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Biographical Mechanisms of British Service Class Formation

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Abstract

Goldthorpe's conception of mobility into the service class relies strongly on biographical explanations. Hence, it is surprising that empirically biographical trajectories are either not taken into account as such or merely approached by methodological proxies. Employing a sequence analysis of the work histories of the NCDS 1958 cohort we examine different routes into service class with respect to gender and service-class fractions. We show that there are two important routes to the service class: either biographically very early and directly, or later and indirectly. Surprisingly, these two routes cut across the fractions of the service class. In addition, women move to service class positions rather late, whereas men attain these positions early and directly subsequent to education. To conclude, we discuss the implications of these findings in the light of theories of asset accumulation and theories of the life course.

Keywords

Accumulation of Assets, Life Course, Service Class

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Biographical Mechanisms of British Service Class Formation

1. Introduction

Goldthorpe's analysis of the class structure maintains that despite many differences in terms of work conditions, salary, or education, a unitary service class distinguishes itself by the specific relation of trust with the employer (Goldthorpe, 1982; 1995; 2000). The conceptualisation of this 'service employment relationship' relies explicitly on biographical explanations. Two elements are noteworthy: first, Goldthorpe claims that the biographical routes that lead to the service class contribute, in combination with the social origins of service class members, to the demographic and socio-cultural uniformity of the group (Goldthorpe, 1982). Second, members of the service class experience better life chances, because within the service relationship they are offered long-term promises of income progression and career opportunities on formal and hierarchical ladders of prestige and authority (Goldthorpe, 1982; 1995). However, it seems as though these biographical explanations are not always empirically examined and are only sketchily theorised.

Empirically, the log-linear models on which the traditional mobility research is based are not able to grasp trajectories (Abott and Hrycak, 1990; Abbott, 2001). Mobility tables rely ultimately on comparisons of two (or sometimes three) moments in time and must make speculative assumptions about people's trajectories. Its advocates think in terms of 'causes' rather than in terms of 'narrations' (Abbott, 2001, pp. 161-182): a certain social origin, a certain educational degree, or a certain job when entering the labour market are considered to (stochastically) determine whether a person occupies a service class position at a certain age. In some cases, this age is standardised across the sample, corresponding to a supposed age of 'occupational maturity' (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992: 72; 280-282). This strategy assumes that people remain in the position they have attained at the age of 30-35, and therefore it is sufficient to compare the first job with the job at the age of 35 when examining intra-generational mobility. In other cases, the authors simply use the occupational position at the moment of the inquiry, irrespective of biographical questions (Goldthorpe, 1980; Savage, 1992). This raises two related issues: the problem of the temporal duration and the temporal ordering of these causes (Abbott, 2001, pp. 51-54) and the problem of the embedding of these causes in biographical structures (Sorensen, 1986; Elder, 1985). It is problematic to assume that the length of periods spent in one position and the moment in the life-cycle do not influence social mobility and what it does to the people who experience social mobility.

Theoretically, Goldthorpe's interest in social mobility is not limited to rates and directions of mobility. Particularly in his early texts on the service class, he is preoccupied with class formation. He aims to explain the 'demographic' and 'socio-cultural' identity of the service class and 'to link satisfactorily the analysis of class positions to the understanding of collective action' (Goldthorpe, 1982: 171). In our eyes, the theorisation of this link between social mobility and the political and cultural identity poignantly reveals the lack of biographical explanations. Goldthorpe holds that the political potential of the service class can only be realised if the group is has shared origins and backgrounds (demographic identity) and acquires a shared life-style and patterns of preferred association (socio-cultural identity) (Goldthorpe, 1982). However, the emergence and development of these shared beliefs, identities, and life-styles are hidden in a black-box. The origins of the life-styles and identities of the service class and how these develop over the life-course have not been seriously considered. Similarly, it is not clear how and at what biographical moment the employment relationship of the service class enables them to develop a specific connection to the future.

In this paper, we argue that it is necessary to examine carefully the trajectories of the members of the service class in order to understand its character and nuances. We believe that the careers and especially the routes into the service class and their embedding in patterns of the life-course contribute crucially to the construction of political beliefs, cultural values, and life-styles of the service class (Mills, 1995). Therefore, as an alternative to the general linear model, we apply a sequence analysis to the occupational trajectories of the members of the National Child Development Study sample. Sequence analysis is a method that allows us to examine entire trajectories and to compare them within a small number of clusters (Aisenbray, 2000). This enables us to empirically show which routes effectively lead to service class positions and to discuss the influence of these access paths on the socio-cultural homogeneity of the group. Two theoretical approaches may be of use in explaining the biographical construction of service class positions: the idea of differential accumulation of assets (Dannefer, 1987; Savage et al., 1992; Savage et al., 2005) and the idea of a life-course dependent construction of identity (Elder, 1985; Hagestad, 1990; O'Rand, 1990).

The paper is organised as follows: in the first section, we discuss the theories of asset accumulation and the theories of the life-course. Then, we propose several hypotheses on the differential routes to the service class, with respect to occupational sub-groups and gender. We then present the NCDS-data and provide a detailed description of the method and the research strategy we have used. Following this, we showcase a description of the service class trajectories and break down the analysis to sub-groups of the service class and to gender. To conclude our argument, we revisit the questions of accumulation of assets and of biography and reflect on the link between trajectories and service class positions.

2. A Biographical Conceptualisation of the Service Classes

In the opinion of Goldthorpe, the more the routes to service class positions resemble each other, the more homogenous the group should be in terms of beliefs, life-styles, and identity (Goldthorpe, 1982). We can think of two intertwined theories explaining the construction of these beliefs and identities in terms of trajectories: theories of asset accumulation and theories of the life-course.

The Biographical Construction of Service Class Positions

As a complement of (and as an opposite standpoint to) class and mobility theories that rely on occupational positions (or relationships), theories of class that rely on capitals and assets have gained influence since the 1980s (Bourdieu, 1980; Wright, 1985; for an overview see: Savage et al., 2005). Such a conception focuses on '*how the effects of class are produced through individual actions drawing variously on 'assets', 'capitals' or 'resources'*' (Savage et al., 2005: 32). As a result, this theory allows researchers to make processes of accumulation of assets a subject of discussion and to align it with life-course theory (Dannefer, 1987; 2003). The routes across which people accede to service class positions are important because the capitals that actors accumulate on these pathways can differ. Let us illustrate this by comparing the accumulation of 'organisational capital' and 'educational capital' (Savage et al., 1992). Organisational assets might take a rather long and unforeseeable time to build up. By contrast, the accumulation of educational assets is rather short and temporally restricted by the educational curriculum. However, more important are the repercussions for the supposed long-term perspectives of the employment relationship, as it seems as though the organisational assets procure a much less stable security in comparison with educational assets. Whereas the latter is sanctioned by the state, transformable, and, therefore, rather broadly accepted, the first is bound to a specific firm or sector and might lose its value in the case of a firm shift (Savage et al., 1992).

In order to understand further the impact of the accumulation process of assets on service class trajectories, it may be linked to theories of the life-course. This school of thought conceives the life-course as a sequence of positions (O'Rand, 1990), assumes that the biography is structured by major biographical events, transitions, and turning points and assumes that life-styles, cultural values, and political beliefs develop around these moments (Elder, 1985; Hagestadt, 1990). In particular, the transition to adulthood (with the leave of the parental home), the transition from education to the first job, the start of longer and more stable relationships, and marriage or the birth of the first child are important periods in this respect. The choices that individuals make at these biographical junctions define their beliefs, identities, and life-styles in a very broad sense. Therefore, the intertwined sequences of asset accumulation and adult socialisation are crucial (Sorensen, 1986:77). If we assume that service class positions can be reached by different routes and at different biographical moments, we should then ask how these routes and moments impact the development of beliefs, identities, or life-styles between age 20 and 35. For instance, we would argue that access to service class positions that occurs early (i.e., prior to the start of a family or the birth of the first child) leads to an influence of a service class life-style on these biographically formative transitions, extends the length of the period spent in this position, and therefore contributes to a deeper anchorage in the service class. Argued from another angle, the early attainment of a secure and promising employment relationship offers different perspectives on crucial biographical projects such as the family, the upbringing of children, or the purchase of property. These essential projects for service class identity can be pursued with the assurance of a long-term employment relationship only when the service class is attained early.

Different Routes to the Service Class: Gender and Occupational Sub-Groups

Two differentiations of the service class have been examined in recent debates: the differences according to service class fractions (managers, associate professionals, professionals) and the differences according to genderⁱ. How do the routes into the service class differ and what does this mean for the homogeneity of the service class?

A first debate focuses on the supposed differences of the access routes into service between managers, professionals, and sometimes associate professionals. It has been maintained that *'the entry into management or the professions represent two biographically distinct routes into the service class'* (Mills, 1995: 100). The routes to professional positions would lead exclusively across higher education, and those to managerial positions would pass, at least for a certain proportion of managers, through so-called *feeder occupations* (Mills, 1995). On their route, the managers would accumulate mainly organisational assets, while the future professionals would rely primarily on educational credentials. This would lead to service class positions that differ in terms of long-term stability as well as in terms of beliefs, identities, and life-styles. In addition, it is possible that the experiences on the road to service class contribute to the differential values of the two groups. Two types of feeder occupations that lead to management have empirically been identified: a sub-group of the future managers have formerly been in routine white-collar positions, while a second sub-group reaches managerial positions from positions of skilled manual work (Savage et al., 1992: 141). The period spent in these different types of feeder occupations might influence the identities of the actors moving to management positions and contribute to service class identities that differ from those of individuals who attained the same positions directly through education.

In considering the access of women to the service class, two crucial questions arise: the female interruption/instability of occupational activity and the question of expertise and authority (Savage, 1992; Crompton, 1995). It has been argued that female occupational trajectories are generally more disrupted and less standardised than male careers (Dex, 1987). In addition to the gendered segregation of the labour market and the structure of 'female occupations' (Witz, 1995), this instability is also due to the impact of family life (interruptions of paid work because of child caring, for example) on female service class

careers (Crompton, 1995: 67). It is conspicuous that the biographically average moment of giving birth and child caring falls within the crucial ages of 20 and 35 that has been neglected by the approaches that measure trajectories at two points in time. How are future female service class members affected by these potential interruptions and how does it affect their access routes to service class positions? Mills, based on the calculation of the proportion of historical cohorts occupying service class positions, believes that women engaged in service class trajectories face a specifically female work life *déclassement* at their re-entry into the labour market after childcare interruption (Mills, 1995: 101).

In a similar discussion on the gendered organisation of contemporary middle classes, Savage (based on data measuring the occupational positions in 1971 and 1981) postulates that after the abolition of gender barriers to education, women gained relatively easy access to educational skills and expertise. At the same time, *'organization assets, because they draw upon male forms of solidarity and on gendered patterns of subordination, are intrinsically vehicles of male power'* (Savage, 1992: 130). This asymmetry of the ease with which women are able to acquire educational and organisational assets would mean that women would find easier access to professional positions than to management positions. As a consequence, in order to move to service class positions, women would rely on the accumulation of educational assets rather than on the accumulation of organisational capital. Assuming that these accumulation processes rely on different temporalities, women who rely on expertise would therefore reach service class positions earlier in their life-course and more directly after their degree than would men (who would tend to rely on organisational assets in order to attain managerial positions).

Questions

These theoretical discussions raise three sets of questions. In descriptive terms, we first aim to better understand the trajectories that lead to service class positions. Second, we aim to differentiate these trajectories with respect to service class fractions and gender. Finally, we address theoretical questions on the link between biographical trajectories and beliefs/identity.

We first aim to better understand the routes that lead to service class positions. Can we support the supposed difference between the routes to managerial positions and professional positions? And if so, can we make a distinction in this respect between higher and lower professionals? Furthermore, it will be interesting to explore whether all routes to management are led through feeder occupations or if there are certain managers with access patterns that are similar to professional routes. Finally, it would be interesting to see what distinguishes these feeder occupations from other occupations and to examine whether different social groups rely on different feeder occupations. Second, we aim to determine how the routes into service class positions differ between men and women. How do women access service class positions compared to men? Can we effectively observe more interruptions or instability in the routes dominated by women? If so, is the effect of this interruption the same for managers and professionals or does it interfere with (respectively add to) other biographical mechanisms? Do women tend to choose more direct routes to service class positions, mainly relying on educational assets? Finally, we ask what these potentially different routes could mean in terms of the accumulation of assets and the biographical development of life-styles. What are the consequences of different mechanisms of accumulation of assets for the supposed stability of service class positions? Do the durational structure and the sequential ordering of the access routes impact the meaning of long-term security and the contribution of this supposed security to beliefs, life-styles, and identities?

3. Data and Methods

Data

The following analyses are based on the British National Child Development Study (NCDS). NCDS is a longitudinal study (currently in its 51st year) that investigates the biographies of a sample of people born in one specific week in 1958. Originating in the Perinatal Mortality Survey, it included over 17,000 children in 1958. In the meantime, seven sweeps have been carried out: when the respondents were age 7 (1965), 11 (1969), 16 (1974), 23 (1981), 33 (1991), 41-42 (1999-2000), and 46 (2004). In this paper, we mainly used the data in the form of work histories. As a part of the 'Gender Equality Network Project', the work histories of the respondents were reconstructed based on the data of waves 4, 5, and 6. They cover the period from 1974 to 2000, corresponding to the period from age 16 to age 42 of the respondents. The database indicates the beginning and the end of each occupational period in terms of month and year. The two main variables are the occupational status (full-time vs. part-time employment) and the occupation according to the SOC 80/SOC90 scheme.

The data contains a large number of missing values, partly due to the attrition of the panel and partly due to the fact that not all work stories could be reconstructed over all necessary sweeps. For the present analyses, we excluded all of the general missing values as well as all of the individuals with incomplete trajectories. Apart from these general missing values, we must also deal with a number of gaps in the data as the respondents were only asked to indicate their periods of occupational engagements. This means that we do not know the reasons for the periods in which they were not active. They could correspond to unemployment, education, child caring, disability, or even voluntary sabbaticals. As we were able to distinguish gaps at the beginning from gaps in the middle or at the end of the sequences, we assumed that gaps at the beginning correspond to educational periods, whereas the gaps in the middle and at the end of the trajectory equate to non-educational but otherwise non-specified inactivity.

Coding Strategies

The centrepiece of the analysis, as in most endeavours to classify social classes in order to analyse social mobility systematically, is the coding of the occupational positions. We were compelled to rely on the SOC90 data as no further information on the occupational situation (employed vs. self-employed) or on the size of the firm was available in form of retrospective work history data. The SOC90 scheme classifies the individuals according to occupation, status in employment, and industry and categorises the occupations as 'managers and administrators', 'professionals', 'associate professionals and technical occupations', 'clerical and secretarial occupations', 'craft and related occupations', 'personal and protective service occupations', 'sales occupations', 'plant and machine operatives', and 'other occupations'. In order to approach a classification that also reflects typical employment relationships in the sense of Goldthorpe as effectively as possible, we carried out a series of re-codificationsⁱⁱ. First, several of the administrative positions in national government and civil servants have been coded as professionals (rather than managers), while some of the owners of small businesses have been coded as managers rather than as skilled tradesman. Also, particularly female professions such as primary and secondary school teachers have been coded as associate professionals rather than as professionals. Finally, some changes have been made between the working class categories with the aim of uniting skilled tradesmen and petite bourgeoisie in a relatively homogenous category in terms of educational skillsⁱⁱⁱ.

Methods and Strategies of Enquiry

The analyses of the following section rely on sequence analysis. This method, initially developed in molecular biology, was introduced to the social sciences by Abbott in the late

1980s (Abbott & Hrycak, 1990). It enables the researcher to measure the distance between sequences of categorical states and to organise the most similar sequences in a small number of clusters. The algorithm that calculates the distance between the sequences either proceeds by inserting or deleting elements of the sequence or by substituting certain elements. Certain costs can be attributed to these operations on the basis of theoretical reflexion or on the basis of empirical measurement of the frequency of a transition between two states (Aisenbray, 2000). In the present cases, we set the inserting/deleting costs to 3 and calculated the matrix of the substitution-costs according to the relative frequencies between the states. For the cluster-analysis, we used a ward-procedure, an option that simultaneously minimises the within-cluster distances and maximises the between-cluster distances. As a rule, it produces a small number of equal-sized clusters. The number of clusters has been specified by the interpretation of the dendrogram.

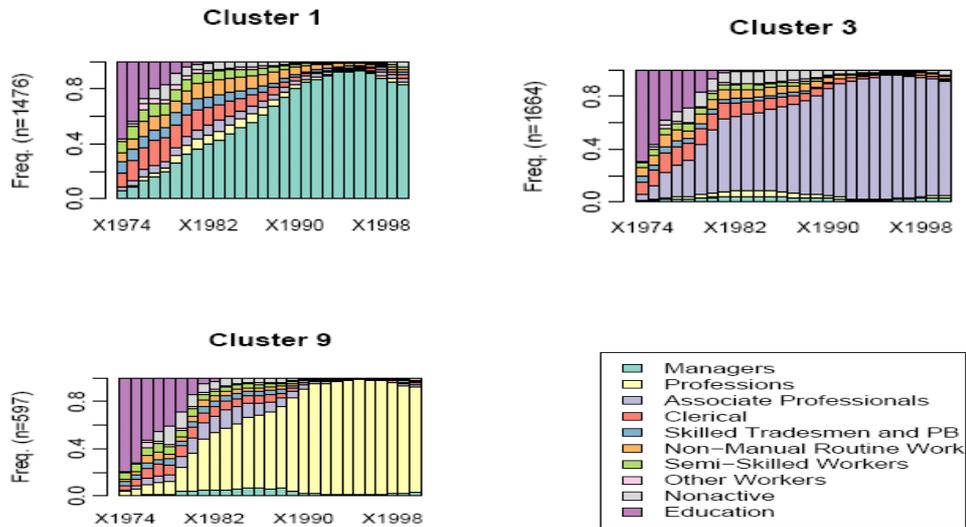
Our strategy of enquiry consists of two stages: first, we explore the trajectories of the entire sample. With this overview, we compare the careers of the service class with other types of occupational trajectories and draw provisional conclusions on the trajectories of managers, professionals, and associate professionals. In a second step, we consider the trajectory-types of the service class factions and examine the sub-types that compose these clusters. This allows us to examine the homogeneity of the clusters and to refine our analysis. Finally, we investigate the composition of the sub-clusters in terms of gender.

4. Typological Analyses

The Service Class and its Trajectory-Types

An analysis of the trajectories of the 1958 cohort reveals that they differentiate into 9 clusters, each dominated by one occupational type: managers (n=1,476), associate professionals (n=1,664), professionals (n=597), skilled tradesmen and petite bourgeoisie (n=1,603), clerical and secretarial jobs (n=1,728), semi-skilled workers (n=1,308), non-manual routine work (n=1,646), other workers (n=614), and non-active (n=2,091). The clusters are not organised according to the entry job, but seem to rely on the occupational position the individuals reached at the age of approximately 35 to 36 years. In other terms, it seems that –in accordance with the hypothesis of Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992) - at this age, individuals' occupational positions remain relatively stable until the age of 42. This mid-career stabilisation of the occupational trajectories allows us to examine the routes that lead to these stable positions from the age of 16 to the age of 35. Here we focus on the service class factions: the managers (cluster 1), the associate professionals (cluster 3), and the professionals (cluster 9).

Graph 1: Distribution-plots of managers, associate professionals and professionals



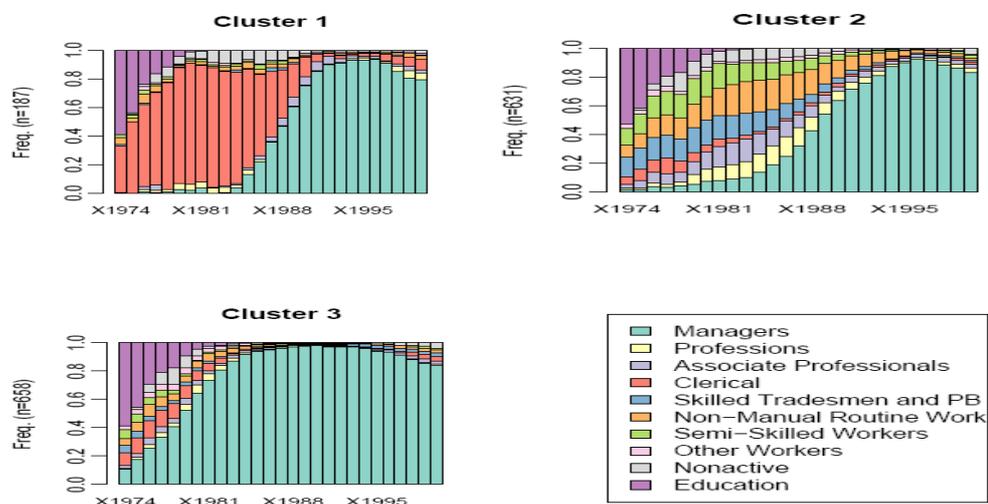
A first glimpse at the three plots shows that, on *average*, all three types of trajectories traverse a comparatively long period of education, some years of feeder occupations (mainly clerical work, skilled manual work, and routine non-manual work) and then managerial, associate professional, and professional positions that remain stable until the age of 42. However, there are also some differences between the three types. On average, the managers enjoy a significantly shorter period of education and traverse a significantly longer period in feeder occupations than both associate professionals and professionals. The professionals experience a slightly longer period of education than associate professionals. We also see that associate professional positions can be intermediate steps on the way to professional position, whereas the inverse is rather rare. Both associate professional and professional occupations can lead to managerial positions, even though they are a minority among the feeder occupations of managerial positions. It seems as though managers have the most diverse entering routes of the three occupational groups.

5. Scrutinising Service Class Trajectories

In order to unpack these rather aggregate trajectory types, in a second step we closely examine each cluster and apply a second sequence analysis that reveals the sub-types in each cluster. For each service class trajectory type, three sub-clusters have been differentiated.

Managers

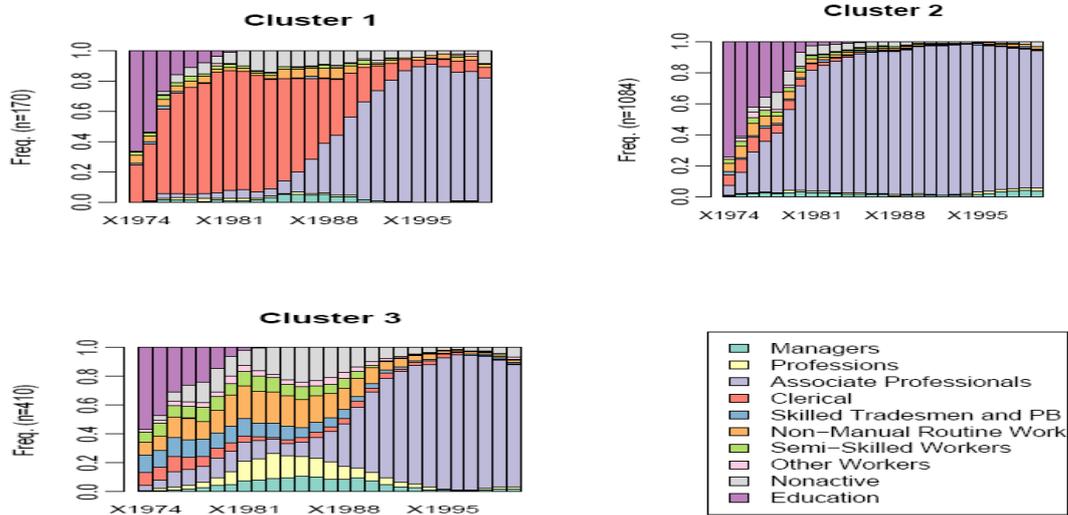
Graph 2: Sub-clusters of the management trajectory-types



The sub-clusters reveal that the management trajectory type includes at least three significant sub-trajectories. The cluster 1 (n=187) shows a group that subsequent to a comparatively short period of education, traverses a period of approximately 10 years of clerical and secretarial work before entering managerial positions. Cluster 2 (n=631) is more heterogeneous: its members arrive at management positions by different routes. Despite what the graph might insinuate at first sight, individuals hardly ever change between the feeder positions, rather they remain on one single route: skilled tradesmanship *or* semi-skilled work *or* non-manual routine work. The third cluster (n=653) is composed of people who directly start their trajectory in management positions or who attain those positions very shortly after some years of education. It seems as though this type of direct access to service class positions, far from being exclusive to professionals, is a major route into managerial positions.

Associate Professionals

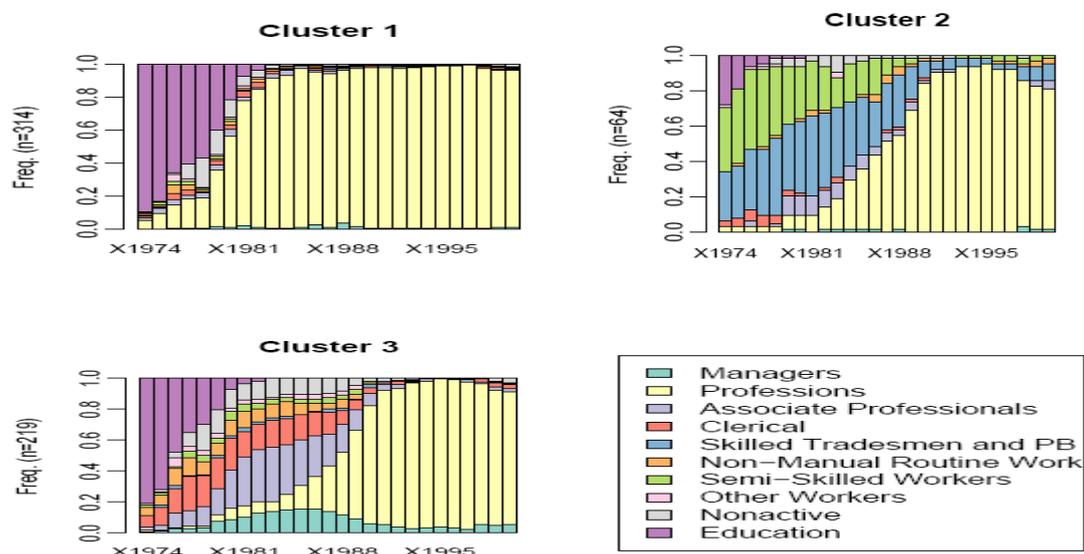
Graph 3: Sub-clusters of the associate professional's trajectory-types



The associate professionals were also split into three sub-clusters. In cluster 1 (n=170), the individuals gain access to associate professional positions over a period of clerical work. It is only at an age over 30 that this group seems to accede to the service class. Cluster 2 (n=1,084; the largest cluster) includes individuals who experience a slightly longer educational phase and then move directly to associate professional positions. This also indicates that their access to the service class occurs biographically relatively early, in their early twenties. The members of cluster 3 (n=410) come across a series of feeder positions, mainly through non-manual routine work and skilled manual work.

Professionals

Graph 4: Sub-clusters of the professional's trajectory-type



The sub-types of the professionals set the group apart from both the managers and the associate professionals. Cluster 1 includes actors benefiting from direct access to professional positions (n=314). The members of this group attain professional positions early (at an average age of 22 years) and remain stable. The second cluster (n=64) shows that for a minority, it is also possible to reach professional positions without a long history of education and through positions of skilled and semi-skilled manual labour. Cluster 3 comprises members who pass through several feeder positions (n=219). In contrast to the second cluster, however, they traverse a longer educational period and then, as an intermediate step, move to associate professional or clerical positions from where they finally move to professional positions.

6. A Biographical Reformulation of Service Class?

Direct and Early vs. Indirect and Late Access

First and most surprisingly, the results show that in all three sub-groups of the service class, there are patterns of direct, biographically early, and education-based access and indirect, biographically late access that rests upon feeder occupations. In contrast to scholars who maintain that the direct or mediated access to service class positions distinguishes managers and professionals (Mills, 1995; Savage et al., 1992), our analyses suggest that in all three service class groups, direct passages to service class positions and access routes through feeder positions coexist. The feeder-based routes into professional positions are particularly surprising since the exclusivity of direct access from education to professionalism has been considered as setting professionals apart from managers.

However, there are differences concerning the length of the educational period, the length of the intermediate phase, and the feeders according to the three factions. The educational period, on average, lasts longer for professionals than associate professionals and managers and longer for associate professionals than for managers. It appears also that longer

educational periods in each of the clusters lead to a *more direct* and *earlier* access to professional/managerial positions than trajectories with short educational periods. In addition, it seems as though early and directly attained professional or managerial positions are *more stable* than those achieved by alternative routes. This indicates that there are two ways of attaining these positions linked to two types of assets. In the first route, the actors accumulate educational credentials. In the second (lacking these credentials) they replace them with occupational experience in other occupational categories, such as clerical work or routine non-manual work.

Gendered Access Routes

Within several of the initial nine clusters, we can see temporarily larger parts of inactive groups between 25 and 35 years, supposedly women who interrupt their employment to look after their children and then return back to the labour market. Conspicuously, such pockets of employment interruption cannot be observed among any of the service class cluster plots. This could mean that these clusters are strongly dominated by men. On the other hand, it could signify that the women in these occupations, in contrast to other occupations, do not interrupt their employment in the aftermath of giving birth. This last hypothesis would indicate that the issue of women’s *déclassement* through interruption would not be as virulent as supposed, for example, by Mills (1995). In order to understand the gender relationships within the service class factions, we examine the distribution of men and women according to the sub-clusters.

Table 1: Distribution of Gender According to Sub-clusters

	Sub-clusters									Total
	Manager 1	Manager 2	Manager 3	Assoc Prof 1	Assoc Prof 2	Assoc Prof 3	Prof 1	Prof 2	Prof 3	
Male %	45.5	72.6	74.9	30.0	41.8	46.3	70.4	93.8	61.6	57.4
Female %	54.5	27.4	25.1	70.0	58.2	53.7	29.6	6.3	38.4	42.6
N	187	631	658	170	1084	410	314	64	219	3737

These results ($p=0.00$; Cramer’s $v = 0.324$) show that, overall, women in management positions are a minority: not even one-third of the managers are women. However, an examination of the sub-clusters suggests that women are strongly overrepresented in the sub-cluster with clerical positions as a feeder, while they are marginal in the two other sub-clusters. Among the associate professionals, 58% are women, whereas 42% are men. A closer examination of the sub-clusters reveals that women particularly dominate the trajectory-type that leads to associate professional positions through clerical feeder occupations. However, the other two sub-clusters are also composed of a majority of women; there is no significant difference between sub-cluster 2 (with direct access) and sub-cluster 3 (with non-manual routine work and skilled manual work as feeder occupations). In terms of professionals, the table indicates that women again compose only 30% of the overall cluster. An examination of the sub-cluster shows that women are more likely to be in the sub-cluster in which actors attain professional positions via routes leading from associate professional positions and clerical work. The proportion of women in this sub-cluster is higher than in the sub-cluster characterised by direct and education-based access to professional positions.

Over all three factions of the service class, it seems as though men are overrepresented in the sub-clusters that lead directly from the educational phase to service class positions. Women, on the other hand, seem to reach managerial and associate professional positions mainly

across feeders of clerical work, while they accede to professional positions across positions of associate professionals. We find no evidence that women are degraded because of the interruption of paid work by child-caring tasks. However, it could be that interruptions for child caring tend to prolong the feeding phase on the route to service class positions. Inversely, the prospect of having children may prevent women from directly entering service class positions and force them to traverse some years of clerical work. If the biographical moment of the access to service class positions is crucial for the opening of life chances and the development of a service class life-style, asymmetries between the sexes could be due to such differences in the temporality of the routes to service class.

7. Discussion

We argued that the log-linear models that dominate mobility research, besides their tremendous advantages, suffer from certain weaknesses. Because they struggle to grasp mobility as a biographical trajectory, they do not shed light on the biographical explanations that are built into mobility theory. This prevents them from examining processes of asset accumulation and life-course events in the period between 20 and 35 years, which seems to be particularly important for the formation of beliefs, life-styles, and identities. In order to overcome these shortcomings, we have applied a sequence analysis to the work histories of a cohort of Britons born in 1958. A closer examination of the trajectories leading to service class positions shows two types of access: direct, early access through educational periods and late, indirect access through feeder occupations. These two forms of access can be found among all three sub-fractions of the service class but differ according to gender. What does this mean in terms of accumulation of assets, life-course embedding, and ultimately for the construction of beliefs, identities, and life-styles of the service class?

Accumulation of Assets

Savage et al. (1992) argue that the capitals that enable individuals to remain in their jobs or to compete for higher positions are accumulated and transformed in the course of biographical trajectories. They show that in the 1970's, there was a clear distinction between managers and professionals: the first accumulated organisational assets, while the second built their career on educational assets. These dynamics of asset accumulations may change according to the historical period or the economic context. For the cohort born in 1958, we show that the link between a certain type of accumulation or transformation of assets and certain factions of the service class are no longer as clear. There are managers who access their positions directly, early, and on the basis of educational assets. At the same time, not all professionals seem to attain professional positions through the educational channel. The differences that Savage et al. (1992) attributed to managers and professionals might more readily apply to men and women. The careers of men in this cohort seem to be more stable, because they rely in greater proportions on stable and legitimate educational assets than do women. A biographical re-examination of Savage's comparison of the positions of middle class men and women at two moments in time (1971 and 1981) seems to contradict the conclusion that women rely on educational assets to enter the service class, whereas men use their male networks and the organisational assets they procure. Even though the two analyses are not historically comparable, we hypothesise that women might indeed rely on educational assets. However, in the early periods of their career, a proportion of the women are not able to transform and realise their educational capital and must sidestep into clerical or non-manual routine work before acceding to service class positions some years later. However, further investigations on the reasons for the women's inability to realise their educational assets are necessary: is it due to female interruption of employment or temporal part-time work because of child caring or is it due to structural barriers that are built into the female service class occupations?

Embedding in the Life-Course

In addition, the biographical meaning of the service class employment relationship is at stake. The difference between the direct and early access to service class and the late and feeder-based access reveals that the biographical moment of arrival in the service class has not been given sufficient explanatory weight. The literature on the life-course suggests that crucial biographical events and transitions occur during the period from 20 to 35 years and shape people's beliefs, identities, and life-styles. To attain a service class position at the age of 22 is different from reaching the same position at the age of 35. For instance, the promises for psychological and material security built into the employment relationship can mean completely different things at these two biographical moments. What is more, these promises are interpreted differently by people who slip easily and as a matter of course into the service class than by people who must 'struggle' in feeder occupations for some years to accede to the same type of positions. The differences in this respect seem again to be the largest between male and female members of the service class (Witz, 1995). The question is: when women, despite equal educational achievements, are not able to realise these achievements immediately, do they enjoy the same employment relationship as their male colleagues if they attain a service class position biographically later and only following several years of cumbersome clerical work? What does this mean in terms of life-styles and political values? Now that the routes into the service class have been described in terms of trajectories, future research should examine the link between the biographical routes into the service class and the biographical construction of life-styles or identities. Do these trajectories, in particular the direct vs. the indirect route, effectively create different political values or different service class life-styles.

ⁱ As a result of the 'women and class debate', women are now taken into account in most class and mobility analyses as individuals – and no longer as part of the household approached by its male 'head' (see for example: Crompton, 1993, 1995; Witz, 1995)

ⁱⁱ We would like to make it clear that the categories do not correspond exactly to the Erikson/Goldthorpe class scheme. This is unfortunate; however, we also emphasise that this exact match is not necessary to demonstrate our point.

ⁱⁱⁱ I am grateful to Andrew Miles for the generous and instructive help on the British occupational classification system.

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