

The RC28 Spring Meeting in Brno, 24–27 May 2007

The Spring Meeting of the International Sociological Association's Research Committee 28 (RC 28),¹ held May 24–27 at Masaryk University in Brno, was arguably the most significant sociology conference to take place in the Czech Republic this year. Organised by Petr Matějů, the Spring Meeting was jointly hosted by the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic and by Masaryk University in Brno. For RC28, the leading international research community on social stratification and mobility, the Spring Meeting represented its largest conference in its glorified 57-year history.² With 31 of the 151 participants coming from North American universities, 12 from Asia, 16 from the Middle East and South America, and with the representation of 13 different European countries, the Spring Meeting also reflected the growing interest in, and global scope of, stratification and mobility research generally.

To understand the significance and contributions of the Spring Meeting, it is useful to dive into the history of RC28 itself. What is now called RC28 was originally founded as a research community in 1950 by Theodor Geiger, David Glass, and other sociologists, with the aim of standardising data and methods of analysing social mobility in order to make reliable cross-national comparisons of mobility rates. Since then, the research committee's collaborative work has greatly expanded, in part due to the success of the CAS-MIN project and the University of Wisconsin-based longitudinal studies on status attainment. RC28 members have produced some of the most significant findings in the field of social stratification (and perhaps in sociology overall) during the past half century. In their overview of RC28's main achievements, Hout and DiPrete (2004) listed twenty major empirical generalisations

by RC28 members that have withstood the test of time, ranging from the Treiman constant (the commonality of occupational rank orders across societies), education as the main motor of the inter-generational reproduction of status, to the universality of occupational gender segregation.

The ability of research by RC28 members to advance by building on prior scientific findings was significantly aided by the frequent meetings and the character of the research committee. As Hout and DiPrete explain,

The discipline of interacting with one another and communicating research results to a community of scholars that shared the larger goal of getting the results right but who differed in how to approach that goal added rigor. The intense debates and exchanges – face-to-face and in print – that marked the late 1980s and early 1990s identified the weak points in all arguments and advanced the collective endeavour. The debates and multiple sessions no doubt tried the patience of some RC members... Nonetheless, it was invaluable to the participants and to our search for reliable knowledge that there be a community of scholars that would host the debates, participate in testing the hypotheses, and agree to live by the results. (p. 10–11)

Thus RC28 has been able to develop a large range of empirical generalisations through the culture of its biannual meetings and its commitment to assessing scientific claims by subjecting findings to a broader array of countries, surveys, and statistical tests. As one long-term RC28 member explained to me, whenever someone in the past 'would challenge the findings of a presenter at a RC28 meeting, the presenter would run a new analysis right in front of the audience to determine who was right'. While these narratives about RC28's history may be a bit idealistic, they do point to the key elements nurtured by RC28 that are important for the advancement of sociological knowledge.

The 116 papers presented at the Spring Meeting, spanning 29 panels in 9 main sessions, represented most areas of stratification research. Not surprisingly, over a third of all the papers focused on educational inequality in one way or the other. One of the most ambitious contributions was by Jeroen Smits (Radboud University), who presented a multilevel analysis of the determinants of primary school enrolment in 75, mostly undeveloped, countries, measuring, for example, how competition between siblings or the absence of a parent reduces children's chances of going to school. While Smits' paper reflected the goal of some RC28 members to make empirical generalisations through large-scale cross-country comparisons, Anna Zimdars' (Oxford) paper represented the opposite extreme. Through a case study of university admissions at Oxford, her paper sought to contribute to the RC28 literature on educational inequality in university admissions by focusing on the key role of university 'gatekeepers' – which for obvious reasons cannot be easily measured through large-scale comparisons – in identifying and accepting university applicants from more privileged backgrounds. The two poles of research exemplified by these papers reflect the importance of diverse methods and approaches to the study of educational inequality that were embodied by the other papers at the Spring Meeting.

The large size of the Spring Meeting made it possible for a number of papers to be presented that expanded or challenged the limits of what may be considered stratification research. The Spring Meeting saw, for example, an interesting confrontation between David Grusky (Stanford University) and Harry Ganzeboom (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) over the relevance of 'low' versus 'high culture' models of lifestyle attainment. Another exciting paper that broadened the scope of stratification research was Glenn Firebaugh's (Penn State University) presentation of his collab-

orative research on the use of census tracts to measure racial segregation in the United States. Since the measurement of a minority's geographic segregation depends on the geographic scope of the measurement used, Firebaugh questioned the validity of measuring segregation through census tracts, which can vary greatly in size and with which it is impossible to measure the relationship between people in neighbouring tracts. He instead proposed a new measurement of segregation that takes each individual as the centre of his or her local environment, the latter being the distance or radius of the individual to a wide set of geographic scales; 'segregation' is then defined and measured as the average degree to which individual local environments differ from the overall composition of a city.

While Firebaugh began and concluded his presentation by insisting that research can be an important contribution to the goals of RC28, in a sense he stated the obvious. Housing conditions and segregation are fundamental to the study of individual well-being and the transmission of social inequality. Claudia Solari's (UCLA) presentation on the effects of crowded housing on children's well-being is exemplary in this regard, as she used two different surveys to demonstrate the large negative impact of crowded housing on the cognitive, behavioural, and health conditions of children. Based on the quality of her paper, Solari was one of the six participants to receive the RC28 Travel Award to help cover the costs of coming to the Spring Meeting. The other recipients of the Travel Award were Alfred Essuman (University of Trondheim), who presented a paper on educational inequalities in Ghana; Megan Andrew (University of Wisconsin-Madison), who presented two highly acclaimed papers on functional form and educational transitions; Kasia Karpinska (Utrecht University), who presented her research on self-employment in post-communist soci-

ties; Bongoh Kye (UCLA), whose paper focused on the literacy gap among older adults in 20 countries; and Eyal Bar-Haim (Tel-Aviv University), who was the co-author of the paper 'The Persistence of Persistent Inequality', presented by Yossi Shavit (Tel-Aviv University) in the plenary session.

There are perhaps two reasons why the Spring Meeting was as large and diverse as it was. The first reason is simply the sheer number of abstract submissions received – nearly 200 in total – making acceptance to the Spring Meeting highly competitive, even despite its size. Second, the organisers of the Spring Meeting were committed to ensuring the presence of doctoral candidates and young scholars at the conference. If RC28 is to develop as a research community over time, it must engage and bring in talented young scholars at its meetings. After witnessing the large volume of abstracts received, the organisers sought to ensure a degree of inclusiveness by developing a special poster session for junior scholars. As preparations for the meeting progressed, it was possible to change the poster session into a 'Young Scholars Panel' in which 11 authors and co-authors were able to present their full papers. The panel turned out to be a great success, measured by the size of the audience it attracted. The panel was also a showcase for the work of Czech sociologists: Tomáš Katrňák (Masaryk University) presented a well-received paper on age and educational homogeneity in the Czech Republic; Natalie Simonová and Petr Soukup (Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic) presented their research on the determinants of the reproduction of Czech educational inequalities; Iva Šmídová and Klára Janoušková (Masaryk University and Ostrava University) presented a paper on the effect of gender-based features of the Czech educational system on pupils' aspirations; and Josef Basl (Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic) presented a study of the determi-

nants of computer literacy among fifteen-year old Czech pupils.

One of the exciting aspects of the Spring Meeting was the sheer number of 'big names' in stratification research in attendance, such as Richard Breen (Yale), Walter Mueller (University of Mannheim), Donald Treiman (UCLA), Wout Ultee (Radboud University), Michael Hout (UC-Berkeley), and many others. This was particularly important given that the research of leading scholars often served as the starting point for many of the presentations. For example, research by Robert Mare (UCLA), who is the current President of RC28, was the fulcrum of a number of discussions, particularly his article on how historical differences in the distribution of education (educational expansion) impact inequality in educational attainment (Mare 1981). For example, Maarten Buis' (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) paper on the effects of educational expansion in the Netherlands between 1906 and 1990 provided a reinterpretation of Mare's analysis of how the effect of social origin on the highest level of education attained relates to the effect of social origin on specific educational transitions. The intensive discussions among such scholars made the Spring Meeting especially lively and will hopefully have a material impact on future research.

Another highlight of the Spring Meeting was the debate surrounding Stein Ringen's (Oxford) paper on 'The Truth about Class Inequality' presented in the plenary session (published as Ringen 2006), which was followed up by a special discussion panel composed of Michael Hout (UC-Berkeley), John Logan (University of Wisconsin-Madison), and Samuel Lucas (UC-Berkeley). The main goal of Ringen's paper was to challenge the 'stability thesis' (Goldthorpe et al. 1980) – the idea that despite major increases in social mobility, class inequalities have remained largely constant in the long run – and thus also the

implications of the stability thesis on how we understand the effectiveness of welfare-state policies. Ringen's critique centred on the methodological basis of that thesis: changes in inequality are measured in terms of changes in the conditional associations, net of the effects of marginal distributions, of class-by-education relationships in social mobility tables. To Ringen, such an 'odds-ratio reading' of inequality masks 'certain changes in inequality because they are changes that have a certain cause, in this case changes in inequality which result directly from changes in the social structure' as measured by the marginal distributions (Ringen 2006: 479). Ringen's collaborator, Ottar Hellevik (University of Oslo), also presented a paper at the Spring Meeting – now published in this journal – defending the same position. As illustrated in Table 1 of his article, Hellevik argued that even though loglinear associations between class and educational attainment in British data show stability in inequality across cohorts, gini-coefficient measures of inequality reveal marked declines in class inequality over time. Both Ringen and Hellevik questioned the meaningfulness of loglinear associations as measures of class inequality and the kinds of inferences that can be drawn from those associations.

Not surprisingly, Ringen's paper faced a significant degree of criticism in the discussion panel devoted to it at the Spring Meeting. The presentation by Michael Hout (UC-Berkeley) and Robert Hauser (University of Wisconsin-Madison; not in attendance) was particularly critical. First, Hout charged Ringen for misinterpreting the scholarly acceptance of the stability thesis, as numerous studies by stratification researchers (e.g. Featherman and Hauser 1978; Breen and Jonsson 2005) also found significant cross-national or historical variation in the odds-ratio data. Second, while Hout substantively agreed with Ringen on dismissing the stability thesis, he defended the use of methods based on

odds-ratios for a number of reasons, particularly the ability of loglinear models to separate out structural mobility from that due to persistence, as well as the falsifiability and parsimony of the models. Further, both Hout and Lucas criticised Ringen for his reliance on Gini-coefficients as measures of inequality, as Gini indexes require a complete ordering of classes (which may not be possible) while loglinear methods do not. While it seemed that the debate led to few conclusions, the fact of the matter is that both Ringen and his critics reached a consensus on dismissing the stability thesis once and for all.

In conclusion, what can the Spring Meeting teach us about current stratification research? I was particularly struck by three things. First, despite the high level of methodological sophistication of many of the papers, I was surprised that some scholars sought to draw out the policy implications of their work. Robert Mare stressed in his plenary address that RC28 researchers have always been inspired, in different ways, by real social problems. But the presenters could have given more attention to those social problems and the kinds of policy responses their research implies. Given the large number of empirical generalisations that scholars see RC28 as having achieved, it seems that the next major step for RC28 is to better translate technical analyses of stratification, inequality, and mobility into usable educational and social policies.

Second, while there were roughly a dozen or so sociologists from Central and Eastern Europe who presented papers, it was hard not to notice their relative absence at the Spring Meeting, particularly in terms of the discussions after the presentations. It seemed that many of the presentations by the 'Western' sociologists were much more methodological and model-driven than what sociologists from this region prefer or are used to. Given the large number of prominent scholars in attend-

ance, it was also disappointing that more students from Masaryk University did not hang around and listen in on presentations. While I would not make too much of East-West differences, the Spring Meeting did give a sense of how difficult it is for young scholars from non-Western universities to break into the RC28 club.

Finally, I was impressed by how much the Spring Meeting forged a community of learning. It often seems at academic conferences that participants care little about the other panels and presentations. The Spring Meeting, on the other hand, gave the impression that participants primarily came to listen to each other, collaborate, and learn. While there were of course participants who might have skipped a session in order to wander around Brno, many of the panels, and even the Young Scholars Panel on Sunday afternoon, had full audiences and engaging discussions. In terms of the overall goal of the RC28 meetings to provide a forum for advancing stratification research, the Spring Meeting can only be regarded as a success.

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References to Paper presentations at the Spring Meeting (papers and presentations available online can be accessed on the Spring Meeting website at <http://www.soc.cas.cz/rc28/>):

Andrew, Megan and Cecilia Ceja, 'Path Dependence in Post-Secondary Persistence: A Multi-State Model of Education Transition in the U.S., 1982–2000.'

Basl, Josef, 'Computer Literacy in the Context of Social Exclusion and Digital Divide: Czech Republic in an International Perspective.' (paper available online)

MBuis, Maarten, 'Not All Transitions are Equal: The Effect of Educational Expansion and the Decreased Disadvantaged Position of Women in Education on Educational Inequality in the Netherlands between 1906 and 1990.' (paper available online)

Essuman, Alfred A. and Kristen Ringdal, 'A multilevel Analysis of Rural-urban Inequalities in Basic Education in Ghana.' (paper available online)

Firebaugh, Glenn, 'Beyond the Consensus Tract: Methods for Studying the Geographic Scale of Metropolitan Racial Segregation.' (presentation available online)

Grusky David, and Ivalyo D. Petev, 'How Many Lifestyles Are There?'

Ganzeboom, Harry and Ineke Nagel, 'Cultural Participation among Ethnic Minority and Native Majority Adolescents and their Parents in the Netherlands.' (paper available online)

Hout, Michael and Robert M. Hauser, 'Comments on Ringen.'

Karpinska, Kasia, Ineke Maas and Wim Jansen, 'Self-employment in Structural Change: A Cross-country Comparison of Post-communist Economies.' (paper available online)

Katrňák, Tomáš, 'Does Age Homogamy Influence Educational Homogamy? The Case of the Czech Republic, 1994–2004.'

Kye, Bongoh, 'Internal Labor Markets and the Effects of Structural Change: Job Mobility in Korean Labor Markets in 1998–2000.'

Shavit, Yossi, Meir Yaish and Eyal-Bar-Haim, 'The Persistence of Persistent Inequality.' (presentation available online)

Simonová, Natalie and Petr Soukup, 'The Determinants of Educational Inequalities Reproduction in the Czech Republic after 1989.'

Šmídová, Iva and Klára Janoušková, 'Factors Conditioning Educational Aspirations and Educational Segregation for Girls and Boys in the Czech Educational System.' (paper available online)

Smits, Jeroen, 'Effects of Factors at the Family Level, District Level and National Level on Primary School Enrolment in 75 Developing Countries.'

Solari, Claudia D. and Robert D. Mare, 'Housing Crowding Effects on Children's Wellbeing? National and Longitudinal Comparisons.' (paper available online)

Zimdars, Anna, 'Education, Education, Education and the British Elite University: Towards a New Framework of Understanding Social Reproduction at the University Gate.' (paper available online)

Other references

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