



## Intergenerational social mobility and mid-life status attainment: Influences of childhood intelligence, childhood social factors, and education

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### Abstract

We examined the influences of childhood social background, childhood cognitive ability, and education on intergenerational social mobility and social status attainment at midlife. The subjects were men born in 1921 and who participated in the Scottish Mental Survey of 1932 and thereafter in the Midspan Collaborative study in Scotland between 1970 and 1973. In logistic regression analyses, childhood cognitive ability and height were associated with upward and downward change from father's social class to participant's social class at mid-life. Education significantly influenced upward social mobility. Number of siblings had no significant effect on social mobility. These effects were also examined after adjusting for the other variables. In structural equation modelling analyses, father's social class and childhood cognitive ability influenced social status attainment at midlife, with education and occupational status in young adulthood as partially mediating factors. It was noteworthy that childhood cognitive ability related more strongly to occupation in midlife than to first occupation. These data add to the relatively few studies that track the process of status attainment in adulthood, they provide information from

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a new geographical setting, and they contain information from a greater proportion of the lifecourse than do most existing studies.

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## 1. Introduction

The determinants of individual and group differences in social status attainment, material conditions, wealth, and other aspects of the well-being of people in adulthood are studied by psychologists, sociologists, human geographers, epidemiologists, and specialists in social medicine. This spread of disciplines signals the importance of the topic, and also the diversity of determinants and research approaches that may be applied to human social status attainment and social mobility. Adult social status is important per se, as an index of access to material things and environments, and also as an important predictor of health, with people in poorer social categories having higher morbidity and mortality (Davey Smith, Hart, Watt, Hole, & Hawthorne, 1998; Drever, Whitehead, & Roden, 1996). Understanding the influences on adult social status is problematic. There is a correlated nexus of independent variables that are consistently found to be associated with adult outcomes but whose effects are difficult to disentangle. Mental ability, parental social class, and education all correlate significantly with individual differences in people's future social status (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Breen & Goldthorpe, 2001; Halsey, Heath, & Ridge, 1980; Jencks, 1979; Sewell & Hauser, 1975). Mental ability test scores are also well-validated predictors of future educational and occupational performance (Neisser et al., 1996; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). Using unusually informative data from a novel geographical setting, this report addresses the contributions of childhood IQ, childhood social factors, and education to social mobility and individual differences in social status attainment in middle age. A principal aim is to isolate better the role of psychometric intelligence in the causal sequence between father's and son's social positions.

### 1.1. Previous studies on the determinants of status attainment

An informative, early contribution to this field was the analysis of seven studies by Jencks and co-authors (Jencks, 1979). Six studies were from the USA, and one was from Sweden. For the most part, the subjects in the samples, which ranged in size from 198 to 1789, were given mental ability tests during their school years. Most of the studies ran from the 1960s to the 1970s. With a few exceptions, the final data were typically collected when subjects were in their 20s or early 30s. Adolescent ability test scores were strongly predictive of educational outcomes (standardised betas from .403 to .576), and the reduction in this bivariate association was between 12% to over 40% after controlling for multiple background variables such as parent's education, occupation and income. Adolescent ability test scores were strongly predictive of occupational status (standardised betas from .350 to .474). The reduction in this bivariate association was between 12% and about 25% after controlling for the parental background variables. There was a much larger reduction in the size of the adolescent ability–occupational status association when the subject's education was controlled, with attenuations in the effect size between

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