For many, social mobility refers to the difference between a child’s social class in adulthood and the social class of their parents. How likely is it that the son or daughter of a plumber will become a lawyer, and vice-versa? Social mobility in this view is an inter-generational phenomenon.

But the reality of many children’s lives is that their parents move between more and less advantaged social and economic positions while they are growing up: their parents acquire more qualifications and so become accountants rather than just bookkeepers, for example. Or the family breaks up so that the child is brought up by a single mother who works as a bank clerk rather than in a two parent family where the father is a bank manager. This intra-generational social mobility is the topic Mel Bartley and Ian Plewis tackled in a new piece of research. Is the level of education attained by sons and daughters associated with a change in parental social class? If, as we suspected from earlier work we had done on health, children whose parents were upwardly mobile had, on average, better educational qualifications than peers in their less advantaged class of origin but worse qualifications than those in their more advantaged destination class (and conversely for those who were downwardly mobile) then this would have three implications.

First, it would mean that the intra-generational mobility acts to constrain social class differences in educational qualifications. Second, it would support the theoretical perspective that educational inequalities arise more from the unequal distribution of economic resources across the social classes than they do from social class differences in cultural capital and aspirations. Finally, it would imply that we need to be careful when comparing associations between parental social class and children’s educational qualifications across studies because this association will vary according to the age of the child at the time their parents’ social class is measured.

We tested our hypotheses using data from the Census-based Longitudinal Study (ONS LS) and the 1970 birth cohort study (BCS70). The figure gives a flavour of our results from ONS LS data. It shows that intra-generational parental social mobility between 1981 and 1991 leads to the predicted differences between the upwardly and downwardly mobile on the one hand, and those whose social class is stable on the other, in the probability of a child having a degree by 2001. Intra-generational social mobility is extensive; it was experienced by about one third of the sample in the figure. It is a topic worthy of further investigation, not just in terms of social class but also the effects of changes in family income.

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