

First Employment, Social Status and Mobility in Dublin

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It is widely believed that a young man entering the labour market for the first time may, if he wishes, take any job open to him, of whatever social status or degree of skill, confident that this will not affect significantly his subsequent career. On this view, that is, the character of first employment does not necessarily limit a man's reasonable hopes for his future. Opposing this, however, is the contrary belief that a man establishes his public *persona* largely through the employment he takes up; and that the manner of first entering the labour market must be, in consequence, the subject of careful consideration by a young man ambitious for his future. On either view, of course, the reference is more to the "nature" of the employment than to a position within it—to the difference, for example, between manual and non-manual, skilled and unskilled, "clean" and "dirty", occupations; less to the difference between operative and foreman, or junior and senior clerk.

Evidently such hypotheses are not readily tested by methods short of intensive case-study. Too many of the ideas whence they emerge are qualitative, imponderable ones not open, or at any rate not meaningfully open, to measurement. Nevertheless, in the course of a recent Dublin survey the opportunity presented itself to collect some preliminary data on first employment; and to pay particular attention while doing so to considerations of social status and social mobility. During 1968, a sample of 2,540 adult males drawn from the Dublin Electoral Rolls was interviewed during a study of social mobility. Information was obtained as to the informant's first and current occupations, together with the occupation of his father. These occupational data were later classified in accordance with the Hall-Jones scale of social status¹; and in what follows we shall discuss certain of the conclusions it seems possible to draw from them.

We defined first employment as "the first paid, full-time, employment" a man had taken. Such a definition, it will be noted, removed from our purview such unpaid or part-time occupations as a youth may choose, or be parentally obliged

1. Cf. D. V. Glass (ed.), *Social Mobility in Britain*, London, 1954. The general results of the Dublin survey, together with some commentary on the sampling, may be seen in B. Hutchinson, *Social Status and Inter-Generational Social Mobility in Dublin*, Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute, 1969.

to take up while still at school, or at a University. It does not exclude, on the other hand, temporary employment. To have attempted this would have led to difficult, perhaps insoluble, problems of definition: a post taken "temporarily" may prove permanent (if not always *de jure*). The contrary case is too familiar to require specification. On the whole, however, the residual category of occupations on which information was sought was composed of jobs we considered more likely to contribute significantly to a man's ultimate social status than would juvenile employment on a paper-round, or unpaid boyhood assistance in the hayfield. We placed no lower limit to the age at which a job, to be considered "first employment", might be taken. Statements of informants to the effect that they had been in full-time employment at ages below fourteen years were accepted at their face value. In the majority of such cases employment had been taken when the subject was thirteen years old. The number in full-time employment at ages below this was small: 26 in a sample of 2,540; or slightly over 1 per cent. By the age of twenty, seven men out of eight had been in full-time employment, mean age at first job falling in the neighbourhood of 16.6 years (Table 1).

TABLE 1: Age at first full-time employment.

Age	Number	Percentage	
12 years or under	26	1.0	} 30.3
13-14	732	29.3	
15-16	705	28.2	} 57.0
17-18	493	19.7	
19-20	228	9.1	
21-22	160	6.4	} 12.6
23-24	93	3.7	
25-26	39	1.6	
27-28	11	0.4	
29-30	5	0.2	
31 and over	7	0.3	
Total	2,499	99.9	

Mean=16.60

The significance of an overall sample mean is of course not particularly great, when we recall that the sample was drawn from a population varying in date of birth and, presumably (since convention may have changed somewhat), varying

in the age at which the labour market was first entered. There are reasons for supposing that full-time employment is entered somewhat later nowadays than was the case at the turn of the century. We must not fall into the error, therefore, of confusing the sample mean of 16.6 years with the mean age at which contemporary adolescents are today taking their first full-time job. Yet, while this confusion must be avoided, it will be seen that Table 2 shows how limited after all has been the change in the mean amongst Dubliners now of ages 20 and above.

TABLE 2: *Age at first full-time employment, related to date of birth*

Date of Birth	Age at First Employment			N	Mean (yrs.)
	14 and under	15-20	Over 20		
	%	%	%		
Before 1903	34.1	51.6	14.2	246	16.6
1903-07	39.2	54.1	6.7	148	15.9
1908-12	30.5	55.8	13.7	233	16.7
1913-17	18.0	66.5	15.5	233	17.5
1918-22	33.6	56.0	10.4	250	16.4
1923-27	31.7	54.5	13.8	268	16.7
1928-32	30.5	58.3	11.2	259	16.6
1933-37	33.1	57.0	9.9	263	16.4
1938-42	30.8	57.1	12.1	315	16.6
1943-47	26.2	66.5	7.2	263	16.6
Total	30.5	57.9	11.6	2,478	16.6

Only two five-year periods emerge from the unchanging record of the mean: that of 1903-1907, and that of 1913-1917, ten years later. The first of these constituted the natal period of men who were first to enter the labour market in the final year of the First World War, and the years immediately following its conclusion. It was a period in which the demand for labour was simultaneously at a high level, and yet difficult to satisfy because of the conflicting demands of the armed forces, and the loss of manpower from military casualties. The response, as can be seen, was a lowering of the age at which adolescents took their first full-time employment. In the second period, covering those born between the years 1913-1917, matters were reversed—that is to say, average age at first job reached an unusually high level. The divergence from the usual average is noticeably more marked than that apparent in the other anomalous period ten years before. Nor is this surprising. Men born during the First World War were those who were to enter the labour market during the years of depression and high unemployment of the 'thirties. These two cataclysmic events, then,

alone leave their mark on the record of first employment; otherwise the means are unvarying. Only amongst men most recently born, between the years 1943-1947, does the percentage distribution hint at change: fewer are entering at ages 14 and under. The mean remains unaffected. This general impression of stability is unexpectedly inconsistent with a widespread belief that age at first employment has been showing an upward tendency during the past half-century. Table 2 suggests that such a tendency, if it exists, is of recent origin; but, because of the possible effects of differential mortality, it does not demonstrate it. The earlier the date of birth, the more the cohort has been diminished by mortality. Other things being equal, the higher the social status, the greater the expectation of life. If age at first employment is also directly related to social status, then the figures in Table 2 may be expected to be progressively overestimating the mean as dates of birth become increasingly remote. In other words, men who first entered employment at a later than average age were more likely to be interviewed because they were more likely to be alive.

When we come to examine our analysis of age at first employment in relation to social status, the assumed relationship is amply confirmed: the higher his father's social status, the older a boy when he took his first full-time job. If informants were ranked according to their present social status, a similar relationship became evident. Men now allocated to the lowest position on the hierarchy of status (category 7) had, on average, taken their first job at 14.8 years. Men allocated to the highest status category had first entered employment, on average, at the age of nearly 22 years. The relationship was consistent through the intermediate status ranks on the hierarchy; and, as we presently discovered, notably simple and inescapable.

As Table 3 shows, we classified each of the status categories of informants according to age at first employment. For each five-year interval we computed the "mean social status" of informants' fathers.

TABLE 3: *Age at first employment related to informant's present social status and to "mean" paternal status*

<i>Age at First Employment</i>	<i>Present Status Category of Informant</i>						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11-15	3.7*	5.0*	4.7	5.0	5.4	5.9	6.2
16-20	3.0	3.2	3.7	4.1	4.9	5.5	5.8
21-25	2.7	3.1	3.4	3.9	4.9	4.9	5.8*
26-30	2.4	—	3.3*	—	4.3*	—	—
All informants:	2.8	3.3	3.8	4.3	5.2	5.7	6.1

*N < 10

The vertical columns of Table 3, therefore, show us the average social status of the fathers of our informants, classified first by the latter's present status, secondly by the age at first employment, so that, reading the means vertically, we can see how these vary in relation to the ages. Little weight can be given to the individual results, both because of limitations imposed by statistical error, and because of the unreality surrounding the concept of "mean" status. However, we are not concerned with them individually; and the vertical array of values in Table 3 shows a tendency that is unambiguous. It is that, whatever a man's social status may be today, the age he began employment remains directly related to his father's social status. Or, in other words, the lower a man's social origin, the earlier he was obliged to enter full-time paid employment in order to enjoy today a given level of social status. As a consequence, we see, men in every category of social status from the highest to the lowest who took their first job between the ages of 11 and 15 are of lower status origin, on average, than their colleagues of equivalent status.

This analysis draws our attention to the question of intergenerational social mobility, and to the possibility that changes in status as between father and son are in some way related to the age at which the latter begins his working life. We therefore calculated sets of mean ages at employment specific to each of the seven status categories in order to see how far the means differed when we compared the mobile with the socially immobile. Table 4 shows, for each current social status, the average age at first employment of men of the same status as their father, or of a higher or lower one. Once more the tendency is unambiguous. Social mobility appears strongly associated, in not unexpected ways, with age at first employment.

TABLE 4: *Mean age at first full-time employment, for each current status category, by relationship to father's social status.*

Current status Category	Current status related to Father's			All
	Informant higher	Same	Informant lower	
1	21.5	22.8	—	21.9
2	20.2	19.9	21.5	20.2
3	18.2	19.0	19.3	18.6
4	16.3	17.3	18.1	17.0
5	15.1	15.9	17.3	15.9
6	14.1	15.0	15.7	15.1
7	—	14.5	15.0	14.8

For the sample as a whole the direct relationship between attained status and age at first employment is in evidence; and it is equally evident that the relationship persists in each of the social mobility categories (reading the columns

vertically). The matter takes on a somewhat different cast if we compare mobility categories at single levels of attained status. Let us take, as an example, the group of subjects whose current or attained status is that of Category 6. Mean age at first employment for the group as a whole was 15.1 years. Men whose fathers were, like themselves, also of Category 6 tended to take a full-time job at about this average age. In contrast, men who had risen from the paternal Category 7 to their present position in Category 6 had begun full-time employment about a year earlier, on average. Men who had fallen to Category 6 from higher paternal status levels had started work, on average, some six months later. A horizontal reading of Table 4 reveals that the same pattern is repeated pretty consistently at all status levels. Each status category is partly composed of men who were born in some other category, some having moved down from a higher status, and others having moved up from a lower one. The latter group is notable in having begun working life, on average, one or two years earlier than men who had lost status; and this remains true whatever the status category ultimately achieved (except at the extremes where mobility is restricted to a single direction). Our results therefore seem consistent with a conventional picture of socially "successful" and "unsuccessful" men—the former keen early birds in the labour market, getting the best opportunities and exploiting what they get; the latter undynamic procrastinators missing the best jobs. There may be, however, a less satisfying explanation for the variations apparent in Table 4, having its origin in levels of education.

A man's educational attainment is directly related to his father's social status; and a man's own status is similarly related to his educational attainment: adequate educational attainments comprise one of the most important qualifications for membership of a given category of social status. Downward social mobility tends to occur when educational qualifications suitable to an inherited status position are not obtained. Men who move to a status above that of their father tend to have had more education than necessary to maintain their hereditary status. Since one who is in full-time education cannot be simultaneously in full-time paid employment, it seems not improbable that relative educational attainment may have operated to produce the pattern we have noted in Table 4. If we analyse each of the mobility categories according to educational attainment, it should be possible to control the latter's influence upon mean age at first employment. In other words, if we hold educational attainment constant, does mean age at first employment still vary from one mobility group to another; and, if so, are the variations in the same direction as before? The limitations imposed by the size of our sample made undesirable the further subdivision, by educational level, of each of the seven status groups used in Table 4. We were therefore obliged to restrict analysis to a more general classification: men who, irrespective of their point of departure and of their destination, had risen above, fallen below or had remained in the status category to which they were born. This procedure reduced considerably the sensitivity of the subsequent analysis, for it neglected certain features of social mobility, such as "distance" moved, and departure and arrival

points, that give each type of movement a special character. The tendencies apparent in Table 5 are perhaps less distinct than those that might have emerged from a more detailed analysis, had this been possible.

TABLE 5: Mean age at first employment, related to social mobility category, and to subject's educational attainment.

Educational Level of Subject	Subject's social status relative to father			
	Higher	Same	Lower	
Primary: incomplete	14.4	14.5	14.3	15.1
„ complete	14.5	14.6	15.4	
Technical & vocational: incomplete	15.6	16.4	16.3	16.9
„ complete	16.5	17.1	17.1	
Secondary: incomplete	16.7	17.8	17.3	18.1
„ complete	18.6	18.5	18.7	
University: incomplete	19.6	20.2	18.5	20.8
„ complete	22.4	22.0	22.0	
All subjects:	16.9	16.3	16.5	

The columns show the expected variations in mean age at first employment related to educational level. These have little beyond a confirmatory interest. Our chief concern here lies with a comparison of mean ages by educational attainment, for each of the three mobility categories. It cannot be said that in controlling the educational influence we have succeeded in eliminating the differences in age at first employment that were originally evident as between the three mobility categories; although some of the differences may have undergone transformation. In the general analysis we observed that ascenders tended to have started their working life a year or two earlier than the downward mobile. The tendency remains, as Table 5 shows us, among those with primary education (if completed), as also among men who had reached the technical and vocational level. The difference is somewhat reduced, it is true; but we seem justified in supposing that difference in educational attainment does not entirely account, at these levels, for the difference in age at entering the labour market. When we come to those of secondary education, however, the matter is more open to doubt. Indeed, if we look at secondary education as a single category (that is, if we do not ask whether the secondary course was completed or not) it is apparent that mean age at first employment differs little from one mobility group to the other. Only

among men who embarked upon, but did not complete, a secondary course does the tendency persist for social ascenders to start employment earlier in their lives. At the next educational level, the university level, a further complexity is added by the apparent reversal of the general trend: social ascenders of university level appear to enter the labour market *later* rather than earlier.

There is therefore some evidence that the overall variations in age at employment that became apparent in Table 4 had part of their origin in differences in educational history. As we have seen, some of the variations were reduced, others eliminated and another reversed, when we subjected educational attainment to control. Yet the relationship between social ascension and earlier employment by no means entirely disappeared as a result of this analytical procedure; and one seems justified in asking whether, had a more detailed analysis been possible, more definite and more interesting conclusions might not have been open to us. In particular, the assumption that all status movements in the same direction are the "same" phenomena (for example, that all men who have ascended the status hierarchy have undergone the same experience, sociologically speaking) really begs a very significant question in mobility studies. Indeed, some of the figures in Table 5 can best be explained on grounds that assume the nature of social mobility to be largely dependent upon a man's point of departure in combination with his destination. A man who moves up the entire hierarchy, from the lowest, unskilled manual status to the highest professional category experiences something entirely different from the experience of one who moves from the semi-skilled to the skilled manual level. In the preceding analysis both are nevertheless classified as ascenders; and some loss of sensitivity of understanding is to be expected as a result.

However, there is no reason to suppose that first employment lacks significance for a man's social mobility history. There is no strong association, except at the higher status levels, between inherited social status and that achieved through the first full-time job (for the sample as a whole the index of association is 1.74). Less than a third of our subjects entered employment at the same status level as their fathers: as was to be expected, a majority started at a lower one (Table 6). Indeed, the "mean" status of first employment proved to be 5.6, compared with a paternal mean status of 4.9. In other words, for a large majority of men first entry into the labour market proved to be simultaneously a first exercise in the process of social mobility—dominantly in the downward direction. There remains, it is true, some degree of class self-recruitment at all levels, as the indices of association demonstrate; but this is really notable only among men inheriting status category 1 from their fathers.

How far, then (to return to the question we raised in our opening paragraph), does the status of a man's first full-time employment determine his future career? Is he condemned, by and large, to remain at the level at which he finds himself at the dawn, as it were, of his employment history? Table 7 relates the status of first employment to the present social status of our informants. Mean status has now risen to 4.8, equal, in fact, to the paternal mean; and in order to achieve

TABLE 6: Status category of subject at first employment, related to paternal status.

Subject's Status Category at first job	Father's Status Category							Total	%	Index of association
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7			
1	21	8	9	12	6			56	2.3	13.38
2	9	11	14	18	9			61	2.5	3.69
3	5	11	22	15	12	1		66	2.7	3.88
4	19	47	84	143	102	14	16	425	17.3	1.97
5	2	12	23	60	137	23	36	293	11.9	1.31
6	11	21	43	106	335	108	103	727	29.6	1.22
7	2	10	16	65	272	153	309	827	33.7	1.98
Total	69	120	211	419	873	299	464	2,455	100.0	1.74
%	2.8	4.9	8.6	17.1	35.6	12.2	18.9	100.0		

%

First employment status higher than father: 16.2
 " " " the same as father: 30.6
 " " " lower than father: 53.2
 N=2,455

TABLE 7: Status category of subject at first employment, related to his present status

Status Category at first job	Present status category							Total	%	Index of association
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7			
1	54	2						56	2.2	20.07
2	18	39	4					61	2.4	12.38
3	13	19	32	2				66	2.7	5.71
4	23	47	121	200	19	11	7	428	17.2	2.53
5	1	8	15	61	165	25	21	296	11.8	1.67
6	11	12	24	121	409	98	60	735	29.5	1.02
7		2	16	78	238	192	329	855	34.3	2.30
Total	120	129	212	462	831	326	417	2,497	100.0	2.14
%	4.8	5.2	8.5	18.6	33.3	13.0	16.6	100.0		

%

Present status higher than at first job: 57.3
 " " " the same as " " " 36.7
 " " " lower than " " " 6.0
 N=2,497

such a rise in average status nearly three-fifths of the men had in the intervening period moved to employment of a higher status. A rough preliminary measure of the status-determinant effect of first employment may be seen in the proportion nearly 45 per cent, who had failed to move up from their first level, or had even fallen below this.

We must not be deceived, however, into allowing too much weight to this figure: the incidence of social mobility depends initially upon the number of opportunities for a change in status that are open. An entirely rigid status structure, if it allows mobility at all, permits it only in the form of simple or multiple exchange of positions. The index of association (or ratio of observed to expected values in the "same" cells of the contingency table) is therefore a more useful indicator here. The overall index of association for the entire sample, 2.14, suggests a fairly low association between initial and subsequent social status. On the other hand, it will be noted that the index varies markedly according to the level at which first employment was taken: the relationship is in fact a direct one, higher status at first employment carrying with it a greater likelihood that subsequent mobility will not take place. A very high degree of status immobility is particularly evident among men whose first employment had taken them into the two highest status categories, 1 and 2. At the other extreme, men first employed at category 6 level (index of association, 1.02) were almost entirely unaffected by this in their subsequent history. The marginal percentage distributions, showing heavy declines in the proportions of men in categories 6 and 7, suggest that these are in some sense "recruitment" levels in the labour market: levels that men enter in the expectation of leaving them as soon as possible; nor is this surprising since such levels of social status are accorded mainly to unskilled and semi-skilled occupations.

These differences are reflected in figures relating to occupational mobility (Table 8). Among the sample as a whole the average number of jobs taken since

TABLE 8: Mean number of jobs from first entering labour market, related to social mobility history

Social Status of first job	Subject's present status relative to paternal status			All Subjects
	Higher	Same	Lower	
1	3.29	2.89	—	3.15
2	3.02	2.83	2.29*	2.90
3	3.08	2.63	2.13*	2.85
4	2.89	3.16	3.09	3.00
5	4.29	4.32	4.00	4.22
6	4.42	4.52	4.53	4.49
7	5.26	5.51	5.53	5.45
All subjects	4.08	4.57	4.58	4.41

*N < 10

first entering the labour market lay between four and five; but this was influenced by the social status of first employment. Those entering the labour market towards the top of the status hierarchy had changed their job less frequently than those entering at the bottom. Perhaps contrary to expectation, social ascenders (i.e., men who had risen above the status level of their fathers by the time they were interviewed) had changed their job, on average, less often than descenders or the immobile. But this overall sample mean is heavily weighted by the numerical dominance of men whose first employment lay in status categories 6 and 7. As we rise above these levels there becomes evident a tendency for the contrary to happen: ascenders change their jobs somewhat more often than descenders. But it is significant that the process of social mobility, whether in the upward or the downward direction, seems in many cases to begin very early in the occupational career. It is not by any means certain that changes in social status between one generation and another (comparing son with father)

TABLE 9: *Subject's status at first employment relative to paternal status, by subsequent mobility history*

<i>Status of first job relative paternal status</i>	<i>Mobility history</i>			<i>All Subjects %</i>
	<i>Ascender %</i>	<i>Static %</i>	<i>Descender %</i>	
Higher than father	41.5	4.5	1.8	16.2
Same	36.2	42.1	6.5	30.6
Lower than father	22.3	53.4	91.7	53.2
N=	825	972	658	2,455

are the culmination of a lifetime's effort. On the contrary, Table 9 reveals that more than 90 per cent of subjects who had fallen to a status position below their inherited one made the descent with their first employment, and had apparently remained there. Of social ascenders, two-fifths made their initial movement upward as soon as they entered the labour market. It will be noted also that even the socially static show a more than average tendency to take up first employment of a status similar to their father's. In other words, the meaning of Table 9 appears to be that to a significant degree a man's future social status is reflected in the status of his first employment; and in the case of those fated to be social descenders, the first job is very highly predictive indeed of what this fate is to be. More specifically, the majority of future social ascenders enter the labour market at a status level equal to or above that of their fathers; the majority of men who will remain socially static take first employment at the same level of status, or below,

their fathers'; and future descenders enter employment almost unanimously, as we have seen, at a status level below the paternal one.

Summing up, then, it seems that the general tenor of our evidence supports the view that how a young man first enters the labour market has considerable relevance to his future. Among the adults making up our sample, mean age at first employment did not vary significantly with date of birth, except perhaps for those born during the 1940's. However, there were factors associated with social status, such as differential mortality, that may have been partially responsible for this apparent stability. But uniformity did not extend to levels of social status: the higher a young man's inherited social status, the older he was when he took his first job; and social mobility also proved to be associated with age at first employment. Men whose later history showed them to have been social ascenders tended to have entered full-time employment earlier, and social descenders later, than the average. Some of the overall variations in age at first employment relating to status origin were accounted for by differing educational commitments; but some of the main differences by social mobility history remained after controlling by educational attainment. Indeed, for a majority of the sample, entry into the labour market meant at any rate a temporary fall to a level of status below the one they had inherited from their fathers, class self-recruitment becoming notable only at higher levels of inherited status.

Social mobility became less likely the higher the status acquired at first employment. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, it appears that much subsequent mobility history may be predicted from the nature of first employment: inter-generational social mobility often seems to take place, if it is to take place at all, at the beginning of a man's career.