The 'Class' Ceiling in Britain's Elite Occupations

This project explores rates of social mobility into, and within, Britain’s elite occupations. Improving social mobility is a key policy objective of all Britain’s main political parties. This usually centres on a commitment to raise the numbers of those from lower occupational class backgrounds who move into higher class groups during their working lives. However, this focus on class mobility misses potentially important differences in rates of mobility between occupations – particularly elite or prestigious occupations. In the past, such detailed analysis has not been possible as data sets have simply not had big enough sample sizes to meaningfully examine mobility into individual occupations. Yet in 2014 new questions on parental occupation were introduced to the Labour Force Survey (LFS), Britain’s largest employment survey with over 100,000 respondents. This project capitalises on this new data to show, for the first time, how rates of upward mobility vary between Britain’s 29 most elite occupations. It also examines the relationship between rates of mobility and other forms of disadvantage, such as gender and ethnicity, in each of these occupations.

This new analysis will provide unprecedented insight into the relative social exclusivity of Britain’s elite occupations. Yet there is also a danger of reducing social mobility to a one-dimensional issue of ‘fair access’ to elite occupations. All too often academic and policy research concentrates on rates of occupational entry and neglects what happens to the upwardly mobile once they have entered professions. My own preliminary research, for example, indicates that the upwardly mobile may face the kind of ‘glass ceiling’, in terms of pay and career progression, traditionally associated with women and ethnic minorities. The second main objective of this research is therefore to examine how the upwardly mobile fare within elite occupations and whether they face barriers in achieving the highest levels of success. To achieve this, the project will proceed in two stages. It will begin by using the LFS to examine whether the upwardly mobile within elite occupations earn less than those from privileged backgrounds. It will then use longitudinal data from the British Household Panel Study/Understanding Society to examine whether there are particular points in elite career trajectories where the upwardly mobile tend to fall behind more privileged colleagues.

The second stage will deepen this quantitative analysis by providing three qualitative case studies that probe the experience of mobility in three elite occupations - journalism, law and banking. The aim of this qualitative dimension, incorporating 90 life history interviews with the mobile and immobile, will be to gain a more in-depth understanding of whether the mobile face lingering disadvantages within elite occupations. In particular, interviews will probe whether the mobile face discrimination in these settings, whether their ambitions, aspirations and wellbeing differ to those from privileged backgrounds, and how the transparency of entry requirements and progression criteria compare in each occupation.

Working in partnership with key policymakers, mobility charities, and professional associations, this project will make an invaluable contribution to the public debate on increasing access to, and reducing disadvantage within, Britain’s elite occupations. Not only will it aid our understanding of how class inequalities are reproduced within such settings, but it will also influence policy initiatives aimed at breaking down elitism and increasing the representativeness of the key shapers of British public life.