

How fair is the route to the top?

Perceptions of social mobility

Anthony Heath, Nan Dirk de Graaf & Yaojun Li

This chapter examines trends in people's perceptions of social mobility, factors perceived to be important for getting ahead in Britain, and views about actual and ideal pay levels.

More people think they have been upwardly mobile (that they have a job that is "higher" up the occupational scale than their father's) than think they have moved downwards.

- 39% think that they are in a higher or much higher job than their father's, while only 23% think they are in a lower or much lower job.
- Long-range mobility is quite rare; people tend to say their jobs are "higher" or "lower" than their father's (rather than "much higher" or "much lower").
- There has recently been a slight fall in perceived long-range upward mobility. 12% say their job is much higher than their father's, compared with 18% in 1992, and 16% in 1987.

Meritocratic factors are seen as being the most important when it comes to a person "getting ahead" in modern Britain.

- 84% say hard work is important; 74% a good education; 71% ambition.
- A third (33%) think knowing the right people is important.
- The importance of 'ascriptive factors' (which people are born with or into) has fallen. Being born into a wealthy family was thought to be important by 21% in 1987, but only 14% in 2009. In 1987, 16% thought a person's race/ethnicity was important, compared with 8% in 2009.

People accurately estimate the earnings of those at the lower end of the pay scale, but underestimate the earnings of jobs at the upper end. For example:

- People estimate a shop worker earns £12,000, almost equal to the real average salary of someone with this job.
- Cabinet ministers are estimated to earn £85,000, far lower than their actual salary (£144,500 in 2009).

Generally people believe that wages across the scale are unfair. Those at the bottom of the pay scale are seen to earn less than they should, while those at the top are seen to earn too much.

- On average, people think a shop worker earns £12,000, but believe someone doing this job should earn £16,000. Factory workers are estimated to earn £13,000, but it is thought that they should earn £16,000.
- For example, the chairman of a large company is estimated to earn £200,000, but people feel they should earn £100,000. Cabinet ministers are estimated to earn £85,000, while people feel they should earn £60,000.

Estimates of wages at the top of the pay scale have risen since 1999.

- In 2009 a chairman of a large company was **estimated** to earn 15 times more than an unskilled factory worker, up from 13 times in 1999.
- However people think that a chairman of a large company **should** earn only 6 times more than an unskilled factory worker, and this has remained unchanged since 1999.

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Co-author Anthony Heath concludes:

“There has been a perception that earnings differentials have risen sharply between 1999 and 2009, especially for cabinet ministers and the chairmen of large companies, and that they should not have done.”

