

The American Occupational Structure

**Peter M. Blau
Otis Dudley Duncan**

Sorokin Award Winner

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Peter M. Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan

WITH THE COLLABORATION OF ANDREA TYREE



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TO

Theodor I. Blau and Otis Durant Duncan
whose occupational achievements greatly
facilitated those of their sons

Preface

We may assume, then, that in contemporary life we have to do with a society in which the constitution of classes, so far as we have them, is partly determined by inheritance and partly by a more or less open competition, which is, again, more or less effective in placing men where they rightly belong. . . .

Where classes do not mean separate currents of thought, as in the case of caste, but are merely differentiations in a common mental whole, there are likely to be several kinds of classes overlapping one another, so that men who fall in the same class from one point of view are separated in another. The groups are like circles which, instead of standing apart, interlace with one another so that several of them may pass through the same individual. . . .

In modern life, then, and in a country without formal privilege, the question of classes is practically one of wealth, and of occupation considered in relation to wealth. . . .

Charles Horton Cooley, *Social Organization*

. . . There is a certain opposition between the ideal of equal opportunity and that of family responsibility. Responsibility involves autonomy, which will produce divergence among families, which, in turn, will mean divergent conditions for the children; that is, unequal opportunities. . . .

I think that equal opportunity, though not wholly practicable, is one of our best working ideals. We are not likely to go too far in this direction. There is a natural current of privilege, arising from the tendency of advantages to flow in the family line, and any feasible diversion into broader channels will probably be beneficial.

Charles Horton Cooley, *Social Process*

Men's careers occupy a dominant place in their lives today, and the occupational structure is the foundation of the stratification system of contemporary industrial society. In the absence of hereditary castes or feudal estates, class differences come to rest primarily on occupational positions and the economic advantages and powers associated with them. A knowledge of the occupational structure and of the conditions that govern men's chances of achieving economic success by moving up

in the occupational hierarchy is, therefore, essential for understanding modern society and, particularly, its stratified character. In a democratic country where equality of opportunity, though never perfectly realized, is an important ideal, the question of the extent to which the class or ethnic group into which an individual is born furthers or hinders his career chances is of special theoretical as well as political significance. The present monograph provides an analysis of the American occupational structure and the factors that influence social mobility in it on the basis of a large-scale empirical survey of the working lives of men in the United States.

This book is the result of a collaborative effort extending over seven years. We have tried hard to make the book a genuine joint product to which each of us made the contributions he is best qualified to make. There is no senior author; the sequence of name is simply alphabetical, and we have reversed it in signing the preface and elsewhere to emphasize this fact. Our collaboration was motivated by our shared interest in social stratification, our common concern with advancing scientific social theory on the basis of systematic research, and the conviction that the inquiry would benefit from the different qualifications and viewpoints the two of us represent. There can be no doubt that our interests in and approaches to sociological problems differ to a considerable degree. Although we agree that refining research methods and advancing social theory are both important, for example, it is only fair to state that Duncan puts priority on developing rigorous methods and Blau lays more stress on deriving theoretical generalizations.

Joining forces in this research endeavor posed the challenge for us of whether we could reconcile the disagreements resulting from our divergent perspectives sufficiently to take advantage of our complementary skills. It is not for us to say how successful we were in meeting this challenge. We do realize, however, that the problems created by our collaboration are reflected in certain limitations of the book. It is unquestionably not as well integrated—either in style or in continuity of thought—as it would be had it not been written by two social scientists with rather different orientations. One conclusion our experience has impressed upon us is that reasonable men (if we may so describe ourselves) may reasonably differ when jointly exploring a rough terrain. We have not only differed concerning the best interpretation of a set of empirical findings, which is to be expected, but sometimes even disagreed as to what the findings themselves show. Confronted by the same set of quantitative data, two men do not necessarily arrive at the same conclusion regarding the empirical “facts” of the case, let alone

regarding the inferences to be drawn from them. A configuration clearly apparent in a number of complex tables to one may be seen by the other as conforming to a different pattern, dependent on initial assumptions and problem focus. Orders of significance and priority of emphasis may fail to coincide, and what looks like an interesting discovery from one point of view seems trivial from another. Moreover, there can hardly be full consensus on what demands to be placed on the reader—whether to let him draw his own conclusions or present what possibly only one of us considers to be the most plausible interpretation of the findings. We have reconciled these differences as best we could and in various ways. Sometimes, we have carried out additional empirical analysis to clarify a problem to our joint satisfaction (for instance, in Chapter 2); at other times, we reached a compromise conclusion after discussion; at still others, we agreed to differ and presented alternative perspectives (for instance, in Chapter 11). We have also given preference to the inclination of the author of a given chapter in respect to how far to go beyond the data in suggesting interpretations for them. If we have often erred in both directions, offering insufficient interpretations on some occasions and engaging in excessive speculations on others, and if this has produced some unevenness in the book, we must ask the reader's indulgence in sharing with us the vicissitudes of a collaborative effort of this kind.

Given the differences in our skills and concerns, it appears appropriate to outline the division of labor that produced this book, if only to help the reader understand any inconsistencies that have remained in the volume despite our awareness of the problem and our efforts to achieve coherence. The study as a whole was initiated by Blau, having been originally conceived over 12 years ago in discussions with Nelson N. Foote and with Clyde W. Hart, then director of the National Opinion Research Center. The involvement of Duncan occurred at the time when it was determined that the project could best be carried out in cooperation with the U. S. Bureau of the Census. Early planning was carried out in close collaboration through the stages of questionnaire design and the first round of tabulation specifications. Generally, however, Blau was more concerned with conceptual issues and hypothesis formulation, and Duncan with problems of measurement and hypothesis testing. A second round of tabulation specifications was primarily the work of Duncan, in connection with the separately funded study of fertility in relation to social mobility (this material is presented mainly in Chapter 11 and, to some extent, in Chapter 10).

The development of statistical methods and models and the supervision of the bulk of the calculations fell on Duncan. Results of this

work were allocated between the two authors, each taking primary responsibility for drafting certain chapters. Subsequently, intensive mutual criticism and exchange of ideas led to extensive revisions. The primary responsibility for the final as well as the preliminary versions of Chapters 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, and 11 was Duncan's, and that for Chapters 2, 6, 7, 9, and 12 was Blau's. But most chapters include not only many ideas and suggestions but also entire passages contributed by the author not primarily responsible for them. Andrea Tyree was Blau's research assistant while these chapters were prepared and helped him in the over-all organization of the volume, and her designation as collaborative author is in acknowledgment of her substantial contributions to the book.

The analysis of empirical findings is presented in ten chapters, preceded by a general introduction to the study of occupational structure and mobility and followed by a concluding chapter dealing with some broader theoretical issues raised by the research findings. The organization of the material in the volume is discussed at the end of the introductory chapter, but a few preliminary remarks on the tabulations and the appendices are in order. Unless otherwise indicated all tables refer to all men between the ages of 20 and 64 in the civilian noninstitutional population of the United States in March 1962. The numbers are population estimates, in thousands, derived from our representative national sample. Whenever a table pertains to a narrower age range, such as 25 to 64, or a subgroup or a different sample, the population base is explicitly specified in the table heading. We have devoted considerable time and energy to the analysis of differences between age cohorts. Most relationships between variables were observable in all age groups (with the partial exception of the youngest group, the men less than 25 years, many of whom are still in preparatory stages of their careers). We have combined age cohorts in these instances in the interest of preserving larger case bases for refined analysis, considering it unnecessary to present separate data for different cohorts merely to demonstrate the parallel patterns. The noteworthy differences between age cohorts are, of course, discussed at various appropriate points in the text, and Chapter 3 deals extensively with age differences and their implications.

Some basic descriptive information on the variables used in the study and their relationships as well as on a variety of methodological points is presented in ten appendices. The first of these is a bibliography of Census publications containing material relevant for this study. The last appendix consists of supplementary tables. Most of the other appendices deal with methodological questions. For example, two re-

liability checks on our data are discussed. Of special interest is Appendix H. It contains not only a specification of every variable used, but it also shows how much of the variance in occupational status and in education is explained by each independent variable singly and by a large number of combinations of independent variables. These data disclose much information about the conditions that influence success in our society.

OTIS DUDLEY DUNCAN
PETER M. BLAU

*Ann Arbor and Chicago,
February 1967*

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This study would not have been possible, of course, without the cordial cooperation of the Bureau of the Census and the conscientious exercise of its wide array of skills. Most of the people who carried out the exacting operational tasks—interviewing, data processing, and tabulating—were not known to us, but we appreciate their excellent work nonetheless. Several members of the professional staff of the Bureau were directly involved with the research at various points. We should particularly like to mention that Conrad Taeuber, as Assistant Director, was the person with whom our initial discussions of feasibility took place, and he has maintained a friendly interest in the study. Robert B. Pearl, Chief of the Demographic Surveys Division (the unit responsible for the Current Population Survey), provided sound counsel on the many perplexing details of research design. Three members of the Economic Statistics Branch of the Population Division served as Project Coordinator of our study of Occupational Changes in a Generation: Stuart Garfinkle during the period when the questionnaire was designed and pretested, William J. Milligan during the period of the field work, and Stanley Greene during the period of data processing and tabulation. It was a great advantage to have the guidance of these experts in the field of occupational statistics. We should like, finally, to express our thanks for the several useful suggestions made by members of the staff of the Population Division: Howard G. Brunsman, Henry S. Shryock, Jr., Paul C. Glick, Charles B. Nam, and Robert Parke, Jr. It should only be added that the conclusions drawn in this book are the sole responsibility of its authors, as are any errors in the analysis and interpretation of the data provided by the Bureau of the Census.

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we initially approached him with our proposal, and Robert L. Hall, then at the National Science Foundation and now at the University of Illinois, whose *cooperative attitude and helpful counsel* were of great assistance in formulating the research proposal.

A number of students at the University of Chicago and the University of Michigan served as associates and assistants in this study. Robert W. Hodge worked with us at the beginning of the study, preparing an illuminating review of the literature and contributing significant observations to the evaluation of the pretest. The execution of the statistical analysis would not have been possible without the expertise of J. Michael Coble in programming and data handling. Bruce L. Warren lived with the data for several years and made substantive as well as technical contributions to the analysis. Their labors were augmented by the faithful services of Ruthe C. Sweet and Sally Frisbie. More than ordinary skill and diligence went into the work of Beulah El Dareer and Alice Y. Sano in typing tables and manuscript.

The colleagues with whom we discussed one problem or another of our research in the long period of its gestation are too numerous to mention, and we can only express our appreciation to them collectively. We were particularly fortunate, however, to be able to benefit from the insightful suggestions and penetrating criticisms of two colleagues throughout these many years, two colleagues on whose perceptive understanding of social research and our own work we had come to rely long before this project had been started. We are greatly indebted for their supportive assistance to Beverly Duncan and Zena Smith Blau.

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CHAPTER 1

Occupational Structure and Mobility Process

The objective of this book is to present a systematic analysis of the American occupational structure, and thus of the major foundation of the stratification system in our society. Processes of social mobility from one generation to the next and from career beginnings to occupational destinations are considered to reflect the dynamics of the occupational structure. By analyzing the patterns of these occupational movements, the conditions that affect them, and some of their consequences, we attempt to explain part of the dynamics of the stratification system in the United States. The inquiry is based on a considerable amount of empirical data collected from a representative sample of over 20,000 American men between the ages of 20 and 64.

Many of the research findings and conclusions we report have significant implications for social policy and action programs. For example, we repeatedly indicate whether the inferior occupational chances of some groups compared to those of others are primarily due to the former's inferior educational attainments or to other factors. These differences reveal whether educational programs would suffice or other social actions are necessary to effect improvements in the occupational opportunities of the groups under consideration. We hope that the documented generalizations presented will be helpful to policy makers and the interested public in formulating appropriate action programs and clarifying partisan controversy, but we have not seen it as our task to spell out the practical implications of our findings in detail.

Neither have we set ourselves the objective of formulating a theory of stratification on the basis of the results of our empirical investiga-

tion. This does not mean that we have restricted our responsibility to reporting "the facts" and letting them speak for themselves, or that we favor an artificial separation of scientific research and theory. On the contrary, we seek to place our research findings into a theoretical framework and suggest theoretical interpretations for them. To bring theoretical considerations to bear upon our empirical data on occupational achievement and mobility, however, is a much more modest undertaking than to construct a theory of stratification. The latter is not the aim of this book, although we shall speculate in the concluding chapter about some of the broader implications of our results for such a theory.

STRATIFICATION THEORY AND MOBILITY RESEARCH

In a classical presentation of social mobility as an important problem for sociological inquiry, completed four short decades ago, the author lamented,

Within our societies vertical circulation of individuals is going on permanently. But how is it taking place? . . . what are the characteristics of this process of which very little is known? Individuals have been speculating too much and studying the facts too little. It is high time to abandon speculation for the somewhat saner method of collecting the facts and studying them patiently.¹

It was only after World War II that Sorokin's challenge began to be met in any substantial way. To be sure, many of the great social thinkers of the last century, stimulated by the great impact of industrialization on society and the resulting concern with social change in general and the role of class differentiation for change in particular, developed theories of stratification or differentiation. The classical example is Marx's theory of class conflict as the prime force generating historical change, which has dominated much of social thought in the nineteenth century and much of political life in the twentieth.² Marx would probably not be displeased to see that his theory today is much more influential in actual political life than in the social sciences, since he held that the action implications of a social theory, not its objective scientific merits, are what justifies it. Durkheim's theory of the division of labor focuses more specifically on occupational differentiation, its roots in social density, and its implications

¹ Pitirim A. Sorokin, *Social Mobility*, New York: Harper, 1927, p. 414.

² For a concise summary of Marx's class theory, see Reinhard Bendix and Seymour M. Lipset (eds.), *Class, Status, and Power*, Glencoe: Free Press, 1953, pp. 26-35.

for lessening consensus and altering the nature of social solidarity.³ But neither these two nor any of the many other broad theories of social class and differentiation had much influence on the systematic research on social mobility that has been carried out in the last two decades. Indeed, most empirical studies of occupational mobility never refer to these theories. Thus even investigators known to be conversant with and sympathetic to Marx's theory do not make reference to it in their mobility research.

The reason for this neglect of stratification theory in mobility research is not simply the often-voiced complaint that the grand theories developed in the last century are not formulated in terms that make them easily amenable to empirical investigation. It is more specific than that. Stratification theories seek to explain the features of social differentiation in a society by reference to the historical conditions that have produced them, which implies a comparative framework in which differences in institutional conditions between historical periods or societies are related to consequent differences in the stratification systems. To explain the conditions that have produced the distinctive features of a stratification system it is necessary to contrast it with other systems or, at the very least, with one other, whether the comparison is based on systematic data or relies on impressionistic observation. Empirical studies of social status and mobility in one society cannot make the relevant comparisons to formulate or refine the propositions of stratification theories, because each society constitutes merely a single case from the perspective of these theories, regardless of the volume of quantitative data collected. Moreover, stratification theories generally are concerned with other institutional conditions in a society that produce the characteristic class structure, or with other conditions that have been produced by this class structure. Empirical studies typically have no information on these other variables. Thus both Marx and Durkheim consider extensive social interaction an essential condition for the development of social differentiation—specifically, for the development of the class consciousness that crystallizes class differences in Marx's case, and for the development of the division of labor in Durkheim's. But mobility research rarely if ever collects information on the extent of social interaction. The design of mobility research is not suited for the study of the problems posed by stratification theory, for it centers attention not on the institutional differences between societies but on the differ-

³ Émile Durkheim, *On the Division of Labor in Society*, New York: Macmillan, 1933.