

Intergenerational mobility

June 2008 conference



On 23 June 2008, the Prime Minister gave a flagship speech to school leaders in which he said that 'raising social mobility in our country is a national crusade in which everyone can join and play their part' and pledged that a White Paper on social mobility would be produced by the end of the year.

On the same day, CEP – which has been at the forefront of recent research into intergenerational mobility – hosted a one-day conference on the subject, co-organised with the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at the Institute for Education. The day brought together many of the leading academics in the field – what Polly Toynbee described in *The Guardian* as 'a roll call of top sociologists and economists'.

The first session contrasted the approaches and results from the sociological and economic approaches to measuring intergenerational mobility. Colin Mills presented joint work with John Goldthorpe from the sociological side while Jo Blanden provided the economists' perspective, presenting a paper she has written with Paul Gregg and Lindsey Macmillan. Discussion from Robin Naylor and John Hills brought out the similarities and differences in findings and approach.

Paul Gregg and Lindsey Macmillan then brought the evidence on intergenerational mobility right up to date, looking at how the relationship between

family background and educational achievements has changed under New Labour and the implications of this for future mobility. Miles Corak gave the last paper of the morning, showcasing Canadian data which indicates that 40% of men follow their father into the same firm.

In the afternoon, Marco Francesconi presented joint work with John Ermisch, using data from the Millennium Cohort Study to examine the impact of family background on birth weight, one of the very earliest ways in which family investments can influence children's outcomes. Maia Güell followed with a paper (joint with Sevi Mora and Chris Telmer) showing how the ability of surnames to explain income in the population is related to, and can estimate, intergenerational mobility from one generation to the next.

Steve Nickell responded by questioning the worth of estimating intergenerational mobility, arguing that one number is insufficient to capture all the complex social and economic processes involved. In the discussion that followed, intergenerational elasticity was compared with the growth rate and the Gini coefficient measure of inequality as one of the essential statistics that describe an economy.

The final academic paper of the day was by Anders Björklund (joint with Lena Lindahl and Matthew Lindquist), using data from Sweden to explore the value of

sibling correlations in income as an alternative measure of mobility.

The audience for the day came from a broad background: representatives of charities, thinktanks and government departments were present, alongside academics from across the UK. In recognition of this, the conference aimed to combine academic papers with a broader discussion of the policy implications of social mobility research.

To this end, the day closed with a roundtable discussion chaired by Stephen Aldridge of the Cabinet Office. Academics Stephen Machin and John Goldthorpe set the scene by building a bridge between the academic and policy viewpoints. Contributions then followed from Liberal Democrat MP Lynne Featherstone, Conservative MP David Willetts, Lee Elliot Major of the Sutton Trust and Polly Toynbee.

Social mobility remains at the top of the policy agenda and the discussions at CEP have contributed to bringing the academic and policy communities a little closer together in their thoughts.

The conference on intergenerational mobility was co-organised by **Jo Blanden** of CEP and **Kirstine Hansen** of the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at the Institute for Education. Further information is available here: http://cep.lse.ac.uk/_new/events/event.asp?id=48