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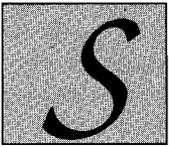
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Social Class in Singapore

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Social Class in Singapore devotes many of its 286 pages to an analysis of education and social stratification in Singapore, and will accordingly be of interest to all those involved in education. It is hard to imagine a more important and basic topic and the book has the virtue of helping us to ground our discussions of important educational issues concerning education, economic efficiency and social justice in Singaporean data. Though the book deals centrally with social class, and is described by the NUS authors as the first published book on the subject in Singapore, the discussion here will be confined to sections dealing with education.

The authors have "three principal goals: to replicate well-known occupational prestige scales in the context of Singapore; to provide empirical information on Singapore's stratification hierarchy and pattern of social mobility; and to document our findings as precisely as possible in order to provide the bases for future periodic comparisons" (p 16). Their central argument is that, though it is progressing rapidly both socially and economically, Singapore is not a middle class society, as commonly believed (p 269). Rather, "there is a relatively even distribution of people along the social class continuum" (p 264), based on differences in education, occupational

prestige and income. However, high rates of educational and occupational mobility show that the class structure is flexible (p 215). In advancing their case, the authors draw on two principal sources of data: firstly their own survey conducted in 1983/4 with a random sample of Singapore citizens; and secondly data from the 1970 and 1980 censuses. This data is used to shed light on both "subjective" and "objective" dimensions of social class, their inter-relationships, and significance in a multi-ethnic society.

Though chapter 3, **Education and Social Class**, is devoted specifically to educational issues, the reader will find these taken up in other chapters as well, as various facets of stratification are explored. Key questions addressed throughout the book are: how well schooled is the Singapore population; how important are educational qualifications in social stratification; how does education influence social perception, attitudes and action; and what is the influence of home background on educational attainment and occupation?

On the first question, the rapid expansion of educational opportunities and rising levels of educational attainment are highlighted, though it is noted from 1980 census data that "the large majority of literate people had only primary education" (p 44). On the second question, data is presented to show the close relationship between educational qualifications occupational prestige and income. Table 9.9 on p 267 is a useful summary of the discussion in the earlier part of the book.

Answers to the third and fourth questions regarding the effect of education on social perceptions, attitudes and actions are perhaps of more direct relevance to those involved in education. The authors assert that Singaporeans typically value education more as a means than an end, in the pursuit of material well-being. The possession of money, wealth and property are perceived to be the main symbols of higher social class, especially for the Chinese, though it is increasingly so amongst young people in general. Teachers will no doubt agree with the acculturation argument here: the data show that the longer the exposure to formal education, the more constructive and consensual people's views of society are. The views are not always rational, however, with the better educated Malays, and Chinese graduates, believing in luck, rather than hard work, as the main factor contributing to success. Though producing an acculturation effect in terms of attitudes, formal education seems to play a secondary role to that of ethnicity when it comes to choice of friends. Though "the main trend for both sexes is to select close friends within a narrow circle of educational equals" (p 68), ethnicity is "a dominant factor". There is strong evidence of ethnic stratification: "Class subcultures are subcultures within ethnic boundaries" (p 181). There is insufficient space here to follow the authors into their analysis of the complex relationships between social class and ethnicity in patterns of stratification.

Home influences on educational and occupational attainment are addressed in various parts of the book. Under scrutiny is the notion of "meritocracy", where achievement rather than ascription is considered to be the main criterion for social advancement. Home background is measured in terms of parental education and occupation, and though the importance of the "child's capacities" is mentioned, measurements of IQ are not used. A variety of statistical techniques, including path analysis, is deployed to tease out the level and direction of home influence.

The authors appear to agree that home background had little direct effect on their respondents' first job attainment, and what little

effect there was was "mostly mediated by one's education". They continue: "Our survey data seem to suggest that Singapore, like other industrialised societies, is dependent more on education than on family background in the process of first job attainment" (pp 237-8). The reason for this is that: "The expanding education system has provided the less well-to-do with greater opportunities for educational advancement, thus diluting the effect of the social origins on educational differences among our respondents" (p 237). In fact, the home background variables "explain about 20% of the variance in education (which) compared with other industrialized countries is relatively low and it is declining among the younger groups from 32 per cent among the 46-65 age group to 14 per cent among the 21-30 age group" (p 237).

However, the authors suggest that home background factors may operate differently on males and females. Though upward educational mobility is high for women it is even higher for men, suggesting that there is "some degree of discrimination against females" (p 211). The authors feel that this is so because those with no formal education or low educational attainment subscribe to "the traditional belief that daughters do not need formal education or a high educational level" (p 65). Upon closer examination, however, when measures of parental education and occupation are taken together, it seems that their effect on educational attainment is "more or less the same for the two groups" (pp 225,227). The reader may conclude from this that other non-home influences are at work, the school presumably being an important one. Given the importance of the "effective school" movement in recent years, it is a pity that the authors do not present any data on the schools attended by their respondents (Hartley, 1989).

Given the general picture of a rapid expansion of educational opportunities and upward educational inter-generational mobility, the reader may feel that the prognosis advanced in chapter 5 is a little overstated:

"With the educational background of parents influencing the educational attainment of children; and with educational qualifications as

the main vehicle for higher income and occupational status, then a certain degree of "social immobility" or perpetuation of the social classes is to be expected. Under these conditions, children of illiterate parents, or of parents with low education, face a herculean task (my emphasis) staying in school and competing to succeed in the educational system with the children of educated parents".

This "closure" or "reproduction" thesis seems at odds with the general picture of educational and occupational mobility provided, especially in Chapter 7. Regarding educational mobility, it seems that as many as 72.3% of male respondents achieved higher qualifications and only 8.1% lower than their fathers, with no difference for the remaining 19.6%. The pattern is more interesting when cohort analysis is conducted, showing that "the rate of no mobility or status inheritance decreases from 54.2 per cent among the old to only 14.6 per cent among the young" (p 213). Children have been outperforming their parents and this is reflected in a weakening of the association between parental and respondents' education from the oldest to the youngest cohort (Gamma 0.64 to 0.27). With an overall upward educational mobility rate for males of 79.4 per cent, and for females of 69.5 per cent, any closure argument seems, at best, a little premature and raises questions about the validity of using parental education as an index of parental encouragement and support. If parental encouragement is a strong factor in children's educational attainment in Singapore, it seems to me that hidden in the statistics are large numbers of supportive but uneducated parents.

Though finding the text readable and generally rewarding, it has one or two shortcomings. One is that though there is a good coverage of Singaporean studies, the reader is likely to feel that the text might have benefited from wider international references, for example to the Oxford Social Mobility study (Goldthorpe, et al, 1980) and Halsey's work on education and social mobility in Britain (Halsey, 1980). Another difficulty is that frequencies in some of the tables drop to very low levels, and one wonders whether they are adequate to support

the conclusions drawn from them. For example, in Table 3.9 (p 64), there is only one mother with 13+ years of formal education and this is represented in the table as a 100 per cent value. Table 3.6 (p 50) could be clearer: the description that the figures show "the proportion of the Singapore population attaining post-secondary education" is a little misleading until one realizes that they show the total number of males and females graduating in different years divided by the total population at that time (babies and previous graduates included).

Perhaps too much is expected by the authors from their measures of parental education. The tendency throughout the text is to equate levels of parental education with levels of encouragement and support: the more educated, the more interested; the less educated, the less interested. This seems to me, at best crude and, as already stated, appears to be inconsistent with the data. The predominant pattern is of large numbers of successful children emerging from less successful homes. This suggests that many of these children received encouragement from parents who were less well educated than themselves. This being the case, a clear distinction needs to be made between parental interest and parental education. Educated parents, who are also interested, of course, might be expected to have the edge in such matters as choice of school, help with school studies, provision of tutors and so on. However, there is some way to go before Singapore might follow the rest of the developed world into a post-meritocracy phase that has been termed 'parentocracy', where the education a child receives "must conform to the wealth and wishes of parents rather than the abilities and efforts of pupils" (Brown, 1990).

Regarding the correlations between parental and respondents' education themselves, there is clearly a problem of how they should be interpreted in the context of a period of rapid expansion of educational opportunities. Clearly, higher correlations do not necessarily mean higher levels of support. For example, there are higher correlations for the older than the younger cohorts, and for girls over boys. The former correlation seems to be saying more about the

shared inequalities of opportunity of earlier generations, and the latter (as is acknowledged on p 62) more about cultural attitudes towards the education of females. All this makes interpretation of the correlations very difficult indeed, and perhaps deserved more editorial scrutiny.

Given the almost simultaneous publication of the "Advance Data Release" of the 1990 Census (Department of Statistics, 1991), it is a pity that the authors could not have waited a short while to update some of their tables.

Table 3.2, for example, seems dated now that it is known that there has been almost a doubling over 1980 of the proportion of Singaporeans with secondary, upper secondary and tertiary levels as their highest educational qualifications. Had the book been delayed for a short while to allow inclusion of these figures, worries about educational closure might have been dispelled, and a more consistent interpretation of trends in education been advanced. Despite that, the book is clearly an important contribution.

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