The role of education in intergenerational class mobility trends in Argentina: mediating and moderating effects across cohorts, 1940-2010

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Declarations

Authors' contributions: RJ collected a major part of the data and created the harmonized comparative database. RJ conceptualized and drafted the paper and conducted all statistical analyses. HG assisted with harmonizing the database and the statistical analysis. RJ and HG jointly rewrote the paper in response to the reviews, which involved a reconceptualization of the argument.

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Replication materials. The data analysed, together with syntax specifications, are available on at https://osf.io/TOBEADDED. The repository has been anonymized to comply with the requirements of double-blind peer review.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of education in intergenerational class mobility in Argentina using cohort comparisons from 12 nationally representative probability sample surveys collected between 2003 and 2021 (N = 13,175 men, 12,698 women), in the age-bracket of 25–65 (supposed age of occupational maturity). Education is hypothesized as having a dual role. On the one hand, education is a mediator between social class origins and destinations, in two steps that we label Inequality of Educational Outcomes (OE) and Occupational Class Returns to Education (ED), respectively. On the other hand, education may also act as a moderator, if the direct origin–destination association (OD|E), i.e. the net association between social origins and destinations controlled for education, declines with higher education. Against the backdrop of the expectations of modernization theory—declining OE and OD|E and strengthening ED--, the paper investigates whether these trends materialize in Argentina. Using margin-free odds-ratio models, trends are assessed through comparisons of constant, unconstrained, and linearly constrained UniDiff parameters. Results indicate significant declines in both OE and ED associations, the origin-education and education-destination associations, suggesting a weakening mediating role of education, alongside a relative strengthening of the direct OD|E association between origins and destinations. These results align Argentina with a number of recent international findings

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1. Introduction

Mediation and moderation in the OED model

Stratification sociology has long been concerned with questions about the role of education in shaping intergenerational occupational class mobility, and in particular whether and how the ubiquitous process of educational expansion promotes such intergenerational mobility. Although not always clearly delineated in this literature (but see Jorrat & Marqués-Perales (2022)), the hypothesized role of education is twofold (**Figure 1**). On the one hand education ***mediates*** the relation between origins and destinations via an indirect effect. This indirect effect involves two steps: social origins determine education attainment (OE), and educational attainment determines labor market outcomes (ED). The relevant question for research thus is not only to examine the strength of the effect of social origins on educational attainment, but also the strength of the subsequent step in the process, as these two steps combine to form the indirect effect. On the other hand, researchers have also proposed that higher education generates intergenerational mobility by ***moderating*** the causal relation between origins and destinations, and in particular by weakening the direct effect of origins on destinations, net of educational mediation (OD|E)[1].

[1] OD|E denotes the partial **(**or direct) association between origin and destination conditional on education, while OD refers to total association with no conditioning on education.

(Figure 1 about here)

The *mediation role* of education between origins and destinations has been the subject of research ever since the classic status attainment model of Blau & Duncan (1967: p. 170), who showed that for American men in 1962 about half of the association between father's occupation and occupation at entry in the labor market was mediated by education, and that this share was even larger for these men when current occupations were examined.

Although the mediated effect consists of two steps, most research has focused on the first step, inequality of educational outcomes (OE). For instance, in support of the mediating role of education, Breen (2010) points out that education is usually regarded as a major "channel" of intergenerational mobility, noting that a highly debated question has been to see if "inequalities in educational attainment according to social background diminished or remained more or less unchanged" (p. 366). Likewise, Jonsson (1996, p. 113) highlights that a weaker association between origins and education reflects progress toward equality of opportunity: "the weaker the association between origin and education, the closer we come to the classical liberal goal."

The most commonly held hypothesis on inequality of educational outcomes has been that processes of modernization will decrease the strength of this effect. Various dimensions of the modernization process, such as technological and economic developments, industrialization and tertiarization of the labor force, urbanization, globalization, the rise of gender equality, the growth of mass communication and transport and the spread of modern values ('universalism') would all contribute to this decline. However, a special place in this argument has been reserved for the ubiquitous

expansion of educational distributions. As students stay longer in education and newer cohorts receive more education than previous cohorts, this is transposed into the expectation that educational opportunities would 'open up for all'. This hypothesis has found further support in the widely observed effect in research on educational transitions, that has shown that school continuation is much less affected by social background at higher transitions, that are made at a more advanced age (Mare 1981; Shavit & Blossfeld 1993). If the explanation of the 'Mare pattern' is (at least partly) that students who make decisions at a later age are less influenced by their parents, it seems plausible that educational expansion leads to less inequality of educational outcomes and hence to more intergenerational mobility.

The *moderating role* of education has been proposed by many, but is in recent stratification literature most often attributed to Hout (1988). In a seminal contribution on trends in the US, Hout (1988) challenged the claim that "no amount of education can overcome origins," arguing instead that the effects of social origins vary across educational levels and that "a college degree can do it" (p. 1391). Based on this idea, Pfeffer & Hertel (201**5**) developed the argument of a "compositional effect" (p. 148), referring to the weakening of the origin–destination association as educational distributions expand. Drawing upon Torche (2011), they claim that the hypothesized moderation holds in the United States, where "a college degree continues to mitigate the direct effect of socio-economic origins on socio-economic destinations," whether measured by social class or other indicators (p. 6).

The arguments in favor of a moderation effect of education are related, but not identical to the arguments that leads to the expected equalization of educational outcomes by social background. The moderation hypothesis holds that a higher education makes

students independent of their parents, to begin because graduates from tertiary education are at their point of transitioning to the labor market older than their peers who leave education at the secondary or primary level. Another argument is that graduates from higher education most likely enter jobs that have very strict credential requirements. You cannot become a doctor without completing medical school. Parents who want to transfer their professional occupations to their children, have to use the school system to accomplish their goal. The direct transfer of occupational positions, unmediated by education (OD|E), is largely confined to occupations without strict credential requirements, such as entrepreneurial, management and political positions. Despite the plausibility of this argument to support the moderation hypothesis, most evidence has failed to show an increasing moderation role of education in promoting mobility (Jonsson 1996; Breen & Jonsson 2005; Breen & Karlson 2014).

While the arguments to expect a weakening of the indirect effect O → E → D because of the weakening of OE component are well developed, there is a missing link in this reasoning. Trends in the total association OD, as well as in the indirect effect itself are also determined by what happens to the occupational returns to education (ED). In classic modernization theory this relationship has been the focus of the rise-of-meritocracy (or from-ascription-to-achievement) argument, which holds that in modernizing contexts education will become an ever more important determinant of selection into occupations. Seen from the indirect effect perspective, such a rise-of-meritocracy argument could countervail the weakening of the OE association and make that the direction of trend in the indirect effect is uncertain. Surprisingly, recent empirical evidence has not at all confirmed the rise-of-meritocracy argument, once firmly established as a component of modernization theory (e.g., Treiman 1970). Cross-

national comparative analysis of O-E-D relationships (Breen 2004, 2011) seem to agree on one consistent pattern of change: the association between education and occupation is *not* strengthening over time, but is rather weakening.

Previous studies on the mediating and moderating roles of education in intergenerational class mobility in Argentina (Jorrat 2016; Dalle 2018; Solís & Dalle 2019; Fachelli 2019; Boado & Fachelli 2020; Jorrat et al. 2024; Jorrat & Marquéz-Perales 2022; Jorrat, Boado & Espinoza 2025) — whether comparing periods or birth cohort -- report little evidence that education, whether conceived as a mediator or moderator, significantly affects class mobility, diverging from meritocratic expectations. In some cases (e.g., Jorrat 2016), this has led to the conclusion—echoing Goldthorpe's for Britain (Goldthorpe 2012, 2016; Bukodi & Goldthorpe 2018)—that educational expansion alone is unlikely to foster greater mobility. For example, Jorrat (2016, pp 200-201), after analyzing eight national surveys concludes that "all three-way models are consistent with a constant-association specification."

Research questions and contributions

Previous studies on intergenerational class mobility in Argentina —whether across time periods or birth cohorts— have relied mainly on pooled surveys from the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area (AMBA) or on a small number[2] of national surveys. The present study revisits the relationships in the OED model in Argentina comparing birth cohorts in twelve national surveys conducted between 2003 and 2021. While the data still cover

[2] Dalle (2018) analyzed six national surveys collected in 2003-2010. Jorrat et al. (2024) analyzed six national surveys collected in 2007-2017.

a relatively short historical period, it encompasses five birth cohorts (1938–1951 to 1985–1996), spanning nearly fifty years. For individuals aged 25–65 (which we assume to be the age of occupational maturity), estimated labor market entry ranges from ca. 1960 to 2020, thus covering almost six decades. Hence, our analysis seeks to assess how the role of education in stratification and mobility evolved at the national level. Specifically, we examine for this database:

1) How the total effect of origins on destinations (OD has developed over cohorts;
2) How the total effect of origins on destinations is mediated by education and how this mediation has changed over cohorts;
3) Whether and how the direct effect of origins on destinations (OD|E is moderated by level of education and how this has changed over cohorts.

We examine these processes for men and women separately, on the argument that occupational distributions and occupational careers differ between genders, which may affect the relationships in the OED model, as well as the trends therein.

Our major contribution to the emerging literature on stratification in Argentina (and Latin-America more generally) is that the database is larger, more representative and more rigorously harmonized than in previous research. At the same time, we use models closely related to OED research on Latin-America (Costa Ribeiro 2023; Solís & Dalle 2019; Jorrat, Boado & Espinoza 2024; Torche & Costa Ribeiro 2010; Torche 2014) and some European countries (Vallet 2013, 2022; Breen & Jonsson 2005; Breen 2010; Bukodi & Goldthorpe 2013). In particular, we measure occupational positions by the internationally acknowledged EGP categories, use odds-ratio models to study relative mobility cleansed from (changes in) marginal distributions, and test trend hypotheses

using statistically powerful models with multiplicative UniDiff parameters. UniDiff parameter allow odds-ratio's to freely vary within tables, but constrain differences of odds-ratio's between-tables into a single parameter. Our analysis closely follows established practices in this literature, in particular the examples of Vallet (2015) on France and Breen et al. (2009) on eight European countries.

2. Historical-Contextual Background

Political and economic developments in Argentina

Argentina has often been recognized for its strong economic performance and relatively high standard of living in the early 20th century (1900-1930), on par with other so-called "countries of new settlement," such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and even the United States (Taylor 1992, 2018; Míguez 2005, 2008; Gerchunoff & Llach 2006; Gerchunoff & Hora 2021). However, following the global crisis of the 1930s the country's trajectory diverged significantly from that of its peers. The early process of modernization faded and was followed by what Waisman (1987) has described as a "reversal of development". The economic effects of the 1930s crisis lingered until 1937. While the war years were difficult, post-WW2 export growth boosted the economy for a short while. From 1949 onwards, stagnation emerged, partly initiated by Juan Domingo Peron's first presidency (1946-1955). Peronist policies affected social stratification in Argentina by expanding social rights, unionization, and access to welfare. This improved the relative position of the working class, but left long-term patterns of inequality intact.

Between 1960 and 2020, the time in which our cohorts left school and entered the labor market, Argentina has a unique history of economic decline, with repeated periods of

hyperinflation and high unemployment, punctuated by at least three national defaults, in 2001, 2015 and 2020 (Reinhart & Rogoff 2009; Levy Yeyati & Panizza 2011). The same period is characterized by political turmoil. Three military coups took place between 1962 and 1976, each followed by dictatorial rule or authoritarian regimes. Historians hypothesize that, after the 1966 and 1976 coups, occupational stratification in Argentina became more rigid, with fewer opportunities for upward mobility among working-class groups (O'Donnell 1982; Torrado 1994). The authoritarian regimes, to a significant extent, might have reinforced class-based inequalities by weakening labor protections, suppressing unions, and reducing workers' bargaining power (O'Donnell 1982). Moreover, economic restructuring reduced industrial and public-sector employment, perhaps –and to a certain extent- undermining traditional channels of social mobility (Torrado 1994; Beccaria 2002).

A return to democracy took place after the Malvinas/Falklands war of 1982. The period between 1983 (when Alfonsìn was democratically elected as president) and 2003 witnessed significant transformations across political, economic, educational, and stratification dimensions. Market liberalization and privatization increased unemployment and informal employment, culminating in the 2001–02 crisis (Beccaria 2002; Gerchunoff & Llach 2003). Democratic governance consolidated after 1983, but state capacity weakened and political dissatisfaction grew again (Levitsky & Murillo, 2005). It has been suggested that the rising income inequality caused social polarization, and downward mobility of middle and working classes (Torrado 1994; Kessler 2014).

The 2003-2015 period was dominated by the governments of Néstor and Cristina Kirchner. Their economic strategy focused on expanding the domestic market through

rising public spending, which ultimately led again to high inflation, debt default, and weak (private) job creation.

Education

In line with its early modernization, Argentina established free, public, compulsory, and secular *primary education* very early *(*Ley 1420 in 1884). It took place before many developed countries at the time. Only many years later *compulsory secondary education* emerged, which had to wait until a national law of 2006. Meanwhile, secondary education had expanded by the end of the 1980s, more so in the 1990s. Importantly, fundamental reorganizations of schooling took place in 1992, among them an integration of primary education with the early years of secondary levels (EGB: *Educación General Básica*), which was later (2006) suspended. This favored the supply of workers with mid-level credentials. (See, among others, Beccaria & Maurizio 2017).

Argentina also witnessed early university reforms (1905, 1912, 1918). The most relevant was the 1918 University Reform, with an extended impact in Latin-America. It introduced university autonomy and student participation in the university's governance and laid the foundations for a public, tuition-free university system that later expanded geographically across the country, limiting the development of elite institutions, and promoting relatively open access supported by state subsidies. After several political struggles, fee-paying private universities were allowed in 1974. This generated the present dual system in the university regime in the country. At present, between 20% and 25% university students go to these universities: graduates from private universities quadrupled from 1995 to 2015 (Clarín, 31-01-2018). This duality of strictly public versus strictly private universities) may have increased inequality of education outcomes: Chiroleu & Marquina (2017) document that students in private universities

come from families with higher educational and occupational resources than those in the public sector.

Figure 2 around here

Census data (see **Figure 2**) confirm that among persons aged 25 and over, the completion of secondary education increased substantially in our period of study, doubling from about 10% to nearly 20% between 1980 and 2010 (Di Pietro & Tófalo (2013)), and reaching approximately 25% by the 2022 census. This refers only to individuals who completed secondary education; however, those who attained any level of higher education should also be taken into account. Accordingly, the share of the population with completed secondary education or more increased from 17.3% in 1980 to 43.2% in 2010—an expansion of roughly 2.5 times, that is, more than a doubling over the period.

Cohorts

Linking historical politico-economic events to mobility trends is inherently challenging. As will be detailed below, the present study examines the fate of five birth cohorts: 1) 1938–1951, 2) 1952–1962, 3) 1963–1973, 4) 1974–1984, and 5) 1985–1996. Notice that these birth cohorts need to be considered at their time of adolescence and early adulthood, as students take decisions about leaving education and entering the labor market at around 15-20 year of age, and reach occupational maturity after at age 25 or later. While the cohorts are born in a period range of about 10 years, the time at which they were in their sensitive years (taking decision about school continuation, entering the labor market and attaining a stable occupation) spreads out to about 20-25 years. Also note that the question about father's occupation usually refers to "the time when

you were growing up", and thus refers to a time somewhat earlier. Finally, it is important to note that some cohort-specific events had effects extending well beyond the temporal boundaries of the cohorts themselves. Given these caveats, it is still informative to characterize the five cohorts with respect to the most dramatic historical events they experienced in their sensitive years.

Cohort 1: 1938–1951 (labor market entry between 1960 and 1976). The older members of this cohort entered primary education during the rise of Peronism (after the military coup of 1943), with labor rights and unions gaining strength. This cohort experienced the aftermath of Perón's ousting in 1955 and the short-lived civic-military government of 1962–1963. Economic growth resumed at the time, although with fluctuations. While not unfavorable years, Argentina underperformed relative to other countries during the global boom that lasted until the 1973 oil crisis.

Cohort 2: 1952-1962 (labor market entry between 1977 and 1987). This cohort was in adolescence and early adulthood through one of Argentina's most turbulent periods: Perón's return and death, Isabel Perón's presidency, and the 1976 military coup. Economic growth until 1974 was followed by instability, chronic inflation, and the severe crises of the 1980s, Latin-America's "lost decade." This cohort then experienced the 1976 coup, the intensification of guerrilla warfare, followed by the escalation of state terrorism and the destruction of the guerrilla movement, which by 1979 was virtually defeated and under persecution. Finally, in adolescence this cohort experienced the Malvinas/Falklands War and the definitive collapse of the last phase of the military dictatorship, concluded by the first electoral defeat of Peronism without proscription at the hands of Alfonsín in 1983.

Cohort 3: 1963–1973 (labor market entry between 1988 and 1998). This cohort came of age after Argentina's democratic restoration in 1983, which marked a new political era. Yet the debt crisis and the "lost decade" continued to weigh heavily on the economy, resulting in stagnation. In late 1980s, there was hyperinflation and state sovereign default. This cohort witnessed the return of Peronism under Menem (1989-1999). who adopted orthodox economic policy (the 'Washington Consensus'). In the 1990s Menem's neoliberal reforms, privatizations, and currency convertibility plan made growth resume temporarily.

Cohort 4: 1974–1984 (labor market entry between 1999 and 2009). If we look at the conditions of this cohort in maturity, we find more inflation, deindustrialization, financial liberalization, rising foreign debt (Basualdo 2006); budget cuts and political repression of universities led to a deterioration in the quality of public higher education—teaching conditions, institutional resources, and academic training—and to higher dropout rates and reduced chances of degree completion among students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Tiramonti 2004). In 2001-2002 there was again a profound economic crisis, linked to social and political crisis; monetary default and repeated mass protests. In 2003–2009, the Kirchner administrations made some relevant economic recovery (including improved financial situation of academic research), with a re-regulation process.

Cohort 5: 1985–1996 (labor market entry between 2010 and 2021). Between 2010 and 2021, Argentina experienced once again political alternation and economic volatility. There was an alternation between Kichnerismo 2010-2015 plus 2019-2021 and Macrismo 2015-2019 governments. Some expansion of social rights took place. Rising inflation, balance of payment crises, growth of public debt tended to predominate, with

a partial recovery in 2021. Kirchnerismo's economic policies were characterized by the promotion of the internal market and an unsustainable expansion of public spending, which in the end led to very high inflation, default on the public debt, and consequently low rates of investment and private job creation.

3. Data, Variables, Survey Harmonization, and Basic Tables

Our analysis draws on twelve national population sample surveys conducted between 2003 and 2021, making this dataset the most comprehensive currently available. Most of these surveys were collected by CEDOP (*Centro de Estudios de Opinión Pública, Universidad de Buenos Aires*), linked to the International Social Survey Programme [ISSP], with a sampling plan and measurement procedures as specified by ISSP. Three surveys were conducted by a different institution, but with very similar methodologies. All surveys employed multi-stage random sampling, with random selection at each stage. In addition, in four of the surveys sampling was stratified by using sex and age quotas in the final stage. All surveys employed a standardized occupational/class coding scheme, the International Standard Classification of Occupation 1988 (ILO 1990), as specified by the ISSP methodology. **Appendix 1** gives further details of the 12 surveys.

The successful harmonization of surveys was tested in several ways, following procedure suggested by Vallet (2015) and Breen et al. 2009. **Appendix 2** gives further details on the successful harmonization of the surveys.

Construction of the variables

The analysis focuses on four variables: (1) five birth cohorts, (2) three educational levels, (3) seven classes of origin, and (4) seven classes of destination. The age range is restricted to individuals between 25 and 65 years.

The five birth cohorts, as previously noted, are: (1) 1938–1951, (2) 1952–1962, (3) 1963–1973, (4) 1974–1984, and (5) 1985–1996. As explained above, the analysis covers a period of roughly 50 years in terms of birth cohorts (1938–1991) and about 60 years of labor market entry —or "class positioning"— (1960–2020).

The three educational levels reflect major transitions in educational attainment in Argentina. The first category comprises individuals with less than complete secondary education. The second includes those who completed secondary education but did not pursue tertiary or university studies. The third consists of individuals who completed tertiary or university education.

Following established practice in mobility studies, we employ the EGP class scheme (Erikson, Goldthorpe & Portocarero 1979; Erikson & Goldthorpe 1992), using seven categories, that we label as: I) Higher-Grade Managers & Professionals; II) Lower-Grade Managers & Professionals; III-a) Routine Non-Manual; IV) Small Self-Employed; V-VI) [Supervising and] Skilled Manual; III-b) Lower-Grade Service & Sales; VII) [Elementary or] Unskilled Workers. While III-b (when separated from class III-a) is sometimes merged with the Unskilled Workers class, prior analyses of mean educational attainment suggest that III-b consistently ranks higher than the Unskilled Workers class. Therefore, we retained III-b as a separate category, positioned second-to-last in the scheme used. For the EGP construction, we relied upon Ganzeboom's algorithm (Ganzeboom & Treiman 2003).

Occupation Class Distributions by Cohort

(Table 1 around here)

Table 1 shows the marginal distributions of the EGP class categories by cohort, for men and for women, as well as their fathers. For men, the most important changes across cohorts are the fall of the Small Self-Employed (IV) and the rise of the Lower-Grade Professionals (II) and the Routine Non-manual employees (III-a). This is somewhat similar for women, but we have to add the fall of the Unskilled Workers in the youngest cohort. We see less dramatic developments among the fathers, with a consistent decline of the Unskilled Manual Workers (VII) and a modest increase of Managers & Professionals (I+II).

When comparing origins (fathers) and male destinations we see that upper class (I and II) has expanded—although class I declines in the youngest cohort, perhaps because professionals have not yet had time to reach career maturity—while the Small Self-employed (IV) declines sharply in the last two cohorts. By contrast, the manual working class (VII) shows a steady decrease between origins to destinations, although at a diminishing rate, with the most pronounced decline observed in the three oldest cohorts.

For women, when comparing origins and destinations, the trend for the higher-grade upper class (I) is erratic, declining around the mid-1960s, whereas the lower-grade uper class (II) and routine non-manual employees —both higher-grade (III-a) and lower-grade (III-b)— show steady growth. Like men, the female Small Self-Employed, Skilled Workers and lower-grade Supervisors (V+VI), and the Manual Workers class (VII) all experience notable declines. As highlighted by classes IV and V+VI, daughters generally do not follow their fathers' footsteps.

Across both sexes, the upper classes I and II expand, while middle classes (III-a and IV) grow for women. The manual working class VII decreases for both men and women, although the decline is less pronounced among men.

Educational Distributions by Cohort

(Table 2 around here)

Table 2 examines the relationship between birth cohorts and educational attainment. For both sexes, the proportion of individuals completing higher education rises after the oldest cohort and then stabilizes**.** Much more dramatic development took place at the lower and middle levels of education. Specifically, among men, higher education increased by 3.6 percentage points, middle-level education rose by 20.6 points, and the proportion with low education declined by 24.3 points from the oldest to the youngest birth cohort. An even more dramatic pattern is observed among women, with corresponding changes of 8.5, 20.2, and 28.7 percentage points, respectively. Importantly, the figures indicate that the most substantial shifts occurred at the lower end of the educational distribution, which experienced a marked contraction.

4. Components of Absolute Mobility

Intergenerational mobility is commonly analyzed in two forms: absolute and relative (Breen ed. 2004; 2019). *Absolute mobility* refers to observed[3] movements between origins and destinations—the proportion of individuals who changed class position. When class positions are rank-ordered this allows for the identification of upward and

[3] In fact, the term "observed" mobility (Vallet 2015) would better fit the phenomena described in **Table 3**.

downward moves. *Relative mobility*, in contrast to absolute mobility, reflects the strength of the association between origins and destinations and is also known as 'social fluidity'.

Table 3 presents standard descriptive statistics about absolute mobility. As noted in the literature, observed mobility conflates structural factors—stemming from differences between the marginal distributions of origins and destinations—with relative mobility, which is about the association between origins and destinations (Ganzeboom, Treiman & Ultee 1991; Xie & Killewald 2013). Breen & Jonsson (2005, p. 237) emphasize that variations in observed flows largely reflect marginal distributions of origins and destinations rather than differences in social fluidity. While sociologists often argue that measures of absolute mobility "misframe" mobility regimes (Hout 2015, p. 28), we feel that it is nevertheless relevant to describe components of absolute mobility and analyze how it changes over cohorts, as this is the way how members of society experience and discuss[4] social mobility.

(Table 3 around here)

The dissimilarity index (DI) by birth cohort measures the differences between origin and destination class distributions – **structural mobility** --, indicating the proportion of cases that would need to change positions to make these distributions identical (Breen 2004, p. 19; Treiman 2009, p. 59). For both sexes, structural mobility rises in younger

[4] Public discourse about social mobility tends to focus heavily on changes in *upward* mobility which is only one of multiple components of absolute mobility and driven by changes in the marginal distributions.

cohorts, more markedly for men (35%) than for women (19%). Most notably, structural mobility for women is three times that of men, although this gap narrows in younger cohorts. Breen & Luijkx (in Breen ed. 2004, p. 46) observe that structural mobility remains stable or declines in many European countries, "suggesting that long-term structural change is gradually diminishing." In Argentina, however, later cohorts suggest an upward trend, with the DI rising among men born in the mid-1970s. When the 1970s cohort entered the labor market and reached occupational maturity (around 1995–2005), Argentina operated under the Convertibility regime (1 peso = 1 dollar), introduced in 1991 to curb chronic inflation. This period saw macroeconomic stabilization, privatizations, and some trade openness, but rising unemployment and increasing public debts were the other side of the coin. This culminated in the 2001 crisis. These are some of the structural changes within which occupational variations took place.

For the specification of "vertical" mobility, we adopt the tripartite grouping approach of Erikson & Goldthorpe (1992, pp. 44-46), which in our study corresponds to: 1) I–II, 2) III-a, IV, V+VI, and 3) III-b, VII. Although we feel that this ranking[5] is somewhat crude and arbitrary, using it leads to results that are comparable to other countries.

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[5] Recall that these authors made their compression of the EGP class scheme to provide "*an instrument du travail*" (p. 46). It is clear that there is rank differentiation within the three broad EGP classes. We also feel that the grouping of class III-b with the working class may not fit with the Argentinean stratification.

Gross mobility rates (i.e. mobility between the seven classes) for men fall within the 70–80% range observed in 30 European countries for cohorts born between 1938 and 1985, and are even higher for women, consistent with the convergence described by Bukodi & Goldthorpe (2022, pp. 273–274) between European countries. *Vertical mobility* refers to movement across the three broad layers, while *non-vertical mobility* captures movements within them refers to movements occurring within these layers (Breen 2004, p. 18). Women experience slightly more vertical mobility than men, driven largely by greater *downward mobility*, which exceeds *upward mobility* in the youngest cohort. In general, upward mobility outweighs downward mobility across most cohorts, but this difference vanishes in the youngest cohort, in a context of higher men immobility and thus lower gross mobility. Despite such sex differences, vertical mobility remains relatively stable across the five cohorts, echoing the trends reported by Bukodi & Goldthorpe (2022) for recent periods in Europe.

Notice that **Table 3** shows all components of absolute mobility to be rather stable across cohorts, despite the strong changes in the occupational distributions that were found for both men and women in **Table 2.** This is not surprising as it may be at first glance. The obvious reason is that the origin distribution also changed by cohort, making for no difference in structural mobility, and little difference for the other components of observed mobility.

5. Components of Relative Mobility

Relative mobility, in contrast to absolute mobility, reflects the strength of the association between origins and destinations and is also known as ‘social fluidity’. As Breen (2019, p. 447) notes, relative mobility refers to “the degree to which a person’s destination

depends on their origin." It is typically assessed using odds ratios (or their logarithms), which capture the odds of moving associated with belonging to one group rather than another (Powers & Xie 2000, p. 50). Strong origin–destination associations (i.e. large odds ratios > 1) imply low social fluidity, while weak associations (odds ratio's closer to 1) indicate almost perfect fluidity between classes. Odd-ratio's have the virtue of being 'margin-free' as their particular value is insensitive to changes in the marginal distributions as described above, and thus embody the pure association between variables.

We address differences in the association between tables with three models that vary in how the pattern of odds-ratio's is constrained between tables. The Constant Assocation model constrains the pattern of odds-ratio's to be the same between tables. In the UniDiff model the odds-ratio patterns are constrained to be different between tables by a single multiplicative constant that we label UniDiff. These uniform differences are expressed relative to a reference pattern[6] which is fixed at 1 and by default refers to the first table in the analysis. Finally, we consider the Linear UniDiff, which introduces "a linear cohort trend in the strength of the association" while keeping the pattern of association constant (Pfeffer & Hertel 2015, p. 156). This model is situated between Constant Association (all UniDiff parameters fixed at 1) and UniDiff (UniDiff parameters vary freely), and provides a single degree-of-freedom test whether any steady change occurred.

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[6] Notice that UniDiff parameters inform only about differences in strength of association, but not about the pattern and strength of the association itself.

Accordingly, our analyses are restricted to comparisons among the Constant Association, Linear UniDiff, and UniDiff models, with particular attention to the Constant Association versus UniDiff comparisons. Our evaluation of model fit relies primarily on L^2 and BIC tests comparing the Constant Association and UniDiff models. L2 comparisons search for differences between models using null-hypothesis testing at the $p < .05$ significance level. BIC adjusts the L2 values for sample size. Models with a more negative BIC are to be preferred over models with higher BIC. However, we also examine the pattern of change of the UniDiff parameters in a more qualitative way, by plotting the values of the UniDiff parameter by cohort.[7]

Our data consist of the counts in a four-way Cohort * Origin * Destination * Education crosstabulation with 5*7*7*3 = 735 cells. However, before addressing the association in the full four-way table, we examine association in three-way aggregations of the four-way table.

5.1 Three-way models of relative mobility: associations OD, OE, and ED

Three-way analyses are first used to examine OD-C, OE-C and ED-C (i.e. how the mediation pathways have developed across cohorts), and finally to test the moderation hypothesis that a higher education mitigates OD|E. Results are presented separately for

[7] Models were run using the Lem Program 1.0 (Vermunt 1997). For 4-way models with problems of sparse cells, we choose to add 0.12 to each cell, following suggestions from Breen & Luijkx (2007), p. 108.

men and women. **Table 4** and **Figure 3** report all three-way associations for men aged 25–65

(Table 4 around here)

(Figure 3 around here)

Mediation for men

For OD-C (total intergenerational class fluidity by cohort), the association appears to be roughly constant across cohorts. UniDiff parameters increase up to the 1960s cohort, then decline for the two youngest cohorts, but the statistical tests (BIC and P) favor the constant association model.

By contrast, OE-C (trends in inequality in educational outcomes) and ED-C (trends in class returns to education), UniDiff and Linear UniDiff models are to be preferred over Constant Association. In OE-C, either UniDiff (according to L^2) or linear UniDiff (according to both L^2 and BIC) are to be preferred. In ED-C, both UniDiff and linear UniDiff are preferred based on L^2 and BIC tests. The UniDiff parameters as shown in **Figure 5** indicated that the OE association decreases for the two youngest cohorts, and that the negative linear UniDiff parameter for OE mostly reflects changes in these two cohorts. The ED UniDiff parameters decline monotonically across cohorts and the negative linear UniDiff parameter indicates a gradual weakening of the association between educational attainment and class destination. In conclusion, both steps in the indirect effect O → E → D indicate weakening of association and hence a weakening of the mediation.

It is to be appreciated at this point that the three-way models refer to the full associations conditioned by cohort. For the partial associations OD|E and ED|O develop over cohorts, we refer to the four-way models in the next section.

Moderation OD|E for men: differences in OD by levels of E

We can use the three-way analysis to test the moderation hypothesis, which holds that OD is weaker among the higher educated. The fourth panel of **Table 4** shows the pertinent information for men, which indicates that there is no difference in OD|E association between tables defined by the three levels of association. The estimated UniDiff parameters (not shown in a figure) are virtually identical between the three levels of education.

Mediation and moderation for women

For women (**Table 5**, **Figure 4**), like for men, the total association OD-C appears largely constant across cohort. When trends emerge, the OD association strengthens up to the third cohort and then weakens slightly in the youngest cohorts. The OE association pattern remains largely constant across cohorts, though exhibiting a slight decline in the most recent cohorts. By contrast, ED-C shows significant differences between cohorts, with UniDiff parameters monotonically falling below 1, particularly for the youngest cohort. The negative linear UniDiff parameter suggests a linearly declining trend in ED.

Finally, the fourth panel in **Table 5** show that there is no moderation effect OD|E for women either. Just like for men the UniDiff parameters between the three education

levels are virtually indistinguishable and the linear trend parameter is far from statistically significant.

(Table 5 around here)

(Figure 4 around here)

It is to be noticed that while the statistical evaluation of models for women leads to different results than for men, the pattern of UniDiff parameters in **Figures 3-4** is strikingly similar between men and women. The relevant question here may be whether the differences between men and women are significant.

These three-way results raise questions about the presence of meritocratic trends, which will be further examined in subsequent four-way (C-OED) analyses. Pfeffer & Hertel (2015, p. 158) note that three-way interaction findings, while informative, are insufficient for capturing the overall role of education in social mobility, turning to decomposition analyses. Similarly, Breen & Luijkx (in Breen ed. 2004, p. 394) argue that although educational qualifications may signal merit, their effect is minor relative to the partial direct effect of origins on destinations. This conclusion is problematic, as the analyses in question do not assess the *relative magnitude* of the ED and OD|E associations, but only their *variation across cohorts*. As a result, no inference can be drawn about whether the effect of education is weaker or stronger than the direct effect of origins. These insights provide the framework for developing a four-way C-OED analyses, following Vallet (2013, 2015).

5.2 Four-Way Models (C-OED). Changes Across Cohorts in OD|E and ED

This section extends the three-way analyses to four-way models (C-OED) using the combined data on men and women. We combined men and women, as the three-way analysis suggested that the association patterns do not differ between men and women and pooling the data will boost power[8]. To analyze four-way models, we closely follow the example of Vallet (2013, 2015) for men in France.[9] Vallet's approach is based on twelve models. In the present text, we discuss eight of Vallet's models (our results for models 9 to 12 are provided in **Appendix 3**).

(Table 6 around here)

Table 6 presents the results of first eight of Vallet's models for the four-way C-OED table.[10] Models 1-4 all fit COE and CD associations with saturation, and then add the two-way saturated associations OD and ED one at a time (Model 2-3) and together (Model 4). It is to be appreciated that in this four-way design OD and ED are partial

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[8] The separate results for men and women are available in the online Replication Package..

[9] Vallet's methodology was also adopted in earlier research on Brazil by Torche & Costa Ribeiro (2010), Costa Ribeiro (2023), and Jorrat, Boado & Espinoza (2025) in their comparative analysis of Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay, but these authors considered only the first five models.

[10] Although our EGP class scheme differs somewhat from Vallet's, we believe these differences do not compromise the overall comparability of the findings. Vallet distinguishes categories I, II, III-a, IV-ab, IV-c, V+VI, and VII+III-b. The small size of IV-c as a destination in Argentina makes it difficult to treat it as a single category.

associations, i.e. conditioned on E and O, respectively. The baseline Model 4 fits the four-way data clearly much better than models 1-3. With respect to model 4, Vallet (2013) notes for France that "an effect of both class origin and education on class destination can be observed". Unsurprisingly, this observation also applies to Argentina. Following these baseline results, Vallet considers the UniDiff specifications in Model 5, which examine variations in OD by education level (the moderation effect). However, like in three-way models, there is no indication of any moderation effect: in Argentina, the OD association does not weaken among individuals with higher levels of education.

In Model 6, the strength of the UniDiffed ED association is allowed to vary across class origins (O). While the BIC statistic still favors the baseline model 4, the L^2-test indicates that model 6 is a significant improvement. The parameters of model 6 show ED to be weaker for non-manual classes and stronger for the manual working class (VII), followed by the small self-employed (IV). While the OD association does not vary across education levels, we find a significant variation in ED by class origin suggesting that the link between education and destinations is slightly stronger for the lower classes.

Model 7 combines the two UniDiffed moderation effects. Again, this model is not better than the baseline model 4 according to BIC, but the L^2-difference test indicates significant improvement. Vallet (2013: p11) notes for France that Model 7 "very clearly reveals that the second specification ('the strength of the ED association varies over O') dominates the first". In Argentina, we observe a similar domination. Notice that the first moderation—OD varying by education—is now marginally significant while the second moderation – ED varying over O –passes the critical test value by a wide margin.

In Model 8—the last of Vallet's twelve models discussed here—Vallet introduces a `"simple" UniDiff cohort effect on ED – making the four-way model fully "dynamic" --, but finding only minor. Tthe results for Argentina are more pronounced, as the dynamic constraint is a clear improvement over model 7. In both countries, class returns to education appear considerably lower among the two youngest cohorts than among the two oldest.

5.3 Comparative interpretation

Considering the eight C-OED models, Vallet (2013: p.12) concludes that in France "only limited changes in ED and OD effects across cohorts" are observed and the "static" Model 6 is to be preferred. For Argentina, more substantial changes are detected for these effects, in particular in the ED-C part of the model. We see that the dynamic Model 8 should be clearly preferred over Model 6. In Argentina, variations of ED conditional on origins across cohorts appear to be more pronounced than variations across class origins if we look at any given point in time.

Our results, like Vallet (2022) for France and others on for other countries (Breen & Jonsson (2005); Breen (2010); Bukodi & Goldthorpe (2013); Hout (2012)), imply that OE and ED associations have decreased over time, while the trend in OD patterns remained uncertain. Argentina exhibits similar tendencies as the elsewhere, although with less pronounced change of social fluidity in OD–C and only a modest weakening of OD in the youngest cohorts. In a meritocratic, modern society, education is expected to play a central role in class allocation, but at the same time become less associated with class background. In Argentina, however, only OE behaves as expected by modernization theory —and only to a limited extent—while ED declines and OD

remains nearly stable. In this context of no change in OD and modest educational expansion, Argentina may reflect Vallet's conclusion for France: "So, as education has expanded and the highest educational categories have grown in size, the capability of advanced education to weaken the 'ascriptive effect' has declined" (in Breen ed. 2004, p. 142).

According to modernization theories, a weakening OE indicates greater equality of educational opportunity, while ED would be expected to strengthen with educational expansion (Bukodi & Goldthorpe 2022, p. 279). In Argentina, OE declines only in the youngest male cohort, while ED decreases, consistent with findings from other contexts (Breen ed., 2004; Breen & Müller, eds., 2020). Overall, early 21st-century surveys in Argentina suggest that education–class mobility relationships across cohorts do not follow the expectations of meritocratic or modernization theories. At the same time, this trajectory of Argentine broadly resembles patterns observed in several European countries, where educational expansion has had limited effects on educational opportunities. Furthermore, in Argentina no moderating effect is not found, further constraining education's capacity to offset the enduring influence of social origins by compositional changes.

6. Counterfactual Simulations of Mechanisms Driving Intergenerational Mobility in Argentina

Having examined potential changes in OD, OE and ED within the C-OED four-way interactions, we now turn to exploring the impact that mechanisms may have for the degree of societal openness—or its absence—across birth cohorts, following Breen (2010) and Vallet (2015, 2020), through counterfactual or simulation analyses.

Breen (2010, p. 378) explains this approach as follows: "I generate a set of counterfactual OD-C tables by successively removing terms from an initial log-linear model that includes all four avenues by which the unconditional origin–destination relationship can change over cohorts. These avenues are: *educational expansion* **(**changes in the marginal distribution of education across cohorts**),** *educational equalization* (changes in OE, weakening/strengthening of social background effects on educational outcomes)**,** *educational class returns* (changes in ED, how education connects with class positions)**,** and *direct origin-destination association* (changes in OD net of education). Breen (2018, p. 11) notes that a weakening of the OE association (*educational equalization*) may be the most common way educational change affects social fluidity. He further adds, following Breen & Jonsson (2007), that social fluidity can also be influenced by a compositional effect, which occurs when: (i) social fluidity is higher among those with greater educational attainment, and (ii) educational expansion increases the share of the population achieving these levels. Hence, Breen (2018, p. 11) poses the question of the which extent educational equalization and expansion have contributed to changes in social fluidity. We address these questions, to a limited extent, in the following analysis, adopting a slight variation of Vallet's simulation models following Hertel's suggestions (**Appendix 4**), yielding virtually identical results.

(Figure 5 around here)

The starting point, the Baseline model, assumes a fully saturated OD association that is not linked to either cohorts or education that is, no cohort-related variation associated with the explanatory mechanisms has occurred.

Breen (2010) identifies two main mechanisms through which education may influence social mobility. The first is equalization of educational opportunity, reflected in a weakening OE association—a central concern in mobility research. In Argentina, this association remains stable for the first three cohorts, declines slightly for the fourth, and more noticeably for the fifth. The second mechanism is compositional. If OD weakens with higher educational attainment, and educational expansion increases the proportion of individuals reaching these levels, then "this compositional change will lead to a reduction in the gross association between origins and destinations" (Breen 2010, p. 368). In Argentina, however, OD does not weaken with rising education. The gross OD association remains stable—or even increases—up to the third cohort, declining only slightly among the youngest cohorts. By contrast, ED decreases steadily across cohorts, while educational expansion shows no clear trajectory. (As noted in the three-way analyses, the constant association model is preferred for OD–C.)

Against this backdrop, we observe somewhat distinctive—and perhaps unusual—patterns in the total origin–destination (OD) association across cohorts, net of education.

Notably, the current direct OD profile mirrors the declining pattern in the net OD association following an initial increase (reversal of the trend), previously identified in a comparative analysis with Chile and Uruguay, where Chile showed a trajectory similar to Argentina (Jorrat, Boado & Espinoza 2025). This occurs amid a modest increase in social fluidity among cohorts born from the mid-1960s onward. Educational expansion and compositional effects, however, display only a slight downward trend, without a clear trajectory. It is possible that trends in educational equality did not translate into higher mobility because the link between education and occupational outcomes also

weakened over time, reducing the class returns for newly educated cohorts, though this remains speculative.

Simulation results confirm the declining pattern of the direct OD effect after the third cohort (a reversal of the initially upward trend). In Argentina, this downward trend since the 1960s cohort appears to reflect parallel decreases in both educational equalization and returns to education, while expansion and compositional effects produce weak and ambiguous (downward) changes.

7. Conclusions

We begin these concluding remarks by returning to our three research questions.

Trends in the total effect of social origins on destinations across cohorts

For men, association between origin and destination classes (commonly referred to as relative mobility or social fluidity) is largely stable, with only minor fluctuations across cohorts: initially for men there is a rise up to the 1960s cohort and then a slight decline among the two youngest cohorts, indicating limited cohort variation in social fluidity. For women, the association remains essentially constant but shows a marginal, slight decline in the youngest cohort, not significantly different from men. Overall, the origin–destination association changes little across cohorts, providing scant evidence of increasing social fluidity, as anticipated by classical versions of modernization theory.

How is the total effect of origins on destinations mediated by education and how has this changed over cohort?

Educational processes display a dual pattern. Inequality of educational outcomes declines only among the two youngest cohorts (somewhat stronger for men than for women), whereas class returns to education decrease monotonically across cohorts,

indicating a gradual weakening of the link between education and class destination, both for men and women. Despite these changes, the direcr association between social origins and destinations, net of of education, remains largely unchanged, suggesting that declining educational returns have not translated into a substantial fall of educational ascriptive trends.

Whether and how is the direct effect of origins on destinations moderated by education and how this has changed over cohorts?

The moderation hypothesis posits that higher education weakens the direct influence of social origins on class destinations. Our results, however, provide little support for the expectation that education has increasingly served as a mechanism for attenuating the influence of social origins. We found no confirmation in the three-way design, neither in the four-way design. In Argentina the origin–destination association remains largely constant across educational levels and cohorts. In this sense, education has not operated as a mobility mechanism capable of counterbalancing ascriptive backgrounds, even though class returns to education have declined over time. This finding challenges strong meritocratic interpretations and suggests that educational expansion alone has been insufficient to offset persistent class-based inequalities.

The counterfactual simulations suggest that the modest increase in social fluidity observed from the 1970s cohort onward—particularly among the youngest cohort—was not driven by educational expansion, which had already stabilized. Instead, the later rise in fluidity appears to reflect reductions in educational inequality and, more clearly, declining educational returns across cohorts. This pattern is consistent with the possibility that a growing share of working-class individuals obtained educational

credentials whose occupational value had diminished, reflecting a decline in their signaling power.

The weakening of the education–destination association emerges from cohorts born in the 1960s onwards. These cohorts entered adulthood around the early 1980s, coinciding with the return to democracy in 1983 under the Alfonsín administration. Subsequent cohorts experienced the 1992 EGB education reform during their secondary schooling years. Although it remains hard to connect historical events to trends in social mobility, it is striking that the timing of these institutional and political events closely parallels the patterns observed in our trend figures. This temporal correspondence suggests that shifts in the wider political and educational context of Argentina may have contributed to changes in the strength of educational class returns, even if they do not by themselves account for the stability of the general origin–destination association. Of course, more explorations are needed on these lines.

In sum, the Argentine case points to a nuanced trajectory of intergenerational class mobility, occasionally resembling but not fully replicating patterns of class reproduction observed elsewhere. Although some increase in fluidity appears among cohorts born after the 1970s, these changes do not seem to result from educational expansion but rather from reduced educational inequality and declining class returns to education. Unlike Brazil—where higher education more clearly weakened the influence of class origins—Argentina more closely resembles Chile and Uruguay, where inheritance effects persist across educational levels. Overall, the evidence highlights the enduring role of social origins in shaping class destinations in Argentina and underscores the need for further research on how institutional, political, and economic factors interact

with educational changes, which may mitigate, yet not fully offset, the long shadow of parental background.

8. Discussion

We notice that our finding of weaker mediating role of education in the association between social origins and destination is a new conclusion about Argentina which we would like to attribute to our larger, more recent and better harmonized nationally representative database, and the use of a cohort design and the statistically powerful UniDiff models. At the same time, we acknowledge that this weakening mediation cannot easily be interpreted theoretically, as it contradicts expectations from modernization theory in two respects. The anticipated contribution of less inequality of educational outcomes is only minor, and the unanticipated weakening of class returns to education is the major driver. As we do not find any moderation by education, this seems to bar an explanation of developments by educational expansion.

While our analyses exhibit a conditioning on cohort rather than on educational expansion itself, successive cohorts have increasing levels of educational distributions. The observed weakening of the education–destination association is therefore consistent with some educational expansion-processes—in particular credential inflation[11]. In this sense, educational expansion may have contributed to a weakening of both components

[11] Credential inflation can have two meanings that are often confused (Kreidl et al., 2004): (A) a decrease of occupational status for each next cohort, once their higher level of education is taken into account; (B) a decrease of the association ED in more recent cohorts. These two may co-occur and both be produced by educational expansion.

of educational mediation—the transmission of origin advantages and its possible effects on favoring destinations—without generating a reduction of the (total) origin–destination association.

A tentative explanation for the observed weakening of the education–destination association -- a pattern observed in Argentina as well as in many other countries -- is that it *is* linked to educational expansion. When expansion acts by means of upward pressure from the bottom of the educational distribution, in particular by saturating primary and secondary levels, rather than through an expansion of higher-level credentials, it will reduce variation in educational credentials. Under these conditions, it is plausible that educational attainment becomes less relevant with respect to class destinations, leading to a weakening of the ED association without necessarily increasing social fluidity.

While our analyses of trends in intergenerational class mobility in Argentina has presented new findings, it awaits further research to test the conclusiveness of our findings. Further research should extend the database, not only by incorporating newer data, but also by reincorporating older data on developments in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area and test whether and how patterns of class mobility in AMBA are different from the national pattern. Our reliance upon the UniDiff specification could also be challenged as these models are useful in detecting change of association, but say little about the pattern and strength of association itself. As Vallet (2006: p11) notes: "[UniDiff] is very powerful to detect a dominant trend in the data, but it may be also rather crude to accurately describe the change that has occurred."

References (see separate file)

Figures & Tables (See separate file)

Appendices (see separate file)

Appendix 1: Data Sources

Appendix 2: Survey Harmonization

Appendix 3: Vallet's 12 models

Appendix 4: Hertel's simulations