



## Social Mobility: An Overview

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The concept of social mobility is a multifaceted one. In simple terms, social mobility concerns the process whereby individuals move either upward or downward from one class or social group into another or out of and into social groups within the same socio-economic status or class. Nunn et al. (2007) describe social mobility in more complex terms, first mentioning that it "can be thought of in absolute and relative terms. When social mobility occurs in an absolute manner, a given society affords the mass of individuals therein with greater opportunities for socio-economic advancement. Absolute social mobility is made possible through advancements within the economic structure of a society. Relative social mobility however occurs as a result of progressive intra- and inter-generational advancements to the socio-economic status of an individual or family. Whereas intra-generational advancements refer to socio-economic advancement or upward social mobility within a given individual's lifetime; inter-generational advancements occur within a given family, but over two or more generations.

Moreover, one can distinguish between two forms of social mobility; namely, horizontal and vertical. When the former sort of social mobility occurs, individuals move from one social group into another (Habil et. al.). Examples of horizontal social mobility provided by Habil et. al include a change in religion or in country of citizenship. Vertical social mobility on the other hand refers to a movement from one class or socio-economic group, into another. In the former type of social mobility, individuals do not improve their living conditions, nor do they necessarily improve their social or political status within a given society. In the latter form of social mobility though, individuals necessarily experience an increase in economic welfare, which often comes along with increased social and/or political welfare as well. In contrast to vertical social mobility; horizontal social mobility does not affect the socio-economic status or class of individuals and their families.

Rates of social mobility are some of the most revealing indicators of a society's character. In any society there is a tendency for privileged groups to try to close ranks, preserve their advantages and pass them on to their children, but the arguments of social justice, economic efficiency and social stability all suggest that these tendencies towards closure and inherited privilege should be curbed. In western liberal societies the dominant version of social justice is perhaps the one that advocates equality of opportunity: those with equal effort and talent should be equally rewarded whatever their class, sex, age, race or religion. Economic efficiency likewise requires that workers should be paid according to their actual productivity rather than to ascribed (and economically irrelevant) characteristics such as their race or sex. And theories of social order hold that the blocking of legitimate aspirations for social and economic advancement will be a potent source of social dissent and conflict (see Goldthorpe, 1980; Heath, 1981). On all three counts the opportunities open to members of ethnic minorities are of interest, but sociologically the third has particular interest for whereas within native white society failure to secure upward social mobility may lead to individual responses—to personal frustration and stress—an ethnic minority which experiences discrimination and blocked careers as a

shared grievance is to that extent more likely to respond with collective protest and militant group action.

### The Concept of Social Mobility from a Sociological and Socio-Economic Perspective

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Finally, it is worth noting that one often finds a strong relation between income and occupational status. And as such, the concept of social mobility is not a merely an economic or sociological question. However, Nunn et. al (2007, 21) notes that economists tend to consider social mobility from an economic perspective; i.e., income- while sociologists tend to consider social mobility from the perspective of social status or "occupational status."

### Upward Mobility is more than Downward Mobility

In considering whether vertical social mobility most often occurs in an upward or downward trend, it is useful to remember that there are two ways of measuring social mobility; namely, absolute and relative. And in fact, many scholars maintain that these forms of vertical social mobility occur differently from one another, as will be demonstrated herein. Moreover, it is interesting to note that most scholars agree; vertical social mobility more often occurs in a down-up con-

text. Or in other words, groups and individuals experiencing absolute and relative vertical social mobility most often move up the socio-economic ladder, rather than downwards (Habil et. al, 5). However, individuals may move in an up-down context as well.

Wilby (2008) considers the issue of social mobility from both a historic and contemporary perspective. He mainly considers the issue within the context of post-World War II British society, though his findings to bear semblance within Continental European and American societies as well. He maintains that absolute and relative vertical social mobility occur in considerably different fashions, for similarly different reasons. Vertical social mobility in the absolute sense has occurred within Britain, Continental European and American societies following WWII, on a large scale. This development relates mainly to economic development and structural changes to these various economies (ibid). Interestingly, he also maintains that democratic governments often attempt to remove barriers to upward social mobility, while "The barriers to downward social mobility grow all the time (ibid.)." This implies that when economies develop and governments seek to raise the living standard of their populace; it becomes easier to increase one's wealth, while it simultaneously becomes more difficult to hit poverty.

According to Borjas (2006), one major reasons providing for the high degree of social mobility within American society throughout the 19th and 20th centuries has to do with the assimilation of large immigrant populations. Borjas maintains that first-generation Americans tended to struggle with adapting to life in their new country, in a number of ways. As a consequence, they typically remain relatively low on the socio-economic ladder. Their children; the second-generation, has generally managed to overcome the obstacles posed to their parents; such as linguistic and cultural issues, better enabling them to integrate into and move up the socio-economic ladder of American society (ibid.).

Second-generation Americans, by contrast, typically experience a considerable degree of relative social mobility, in comparison to their immigrant parents. There are a number of factors which enable the second generation to better adapt to and thrive in American society. Perhaps the most fundamental therein include early socialization in American culture, developing an early proficiency in the English language, as well as greater education- and consequently- improved work opportunities (ibid.).

Borjas (2005) mentions the phenomenon of regression towards the mean, and its relation to upward social mobility. The first side of this phenomenon is that the less wealthy classes of a given society- such as second-generation populations, female headed households and minority groups- tend to increase their socio-economic status, consequently experiencing upward social mobility. This occurs relative to the dominant groups in society, and happens over the term of two or more generations.

On the other side however, the upper classes of a given society have little opportunity in the way of upward mobility; as a consequence then, they consolidate and/or maintain their lofty positions, or move down on social mobility scale (ibid.).

The importance of Borjas' argument for the purpose of explaining upward social mobility is this: in a society made up of a significantly large and relatively unskilled immigrant population where "...even though the children of low-skill parents are themselves likely to be low-skilled, they are unlikely to be as unskilled as their parents (ibid.)," and where higher skills and abilities most often equal higher socio-economic status; a significantly large proportion of that society- namely, the children of immigrants- is likely to experience upward social mobility. Perhaps this occurs by default, in so far as the only choices in this regard for second-generation Americans are often static or upward social movement.

This can be contrasted, however, with the case of a given society's extremely wealthy; for children born to individuals in this group "are not likely to be as successful as their parents," and as a consequence, "Their economic performance will probably revert downward toward the population average (ibid.)." As a result then, when a considerably larger proportion of a given society consists of immigrants moving upwards in terms of social mobility, and a considerably smaller proportion of wealthy moving downwards on the same terms; that society's absolute degree of vertical social mobility increases.

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