

### 3 | Class Mobility in Relative Terms: Resistance to Change

In this chapter we move on to consider intergenerational class mobility in relative rather than in absolute terms. We noted at the start of the previous chapter that by absolute class mobility is meant mobility as it can be directly observed as individuals move from one class position to another, and we showed how absolute mobility rates can be expressed in a fairly straightforward way through percentages. We also noted – somewhat cryptically – that relative mobility rates compare the chances of individuals of different class origins being found in different class destinations and reflect social processes creating inequalities in mobility chances that, as they operate within the class structure, generate absolute rates. We now need to expand on this statement: that is, we need to explain more fully the concept of relative mobility, to show how this concept is made operational in research, and to bring out the possible interrelations that can exist between changes in the class structure, in relative rates and, in turn, in absolute rates.

Relative rates of intergenerational class mobility are intended to capture what sociologists refer to as the ‘endogenous mobility regime’: that is, the total pattern of individuals’ relative chances of moving intergenerationally between different class positions when these chances are considered *net of* all changes in the class structure. This is in fact equivalent to saying, as will emerge, that relative rates capture the strength of the *inherent association* – of the inherent ‘stickiness’ – that exists between the class positions of parents and their children, whatever may be happening to the class structure. Sociologists take the strength of this inherent association as indicating the degree of *social fluidity* that prevails within the class structure: a strong association implies low fluidity, a weak association, high fluidity. It is, then, relative rather than absolute rates of mobility that are of prime relevance in regard to questions of how ‘open’ a society is or of the degree of equality of opportunity that exists within it.

Table 3.1 The odds ratio for Omega

		Class of destination		
Class of origin	a	b		Odds ratio
a	$F_{aa}$	$F_{ab}$		$\frac{F_{aa}}{F_{ab}}$
b	$F_{ba}$	$F_{bb}$		$\frac{F_{ba}}{F_{bb}}$

In measuring relative mobility rates, a key role is played by a statistic known as an *odds ratio*. Imagine a society – we may call it Omega since  $\Omega$  is the symbol often used for the odds ratio – that has only two classes, Class *a* and Class *b*. We can construct a hypothetical mobility table for Omega, on the lines shown on the left-hand side of Table 3.1, in which individuals’ class origins are cross-classified against their class destinations and *F* stands for frequency. Thus,  $F_{aa}$  is the number of individuals originating in Class *a* who are found in Class *a*,  $F_{ab}$  is the number originating in Class *a* who are found in Class *b*, and so on. The corresponding odds ratio will then be calculated as is shown on the right-hand side of Table 3.1.

What this odds ratio tells us is the chance of someone originating in Class *a* being found in Class *a* ( $F_{aa}$ ) rather than in Class *b* ( $F_{ab}$ ) *relative to* the chance of someone originating in Class *b* being found in Class *a* ( $F_{ba}$ ) rather than in Class *b* ( $F_{bb}$ ). If these chances were to be equal, then the odds ratio would obviously work out as 1, and this would mean that *no association* exists between individuals’ class origins and their class destinations. Someone originating in Class *a* has exactly the same chance of being found in Class *a* rather than in Class *b* as someone originating in Class *b*. In this case fluidity would be at its maximum level: or a state of ‘perfect mobility’ would prevail. Conversely, the more unequal the relative chances, the further the odds ratio would rise above 1, and the stronger would be the association between class origins and destinations and the lower the level of fluidity.<sup>1</sup>

As said above, relative rates of class mobility concern mobility treated independently of class structural change; and it is the crucially

<sup>1</sup> It would of course be possible for an odds ratio to fall below 1 but this would then imply a *negative* association between class origins and destinations.

Table 3.2 *Class mobility in Omega; results from three successive surveys*

Class of origin	Survey 1			Survey 2			Survey 3		
	Class of destination		Total	Class of destination		Total	Class of destination		Total
a	120	80	200	240	60	300	120	180	300
b	80	720	800	160	540	700	280	420	700
Total	200	800	1000	400	600	1000	400	600	1000
Total mobility (%)			16			22			46
Upward mobility (%)			8			16			28
Downward mobility (%)			8			6			18
Odds ratio			13.5			13.5			1.0

valuable property of odds ratios that they allow this to be done. To illustrate, we may stay with our imaginary society of Omega and consider results obtained from three successive mobility surveys carried out in this society. The first and second surveys were separated by years in which significant class structural change occurred, with Class *a* expanding and Class *b* contracting, and the second and third surveys were separated by years of class structural stability but in which a social revolution took place, leading to Class *a*, previously the superior class, losing the distinctive privileges that it had held over Class *b*. The results of the surveys, each of which was based on a random sample of 1,000 individuals drawn from Omega's population, are shown in the three mobility tables that are brought together in Table 3.2.

At the time of the first survey, as can be seen from the marginal distributions of the mobility table, Class *a* was much smaller than Class *b*. The total mobility rate was rather limited at 16 per cent ( $80 + 80/1000$ ) with this rate being then equally divided into 8 per cent of the total sample who were upwardly mobile from Class *b* to

Class *a* and 8 per cent moving in the reverse direction. Also at this stage in its history Omega could not be regarded as a very fluid society. As can further be seen, the odds ratio, following the formula given in Table 3.1, works out at 13.5: that is to say, the chances of someone originating in Class *a* being found in Class *a* rather than in Class *b* were thirteen and a half times greater than the chances of someone originating in Class *b* being found in Class *a* rather than in Class *b*.

By the time of the second survey, the marginal distributions of the mobility table show that Class *a* has expanded and Class *b* contracted. The total mobility rate has now increased to 22 per cent ( $160 + 60/1000$ ), with the upward component rising to 16 per cent while the downward component falls to only 6 per cent. Between the first two surveys, one might say, Omega enjoyed, as a result of the expansion of Class *a* – more room at the top – its own golden age of mobility, like that of Britain in the mid twentieth century in which social ascent became far more widely experienced than social descent. But did Omega at the same time become a more fluid society? In fact, it did not. Despite all the other changes, the odds ratio, again using the formula of Table 3.1, remains exactly as it was before at 13.5. The level of social fluidity is unaltered.

The third survey comes after the egalitarian revolution. The class structure has not changed further from the time of the second survey: the marginal distributions of the tables for the second and third surveys are identical. But the total mobility rate has increased substantially, up to 46 per cent ( $280 + 180/1000$ ), with the upward component rising from 16 to 28 per cent and the downward component also rising from 6 to 18 per cent. Given the stability of the class structure, these changes have then to be attributed entirely to the change in the odds ratio which, it can be seen, has been reduced, as a result of the revolution, from 13.5 down to 1: that is, down to a level indicating *no* association between individuals' class of origin and their class of destination – a state of perfect mobility has been created.

For our present purposes, the important point that this imaginary example brings out is the following. Relative mobility rates, as expressed through odds ratios, can remain unaltered even while class structural change is having a major effect on absolute rates – the total mobility rate and its upward and downward components. But if a change in relative rates does occur, this will necessarily influence

absolute rates – upward and downward alike – and even in the context of a stable class structure.<sup>2</sup>

In providing a way of capturing relative mobility chances, independently of structural effects, odds ratios play an essential role in the analysis of social mobility. But a difficulty does arise. If one need distinguish only two classes, as in the case of Omega, then there is only one odds ratio to be calculated, as we have shown. However, where more than two classes are distinguished, the number of odds ratios that is calculable rises rapidly with the number of classes. There is an odds ratio for every possible pair of classes of origin taken together with every possible pair of classes of destination. Thus, when we base our analyses of mobility on tables in the same form as those shown for Omega in Table 3.2 but using the seven NS-SEC classes, there are  $(7 \times 6)/2$  pairs of classes of origin to be taken together with  $(7 \times 6)/2$  pairs of classes of destination or, in all,  $21^2 = 441$  odds ratios involved.

We cannot therefore proceed simply by the inspection of odds ratios but have to resort to statistical models: that is, to models that make statements about odds ratios – all of the odds ratios of interest in a particular case – which models and the statements they embody can then be tested against the relevant empirical data. In examining relative rates of class mobility across the birth cohorts with which we are concerned, we apply three such models that can be specified as follows.

**Model 1: *The independence model.*** This model states that in mobility tables for men and women in our birth cohorts all odds ratios are equal to 1. That is, just as in post-revolutionary Omega, there is no association between class origins and destinations – they are

<sup>2</sup> What is crucial about odds ratios in this regard is that they are – to use the technical phrase – ‘margin insensitive’ measures of association. So with mobility tables like those of Table 3.2, the odds ratio will be insensitive to – i.e. will be unaltered by – any changes in the marginal distributions resulting from a row or column of the table being multiplied by a (non-zero) constant. The mobility table for Survey 2 is in fact derived from that for Survey 1 by multiplying the left-hand column by 2, so as to increase Class *a*, and the right-hand column by 0.75, so as to decrease Class *b*, and the odds ratio is thus left unchanged. In the mobility table for Survey 3 an odds ratio of 1, implying no association between class origins and destinations, is obtained by deriving each cell value from the marginal distributions of the table alone: i.e. by setting each cell value equal to the product of its corresponding row and column marginal values divided by the total *N* of 1000.

independent of each other – and perfect mobility prevails. We would not in fact expect this model to apply in any real society but it can serve as a useful baseline.

**Model 2: *The constant association (CA) model.*** This model – sometimes also referred to as the constant social fluidity model – states that there is an association between class origins and destinations but that all the odds ratios expressing this association *are constant over time* – in our case, across the birth cohorts that we distinguish. That is, just as in pre-revolutionary Omega between the first and second surveys, the level of social fluidity remains unaltered, regardless of any changes that may be occurring in the class structure.

**Model 3: *The uniform difference (UNIDIFF) model.*** This model states that there is an association between class origins and destinations but that over time – in our case, from one cohort to another – the odds ratios expressing this association *all change by some common multiplicative factor*, the parameter for which is labelled as  $\beta$ . That is to say, from one cohort to another all odds ratios, depending on the direction of change in the value of  $\beta$ , either increase or decrease to the same extent, so that social fluidity within the class structure, rather than being constant, is either systematically falling or systematically rising.<sup>3</sup>

How, then, do these models fare when we set them against our mobility data? We organise these data in the form of mobility tables, like those shown for Omega in Table 3.2, but using the seven NS-SEC classes as presented in Table 1.1, and then fit each of the three models to the data in turn. We focus here on results for men and women – treated separately – in the 1946, 1958 and 1970 birth cohorts. With

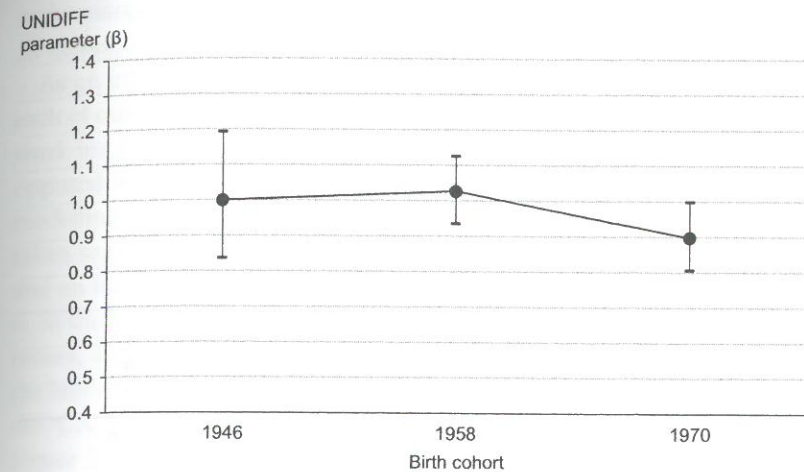
<sup>3</sup> In statistical terminology, Models 1 and 2 are loglinear models and Model 3 is a logmultiplicative model. Formal presentations of these models can be found in Bukodi et al. (2015). As noted in the Introduction, it is now generally recognised that the analysis of social mobility requires the application of statistical models rather than the calculation of various ad hoc indices directly from the data. Unfortunately, some British sociologists writing on mobility still wish to resort to such indices, which reflect the *combined* effects of structure and relative chances (see e.g. Payne, 2017: 134–6, 176–8). But whatever descriptive value these indices may have, given the class structure at a particular point in time, the confounding of effects involved means that they are of little value analytically – as, for example, in understanding *change* in either absolute or relative rates.

these cohorts we can determine class destinations at age 38, by around which age it is known that the probability of changes in occupation involving changes in class position falls away, whereas in earlier working life, as was previously noted, class positions are less stable, due mainly to upward worklife mobility.

We have in fact already anticipated the main outcome of our analyses in our discussion of absolute mobility rates in the previous chapter: that is, that across the cohorts *little directional change in relative rates occurs* – with then the implication that we wished to stress that changes in absolute rates have to be seen as essentially driven by class structural effects. However, we need now to spell out in some detail how we reach this conclusion regarding relative rates, and also to elaborate on the particular exception to it to which we also referred.<sup>4</sup>

To begin with men, we discover, not surprisingly, that Model 1, the independence model, does not give at all a good fit to the mobility tables for the three cohorts. Under this model, 15 per cent of all men in these cohorts would be misclassified – that is, would be placed in different cells of the mobility table to those in which they are actually found. We can then say that most of the odds ratios calculable within the tables do differ significantly from 1. For men in Britain over the period covered mobility was certainly not ‘perfect’. However, when with Model 2, the CA model, we allow for an association between individuals’ class origins and their class destinations but require that this association is at the same level in the tables for all three cohorts, we obtain a quite satisfactory fit to the data. Now only 4 per cent of all cases in the tables are misclassified and this lack of fit is not statistically significant: that is to say, one cannot safely rule out the possibility that all 441 corresponding odds ratios underlying the tables for the three cohorts are in fact the same – or, in other words, that constant social fluidity prevails. Moreover, if we go on to apply Model 3, the UNIDIFF model, envisaging some uniform increase or decrease in odds ratios from one cohort to another, we find that this gives no significant improvement over the CA model in its fit to the data.

<sup>4</sup> For further details of the research reported on in the following paragraphs, see Bukodi et al. (2015) and, specifically in regard to women, Bukodi et al. (2017).

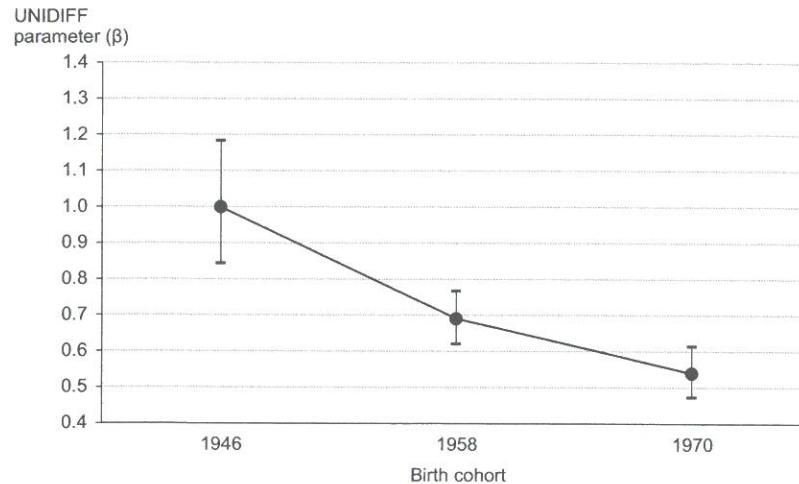


Source: Bukodi et al. (2015)

Figure 3.1 UNIDIFF parameters for 1946, 1958 and 1970 cohorts, men at age 38, with 95% confidence intervals

In Figure 3.1 we plot the  $\beta$  parameters that are returned with the UNIDIFF model: that is, the factors by which, under the model, odds ratios should increase or decrease from cohort to cohort. It can be seen that, taking the 1946 cohort as reference, a very slight increase between this cohort and the 1958 cohort is suggested – all odds ratios are to be multiplied by something just a little over 1; but this is followed by a somewhat larger decrease between the 1958 and the 1970 cohorts. There is, then, no sign here of any consistent directional change. And what it is more important is that the confidence intervals shown around the point estimates substantially overlap, thus indicating in another way that a conclusion of ‘no change’ in fluidity within the class structure is that which can best be drawn.

Turning to women, we find that, as with men, the independence model is far from fitting the data of the mobility tables we have constructed: 12 per cent of all individual cases are misclassified. But, also as with men, the CA model does provide an acceptable fit, by conventional statistical criteria, and again reduces the proportion of cases misclassified to 4 per cent. To this extent, no gender differences are apparent. However, when we move on to apply the UNIDIFF model, we obtain a somewhat surprising result. Despite the CA model being an acceptable one, the UNIDIFF model still significantly



Source: Bukodi et al. (2015)

Figure 3.2 UNIDIFF parameters for 1946, 1958 and 1970 cohorts, women at age 38, with 95% confidence intervals

improves on it, with now only 3 per cent of cases being misclassified. And, further, if, as shown in Figure 3.2, we plot the  $\beta$  parameters that are returned, we see that these decrease steadily across the cohorts and that there is no overlap of the confidence intervals. While we should not exaggerate the magnitude of the change that is involved here, some increase in fluidity among the women represented in our three cohorts has to be recognised.

The gender difference that in this way emerges is of obvious interest, and we would like to know how it comes about. One explanation that has been suggested for possibly increasing fluidity among women, but not among men, is that women move into part-time work more often than men, and thus become more exposed to what has been called 'perverse fluidity': that is, fluidity that results from constraints rather than from opportunity. When women become part-timers, as, say, for family reasons, it is known that, because of the limited range of jobs available to them, they have often to take up employment that implies downward mobility relative to their earlier full-time employment. And insofar as this downward worklife mobility is such as *also* to imply downward mobility intergenerationally, then, with the growing numbers of women working part-time, this could lead to a weakening

in the association between class origins and destinations – or, that is, to an increase in fluidity – becoming apparent among women at large.<sup>5</sup>

As an initial test of this explanation, we have divided the women in each of our cohorts into those who have and have not been in part-time work for a period of at least six months' duration – the 'part-timers' as opposed to the 'full-timers'. We have then repeated our previous modelling sequence on mobility tables for these two groups of women taken separately. The result is clear. The UNIDIFF model is preferred and an increase in fluidity is revealed *only among the part-timers*: that is, in their case we can essentially replicate Figure 3.2. Among the full-timers, and even among those who have had periods of absence from the labour market, the UNIDIFF model gives no improvement in fit on the CA model: that is, in their case we can essentially replicate Figure 3.1 for men. We can therefore say that the increase in fluidity that shows up among women is not general but is indeed confined to those who have had some experience of part-time work.

However, it does not necessarily follow from this that it actually is part-time work, and the downward worklife mobility to which it may lead, that generates the increasing fluidity among part-timers in inter-generational perspective. And if we go on to identify, from their detailed work histories, those part-timers who have in fact followed 'perverse fluidity' paths – that is, whose downward worklife mobility has also entailed downward intergenerational mobility – it turns out, first, that they are rather few in number, in fact less than 10 per cent of all part-timers, and, second, that the increase in fluidity is still clearly present among the majority of part-timers who have *not* followed such paths. Perverse fluidity cannot, then, be a satisfactory explanation for the general increase in fluidity among women who have worked part-time; and in turn the possibility is raised that an explanation has to be sought 'further back', so to speak, in the life-courses of these women.

In pursuing this possibility we do in fact obtain findings that are illuminating. Eventual part-timers, we discover, do not differ from full-timers in their class origins – they are just as likely to come from more advantaged as from less advantaged families; nor in the two later cohorts do they have consistently lower educational qualifications than

<sup>5</sup> An early version of the perverse fluidity explanation is given in Goldthorpe and Mills (2004). For evidence on the association between women's part-time working and downward worklife mobility, see Connolly and Gregory (2008), Dex, Ward and Joshi (2008) and Dex and Bukodi (2012).

full-timers at the time of entering the labour market. However, where they do differ is *in the level at which they enter*. They are significantly more likely than women who subsequently work only full-time to enter the labour market in wage-earning jobs falling into NS-SEC Classes 6 and 7, and even if at this point, as is the case with the large majority, they are working full-time.

What is therefore suggested is that those women who become part-timers *tend to have from the start a different orientation to work* to those who remain full-timers; one, it may be suggested, that entails giving priority – if initially, perhaps, in only an anticipatory way – to marriage or partnership and to family life. Thus, where these women come from more advantaged class backgrounds, they are in effect not seeking to exploit their advantages as fully as they probably could *in the context of their own working lives*. And since the numbers of women from Class 1 and 2 origins who eventually move into part-time work is steadily increasing across our cohorts, it would appear that it is the cumulative effects of the life-course choices made by these women, rather than the effects of part-time working itself, that produces the weakening in the association between class origins and destinations that we find among part-timers.<sup>6</sup>

One further point may be added that confirms but at the same time qualifies the foregoing. Part-timers who come from managerial and professional families in Classes 1 and 2 do still appear to draw benefit from their advantaged backgrounds *in the marriage market* even if they do not seek to do so in the labour market. In the case of women of Class 1 and 2 origins who are themselves in Class 1 or 2 positions, there is little difference between part-timers and full-timers in the class distributions of their husbands or partners. But with women of Class 1 and 2 origins who are in Class 6 and 7 positions, part-timers are

<sup>6</sup> This explanation of increasing fluidity among women is in line with arguments advanced by Hakim (2000, 2004) to the effect that women's orientations to work are highly heterogeneous and probably becoming more so. However, we would not wish to follow Hakim in seeing this as reflecting no more than the expression of different 'preferences'. As critics of Hakim have pointed out (e.g. McRae, 2003; Kangas and Rostgaard, 2007), preferences are formed in particular social contexts; and under different institutional arrangements – regarding child care provision, maternity (and paternity) leave, flexible working hours etc. – women's orientations to work could also be quite different. At the same time, though, the possibility of 'free choice by equal-but-different men and women' (Charles, 2011: 367) should not be precluded.

clearly more likely than full-timers to have husbands or partners in positions within the managerial and professional salariat. It thus follows that the increase in social fluidity that is apparent among women when only their own class positions are considered will be of significantly reduced impact on the level of fluidity overall if it is the conjugal family rather than the individual that is taken as the unit of analysis.<sup>7</sup>

### Women's part-time work and downward mobility – 1

#### Bronwen

Bronwen was born into a professional family but when she was three her mother died. Her father remarried and she never developed a close relationship with her stepmother. She got decent O levels but decided not to stay on at school to do A levels. After leaving she worked in a series of junior office jobs.

She married young and on the birth of her first child, when she was 23, left work and went abroad with her husband who was starting on a managerial career. After two years, they returned but her husband, who has risen to become a senior executive in a multinational manufacturing firm, always had to spend a lot of time away, travelling around Europe. So 'home life', especially looking after eventually three children, and now her invalid stepmother, has always been 'first priority'.

Eventually, Bronwen did go back to work but only part-time – 'never full-time' – in various routine clerical jobs. She says she did not have a career 'because I chose not to'. Work is 'just somewhere I go... and then come home – it doesn't have any effect'. But she says she has no regrets. She enjoys a 'very comfortable' standard of living, with an ideal house, a full leisure life and frequent holidays.

<sup>7</sup> In the 1970 cohort 52 per cent of women of Class 1 and 2 origins who were working part-time in the semi-routine or routine wage-earning jobs of Classes 6 and 7 were paired with men in Class 1 or 2 positions as compared with only 28 per cent of such women who were working full-time in Class 6 or 7 jobs (see further Bukodi et al., 2017).

### Women's part-time work and downward mobility – 2

#### Donna

Donna grew up in what she describes as a middle-class business family: 'we never seemed short of money'. At school she was 'about average'. When she was 16 a wealthy aunt offered to take her on a world tour so she left school and was away for six months. On her return, she did not know what to do, except that she did not want to go back to school. She had some thoughts of becoming a beautician but eventually worked as a receptionist and in various routine office jobs. She says 'I never had a career', but she is unsure about whether she ever wanted one.

When she was 23 she married and had two daughters in quick succession. Her husband is an executive in an IT firm and often has to travel away from home. So Donna brought up the children more or less single-handed. By the time they were of secondary school age, her father had developed dementia and then later her mother got cancer. So for several years Donna was completely preoccupied with family responsibilities. Now both her father and mother are dead and her daughters, though still living at home, are quite independent: 'I scarcely see them.' While she again works part-time in a customer service centre – 'just 20 hours a week' – she is at something of a loss to know what to do with the rest of her time: 'I'm left with this big gap.'

Donna appreciates the fact that she has 'a nice house and money in the bank'. But while her husband enjoys an active social life, centring around golf and watching football, these things don't interest her, and she is finding it difficult to renew her own social and leisure life: 'I can't say I'm a happy person at the moment.'

To sum up, our analyses of relative rates of intergenerational class mobility, as measured by odds ratios, indicate that no change of any major or systematic kind has occurred over the historical period that our birth cohorts cover. Britain is far from being a society of perfect mobility – individuals' class destinations are significantly associated with their class origins – and, more importantly, *the strength of this association shows a high degree of temporal stability*. Among men and among women who have not taken up part-time employment – that is, among a substantial majority of the economically active population – relative rates, indicating the level of social fluidity within the class

structure, are more or less unchanging. And that we come to such a conclusion should not in fact be regarded as especially surprising. It is essentially the same conclusion as that which has emerged from a series of previous studies of class mobility in Britain based on cross-sectional surveys of the population and dating back to the Nuffield study of 1972.<sup>8</sup> In exploiting the possibility of cross-cohort comparisons, our work serves primarily to confirm these earlier results from a different perspective, and to show that a situation of largely constant social fluidity has extended from the twentieth into the twenty-first century.

We may now go on to consider the significance of our findings on relative rates in the context of the discussion of social mobility in political and policy circles, just as we did in the case of our findings on absolute rates. Again, it is the disconnect that is striking. Most obviously, the results we have obtained contradict in a further way the prevailing idea of mobility in decline. We find no evidence of relative rates becoming more unequal, or, that is, of the association between class origins and destinations strengthening, and of absolute mobility being in this way increasingly restricted. Insofar as there is any exception to our general conclusion of unchanging relative rates, it goes, as we have seen, in the opposite direction: that is, more equal relative rates, implying greater social fluidity, are apparent among women who have worked part-time.

We noted in the previous chapter that the one – and only – piece of research that has actually indicated declining mobility in Britain is that carried out by a group of economists concerned with income mobility: specifically, with the association between the earnings of members of

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Goldthorpe (1980/1987), Goldthorpe and Mills (2004, 2008), Paterson and Ianelli (2007), Buscha and Sturgis (2017), on the basis of their work on the ONS Longitudinal Study referred to in Chapter 2, n. 6, obtain results that contrast yet more sharply with those of Blanden et al. than do our own. They find evidence of some *increase* in fluidity among men and women between cohorts born in the late 1950s and late 1960s (cf. Figure 3.1 above), although this increase is not maintained between the latter cohort and subsequent ones, and was in any event very slight when individuals were considered at age 40–46 rather than at an earlier age. We might add here that if we take individuals' class destinations at age 27 and on this basis bring the 1980–4 birth cohort into our analyses, we also find, for men and women alike, that the UNIDIFF model improves on the CA model and that its parameters indicate increasing fluidity. However, whether this reflects some emerging long-term trend must remain open to doubt until analyses can be made of the mobility of members of this cohort when they have reached a later age.

the 1958 and 1970 birth cohorts at age 33–34 and their family incomes when they were aged 16. This association is found to strengthen from the earlier to the later cohort. However, although, as earlier described, this research achieved great political and media impact, it has by now attracted critical questioning on a number of grounds. For our present purposes, the following points are of main relevance. First, and to revert to what was said in Chapter 1, the data available for the analysis of income mobility in Britain – including data from the cohort studies – are not of high quality, and any results deriving from these data have to be seen as subject to a wide margin of error. Second, although there is no reason why research on income and class mobility should necessarily lead to similar conclusions, other – less publicised – research on relative income mobility, while also subject to data problems, has produced results that are clearly more in line with those on class mobility in showing no directional change.<sup>9</sup> And third, and again to go back to the argument of Chapter 1, there are good grounds for claiming, both in the case of the 1958 and 1970 cohorts and more generally, that the association between origins and destinations is *stronger* when mobility is treated in terms of class than it is when treated in terms of income, or, in other words, the intergenerational transmission of economic advantage and disadvantage is more comprehensively captured through a focus on class.<sup>10</sup>

We would therefore again have to see the economists' work, or at all events the reception it received, as serving largely to misdirect attention so far as the political and wider public understanding of current issues

<sup>9</sup> See Ermisch and Francesconi (2004) and Nicoletti and Ermisch (2007). Economists involved in the research referred to in the text have subsequently claimed that the findings of these studies are consistent with their own conclusions, but this is not correct. Nicoletti and Ermisch (2007: figs. 1 and 2) show that for cohorts in their study born between 1961 and 1972 the correlation between fathers' earning and sons' earnings remained stable or actually decreased.

<sup>10</sup> See, for Britain, Cox, Jackson and Lu (2009), Erikson and Goldthorpe (2010) and Goldthorpe (2013); and for Sweden, where far better quality income data are available, Erikson (2016). The association shown by the economists between family income and children's earnings in the 1958 cohort is remarkably weak, and must give rise to doubts about the reliability of the family income variable in particular. Yet a version of this variable is still being used in further analyses of income mobility, again claiming a decline (Belfield et al., 2017). For what we would regard as a balanced assessment of the debate between economists and sociologists on this issue – written by economists – see Jäntti and Jenkins (2015: section 5.3).

of social mobility is concerned. As a corrective to the preoccupation with 'mobility in decline', what we would wish to bring out is the significance of the finding that, although mobility as considered in terms of relative as well as absolute rates has not in fact decreased, *neither is there any evidence that it has shown a steady and general tendency to increase, and over a period extending back to at least the middle of the last century.*

To begin with, it is worth repeating that it is this finding of constant social fluidity that underpins the central argument of Chapter 2: that the crucial changes observed in absolute mobility rates – the reversal in trend of the upward and downward components of the total rate – have to be seen as almost exclusively the result of class structural change. Thus, if we were to redraw Figures 2.3 and 2.4 on the basis not of our actual data but of the mobility tables that would be predicted under the CA model, when all odds ratios would be the same across cohorts by construction, *the graphs would be indistinguishable from those we have presented* – except that the slight increase shown in Figure 2.4 in the total mobility rate for women, which we can now see as reflecting the increase in fluidity among part-timers, would not be picked up. And in turn the further argument of Chapter 2 is reinforced: that any policy initiatives that might be taken to try to move back from the present pattern of absolute mobility rates towards that of the golden age, in which social ascent predominated over social descent, will need to be ones focused not on making relative rates more equal but rather on regenerating the upgrading of the class structure.

Moreover, the significance of the finding of a long-term constancy in the level of social fluidity is heightened when two further considerations are taken into account, as we will here simply flag up before going on to more extensive discussion in subsequent chapters.

First, the inequality involved in relative rates of class mobility, as well as being persistent, is also in certain respects quite extreme. What is important in this regard is not that British society falls short of exhibiting perfect mobility – which could be thought a rather implausible and, in any event, perhaps not altogether desirable state.<sup>11</sup> It is, rather, that prevailing departures from perfect mobility, although overall highly variable in their extent, are in the case of some mobility transitions so large as to be difficult to reconcile with any notion of

<sup>11</sup> On the question 'Would perfect mobility be perfect?', see Swift (2004).



equality of opportunity. Our research, as we will show in the next chapter, allows us to make better estimates of the extent of inequalities in individuals' relative chances of mobility or immobility than have been possible in previous work, and also to trace their pattern within the class structure and how this pattern is formed.

Second, it has to be recognised that the period over which relative rates of class mobility have remained little altered is one in which repeated efforts have in fact been made to bring about a greater equality of opportunity, *primarily through policies of educational expansion and reform*. And, as we have observed, politicians from all parties continue to regard educational policy as key in regard to this objective. But, in the light of findings of the kind we have reported, the question is obviously raised, even if politicians themselves fight shy of it, of why educational policy has over so many decades had so little apparent effect on relative rates of mobility – so little effect in weakening the association between class origins and destinations and in making Britain a supposedly more 'open' society in the form of an education-based meritocracy. In the chapters that form the second part of this book we will elaborate on this question and draw on the results of our research to try to provide an answer.

In conclusion of the present chapter, however, we need to make one further observation as essential background to what is to follow. In any attempt at understanding the long-term constancy of relative rates of mobility, in the face of policy interventions aimed at reducing the inequalities they entail, it is important to see this constancy – or what we might refer to as the stability of the endogenous mobility regime – not as some impersonal 'social fact' but rather as the outcome of *a powerful resistance to change* stemming from the actions of individuals whose interests lie in the status quo.

In this regard, it has always to be kept in mind that the effects of changes in relative rates, unlike the effects of class structural change, necessarily impact on upward and downward mobility *in the same way and to the same extent*. Thus – as is well illustrated in the case of post-revolutionary Omega (see again Table 3.2) – if relative mobility rates become more equal, then, assuming no class structural change, upward mobility will increase *but so too, and in similar measure, will downward mobility*. Or, to put the matter another way, if the net association between the class positions of parents and their children is weakened, the chances of children moving down the class hierarchy

intergenerationally must, overall, increase in exactly the same degree as their chances of moving up. In this sense, relative mobility chances amount to a zero-sum game – a fact that politicians deploying the easy rhetoric of 'greater opportunity for all' either do not grasp or at all events would rather not acknowledge. When politicians speak of 'mobility' they have in fact almost invariably to be understood as referring to mobility upwards: downward mobility is a taboo topic.<sup>12</sup>

What is, however, important to recognise is that, as against the mathematical symmetry of changes in relative rates, there has to be set a psychological *asymmetry*. There is by now a substantial body of psychological research on the issue of 'loss aversion' that reveals a general human tendency to subjectively experience losses more intensely than gains, even if, objectively, they are of the same value. You are more displeased if you lose a £20 note in the street than pleased if you find one: losing what you once had, and perhaps felt entitled to, is especially disturbing.<sup>13</sup> In the light of this research, it has then to be expected that a still stronger motivation will exist *to avoid downward mobility* – to avoid losing a relatively advantaged class position – than to achieve upward mobility. And, further, the resources of those families and individuals who have most to lose through downward mobility will, in the nature of the case, tend to be greater than those of families and individuals who have most to gain through upward mobility. Taken together, then, the high priority that is likely to be given to avoiding *déclassement* on the part of those faced with this possibility and their capacity to protect themselves – or their

<sup>12</sup> At a Cabinet Office seminar on social mobility held a little while before the 2001 general election, several sociologists present managed finally to get across the point that equalising relative mobility rates implied a zero-sum game, whereupon one of Prime Minister Blair's senior political advisors strongly objected 'But Tony can't possibly go to the country on a platform of increasing downward mobility!' The advisor was, however, still somewhat confused. What has to be understood – and what, it has to be admitted, *some* sociologists still fail to see (e.g. Saunders, 2010: 27–30) – is that the idea of a zero-sum game *applies only to relative and not to absolute mobility*. Thus, as we have shown, during the golden age, rates of upward mobility into the salariat increased without rates of downward mobility from salariat origins likewise increasing – because, that is, of the steady expansion of the salariat.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Kahneman (2011: ch. 26 esp.). Kahneman regards loss aversion as involving 'a failure of rationality'. But while this is evidently true in relation to 'content blind' norms of rationality deriving from principles of logic and probability and to which economists tend to adhere, it is far less so from the standpoint of 'rationality for mortals' (Gigerenzer, 2008).

children – against it have to be seen as creating a large potential for resistance to any attempts at widening opportunity, in the sense of equalising mobility chances, whether through educational policy or otherwise.

It is in this regard instructive that in the one instance we have found of relative rates in fact becoming more equal – that is, among women part-timers – it would appear that this trend results from growing numbers of women from more advantaged class backgrounds in effect *opting* to become downwardly mobile intergenerationally by declining opportunities in the labour market – if not in the marriage market – that their class origins and educational attainment would probably have made available to them. But, in general, it has to be accepted that policies aimed at reducing inequalities in relative mobility chances will not be costless to the members of families who hold more advantaged class positions; and that, rather than showing a merely passive acceptance, these families can be expected to apply their superior resources, economic and otherwise, in all available ways in order to counter or circumvent such policies.

## 4 | *The Pattern of Social Fluidity within the Class Structure: Hierarchy, Inheritance and Status Effects*

In the previous chapter we have shown that over a period extending back at least to the middle of the last century there has been little change in relative rates of class mobility in British society. Or, in other words, little change has occurred in the level of social fluidity within the class structure as expressed by the strength of the association between the class positions of children and their parents when considered net of all structural change. The only exception arises in the rather special case of relative rates becoming more equal among women who at some point have worked part-time. In the present chapter we move on to consider a number of questions that arise. First, given the essentially stable *level* of social fluidity, so far as the large majority of the active population is concerned, what is the *pattern* of this fluidity within the class structure and how is this pattern created? Second, is this pattern itself stable over time? Third, is this pattern and its degree of stability the same for men and for those women who when in employment have only worked full-time? And, finally, and most consequentially, what are the implications of the patterning of social fluidity for the likelihood of different mobility transitions being made and in turn for issues of equality of opportunity?<sup>1</sup>

When considering possible trends in the level of social fluidity, we observed that because relative mobility rates are captured by a very large number of different odds ratios, it is necessary to proceed by formulating statistical models that make statements about all odds ratios of interest and by then seeing how well these models can

<sup>1</sup> We do not seek to address a comparable set of questions in the case of women who have worked part-time since we know that in their case the level of fluidity has in fact increased, so that in certain respects at least the pattern of fluidity cannot have remained stable – and also must be, or have become, different from that applying in the case of men and of women who have only worked full-time. To investigate in further detail the changes that have occurred would require more data on part-timers than we have presently available.