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Retaining a focus on absolute change: A generational shift in the working-class transitions to university in the UK

Dr Kaidong Yu

School of Management, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK, S10 1FL

Email: k.yu@sheffield.ac.uk, yukaidong1994@gmail.com
ORCiDs: 0000-0002-9383-5132
Twitter: @Yukaidong
LinkedIn: Kaidong Yu

Biographical note:

Dr Kaidong Yu is a postdoctoral Research Associate in Sheffield University Management School. He obtained his PhD in Sociology from the University of Manchester in 2023. His research interest is built upon the question of how inequalities shape young people's transition and social mobility, with a key focus on a subjective sense of inequality and changing opportunity structure.

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Abstract

This article explores the impact of absolute changes in the opportunity structure on the experiences of education and social mobility among working-class students in the UK. Existing approaches to social mobility often overlook absolute changes or adopt limited timeframes, focusing on continuity within change. Based on 28 life-history interviews with working-class students, this study compared three cohorts' educational trajectories to analyse how absolute shifts in educational and occupational opportunities shape working-class students' experiences of education and social mobility. The research findings reveal a generational shift in reduced positional advantage of HE attendance, with the shifting meaning of social location for working-class students who attend university in different contexts. By retaining a focus on absolute change, this article challenges the standard working-class narratives of social mobility based on shared class inequality and contributes to a nuanced understanding of the historically contextualised nature of social mobility processes and experiences.

Keywords: absolute change, generation, higher education, class inequality

Introduction

Higher education (HE) has profoundly changed over time in the United Kingdom (UK), and has been marked by a generational shift, in *absolute* terms, of improved opportunities for access. The number of students in HE in the UK has increased from 216,000 in 1962/3, accounting for only 8.5% of young people aged under 30 (Robbins, 1963), to 2,343,095 in 2017/8, representing over 50.2% of the age group (DfE, 2019). Working-class students, in particular, benefited from the expansion of HE, despite being under-represented compared to their middle-class counterpart. More working-class students went to university over time but the relative inequality in HE access persists: 3.6% of the working-class and 26.7% of the middle-class students aged under 21 attended university in 1962, whereas by 2018, 27.3% and 57.8% of students aged under 21 from working-class and middle-class backgrounds attended university (UK Government, 2020; ONS, 1999) [1].

In recent decades, Bourdieusian scholars have increasingly sought to understand and explain the persisting inequality in education that creates a barrier for working-class access to HE (Lehmann, 2012; Loveday, 2015; Reay, 2017). The emphasis in this approach is on the incompatibility of the middle-class educational field with working-class habitus (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Ingram, 2011; Reay, 2004; Reay et al., 2009). However, critics argue that the working-class experience of university is too often presented simply as that of a homogeneous group of people defined by class-based barriers and struggles in a predominantly middle-class realm (Atkinson, 2012; Winzler, 2021). While it is right to stress the shared experience of class inequalities for working-class students, more work is needed on how *absolute* changes – proportional shifts in working-class student numbers in HE – affects the meaning of social location and advantage for working-class students who attend university in different contexts.

To address these concerns, this article examines on the impact of absolute change on working-class transitions to, and experiences of, university in the UK. As Bourdieu (2000, p.

160) argues, when 'a field undergoes a major crisis […] its regularities (even its rules) are profoundly changed'. Key shifts in policies, such as the introduction and the rise of tuition fees, transformed students into fee-paying 'consumers' concerned with the value of their learning outcomes and their employability (Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Brancaleone & O'Brien, 2011; Tomlinson, 2017; Tomlinson & Watermeyer, 2022). In this context, it is also important to recognise how working-class trajectories to university unfolded within the shifting educational and social contexts, whereby people's awareness of absolute change is the key to their narratives of education and social mobility. While university attendance has become more common for working-class students, there is little discussion about how absolute changes in HE since the 1950s have affected the meaning and value of university attendance for working-class students, and how they have shaped the varied ways in which working-class students perceived and understood university as their possible future prospect. To answer these questions requires an analysis connecting intergenerational working-class transition to university with the wider absolute changes in the opportunity structure.

This article draws upon 28 life-histories with working-class students who went to university as the first generation in the family since the 1950s. The sample of working-class students is defined in both objective and subjective terms: not only did their parents work in either manufacturing industries or routine, part-time, casual and flexible employment in services, but they self-identified as working-class students. The following discussion begins by presenting a critical review on the theme of continuity and change within the Nuffield approach and the Bourdieusian account. The next section explains this study's methods, data collection and data analysis. Then I present a comparative analysis of the three sample cohorts to illustrate the importance of retaining a focus on absolute change. Overall, I conclude this article by arguing that a focus on absolute change helps to understand the reproduction of relative class inequality in the process of how working-class people negotiate university opportunities across time.

Challenging Contexts: The problem of continuity in social mobility studies

The Nuffield approach – using quantitative survey methods examining intergenerational mobility within an occupational class scheme (Goldthorpe, 1987) – has dominated the study of social mobility in the UK for over 50 years. Social mobility studies in this tradition highlight the dynamic patterns of change in social structure, with a key contribution to distinguish absolute mobility from relative one. Absolute mobility refers to the *numbers* of individual movements between different positions within the class scheme, and relative mobility explains the different *chances* of people from different class origins of entering the same class destinations (Goldthorpe, 1987).

The Nuffield approach to social mobility increasingly shifted its focus onto relative differentials in access to opportunities, where the greater emphasis is placed on the continuity of occupational class mobility (Bukodi et al., 2015; Goldthorpe, 1987; Goldthorpe & Jackson, 2007; Goldthorpe & Mills, 2004, 2008). For Goldthorpe and his colleagues, the focus of class analysis should be on relative mobility rather than on shifts in the opportunity structure, because relative mobility is about the fairness and openness of social arrangements rather than on how mobility might be mechanically enabled or constrained by shifts in the structure of positions (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992). A series of intergenerational mobility studies[2] have concluded that relative class inequalities have remained stable, despite the changing pattern of absolute mobility across generations (Bukodi et al., 2015; Goldthorpe, 1987; Goldthorpe & Jackson, 2007; Goldthorpe & Mills, 2004, 2008).

Whilst relative mobility rates show the enduring nature of class inequalities even within widespread patterns of social transformation, there have also been significant absolute changes in the opportunity structure since the 1950s, which should not be quickly dismissed. The UK witnessed a profound expansion in the absolute number of the age group entering university. Following the recommendation of the Robbins Report, the overall percentage of young people entering HE increased by 5.0% between 1950 and 1970, and the number of students obtaining university degrees rose from 17,337 in 1950 to 51,189 in 1970 (ONS, 1999). While polytechnics and some colleges were promoted to universities (DfE, 1991), the further expansion of HE was central to its educational policy as part of its agenda of widening participation in HE. The student numbers of people aged 19-24 in full-time education went up from 984,000 in 1992 to 1,248,000 in 2000 (ONS, 2016), and subsequently, this figure increased to 1,288,160 in 2021/2 (HESA, 2023).

However, expanding educational opportunities do not straightforwardly map onto social mobility. Part of the problem here is how expanding educational opportunities create positional shifts across generations. As a positional good, the value of education partly depends on the proportions of people achieving education qualifications, creating positional conflict (Hirsch, 1977) between different groups to maintain relative advantage over others. As more people now go to university, the advantage that a university degree brought in the past is declining. This is also affected by the fact the expansion of educational opportunities has not been matched by a sufficient expansion of professional, managerial and technical jobs, leading to 'credential inflation' (Brown, 2013; Brown & James, 2020; Collins et al., 2019). This means that the analysis of absolute educational opportunities must be understood in relation to the overall pattern of occupational mobility (Brown & Souto-Otero, 2020).

In the UK, there has been a shifting overall pattern of occupational social mobility since the 1950s. A post-war 'Golden Age' saw rising rates of upward mobility, a period in which working-class people were able to take up new chances for professional and technical jobs in the labour market, mainly because there was more 'room at the top' (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2019; Goldthorpe, 2016; Todd, 2021). However, from the 1980s onwards, this mobility pattern stagnated: there has been more downward mobility and upward mobility has become less common due to deindustrialisation and the slowing of the expansion of professional and technical jobs (Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2019; Bukodi et al., 2015). This means that the analysis of educational mobility must take absolute changes in the labour market into account, an angle that this paper aims to provide.

Altogether, the continuity of class inequalities should not rule out consideration of the impact of absolute changes in the opportunity structure. Post-war Britain experienced significant changes not only in the overall pattern of absolute mobility but also in wider socio-economic conditions which have transformed the nature of working-class locations and lives. The change in the composition and class relations of the working-class between then and now is significant for people's experience and life-course trajectories (Saunders, 1995). As Saunders (1995) reminds us, 'whether we are interested in people's objective life chances or in their subjective lived experiences, what matters is precisely that there is now more "room at the top", but a focus on relative measures directs our attention away from this'. Thus, the focus on relative differentials within the Nuffield approach is in danger of overlooking 'the *social consequences* of change on inequality' (Bottero, 2014, p. 544).

Bourdieu, social mobility and the question of absolute change

In addressing the key theme of continuity and change, it is necessary to address Bourdieu's framework (focused on the key concepts of habitus, capital and field) which has significantly influenced today's scholarship on social mobility. For Bourdieu, habitus represents a set of durable and transposable dispositions and behaviours shaped by past experiences, producing an embodied orientation to and understanding of the social world in which one is embedded (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72). In Bourdieu's term, habitus is a 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 66), in which actors act according to a practical 'sense', in which (when habitus is adapted to field) they have a 'social instinct' of how to proceed without always being fully conscious of why. The notion of capital represents three different forms of resources – economic, social and cultural – rooted in power relations that shape the pre-reflexive positions of individuals. The concept of field then is understood as a matrix of positions (sites) where habitus and capital play out (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97). Influenced by Bourdieu's theory, social mobility analysis explores how class inequalities shape not only resources but also what is valued educationally, and how the 'fit' (or lack of it) between habitus and field profoundly affects the upward mobility process for working-class people (Mallman, 2017; Payne, 2017).

By adopting Bourdieu's theoretical tool, qualitative approaches to social mobility contribute to a more complex and diverse story of the social mobility experiences of working-class people, by attending more to people's subjective perspective on their situation (Lawler & Payne, 2018; Littler, 2017; Reay, 2018). Such research shows that class inequalities shape how working-class people perceive social mobility, with working-class people often experiencing feelings of discomfort about social mobility (Johnson & Lawler, 2005; Lawler, 1999). Class inequalities affect the emotional and psychological feelings of individuals, and such reactions represent the hidden stories of social mobility (Friedman, 2014). This is not to say that working-class people do not aspire to social mobility, but rather that their experience of social mobility is often fraught and morally charged. Qualitative approaches to social mobility, therefore, demonstrate the significance of subjective inequalities in mobility experience, which, since the 1970s, the dominant Nuffield approach to the topic has largely neglected (Miles, 2018).

However, there remains an emphasis on the continuity of class inequality and factors hindering the upward mobility of the working class (Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Friedman & Savage, 2017), in which absolute changes in the opportunity structure seem to be bracketed out of the topic. For example, the 'class ceiling' argument focuses on how factors of the persistence of classed stereotypes and norms in the workplace, the influence of family backgrounds, and the importance of social networks affect people moving into prestigious industries (Friedman & Laurison, 2020), but takes less accounts of classed norms that are period-specific and constantly changing across contexts (Nilsen et al., 2015). It is then necessary to note absolute changes in the class composition and demography at elite schools over time and their implications on the access to elite university. In America, for example, recent studies highlight how privileged preparatory and elite boarding schools equip working-class students with necessary cultural capital which leads to a positive transition to progress to elite university (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009; Jack, 2019; Khan, 2011). These studies illuminate how exposure to middle-class culture at elite schools facilitates a classed diversity within working-class students and shapes their privileged pathways to university – an aspect that Bourdieu's theory of the reproduction of class inequality within educational institutions does not fully address.

In a broad sense, even though Bourdieu and his followers do concede that there can be changes to the habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), the focus of social mobility experiences is more on describing the status quo rather than analysing why and how the habitus is shifted over one's social mobility process. However, while temporality is a key component for this potential change in habitus, it is one that Bourdieu fails to fully address (McNay, 1999). Recent work has focused on the notion of habitus clivé (Bourdieu, 1999), which refers to the internalised conflict of the self because of a mismatch between early socialisation (the primary habitus) and new experiences in specific fields over the life course (the secondary habitus). Empirically, there is evidence of such habitus clivé occurring over the course of upward mobility (Friedman, 2016; Ingram, 2011; Lawler, 1999), but it is worth noting that such research also points out that social mobility does not always leads to habitus clivé (Ingram & Abrahams, 2016). More generally, it is argued that there is insufficient focus on 'how the habitus is likely to be altered, adjusted, and/or disrupted by such processes of mobility' (Friedman & Savage, 2017, p. 77).

So while the Bourdieusian research on social mobility provides a nuanced account of 'continuity within change' – highlighting class origins in shaping unequal opportunities for individuals and negative experiences of social mobility for the working class – there is little discussion of the implications of absolute changes in the opportunity structure that working-class people navigate nor on how they perceive these changes. Thus, this article brings a focus on absolute changes to understand different generations of working-class students transitions to university as movements within a changing structure, in order to address the question of both continuity and change in social mobility studies.

The study

This article draws on 28 life-history interviews with working-class students who went to university in the UK as the first generation in their family. Although the study was done within a nation-state, the methodological distinction of the life history approach is to address the central theme of 'continuity and change', concerning how working-class people's educational trajectories, and the ways in which they are understood, are embedded in different social contexts in the UK. As Clausen (1998, p. 196) argues, life history interviews address the experiences of the 'more or less autonomous person and which (a) takes place in a changing cultural, social structural and historical setting; (b) increasingly involves individual choices as to the direction taken; and (c) almost always entails both continuities and discontinuities'. In thinking about 'continuity and change', I consider not just the temporality of absolute changes (in the labour market, educational policy etc.) but also people's subjective awareness of such changes through family, school, university, and workplace, in which people lead their lives, and which shapes their understanding of their situation and the opportunities and constraints they face.

A key element of my research strategy is the sampling of three cohorts of working-class students who experienced different types of schooling and entered university at different points in time, a strategy designed to capture how a changing and differentiated opportunity structure affected working-class people's relations and transitions to university.

NAME	**GENDER**	**YEAR OF BIRTH**	**OCCUPATION**	**TYPE OF SECONDARY SCHOOL**	YEAR ATTENDED UNIVERSITY

		(AGE AT INTERVIEW)			(AGE)
			First cohort		
Megan	F	1944 (76)	Retired (former head of a sixth form)	Senior secondary school in Scotland	1963 (18)
Grady	M	1955 (64)	Retired (former sale director of an IT company)	Secondary modern and then a technical college	1973 (18)
Graham	M	1955 (64)	Librarian at a university	Grammar	1973 (18)
Carla	F	1956 (64)	Retired (former school teacher)	Grammar	1975 (19)
Isaac	M	1961 (58)	A lecturer	Grammar	1980 (19)
Naomi	F	1973 (46)	Teaching fellow at a university	Grammar	1993 (20)
			Second cohort		
Patrick	M	1958 (61)	Manager	Comprehensive	1986 (27)
Khloe	F	1971 (49)	PhD student	Comprehensive	1992 (21)
Michael	M	1971 (48)	School teacher	Comprehensive	1990 (19)
Carter	F	1973 (46)	Associate lecturer	Non-selective schooling in South Africa 1986-9 and then back in Scotland from 1989	1992 (19)
Kimberly	F	1975 (44)	Lecturer	Comprehensive	1992 (18)
Derek	M	1978 (42)	Social worker	Comprehensive	2002 (24)
Madison	F	1978 (42)	Officer at a school	Comprehensive	2015 (37)
David	M	1979 (40)	Master's student	Comprehensive	2007 (27)
Karen	F	1981 (38)	Officer of an insurance company	Comprehensive	2010 (29)
Chandra	F	1982 (38)	Doctor	Attended school in Pakistan	2000 (18)
Sue	F	1986 (33)	Lecturer	Comprehensive	2005 (19)
Klaus	M	1987 (33)	PhD student	Comprehensive	2013 (26)
			Third cohort		
Charles	M	1990 (30)	Lecturer	Comprehensive	2010 (20)
Khari	M	1990 (29)	PhD student	Attended non-selective school in Poland	2009 (19)
Poppy	F	1991 (28)	Master's student	Comprehensive	2015 (23)
Gina	F	1994 (26)	PhD student	Comprehensive	2012 (18)
Fayla	F	1994 (26)	Officer at a university	Non-selective school in Ireland	2017 (23)
Celina	F	1995 (25)	Student	Comprehensive	2016 (21)
Nilo	M	1995 (25)	Master's student	Comprehensive	2014 (19)

Ava	F	1997 (23)	Student	Comprehensive	2017 (20)
Daryll	M	1997 (22)	Student	Comprehensive	2017 (20)
Jessica	F	1998 (21)	Student	A 'free grammar' school	2017 (19)

The categorisation of the sample cohort was central to the question of 'absolute change' in the opportunity structure, highlighting differences in types of schools attended (see table above). The first sample cohort (N=6), born between 1940s to the 1960s (plus the 1970s cohort of Naomi), attended schools under the tripartite system (i.e. grammar schools or secondary moderns). In contrast, the later two cohorts all attended comprehensive schools, but the boundary between them highlights changing opportunities for university places – the second cohort (N=12), born between the 1970s and the 1980s, mapped out the first phase of the comprehensivation policy whereas the third cohort (N=10), born in the 1990s, experienced their educational transitions during the period of increased participation in HE.

While the three cohorts' pathways showed a 'U-turn' in terms of years of university attendance (Yu, 2022), concerns may arise regarding gendered differences in their narratives, particularly given increased opportunities for working-class women in Britain. However, women's narratives about getting into university were less obvious than their class accounts, as the increased opportunities for women corresponded with the relative proportion of working-class entrants in HE. Additionally, acknowledging the limitation of sample which consists primarily of white British, the analysis in this paper centres to the classed nature of changing opportunity structures, and, therefore, cannot map out the racial and ethnic dimensions of changing opportunities during the period.

The data analysis focuses on people's subjective understandings of their social situations shaped by the wider social contexts, with theoretical concerns of the question of continuity within change in working-class experiences of and transitions to university across different generations. To locate the generational and contextual differences in educational trajectories to university, data analysis adopted a temporal comparison of the three cohorts' trajectories as movements within a changing structure, where I discuss how absolute changes in the opportunity structure have shaped the variability of working-class experiences of education and social mobility, as well as the shifting meaning of social location and advantage.

Changing school effect on the significance of university

The first cohort represents a highly atypical group with privileged routes from grammar schools to university, but this atypicality declines over time in later cohorts' narratives. I argue that a focus on absolute changes in education system explains this decline by highlighting the changing role of schooling on shaping their sense of university as a possible route, particularly with a clear division between those with privileged routes and those without (Jack, 2019).

Members in the first cohort spoke of their early success in school, where they felt marked out from their peers. Attending grammar school established a sense that they were on a different path to their working-class peers. Despite feeling a 'fish out of water' at Grammar school, the school ethos and the trajectories of their Grammar school peers shaped their expectation of university as the next step. In contrast, the later cohorts' pathways reflect a decrease in the relative proportion of working-class entrants with privileged pathways into university

following the comprehensivation policy. They had more typical working-class schooling experiences, as the narrative of struggles for 'fitting in' was evident.

However, there were important differences between the second and final cohort. The second cohort often reported quite negative schooling experiences, with poor educational provision and low expectations for people from working-class backgrounds. In contrast, the final cohort generally spoke more positively of their schooling, and referred more often to how teachers mentioned university and encouraged them to think of applying. By adopting a focus on absolute change, I have identified a temporal effect of rising university attendance on how schools framed university as a more possible route.

> It [university] was very much that was the next thing you do because that's what everybody did and in the school magazine every year there was a list of people who had gone to Oxford or Cambridge and there was this thing that they had exhibitions, or they had scholarships. (Isaac, male, born 1961, C1[3])

> So I just remember being very unsettled at school because there was never a very relaxed. I don't remember feeling very relaxed at school that seemed to be a lot of tension. And the teachers never seemed very happy. I always remember I had an English teacher who... I always look back now and think, he surprised me as being very depressed, he would come in and sort of put his head on the desk and then he would just be left. I don't really feel that the teachers were very motivated or engaged (Khloe, female, born 1971, C2)

> I think my teachers were more of a source about telling me about university. Occasionally teachers will tell you certain things or they'll drop certain things about when you're at university you might do this, or at university you're consuming too much pizza or just say flipping things like there was an assumption that most of you would go to university. (Nilo, male, born 1995, C3)

These accounts highlight the variability of the school effect in shaping working-class transitions to university in different contexts. For my three sample cohorts, school was not always a homogeneous barrier for excluding working-class pupils, so we must challenge the literature that over emphasises the dissonance of education and working-class pupils by considering how absolute changes in schooling foster different school ethos that encourage working-class pupils to feel the possibility about going to university.

Changing labour market effect on university attendance

Absolute shifts in the opportunity structure were reflected in the varied ways in which the sample cohorts perceived university in relation to the changing labour market. On one hand, there is growing importance of degree qualifications which the sample cohorts increasingly perceived as a route to decent work. On the other hand, the data highlights how a generational decline in the atypicality of getting into university affected subjectivity in terms of how university is valued.

The first cohort connected their university choices vocationally to their future careers, with university study valued in its own right, as well as being seen as an intrinsic part of their pathway to their chosen profession. The accounts of the later cohorts expressed a more instrumental view of university in response to changes in both university and the labour

market. They went to university because they felt rising qualification requirements in the labour market made it more necessary to have a degree for many jobs, not just the professions (Boden & Nedeva, 2010; Molesworth et al., 2009).

> I only saw going to university as the option for me to get a job that was worthwhile. (Carla, female, born 1956, C1)

> It was to have qualifications, get a degree and then it was to be able to go into employment where I got paid more than I had previously. So money, it was a subject I was interested in. It was to be a sense of achievement as well. (Derek, male, born 1978, C2)

> If you look at a lot of job applications, the essential requirement is that you need a degree for everything. (Fayla, female, born 1994, C3)

It is also important to note the sample's awareness of the changing meaning of HE attendance and working-class trajectories within HE. All my interviewees experienced atypical working-class educational trajectories in the sense that they all attended university. But for the earliest cohort, university was a much more minority experience for their whole age group compared to the contemporary generation – something that shifted over time with a generational decline in the atypicality of HE attendance. So social mobility analysis must focus on how a changing opportunity structure affected the ways in which people perceived not only the significance of university but also their atypical routes within it. The changing pattern of educational trajectories affects how routes across contexts become seen as common, typical or even expected. Consequently, such shifts in wider opportunities over time filter into people's subjective understanding of their relative position. From the first cohort to the final cohort, attending university become a much more common experience and so offered a reduced positional advantage (Brown, 2000; Hirsch, 1977).

> In those days a small proportion, I don't know what it was, probably, one in ten, maybe not even as much as that, went from school to university. So from the background that I was, it was very, very few people. (Graham, male, born 1955, C1)

> Even when I was doing my A Levels, only a few people went to university, or only certain people went to university. (Michael, male, born 1971, C2)

> But for my generation, you need a… There's no way of getting your foot in the door without a degree, even if the job doesn't in practice require any skill learned on your degree. (Khari, male, born 1990, C3)

The changing effect of the HE sector

A focus on absolute changes in HE reflects how proportional shifts in HE over time not only affect the distinction of going to university but also generate diverse experiences of university, whereby pressures, anxiety and flexibility are increasingly emphasised.

When university has become increasingly common from one cohort to the next in my sample, the account of university experience manifests great pressure and risks for working-class students. For example, the first cohort spoke of experiencing financial and personal independence at university, whilst the final cohort (and some members of the second cohort)

spoke of the financial pressures and anxiety of attending university and most had part-time jobs to maintain their living costs.

> I saw university as a chance to be independent. But a lot of students, their parents would come up. Parents would send them money and buy them this and that. But it wasn't so much like that in my case. But I don't see that is a negative thing because I think part of the experience of being university is learning to be independent and not relying on that. I mean, the person I married, for example, had very protective parents, it's almost you can… if they'd had their way, they'd have sent it to university with a chaperone. (Graham, male, born 1955, C1)

> Because I've chosen to do things part time, because I cannot bear the thought of not being able to have money. (Karen, female, born 1981, C2)

> I did [have financial difficulties] more or less. Now I live with my mum and dad just because it's not as expensive, but I lived on my own for six months and that was quite difficult, financially difficult, had to work more. (Ava, female, born 1997, C3)

To fully situate the accounts above, it is important to note that the typicality and the payoff of university attendance changed significantly from one cohort to another. In thinking about social mobility with a focus on absolute change, there was an important decline in the distinction of going to university, because society itself is changing over time so class boundaries are temporalised (Friedman & Savage, 2017). In attending university at the time that they did, the older members of the sample had a relatively much more advantaged position than the younger members and shifts in reduced positional advantage can be observed in the positive accounts of mixing with people from different backgrounds.

> Yeah, I suppose I did [get on well with them] in a way. Because at the end of the day, we're all there for the same thing. We played and sang together. (Graham, male, born 1955, C1)

> And what I liked about the course was that it was a mix of people of all ages and backgrounds. (Khloe, female, born 1971, C2)

> It's more about their mentality if they [people from wealthy backgrounds at university] are very sort of down to us and they can have a bit of a laugh at themselves and other people and they can banter well, stuff like that. Then it's fine yeah, I get along very well with them. (Daryll, male, born 1997, C3)

Of course, these are all retrospective accounts of social mobility and, as 'success stories', are more likely to be inflected with a positive tone about experiences. But a focus on absolute change addresses the differences in how the different cohorts spoke of their positive university experience with people from more wealthy backgrounds. The first cohort, who spoke of university as a place where they fulfilled their academic ambitions, did not see 'posh' people at university as a social barrier because of their experience of Grammar school. They had already had their 'fish out of water' experiences at school, and had made adjustments to middle-class educational environments (Reay et al., 2009). By contrast, the narratives of the later two cohorts emphasised their flexibility – they were able to make friends with people from different backgrounds, but there was a focus on how there was similarity in mentality and experience rather than in backgrounds. Here it was a morally

charged working class label that generated more selective strategies to 'fitting in' and of distancing from class (Miles et al., 2011; Savage et al., 2015; Skeggs, 1997).

> I didn't feel that I was out of place. I mean, I didn't know that some of the students were from… not massively wealthy backgrounds, but they did seem quite posh, but actually most people like me were just, it didn't seem like a big thing. (Naomi, female, born 1973, C1)

> So it kind of the people, I really liked the people on the social policy course because they came from such different backgrounds. There was sort of older people, younger people, who have work, but some haven't. And I felt like I could relate to them more. (Khloe, female, born 1971, C2)

> Similar background doesn't really matter, because I have friends a lot of people now who are from very different backgrounds, similar mentality. (Daryll, male, born 1997, C3)

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, I examined how absolute changes in the opportunity structure affected the varied ways in which working-class students framed their experiences of education and social mobility in relation to historical shifts in HE. I argue that it is important to retain a focus on absolute changes to understand the reproduction of relative class inequality and social mobility in the process of how working-class people negotiate university opportunities across time.

Existing approaches to social mobility tend to either hold change constant or else adopt a limited timeframe and often frame temporal issues from the perspective of 'continuity within change' (Brown & James, 2020; Bukodi & Goldthorpe, 2019; Halsey et al., 1980; Mandler, 2020). The Nuffield approach to social mobility put great emphasis on the relative class inequality that persists over time, despite the overall HE participation, in an absolute sense, working-class attendance of HE increased from 3.6% of the working-class pupils aged under 21 in 1960 to 27.3% of the age-group in 2018 (UK Government, 2020; ONS, 1999). While a Bourdieusian approach certainly helps address working-class people's limited or dissonant experiences of social mobility, the account is largely framed within a model of the reproduction of class disadvantage within processes of change (Archer et al., 2003; Bathmaker et al., 2016; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Reay et al., 2009). My research, with its distinctive temporal comparative focus on three cohorts' trajectories, aims to consider how absolute shifts in both educational and occupational opportunity structures shaped the varied ways in which working-class students experienced education and social mobility over their life courses. By adopting a temporal focus on absolute change in the opportunity structure, this article highlights how working-class experiences of education and social mobility were situated with the changing meaning of social space in both HE and the labour market.

In this article, I have argued that it is necessary to retain a focus on absolute change and understanding the reproduction of relative class inequality and social mobility in the process of how working-class people negotiate university opportunities across generations. As my research findings demonstrate, there is an important variation in how working-class people understand and perceive university and such variation must be understood in terms of absolute changes in the opportunity structure, which is not well addressed within the

dominant Nuffield and Bourdieusian analytical approaches to social mobility. As my sample cohorts show, the later cohorts were more likely to have an instrumental choice to go to university than the first cohort, due to individuals' awareness of the rising requirement of a university degree for a high-paid job. By contrast, members in the first cohort framed their choice of university as a more positive, aspirational choice and this may be connected to their greater emphasis on their enjoyment of the academic side of their time there. Focusing on such variation not only helps to show working-class people's sense of university is temporally situated within education and the labour market, but also helps to understand a generational shift in a reduced positional advantage (Brown, 2000; Hirsch, 1977).

By retaining a focus on absolute change, this article makes contribution to Bourdieu's thinking about social mobility – how society itself is changing which affects the production of relative advantage (Friedman & Savage, 2017). However, Bourdieu's thinking about the temporalised aspects of social mobility is less developed within the dominant analytical approaches to social mobility studies. Seen from the lens on absolute change, social mobility analysis is focused more fully on the implications of shifts in the opportunity structure for the meaning of social location. Goldthorpe's (1996) emphasis on the significance of absolute upward educational mobility is valid but non-traditional students in higher education may not enjoy the same educational outcomes as students from privileged backgrounds. Bourdieu's solution is to emphasise shifts in distinction in which, as HE expands and more people get access to it, its value as marker of distinction declines (Friedman & Savage, 2017). This is a question of the temporality of education and social mobility, a fluid and dynamic process in which markers of distinction change over time. To fully address the question of absolute change, it is necessary to see working-class individuals at different time points inhabit markedly different structures of opportunity, so that absolute shifts in working-class opportunities in the labour market and education system need to be factored into our account.

Altogether, this article challenges a linear story of a 'rags to riches' journey as a product of a particular historical moment in twentieth-century Britain (de Bellaigue et al., 2019; Savage & Flemmen, 2019; Worth, 2019). Following the new trend of historical analysis of social mobility, by situating individuals at the heart of historical shifts within their social mobility experiences, my study sheds light on how individual life histories of social mobility help to grasp the 'changing character of the meaning, experiences, and processes of social mobility' (de Bellaigue et al., 2019, p. 8). More generally, my analysis suggests that social mobility is multi-dimensional, with a focus on exploring the specificity, complexity and variation of mobility process and experiences (Lawler & Payne, 2018; Miles, 2018; Payne, 2017). The article therefore underpins the need for a nuanced and historically contextualised understanding of social mobility processes and experiences by bringing a focus on absolute change as a useful tool for understanding the complex experiences of working-class individuals and their journeys to HE.

Notes

1. The definition of working-class students has shifted from people from manual backgrounds to undergraduate students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (referring to lower supervisory & technical occupations, semi-routine occupations and routine occupations).
2. These longitude studies on intergenerational mobility based on the similar data resources, including the British Cohort Study, the National Child Development Study and British Household Panel Survey.

3. C1, C2 and C3 indicate members in the first cohort, the second cohort and the final cohort.

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