18. Socio-economic background and career progression within the UK Civil Service

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This case study examines the impact of socio-economic background, referred to by sociologists as 'social class', on career progression within the UK Civil Service. Despite efforts to promote diversity and inclusion, evidence suggests that someone's class background continues to play a significant role in shaping their career trajectory within the public sector. The UK Civil Service, one of the country's largest employers, offers a unique lens through which to examine broader societal issues of social mobility and equality of opportunity. This study aims to uncover how individuals from different economic and social classes experience career paths, highlighting both the explicit and subtle ways in which class influences professional advancement.[1]

The case provides a rich source of material for exploring a wide range of management, human resource and social mobility questions. By the end of this case study, you will be able to:

- highlight the impact of socio-economic background on career progression
- critically reflect upon the impact of educational background and cultural capital on career progression
- assess the challenges of achieving socio-economic diversity in a traditional institution
- identify the role of senior leaders in preserving or challenging class-based disparities
- identify how informal networks and unwritten rules impact career progression and opportunities

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- critically assess impact of class, educational background and cultural capital on career progression.

Guidance on how to write a case analysis can be found in Chapter 1, 'Business cases: what are they, why do we use them and how should you go about doing a case analysis?'.

Introduction

In today's work environment, when diversity and inclusion are at the forefront of public discourse, understanding the role of hidden factors that determine someone's success in career progression, such as a person's socio-economic background, is more important than ever. This case study focuses on the UK Civil Service, one of the UK's largest public sector employers. It highlights the complex challenges the institution faces in its attempts to change its elitist culture. Additionally, the case study addresses the deeply engrained informal rules which have historically influenced career progression within its departments.

The UK Civil Service has long been regarded as a diversity pioneer, aspiring to be the UK's most inclusive employer and setting standards for large organisations to follow. However, recent studies, particularly the work of Sam Friedman, Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), has revealed significant disparities in socio-economic representation and career advancement within this organisation.[2]

The UK Civil Service

The UK Civil Service is the country's permanent bureaucracy that helps the government develop and implement its policies. It is one of the country's top employers, employing about half a million people and providing direct services to citizens, such as benefit and pension payments, prison operations, state education and issuing driving licences. As an organisation, the UK Civil Service is politically neutral and independent of the government. Its employees, known as the civil servants, work for central government departments, agencies and non-departmental public organisations. However, several other key groups are not part of the Civil Service, even though they play a key role in governance and public services. These include: government ministers, the British armed forces, police, local government, NHS staff and royal household staff.

Although the UK Civil Service has made considerable efforts in increasing gender and ethnic-minority equality since the Second World War, particularly at the senior civil servant (SCS) level, people from privileged backgrounds are

still significantly over-represented. While between 1996 and 2020, the proportion of women in senior roles rose from 17 per cent to 46 per cent, and the representation of Black and minority ethnic individuals increased from 4 per cent in 2006 to 9 per cent by 2020, the number of people from low social-class[3] backgrounds has not significantly changed.

In fact, in the Civil Service 54 per cent of employees still come from higher socio-economic backgrounds, compared to 37 per cent in the general UK workforce. In the SCS this percentage is even higher, with 72 per cent of employees coming from privileged backgrounds in 2021.[4] Despite decades of governments' efforts to change the historically low social mobility within the sector, these figures have not changed. In fact, the percentage of senior civil servants from affluent backgrounds was greater in 2021 than in 1967, when the last data was collected. Before looking at the figures in more detail, we need to explore how it is possible that, despite significant efforts to the contrary, employment and career progression to the most senior positions in the Civil Service are practically blocked or significantly challenged for those who come from less privileged backgrounds.

Class and career progression in Britain

Britain's most influential occupational positions have long been dominated by those from privileged class backgrounds.[5] According to the Social Mobility Commission's 2018–2019 survey,[6] in the UK, people from more affluent backgrounds are 80 per cent more likely to have professional jobs compared to their working-class peers. As a result of these differences, it is not a surprise that those from working-class backgrounds earn 24 per cent less annually, and even when they manage to enter professional roles, they earn 17 per cent less than their more privileged colleagues. Despite common perceptions, moving to more prosperous areas like London may not improve someone's social mobility,[7] since people from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to move. Moreover, people who move to London from working-class backgrounds from other countries also fare poorly in occupational attainment compared to people from within the UK.[8]

Working-class employees face a 'double disadvantage' in their career progression if they are women, have disabilities or have ethnic-minority backgrounds.[9] The concept of intersectionality explains how these overlapping identities intensify barriers to advancement. For example, only 21 per cent of people with disabilities from working-class backgrounds reach the highest occupational levels, compared to 43 per cent from professional backgrounds. Furthermore, women and ethnic minorities are more likely to experience downward mobility than their male or white counterparts. People from working-class backgrounds are also disproportionately likely to be paid below the voluntary living wage and face the highest levels of unemployment despite overall employment growth.

Living standards and wellbeing also have important implications on social mobility as they enable people to take more risks and allow them to have more options. Yet, working-class people are affected by rising poverty and lower home ownership and suffer from lower levels of wellbeing.

Socio-economic diversity in the Civil Service

Individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds (SEBs) have a lower likelihood of working in high-profile areas of the Civil Service that provide rapid career advancement, particularly in departments such as His Majesty's (HM) Treasury. Positions like policymaking, and occupations that provide exposure to the political networks of Whitehall are considered more sought after and hence less accessible to working-class employees.[10] Among the HM Treasury's employees, for instance, only 12 per cent have a low socio-economic background, while the share of them in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) is significantly higher, at 45 per cent.

The divide between prestigious and less prestigious departments is consistent with employees' schooling patterns. While 26 per cent of employees of the HM Treasury and 22 per cent of the Foreign & Commonwealth Office staff were privately educated, these figures drop to 5 per cent in HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) and 4 per cent in the DWP. Similarly, the less socio-economically diversified departments, such as the Treasury, employ more people at top levels, while departments like DWP and HMRC employ primarily junior level staff outside the capital. The diversity gap is also evident in different job roles and among departments. While only around a fifth (19 per cent) of employees from low socio-economic backgrounds work in high-profile, policy-related roles, almost half of them (40 per cent) work in less prestigious operational roles, such as front-line services.

Patterns behind the data – the hidden hand of occupational sorting

These patterns underline a very important, so-called 'occupational sorting pattern', which refers to the trend that people are attracted to roles that are more accessible for them.

Sorting pattern 1: hidden behavioural codes vs transparency

People from low socio-economic backgrounds frequently gravitate towards operational roles, that are perceived more transparent and meritocratic, rather than to policy work, which is generally viewed as requiring a specific behavioural code, and hence favouring those from privileged backgrounds. Yet, most policy jobs are based in socio-economically exclusive departments, while more socially accessible departments tend to have a strong emphasis on operational delivery. In the Treasury, for instance, approximately two-

thirds of staff work in policy-related roles, whereas at departments that are more accessible for people with working-class backgrounds, for instance the HMRC and DWP, the share of policy-related roles is significantly lower at 9 and 12 per cent respectively.

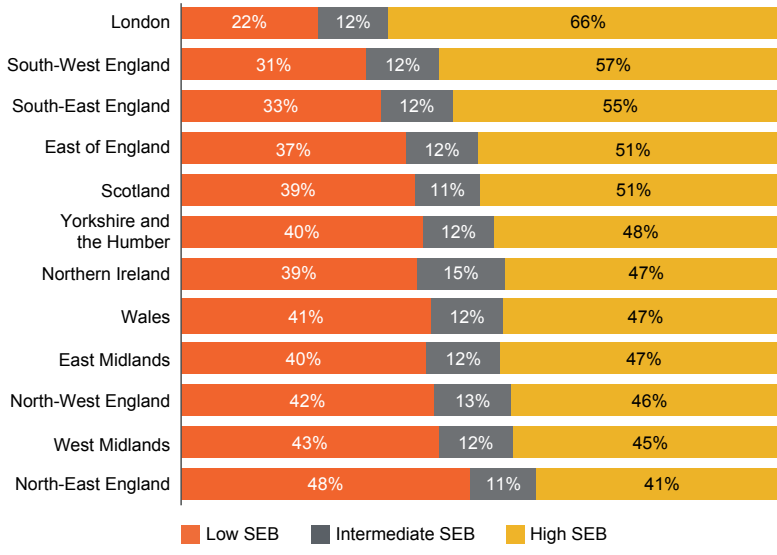
Sorting pattern 2: hidden geographical barriers

Civil servants from working-class families are also significantly under-represented in London (22 per cent), compared to 48 per cent in the north-east. This difference in geographical location has an important impact on career progression into higher level positions. Physical proximity to ministers at the Civil Service's Whitehall headquarters is crucial for gaining 'visibility', as top-level positions are still concentrated in central London (see Figure 18.1).

While 20 percent of all civil servants work in London, the capital also houses the majority – 66 per cent – of all SCS jobs and 45 per cent of all experienced officials with significant responsibilities in high-end (G6/G7 level) posts. In comparison, the north-west is home to 12 per cent of civil servants, but only 3 per cent of SCS and 7 per cent of high-end (G6/G7) staff.

Access to the more prestigious London 'career track' is affected by people's socio-economic background. Those from working-class backgrounds who grow up outside of London and the south-east often 'sort into' or end up in regional positions due to a lack of economic resources to move to the capital and for preferring to stay close to their families or their hometowns.

Figure 18.1: Work location of civil servants by parental occupation



Source: Friedman (2021) Figure 2, p. 30

Career progression within the Civil Service

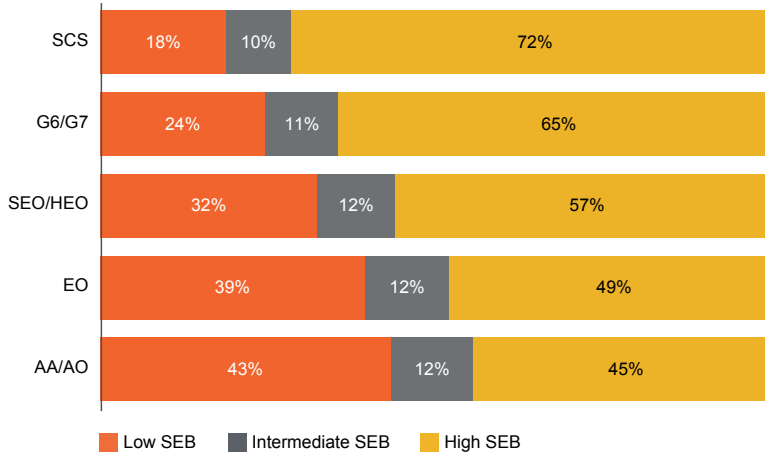
The higher someone goes in the hierarchy of the Civil Service, the less likely they are to come across working-class people. The organisation is becoming more socio-economically exclusive or elitist in each category. At the most junior grade, the level of administrative assistant/officer positions that include administrative support and operational delivery roles such as prison officers or caterers, only 45 per cent of staff are from privileged backgrounds. This percentage increases consistently as we move up the hierarchy within the organisation. For example, 49 per cent of executive officers (EO) (such as executive assistants, finance, HR, IT, and communications specialists), 57 per cent of senior executive officers/higher executive officers filling policy roles and 65 per cent of experienced officials with significant responsibilities in G6/G7 roles come from privileged backgrounds.

At the top of the hierarchy, in the level of the SCS that make up the senior management team, people from high socio-economic background fill the majority – 72 per cent – of the roles.

While in 1967, the Civil Service had the same proportion of people from high socio-economic backgrounds (67 per cent) as other professional and managerial jobs in the UK, by 2021 the SSC has become even more exclusive, with 72 per cent coming from high socio-economic backgrounds, compared to 49 per cent of the UK professional/managerial workforce and 49 per cent of other management occupations (see Figures 18.2 and 18.3).

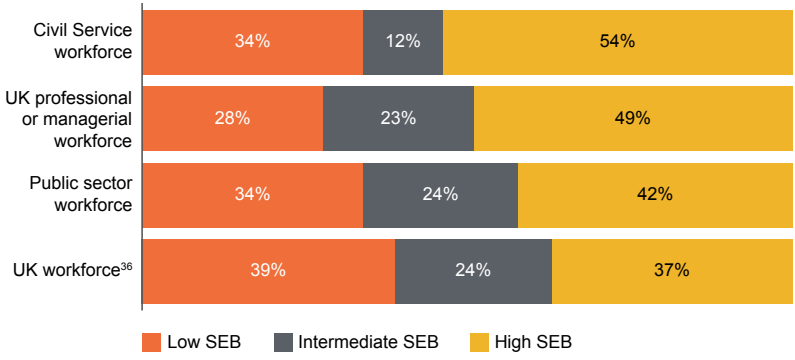
While just 4 per cent of lower-level (AA/AO) employees received private education, this figure jumps to 25 per cent for SCS staff at the top of the hierarchy. The socio-economic exclusivity of the SCS's top grades is even more remarkable, with 59 per cent of permanent secretaries having received private education, compared to only 7 per cent in the general population (see Figure 18.4).

Figure 18.2: Civil Service grades by parental occupation



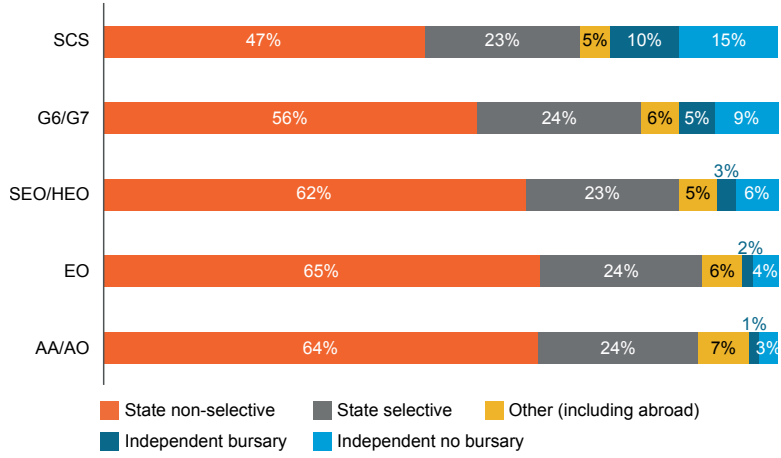
Source: Friedman (2021) Figure 4, p. 35

Figure 18.3: Parental occupation of civil servants, UK workforce, professional/managerial occupations and public sector



Source: Friedman (2021) Figure 1, p. 29

Figure 18.4: Civil Service grade by type of school attended between ages 11–16 in 2019 Civil Service People Survey



Source: Friedman (2021) Figure 5, p. 36

Labyrinth or class ceiling?

Friedman's 2021 report[11] used the metaphor of the labyrinth[12] to explain how it feels to navigate career progression in the Civil Service. This metaphor, adapted from Eagly and Carli's[13] work on women in leadership and Wyatt and Silvester's work on Black and minority leaders captures both the size and complexity of the Civil Service and the fact that career progression is rarely simple or direct. Due to its size and complexity, career advancement here rarely follows a straight line. While formal career progression criteria

exist, the unwritten rules and deeply engrained informal institutional mechanisms create a discriminative environment, in which people from certain backgrounds enjoy privileges while others face barriers. Friedman asserts that mastery of these unwritten clues is critical for navigating the maze, providing significant rewards for those from privileged backgrounds.

Certain positions, such as working in 'central' departments, securing a leadership role during a national crisis, or serving as a minister's private secretary, can help people advance quickly. However, access to such 'accelerator' posts is often dependent on personal relationships through leadership programmes such as the fast stream or senior 'guides' – typically senior colleagues – who distribute knowledge about how the Civil Service operates and how to manage it effectively.

For example, Mark, a director from a low socio-economic background explains:

> Very little of it is explicit, there's a lot of implicit stuff. So, obviously there's formal processes and, you know, the Civil Service bureaucracy is your friend on social mobility to some extent. Like there's a bigger paper trail on promotions than I've seen elsewhere. But it's about the extent to which that's actually driving decisions rather than just sort of collecting paper. Because lots of people beaver away doing the competencies, you know, trying to tick each box. And sort of miss the bigger picture of, actually, can you spot the hidden rules? Or do you know people who can help you decode them?[14]

Navigating career progression opportunities often involves considerable uncertainty, especially in relation to interactions with hiring managers and promotion requests. Individuals from privileged backgrounds tend to leverage this uncertainty to their advantage, while those from lower class backgrounds often experience ambiguity. Furthermore, the uncertainty of outcomes, the ambiguity of hiring, pay and promotion processes impact female employees and those who have intersectional minority characteristics – for instance women from minority ethnic backgrounds, or women with disabilities – considerably more negatively than men and especially those from white privileged backgrounds.[15]

What are the factors that sustain discrimination and prevent change?

According to the report 'Navigating the labyrinth',[16] there are seven unwritten rules of progression that act as barriers for those from low socio-economic backgrounds.

1. Access to informal guides and accelerator career tracks

Friedman found that securing what is perceived as valuable work within the Civil Service leads to quicker career progression. Such roles might include securing a lead role during a national crisis, as a minister's private secretary or serving within a central department, for example:

> So, my sense from quite early on was that there was a secret code as to how to get on. There were these folk that worked in the Treasury, had done certain things… they knew about 'the velvet drainpipe', as you hear it described. The way up and through. And they'd clearly done it, and they had a language to speak about it. (Aaron, director, high SEB)[17]

The existence of such accelerator roles runs counter to official guidance for career progression within the Civil Service, with emphasis placed on gaining experience with a wide range of skills. Instead, tacit knowledge of which roles lead to accelerators for career progression exist with interviewees gaining tacit knowledge during the Civil Service fast stream which is disproportionately composed of people of high SEBs.

Moreover, relationships with informal guides are created through shared cultural similarity and socio-economic backgrounds, with one respondent suggesting that shared humour with an informal guide was the main reason they hit it off:

> Definitely it's the humour. I think that's probably the main thing. So like when we worked together we just really enjoyed each other's company.[18]

While shared humour may seem trivial, research has long suggested thay 'homophily' exists, whereby people of similar backgrounds, such as SEB, are more likely to have shared interests, tastes and lifestyles.[19] Thus, shared humour due to similar SEB was a determinant of success in this example.

2. Negotiated opportunities in moments of organisational ambiguity

The report found evidence that civil servants consistently face ambiguity around interactions with hiring managers and requests for promotion. Members of high socio-economic backgrounds were able to negotiate these ambiguous moments better than low socio-economic status individuals. Often this was achieved via selling themselves during an informal chat with a gatekeeper:

> Interviews are so formal, you can't move from the questions, so I do think [fireside chats] sometimes have that self-promotion function.

> So I would probably find a relatively casual way to mention some relevant previous experience. But it works less well when someone's on sell. Like it's meant to be like a relatively quick, light interaction. (Olivia, deputy director, high SEB)[20]

Yet people from low socio-economic backgrounds find the informal process much more difficult to navigate:

> I find it morally really difficult, because I want to do well because I deserve to do well. And I find the whole idea that someone needs to talk to the right people, and it's not enough that I do a good job, really, really hard. (Jo, Grade 6, low SEB)[21]

3. The 'Whitehall effect'

The central departments within the Civil Service, which include the HM Treasury, Number 10 and the Cabinet Office, are all based in London and predominantly staffed by London-based civil servants from high socio-economic backgrounds, whereas staff from low socio-economic backgrounds tend to be regionalised, because they lack the resources to move to London and prefer to stay localised due to familial ties and for cultural reasons. This point is illustrated by Shaun, a low SEB person based in the north-west of England who is frustrated by the prospect of moving to London to advance his career:

> It's frustrating because I would like to push on but the risks are just too high – why would I disrupt my whole family just for a promotion?[22]

The 'Whitehall effect' results in disproportionate representation of high socio-economic background people in senior roles with 63 per cent of all senior roles within the Civil Service being based in London.

4. Bottlenecks in operational career tracks

The report found that people from low socio-economic backgrounds opt into operational career tracks with low ceilings or 'bottlenecks' in terms of progression. Low SEBs are over-represented in operational delivery (40 per cent) and under-represented in policy roles (30 per cent). The report found that occupational sorting occurred, with people from low SEBs tending to join at lower operational grades. This is partially facilitated by the Civil Service fast stream which is over-populated by people from high socio-economic backgrounds who then enter policy jobs at higher grades. The skills required for

policy roles have more ambiguity associated with them, which is another reason for the divide. For example:

> Policy work is so ambiguous it's really hard to know who is good and who isn't.' (Harriet, director, low SEB)[23]

> Ambiguity is a really good word, being comfortable with it, being able to exist in it. And it all comes down to good judgement in a way. So, there's judgement in the information you gather. There's judgement in how you put it together and in how you present it. And then at certain times it's a selling point, or a persuading point. There's no point coming up with the best option if no one agrees with you. (Bill, director, high SEB)[24]

The two examples show that Harriet, a director from low SEB, struggles with ambiguity whereas Bill, a director with a high SEB, appears to demonstrate what it entails.

5. Dominant behavioural codes

The dominant behavioural codes within the Civil Service include a particular accent and style of speech along with an emotionally detached persona and understated self-presentation. The behavioural code also includes a preference towards intellectual curiosity of culture and politics. For example, on accent and neutrality, the following quotation is typical:

> There is a definite style of speaking… that kind of neutral-ish RP [received pronunciation] accent, like trying to place yourself as from nowhere … so I think most people in the SCS end up having an accent that is quite similar, at least the ones who are in the central teams, and replicate the style, the rhythms … there is a kind of go-to neutrality, same voice, same accent. And it is very like: 'I'm objective, my analysis is objective. (Isaac, DD, high SEB)[25]

The following quotation also depicts emotional detachment:

> I don't see anyone getting emotional. Maybe that's because it's sort of filtered out before [SCS]. But I think if someone did get very concerned, that would probably be frowned upon. Self-control is really prized. (Oyinda, DD, high SEB)[26]

6. Downplaying of socio-economic privilege

Of those interviewed for the report, 1 in 4 who self-assess as coming from a low socio-economic background actually have parents who did professional

or managerial jobs. The proportion of those misidentifying increases with seniority, with 29 per cent of those above grade 7 misidentifying their privilege. Here are two examples of misidentification:

> Although I grew up with two teachers, I think I felt more working class because my parents were both first generation university. They both grew up in a working-class family … so the consciousness of my upbringing was … I felt much more working class. (Mike, DD, high SEB)[27]

> My parents and I would define myself, psychologically, as working class. So my dad, he went to what would then have been called a polytechnic for his engineering degree, he was certainly the first person in his family. None of his siblings or extended family went to uni. So yeah my parents got more comfortable as I got older, but I identify more with working class. (Alex, Director, high SEB)[28]

In both of these examples, the high SEB civil servant attributed their working-class status to their grandparents and while there is some evidence of the 'grandparent effect',[29] this is not as pronounced as both parents being from traditionally working-class occupations.

7. Cumulative barriers (for women and Black civil servants from working-class backgrounds)

Socio-economic status is not the only structural form of inequality through which people are excluded from top jobs in the Civil Service. There is also extensive research that demonstrates how women and members of ethnic minorities are excluded from top jobs in the Civil Service.[30] This suggests that intersectionality significantly intensifies barriers within the organisation as employees move higher in their career ladder. For example, low SEB women are more under-represented at senior grades than low SEB men. In fact, low SEB men are more comfortable discussing their status at work and often position themselves as senior leaders with a unique perspective. Contrastingly, low SEB women largely choose to conceal their background. For example, in both cases below, the low SEB women face shame and embarrassment about their background:

> I don't tell people my background, you know, that's a thing I hide. And, you know, if I did say what my dad did, I would always say, 'Oh, he's an HGV driver,' because that's a bit, you know, better than that he drives a lorry and moves furniture. There's always a bit of trying to posh it up a bit. (Steph, DD, low SEB)[31]

> I've never shared my background at work, just being in a social mobility network is a step for me … why wouldn't I? I think it's partly a sense of shame, judgement, what would it gain me to say that? It would mark me out as even more different. (Nicola, Grade 7, low SEB)[32]

For ethnic minorities the story is a little different. Civil servants from ethnic minorities are more likely to be from advantaged socio-economic backgrounds, with the exception of those with an Asian origin. For Black staff, they are often subjected to negative and stereotypical assumptions about Black working-class communities regardless of their socio-economic background. The examples below illustrate this misrepresentation:

> So yeah, you do get a lot of misconceptions, and people look at you and before speaking to you, judge you and just assume, 'Oh, you live in London, you must come from the ghetto,' and it's like, no I don't live in a slum, we're not all in debt!' (Martina, Grade 7, low SEB)[33]

> I was having a meeting and my manager started talking about, 'Oh, you know, like Black-on-Black crime,' and like nodding to me as if I would like know everything about this and I was just like, 'What on earth is going on? Like why would that ever be something that you think you should say? (Joy, director, high SEB)

Summary

The Civil Service's structure and progression patterns closely resemble a labyrinth. While there is a viable route to the centre for everyone, this route is largely hidden, governed by both formal guidelines and informal rules and norms. This background sets the stage for a deeper examination of the factors influencing career progression within the UK Civil Service, particularly for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Preparing the case

In preparing the case analysis, you might like to consider the following specific propositions and discussion points:

1. Why does class matter?
2. From an ethical point of view, it is wrong that privileged groups in society get an unfair advantage. Discuss.
3. From a political perspective, the demographic profile of the Civil Service should reflect that of the general population to reduce the possibility of civil strife. Discuss.

4. From a managerial perspective, a more diverse workforce will make better decisions. Discuss.
5. The 'labyrinth' metaphor illustrates the complex, indirect career paths faced by individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds in the Civil Service. However, does it help us understand the intersectional challenges of class, race and gender? Evaluate how well the 'labyrinth' metaphor works and assess whether it could be applied to other sectors and industries.
6. While progress in gender and ethnic diversity is evident in the Civil Service, socio-economic diversity remains a challenge. This may be due to covert biases and less public focus on class. Compare and contrast the progress made in gender and ethnic diversity with the lack of progress in socio-economic diversity within the Civil Service. What factors might account for these differences?
7. Friedman's 'unwritten rules of progression' favour those from privileged backgrounds. Dismantling these informal rules is key to fairer progression. How can the Civil Service challenge and change these 'unwritten rules' and create a more level playing field for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds?
8. Consider the ethical implications of the 'class pay gap' in the context of a public service organisation. How might this impact public trust and the Civil Service's ability to fulfil its mission?

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[1] The authors would like to thank Professor Sam Friedman and the Social Mobility Commission for the figures and data used in this case study. All figures are reproduced with their permission.

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[3] In this case study we use social class and socio-economic background interchangeably.

[4] In the case study we follow the terminology of the Social Mobility Commission as explained in Friedman (2021). We refer to those whose parents did 'professional or managerial' occupations as coming from 'high', 'privileged' or 'advantaged' socio-economic or class backgrounds. Those whose parents did 'intermediate' occupations are referred to as 'short-range socially mobile' and those whose parents did 'routine, semi-routine, lower supervisory and technical' occupations, or whose parents 'never worked', are referred as coming from 'low', 'working class' or

'disadvantaged' socio-economic backgrounds. The terms low socio-economic backgrounds (SEB), 'low SEB' and 'working class background' are often used interchangeably, as 'socio-economic background' is often not representative of individuals' experiences. In contrast, the term 'working class' remains popular and a source of identity and pride for many. Additionally, the term 'working class background' is commonly used in Social Mobility Commission and academic research using NS-SEC categories.

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