



Social Mobility: What We Know So Far

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Answers depend on too many factors; question itself invites **confusion**

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No mobility table ever had an empty triangle showing no downward mobility

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To study equality of opportunity, fairness, justice, ... ask:

To what degree does success in life — economic success at least — depend on the **circumstances of birth and upbringing?**

Recasts parents' attributes as attributes of the research subject

Mobility is symmetrical in the absence of
growth & immigration

Mobility is symmetrical if no growth or immigration

Downward moves offset upward moves if each origin category is the same size as each destination category (e.g., income quintiles normed separately)

A regression model with zero intercept also predicts a balance between up & down

Percent mobile depends on strength of association (so that part of intuition is correct)

Growth — a redistribution of the destination distribution away from less desirable and toward more desirable occupations or upward toward more money — nets more upward than downward mobility

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Immigration from poorer countries analogous to growth

Immigration from similar countries pretty neutral

Circumstances of birth and upbringing
— “social origins” —
meld several factors

Social origins meld several factors

Economic resources (family income and wealth)

Employment status and quality of employment of family members

Genetic endowment

Cultural endowment, particularly parents' educations

Family **location**: neighborhood, urbanity, state, nation

Family **structure**

Relationships: parents, siblings, grandparents

Stability: separation, divorce, death

Family **heritage**: race, ancestry, nativity, citizenship

Timing

Social origins constrain success to varying degrees

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Origin effects decrease as **education** increases (stronger for high school dropouts than college graduates)

Origins may matter more at some **times** than others

Origins probably matter more in some **nations** than others

In the USA, origins used to matter less for **African Americans** than others (probably not since the late 1960s)

Divorce and non-marriage may weaken intergenerational link

Decreasing variance in some factors — parents educations and number of siblings

Increasing variance in some others — economic resources.

Implications for data collection

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Measure full array of origin factors

Economic resources, employment status & quality of employment, genetic endowment(?), parents' (and surrogates) educations, location, structure, stability, and heritage

Sample of sufficient size to detect variations

Broad age range to capture cohort variation

Link to other persons in household to gauge selection

Cluster observations to estimate context effects