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Class origin closure: economic advantages of occupational elitism

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This study investigates the role of class origin compositions of micro-occupations in creating economic inequalities using three decades of British longitudinal surveys. Drawing on social closure theory, we analyze how class origin contributes to between-occupation earnings disparities and class origin earnings inequality at the individual level. Using fine-grained data on the class origins of occupational incumbents, we construct a robust indicator of the concentration of privileged class origins within labor market niches, "occupational elitism," measured as the percentage of incumbents with parents in the higher salariat (ESeC class 1) within an occupation. Our results reveal that occupational elitism of micro-occupations is positively associated with earnings, after accounting for indicators of positional closure mechanisms, such as educational credentialing, licensure, and unionization. However, these collective earnings premiums are unevenly distributed, with earnings advantages for individuals from upper-class families emerging in occupations with higher levels of occupational elitism.

Key words: social closure; class origin; earnings inequality; occupational status; occupational elitism; social mobility.

Introduction

Class origin—defined as parents' occupational status during the formative years of childhood—remains a salient determinant of labor market inequalities (Grusky 2019). Recent analyses of survey and register data indicate that class background gradients in occupational status and earnings are substantial (Blanden 2013), remain stable over time (Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2018), and persist in egalitarian societies (Erikson and Goldthorpe 2002; Mood 2017). Even amid late-20th-century shifts toward more market-driven employment practices, evidence suggests that class-based disparities in Britain's workplaces persisted rather than diminished (McGovern, Hill, and Mills 2007). The "long arm" of the parental home is visible after occupational sorting. For example, using data from the United Kingdom (UK), Friedman and Laurison (2020) report earnings inequalities along class origins *within* occupations, which they term "class ceilings" (Laurison and Friedman 2016).

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Multiple traditions document class inequality in access to elite occupations. Sociologists have long observed that elite professions in Britain tend to recruit from a narrow social stratum dominated by those from higher-class origins or privately educated backgrounds (Glass and Hall 1954; Stanworth and Giddens 1974). UK Policy reviews similarly warn that "class background still too often determines life chances" and that many top occupations remain a closed shop (Milburn 2009). Research on the British class structure reinforced these insights by highlighting how fractions of the middle class—entrepreneurial, managerial, and professional—each defined by different assets (property, organizational authority, cultural capital) all remain advantaged in access to elite occupations (Butler and Savage 1995; Savage et al. 1992). Enduring exclusivity of (certain) British occupational niches makes the UK an appropriate setting for our study, which examines how class origin compositions of occupations relate to earnings inequality both between and within occupations.

We draw on stratification and social closure frameworks that explain status maintenance and, to some extent, class origin earnings inequalities. Qualitative research has shown how transmission of class-based social, cultural, and economic resources within families extend well beyond childhood (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Lareau 2015). Quantitative research unveils class-based opportunities and obstacles within labor markets, such as school-to-work transitions and job applications (Breen and Müller 2020; Rivera 2012). However, empirical research often falls short of capturing the *collective* force of the class structure that acts upon earnings variation between occupations and within occupations (along class origin). While theorists have stressed that class origin *compositions* of labor market spaces should be predictive of intergenerational class mobility (Giddens 1975; Goldthorpe 1988; Wright 1979), the *empirical* linkage between the social origins of workers in occupations and earnings inequalities has rarely been examined.

We draw on social closure theory to formulate specific hypotheses regarding the relationship between the class origin composition of a labor market niche (all workers in the same micro-occupation) and (1) collective monetary rewards variation across occupations and (2) individual-level class origin earnings inequalities within occupations.

Social closure theory helps us understand how these outcomes are inherently intertwined, representing different faces of the same phenomenon. We argue that concentrations of *privileged* class origins create salient social boundaries that not only "increase the pie" of monetary rewards for its own economic space (occupation), but also generate class origin earnings disparities among workers within it. The former process is analogous to Weeden's (2002) positional approach to between-occupation earnings variation, wherein an occupation's ability to restrict access to the profession based on recognized *institutional* signals (e.g., licensure, credentials) is positively associated with its average compensation.[1] Our focus remains on the *social* component of closure and specifically on the role of class origin as providing ready-made scripts and cultural currencies that subtly exclude individuals from accessing certain labor market niches (Murphy 1988; Tilly 1998; Sørensen and Kalleberg 1981). One by-product of such artificial restriction of labor supply to an occupation is an average earnings premium enjoyed by its incumbents.

We propose an analysis of *occupational elitism*. This is the concentration of privileged class origins within an occupation, which determines the opportunity structure for social closure via class origin. To operationalize this concept, we use detailed occupational data from three decades of longitudinal surveys in the United Kingdom. These data contain more than 220,000 combinations of occupational incumbents and their parental occupations in four digits from which parental class membership in the European Socio-Economic Classification (ESeC) can be derived. Occupational elitism is an occupation-level metric that constitutes the percentage of incumbents with *parents* who belonged to ESeC class 1 (the higher salariat) across hundreds and up to tens of thousands of observations *per micro-occupation*. A higher share of workers with parents in ESeC class 1 implies a higher degree of occupational elitism.

The empirical analysis falls in the micro-class tradition, which examines stratification using the smallest grouping of job titles (Jonsson et al. 2009; Weeden et al. 2007; Weeden and Grusky 2004, 2012). We first assess the collective payoffs of occupational elitism: To what extent is the

concentration of privileged class origins within occupations associated with earnings levels? The social closure dynamic tested is that of strategic and non-strategic social "exclusion" from accessing lucrative labor market spaces, which in turn increases the average occupation income (Murphy 1988; Parkin 1971). Analyses then turn to explaining class origin earnings gaps *within* occupations: To what extent is the concentration of privileged class origins within occupations associated with class origin earnings gaps? Here, we hypothesize to observe consequences of "opportunity hoarding," whereby, on average, powerful incumbents disproportionally reward workers from higher-class origins (Tilly 1998). These two research questions address both sides of the same social closure coin: occupational elitism increases the size of pie for its labor market niche, but also affects the distribution of those rewards among members of different social groups.

Literature

Occupations as foundation of class schemas

The class structure serves as a fundamental framework for analyzing social stratification and inequality through at least three distinct traditions (Weeden and Grusky 2012). First, *big class regimes* stratify labor markets based on variation in authority, autonomy, and power in the production process (Carlsson 1958). This framework typically organizes employment relations into four to nine classes of workers (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992; Wright 1997). Classification is grounded in the idea that employment relations strongly predict future life chances for workers (including salaries). For example, Goldthorpe's influential service class concept (grouping higher-grade professionals and managers) treated this salariat as a unified class, although later scholars demonstrated that it actually contains internally distinct segments (Savage et al. 1992).

Second, *gradational class regimes* were developed in direct opposition to big classes to organize occupations according to a hierarchy of total resources available to workers, including Duncan's (1961) Socioeconomic Index (SEI) and Treiman's (1977) prestige score. Gradational schemas share with big classes the fundamental assumption that both material and positional resources available to workers matter for status attainment and reproduction (Hauser and Warren 1997). Additionally, stratification scholars have developed scales based on empirical interaction patterns, such as the Cambridge Social Interaction and Stratification (CAMSIS) scale. CAMSIS assigns occupations a position along a single hierarchy of social prestige derived from observed association patterns. Unlike measures based purely on economic attributes or survey ratings, CAMSIS derives the stratification order from social connectivity, reflecting the idea that patterns of interaction constitute the hierarchy of status in society (Lambert, Prandy, and Bottero 2008).

Third, a micro-class regime stratifies niches within the labor market known as "micro-occupations," which consist of collections of job titles. This framework assumes that occupations achieve internal homogeneity through a combination of workers' self-selection, recruitment, socialization, and interactional closure by their incumbents (Weeden and Grusky 2005; Murphy 1988; Tilly 1998). Similar to big class regimes, this perspective views the labor market as fragmented into discrete and relatively homogeneous categories (Jonsson et al. 2009; Weeden and Grusky 2004). However, unlike big class approaches, these delineations represent differentially institutionalized economic spaces that are not only smaller in scale (i.e., organized in specific occupations) but also provide better predictions of life chances, attitudes, and intergenerational mobility (Jonsson et al. 2009; Weeden and Grusky 2005).

Following earlier work on social closure, this study adopts a micro-occupational approach as its analytical foundation. That is, the smallest possible grouping of job titles—micro-occupations measured in four-digit codes—are used as the unit of analysis. It is noteworthy that all three

theoretical perspectives put the **occupation** at the center of social stratification (Parkin 1971). We argue that micro-occupations are key sites where institutionalized practices *and* social closure generate earnings disparities by class origin.

Social exchange and social closure

The principle advanced in this study posits that the social compositions of micro-occupations can significantly influence collective rewards hierarchies and earnings inequalities within these strata at the same time. The relationship between the social *composition* of economic spaces and its inequality patterns has a long-standing foundation in various social stratification strands, notably social exchange theory and social closure theory.

Starting with the former, social exchange theorists highlight the significance of the size and interconnection of "categories" (status groups) within social spaces. The presence of at least one prominent status category within a social space indicates some level of separation from the broader population (Rytina and Morgan 1982). Building on Durkheimian principles, Blau (1977) contends that a high degree of status group heterogeneity fosters interdependencies and promotes cohesion. Conversely, a space with a "heavy" majority tends to create social inequalities and hierarchies. The sheer size of a dominant group grants them disproportionate advantages in resources, power, and decision-making. Social exchange theorists explicitly link low diversity to emergence of in-group preferences in the selection and allocation of resources: "social homophily" (Homans 1950). Identifying these social inequality mechanisms presents challenges to analysts because boundaries remain fluid, allowing some minority groups to integrate with the majority (Blau 1977).

Social closure theorists further theorized conditions and means of exclusionary allocation mechanisms. Social closure is defined as the process of drawing boundaries with the purpose or consequence of monopolizing resources for in-group members (Parkin 1971; Weber 1978[1922]). Common applications pertain to *economic* spaces, such as how the incumbents of occupations and firms leverage their own monetary advantages by (1) restricting access opportunities for out-group members, while simultaneously (2) favoring individuals deemed as in-group in the allocation of resources. These mechanisms, termed exclusion and opportunity hoarding (Murphy 1988; Tilly 1998), represent two facets of the same power dynamic exerted by dominant groups. Exclusion involves out-group bias, manifesting as systematic deprivation of outsiders' access to lucrative economic spaces, exemplified in structural dismissal of ethnic minority and working-class job applicants (Quillian and Lee 2023; Rivera 2012, 2016). On the other hand, opportunity hoarding occurs when implicit categorical distinctions are exploited to monopolize valuable resources for in-group members *within* economic spaces. This may involve offering the most lucrative promotions or highest salaries to employees with educational credentials from elite universities (Bühlmann et al. 2022) or upper-class origins (Ashley 2023).

Empirical quantitative research on the UK corroborates within-occupation mechanisms of opportunity hoarding, leading to class origin earnings inequality. Even after individuals from lower-class backgrounds successfully enter elite occupations, they continue to face disadvantages in rewards: an intra-occupation disparity termed a "class ceiling." Laurison and Friedman (2016) demonstrate that these upwardly mobile workers earn on average about 16 percent less than colleagues from privileged families in Britain's high-status fields. This class-origin pay gap—roughly £7000 lower in annual earnings—persists even after controlling for education, firm size, location, and other factors. Friedman and Laurison's (2020) subsequent book further underscores how class origin remains a major axis of inequality within top professions.

It is important to note that social exclusion and opportunity hoarding can hinge on *any* ascriptive feature (e.g., race, gender, class origin) and *any* positional feature (e.g., educational credentials, professional memberships) of individuals. Social closure mechanisms inevitably arise in situations where there is competition for economic well-being. This prompts status groups to minimize competition for their own members on the basis of accepted categorical distinctions.

Sociological research on exclusion and opportunity hoarding in modern labor markets have primarily focused on the role of positional features within and between occupations.

Social closure in the labor market

How do "exclusion" and "opportunity hoarding" manifest within labor markets? According to the micro-occupational perspective, occupations are relatively homogenous *institutional* settings, and where both ascriptive and achieved traits matter for patterns of selection, sorting, and rewards.

Scholars of the British professions have long shown that occupations pursue closure by erecting barriers to entry—for example, by requiring specific educational credentials or licenses as a means to monopolize opportunities (Williams and Koumenta 2020; Witz 1990, 1992). These mechanisms may interact with workers' ascriptive features. For instance, Witz's analysis of professionalization shows how credential barriers allowed *male* physicians in the 19th century to secure monopolies on high-status work and its rewards, reinforcing existing gender and power hierarchies (Witz and Savage 1991).

Weeden and Grusky (2005) describe the role of ascriptive features in these allocative processes, stressing how occupational practices perpetuate social homogeneity. For example, on the demand side, hiring often relies on referrals from existing networks of incumbents (Fernandez and Fernandez-Mateo 2006; Granovetter 1995). Gatekeepers in human resources or management are tasked with recruiting based on job tasks, but also seek to maintain cultural repertoires in their organizations. These subtle social exclusionary mechanisms—called "interactional closure"—solidify pre-existing cultural attitudes and behavioral norms, and contribute to more within-occupation homogeneity (Weeden and Grusky 2005). In other words, occupations tend to cultivate social homogeneity-inducing collective consciousness that trickle down to the allocative process.[2]

Interactional closure invokes class origin. For example, Ashley's (2023) study of hiring practices within the City—London's financial center—describes exclusionary techniques that overtly favor job candidates from the most affluent social origins. Despite assertions by finance recruiters that the profession is meritocratic, the senior positions remain predominantly populated by individuals from upper-middle-class backgrounds. Her study demonstrates how the narrative of meritocracy—selection on positional goods (education) and achieved traits—can coexist with de facto occupational elitism and exclusion based on class origins. Ashley's (2023) analysis indicates how hiring managers continue to discriminate based on "fit," often referring to class-origin-based attributes of applicants and newcomers, under the guise of ensuring that the "top jobs" are awarded to individuals who project authority and prestige.

Furthermore, Rivera (2012, 2016) shows that working-class applicants face significant barriers for high-skill and lucrative jobs in banking, consultancy, and law, primarily due to explicit preferences for social and cultural matching. One example of such access inequality is the "airport test," wherein business recruiters are asked whether they would be happy spending three hours stuck at an airport with a job applicant (Rivera 2012). Although some of the cultural signals identified in Rivera's interviews with business recruiters were not exclusively highbrow, they frequently align with the cultivation of leisure time typical of the upper-middle class (Lamont 1992). Moreover, the role of class origin as a cultural currency in job access is underscored by survey experiments; a study by Galos (2024) suggests that incumbents exhibit a preference for upper-class signals ("cues") on applicants' social media profiles (the treatment), viewing them as indicators of both warmth (i.e., social fit) and competence (i.e., skill match).

To summarize, individual-level sociological analysis provides compelling circumstantial evidence for social exclusion from occupations, and especially more lucrative economic spaces. This process is at least in part focused on the class origins of applicants—alongside selection on human capital or positional goods, such as educational credentials.

Evidence on positional closure

Our assessment of class origin-based social closure *complements* existing closure research, which has primarily focused on the concentration of positional statuses in occupations and their

capacity to generate occupation-level wage premiums. Weeden (2002) pioneered this research stream by documenting how the social and legal barriers of occupations are uniquely associated with *between-occupation* earnings variation—dynamics of "collective upgrading." As occupations aim to channel demand and signal quality (Abbott 1993; Grusky and Sørensen 1998), they often implement access requirements, such as licenses and educational credentials. These requirements serve as effective closure "devices" because they artificially restrict the supply of labor to the occupation. As a result, occupations that exert greater control over their labor supply tend to experience collective earnings that exceed what would be expected based on incumbents' skills and market demand alone, called "excess rents" (Bol and Weeden 2015; Weeden 2002).

Weeden (2002) identifies three primary positional closure devices that contribute to bidding up the monetary value of an occupation's services: educational credentials, licensure, and unionization.[3] Educational credentials are the most effective gatekeeping device because of their legitimized "codes of exclusion", often granted by state-certified institutions (Parkin 1979; Murphy 1988). They provide occupational incumbents with an ideal means of monopolizing economic advantages and controlling access to their profession (Sørensen 2000; Weeden and Grusky 2014). Similarly, licensure and professional registration requirements enable control over labor supply by granting occupational incumbents the sole right to monetize a specific skill set. In addition, labor unions enhance the bargaining power of incumbents, resulting in access to a larger share of profits and imposition of registration or licensure-based access barriers for non-members.

Empirical research by Weeden (2002), Bol and Weeden (2015), Williams and Koumenta (2020) confirms the positive associations between these positional closure devices and occupation-level earnings in various countries, including the United Kingdom. Weeden (2002) finds that while 66 percent of earnings variation exists within US occupations, between-occupation pay gaps are primarily explained by occupations' credentialism (proportion college graduates), certification and licensing, and unionization. Notably, these occupation-level associations persist after controlling for workers' education and experience (indicators of human capital). The monetary advantages derived from the positional compositions of occupations can be attributed to their competition-reducing effects, which reduce competition from individuals with similar skill sets.

Occupational elitism

We argue that an important additional explanatory factor of earnings inequality is the density of class origins in occupations. Whereas classic studies of occupational closure focused on explicit exclusionary devices (e.g., credential barriers or professional regulations) to secure advantages for insiders (Parkin 1979; Witz 1992), our approach considers an informal, ascriptive form of closure captured by the class origin profile of incumbents. Specifically, the social composition of a labor market niche can become a salient closure mechanism that generates collective earnings premiums and individual-level earnings disparities. Qualitative research and experiments provide evidence of such social exclusion and opportunity hoarding, emphasizing class-based cultural matching along "fit" and preferences for attitudes that display "prestige" (Ashley 2023; Rivera 2016). These legitimized social selection pathways into occupations effectively restrict labor supply by narrowing the pool of candidates who either possess or have mastered elite cultural practices. However, there is no quantitative empirical evidence of how these collective forces of the class origin structure shape labor market inequality.

In order to answer our research questions regarding earnings premiums from class origin-based closure (increasing the pie), and the distribution of such resources among individuals of different class backgrounds (sharing the pie), we conceptualize "occupational elitism." We define occupational elitism as the aggregate level of social and material privilege enjoyed by incumbents during childhood: the class position of the parental home and its associated cultural, economic, and social resources that shape life course outcomes (Passaretta et al. 2018). We measure occupational elitism by calculating, for each occupation, the percentage of incumbents whose parents were in the higher salariat (ESeC class 1). This analytical choice assumes that individuals with similar class origins have acquired comparable endowments of economic, social,

and cultural capital during childhood. These resources continue to manifest throughout the life course, playing a critical role in occupational attainment (Grotti and Passaretta 2023) and in the expression of socio-cultural dispositions and preferences (Laurison 2016).

A focus on occupational elitism also provides a theoretical foundation to study within-occupation opportunity hoarding along class origin. While social closure is often interpreted as operating through entry barriers, both Murphy's (1988) and Tilly's (1998) formulations explicitly extend closure processes beyond access into ongoing allocation of rewards. For Murphy, closure concerns how groups that do not own the means of production nonetheless secure economic advantages by monopolizing returns to positions already occupied. Tilly similarly conceptualizes opportunity hoarding as a relational process whereby members of a categorical group who control access to valuable resources disproportionately channel those resources to people like themselves, thereby converting categorical distinctions into "durable inequalities." Importantly, this process does not require exclusion from the occupation as such. Instead, it operates *within* bounded economic spaces by shaping promotion and pay trajectories. Micro-occupations constitute such spaces because incumbents exercise discretion over rewards. When an occupation is dominated by individuals from privileged class origins, class becomes a salient and legitimized categorical distinction among workers, facilitating conversion of shared cultural affinities and mutual recognition into material advantages. Thus, occupational elitism conditions the strength of opportunity hoarding, allowing class origin-based inequalities in rewards to persist even after lower-class individuals have successfully entered elite occupations – a mechanism that links occupational elitism to a manifestation of Tilly's (1998) "durable inequality."

Importantly, occupational elitism does not imply that occupations are numerically exclusive or closed in an absolute sense. Even in high-elitism occupations, a substantial share of incumbents originate from outside the higher salariat; class origin closure is therefore understood here as a relational process rather than an impermeable barrier. Occupational elitism captures the degree to which class origin becomes salient in boundary-making and reward allocation within occupational niches.

Taken together, this conceptualization implies two empirically distinct but theoretically connected consequences of occupational elitism. First, higher levels of occupational elitism should be associated with collective earnings premiums, as socially legitimized class-based exclusion restricts effective labor supply to occupations. Second, occupational elitism should be associated with larger earnings advantages for individuals from higher-class origins within occupations, as opportunity hoarding enables powerful incumbents to disproportionately allocate rewards to in-group members. These two outcomes represent complementary characteristics of the same social closure dynamics along class backgrounds.

Analytical Approach

Research questions

Using a micro-class stratification perspective of labor market stratification, this study examines two dimensions of social closure via class origin with the overarching goal of understanding how the collective structure of class origin compositions explains earnings differentials.

(1) To what extent is the concentration of privileged class origins within occupations associated with earnings levels? This inquiry tests whether occupational elitism produces social closure mechanisms (exclusion) that generate excess rents beyond existing positional closure—i.e., credentials, licensure, union density (Weeden 2002)—and net of the human capital of respondents (i.e., educational background, experience). Analyses will assess the contribution of class origin compositions to between-occupation earnings variation. We expect that occupational elitism is positively associated with earnings premiums because it enables socially legitimized class origin-based exclusion at the gate of occupational niches.

(2) To what extent is the concentration of privileged class origins within occupations associated with class origin earnings gaps? Interaction models will be used to examine whether class origin-based opportunity hoarding (Tilly 1998) within micro-occupations is associated with earnings inequality among workers of different class origins. This approach also sheds light on mechanisms contributing to a "class ceiling" (Friedman and Laurison 2016) situated within the social composition of occupational niches. We expect that occupational elitism is positively associated with higher earnings rewards for higher-class origin workers within their respective occupations because it allows for more extensive class origin-based opportunity hoarding.

Data

We use the British Household Panel Study (BHPS) and its successor, the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS), covering annual surveys between 1991 and 2020. Wave 1 of the BHPS was collected in England and Wales only in 1991 (N = 10,300). It was expanded in 1999 to Scotland and Wales, and in 2001 to Northern Ireland, resulting in a nationally-representative sample of the United Kingdom.

The annual survey captures information on family life, social networks, education, work, aspirations, attitudes, behavior, health, and well-being using face-to-face or online self-completion surveys. This study uses the restricted-access version of the BHPS-UKHLS, which includes four-digit occupation codes for respondents' fathers and mothers when the respondent was 14 years old (University of Essex 2023). These detailed parental occupation codes allow us to calculate class origin compositions with a frequency per micro-occupation that is sufficiently large.

Out of the 108,914 individuals ever observed in the BHPS-UKHLS, 80,939 were part of the working-age population (ages 18–64). Individuals with no substantial connection to the labor market—enrolled in education, employed for 12 hours per week or less, or reporting zero or negative income for labor—were excluded (N = 74,066). We further exclude respondents with no information on educational attainment history and with no (valid) ISCO-88 (International Standard Classification of Occupations); members of the armed forces were excluded. This leaves a study sample of 71,381 unique individuals and a maximum of 220,156 person-year observations in the most elaborate predictive models.

To ensure additional robustness of the key independent variable, occupational elitism, we also derive class origin composition variables from the UK Labour Force Survey (LFS) (Office of National Statistics 2023). The LFS consists of 55,000 workers interviewed for five consecutive quarters, collecting more recent occupational classifications (ISCO-08) of parents. The June–September survey between 2014 and 2019 contains the same question about parental occupation, which can be used as an alternative benchmark for the occupational elitism measure.

Dependent variables

The dependent variable is earnings, derived from a survey question on average pre-tax monthly earnings from respondents' current main job. These amounts were standardized to 2019 British pounds. All models estimate the natural log of this variable. Descriptive statistics, presented in Table 1, indicate that average monthly earnings was £2647.80, ranging between £1 and £217,330.

Key independent variable: parental class

To examine the relationship between workers' parental class and earnings – via occupational elitism – we also use ESeC as indicator at the individual-level. This schema is applied to ISCO codes derived from the survey question "What was your father's/mother's occupation when you were 14 years old?" The ESeC classification is based on the Erikson-Goldthorpe-Hope (EGP) schema (Goldthorpe and Hope 1974), but offers an additional split in the service classes, distinguishing between large employers and higher-grade managers (ESeC 1) and lower-grade managers and

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

	Mean	Proportion	S.D.	Min	Max
Individual-level (N = 71,381)					
Age	41.21		11.45	18	64
Gender					
male		.466	.001	0	1
female		.534	.001	0	1
Parental class (ESeC)					
class 1: large empl., hi managers/professionals		.128	.001	0	1
class 2: lo managers/prof., hi supervisory/tech		.165	.001	0	1
class 3: intermediate occupations		.126	.001	0	1
class 4: small empl. & self-empl. (non-agr.)		.077	.001	0	1
class 5: small empl. & self-employed (agr.)		.019	.0003	0	1
class 6: lower supervisors & technicians		.007	.0002	0	1
class 7: lower sales and service		.133	.001	0	1
class 8: lower technical		.137	.001	0	1
class 9: routine		.181	.001	0	1
neither parent employed		.027	.0003	0	1
Race					
White		.877	.001	0	1
Black		.042	.0004	0	1
Asian		.076	.001	0	1
other		.006	.0002	0	1
Migration background					
UK born		.881	.001	0	1
first-generation immigrant		.119	.001	0	1
Marital status					
never married		.179	.001	0	1
married		.572	.001	0	1
living as couple		.155	.001	0	1
divorced		.062	.001	0	1
separated		.020	.0003	0	1
widowed		.010	.0002	0	1
other / NA		.001	.000	0	1
Dependent child in HH					
at least one <18		.206	.001	0	1
none <18		.794	.001	0	1
Education level (highest)					
master's degree or higher		.125	.001	0	1
bachelor's degree		.196	.001	0	1
other HE degree		.232	.001	0	1
A levels		.100	.001	0	1
below A levels		.247	.001	0	1
other school cert		.011	.0002	0	1
other / none above		.090	.001	0	1
Typical weekly hours worked	34.88		9.04	13	99
Employment type					
employed		.992	.0002	0	1
self-employed		.008	.0002	0	1
Monthly earnings (2019 pounds)	2647.80	2157.06		1	217,330
Monthly earnings (2019 pounds) logged	7.67	.66		.07	12.29
Region					

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued

	Mean	Proportion	S.D.	Min	Max
North East		.039	.0004	0	1
North West		.104	.001	0	1
Yorkshire and the Humber		.081	.001	0	1
East Midlands		.074	.001	0	1
West Midlands		.081	.001	0	1
East of England		.084	.001	0	1
London		.112	.001	0	1
South East		.122	.001	0	1
South West		.078	.001	0	1
Wales		.077	.001	0	1
Scotland		.111	.001	0	1
Northern Ireland		.038	.0004	0	1
Occupation-level (N = 288)					
Positional closure and control variables					
Vertical credentialing: % BA or higher	28.79		25.93	0.36	95.90
Licensure required (binary)		.222	.42	0	1
Union density: percent union member	55.24		18.64	4.55	100.00
% Female	40.01		28.94	.15	100.00
% First-generation immigrant	11.26		8.43	.52	75.00
Occupational elitism					
% ESeC Class 1: BHPS / UKHLS	12.98		8.46	0	45.10
% EGP Class 1: BHPS / UKHLS	17.96		10.98	0	62.50
Mean CAMSIS: BHPS / UKHLS	50.68		5.78	36.68	68.31

Notes. The means and proportions of individual-level predictors are time-variant (excepting highest-ever education) based on 71,381 individuals and 220,156 person-years. Survey respondents are included if they are adults aged 18 thru 64, employed for more than 12 hours a week on average, report positive monthly earnings, and are not enrolled in education in the observation years (1991–2020). *Source.* Author's calculations of waves 1 thru 18 of the British Household Panel Study (1991–2008), waves 1 thru 12 of the UK Household Longitudinal Survey (2009–2020), and the UK Labour Force Survey (2014–2019). Database for Regulated Occupations (Koumenta et al. 2014) for occupational licensure information.

higher-ranked supervisors (ESeC 2). Nonetheless, EGP and ESeC display a high degree of validity in the same data (Bihagen, Nermo, and Erikson 2014).

Table 1 presents the distribution of the eight categories of parental class (ESeC) in the sample. Parental class is determined by the highest-ranked occupation among either parent, where any parental ESeC class 1 supersedes ESeC class 2, and so forth. A separate category denotes having parents who were not employed at age 14 and thus lack a parental ESeC. In regression models, ESeC class 9 (parents working in "routine" occupations) serves as the reference category. Consequently, parental class estimates indicate differentials in respondents' earnings relative to a working-class background.

Control variables (individual-level)

Respondents are on average 41.21 years old. All models include age and age-squared. Time-invariant socio-demographic controls include race/ethnicity, gender, and migration background. These demographic distributions are presented in Table 1, noting a slight overrepresentation of women (53.6 percent). About 88 percent of respondents identify as White, 4.2 percent as Black, and 7.6 percent as Asian. About 12 percent of the sample is foreign-born.

Due to the panel structure, all analytical models include time-*variant* controls – i.e., confounders of earnings. Shown in Table 1, and based on person-year observations, about 30 percent

of respondents holds a bachelor's degree or more. Other socio-demographic controls focus on the household: marital status and having dependent children under 18. Models also account for self-employment, typical hours worked, and region, which are well-known predictors of labor market outcomes.

Occupational elitism: class origin composition

The occupational elitism variable is constructed by measuring the class origin composition of occupations. We first pool all 220,156 person-year observations available in the 1991–2020 BHPS-UKHLS, each containing ISCO-88 codes for current occupation and that of at least one parent.[4] Subsequently, for each of the 288 micro-occupations in which BHPS-UKHLS respondents are currently employed, we calculate the percentage of incumbents whose parents belonged to ESeC class 1—large employers, higher-grade professional, administrative, or managerial positions (higher salariat)—during the formative years of childhood (≈age 14). This measure captures the class-origin composition of occupations in the UK labor market over the past three decades, ranked from lower to higher by the share of incumbents from an upper-class background. While the higher salariat (ESeC class 1) is not an "upper class" in a traditional sense, it denotes the segment of the class structure most strongly endowed with closure-relevant cultural and social resources.

We employ two robustness checks. First, we calculate the percentage of occupational incumbents whose parents belonged to EGP class 1, also considered the higher salariat. The EGP is a predecessor of the ESeC and should therefore yield similar results. Second, we calculate the mean parental CAMSIS score of each occupation as an alternative occupational elitism metric. CAMSIS is a continuous indicator of an occupation's relative social status based on patterns of social interaction—such as who works, marries, or socializes with whom—derived from empirical models of inter-occupational contact (Lambert et al. 2008). In contrast to big classes, rooted in employment relations, the CAMSIS places occupations along a hierarchical scale of prestige and social connectivity. If similar directional associations with earnings can be found for mean parental CAMSIS scores, it would suggest that the social closure mechanisms we identify operate through both class-based exclusion and status-based homophily (Lambert, Griffiths, and Payne 2021).

The large sample size of the BHPS-UKHLS provides a unique opportunity to construct a robust indicator of class-origin composition across the entire occupational structure. We exclude occupations with fewer than 50 observations of incumbents' parental class to ensure reliability, with most occupations containing thousands or even tens of thousands of observations. For comparison, Rytina (2020) uses the US General Social Survey to construct parent-offspring combinations of SEI, which he terms "ascend class." His approach reduces the total number of occupations in a mobility table to 91, applying only a modest restriction of at least six fathers, at least six offspring, and at least 25 fathers and offspring combined. Only long-running or very large surveys, such as the UKHLS, contain a sufficient number of parental occupation observations (four-digit) *per micro-occupation* to allow construction of a class origin composition variable.

Figure 1 plots the occupational elitism variable for each occupation (288 in total), showing a right-skewed distribution. Across all occupations, the mean share of incumbents with ESeC class 1 parents is 12.98 percent. The "least elitist" occupations appear on the lefthand side of the graph, such as bus and tram drivers (4.8 percent of incumbents' parents in ESeC class 1), and the "most elitist" on the righthand side, such as lawyers (43.2 percent). Optometrists fall near the average level of occupational elitism (12.7 percent). It is important to note that, due to intergenerational transmission of status, an occupation's own social class will always be correlated with its mean percentage ESeC 1 parents. However, this correlation is only weak to moderate (.253), suggesting that socio-economic ranking and elitism still describe fairly different characteristics of the occupational structure (Appendix A).[5]

To provide more insight into the class origin compositions of occupations, Table 2 presents examples from the top, middle, and bottom of the occupational elitism distribution. Among the

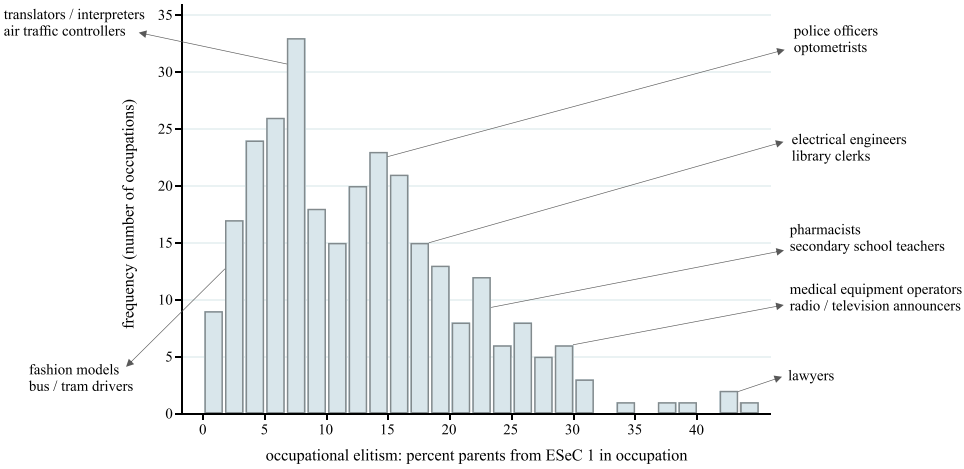

Figure 1. Occupational elitism: percent parents from ESeC class 1 in occupations. *Notes*. Number of current occupations: 288. Number of first occupations: 238. *Source*. Author's calculations of waves 1 thru 18 of the British household panel study (1991–2008) and waves 1 thru 12 of the UK household longitudinal survey (2009–2020).

top-10 ranked professions—e.g., senior officials of humanitarian organizations (% of incumbents with parents in ESeC class 1 = 45.1), dentists (38.4%), and radio/television announcers (29.4%)—we still observe a range of average monthly earnings (£2931–£9421). Most professions with high levels of occupational elitism are classified as ESeC class 1. However, this relationship is much less consistent below the very top of the distribution, where we find occupations with a mix of different social class assignments (and earnings levels). For instance, physical and engineering technicians (% ESeC 1 parents = 11.8) and police officers (12.2%) have nearly the same levels of occupational elitism, but occupy different positions in the class ranking; lower managerial / high supervisory and intermediate, respectively. This pattern also holds for the lowest degree of occupational elitism (bottom of Table 2).

Occupation-level control variables

The analyses include occupation-level control variables to measure earnings premiums attributable to class origin-based *social* closure, over and above *positional* closure (Bol and Weeden 2015; Weeden 2002). Following previous work, we calculate the percent of occupational incumbents who are union members (mean = 55.2 percent) and who hold a bachelor's degree (mean = 28.8 percent) using the pooled dataset of person-year observations. Licensure is measured using a dichotomous variable indicating that the occupation is subject to legal requirements postulating that the worker must meet prescribed standards of competence, which is the case for about 10 percent of UK occupations. This variable has been coded by Koumenta et al. (2014), who drew occupational regulation information from the UK Database of Regulated Occupations. The gender distribution and share of foreign-born workers are also included as control variables because they are important correlates of mean occupational earnings (Bol and Weeden 2015; see Witz 1990).

Estimation

We employ hierarchical linear models (HLM), also known as multilevel models, for estimation. These models allow for random slopes and random intercepts, addressing the clustered standard errors at each observation level (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002): individuals (level 1) are nested in occupations (level 2). HLMs allow for assessing the amount of variation in the dependent

Table 2. Selected descriptive statistics of micro-occupations ranked by occupational elitism.

Title	Occupational elitism		ESeC	monthly earnings
	rank	% parents from ESeC 1		
Senior officials: humanitarian + special-interest orgs.	1	45.1	1 - Large employers, high managerial / prof.	£ 3898
Lawyers	2	43.2	1 - Large employers, high managerial / prof.	£ 5393
Medical doctors	3	42.7	1 - Large employers, high managerial / prof.	£ 6577
Dentists	4	38.4	1 - Large employers, high managerial / prof.	£ 5833
Legal professionals	5	33.6	1 - Large employers, high managerial / prof.	£ 7359
Medical equipment operators	6	31.4	6 - Lower supervisory / technical	£ 2931
Physicists, chemists and related professionals	7	30.5	1 - Large employers, high managerial / prof.	£ 3394
Directors and chief executives	8	30.4	1 - Large employers, high managerial / prof.	£ 9421
Radio, television and other announcers	9	29.4	3 - Intermediate	£ 3998
Cartographers and surveyors	10	28.8	1 - Large employers, high managerial / prof.	£ 4026
Midwifery associate professionals	140	12.5	2 - Lower managerial / prof.; high supervisory	£ 2981
Employment agents and labor contractors	141	12.4	2 - Lower managerial / prof.; high supervisory	£ 2627
Police officers	142	12.2	7 - Lower sales / service	£ 3455
Tellers and other counter clerks	143	12.2	7 - Lower sales / service	£ 1723
Secretaries	144	11.9	3 - Intermediate	£ 1902
Physical and engineering science technicians	145	11.8	2 - Lower managerial / prof.; high supervisory	£ 3433
Textile-, fur-, and leather-products machine operators	146	11.8	9 - Routine	£ 1628
Managers, small enterprises: personal care, cleaning	147	11.6	4 - Small employers / self-employed (non-agr.)	£ 1940
Ships' deck officers and pilots	148	11.4	2 - Lower managerial / prof.; high supervisory	£ 4036
Telegraph and telephone installers and servicers	149	11.3	8 - Lower technical	£ 2989
Building frame and related trades workers	279	2.3	8 - Lower technical	£ 3008
Mail carriers and sorting clerks	280	2.0	9 - Routine	£ 2385
Welders and flame cutters	281	2.0	8 - Lower technical	£ 2697
Freight handlers	282	1.7	9 - Routine	£ 1951
Farm-hands and laborers	283	1.5	9 - Routine	£ 1991
Metal finishing-, plating- coating-machine operators	284	1.0	9 - Routine	£ 2303
Mechanical-machinery assemblers	285	0.9	9 - Routine	£ 2400
Bookmakers and croupiers	286	0.9	7 - Lower sales / service	£ 1451
Electronic-equipment assemblers	287	0.6	9 - Routine	£ 1965
Garbage collectors	288	0.5	9 - Routine	£ 2144

Notes. Micro-occupation titles as defined in ISCO-88. Earnings reflect monthly averages. *Source*. Author's calculations of waves 1 thru 18 of the British Household Panel Study (1991–2008) and waves 1 thru 12 of the UK Household Longitudinal Survey (2009–2020).

variable that is explained by differences in higher levels of the model relative to the total variance in the dependent variable – i.e., within-occupation and between-occupation earnings variation. The intraclass correlation (ICC) indicates the share of the total variance in earnings that can be attributed to higher-level predictors, such as class origin composition and positional closure. It shows the contribution of occupational elitism to between-occupation earnings variation, which can be compared to established positional closure effects.

For the first research question, regarding the association between the concentration of privileged class origins and occupation-level earnings, the following HLM is estimated:

$$\begin{aligned} Y_{ij} = {} & \gamma + \pi \text{age}_{ij} + \eta \text{age}_{ij}^2 + \theta \text{year}_{ij} + \boldsymbol{\psi} \mathbf{Z}_{ijt} + \boldsymbol{\delta} \boldsymbol{S}_{ij} + \beta \text{parental class}_{ij} \\ & + \lambda C_j + \boldsymbol{\alpha} \boldsymbol{M}_j + u_j + r_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ij}, \end{aligned} \qquad \begin{aligned} & \varepsilon_{ij} \sim N\left(0, \sigma_e^2\right), \\ & r_{ij} \sim N\left(0, \sigma_r^2\right), \\ & u_j \sim N\left(0, \sigma_u^2\right), \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

where Y_{ij} is the monthly pre-tax labor earnings of individual (i) $_i$, located in occupation (j). Here, γ denotes the intercept. Level-1 variables age_{ij} and $\text{age}^2{}_{ij}$ are by definition time-variant and also nested within individuals and occupations. These yield coefficients π and η. The time-varying (level-2) socio-economic controls (marital status, dependent children in the household, highest current education, typical weekly hours worked, employment type, and region) are denoted with vector $\mathbf{Z}_{ijt}$. Time-invariant socio-demographics (gender, race/ethnicity, and migration background) are denoted with vector $\mathbf{S}_{ij}$. The corresponding estimated coefficients are $\boldsymbol{\psi}$ and $\boldsymbol{\delta}$, respectively. At the individual-level, only the coefficient β is interpreted in the results section: respondent's own parental class (ESeC).

At the occupational-level (level 2), C_j denotes the percent of incumbents with parents from ESeC class 1 of the respondent's occupation and coefficient λ therefore indicates its association with earnings. Vector $\boldsymbol{M}_j$ includes all positional closure predictors (union density, licensure, and percent bachelor's degree), percent female, and percent foreign-born workers. The coefficients of occupational-level control variables ($\boldsymbol{\alpha}$) are presented. Finally, in equation 1, u_j is the random intercept for level-2 (i.e., occupation) ($N(0, \sigma_u^2)$), r_{ij} is the random intercept for level-2 (i.e., individuals) ($N(0,\sigma_r^2)$), and ε_{ij} is a level-1 error term ($N(0,\sigma_e^2)$).

For the second research question, regarding the extent to which occupational elitism contributes to parental class earnings gaps, we add a cross-level interaction term:

$$\begin{aligned} Y_{ij} = {} & \gamma + \pi \text{age}_{ij} + \eta \text{age}_{ij}^2 + \theta \text{year}_{ij} + \boldsymbol{\psi} \mathbf{Z}_{ijt} + \boldsymbol{\delta} \boldsymbol{S}_{ij} + \beta \text{parental class}_{ij} \\ & + \lambda C_j + \upsilon \left(\text{parental class}_{ij} \times C_j\right) + \boldsymbol{\alpha} \boldsymbol{M}_j + u_j + r_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ij}, \end{aligned} \qquad \begin{aligned} & \varepsilon_{ij} \sim N\left(0, \sigma_e^2\right), \\ & r_{ij} \sim N\left(0, \sigma_r^2\right), \\ & u_j \sim N\left(0, \sigma_u^2\right), \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

where υ is the interaction coefficient of individuals' (i) parental class and the corresponding class origin composition—degree of occupational elitism (j)—in relation to earnings. This coefficient will be interpreted as the heterogenous earnings effects of parental class (ESeC) as dependent on the class origin-based social closure of the labor market niche.

Findings

Collective earnings premiums from occupational elitism

Table 3 presents associations between occupation-level variables and logged earnings, controlling for all individual-level variables. The estimates for the individual-level controls in the full model are reported in Appendix B. Consistent with previous studies on the United Kingdom, the results show substantial class origin gradients in earnings. For example, having parents in ESeC class 1 or 2 (salariat) is associated with 8 percent and 6 percent higher earnings, respectively, compared to having parents in class 9 (routine).

Table 3. Occupation-level estimates of logged monthly earnings from a hierarchical linear model.

	Class origin closure (1)	Positional closure (2)	Social closure (3)	Parental class × occ. elitism (4)
Occupational elitism: percent parents from ESeC 1	.019***		.009***	.009***
	(.002)		(.002)	(.002)
Vertical credentialing: percent BA or higher		.008***	.005***	.005***
		(.0004)	(.001)	(.001)
Licensure required (binary)		−.016	−.010	−.009
		(.027)	(.026)	(.026)
Union density: percent union member		.003***	.003***	.003***
		(.001)	(.001)	(.001)
Percent female		−.003***	−.003***	−.003***
		(.0004)	(.0004)	(.0004)
Percent first-generation immigrant		−.005***	−.005**	−.005**
		(.001)	(.001)	(.001)
Parental class × percent parents from ESeC 1				
class 1: large empl., hi mgrs. / prof.				.0032***
				(.001)
class 2: lo mgrs. / prof., hi supervisory / tech.				.0025**
				(.001)
class 3: intermediate occupations				.0019
				(.001)
class 4: small empl. / self-empl. (non-agr.)				.0003
				(.001)
class 5: small empl. / self-employed (agr.)				−.00004
				(.002)
class 6: lower supervisors & technicians				−.0044
				(.003)
class 7: lower sales and service				−.0009
				(.001)
class 8: lower technical				.0018*
				(.001)
class 9: routine				*ref.*
neither parent employed				−.0008
				(.002)
Socio-demographics	*yes*	*yes*	*yes*	*yes*
Year fixed effects	*yes*	*yes*	*yes*	*yes*
Individuals	71,381	71,381	71,381	71,381
Person-years	220,156	220,156	220,156	220,156
Occupations	288	288	288	288
AIC	145,075	144,988	144,969	144,947
BIC	145,879	145,833	145,825	145,897

Notes. Hierarchical linear models fit individuals within micro-occupations (level-2). Survey respondents are included if they are adults aged 18 thru 64, employed for more than 12 hours a week, report positive monthly earnings, and are not enrolled in education in the observation years (1991–2020). Models contains age(−squared) and year fixed effects. Time-invariant socio-demographics include gender, race, migration background, and parental class. Time-variant socio-demographics include age, dependent children in the household, marital status, educational level, type of employment, typical hours worked per week, and region (estimates reported in Appendix A). A trimmed analytical model with only workers who earn more than the 10th percentile yields the similar occupational elitism estimates: .017 (model 1), .009 (model 3). Standard error between parentheses. *$P < .05$; **$P < .01$; ***$P < .001$ (two-tailed tests). *Source.* Author's calculations of waves 1 thru 18 of the British Household Panel Study (1991–2008) and waves 1 thru 12 of the UK Household Longitudinal Survey (2009–2020). Database for Regulated Occupations (Koumenta et al. 2014) for occupational licensure information.

In Model 1, earnings are regressed on occupational elitism while excluding all other occupation-level predictors: a class origin closure only model. We observe a positive association between the percentage of incumbents with parents from ESeC class 1 (higher salariat) and earnings: .019, $P < .001$. This implies that a one-percentage-point increase in the share of incumbents with higher-salariat parents in an occupation is associated with approximately 1.9 percent higher average occupation-level earnings.[6]

Model 2 confirms most of earlier occupational closure research regarding the *positional* closure effects on earnings levels. Point estimates indicate that vertical educational credentialing (.008) and union density (.003) are positively associated with earnings ($P < .001$), while the coefficient for licensure remains statistically non-significant. In addition, two additional social closure controls – the gender distribution and share of foreign-born workers – yield the expected negative coefficients in relation to earnings (−.003 and − .005, $P < .001$, respectively).

Model 3 adds class origin composition – occupational elitism – to the positional closure model (Model 2), producing a full "social closure model". Consistent with expectations of class origin-based exclusion and excess rents, occupations' percentage of incumbents with parents from ESeC class 1 indicates a significant positive association with earnings (.009, $P < .001$). Moreover, the coefficients of the positional closure variables remain comparable between Models 2 and 3, suggesting that positional closure and class origin–based social closure mechanisms operate as relatively independent mechanisms contributing to excess rents.

Although the coefficient for occupational elitism is about half the size observed in Model 1, the association with earnings remains sizeable and significant after accounting for positional closure variables, social closure controls, and individual-level correlates of earnings. This implies that one-percentage-point more occupational incumbents with parents in the higher salariat is associated with about 1 percent greater occupation-level earnings. Expressed in standard deviation terms, a one-standard deviation increase in occupational elitism (equivalent to 8.46 percentage points) corresponds to roughly 8 percent higher average occupation-level earnings.

The ICCs derived from Table 3's nested models help provide a better understanding of the role of class origin compositions on occupational earnings *variation* relative to other closure dynamics. Shown in Table 4, and anticipated based on earlier work by Williams (2013), a null model that excludes all occupation-level but includes all individual-level variables indicates that about a quarter of the earnings variation occurs between occupations (ICC = .270). The ICC decreases to .190 when adding occupational elitism alone to the model (Model 1, Table 3), thus explaining 29.6 percent of between-occupation earnings variation.

We examine the ICC reduction for each occupational closure "device" in the bottom rows of Table 4. Benchmarking these ICC changes against the null model shows that the class-origin composition of occupations explains a sizable share of between-occupation earnings variation. The explanatory power of occupational elitism is high relative to most other closure devices, with the exception of vertical educational credentialing (32 percent).

Consistent with prior UK work (Bol and Weeden 2015), positional-closure variables explain 48.6 percent of between-occupation earnings variation. Adding occupational elitism to form a "social closure model" raises this to 51.8 percent. The ICC falls from .139 (positional-closure only) to .130 (occupational elitism added), indicating a 6.2 percent relative reduction in unexplained between-occupation variance. In other words, measures of class origin-based closure account for a meaningful share of the residual earnings differences between occupations that are not captured by positional attributes alone. This aligns with Model 3 of Table 3, which shows a positive, statistically significant association between occupational elitism and earnings.

Occupational elitism and parental class earnings gaps

We next examine how class origin-based excess rents are distributed among workers from different parental class backgrounds. Model 4 of Table 3 adds a cross-level interaction between *individuals'* parental class and *occupations'* degree of elitism. The interaction terms for parental the two salariat classes (ESeC 1 and 2, reference = class 9) are both statistically significant, with

Table 4. Intraclass correlations (micro-occupations) of logged monthly earnings from a hierarchical linear model.

	Intraclass correlation	Percent Δ vs. null
Null model (including individual-level predictors)	.270 (.017)	
+ occupational elitism: percent parents from ESeC 1 (M1, table 3)	.190 (.014)	−29.6%
+ positional closure only (M2, table 3)	.139 (.011)	−48.6%
+ positional closure and occupational elitism (M3, table 3)	.130 (.011)	−51.8%
+ vertical credentialing: percent BA or higher	.184 (.014)	−32.0%
+ licensure: requirement (binary)	.270 (.017)	−0.1%
+ union density: percent members	.262 (.017)	−3.0%
+ percent female	.265 (.017)	−2.0%
+ percent first-generation immigrant	.269 (.017)	−0.4%

Notes. Correlations are drawn from a hierarchical linear model with individuals nested in micro-occupations (Table 4). The occupation-level measures of "positional" closure include percent bachelor's degree or higher, licensed (binary), and percent union member, with additional controls for percent female and percent immigrant. Standard error between parentheses. *$P < .05$; **$P < .01$; ***$P < .001$ (two-tailed tests). *Source.* Author's calculations of waves 1 thru 18 of the British Household Panel Study (1991–2008) and waves 1 thru 12 of the UK Household Longitudinal Survey (2009–2020). Database for Regulated Occupations (Koumenta et al. 2014) for occupational licensure information.

coefficients of .0032 and .0025, respectively, in relation to logged earnings. These results align with the theorized mechanism of opportunity hoarding via class origin concentration in micro-occupations: earnings advantage associated with parental class partially depends on the class origin composition of one's occupational niche.

Figure 2 visualizes this interaction using a binary parental class indicator (ESeC classes 1 and 2 vs. other classes) to aid interpretation. The positive slope of the marginal effect (dy/dx) shows that individuals with higher parental class backgrounds benefit more from working in more elitist occupations. In low-elitism occupations (on the left-hand side of the graph), the earnings advantage of upper class–origin workers is much smaller compared to in those ranked higher on the occupational elitism scale. A one-standard-deviation increase (8.46) in occupational elitism is associated with a 1.2-percentage-point greater earnings advantage for individuals with ESeC 1 and 2 parental backgrounds – equivalent to about £1640 annually.

Together, these findings suggest that social closure is "increasing the pie": as shown in Model 3 (Table 3), the higher the share of incumbents from class-privileged origins in an occupation, the higher its average earnings, all else equal. Yet this earnings-boosting mechanism is disproportionately stronger for those who themselves grew up in upper-class households, as evidenced by the statistically significant interaction effect (Model 4, Table 3; figure 2).

Robustness checks

How robust is our measure of occupational elitism as derived from the BHPS-UKHLS? One alternative is to use an external data source to compute class origin compositions: the parental occupational codes of incumbents in the Labour Force Survey (2014–2019). Despite a shorter

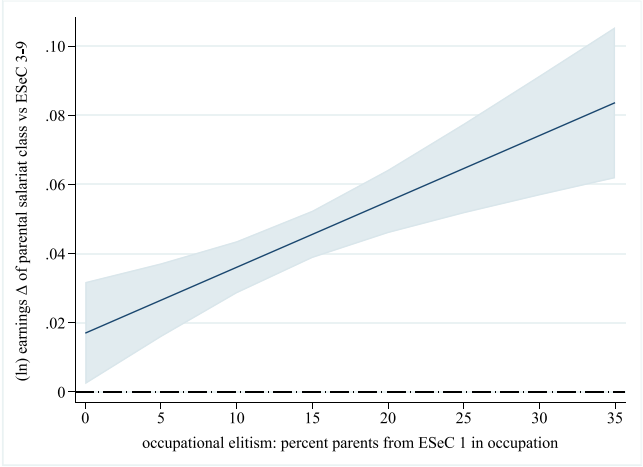

Figure 2. Marginal effects (dy/dx) of parental class × occupational elitism on logged monthly earnings from a hierarchical linear model. *Notes.* Marginal effects drawn from model 4 in.

observation span than the BHPS-UKHLS, we find that occupational elitism (the percentage of incumbents with parents in ESeC class 1) derived from both sources are highly correlated (.862).

Table 5 presents estimates from alternative indicators of occupational elitism in relation to earnings. Results show strong consistency between the main model in Table 3 and specifications using alternative metrics for occupational elitism (EGP- and CAMSIS score-based) and alternative data (LFS). For example, measuring occupational elitism by incumbents' parental EGP produces the same coefficient as the main results (.009, $P < .001$). Estimates are similarly close for both indicators drawn from the LFS (.011 and .010, $P < .001$). The association between the mean parental CAMSIS score and earnings is .016 ($P < .001$). Thus, regardless of class schema or data source, a higher concentration of class-origin-privileged incumbents within micro-occupations is positively associated with collective monetary rewards.

To address the concern that occupational elitism primarily proxies fine-grained differences in occupational skill requirements—thus reflecting class origin-stratified educational pathways into high-skill occupations rather than social closure within occupations – we conducted two robustness checks (Appendix C). These tests isolate the component of occupational elitism that is orthogonal to occupational education "density" and relax linearity assumptions in its functional form; in both cases, the estimated association between occupational elitism and earnings, as well as the parental class × occupational elitism interaction, remains substantively unchanged.[7]

We also conduct robustness checks to examine whether occupational inheritance could partly explain the relationship between occupational elitism and earnings. Evidence from the social mobility literature is inconclusive on whether the transmission of parental occupations to offspring is strongly dependent on occupational ranking. Some studies question whether such transmission is concentrated in higher-class occupations (Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2018), while research on educational field choice indicate that intergenerational inheritance patterns are not uniform (Van de Werfhorst et al. 2001) and may be somewhat stronger for classical professions such as law and medicine (Helland and Wiborg 2019). However, Appendix D shows that excluding respondents who inherited their occupation, inherited their social class, have parents in the higher-salariat class, or have parents in classical occupations produces estimates of the occupational elitism-earnings association that are virtually unchanged from the main results. This strengthens confidence in our occupation-level estimates of the earnings effects of occupational elitism.

Table 5. Occupation-level estimates of logged monthly earnings: Alternative occupational elitism calculations.

	Reported Table 3	Occupational elitism in BHPS / UKHLS		Occupational elitism in LFS '14-'19	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Occupational elitism: class origin composition					
percent parents from ESeC 1	.009***			.011***	
	(.002)			(.001)	
percent parents from EGP class 1		.009***			.010***
		(.002)			(.002)
mean parental CAMSIS score			.016***		
			(.004)		
Vertical credentialing: percent BA or higher	.005***	.004***	.004***	.004***	.004***
	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)
Licensure required (binary)	−.010	−.013	−.027	−.032	−.033
	(.026)	(.026)	(.026)	(.031)	(.031)
Union density: percent union member	.003***	.003***	.003***	−.003***	−.003***
	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)
Percent female	−.003***	−.003***	−.003***	−.003***	−.003***
	(.0004)	(.0004)	(.0004)	(.001)	(.001)
Percent first-generation immigrant	−.005**	−.004**	−.004**	−.004*	−.004*
	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.002)	(.002)
Socio-demographics	*yes*	*yes*	*yes*	*yes*	*yes*
Year fixed effects	*yes*	*yes*	*yes*	*yes*	*yes*
Individuals	71,381	71,381	71,381	53,567	53,567
Person-years	220,156	220,156	220,156	164,226	164,226
Occupations	288	288	288	175	175
AIC	144,969	144,958	144,968	110,882	110,991
BIC	145,825	145,813	145,823	111,777	111,865

Notes. Hierarchical linear models fit individuals within micro-occupations (level-2). Models contains age, age-squared, and time-variant and time-invariant socio-demographics. Survey respondents are included if they are adults aged 18 thru 64, employed for more than 12 hours a week, report positive monthly earnings, and are not enrolled in education in the observation years (1991–2020). Time-invariant socio-demographics include gender, race, migration background, and parental class. Time-variant socio-demographics include age, dependent children in the household, marital status, educational level, type of employment, typical hours worked, and region. Standard error between parentheses. *$P < .05$; **$P < .01$; ***$P < .001$ (two-tailed tests). *Source.* Author's calculations of waves 1 thru 18 of the British Household Panel Study (1991–2008), waves 1 thru 12 of the UK Household Longitudinal Survey (2009–2020), and the UK Labour Force Survey (2014–2019). Database for Regulated Occupations (Koumenta et al. 2014) for occupational licensure information.

Conclusion

When class origins become salient in social boundary making within occupational niches, both between-occupation and within-occupation economic inequalities are produced simultaneously.

On the one hand, class origin-based social closure generates excess rents enjoyed by all incumbents. These occupation-wide earnings advantages result in part from social exclusion within labor market niches, such as based on positional features (Weeden 2002). However, in addition to earnings premiums from educational credentialing, licensure, and unionization, access restriction can also be on the basis of socio-demographic features of individuals, commonly referred to as "cultural matching" in sociological analysis. This form of social closure

remains unrelated to the human capital of occupations but nonetheless occurs even in high-skill segments of the labor market (Rivera 2012). The subtle social selection and sorting as employed by managers, recruiters, and other powerful incumbents perpetuate the social composition of the occupational niche (Ashley 2023) and maintain its internal homogeneity (Weeden and Grusky 2005). This study reveals a relationship between a strictly *social* component of social closure—class origin—and earnings stratification.

This study quantifies the collective dimension of class structure in between-occupation earnings variation. Drawing on social closure theory developed by Murphy (1988), Parkin (1971), and Tilly (1998), who state that any ascriptive feature could become a salient dimension of restriction of access to a lucrative economic space, we hypothesized that a higher concentration of incumbents from upper-class origins would lead to greater social exclusion along parental class lines and that this would be observable in pay premiums. This mechanism persists in modern labor markets due to job allocation practice that go beyond skill selection, involving legitimized forms of social selection and cultural alignment. This blurry line is evidenced by research on cultural fit (Rivera 2012), maintaining prestige (Ashley 2023), and responding to positional signals such as elite credentials (Bühlmann et al. 2022), which activates social class as a distinction.

In addition, contemporary network analyses emphasize that labor market stratification is relational. According to this perspective, labor market niches and professions can be perceived as the natural outcome of path dependent social networks. Class theorists such as Giddens (1975), Goldthorpe (1988), Rytina (2020), and Wright (1979) argue that the characteristics of occupations are affected by the individuals who occupy them and the individual who did so in the past. Consequently, movements between occupations are sticky because of hierarchical boundaries that partially reflect the skill differentials between occupations and partially reflect social allocation. Recent studies demonstrate varying mobility rates between occupations (Cheng and Park 2020; Villareal 2020), reflecting not only human capital constraints but also the fact that opportunities and obstacles are relational (Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt 2019). Rather than viewing labor market stratification as a consequence of the sum of individual choices, both closure and network theories stress the enduring influence of social boundaries on mobility and stratification.

In line with social closure perspectives, this study provides evidence that class origin concentrations within occupational niches are systematically associated with occupation-level earnings variation and class origin earnings inequality. In doing so, we offer a perspective on earnings stratification through the lens of *occupational elitism*: the class origin composition of micro-occupations. This reflects the social homogeneity of labor market niches, which partially results from in-choosing in the past and continuous social closure mechanisms. Analyses confirm our expectations regarding the collective payoffs from occupational elitism. The concentration of incumbents from privileged social backgrounds is associated with earnings premiums, over and above positional closure (Weeden 2002, Bol and Weeden 2015), covariates of earnings related to human capital, and socio-demographics. These findings do not completely rule out human capital-based explanations; rather, they indicate that variation in skills and educational attainment are insufficient to fully account for the observed patterns.

The contribution of occupational elitism to between-occupation earnings is smaller than the most powerful positional closure device—vertical educational credentialing—but on par with the explanatory roles of licensure and union density (Table 3). This suggests that the socio-economic backgrounds of individuals within occupations contribute to an "excess rent," which are collective monetary return beyond what would be expected in a strictly competitive market (Grusky and Sørensen 1998; Weeden and Grusky 2014). The best explanation for this phenomenon is the presumed restrictive nature of micro-occupations with higher levels of occupational elitism. One key aspect is the tendency for incumbents to match with applicants and newcomers from similar class origins—a mechanism that operates via social and cultural currencies as shown in previous sociological research. These processes combined exert a monopolizing force which, when expressed in effect sizes, yields a linear monotonic association: a collective earnings

premium of approximately 1 percent for each additional percentage point of incumbents with parents in ESeC class 1—the degree of occupational elitism.

The panel data used in this study span 30 years and contain observations of both incumbents and their parental origins (four-digit codes). The extensive size of the BHPS-UKHLS dataset offers a unique opportunity to compute class origin compositions for micro-occupations. The percentage of incumbents with upper-class parents is derived with at least 50 observations per micro-occupation, often reaching hundreds or thousands, which significantly improve on previous calculations of "ascend class" (e.g. Rytina 2020) which often lacked a sufficiently large sample for benchmarking. This study builds a comprehensive measure of class origin composition for the entire occupational structure, shown in Table 2. This methodological step is important because it enables researchers to examine its *consequences* for labor market stratification using a micro-class approach (Jonsson et al. 2009).

In addition to the occupation-level effects of class origin composition on earnings, we applied social closure theory to predict class origin heterogeneity in the individual-level payoffs from occupational elitism. Cross-level interactions between the parental class of respondents and the percentage of upper-class origin incumbents in the occupation revealed that a greater degree of occupational elitism is associated with disproportionally larger class origin earnings inequality.

Specifically, a one-standard-deviation increase in occupational elitism is associated with a 1.2-percentage-point greater earnings advantage for individuals with upper-class backgrounds (ESeC class 1 and 2). This finding aligns with a process of opportunity hoarding (Tilly 1998), wherein concentrations of status groups enable powerful incumbents to favor in-group members in terms of rank or salary. It underscores the double-edged nature of social closure devices. Occupational elitism increases the size of the pie—i.e., monopolizing a larger market share—yet working-class workers within those occupations, who passed access hurdles against the odds, still reap the smallest slices of these rents.

Collectively, our findings indicate that occupational elitism significantly contributes to disparities between earnings and exacerbates class origin earnings gaps. It is important to note a key distinction between occupational elitism as a social closure "device" and positional closure (Weeden 2002). While positional closure dynamics are partially driven by occupation-wide *strategizing*, class origin-based closure stems from activating class origin as salient social or cultural barrier. This activation *can* be strategic, rational, and mimicked within professional niches, but it lacks the same level of legitimacy as positional closure devices. Of concern in the present study is the extent to which concentrations of privileged class origin yield economic benefits for micro-occupations, particularly for their most privileged incumbents.

Future research should unpack relational processes, for instance through examining the between-firm income variation as a function of firm's class origin composition or between-workplace sorting mechanisms that invoke family networks (Engzell and Wilmers 2025). This would improve on one limitation of the current study, which is that job matching by individual firms or organizations is not observed. As suggested by Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt (2019) and Janietz and Bol (2020), such analyses would provide insights into role of the wage setter (firms) in class origin-based exclusion and opportunity hoarding, including the relevance of the organization's size, location, and recruitment styles.

Endnotes

1. Termed a positional approach by Weeden (2002) because of its emphasis on achievements: licenses, credentials, certificates, union membership, and associations.
2. On the supply side, applicants select themselves out of some roles and occupations and into others based on their perceptions of what professions represent in terms of beliefs, attitudes, lifestyles, and demographic attributes (cf. Weeden and Grusky 2005).
3. We use the term "positional closure" instead of "occupational closure" (Weeden 2002) to avoid confusion with other forms of closure at the occupational level. Here, "class origin closure"

refers to the role of class origin composition only and "social closure" represents the complete model.
4. The 2014–2019 LFS-based occupational elitism variable relies on 137,225 person-year observations.
5. The point biserial correlation between respondent's ESeC and percentage of ESeC class 1 parents in the occupation is .253. The correlation between respondents' parental ESeC and the percentage of ESeC class 1 parents in the occupation is .276. Correlations between respondents' occupation (and ESeC) and parental class range between .211 and .265.
6. Coefficients regressed on logged-earnings can be interpreted as a percent delta in Y for a one-unit change in the independent variable after exponentiating, subtracting it by 1, and multiplying it by 100.
7. First, we residualize occupational elitism on education density and other occupational characteristics (licensure, unionization, demographic composition) and re-estimate Models 3–4 using the residualized measure, thereby isolating the component of elitism orthogonal to standard proxies of education/credential intensity (Appendix C1). Second, we allow for non-linear functional forms by estimating models with quadratic terms for occupational elitism (and corresponding interactions); results indicate at most mild concavity and do not alter conclusions (Appendix C2).

About the author

Dirk Witteveen is a sociologist and social policy researcher at the University of Oxford. He obtained a PhD in sociology from the CUNY Graduate Center. His research focuses on class and racial/ethnic inequality in higher education, earnings, wealth, and social mobility using large social surveys and administrative data. His current projects examine firm-level drivers of earnings inequality, ethnic earnings inequality in professional soccer, college major-occupation matching trends, and historical occupational mobility in the United States.

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Supplementary material

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Conflicts of interest

None declared.

Data availability

The datasets underlying this article were provided by third parties under special licenses. The UKHLS data can be accessed from Understanding Society via the UK Data Service (SN 6931): waves

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