

Institution: London School of Economics and Political Science		
Unit of Assessment: 21 - Sociology		
Title of case study: The “class ceiling”: tackling barriers to social mobility in UK television		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2016-2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Sam Friedman	Associate Professor of Sociology	2014 to present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2016-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) <p>Sam Friedman conducted the first investigation of social mobility in Britain’s television industry. His work exposed a serious lack of social diversity - and particularly a significant over-representation of people from privileged backgrounds - in the UK’s most popular and influential industry organisations. The research has been used by such organisations, notably Channel 4 (C4), to develop and implement new or revised strategies supporting improved social mobility in UK television. As a result of changes implemented at C4, the proportion of its staff from low socio-economic backgrounds increased by almost 20% between 2016 and 2020.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) <p>The class pay gap – social mobility in elite professions: In work published in 2016, Friedman and his co-author Daniel Laurison (Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania) were the first academics to elucidate a “class pay gap” preventing those who are upwardly mobile from accruing the very highest earnings in Britain’s higher professional and managerial occupations [1]. Even when those from working-class backgrounds are successful in entering these elite occupations, they go on to earn an average of 16% (or GBP7,350 per year) less than those from privileged backgrounds. Significantly, this pay gap persists even when the upwardly mobile are similar to their privileged colleagues in terms of educational attainment, human capital, and a range of other demographic and employment measures.</p> <p>Understanding the drivers of the class pay gap in UK creative industries: Follow-up research by Friedman looked in more detail at social mobility in the UK’s creative industries. In a 2016 paper [3] written with Dave O’Brien (University of Edinburgh), he used new social origin data from the 2014 UK Labour Force Survey to provide the first large-scale, representative study of the class composition of Britain’s creative workforce. While the analysis demonstrated variation in “openness” across creative and cultural industries (CCIs), it found a significant under-representation of those with working-class origins across the sector. Friedman and O’Brien used these findings to challenge policy narratives portraying the CCIs as open and meritocratic; to highlight the particular social exclusivity of publishing and music; and to expose the existence in some CCIs of a significant class pay gap. They have followed up with specific analysis of the under-representation of, and career paths taken by, people from working-class backgrounds in the UK acting profession [2] [6].</p> <p>Friedman used an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Future Leaders project (March 2016-2019) to extend this work by investigating the <i>drivers</i> of the class pay gap in Britain’s elite occupations. This was achieved via four in-depth occupational case studies, spanning accountancy, broadcasting, architecture, and acting. These were analysed together in his 2019 book, <i>The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged</i> [5].</p> <p>Exposing barriers to social mobility at Channel 4: Impacts described here arise particularly from work on the broadcasting case study - the first ever investigation of social mobility in Britain’s television industry - which took place at Channel 4 (C4) between May 2016 and December 2017. Results were published as a report for C4 in December 2017 [4]. A questionnaire circulated to all 828 C4 staff (response rate 76%) revealed that 67% of respondents came from professional or managerial backgrounds and only 9% from working-</p>		

class backgrounds. This mirrored the wider social exclusivity of the Independent Television Production Company (Indie) sector: those working in television are twice as likely to be from a professional and managerial background (66%) than the average UK citizen. At C4, though, the research suggested that even when those from lower socio-economic backgrounds *are* employed, a powerful “class ceiling” inhibits their progression. This is most acute within the organisation’s commissioning arm (79% from professional or managerial backgrounds) and within senior management, 87% of whom are from professional or managerial backgrounds while only 2.5% come from working-class backgrounds.

Meritocratic differences in education, skills, and experience did not fully explain the ceiling effect identified here. Fifty in-depth interviews with C4 staff revealed that those from low socio-economic backgrounds face a set of distinct economic, social, and cultural barriers to progression. First, the upwardly mobile often decide not to follow the creative pathway in television due to the economic risk and uncertainty involved. This sorting restricts the supply of those from low socio-economic backgrounds entering the pool for commissioning roles. Second, there is a widespread culture of sponsorship in television. The “forced intimacy” that characterises TV production ensures that these sponsor relationships often emerge informally based on a cultural similarity rooted in shared social class background. Finally, an exclusive highbrow culture prevails in commissioning. In particular, the ability to employ a highbrow style of aesthetic appreciation, or reference high-art forms, in creative discussions is highly prized - even if most interviewees agree that such knowledge is often unnecessary for effective discussion about TV programme-making. Those from low socio-economic backgrounds find this cultural norm alienating and intimidating, but one which they must assimilate in order to succeed. In August 2018, this work was extended to include data from the BBC, ITV, Viacom, and the Indie sector.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- [1] Laurison, D. and Friedman, S. (2016). The Class Pay Gap in Higher Professional and Managerial Occupations. *American Sociological Review*, 81(4), pp. 668-695. DOI: 10.1177/0003122416653602.
- [2] Friedman, S., O'Brien, D., and Laurison, D. (2016). 'Like skydiving without a parachute': How Class Origin Shapes Occupational Trajectories in British Acting. *Sociology*, 51(5), pp. 992-1010. DOI: 10.1177/0038038516629917.
- [3] O'Brien, D., Laurison, D., Miles, A., and Friedman, S. (2016). Are the Creative Industries Meritocratic? An Analysis of the 2014 UK Labour Force Survey. *Cultural Trends*, 25(2), pp.116-131. DOI: 10.1080/09548963.2016.1170943.
- [4] Friedman, S. (2016). *Investigating Social Mobility in UK Television*. Draft report for Channel 4.
- [5] Friedman, S. and Laurison, D. (2019). *The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged*. Policy Press. ISBN: 9781447336105.
- [6] Friedman, S. and O'Brien, D. (2017). Resistance and Resignation: Responses to Typecasting in British Acting. *Cultural Sociology*, 11(3), pp. 359-376. DOI: 10.1177/1749975517710156.
- [1] was the Winner of the American Sociological Society's 2017 Inequality, Poverty and Mobility Outstanding Article Award. [1] [2] [3] [5] and [6] are peer-reviewed publications.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

In 2019, [almost 120,000 people worked in film and video production in the UK](#). Friedman's research has had impacts on strategies and activities in major UK television organisations, with direct effects on their employees. As well as shaping industry attitudes and practices, the work has catalysed the development of a new policy agenda around social mobility, informing the development of new Labour Party, Social Mobility Commission, and Trades Union Congress policy proposals. Mainstream (as well as industry) media coverage of the research has enhanced public awareness of key social mobility challenges within the UK's creative sector. The breadth of its public impact is illustrated by the now widespread use of the term “class ceiling”, which was coined in [1].

Improving social mobility at Channel 4 - a new strategic approach: Despite its explicit ambition to be a pioneer of social diversity, Friedman found C4 to be highly socially exclusive compared to the UK as a whole. C4 responded positively to his report, “Investigating Social Mobility in UK Television” [4], and its practical recommendations for improving social mobility. As C4 Chief Executive, Alex Mahon explains:

“We chose to work with Dr Friedman because of his leading expertise and authority in this area and his valuable, sector-by-sector approach to understanding the barriers to greater socio-economic diversity... The research was vital in helping us to understand both the economic and social barriers that exist at Channel 4 and... the data and insights provided by the research enabled us to devise a strategy for improving the socio-economic diversity of Channel 4.” [A]

C4’s social mobility strategy was facilitated by the institution of a C4 Social Mobility Taskforce (of which Friedman was a member), which met three times between January and May 2017. In September 2017 it produced “A Strategy for Socio-economic Diversity at Channel 4”, setting out the organisation’s new strategic vision to improve diversity [B]. The strategy sets out plans to improve social mobility, focusing on removing or reducing the key barriers identified in Friedman’s report. Key steps subsequently taken include:

1. Since 2017, the methodology outlined in [4] (and developed further in a Social Mobility Commission Employers Toolkit - see below) has been used to measure and monitor social mobility among both existing staff and new applicants to C4.
2. Numerous steps to address economic barriers, including:
 - a. Banning family and friends work placements and instituting a new, application-only work experience scheme. This provides 60 placements annually in London and Manchester.
 - b. Starting the 4Talent outreach programme in areas of social deprivation. This offers skills tuition for up to 1,000 young people each year.
 - c. Introducing financial relocation assistance for apprentices and trainees.
 - d. Introducing an apprenticeship scheme aimed at applicants from low socio-economic backgrounds who do not hold a degree.
3. Setting up a Commissioner Mentoring Network, which seeks to drive positive change by replacing informal sponsorship with more formalised processes targeted at underrepresented groups, including those from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Addressing barriers identified by the research was also a key driver behind C4’s “4 All the UK” strategy. This, the biggest structural change in C4’s history, has involved opening new bases across the UK (including a new national headquarters in Leeds) and increasing investment in content produced outside London. These changes create more opportunities for both on- and off-screen representation of voices and talent from across the UK, and allow C4 to access talent from less socio-economically advantaged backgrounds [A].

Effects on socio-economic diversity at C4: Implementation of new HR policies and approaches informed by the research has already delivered improvements in socio-economic diversity at C4. The organisation particularly reports:

“... a positive impact in terms of the socio-economic diversity of our applicants. We received over 17,000 job applications in 2019, the first year recruiting for our new locations, and the percentage of those from a working-class background increased to 27%, up from 25% in 2018. This has contributed to the proportion of staff who are socially mobile increasing from 33% in 2016, when the research was carried out, to 39% in 2020.” [A]

Putting class inequality and social mobility on the UK television sector agenda:

Alongside internal reforms, the report [4] recommended that C4 take a public leadership position by using the research to start an industry-wide conversation about social mobility. In August 2018 C4 did indeed publish the research, circulating its results widely through the national media. It also committed in its social mobility strategy to “*shining a light on the issue... publicising the actions that Channel 4 has taken to other employers in the sector; strongly encouraging Indies and other suppliers to follow suit*” [B, p.9]. The strategy further stated that:

“In time, we will seek to make these policies a prerequisite to working with C4. This will result in a ripple effect as the c.300 indies implement social diversity measures in their organisations” [B, p.11]. In evidence provided in June 2018 to a House of Commons Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) Committee, Mahon cited [5] as a catalyst for this commitment to promoting industry-wide change. She noted particularly the role of [5] in illustrating the sector-wide nature of the class ceiling and explained that she had shared data from the “brilliant study” by Friedman “across the industry” to facilitate wider discussion about social mobility [C, Q.92].

C4 took further steps to improve industry understanding of the challenges associated with social mobility by making this the key theme of its 2018 DIVERSE Festival, where Mahon (with Friedman) launched [4] for an audience of 450 industry professionals. This sort of advocacy has helped extend the reach of the research impacts to other UK television industry organisations. In April 2018, C4, BBC, ITV, Channel 5, and PACT (which represents TV indies) provided Friedman with data for follow-up research comparing social mobility at Britain’s main broadcasters. Findings were presented in August 2018 at the Edinburgh International Television Festival, and demonstrated that the sector as a whole is skewed heavily toward the privileged - although C4 was shown still to be by far the most exclusive.

The wider effects of these efforts to enhance industry understanding of issues relating to social mobility are now being felt. In 2019, Ofcom’s annual “Diversity and equal opportunities in television” report included, for the first time, analysis of the socio-economic backgrounds of the industry workforce. Significantly, it echoed Friedman and Laurison’s term in summarising the findings: “Breaking the class ceiling – social make-up of the TV industry revealed” [D]. *Broadcast*, the UK’s main trade publication for television and broadcast media, published Friedman’s Edinburgh International Television Festival speech in full. As a result, all main broadcasters agreed to take part in a summit on social mobility in broadcasting, hosted by Friedman and The Bridge Group. At this summit, which took place in November 2020, BBC, ITV, Viacom, and C4 agreed to develop a pan-industry policy approach to improving social mobility.

Shaping new debates about social mobility among UK policy-makers: Mahon’s presentation of evidence at the DCMS Committee in June 2018 reflected growing interest among policy-makers in the effects of class background on access to opportunities within a range of sectors. The publication of [4] helped catalyse this interest in the context of the creative sectors and Friedman’s wider research - notably [5] - has also been widely cited in policy discussion. Policy discussions and debates informed by his work include:

- The work of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Social Mobility, to which Friedman provided oral evidence based on his research in July 2018.
- The Performers’ Alliance APPG inquiry on social mobility: Friedman drew on insights of research published in [1]-[6] in oral evidence submitted to this inquiry in March 2019.
- In March 2019, the then Minister of State for DCMS cited Friedman’s “ground-breaking work” in urging attendees of the Oxford Media Convention to do more on social mobility [E].
- In August 2019, Friedman was invited to No.10 by its Special Adviser on Civil Society, Youth & BME Communities to discuss how findings from [5] could inform government policy on social mobility.
- In September 2019, the TUC drew heavily on Friedman’s work in a report on “Building working class power: how to address class inequality”. Directly echoing policy recommendations in [5], the TUC argued that the government should make class origin a protected characteristic and introduce mandatory reporting of class pay gaps among large employers. Friedman is part of an advisory group on class inequality convened by General Secretary, Frances O’Grady [F].
- A [speech on the role of the arts and creative industries in unleashing potential](#), given by Baroness Bull on 11 February 2020 as part of the Lord Speaker’s Lecture Series.

Supporting the development of Labour Party policy on social mobility: In February 2017, the Labour Party commissioned “Acting up”, an inquiry into access and diversity in the performing arts. Friedman took part in a roundtable that informed the final report and policy

recommendations of this inquiry [G]. Published in August 2017, its report makes several references to Friedman's research, including [2]. In December 2018, Friedman produced a chapter on "institutional classism" for inclusion in a Labour Party pamphlet on tackling inequality. This was swiftly followed by then-Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn's announcement at the Edinburgh International Television Festival of plans to measure the class origins of all those creating BBC content. Friedman is also a member of a continuing Labour Party advisory group on social mobility, headed by Lyn Brown MP.

Informing the work of the UK Social Mobility Commission: The Social Mobility Commission is an advisory, non-departmental, public body established in 2010 to assess progress in improving social mobility in the UK. In January 2017, Friedman produced a report for the Commission, extending his work on the class pay gap [H]. He was subsequently appointed as a Commissioner in October 2018; he is the only academic appointed to the current Commission and its first ever sociologist [I]. [5] is cited in the Commission report "State of the Nation 2018-19: Social Mobility in Great Britain" [I], and Friedman also helped shape its employers' toolkit for socio-economic diversity and inclusion [J]. C4 has been used as a case study in that toolkit, which notes that at C4 "the proportion of staff not from professional or managerial backgrounds has increased by almost 20% between 2016 and 2019" [J, p.18].

Enhancing public awareness and understanding of the class pay gap: Key insights from the research have been widely reported in mainstream media with large public audiences in the UK and internationally. This includes reviews in and coverage by the BBC, *The Guardian*, the *Financial Times*, *The New York Times*, and *The Sunday Times* [K]. The research also formed the backbone of the August 2019 BBC2 documentary "How to Break into the Elite", which featured Friedman [L]. The documentary has been viewed more than 1.5 million times. Friedman's presentation of his findings on social mobility across the main broadcasters at the Edinburgh International Festival in August 2018 also generated significant media coverage, including on Channel 4 News and *The Guardian*, *The Times*, and *The Daily Telegraph* [K]. This extensive media coverage of the research and associated issues has helped open up public - as well as policy and practitioner - debate about how class origin affects social mobility.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- [A] Statement provided by Chief Executive, Channel 4, December 2020.
- [B] "A Strategy for Socio-economic Diversity at Channel 4", Channel 4, 18 September 2017.
- [C] House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media & Sport Committee. [Oral Evidence: Channel 4 Annual Report 2017, HC 992](#), 26 June 2018.
- [D] "[Breaking the Class Ceiling](#)", Ofcom report, 18 September 2019.
- [E] "[DCMS Minister tells Project Diamond it must do better](#)", Campaign for Broadcasting Equality, 24 March 2019.
- [F] "[Building working class power: How to address class inequality today](#)", TUC, September 2019. See pp. 7 and 18 for references to [5].
- [G] "[Acting Up Report: Labour's Inquiry into Access and Diversity in the Performing Arts](#)", Labour Party, August 2017. See pp. 4, 5, 11, and 24 for discussion of Friedman's work.
- [H] "[Social Mobility, the Class Pay Gap and Intergenerational Worklessness: New Insights from The Labour Force Survey](#)", Social Mobility Commission, 26 January 2017.
- [I] "[State of the Nation 2018-19: Social Mobility in Great Britain](#)", Social Mobility Commission, April 2019. See pp. 7, 8, 55, 91, and 107.
- [J] "[Socio-economic diversity and inclusion: Employers' toolkit](#)", Social Mobility Commission.
- [K] Examples of high-profile media coverage include articles in: *The Guardian*, [22 August 2018](#) and [30 January 2019](#); *The Times*, [25 August 2018](#); and *inews* [26 January 2019](#).
- [L] "[How to Break Into The Elite](#)", BBC2, 16 August 2019.