

structural reorganization. As we noted in the previous chapter, the rate of decline of the working class appears to have accelerated in recent decades, and, in the 1980s, the proportion of the labor force that is supervisors also appears to be declining. We also now see that the decline of the petty bourgeoisie that persisted since the nineteenth century has been halted, at least temporarily. Explaining the mechanisms which are generating these changes is essential if we are to understand the trajectory of the American class structure into the next century.

5. The permeability of class boundaries

Class structures differ not only in the distribution of people across the various locations in that structure, but also in the extent to which people's lives are bounded by specific class locations. At the micro-level, class is explanatory because it shapes the interests, strategic capacities and experiences of people, and each of these effects depends not simply on the static location of individuals in a job-class structure, but also on the complex ways in which their lives are linked to various classes through careers, mobility, voluntary associations and social ties. In some class structures, friendships, marriages, churches and sports clubs are largely homogeneous with respect to class. In such cases, class boundaries can be thought of as highly impermeable. In other class structures, these social processes frequently bring together people from different class locations. When this happens, class boundaries become relatively permeable.

In this chapter, I will begin by giving some precision to the concept of the permeability of class boundaries and then propose a general empirical strategy for analyzing permeability. This will be followed by an empirical examination of three kinds of permeability: the formation of friendship ties across class locations, the class composition of families, and intergenerational class mobility.

5.1 Theoretical issues

Permeability in the Marxist and Weberian traditions

The two primary sociological traditions of class analysis – Marxist and Weberian – have given different priorities to class structure and boundary permeability as objects of analysis. In a variety of ways,

Marxists generally put the analysis of class structure (or a closely related concept like "relations of production") at center stage and pay relatively little attention to the permeability of class boundaries. In contrast, the permeability of class boundaries looms large in the Weberian tradition, whether termed "class structuration" (Giddens 1973) or "closure" (Parkin 1974, 1979). This is especially clear in the analysis of social mobility, which is largely inspired (if in a somewhat diffuse way) by Weberian conceptions of class rooted in a concern with "life chances." Weberians tend to devote much less attention to the rigorous elaboration of the concept of class structure itself. As Burriss (1987) and Wright (1989: 313–323) have argued, sociologists working in the Weberian tradition typically treat locations within class structures as soft categories requiring only loose definitions and relatively casual theoretical defense.

The analysis of class boundary permeability in this chapter, therefore, combines the conceptual apparatus of the Marxist tradition with the substantive focus of the Weberian tradition on the intersection of people's lives with class structures. This marriage of Marxist categories with Weberian questions is motivated by a desire to deepen the micro-analysis of class within the Marxist tradition. My assumption is that the complex ways in which individual lives traverse class boundaries is one of the important factors that shape the ways in which people experience class structures. For example, political coalitions across specific class boundaries should be facilitated to the extent that friendship and family ties cross these boundaries. On the other hand, higher levels of class consciousness would be expected in societies in which friendship ties and biographical trajectories were overwhelmingly confined within the same class rather than diffused across a variety of class locations.

Static and dynamic permeability

The permeability of class boundaries can be usefully divided into two general forms which we will refer to as *static* permeability and *dynamic* permeability. The static permeability of class boundaries refers to the patterns of active social ties between people situated in different locations within a class structure. Examples would include such things as the cross-boundary patterns of neighborhood composition, household composition, memberships in voluntary associations and friendship networks. Dynamic permeability, on the other hand, refers to the ways in which biographical trajectories traverse different locations within class structures over time. Inter- and intra-generational class mobility would,

of course, be prime examples, but life-course patterns of participation in various social networks would also be relevant to the dynamic permeability of class boundaries. For example, different levels of the education system might vary a lot in the extent to which they bring people from very different classes together in the classroom. Pre-school might be more class homogeneous than elementary school, and elementary school classrooms less class segregated than high schools (because of tracking in high school), and high schools less than universities. The biographical trajectory of people through the education system, therefore, can involve moving through a series of settings with more or less permeable class boundaries.

Defined in these terms, the problem of the permeability of social boundaries is by no means restricted to class analysis. International migration, for example, constitutes an aspect of the dynamic permeability of national boundaries, while patterns of membership and participation in international professional associations are an aspect of the static permeability of those boundaries. Interethnic marriages and friendships are aspects of the static permeability of ethnic boundaries, while the problem of "salad-bar ethnicity" and the intergenerational transmission of ethnicity are aspects of the dynamic permeability of those boundaries. Interdisciplinary research institutes and faculty seminars are instances of the static permeability of the boundaries of academic disciplines, while the pattern of career trajectories through academic specialities is an example of dynamic permeability.

The problem of permeability of social boundaries is sociologically important because it may help us to understand the extent to which various kinds of social cleavages are reinforced or undermined by the social ties and experiences of people within social structures. It is often argued, for example, that a regime of very high social mobility will tend to generate less bitter interclass conflict than a regime of rigid class boundaries. It would be expected that situations in which there are high degrees of interracial, interethnic or interreligious marriage and friendships will contribute to (and be fostered by) low levels of conflict across these boundaries. Interlocking directorates among firms are generally thought to facilitate cooperation among corporations. Career trajectories that involve movement from private business to government and back to business probably reduce conflict between the state and private enterprises. In these and other ways, the variable permeability of different kinds of social boundaries can play an important role in bridging or intensifying the fault lines of social structures.

In what follows we will explore two aspects of the static permeability of class boundaries – friendships and cross-class families – and one aspect of dynamic permeability – inter-generational mobility.

5.2 Methodological strategy

*Operationalizing class structure*¹

In the analysis of class-boundary permeability we ideally would want to examine the patterns of social ties that people in each of the categories of the 12-category class structure matrix in Figure 1.2 have with friends, spouses and parents, also classified into this same 12-category matrix. That would mean examining 144 possible combinations. Unfortunately, the samples available in this project are simply not large enough to reliably study such a large number of combinations. We have therefore had to collapse a number of the categories in the class structure matrix. For the friendship and family analyses we can operationalize eight class locations: employers (capitalists and small employers), petty bourgeoisie, expert-managers, managers, supervisors, experts, skilled employees, and workers². In the mobility analysis, managers and supervisors are combined, yielding a total of seven categories.³

The permeability-event matrix

On the basis of these class location categories we can construct an 8×8 matrix of “permeability events” (a 7×7 matrix in the case of mobility). In the analysis of mobility, one axis of this matrix represents class origins, the other class destinations. In the analysis of friendship ties, one axis represents the class locations of respondents and the other the class location of respondents’ friends. And, in the analysis of the cross-class

¹ The details of the operationalization of the class structure variable are somewhat different for this chapter from other chapters. See Wright 1997: 152–154.

² The relationship between the class location categories we are using here and those in Figure 1.2 are as follows: employers = small employers and capitalists combined; petty bourgeoisie = petty bourgeoisie; expert-managers = expert-managers, skilled managers, expert supervisors and skilled supervisors; managers = nonskilled managers; supervisors = nonskilled supervisors; experts = experts; skilled worker = skilled worker; and worker = workers.

³ Managers and supervisors had to be combined in the mobility analysis because we were unable to distinguish managers from supervisors for the head of household in the respondents’ family of origin.

families, one axis represents the class location of husbands and the other of wives in two-earner households. The cells in the matrix thus constitute types of permeability and impermeability events: the off-diagonal cells represent events that cross class locations; the diagonal cells represent events contained within a given class location. Thus, for example, in the mobility analysis, the diagonal cells are different types of *immobility* and the off-diagonal cells different types of mobility, say from a worker origin to an expert destination.

Our analytical task is to analyze the relative likelihood of different types of permeability events in this matrix. If, for example, the likelihood of friendship ties linking an employer with an employee is much lower than the likelihood of friendship ties linking an expert with a nonexpert, then we will say that the property boundary is less permeable than the expertise boundary. The statistical strategy for modeling differential relative odds of such events is standard log-linear analysis. It is not necessary, however, to understand the technical details of this methodology to understand the empirical research in this chapter (see Wright 1997: 165–168 for a brief technical introduction).

Alternative approaches to analyzing permeability

There are two ways to conceptualize the problem of “boundary permeability” in the class structure. The first strategy sees the class structure as an array of categorically defined locations (cells in a matrix). A permeability-event, therefore, is anything in the life of an individual which links that person to two or more of these locations. Thus, for workers in the eight-category class structure variable we are using here, there would be seven possible boundary-crossing events: WORKER | EMPLOYER, WORKER | PETTY BOURGEOIS, WORKER | EXPERT-MANAGER, etc.⁴ For expert-managers, there are six additional boundary-crossing events (since the WORKER | EXPERT-MANAGER boundary has already been counted). Among the eight class locations we are using, there are thus 28 boundaries across which permeability events can occur. We will refer to this as *locational permeability*. One approach to studying the permeability of class boundaries, then, would be to measure the relative permeability of each of

⁴ Throughout our analyses we will generally treat permeability-events as “symmetrical” (e.g. we will treat a friendship tie between a respondent who is a worker and a manager–friend as the same as a tie between a respondent who is a manager and a worker–friend).

these 28 location-boundaries and rank order them from highest to lowest degree of permeability.

The second strategy analyzes directly the three underlying mechanisms that generate the locations in the class structure: property, authority, and skills/expertise. These mechanisms might be thought of as more fundamental than class location as such, since the concept of class structure is constructed by combining these mechanisms in different ways.⁵ Data analysis would then involve assessing the relative densities of permeability events which span the categories defined by these three underlying mechanisms rather than studying the permeability events between pairs of cells of the class structure matrix. We will refer to this as *dimensional permeability*.

To measure dimensional permeability, we will trichotomize each of the three dimensions of the class structure matrix: the property dimension is trichotomized into employers, petty bourgeoisie and employees; the authority dimension into managers, supervisors and workers; and the skill dimension into experts, skilled and nonskilled.⁶ In order to insure that we are measuring significant incidents of class-boundary crossing permeability, we will define a "permeability event" as an event that spans the *extreme* categories in these trichotomies. For example a friendship between an employer and an employee will be treated as a permeability event across the property boundary, whereas friendships between employers and petty bourgeois or between petty bourgeois and employees will not. Similarly, a friendship between an expert and a worker will be treated as crossing the expert boundary, and a friendship between a manager and a worker will be viewed as crossing the authority boundary.

In the empirical investigations of friendships, mobility and family structure in this book we will examine both locational and dimensional permeability, although the emphasis will be on dimensional permeability. The bulk of the analysis thus investigates the relative likelihood of permeability events across the property, authority and expertise boundaries. Once the basic pattern of dimensional permeability is

⁵ Halaby and Weakliem (1993) argue that the concept of class structure used in the class analysis project should be decomposed into these three "primitive" dimensions and that nothing is gained by the theoretical gestalt class "structure." For a critique of Halaby and Weakliem's argument, see Wright (1993).

⁶ Employers are treated as managers on the authority dimension in this analysis and treated as being in the intermediary category – skilled – on the skill dimension. See Wright (1977: 160–161).

mapped in terms of these three class boundaries, we will then analyze in a more fine-grained manner the locational permeability between the working class and other specific class locations.

How to read the results

The results of the data analyses in this chapter will be presented as graphical comparisons of values on what I will call the "permeability coefficient" for different kinds of permeability events.⁷ A value of 0 on this coefficient would mean that there were no events that crossed the class boundary at all – no friendship ties, no mobility, no marriages. The boundary in question would thus be perfectly *impermeable*. A value of 1 for this coefficient means that the event in question occurred at the frequency that would be expected if boundary-crossing events were strictly random. If, for example, the permeability coefficient for a friendship tie across the authority boundary was 1, this means that the probability of a friendship tie between a person with authority and a person without authority is the same as between any two randomly selected persons. A permeability index value of greater than 1 thus indicates that the boundary in question is positively permeable: more events occur across such a boundary than would be predicted randomly.

5.3 Intergenerational class mobility

It is perhaps not surprising that most research on social mobility has been at least loosely linked to a Weberian framework of class analysis. The Weberian concept of class revolves around the problem of common life chances of people within market exchanges. This naturally leads to a concern with the intergenerational transmission of life chances – i.e., the extent to which one's own class location is determined by the class into which one is born and raised.

Marxist class analysis has paid much less systematic attention to the problem of mobility. Although Marxists engaged in qualitative and historical research on problems of class consciousness and class formation frequently allude to the issue of mobility in the context of discussing the development and transmission of class cultures and community solidarities, there are virtually no systematic quantitative investigations

⁷ Technically, the values on the permeability index are the antilogs of the coefficients in log-linear models of permeability events. For a more technical discussion, see Wright (1997: 163–168)

of class mobility within a specifically Marxist framework. Thus, while we know a great deal about social mobility between categories defined in *occupational* terms, we know little about the specific patterns of mobility across *class* boundaries defined explicitly in terms of social relations of production. Exploring such patterns is the basic objective of this analysis.

Theoretical expectations

The relative permeability of class boundaries

There are two basic reasons why one might expect different class boundaries to have different degrees of permeability to intergenerational mobility. First, the extent to which the parental generation is able to appropriate surplus income through mechanisms of exploitation shapes the material advantages and disadvantages experienced by their children. It would therefore be predicted that the more exploitation is linked to a class boundary, the more that class boundary should be impermeable to mobility. Second, insofar as the cultural resources of the parental generation are linked to different class locations, children from different class origins will have different occupational aspirations and cultural advantages. It would therefore be predicted that the more divergent is the "cultural capital" across class boundaries, the less permeable will be the boundary. The first of these mechanisms is the one most associated with Marxist understanding of class. The second is more closely associated with theorists such as Bourdieu (1984, 1985, 1987) who stress the cultural dimension of class relations. Goldthorpe (1987: p. 99) combines these arguments when he asserts that the class mobility regime depends on the different material opportunities parents have to shape their children's economic welfare, and the likely preferences of offspring for some jobs rather than others.

Taken together, these arguments imply relatively impermeable boundaries associated with both property and skills, and a more permeable boundary associated with authority. Mobility across the property boundary is likely to be limited because, first, financial and physical capital are potentially transferable to the offspring of property owners, and, second, capitalist parents are able to finance their children's businesses out of profits or borrowings. Parental property ownership is therefore "insurance" against downward mobility into wage labor for the offspring of capitalists, and the requirement of capital ownership is a

barrier to entry to the children of most employees. The rigidity of the property boundary may be further compounded by the preferences of children of property owners for self-employment rather than wage labor. In small businesses, the experience of unpaid family labor may lead the offspring of the self-employed to value self-employment especially strongly. At the very least, the experience of growing up in a capitalist family of origin presents children with an example of property ownership as a viable form of economic activity that children whose parents are not capitalists may lack.

The material circumstances and lived experiences associated with high levels of skill assets also make for a relatively impermeable mobility boundary on the expert dimension of the class typology. Like financial capital, skills and expertise are potentially transferable to children, and this generates a barrier to entry into expert labor markets. Because of the rent components of their wages, parents in expert class locations have significant economic resources to invest in their children's education. In addition, given that the economic welfare of experts depends on the mobilization of institutionalized skills, expert parents may have an especially strong commitment to education as a mechanism of social attainment. Such preferences form part of the cultural capital expert parents are uniquely placed to pass on to their children through familial socialization.

Unlike the property and expertise boundaries, the mechanisms of inheritance associated with managerial authority are much weaker, and thus our expectation is that the mobility boundary between managers and nonmanagers would be much more permeable. Organizational control is an attribute of a position in a formal authority hierarchy, and as such is not individually transferable to offspring in the manner of physical capital or expertise.

Our first expectation, then, is that the property and skill boundaries will be less permeable than the authority boundary to intergenerational mobility. It is less clear what should be the expectations about the relative mobility permeability of the property boundary compared to the skill boundary. Marxist class analysis assumes that private property in the means of production is fundamental to the distribution of material welfare and control over the surplus product in capitalist societies and thus capitalist property ownership should generate bigger divisions in financial resources available to offspring than either of the other class boundaries. On the other hand, non-Marxists such as Bourdieu (1987: 733) have argued that the most important source of social power in

advanced capitalist societies is the symbolic mobilization of cultural capital, rather than the ownership of means of production. In Bourdieu's account, generalized cultural competencies are symbolically legitimated in formal academic qualifications, and reproduced intergenerationally through class-specific differential educational attainment (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990: 153–164). This view suggests that the skill boundary should be most impermeable to intergenerational mobility.

The above arguments imply two rankings from the least to most permeable class boundaries to intergenerational mobility: property, skill, authority for Marxist class analysis; skill, property, authority for Bourdieu's culturally-grounded class analysis. Both of these hypotheses rest on assumptions that the capacity to transmit assets to offspring is an integral aspect of property rights in productive resources, and that the impermeability of mobility boundaries associated with these resources is a function of the relative importance of such resources in the distribution of social power.

Cross-national variations

The reasoning in both the Marxist and Bourdieu approaches to class have implications for expected cross-national variations in patterns of class-boundary permeability. Both approaches would argue that the more purely capitalistic is an economy, the more impermeable would be the property boundary relative to other boundaries. To use Bourdieu's formulation, the more central to a system of power and privilege is a specific "form of capital," the greater will be the concern of those who hold such capital to safeguard its reproduction. In terms of permeability of class boundaries, this means that the more a class structure is dominated by capitalist relations, the greater will be barriers to acquiring capitalist property. In a purely capitalist economy, therefore, Bourdieu would agree with Marxists that the property boundary should be less permeable than the expertise boundary. This runs counter to popular mythologies of capitalism, where it is believed that the more open and unfettered is the "free market," the greater will be the opportunity for propertyless individuals to accumulate wealth and thus traverse the class boundary between wage earners and capitalists.

In this analysis we will study four countries: the United States, Canada, Sweden and Norway. While all four of these countries have capitalist economies, they differ significantly in terms of the extent to which their economies are dominated by capitalist principles. Within the family of economically developed capitalist economies, the United States

is generally considered the most purely capitalistic, both in its institutional structure and in its popular culture, while Sweden is the paradigm of social democratic capitalism, a capitalism in which the state plays a systematic role in countering the inequalities generated by capitalist markets. According to figures cited in Currie and Skolnick (1983: 41–43), next to Japan, the United States has the lowest rate of taxation (29% in 1984), and the lowest rate of Government expenditure (38% in 1983) as a proportion of GDP among developed capitalist countries, while Sweden has the highest rate for both of these (taxes are 50.5% and spending is 66% of GDP). Sweden also has the highest level of government expenditure on social welfare of all capitalist countries (Ginsburg 1992: 33). Canada is generally closer to the United States, and Norway closer to Sweden on these and other indicators.

This leads to the following two comparative hypotheses for the four countries in the study: first, the property boundary should be less permeable in the North American countries (especially the United States) than in the Scandinavian countries (especially Sweden), and, second, the difference in permeability between the property boundary and the skill boundary should be greater in the North American countries than in the Scandinavian countries.

Hypotheses

Taking all of these arguments together yields five general hypotheses about the relative permeability of class boundaries to intergenerational mobility:

Hypothesis 1: The authority boundary should be the most permeable of the three class boundaries.

Hypothesis 2: Marxist hypothesis. The rank ordering of class boundaries from least permeable to most permeable will be property, skill, authority.

Hypothesis 3: Cultural Capital hypothesis. The rank ordering of class boundaries from least permeable to most permeable will be skill, property, authority.

Hypothesis 4: The property boundary should be less permeable in North America than in Scandinavia.

Hypothesis 5: The difference in permeability between the property and skill boundaries should be greater in North America than in Scandinavia.

A note on gender and class boundary permeability to mobility

In a manner similar to most research on social mobility, the analyses of class boundary permeability to intergenerational mobility in this chapter will be restricted to men. The analysis of boundary permeability to intergenerational mobility for women raises a number of special complexities that would take us too far afield for present purposes. Readers interested in this topic can find systematic analysis of gender differences in boundary permeability in Wright (1997: 176–178, 192–195).

Results

The relative permeability of class boundaries

Figure 5.1 presents the permeability coefficients for the *dimensional* permeability of class boundaries to intergenerational mobility for men in the sample for all four countries combined. Several things are worth noting. First, the authority boundary has a permeability coefficient of 0.92, quite close to 1.0. This means that the chances of mobility across the authority boundary are almost what one would predict if such mobility was random. Although in terms of formal statistical tests, this value on the permeability coefficient is still “statistically significant” (i.e. we can be confident at a 5% level of certainty that it is less than 1.0) for all practical intents and purposes, the authority dimension of the class structure does not constitute much of a barrier to intergenerational class mobility. Second, in contrast to the authority boundary, both the property boundary and the skill boundary do generate substantial barriers to intergenerational mobility: the permeability coefficient for property is 0.33 and for skill, 0.55. This means that there are one-third as many instances of intergenerational class mobility across the property boundary than one would predict if such mobility were random, and about half as many instances of mobility across the skill boundary. Finally, when a formal statistical test is done of the *difference* between the permeability coefficients for these boundaries, the property boundary is significantly less permeable than the skill boundary and both are significantly less permeable than the authority boundary. These results are broadly in keeping with the expectations of a neo-Marxist approach (Hypotheses 1 and 2).

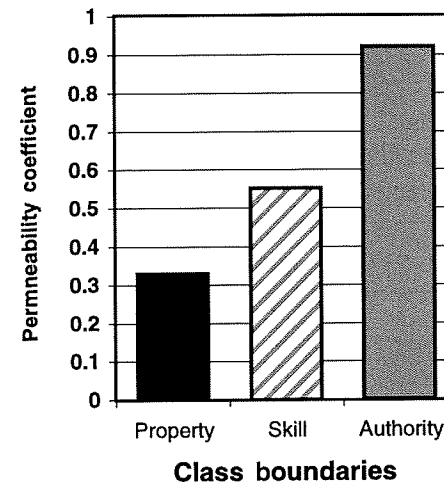


Figure 5.1 The relative permeability of class boundaries to intergenerational mobility among men, four countries combined.

Mobility across the working-class boundary

In analyzing what we are calling *locational* permeability (the permeability across the boundaries of specific *locations* within the class structure) we are particularly interested in discovering whether or not the patterns of permeability barriers between working-class locations and other class locations can be considered simply the sum of the permeability barriers across the relevant dimensions of class structure, or, alternatively, whether there may be special barriers attached to specific boundaries between class locations. For example, consider mobility between the working class and expert-managers. This mobility crosses two “boundaries” – the authority boundary and the skill boundary. The question in this case, then, is this: is the permeability of mobility between workers and expert-managers simply the sum of the permeability of the authority boundary and the skill boundary, or is there also an *interaction* between these two dimensions which affects the permeability of the specific boundary between workers and expert-managers?

To answer this question, a mobility model needs to be studied in which the effects of the three dimensions of class boundaries – property, authority, and skill – are first examined and then a variable which measures all of the specific pairs of mobility events connecting the working class to other locations is added. The technical statistical issue in this model is whether the “fit of the model” – how well it captures all

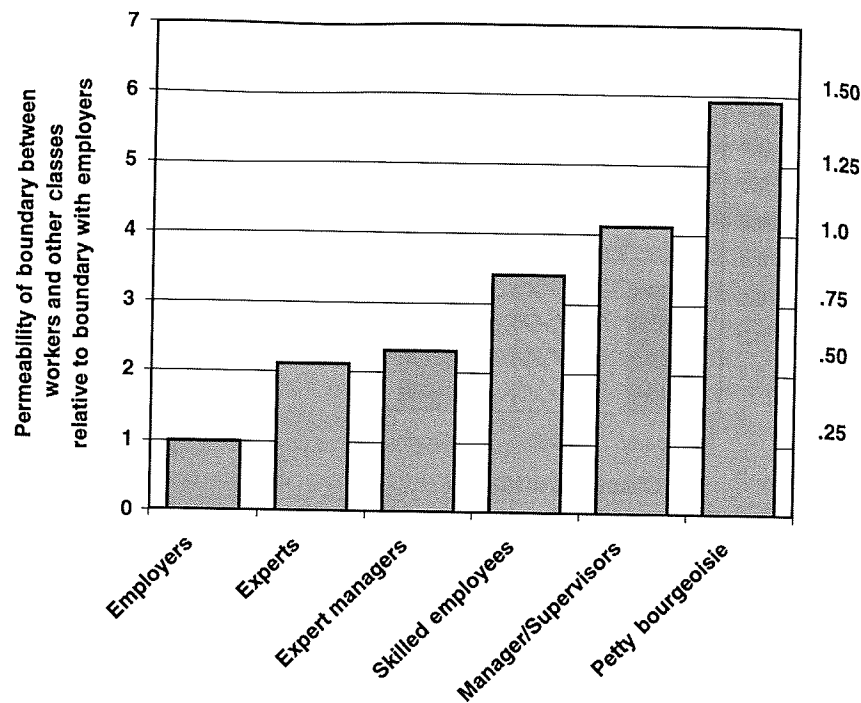


Figure 5.2 Permeability of class boundaries between workers and other class locations, four countries combined.

of the patterns in the data – is improved when these “locational permeability” variables were added. As is shown in Wright (1997: 185–186), the fit of the model was substantially increased.

Figure 5.2 presents the permeability coefficients for each of the specific class boundaries between the working class and the other class locations.⁸ A number of things are striking in this figure. First, the class mobility permeability coefficient for the class boundary between the working class and the petty bourgeoisie is nearly 1.5, significantly greater than 1.0. This indicates that there are nearly 50% more mobility events between these two class locations than would be predicted if mobility was a random process. Second, the permeability coefficient between workers and employers is only 0.25. The permeability to mobility of the WORKER | EMPLOYER boundary is thus one sixth that of the

⁸ The coefficients in this figure are derived from the sum of the relevant dimensional permeability coefficients and the location-specific coefficients for each category.

WORKER | PETTY BOURGEOIS boundary. Clearly, the socially significant barrier to mobility across the property boundary for people in the working class is not between workers and self-employment as such, but between workers and employers. Third, the permeability to intergenerational mobility of the boundary between workers and experts and between workers and expert-managers are virtually identical – just over 0.5. As in our earlier discussion of dimensional permeability, this indicates that the barrier to mobility is much more concentrated on the skill/expertise dimension than the managerial dimension.

This analysis of locational permeability has important implications for the broader concept of class structure itself. One way of thinking about locational permeability is that this represents *interactions* among the three underlying dimensions of the class structure. If there were no interactions of this sort, then the concept of “class structure,” formed through the combination of the three “primitive terms” (property, authority and skill) would simply be a heuristic convenience. Nothing would be lost by simply talking serially about the effects of property ownership, the effects of skill, and the effects of authority, and ignoring the effects of specific locations in the class structure. “Location” gets its analytical bite from the synergetic consequences of the specific combinations of dimensions that generate a given location. To use a cliché, “the whole is greater than the sum of the parts,” and the presence of significant locational permeability effects (i.e. interaction effects) captures this.

Cross-national variations

So far we have examined the mobility permeability of class boundaries for data which combines the samples for men from the United States, Canada, Norway and Sweden. Figure 5.3 presents the results for each of these countries taken separately. In the United States and Canada the property boundary is significantly less permeable than the skill boundary; in Norway, the property boundary appears less permeable than the skill boundary, but the difference between these two boundaries is not statistically significant (at the conventional 0.05 significance level); in Sweden the skill boundary is nominally (although not statistically significantly) *less* permeable than the property boundary. There therefore appears to be a significant difference in the class-boundary permeability patterns in the two North American countries and the two Scandinavian countries in our study: in North America, but not in Scandinavia, the property boundary is significantly less permeable than the skill

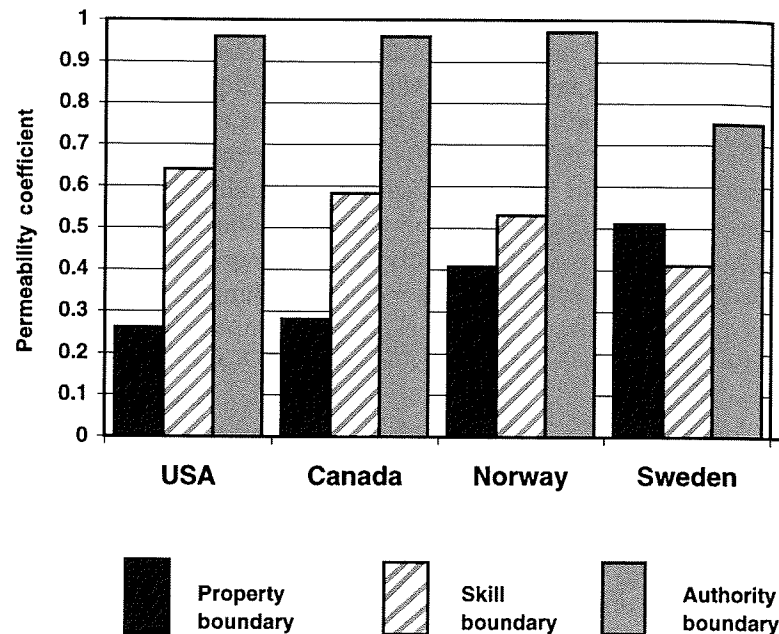


Figure 5.3 Class-boundary permeability to intergenerational mobility among men, four countries compared.

boundary to intergenerational class mobility. The basic source of this difference lies in the significantly greater permeability (at the 0.05 significance level) of the *property* boundary in Scandinavia. This coefficient is roughly 50% greater in the Scandinavian countries (0.41 in Norway and 0.51 in Sweden) compared to the two North American countries (0.26 in the US and 0.28 in Canada). The results are thus consistent with Hypotheses 4 and 5, suggesting that the property boundary is less permeable in societies within which capitalist economic relations are less constrained by state interventions.⁹

⁹ A possible objection to all of these results involving the property boundary is that they might all be due to presence of farmers among the self-employed. Since it is well known that there is relatively little mobility from nonfarm to farm occupations, this might account for the relative impermeability of the property boundary. To check this, all of the analyses were also done excluding everyone in either a farmer origin or farmer destination. While this did affect somewhat the magnitudes of the coefficients, the basic patterns of results were unchanged. See Wright (1997: 174–175, 190–192)

Conclusions for mobility analyses

Three general conclusions stand out from these results.

First, in North America, the patterns of permeability of class boundaries to mobility among men are broadly consistent with the expectations of neo-Marxist conceptualizations of class: the property boundary is the least permeable, followed by the skill boundary and then the authority boundary. On the basis of these results, the material resources linked to capitalist property relations appear to constitute a more significant barrier to mobility in the USA and Canada than the cultural resources linked to skills.

Second, in Sweden and Norway, the property and skill boundaries do not differ significantly in their degree of permeability to intergenerational mobility among men. This difference from North America is primarily because the property boundary is more permeable in Norway and Sweden. The relative degree of permeability to mobility of different class boundaries, therefore, is not an invariant feature of capitalist class structures. Our results suggest that the more purely capitalistic is an economic structure, the less permeable will be the property boundary to intergenerational mobility.

Third, the permeability patterns suggest that the class structure should not be viewed simply as the “sum” of the three dimensions that underlie it. Halaby and Weakliem (1993) argued that combining these three dimensions into a “class structure” typology is simply a descriptive convenience; the analysis of classes can just as easily be carried out directly on the basis of the three “primitive” dimensions taken one by one. The results of the analysis of *locational permeability* (Figure 5.2) indicate that the additive effects of these three dimensions do not exhaust mobility patterns within this typology, and thus class structures are indeed “wholes” that are not reducible to the “sum of their parts” in the sense that there are distinctive effects of the gestalt as such.

5.4 Cross-class friendships

Class mobility is not the only issue involved in understanding the permeability of class boundaries. Patterns of intimate social interaction among people within marriages and friendships are also relevant aspects of the permeability of such boundaries. A rigid class structure in which people’s lives are tightly bounded within particular class locations is not simply one in which there are few prospects for individual mobility but

Table 5.1 Rank orderings of relative impermeability of class boundaries to friendship ties in different theoretical perspectives

Theoretical Perspective	Ranking from most impermeable (1) to most permeable (3)		
	PROPERTY	AUTHORITY	SKILL
Class interests (Marxian variant) ^a	1	2 or 3	3 or 2
Class interests (Dahrendorf variant)	2	1	3
Class habitus (Bourdieu)	2	3	1
Class as opportunity structure ^b	1 or 2	3	2 or 1

^a The Marxian variant of the class interest perspective predicts the property boundary to be the most impermeable, but provides no clear basis for rank ordering the authority or skill boundaries.

^b The "opportunity structure" perspective predicts the authority boundary to be the most permeable, but provides no clear basis for rank ordering the property or skill boundaries.

one in which social networks rarely cross class boundaries. In the popular consciousness, when people argue that social classes are not very important in the United States part of what they mean is that the social barriers that separate people in different classes are thought to be relatively weak. The extent of cross-class friendships would be one measure of the extent to which this is true.

Orienting hypotheses

A number of orienting hypotheses can be derived from class analysis and the sociology of friendships to guide our exploration of class boundary permeability to friendships. As in the mobility analysis, these hypotheses are organized around the rankings of the three class boundaries by degree of impermeability (see Table 5.1). These rankings are derived from arguments about three ways in which these class mechanisms might generate obstacles and facilitations to friendship formation: (1) by structuring the *interests* of actors; (2) by shaping actors' *life styles*; and (3) by creating differential *opportunities* for informal interpersonal contact. Each of these causal processes suggests different rankings of the three kinds of class boundaries by relative permeability.

Class interests (Marxian variant)

Marxism has relatively little to say about interpersonal relations. Nevertheless, the Marxist approach to class analysis would generally predict

that the more antagonistic are two peoples' class interests, the less likely it is that friendships will form between them, both because the antagonism of class interests would directly constitute a tension within interpersonal interactions and because class interests shape values and ideologies, which also affect the likelihood and durability of friendships. On these grounds, Marxists would predict that friendships crossing the property boundary are particularly unlikely. More tentatively, insofar as Marxists regard the interests of managers as generally more closely integrated with the interests of capitalists than are the interests of experts, they would rank the authority boundary as more impermeable than the skill boundary. This prediction, however, would be tempered by the realization that segmentation of labor markets by credentials is a deep source of conflict in contemporary capitalist societies.

Class interests (Dahrendorf variant)

Ralf Dahrendorf (1959) argued that in contemporary societies authority is the fundamental basis of class antagonism. In early periods of capitalist development, his argument goes, authority and property coincided, and thus social theorists like Marx mistakenly identified property as the fundamental axis of class conflict. In the twentieth century, however, the deepening separation of formal ownership of property from substantive command means that property ownership has declined as a basis for class relations. This perspective would therefore predict that the authority boundary should be the most impermeable. To the extent that property ownership still confers some authority, the property boundary would be expected to have intermediate permeability. Since skill without organizational authority confers little capacity to command, the skill boundary should be the most permeable of the three.

Class habitus (Bourdieu)

Virtually all research on friendship formation has argued that one of the primary mechanisms shaping friendship patterns is common values and life styles. As Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1985, 1987) has argued in his analysis of "class habitus," a pivotal determinant of life style is cultural capital. This suggests that the odds of friendship ties between experts and nonexperts should be particularly low since people on either side of the skill boundary are likely to differ sharply in terms of cultural capital. Thus, class habitus theory would predict the skill dimension to be the most impermeable. Furthermore, because wealth and income are generally viewed as crucial bases of life style (although perhaps less important

than cultural capital), the property boundary would be expected to be more impermeable than the authority boundary.

Interaction opportunity

Sociological analyses of friendships decompose the friendship formation process into two consecutive processes, meeting and mating. Meeting is the process of strangers being converted into acquaintances; mating is the conversion of acquaintances into friends. Although meeting can simply be a matter of chance, typically it is the result of people being in situations that systematically facilitate friendship formation. In part, this is a question of spatial proximity, as in the importance of neighborhood of residence as a factor influencing friendship formation – people often make friends with neighbors of dissimilar social position. More significant than sheer proximity for our present purposes, certain “foci” of social interaction, to use Feld’s (1981) expression, generate sustained joint activities among people and thus enhance the probabilities of people getting to know each other in ways that could lead to friendship.

Worksites are an important instance of such interactional foci. Furthermore, many worksites involve joint activity among people in different class locations, thus creating opportunities for cross-class friendships, particularly between managers and nonmanagers. These opportunities are further enhanced by the fact that many supervisors and even some managers spend significant parts of their careers as nonmanagerial employees. Intra-career authority mobility is undoubtedly much higher than intra-career mobility across either the property or skill boundaries. To the extent that friendships survive promotions, then, this would also enhance the permeability of the authority boundary. The opportunity structure arguments, therefore, would suggest that the authority class boundary should be the most permeable. The opportunity structure perspective, however, makes no clear prediction about relative impermeability of the property or skill boundaries.

Results

Respondents in the class analysis survey were asked a battery of questions about the principal jobs of their three closest friends. If a friend was currently unemployed or out of the labor force, they were asked about that person’s last job (see Wright 1997: 218–222 for details). On the basis of this information, we are able to classify friends into the same basic class structure matrix as respondents.

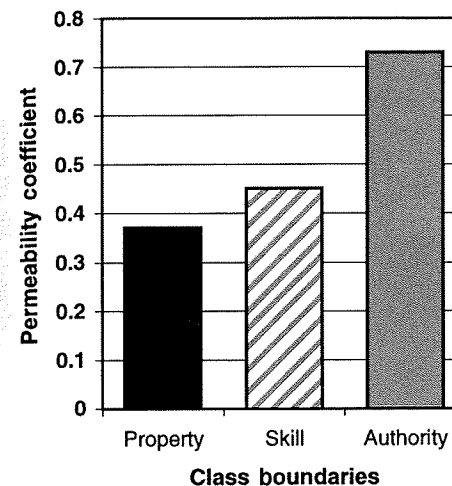


Figure 5.4 The relative permeability of class boundaries to friendships, four countries combined.

The relative permeability of the three exploitation boundaries

Figure 5.4 presents the basic permeability coefficients for the friendship ties across the three class-boundary dimensions for all four countries combined.

All three boundaries have statistically significant coefficients, indicating that these boundaries do in fact constitute obstacles to the formation of friendships. The coefficients for the property and expert boundaries are significantly smaller than that of the authority boundary: the odds of a friendship across the authority boundary are nearly 100 percent greater than the odds of a friendship across the property boundary and 60 percent greater than a friendship across the skill boundary. The coefficient of the property boundary is also significantly less than that of the skill boundary. These results are most in keeping with the expectations of the Marxist and opportunity structure perspectives on class-boundary permeability.

Friendship ties between the working class and other class locations

Figure 5.5 presents the results of the specific pattern of locational permeability of class boundaries to friendship ties between the working class and each of the other class locations. As in the class mobility results, the addition of locational permeability to the simpler dimensional permeability analysis significantly improves the “fit” of the model. Of the

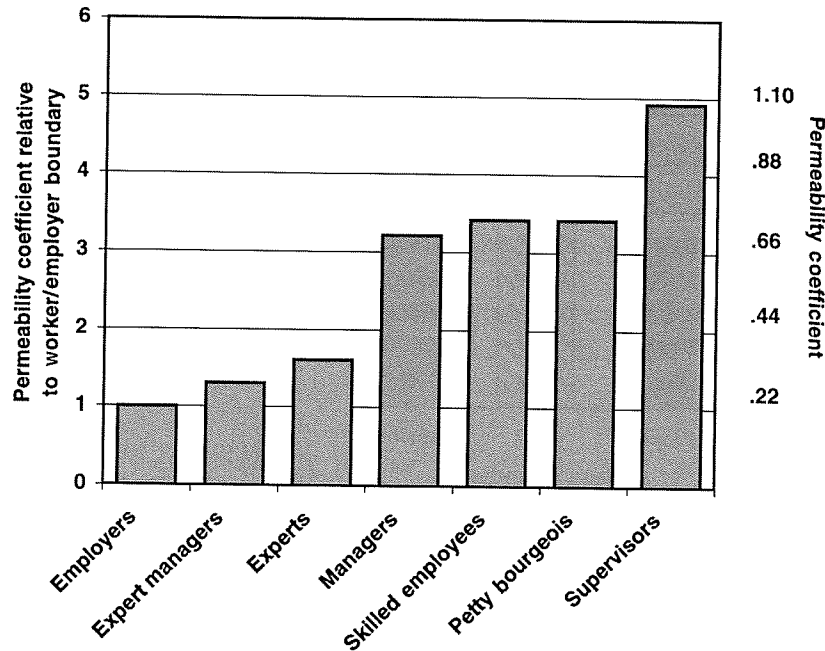


Figure 5.5 Permeability of class boundary to friendships between workers and other class locations, four countries combined.

seven boundaries between the working class and other class locations, the WORKER|EMPLOYER boundary is the least permeable, while the WORKER|SUPERVISOR boundary is the most permeable: workers have nearly five times the odds of a friendship with a supervisor than with an employer. The second and third ranks in impermeability are the WORKER|EXPERT-MANAGER and WORKER|EXPERT boundaries. The next three boundaries – WORKER|MANAGER, WORKER|SKILLED-EMPLOYEE, and WORKER|PETTY BOURGEOIS – are of roughly equal permeability. As in the previous results for mobility, the results for the WORKER|PETTY BOURGEOIS boundary indicate that the salient issue for the property boundary is not self-employment as such, but capitalist property relations. The odds of friendship ties between workers and petty bourgeois are over three times greater than those between workers and employers.

Variations across countries in permeability to friendships

Figure 5.6 presents the results of the dimensional permeability of class boundaries to friendships separately for each of the four countries. In

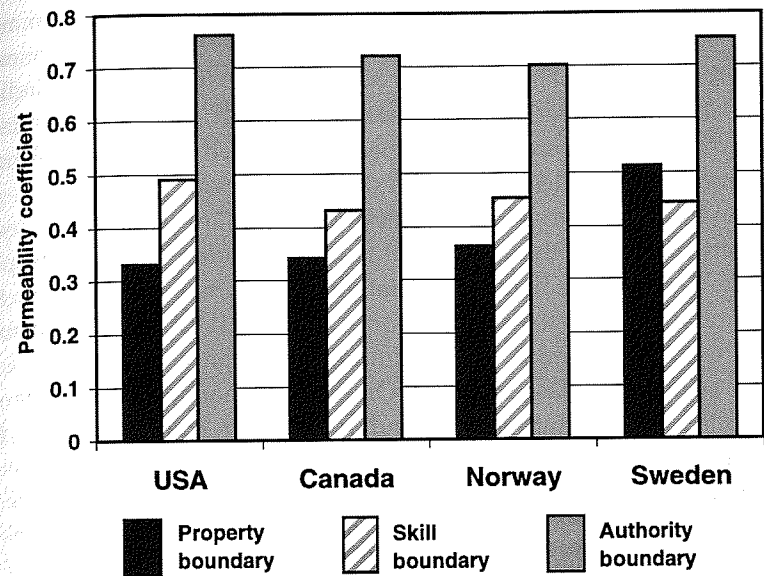


Figure 5.6 Class-boundary permeability to friendships, four countries combined.

formal statistical tests, none of the differences across countries were statistically significant. The only apparent difference across these countries is that in Sweden the property boundary and the skill boundary are not significantly different, whereas they are in the other three countries.

Conclusion for the friendship analysis

Overall, these results indicate that, with the exception of Sweden, the property boundary is the most impermeable to the formation of friendships, followed by the skill boundary, with the authority boundary being the most permeable. This rank order is most sharply inconsistent with Dahrendorf's class analysis. Not only is authority the most permeable of the three boundaries in relative terms, it is also quite permeable in absolute terms.

What about the three other theoretical perspectives outlined in Table 5.1? Marxist theory predicts that the property boundary should be the most impermeable, and this is generally supported by the analysis. The results for the skill and authority boundaries, however, are not entirely what most Marxists would expect: the skill boundary is less permeable and the authority boundary is more permeable than would be expected

strictly on the basis of a theory of exploitation, domination and common class interests alone. While with a bit of a stretch the Marxist concern with exploitation and class interests may be consistent with the finding that the skill boundary is less permeable than the authority boundary, Marxist class analysis would not expect the relative magnitude of these two permeability coefficients to be so sharply different.

The findings for the skill and authority boundaries, therefore, seem more consistent with the class habitus and opportunity structure perspectives. On the one hand, the relatively high impermeability of the skill boundary is consistent with theories of cultural capital, even if such theories tend to minimize the continuing importance of property as a basis for structuring class practices. On the other hand, the high relative permeability of the authority boundary is most consistent with the opportunity structure perspective on friendships. In many workplaces there are diverse opportunities for informal interaction between workers and supervisors, and even between workers and managers. This density of interactional possibilities, combined with relatively high levels of career mobility across authority boundaries compared to the property and expert boundaries, may account for the relatively high permeability of the authority boundary.

The analysis thus suggests that the causal mechanisms identified by theories of class interests (at least the Marxist variant), class habitus and opportunity structure probably all operate to create obstacles and opportunities for friendship formation across class boundaries. The result of the joint operation of these three clusters of causes is that the boundary Marxists predict to be the least permeable is indeed the least permeable. This might imply that the property-exploitation-interest mechanism is a more powerful structuring mechanism than are the class habitus or opportunity mechanisms. Such a conclusion, however, is vulnerable to criticism on two scores. First, claims about the relative potency of causal processes are always vulnerable to measurement issues. Our conclusion about the relatively high permeability of the authority boundary might change if we adopted a more restrictive definition of authority, e.g., limiting "managers" to high-level executives. Also, if we distinguished among experts between highly credentialed professionals with advanced degrees and other experts, the skill boundary might become the "least" permeable. While such conjectured results could potentially be countered with a comparable respecification of the property-boundary, this would only reaffirm the sensitivity of claims about relative causal potency to measurement choices. Second,

even if a more fine-grained inspection revealed that our core results were robust across alternative specifications of these boundaries, there is still the problem of ascribing this impermeability to "exploitation interests" rather than class habitus or opportunity structure. Employers certainly live different life styles from most nonproperty owners, and the physical opportunities for informal interaction between most employees and employers are few. Therefore, while our data are consistent with the claim that property-based interests have stronger effects on friendship formation than either opportunity structure or class habitus, they cannot effectively refute counterclaims.

5.5 Cross-class families

The third form of class-boundary permeability we will explore occurs when husbands and wives in dual-earner families occupy jobs in different classes. The patterns of homogeneity and heterogeneity of class compositions within families is the result of three interconnected processes:

- 1 The process of what sociologists call "assortative mating" by which men and women from different class origins and occupying different job-classes before marriage make marriage choices in the first place.
- 2 The process within marriages which determine if and when the wife enters the labor force.
- 3 The processes which determine the job-class occupied by husbands and wives given their class origins and the decisions about labor force participation.

With the available data we cannot even begin to sort out the separate contributions of these three processes. What we can do, in a manner parallel to the exploration of permeability of class boundaries to friendships and mobility, is map out the static patterns of class boundary permeability within families that result from the interactions of assortative mating, labor force participation decisions and job acquisition.

As in the case of the problem of friendship formation, the Marxist tradition of class analysis has little explicitly to say about the class structuring of marriage markets or labor market choices within families. Nevertheless, the arguments around class interests we explored in the contexts of friendship formation are broadly applicable to the present problem as well. We will therefore explore the same basic theoretical

predictions as in the discussion of mobility and friendships. I will take the core predictions from a Marxist class analysis to be that the property boundary will be the least permeable to cross-class families, whereas a class analysis that emphasizes issues of cultural capital would predict that the skill boundary would be the least permeable.

Results

Patterns of cross-class families

Before looking at the results of our statistical models of class boundary permeability for cross-class families, it will be useful to get some sense of the overall distribution of cross-class families. Figure 5.7 distinguishes five kinds of two-earner households based on the eight class categories we have been using in this chapter: 1. households with a homogeneous class composition (the jobs of the husband and wife are in the same class location); 2. marginally heterogeneous households, in which the husband and wife are in different class locations, but they occupy adjacent locations in the class structure matrix (e.g. workers and supervisors); 3. cross-class households in which there is no clear status difference between husband and wife (e.g. expert and expert manager); 4. cross-class households in which the class location of the wife is more privileged than that of her husband; 5. cross-class households in which the husband's class is more privileged than the wife's.¹⁰

Several things are worth noting in this figure. First of all, in all of these countries roughly two-thirds of all households in which both the husband and the wife are in the labor force are either class homogeneous or only marginally heterogeneous.

Second, cross-class families are not a rare occurrence. In roughly 30–35% of dual-earner families in these four countries, the husbands and wives occupy jobs in clearly different class locations. Virtually every possible form of cross-class household exists in all four of these countries (see Wright 1997: 227). In the United States, for example, in 1.2% of dual-earner households, the wife is an employer and the husband a worker and in 3.1% the wife is an expert-manager and the husband a worker. Roughly half of these cross-class families consist of one spouse in the

¹⁰ The details of the data used in this and other figures in the analysis of cross-class families are given in Wright (1997: 235–236). The detailed description of the distribution of households across all combinations of husband's and wife's class locations can be found in Wright (1997: 226).

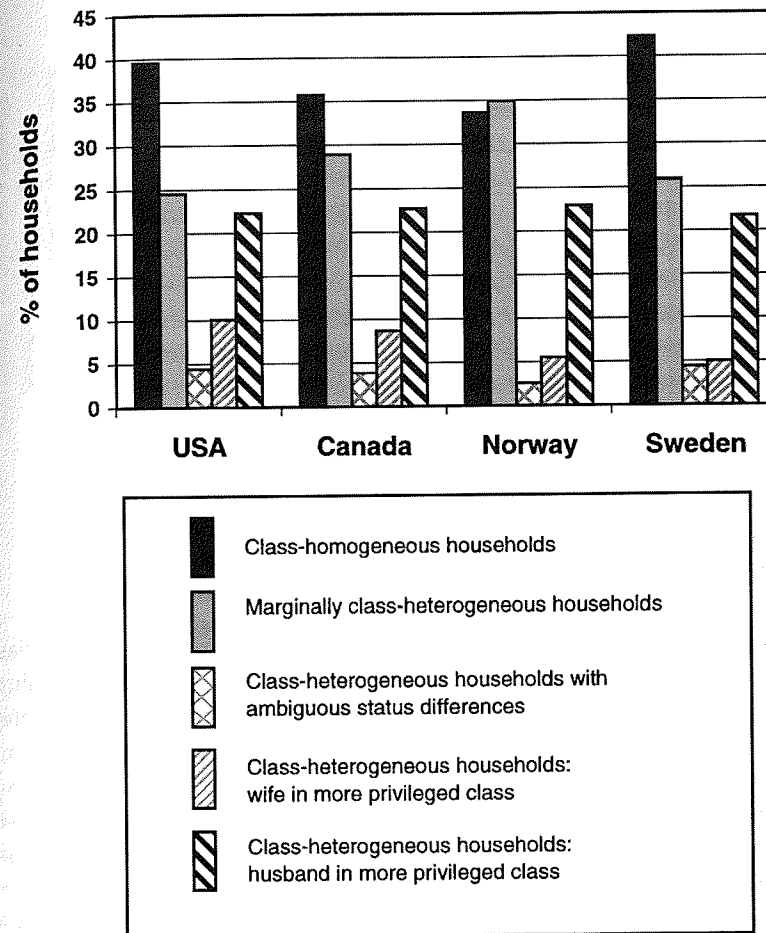


Figure 5.7 Class composition of families, two-earner households.

working class and one who is an employer, an expert-manager, a manager, or an expert. Since in the early 1980s when these data were gathered, roughly 40% of all people lived in dual-earner households in these countries, this means that about 12% or so of the population live in unambiguously cross-class families. While it is still the case that most people live in class-homogeneous households, cross-class families are a significant reality in developed capitalism.

Third, as would be expected, it is much more common in cross-class families for the husband to be in a more privileged class location than the wife. In the United States, for example, about 10% of all dual-earner

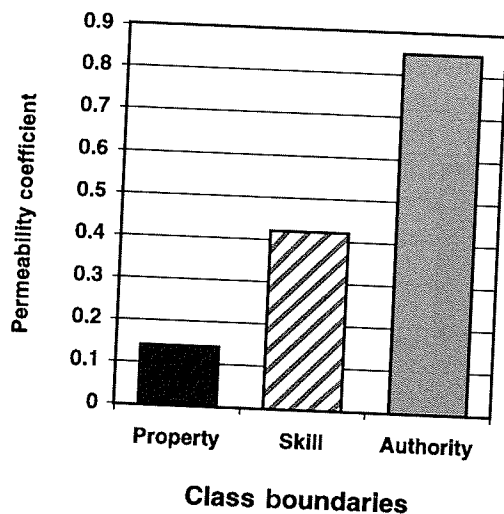


Figure 5.8 *The relative permeability of class boundaries within dual-earner households, four countries combined.*

marriages consist of a manager or expert husband and a working-class wife, but only 5% consist of a manager or expert wife and a working-class husband. In Sweden and Norway this contrast is even greater: 10–12% of dual-earner households have manager/expert husbands and worker wives, but only 2–3% have manager/expert wives and working-class husbands. Overall in the United States and Canada women are about two-and-a-half times more likely to live in households with husbands whose jobs are in more privileged rather than less privileged class locations than their own jobs, whereas in Scandinavia they are four-and-a-half times more likely to live in such a household. Still, even though this expected gender difference occurs, there is a significant number of households, especially in the United States and Canada, in which the wife's job is in a more privileged class location than is their husband's.

The relative permeability of the three class boundaries

Figure 5.8 presents the permeability coefficients for household composition for the four countries combined. The coefficients for all three class boundaries indicate some degree of impermeability. The property boundary is clearly the least permeable and the authority boundary the most permeable for cross-class marriages: the odds of a cross-class family across the property boundary is less than one-sixth the odds of

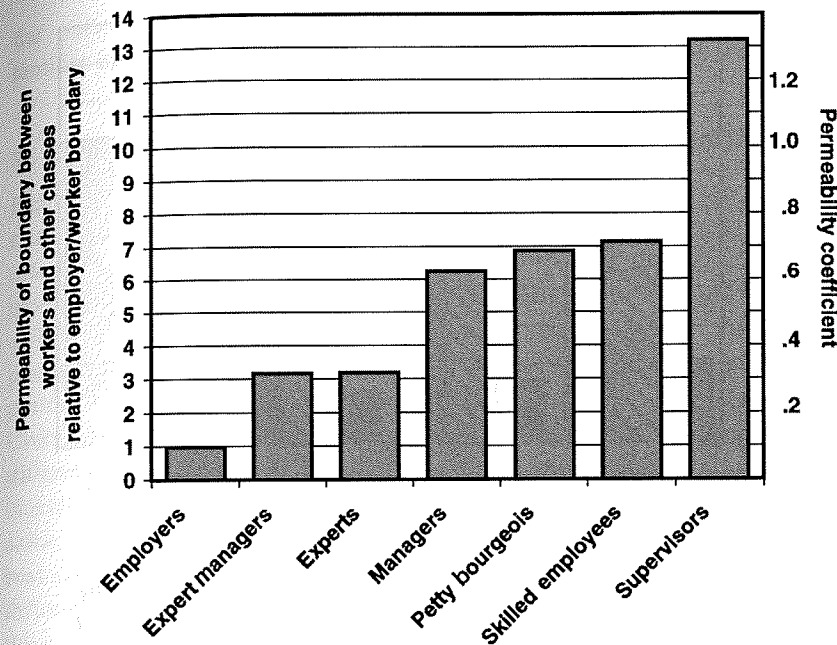


Figure 5.9 *Permeability of class boundary within two-earner households between workers and other class locations, four countries combined.*

one across the authority boundary and one-third the odds of one across the expertise boundary. These results are strongly consistent with expectations of Marxist class analysis.

The locational permeability of boundaries between working-class and other class locations

As in the prior analysis of mobility and friendships, the locational permeability analysis significantly improves the statistical fit of the models. This, again, indicates that the degree of permeability of class boundaries within households between working-class locations and other classes is not simply an additive effect of the three underlying dimensions of the class structure; interactions among these dimensions matter.

Figure 5.9 presents the relative locational permeability of the working class with other class locations within households. As in the prior analyses, the odds of a WORKER | EMPLOYER cross-class family are much lower than any other combination. The odds ratio for a WORKER | EXPERT-MANAGER family is three times greater than for a WORKER | EMPLOYER

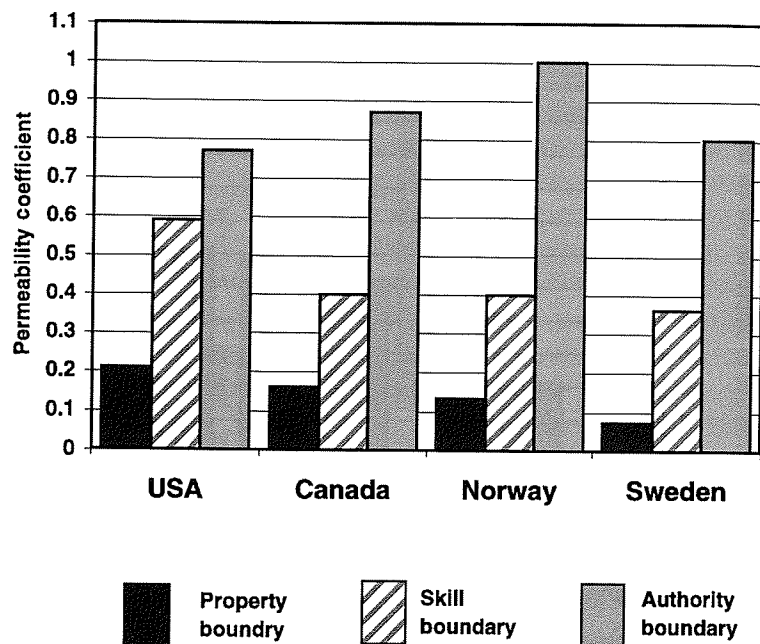


Figure 5.10 *Permeability of class boundaries within two-earner households, four countries compared.*

family, for a WORKER|PETTY BOURGEOIS family almost seven times greater, and for a WORKER|SUPERVISOR family thirteen times greater. These results again confirm the relatively high permeability of the authority boundary, the impermeability of the property boundary, and the fact that the salient aspect of the property boundary is not self-employment as such, but capitalist class relations.

Country interactions

Figure 5.10 presents the patterns of class-boundary permeability separately in each of the four countries. In this case the basic patterns are virtually identical in all four countries: the property boundary is the least permeable to the formation of cross-class families and the authority boundary the most permeable. While there are a number of nominal differences between the countries which might turn out to be significant if we had larger samples – the coefficient for skill seems larger in the US and the coefficient for property seems somewhat smaller in Sweden – nevertheless, with the present data none of these even approach the conventional levels of statistical significance. We can thus conclude that

the patterns of permeability of class boundaries within cross-class families appear relatively invariant across countries.

5.6 Comparing the three forms of class-boundary permeability

Figure 5.11 compares the permeability coefficients for the three aspects of class-boundary permeability we have been exploring across the four countries. Considering how much friendships, family structure, and mobility differ as social phenomena, the patterns of boundary permeability within countries are quite similar across these three social phenomena. In all four countries, the authority boundary is the most permeable for all three of these social phenomena, although in the United States the authority and expertise boundaries are not significantly different for cross-class families. In the United States, Canada and Norway, the rank order of permeability for the three phenomena are the same, although in a few cases the coefficients for the property and skill boundaries do not differ significantly. Only Sweden exhibits clear differences in the basic patterns for the property boundary across the three phenomena: the property boundary is much less permeable than the expertise boundary for the class composition of marriages, while the two boundaries do not differ significantly for mobility or friendships. With the exception of Sweden, therefore, the patterns of boundary permeability are rather consistent across these qualitatively different social phenomena.

Taken together, these results support several general conclusions. First, they lend support to the general expectation in Marxist class analysis that the property dimension of the class structure remains the most fundamental in capitalist societies. While class structures in capitalism cannot adequately be described simply in terms of relationship to the means of production, nevertheless the property boundary appears to be the most rigid. What is more, this relative impermeability of the property boundary is not generated by the division between the self-employed and employees, but rather by capitalist property relations. As the analysis of the location-permeability between the working class and other class locations demonstrates in all three analyses, the boundary between the working class and employers is the least permeable of all boundaries, and much less permeable than the boundary between workers and the petty bourgeoisie.

Second, with the exception of some of the results for Sweden, the cross-national variations in the patterns of class boundary permeability

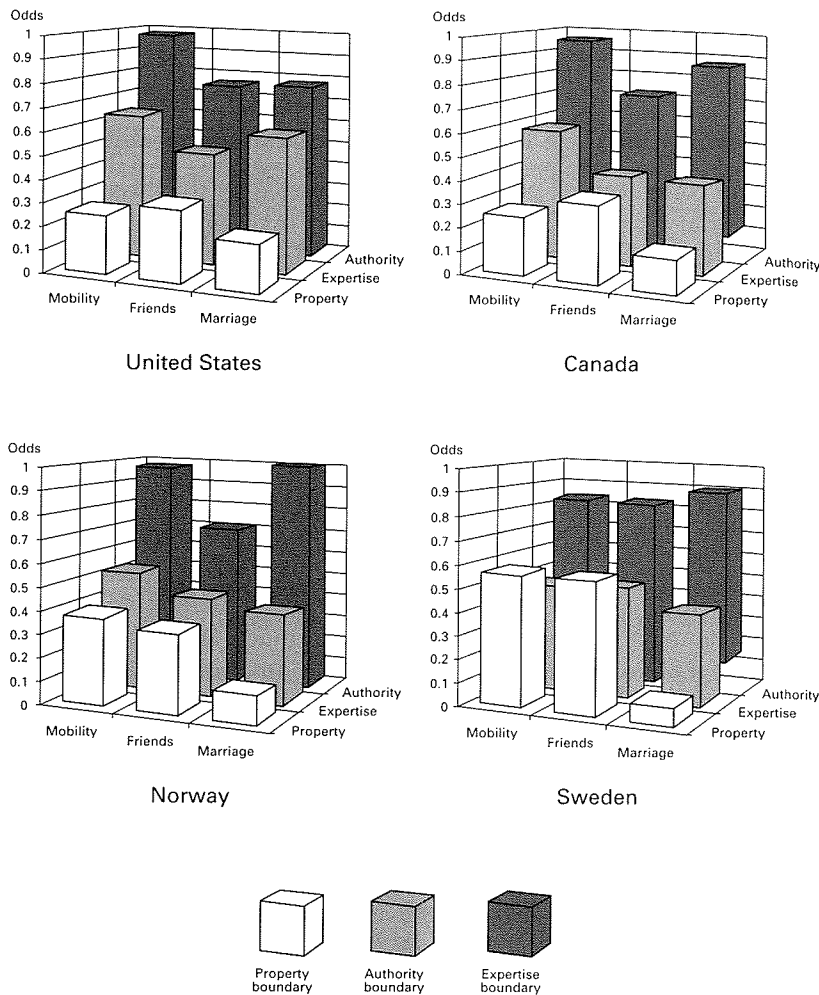


Figure 5.11 *The odds of class-boundary permeability to mobility, friendships and cross-class families in the United States, Canada, Norway and Sweden.*

are quite muted. While in the case of the mobility results, there was some basis for distinguishing the patterns in the social democratic Nordic countries from the more purely capitalistic North America, nevertheless these differences constitute variations on a theme rather than completely different patterns. This suggests that the relative permeability of different class boundaries is shaped more by properties of the class structure itself than by cultural or political processes.

Finally, the results from the analysis of the locational-permeability between the working class and other class locations support the view that the class structure is not simply the "sum" of its underlying dimensions. The probabilities that friendships, biographies and marriages cross specific class boundaries are the result of the interactions among these dimensions, not simply their separate effects. If this interpretation of the results is correct, then the concept of "class structure," should not be seen simply as a heuristic convenience for summarizing the three separate underlying dimensions.