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The Future of Social Mobility Studies

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Despite decades of theorizing and researching, sociologists are starved for explanatory ideas. Consequently, a new or revived idea—like alienation, deferred gratification, social mobility, or status inconsistency—is often seized upon and overused, perhaps abused. Many concepts have a similar natural history. After initial high popularity in the professional literature, some wavering occurs because the findings of various studies do not mesh. Then, methodological criticism severely wounds the concept, for few ideas and studies can withstand the forceful sophistication of contemporary methodologists. Disillusionment with the concept is likely to follow. Occasionally, some hardy investigators partially rescue the concept and show how it might have some vitality. Some others continue to use it as though it had not suffered any injury.

The three studies reported in this issue seem to be in the disillusionment–partial rescue stages, difficult exercises indeed. The editors have asked me to broaden the context of discussion, and I shall refrain from closely examining each of the studies.

The growth of methodological interest in social mobility should not overwhelm theory. Obviously, mobility can be measured in many ways. Which way to go is not primarily a methodological question but an analytical one. I may be oversensitive but I fear that Laslett's fourth footnote seems to imply that the question of how to formulate interaction effects is a methodological rather than a theoretical issue.

Many sociologists have adopted a straightforward, rigorous—and likely unrewarding—mode of analysis. They are looking for a swift stream which carries conceptual gold. They then assay the quality of the gold by seeing how it does against dependent, usually attitudinal, variables. As it is panned through a wide variety of dependent variables, uneven or low-quality results emerge. In social mobility studies this style leads to concentration on the correlation between (additive or interactive) social positions, on one hand, and a dependent variable, on the other.

Consider a different approach. Overall correlations (even multiple or partial) are not the main concern. Rather, the target is to discover, within a group, the subgroups which are affected by the independent variable. For which Lutherans or Jews is status inconsistency important in regard to the dependent variables? How do those markedly affected by status inconsistency differ from fellow ethnics who seem unaffected by it?

The implicit model is one of detection, adding pieces together to gain a fuller picture, rather than one of locating the unique variable or variables which provide satisfying explanations. This alternative style is largely ignored in current sociological investigations. Its absence particularly mars evaluation studies which tend to ignore the question of which subgroups are particularly helped or not helped by a particular intervention. Rather, the focus is on obtaining a "yes/no" verdict in regard to an intervention (read independent variable); the diagnostic issue of what is important to whom is usually left unresolved.

The standard style also assumes the timelessness of its data. Studies of 1936 or 1952 have the same significance for 1971 as do studies of 1968. Implicitly there is a belief in the significance of structure regardless of changes in social climate. A pseudo-cumulativeness exists, acting as though data are floating in statistical space unconnected to their historical emergence. Laslett concludes by recognizing that individuals change over time. But even more than that, awareness is needed: social values also change over time.

None of the three studies includes age as a variable. At one level, people are at different stages of their mobility patterns because of differences in age; thus, the age factor may confound results. For example, a fifty-five-year-old who was affected by the depression of the thirties is likely to have a different outlook on social mobility than a thirty-five-year-old whose work life has not been marred by severe depression.

Some engineers are now unemployed. Probably few will ever become engineers again. Their occupational lives have been profoundly changed by the deliberate curtailing of military production and the deliberate effort in 1969–70 to slow down the economy. Similarly, the current academic recession and prospective demographic shifts will deeply and perhaps permanently change the career lines of many now in graduate school.

If blacks get good jobs as a result of political pressure as often as because of individual merit or striving, how will they react to the fact of occupational advance? Or if "opting out" is not thought to be the same as "failing out" or "copping out," how then will white middle-class youths respond to downward mobility?

These specific and concrete events and changing social attitudes affect the possibilities of mobility and reactions to it. But it is not the standard sociological style to pay attention to them as we focus on structure rather than events or processes. We should not assume when we study the impact of social mobility that we are dealing with invariant relationships.

My guess is that social mobility and status inconsistency will increasingly fail to explain much about attitudes. Sociological attention will wander away from it at the same time that social mobility will become an important objective of national and local policies. "Open admissions" will

become more widespread as a way of increasing the chances for educational mobility of youth from minority and white working-class families. A new third-tier educational system (the Swedes call it "recurrent education") is emerging which provides education and training at whatever point in an individual's lifetime he wants it and in a way appropriate to him at that point. Occupational upgrading (or intra-generational mobility) is a primary though not exclusive purpose. Indeed, the notion of dead-end jobs is challenged as ladders to higher-level jobs are constructed where formerly no connections existed. Federal funds are likely to be increasingly spent on encouraging in-plant promotions, and some unions are now amassing educational allotments through collective bargaining. These funds can be used for the general educational interests of members.

In short, upward mobility—both intra- and inter-generational—is becoming more and more regarded as a social right, at least in the sense that government should provide many more opportunities and ways of achieving it. If mobility does come closer to the position of an assured experience, then its impact may well change. For then the experience will be more common; much mobility may become horizontal rather than vertical as individuals shift jobs to increase their work satisfactions as much as for prestige advance. (This change would become more likely if wage and salary differentials decreased and/or income in the form of public services or subsidies increased—that is, if there were overall decreases in income inequality.) Moving up then would require less individual zeal; it may be more socially acceptable to reject social mobility opportunities rather than to accept them automatically (especially if counterculture values persist).

What I have just outlined is not inevitable. It may happen that way, and my hope is for a future somewhat like this picture: greater equality in income and status but with considerable horizontal mobility to liven up activities. Whether this vision is good or bad, likely or unlikely, is not the main issue for this discussion. Rather, I would stress the impact of broader situations on the mobility experience. Mobility or status inconsistency means different things to different people at different historical points. If mobility is relatively easy to achieve *if* one wants it, or if its achievement depends clearly on governmental policies, then the experience of it may be much less of a significant element in one's life or it may have a different kind of significance than when it is regarded as one's own unique achievement or failure.

The study of social mobility has been obsessively concerned with consequences rather than causes. I have long been puzzled by this and have speculated about the fate of sociologists were they forbidden to use the concepts of mobility to explain behavior. A surprising amount of sociological literature would stop. I now suspect that the attraction of mobility-as-an-explainer was that it served in the fifties to provide a criticism of

Eisenhower bourgeois society. It was a way of saying: Watch out for the prices paid in conforming to the American motif of onward and upward. In both the fifties and sixties, the thesis of status inconsistency as the propellant of radicalism, whether left or right, deflected attention from the content of the radicalism to the motivation of the radicals. Again, this perspective fitted into the outlook of those critical of American society, from a liberal but not radical stance.

I do not have a full account here but I feel certain that the social (and personal) values of liberal sociologists led to a preoccupation with the examination of status and made it easier to accept with little criticism the results of rather weak studies. We have been able, for example, to pursue social mobility studies despite the fact that there is sizable dispersion in income for a given occupation, even when detailed occupational coding is used. Similarly, we regard education as an important explainer of income when at least two-thirds of income variation is unexplained by education.

By contrast, we have not sought to explain why there is a high dispersion of occupational income or why the low explanatory power of education. For these findings contradict important beliefs about the order and rationality of our economic and social system. Economists also find it difficult to recognize and analyze data which contest the orderliness of the structure of society.

Future social mobility investigations, I think, should turn more to the question of what produces or retards mobility or particular groups. This interest will force sociologists to move to the intermingling of economic and social forces and to overcome their economic illiteracy. Even more difficult will be a shifting of sociological concern from the focus on attitudes —despite the continuing evidence of the shakiness and utility of attitudinal measurements—to the broader forces which shape relations, values, and experiences.

Social mobility and status inconsistency are being downgraded as all-purpose explanatory variables. They will be useful if they are employed less indiscriminately. In the three studies, they are tested to see if they help explain social participation, political attitudes, work satisfaction, social integration, and emotional adjustment. And should be used less ahistorically. The downgrading is to the good, I think. But social mobility as one measure of the performance of this society will continue to be important. Paradoxically, it may grow in political significance as its impact on attitudes lessens.