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6. SUBJECTIVE SOCIAL MOBILITY: DATA FROM 30 NATIONSⁱ

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Abstract

There is extensive research on the causes and consequences of actual social mobility but much less is known about subjective social mobility – about how people believe their adult social position compares to their parents' position. The ISSP Inequality-III surveys of 1999/2000 asked respondents to compare the status of their most recent job with the status of their father's job when the respondent was a teenager (N= 31 691 in 30 nations). On average, people thought they had moved up a moderate amount compared to their fathers, although women thought they had moved up less than men did. The actual gain in occupational status between father and offspring is an important influence on this subjective mobility (beta = .27) but it is not the only influence. Two other changes also influenced subjective mobility: educational gains between parent and offspring, and country-wide gains in GDP between when the respondent was growing up and the present. Income and authority also matter. Subjective social mobility has important consequences, even controlling for actual social mobility, education, income, gender, and authority. Those who think themselves mobile identify with a higher class subjectively, are more likely to think their pay is just, and believe they ought to earn high salaries. Thus understanding subjective social mobility helps us to understand other aspects of society, especially attitudes towards inequality.

A vast literature on social mobility investigates what causes people to move up or down in society. Particularly important is intergenerational social mobility: the difference in occupational status between parents and their children – whether children have better jobs than their parents', similar jobs, or worse jobs than their parents had. Social mobility is interesting and important in its own right and, moreover, is also known to influence many other attitudes and behaviors, such as fertility and life satisfaction. Researchers suspect that many of these effects operate through people's *perception* of their mobility – that what matters is people's subjective belief that they are moving up or down in the world. Thus understanding not only how much people have actually risen or fallen in status compared to their fathers but also how much they *think* their status has changed may help us understand more about attitudes and behaviors influenced by social mobility and why social mobility affects them.

In earlier years, there was much interest in the consequences of subjective social mobility for anomie, politics, prejudice, and fertility. But this early research did not lead to reliable results, partly because of the difficulty of dealing with change scores (Blau and Duncan 1967: Ch. 5; Kelley 1992). We suggest that there may be a second major difficulty. All these arguments assume that actual social mobility wholly determines people's subjective perceptions of mobility, which in turn shapes attitudes and behaviors. But we will show that this is problematic: subjective social mobility does depend on actual occupational mobility, but it also depends on educational mobility, on the economic growth of the country (GDP mobility), and on other factors. As most mobility studies have been done in the second half of the 20th Century, a period of educational expansion and economic growth, these may have confounded the analysis of occupational mobility effects.

To help fill this gap, this chapter analyzes some of the causes and consequences of subjective social mobility. We first use regression methods to investigate how *actual* social mobility (measured using actual change in occupational status between parents and their children) influences *subjective* social mobility (measured using people's perception of intergenerational change in occupational status). Due to limitations in the data, the reference point is father's occupational status, although it would have been theoretically preferable to use both mother's and father's. Second, we examine subjective social mobility's effects on three outcomes: subjective social class, whether or not people think their own pay is just, and how much people think they ought legitimately to earn. In each case we find that subjective social mobility has a real effect, even controlling for actual social mobility: whether or not people *think* that they have moved upward is important as well as their actual movements.

6.1 Prior research

Early research suggested no difference in subjective class identification between Britain and the US (Vanneman 1980), despite predictions from the Tocquevillian tradition that that subjective social class in the US should be higher because the US is much more egalitarian (de Tocqueville 1836). More recent research using better measurement finds that Americans place themselves a little higher in the social hierarchy than do Britons (Kelley and Evans 1995), although the difference appears to stem from national prosperity rather than from a difference in individual social mobility (Evans and Kelley 2004) and in general the US is not exceptional (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). Ownership of the means of production, the key to class position in Marx's analysis (Marx 1852 [1972]), does not seem to influence subjective class identification in the US (Jackman and Jackman 1973), although it might in more class-conscious European societies. Authority in the workplace, the key to Dahrendorf's class analysis, might as well (Dahrendorf 1959; Robinson and Kelley 1979).

Subjective social class is only correlated between .20 and .30 with occupational status and other objective measures of class, leading some to posit the "death of class" (Clark and Lipset 1991; Pakulski and Waters 1996). Other researchers have pointed out that these relationships are highly robust and are found in many countries throughout the world (Evans and Kelley 2004). Moreover, research shows that subjective social class is an overall assessment of one's place in the social hierarchy, being about as highly correlated with education and income as with objective occupational status (Kluegel, Singleton, and Starnes 1977).

Actual social mobility has a number of important features that help guide the analysis of subjective mobility (Beller and Hout 2006; Solon 2002). (1) The amount of upward social

mobility in US has decreased since 1975. In earlier generations, many more were upwardly occupationally mobile, but recently about as many are downwardly mobile as upwardly mobile. (2) Both occupational mobility (sociologists' favorite) and income mobility (economists' favorite) are distinct and important aspects of social mobility. (3) Income mobility has not changed substantially over time. (4) America is about middle of the pack among developed nations in terms of social mobility (some less, like Portugal and Germany) some more (like the Scandinavian nations and Canada). (5) Importantly, the processes of actual social mobility are broadly similar across the developed world (Ganzeboom, Treiman, and Ultee 1991).

By analogy to this prior research on objective mobility, it makes sense to expect that the processes of subjective social mobility will be broadly similar in many nations, and that its causes will include many of the causes of objective mobility (Ganzeboom, Treiman and Ultee, 1991; Beller and Hout, 2006). But subjective mobility may be influenced by a broader array of things. In particular, the earlier finding that subjective social class depends on economic development suggests that subjective mobility may also depend on gains in national economic development, as well as on individual characteristics.

Subjective social mobility is complex, and prior research does not provide a particularly extensive foundation for investigating its consequences, but there is evidence of effects stretching into diverse zones of life. For example, in predicting fertility, simply knowing actual mobility between parent and child is not enough and models are significantly improved by the inclusion of subjective social mobility (Stevens 1981). Both actual and subjective class are linked to ill-health in Britain, so subjective social mobility may be as well (Singh-Manoux, Adler, and Marmot 2003). The intriguing idea that actual social mobility shapes people's political party loyalties appears not to be supported by the evidence (Turner 1992), so subjective perceptions of social mobility are probably not politically salient either; nor is social mobility linked to prejudice (Treiman 1966). But it seems reasonable to expect that subjective social mobility will tend to increase tolerance of inequality, both by psychological processes of rationalization and by generalization.

In summary, our theoretical model is shown in Figure 6.1.

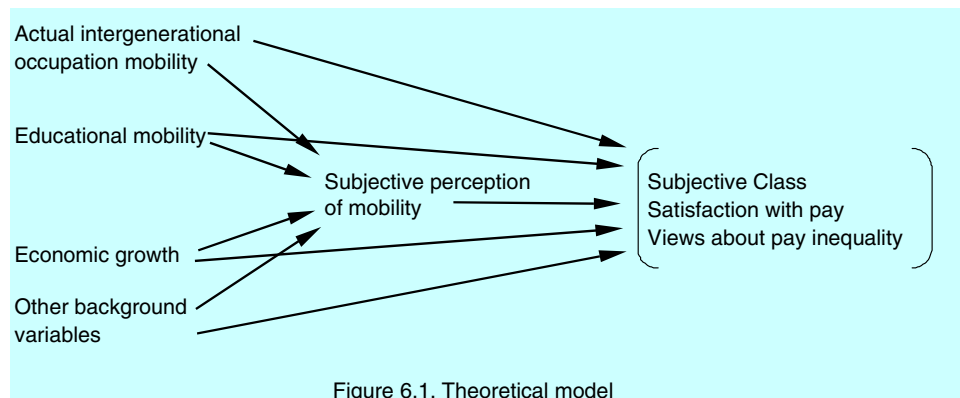


Figure 6.1. Theoretical model
[FIGURE 6.1 NEAR HERE]

6.2 Data, measurement and methods

Data

We analyze data from the ISSP 1999/2000 Inequality-III surveys, in the refined form in which they appear in the World Inequality Survey, a compendium of over 130 surveys from several major international survey projects that include measures of education, occupation, income, and family background. These data were merged and occupational and other measures harmonized with the support of grants from the Australian Research Council to the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research (Kelley, Evans, and Sikora 2005). The Inequality-III surveys have extensive data on family background as well as subjective social mobility. These surveys are all large, representative national samples. There are 31 691 respondents in total.

Measurement: Actual mobility

Occupational status (both respondent's and father's) is based on detailed occupational data, most commonly 4-digit ISCO codes, recoded first into Treiman's 14 category occupational classification (Treiman 1977) and then into Worldwide Status Scores (Evans and Kelley 2002: Appendix). For the US, these scores are essentially interchangeable with Duncan SEI scores. They range from a low of 0 for farm workers through 100 for higher professionals (doctors, academics, secondary school teachers and the like), with other occupational groups scored at appropriate points in-between.

Actual *occupational mobility* is then measured as the difference between the occupational status of the respondent and that of his or her father. The Appendix shows that, taken separately, respondent's status and father's status have effects approximately equal in magnitude and opposite in sign, justifying their combination into a single difference score (Blau and Duncan 1967: Ch. 5). It seems that people react to the *distance* they have moved between their family of origin and their present status, regardless of whether that comes about because their father's status was low, or their present status high, or some combination of the two.

Similarly, *GDP increase* is measured as the difference between the GDP of the respondent's country at the time of the survey and its GDP when they were 15 years old (using historical GDP data from Evans and Kelley 2006). We choose to combine the two measures because this makes the model conceptually easier to understand and the two have effects approximately equal in magnitude and opposite in sign, as can be seen in the Appendix.

Measurement: Other predictors

Prior research suggests a variety of potential predictors for social mobility, so we guess that some of the same variables may effect subjective social mobility. (1) *Parent's education* is measured as the mean number of years of education of the respondent's mother and father. (2) *Education* is the total number of years of education which the respondent has completed. We do *not* combine education and parents' education into a single educational mobility measure because their effects differ greatly in magnitude, as shown in the Appendix. (3) *Family Income* is measured as the natural log of the total reported income of the respondent and their spouse. This includes all earnings, pensions and other money coming into the family from all sources. (4) We measure *Ownership*, the key aspect of class for Marx, as 1 for those who

own their own business and 0 for all others. These are mainly very small businesses, including some with no employees. (5) *Supervision*, the key aspect of class for Dahrendorf, is scored 1 for those who supervise others and 0 for those who don't supervise (Robinson and Kelley 1979). (6) *Gender* is measured with women scored as the reference category, 0, and men scored as 1. (7) *Marriage* is scored 1 for those currently married, and 0 for everyone else.

Measurement: Consequences

Our second analysis concerns the consequences of subjective social mobility, focusing on three important variables related to inequality and class.

Subjective social class: This measures where people believe they fit in the social hierarchy. It is a composite of two questions. The first is self-placement on a vertical scale, often used in cross-national research, anchored between "top" and "bottom", with eight unlabeled categories in-between (Evans and Kelley 2004; Smith 1986). The second is self-placement on a visual image of society representing classes arrayed from "top" to "bottom" (Evans, Kelley, and Kolosi 1992). These two measures are averaged to form a scale ranging from 0 for people who see themselves as fitting into the lowest category on both questions to 100 for those who feel they are in the highest class on both.

Whether people think their pay is just: This is a measure of whether the respondent thinks their pay is just, based on the question: "Is your pay just? We are not asking about what you do earn, nor what you would like to earn, but what you feel is just given your skills and effort...". Respondents who do not work are asked to consider their last job. People who think they are paid "much less than is just" are scored 0, people who think they are paid "a little less than is just" are scored 50, and people who think they are paid "justly" (together with the few who think they are overpaid) are scored 100. This scoring was chosen because responses were heavily concentrated among people who think they are paid too little; hardly anyone thought they were overpaid.

How much people think they ought to be paid: This is one of a well-known battery of legitimate earnings questions (Kelley and Evans 1993) that begins: "Next, what do you think people in these jobs *ought* to be paid – how much do you think they *should* earn each year before taxes, regardless of what they actually get...". After asking about seven or eight occupations, the battery concludes: "And someone who works in **your** usual occupation – how much ought they earn?" Answers were in local currency (for example, dollars in the US and pounds in Britain).

As is usual in income inequality studies, we analyze the natural log of this figure. This abstracts away from the huge difference in wages between countries, treating income as *relative* to others in the same nation. The other conventional alternative for dealing with these figures (Kelley and Evans 1993: 85-86) leads to mathematically identical standardized results.

Measurement: Subjective Social mobility

Our main dependent variable measures whether respondents think the status of their present job is greater or less than that of their father when they were a teenager. The exact question

wording is given in Table 6.1. For clarity, the five answer categories were scored at equal intervals from 0 to 100.

Model and estimation:

Our model predicting subjective social mobility is:

$$\text{Subjective mobility} = b_0 + b_1\text{Occupational mobility} + b_2\text{Parent's Education} + b_3\text{Education} + b_4\text{Family income} + b_5\text{GDP increase} + b_6\text{Owenship} + b_7\text{Supervision} + b_8\text{Gender} + b_9\text{Marriage} + e_1$$

To analyze the consequences of subjective mobility we used all the variables from the first model plus subjective social mobility:

$$Y = b_0 + b_1\text{Occupational mobility} + b_2\text{Parent's Education} + b_3\text{Education} + b_4\text{Family income} + b_5\text{GDP increase} + b_6\text{Owenship} + b_7\text{Supervision} + b_8\text{Gender} + b_9\text{Marriage} + b_{10}\text{Subjective mobility} + e_1$$

[where Y is in turn: Subjective social class, whether one's pay is just, or how much one ought to be paid]

We estimated these models by ordinary least squares regression. The model has a multilevel element (Goldstein 1987) in GDP of nation when respondent reached age 15. However, as there are over 3,500 such contexts, the practical effect is minimal and for simplicity we ignore that complication.

6.3 Description

Only a very small number of people, 7 percent, see their occupation as "Much lower" than their father's and less than a fifth see their occupation as "Lower" (Table 6.1). About a third think that their occupation is about the same status as their father's. Another third think their job is somewhat higher. Only a little over one in ten see their job as "Much higher" status than their father's. Thus a great majority of respondents see their occupation as about the same as their father's, or only a little lower or higher.

To summarize, we score each category of status change in equal intervals from 0 (much lower) to 50 (about the same) to 100 (much higher). Hence all scores above 50 represent an upward subjective mobility and all below 50, downwards. On average, respondents score 57 points, thus putting their own occupation slightly higher than their father's.

Table 6.1: Subjective social mobility: Frequencies. 30 nations, 1999.

Please think of your present job (or your last one if you don't have one now). If you compare this job with the job your father had when you were 16, would you say that the level or status of your job is (or was)...

	Percent	Score
Much lower than your father's	7	0
Lower	17	25
About equal	31	50
Higher	33	75
Much higher than your father's	13	100
Total	100%	
Cases	31 691	
Mean (points out of 100)	57	

Source: ISSP Inequality-III

[TABLE 6.1 NEAR HERE]

6.4 International Comparison

Of the 30 nations included in this analysis, 29 have a mean between 50 (no change from father's status) and 65 (moderate upwards mobility); the countries are more or less evenly distributed in a fairly narrow band (Table 6.2). Thus, in a large majority of nations, the average person thinks they are at the very least equal to the status of their father and often above him. The most optimistic countries – like Portugal, Cyprus, Spain, and Brazil – think that they have risen a moderate amount, 13 to 15 points upwards. Others see smaller gains, including the USA with an 8 point gain. Only Chile sees no gain.

Table 6.2: Subjective social mobility:
Mean points where 0 is "much lower",
50 is "about equal", and 100 is "much
higher". Each country separately, 1999.

Country	Mean	N
Portugal	65	1012
Cyprus	64	828
Spain	63	1025
Brazil	63	1633
France	62	1736
Australia	61	1544
Northern Ireland	60	671
Israel	60	1065
Bulgaria	60	955
Switzerland	59	1140
Poland	58	977
USA	58	1082
Austria	58	895
Eastern Germany	57	441
Hungary	57	1082
Britain	57	714
Canada	56	931
Netherlands	56	1515
New Zealand	56	1028
West Germany	56	776
Slovakia	56	880
Norway	56	1184
Slovenia	55	864
Latvia	55	912
Russia	54	1167
Czech Republic	54	1582
Philippines	54	990
Sweden	54	1050
Chile	50	1134
Japan	37	878

Source: ISSP Inequality-III

[TABLE 6.2 NEAR HERE]

Japan is the real exception, an outlier with a mean of only 37. This implies that the Japanese believe they have actually *declined* in occupational status from their fathers' position, by 13 points out of 100. And it is despite modest real improvement in occupational status (6 points out of 100) and strong growth in the nation's GDP over most of the post-war period. Since Japan is one of the few Asian nations in the survey, it is hard to determine if this difference has to do with particular events and circumstances in Japan, or more general differences

between Asian and Western countries. Some possible reasons for this anomaly are discussed further below.

6.5 Causes of subjective social mobility

The main influence on subjective occupational mobility, as one might expect, is *actual* occupational mobility, with a standardized effect of .27 (Table 6.3). It makes sense that people who have actually moved up occupationally from their fathers believe that they have done so. But, interestingly, actual occupational mobility does *not* have the overwhelmingly dominant effect one might expect: although it is important, it is by no means the only variable which influences subjective mobility.

Table 6.3: Effects on subjective mobility:
Regression analysis. 30 nations, 1999. N=31 691.

Variable	Metric effect	Standardized effect	t
Occupational mobility	0.24	.27	33.42
Parents' education	-1.4	-.22	-22.36
Education	0.5	.07	6.66
Family income	2.9	.08	9.58
GDP gain	6.1	.04	5.72
Ownership	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	1.17
Supervision	5.2	.09	10.98
Gender (male)	4.4	.08	10.71
Marriage	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	1.85
Constant	54.6		72.02
R-squared	18%		

ns -- not statistically significant at p<.01, two-tailed.
Source: ISSP Inequality-III.

[TABLE 6.3 NEAR HERE]

Interestingly, having educated parents decreases subjective social mobility substantially (a standardized effect of -.22) but, in sharp contrast, being educated oneself increases subjective mobility by a much smaller amount (.07). Thus, education and parents education cannot be combined into a single educational mobility variable, for reasons discussed in the methods section. But, taken together, it seems that educational changes are about as important as occupational changes in shaping perceptions of social mobility.

People with a higher family income believe they have moved up slightly more than people with a lower income, with a standardized effect of .07. This is net of occupational mobility, education, parents' education, and other control variables.

The change in the GDP of the respondent's country from the time respondents were children until the year of the survey – that is, GDP mobility for the country as a whole – also influences whether people believe that they have moved up from their fathers. People who have experienced GDP growth, independent of their actual occupational mobility and other individual characteristics, believe that they have risen a little more from their fathers than do comparable individuals who experienced no GDP growth.

Interestingly, whether the respondent owns a business – believed by Marx to be one of the foundations of class and social position – does *not* influence subjective social mobility. People who own a business do not think they have moved up any more socially than people who are not owners (net of any change in occupational status). In contrast, authority in the workplace – believed by Dahrendorf to be the foundation of class and social position – does have some influence on subjective social mobility. Supervisors believe they have moved up more than those who do not supervise, although only by a modest amount (.08).

Demographic differences are modest. Men see themselves as having risen slightly more than women do (.08). Marital status has no effect on subjective social mobility.

6.6 Sensitivity analysis

To examine whether factors such as occupational mobility, educational changes, change in GDP, and the like operated differently for different groups, we ran separate regression analyses for men and women. We also ran separate analyses for people from English speaking nations, Ex-Communist nations, and Western Europe (these three groups represent most of the nations surveyed). The results of this sensitivity analysis are in Table 6.4. Effects in bold type are significantly different from the comparison group.

Table 6.4. Effects on subjective social mobility, separately by gender and type of country. 30 nations, 1999.

Variable	Gender				Nations					
	Men (all nations)		Women (all nations)		English- speaking		Ex- Communist		Western Europe	
	Metric effects	t	Metric effects	t	Metric effect	t	Metric effect	t	Metric effect	t
Occupational mobility	0.23	24.43	0.24	0.01	0.21	12.38	0.23	16.46	0.25	22.42
Parents education	-1.28	-15.21	-1.54	0.10	-2.06	-11.10	-1.57	-12.47	-1.97	-19.18
Education	0.42	4.77	0.49	0.11	0.62	2.86	0.87	5.85	0.46	4.55
Family income	3.28	8.00	2.56	0.46	4.77	5.75	2.38	4.19	3.96	6.85
GDP gain	10.3	7.17	ns	1.61	18	5.79	ns	-1.50	8	4.61
Ownership	<i>ns</i>	0.60	<i>ns</i>	0.94	<i>ns</i>	0.72	6	5.15	<i>ns</i>	-0.70
Supervision	5	8.43	<i>ns</i>	0.76	4	3.28	4	4.40	4	5.93
Gender (male)	--	--	--	--	7	5.86	ns	1.81	6	8.64
Marital status	<i>ns</i>	1.836	<i>ns</i>	0.66	<i>ns</i>	-0.28	<i>ns</i>	1.07	<i>ns</i>	0.04
Constant	57.1	57.9	56.2	1.1	60.7	19.7	53.1	31.8	58.5	47.06
R-squared	17%		16%		22%		17%		23%	
Cases	17 651		19 258		6 661		10 610		11 475	

Source: ISSP Inequality-III.

ns -- not statistically significant at p<.01, two-tailed

Boldface type with a grey screen indicates that effects for women differ significantly from those for men, or that effects in Ex-Communist or Western European nations differ significantly from those in English-speaking nations, at p<.01 two-tailed.

[TABLE 6.4 NEAR HERE]

Gender Differences

Most things influence subjective mobility in much the same way for men and women. But there is one interesting exception: for men, an increase in the nation's GDP significantly raises subjective social mobility, but GDP has no significant effect for women. Thus it seems men are more attuned than women to economic changes in the nation as a whole, although

not more attuned to changes in their own personal economic situation as reflected in education, occupation, class, or income.

Country differences

There are few significant difference between English-speaking, Western European, and ex-Communist countries. Interestingly, gender has no effect on subjective social mobility in ex-Communist countries. This might be because the efforts of Communist governments to reduce gender differences have been successful. Increases in GDP over the life-cycle – comparing childhood to current GDP – matter most in English-speaking countries, less in Western Europe, and not at all in ex-Communist countries. For the ex-Communist countries, the recent and dramatic changes in GDP since the fall of Communism may outweigh life-cycle changes.

6.7 Consequences of subjective social mobility

Researchers have argued that social mobility has an effect on a wide variety of things, including fertility, politics, life satisfaction, and subjective social class. Most of these arguments implicitly assume that people are aware of their success or failure – that they respond positively if they feel they have advanced in the world, but negatively if they feel they have done poorly, or been held down or restricted in gaining their just and expected position in life. If so, it is not so much the *objective* fact of mobility as the *subjective* reaction to it that matters. We test these assumptions by incorporating an explicit measure of subjective mobility.

Because of the limited number of questions asked in the surveys we are analyzing, we are only able to investigate the effects of subjective social mobility on a few inequality-related questions. But they are interesting questions (Table 6.5).

Table 6.5: Effects of subjective social mobility: Consequences for subjective social class, perception of whether one's pay is just, and views about how much one ought to earn: OLS regression 30 nations, 1999, N = 31,691.

	Subjective Social Class		Perception: One's own pay is just		How much one ought to earn (log)	
	Standardized effect	t	Standardized effect	t	Standardized effect	t
Subjective social mobility	.13	16.17	.08	9.38	.10	12.28
Occupational mobility	<i>ns</i>	2.11	<i>ns</i>	-0.41	.04	4.66
Parents' education	.24	24.70	.15	13.72	<i>ns</i>	-1.87
Education	.12	13.09	<i>ns</i>	1.70	.11	11.98
Family income	.21	25.77	.10	11.33	.36	44.68
GDP increase	.16	20.66	.19	22.88	<i>ns</i>	1.01
Ownership	.03	3.95	.03	4.04	.11	15.57
Supervision	.08	10.88	.03	3.82	.04	5.50
Gender (male)	<i>ns</i>	0.58	.03	3.37	.17	23.02
Marital Status	<i>ns</i>	-0.75	-.05	-6.51	-.02	-2.86
R-squared	24%		8%		26%	

ns -- not statistically significant at $p < .01$, two-tailed.
Source: ISSP Inequality-III

[TABLE 6.5 NEAR HERE]

Subjective social class

People who believe that they have moved up from their parents identify with a higher social class than those who do not believe themselves socially mobile (a standardized effect of .13). This is true even controlling for actual occupational mobility, actual changes in educational level, growth in the nation's GDP, and other things which affect subjective social class. This suggests that parents' occupational status is an important benchmark for most people. Improvements in the country as a whole, reflected in GDP mobility, also serve as an important benchmark. But interestingly, actual occupational mobility has no significant effect, except insofar as it affects subjective mobility: change matters only insofar as people are explicitly aware of it. Consistent with past research, income, education, and class position in the senses of Marx and Dahrendorf all shape subjective class identification (Jackman and Jackman 1973; Evans and Kelley 2004).

Whether people think their pay is just

Upward subjective social mobility leads people to see their pay as a little fairer than their subjectively stable peers, net of other characteristics (a standardized effect of .08). Interestingly, *actual* occupational mobility has no significant direct effect on this. Instead, the reality of mobility matters only insofar as it shapes *subjective* mobility. GDP mobility for the country as a whole matters a lot: when a country is growing economically (a main goal of most governments), each individual in it is likely to feel more satisfied with their personal pay. And people who are actually well paid are inclined to think that fair.

How much people think they ought to be paid

Finally, subjective social mobility also influences how much one thinks one ought to be paid: people who think that they themselves have moved up think that they deserve higher pay (a standardized effect of .10), independent of other characteristics. Again, subjective mobility matters much more than actual occupational mobility, although actual mobility is not irrelevant. The biggest influence is actual earnings, with people who earn a lot very much inclined to think they deserve it. Well educated people think they deserve more as well. Interestingly, men think they deserve more than women with comparable education, occupational status, and actual earnings.

6.8 Discussion

In sum, this chapter has investigated the causes and consequences of subjective social mobility, using data from the ISSP Inequality-III survey, with 31 691 cases in 30 nations. The question used to measure subjective social mobility asks respondents how they would compare the status of their current job to the status of their father's job. Although this question does not measure all aspects of social mobility, change in occupational status is surely a very important aspect. As control variables we included family background, actual intergenerational occupational mobility, and some other measures of class position such as whether the respondent supervises other or whether they own their own business. Later we also investigated the effect of subjective social mobility on subjective social class, on respondents feelings of earnings justice, and on how much respondents think they ought to earn.

The subjective social mobility question had five answer categories which we scored in equal intervals from 0 (much lower than your father) to 50 (about the same) to 100 (much higher). Using this scoring, the mean is a slightly positive 57 points. This means that people on average think that they have moved up very slightly from their father. In fact very few people, only 7%, think that they have moved a long way down from their fathers; a fifth think they have moved down just a little. A third think they have the same status of their father, and another third think they have moved up slightly. Thus the large majority of people think they are equal to or just a bit higher in status than their father.

The frequencies for each nation are interesting. 29 of the 30 nations have a mean between 50 and 65. This means that in most countries, people feel that they are either of similar status to their father or are slightly higher status. The one exception is Japan, with a mean of only 37 points. This means that on average the Japanese think that they are of *lower* status than their fathers. Some difference between Western and Asian culture might help to explain this discrepancy – for example, Asian cultures are thought to have more respect for parents than Western cultures, so it might be that people in Asian nations are more reluctant to say that they are of higher status than their father even if, in fact, they are. Another possible explanation is that some characteristic peculiar to Japan, such as its particularly difficult economic circumstances around the time of the survey, might help explain this pessimism as to their social status.

Actual occupational mobility is the most important single predictor of subjective social mobility; unsurprisingly, people who are *actually* moving upward occupationally are much more likely to *believe* that they are moving up. Nonetheless, the relation between subjective occupational mobility and actual occupational mobility is not as strong as might be expected. Many other things also shape people's perceptions of mobility. Parents' education plays an important role (people with highly educated parents are less likely to think they are socially mobile – perhaps because there is less opportunity for children whose parents are already at the top of the social hierarchy to move upwards). Interestingly, women are less likely than men to see themselves as moving upwards in comparison to their fathers. Those who supervise others are more likely to see themselves as having moved upward than people who do not supervise.

Subjective social mobility affects several important attitudes, even controlling for actual social mobility, actual education, occupation, income, and class, for parents' education, and for GDP growth. Firstly, subjective social mobility has an important effect on subjective social class, with those who think they have a higher status than their father more likely to think they are in a high social class, independent of everything else. Similarly subjective social mobility has a noticeable effect on whether the respondent thinks they are paid fairly and how much they think they themselves ought to earn. These few examples (limited by the variables available in the dataset) clearly show that including subjective as well as actual social mobility makes a difference. In future research it might be interesting to test the effect of subjective social mobility on various other factors thought to be effected by actual social mobility, for example life satisfaction, social conflict, and stress.

These findings have important implications for future researchers of social mobility. As we have shown, subjective social mobility is related to actual social mobility but also to many other factors independent of actual social mobility. Since subjective social mobility has important independent effects, including it gives more information than using actual social

mobility alone. Indeed, for most of the outcomes we have considered, actual occupational mobility affects things *only indirectly* through its effects on subjective mobility.

6.9 Conclusion

People's perception of social mobility are caused by their actual social mobility but also by other factors. Perceptions of mobility influence several other factors, such as subjective class and attitudes to inequality, even controlling for actual social mobility. Because many observed influences of social mobility are believed to act through peoples perceptions of their mobility, adding subjective mobility to questionnaires on actual social mobility would allow researchers to gain new insight into the impact of social mobility on attitudes and behaviors.

6.10 Appendix: Difference scores

Mobility and other difference scores can be problematic, as is well known (e.g. Blau and Duncan 1966: Ch. 5; Kelley 1992). The very concept of subjective social mobility involves an implicit difference, comparing your position to your father's, so there is nothing to do about that. But many of the causal variables could be treated either as difference variables themselves (conceptually attractive) or as two separate variables (avoiding some potential problems, but conceptually unattractive).

In our case, occupation and father's occupation have equally strong effects in opposite directions, as Appendix Table 6.6 shows. This means that their effect can be adequately and conveniently approximated by using a mobility variable 'Occupational status gain' = 'occupational status' – 'father's occupational status'. This treats gains equivalently, regardless of the starting point. That is what we have in mind by conceptualizing it as social mobility rather than two separate variables. And in this case, the data are amenable to that conceptualization.

Appendix Table 6.6. Effects on subjective mobility, difference variables separately

Variable	Metric effect	t
Pair 1:		
Occupation	0.22	24.86
Father's occupation	-0.24	-27.93
Pair 2:		
Current GDP	7.57	6.37
GDP when you were 15	-6.11	-6.49
Pair 3:		
Education	0.51	8.48
Parents' education	-1.4*	-21.82
Control variables:		
Family income	3.25	9.51
Ownership	0.24	ns
Supervision	5.27	11.48
Gender	4.58	12.00
Marital status	0.57	ns
R-squared	17%	

Source: ISSP Inequality-III, 1999, N= 36 981

* Magnitude significantly different from the other coefficient in the pair at $p < .01$, two-tailed.

[TABLE 6.6 NEAR HERE]

The same is true of GDP when the respondent was 15 and current GDP. Thus these measures can be replaced with 'Change in GDP' = 'current GDP' – 'GDP when respondent was young'.

However, the table also shows that the effects of parents education and respondents' education are very different in magnitude. Therefore they cannot be approximated with a difference score.

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