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Social mobility and post-compulsory education: revisiting Boudon's model of social opportunity

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This paper uses Raymond Boudon's model of educational expansion to examine the relationship between education and social mobility, paying particular attention to post-compulsory education – an important site of social differentiation in England. The paper shows how Boudon focuses explicitly on the consequences of educational expansion, and argues that his work helps us understand why widening access to post-compulsory education does not necessarily lead to higher rates of social mobility. We investigate Boudon's key theoretical insights and assess the contemporary relevance of his model. The paper argues that the fundamental assumptions of Boudon's model not only remain valid, but have been intensified by systemic changes in English post-compulsory education, and its articulation with the labour market.

Keywords: social mobility; Boudon; post-compulsory education; positional theories

Introduction

For much of the twentieth century, widening access to education was seen in western societies as *the* legitimate means of increasing social mobility. More recently, discourses of neo-liberalism and globalisation have intensified this focus and positioned educational expansion as central to economic competitiveness and social cohesion (Avis 2007). Emphasising equality of opportunity as opposed to equality of outcome, greater social mobility has become something of a holy grail for successive UK governments. However, despite such aspirations, the relationship between social origins and destinations in the United Kingdom displays a remarkable degree of stability (Erikson and Goldthorpe 2010; Goldthorpe and Mills 2008). Although there is evidence that countries with higher levels of income inequality have lower social mobility, and that redistributive policies can have a positive impact on mobility (Blanden 2009; Ermisch, Jäntti, and Smeeding 2012), successive

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UK governments have promoted education and training as a panacea for a range of social and economic ills (Keep and Mayhew 2010). Improving schools and raising the aspirations of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, rather than direct measures to reduce inequality, continue to be presented as the chief means of increasing social mobility (see, for example, Cabinet Office 2012a, 67–78).

Attempts to educationalise social questions in this way are underpinned by what Goldthorpe (1996) describes as a liberal–industrial theory of the decline of class. According to this theory, a logic of industrialism demands increasingly efficient utilisation of human resources, reflected in the expansion and reform of education, greater equality in educational attainment, and consequent increases in social mobility as class-linked inequalities of opportunity are reduced. However, although educational attainment remains an important determinant of achieved status, evidence suggests that its contribution to social mobility in the United Kingdom has not increased as liberal theory predicts. There are two key reasons for this: firstly, class-based inequalities in education have persisted rather stubbornly; and secondly, the influence of educational attainment on achieved status has remained stable, or even diminished, between cohorts born since the mid-twentieth century (Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2011; Jackson, Goldthorpe, and Mills 2005). Similar trends are evident in other OECD nations (Shavit and Blossfeld 1993; Breen 2004; OECD 2011), calling into question the assumption that western societies will increasingly be transformed into education-based meritocracies.

In spite of significant increases in participation over the last 40 years, educational opportunities continue to be structured by gender, ethnicity and, above all, social class – albeit to differing degrees in different countries (Ermisch, Jäntti, and Smeeding 2012; Strand 2011; Jackson 2013). In Britain, Sullivan, Heath, and Rothon (2011) find evidence for equalisation in post-compulsory education, but conclude that class-based inequalities remain significant and are greater at higher levels of attainment. In UK higher education we see clear continuities of advantage and disadvantage: in 1961, around 25% of undergraduates were from manual or routine backgrounds, compared with 28% in 2008 (Bolton 2010). Moreover, there is no guarantee that an individual's educational attainment will translate unproblematically into achieved social status. In many western societies, an 'opportunity trap' (Brown 2006) appears to exist as labour-market opportunities have failed to keep pace, not only with increased participation in education but also with the implications of an expanded middle class, whose children must now consolidate their position if they are to avoid downward mobility. The resulting social congestion has led to intensified positional competition in education.

The persistence of educational inequality is perhaps unsurprising, given the extensive empirical and theoretical evidence contesting the notion that education can straightforwardly interrupt patterns of advantage and

disadvantage. In the sociology of education, the work of Pierre Bourdieu has been particularly influential, offering a powerful critique of the effects of inequality on educational outcomes and arguing that an important function of educational systems is to legitimise and strengthen the position of those already possessing the greatest concentrations of economic, cultural and social capital. Bourdieu proposes a cultural theory of social reproduction, in which individual habitus is simultaneously a product and a constituent of social and cognitive relations characterising a field of unequal positions. In this account, both the performance of an individual in the educational system and their orientation towards it are unified within the habitus. However, whilst Bourdieu's analysis has much to offer, it finds difficulty in accounting for the realities of educational expansion. If differences in habitus explain both performance and orientation, class inequalities in educational attainment would widen, as advantaged groups take up new educational opportunities at a greater rate than their disadvantaged peers; as Goldthorpe (1996, 489) points out, this contradicts the evidence for stability outlined above.

Nearly 40 years ago Bourdieu's contemporary and great rival, Raymond Boudon, offered an alternative perspective in his seminal work *Education, Opportunity and Social Inequality* (Boudon 1974). Here Boudon focuses directly on the consequences of educational expansion and demonstrates that, even in a meritocratic society, increasing levels of participation in post-compulsory education do not necessarily increase social mobility. Although educational expansion may benefit people from disadvantaged backgrounds, it also increases competition at all levels and erodes the labour-market value of qualifications. In a society where opportunities to achieve higher social positions grow less rapidly than the supply of qualified individuals, expanding educational participation may have little effect. Boudon's approach is to build an explanatory model that shows how the actions and choices of individuals engaging in positional competition make intelligible observed patterns of educational and social inequality:

[I]n order to analyse the system of macroscopic data which social mobility represents, it was vital to take it for what it in fact *is* – the statistical imprint of the juxtaposition of a host of individual acts ... [by] individuals who are socially *situated*, in other words people who are part of a family and other social groups, and who have resources which are cultural as well as economic. Moreover, the choices which these individuals face are not abstract, but are choices the terms of which are fixed by specific institutions – for example, in the field of education; or by constraints – for example, the supply of and demand for skills in the context of career choices. (Boudon 1989, 6–7)

This paper takes up the central question of Boudon's problematic: how is it that the benefits of education have been extended to more and more people, without consequent increases in social opportunity? It investigates

Boudon's theoretical insights and considers their applicability to the contemporary UK context, paying particular attention to the role of post-compulsory education in England. The paper begins by discussing the nature of this sector, highlighting its importance as a site of social differentiation. The conceptual framework underpinning Boudon's model of educational expansion and social mobility is then critically discussed, followed by a detailed account of the model and its implications. We argue that the fundamental assumptions of Boudon's model not only remain valid, but are intensified by systemic changes in education and its articulation with the labour market. In contrast to contemporary discourses emphasising the individual and social benefits of continued participation, post-compulsory education therefore operates as a positional rather than an intrinsic good, reproducing and strengthening inequality and social division.

As Nash (2006) points out, the sociology of education has largely forgotten Boudon's contribution – apart from notable exceptions such as Hatcher (1998) and Brown's work on positional competition (see, for example, Brown 2006). By contrast, Boudon's ideas on primary and secondary effects of social stratification have retained great importance in the study of social mobility. An indication of their continuing vitality is given by an important recent volume bringing together new contributions from eight countries (Jackson 2013). One of the aims of this paper is to re-emphasise the continued relevance of Boudon's insights at a time when some of the questions that provoked his work are particularly pressing.

Transitions from school to post-compulsory education in England

This section considers the nature of post-compulsory education in England, where a diverse range of providers, including further education colleges, sixth-form colleges, school sixth forms and specialist colleges, deliver a wide range of academic, vocational and pre-vocational education and training. Private and voluntary providers are also an important part of this landscape and, since the 1980s, successive governments have driven the commercialisation and marketisation of English post-compulsory education, which is now effectively a mixed economy of public, voluntary and private-sector organisations operating in an educational quasi-market (Fisher and Simmons 2012, 34–35). This system – if system is an appropriate term – is more differentiated not only than those found in most other European countries but also in comparison with the other nations of the United Kingdom, where, for example, in Scotland there are fewer private providers, further education colleges tend to have a more focused remit and sixth-form colleges do not exist (Avis et al. 2012).

Certain forms of vocational and pre-vocational learning, particularly those located in further education colleges, have traditionally been seen as an 'alternative route' to success for early school-leavers (Raffe 1979). Even

today, such forms of participation are claimed to provide a fresh start for both young people and mature students. However, in England especially, patterns of participation in post-compulsory education depend significantly but subtly on social class. On the surface, the highly comprehensive nature of further education colleges means that, at an institutional level, they are not selective. Although often described as being for ‘other people’s children’, social class inequalities are in fact quite low in terms of attendance at such colleges (Sullivan, Heath, and Rethon 2011). However, this broad feature conceals deeper inequalities. Firstly, further education has been viewed rather differently by children from different backgrounds (Thompson 2009): as a route to mobility for relatively successful working-class children, but as a remedy for failure by the middle class. Secondly, further education colleges are not the whole story: on the one hand, elite schools and sixth-form colleges attract students from middle-class backgrounds, whilst private and charitable work-based learning providers cater for learners from largely working-class backgrounds deemed to be disaffected or disengaged from academic study. Even within further education colleges, there is evidence of social stratification by academic level. Although highly diverse, the post-compulsory sector is therefore stratified in ways that schools, and even universities, are not (Thompson 2009).

Participation and attainment have always been significantly greater for the higher social classes, and they have also tended to access high-status forms of learning and attend more prestigious institutions, but recent policy decisions have exacerbated such inequalities (Ball 2012). As Ball (2003) argues, in an educational marketplace those from higher social classes are better able to manipulate ostensibly neutral mechanisms of educational selection and allocation. Notions of diversity and choice are highly stratified according to social class and other forms of difference and effectively the number of transition points which young people are required to negotiate has multiplied. However, whilst elite forms of education continue to offer social and economic advantages for those able to access such opportunities, other forms of provision may actually reproduce and reinforce disadvantage. Wolf (2011, 21) highlights the 350,000 16–19 year olds on low-level vocational programmes whose engagement fails either to promote progression into stable employment or to help them access higher level education and training. Simmons (2009) argues that the stigmatising effects of certain forms of work-related learning make progression into decent employment or more prestigious forms of education especially difficult for people on the margins of participation. The traditional image of the young person gaining incremental progression at work facilitated by study at their local college seems increasingly outdated. These considerations support Boudon’s contention that educational expansion alone cannot prevent young people with lower-level qualifications being exposed to the effects of positional competition.

Educational opportunity and social mobility

This section is concerned with the conceptual basis of Boudon's model of social opportunity. Following Boudon (1974, xi), we define inequality of educational opportunity (IEO) as differences in educational attainment according to social background, whilst inequality of social opportunity (ISO) is defined as differences in achieved social status according to social background. Although the term 'opportunity' is used in these definitions, the focus is on outcomes rather than a narrower conception of opportunity in terms of access to education or employment. ISO is not simply the converse of social mobility – for example, positive discrimination in favour of those in lower social positions could lead to a situation in which both ISO and social mobility were high. However, in practice it is assumed that in contemporary societies ISO tends to favour those in higher social positions, so that ISO and social mobility are inversely related – high ISO implies that those already advantaged are more likely to retain this advantage. Furthermore, specific levels of IEO are not necessarily associated with specific levels of ISO or social mobility. As discussed above, Boudon argues that although liberal-industrial theory proposes that reductions in IEO should decrease ISO, there is no necessary relation between the two. The structure of labour-market opportunities need not correspond to the supply of people with particular educational credentials.

The definitions of ISO and IEO raise a number of methodological problems. Firstly, social background can be measured in various ways – for example, by social class, income, occupational status, or educational level – so that the generic concept of social mobility decomposes into more specific measures, which are not necessarily equivalent. Choosing between these measures is not simply a practical issue based on the availability of data, but also embodies more fundamental distinctions – for example, between analysing correlations involving continuous variables such as income, and a more sociological approach in which the focus is on patterns of association between categories with specific social meanings, notably social class (Erikson and Goldthorpe 2002). Indeed, the way in which social background is operationalised can significantly affect the conclusions drawn from empirical data, with recent evidence pointing to decreases in social mobility when social background is measured by income, but stability when class is used as the indicator (Blanden and Machin 2007; Erikson and Goldthorpe 2010).

Secondly, it is necessary to distinguish between absolute and relative mobility. Changes in the social structure, such as the growth in professional and managerial positions in the 30 years following the Second World War, will inevitably increase social mobility as the distribution of available positions changes. However, the relative chances of people from different social backgrounds achieving higher or lower social positions need not change in the same way. A classic finding of social mobility research in the United

Kingdom is that, whilst significant absolute upwards mobility existed in the post-war period, analysis of relative mobility showed great advantages in favour of those originating in the highest social classes (Goldthorpe 1980). Since then, whilst the class structure has continued to change (albeit more slowly than hitherto), relative mobility between social classes in the United Kingdom has remained essentially constant (Goldthorpe and Mills 2008). The distinction between absolute and relative mobility draws attention to a point rarely mentioned by politicians – that, in the absence of general increases in social opportunities, for an individual to move up, someone else has to move down. It is therefore more appropriate to think of ISO as related to both absolute and relative social mobility, rather than absolute mobility alone.

Similar considerations apply to IEO, and the effects of educational expansion must be considered when discussing inequalities in educational opportunity (Mare 1981; Sullivan, Heath, and Rothon 2011). Although in most industrialised countries access to higher levels of education has increased substantially, this does not necessarily lead to greater equality. If educational reform and expansion really are effective in reducing IEO, social background effects on educational attainment should weaken. Conversely, if educational expansion takes place largely through increased participation at higher levels of children from more advantaged backgrounds, social background effects may strengthen. Again, relative rates are the most useful here, in the form of ratios expressing the differential likelihood of educational outcomes according to social origin (Jackson et al. 2007).

The model of social opportunity that Boudon develops consists of two components: a model of changing IEO under conditions of educational expansion, and a model of ISO under conditions in which the supply of educated individuals grows more rapidly than the availability of social positions. An essentially meritocratic society is assumed, in which the highest social positions tend to go to those with the highest levels of education; although Boudon discusses the potential impact of dominance effects, in which the chances of obtaining a high-status position for a given educational level increase with social background, his model explicitly excludes such effects. The IEO component of the model will be discussed first, examining some of its basic assumptions; the ISO component and the main conclusions from the model will be considered in the next section.

Primary and secondary effects of social stratification

Perhaps the most crucial element of the IEO component is Boudon's distinction between the primary and secondary effects of social stratification on educational inequality. In a recent formulation of this distinction, Jackson et al. (2007) define primary effects as those expressed through the association between children's social backgrounds and their educational

performance, whilst secondary effects are expressed through the educational choices made by children from differing social backgrounds but with similar levels of performance. Unlike Bourdieu, for whom IEO results from a unitary cultural process in which habitus and field condition one's whole experience of education, Boudon explicitly distinguishes between cultural (primary) effects and positional (secondary) effects:

IEO is generated by a two-component process. One component is related mainly to the cultural effects of the stratification system. The other introduces the assumption that even with other factors being equal, people will make different choices according to their position in the stratification system. In other words, it is assumed (1) that people behave rationally in the economic sense ... but that (2) they also behave within decision fields whose parameters are a function of their position in the stratification system. (Boudon 1974, 36)

Although Boudon uses the language of choices, aspirations and ambitions, this should not be seen as essentialising secondary effects – producing a discourse of low aspirations reminiscent of the 'value theory' that Boudon (1974, 22–23) was at such pains to reject. Secondary effects comprise influences on transitions deriving not only from individual preferences, but also from social position, economic and cultural resources, and local opportunity structures. Drawing on Keller and Zavalloni (1962), Boudon relates secondary effects to a positional theory of educational progression, in which young people's aspirations are seen as relative to their social background. This theory rejects the notion that differing aspirations between social groups arise from different value systems; instead, similar processes operate across all social classes, but because the costs and benefits of particular educational decisions vary with social position, behavioural outcomes may differ (Boudon 1974, 23). As we have seen, Boudon regards people as behaving rationally, but the rationality involved is bounded – or perhaps, more accurately, situated – and one's current position is an important factor in evaluating the satisfactions associated with individual mobility. Those from higher social classes must aspire to a high position merely to avoid downward mobility; conversely, more modest aspirations may still provide a measure of upward mobility to someone from a lower social class. A more meritocratic society may actually increase secondary effects, in that those from the highest social classes must strive through education to achieve the strongest possible labour-market position (Brown 2006).

In Boudon's formulation, both costs and benefits may have socio-cultural as well as economic dimensions: for example, through the impact of choices on family solidarity or the risk of losing touch with peers. More recently, there has been considerable debate on the relative importance of cultural and economic factors in the evaluation of costs and benefits; in particular, Goldthorpe rejects the inclusion of socio-cultural elements in models of educational choice and emphasises the role of economic resources and benefits

(see Goldthorpe 1996; Hatcher 1998; Hansen 2008). Nash (2006) proposes that the distinction between primary and secondary effects should be seen as methodological rather than theoretical, and that there is no reason why performance and choice effects should be associated with different causes, or why these causes should be identified as due to primary socialisation and rational decision-making, respectively. However, whilst these criticisms are important, there is substantial evidence that secondary effects as conceptualised by Boudon are both significant in size and theoretically valuable, particularly in accounting for variability in IEO between different educational systems (Jackson and Jonsson 2013).

Evidence for secondary effects

Empirical support for distinguishing between primary and secondary effects is provided by evidence that choices made at a particular point in an educational career – for example, whether to pursue an academic or vocational curriculum, or to continue in schooling rather than seek work – depend significantly on social background. Boudon (1974, 24–28) cites data from the United States, France and Denmark indicating a substantial class gradient in continued participation, after controlling for various measures of underlying academic ability. Since then, although participation by all social classes has increased considerably, the continued importance of secondary effects has been confirmed in a succession of more recent studies (for example, Breen and Yaish 2006; van de Werfhorst and Hofstede 2007; Jackson 2013). Thus, children from high-socio-economic status backgrounds are more likely to aspire to the highest levels of education, even at modest levels of academic ability. Furthermore, educational choices of low-socio-economic status children are more sensitive to academic ability than those from high-socio-economic status backgrounds, particularly in the mid-range of ability. For example, Jackson et al. (2007) analyse A-level transitions in England and Wales: in three cohorts, progressing from compulsory education in 1974, 1986 and 2001, respectively, transition probabilities controlled for academic attainment are consistently ordered by social class, with particularly large differences in the mid-range of attainment. Jackson et al. estimate that secondary effects account for 25–50% of overall class differentials at A-level, but declined between 1974 and 2001.

Significance of secondary effects

The significance of secondary effects for Boudon's model is that over an individual's educational career they will typically make a number of decisions affecting their ultimate level of attainment. These decisions include what to do at certain institutionalised transition points, such as whether to enter higher education, but are not limited to formal choices at specified

times: they may also include frequent informal decisions concerning one's educational priorities and commitment (Nash 2006, 171). Boudon argues that primary effects become less visible in higher-status curricular tracks over the life of a school cohort, because lower-ability students from working-class backgrounds tend to leave these tracks at an earlier stage. This effect is also noted in Bourdieu's 'unequal selectedness', although for Bourdieu selectedness operates through the criteria required for progression rather than through explicit choices (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, 72). By contrast, secondary effects 'assert themselves repeatedly over the life of a cohort' (Boudon 1974, 86), so that according to Boudon IEO is 'probably more attributable to the different systems of expectations generated by different social backgrounds than to the different cultural backgrounds that are due to the same source' (1974, 85).

Boudon emphasises the cumulative impact of secondary effects, which increases exponentially with the number of transition points. So-called 'anticipatory' decisions (Jackson 2013, 17), in which a student ceases to make a serious effort well before a formal transition point, highlight the continuously-operating nature of secondary effects and provide a challenge to their estimation. When comparing empirical studies of primary and secondary effects with Boudon's model, a distinction must be made between the multiplication of secondary effects over a sequence of transitions (formal or informal) and the magnitude of 'choice' effects at a specific transition. A cross-sectional study will typically isolate secondary effects operating at a particular transition, with reference to an estimate of primary effects based on performance at a time more or less removed from the transition. As Jackson (2013, 17) notes, secondary effects at age 16 are estimated to be much smaller relative to primary effects when a contemporaneous measure of performance is used than when based on a measure of ability at age 11 (see also Nash 2005, who finds a low contribution of secondary effects using an ability measure close to the relevant transition point).

Boudon's model of educational opportunity and social mobility

Unlike the statistical modelling techniques that were attaining a high level of sophistication at the time, Boudon does not intend his model to provide a 'fit' to the patterns of IEO and ISO in a particular society. Replying to an unsympathetic review by Robert Hauser, one of the leading proponents of statistical modelling, Boudon explains that his aim was rather to answer:

[A] set of questions, not of the *how much* type but of the *why* type: Why does IEO remain so high in spite of all the efforts to reduce it? Why has the decline in IEO not provoked a decrease of intergenerational inheritance, even though educational attainment is a powerful determinant of status? ... Given my objective, I came to the idea of building a model roughly describing the basic mechanisms responsible for educational and social inequality ... a kind

of ideal-typical model taking into account only some simplified basic mechanisms to check whether this model could account for a set of 'qualitative' statements. (Boudon 1976, 1176–1177)

Criticism of Boudon's model on the basis of deviations from specific empirical data would therefore be misplaced. Indeed, Boudon would regard his model as being refuted only if it failed to generate the qualitative features he highlights as puzzling, or if another model, using substantively different assumptions, could account for them more effectively (1976, 1181). The model is developed by first stating a set of axioms embodying what Boudon sees as the essential mechanisms generating IEO/ISO, and then operationalising these axioms to construct an idealised quantitative system whose development can be traced over time, enabling the effects of educational expansion to be analysed. Although the operational parameters are chosen somewhat arbitrarily, Boudon argues that the features he seeks to reproduce are not particularly sensitive to their precise values.

Generating IEO and ISO

The axioms defining Boudon's ideal-typical society comprise two sets: the first set of four axioms (E1–E4) specifies the way in which primary and secondary effects of social stratification combine to produce socially differentiated educational outcomes for a cohort of students, and is therefore the IEO component of the model. The remaining two axioms (S1–S2) concern how educational attainment translates into achieved social status, and therefore provide the ISO component. The conceptual basis of these axioms has largely been discussed in the previous section; however, some additional comments are made here where necessary.

- E1: the society is stratified, and primary effects of stratification exist in which underlying academic ability is differentiated by social class from an early age. These primary effects are persistent; that is, the academic aptitude of an individual does not change over time.
- E2: the curriculum available to young people is differentiated for a substantial proportion of an educational career. Some routes offer progression to the highest levels of academic attainment, whilst others do not. At certain transition points, students must choose whether to continue with the higher curriculum. Once having left this curriculum, students are unlikely to return to it.
- E3: at any transition, secondary effects of social stratification operate, so that the probability of a particular individual continuing with the higher curriculum is an increasing function of social status as well as academic aptitude.

- E4: the society is in a state of educational expansion. The probabilities of continuing with the higher curriculum are increasing with time, although not necessarily uniformly for all social groups.

In axiom E1, the variables used to specify underlying ability are not particularly important: they may include cognitive test scores, age of reaching a particular educational level, or other dimensions – what matters is that they produce a hierarchy of academic aptitude, and predict later educational outcomes. Evidence for this axiom is plentiful; as Boudon suggests, empirical findings support the view that few, if any, school systems have been able to reduce significantly class differentials in educational attainment. For example, a recent UK study finds that by three years of age, significant differences have emerged in cognitive test scores according to family socio-economic position (Goodman and Gregg 2010, 11). Furthermore, these differences persist or even widen up to age 14, although some decrease is evident from 14 to 16. Recent research on 10 western OECD countries uncovers similar trends: none of these countries showed reductions in class-based disparities as children grew older (Ermisch, Jäntti, and Smeeding 2012).

Axiom E2 makes two claims: that the curriculum is differentiated, and that this differentiation operates long enough for progression choices to have a significant impact. Earlier in this article, we have focused on English post-compulsory education, arguing that whilst in principle it could begin to compensate for inequalities in compulsory education, in practice it is currently one of the most highly differentiated parts of the education system, with progression particularly sensitive to choice at a time when decisions are crucial to whether an individual reaches the highest levels of attainment. At earlier ages, curriculum differentiation is less overt, although still significant – particularly at age 14, when lower-status vocational tracks are often promoted as an alternative to academic learning for those deemed to be disengaged. Institutional differentiation, however, is of growing importance and is often related to family economic and cultural resources – the most obvious examples being selective and private education. Axiom E3 has, of course, been discussed in the previous section. Axiom E4 asserts that, whilst secondary effects remain important, social differentiation of transition rates may be expected to decline as more students from all social backgrounds access higher levels of education. In operationalising this axiom, Boudon introduces a ceiling effect to represent the slackening in growth to be expected as the participation of a particular social group approaches 100%.

ISO and changes in social structure

The four axioms E1–E4 have defined the IEO-generating component of Boudon's model. The central further assumptions embodied in the ISO generating component are as follows:

- S1: the social structure, in terms of the number of social positions available at each level, changes considerably less rapidly over time than the educational structure.
- S2: an individual's achieved status depends on four independent variables: social background; educational attainment; social structure; and educational structure, in terms of the number of people reaching each level of educational attainment.

The axioms S1–S2 are expressed here in the general form provided by Boudon. However, the detailed model he presents is based on two simplifications of these axioms: in S1, that the social structure remains essentially unchanged; and in S2, that social background acts only indirectly, through educational attainment. Both of these simplifications require some comment.

As the distribution of people across different occupations has changed, 'white-collar' employment has grown, at the expense of manual work. To some extent, this has driven change in the class structure; in the United Kingdom, Goldthorpe and Mills (2008, 86–87) point to a steady growth through the 1970s and 1980s in the professional and managerial salariat, while the body of manual workers – the traditional working class – has declined, particularly its skilled component. Official discourse presents de-industrialisation as part of a transformation from an economy based on largely low-skill mass production, to a 'knowledge economy' demanding highly-skilled workers able to contribute to value-added labour processes (Avis 2007, 2–4). However, a decline in manufacturing does not automatically mean there will be less unskilled work. Although, since the 1980s, there has been some increase in professional and 'hi-tech' employment, the most significant growth has been in retail, care, personal services and other relatively low-skill areas of the service sector. The UK economy remains mired in what Finegold and Soskice (1988) describe as a 'low-skills equilibrium' (Holmes and Mayhew 2012). Whilst Boudon's model assumes that the number of social positions available at each level remains stable, opportunities for young people may *worsen* as manufacturing jobs disappear and competition from displaced workers increases (Lloyd, Mason, and Mayhew 2008). Moreover, the apparent growth of professional employment needs to be treated with caution. As Boudon (1974, 157) argues, changes in the distribution of occupations lead to changes in their sociological meaning. Despite high-status titles, many apparently 'good jobs' offer mediocre pay, and underutilise the skills and abilities of an increasingly well-qualified workforce (Holmes and Mayhew 2012). As such positions have become downgraded, so the upgrading of the class structure has slowed: between 1991 and 2005 the higher salariat grew very little, and the working class largely maintained its size (Goldthorpe and Mills 2008, 87). Given the expansion of education over this period, the general form of S1 appears largely valid in contemporary Britain; however, the stronger statement that

there is *no* change in the social structure may be applicable only as an idealisation – which is, after all, what Boudon intends.

The second simplification introduced above is that social dominance effects are omitted. However, there is considerable evidence that in the United Kingdom a more realistic model would be obtained by including such effects. Those from privileged backgrounds have considerable advantages over their contemporaries in labour-market entry, and are able to capitalise on them in various ways. Many middle-class parents mobilise social, economic and cultural advantages that influence not only transitions into post-compulsory education, but various other parts of their children's lives – whether using their connections to secure employment, subsidising unpaid or low-paid work experience, or assisting with property purchase. Such processes illustrate what Boudon (1984) describes as the *dominance de milieu* of social class. In other words, inequalities deriving from social background mean there is a lower probability of working-class people reaching a higher social position, even with similar levels of educational attainment to their more privileged peers. Whilst Boudon argues that dominance effects are a feature of even relatively meritocratic societies, the changing nature of the UK labour market is likely to exacerbate ISO in this way.

Extended programmes of study and poorly-paid periods of work experience have always presented a barrier for young working-class people seeking to enter professions such as medicine, architecture or law; however, the replacement of many established graduate trainee schemes with internships, where young people are often expected to work unpaid to prove themselves worthy of employment, is likely to exclude working-class young people from a wider range of occupations than hitherto (Cabinet Office 2012b). Moreover, formal qualifications are becoming a less reliable predictor of securing employment. Personal attributes gained via family or community socialisation, as much as through educational processes, are increasingly sought by some employers (Brown and Hesketh 2004; Jackson, Goldthorpe, and Mills 2005, 13). Such practices demonstrate not only the lack of any straightforward link between educational expansion and decreasing ISO, but are likely to intensify the intergenerational persistence of advantage and disadvantage. Whilst excluding social dominance effects from axiom S2 may be unrealistic, such a simplification provides an interesting test of the meritocratic ideal that open competition based on educational attainment increases social mobility. The remainder of axiom S2 is essentially a statement concerning the nature of positional competition, and enables Boudon to use the output of his IEO component as the input to the ISO part of his model, constructing a numerical model that shows over-time changes in educational inequalities and social mobility for an ideal society with three social classes. Boudon repeatedly emphasises the over-simplifications of this model, but also the robustness of its conclusions taken as qualitative answers to the *why* questions discussed earlier.

Educational change and social mobility

We illustrate the main trends of Boudon's model of social opportunity by presenting three tables briefly summarising its output. Tables 1 and 2 show over-time development of IEO, condensing the six educational levels used by Boudon to three: these broadly correspond to attending higher education, reaching upper-secondary education, and all lower levels of attainment. In Table 1, we use the proportions of children from each of three idealised social classes (C1, C2 and C3) reaching each educational level, which provides a vivid illustration of the extent of expansion and differences in uptake by social background. However, proportions conflate the effects of educational expansion with changes in the underlying association between attainment and social background, and in Table 2 odds ratios are used instead – the now standard method of isolating changes in IEO from the structural changes associated with expansion.¹ Table 3 is a mobility table showing changes in ISO over the same time intervals as Table 1. Odds ratios showing the relative chances of different classes of origin reaching different destination classes are again used to express inequality, although because Boudon assumes constant social structure there is no expansion effect to allow for.

From Table 1 we see that although increases in participation take place across all social classes, analysing these increases in different ways shows that expansion does not benefit different social groups uniformly. The most marked changes over time in the chances of reaching the highest educational

Table 1. Proportions achieving each educational level by social background.

Time	Social background	Educational level		
		Highest	Intermediate	Lowest
t0	C1	0.2872	0.2353	0.4775
	C2	0.0736	0.1755	0.7509
	C3	0.0157	0.0772	0.9072
t1	C1	0.3266	0.2334	0.4399
	C2	0.0982	0.1944	0.7074
	C3	0.0246	0.0996	0.8758
t2	C1	0.3665	0.2292	0.4043
	C2	0.1264	0.2103	0.6633
	C3	0.0366	0.1235	0.8399
t3	C1	0.4062	0.2230	0.3707
	C2	0.1580	0.2228	0.6193
	C3	0.0522	0.1475	0.8004

Source: Boudon (1974, 146).

Table 2. Odds ratios for educational achievement by social background.

Time	Social background comparison	Educational level		
		Highest	Intermediate	Lowest
t0	C1/C3	25.26	3.68	0.09
	C1/C2	5.07	1.45	0.30
	C2/C3	4.98	2.54	0.31
t1	C1/C3	19.23	2.75	0.11
	C1/C2	4.45	1.26	0.32
	C2/C3	4.32	2.18	0.34
t2	C1/C3	15.23	2.11	0.13
	C1/C2	4.00	1.12	0.34
	C2/C3	3.81	1.89	0.38
t3	C1/C3	12.42	1.66	0.15
	C1/C2	3.65	1.00	0.36
	C2/C3	3.41	1.66	0.41

Source: Calculated from data in Boudon (1974, 146).

Table 3. Odds ratios for achieved social status by social background.

Time	Social background comparison	Achieved social status		
		C1	C2	C3
t0	C1/C3	8.12	1.26	0.29
	C1/C2	2.92	0.99	0.50
	C2/C3	2.78	1.28	0.58
t1	C1/C3	8.27	1.21	0.30
	C1/C2	2.93	0.98	0.50
	C2/C3	2.82	1.23	0.59
t2	C1/C3	8.72	1.17	0.30
	C1/C2	2.95	0.97	0.50
	C2/C3	2.95	1.20	0.60
t3	C1/C3	8.56	1.18	0.30
	C1/C2	2.93	0.98	0.50
	C2/C3	2.92	1.20	0.60

Source: Calculated from data in Boudon (1974, 152).

level, when expressed as a ratio of proportions from one time period to another, are for students from less privileged backgrounds. However, in terms of differences between proportions, the greatest increases are for students from more privileged backgrounds. Comparing the first and third rows

of Table 1 at times t_0 and t_3 , participation by class C1 increases by 11.9% whilst that by class C3 increases by 3.4%; however, this represents just over a threefold increase in proportion for class C3 compared with less than half this for class C1. Thus, although *opportunity* may be said to have increased significantly for those from class C3, the greatest benefit in numerical terms – and therefore in resources allocated to education – has been received by class C1. This point has been observed in empirical data on the expansion of UK higher education (Machin and Vignoles 2004). Part of the reason for this lies in the relative underdevelopment of the educational system modelled here: even for class C1, participation at the highest level is initially quite low, so that secondary effects are not offset by proximity to the ceiling of full participation.

A clearer picture of how inequalities have changed is provided by Table 2, which as discussed earlier uses odds ratios to allow for the effects of educational expansion. In this table, we see a steady decrease in inequalities between the highest and lowest social class, although decreases in other class comparisons are less dramatic. Taking into account Tables 1 and 2, we may conclude that inequality in educational opportunity decreases over time and with the degree of development of the educational system. However, in spite of the reductions in inequality occurring in the educational system, intergenerational social mobility is remarkably stable over time. In Table 3, which again uses odds ratios expressing the relative chances of reaching each social class by social class of origin, we see no particular trend of increasing or decreasing equality. Clearly, this is partly due to the somewhat unrealistic simplification that the social structure remains unchanged. However, another important factor is the greater uptake of education by higher social classes discussed in relation to Table 1; because of the difference in proportions reaching higher education between the classes, the market is flooded with well-qualified young people from higher classes, squeezing out those below. Unless the social structure changed *substantially*, this effect would still be present even if the simplification was dropped. Furthermore, including social dominance effects would also reinforce social immobility.

Conclusion

Despite the multi-causal nature of social mobility and the importance of underlying inequalities in shaping opportunities, the nature and form of education plays an important role in individual social achievement. As educational expansion proceeds, the later stages of education become more critical in differentiating between students, and we have therefore focused particularly on post-compulsory education. Raymond Boudon's work shows us that greater differentiation within education increases inequality of attainment, over and above that which can be attributed to socio-cultural influences on

academic aptitude. In England, government policies since the 1980s have exacerbated the accumulation of secondary effects over an educational career. As we have shown, the post-compulsory sector is a site in which such policies have had a particularly negative impact.

In recent decades, neo-liberal governments have used discourses of social mobility as a means of legitimising growing social inequality. Disparities in wealth and income are presented as acceptable, provided everyone has an equal chance of climbing the ladder of success. In achieving this ideal, education is given a central role, based as we have seen on the assumptions of liberal-industrial theory on the decline of class. However, Boudon's model shows us that educationalising the issue of social mobility is untenable without concomitant changes in the structure of social opportunities, and powerfully illustrates Bernstein's famous claim that education cannot compensate for society (Bernstein 1970). In order to facilitate social mobility, a range of interventions in the labour market are necessary, alongside broader measures to reduce inequality. Boudon's analysis provides a powerful explanatory framework for understanding this: firstly, by underlining the logical disconnection between decreasing educational inequality and social mobility; and secondly, by emphasising the contribution of rationality and choice in the production and reproduction of educational inequality. Boudon's positional theory provides an important counterweight to essentialising arguments that present low aspirations as an explanatory variable, rather than mediating the relationship between broader social conditions and educational or labour-market outcomes.

Critiques of Boudon's work show the importance of elucidating the nature of secondary effects. Are they, as Goldthorpe argues, largely based on economic rationality, or do they have a socio-cultural component, as Boudon suggests? If secondary effects are at least partly socio-cultural in origin, the question of how to distinguish them from primary effects arises – a difficulty highlighted by Nash (2006). It is also important to consider how secondary effects change over time, and how we interpret evidence suggesting that high-achieving working-class young people are more likely to pursue prestigious progression routes than was the case in previous generations (see, for example, Jackson et al. 2007). A related question is how differences between the educational systems in different countries influence the relative magnitude of primary and secondary effects. Drawing on evidence from eight countries, Jackson and Jonsson (2013, 327) conclude that, whilst primary effects appear to vary little between these countries, there is considerable variation in secondary effects. Although the relationship with educational structures is not entirely clear, it is striking that where secondary effects are relatively large, so is inequality of social opportunity.

Although concepts such as bounded rationality may appear to endorse a theory of social reproduction in which different forms of consciousness are attributed to people from lower social classes, Boudon in fact proposes that

the same motivations and consciousness underlie the decisions of people from all classes. Unlike Bourdieu's account, in which 'We can always say that individuals make choices, so long as we do not forget that they do not choose the principles of these choices' (Wacquant 1989, 45), the desire to 'better oneself', to achieve a higher position than one's parents or at least to avoid downward mobility, is shared by all. What is different, according to Boudon, is their social, cultural and economic situation, which any rational person must take into account when considering their future. Although Ichou and Vallet (2013, 143) warn that differences between Boudon and Bourdieu should not be exaggerated, by ascribing a greater level of consciousness and intentionality to the individual, Boudon's approach avoids a cultural determinism that tends to deflect attention from the possibility that changes in the social structure could contribute to reducing inequalities in both educational and social opportunity.

Note

1. Odds are calculated by dividing the probability of an event occurring (e.g. someone from class C1 reaching educational level E1) by the probability of it not occurring. However, odds taken in isolation can be misleading – if educational opportunities increase for all, the odds of reaching a high level will also increase for all, but the odds of one class relative to another may not change to the same extent. An odds ratio is the odds for one class divided by the odds for a comparison class (Sullivan, Heath, and Rothon 2011). Large odds ratios indicate high degrees of inequality; if an odds ratio remains constant over time, this implies that any reduction in inequality is due to expansion alone.

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