father-son correlation, need not be controlled because they are part of the indirect effect; we can just think of estimates



of origin coefficients and elasticities as reduced form estimates. The statistical complications of limited dependent variables add some hurdles, but they are not insurmountable. DiPrete (1990) spelled out how to incorporate covariates in mobility (and other) tables more than 20 years ago. The approach is far from fully exploited or even explained in the one journal article. The full array of conventional models for mobility tables, including those for ordered categories, can be accommodated in this framework (that goes by the unfortunate name of “stereotype logistic regression models”).

Sibling models promise the opportunity to control both observable and unobservable family effects by capturing all the constant family effects that siblings share. In practice, however, modeling is not as straightforward as it seems (Griliches 1979; Hauser 1988); decomposing total variance into between- and within-family components can be a powerful approach. Thus, the 1973 Occupational Changes in a Generation Survey (OCG) design that asked for reports on brothers might be elaborated (at least for a random subset of respondents).

## Conclusion

Knowledge about American social mobility based on the last two large-scale national mobility studies (Blau and Duncan 1967; Featherman and Hauser 1978) and other sources of data has deepened our understanding of the mobility phenomenon. While the main justification for a new social mobility initiative is to update estimates of benchmark rates and correlations, the opportunity to accumulate new knowledge may yield an even bigger dividend. Interesting new data frequently draw new scholars to a subject. A large new mobility dataset would be no exception. Sociologists, demographers, economists, and statisticians have already built interdisciplinary relationships that abet dissemination of new results.

The accumulated knowledge to date emphasizes four points: (1) Framing the question as one of mobility—the difference in social standing from one generation to the next—raises the wrong questions. Replacing that focus on difference with the idea that social origins may be either a large or small constraint on adult success leads to clearer and more policy-relevant research. (2) People move both up and down in relation to others and their own origins. Economic advancement and differentiation play a very large role in the ratio of upward to downward moves. The stagnant wages and declining employment opportunities in the middle of the income and occupational distributions may be a bigger factor in Americans’ life chances than most discussions admit. (3) Social origins include many factors. Although like goes with like to a first approximation—parental education correlates most with offspring education, parental occupations with offspring occupations, and parental incomes with offspring incomes—it is better to think of origins as a complex of family-related factors, including the structure of the family itself. (4) Origins have more impact on success for some groups than

others. College graduates, in particular, are less constrained than people with less education. Family disruption, especially divorce, can reduce the ability of privileged parents to give their children advantages they otherwise would have. This often serves to reduce the intergenerational correlation for disrupted families.

This accumulated knowledge implies a more complicated measurement and modeling strategy than first appears. If we turn to an approach that relies on linking administrative records, the burden can be shifted away from survey respondents—a possibility that many of the contributions to this volume explore in detail.

## Notes

1. The latter is from the 1982 hit song “Allentown” by Billy Joel.
2. My calculation from Smith et al. (2013).

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