



The Up Series

Sociologists have had a long-running interest in the relationship between social origins in childhood and adult destinations. There is now a large body of research on what is termed as inter-generational social mobility (i.e. changes in occupational position between one generation and the next). Social mobility research initially took the form of studying associations between a father's occupation and their son's occupation a generation later. The scope of social mobility research has since widened considerably and become more sophisticated, both in terms of the data that are collected and the methods of analysis that are employed.

During May 2012 the documentary *56 Up*, is being broadcasted. This is the latest instalment of the *Up Series*, which provides an excellent journalistic account of childhood origins and adult destinations for a group of children who were age seven in the early 1960s. I first became aware of the *Up Series*, in the mid-1980s. One afternoon our general studies lecturer showed us some early instalments of the documentary using a reel-to-reel projector. Shortly after a sociology lecturer showed one of the films to illustrate differences in linguistic ability between children from different backgrounds.

The premise of the original 1964 film *7 Up* was to bring a group of children together from various walks of life because their cohort would be the union leaders and the business executives of the year 2000. The children were selected to represent the wide range of socio-economic backgrounds of the time. The explicit assumption was that each child's social circumstances in childhood predetermined their future in adulthood. The original programme *7 Up* was intended to be a stand-alone documentary that focussed on the British class structure in the 1960s. The idea of filming a group of seven year olds draws on the Jesuit statement 'give me a child until he is seven and I will give you the man'. Follow-up films have since been made every seven years and are titled *14 Up*, *21 Up*, and so on, through to *56 Up*.

The *Up Series*, might reasonably be considered as reality television. It is a fantastic exercise in investigative journalism, and it makes compelling viewing. The first film painted a picture that there was a dominant social class structure in Britain in the 1960s. Given the observable economic, social, cultural and political changes that took place directly after the war it is beguiling to imagine a weak link between origins in childhood and subsequent adult occupations for this cohort. The resounding message of the series is that this link was still particularly strong. The children from more privileged backgrounds went to university and then went on to work in professional occupations. Their counterparts from less advantaged backgrounds have been ascribed to a working life in lower paid, often manual, occupations.

The public understanding of social class is fantastically confused. This is completely understandable because social class is formally measured by socio-economic position but frequently understood with reference to consumption and cultural tastes. Conceptions are further muddled by competing political views of social class. Similarly historical depictions of social class (which include misrepresentations) further muddy the public understanding. Descriptions of social class are also routinely riddled with statements about status and with various moral value judgments.

An amusing anecdote illustrates the degree of confusion surrounding perceptions of social class. A professor of sociology at a Russell Group university, who I know is well paid, recently told me that he was definitely working class. To the best of my knowledge however none of the established social class schemes would classify his occupation in a category that supported his claim.

Furthermore, thoughts on social class are routinely clouded by isolated cases of extreme differences in income. I frequently encounter people who know a plumber (usually a friend, of a friend, of a friend) who earns £90K. My cursory examinations of nationally representative data suggest that this plumber is exceptional, and that the average wage for their occupation is more modest. I suspect that many similar stories of tradespeople earning very large incomes are exaggerated since in general these occupations are still paid comparatively poorly.

To circumvent the general confusion that surrounds the labeling of social classes within my research group¹ we advocate the use of formal socio-economic classifications. These measures do not simply act as a proxy for income where income data are themselves unavailable. Rather they help to identify key forms of social relations to which income is merely epiphenomenal. Formal socio-economic classifications are relatively more general and stable measures than income which is well known to fluctuate over the lifecourse. Indeed it is well known that there are high levels of 'income churning' from year to year in countries like the UK. Therefore what socio-economic classifications might reasonably be expected to proxy is the lifecourse/earnings profile, and this has many attractive analytical properties for social science research.

Within my research group we believe that the concept of social stratification is highly informative. We consider social stratification as a system of social structures that produce consequential inequalities that are enduring and reproduced. These inequalities are usually economic in their nature and longstanding in their character.

There are many commentators that hold the view that social class is increasingly less relevant in Britain, despite there being a wealth of supporting sociological evidence to the contrary. I would simply ask the reader to consider engaging in a sociological exercise, at least as a thought experiment if time does not permit. First, visit a local independent school and count how many expensive 4x4 vehicles arrive on the school run. Second, take a trip to Waitrose and do some shopping. Third, visit your high street branch of Cashconverters. Fourth, go down to a Job Centre Plus. It is unlikely that this series of activities will fail to convince you that there is a distinctive pattern of stratification in the UK. Similarly the recent episodes of *56 Up* clearly depict a socially stratified Britain.

The *Up Series* follows a cohort of fourteen children (although twenty were originally selected). The individuals were primarily chosen because they were representatives of a specific social background. The choices reflected the film maker's perception of the social make-up of Britain in the early 1960s.

The original film introduced us to Kensington based prep school boys Andrew, Charles and John. Andrew studied at Cambridge and became a solicitor, and John studied at Oxford and became a barrister. Charles went to Durham University, and has subsequently become a film producer, but has not taken part in the documentary since *21 Up*.

Suzy was from a similarly wealthy background and was initially filmed at a boarding school. She left school at sixteen but later she went on to marry a successful solicitor. Bruce was also at a boarding school and he went on to study mathematics at Oxford. He later taught children in the East End of London and in Bangladesh, but now teaches at an independent school. Nick was chosen from a farm in the Yorkshire Dales. He was educated in a small school and went on to study at Oxford. He later moved to the US and is a university professor.

Peter and Neil were chosen from a Liverpool suburban school. Peter became a school teacher but left the series after *28 Up* (although appeared again in *56 Up*). Neil has probably been the most unpredictable of the cohort. He dropped out from Aberdeen University and has been depicted as being homeless and struggling with mental health challenges. Neil has also been a Liberal Democrat councillor and has stood for parliament.

Jackie, Sue and Lynn were selected from a London primary school. Lynn became a librarian and Sue and Jackie undertook a variety of low paid jobs. Tony was a colourful child from the East End of London. He had the ambition to become a jockey, which was partly realised when he became an apprentice in a racing yard. He competed in a few races before leaving the sport and later did 'the knowledge' and became a London taxi driver.

Paul and Symon were originally living in residential care. Paul's parents divorced and he later emigrated to Australia with his father. Symon is from a minority ethnic background. He has worked in manual jobs and has a large family.

The interviews in the films were not collected for social science analysis but are still insightful. It is hardly surprising that the privately educated children went to university and this was their gateway to professional occupations. There is a stylized sociological fact about independent education. Independent schools teach only seven percent of British pupils but have produced seventy percent of our judges.

For the *Up* group the educational die was cast by the eleven plus exam. At the time there were two distinctive state education tracks which clearly led on to different employment opportunities. For example Lynn passed the eleven plus examination and went to a grammar school and moved into a career as a librarian. Her friends Sue and Jackie did not go to grammar school and did not make the same transition onto a clear career path. The introduction of comprehensive schooling dissolved these two clear trajectories. If the series had followed a cohort born ten years later the outcomes for the state school pupils could potentially have been different.

When the group in the film reached eighteen, only about ten percent of pupils in Britain went on to university. At the time more boys went to university than girls and the majority of pupils were from non-manual backgrounds. Gaining a university education acted as a dynamo for the fortunate *Up* participants. However, it is worth noting that they attended more prestigious universities. It is not unreasonable to suspect that this probably gave them additional advantages in the labour market.

There has since been an explosion in participation in higher education. In more recent times over thirty percent of pupils entered higher education, there are now many more universities, and female participation has overtaken male participation. Despite access to higher education expanding the rate of participation from entrants from manual backgrounds has not risen particularly steeply.

The most striking change in the labour market during the second half of the twentieth century is the high-level of female participation. It is disappointing that the programme only follows four girls. This point was admitted by the film's maker Michael Apted in a recent interview. A sizeable expansion in the female labour market has been in non-manual occupations. We do observe that Sue has experienced upward intra-generational mobility (i.e. mobility within her working life). Sue achieved this through her engagement in clerical work, and she is now a university administrator despite not having attended university herself.

How women combine motherhood and employment is an enduring area of sociological interest. We do gain some small insights into how the four women cope with juggling work and home-life however. This is an area which could have been better illuminated had more girls from different backgrounds been filmed. However, the programmes do offer a glimpse of the consequences, the costs, and the benefits of marital dissolution and forming new partnerships.

Despite many observable changes in the labour market in recent decades, with a few notable exceptions, the members of the *Up* cohort have enjoyed a relatively high degree of occupational stability. This runs counter to our fluid view of modern employment, although it is consistent with some sociological evidence that although people change jobs their occupations are often very stable. Commentators have suggested that having a long 'carriage clock' career is still not uncommon.

The *Up* sample is small and it is inconceivable that an alternative picture of work-histories would not have been painted had different children been chosen. In the film we see no obvious signs of the effects of the deindustrialization and the related decline in manufacture that took place in the UK during the working lives of the participants. I suspect that had individuals been chosen from communities around the Durham coalfield or from shipbuilding communities along the Clyde, the narrative would not been one of relative occupational stability. In these geographical areas whole industries have vanished, taking many occupations with them.

Symon was the only non-white child in the programme. He was illegitimate and the programme suggests that he never got to know his black father. It is reasonable to assume that had the *Up Series* commenced later, the programme makers would have included more children from minority ethnic backgrounds. Although it is worth remembering that in the post-war period the timing and the patterns of immigration to Britain varied across ethnic groups.

Social mobility (or more precisely immobility) is high on the political agenda in the UK. The government appointed Alan Milburn, a man who had grown up on a council estate but ended up in the Cabinet, as the 'Social Mobility Tsar'. Studies of the trends in intergenerational mobility report mixed results. In the case of Britain and the US this is partly due to differences in definition, measurement and methods of analysis. There is an orthodox sociological view that the flux in the pattern of stratification is relatively constant, both in time and across different societies. More recent empirical analyses which combine both historical and contemporary social survey datasets

(from 1800 onwards) report convincing empirical evidence of a small but linear trend towards increasing social mobility.

Politicians of various political persuasions are convinced that social mobility in Britain has slowed down. There is some evidence that income mobility has declined and that a more recent cohort born in 1970 experienced less income mobility than a similar cohort born in 1958. Whilst this finding is robust it is qualified by some methodological caveats. Other research using different data sources suggests that this finding is particular to a comparison of these two birth cohorts. The conclusion is that more generally intergenerational mobility did not change much over the two decades after 1950.

The *Up Series* is an imaginative exercise in longitudinal (i.e. the repeated contacts) data collection. Britain leads the way in the collection of longitudinal social science data. In the UK there is an envied stock of social science surveys which have multiple repeated contacts with individuals. The majority of these studies collect data through interviews and other sources. A particular strength of the British data portfolio is our birth cohort studies. These are nationally representative datasets that continue to follow children who were born in 1946, 1958 and 1970 far into adulthood. These datasets are large in scale, for example the 1958 study is still in contact with over 9,000 people. These older birth cohort datasets were augmented by a new study of children born at the Millennium and a further study is planned.

The British longitudinal datasets are very rich and support a wide range of analysis in addition to social mobility research. These datasets are not solely the interest of sociologists, and the effects of childhood experiences on adult life have been widely studied in a number of other social science disciplines, and by health and medical researchers. The *Up Series* is a non-academic illustration of the value of longitudinal studies, and is therefore a device that may improve the public understanding of this area of social science.

Overall the series demonstrates that despite widespread perceptions of social change there is a persistent pattern of social stratification in Britain. The programme indicates that social origins (i.e. family background) influence occupational positions in adult life, but this is mediated by educational experiences. In Britain the social structure is relatively stable although it is not completely fixed, and there is some degree of social mobility.

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1. The Social Surveys and Social Statistics Research Group, University of Stirling, undertake empirical research on social stratification and have specialist expertise in the analysis of longitudinal data.