

Personality and Social Mobility

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Personality and Social Mobility

There is a growing feeling in America that the competition for professional status is becoming more severe and that our status system generally is tightening. Perhaps this belief contributes to the pressure for acceleration by our schools. Middle-class parents, moreover, are increasingly fearful that their children will not qualify for admission to a good college. These parents, as well as many teachers and administrators, exert strong pressure upon the child from the time he is in elementary school. The tension builds up until the months preceding the announcement by colleges of their decisions upon applications; at that time even the best students often are in a nearly frenetic condition.

This whole process is a function of our social-class system. Educators are realizing that the social-class system is a stubborn reality, which influences every aspect of the school, from the values and attitudes of teachers and pupils to the curriculum itself. The social-class system in America is becoming sharply defined. Techniques exist, it is true, for climbing the ladder of social status. This process of changing one's status is called "social mobility." Education is the most readily available means of rising in the world. Even with education, however, an individual's upward mobility is slow; to climb one subclass in his lifetime, such as from lower-middle class to upper-middle class, constitutes an unusually rapid rate of social mobility for an individual.

Failure attends the efforts of the majority of those individuals who wish to rise to a higher status and actually attempt to do so. A major

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cause of these failures lies in the personalities of the individuals. In the following pages an effort will be made to define some of the personality factors related to success or failure in upward social movement. In a recent paper (1), I considered the relation of anxiety to status. Here the purpose is to examine the functions of *aggression* and of a sense of *identity* in facilitating the processes of upward status movement.

These processes usually begin in the early family life of the individual. Many parents seek to train their children toward upward mobility. Perhaps the prototype of such a parent is the immigrant who insists that all his children become physicians, lawyers, or teachers. The son of such a father commented recently that everyone in his family had taken books seriously because his father considered the reading of English the most important factor in "getting up" in the American social system. In such a family, books have a kind of pragmatic value in addition to whatever value they may have as intellectual and imaginative stimuli. Books and school marks become "instruments" of social mobility. Although the ethnic cases may afford the more dramatic instances of the pushing and training of a child to rise above the status of his parents, it is of course true that many established American middle-class families train their children for extremely high goals, superior to those of the parents' occupational and educational standings.

Such parents really teach the child that he must be superior to his parents. To accomplish the Herculean task of becoming smarter and more successful than his own father or mother, the driven child apparently often learns to feel that he must actually be "perfect" in school and in work. Since he can never be perfect, he can never be satisfied with his success, no matter how great it may seem to others. Thus to him the game seems not worth the candle. For he can never extinguish his early learned need to be perfect, and therefore he must continue the pursuit of the ever retreating goal of perfection by driving himself toward increasingly greater attainment.

What of the parents who push their children hard and early for the attainment of the culture of a higher social level? Often such parents feel that they themselves have failed in the world. Their own hopes may have been blocked by lack of money or by undue economic responsibility for their own parents. The mother may feel that, as a woman, she has been prevented from achievement in business, law, medicine, or some other field dominated by men—an achievement which she deeply wanted. Such parents set the highest standards for their children, for they project their own ambitions upon the child. They feel that the child needs, more than anything else in life, the prestige and position in the world which the parents themselves always have desired.

Such a child may fail at upward mobility because he has been weakened, by parental guidance and pressure, in just those ego functions which are essential for upward mobility. As a child, he learned from his parents that he could not direct his own life, stand on his own feet, make his own decisions both in the present and in the future. Although such children perform well in the academic world (a relatively simple world, where books are far more important than relationships with people), they often have trouble when they begin their careers. Their difficulty apparently results from their long-repressed hostility toward the parents, which is displaced to other authority figures. It is likely that the child who believes he has not been allowed to make his own decisions will feel that he has been used and exploited, and the resultant hostility often will be transferred to his relationships with later authority figures. Such a child may also turn his (now guilty) resentment against himself and become self-punishing. In either case, whether by turning his resentment toward later parental figures, such as his boss, or by turning it inward against himself, he succeeds in being avenged upon the ambitious parent by failing in the world. These children often are harried by feelings of unworthiness, of having betrayed their parents. Their guilt really may be due not to their failure but to their own resentment against their parents (2).

Another area in which the driven child may have difficulty as he grows up is that of relationships with the opposite sex. Where the mother has been the driver, the son may have difficulty, not only with objective authority figures, but also with women generally, including his wife, because he views women as authority figures like his mother.

Many parents who push their children toward social mobility are members of mixed-class marriages. The most common type of mixed-class marriage is that between a woman from the lower-middle class and a man from the top part of the working class. A lower-middle-class woman who marries a man from the top part of the working class usually begins to try to recoup her original social-class status either by reforming and elevating her husband's behavior to meet lower-middle-class standards or by seeking to train and propel her children toward the status which she once had or toward an even higher status, thus compensating for her "error." A similar situation may arise with a man who has been downward mobile, due either to economic mishap or to his having married into a lower class. He may wish to help his children to avoid the kind of error which he feels he has made or the kind of deprivation which he has had to undergo.

The child of such a mixed-class marriage faces many of the conflicts typical of any marriage between individuals from different cultures (3). He will be caught between the lower-middle-class parent, who will have the ideas of child-rearing, the ambitions with respect to education, and the concepts of sexual renunciation which are typical of the lower-middle-class culture, and the other parent from the working class, who may have quite different views with respect to education, discipline, child-training goals, recreation, and sexual exploration and behavior. Thus the conflict will be in the basic areas of life. Such a conflict is most readily seen, however, in the area of education. The working-class father in such a mixed-class marriage often feels that the girl or the boy should go to work after she or he has finished high school, but his wife from the lower-middle class almost always feels that the child should go on to college to train for a

profession. This conflict is often bitter; it is also pivotal, since education is one of the most available means for upward mobility.

Until now this discussion has dealt with children who have been “trained” for mobility but trained, perhaps, in the wrong way. The best training for upward mobility probably is training to be independent, to make one’s own decisions, to seek one’s own goals, and to have a proper degree and level of aggression. It is possible here to discuss only aggression. The handling of aggression—the control, direction, and transformation of his own aggression—is especially important for the successfully upward-mobile individual. Basic means of controlling and redirecting aggression are learned in childhood and adolescence. The young child seeks, first of all, to satisfy his own impulses and reduce his tensions. When his parents or siblings block his pursuit of food, activity, and love, he feels angry. He soon learns that his physical weakness prevents his attacking the parents. As he grows older, he also is deterred from aggression toward the parents by his learned feelings of guilt and anxiety as well as by his desire for approval. But the fact that the parents must deny him many things he wants, together with the basic status structure of privileges inherent in the social structure of the parent-child relationship, still chronically arouses the hostility of the child toward the parent.

The resolution of this hostility is a complex process which I have discussed elsewhere (1). Until the child has worked out, through his culturally permitted roles, socially effective forms of initiative and aggression, he has one of two choices. He may either displace his rage from the all-powerful father or mother to a sibling, or he may turn his hostility inward and attack and depreciate himself (as he feels his parents would do if they were aware of his resentment toward them). Thus the healthy child expresses his hostility toward his parents by displacing it to his brother or sister. In this way he seeks to preserve his self-regard by counterattacking but, at the same time, saves himself the destructive guilt and anxiety which would

be aroused by direct and conscious hostility toward the parents. The other recourses, that is, to repress his hostility, or to attack the parents themselves, or to turn his rage against himself, usually lead to destructive levels of guilt and anxiety.

The method by which the upward-mobile individual handles his aggression is extremely complex. It varies, moreover, from one type of personality to another. Boys may repress their hostility toward the parents, usually the father, and, owing to the repressed hate, become the victims of a great deal of vague anxiety and guilt. Other upward-mobile individuals may experience their hostility toward the father at a more nearly conscious level and therefore may suffer less guilt and less anxiety than those of the first group. This second group would presumably include many of the leaders of industry, studied by Warner and Abegglen (4), who depreciate their fathers in their memories and who insist that they, themselves, became successful without the help and example of their fathers. Really this is only another way of saying, "I am better than, stronger than, smarter than, my father was." Still another type of child may develop a great deal of fear and insecurity in his early relationships with the parents. Throughout the remainder of his life, he may be seeking to gain forever increasing power, applause, and prestige in an effort to satisfy his insatiable desire to be reassured.

Similarly, one may distinguish several levels of aggression which are developed in the individual's early relationships with his siblings. The normal adaptation, as has been said, is to be jealous of the sibling; every child apparently wants all of his mother's and father's love or certainly the best part of it. To be jealous of, and to be competitive with, the siblings are therefore almost universal experiences. This rivalry, however, has certain normal limits. It becomes abnormal when the child is obsessed with the feeling that the brother or sister has all the best of it; that he, himself, is rejected by the mother and father. Such a child devotes his life, so to speak, to the self-pity and the feeling of rejection which results from his belief that his sibling has been strongly preferred. Or the reaction may be one of

chronic and inextinguishable rage and resentment. The third type of relationship to the sibling is that of overidentification with the sibling. In this case the child apparently feels that the effort to compete with the sibling is hopeless, owing either to the belief that the mother or father has given all his love to the sibling or to the belief that the sibling, himself, is far more able and effective. The overidentified individual then feels, apparently, "The best recourse I have is to be just like the sibling, to become another one such as he or she." This process by which a sibling loses his identity and initiative in order to escape the resentment of the parent is a destructive process to the ego. It is similar to overidentification with a parent and to identification with the aggressor.

In the social realm, realistic aggression is one of the child's basic ego functions. Aggression, in this sense, includes the ability to stand up for one's self, to fight for one's own stake in the love of the parent, to gain physical pleasure as well as prestige in the areas both of social relations and occupational competence. These ego functions are all subsumed under the general terms "aggression" or "initiative" or "autonomy," and they are strengthened or weakened in the early relationship to the parent and to the sibling. Upward-mobile individuals may come out of their early family life either highly competitive and highly hostile or skilful and realistic in their aggression. But they certainly do not come out of the early family life either as highly self-punishing individuals or as individuals overidentified with their siblings.

The individual who has been *socially*, as distinguished from occupationally, upward-mobile must be one who has especially firm control of his hostility. The socially mobile individual has learned from childhood and adolescence not to fly in the face of authority. He has somehow learned how to placate and win over the authority figures. He has not weighed himself down with fruitless and guilt-laden hostility or resentment toward the parent. With his parents, as later with his social-class superiors, he is a diplomat in aggression. He learns how far he may go, presses for his just due, but he also expects

to knuckle under when necessary and is able to do so without losing his self-regard and without feeling undue humiliation and resentment.

As child and adult, such an individual has learned how to redirect and transform aggression into the socially approved virtues of competition and initiative. He has learned to walk nimbly the tightrope of his superiors' approval by skilful aggression (initiative), while avoiding defiance, on the one hand, and self-depreciation and guilt, on the other. This is his distinguishing characteristic, perhaps—this fine tempering of his aggression. He faces the constant, objective necessity to impress, and to win acceptance from, persons who have more power and more status than he has. These superiors must not, in spite of his efforts to enter their group, come to regard him as a “pusher” or as an *arriviste*. His must be an effective, but congenial and disarming, aggression.

The most difficult task faced by the upward-mobile child and adolescent is that of becoming identified with some group and of achieving a sense of personal identity. Erikson (5) has helped our understanding of adolescence by pointing out that the adolescent's central problem is the attainment of a sense of identity. To develop his identity, he must have a group, know what it is, and feel that he is intimately a part of it.

But the upward-mobile adolescent is *leaving* his family and group and therefore is losing his old identity. Moreover, his parents, if they are “ambitious for him,” are urging and guiding the adolescent toward a culture and a social place which they themselves do not possess. Thus the adolescent in an upward-striving family is being directed toward an identity which neither he nor his parents can conceive in terms of those specific behaviors, goals, and values which the higher social status, or social class, demands; for the parents can define the identity goals of only that culture and that social class in which they have been participating. Thus the child or adolescent whose parents are consciously, or more often unconsciously, directing

him toward a social class higher than their own cannot learn from his parents how to obtain recognition from this higher social class nor how to conceive of himself as a prospective member of the higher class. He is attempting to learn an identity without having the necessary targets for identification and without having a group which can give him, through mutual association and "recognition," the necessary help in conceiving or integrating his new ego identity.

Thus, in upward-striving families, the adolescent is faced with two life-plans: that of his family's own culture and place and that of the more privileged culture and group which he is attempting to integrate into his life. The result is to intensify in these adolescents what Erikson calls "ego-diffusion" and to drive many of them, no doubt, toward a negative identity.

Faced by two conflicting demands—to follow the demands and assume the identity of the parents or to abandon much of the parents' culture and learn a culture to which neither they nor he has social access—the adolescent finds himself confronted by more social tasks, roles, and emotional problems than he can learn to handle. In this social situation and also, no doubt (to follow Erikson's reasoning) as a result of his deep-seated disappointment in the parents in earlier stages of his relationship to them, the adolescent may retreat to an identity which is the opposite of his parents'. Specifically he may move *downward* in his social-class participation, choosing radical groups, identifying with out-groups, marrying "out," or giving up the effort to form any identity at all.

On the other hand, those adolescents who have satisfactorily come through the earlier stages of development are capable of learning the identity of a higher social class and of eventually moving up into that class. But, in all probability, these successfully upward-moving individuals are precisely those who have *not* been dominated or overprotected or had their life-plans mapped out by their parents.

NOTES

1. Allison Davis, "The Ego and Status Anxiety," in *The State of the Social Sciences*, pp. 212–28. Edited by Leonard D. White. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956.

2. Another "transformation" of aggression is that by which an individual's shame concerning his parents' status—his feelings that his parents are inferior economically or socially to the kind of parents he would like to have had—and the accompanying contempt and resentment against the parents are turned into the opposite, namely, into great conscious admiration for the parents and an excessive feeling of indebtedness to the parents.

3. The author has had the opportunity to follow cases of such individuals first studied nineteen years ago in a research which he directed (Allison Davis and John Dollard, *Children of Bondage*. Washington: American Council on Education, 1940).

An intensive research on these individuals, who are now over thirty years of age, is being carried out at Tulane University by a group of psychiatrists and social scientists, under the direction of Professor J. H. Rohrer. This is the only published report of a sample which has been studied by psychiatrists and social scientists during adolescence and again nearly twenty years later.

4. W. Lloyd Warner and James C. Abegglen, *Big Business Leaders in America*. New York: Harper & Bros., 1956.

5. Erik H. Erikson, "The Problem of Ego Identity," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, IV (January, 1956), 56-121.