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The Social Ladder

Status Mobility Across Time and Countries

Cinzia Meraviglia

Introduction¹

Society can be imagined as a ladder, whereby the rungs are the different social positions. Social mobility is the term for how individuals and families move along this ladder, however, movement is constrained by various factors. A university degree allows an individual access to the mid-level to higher rungs; while similarly, a wealthy family background – no matter what education one gets – improves one's chances for getting a good job, and remaining among the top rungs.

Social change and social mobility are seen as connected: If the same families or groups, generation after generation, are found on the same rungs, i.e., in the same social strata, society is immobile over time. However, movement among the social strata, whereby people coming from the lower can reach the top, and vice versa, produces changes in society.

In Westernized, post-industrial countries it is common wisdom that social strata should be occupied based on merit. People having the right abilities, skills and motivation to hold prestigious social positions should be able to get to them, independent of a privileged or non-privileged background. Are our societies open enough to allow people from under-privileged social strata to get to the top social positions; or are the most advantageous positions secured by inheritance, one generation after the other? Do social institutions (like the educational system) foster or hinder social mobility? Have our societies become more socially open over the 20th century?

A number of studies in recent decades have addressed these questions. Most of these have compared the social position held by individuals with that of their parents, to measure persistence or change in the various social groups; while also considering whether, and to what extent a privileged social origin successfully guarantees a better education *per se*, and hence a better social position, regardless of individual merits or abilities.

Yet very few studies focus on whether individuals perceive themselves as being socially mobile or immobile, with respect to their family of origin. However, the subjective side of mobility is relevant for shaping the mobility strategies of families. Presuming that social inheritance prevails, parents of lesser-privileged social strata might invest less in the education of their children, thus (unwittingly) contributing to social immobility. This will

1 I wish to thank Andrea Maniscalco (University of Eastern Piedmont) for his help in preparing the data for the analyses reported in this paper.

shape the expectations of future generations with respect to the openness of society, again fostering immobility rather than social fluidity between classes and strata.

Another reason for investigating the subjective side of mobility is that being socially mobile/immobile might be connected with one's perception of holding the same or a different position than one's parents. Are socially mobile people more likely to describe themselves as such; or do they think they are socially mobile even while holding the same social position as their parents? Do the two dimensions match or diverge? Are there any cross-national differences?

This paper explores the similarities and dissimilarities between the actual and perceived social structure in the context of social mobility in a comparative perspective based on the relevant questions asked in the four ISSP Social Inequality surveys. My aim is two-fold: First, to investigate the degree of openness of ISSP countries, also with respect to the influence that parental socio-economic background has on respondents' education; and second, to consider how socially mobile people perceive themselves as being, whether this perception connects with an actual change of social position, and how this varies across countries.

The next section addresses this first aim, analyzing the influence of the family of origin on respondents' social outcome; in the following I will analyze subjective social mobility and its relationship to actual social mobility.

Social Mobility Across Countries and Over Time

Social mobility is investigated as the influence of the family of origin (i.e., the family an individual was raised in) on respondents' social position. The stronger this influence, the higher the inheritance of social positions over generations, and the less open is a society as a whole.

A simplified version of the status attainment model proposed by Blau and Duncan (1967), also known as the OED triangle, is a useful tool for disentangling the process of attaining a social position. According to this model (Figure 1), an individual's social position is influenced by their parents' social position (path *a*) and by her/his own education (path *c*); the latter, in turn, is influenced by parental social position (path *b*).

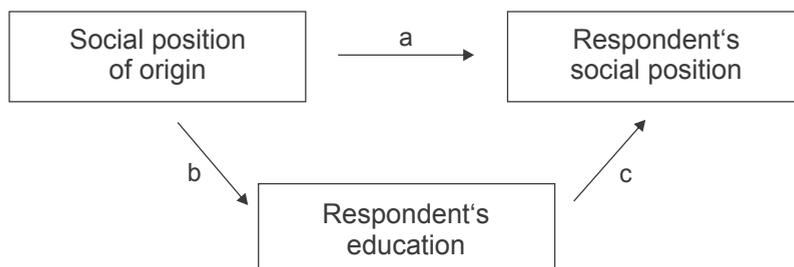


Figure 1 The simplified status attainment model

In the OED triangle the focus is placed on the influence that the family of origin can exert in various ways (e.g., providing the offspring with endowments and assets, or exploiting their social network to find them a good job, or allowing their children to study for a long time, etc.). This overall influence is called the *total effect of social origin* (TESO, see Bernardi and Ballarino 2016b), which comprises the effect of all sources of influence that parents may exert over the social position of children (path *a* and paths *b-c* in Figure 1). As such, this total effect also includes the influence that parents may have on their children's educational attainment (path *b* in Figure 1). The latter relationship has received the most attention from stratification scholars over the last century. As modernization theory contends (Parsons 1961; Treiman 1970), societies change under pressure from increasing social division of labor. This in turn makes both the economic system more efficient, and individuals (or, better, *roles*) more mobile and free to “acquire knowledge and ability, [with] a greater likelihood that they will do so” (Mayhew 1982, 44). Increasing specialization, in turn, demands individuals upgrade their competences to a higher level to meet the new productive standards. At the same time, as rational behavior replaces more traditional forms of behavior (based, for example, on kinship), individuals are then sorted into occupational roles according to their competences, rather than personal bonds, inheritance, etc. Therefore, education is key to modern societies, since it becomes the main mechanism allowing for the efficient allocation of individuals to roles.

It is a fact that over the last century education has gained significantly in importance in the labor market. Increased bureaucratization and rationalization of Western societies; the growing share of the workforce employed in the service sector, and in large, organized firms; the expansion of the welfare state and state administration are all processes parallel with the expansion of the education systems, as well as with the increasing importance attributed to education and skill qualifications (Shavit and Blossfeld 1993). Within this framework, families have learned to invest in their children's education to be able to offer them a better future, or to continue holding a privileged position. Hence, as modernization theory contends, the direct effects of the family of origin should decrease over time.

However, since individuals, families or groups can always counteract social change, the influence of social origin may take an indirect path through education as a means to secure a better future for the offspring. Again, as maintained by modernization theories (Blau and Duncan 1967; Treiman 1970), meritocracy theories (Goldthorpe 1996; Goldthorpe and Jackson 2008), as well as common wisdom, better education should allow to access better occupations, in turn, bringing better social positions. Whether true or not, and to what extent, many families invest in their children's education in order to gain better social positions, or to allow them to continue holding the privileged positions they already hold by birth. Assuming that families seek to avoid social demotion (Boudon 1974), the indirect effect of the family of origin could be increasing – instead of decreasing – over time; since medium-high status families may send their children to better schools, and/or to support them in studying longer (Raftery and Hout 1993; Lucas 2001; Parman 2011). Lower status families, however, cannot easily afford the direct costs of education or the indirect cost of postponing their offspring entering the labor market.

Clarifying the role of education in the mobility process requires consideration of two separate issues. The first issue is whether or not access to all educational levels is granted to all children, independent of social background (path *b* in Figure 1); and the second is

whether a better education does indeed bestow some advantage in the labor market over a lower level of education (path *c* in Figure 1). The *inequality of educational opportunity* (IEO), as the first is termed, enjoyed a vast amount of research over the last century (see among others: Shavit and Blossfeld 1993; Breen and Jonsson 2005). The latter issue addresses the *returns to education*, i.e., the value (in terms of either income or social status) of any given educational level (Acemoglu 2002; Goldin 1999; Goldthorpe 1996; Müller and Gangl 2003; Bernardi and Ballarino 2016a).

Along with the above, the *direct effect of social origin* (the so-called DESO; see Ballarino and Bernardi 2016), i.e. the influence exerted by the family of origin on the offspring social position, net of their education, is also of interest (path *a* in Figure 1, once education has been taken into account). Comparing direct with total effect offers insight into how much of the effect of parental background on the offspring's social position is via education, and how much is direct effect beyond education.

Empirically the variables used for studying the relationships of the OED triangle are parental social background, which is obtained from father's and mother's occupation (variables V70 and V72 respectively); respondent's occupation at time of survey (variable ISCO88) and respondent's education as measured by years of schooling (variable EDUYRS). Parental and respondent's ISCO-88 codes has been transformed into the scores of the International Socio-Economic Index (ISEI) (Ganzeboom and Treiman 1996, 212)². In order to have a single variable indexing respondent's social background, the highest value between mother and father's status has been considered (see Erikson 1984).

An ISEI score can only be calculated if a respondent has a paying job; the valid sample includes solely respondents having an extra-domestic job at the time of the interview in each of the four module years 1987, 1992, 1999 and 2009, and in the various countries. Not all countries in the harmonized file provided a detailed 4-digit ISCO-88 code; in particular, Austria, France and Israel provided a 3-digit code in the year module 1999, while France, Finland and South Africa did the same in 2009. Indeed, South Africa (which I only consider in the analyses reported in the next main section) only provided a 1-digit ISCO-88 code.

Table 1 shows the valid sample size by country, according to the availability of year modules, as resulting from selecting the cases with valid information on all relevant variables.³

OLS regression was used to estimate the influence of parental background on respondent's socio-economic status. Following from the specifications given above, three kinds of effects will be scrutinized, namely the DESO, the IEO and the returns to education. In analyzing all three effects magnitude, the trend over time and the differences across the

2 Treiman (1977) ascertained that the social evaluation of occupation remains substantially constant over time and across countries. Hout and DiPrete (2006) call this result the "Treiman constant" and the (likely) only true universal that sociology as a discipline ever discovered. For this reason, I use the ISEI in my analyses in the case of both respondents' and their parents' occupation, as is customary in stratification research.

3 This amounts to selecting cases based on listwise deletion of the three variables at once. Furthermore, the sample includes only respondents at least 30 years old at time of survey, so that by then they would have most likely completed their education, and not older than 65, in order to account for retirement and differential mortality after that age.

ISSP countries will be examined. The results will be presented by country and according to a geo-political classification.

Table 1 Number of valid cases by country and year module

No. Year modules	Country	Year modules				Total
		1987	1992	1999	2009	
4	AT	523	561	515	525	2124
	DE-W	515	894	462	492	2363
	HU	1619	735	640	572	3566
3	AU		1400	955	681	3036
	CZ		437	1013	677	2127
	DE-E		494	256	217	967
	NO		693	589	778	2060
	PL		906	654	701	2261
	RU		869	633	701	2203
	SK		257	490	643	1390
	US		649	633	812	2094
2	CH	524			788	1312
	CL			713	719	1432
	CY			527	622	1149
	ES			624	543	1167
	FR			998	1529	2527
	LV			576	515	1091
	NZ		678	650		1328
	PT			641	566	1207
	SE			612	670	1282
	SI			562	521	1083
1	BG				458	458
	CA			524		524
	IL				625	625
	IT				523	523
	JP				528	528
	PH				691	691
Total		3181	8573	13267	16097	41118

The Effect of the Family of Origin

Let us first consider the DESO, that is, the influence of parental background on a respondent's status, net of the effect of education, gender and work experience. The latter variable accounts for the fact that respondents entered the labor market at different times, hence differing in length of occupational career.⁴

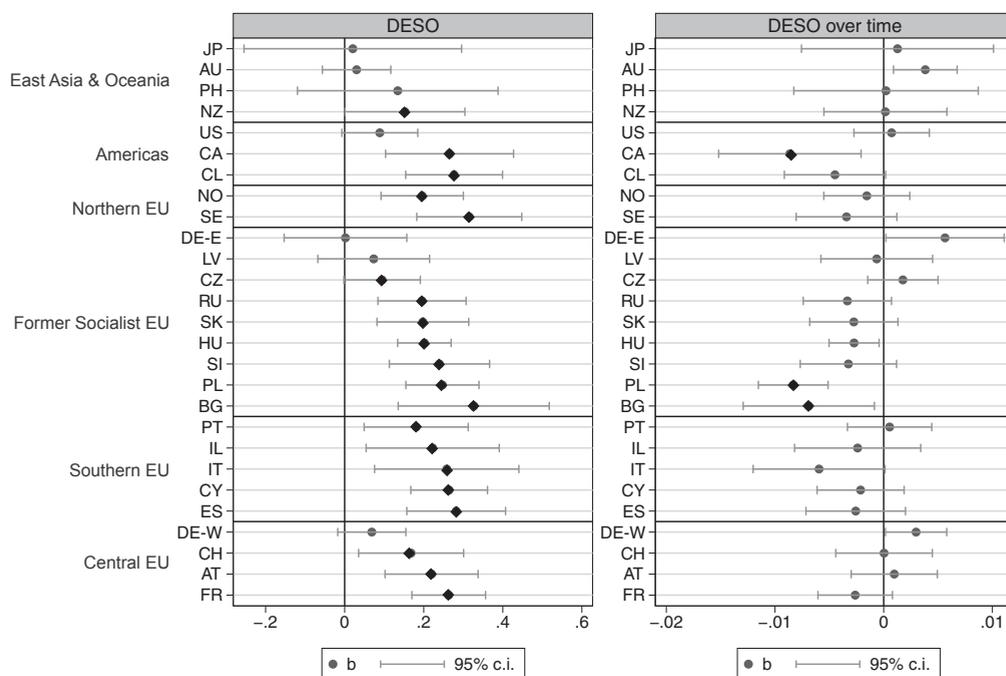


Figure 2 Influence of parental socio-economic status on respondent's socio-economic status (DESO) (left panel) over time (right panel) by country, controlled for respondent's education, work experience and gender. Significant coefficients are marked with black diamonds ($p < 0.05$)

The ISSP countries vary with respect to strength of direct influence of parental background on offspring socio-economic status.⁵ At one end, in Bulgaria a difference of 10 points

4 Following Ganzeboom and Treiman (1993), I approximate work experience utilising the following equation:

$$\text{Work experience} = \text{age} - \text{years of education} - 6$$

Hence, I assume that respondents entered the education system at an average age of six, and entered the labor market soon after completing their education, and have worked continuously since. These assumptions are not necessarily met for everyone in the cumulative sample; nonetheless, they are reasonable and allow some control over the career effect, which would otherwise create bias in the estimates. The approximation of work experience serves as a measure of time in the analysis.

5 As Table 1 shows, sample size across countries varies a lot, owing to the number of available surveys. Hence, in interpreting the findings relative to countries with only one or two surveys, some caution is warranted.

of parental socio-economic status (say, between office clerks, who score 45 on the ISEI, and sales representatives, who score 55) changes respondent's socio-economic status by about 3 points; at the other end, in the Czech Republic the change is just 1 point. These quantities are not so appreciable in absolute terms; however, note that this is the effect of parental socio-economic background over respondent's status *net* of education, work experience and gender effects. Otherwise said, of all possible (and accountable) sources of influence over an individual's social position, the DESO is the impact of just one among them, namely parental background, keeping all other known sources of influence constant. Therefore, even small figures are relevant since they express the direct influence of the family of origin *per se*, over and above that channeled through other variables.

In the remaining countries, a change of 10 points in parental status brings an average difference of 2 points in respondent's socio-economic status score. Overall, excluding the non-significant effects, the size of the estimated influence of parental background is rather similar across the various geo-political groups, while some dissimilarities can be observed within groups. As an example, the countries in the East Asia and Oceania group enjoy a very low influence of parental background on respondent's socio-economic status, with Australia, Japan and the Philippines even showing a non-significant coefficient (though in the latter two cases the modest sample size could be at stake). Within the Americas group, the USA stands out for having a low and non-significant coefficient, while Canada and Chile align with Southern European countries in terms of the magnitude of their coefficient.⁶ The group of former Socialist countries also shows marked dissimilarities with East Germany and Latvia at one end demonstrating very low parental influence, while Poland, at the other end, and, most of all, Bulgaria show a comparatively high parental influence. The other European countries (Northern, Southern and Central) show more similarities than differences; in these countries a change of 10 points of the parental socio-economic status delivers between 2 and 3 points of respondent's ISEI. West Germany is an exception to this pattern, showing a non-significant coefficient which points towards a very low influence of family of origin on respondent's social position (as indeed Eastern Germany).

A first general conclusion is that there is a substantial direct influence of parental background over offspring's socio-economic position in almost all countries. Did this picture change over time towards greater independence of respondent's status from the family of origin? As can be seen in the right panel of Figure 2, a significant change over time is observed in just 3 of 27 countries: Canada, Bulgaria and Poland. Among the remaining countries, the possibility that there is no appreciable reduction cannot be ruled out given the size of the coefficients and their generally wide confidence intervals.

These results largely replicate findings by Bernardi and Ballarino (2016a), whose analyses showed that in most of the countries considered the DESO did not change over time. More precisely, this finding is valid for Germany, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Russia, Spain, Switzerland and the USA, for which I found stability as well. In the cases of France and

6 This amounts to selecting cases based on listwise deletion of the three variables at once. Furthermore, the sample includes only respondents at least 30 years old at time of survey, so that by then they would have most likely completed their education, and not older than 65, in order to account for retirement and differential mortality after that age.

Israel they found rather an increase, while I found stability; and in the case of Sweden (where I also find stability) a decrease of DESO over time was found.

Following Ballarino and Bernardi (2016), Figure 3 compares the direct effect of parental background, net of education (DESO), to its total effect on the offspring’s socio-economic status (TESO)⁷. Notwithstanding the, sometimes, huge variation between countries, and to some extent, between the geo-political groups, the graph shows two relevant outcomes. First, an appreciable part of the influence of the family of origin (represented by the full-length bars) is channeled through education (white bars), while second, education is not the only means to allocate individuals to job positions, since the family of origin exerts a direct influence over this process, over and above education (grey bars). As the two authors conclude, what we observe is “a sizeable deviation from a solely education-based meritocratic process of job allocation” (2016, 257) in all countries.

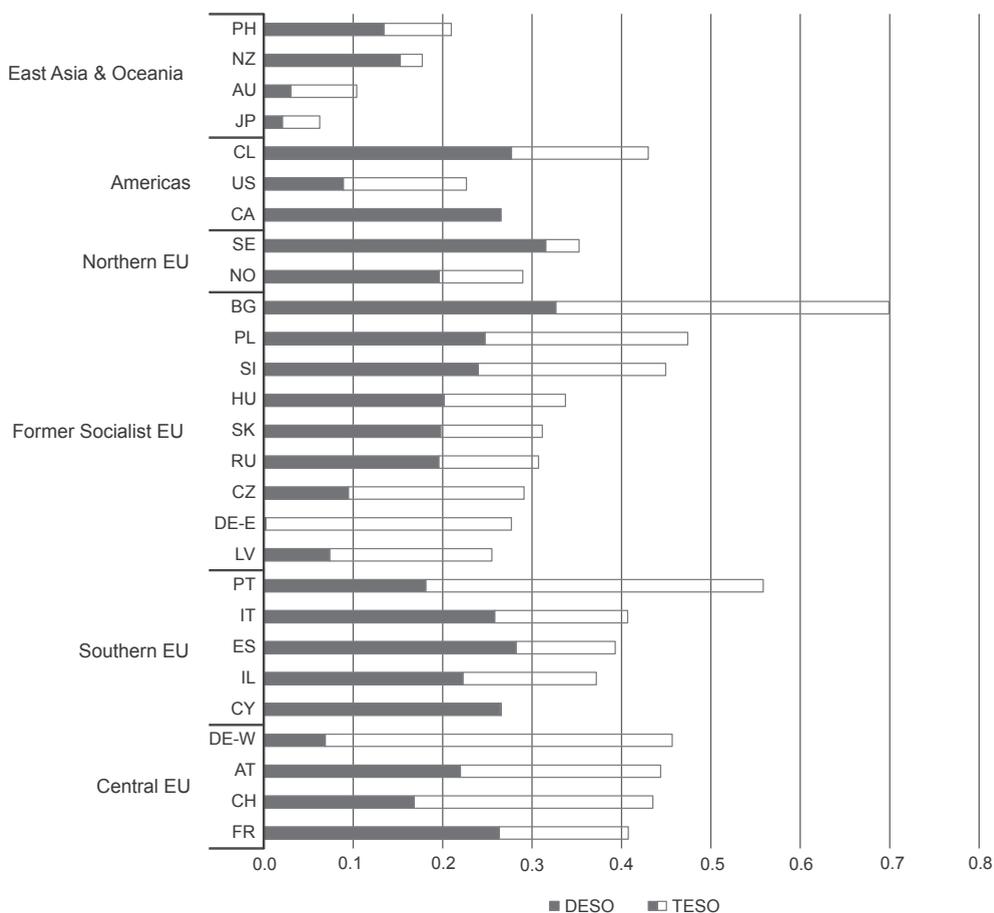


Figure 3 Total (TESO) and direct (DESO) effect of parental background on respondent’s socio-economic status by country

7 The TESO is obtained by estimating the same linear regression model used for obtaining the DESO coefficients, while omitting education. Details of this analysis are not shown here, however are available upon request from the author.

Inequality of Educational Opportunity

Looking at the influence of parental background on respondents' educational attainment (IEO), the usual expectation in this case is that IEO would decrease over the 20th century, as an effect of the prevalence of meritocratic and universalistic criteria for allocating individuals to occupational roles. This expectation however seldom stands up empirically. Research findings indicate that the 20th century was marked by the persistence of educational inequality (Shavit and Blossfeld 1993; Wheelan and Layte 2002; Hout and Dohan 1996), while more recently some studies illustrate support for a decrease in inequality (among others, Breen, Luijckx, Müller and Pollak 2009; Ballarino, Bernardi, Requena and Schadee 2009). Other cases offer mixed evidence, as some countries show a decline, while in others persistence of inequality prevails (Jonsson, Mills and Müller 1996; Müller and Karle 1993; Bernardi and Ballarino 2016a).

Although most of the interest in the research literature focuses on the trend of the IEO over time, it is interesting to examine the magnitude of this effect in the various countries. In the estimated model, years of education are the dependent variable, while family background (measured by parental ISEI, as in the previous analysis) is the key independent variable and respondent's birth years used as a measure of time; gender is included as a control variable.

The estimated influence of parental background on educational attainment in the 27 countries appears in the left panel of Figure 4. With respect to geo-political groups, Southern European countries emerge as the most internally heterogeneous group. At one end, a change of 10 points in the parental socio-economic status brings a change of about 1 year of schooling in Israel and Portugal (whose coefficient is not significant). Down the other end, this change amounts to 4 years of schooling in Cyprus; while in Italy and Spain the change is more moderate (2.5 years of schooling), which is still substantial. The Americas present another rather heterogeneous group, as in the case of DESO: in Canada and Chile a change of 10 points of parental status brings a change of 2.5 years of schooling, while in the USA the analogous change is just half a year.

In the remaining countries, a change of 10 points of parental socio-economic status brings a change in offspring educational attainment between 0.5 and 1.5 years of schooling. The Philippines, Bulgaria, Latvia and Portugal are four countries where the coefficient of parental background is not significant, indicating either a lack of information (as suggested by the wide confidence interval for the Philippines and Bulgaria), or – more puzzling – perhaps to the irrelevance of social origin, as measured by parental ISEI, on educational attainment.

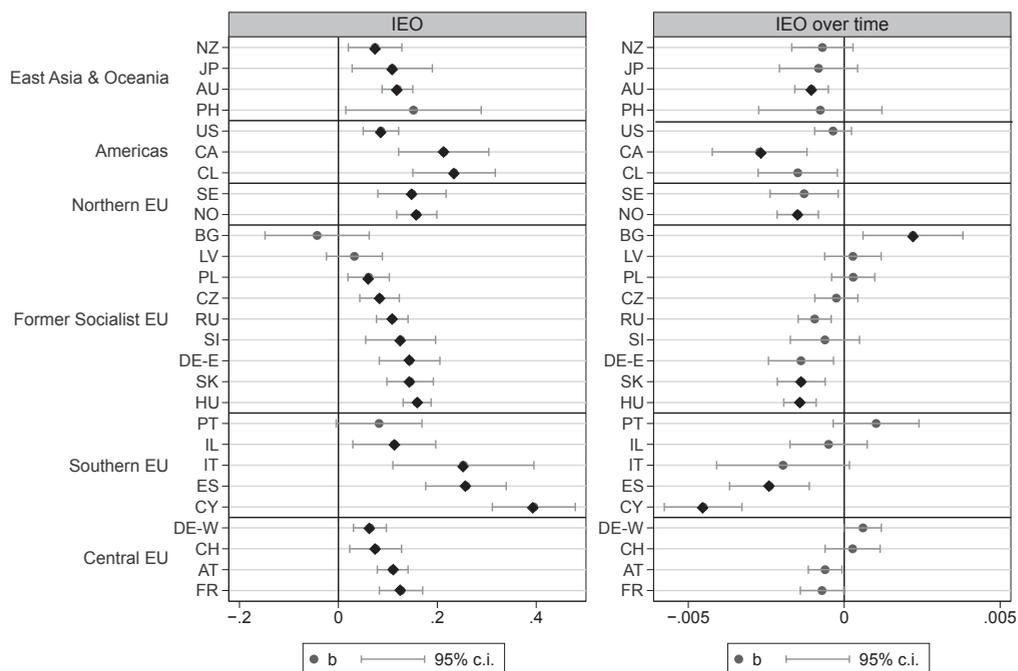


Figure 4 Influence of parental socio-economic status on respondent's education (inequality of educational opportunity) (left panel), over time (right panel) by country, controlled for age and gender. Significant coefficients are marked with black diamonds ($p < 0.05$).

With respect to the change of the IEO over time, Figure 4 (see right panel) illustrates changes found in 8 of the 27 ISSP countries. Changes occurred among the former Socialist countries of Bulgaria, Hungary and the Slovak Republic; the Southern European countries of Cyprus and Spain; the Northern European country of Norway; and among the East Asia/Oceania and American countries Australia and Canada, respectively. The direction of change is towards a lesser inequality in all 8 countries, save for Bulgaria, where it actually increased. This is also the case in two other former Socialist countries, Latvia and Poland, whose coefficients though are not significant. Bulgaria's result should be understood in light of two considerations. For one, the particularly low sample size (as in all countries with only one year module - see Table 1) means that the results should be interpreted cautiously. The second point to consider is that, as previously reported, the influence of parental background is close to zero; an increase over time brings Bulgaria in line with other European countries regarding the level of IEO.

In total, the most relevant IEO-related result is that, over time, it did not change in 20 of 27 countries. For some countries perhaps this is due to low sample, however, the general sense of the finding is that – once again – there is no support for the hypothesis of a general shift towards meritocracy and universalism over the 20th century. These results confirm the persistence of educational inequalities found in the mid Nineties by Shavit and Blossfeld (1993). More recent results by Breen, Luijkx, Müller and Pollak (2009) point to a decrease of IEO, however, these authors only consider 8 European countries, with

strictly male data, hindering any comparison of their results⁸ with ours or that of Shavit and Blossfeld.

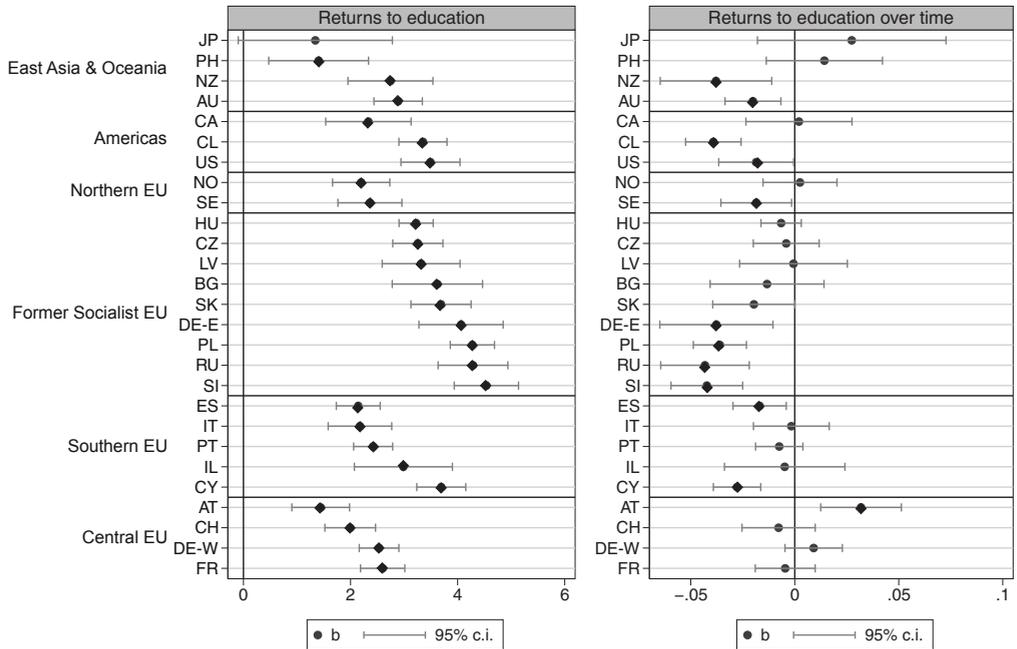


Figure 5 Influence of educational attainment over respondent's socio-economic status (returns to education), 1987-2009 (b values with 95% confidence interval; black diamond markers indicate significant changes of parental IseI over time)

Returns to Education

The final result discussed in this section concerns the returns to education, which point to the value that education holds in the labor market. Does more education bring better social position? Has this changed over time, i.e., is more education enabling people to secure a higher status?

As the left panel of *Figure 5* illustrates, the ISSP countries vary widely regarding returns to education.⁹ Former Socialist countries exhibit a higher effect of respondents' education on own occupational outcome than the other countries. In this group and on average, a change of one year of education brings a change of almost 4 points of socio-economic

8 Actually, Breen and colleagues' result of a decreasing IEO in Europe come from a model that does not fit the data, as the authors themselves acknowledge (2009, 1493).

9 In this analysis, as in the case of DESO, work experience is used as a measure of time. Furthermore, I consider absolute returns to education, that is, the proportion of respondents with any given educational level reaching a specific socio-economic position. Parental socio-economic status and gender are included as control variables.

status. Once again, when interpreting the size of this effect, consider that this is the net effect of just one variable, namely respondents' education, on their social position, holding other relevant variables (family background, gender and time) constant.

Among former Socialist countries, Slovenia displays the strongest effect of education on socio-economic status (ISEI 4.5 points), while Hungary shows the lowest (ISEI 3.2 points). Among the Southern European countries, Spain and Italy show a comparable size of the effect of education (about 2 ISEI points, like the two Northern European countries), while Israel and, most notably, Cyprus show a much higher effect (respectively 3 and 3.7 ISEI points), with Portugal in the middle (2.4 ISEI points). Central European countries, especially Austria and Switzerland (respectively, 1.4 and 2 ISEI points) show a rather low association between one's education and occupational status. Among the American countries, Canada shows a lower effect of education (2.3 ISEI points), while the USA and Chile show much higher returns to education (respectively, 3.5 and 3.3 ISEI points). Countries in East Asia & Oceania also seem rather heterogeneous, with the Philippines and Japan (whose coefficient is non-significant) at the lower end, while Australia and New Zealand appear at the other end (2.7 and 2.9 ISEI points, respectively).

Figure 5 (see right panel) provides an answer to the question of whether the returns to education have changed over the course of the 20th century. The answer is affirmative in the case of 12 countries distributed across the geo-political groups: New Zealand and Australia; Chile and the USA; East Germany, Poland, Russia, and Slovenia; Cyprus and Spain; and finally Austria. Notably this last country, Austria, is the only one that witnessed an increase over time of the returns to education, but, while this is also the case for Japan, the Philippines and West Germany, their coefficients are not significant.

This analysis demonstrates that the association between respondents' education and occupation has remained stable in most of the ISSP countries, or even declined in a good share of them. Such findings support the hypothesis of credential inflation (Boudon 1974; Collins 1971; 1979), according to which a higher share of educated individuals in a given society, together with mass participation in the educational system, lowers the value of educational titles, and especially those of a higher degree, as signals used by employers to select potential workers.

Summarizing the outcomes thus far presented, parental background exerts a substantial influence over the educational and occupational outcomes of their offspring in Western(ized) countries. The influence of the family of origin flows both in a direct way (DESO), and through education (IEO); in both cases, the majority of countries did not witness an equalization process, since both DESO and IEO remained essentially stable over time. Furthermore, the returns to education have decreased in a fair number of countries, partially obliterating the overall effect of social origin on offspring social position. However, elite families could well find ways of compensating this process, as some theories contend (see for example Lucas 2001) and as recent research findings confirm (Bernardi and Ballarino 2016b). Yet, in most countries the returns to education remained stable, and only in one case (Austria) did they increase, pointing to an overall stable frame of reference for families who shape their mobility strategies in a rather stable social environment.

Perceived and Actual Social Mobility

The ISSP surveys on Social Inequality include a question asking respondents to compare the status level of their own job to that of their father's:

Please think about your present job (or your last one if you don't have one now). If you compare this job to the job your father had when you were <14/15/16>, would you say that the level of status of your job is (or was)...

1. *Much higher than your father's*
2. *Higher*
3. *About equal*
4. *Lower*
5. *Much lower than your father's*
6. *I never had a job*
7. *I don't know what my father did / father never had a job / never knew father / father deceased*

At the root of this query is an important issue, namely that of the self-assessment of being socially mobile or immobile in the opinion of respondents. Although most empirical research in the field of stratification focuses on actual social mobility, recent research by Kelley and Kelley (2009) analyzes the causes and consequences of subjective social mobility, finding that actual mobility is the most important predictor of subjective mobility, but that the latter also depends on a wider range of factors, including a country's GDP.

Actual mobility here denotes the difference between respondent's social position and his/her father's social position, as measured by means of the socio-economic status index (ISEI) used in the previous section. This directly follows Kelley and Kelley (2009) who note that people seem to react more to the actual distance between their own social position and that of their family of origin, than to the absolute place they or their family of origin hold in the social hierarchy. Hence this difference can be interpreted as an index of socio-economic mobility such that the higher and positive its value, the more upwardly mobile is the respondent; while high and negative values refer to downwardly mobile individuals.

To familiarize the reader with this measure, average values by country are shown in Figure 6.¹⁰ Note that in all countries respondent's status is higher than father's status, i.e., on average all countries experienced upward, absolute social mobility. In addition, since the highest average difference between respondents' and their fathers' status score is less than 10 points on the ISEI scale, the distance between respondents and their fathers, on average, is not particularly high.

Figure 6 clusters the ISSP countries according to geo-political groups displaying marked internal variations. East Asian and Oceanian countries show a higher average level of the mobility index, with the exception of Japan and Australia. Russia and Sweden show extreme values with respect to the other countries in their groups, pointing at a higher-

¹⁰ In order to have an up-to-date picture of respondents' opinion on this matter, I restrict the analysis to the last available module year, namely 2009. For this reason, the countries in the analysis differ from those considered in the previous section.

than average positive difference between parental and respondents' ISEI. The European countries seem to enjoy a rather homogeneous level of mobility, while former Socialist countries (notwithstanding the high score of Russia and the rather high score for the Czech Republic, Ukraine and Estonia) show a lower score on average. To properly understand these findings, what must also be taken into consideration is that a high level of social mobility does not always come with an improvement in the life conditions of the general population. For example, Sweden and Russia are two countries with the highest level of absolute mobility and the former shows rather low inequality as measured by the Gini index (26.6 in 2009), while Russia shows far higher inequality (39.7 in 2009), that is rather stable over the last decade.¹¹

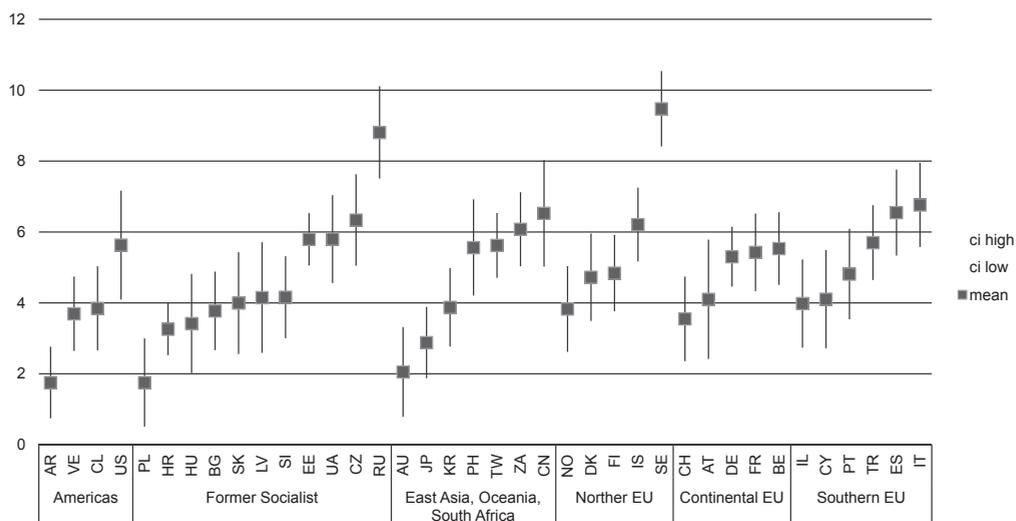


Figure 6 Means of the social mobility index (difference between respondent's and father's ISEI score) by country (2009)

Figure 7 shows the answers to the question on respondent's status as compared to that of his/her father by country in the 2009-year module. A first remark is that in all countries most of the people are found in the middle category ("about the same"), while few respondents chose the extreme categories ("much higher" and "much lower" than their father's status). An exception to this pattern is Japan, which has a conspicuous number of respondents who perceive their status as "much lower" than their father's, with very few answers of "much higher".¹²

11 This amounts to selecting cases based on listwise deletion of the three variables at once. Furthermore, the sample includes only respondents at least 30 years old at time of survey, so that by then they would have most likely completed their education, and not older than 65, in order to account for retirement and differential mortality after that age.

12 These findings parallel those obtained by Kelley and Kelley (2009). A possible reason for this response pattern is that in Japanese society "those who came before" (i.e., the elderly, parents, grandparents, etc.) are held in great social esteem, to the point that it is extremely socially

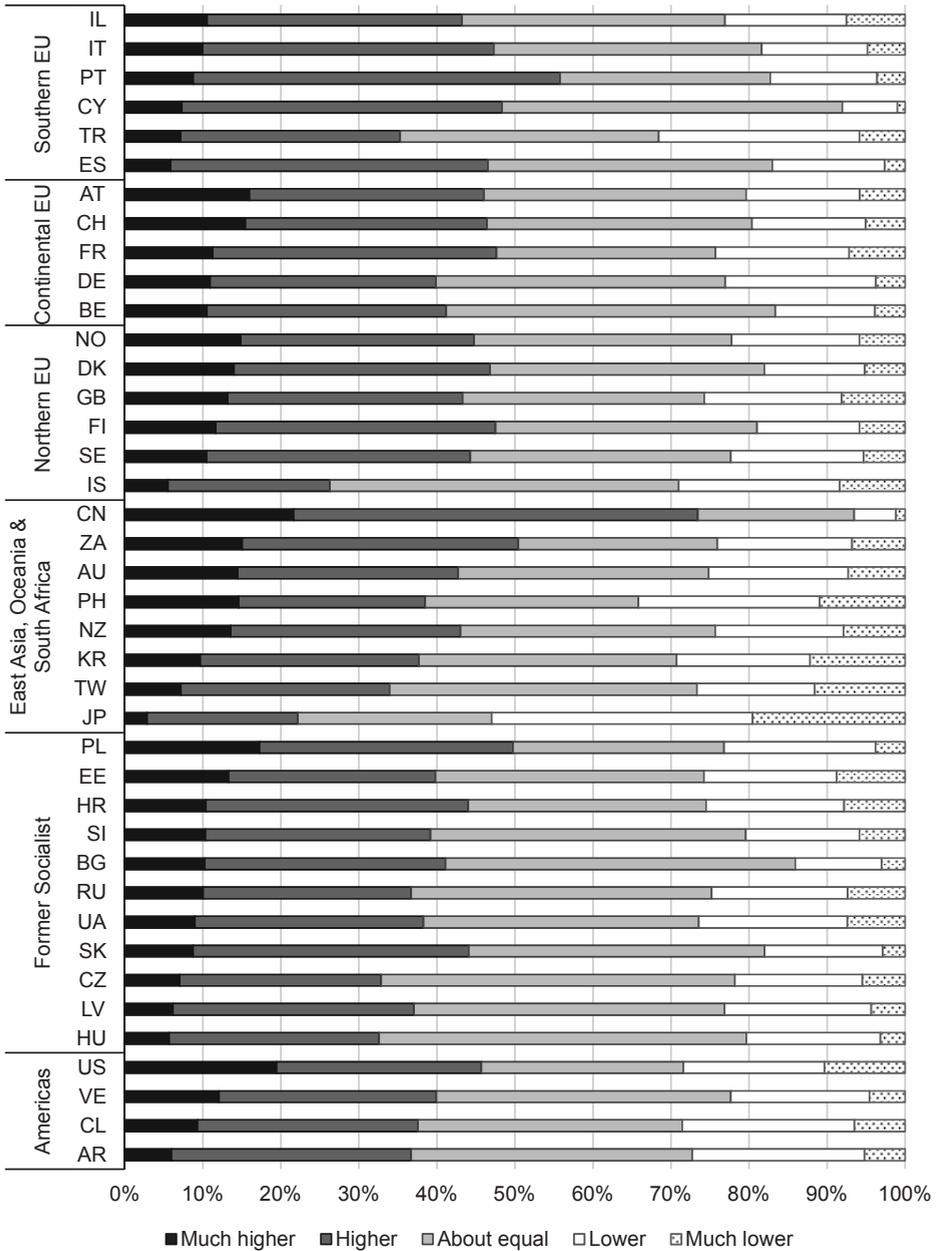


Figure 7 Respondent's perceived social status compared to father's social status by country (percentages) (2009)

undesirable to say that one's own social position is higher than theirs. This hypothesis would obviously require an empirical test to be confirmed as valid.

Considering the geo-political groups, the USA, China and Poland stand out among the other countries in their respective groups for the share of respondents who assess their own status as being higher or much higher than that of their fathers. This pattern is particularly evident in China, where half of the sample is found in the “higher” answer category, while 22% of respondents answered that their status is “much higher” than their father’s – an overall share of 74% of respondents saying that they were socially mobile with respect to their fathers.

Moving one step further towards the comparison of actual and perceived mobility, a very general expectation is that the two dimensions are positively associated; for example, it is expected that respondents in China not only state that they are (highly) socially mobile with respect to their fathers, but that they actually are. The social mobility index (ie. the difference between respondent’s actual social status and that of his/her father) scores should be about zero for those who answered that their social position was “about equal”. Following the same line of reasoning, we should see negative scores on the social mobility index for those who answered that their position is “(much) lower” than their father’s, and positive scores for those who assessed their social position to be “(much) higher” than that of their father’s.

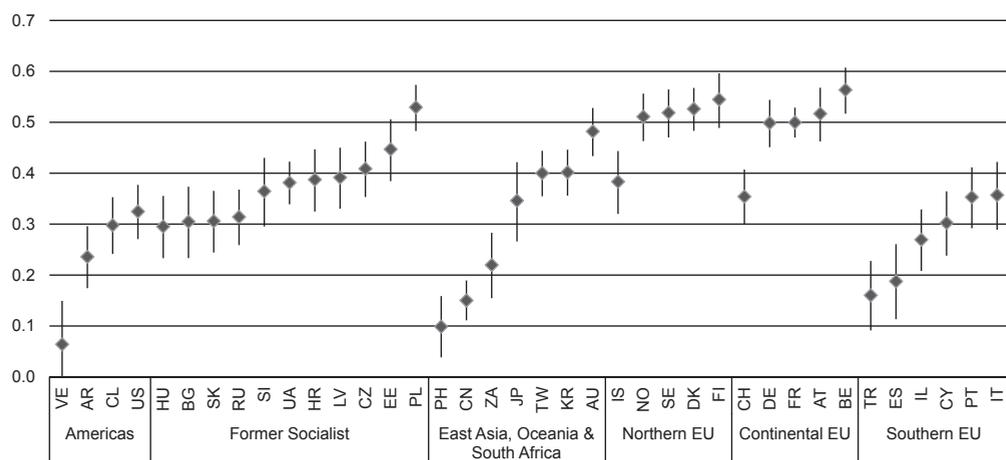


Figure 8 Association between perceived and actual social mobility by country (2009; z-transformation of Spearman’s rank-order correlation coefficients with 95% confidence intervals)

As Figure 8 shows, countries differ widely with respect to the strength of the association between actual and perceived dimensions of social mobility¹³, however some patterns can be singled out. Respondents in Northern European countries (with the exception of Iceland) show a very high association between the perceived and the actual dimension of mobility. While some countries in the East Asia, Oceania & South Africa group, as well as

13 I first calculated the Spearman’s rho coefficient; then, following Bonnett and Wright (2000), I transformed the Spearman’s rank correlation r into z_r , which has an approximately normal distribution with variance $1/(N-3)$. The lower and upper confidence limits are then calculated as for the Pearson’s r .

in the Mediterranean region, show a rather low association between the two dimensions of mobility. In the Philippines, China, South Africa, Turkey and Spain those being socially mobile (either in an upward or downward direction) infrequently assess themselves as being so, similar to those who did not change their status with respect to their fathers. While most of the Southern European countries show a similar pattern, a different scheme characterizes the former Socialist countries, whose respondents show on average a rather good ability to assess their actual status with respect to that of their father's.

In interpreting these results one must bear in mind that the differences reported above could reflect either actual differences in the way in which people in the various countries perceive the social structure they are embedded in, as well as their changing position in it, or some measurement-linked methodological factors. For example, either the question in the ISSP module, or the measurement of the respondent's and their father's social position by means of the international socio-economic index could be especially adequate for perception of their own social mobility, or of their actual mobility, and more in some cultural areas than in others. In this vein, the Nordic countries show the highest correlation between actual and perceived mobility because the measurement of the two dimensions of mobility could be more adequate for them in particular than for other cultural areas of the world.

Conclusions

My twofold goal was to analyze the trends in social mobility in the ISSP countries over time and to explore similarities between respondents' perception/assessment of their being socially mobile with respect to their father's social position, and their actual social mobility.

This first goal, the analysis of the four ISSP Social Inequality module years (1987, 1992, 1999, and 2009), relied on a simplified version of the status attainment model (Blau and Duncan 1967) or so-called OED triangle, to break down the overall effect of parental background on respondent's social destination into four different effects (TESO, DESO, IEO and returns to education).

In line with the most recent findings (Bernardi and Ballarino 2016b), the results show that in the majority of the countries the direct influence of parental socio-economic status on the offspring's status, net of the effect of education, remained stable over time. Three exceptions arose, namely Canada, Poland and Bulgaria, where the DESO decreased. Comparison between the total and the direct effect of social origin (Figure 3) indicated that the job allocation process departs rather markedly from that typical of a meritocratic society, in which education is the key resource allowing for an efficient matching between individual skills and knowledge on one side, and occupational positions on the other.

With respect to the influence of social origin on respondents' education (IEO), the analysis documented the existence of a substantial effect of parental background on offspring educational attainment, although with marked variations between countries. Southern European countries, along with Canada and Chile show the highest level of influence, while Central European and former Socialist countries show a lesser IEO. This situation did not change over the 20th century in more than two thirds of the ISSP countries. Inequality

decreased in eight of them (Bulgaria, Hungary, the Slovak Republic, Cyprus, Spain, Norway, Australia, Canada), but did not change in the remaining countries. Here too one can speak of a substantial difference between the current state of affairs and the ideal-typical situation in which parental background gradually loses its influence over offspring's education, which in turn becomes a means to foster social openness. Education seems actually to foster more immobility than change, hence contributing to maintaining the actual social inequalities as found in the various countries.

To complete the picture I considered the returns to education, i.e., the value attached to education in the labor market. Once again, the ISSP countries differ with respect to the strength of the association between respondents' education and occupation. Slovenia shows the strongest effect, with Austria showing the weakest. For 11 of the 27 countries in the analysis the results point to a decrease in the value attached to education over time, hence giving support to the hypothesis of educational credential inflation (Boudon 1974), while in the case of Austria (as mentioned, the country with the lowest association) an increase was found.

Taken together, these findings point towards a persistence of inequality over time (with the few exceptions noted above), though of course the absolute level of inequality varies across countries in a way that the geo-political grouping can account for only to a limited extent. Hence these results add to previous ones that do not support the modernization theory (like the now classic Shavit and Blossfeld's comparative project), or theories on meritocracy. Still to be ascertained is whether these findings call for a revision of these theories, or for a complete change of perspective.

The second goal of the paper was to explore the similarities and differences between respondents' self-assessment of their social mobility, and their actual mobility. Analysis was conducted on the most recent year module, i.e. the 2009 dataset, and the results show that all ISSP countries on average experienced (absolute) intergenerational upward mobility. As for the perceived mobility, the results showed that most often people tend to choose the middle answer category ("about the same as father's status"), while few respondents chose the extreme categories ("much higher" and "much lower" than their father's status). In Japan the "much lower" answer category is selected more frequently than in other countries. The USA, Poland, and particularly China offered a greater share of respondents indicating their status to be higher or much higher than their fathers was and this was higher than in other countries of their respective geo-political groups.

Finally, the association between actual and perceived social mobility widely differs among the ISSP countries. In Scandinavian countries as well as in Austria, Belgium, and Poland, the perception of social mobility follows actual mobility more closely. On the other hand, in Venezuela, the Philippines, China, Turkey, Spain, South Africa, and Argentina respondents' assessment and actual mobility are rather independent from one another.

A possible development of the analyses discussed in this paper concerns the role of perceived social mobility in the status attainment process, reversing the usual direction of the relationship. For example, Kelley and Kelley (2009) analyzed the role of actual social mobility as a predictor of subjective social mobility. However, the difference between the two, once lagged of one time-unit (e.g., birth cohort), could be used as an indicator of how accurately families perceive mobility or immobility in their country and added as a predic-

tor to a status attainment model, in order to account for the perception of society as being more or less open to social change.

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