

The importance of social class in explaining the educational attainments of minority ethnic pupils in Britain: evidence from the Youth Cohort Study

Catherine ROTHON, University of Oxford

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1 Introduction

The association between social class and educational attainment has been extensively documented (see for example Floud et al. 1956, Halsey et al. 1980, Blackburn and Marsh 1991, Shavit and Blossfeld 1991, Jonsson and Mills 1993a, 1993b, Savage and Egerton 1997, Heath 2000). How the effect of social class varies by ethnicity is less clear. Minority ethnic groups are heavily concentrated towards the bottom of the class structure; it might therefore be expected that many of the inequalities in performance can be explained by the differential distributions of the major ethnic groups across the occupational framework. However, as previous research has shown, Indians evince a higher performance than whites at GCSE (Demack et al. 2000, Owen et al. 2000) despite the fact that they are more heavily weighted at the lower end of the class structure. It might be expected then that some groups do well *despite* their comparatively lower class position; for other groups social class may provide a good deal of the explanation for poor attainment levels relative to whites.

No British work on minority ethnic educational attainment to date has been able to control adequately for social background. Drew and Gray (1990) and Drew (1995) used the Youth Cohort Study (YCS) to analyse attainment at GCSE and broke down ethnic groups by social class. However, although their sample contained 14,430 respondents, the minority ethnic contingent was relatively small. When social class was taken into consideration, there were only 12 Black/African/Caribbeans in the professional group and 17 Asians. Demack et al's (2000) analysis suffered from similar limitations; when social class was included in the analysis, the groups become extremely small. Owen et al. (2000) faced equivalent problems. In Haque and Bell's (2001) paper the social class control is fairly crude, differentiating only between manual, non-manual, unemployed and other. A more sophisticated class schema might have accounted for a greater proportion of the effect of ethnicity.

The number of respondents in a combined dataset of the Youth Cohort Study surveys from 1991 to 2000 introduces the possibility of meaningful analysis of the effects of social class and parental education on ethnic differences in educational attainment. It will not only provide a descriptive contribution, but will also formally test for these effects; of the studies mentioned above, only Haque and Bell's work has attempted this.

2 Data

2.1 *The Youth Cohort Study*

The analysis reported here uses the *Youth Cohort Study of England and Wales* (Courtenay 1996a, 1996b, 2000, Finch et al. 2002, 2004, Fitzgerald and Finch 2004). This study aims to monitor the behaviour and decisions of representative samples of people aged sixteen and above as they move from compulsory education to further or higher education or the labour market. The main aim of the Study is to examine and explain the factors that influence post-16 transitions. The Youth Cohort Study (YCS) samples young people who reach the minimum school leaving age in the year before the first sweep of the survey. To date the YCS covers ten cohorts and over twenty

surveys. The first survey was carried out in 1985 and the most recent in 2004.¹ Until 1992 the study was carried out every year; it is now carried out every other year. The questionnaires have aimed to be broadly comparable, but external changes and shifts in policy interest have necessitated some revisions over time. The research reported here will utilise Cohorts 5 to 10 (1991-2000).

2.2 *Number of respondents*

The total number of respondents in the combined dataset is 101,713. The use of this dataset represents a considerable advance on previous work due to its size. This enables detailed analysis by gender, ethnicity and social class. In most of the work to date, researchers have encountered difficulties in doing this because cell counts became so small once the sample was broken down by gender and social class.

2.3 *Variables of interest*

The key variables used in this paper are as follows:

Gender	Male or female.
Year	1991 (Cohort 5), 1992 (Cohort 6), 1994 (Cohort 7), 1996 (Cohort 8), 1998 (Cohort 9), 2000 (Cohort 10).
GCSE results	The main benchmark that will be used to measure “success” at GCSE is the attainment of 5 or more GCSEs at grades A*-C. This is the most common measure of achievement, utilised by schools and policy makers. This measure is available as a recoded binary variable for all years of the YCS.
Ethnicity	Cohorts 5 to 10 of the YCS all have slightly different coding for the ethnicity variable. Ideally, the black group (comprising Afro-Caribbeans, black Africans and “other” blacks) would be divided into its three constituent parts; previous research has found important differences between these groups (see for example Heath and McMahon 1997). Unfortunately in the earlier survey years the variable does not take this form. It is possible to retain the Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups initially as two separate categories due to the large N created by merging the data for several survey years. ²
Social class	The class schema used takes into account both mother’s and father’s social class. This is based on the official NS-SEC class schema. Cohort 10 of the YCS provided the NS-SEC as a variable but for Cohorts 5-9 NS-SEC had to be recoded from SOC90.

¹ The most recent data that has been released is that for 2000.

² See Table A1 in the appendix for full details of the coding of the ethnicity variable

3 Measuring the social class position of minority ethnic pupils

3.1 Background

Much of the sociological analysis of Britain's class structure has focused upon the economic role of the male as the primary determinant of the social class position of the family or household. Bonney (1988) argued that the conventional approach has in part evolved from considerations of practical suitability in terms of both theoretical interpretation and empirical investigation. In terms of theory, an assumption that the economic position of the husband-father is the major determinant of the class position of the household has made theoretical analysis more manageable. As far as empirical investigation is concerned, such an assumption has simplified the analysis of large bodies of data. It has also been argued that the conventional approach could be defended not only in terms of practical expediency, but also on the basis that it reflects the realities of the class position of the family unit (Goldthorpe 1980, 1983). According to this view married women are required by conventional norms to take the major responsibility for domestic matters in the shape of maintaining the household and looking after children. Because of this, women's opportunities and prospects are restricted and they are thus forced into a position of economic dependence on their male partner.

A number of alternative approaches to class have been mooted in response to the limitations of the conventional model. One of the most popular of these has been the "dominance" method where one spouse "whose labour-market participation may be regarded as dominant" outranks the other within a nuclear family; families or households are regarded as the unit of class analysis (Goldthorpe 1987). Erikson (1984) tested a number of approaches to class and found the dominance approach to be helpful in assigning a family a "market situation".³

With reference to the educational attainment of minority ethnic pupils, a class schema that takes into account the economic roles of both men and women may have particular utility due to the variation in male and female roles by ethnicity. It is especially important in the case of Afro-Caribbeans, where a large proportion of households are headed by a single mother; the father's class is likely to have less of an impact on the achievement of a pupil if he is not present in the household. For South Asian families where both parents are usually present, and where the father is the sole earner in the majority of cases, the traditional schema may work adequately.

3.2 The schema used here

This paper uses a social class schema that takes into consideration the social class of father and mother simultaneously.⁴ This is based on the NS-SEC classification of social class:

The categories for the schema are as follows:

³ This is distinct from the "work situation" which relates to the way in which production is organised.

⁴ A similar schema was proposed by Britten and Heath (1983).

- 1.1 Large employers/higher managerial occupations
- 1.2 Higher professional occupations
- 2 Lower managerial and professional occupations
- 3 Intermediate occupations
- 4 Small employers and own account workers
- 5 Lower supervisory and technical occupations
- 6 Semi-routine occupations
- 7 Routine occupations

For the purposes of this paper it was necessary to combine NS-SEC classes 1.1 and 1.2 to achieve a realistic N. Both groups are at the top end of the class schema and enjoy similarly privileged employment conditions. NS-SEC classes 2 and 3 are also combined. This seemed logical since both groups do not include management above the junior or middle manager level. The majority of their number is supervised. For example, class 2 contains social workers, teachers and production and planning engineers, while class 3 includes constables and junior prison officers. At the lower end of the schema classes 4, 5, 6 and 7 are combined. This is consistent with the performance indicators used by the Higher Education Statistics Agency, where classes 4, 5, 6 and 7 are combined to give a benchmark for accomplishment (Higher Education Funding Council 2004). Analysis of the effect of having a “missing” parent on educational attainment reveals that it results in a similar level of attainment as having a parent in class 7, hence the grouping of the “missing” category with classes 4, 5, 6 and 7.⁵

The table below outlines the coding of the variable used here:

Derivation from NS-SEC	
A	Both parents NS-SEC classes 1.1/1.2 OR one parent NS-SEC classes 1.1/1.2 and one parent NS-SEC classes 2/3
B	Both parents NS-SEC classes 2/3
C	One parent NS-SEC classes 1.1/1.2, one parent NS-SEC classes 4/5/6/7 or missing
D	One parent NS-SEC classes 2/3, one parent NS-SEC classes 4/5/6/7 or missing
E	Both parents NS-SEC classes 4/5/6/7 or missing

Table 1 Derivation of modified class structure from NS-SEC

An alternative to this would have been to enter father and mother’s social class into the regression models separately. It is argued here, however, that the combined variables approach is preferable. As well as making theoretical sense with reference to the measurement of the social class of minority ethnic students, the schema has the advantage of relative parsimony. By its nature, it accounts for interactions, which results in any statistical analysis being more economical. Additionally, it limits the problem of co-linearity. The two variables of the male and female partner’s occupation are often related to each other, in that couples frequently partner someone with whom they are matched occupationally. This makes it difficult to distinguish the separate effects of these explanatory variables on the response variable. Finally, that

⁵ See Table A4 in appendix

fact that for most children immediate family is their key reference point; it would seem logical that this should be the basic unit of class analysis.⁶

3.3 Missing data

It should be noted that missing data has been taken into consideration when constructing the schema. The question asked in the Youth Cohort Study as regards parental occupation is as follows:

What are your parents' (or stepparents') current jobs (or if they are not employed what were their most recent jobs)?

Rather than being given a multiple choice style answer scheme, with a “don’t know” category, respondents were asked to simply write in the job title of their father/stepfather and mother/stepmother. This has resulted in the presence of a significant amount of missing data that is impossible to categorise into meaningful groups such as “has never worked”, “don’t know” and “not answered”. As shown below, the degree of data missing varies by ethnicity.

	White	Black	Indian	Pakistani	Bangla.	Other	χ^2	p
Father missing	17	47	24	44	58	27	3215.45	<.001
Mother missing	25	36	37	81	88	38	4635.08	<.001

Table 2 Percentage of missing data on occupation by ethnic group and gender 1991-2000

Source: Youth Cohort Study 1991-2000: combined dataset

As the table shows, there is a large amount of data absent, with a great deal of discrepancy in item non-response across the ethnic groups. Large amounts of data are missing for Pakistani and Bangladeshi mothers in particular, as well as black and Bangladeshi fathers.

There are a number of possible explanations for the variation:

1. *The respondent's parent has never worked.* This explanation may be of particular relevance in the case of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis where a large proportion of mothers do not work (Office for National Statistics 2004).
2. *The respondent does not know the parent's occupation because the parent does not live with them.* This may be particularly the case with black respondents; over 40 per cent of black families are headed by a single parent. In most cases, the missing partner is the male (Office for National Statistics 2002).
3. *The respondent is reluctant to disclose low status parental occupations.* Analysis using the Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities (FNSEM) revealed that all minority ethnic groups have a higher proportion of workers that

⁶ The explanatory power of the father's class, dominance and combined variables schema were tested using binary logistic regression models. Details of this can be found in Tables A2 and A3 in the appendix.

fall into the semi-skilled and unskilled manual classes than whites (Modood 1997).

4. *The question has not been answered for other reasons.* It is possible that in the case of some respondents, a lack of familiarity with either parent's occupation resulted in their failure to respond to the question. Alternatively, they may not have answered the item because of a failure to comprehend the question. Finally, there is the question of the motivation of the child to fill in the questionnaire in the first place.

Many researchers have chosen to exclude cases for which data is missing when carrying out their analysis. However, having looked in detail at the extent to which missing data varies by gender and ethnicity, it is clear that excluding cases in this way would result in a serious selection bias problem. Looking at the possible reasons for missing data confirms this; the pattern is systematic rather than random.

Multiple imputation would have been an alternative approach. However, as discussed above, data on occupation may be missing for very different reasons depending on ethnic group. In addition, there are very few relevant variables available from which to impute the missing values.

4 Performance at GCSE

4.1 *The General Certificate of Secondary Education*

General Certificate of Secondary Education examinations (GCSEs) now form the first important "branching point" at the end of compulsory education, taken at age 16. These replaced the old O level and CSE examinations. Taking GCSE examinations is not obligatory, although schools enter the majority of their pupils for them. It is therefore possible to analyse the attainments of almost the entire ability range of a cohort through looking at GCSE results. Under the National Curriculum, all students cover a similar range of subjects. All pupils study the "core" subjects of English, mathematics, science, technology, religious education and physical education (although they may not take examinations in all of these). They can take a number of additional options including humanities subjects, modern languages and creative and artistic subjects. Typically, students study 8 or 9 subjects. These are assessed partly by examination and partly by coursework. Pass grades range from G to A*, but measures of attainment by school are usually measured by the number of pupils who attain 5 or more A*-C grades. This benchmark largely reflects its past use as a means of entry to the professions and higher education, where the possession of 5 or more higher grades has usually been the cut-off point for acceptance (see Drew et al. 1992).

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4.2 *Performance at GCSE by ethnicity and gender*

To begin with, the overall attainment levels of pupils between 1991 and 2000 are examined, with a breakdown by gender and ethnicity. It is important to bear in mind that the achievements of some minority ethnic groups may be underestimated here due to the absence of GNVQ examination results in the data; some groups of minority

ethnic students are more likely to study for vocational qualifications than whites (Connor et al. 2003).⁷

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	White	Black	Indian	Pakistani	Bangladeshi	Total
Male	51	34	57	33	29	50
Female	56	40	58	36	35	56
Valid N	90421	1694	2518	1707	747	99201

Table 3 Respondents gaining 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE
Source: Combined YCS 1991-2000

In examining performance by ethnicity, there is a clear hierarchy of achievement. Table 3 indicates that males Indians outperform whites by some margin, while blacks, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis display a lower percentage gaining 5 or more A*-C grades than whites. Blacks, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are at the bottom end of the attainment spectrum. Bangladeshis exhibit the lowest level of performance. These findings replicate a great deal of the previous literature on minority ethnic educational attainment (Drew and Gray 1990, Drew 1995, Demack et al. 2000, Owen et al. 2000, Demie 2001, Haque and Bell 2001).

A significant gender differential is apparent. Indeed, a distinctive feature of the pattern of results over the last decade and a half has been the “gender gap” in attainment. From the late 1980s, a pattern emerged whereby girls outperformed boys at GCSE level; this has been sustained ever since (Arnot et al. 1998). The trend has been greatly publicised in the media and has not generally led to a resounding acknowledgement of girls’ achievements. Most frequently, it has led to a panic about boys being “in terminal decline” (Judd 1994), “lost” (Gold 1995, *The Independent* 1998), “lapped by girls” (Williams 1995) and “the failing sex” (Kingston 1996). Chris Woodhead (1996) asserted that the “failure” of boys was “one of the most disturbing problems that we face in the whole education system”. He proposed challenging vocational courses to motivate pupils (“in particular boys”) and the need for schools to have appropriate courses for girls (“and above all boys”).

The table indicates a varying effect of gender depending on the ethnic group in question. Although in all groups girls outperform boys; the gap between the genders is smallest for the Indian group at 1 percentage point and largest for blacks and Bangladeshis at 6 percentage points. With the exception of Pakistani girls, the performance of minority ethnic girls is closer to that of their white counterparts. The formal analysis will take account of this by carrying out separate regression analyses for males and females.

⁷ It is not made clear for which ethnic groups this is the case but it is suggested here that those groups containing the largest proportion of working class students will enrol in GNVQ courses in the highest numbers. The groups in question would be blacks, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis.

4.3 GCSE performance and social class

The location of ethnic groups within the modified class schema is tabulated below.

	White	Black	Indian	Pakistani/ Bangladeshi
A	10	6	7	1
B	14	10	13	3
C	7	4	7	3
D	28	29	20	13
E	42	52	53	81
ID	0	10	11	39
N	91447	1711	2529	2489

$$\chi^2 = 1785.65, p .000$$

Table 4 Percentage of ethnic groups occupying each social class: collapsed class schema

Source: Youth Cohort Study 1991-2000: combined dataset

4.4 Minority ethnic attainment by social class

The analysis that follows uses the benchmark of attaining 5 or more A*-C grades as the outcome measure. Table 5 summarises the attainments of ethnic groups in Britain by social class. One striking feature is that in almost all class categories perform above the average for any given class. The only exception is in Class B where 73 per cent of Indians attain 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE, but this is only 1 percentage point below the average. Both blacks and the Pakistani/Bangladeshi group appear to perform badly regardless of class. This low performance is generally more marked in the case of blacks; in all classes their distance from the average is greater than that of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis.

	White	Black	Indian	Pakistani/ Bangladeshi	Total
A	84 (0)	73 (-11)	93 (+9)	80 (-4)	84
B	74 (0)	61 (-13)	73 (-1)	62 (-12)	74
C	71 (0)	65 (-6)	83 (+12)	68 (-3)	71
D	57 (0)	41 (-16)	67 (+10)	55 (-2)	57
E	33 (0)	25 (-8)	41 (+8)	27 (-6)	33

Table 5 Percentage gaining 5 or more A-C grades by ethnicity and parental social class*

Source: Youth Cohort Study 1991-2000: combined dataset⁸

The table below shows the differences in the percentages gaining 5 or more A*-C grades between social class groupings. It is arresting how similar the distances are for each ethnic group, with the smallest distance between classes B and C, and the largest

⁸ Percentage point difference from average is in parentheses, Ns smaller than 50 italicised. For Ns see Table A5 in appendix

differences between classes C and D and D and E. In other words, although the size of the class effect is not identical for all ethnicities, being in a given class grouping does appear to have a similar impact for each group.

	White	Black	Indian	Pakistani/ Bangladeshi	Total
A-B	10	12	20	-	10
B-C	3	4	10	6	3
C-D	14	24	16	13	14
D-E	24	16	26	28	24

Table 6 Percentage differences between social classes (gaining 5 or more A-C grades) by ethnicity and parental social class*
Source: Youth Cohort Study 1991-2000: combined dataset⁹

The possibility that the social class measure does not accurately represent the “true” background of some minority ethnic groups must be borne in mind. Many minority ethnic immigrants of the first generation evinced a movement towards the lower end of the social class spectrum after arriving in Britain. This was in large part to a refusal of many British employers to recognise qualifications gained and skills learnt abroad as well as a lack of work experience on the British labour market. It is also likely that discrimination had a role.

This issue is particularly pertinent in the case of Indians, most of whom came from urbanised backgrounds where they could be found in relatively skilled jobs.¹⁰ This raises the possibility that the social class measure used here is not entirely appropriate for the Indian group. If a measure of occupation before migration were to be used, it is possible that the ethnicity co-efficient would not increase for the Indian group, negating the conclusion that Indians do even better once social class is taken into account. This argument accords with Breen and Goldthorpe’s (1997) concept of “risk aversion” whereby young people evince the desire to achieve at least the occupational level of their parents. In terms of aspirations Indian students may refer to their parents’ social class in the country of origin rather than their social class as measured by their current occupational level in Britain. This caveat must be borne in mind in the interpretation of the results discussed below. However, if class is defined by the “relations of production” (Goldthorpe 1981, Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992) the schema used here is less problematic.

One possibility would have been to use parental educational attainment as a benchmark instead of social class. This is not without its problems, however. Like social class, the level of parental education can be underestimated in datasets because foreign qualifications do not fit well into the pre-determined categories present in the survey. This is particularly problematic in the case of “A levels” for which there may be no obvious equivalent. The survey questions asked are simply whether the respondent’s father and mother have attained a) A levels and b) a degree. As a middle level of educational attainment this is highly inappropriate for parents with qualifications from abroad.

⁹ Ns smaller than 50 not included in table

¹⁰ [By contrast, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis were predominantly from rural areas.](#)

There is also the question of what constitutes “highly educated” in the country of origin. In some developing countries simply being literate may be seen as having a high level of education relative to the rest of the population. In Britain a high level of literacy is taken for granted; to be described as “highly educated” would normally require the possession of an educational qualification above secondary school level.

4.5 *Testing social class as an explanatory variable*

Three models are used to formally test the effect of social class on the educational attainment of the ethnic groups in question. The first of these includes variables for year and ethnicity only. The second adds social class and the final model tests for interactions.

Model 1 for both males and females indicates an increase in performance in GCSE results between 1991 and 2000. Indeed, one of the key features of GCSE examinations since their inception has been the rate of improvement in the number of pupils gaining 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE. The issue has been particularly prominent in the media, where the majority of articles relating to examination results in 2002 concerned “falling standards” and “record pass rates” (Warmington and Murphy 2003). Data from the YCS indicates that the percentage of students reaching the 5 or more A*-C grades benchmark rose from 45 per cent in 1991 to 64 per cent in 2000. This improvement is also evident in the official figures (Department for Education and Skills 2004).¹¹

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Carrying out a loglinear logit analysis on the data with year as a continuous variable indicates that, for the majority of ethnic groups, a linear trend in improving results is not evident. Rather, the attainments of most ethnic groups exhibit a somewhat bumpy ride over the time period. The only ethnic group for which there is a significant parameter estimate, and therefore a linear improvement in performance, is the Indian one. The other groups cannot be said to be catching up with or overtaking whites.

The ethnicity coefficients confirm the earlier finding that there is a significant attainment hierarchy, with Indians doing particularly well compared to whites and blacks and Pakistanis and Bangladeshis performing at a lower level. This is the case for both boys and girls, although female Indians evince a smaller advantage and Pakistani and Bangladeshi females a greater disadvantage relative to their male counterparts.

¹¹ The figures indicate a somewhat inconsistent trend upwards, with a noticeable dip in 1998. This may be due to the number of students taking General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) rather than GCSEs. 1998 saw the number of students entered for GNVQs almost double which again resulted in fewer pupils being entered for GCSE examinations (The British Council 1998).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	β	β	β
Year (1991)	0	0	0
1994	0.23 (0.03)***	0.25 (0.04)***	0.25 (0.04)***
1996	0.50 (0.03)***	0.50 (0.04)***	0.50 (0.04)***
1998	0.42 (0.04)***	0.43 (0.04)***	0.43 (0.04)***
2000	0.67 (0.04)***	0.73 (0.04)***	0.73 (0.04)***
Ethnicity (White)	0	0	0
Black	-0.84 (0.10)***	-0.71 (0.10)***	-0.50 (0.39)
Indian	0.20 (0.07)**	0.38 (0.07)***	0.73 (0.40)
Pakistani/Bangla	-0.88 (0.07)***	-0.30 (0.07)***	-0.03 (0.79)
Class (A)		0	0
B		-0.62 (0.06)***	-0.60 (0.06)***
C		-0.70 (0.07)***	-0.73 (0.07)***
D		-1.38 (0.05)***	-1.38 (0.05)***
E		-2.32 (0.05)***	-2.32 (0.05)***
Class A*black			
B*black			-0.51(0.49)
C*black			0.76 (0.64)
D*black			-0.46 (0.43)
E*black			-0.12 (0.42)
Class A*Indian			
B* Indian			-0.87 (0.45)
C* Indian			-0.12 (0.51)
D* Indian			-0.34 (0.43)
E* Indian			-0.31 (0.41)
Class A*P/B			
B* P/B			-0.21 (0.90)
C* P/B			1.30 (1.00)
D* P/B			-0.30 (0.81)
E* P/B			-0.32 (0.79)
Constant	-0.22 (0.03)	1.25 (0.05)	1.25 (0.05)
χ^2	690.87	5453.70	5483.81
P	.000	.000	.000
N	34660	34660	34660

Table 7 Logistic regression of pupils attaining 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE with year, ethnicity and social class as explanatory variables: males
Source: Youth Cohort Study 1991-2000: combined dataset

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	β	β	β
Year (1991)	0	0	0
1994	0.31 (0.03)***	0.31 (0.03)***	0.31 (0.03)***
1996	0.61 (0.03)***	0.60 (0.04)***	0.60 (0.04)***
1998	0.56 (0.03)***	0.58 (0.04)***	0.58 (0.04)***
2000	0.91 (0.04)***	0.94 (0.04)***	0.94 (0.04)***
Ethnicity (White)	0	0	0
Black	-0.80 (0.08)***	-0.62 (0.08)***	-0.89 (0.41)*
Indian	0.06 (0.07)	0.28 (0.07)***	1.41 (0.72)*
Pakistani/Bangla	-0.96 (0.07)***	-0.38 (0.07)***	0.01 (1.09)
Class (A)		0	0
B		-0.71 (0.06)***	-0.69 (0.06)***
C		-0.91 (0.07)***	-0.91 (0.07)***
D		-1.47 (0.05)***	-1.46 (0.06)***
E		-2.49 (0.05)***	-2.48 (0.05)***
Class A*black			
B*black			0.18 (0.50)
C*black			0.51 (0.58)
D*black			0.14 (0.43)
E*black			0.39 (0.43)
Class A*Indian			
B* Indian			-1.34 (0.75)
C* Indian			-1.07 (0.80)
D* Indian			-1.04 (0.74)
E* Indian			-1.16 (0.73)
Class A*P/B			
B* P/B			-0.45 (1.19)
C* P/B			-0.96 (1.16)
D* P/B			-0.24 (1.10)
E* P/B			-0.40 (1.09)
Constant	-0.10(0.02)	1.56 (0.05)	1.56 (0.06)
χ^2	1152.99	6809.20	6823.34
p	.000	.000	.000
N	40429	40429	40429

Table 8 Logistic regression of pupils attaining 5 or more A-C grades at GCSE with year, ethnicity and social class as explanatory variables: females
Source: Youth Cohort Study 1991-2000: combined dataset*

Model 2 introduces social class as a variable of interest. The chi-squared figures for both males and females in model 2 indicate a significant improvement in model fit. The highly significant coefficients and the increasing distance from those with professional and managerial parents as one goes down the class structure reveals what is expected: social class greatly influences educational attainment. It is worth noting that the coefficients for social class are far larger than those for ethnicity.

The effect of the introduction of social class on the ethnicity coefficient for each ethnic group varies significantly. Once the lower social class of the Indian group is taken into account, it appears that their performance is even more impressive. For Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, their relatively low social class backgrounds explain much of the differential in attainment. The coefficient decreases by almost two-thirds. This is to be expected as their class distribution is the most different from the white one (see Table 4). For blacks, and black males in particular, social class is less powerful as an explanatory variable; there are clearly other factors that merit consideration.

None of the social class*ethnicity interactions in model 3 are significant. This confirms the point made earlier; the effect of social class is of a similar magnitude for all ethnic groups. The chi-squared figure increases only slightly, and the model uses up an additional degree of freedom, suggesting that the interactions should be dropped in further models.

5 Concluding remarks

This paper has examined the effects of social class background on ethnic patterns of attainment in detail. Very few studies have taken these factors into consideration at all, and those that have done have rarely formally tested for them. Attempts to interrogate these determinants of attainment have mainly been hampered by the small numbers of ethnic minorities in nationally representative datasets in Britain. For the first time, combining 6 Youth Cohort Study surveys and creating an N of over 100,000 respondents has solved this problem.

The class distribution of the main minority ethnic groups in Britain is very different to that exhibited by whites. Whites dominate the higher echelons of the class structure. Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are almost twice as likely to be in the manual classes than any other group. Since GCSE performance is so stratified by class, it is not surprising that, for the Pakistani/Bangladeshi group, a great deal of their poor performance is explained by their position in the class structure.

The performance of Indians might be seen to be even more impressive once social class is taken into account. Despite being employed in the most prestigious occupations to a lesser degree than the white majority, their performance is high. The addition of parental education as an explanatory variable appears to further emphasise the superiority of their performance despite the fact that their typical social background (as measured by the data here) is less privileged than that of whites. However, it must be remembered that the social class allocation of Indians in the YCS might be inaccurate, with highly skilled Indians not being recognised as such because of the disjuncture between occupation in country of origin and their employment on arriving in Britain.

Blacks also exhibit an internal class structure that is different from that of whites; their numbers are more heavily loaded towards the manual classes and are less dominant at the top of the class structure. One would not expect the effect of class to be as large as that for Pakistanis and Bangladeshis since their distribution is not as heavily weighted towards the bottom of the class schema. Nevertheless, it might be

expected to form an important part of the explanation for the poor performance of this group. However, adding social class as an explanatory variable does little to explain why blacks are so much less likely to attain 5 or more A*-C GCSE grades than whites. The distance from whites that remains after controlling for this factor is significantly larger for boys than it is for girls.

The absence of any significant interaction effects for the four major minority ethnic groups seems important. It suggests that class operates in the same way for blacks, Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis as for whites. Blacks do worse at every level of the class structure than whites and at every class level Indians do better. This is a key point as it raises the possibility that other processes that are known to apply to British whites also apply to minority ethnic groups. Since they are more likely to be from working class backgrounds than whites, it is likely that any social class “disadvantage” will result in each group having a lower overall level of attainment than whites.

One group of theories that may be of importance in this context are those of “social reproduction”. According to conflict theories of social reproduction, powerful groups shape the school system to suit their own interests at the expense of the powerless. If this line of reasoning is extended to minority ethnic groups, one would infer that their children are likely to underachieve at school because their parents are often not in a position to exert a great deal of power. Moreover, if immigrants arrive without much financial capital and without educational credentials that will have currency in the country to which they migrate, their children may also be vulnerable on account of low social class.

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The notion of the transmission of “cultural capital” is one example of an influential social reproduction argument. The concept of cultural capital in relation to education has been primarily associated with the work of Bourdieu (1977a, 1977b) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1977). Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argued that middle class parents are able to endow their children with various linguistic and cultural competencies that are vital to success in school. These competencies may be acquired in many ways, for example through the availability of suitable books in the household, visits to museums and visits to art galleries. Such advantages are likely to be more accessible to middle class children than to working class children. Bourdieu and Passeron’s view was that children develop a deeply ingrained, largely unconscious orientation (*habitus*) that shapes their tastes. Although Bourdieu acknowledged that people do pick up new cultural baggage, he argued that they only enjoy consuming culture that fits with their *habitus*. They may learn new things but they are learning the same kinds of things, so their cultural capital stays the same. Schools contribute to the reproduction of inequality by devising a curriculum that rewards the cultural capital of the dominant classes, and systematically devalues that of the lower classes. Schools fail to teach these competencies to other pupils. By this line of reasoning, it would seem that the further one’s origin is from a country’s cultural elite, the slighter are one’s chances of doing well at school.

A lack of connection with the school due to cultural and linguistic differences may also lead to an inability to view teachers and other adults at the school as positive role models; their *habitus* may be too distant from that of a working class child. For minority ethnic children, the paucity of co-ethnic adults in educational institutions

might compound this. Some researchers have suggested that this is a major factor in explaining the low attainment of some ethnic groups. Mac an Ghaill (1991), for example, has pointed to the conspicuous success of black voluntary schools. These are private schools, but are often linked to the state sector through funding from Local Educational Authorities or Community Relations Councils. The teachers are black and the schools are closely linked to the communities that they serve. Parents are encouraged to take an active role in the running of the school. Specifically black material is incorporated into the curriculum.¹² These characteristics lead to more positive engagement with school on the part of black children and to higher educational attainment.

Residential patterns may also have an important impact on attainment levels. Greater levels of contact with disenchanted majority working class youth can lead to negative engagement with school and poorer levels of attainment for all groups, including whites (see Portes and Zhou 2001 [1993] for a specifically minority ethnic framework). Afro-Caribbeans tend to have the lowest levels of residential segregation of the major minority ethnic groups and therefore a greater level of contact with disillusioned majority youth. Bangladeshis evince the highest level, followed by Pakistanis, then Indians (Peach 1996, 1998, Johnston et al. 2002). It has been suggested, for example, that the amount of intra-ethnic contact children experience has a direct impact on their life-chances (Borjas 1995). Whether this has a positive or negative effect depends on the average human capital and density of their ethnic group in their neighbourhood. Once again, therefore, the adults present in the neighbourhood are key. Wilson (1987) posited that the absence of middle class blacks in American ghettos deprived neighbourhoods of role models and leaders and contributed to creating an ethnic “underclass”. Given the enormity, as well as the variation, of residential segregation and neighbourhood structure within Britain, this approach has the potential to contribute significantly to developing such (largely untested) theories into a general explanatory framework.

The greater propensity of minority ethnic students to be from working class backgrounds also means that they are more likely to attend schools in poorer areas. It has been argued that this has been exacerbated by government policies that have been designed to introduce market processes into education. Although in theory this system allows *all* parents to make choices, it is the middle classes who have learnt how to play the market to their advantage due to their greater knowledge and interest (Walford 1996, Ball 2003, see also Kristen 2004, Modood 2005). For Bangladeshis and Pakistanis in particular, who represent the poorest groups and are more residentially segregated, this may be particularly important (Peach 1996, 1998, Johnston et al. 2002). They are likely to live in the very poorest areas; a direct comparison with the white working class may not be appropriate in terms of living conditions and the poverty of the community.

Sullivan and Heath (2003) used linear regression to look at the number of O level and CSE passes obtained. The coefficient for neighbourhood effects such as those described above is -0.20 (the coefficient is for the percentage of non-manual workers in the area). This is a strong negative effect. Taking account of this would be expected to reduce the differential between whites and the poorest, most highly residentially

¹² [This is linked to the earlier discussion of institutional racism](#)

segregated groups such as Pakistanis and Bangladeshis and to a slightly lesser extent blacks.

Qualitative work has suggested that discrimination is also a potentially important factor. A number of studies have accounted for the disadvantage that some minority ethnic groups suffer in educational terms by teacher racism. Mac an Ghaill (1988, 1989, 1993) carried out a detailed study on this subject and concluded that “racism was prevalent throughout the white staff” (Mac an Ghaill 1988: 61). Wright (1986, 1987, 1993) focused on the interaction between teachers and Afro-Caribbean students. This was often characterised by confrontation and conflict. She found that Afro-Caribbean students were placed in academic bands and examination sets that did not reflect their ability. This is backed up by Eggleston et al.’s (1986) finding that children from minority ethnic backgrounds were more likely to be placed on courses below those which might better suit their abilities and ambitions. Wright’s (1986) study described a situation where it was “not uncommon” for teachers to blame black pupils for a perceived decline in standards of achievement (Wright 1986: 130).¹³

The possibility that there are features of the British educational system that unintentionally discriminate against minority ethnic students is also an important point to consider. Because it is not a calculated act, it is very difficult to detect. The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry identified institutional racism as a major factor disadvantaging some minority ethnic groups (MacPherson 1999). The Commission for Racial Equality defines it as “organisational structures, policies and practices which result in ethnic minorities being treated unfairly and less equally, often without intent or knowledge”. In this context, Troyna’s (1992) claim that inflexible setting policies (based on results from primary schools) work against minority ethnic groups since they tend to make greater progress than whites at secondary schools is highly plausible. Restrictions in terms of subject choices may also be relevant, for example with reference to the lack of availability of non-European modern languages in many schools.

Whilst the factors outlined above have the potential to explain at least some of the remaining minority ethnic “disadvantage” in attainment, there is still some uncertainty about the causes of apparent Indian exceptionalism. One can only be speculative as to the causes of this phenomenon. As discussed earlier, one possibility is that the social class measure used does not accurately represent the “true” background of the Indian group, most of whom came from urbanised backgrounds where they could be found in relatively skilled jobs.

Parental expectations may be a factor. Modood (1997b) points to the motivational drive for self-improvement that some ethnic minorities have for themselves and their children. Inglehart’s (1981, 1997) theory of post-materialism may have relevance here. The majority of the white British children in the YCS 1991-2000 will have been born to the “baby boomers” that grew up in a period of relative affluence following

¹³ There has been some criticism of ethnographic studies such as those cited here. It has been argued that much of the work alleging racist attitudes is filtered through a process of selective interpretation based on the preconceived assumption that schools are racist. There is also a methodological weakness in many of the studies which allege teacher racism in allocating students to lower ability sets at school and in making decisions to exclude pupils: they fail to control for pupils’ prior attainment and behaviour. Without doing this, it is impossible to ascertain whether any discrimination has taken place.

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Throughout the thesis, it has been shown that Indians perform at a higher base level than any of the other major minority ethnic groups. They alone show improvement relative to the overall increase in the numbers attaining 5 or more A*-C grades between 1991 and 2000. When social class and parental education are taken into account, they perform at an even higher level relative to whites. ¶

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the Second World War. Such parents are argued to have post-materialist values ie. to value goals other than upward mobility through material gain (such as self-actualisation). Indian parents born in the same era may have very different priorities for their children. Less affluent than whites in relative terms, they develop materialist values that place emphasis on the social mobility of their family. As a result of this, they view the academic achievement of their children as a concern of the utmost importance.

Research has tended to focus on the “underachievement” of black boys; it is suggested here that a focus on Indian “overachievement” might also contribute to a better understanding of some of the processes of ethnicity and school attainment. The impact of the occupation held by parents prior to migration is one area in which research is lacking in this context. A number of other possibilities have been outlined above, but their significance has not yet been empirically tested. This could provide a promising direction for future research.

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Appendix

Year	Ethnic groupings in the Youth Cohort Study	Recoded ethnic groupings
1991	White Black Indian Pakistani Bangladeshi Chinese Other Asian	White Black Indian Pakistani Bangladeshi Other
1992, 1994	White Black Indian Pakistani Bangladeshi Chinese Other Asian Other	White Black Indian Pakistani Bangladeshi Other
1996	White Black Caribbean Black African Other Black Asian Indian Pakistani Bangladeshi Chinese Other Asian	White Black Indian Pakistani Bangladeshi Other
1998, 2000	White Black Caribbean Black African Other Black Indian Pakistani Bangladeshi Chinese Other Asian Any Other	White Black Indian Pakistani Bangladeshi Other

Table A1 Recoding of the YCS ethnicity variables

Which class schema?

Logistic regression techniques are employed to look at the fit of the model when each of the class schemas is used. In order to compare the schemas, it is necessary to create a variable which is coded into 5 classes for each. It must be noted that this is not a *formal* comparison, as the models are not nested. However, the degrees of freedom are the same and for the dominance and father's class methods, identical categories are used. Bearing any caveats in mind, an informal comparison is therefore possible.

As can be seen from the chi-squared figures in the table below, the fit of the model for males improves when the class position of both parents is taken into account. The improvement in fit from the traditional “father’s class only” schema when the dominance method is used is 530.14; when the combined class schema is utilised the improvement from the initial model is 911.51. The fact that the direction of the coefficients and their hierarchy for all variables is the same is encouraging and suggests that the combined class schema is able to replicate the results found when using tried and tested traditional schemas, but with a better fit.

	Father’s class	Dominance method	Combined class schema
	β	β	β
Year (1991)	0	0	0
1994	0.26 (0.04)***	0.25 (0.04)***	0.25 (0.04)***
1996	0.55 (0.04)***	0.52 (0.04)***	0.50 (0.04)***
1998	0.47 (0.04)***	0.44 (0.04)***	0.43 (0.04)***
2000	0.74 (0.04)***	0.71 (0.04)***	0.73 (0.04)***
Ethnicity (White)	0	0	0
Black	-0.59 (0.10)***	-0.68 (0.10)***	-0.71 (0.10)***
Indian	0.28 (0.07)***	0.41 (0.07)***	0.38 (0.07)***
Pakistani/Bangla	-0.51 (0.07)***	-0.24 (0.08)***	-0.30 (0.07)***
Other	0.31 (0.08)***	0.39 (0.08)***	0.32 (0.08)***
Class (A) ¹⁴	0	0	0
B	-0.49 (0.04)***	-0.81 (0.04)***	-0.62 (0.06)***
C	-1.19 (0.04)***	-1.70 (0.04)***	-0.70 (0.07)***
D	-1.50 (0.05)***	-2.16 (0.04)***	-1.38 (0.05)***
E	-1.92 (0.04)***	-2.17 (0.04)***	-2.32 (0.05)***
Constant	0.94 (0.04)	0.50 (0.03)	1.25 (0.05)
X ²	4542.19	4767.86	5453.70
p	.000	.000	.000
N	34660	34660	34660

Table A2 Logistic regression of pupils attaining 5 or more A-C grades at GCSE using father’s class, dominance and combined social class schemas: males*
Source: Youth Cohort Study 1991-2000: combined dataset¹⁵

For females, the fit of the model is also better when mother’s, as well as father’s, social class is taken into account. The chi-squared figure increases by 897.39 when the dominance method is used and by 1284.84 when the combined class schema is used. The relatively higher increase compared to males suggests that taking the mother’s class into account is even more important for girls than for boys. Again, the coefficients are all in the same direction and the distance between the classes at the top of the combined class schema and those at the bottom is the same.

¹⁴ For traditional and dominance methods: A = higher managerial and professional, B = lower managerial and professional, C = intermediate/small employers and own account, D = lower supervisory/technical, E = semi-routine/routine/missing

¹⁵ Standard errors in parentheses

	Father's class	Dominance method	Combined class schema
	β	β	β
Year (1991)	0	0	0
1994	0.33 (0.03)***	0.32 (0.03)***	0.31 (0.03)***
1996	0.64 (0.03)***	0.62 (0.04)***	0.60 (0.04)***
1998	0.61 (0.04)***	0.58 (0.04)***	0.58 (0.04)***
2000	0.95 (0.04)***	0.92 (0.04)***	0.94 (0.04)***
Ethnicity (White)	0	0	0
Black	-0.48 (0.08)***	-0.58 (0.08)***	-0.62 (0.08)***
Indian	0.18 (0.07)***	0.33 (0.07)***	0.28 (0.07)***
Pakistani/Bangla	-0.60 (0.07)***	-0.30 (0.07)***	-0.38 (0.07)***
Other	0.33 (0.07)***	0.45 (0.07)***	0.38 (0.07)***
Class (A)	0	0	0
B	-0.52 (0.05)***	-0.81 (0.04)***	-0.71 (0.06)***
C	-1.21 (0.04)***	-1.76 (0.04)***	-0.91 (0.07)***
D	-1.51 (0.05)***	-2.17 (0.04)***	-1.47 (0.05)***
E	-1.98 (0.04)***	-2.32 (0.05)***	-2.49 (0.05)***
Constant	1.15 (0.04)	1.12 (0.04)	1.56 (0.05)
χ^2	5524.36	6421.75	6809.20
p	.000	.000	.000
N	40429	40429	40429

Table A3 Logistic regression of pupils attaining 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE using father's class, dominance and combined social class schemas: females
Source: Youth Cohort Study 1991-2000: combined dataset

NS-SEC		% 5 or more A*-C	
		Father's class	Dominance method
1.1	Large employers/higher managerial occupations	74	73
1.2	Higher professional occupations	83	82
2	Lower managerial and professional occupations	70	67
3	Intermediate occupations	64	57
4	Small employers and own account workers	46	41
5	Lower supervisory and technical occupations	47	39
6	Semi-routine occupations	40	34
7	Routine occupations	34	26
8	Missing	34	27

Table A4 Effect of having a missing parent on educational attainment
Source: Youth Cohort Study 1991-2000: combined dataset

	White	Black	Indian	Pakistani/ Bangladeshi	Other	Total
A	84 (8705)	73 (97)	93 (177)	80 (30)	87 (202)	84 (9211)
B	74 (12989)	61 (165)	73 (339)	62 (65)	77 (286)	74 (13844)
C	71 (6244)	65 (69)	83 (167)	68 (69)	82 (149)	71 (6698)
D	57 (25406)	41 (488)	67 (510)	55 (311)	69 (498)	57 (27213)
E	33 (38103)	25 (892)	41 (1336)	27 (2014)	46 (991)	33 (43336)

Table A5 Percentage gaining 5 or more A-C grades by ethnicity and parental social class*

Source: Youth Cohort Study 1991-2000: combined dataset

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