

MARITAL STABILITY AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

Author(s): ROBERT CHESTER

Source: *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (July-December 1978), pp. 159-170

Published by: International Journals

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23028525>

Accessed: 18-12-2019 08:59 UTC

**REFERENCES**

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

[https://www.jstor.org/stable/23028525?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/23028525?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents)

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*International Journals* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*

# MARITAL STABILITY AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

ROBERT CHESTER

*The University of Hull*

International Journal of Sociology of the Family 1978, Vol. 8 (July-Dec.): 159-170

*Studies of social mobility have produced "dissociative" and "compensatory" hypotheses about its effects on primary group relationships, and on the former hypothesis social mobility could be expected to be potentially disruptive of marriage, although in fact the relationship between mobility and marital stability has not been widely studied. Taking as starting point an article which denies the dissociative hypothesis in regard to marriage, this paper indicates that there are problems both of data and of definition in resolving this issue. The paper also suggests that there are reasons for supposing that social mobility can be disruptive of marriage, but that the matter cannot be settled by examining the overall statistical relationships of a few gross indicators. Rather than measuring net effects, enquiry should seek to discover patterns of effect and refined depiction of syndromes of marital instability.*

Out of the large and contradictory literature on mobility and individual behavior there have emerged what Ellis and Lane (1967) called the "dissociative" and the "compensatory" hypotheses. The former conceives mobility as a potentially disorganizing experience which is disruptive of primary group relationships, while the latter inverts causality and sees mobility as a compensatory process following upon unfavorable primary relationships. Such issues are currently unresolved, and it is anyway probable that studies which seek to establish overall relationships between mobility and various dependent variables will continue to produce uneven and inconclusive results. This point will be taken up again, but first I wish to consider the issue of social mobility in relation to the stability of marriage.

On the dissociative hypothesis it could be predicted that social mobility would be potentially disruptive of marriage in various ways. A search of the literature, however, suggests that the relationships of these two variables have not been widely studied, although there are scattered considerations of this and cognate topics. A relatively recent discussion can be found

in an article by Tropman (1971), and this can be used as a useful starting point for analysis. The present paper is not specifically intended as a rejoinder to Tropman, but by taking up his arguments it is possible to clarify some issues and review some relevant work.

#### SOCIAL MOBILITY AND THE FAMILY

According to Tropman, mobility has traditionally been seen in sociology as disorganizing of primary social groups, and he is referring here to the dissociative hypothesis mentioned above (while making no note of the compensatory thesis). In his reading of the literature, conventional sociological wisdom leads to the expectation that mobility would be associated with instability of marriage, and he cites authors who have purportedly taken or lent support to this view. Believing this idea to be erroneous, Tropman sets out to examine the relationship between mobility and marital stability in the light of data drawn from research on the American occupational structure by Duncan and Blau (1967). Treating marital disruption as an independent variable, Tropman measured mobility in occupational status for males of various marital conditions, and found that men married once only and still married experienced greater upward mobility than men with disrupted marriages. From this he deduced that marital stability facilitates occupational achievement, and that therefore the "traditional wisdom" of sociology on social mobility and marriage is questionable.

An important initial point here is a certain confusion concerning whether the author's focus is on marital stability as a mobility factor or on social mobility as a destabilising agent. Tropman's expressed concern is with the latter issue, but his data bear upon the former. Apart from this, however, his discussion is unsatisfactory in a number of respects which nevertheless have heuristic value. Specifically:

(i) There are insufficiently-examined problems concerning the limitations of the data and the conclusions which may be drawn from them. Although this requires criticism at the level of detail, consideration of these problems illustrates some more general points.

(ii) There is an unhappy conflation of issues in his review of relevant literature. This confuses different meanings both of mobility and of family disorganization, and is not faithful to some of those reviewed because it fails to distinguish adequately their differing concerns. It also fails to establish a conventional view upon which Tropman's data would bear antagonistically, partly because few writers have specifically concerned themselves with stability of marriage and mobility, and not all those who have were addressing the same question as Tropman.

(iii) There are doubts about the suitability of the chosen style of analysis for the production of helpful findings in this particular sphere.

These various points will be taken in order, so that a more satisfactory strategy of enquiry may be suggested for examining the relationship between mobility and stability of marriage.

#### LIMITATIONS OF THE DATA

Tropman's quantitative data derive from research on occupational structure by Duncan and Blau, and these authors themselves found differential occupational achievement by marital status. They comment, however, that the net effect of marital status is not pronounced, and they are agnostic on temporal sequence and direction of causation, leaving it open whether lack of occupational achievement follows or is a prelude to marital disruption. Since marriage tends to occur early in a career, and since marital dissolution tends to occur early in marriage, it might well be supposed that dissolution commonly precedes ultimate occupational achievement, but this temporal sequence cannot be taken for granted, and in any case temporal precedence is not the same thing as causation. Furthermore, it is well established that instability of marriage is related in inverse although probably complex ways both to socio-economic status and to age at marriage (Chester, 1972), and that youthful marriage is associated with low status. Those with least opportunity for occupational advancement (low status men), therefore, are also those most prone to disruption of marriage. Conclusive analysis of the relationship between individual mobility and stability of marriage therefore requires more information than simply the degree of mobility since first employment and current marital situation. Knowledge of marriage age and duration is required, as well as information about when and in what stages mobility occurred.

In addition to the foregoing, Tropman notes that his data cannot be controlled for race, and while he cautions the reader he does not estimate the possible effect on his results. However, Cutright (1971) indicates that it is precisely the age-group studied by Tropman (45-54 years) in which race differences in marital stability are greatest, while Farley and Hermalin (1971) show that differences in occupational achievement between marital status categories are modest compared with those between whites and non-whites. The issue is complex, but non-white males have both a greater propensity for marital disruption and a lesser opportunity for occupational advancement, so that control for race might have significant effect on Tropman's findings.

Most importantly in this section, Tropman's own figures do not support the case that disrupted marriage has serious adverse effects on mobility, because divorced but remarried men achieved not much less mobility in occupational status than those remaining once-married. Since most divorced men remarry (80 per cent in this sample) we must ask whether selective

processes are operating which relate to the likelihoods of both remarriage and career mobility. Glick and Norton (1971) indicate that male remarriage after divorce is positively related to income, and Bernard (1956) suggests that divorcees who remarry are those who are more attractive, competent and healthy, while those who do not are more likely to be ill, disabled, unstable or withdrawn. Failure to remarry may thus reflect personal variables which are either indicative or prognostic of poor occupational performance, and on the evidence disrupted marriage seems not to be an important mobility impediment if it is followed by remarriage. Even if we take the issue as it has been framed by Tropman, therefore, it is clear that the relationship between marital and occupational experience requires more for its elucidation than the marshalling of a few gross variables. Moreover, mobility and stability can be considered in terms other than those of individual experience, and it is to this matter that attention must now turn.

#### OTHER SOCIOLOGICAL THOUGHT

In his outline of "traditional wisdom" on the relationship between mobility and marital stability Tropman refers to a number of writers who were not concerned with the family at all. Of those who were so concerned, only one appears to deal with the direct effects of individual mobility on marriage, while the others deal with different issues. Wilensky and Lebeaux (1958) are cited, for instance, but for the most part these authors are concerned not with the fate of the marital bond but with extended family solidarities, and it is not reasonable to lump together and equate such notions as family disorganization and marital disruption, because these are distinct even if often-related categories (see Sprey, 1966). An older sociological view did see mobility as disruptive of solidary kin-groups, and for some observers the consequence of mobility and associated processes was the isolated nuclear family, relatively stripped of commerce with kin, and uniquely functional for industrial society. This notion has been refuted by many subsequent writers (e.g. Litwak, 1960; Rosser and Harris, 1965; Bell, 1968), but these refutations related to intergenerational ties rather than to marital stability. In fairness to Wilensky and Lebeaux it needs to be said that they related kinship disruption to *early* industrialization, and found in contemporary conditions considerable contentment with the narrow circle of kin and close friends rather than any kind of rootless mass disintegrating for want of intimate ties. They recognized the mobility norms brought by mature industrialization, and Wilensky (1966) amplified the point that the routinization of mobility counters earlier disruptive tendencies. Similarly, Germani (1966) emphasized the need to consider the societal context of mobility, and other research indicates the relevance of such variables as

adequacy of resocialization, magnitude of movement, visibility of mobility, saliency of status, and general mobility rates (see Kessin, 1971). The effects of the initial impact of industrialization on extended family relationships may still be arguable, but the issue has little relevance to the contemporary relationship between mobility and marital stability.

Two further sources noted by Tropman refer not to occupational mobility but to inter-class marriage (Le Masters, 1957; Roth and Peck, 1951). While mixed marriages represent a kind of social mobility for one spouse, and may imply differential response by the spouses to any future mobility, the consequences of such marriages are probably better dealt with by such concepts as heterogamy, hypergamy and assortative mating. It should also be noted that Roth and Peck studied *marital adjustment* rather than marital stability, and this is more than a quibble because the relationship between adjustment and stability is an uncertain one. Cuber and Harroff (1963), for instance, found that in high-status marriages neither happiness nor satisfaction with the spouse were necessary concomitants of stable marriage. If satisfaction with the instrumental aspects of a marriage may compensate for the absence of emotional gratifications, then occupational achievement may well function to preserve stability, but other interpretations are possible. It might well be, for instance, that where marital satisfactions are low and stability represents simply the formal preservation of the marriage bond, then this acts as a spur to occupational achievement as a compensatory process.

With regard to marital disruption, only Locke (1940) and MacIver (1937) of those cited by Tropman seem specifically to relate divorce to mobility, and by mobility MacIver clearly means more than simply individual experience of occupational progress. He refers to old traditions losing their hold, and to the "mobility of life" and is thus concerned with a compound quality of the urban-industrial milieu, namely its novel fluidity and discontinuities, and the effect of these on the durability of marriage. Of course, the geographical and social mobility of individuals forms part of the "mobility of life" but the reference is really to the creation of a structural context which emancipates individuals from direction by tradition and close community controls. Similarly, Wilensky and Lebeaux refer to a multi-fronted attack on tradition, and in their marginal mention of divorce they refer this not to personal mobility but to the new marital relationship which emerges consequent upon changes in the kinship system wrought by industrialization.

These authors and other commentators in this vein tend to see *complexes* of mobility operating to produce high *rates* of marital disruption. Support for this notion comes from recent writers such as Marwick (1969) who found high rates of divorce to be associated with changeful social conditions, and Felton (1971) who found high correlations between the divorce

rates of American states and their migration rates, despite controlling for ethnicity, urbanization, religious affiliation, and *per capita* income. The lessened integration of generally mobile social contexts seem to affect those who remain stationary as well as those who move, and there is nothing in the position of older writers which contradicts the possibility that personal *immobility* may also influence marital stability. Indeed, where social mobility has been routinized and there are strong achievement drives and materialistic values it might be expected that the husband's economic performance would be relevant to marital stability, and it may be that American spouses are particularly prone to react to economic role failure. The findings of Scanzoni (1968) and Coombs and Zumeta (1970) that divorced wives are critical of the economic performance of their ex-husbands bears on this, as does the finding by Cutright (1971) that the stability of first marriages is more affected by income than by education or occupation. Relevant again is the Cuber and Harroff finding that the marriages of economically-successful males may remain intact despite the absence of marital happiness. The general point here, however, is that the authors cited by Tropman were writing not of the individual consequences of individual mobility, but of rates of marital disruption in relation to structural conditions, and the conventional view which he claims to oppose seems not to exist.

So far the term mobility has been used in a relatively diffuse way, and the ways in which mobility might relate to stability of marriage have not been clearly differentiated. This is because of the conflation by Tropman of distinctive issues, and it would be appropriate here to distinguish the different concerns which can be found in the literature. Reference can be found to at least eight types of mobility, namely:

- (1) Immigration from one culture to another.
- (2) Internal migration between sub-cultures.
- (3) Intra-cultural residential mobility.
- (4) Intergenerational social mobility.
- (5) Intra-generational social mobility.
- (6) Temporary separation from customary associations.
- (7) Physical mobility via modern transportation methods.
- (8) Ideational mobility via exposure to cultural pluralism.

These different types of mobility have been discussed in connection with various questions concerning family relationships including:

- (a) The effect of stability (or its lack) in the family of origin on an individual's occupational career.
- (b) The effect of the stability of his own marriage on an individual's occupational career.

(c) The effect of different kinds of mobility experience (or combinations of kinds) on the marriages of those with such experience.

(d) The effect of a generally mobile society on the durability of the marriage tie in general.

(e) The effect of different kinds of mobility experience (or combination of kinds) on the wider family relationships of those with such experience.

(f) The effect of a mobile society on wider family relationships more generally.

Clearly, for orderly progress it is necessary to specify what kind of mobility is being considered in relation to which particular issue. Of Tropman's sources, only Locke seems to be directly concerned with mobility type (5) in relation to issue (c). Most of the others he quotes are either not concerned with mobility and family stability or are concerned with issues (d) and (f). Tropman's expressed concern is with mobility type (5) in relation to issue (c), although since he treats marital disruption as an independent variable his material strictly speaking addresses issue (b). The remainder of this paper will consider some issues related to issue (c) and mobility type (5).

There is, in fact, scant literature offering data on this issue, and certainly no very widespread promotion of the idea that social mobility may be generally disruptive of the marriages of those concerned. No relevant work is reported in a decade review of research (Hicks and Platt, 1970), and no one seems to suggest that this is a major phenomenon. It is not necessary, however, to show that marital disruption is a *frequent* consequence of mobility experience, so long as it can be demonstrated that the relationship occurs often enough to be a recognizable pattern which makes sense in an interpretative framework. From scattered materials, particularly of a biographical or clinical kind, it is reasonable to suppose that for some married couples social mobility may have disruptive consequences, and indeed that there are definite syndromes. Equally, however, it can be argued that little progress can be made in this issue by use of the style of analysis typified by that of Tropman.

#### AN ALTERNATIVE STRATEGY OF ENQUIRY

The mode of analysis referred to above is one where a limited number of fairly gross variables (some of them perforce measured by inadequate indicators) are examined for overall positive or negative relationships, using various statistical techniques on relatively large samples. This approach often produces inconclusive results, and can very easily obscure particular patterns within an overall conclusion. As an index of social mobility occupational rating has been criticised as a crude tool by Miller (1955) and Curtis (1961) amongst others, since social mobility involves not



only movement between occupational categories but also between styles of life and social groups. Change in occupational rating does not necessarily imply that these other changes have taken place, and it is not clear whether a movement of 'n' points has equal momentousness at all points of a rating scale. Whatever might be the validity of overall correlational findings such as Tropman's, it would not negate the possibility that there exists a mobility-induced marriage break-up syndrome, because this could be concealed in figures which ignore a host of factors related to marital stability.

This point is not made to side with those contemporary sociologists who would reject macrosocial statistics and quantitative techniques on principle, because the marshalling and manipulation of statistics can serve many valid functions in the study of the family (Chester, 1976). Rather, the point is to advocate for some issues an approach which would not pursue definitive overall answers with regard to the effects of a given variable, but would take a diagnostic approach, seeking to discover what kind of experience was significant in what kinds of ways for which sub-groups within an overall population. The aim of the approach is to put together various pieces of information and interpretation in ways which give a rounded picture of social experience. Such an approach is not, of course, in any way novel or innovative either theoretically or methodologically, but is simply advocated here as the strategy among those available to sociologists which is most likely to throw light on the relationship of social mobility to the stability of marriage.

#### MOBILITY-INDUCED DISRUPTION OF MARRIAGE

One pattern which may be envisaged is that where the spouses adjust differentially to the experience of mobility, and find that this differential has eroded their community of values, assumptions and expectations to a point where their marital relationship is no longer viable. For instance, since mobility is most commonly due to the husband's occupational advancement, and since this often depends upon resocialization to the norms of a higher status group, he may find that he has left his wife behind him socially. Committed to the domestic sphere, she may not have acquired the new norms in concert with her husband, or may not find them congenial. Locke (1940) seems to conceive such a situation when he notes that there may be more problems for the wife and other children than for the husband and younger children when the family moves into a new social milieu. An alternative pattern might be where the husband rejects the life-style and normative implications of his occupational advance whereas his wife assimilates socially and appreciates the new possibilities. Waller and Hill (1951) present case material suggesting this pattern, and clearly regard differential adjustment to social mobility as potentially threatening to

marital stability. Yet another pattern, envisaged by Harris (1969), is the dual-career family where the wife is occupationally more mobile than the husband, thus not only causing social differentiation but also offending cultural assumptions about male superiority. Such patterns could perhaps be conceptualized as a kind of "postmarital heterogamy," but they do not exhaust the possibilities. A man who is successful by his early middle years may simply find that he can command a younger and more attractive partner, and be tempted by this. Or the situation may hinge upon differential personality development. An experienced marital therapist (Dominian, 1969) describes how a previously dependent partner may discover unrealized personal potential, and grow away from the other partner. Here there would be an erosion of complementarity, and it is specifically noted that this may stem from occupational achievement. A further possibility, discussed by Glaser and Strauss (1971), is that a man's commitment of time and resources to the quest for mobility may create marital disharmony and sometimes disruption. It might be added here that these suggested patterns are not simply *a priori* possibilities but can all be detected in case materials.

The kind of process which can be involved is shown clearly in a study of mature-age students in an English university, conducted by Tapper and Chamberlain (1971). Those concerned are a group of men denoted "traditional working class" and typified by origin in a close-knit working-class family, truncated school experience, and previous employment in routine manual occupations. Typically they will have married a girl of similar origins at a relatively young age and maybe commenced a family before embarking via a complex path on a university education. As they are incorporated into the intellectual concerns and middle-class styles of the university, and orient themselves to future professional employment, there emerges a potential and sometimes realized threat to the viability of their marriage relationship. For various reasons the wife tends to be excluded from the mobility experience, and thus to remain the person she was, retaining strong links with her social background. This conjugal divergence does not necessarily lead to disruption of the marriage, but evidently sometimes does, and the study illustrates how social mobility may have dissociative consequences for those who experience it.

#### CONCLUSION

The material presented in the preceding section is not claimed to be definitive, but it does show that the notion of mobility-induced marital disruption is not only plausible but receives some support from the literature. Whatever its validity, however, this notion cannot be tested by the measurement of gross relationships between occupational ratings and marital

status, because such measurements may obscure different patterns. Understanding of the process involved is more likely to follow from seeking such *patterns of effect* than from hoping to settle the issue by the discovery of *net effects*. What is needed in this issue is the refined depiction of syndromes rather than the production of statistically-valid overall conclusions. Which couples respond in what kinds of ways to how much experience of what kinds of mobility? What patterns of adjustment or differentiation, solidarity or disengagement, can be discerned as married couples respond to new social or spatial locations? To understand the impact of mobility on marriage, we need answers to questions of this level of specificity.

## REFERENCES

- Bell, C.  
1970 *Middle Class Families*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Bernard, J.  
1956 *Remarriage*. New York: Dryden.
- Chester, R.  
1972 "Current incidence and trends in marital breakdown." *Postgraduate Medical Journal* 48 (September): 529-541.  
1976 "Official statistics and family sociology." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 38 (February): 117-126.
- Coombs, L. and Z. Zumeta  
1970 "Correlates of marital dissolution in a prospective fertility study." *Social Problems* 18 (Summer): 92-102.
- Cuber, J.F. and P.B. Harroff  
1963 "The more total view: relationships among men and women of the upper middle class." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 25 (May): 140-145.
- Curtis, R.F.  
1961 "Conceptual problems in social mobility research." *Sociology and Social Research* 45 (July): 387-395.
- Cutright, P.  
1971 "Income and family events: marital stability." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 33 (May): 291-306.
- Dominian, J.  
1968 *Marital Breakdown*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Duncan, O.D. and P.M. Blau  
1967 *The American Occupational Structure*. New York: Wiley.
- Ellis, R.A. and W.C. Lane  
1967 "Social mobility and social isolation: a test of Sorekin's dissociative hypothesis." *American Sociological Review* 32 (April): 237-253.
- Farley, R. and A. Hermalin  
1971 "Family stability: a comparison of trends between black and white." *American Sociological Review* 36 (February): 1-17.
- Fenelon, B.  
1971 "State variations in the United States divorce rates." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 33 (May): 321-327.

- Germani, G.  
1966 "Social and political consequences of mobility." In N.J. Smelser and S.M. Lipset (eds.), *Social Structure and Mobility in Economic Development*, Chicago: Aldine.
- Glaser, B.G. and A.L. Strauss  
1971 *Status Passage*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Glick, P.C. and A.J. Norton  
1971 "Frequency, duration and probability of marriage and divorce." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 33 (May): 307-317.
- Harris, C.C.  
1969 *The Family*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Hicks, M.W. and M. Platt  
1970 "Marital happiness and stability: a review of research in the sixties." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 32 (November): 553-574.
- Kessin, K.  
1971 "Social and psychological consequences of intergenerational occupational mobility." *American Journal of Sociology* 77 (July): 1-18.
- Lemasters, E.  
1957 *Modern Courtship and Marriage*. New York: Macmillan.
- Litwak, E.  
1960a "Occupational mobility and extended family cohesion." *American Sociological Review* 25 (February): 9-21.  
1960b "Geographical mobility and extended family cohesion." *American Sociological Review* 25 (June): 385-394.
- Locke, H.J.  
1940 "Mobility and family disorganisation." *American Sociological Review* 5 (August): 489-494.
- MacIver, R.M.  
1937 *Society*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Reinhart.
- Marwick, M.G.  
1969 "The comparative sociology of divorce." In H.A. Findlay (ed.), *Divorce, Society and the Law*, pp. 87-110. Melbourne: Butterworth.
- Miller, S.M.  
1955 "The concept of mobility." *Social Problems* 2 (October): 65-73.
- Rosser, C. and C. Harris  
1965 *The Family and Social Change*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Roth, J. and R. Peck  
1951 "Social class and mobility factors related to marital adjustment." *American Sociological Review* 16 (August): 478-487.
- Scanzoni, J.  
1968 "A social system analysis of dissolved and existing marriages." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 30 (August): 452-461.
- Sprey, J.  
1966 "Family disorganisation: toward a conceptual clarification." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 28 (November): 398-406.
- Tapper, E.R. and A.R. Chamberlain  
1971 "Education, social mobility and family stability." *Marriage Guidance* 13 (November): 743-747.
- Tropman, J.E.  
1971 "Social mobility and marital stability." *Applied Social Studies* 3 (October): 165-173.

Waller, W. and Reuben Hill

1951 The Family. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Wilensky, H.

1966 "Measures and effects of social mobility." In N.J. Smelser and S.M. Lipset (eds.), Social Structure and Mobility in Economic Development. Chicago: Aldine.

Wilensky, H. and C. Lebeaux

1958 Industrial Society and Social Welfare. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.