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Occupational choice, socio-economic status and educational attainment: a study of the occupational choices and destinations of young people in the British Household Panel Survey

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The article considers young people's occupational choices at the age of 15 in relation to their educational attainment, the occupations of their parents and their actual occupations when they are in their early 20s. It uses data from the British Household Panel Survey over periods of between five and ten years. The young people in the survey are occupationally ambitious: many more aspire to professional, managerial and technical jobs than the likely availability of these occupations. In general ambitions and educational attainment and intentions are well aligned but there are also many instances of misalignment; either people wanting jobs which their educational attainments and intentions will not prepare them for, or people with less ambitious aspirations than their educational performance would justify. Children from more occupationally advantaged families are more ambitious, achieve better educationally and have better occupational outcomes than other children. However, where young people are both ambitious and educationally successful the occupational outcomes are as good for those from disadvantaged as advantaged families. In contrast, where young people are neither ambitious nor educationally successful, the outcomes for those from disadvantaged homes are very much poorer than for other young people. The article suggests that while choice is real it is also heavily constrained for many people. A possible educational implication of the study is that career interventions could be directed at under-ambitious but academically capable young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Keywords: occupational choice; social reproduction; educational attainment; British Household Panel Survey

Introduction

A major theme of the sociology of education in Britain and elsewhere has been the intergenerational transmission of socio-economic status, principally expressed in terms of the relationship between the occupational destinations of parents and their adult children. These patterns of continuity are well established in the various countries that make up Great Britain. During the second half of the twentieth century there was a considerable upward shift in occupational status with a much higher proportion of the population working in professional and managerial occupations. But at the same time as this movement in absolute mobility, the relative mobility of people from different occupational origins remained largely unchanged.[1] However, while these patterns of differential outcomes are well documented, the processes which give rise to them are less well understood. In particular, the process of choices about occupational destinations has received much less attention.

Seeing occupational destinations in terms of choice, albeit choice which may be constrained by circumstance, is partly influenced by theorists such as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1992, 2001) who are moving away from heavily structuralist explanations for personal destinations and life experiences, especially those based around social class, to a focus on life patterns as an individual

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project and to individualisation as the key feature of modern society. These theorists have argued that social groupings and identities based on occupation and inherited socio-economic status, which have dominated traditional sociological thinking, have been replaced by groupings based on lifestyle, choices, diversity and a highly individualised notion of identity. For these authors, 'The ethic of individual self-fulfillment and achievement is the most powerful current in modern society. The choosing, deciding, shaping human being who aspires to be the author of his or her life, the creator of an individual identity, is the central character of our time' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001, 22–3).

These arguments are clearly relevant to a consideration of the occupational choices made by young people and how these relate to the socio-economic circumstances of their families, their gender and a variety of other factors. Occupational choice decisions, including a refusal to make such choices (Du Bois-Reymond 1998), are central life decisions for most people. An emphasis on choice matches the perspectives of young people themselves which have emerged from a variety of research studies. These have shown how, despite the relatively predictable employment and educational outcomes for many young people, they still typically have a strong sense of personal agency (Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 2000; Attwood, Croll, and Hamilton 2003). Most young people in these studies see themselves as having, in Beck's terms, an 'elective' or 'do it yourself' biography (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001, 3).

The contrast between the sense of agency, of young people feeling that the way their lives develop will depend on their own choices, efforts and abilities, can seem at odds with the evidence that, as discussed in note 1, structural factors such as socio-economic background and gender are strongly associated with educational and occupational outcomes. However, it should also be noted that the structural relationships are probabilistic: young people from advantaged backgrounds are over-represented in advantaged destinations and young people from disadvantaged ones in disadvantaged destinations, but there are many exceptions to this pattern, particularly with regard to upward social mobility, and therefore plenty of spaces in which choice and agency can operate. The extent to which social structures determine outcomes is also qualified by the substantial upward shift in available destinations in the second half of the 20th century. Although the relative advantages of people from different socio-economic backgrounds has remained, the absolute upward movement in educational and occupational outcomes has inevitably come about through people from less advantaged backgrounds moving into more advantaged destinations (Bynner, Ferri, and Wadsworth 2003).

An important and very distinctive approach to the role of choice with regard to differences in educational participation for different socio-economic groups is that of Goldthorpe (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Goldthorpe 2000, Ch. 8). This approach uses Rational Action Theory to demonstrate that decision processes based on a rational analysis of resources, opportunities and constraints can be used to account both for the increase in educational participation over the second half of the twentieth century and for the continuing differential rates of participation by people from different socio-economic backgrounds. In particular, it is argued that it is not necessary to invoke cultural differences in the values and identities of people from different socio-economic backgrounds to explain different patterns of decision making. Families in more advantaged social locations have greater resources to devote to their children's education, are more confident of favourable outcomes from educational participation and see greater benefits, particularly with regard to avoiding downward mobility, than families in less advantaged circumstances. Although this analysis is concerned with educational decisions it is also focused on future occupational outcomes and is highly relevant to the issue of occupational choice.

Another theme of research on occupational choice has been that of *alignment*: the extent to which the occupational ambitions of young people line up with their educational intentions and attainments. In a study of adolescents in the United States, Schneider and Stevenson (1999)

argued that many of the young people in their study had misaligned ambitions: they either wanted careers which required far greater levels of time spent in education than they were intending or, in some cases, aimed for jobs that required less education and qualifications than they planned. Schneider and Stevenson stressed the importance of parents helping their children to align their occupational ambitions with the educational choices they made and the way that parents need to both support and challenge their children.

The present study

The data presented here come from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), a major research resource in which a representative sample of the same 10,000 people have been interviewed annually since 1991. The original BHPS sample was taken proportionately from people in England, Scotland and Wales. More recently the sample has included Northern Ireland and, following devolution, the size of the Scottish and Welsh samples have been much increased. However, the analysis here is based on the original sample, excluding people in Northern Ireland and representing Scotland and Wales proportionately. From 1994 an annual Young Person's Survey has also been carried out in which approximately 770 young people aged 11–15 living in sample households have been interviewed. The BHPS makes possible a unique longitudinal and inter-generational analysis which can: a) consider individual patterns of continuity and change in young people's responses and educational outcomes; and b) relate information about the young people to information about their families. This means that patterns of occupational choice can be related to a variety of other characteristics of young people and to changes in these over time, including educational and employment outcomes. Because all family members over the age of 11 are interviewed it is also possible to relate characteristics and behaviour of the young people to information about parents obtained directly from the parent. At the age of 16 participants in the Young Person's Survey are asked to join the main sample. This means that the results from the most recently available round of interviewing (2004) contains interviews with young people who were first interviewed as children during the 1990s. The data in the present analysis therefore relate to 763 young people interviewed at the age of 15 between 1994 and 1999 and to 528 of these young people interviewed in 2004 when they were aged from 20 to 25. These data include young people's career choices at the age of 15, occupational or educational outcomes immediately post-16, the occupational and characteristics of their parents when the young people were 15 and the young people's occupations and educational qualifications in 2004, between five and ten years after they were originally interviewed.

In considering occupational choices and outcomes it is important to note the changes in occupational structure of Britain in the late 20th century. Edwards (2005) notes how in the last 30 years of the century there has been a dramatic shift in the nature of employment and, in particular, a shift out of manufacturing and into the service sector. The decline in manufacturing has been particularly marked in heavy industries such as coal and steel. A further shift, noted by Raffe (1988), was the convergence between the occupational aspirations of males and females. While many gender-related occupational differences remained, young women became much more likely to plan a full-time career and to seek the same sorts of characteristics in a job as young men. Both these changes are evident in the results reported below.

Results

Young people's occupational choices

As part of the survey interview, young people were asked, 'What job would you like to do when you leave school?' Of course, as Kuvlesky and Bealer (1966) pointed out forty years ago,

occupational choice is not a simple concept. Job preferences and job expectations may differ and, as they emphasise, many other factors in addition to people's own choices influence occupational outcomes. Kuvlesky and Bealer restricted the notion of choice to 'occupational aspirations' and this is the way the concept is operationalised in the BHPS survey and is used here. The relationship between these aspirations and occupational outcomes and the way other factors mediate this relationship is an important part of the analysis in the latter part of this article.

The results used here relate to the answers young people gave to the question about the job they wanted when they left school asked when they were aged 15 and this forms the basis for the analysis of occupational choice presented in Tables 1 and 2. In Table 1 the occupational choices of young people are classified into the socio-economic groupings into which the occupations chosen fall. These are given separately for males and females and the final column of the table gives the classification of the occupations of adults in the BHPS surveys between 1997 and 1999.

The first point to emerge from the table is that most young people were able to give occupational intentions at the age of 15. Almost four-fifths of the sample provided an occupation they would like in response to the question. Females were slightly more likely to provide a response but nevertheless, three-quarters of males gave occupational plans.

In terms of the socio-economic classification of their choices the young people could be described as relatively ambitious in the sense that a high proportion were aiming for jobs generally regarded as desirable and well-rewarded. In this respect they are similar to the young people in the United States described by Schneider and Stevenson (1999) as 'The Ambitious Generation'. In the present study, over two-thirds of the young people chose non-manual occupations and most of these, almost six out of ten of all young people making a choice, chose professional, managerial or technical occupations. 'Managerial and technical' was the largest single category, accounting for 44.1% of responses, while a further 14.1% chose professional occupations. Of the just under a third of young people choosing manual occupations, the great majority were planning jobs as skilled manual workers. Only 3.5% of the sample wanted jobs in partly skilled or unskilled manual work.

Male and female respondents showed broadly similar patterns in terms of the socio-economic classification of their occupational choices. The great majority of the occupational choices of both were for non-manual occupations and virtually identical proportions of male and

Table 1. Occupational plans at 14 or 15 by Registrar General's categories.

	Male	Female	All	BHPS panel occupations 1997–1999
Professional	43 14.5%	41 13.7%	84 14.1%	5.0%
Managerial and technical	120 40.4%	143 47.8%	263 44.1%	28.9%
Skilled non-manual	28 9.4%	26 8.7%	54 9.1%	24.1%
Skilled manual	96 32.3%	78 26.1%	174 29.2%	20.0%
Partly skilled and Unskilled	10 3.4%	11 3.7	21 3.5%	22.0%
N making choices	297	299	596	
No answer, don't know, not coded	95 24.2%	72 19.4%	167 21.9%	
N	392	371	763	30,294

Table 2. Occupational plans at 15: Most frequent choices.

Occupational group	Occupation	Male	Female	All
Professional	Solicitor, barrister	8	10	18
	Scientist, engineer	10	5	15
	Doctor, vet	5	9	14
	Architect	9	2	11
	Psychologist, social scientist	1	10	11
Managerial and technical	Entertainment, sport	33	24	57
	Teacher	15	32	47
	Nurse, paramedic	5	34	39
	Commercial artist, designer	13	13	26
	Journalist, writer	6	16	22
	Manager	14	7	21
Skilled non-manual	Clerical, secretarial	8	15	23
	Police, fire service	12	9	21
Skilled manual	Motor vehicle, electrical, construction	54	1	55
	Child care	0	37	37
	Catering	12	11	23
	Hair and beauty	0	16	16

female respondents chose professional occupations. Males and females also had virtually identically low rates of choosing partly skilled or unskilled manual occupations. Categories where there were gender differences are 'managerial and technical', with more female choices, and 'skilled manual', with more male choices. The latter, in particular, reflects the traditional occupational structure in the United Kingdom where skilled manual work has been mainly a male preserve.

In the last column of Table 1 figures are given for the prevailing occupational structure at the time these data were collected. These figures are based on the classification of the occupations of adults interviewed as part of the BHPS between 1997 and 1999. This gives an indication of the match between the occupational aspirations of the young people interviewed and the occupational roles which are likely to be available to them. The figures show that young people were ambitious both in absolute terms and in relation to the occupational structure of the workforce. This is particularly apparent at the extremes of the occupational distribution. While 14.1% of young people wanted professional jobs, only 5.0% of the BHPS sample had such jobs in the late 1990s. And while 3.5% of young people planned to go into partly skilled or unskilled occupations, 22.0% of those in the adult sample were in such occupations. Overall, professional occupations, managerial and technical occupations and skilled manual work were oversubscribed compared with the distribution of actual occupations, while skilled non-manual work and partly skilled and unskilled manual work were heavily under-subscribed. The results show that this mismatch is not just an issue of preferences for non-manual over manual work compared with the availability of such jobs, although this is certainly the case. It also reflects a preference within manual occupations for skilled work and within non-manual occupations for professional and managerial posts. Again, these results are similar to those reported by Schneider and Stevenson (1999), who found that the occupational aspirations of young Americans for professional and managerial occupations were far greater than the predicted availability of such jobs. Of course, this mismatch raises the question of not just who wants particular occupational outcomes but also who is likely to achieve them.

So far the analysis has been in terms of the socio-economic category of the occupations chosen by the young people. In Table 2 a more detailed analysis is presented which gives a picture of some of the specific occupational choices to emerge from the interviews. The table shows the most commonly chosen occupations within each broad socio-economic category both overall and separately for males and females. Specific occupations are not given within the partly skilled and unskilled category as so few young people chose these occupations. Within the professional category the law was the most commonly chosen occupation followed by scientific and engineering occupations, medicine, architecture and social science. While a legal career was chosen by a similar number of males and females, other careers were more gender-differentiated. Females were more likely to choose medical and social science careers, while males were more likely to choose science/engineering and architecture.

Within the managerial and technical category, careers in professional entertainment and sport were the most frequently chosen. However, a substantial number of people wanted to be teachers, nurses, commercial artists and designers, journalists and various sorts of managers. There were some fairly substantial gender differences, with females much more likely to select careers as nurses, teachers, journalists and artists/designers. Males were more likely than females to want jobs as managers. Skilled non-manual occupations were chosen by a relatively small number of the young people. Of those who did choose them, almost all chose either secretarial and clerical occupations or police and fire service occupations which are also in the skilled non-manual category. Clerical and secretarial occupations were chosen mainly by females, but although there were more males than females in the police/fire service group the difference was not large.

Skilled manual work was the second most commonly chosen of the broad occupational groups. The most common choice within this was the sorts of occupations mostly associated with this category: work as mechanics, electricians, builders and so on. Other types of work chosen within this category were child care, catering and work as hairdressers and beauticians. It is in the skilled manual category that gender differentiation is most marked. Virtually all those choosing 'industrial' jobs were male, while all those choosing child care and hair and beauty were female. Catering careers, however, were chosen equally by males and females.

The first point to make from this analysis was that young people's occupational ambitions are realistic in the sense that they are mostly choosing ordinary rather than fantasy jobs which are, in principle, attainable, whether or not they are obtainable for the particular young person. The exception to this is the figure of 57 young people, nearly 10% of those making choices, who would like careers as professional entertainers and sports men and women. It is unlikely that more than a small minority of these young people can achieve their ambitions and it is unclear whether they themselves see them as realistic. This result is also in line with the American evidence where careers as entertainers and athletes were ambitions for many more young people than were likely to achieve them (Schneider and Stevenson 1999). However, not all of such choices necessarily involve unrealistic expectations. Some of the young people in London studied by Ball, Maguire, and Macrae (2000) had ambitions involving the performing arts and professional sport. However, these young people were also looking at coaching courses and educational qualifications in the arts, suggesting realistic fall-back positions, and this may also be the case for young people in the BHPS survey.

A second point to consider is the extent of gender differences in occupational aspirations. Here the evidence is mixed, with some very strong gender stereotyping alongside some very similar job choices by males and females. Overall, male and female ambitions were about equally ambitious in terms of the broad socio-economic categories of jobs. There was a slight tendency for females to be more ambitious in terms of a rather higher proportion aiming for non-manual and specifically managerial and technical jobs. However, the proportions of males and females aiming for professional occupations were very similar. While there were gender differences for a majority

of occupations, in most cases there are both males and females choosing these jobs. However, in the area of skilled manual work there were very strong gender stereotypical choices. There was also a strong over-representation of females in the traditionally female area of nursing and also among those wanting to work in psychology and social science.

Gender differences are a well-established feature of the occupational structure in Britain and elsewhere and the gender differentiation of the labour market has been of fundamental importance in understanding the socio-economic situation of men and women. In the early 1980s Martin and Roberts (1984) showed how women's occupations were much more restricted in range than men's and tended to concentrate in clerical work, catering, cleaning and hairdressing and as health, education and welfare professionals. Women were also much more likely to be in part-time employment than men. However, even as this work was being conducted, Raffe (1988) had noted the convergence in male and female occupational aspirations in Scotland. The over-representation of females in the combined 'professional and managerial' categories of aspirations in the present study matches the outcomes for males and females noted by Iannelli and Patterson (2006) in their analysis of the Scottish Mobility Study. But they also note the continuing effect of labour market segregation and the fact that women are more likely to be at lower levels within the professional and managerial categories. The analysis of the BHPS data shows both the continuing pattern of gender difference but also the changes over recent years noted by other authors.

The alignment of occupational choice and educational intentions and attainment

The data presented so far have shown the occupational ambitions of young people in terms of the jobs they said they would like. The structure of the BHPS makes it possible to consider these choices in terms of how well they align with other features of the young people which may be relevant to occupational choice. In particular, we can consider the extent to which the jobs they would like were matched to their educational behaviour and performance. In the same interview in which occupational plans were ascertained, the young people were also asked whether they intended to stay in education after they reached the age of 16 (the end of compulsory schooling in the United Kingdom). In a further wave of the panel survey, information was obtained about whether or not they had actually stayed in education post-16 and about the qualifications they had obtained in public examinations taken at the age of 16 or just after.

In Table 3 these educational plans and outcomes are presented separately for young people with different kinds of educational aspirations. A substantial majority of young people said that they planned to stay at school past the age of 16, and this was particularly so of young people planning the kind of careers for which this would be essential. About 90% of those planning

Table 3. The alignment of occupational choice and educational intentions and attainment.

	Occupational choice				
	Professional	Managerial and technical	Skilled non-manual	Skilled manual	Partly and unskilled manual
Plan to stay in education post-16	92.9%	89.3%	77.8%	60.7%	57.1%
Actually in education post-16	83.3%	83.3%	77.8%	52.9%	42.9%
5+ GCSE at grade C or better	77.4%	61.5%	40.7%	27.6%	19.0%
N	84	262	54	173	21

professional and managerial and technical careers said that they would stay in education, and nearly 80% of those planning skilled non-manual careers did so. Most of these young people actually carried out their intentions to stay in education, although the figures for those actually staying on are lower than for those who had planned to do so. Also relevant to the question of alignment is the level of qualifications which young people have achieved at the age of 16. In the United Kingdom, school pupils take a public examination, usually at the age of 16 and marking the end of compulsory schooling.[2] A grade of C or better is generally regarded as a good outcome for an individual subject and five or more passes at C as a good overall outcome. In terms of preparation for A-level examinations taken at 18 and progression to university, five grade Cs is a satisfactory start, although it is certainly possible for people not achieving this to succeed in later stages of education (Croll 2007). Table 3 shows that over three-quarters of those planning professional careers have achieved this level, while just over 60% of those planning managerial and technical careers and 40% of those planning skilled non-manual careers have done so.

Across Table 3 as a whole we see a clear progression in levels of educational participation and attainment for different levels of occupational aspiration. For all three indicators, young people aspiring to professional occupations were at the highest levels and young people aspiring to partly skilled and unskilled manual jobs were at the lowest levels. Between these extremes there is a steady gradient of decreasing levels of attainment and participation. In this sense, and at this aggregate level, the aspirations and attainment and behaviour of young people were relatively well-aligned: young people aspiring to jobs that require advanced educational involvement and accreditation were much more likely to have made choices and achieved qualifications that will lead to this than have other young people. Moreover, the majority of the young people who were aiming for jobs requiring extended education and advanced qualifications were on track to achieve these in terms of their qualifications at 16 and their educational participation post-16.

However, there are other aspects of the results where the alignment between ambitions and attainment and behaviour is less clear. One in six of the young people wanting professional and managerial or technical jobs had left the educational system at the age of 16 even though such participation is virtually essential to achieve these aims. And nearly a quarter of those wanting professional jobs and nearly 40% of those wanting managerial and technical jobs had failed to achieve the kind of GCSE grades that would provide a good foundation for future qualifications. It is also the case that there was considerable overlap between the levels of education and qualifications of young people wanting very different kinds of jobs. For example, over a quarter of those planning to enter skilled manual work had better qualifications than nearly 40% of those planning managerial and technical careers and also better than 22% of those planning professional careers. Even more strikingly, the same was true of almost one in five of those saying they would go into partly skilled or unskilled manual work.

These misalignments between ambitions and educational achievements and choices raise complicated issues in relation to the role of choices and the way that choices are made within the broader context of the social structures in which they are located. One of the starting points for this article was the contrast between young people's belief in individual choice and individual agency and the evidence for the way that socio-economic and educational advantage and disadvantage was reproduced across generations. However, in the introductory discussion it was also made clear that these regularities were only probabilistic and that, in particular, many people from less advantaged backgrounds moved into more advantaged occupations. As Iannelli and Patterson (2006) have pointed out, the latter part of the 20th century has been characterised by a great deal of social mobility, mainly upward mobility. The alignment between ambitions and educational attainment and participation is also highly probabilistic: overall those planning jobs requiring high levels of education are more likely to be on track for educational success than those who do not, but there are plenty of exceptions to this pattern. In particular, a significant minority of those

hoping for professional, managerial and technical jobs did not seem to be on track to achieve appropriate educational qualifications. At the same time, a significant minority of those who said they were aiming for manual occupations had levels of educational achievement and participation that would make other careers available to them. This sort of over-qualification for future occupations is unlikely to have occupational advantages for the young people. The study by Brynin, Lichtwardt, and Longi (2006) found no labour market premium for over-qualified workers.

It should also be noted that the consequences in terms of occupational destination of not having ambitious aspirations and good qualifications may be different for children from different parental occupational backgrounds. Heath (1981) demonstrated how children of parents in non-manual occupations who were educationally unsuccessful were more likely than similar children of manual workers to end up in non-manual occupations themselves. The relationship between aspirations, qualifications and outcomes for different groups will be explored later in this article.

Agency

In the earlier discussion reference was made to the extent to which young people feel a sense of personal agency and, in particular, the extent to which they feel that the direction their lives take is influenced by their own capacities and behaviour. Studies were quoted suggesting that young people do generally feel that their own efforts will determine personal outcomes. Such results are in keeping with the much more sweeping arguments of Beck (1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001) about the centrality of life choices in contemporary society compared with an earlier time of highly socially constrained directions and opportunities.

The relationship of career choices and sense of agency is clearly relevant to understanding the way that young people move into careers and the influence of things like parental occupations on these choices. In most waves of the BHPS survey young people were asked to respond to the statement, 'If you try hard enough you can always get what you want out of life.' The percentages saying they 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with this statement are presented for different groups of young people in Table 4.

The first point to emerge from Table 4 is that most young people did have a belief in personal agency and in the efficacy of their own efforts in achieving their goals. Over 70 per cent of young people agreed with the statement, with identical levels of agreement for males and females. There was also very little difference in levels of personal efficacy across young people from different

Table 4. Young people's sense of personal agency: Per cent agreeing that 'If you try hard enough you can always get what you want in life.'

Gender			Parental occupation			
All	Male	Female	Professional, managerial and technical	Skilled non-manual	Skilled manual	Partly skilled and unskilled manual
71.7%	71.9%	71.6%	69.1%	69.6%	79.1%	61.4%
N=545	285	260	220	92	79	57

Occupational choice				
Professional	Managerial and technical	Skilled non-manual	Skilled manual	Partly skilled and unskilled manual
81.2%	71.6%	76.7%	68.8%	68.8%
N=69	215	43	145	16

socio-economic backgrounds.[3] Those from families with parents in unskilled or partly skilled manual occupations had the lowest level but those in families with parents in skilled manual jobs had the highest level. Averaged across the categories there was no difference between young people from manual and non-manual occupational backgrounds. It might have been expected that the children of parents who had been the most occupationally successful would have a stronger belief in succeeding through effort than the children of parents who had been less occupationally successful. In general this is not the case and a belief that effort will be rewarded is widely spread across all sorts of backgrounds.

Table 4 also shows the distribution of a sense of personal agency for young people choosing different types of careers. Here it is interesting to see if those planning more ambitious and desirable careers have a stronger sense that they can get what they want than those planning less well-rewarded and regarded careers. There is some degree of support for this position in the data but only to a small extent. Young people choosing professional careers were the most likely to agree that effort will be rewarded and young people choosing manual work were the least likely to agree. But the differences are small, especially that between manual work and managerial and technical jobs. The main result from the table is that whatever their intended occupational destinations, most young people believed that they can get what they want through effort, including those making the least ambitious occupational choices.

Occupational choice and parental occupations

A starting point for this article was the question of the inter-generational transmission of socio-economic advantage and disadvantage, in particular, the extent to which occupational advantage is reproduced across generations. The results presented in Table 5 show the relationship between the occupational status of the families of the young people in the survey and the occupational status of the jobs they say they would like. As was apparent in the earlier analysis, most young people were relatively ambitious in the sense of aspiring to professional and managerial rather than manual occupations and, in particular, being very unlikely to plan to go into partly skilled or unskilled manual occupations. Such ambitions are in line with the upward shift in the occupational structure over the last 50 or so years but, as was apparent in Table 1, there were nevertheless many more people choosing professional and managerial jobs than the likely availability of these occupations.

The figures in Table 5 show the relationship between parental occupations and the occupational choices of their children but also the general pattern of ambitious choices for all groups. Parental occupations have been categorised into three broad groups for the purpose of this analysis as there are relatively few parents in professional occupations and virtually no differences in the results for parents in different types of manual occupations. The three categories are therefore: (a) professional, managerial and technical, (b) skilled non-manual and c) manual. The young

Table 5. Occupational choice and family background.

Young people's occupational choices	Parental occupations		
	Professional, managerial and technical	Skilled non-manual	Manual
Professional, managerial and technical	75.8%	54.5%	44.7%
Skilled non-manual	7.2%	9.9%	10.6%
Manual	17.0%	35.8%	44.7%
N	236	101	161

people's choices have been placed in the three equivalent categories. Among all three groups the most popular career choice was professional, managerial or technical occupations. For all three groups the least popular choice was for partly skilled or unskilled manual occupations. The association with parental occupations was also apparent, however. For children from professional, managerial or technical families, three-quarters aspired to such jobs themselves, while only one in six planned to go into manual work. Among the children of manual workers, about 45% planned to go into manual work themselves, almost exactly the same proportion as planned to go into professional, managerial and technical occupations. The aspirations of children of skilled non-manual workers fell between those of children of professional, managerial and technical workers and children of manual workers.

The occupational choices of young people presented here go some way towards explaining the way that the occupational structure and patterns of socio-economic advantage and disadvantage are reproduced across generations. The children of parents in the most advantaged socio-economic locations were particularly likely to aspire to such occupations for themselves and were particularly unlikely to want to go into manual work. In contrast, a substantial proportion of children of parents in manual occupations were themselves intending to enter such occupations. Nevertheless, the extent of reproduction of socio-economic status through occupational plans should not be overstated. Well over half of the children of parents in manual occupations said that they wanted to go into non-manual work and the great majority of these wanted to go into professional, managerial and technical jobs. It is also the case that one in six of the children from professional, managerial and technical families and over a third of those in skilled non-manual families were planning to go into manual jobs.

The availability of jobs in higher socio-economic-status occupations is not going to keep up with the ambitions of the young people. As Table 1 showed, in comparison with the contemporary occupational structure, professional jobs are over-subscribed by about three ambitious young people for each job and professional, managerial and technical jobs together by almost two young people for each job. Even allowing for a continuing upward shift in job opportunities, clearly young people are going to be in a very competitive environment with regard to their occupational ambitions. Such competition will be especially acute for the most desirable jobs within the professional and managerial groups. Brown and Hesketh (2004) have documented market 'congestion' due to the shortage of the most sought-after graduate jobs and the way that a hierarchy of universities as well as aspects of personal background and attributes may influence graduates' success in the 'fast-track' segment of the job market. These sort of detailed job data are not available for the BHPS sample and, as has already been indicated, people heading for the most advantaged posts were at a very early stage of their career trajectory. The analysis of professional and managerial destinations here shows how far young people were positioned to compete for the most desirable jobs rather than the outcomes of this competition.

The ambitious occupational goals of many young people raises the question of how well equipped they are in terms of preparing for and gaining relevant qualifications for these careers. This brings us back to the question of alignment: the match between young people's aspirations and their educational attainment and levels of participation. Two questions arise here. The first is the extent to which young people planning careers which need extended education and qualifications are pursuing educational routes which can lead to such qualifications. The second is the extent to which young people who have good qualifications and are remaining in education have career aims which make use of these.

The data presented in Table 3 showed that while a majority of young people had ambitions which were relatively well aligned to their educational qualifications and behaviour, for a substantial minority this was not the case. In Tables 6a and 6b this analysis is repeated separately for young people from different socio-economic backgrounds. To simplify the presentation, this

Table 6. Occupational choice, educational attainment and participation and family background.

a) Parents in professional, managerial and technical occupations

	Occupational choice		
	Professional managerial and technical	Skilled non-manual	Manual
Plan to stay in education	93.9%	70.6%	70.0%
In education post-16	89.4%	88.2%	62.5%
5 or more GCSEs at C	73.7%	41.2%	27.5%
N	179	17	40

b) Parents in manual occupations

	Occupational choice		
	Professional managerial and technical	Skilled non-manual	Manual
Plan to stay in education	86.1%	82.3%	62.5%
In education post-16	70.8%	76.5%	51.4%
5 or more GCSEs at C	51.4%	41.2%	31.9%
N	72	17	72

analysis has omitted the children from skilled non-manual backgrounds. Therefore the analysis of the relationship between occupational choice, plans to stay at school post-16, actual post-16 behaviour and qualifications at the age of 16 is presented first for young people whose parents were in professional, managerial and technical occupations and then for young people whose parents were in manual occupations.

The first column of the tables gives figures for those planning professional, managerial and technical occupations. These are careers for which extended educational participation and good qualifications are likely to be essential. A comparison of Table 6a and Table 6b shows how far young people in the two groups were on track for attaining appropriate qualifications. At the level of intentions for staying in education post-16, expressed at the same time as their career intentions, the two groups were fairly similar: nearly all young people wanting professional or managerial and technical careers said that they planned to stay in education post-16. Young people from professional, managerial and technical backgrounds were more likely to want to stay on than young people from manual backgrounds, but the gap is only eight percentage points. However, when we look at actual participation post-16 and the qualifications obtained at 16 the two groups begin to diverge. The young people from manual occupational backgrounds with ambitions for professional, managerial and technical jobs were much less likely to actually stay in education post-16 than the similarly ambitious young people who come from these backgrounds themselves, with a gap of 18 percentage points. And they were considerably less likely to have achieved a good outcome in the GCSE examinations taken at the age of 16. The gap here is 22 percentage points.

What emerges from Tables 5 and 6 is the interplay between choice and educational attainments and behaviour in influencing the transmission of advantage between generations. With regard to choice, young people from less advantaged backgrounds were ambitious but not as ambitious, on average, as those from more advantaged backgrounds. And the ambitious young

people from the less advantaged backgrounds were less likely to be educationally equipped to realise their ambitions than those from more advantaged families.

A comparison of the final columns of Tables 6a and 6b makes it possible to consider a second aspect of misalignment – the extent to which some young people had less demanding ambitions than those suggested by their educational attainments. These data show the proportions of young people aiming for manual occupations who were staying in education and had good GCSE results. In the case of young people planning professional, managerial and technical careers, many more of those whose parents were in such occupations had good qualifications in comparison with young people whose parents were in manual occupations. But in the case of young people planning manual careers this difference disappears. In fact, slightly more of the young people from manual backgrounds seeking manual careers had good GCSE results than did young people from more advantaged occupational backgrounds. Almost one in three of the children of manual workers who themselves were planning to go into manual work had five or more good GCSE passes. This is a second aspect of the operation of choice in intergenerational transmission: the children of less advantaged families were less likely to aim for more advantaged careers, even where their educational attainments seem appropriate to such careers.

Occupational and educational outcomes in 2004

The data considered so far are from interviews conducted with young people and their parents in the second half of the 1990s (1994–1999) when the young people were about 15 and with the young people a year or two later when they had taken GCSE examinations and were past the age of compulsory schooling. Most of these young people remained as participants in the British Household Panel Survey and the most recent available data from them are from interviews conducted towards the end of 2004. Information available from these interviews includes their educational or labour force status, their actual occupation and the highest level of educational qualifications they had obtained. It is therefore possible to conduct a preliminary analysis of the relationship between occupational choices at 16 and occupational outcomes and to consider the inter-relationships of occupational outcomes, educational qualifications and the occupations of their parents. Data from the 2004 wave of the panel survey are available for 528 of the original sample of 763 young people (69.2%).

It is important to stress that, for a number of reasons, this is a preliminary and tentative analysis. In particular the gap between the first two interviews and the third interview is different for different sample members and, in some cases, is quite short. The oldest people in the sample had their most recent interview at the age of 25, ten years after the first interview. The youngest were interviewed at the age of 20, just five years after the first interview. Many of the youngest group were still in education and educational outcomes are not final and careers have still to be established. Even among the older people in the sample, final career destinations may be a long way from being settled at the age of 24 or 25. This is particularly the case for people who may be heading for ambitious career destinations but were still in junior positions. Nevertheless, some potentially interesting patterns of continuity and discontinuity over time can be established.

In Table 7 the outcomes for sample members in 2004 in terms of occupation and education are presented. Some of these people were aged 20 and 21 and were still in education, so ‘student’ is presented as a separate category for those in full-time education. In all cases students were attending higher education institutions of various sorts and in most cases were studying for a degree. In 2004, 71.4% of the sample were in employment, 14.0% were students, 6.1% were performing family care[4] and 5.7% were unemployed. Among those in employment the largest single group was ‘skilled non-manual’ (33.6%), followed by ‘managerial and technical’ (27.8%),

Table 7. Occupational and educational outcomes in 2004.

Occupational status	*N*	%	% of those employed	Highest qualification	*N*	%	% of non students
Student	74	14.0		Student	74	15.1	
Professional	5	0.9	1.3	Degree	106	21.6	25.4
Managerial and technical	105	19.9	27.8	A level	88	17.9	21.1
Skilled non-manual	127	24.1	33.6	GCSE	193	39.3	46.5
Skilled manual	70	18.6	15.3	None	30	6.1	7.2
Partly skilled	58	11.0	15.3	Valid *N*	491		417
Unskilled	8	1.5	2.2	Missing	37		
Armed forces	5	0.9	1.3				
Unemployed	30	5.7					
Family care	32	6.1					
Other	13	2.5					
Valid *N*	527		378				
Missing	1						

'skilled manual' (18.6%) and 'partly skilled manual' (15.3%). Very few of the sample were in either unskilled or professional occupations.

A comparison of these figures with the occupational plans made at 15 and presented in Table 1 shows the ambitious nature of the earlier plans but also the fact that the occupational data have been collected very early in people's careers. While nearly 60% of the young people interviewed had said they were aiming for professional, managerial and technical occupations, only half this number had attained such occupations by 2004. In particular, while 14% of the sample had aimed for professional occupations, under a tenth of this figure were in professional work. In contrast, while under 4% had said they wanted partly skilled or unskilled manual work, more than four times this number were actually in such jobs. There is also a striking contrast between fewer than one in ten choosing skilled non-manual occupations and one third of the sample actually in such occupations. The figures in Table 7 look much more like the 'BHPS panel occupations' column of Table 1 (an indicator of the availability of different occupations) than the occupational plans in Table 1.

Of course these figures are for people at an early stage of their careers or, in some cases, before they have left education. The age of 25 is early to have begun many professional occupations and it is very likely that many of those still in higher education in 2004 will move into professional or managerial and technical occupations. The precise outcomes for people within these occupational groups are themselves subject to competition (Brown and Hesketh 2004). It is also likely that the very high figures for people in skilled non-manual jobs include people who will achieve future occupational mobility. In particular, some jobs classified as skilled non-manual will be 'cadet' occupations for young people who will later move into managerial positions. It is also possible that there will be differences in the socio-economic backgrounds of people making these transitions (Heath 1981).

The figures for highest level of education attained, presented in Table 7, also reflect a partially unfinished engagement with the education system. In particular, in addition to just over one fifth having attained degrees or other higher education qualifications (e.g. Higher National Diploma [HND]), a further 15% were still in higher education and on track for such qualifications. To a lesser extent some of those who had exited with lower level qualifications may be planning further qualifications.

Table 8. Occupations in 2004: Most frequent categories.

Occupational group	*Occupation*	*Actual occupations in 2004*	*Choices at age 15*
Managerial and technical	Managers	28 7.4%	21 3.5%
	Teachers	14 3.7%	47 7.9%
Skilled non-manual	Clerical	92 24.3%	23 3.9%
Skilled manual	Routine sales	48 12.7%	4 0.7%
	Motor vehicle, electrical, construction	41 10.8%	55 9.2%
	Catering	24 6.3%	23 3.9%
	Hair and beauty	8 2.1%	16 2.7%
	Childcare	7 1.9%	37 6.2%
	N=	378	596

In Table 8 a more detailed picture is given of some of the specific occupations of the sample in 2004. The numbers in the most common occupations are given and a comparison presented of the same categories of choice when respondents were 15. A similar analysis of choices was presented in Table 2. By far the most common occupation is clerical work, accounting for a quarter of all those in employment. This is a very much higher level of people in such posts than the figures for young people choosing jobs. The other type of occupation where actual outcomes were much higher than choices is that of routine sales jobs. Hardly anyone chose these jobs when they were 15 but one in eight of the sample were doing them in 2004. There was also twice the proportion of managers in 2004 than those choosing such a job. The level of people in teaching was about half of those choosing a teaching career. However, this is an occupation where it is important to remember the age of the sample: many people intending to teach would not have finished qualifying in 2004. In the skilled manual category about the same proportion were in the traditional 'male craft' occupations as those intending to go into them. A much lower proportion was actually in child care than those making such choices, while the opposite was true of catering.

The figures in Table 8 partly reflect the way that, as was indicated above, young people had more ambitious occupational choices than the likely availability of jobs could accommodate. They also partly reflect the fact that the sample were at an early stage in their careers. However, they also reflect the shifting occupational structure and the predominance of jobs in the service sector (Edwards 2005). Clerical work, sales and catering accounts for well over 40% of the occupations reported here. Moreover, the 28 people reporting occupations as managers were all managers in service industries, sales and marketing or catering.

Occupational choice, GCSE results, parental occupation and occupational and educational outcomes

The panel design of BHPS makes it possible to compare choices and outcomes at the individual as well as at the aggregate level. In Table 9 broad categories of choice at 15 are compared in terms

Table 9. Occupational choice at 15 and occupational outcomes in 2004.

	Choices at 15		
Outcomes in 2004	Professional, managerial and technical	Skilled non-manual	Manual
Student	38 16.3%	2 5.4%	6 5.8%
Professional, managerial and technical	67 28.8%	7 18.9%	19 18.3%
Skilled non-manual	74 31.8%	14 37.8%	22 21.2%
Manual	42 18.0%	10 27.0%	50 48.1%
Unemployed	12 5.2%	4 10.8%	7 6.7%
N=	233	37	104

of the actual occupations of the same sample members in 2004. As with the earlier analysis it is important to remember that people were at an early stage in their careers and that some were still in higher education.

The figures in Table 9 show some predictive power for early choices but also many discrepancies between choices and outcomes. As we have seen, occupational choices were generally ambitious; well over six in ten of the choices shown in the table were for professional, managerial and technical occupations. If we assume that the sample members in higher education are likely to achieve professional, managerial and technical posts, then about 45% of those making such choices had achieved them or were on track to achieve them. In addition, some proportion of those in skilled non-manual occupations were probably in jobs which may lead to managerial outcomes. Among those choosing manual occupations when they were 15 nearly a half were in such occupations but almost a quarter were either in professional, managerial and technical occupations or are in higher education. From the table it can be very roughly estimated that about half of occupational choices at 15 had led, or were likely to lead, into that type of occupation. But a substantial proportion, perhaps as many as half, of those choosing the more ambitious professional, managerial and technical occupations were likely to be disappointed. At the same time, something like a quarter of those who chose manual work at 15 seemed likely to end up in professional, managerial and technical occupations.

Throughout this article we have been concerned with one of the central issues within the sociology of education: the extent to which patterns of occupational advantage and disadvantage are reproduced across generations. Table 10 gives an indication of occupational reproduction by looking at the relationship between parental occupations when young people were 15 and their own occupations between five and ten years later. As in other analyses of the 2004 data, ‘student’ has been included as a category as some young people in the sample had not completed higher education. Table 10 shows the clear relationship between parental occupations and the occupational destinations of their children which has emerged from many studies. However, it also shows that this is a probabilistic and not determined relationship and that there were many exceptions to occupational reproduction. For children from the more advantaged backgrounds (professional, managerial and technical), one half were either in such occupations themselves or were still in higher education. Moreover, it is likely that some of the young people in this group who were in skilled non-manual positions in their early twenties will move into managerial or similar

Table 10. Parental occupations and occupational outcomes in 2004.

	Parental occupations		
Outcomes in 2004	Professional, managerial and technical	Skilled non-manual	Manual
Student	39 19.0%	11 12.5%	11 9.3%
Professional, managerial and technical	63 30.7%	18 20.5%	23 19.5%
Skilled non-manual	46 22.4%	31 35.2%	34 28.8%
Manual	49 23.9%	24 27.3%	42 35.6%
Unemployed	8 3.9%	4 4.5%	8 6.8%
N=	205	88	118

positions. However, nearly a quarter of people from more advantaged backgrounds were themselves in manual occupations at this stage of their careers. Of the young people from families in manual occupations, rather less than a third were either in professional, managerial or technical occupations or were still in higher education. Over a third of this group were in the same occupational classification as their parents. The data show the reproduction of occupational position: those from more advantaged backgrounds were substantially more likely to be in or moving towards such positions themselves. But they also show a pattern of social mobility in both directions. Thirty per cent of young people from manual occupational backgrounds were either in higher education or in professional, managerial or technical occupations and more may be on their way to such occupations via skilled non-manual jobs early in their careers. And nearly a quarter of young people from professional, managerial and technical backgrounds were in manual occupations at this point in their careers. So while parental background is influential with regard to destinations, it certainly does not determine them.

The third factor to be considered in relation to occupational outcomes is that of educational attainment. As was apparent in the earlier analysis, a higher level of educational attainment was associated with both parental occupation and occupational aspirations. In Table 11 occupational outcomes in 2004 are presented for people gaining different levels of good GCSE passes at the age of 16 or thereabouts. Other educational measures are also available, such as the highest level of qualification obtained. However, using GCSE passes makes the analysis consistent with earlier analyses in this article where it was the only available measure and it is not affected by the fact that some of the sample are still in education. It is also the case that obtaining five good GCSE passes is almost as good a predictor of occupational success for people in the BHPS sample as achieving degree level qualifications (Croll 2007).

In Table 11 it is apparent that people with better qualifications at 16 had better occupational outcomes. Over half of those with five or more good GCSEs were either in higher education or had professional, managerial or technical jobs. Only just over a fifth of those with between one and four good GCSEs and just less than a fifth of those with no good GCSEs were in this position. Although the figure of five good GCSEs, which is used as an indicator of a good outcome at GCSE, is a fairly arbitrary one it does seem to be something of a watershed. The gap between five good GCSEs and one to four good GCSEs was almost as great as the gap between five and none and this was true for higher education and desirable occupations and also, at the other end of the

Table 11. Educational attainment at 16 and occupational outcomes in 2004

	GCSE results at Grade C or above		
	5 or more	1–4	None
Student	57 21.3%	7 7.1%	10 9.1%
Professional, managerial and technical	85 31.7%	14 14.3%	10 9.1%
Skilled non-manual	75 28.0%	34 34.7%	18 16.4%
Manual	42 15.7%	41 41.8%	53 48.2%
Unemployed	9 3.4%	2 2.0%	19 17.3%
N=	268	98	110

scale, for being in manual occupations. However, higher levels of unemployment were particularly associated with having no good GCSEs. Many studies (e.g. Rees, Williamson, and Istance 1996) have demonstrated how leaving school and not entering work or training are strongly associated both with poor educational attainment and disadvantaged family circumstances.

All three of the variables considered above – job choices at 15, parental occupation and examination results at 16 – had strong relationships with occupational outcomes. An indicator of the gap between the most successful and least successful groups with regard to outcomes can be calculated by comparing the difference between them in the proportions of people either in higher education or in professional, managerial and technical occupations. The difference was greatest with regard to examination attainment, at almost 35 percentage points; next highest was with regard to choices, at 24 percentage points; and least was with regard to parental occupation, at almost 21 percentage points. These variables are all themselves inter-related, as was apparent in the earlier analyses. In the final part of the analysis an attempt will be made to establish the extent to which intergenerational transmission, the links between parents' occupational status and that of their children, can be accounted for by differential educational attainment and different occupational choices.

In Table 12 the patterns of association of outcomes with different predictor variables can be considered together. As with Table 6, to simplify the presentation the children of parents in skilled non-manual occupations have been omitted and the results are presented first for those sample members with parents in professional, managerial and technical (PMT) occupations and then for those with parents in manual occupations. These are the occupations of the parent in the most advantaged occupational category when the sample member was 15. Within each of these two occupational categories data are presented for four groups:

(A) those who chose a PMT occupation at 15 and obtained five good GCSEs;
(B) those who chose a PMT occupation at 15 and did not obtain five good GCSEs;
(C) those who did not choose a PMT occupation at 15 and obtained five good GCSEs;
(D) those who did not choose a PMT occupation at 15 and did not obtain five good GCSEs.

The first column of the table gives the numbers of people in each group and the percentage of all people from that occupational background they represent. The second column gives the numbers in the group who were either in professional, managerial and technical occupations or were still students. The third column gives the second column as a percentage of the first – that is, the percentage of people with each combination of ambition and qualifications who ended up either

Table 12. Parental occupation, occupational choice, GCSE results and occupational outcomes in 2004.

a) Parents in professional, managerial and technical (PMT) occupations

	All % of column	PMT occupations and students	% of row
Choose PMT occupations and gained 5+ GCSEs	98 61.3%	54	55.1%
Choose PMT occupations and gained fewer than 5 GCSEs	29 18.1%	11	37.9%
Did not choose PMT occupations and gained 5+ GCSEs	12 7.5%	4	33.3%
Did not choose PMT occupations and gained fewer than 5 GCSEs	21 13.1%	8	38.1%
N	160		

b) Parents in manual occupations.

	All % of column	PMT occupations and students	% of row
Choose PMT occupations and gained 5+ GCSEs	26 27.4%	14	53.8%
Choose PMT occupations and gained fewer than 5 GCSEs	16 16.8%	4	25.0%
Did not choose PMT occupations and gained 5+ GCSEs	23 24.2%	10	43.4%
Did not choose PMT occupations and gained fewer than 5 GCSEs	30 31.6%	2	6.7%
N	95		

in a PMT occupation or as students in 2004. This analysis makes it possible to consider the relative pattern of association between occupational choice, educational qualifications and occupational outcomes and to compare this for people from different parental occupational backgrounds. As with the analysis in Tables 9 to 11, it is important to stress that this is a tentative analysis. The people in the sample are in their early 20s and career trajectories are far from complete. For this analysis, being a student in higher education is assumed to lead to a good occupational outcome although for some students this may not be the case. It is also likely that some people in other occupational groups, especially in the skilled non-manual category, will attain managerial or similar jobs. The analysis has been conducted for the 160 young people with PMT backgrounds and the 98 young people with manual backgrounds for whom complete data on examination performance, outcomes and earlier choices are available. These do not always aggregate exactly to the figures in Tables 10 and 11 where young people who had not made early career choices are included. More importantly, the detailed analysis results in some low entries for certain rows of the table where results should be treated cautiously.

The results show the interplay of ambition (choosing a PMT job) and attainment (achieving five good GCSEs) in occupational outcomes for people from different backgrounds. The first thing to note, and consistent with the results above, is that the four groups are distributed unevenly across the two parental occupational categories. In the first column we see that, as was apparent

earlier, the children of PMT parents are more likely to aspire to such jobs themselves and are also more likely to achieve at GCSE than the children of manual parents. But what is particularly apparent from Table 12 is the differential distribution of joint occurrences of the two variables. Children of PMT parents were more than twice as likely as those of manual parents to both aspire to PMT jobs and to attain five good GCSEs and were less than half as likely to do neither of these things. This shows the way in which some children were better placed than others for future occupations in terms of aspirations and attainments.

The second and third columns of the table show the actual occupational outcomes for people from different backgrounds and different levels of aspiration and qualification. As we would expect, group A, young people with high aspirations and good qualifications, were much more occupationally successful than any other group. Well over half of these young people were already in PMT jobs or were in higher education in 2004. It is also very striking that the success rates among group A people were virtually the same for those from manual backgrounds as for those from PMT backgrounds. This could be regarded as an aspect of meritocracy in action. Young people with high aspirations who achieved educational success were succeeding occupationally at similar levels whatever their background.

The next most successful group on average was C – those with good qualifications but lower earlier aspirations. Here the young people from manual backgrounds were rather more likely than those from PMT backgrounds to be occupationally successful. However, these percentages are based on small numbers, especially with regard to PMT backgrounds. Among group B, those with ambitious aspirations but poor qualifications, young people from PMT backgrounds were about half as likely again to achieve good outcomes compared with those from manual backgrounds.

The most striking difference between people from different occupational backgrounds is apparent for group D – those without either high aspirations or high levels of attainment. Among those from PMT backgrounds a substantial minority had achieved occupational success, while among those from manual backgrounds very few had done so. In fact about six times as many of the PMT as group as the manual group had either achieved PMT occupations or were in higher education. This parallels in some respects the results from a study of truancy by Attwood and Croll (2006). They suggested that young people from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds may be cushioned to some extent from the negative consequences for employment that, for other young people, were associated with a failure to succeed at school. More generally, Heath's (1981) study of social mobility, based on the Oxford Mobility Study, showed how the children of parents in non-manual occupations often found routes into such occupations themselves when they did not have the educational attainments generally associated with such outcomes. This was not the case for the children of parents in manual occupations.

The analysis in Table 12 shows a relationship of all three of the variables considered – parental occupation, occupational choice and educational attainment – to occupational outcomes. It shows the influence of parental occupation operating via choices and educational attainments but also independently of these. By far the most successful group occupationally are those who have ambitious choices and good qualifications. Such people are disproportionately likely to come from PMT occupational backgrounds. The influence of background on education and aspirations is therefore a major factor in reproducing patterns of advantage and disadvantage. However, there seems to be no further influence of parental background on the occupational outcomes of these young people. Those young people from manual backgrounds who are ambitious and get good qualifications are just as likely to have good occupational outcomes as similarly ambitious and qualified people from PMT backgrounds.

A strong contrast with this result can be found in group D – those who were not ambitious at 15 and did not have good qualifications. For the members of this group from manual backgrounds the prospects of occupational success seem to be extremely poor, at least at this early stage of their

careers. But for members of this group from PMT backgrounds occupational success is just as likely as it is for groups B and C. Only the ambitious and educationally successful (from whatever background) are more likely to be in PMT jobs or higher education. This suggests that there is an influence of parental occupational background for those from more advantaged circumstances which operates independently of either educational success or personal choices. For many of these young people there is a kind of safety net, perhaps consisting of family resources of various kinds, which means that desirable occupational outcomes are available to at least some of them in a way that was much less likely to be the case for those from less advantaged backgrounds.

The people in groups B and C had discordant or misaligned ambitions and attainment, either achieving less well than was required for their ambitions or wanting less ambitious outcomes than their achievements might make possible. For the young people in these groups from manual backgrounds it appears that educational success was more important than making ambitious choices at 15. The numbers are small, but those with good GCSEs who were not ambitious (group C) are more likely to have desirable outcomes than those who chose these outcomes but did not achieve well at GCSE. The situation for people from PMT backgrounds is less clear-cut, with little difference in outcomes for those in B, C and D.

The importance of educational achievement is very apparent from the table. This is the case for both categories of parental background but it appears to be especially important for young people from manual backgrounds, very few of whom were succeeding occupationally without good GCSE results. The importance of parental occupational background is also apparent. To a considerable extent the role of parental occupation operates through its association with better educational attainment and more ambitious choices. A very much higher proportion of the children of PMT parents than of manual parents were in group A, the ambitious educational achievers who had by far the best occupational outcomes. However, there is also an association of parental background and outcomes which appears to operate independently of educational attainment and personal choices. In group D, which consists of young people who did not have ambitions for PMT occupations and did not get good GCSEs, those from PMT backgrounds had very much better prospects of being in PMT occupations than those from manual occupational backgrounds. The role of choice, especially for those people who did not do well at GCSE, is less clear. For those who did succeed educationally an ambitious choice seems to help consolidate their occupational prospects: group A were by far the most successful occupationally. Also, among young people from manual backgrounds who did not get good GCSEs, a PMT choice was associated with much more favourable educational outcomes. But among young people from PMT backgrounds who did not do well educationally there was no difference in outcomes for those who chose a PMT destination and those who did not. Perhaps coming from a family where a parent or parents are in relatively advantaged occupations reduces the importance of personal decisions at 15 and creates a climate where PMT choices are likely to be made at some time. In contrast, young people in families where such a choice takes them out of the immediate occupational environment need to be more focused on such a choice in order to make it happen.

It is not possible from an analysis of the BHPS data to consider the possibility that choices may influence educational outcomes. Educational qualifications have been treated here as a constraint on the operation of choice. However, it is also possible that ambitious occupational choices may make people try harder for good GCSE results. If this is the case then choice may be more influential than the analysis here suggests.

Summary and conclusions

The evidence presented here has shown that young people in Great Britain in the late 1990s had relatively high occupational ambitions and that more of them aspired to more desirable and

well-rewarded occupations than the likely availability of such occupations. In terms of the broad socio-economic categories of occupations, young women and young men were equally ambitious. However, in certain specific types of occupation, such as traditional forms of skilled manual work and child care, strong gender stereotyping of occupational choice was found. It is also the case that, as Weiner, Arnot, and David (1997) point out, the superior educational performance of females has not, at least so far, been reflected in the representation of women at the most senior levels of employment. Of course, there are necessarily time lags in such processes and the data presented here relate to very early stages of careers.

While a majority of young people had educational intentions and attainments which matched their career ambitions, for a significant minority there was a misalignment between education and career. This was mainly a case of not planning or attaining the education necessary for the jobs they wanted, but included young people who were better qualified than their ambitions required. As other studies have shown, young people believe in personal agency: most think that their own efforts will influence outcomes for them.

The results also show aspects of the way that access to more advantaged socio-economic locations are transmitted across generations and the interplay of choice and educational behaviour and attainment in this process. The children of parents in less advantaged locations were ambitious, but less so than the children of parents in more advantaged locations. Moreover, the educational qualifications and participation of the ambitious children of less advantaged parents made it less likely that they would be able to realise their ambitions. Nevertheless, it should be emphasised again that these relationships are probabilistic and that many young people from less advantaged backgrounds had more ambitious occupational aims and higher educational attainments than some young people from advantaged backgrounds.

In the final part of the article a tentative analysis was conducted of the actual occupational destinations of sample members between five and ten years after the data on occupational plans were collected. Early choices, educational attainment and parental occupational background were all associated with occupational outcomes. People were more likely to achieve desirable occupational outcomes if they had chosen them at 15, if they had achieved good GCSE results and if their parents had such occupations. The results showed that the distribution of ambitions and attainment varied with parental background in a way that reinforced occupational advantage and disadvantage. However, ambitious and educationally successful young people from less advantaged backgrounds were just as likely to achieve occupational success as those from more advantaged backgrounds. In contrast, young people from less advantaged backgrounds who were neither ambitious at 15 nor educationally successful were very unlikely to achieve occupational success; but young people from advantaged backgrounds with the same level of ambition and achievement had, in a substantial minority of cases, obtained desirable jobs.

In the introduction to this article two broad sociological issues were raised. The first was the inter-generational transmission of socio-economic advantage and disadvantage and the way that, despite a considerable upward shift in terms of the proportion of jobs in more advantaged locations, the relative chances of them being filled by people from different backgrounds has remained the same. The second was that of the role of individual choice in understanding contemporary society and the arguments of theorists of individualisation that choice and a personally constructed identity has replaced traditional structural explanations of patterns of social difference.

The ambitions of the young people studied here illustrate the upward shift in available social locations over the past fifty or so years (Iannelli and Patterson 2006). Most young people from all backgrounds were ambitious for desirable jobs and the increasing proportion of jobs in professional, managerial and other non-manual work is matched by the ambitions for such jobs of the sample. The distribution of ambitions also shows the operation of choice in inter-generational transmission. While those from less advantaged backgrounds were ambitious for professional,

managerial and other non-manual jobs, a smaller proportion of them had such ambitions compared with young people whose parents themselves came from such backgrounds.

However, the importance of choice is heavily constrained by the importance of scarcity and of competition. Reading theorists such as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (e.g. 2001), it can sometimes seem that choice is unconstrained and operates in a kind of enchanted garden[5] of infinite possibilities and opportunities. A recognition that identity may depend on lifestyle rather than structural location has to be tempered by a recognition that lifestyles have to be paid for and that, for most people, this depends on paid employment. The young people in the BHPS survey see themselves as constructing their own lives and many of them have made ambitious choices for their future employment. But many more of them aspire to desirable forms of employment than the occupational structure can support. Many will therefore be disappointed in their ambitions for professional and managerial careers. The early career data from the 2004 survey shows that the ambitions expressed at 15 are nothing like matched by occupational outcomes and, although there is likely to be further upward movement in occupational destinations for these young people, there are simply not enough desirable jobs to satisfy their ambitions.[6]

In this competitive environment educational participation and achievement are key determinants of who are winners and losers although there may also be an influence of parental background which does not depend on educational achievement. The data show clearly that educational attainment is a crucial factor in predicting occupational success. Consequently, the association of parents' occupational background with their children's educational achievements continues to be a key structural influence on the futures of these young people.

Nevertheless, choice also operates, especially where it occurs alongside good qualifications. For young people from all backgrounds, having ambitious educational aims and, at the same time, performing well in examinations was strongly associated with better occupational outcomes. This is true of young people from manual occupational backgrounds just as much as for children from professional, managerial and technical backgrounds. But for children from less advantaged families choice is both more heavily constrained by attainment, and unambitious choices are particularly likely to result in unambitious outcomes. Of those making unambitious choices at 15, those from manual occupational backgrounds were very unlikely to end up in PMT occupations, while for those from PMT families many more were likely to do so.

The results of this, admittedly tentative, analysis only partly support the Rational Action Theory approach to differential choices between different social groups discussed earlier. Some support for the approach is apparent in the way that young people from manual occupational backgrounds who do well at GCSE are less likely than other young people to have ambitious occupational choices. However, the different outcomes for young people from different socio-economic backgrounds in group D, the lower attaining and non-ambitious young people, suggest a mechanism for transferring advantage between generations which does not operate through occupational ambitions or educational attainment. Also, the much higher proportion of children from advantaged backgrounds in group A results not only from their being more likely to be ambitious but also from their being more likely to perform well in examinations. While the different outcomes for group D young people demonstrate a non-educational and non-choice mechanism, the different pattern of membership of group A shows the importance of the association between background and attainment. However, it must also be said that the possibility that choices may influence attainment cannot be investigated here.

Returning to the initial concerns of the article, the analysis has shown the continuation of inter-generational occupational continuities, the importance of alignment of ambitions and educational attainment and the influence of choice on different occupational outcomes. It has also shown the key role of educational qualifications in rationing access to desirable jobs and that this applies even to an examination taken at the age of 16. While recognising the importance of choice

we can also re-characterise it as *structurally contingent choice*; choices which have different degrees of force in different social and educational circumstances. For those who are educationally successful, ambitious choices are likely to lead to outcomes consistent with these choices whatever their family background. But for those who are less successful educationally, or do not have ambitious occupational aims, choices can have consequences much more influenced by their families' structural locations. In particular, young people from manual occupational backgrounds are more likely to make unambitious choices and are then more likely to see these choices turn into less attractive outcomes. At the same time, the educational and social resources available to families in more advantaged occupational positions mediate the influence of the choices their children make for their futures.

Many of the processes which may be operating here are beyond the influence of the educational system. However, there are aspects of these findings which suggest the possibility of educational interventions. When young people from less advantaged backgrounds get into the ambitious and educationally successful category, their prospects occupationally are as good as those of similar young people from more advantaged backgrounds. But a substantially lower proportion of young people from such backgrounds who did well at GCSE had previously expressed ambitious occupational intentions. This cannot just be the result of socio-economically based cultural differences, as other young people from such backgrounds, who do not go on to do well at GCSE, have expressed ambitious intentions. Many of these young people may be either failing to realise that they can achieve good examination results at 16 or are failing to consider the range of occupational possibilities this opens to them. It is also possible that teachers may either not realise the academic potential of some disadvantaged young people or may not realise that they have limited aspirations. We come back to the notion of alignment discussed earlier. If schools and other services for young people can help academically able young people from less advantaged backgrounds to better align their attainments and ambitions, then it may be possible to attain a more equitable socio-economic distribution of occupational success.

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Notes

1. The evidence for the relationship between the socio-economic situation of parents and the educational and occupational status of their children comes from a variety of sources. The Oxford Mobility Study (Halsey, Heath, and Ridge 1980) provides data on the situations of fathers and sons in England and Wales, and the Scottish Mental Survey (Hope 1984) gives equivalent data for Scotland. A later partial replication of the Oxford Mobility Study (Marshall et al. 1988) also included Scotland. More recently, work at the Centre for Educational Sociology at the University of Edinburgh has used the British Household Panel Survey (the survey used in this article), the England and Wales Youth Cohort Study and the Scottish School Leavers Survey to look at the relationship between parental occupations and children's educational outcomes for males and females across England, Wales and Scotland in the 1980s and 1990s (Patterson and Iannelli 2006; Raffe et al. 2006). Broadly speaking, the results of these studies have been remarkably consistent. All the surveys have shown strong patterns of continuity between the situations of parents and of their adult children. The children of parents in more advantaged socio-economic circumstances have, on average, better educational outcomes and more advantaged occupational outcomes than those whose parents are in disadvantaged socio-economic situations. Over the period of time to which these studies relate, broadly speaking the second half of the twentieth century, both occupational situations and educational outcomes have shown a very marked upward trend: people stay in education much

longer and achieve much higher levels of qualifications and a much higher proportion of occupations are of a professional or managerial nature. In this context of much improved socio-economic and educational prospects it is very striking that the relative situation of people from different socio-economic backgrounds has remained pretty much unchanged. While outcomes have improved for people from all backgrounds, the inequality in outcomes for people from different backgrounds has not lessened. These patterns are very similar for England, Wales and Scotland, although overall levels of educational attainment are higher in Scotland and there is some evidence that levels of inequality are also higher (Patterson and Iannelli 2006). Data from Northern Ireland are not available for the present analysis but the relationship between background and outcomes is also well-established there. For example, Breen's (2003) analysis of the 1996 Northern Ireland Mobility Study showed that both educational and occupational outcomes were related to parental occupation and that the relationship between the occupations of parents and children could not be entirely explained by education. A useful account of the British tradition of social mobility studies is given by Pawson (1993).

2. The examination system in Scotland differs from that in England and Wales and results in Scottish examinations have been converted here to their England and Wales equivalents.
3. Traditionally the socio-economic status of children in families has been determined by the occupation of the father. More recently the occupation of both parents has been taken into account and the 'dominance' approach, which has been employed here, involves using the occupation of the parent in the most advantaged occupational category to determine the socio-economic status of the family (Rose and Pevalin 2003). Of course this means that there is a considerable upward shift in the socio-economic status of the sample compared with the situation if only one parent's occupation was used. In the present study, where data were available on both parents, in only 30% of cases were they in the same socio-economic group. Some of the problems this creates for the use of socio-economic categories and, in particular, the concept of social class, are discussed by Croll (2006). In the present discussion the term 'social class' has been deliberately avoided.
4. 'Family care' may refer in principle to a variety of care situations but all cases in the present sample were young women looking after their own children. It should be noted that this category is quite different to the occupational category 'child care'.
5. 'One closes behind one the little gate of mere boyishness – and enters an enchanted garden. Its very shades glow with promise. Every turn of the path has its seduction' (Conrad 1917).
6. This analysis has treated professional, managerial and technical occupations as 'desirable' outcomes. It has not been concerned with competition within these groups, especially professional and managerial groups, for 'glittering prizes'. The work of Brown and Hesketh (2004) on competition within graduate labour markets gives evidence of these processes.

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