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Author(s): Steven F. Messner

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COMMENT ON "GAPS AND GLISSANDOS: INEQUALITY, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN 24 COUNTRIES"*

(TYREE ET AL., *ASR*, JUNE 1979)

The recent article by Tyree et al. (1979) directs attention to an important but relatively neglected problem in stratification. Although many studies of income inequality have appeared in the past ten years, virtually all of them have dealt with the determinants of levels of inequality rather than with the consequences of these levels. Tyree et al. present data suggesting that a significant consequence of high levels of inequality is low rates of intergenerational occupational mobility. This is an intriguing proposition, but I wish to raise two issues concerning the "fit" between the theoretical arguments put forth in this article and the empirical analysis.

At the most general level, the authors hypothesize (p. 413) that the "shape of a stratification system" will "influence the level of mobility occurring within that system." The "shape of the stratification system" can be distinguished as what might be called either gap-like or glissando-like. In the former type (p. 413), "social position is defined reasonably clearly along class lines, with two or three discrete classes having fairly uniform economic rewards available within each, but having substantial economic differences between them." In the latter type (p. 413), "social gradations from the top to the bottom are numerous and

small, each one being nearly indistinguishable, yet, when taken together, covering a substantial distance."

It is useful to consider, then, how these two types of systems would appear when depicted by means of a typical frequency distribution. The gap-like type would have a bi- or tri-modal distribution. This would suggest the existence of discrete classes situated at the modes with "uniform economic rewards available within each;" that is, there would be little dispersion around the modes, but with "substantial differences between them," and, therefore, large distances between the modes. The glissando-like type would appear as a continuous curve with numerous "intermediate statuses" linking those at the bottom of the status hierarchy with those at the top.

If this interpretation of the types of stratification systems is correct, then the utility of the key operational measure for this variable becomes highly suspect. The authors assume that the shape of the stratification system is reflected in the shape of the income distribution and they proceed to operationalize the shape of the income distribution through the proportion of income received by the top 5% of households. Although the authors acknowledge (p. 422) that such measurement "is not conceptually satisfactory," they do not confront directly what seems to be the most serious objection to this procedure. Income distributions, at least in industrial societies, are notoriously continuous, unimodal distributions. If income inequality is a reasonable indicator of the shape of a stratification system, then it follows from what is known about income distributions that there are no gap-like societies. If there are no gap-like societies, nothing can be said about the mobility rates of these societies. On the other hand, if there are gap-like stratification systems, then income distribution is clearly an invalid indicator of the shape of the stratification system because income distributions are unlikely to assume a gap-like shape.¹

¹ A similar argument can be made concerning the other operational measure of the shape of the stratification system: the proportion of the labor force in middle status occupations. The authors (p. 418) state their assumption that the shape of the reward distribution conforms to the shape of the occupational distribution, that a "glissando of positions and a glissando of rewards go together." If this assumption is correct, then measures of occupational distribution will also fail to uncover gap-like societies. Occupational distributions can be expected to be just as continuous as reward distributions are, implying either that gap-like stratification systems do not exist or that occupational distributions are invalid indicators of the type of stratification system.

* Direct all correspondence to: Steven F. Messner; Department of Sociology; Columbia University; New York, NY 10000.

The operationalization of mobility also seems inadequate when considered in light of the theoretical argument underlying the analysis. Data limitations force the authors (p. 414) to define mobility as intergenerational movement across the white-collar/blue-collar line. There is, of course, considerable status overlap between white-collar and blue-collar workers, but this is well known and is not the key point being raised here. Rather, my point is that the rationale for the basic hypothesis linking inequality and mobility becomes highly questionable once the precise nature of the measures is taken into account.

The authors argue (p. 413) that the relative affluence of the rich will influence both the cost of falling out of the upper group and the ability of the rich to block the entry of members from lower groups. For these reasons it could be hypothesized that the permeability of the upper group would be heightened if the relative well-being of this group were reduced. To test this hypothesis, however, would require a measure of intergenerational movement in and out of the upper 5% of households. This is not the measure of mobility employed in the analysis. The measure actually employed, movement across the blue-collar/white-collar divide, says very little about the permeability of the upper group. Because most mobility tends to involve movement over short distances, the "collar-color" measure will depend largely on shifts occurring somewhere near the middle of the status distribution—i.e., somewhere near the status division between white- and blue-collar workers.² Few of those counted as upwardly mobile will represent movement from the lower 95% into the upper 5%, and few of those counted as downwardly mobile will represent displacement from the upper to the lower group. On the other hand, most of those actually entering or departing from the upper group will be counted as stationary since both origins and destinations for such person are likely to be "white-collar." In short, the empirical findings concerning inequality and mobility really do not address the basic theoretical hypothesis as formulated. Moreover, a theoretical interpretation of these findings is not readily available.

It must be recognized, in all fairness, that Tyree et al. were faced with the dilemma of either doing the analysis with admittedly un-

satisfactory measures or not doing the analysis at all. Nevertheless, I hope these comments have underscored the seriousness of the measurement deficiencies in their analysis. Until measures that are more faithful to key theoretical concepts become available, there will be little of significance to be said concerning the consequence of the shape of the stratification system for circulatory mobility.

Steven F. Messner
Columbia University

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REPLY TO MESSNER AND URTON*

I shall respond to Messner first, for he seems to have understood our message while disagreeing with our method, and Urton second, for he seems to have missed the message, as well as found methodological shortcomings.

Mr. Messner is both right and wrong. I'll allow I know no national income distribution that isn't unimodal with a right skew. There are no societies with an honest-to-God gap of any magnitude in either their income or occupational structures, a big space inhabited by nobody at all. There are also no mechanically solidary societies, ones with no role differentiation. Nevertheless, in comparing societies it is helpful to think of the relative extent social cohesion is achieved through cooperation and exchange of the unlike and the bonding through identification of the like.

While I do not claim to be the reincarnation of Durkheim, I do ask Mr. Messner to treat our title with a bit more tolerance. (I admit this smacks of "listen to what I mean—not what I say.") There are societies in which that right skew is particularly long: where the social distance in income, wealth, life-style, or life expectancy between the median and an elite is intolerably long. This observation is not new with us. Recognition of the extent development efforts in LDCs have aggravated this distance led AID to require social impact statements for development projects using its funds. Even

² This would not be a serious problem if it could be assumed that the rate of movement at a given level of the social hierarchy would be highly correlated with the rate of any other point. There is no good reason, however, for accepting this assumption.

* Direct all correspondence to: Andrea Tyree, Department of Sociology, State University of New York at Stony Brook, NY 11794.