The Price of the Ticket: Rethinking the Experience of Social Mobility

Sam Friedman
City University London, UK

Abstract
Increasing social mobility is the ‘principal goal’ of the current Coalition Government’s social policy. However, while mainstream political discourse frames mobility as an unequivocally progressive force, there is a striking absence of studies examining the long-term impact of mobility on individuals themselves. In British sociology the most influential research was carried out by Goldthorpe 40 years ago and argued that the mobile were overwhelmingly content with their trajectories. However, using a critique of Goldthorpe as its springboard, this article calls for a new research agenda in mobility studies. In particular, it proposes a large-scale re-examination of the mobility experience – one which addresses the possibility that people make sense of social trajectories not just through ‘objective’ markers of economic or occupational success, but also through symbols and artifacts of class-inflected cultural identity. Such enquiry may yield a richer account that explains both the potential social benefits and the costs of mobility.

Keywords
Bourdieu, Goldthorpe, habitus clivé, social mobility, taste, upward mobility

Introduction
In 2010 the English standup comedian Russell Kane won the prestigious Edinburgh Comedy Award for his show, Smokescreens and Castles. The premise of the show was Kane’s uneasy upward journey from a council estate in Essex to his present day success as a critically acclaimed performer. Central to the story are Kane’s parents – and particularly his ultra-masculine, anti-intellectual dad, who Kane explains was forever constructing metaphorical ‘castles’ to conceal his emotions and ward off hostile ‘outsiders’ from ethnic minorities and the stuck-up middle classes. ‘Build a wall around it, keep everything out, boy!’ bellows Kane, recounting his dad’s words of wisdom. Yet, to his
father’s apparent dismay, it was the upwardly mobile Kane who eventually morphed into the cultural snob. He describes growing up ‘romanticising knowledge’ and now, armed with a First in English literature, often aims his comedy downwards at his parents’ attempts at embourgeoisement:

That’s my mum’s ideal home … ‘why would you want an old house when you could have a new-build. Oh a new-build, Russ.’ Just covered in Dettol and Cellophane, that’s what she means. ‘Why would you want character, Russ, it smells.’ That would be her ideal house, right, five Glade plug-ins in every room. Five! So if you ever even smell the coniferous freshness, your nose bleeds with how clean it is. (Kane, 2011)

The show is full of similarly snobby swipes at the Kane family’s inferior taste, their ‘pinched and moronic’ Essex accent and their BNP-voting intolerance. Yet, significantly, the comedian does not exclude himself from the analysis. Instead, it becomes clear that Kane himself has constructed the biggest ‘castle’. While on the outside he may delight in deriding his working-class roots, he also retains an indelible nostalgia, affection and emotional connection to this past. Thus, when in the throws of mockery, Kane continually switches his target from ‘They’ to ‘We’, from ‘Them’ to ‘Us’. His humour is effective precisely because it is so painfully personal, because Kane invites his audience to laugh at him, at his cultural contradictions, rather than his working-class family. As he readily admits, Kane is caught between two class cultures, stuck in a kind of social purgatory.

Yet despite the success (both popular and critical) of Russell Kane’s story of messy, difficult upward mobility, his is a narrative rarely invoked in political or academic discourses on social mobility. Instead, the story that emerges repeatedly is that mobility is an unequivocally benevolent force. Indeed, over the last 20 years, the goal of increasing social mobility has become one of the rare points of convergence among the UK’s major political parties (Payne, 2012). This was underlined in 2011 when the Coalition Government published a cross-departmental strategy with the central slogan ‘improving social mobility is the principal goal of the Government’s social policy’ (Cabinet Office, 2011: 5). At the ideological root of this is the idea that high rates of mobility are the lynchpin in mitigating inequality. Mobility not only curtails the intergenerational continuities of inequity, politicians argue, but most importantly its presence provides any inequality that does exist with ‘meritocratic legitimation’ (Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2007). Mobility is therefore seen as the principal indicator of a fair and just society, a society where no individual is prevented from fulfilling his or her potential.

Academic disciplines with a vested interest in mobility – most notably economics and sociology – have offered little intellectual opposition to this celebratory discourse. Instead, debates have tended to focus on either the measurement of mobility – with economists focusing on income and sociologists on occupation – or, flowing from this, heated disagreement over rates of mobility.1 While I do not have space to delve into the intricacies of this discussion, my point here is that what has been at stake in this debate – namely how the ‘health’ of British society can be deduced from rates of mobility – has acted to inadvertently reify the notion that mobility is an entirely progressive force.

Of course, there is nothing particularly controversial about this political aim. After all, a high rate of relative social mobility is generally considered one of the strongest indicators of an open, fluid and meritocratic society. However, what I aim to tackle
here is rather what may be lost, intellectually, amid the political posturing that dominates thinking on mobility. In particular, simplistic political rhetoric may be threatening to reduce mobility to an increasingly narrow concept, one which collapses ‘achievement’ into measures of economic resources or occupational status, and ignores the multi-faceted axes through which most people actually judge personal success and wellbeing (Pearce, 2012).

This article thus proceeds in three stages. It begins by questioning the prevailing portrait of mobility as straightforwardly beneficial, critiquing in particular the influential work of John Goldthorpe. The article then moves on to review an extensive but disparate set of literatures that currently stand outside the mainstream mobility research paradigm, but which all highlight more problematic elements of the mobility experience – of its adverse effects on kinship ties, intimate relationships, and most significantly on the ontological coherency of the self. Finally, reflecting on these empirical insights and combining them with a more Bourdieusian-inflected theoretical lens, the article calls for a new research agenda in mobility studies, one which takes into account both the potential social benefits and social costs of the mobility experience. Such an account, it argues, will be much better placed to inform both academic debate and social policy on mobility.

**Goldthorpe on the Experience of Mobility**

In the field of sociology, the study of social mobility has long been dominated by John Goldthorpe and his various colleagues and interlocutors at Nuffield College, Oxford (Breen, 2005; Halsey et al., 1980; Marshall et al., 1997). Through his Oxford Mobility Studies (Erickson and Goldthorpe, 1992; Goldthorpe, 1980) and subsequent follow-up projects using the birth cohort studies (Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2007), Goldthorpe established himself as the leading authority on British social mobility. Although he had earlier shown an interest in the qualitative experience of mobility, via the *Affluent Worker* studies (Goldthorpe et al., 1969), it was through his pioneering quantitative work on mobility rates that Goldthorpe rose to international prominence. In particular, he demonstrated that although post-war changes in the occupational structure had facilitated high rates of absolute upward mobility, rates of relative mobility were largely unaltered. Goldthorpe therefore concluded that while upward mobility was increasingly commonplace in post-war England and Wales, the impression that society was becoming more ‘open’ in the 1970s was actually an illusion.

Although Goldthorpe’s work mainly focused on structural changes in mobility, he did – in the 1974 follow-up to the first Oxford Mobility Study – briefly return to the subjective dimension of mobility. In a chapter entitled ‘The Experience of Social Mobility’, Goldthorpe (1980) collected 246 life-history notes from a non-probability sub-sample of the original 10,000 male respondents. He wanted to know how these men made sense of their mobility (or immobility), both cognitively and evaluatively. Thus, in the notes, Goldthorpe asked respondents to reflect on how they ‘view the course of their life’ by answering eight questions. These questions touched on turning points in respondent’s lives, the importance of work, notions of personal ‘success’, and the effects of such success on life outside work.
Significantly, Goldthorpe was unequivocal about the data that emerged from this exercise. He concluded that the socially mobile men in his study, including the downwardly mobile, were overwhelmingly content with the progress of their lives. In particular, the 101 upwardly mobile respondents were especially satisfied – even proud – of their upward trajectories:

The life history notes of our upwardly mobile respondents indeed suggested that they had not for the most part experienced their mobility as socially stressful and, in particular, problems of managing status discrepancies or of translating occupational into status ascent received very little mention. (1980: 248)

Goldthorpe (1980: 339–40) posited that the crucial factor in explaining these psychologically smooth accounts was that these men did not see themselves as having moved through a hierarchy of status groups. Instead, they considered themselves members of a new service class that had massively expanded in the wake of post-war prosperity. Moreover, and in contrast to previous iterations of the British occupational elite, this new service class had, according to Goldthorpe, a ‘rather low degree of demographic identity’ and was ‘highly heterogeneous so far as the social origins of its members were concerned’ (1980: 331). This meant that upwardly mobile men were rarely conspicuous outsiders in high-status occupations and seldom plagued by status anxiety or cultural alienation. Instead, more often than not, they were likely to be surrounded by others who had experienced similar trajectories, who shared similar tastes and lifestyles, and who therefore acted as important reciprocal forces of ontological security. Thus, having ruled out any negative psychological implications of mobility, Goldthorpe concluded that mobility was a positive force at both the individual and societal level. He noted that the upwardly mobile had become pivotal bridges in British society, individuals who could foster cross-class ties, blur the lines of the traditional status order, and ultimately reduce social distance and class conflict:

The extent of upward mobility over recent decades, occasioned by the expansion of the service class, has been a major stabilizing force in creating a sizeable grouping within this class who are aware of having ‘made their way’ and done well for themselves (while not typically burdened by excessive ambition), and whose attitudes towards the existing order of society would thus seem likely to be ones of acceptance if not indeed of approval and gratitude. (Goldthorpe, 1980: 339–40)

It is perhaps possible to see in these authoritative sentiments, then, some parallels with the celebratory social mobility discourse that prevails in British politics. While it is of course important to reiterate that in other ways Goldthorpe has been highly critical of this political discourse – particularly the assumption that high absolute rates of mobility go hand in hand with greater ‘fairness’ – nonetheless it is possible to argue that his work on the experience of mobility has inadvertently fuelled policy assumptions that mobility is necessarily beneficial for the individual. Certainly, his assertions about the mobility experience have gone largely unchallenged in subsequent large-scale studies of social mobility. Indeed, many have echoed Goldthorpe in arguing that upward mobility brings with it distinct social benefits. Following an
initial suggestion by Peterson and Kern (1996: 255) in the USA, Van Eijk (1999) found that the Dutch socially mobile are the social group most likely to exhibit cultural omnivorousness. Far from rejecting their cultural origins, this group instead combines tastes for both ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowlbrow’ forms of culture. The significance of this is revealed when added to existing work on the cultural omnivore. For example, some have argued that the ‘open’ nature of omnivorousness is associated with greater political tolerance (Bryson, 1996) whereas others (Erickson, 1996; Lizardo, 2006) have suggested that omnivores are able to convert their diverse taste into forms of both ‘generalised’ and ‘restricted’ social capital. Thus, while their tastes for highbrow culture may help to foster bonding connections in relatively high-status and exclusive interaction networks, taste for lowbrow culture acts as a ‘bridging tool’, aiding their ability to make weak-tie social connections that transcend social class boundaries. This connection between mobility and omnivorousness therefore suggests support for Goldthorpe’s assertion that the socially mobile may be responsible for reducing social distance and class conflict.

**Challenging Goldthorpe on the Mobility Experience**

Goldthorpe’s mobility studies have become the benchmark for research on British social mobility and many have revisited aspects of his work (Atkinson, 2009; Marshall et al., 1997; Saunders, 2011; Savage, 2000). However, it is striking that his research on the mobility experience has not been subject to either update or critique in the 38 years since it was carried out – either by himself or from others in sociology. Indeed, this is even more surprising considering the limitations of Goldthorpe’s qualitative research design, data collection and data analysis.

To begin with research design, it is possible that Goldthorpe’s results were an artifact of the design strategy he employed. It could be argued, for example, that by asking people to write a ‘narrative’ of their lives, he invited respondents to present a more linear version of their trajectory, one which, crucially, might have precluded the disclosure of more problematic feelings, such as emotional distress or cultural dislocation. Such linearity is arguably induced by the conventions of narratives themselves. Narrative not only describes the story of a life, but it also unwittingly organises it, making the individual story coherent and meaningful – what Bourdieu (1987) calls the ‘biographical illusion’. In particular, narrative acts to link the present to the past, interpreting the latter through the ontological lens of the former. As Ricoeur notes:

[Memory] is itself the spiral movement that, through anecdotes and episodes, brings us back to the almost motionless constellation of potentialities that narrative retrieves. The end of the story is what equates the present with the past. The hero is what he [always] was. (Ricoeur in Lawler, 1999: 10)

The use of life-history notes, then, may have encouraged a version of mobility that privileged the individual’s present feelings and, in turn, blocked access to the kind of ‘backstage’ data (Goffman, 1959) that might have been probed using more interactional and confrontational methods such as lifecourse interviews.
A similar effect may also have been produced by Goldthorpe’s line of questioning. Among eight questions asked, only one addressed the ‘effects’ of mobility outside work, and even then there was no probing of cultural identity – of how mobility may have affected one’s lifestyle, tastes and cultural practices. Instead, the vast majority of questions focused on ‘work identity’ and ‘work life’. This is problematic because it implies that occupational success and contentment is significantly more important than wellbeing in other areas. For example it is perfectly plausible, as Miles et al. (2011) describe, that the upwardly mobile may be content with their professional life, but the price of striving for this occupational success may be unhappiness in other areas of life.

There were also problems with Goldthorpe’s data collection. Not only were his life-notes restricted to men, but he himself noted that the project achieved a particularly poor response rate of just 27 per cent from the 926 men selected for re-interview from the original 1972 sample. Reflecting on this, Goldthorpe explicitly conceded that his subsequent findings should be ‘viewed with extreme caution so far as its representativeness is concerned’ (1980: 220).

Finally, there may be multiple grounds on which to question Goldthorpe’s analysis. First, while Goldthorpe’s portrait of the mobile as anchored through their proximity to mobile colleagues may well have been accurate in the 1960s and 1970s, this analysis is outdated in the contemporary British context. As Goldthorpe himself has detailed, rates of male absolute upward social mobility have been in decline since the 1970s (Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2007: 532) and therefore recent cohorts of the upwardly mobile are less likely to find themselves surrounded by ontologically familiar colleagues ‘at the top’.

Second, and more importantly, for as much weight as Goldthorpe gives the argument that mobility is experienced as positive and beneficial, this finding (1980: 244–5) is premised on just four direct quotes. Moreover, this data arguably does not support such a straightforward reading. For example, while one upwardly mobile chemical engineer notes that ‘success in my working life has had a good effect on my life outside work’, he also admits, ‘I sometimes feel conscious of my background (lack of university) when I am in the company of people who have been to Public School or university’ (1980: 244). Even more striking are the comments of an electrical engineer: ‘To succeed in my work has meant I have had to move home. Inevitably this means that contact is lost with old friends. Nevertheless, I feel that success has proved beneficial to my family’ (Goldthorpe, 1980: 245).

Such testimonies indicate a much more ambivalent experience of mobility than Goldthorpe’s analysis suggests. While this latter respondent ultimately sees his trajectory as ‘beneficial’, it is notable that he frames the benefits in terms of his family’s wellbeing rather than his own. If anything, his own experience seems to be characterised more by loss and upheaval. Of course, such speculative re-interpretation of data is problematic. However, what I am trying to do here is simply illustrate the limitations of Goldthorpe’s initial analysis and show where his qualitative data required further probing. Indeed, considering the centrality of Goldthorpe’s assertions about the beneficial nature of mobility to his overarching thesis, the presence of such limited and inadequate data is problematic.
The Hidden Costs of Mobility

One of the byproducts of Goldthorpe’s ascendancy in the field of social mobility is that it has arguably acted to close down, or at least stymie, competing understandings of mobility – particularly those orientated around the mobility experience. Indeed, subsequent large-scale studies of social mobility (see Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992; Marshall et al., 1997; Saunders, 2011) have focused almost exclusively on rates of mobility rather than how it is actually lived. However, the dilemmas of mobility were extensively explored in social science in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, particularly via a theoretical strand known as the ‘dissociative thesis’ (Hopper, 1981; Musgrove, 1963; Sorokin, 1956; Stacey, 1967). This literature, which traversed both sociology and social psychology, furthered the argument that social mobility (upward and downward) had a largely ‘dissociative’ effect on the individual, resulting in a higher incidence of both social and psychological problems. The theoretical reasoning that lay behind this claim was that in societies with relatively durable class cultures, such as Britain, moving through the class structure was likely to disturb the pattern of one’s social life. Seen this way social mobility does not just denote movement along a socio-economic continuum, but involves processes of detachment from, and attachment to, particular class cultures. In turn, these processes may be particularly stressful because they are often partial, leaving individuals with uncertain cultural and personal ties to two distinct social realms. For example, the upwardly mobile may experience a status anxiety about their acculturation into elite groups and simultaneously a sense of guilt or betrayal about abandoning their class of origin. On the other hand the downward mobile may not wish to make new ties in their destination milieu, as this may confirm their status decline, but may feel a status anxiety when interacting with ties from their origin class.

The general thrust of this thesis, then, is that mobility – because of the stresses it imposes – is likely to be accompanied with social and emotional disequilibrium. Indeed, ever since Durkheim (1951: 246–7) remarked on the relation between mobility and anomic suicide, various investigations have probed the implications of such disruption. In their classic work *Education and the Working Class*, Jackson and Marsden (1963) explored the problems facing working-class grammar-school boys in Huddersfield, where the price of educational achievement was often a painful separation from one’s cultural origins. Likewise, Musgrove (1963) and later Stacey (1967) and Sennett and Cobb (1976: 37) all found that the upwardly mobile frequently experienced problems of ‘isolation’, ‘vulnerability’ and ‘mental disorder’, which were often compounded by the geographical mobility that their occupational trajectories demanded. And finally, reflecting on cross-cultural comparison between the USA and UK, Hopper (1981) argued that mobility was more likely to be ‘pathogenic’ in the UK because greater ‘status rigidity’ ensured that it was harder for the ‘mobile to acquire a legitimate position in the status hierarchy’.

As I outline shortly, Goldthorpe was largely successful in silencing the dissociative thesis in mobility studies. However, some of the key ideas have continued to live on, particularly among those looking indirectly at mobility through the lens of gender, education and ethnicity. Lawler (1999), for example, examines the way upwardly mobile women
narrativise their social trajectories. She argues that upward mobility is particularly problematic for women, as ‘women’s desires for, and envy of, respectability and material wealth’ have long been portrayed as markers of ‘pretense and triviality’. She notes, for example, that no female equivalent exists of the heroic tale of ‘the working-class boy made good’. Instead, among her respondents, she finds a widespread pain attached to mobility that stems from an anxiety about being ‘accepted’ as middle class. These women are keen to escape their working-class history, but are continually prevented from doing so by their accents, pronunciation, tastes and other embodied actions. These markers not only belie class origins considered ‘pathological’, but also act to continually remind these women that they are outsiders in their destination class.

Another set of telling accounts of women’s upward mobility comes from the collection of essays in Mahony and Zmroczek’s (1997) *Class Matters*. Here a selection of leading female academics discusses their uneasy trajectory from working-class origins through to success in the academy (Hey, 1997; Reay, 1997; Skeggs, 1997). While these women concur with Lawler’s argument that mobility is more ‘painful’ for women, they note that the experience is not defined by a desire to flee one’s working-class upbringing, as it is for Lawler’s subjects. Indeed, escaping one’s past is simply not possible, according to these authors, who each movingly reflect on the prevailing ontology of their class habitus. As Reay (1997: 24) notes:

> My own experience of growing up working class has left vivid memories of my social origins imprinted on my consciousness. However that consciousness, rooted in working class affiliation, appears increasingly to be a misfit; a sense of self both out of place and out of time.

Skeggs (1997) reports a similar sense of dislocation. She describes a prevailing sense that she does not ‘fit’ in the social space of her past or her present. While she feels like a ‘fraud’ among academic colleagues, her working-class family cannot provide refuge. Instead, in this context, she is a ‘disappointment’, someone who didn’t understand the importance of ‘staying in one’s place’, someone who ‘got above herself’.

While these accounts may differ in terms of individual contentment, they all underline the specificity of the female mobility experience. Other studies have reversed this focus, looking at the experience of upwardly mobile boys, particularly those negotiating the education system. Reay (2002) and Ingram (2011) both underline the substantial psychic costs incurred by such working-class boys, who struggle to juggle and reconcile working-class masculinities with success in inner-city schools. Both explain how such young men must produce an enormous amount of emotional, intellectual and interactive work to combat the misalignment between dispositions forged in the family and dispositions needed for educational success.

There is also a substantial body of literature examining the social mobility of ethnic minorities in Britain. While studies in this area have typically followed mainstream mobility research in focusing on *rates* of ethnic mobility (Heath and McMahon, 2005; Heath and Ridge, 1983; Iganski and Payne, 1996; Platt, 2005), some studies have focused on how ethnic bonds may actually act to inhibit (or de-incentivise) social mobility (Loury et al., 2005: 19). Rollock et al. (2011), for example, describe how upwardly mobile Black Caribbeans are often forced to abandon accents and other
embodied markers associated with their ‘blackness’ in order to gain acceptance in the white dominated middle class. Moreover, upward occupational mobility often demands a degree of geographical mobility. However, for African-Caribbean and South Asian communities, who have traditionally clustered in small urban areas, this spatial mobility can involve leaving behind important support systems orientated around family, religion and cultural practice (McGarrigle and Kearns, 2009; Peach, 2005). In these instances, the ‘objective’ benefits of social mobility may not outweigh the costs of defying broader notions of cultural and social value inculcated within the person’s ethnic community. One strategy enacted by many ethnic groups to counteract this eventuality – particularly the British South Asian population – has been to enter into self-employment. Srinivasan (1995), for example, found that South Asian businessmen in Oxford greatly valued the enhanced status that owning a business gave them in the local community, as well as allowing them to maintain an active social role in the neighbourhood. Such strategies reflected a desire not just to raise one’s economic status, but also to satisfy ‘ethnically orientated status aspirations’.

Research by Loury et al. (2005: 12) has also explored how upwardly mobile ethnic minorities often move back to less prosperous ethnic clusters even after they have ‘graduated out’, as the area provides certain ‘resources and identity-maintenance that can be delivered only within its boundaries’. This is particularly significant in terms of the broader questions posed by this article, as it suggests that ethnic ties may cut across class lines, meaning that mobility may be less traumatic for ethnic groups if they remain geographically tied to their ethnic community.

It is clear, then, that a strong body of research exists that provides a very different narrative on the mobility experience than that proposed by Goldthorpe. However, reading contemporary literature reviews on social mobility (see Bottero, 2005: ch.12; Crompton, 2008: ch.7), it is clear that this literature has either been consciously ignored or unwittingly forgotten. Here the influence of Goldthorpe is instructive. Not only has his work become the intellectual starting point for most contemporary mobility research but also it is also worth noting that in Social Mobility and Class Structure in Modern Britain (1980), Goldthorpe explicitly discredited the dissociative literature. Deriding what he labeled ‘fashionable theories of the 1970s’, Goldthorpe concluded that his data on the experience of mobility implied the complete ‘rejection of the idea that mobility is an inherently dissociative phenomenon which leads to the disruption of primary social relations and in turn social isolation and marginality’ (1980: 339). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that both the dissociative literature and more contemporary work on the mobility experience have struggled to compete with Goldthorpe – in terms of both political and academic influence.

**Habitus Clivé: The Mobile as ‘Double Agents’**

Considering the limitations of Goldthorpe’s qualitative work, a large-scale re-examination of the mobility experience may be long overdue. In moving forward, though, we perhaps need a theoretical lens that can unite the empirical concerns outlined in studies of education, gender and ethnicity, and help capture the complexities of the mobility experience. One such conceptual frame, following the lead of Ingram (2011), may be
provided by Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus clivé* – albeit nuanced through the work of Lahire (2011) and my own concept of cultural homelessness (Friedman, 2012b).

The *habitus* represents a key conceptual tool in Bourdieu’s social theory, representing both a ‘structured’ and ‘structuring’ force in explaining individual social actions. Bourdieu argued that those located in neighbouring positions in social space are socialised with similar ‘conditions of existence’ (meaning stocks of capital and distance from material necessity) and these conditions act to form the ‘structure’ of their *habitus*. In turn, this structure goes on to generate ‘structuring’ dispositions and schemes of perception that guide an individual’s social practice, shapes their cultural taste and informs their horizon of expectations (1990: 60).

However, significantly, Bourdieu (1984: 101) argued that the dispositions flowing from the habitus were so durable that in the vast majority of the cases they stayed unified through time, meaning that those with strong initial reserves of economic, social and cultural capital were statistically bound to accumulate further and vice versa (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 133).

Of course, this conception of the habitus – as an enduring matrix of dispositions flowing from primary socialisation – appears antithetical to the notion of social mobility. It implies that movement through the social hierarchy is almost impossible, with the individual continually pushing against the constraints of their social positioning. Indeed, many have argued that mobility remained a rather under-theorised area of Bourdieu’s analysis (Lawler, 1999). However, it is important to note that Bourdieu’s conception of social space in *Distinction* was constructed along three dimensions – volume of capital, composition of capital and ‘change in these properties over time’ (1984: 114). Thus, Bourdieu did have a theoretical conception of social mobility, albeit a somewhat limiting one, as a ‘band of more or less probable trajectories’ based on one’s ‘volume of inherited capital’. This trajectory, he continued, depends on the individual’s ‘skill’ in preserving or enhancing their initial reserves of received capital (1984: 110).

He also argued trajectory could operate on a collective scale. For example, his most lengthy discussion of mobility came in relation to the French petite bourgeoisie (lower middle class), who he argued had a ‘collective social trajectory’ that transformed their habitus towards a durable inclination and ‘propensity to accumulation [of capital] in all forms’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 336). In other words, Bourdieu conceived the petite bourgeoisie as inherently aspirational, forever seeking upward mobility but never able to successfully activate the ‘embodied cultural capital’ of the dominant classes (1984: 337).

Yet, returning to the notion of *individual* trajectory, Bourdieu presented a rather different conception of upward mobility in *The State Nobility* (1998: 106–07). Conceding that such advancement stretched beyond just the aspirational petite bourgeoisie, he briefly turned his attention to working-class students making their way through the French education system. These class ‘transfuges’, Bourdieu argued, were caught in a ‘painful’ position of social limbo, of ‘double isolation’, from both their origin and destination class. While they certainly attempted to adopt the cultural dispositions valued in their new elite milieu, they were never able to ‘erase their nostalgia for reintegration into their community of origin’ (1998: 107). They retained a ‘secret guilt’ about abandoning the ties and culture of primary socialisation, and could never fully enjoy their success because it couldn’t be ‘fully shared with loved ones’. Interestingly, this is reminiscent of
Bourdieu’s own social trajectory described in A Sketch for a Self Analysis (2004: 127). Raised by a rural postal worker and his wife, Bourdieu experienced extraordinary long-range upward mobility that eventually took him to the Chair of the prestigious College du France. However, the psychological price of this movement, he argued, was a fundamentally divided habitus – a habitus clivé – ‘torn by contradiction and internal division’ (2004: 161).

It is this notion of a disrupted habitus, then, or one out of sync with the field it inhabits, that may provide a promising theoretical frame for analysing some iterations of the contemporary mobility experience, particularly in its most long-range form. Habitus is especially useful because it helps to conceptualise how the mobile person’s past can shape their horizon of expectations in the present. More specifically, it illuminates how the embodied inscription of this history has an indelible impact. It explains how, even when the mobile person’s conscious presentation of self may align with the subjectivities of those that mobility has brought them into contact with, elements of their bodily ‘hexis’ – accent, pronunciation, vocabulary, posture, taste – may always bear the trace of their class origins (Bourdieu, 1977: 93–4).

Significantly, though, although Bourdieu coined the phrase habitus clivé, it is arguably Lahire (2011: 36–41) who has most effectively developed the concept, especially in terms of social mobility. Lahire argues that while most people are ‘plural actors’ who employ several schemes of action that ‘co-exist peacefully’ and do not threaten their ‘personal coherence’, the mobile often face two ‘contradictory matrices of socialisation’, such as a working-class family and the education system, or a middle-class family and a downwardly divergent occupational or personal milieu. Unlike habitus, which puts the overriding emphasis on primary socialisation, Lahire sees these two poles as equally important sources of socialisation. Moreover, he argues that when they collide they pose a serious threat to the individual’s sense of ‘mental coherency’. Together they act as competing schemes of action in the individual’s mind, leading to ‘discomfort’, ‘paralysis’ and ‘suffering’, and leaving the individual plagued by a ‘central internal conflict that organizes every moment of existence’. He notes:

Socialised successively but in part also simultaneously in worlds in which habits of taste are different and even socially opposed, these ‘class transfuges’ oscillate constantly – and sometimes in a mentally exhausting manner – between two habits and two points of view. (2011: 38)

My own empirical work has supported this conception of mobility as exhausting and disconcerting. Examining the comedy tastes of the British upwardly mobile (Friedman, 2012b; forthcoming), I found that these individuals had a striking propensity to combine tastes for both critically acclaimed highbrow comedy and less consecrated lowbrow artists. Yet unlike studies that portray such omnivorousness as a conscious sign of cultural openness, I found it was more a byproduct of life trajectory – whereby lowbrow comedy taste had been established during childhood and highbrow tastes added as the individual had experienced upward mobility. Moreover, this taste diversity often had more negative than positive implications, with mobile respondents reporting a sense of being ‘stuck in the middle’ of two class-inflected taste cultures. Thus, while they lacked the ‘natural’
confidence to communicate legitimate tastes with the embodied cultural capital possessed by the upper middle classes, they were also acutely aware that the lowbrow comedy tastes developed in their youth (which were often important for maintaining social or family relationships) lacked cultural legitimacy and were often considered socially unacceptable. Deploying the wrong taste in the wrong social context thus frequently acted to disrupt social relationships, creating a sense of uneasiness and cultural dislocation between the individual and their ties of origin and destination.

This is particularly striking, as it seems to problematise the Goldthorpe-led literature on social mobility. Rather than the ‘satisfied’ and ‘proud’ individuals presented in Goldthorpe’s analysis, my upwardly mobile respondents were more accurately characterised as *culturally homeless* – dislocated from a recognisable cultural habitat, permanently caught with one foot in two different taste cultures. While their life trajectory had allowed them to bridge cultural and social boundaries, they were nonetheless acutely aware of powerful external hierarchies of value (Skeggs, 2004), and their slightly precarious position within them.

The dual notions of Bourdieu’s cleft habitus and Lahire’s split self may therefore provide useful theoretical tools for understanding contemporary mobility effects. While work on mobility has often stressed the tension of the parvenu’s struggle to gain acceptance in their new social group, little work has focused on how connections to one’s ‘roots’ can also endure, and what psychic costs are incurred in trying to maintain this double perception of self. Here, habitus provides the vital link, illustrating how – via enduring and embodied dispositions – the present is always configured through the ontological tug of the past.

**Conclusion**

In a major speech on social mobility in May 2012, British Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg railed against the enduring shackles of the British class system: ‘We must create a more dynamic society. One where what matters most is the person you become, not the person you were born’ (Clegg in Jowitt, 2012).

Inadvertently, this banal piece of political sloganeering gets to the heart of what I have aimed to tackle in this article. While Nick Clegg’s desire to produce a more open, meritocratic and ‘dynamic’ society is admirable, his framing of social mobility as the straightforward panacea is alarmingly simplistic. Indeed, in the rush to assert a normative commitment to nurturing social mobility, many politicians, policy makers and academics seem to have subscribed to a discourse that passes over the complexities (and potential difficulties) of the mobility experience.

In this regard, despite what Nick Clegg says, there is no such easy distinction between ‘the person you were born’ and ‘the person you become’. As the literature explored in this article demonstrates, individual identities tend to always carry – at least in some shape or form – the symbolic baggage of the past. Moreover, the imprint of this history can have important consequences for both how people act and how they feel in the present. Large-scale mobility research, unfortunately, has largely neglected this line of enquiry. For some 30 years the field has been dominated by the work of John Goldthorpe. While his research has been groundbreaking in many regards, it has offered limited
insight into how mobility is actually lived. Indeed, as this article has outlined, there were major methodological problems with the one attempt Goldthorpe did make at tackling the issue. This may be due to the fact that, along with many well-meaning politicians, Goldthorpe’s own political commitment to promoting ‘openness’ and ‘social fluidity’ (1980: 4) has inadvertently blinded him to the possibility that social mobility may not always be straightforwardly and one-dimensionally ‘beneficial’.

Thus, using a critique of Goldthorpe as its springboard, this article calls for a new research agenda in social mobility research. In particular, it proposes a shift away from solely examining mobility rates and instead a large-scale re-examination of the British mobility experience – one which attends to the possibility that people make sense of their social trajectories not just through ‘objective’ markers of economic or occupational success, but also through symbols and artifacts of class-inflected cultural identity. Such enquiry, I would argue, might help explain how the emotional pull of class loyalties can entangle subjects in the affinities of the past, and why – despite prevailing political rhetoric – upward mobility may remain a state that not everyone unequivocally aspires to.

Perhaps most importantly, though, it calls for greater understanding of how mobility affects the psychic and emotional life of the individual. We must investigate how social-space travel (upward, downward and horizontal) may disrupt the coherency of the self, and whether this might lead to ‘hidden injuries’ (Sennett and Cobb, 1977) of unease, anxiety and dislocation that may not be discernible from quantitative data sets.

This is not to imply any presupposition that the mobility experience is inherently disassociative, however. On the contrary, it is likely that the ranks of the mobile contain many dislocated and secure individuals, as well as many somewhere in between. Indeed, future research should also be attentive to the potentially beneficial and productive byproducts of mobility (Hey, 1997; Reay et al., 2009). Hey (1997) for example, has presented the subjective negotiation of upward mobility in strikingly optimistic terms. Focusing predominantly on speech and accent, she describes routinely moving between the linguistic codes of working and middle-class culture. Unlike the immobile, she understands the axes of what is culturally ‘valuable’ in both class contexts, and has the agency to ‘play’ and experiment with these codes, constituting her accent ‘as something of a tribal trophy’ (1997: 145). Moreover, Hey talks of occasionally initiating successful ‘translations’ between these codes which result in a ‘sense of euphoria – the outcome of feeling whole, as multiple selves are held in play in language that recovers all forms of one’s cultural capital in classrooms or text’. Hey’s contribution is particularly telling, then, as it demonstrates that the ontological tension brought about by mobility is not always negative, but can also be transformed into a productive, creative force.

Russell Kane, the comedian, introduced at the beginning of this article, represents a fascinating point of departure for understanding this dynamic between mobility gains and losses. While Kane has spoken extensively about how his rapid upward mobility has left him with a lingering, paralytic self-doubt (Logan, 2011), he has also clearly converted this anxiety into a creative tension – one that fuels the observational engine of his comedy. His social trajectory, he says, has given him ‘two different class passports’ and this allows him to communicate, artistically, to completely different audiences:
Maybe it’s about coming from a council estate and then getting a First in English. I’ve got a pathetic need to be liked by everyone. So the thought that someone might not ‘get’ my comedy doesn’t make me think ‘yeah, you don’t get it, leave’. I think, ‘that’s sad, this person’s given me £17.50, they need to get this. I want the big ideas to adumbrate the comedy without me saying, ‘Here’s my thesis – laughter optional.’ (Kane in Friedman, 2012a)

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Notes

1 To summarise this debate, a group of economists (Blanden et al., 2004) have argued that rates of absolute mobility in Britain are declining, whereas sociologists (Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2007) have countered that rates of relative mobility – arguably a better indicator of overall fluidity – have stayed broadly similar.

2 Some exceptions include Bertaux and Thompson (2007) who highlight the diversity of positive and negative mobility experience from life-history interviews, Li et al. (2008) who show that the mobile cannot leverage the same social capital as the service class, and Miles et al. (2011) who find that the upwardly mobile are more ‘modest’ about their trajectories than Goldthorpe suggests. Achievements are described as non-linear and often contingent on ‘luck’ or difficulties elsewhere in life.

3 Goldthorpe (1980: 218) admits that ‘open-ended’ interviews would have been his ‘preferred’ method, but his interviewers did not have sociological training.

4 In recent years this rejection of the dissociative thesis has been augmented by Goldthorpe’s adoption of Rational Choice Theory (Goldthorpe, 1996). The main assumption here is that the upwardly mobile – like all individuals – are rational actors whose decisions are directed towards maximising future social and economic utility. Thus, rather than looking backwards at what they have lost – in terms of class culture, belonging and relationships – the upwardly mobile will always face forward and focus on maintaining their newly elevated positioning.

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Author biography
Sam Friedman is lecturer in Sociology at City University London. He has published widely on class, taste and social mobility, and is the author of Comedy and Distinction: The Cultural Currency of a ‘Good’ Sense of Humour (Routledge, 2014). He is also a comedy critic and the publisher of Fest, the largest magazine covering the Edinburgh Festival Fringe.

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