**Life narratives and personal identity: the end of linear social mobility?**

Over the past century, and especially since the 1950s, the topic of social mobility has become utterly compelling. It is a major social science research specialism and has become a crucial policy concern. Social mobility has become one of the normative tropes of our time, almost universally seen as a ‘good thing’ which permits individuals to rise (or less commonly talked about, fall) according to their individual talents and endeavours. However, we know surprisingly little about the changing ways in which ‘ordinary people’ conceptualised their social position and mobility in the post 1945 period. In this paper I will draw on a vital historical resource, the 1958 National Child Development Study, to highlight how far popular mobility narratives were driven by considerations other than those economic and class measures on which contemporary social mobility researchers were refining in the same period.

My aim is to reflect on changing contours of our cultural understanding of mobility itself, and to reflect on how historical changes in the post war decades have actually come to erase the kind of ‘linear’ models which continue to pre-occupy sociologists. I will thus reflect on how mobility narratives depart from linear conceptions of ‘up’ or ‘down’ move between distinctive states (see the wider discussion in Friedman and Savage 2017). This linear model became hegemonic in public policy and academic terms arose during the later decades of the 20th century leading to a dominant conception in which mobility was akin to a noun: one became socially mobile if one moved one’s social class during one’s life. This way of understanding mobility had great traction: it provided a way of linking one’s own experience to the central role of class in British society, and also proved to be a powerful frame for sociological analysis. For decades, since the 1950s, this linear analysis has held sway: however it is now disentangling at a very fast rate. There are numerous dimensions of this shift, but my focus in this paper is on how people themselves think of mobility in very different, affective ways, and as oriented around jags, turning points, and interruptions.

My empirical focus is the visualisations of life trajectory deployed by a large sub-sample of the 1958 birth cohort which were gathered during a collaborative research project in 2008 (see Elliot et al 2010) and which offer a striking window into lay conceptions of mobility. I especially draw attention to the remarkable uniformity of the kind of visualisations which respondents use, which involve seeking their life as a series of jagged movements, rather than in linear straight terms with clear movements ‘up’ and ‘down’. I will show how this is true for vast majority of respondents across the social spectrum, and will show how these jags represent ‘switches’ between personal and work life. I argue that jags are a way of narrating tensions, discrepancies and resolutions across domains of life which reveal a more emotional and affective way of registering mobility than can be elicited by linear occupational movements alone and in part can be seen to represent the experience of a specific generation born in 1958.

I begin by reflecting on the rise of mobility discourse during the later 20th century, reflecting on its intersections with other ways of grasping life trajectories. I also pull out the rise of strategizing conceptions during the 20th century. In the second part of the paper I turn to the National Child Development Study to reflect on the way that 220 of its members visualised their lives, and how these visualisations relate to other aspects of their lives. My main insistence here is how this analysis reveal ways of understanding their lives in ways different from the class and economic based approaches used in standard mobility research. I conclude by indicating how my findings play into more recent conceptions of mobility in terms of ‘lineages’ (see Mare 2011).

**1: The rise of social mobility**

In 1900, the idea of social mobility hardly existed (see Mandler 2015; Goldthorpe 2018). This partly reflects the rarity of long range mobility (Miles 1993), which was itself underscored by the dominant view that one was born into one’s social position. Yet, by the first decade of the 21st century social mobility had become a fundamental matter of overarching policy as well as academic concern. Google ngram (Figure 1) which examines trends in the relative use of terms across all digitised books over long periods f time, gives a telling - even if crude - indication of this rising prominence, and helps to refine our periodisation more exactly.

----- Figure 1 about here ----

Before 1920, Figure 1 shows that social scientific terms concerned with social mobility were entirely absent from the English cultural lexicon. However, in the remarkable blast of social science energy (see in general terms Savage 2010) which was witnessed during the middle decades of the 20th century, this was to change dramatically. After a tiny trickle of interest during the inter-war years (when the subject began to germinate in academic social scientific study, see Goldthorpe 2018) the term ‘social mobility’ mushroomed in its English language use between 1945 and the mid-1970s[[1]](#footnote-1). This rising popularity was closely associated with the first landmark sociological study of social mobility, David Glass’s *Social Mobility in Britain* (1954). The publication of John Goldthorpe et al’’s (1980) *Social Mobility and the Class Structure in Modern Britain,* widely seen as the‘definitive’ sociological treatment of the issue, in 1980 proved to be the high water mark of the term’s popular use. Goldthorpe built on Glass’s emphasis on mobility as movements between social classes, and helped therefore to institutionalise the idea that social mobility was fundamentally bound up with class transitions across strongly enshrined boundaries – such as into management or the professions. This idiom itself was powerfully tied up with the power of the collar divide, in which the distinction between manual and non-manual work was seen as culturally pervasive (see Goldthorpe et al 1980 and more generally McKibbin 1998; Savage 2000; Todd 2013).

Figure 1 shows that there has been a striking decline in the relative use of the social mobility term down to recent times, but the momentum was later taken forward by two terms flowing in its wash: human capital and meritocracy, both of which continue to expand in their popular use down to the recent period. The term ‘human capital’ was made famous by the economist Gary Becker in 1964 as a means of explaining how people who invested in their ‘human capital’ through skills and education might expect to be rewarded for their efforts in terms of increased income and social position. As Mandler (2018) has shown, these currents began to powerfully influence UK government education policy from the later 1950s. Exemplifying the cultural power of economics (rather than sociology) in commanding public debate, the growing role of this term played into, and was also informed by, the educational expansion agenda during this period. By 2000, the term ‘human capital’ was around three times more popular than ‘social mobility’. It played into an economistic conception of mobility as bound up with strategic and instrumentalising investment in one’s assets- a conception which is strongly embedded in government educational policy, notably the focus on higher education in terms of its significance for ‘employability’.

The term meritocracy follows a similar course, though at a much lower level of recognition. Inspired by Michael Young in 1957 as part of his dystopic account of the inequalities which testing regimes would entail, it soon lost his ironic edge to become part of an iconic mantra fitting for equal opportunities and anti-discrimination agendas, in which recruitment purely on the virtue of ‘merit’ became de rigueur.

The rise and proliferation of the mobility agenda represents a distinctive fusion of academic research, policy concerns, alongside a remaking of popular identities which were attuned to life as characterised by mobility experience. John Goldthorpe (2009) has traced how discourse on social mobility became mainstreamed politically from the 1990s. He particularly associates this with the New Labour policy under Tony Blair, as means of ‘appealing to the supposed electoral middle-ground of ‘aspirational’ families, while at the same time taking over a recognised Conservative emphasis on greater equality of opportunity rather than greater equality of condition’. He notes how the Blair government incorporated (his own) sociological research on social mobility in the report written by Stephen Aldridge at the Performance and Innovation Unit in 2001, but he notes, that it was the work of the economists Blanden et al (2004, first published in 2001) who proclaimed that social mobility was declining which inspired more intense political interest. This played into the creation of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission in 2013, and the fact that this unit is seen as so significant that it has survived different governments tells its own story. Alan Milburn’s resignation as Chair in 2018 is in some respects less surprising than the fact that the Conservative led governments had allowed a leading Labour politician to survive in post for so long.

Although Goldthorpe rightly attributes political interest in social mobility to the distinctive concerns of New Labour under Blair, this can be contextualised further in terms of inequality trends in the UK. During the 1970s, with progressive taxation and strong welfare provision, the UK was one of the most equal nations in the world, but this situation changed rapidly during the 1980s. The rapid intensification of the deindustrialisation of manufacturing which occurred from the mid-1970s led to the mass decline of relatively well paid manual jobs. Major cuts in marginal income tax rates especially benefitted the highest paid, with the top rate of income tax falling from 83% to 40% during this period (Piketty 2014; Atkinson 2015). The deregulation of the financial sector in 1985, which allowed London to become a major global trading centre, generated extremely high incomes for those working in the City and related corporate services, completely out of keeping with income levels across the nation more broadly[[2]](#footnote-2). The research of Atkinson, Piketty and Jenkins has shown a precipitous rise in income inequality in the 1980s which continued rising in the 1990s and then somewhat levelled off in the 2000s. In the context of this increasing gap between rich and poor (see more generally, Savage et al 2015), it is easy to understand why social mobility became strategically vital for governments to address. It was a means of legitimating rising differentials between the highly paid and those who had been increasingly ‘left behind’. Insofar as the glittering prizes (which came to glitter, at least in purely financial terms, much more brightly over this period than they already had before) were open to all talents, then they might be more easily justified than if they were enjoyed by ‘typical suspects’ from already privileged backgrounds. This helps to explain the emotional as well as political freight which the issue of social mobility came to possess during the first decade of the 20th century.

We can therefore certainly put the rising currency of discourse on social mobility, human capital and meritocracy alongside the more general provenance of social science concepts which came to fore during the second half of the 20th century. But we need to be careful not to decontextualize them away from the older, and persistent, idioms by which people have also made sense of their lives. Figure 2 presents the changing currency of a number of terms which have been deployed to talk about life trajectories: the ‘calling’, ‘career’, and ‘vocation’. Figure 2 also includes the term ‘social mobility’ to give a benchmark with respect to these three. This shows very powerfully that even in the later 20th century it is these more vernacular terms which hold vastly more sway compared to social scientific conceptions[[3]](#footnote-3).

----- Figure 2 about here -----

We can see, however, a striking shift. In the early 19th century, it is the concept of the ‘calling’ which is utterly dominant. Borrowing from a powerful religious idiom rooted in Protestant culture, this has a very particular take on mobility, as ‘taking up’ one’s predestined position. Following one’s ‘calling’ thus permitted the idea of mobility within a very clear pathway, as a means of achieving one’s preordained destiny. In this respect, it collapses mobility into a universalising discourse. The idea of the ‘calling’ is increasingly secularised during this period, being taken up especially in professional cultures (such as medicine, law, or the military). It could also be adapted for wider familial roles, for instance with mothers being deemed have a ‘calling’ to raise their children. It reaches a plateau during the mid 19th century before a gentle slide until the 1980s, at which point, it increases its popularity again – which in the context of the arguments I will make here is of some interest.

It is the trajectory of the concept of ‘career’ which is perhaps of the greatest interest. As Raymond Williams relates, the idea of career undergoes a powerful shift during the 19th century, away from its previous meaning of unpredicted movement (which still has a residue in the idea of a vehicle ‘careering out of control’) towards its more recent formulation as a structured set of occupational movements, sometimes in terms of upward movement through structured promotion, but also as enjoying wider provenance. The ‘career’ encompasses strategic conceptions of life trajectory in a form which the calling does not, but also has an instrumentalising overtone.

In earlier work, along with Andy Miles and other colleagues (Miles and Vincent 1993; Stovel et al 1996; Stovel et al 2006; Savage and Stovel 2001), I have traced how the idea of the occupational career originated from the mid 19th century in large scale bureaucratic, often public sector employment. Amongst the ‘uniformed working class’, this elaboration of the career was embedded in a form of discipline, in which advance – often stretched out through numerous grades and levels – was held out as reward for diligence, good behaviour, and effective work. The railways, banks, the post office, and police were crucibles in which these new career cultures were forged. In their inception and development during the early 20th century, careers were highly exclusive, especially on gender lines, with only men being permitted to advance in these occupational careers. Indeed during the early and middle 20th century, as white collar service employment expanded, the increasing use of women as low grade workers made it possible for junior men to be more rapidly promoted over the heads of such women (see Crompton and Sanderson 1993). These exclusive and discriminatory careers remained powerful until the 1960s, from which point anti-discrimination interventions became increasingly influential, bolstered by legislation during the early 1970s outlawing discrimination by sex and race. The pace of change varied across sectors, with male dominated organisational cultures often informally resisting demands to ‘open up’ careers. Banking was one of the most notorious sectors in which during the mid 20th century women were employed on different grades to men with no career prospects, and they had to retire on marriage. Halford et al 1997) showed that organisational barriers remained powerful, with those women who had secured promotion to managerial careers being unusual and feeling their own marginality very directly (see also McDowell 1996; Crompton and Sanderson 1993).

Figure 2 shows that by the 1980s the discourse of the ‘career’ has easily overcome that of the ‘calling’ and has become the dominant mobility related trope: indeed it has become ubiquitous. This is not surprising insofar as it can combine social scientific concerns with ‘human capital’ and ‘meritocracy’ with more personalised, individualised, and affective feelings. It can thus incorporate aspects of the idiom of the ‘calling’, without the earnestness of the term ‘vocation’ which has struggled to gain currency over this period and has fallen back from even its limited use in the early 20th century. It can render social nobility in human form: having a ‘career’ is nearly universally seen as a ‘good thing’.

The rising significance of the idiom of the career can be seen as associated with a broader remaking of social identities which sees mobility as lying at the heart of modern life itself. My analysis of changing Mass Observation narratives between 1948 and 1990 (Savage 2008) underscores this view. In the late 1940s, the overwhelming sense of the correspondents was that you were born into a class, as a form of ascription over which one had little choice or agency. There was no sense of mobility or trajectory, whether this be seen as social mobility, career, or even vocation. This is true even though Mass-Observers were predominantly from professional, middle class backgrounds where we might expect such idioms to have greater provenance. Three exemplary examples include:

If one recognises the professional middle class as an entity, I was born into it. None of my forbears has had the initiative to become anything other than a soldier, doctor, lawyer or clergyman (9-458).

Mammy always said we were professional class…. It's difficult to say why I think I belong to this class, but presumably it is because daddy is a mining engineer and all my recent ancestors on both sides of the family were either doctors, or mining engineers, excepting mammy's father who was a vetinary surgeon and amateur steeplechaser' (15-4343).

I am upper middle class ‘because my forbears have been brought up Christian gentlemen for many generations. Because one of my grandfathers was a church of England parson, and the other the headmaster of a private school, both were at Cambridge, and because my father was scholar at Charterhouse and Trinity College Cambridge, and a wrangler' ((7-2003)

There is not much mobility here! One belongs to a class almost as a birth rite. There is a sense of security and certainty which looks like snobbishness and elitist by today’s standards. This sense of class as ascribed was very powerful in the later 1940s as the upper and middle classes reacted to the situation of manual workers which had improved during the Second World War and under the Labour government by insisting on their innate superiority (Kynaston 2008; Savage 2010).

By the end of the 20th century this sense had completely transformed (see Savage 2008). I will pull out numerous examples of this from the NCDS later, but as an overture I will use one exemplary account from 1990 Mass Observation:

'When I am thinking about stereotyping I want to get out the way of the last paragraph of your checklist. I am so terrified of stereotyping and of being considered racist that I am adamant there is not such thing as a national characteristic…. Class has always been significant to me: born the child of a white-collar worker in London dockland, a working class Tory of the bluest type, a royalist, a snob. That was my father, though I loved him and he had many attractive qualities. I rose, through education, to being middle class in my profession and in my leisure pursuits’

This Mass Observer in 1990s – unlike 1948 – relates an unstable life. This is not simply due to her actual social movements, but also through her awareness of how she might be seen by others. Indeed she has an acute sense of some kind of social scientist looking over her shoulder to see how snobbish and racist she might be. Accordingly she highlights both her own sophisticated social awareness and the capacity to tell a story of ‘mobility’. By claiming ‘mobility’ it is possible to foil the social scientists intent on putting you in a box or somehow pigeonholing you. Even more, one can show you know the rules of social science judgement by projecting pejorative (e.g. racism, snobbery) labels onto your parents from who you have escaped (though you can still love them). Stories of social mobility therefore, can act to cleverly resist social scientific hegemony even whilst appearing to play along with this kind of game.

Britons now live, therefore, in a world trammelled by mobility in numerous intense and powerful ways. Mobility is a sign that we ‘have made our own way’, that we are autonomous and effective individuals and have our own stories to tell. Social scientific conceptions proved useful in this exercise providing benchmarks to allow us to narrate these stories, but they also jostle with older vernacular notions of vocation and career. The belief in meritocracy is tied in with legitimation of inequality to which official discourses of social mobility speak.

**2: Visualising your life: how 50 year olds depict their life trajectories in 2008**

My discussion so far contextualises the reflexive way that popular identities are forged out of reflections on mobile life trajectories. I now turn to a remarkable data source from 2008-9 to reflect on the contemporary reaction against the kind of linear mobility narratives which became so powerful in sociological analyses. I draw on 220 qualitative interviews conducted in 2008 with a sub-sample of the 1958 birth cohort associated with the National Child Development Study, probably the most famous and influential study of its kind in the UK, and amongst the most famous in the world (Pearson 2016).

As Peter Mandler (2016: 11) has related, the NCDS offers a remarkable window on an ‘exemplary’ cohort to enjoy the ‘golden age’ of social mobility (see also Pearson 2016).

This cohort ended compulsory education in 1974, a boomtime for manual working class employment… Those fortunate enough to enter the labour market then did well…. By 1981, 60% of the cohort reported that they had already achieved their career objectives, at 23 years of age. Unfortunately, at just about that time the labour market collapsed…. When the labour market recovered again in the 1990s, many of these people were on the move yet again’ (Mandler 2016: 11)

Mandler (2016: 11) also notes that ‘tracking experiences and expectations alike is very difficult for this turbulent generation’. My paper here breaks new ground by using qualitative data associated with the eighth wave of this panel which was carried out between 11th August 2008 and 18th May 2009, when respondents were age 50 in the vast majority of cases. 9,790 were interviewed as part of the panel study and more than 12,000 are still in contact with the study team. My specific analysis focuses on an additional qualitative component conducted on a sub-sample of 220 of the 2008-9 respondents. Before 2008 qualitative methods had only rarely been applied to cohort members, and this neglect proved the inspiration for a qualitative ESRC funded ‘Social Participation’ Study which sought to conduct detailed qualitative interviews with a sub-sample of the NCDS. All the selected sub-sample had taken part in the main quantitative study, with the qualitative interviews taking place within six months of an individual’s main age 50 interview. These interviews were conducted by a team of researchers led by Jane Elliott at the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS), Institute of Education with Andrew Miles, Samantha Parsons and Mike Savage in the research team (Elliot et al 2012).

These qualitative interviews were carried out between November 2008 and August 2009. The sample was selected on two main criteria. Firstly, geographic location was used for pragmatic reasons as the research team was based in the South East and North West of England. Secondly, sampling was framed on social mobility characteristics to ensure reasonable numbers of upwardly and downwardly mobile respondents, as well as stable professional and managerial, and working class employees in each of the areas (see Elliott et al 2012 for more details).

My focus in this paper is the question which respondents were asked ‘if you had to depict your life up to now by means of a diagram, which of these would you choose, if none of these apply, can you draw a more representative pattern in the blank box’. Figure 3 indicates the life diagrams which respondents could choose from, and include the unusually complicated picture that P61 chose to draw for herself (alongside two other diagrams she toyed with). It includes the percentages of the 220 qualitative interviews who chose various of the life diagrams. Although the exercise does not specifically ask about social mobility, by using the cognate term ‘trajectory’, and comparing it with the parts of the interview where mobility was probed, it is a very rich resource.

---- Figure 3 about here -----

Undoubtedly, the most revealing feature of these findings is people’s reluctance to present their lives in terms of straight lines (pictures 1,2,4,5,8). Only 11% of the sample pick any of the straight line options, and the joint most popular of these, 4, has a cross in its middle. By contrast there is a very strong tendency towards jagged, upwardly pointed life diagrams. Over half pick one of the two dominant visual stories: the upward staircase (slide 3, 26.4% of interviewees pick it) and the zig zag arrows ending by pointing upwards (slide 7, 26.8%). These both represent lives in terms of jags, with a number of punctuated turning points. There are no strong gender or social class differences in the choice of these diagrams. Men and professionals/managers tend slightly to prefer slide 3 rather than slide 7 compared to women and other social classes but not to a very marked extent.

What kind of mobility narratives are encoded in such visualisations? What is going on when so many people depict their lives as a series of jagged lines? Some important arguments have been made about the significance of ‘lines’ in human culture (e.g. Ingold 2015), but it is the ubiquity of jaggedness which intrigues me here. To address this question I considered if there are variations in which kind of panel members chose different diagrams, respondents were clustered according to their stocks of economic and cultural capital. Considering only the three most extreme clusters – those who were the most disadvantaged (the ‘disenfranchised’), those with the highest levels of economic resources (the ‘economic elite’) and those with the most cultural resources (the ‘cultural elite’) we find some differences[[4]](#footnote-4). Although, as we would expect, the dominance of pictures 3 and 7 is evident across these clusters, some subtle nuances are revealed when the clusters are compared.

---- Table 1 about here -----

The clearest difference is that half of the two elite clusters draw their own diagram, but only two of the thirteen disenfranchised do. In being more likely to draw their own trajectory, this is a sign that they have the confidence to ‘tell their own story’ by refusing the visual options given to them in favour of their bespoke picture. The 5 respondents located in the ‘economic elite’ cluster either towards the upward staircase (picture 3), or straight lines (pictures 1 or 2). In every case, these are ultimately stories of upward success. The cultural elite are more likely to use the jagged line pointing upwards (picture 7), rather than the upward staircase (picture 3) which might be seen as too ‘vulgar’. It is revealing that 4 out of the 5 who drew their own picture ultimately used a more complex and jagged version of this picture 3. Having said this, two of the cultural elite also used the diagonal straight line (picture 1). The disenfranchised also clustered towards versions of the upward staircase (picture 3), though also were more varied in their choice of diagrams, with four of them choosing one of the minority options (1,4,5,8)

The most telling differences between the three clusters comes from those who drew their own diagrams. The two disenfranchised who drew their own diagram used bended wavy lines without jags. The economic elite prefer straight lines with only a few jags. The cultural elite, by contrast, are much more ‘jag happy’ and prefer wavy, interrupted lines. This is a telling case of the devil lying in fine detail: the ever-so-subtle differences in how people draw their own life trajectory are very telling.

How do these different visualisations map onto what respondents said about their lives? Here, a striking gendered aspect is revealed. These women, born in 1958, were at the cusp of the striking shift in which career mobility became possible for women. The ambivalences, as well as satisfaction, which this provoked were clearly evident. Jane (P61 whose own highly elaborate visual is shown in Figure 3 above) entered into the spirit of her own diagram very fully

Hmmm, so--, so--, well there must be a sort of an upwards at the beginning, and then there was university and then there was a bit of a flat and then there was coming to Manchester and then there was maybe a bit of faffing around and then… I met {HUSBAND} and started at work and work was good, you know…. and a lot of that was to do with what I put into it and what I got out of it and the firm that I left was very different to the firm that I started with. So then it sort of goes like that. And then you get to children….. Oh lovely. And then I had a year out with the children, that was nice….. And then it did--, and then I suppose it did roll, you know, waffle a bit and then we get to university (for her ongoing doctoral studies). And now it is, it’s going up. So I don’t know what that works out. [Laughs].

But--, It just--, But I suppose, you know, if I was going to--, if it was going to be a square it would go up and on and up….. With up being the most recent, so it might actually--, I don’t know how you’re going to--, and but the--, you know, this--, this time at {UNIVERSITY1} is--, is... it’s the… I mean I can’t say that the children aren’t the best thing that’s ever happened, but, you know, I sort of--, you sort of expect that…..But to have this unique mid--, you know, people have children, not everyone has this unique opportunity… come out of the blue. That’s the things, it’s so completely unexpected.

Jane’s text is revealing. She is confident in entering into the spirit of a somewhat contrived exercise – indirectly displaying her cultural capital. Her account veers from university, meeting her husband, having children, working, and returning to university to study for her doctorate. There is a strong sense here of a defensive narrative as she is cautious not to overblow her enjoyment of her doctorate if this is deemed to detract from her role as mother. One senses a slight anxiety in her account being misconstrued as insufficiently family oriented in her insistence that ‘I mean, I can’t say that children aren’t the best thing that ever happened…’. Her anticipation of earning her doctorate was mediated through her husband’s approving eyes ‘When he’s standing there, cheering when I’m up getting my PhD, I’ll be able to say I’m a doctor of science…. And when they say, oh is that Miss or Mrs, I’d say Doctor….. That’ll be a big moment for me’.

In Jane’s case, one senses very directly, how she was at the vanguard of a new generation of women who juggled older domestic and familial identities with new possibilities for educational and career advance. These issues represent the complexity and ambivalences of mobility itself, the way that it weaves in and out of her personal and professional life, and the impossibility of boiling it down to a defining linear transition of an instrumental kind. Sarah (P152, drawn diagram not shown) had an equally complex jagged diagram, with a large dip in the middle. Sarah’s view of her diagram was equally ruminative

Hmmm. I suppose--, I mean I think generally it’s been an upward progression, but that suggests it’s sort of--, there’s no downs, so I would say it had been an upward progression but with a few downs along the way. I had a feeling you might say that. So yeah, sort of from the point I left school, let’s say….

So it sort of goes up, you know, having kids and all those sort of good things. So yeah, well getting married then and having no money, that would kind of a flat point, and having kids, being promoted, all those sorts of good things, so it’s up to about there, then parents dying which was, you know, pretty awful, so there’s a sort of period of time before you kind of recover, but then you go on, life does go on, and enjoying, as I say, the children, teenage years, oh great, so it sort of goes up again. So yeah, at the moment I’d say if that’s where I am right now that’s--, so it feels as though it’s been a progression, you know, the odd set-back. But yeah I think, you know, some of the other diagrams suggests it all either stays the same or moves forward and actually it doesn’t do that, it does go down again and you do have--,

When asked if she had changed class during her life, Sarah said not, as her parents and herself were middle class – her father having been a seaman who worked his way up to being a ship’s captain, and her mother coming from a south American ‘working class’ background. But as her account shows, she is keen to impart a sense of dynamism based on family relations in her diagram.

This general sense of jags representing movements between personal and work life is also shared by men, though here from a different perspective, in which family life was seen to be at odds with career progress. John (05), for instance, chose the upward staircase like many of his peers. He came from a relatively poor background with low levels of cultural and economic capital, but had in fact achieved significant social mobility. Having left school at 16 he had learned technical drawing skills and successfully worked for an architect, and ended up a sales rep. Having gained connections he set up his own ‘subsidiary’ property management business, which led to him being sacked when his managing director found out about this clandestine operation. He threw himself into his estate management business in order to pay his way, with some success though at the cost of his personal life as ‘my work took over my life’. Indeed, this was only one side of his story, which also covered his feelings of loss when his mother – whose mental health never recovered from her daughter being killed in a road accident when she was 3 - died of cancer when he was 14, his father’s subsequent very rapid remarriage and neglect, leading to him and his sister having to move out of his old family home. His personal life was traumatic. Separating from his first wife was a turning point,

From there, the story begins [laughs]. Moved to various places. My children and wife and her new partner moved in so I lived in caravans, apartments, bedsits [pause]…. so I moved on, had various partners, various relationships and then eventually bought a piece of land and--, which I didn’t have any money for but anyway, I managed to sort of buy this piece of land, build this house, which I’ve still got……

At this point his narrative stumbled

I was in a relationship for seven years. Missing out a lot of the past really….. brings up too many bad memories…. Hmmm, I shall be back in two seconds…..struggled with business, struggled paying out for the kids and the wife and as a consequence, you know, struggled generally. And I think possibly that’s why most of my time was spent wrapped up with the business, just survive, and also throwing myself into it which was seven days a week virtually, even when the kids came to stay

John’s narrative is in keeping with his diagram.

it’s been a plateau, you know, a rise, a plateau, I think…. So maybe--, maybe this one is sort of--, but that was at the bottom and I sort of made my way to the top and I suppose things are consistent now. So maybe--, maybe this one is sort of--, but that was at the bottom and I sort of made my way to the top and I suppose things are consistent now.

John’s jagged life is therefore also a means of narrating contingency, switching between domains of work, personal and family life. The lack of balance between his business success and his perception of failings in his personal life is very marked. He represents mobility as individualised and ‘eventful’, in a way which could not be captured by a linear mobility profile – such as a standardised view of mobility up or down a social hierarchy. It is a narrative in which personal relations cannot be detached from the overall mobility story.

James, chose the staircase diagram because ‘It hasn’t been a big down and it hasn’t been fantastic’. His life had also been marked by major transitions and switches. Brought up in North East England, he left school at 16 and trained as an engineer for the coal board. He was made redundant in his later 20s as the coal industry was cut in the aftermath of the 1984-5 miners’ strike which proved to be a turning point in politicising him. This was the same time in his life that he ‘came out’ as gay and moved to the South of England where he went to university to study law and after working as a bar man became a housing advisor.

We can consider those few respondents with a straight line narrative to examine if there is something distinctive about their accounts. Susan (115) lived in a poor area, though with strong community feeling, with her account being littered with reference to the criminality experienced in the local area. Her life was relayed in apparently straightforward terms

my partner I’ve been with for 11 years now and he could never afford to buy a home for us, so I’ve always lived here, Mum and I share the house and we’re quite happy, he comes and visits and comes back again and we go off on a holiday together but, you know, I’m quite happy with that….. I love my home, I love my garden

Susan’s life trajectory was

Okay, well I was born here and I’ve obviously been to all the local schools…. …. Yes, I would have done a better job but--, but when I came out of there I had no clearer directions, so. We actually had people come into the school to show us different things to do and our teachers thought we all should go down to {COMPANY5} and work in a factory, which I didn’t want to do, I wanted to do something creative, I’ve always been quite arty. I love creating gardens and paintings and things and so I went into hairdressing and I did an apprenticeship for three years in {PLACE5}. I can’t say I really loved it, I had a very strict boss, was worse than having a mother-in-law I think, she was terrifying [laughs].

Susan had travelled extensively, spending a year in a caravan moving round America, before returning and meeting her current partner when she was 40

Meeting {PARTNER} when I was 40, that was great actually ‘cause I’ve never really had a man that stayed round any length of time. Tend to use you for social activities or whatever, he didn’t, he wanted more than that, he wanted a good friend and, you know, companion and I can say anything I like to him now, after 11 years you would hope so wouldn’t you?

Q: You would hope so, yes.

A: And I’ve never had that before, never had that, always had to be very careful what I said and, no, he’s been good for me and I’ve been good for him I hope.

Q: Yeah, so you feel much more of yourself.

A: Very comfortable, very comfortable, yeah I can be myself, I can have no make-up on and he’ll still like me and I can say what I like and he’ll still come back and we can, we can speak our minds which is good. So he was a key turning point for me.

In picking her picture 1 she reported

Okay, well that’ll be a typical Piscean, we don’t swim in two directions really, I like that one, I like that one, that’s fine for me

Susan’s phrase (‘I like that one’) makes it subtly clear that she wishes that her life was this upward line, rather than it actually being like this. In her case, presenting this straightline is a defensive response, a form of disidentification in the terms of Skeggs (1997). For those in the more privileged economic and cultural elite clusters, the occasional choice of visual 1 is more confident: for Sarah (479) ‘Again, I’ve got--, if I picture, that one’.

Conclusions

My paper has been inspired by the fact that despite the hold that social mobility holds over the political imagination, the way that it is implicated in people’s identities is considerably under-researched (though see e.g. Miles et al 2010; Friedman 2014; 2016; Savage et al 2015). In this paper I have traced what lessons can be learned from the visualisation of mobility narratives in the accounts of a representative group of Britons from the 1958 National Child Development Study in 2008. I have shown how panel members in both privileged and under-privileged situations exhibit a broadly similar concern to narrate stories of jagged upward mobility.

The jags, I have argued perform three general roles. Firstly, they emphasise the role of contingent events in people’s lives, which thereby emphasise the individuality of the respondent, and the failure of a general linear narrative to capture the reality of their lives. Secondly, and following from this, it represents the reflexive awareness of respondents who are concerned to show that they are aware of how their lives might be looked at by others – especially experts – and hence to guard against being judged harshly. Jane’s anxiety about not appearing to put her children as the highlight of her life is a case in point. They thus are a response to a widespread awareness of the sense that someone might be looking over their shoulder. Thirdly, jags typically represent switches between different parts of someone’s life, linking family, personal life, work, housing and other issues. Mobility stories are thereby both diffused – since nearly everyone has their own jags to relate– yet also made ubiquitous.

We can’t tell whether the hegemony of the jag is specific to this cohort. Certainly, there is some evidence that they might relate to the way that the 1958 birth cohort straddles crucial social changes. Born at the end of the 1950s, they have their origins in the industrial capitalism of mid-20th century Britain, marked by strongly bounded class and gender roles. Growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, they witnessed both the counter-cultural moment of the 1960s and the economic downturn of the 1970s. Their twenties and thirties took place as the Callaghan Labour government was replaced by Margaret Thatcher’s radical market Tory government. These dramatic shifts are etched in the accounts of these respondents, as they navigate changing gender roles (especially the increasing opportunities for women), the growth of owner occupation and the prospects this offered for social advance. In a very real sense, therefore, social and individual change is welded together in the narratives which this cohort offered. Especially amongst women, the opening up of career possibilities, yet the continuation of their domestic roles is marked. In any event, we need to move beyond standard motifs which have characterised social scientific mobility discourse into a more complex and affective approach to the stories people tell about their lives)

These narratives therefore represent a powerful reaction to the kind of linear mobility narratives which dominate social scientific, and especially sociological analysis. They testify to the limitations of mobility analysis based between transitions of social class alone, as means of understanding people’s identities and sense of their personal lives. Gender and kin relations, household dynamics, housing and mobility all play into respondents’ views about their lives. We might see this as evidence in the concern to open up mobility research to the broader recognition of ‘lineage’ (Mare 2011). Robert Mare’s emphasis that mobility patterns cannot be adequately captured by two point transitions and their link to wider family and household dynamics has been supported by numerous studies, including some using the National Child Development Study (Chan and Bolliver 2014). The findings of my paper, which also point to the way that individuals place their mobility narratives into a wider web of significance which switches between public and private realms also points in this direction. Movement up and down job ladders is only one, not necessarily dominant motifs, which we might better understand as a multidimensional weaving together of life which cannot be captured on a linear scale.

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1. Further analyses of terms related to social mobility, such as ‘socially mobile’, ‘upwardly mobile’, ‘downwardly mobile’ show similar trends, though at a much lower rate of frequency [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jenkins (2016: 154) reports that in 1997-98 2.5% of those working in the financial sector had incomes of over £100k, which rose to over 7% on the eve of the financial crash in 2007. Nationally, less than a quarter of one percent of tax payers earned this much in the later 1990s, and slightly over half of one percent in 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Though we should note that any of these terms, and especially ‘calling’ and ‘vocation’ could be used in contexts which have no bearing on issues of mobility. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The methodology used to cluster respondents is fully described in Flemmen and Savage (2017). Briefly, multiple correspondence was conducted on measures of the economic and social capital of respondents. Clustering on all dimensions produced 9 clusters, of which our focus here is on the three outlying clusters with the greatest and least amounts of capital. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)