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C. James Richardson

The problem of downward mobility*

ABSTRACT

Little is known about the nature and determinants of downward mobility. It has been suggested that downward movement implies the extension of meritocratic norms of selection and rejection. Alternatively, those who fall are seen as social casualties. A third explanation, that most middle-mass downward mobility represents a two generation process of status consolidation, is proposed here. Data for a sample of downwardly mobile urban British males and their fathers provide strong support for the status consolidation explanation. These data indicate that in the middle-mass there is, in fact, very little genuine downward mobility. Rather, most men who 'fall' come from risen working-class families, those which because of the upward mobility of one or both parents are peripheral rather than core members of the middle class. Sons were encouraged towards what fathers viewed as the less ambivalent status provided by skilled trades. In moving 'downwards' into these occupations sons were, in effect, fulfilling status and occupational aspirations of their fathers.

INTRODUCTION

Comparative studies of social mobility have consistently shown that industrial societies are characterized by high rates of downward as well as upward mobility.¹ Indeed, some societies such as Britain have proportionately more people moving downwards than upwards. Why people are likely to fall in the social structure is problematic. Structural factors (level of economic activity, shifts in the occupational structure, and class differentials in fertility) have all been such as to stimulate upward mobility and *retard* downward mobility.² While there is only limited research on downward mobility,³ sociologists, sometimes explicitly, more often implicitly, seem to have had one of two types of explanation in mind: a social casualty or a meritocratic explanation.

The first, the social casualty explanation, is the more traditional answer to why people are downwardly mobile. It suggests that downward movement is the result of mental and physical illness, alcoholism, addiction and family disorganization. The evidence, however, is fragmentary and inconclusive, often speculative.⁴ Probably, as Parkin suggests, some

people who fall are social casualties of one kind or another. But, samples from which we obtain our statistics on rates of social mobility, based as they are around the occupational structure, are not likely to 'catch' those who because of personal problems drift to the 'very bottom' of the social hierarchy. Studies of skid row, in other words, do not tell us much about the short distance downward mobility found in national mobility studies. Thus, the social casualty explanation, rather than necessarily incorrect, may simply be inapplicable to the problem of middle-mass downward mobility.

A more recent explanation is the meritocratic. It suggests that downward mobility is the outcome of an extension of meritocratic norms and the diminishing significance of particularistic-ascriptive norms. Miller, for example, paid particular attention to downward mobility not only because of its frequency but because he believed it to be a better indicator of 'fluidity' than is upward mobility. He argues that 'a society which is dropping sons born in advantaged strata out of these strata has more openness than one which brings up talented manual sons but safeguards the privileges of the already advantaged'.⁵ Subsequently, a number of other sociologists, citing Miller, have also treated the rate of downward mobility as an index of openness in making historical or cross-national comparisons.⁶ The difficulty is, again, that the mobility we wish to explain is middle-mass mobility involving mostly short distance movements across the manual/non-manual line. Further, this conventional measure of social mobility is, of necessity, crude, missing as it does the more subtle differences between fathers' and sons' status which might plausibly be due to differences in ability and merit. Thus, given the systematic evidence we now have on class differences in life chances and on the ability of status groups to perpetuate themselves, we would expect that even the dullest child of a middle-class family could be given sufficient polish to insure him some position within the white-collar stratum.⁷ Although he might be downwardly mobile relative to his father, he would not be labelled as such by conventional measures of social mobility. However, the very limited knowledge we have at present about the downwardly mobile does not allow us to entirely discount a meritocratic explanation.⁸

Because of the nature of middle-mass social mobility, we suggest that an alternative and more plausible explanation is that a good deal of what we measure as downward mobility is in fact a two generation process of status consolidation. A problem with much mobility research is that it usually occurs alongside a number of other competing research topics. The result is that we are provided with only a static or snapshot picture of mobility and there is seldom room on the questionnaire for sufficient background data on the mobile individual and his family of origin. However, some studies of *upward* mobility have attempted to overcome these deficiencies and have tried to look not only at events and conditions in the life of the mobile individual but also at what has happened

to his family of origin and to its members prior to his upward mobility.⁹ These studies suggest that because of downward mobility of one or both parents, geographical mobility or other events, the family of origin has in effect only marginal membership in the working class. As Turner suggests, one important outcome of this marginality is that families mediate the impact of social class upon the child by creating an atypical life situation and by transmitting a subculture which deviates from the family's class position.¹⁰ In particular, the finding that the upwardly mobile come disproportionately from what Jackson and Marsden call 'sunken middle-class families'¹¹ suggests that much of what we measure as upward mobility can more appropriately be viewed from the parents' perspective as *status restoration* rather than as an actual *change* in status.

Much the same argument should also apply to downward mobility. Of course, moving downward is not simply the obverse of moving upwards. It is difficult, for example, to think in terms of concepts such as 'structural supports for downward mobility'.¹² But, at the same time, not all upward occupational mobility is necessarily translated into social mobility in the sense of it involving normative and relational shifts as well as economic.¹³ The crucial variable would seem to be whether the mobility proceeds through a formal educational route and is therefore 'legitimate' or whether it proceeds via a non-educational mobility route and is therefore 'illegitimate'—what Turner refers to as 'irregular' mobility.¹⁴ Hopper points out that these latter routes, through which a considerable amount of upward mobility occurs, 'provide almost no mobility-training experiences. Their career-training and status-training experiences are for the lower classes, and are inappropriate for those who become upwardly despite their having been rejected initially (and in effect incorrectly).'¹⁵ Thus, the lifestyle, attitudes and social ties of these upward mobiles are likely to be at odds with their destination class. Families are likely to have only marginal membership in the middle class.

In short, for the same theoretical reasons that we find 'sunken middle-class families', we should expect to find what might be called 'risen working-class families'. That is, families which because of upward mobility of one or both parents remain essentially working class in terms of their values and norms. And, to the extent that these form the predominant socialization experience of the child, we would expect downward mobility to come disproportionately from these families.¹⁶ Finally, because what is transmitted will represent some modification of the typical working-class situation rather than simply an absence of middle-class socialization as has sometimes been suggested,¹⁷ downward mobility may, from the parents' perspective, be interpreted as *status consolidation* rather than as an actual *status loss*.¹⁸

This paper, through analysis of survey research data on middle-mass mobility, attempts to evaluate these alternative explanations of downward mobility. The first section outlines briefly the research design and

the method used to 'test' these alternative hypotheses. The next section describes some characteristics of the downwardly mobile particularly as they bear on the social casualty and meritocratic explanations. In the latter part of the paper we utilize mainly case material to examine the hypothesis that downward mobility is, in fact, a two generation process of status consolidation.

METHOD

As indicated above, most mobility research has been able to provide us with only a static picture of social mobility and with only a limited amount of information on the individual's life situation prior to his mobility. In particular, a static perspective assumes, implicitly, that the origin status for measuring intergenerational movement is a fixed and unchanging platform; there is little recognition that fathers, too, may have experienced or be experiencing intergenerational and intragenerational mobility. Such studies do not allow us to assess adequately either the meritocratic or the status consolidation explanations. A test of the former requires, in particular, data on the mobile individual's own educational experience and aspirations, his parents' education and expectations, his early career and mobility aspirations. The alternative hypothesis, of status consolidation, requires in addition to these data, a two generation approach in which we direct attention to the mobility experience and orientations of the family of origin of mobile respondents as well as to the mobile individual.

We attempt to overcome these deficiencies in several ways. In order to find downwardly mobile people, we began the research with a sample which was relatively large and representative of middle-mass mobility, upward as well as downward ($N = 884$).¹⁹ Intensive second interviews of a sub-sample ($N = 117$) of this larger sample allow us to look beyond simply the rate of mobility to what has happened to the individual prior to his mobility. We asked about the respondents' family background, education, work-life history and early educational, career and mobility aspirations. These data, especially those concerned with educational achievement and aspirations provide the main test of the meritocratic explanation.

We introduced a dynamic element into the research by attempting to interview all fathers of respondents who were still living. While this was not completely possible, we did succeed in interviewing 40 fathers of mobile respondents. In addition, for all respondents information was recorded about at least three different points in the father's work life, whether he was living or not. Finally, since in mobility studies, some respondents are old enough to be both 'fathers' and 'sons', additional case material illustrating the two generations is provided by treating these respondents also as fathers and asking what has happened to their sons.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DOWNWARDLY MOBILE

Before examining the evidence relevant to an explanation of downward mobility, it can be noted that it is not simply an artefact of our measures. In all, 100 men (11 per cent of the sample) moved downwards inter-generationally across the manual/non-manual line. In general, the data indicate that these men are, in most things, virtually identical to stable manual men but are very different from men who move upwards or have remained stable non-manual. Table I illustrates this. For example, though downward mobility carries with it the likelihood of a relatively low income, there is not a statistically significant difference between mean incomes of downwardly mobile and stable working-class men.²⁰ There is a similiar relationship between the proportion living in a council flat or council house and mobility: men who have moved downwards are almost four times as likely to live in council housing than stable non-manual men but again, do not differ significantly from stable working-class men.²¹ (Column 3, education will be discussed in the next section.)

TABLE I *Mean family income, education and type of residence by pattern of mobility*

	<i>Mean Household Income (£)</i>	<i>Council Flat or House*</i>	<i>Education†</i>
Upwardly Mobile	2408	34%	43%
Stable Non-Manual	2354	12	21
Downwardly Mobile	1238	43	86
Stable Manual	1346	51	93
All Groups	1645	39%	58%
Total (N)	870	815	876

*Per cent living in council house or flat (excludes respondents living in parents' home).

†Education—Per cent of respondents who had completed their full-time education at age 15 or under.

With respect to these objective characteristics, then, men who move downwards, occupationally, differ radically from their class of origin but are highly similiar to their destination class. Other questions in the interview concerning class identification and perceived class mobility, suggest that men who move downwards align and identify themselves with the working rather than the middle class. For example, only about one-quarter (26 per cent) viewed themselves as middle class and less than one-fifth (18 per cent) regarded themselves as 'stable middle class', that is, as not having experienced downward mobility.²²

In one of the few empirical studies of downward mobility Wilensky

and Edwards employ the term 'skidder' to depict the downwardly mobile. In particular, they single out the disorderliness of their work life as one important attribute of these men, a finding which lends some credence to a 'social casualty' explanation.²³

However, accounts of work-life histories recorded in our interviews stand in sharp contrast to their findings. They reveal that of the four patterns of mobility and non-mobility the work lives of men in the downwardly mobile group were, in fact the most orderly.²⁴ While other groups showed a considerable amount of shifting back and forth across the manual non-manual/line, movements downward typically occurred at the outset of the work life with the rest of the time spent in a manual occupation. Nor did their movements downwards involve long distance falls in social status. Table II indicates that most men (78 per cent) were in the low downward category, their most usual destination a skilled trade or an apprenticeship. Thus, there is little evidence to justify using the term 'skidder' to describe these men.²⁵ We turn now to consider data relevant to the meritocratic explanation of downward mobility.

The meritocratic explanation requires evidence that those downwardly mobile anticipated receiving a typical middle-class education but were at some point rejected by the educational system. However, unless 'selection' and 'rejection' are used in the widest sense possible, the educational experiences of the downwardly mobile do not suggest that meritocratic norms have played much part in their downward movement. Some evidence bearing on this appears in column 3 of Table I. This suggests that it is true most had been 'rejected' by the formal educational system but this could also be said of men who are stable working class. Both differ radically from the upwardly mobile and stable non-manual groups in that they had left school at the minimum leaving age after what was invariably a non-grammar school education. Other data from the second interviews show that if allowance is made for changes in school-leaving ages, then downwardly mobile men, like stable manual men, possessed about the same formal educational qualifications as their fathers. There was, as well, little evidence that these men or their families had held higher educational aspirations than were actually achieved. In sum, rather than being 'cooled-out' from mobility striving, the more accurate interpretation is that these men had, like the majority of the working class, never been 'warmed-up' by the educational system in the first place.²⁶

DOWNWARD MOBILITY AND STATUS CONSOLIDATION

When we add to the data of Table II the case material on fathers as well as sons, it appears that downward mobility comes, overwhelmingly, from one of two kinds of families: a minority which though stable have marginal membership in the middle class and the majority which are 'risen working-class'. The case material shows also that this split corresponds

roughly to the division in Table II between High downward and Low downward. In the rest of this paper we examine these two patterns in some detail with particular reference to the status consolidation explanation of downward mobility.

TABLE II Summary of occupational origins and destinations of the downwardly mobile (N = 100)

Fathers' main occupation	High Downward (N = 22)		Per cent
	Per cent	Sons' occupation	
Farmers	32	Skilled manual (e.g., tool-maker, fitter, carpenter, electrician)	27
Shopkeepers	36	Semi-skilled (e.g., drivers, storemen)	46
Professionals (e.g. civil servants, chemist, company director)	23	Unskilled	27
Low level supervisory	9		
	100		100
	Low Downward (N = 78)		
Clerks & bookkeepers	21	Skilled manual	65
Farmers	18	Semi-skilled	28
Sales (estate agents, & commercial travellers)	10	Apprentices	7
Low level managers & supervisory personnel (e.g., bus depot inspector, station master, sales manager, works manager, transport officer)	24		
Business owners	12		
Other (policemen, technical workers)	16		
	100		100

As Table II shows, men who were in the high downward category had fathers who were employed in highly ambiguous occupations: farmers and shopkeepers. Both are occupations which include a wide range of possible income and status levels under the same label and which in many cases may provide their occupants with only a marginally middle-class status.

These men were also generally older so that it was no longer possible to interview their fathers. Nevertheless, the accounts of their childhood clearly indicate that the toe-hold their fathers had had in the middle class was precarious and economically insecure. The result was that their entry into the work world was not very different from that of most of the working-class men who started out in the first three decades of this century.

Representative of this small group of men (N x 15) was Mr Wade,

the son of a long-dead Chelsea greengrocer and now nearly 70 years old himself.²⁷ Mr Wade started work at age 13 in a cycle repair shop. This was followed by a job as an assistant milk roundsman and then seven years in the trenches of France and Belgium. When he was demobbed in 1920 it was with a trade in bricklaying, a job he was to do for some 30 years. In the 1950s he became a messenger in the civil service from which he had just recently retired.

In his view he had done much better for himself than had his father. His two daughters were educated sufficiently to become secretaries and are married to a company director and an accountant both of whom have, as it turns out, been upwardly mobile. In sum, there was little to distinguish Mr Wade and others like him from older non-mobile working-class men interviewed. In his mind, at least, there was a working-class chain unbroken until his daughters' generation. The label of downward mobility did not seem very applicable to these men at all.

As Table II indicated, men who moved downwards one or two social classes were mainly employed in skilled jobs or were apprenticing to enter one. Their fathers were, therefore, in Class 2 or Class 3 (managerial and clerical, respectively). Since low downward mobility makes up most of the sample, it is data on these men and their fathers which will provide the main test of the status consolidation explanation.

Once we adopt a two generation approach and ask what has happened to fathers as well as sons, the assumption of a fixed and solid origin status seldom holds. Inspection of their job histories show that a considerable number of fathers (70 per cent) had been upwardly mobile over their own work life. This pattern was even more pronounced among mothers of the downwardly mobile: over 75 per cent were originally working class and had either 'married up' or had married men who subsequently moved upwards. In contrast, only about 20 per cent of the stable non-manual men had fathers and/or mothers initially working class.

Of particular interest is the high degree of similarity in attitudes and work-life histories between one group of upwardly mobile respondents in the sample and the upwardly mobile fathers of the downwardly mobile men. About two-fifths of the upwardly mobile respondents were in the group in question. They were mainly distinguished from the other upwardly mobile men by having moved up relatively late in their work life through a non-educational mobility route. Typically they had spent most of their career in a variety of semi-skilled and unskilled jobs and, at the time of the interview, were employed in supervisory, sales or low-level managerial positions. Mobile fathers of downwardly mobile men had experienced almost identical patterns of mobility, so much so that it is possible to treat them as identical. As one father described it:

Its gradually worked up to this. I was pushed into it really, this office work. I was always against anything indoors. In mining I found you

got a comradeship you don't get anywhere else. Its a rough job. Mining is always dangerous because you're dealing with Mother Nature and anything can happen. But finally I arrived at the conclusion that if everyone is going to get fat behind a desk, I might as well do it myself. I think I'll stick this job out. See, we're classed as management and we're dealing with management.

As I have shown elsewhere, social mobility is more likely to involve normative and relational changes when the occupational mobility proceeds through a formal educational route, the upward movement is fairly intensive and it occurs relatively early on in the individual's work life.²⁸ None of these conditions held for most fathers of the downwardly mobile men and for about two-fifths of men in the upwardly mobile sample. They were, in effect, risen working class, having retained a more working-class than middle-class set of attitudes and behaviour patterns. As another father of a downwardly mobile respondent (a sales supervisor) described himself:

I still am working class. You can't bribe over. If they stuck a pig next to a Tory candidate, I'd vote for the pig. I've voted Labour every time. I won't vote Communist but I vote Labour. I believe in socialism.

Accounts by fathers and sons suggest that risen working-class families provide their sons with a relatively unique socialization. Although this experience was certainly closer to that typical in the working-class than in the middle class, it still differed from both in a number of ways. First, education was not so likely to be devalued as in the stable working-class homes visited during the interviewing. They were, for example, more willing to 'allow', even encourage, children to go on in school as far as they wished. But, at the same time, academic achievement was not as taken-for-granted as in the middle class proper. None of the downwardly mobile, for example, could say as did Mr Richard, a stable middle-class respondent, that 'It was the way we were brought up, to encourage ourselves. We weren't driven exactly but we were always made aware that in order to get on in life it paid to work and pass exams.' Risen working-class families, instead, shared the working-class concern with maintaining the delicate balance between avoiding 'pressuring the child' while at the same time 'backing him up in whatever he wanted to do'. As Mr Smythe, a buyer, said:

I'd like a good education for them. If they so desire they can carry on beyond fifteen to higher things. I'd back them all the way. But I wouldn't force them into anything they didn't want to do.

Another difference between these upwardly mobile fathers and stable manual fathers was that while they shared the usual working-class disdain for white-collar work, they were able to speak from first hand

experience about these jobs and the middle-class people who occupied them. Thus, positive attitudes about education were somewhat offset by their unflattering depiction of the middle class who receive that education. With emphatic nods of agreement from his father, an office supervisor, Mr Biggin gave his views on the nature of 'high' status occupations.

Some jobs are waster jobs. People doing these jobs are well paid and they're doing nothing. Take a chartered accountant, for instance, he's got to do his training but once that's through he only works a formula, really. Everything works the same—near enough identical—once he gets his qualifications. Or take a job like works manager. From what my father tells me they're absolutely useless. It seems to work out that the brightest people are not at the top.

Mr Biggin is a very contented, almost archetypal, bricklayer. Mr Willets Senior, now in a non-manual job, maintained that:

These glorious suburban boys make me sick. The toffee-nosed what you see, rushing across London at nine o'clock in the morning with their brollies in hand and rushing back again at five. It's one big rat race and they're all so ambitious they trample anybody who gets in their way. I work with them now and they're the most unpleasant people you can meet. The more, the higher they are in status, the worse they are.

It is perhaps not surprising then that his son had chosen to become a manual worker.

Other fathers were more preoccupied with the alienative aspects of the middle-class occupations which they had been able to enter. In part they were romanticizing the work of tradesman and craftsmen and in part they were ambivalent and uncertain about the actual worth of what they found themselves doing. In any event, they differed from working-class men in the emphasis they placed on the intrinsic as opposed to the instrumental aspects of work.

Money is not the mainstay in my estimation. Provided the money you're getting is giving a reasonable standard of living then what I want out of a job is the satisfaction when you can see the end product, you can see what you've done. This doesn't happen very often to me. (Office manager)

Or as another father concluded:

Starting over, I'd probably break away completely from what I'm doing. I think I would have liked to be a shop floor manager of some description. Then I could actually get involved in something, whereas I feel a bit restricted working at a desk. It's all writing and telephoning which all seems vague and pointless. I'd like to point at something and say: 'I did that or I helped make that.' (Sales manager.)

These feelings of dissatisfaction with their present work plus memories of the insecurity which had followed them throughout their life were very often crystallized in strong regrets that they had not been able to learn a specific trade. For instance, in the upwardly mobile sample, over one-quarter—virtually all of those who were, in effect, risen working-class—stated that if they could have their life over they would take up an apprenticeship. As Mr Jamieson, a sales manager of a small firm said:

Starting over I'd have a trade. I'd be a skilled tradesman. Then I'd maybe go into this line of work, but initially I'd have a trade. Then I'd always have that behind me. It wasn't possible, of course at the time.

Another father, Mr Hamilton, had experienced both unemployment and a succession of manual jobs before eventually working his way upward within a small shipping firm to general manager. He, too, focused on the security afforded by a trade.

The one you saw, he's doing the best of the three. He started as an apprentice electrician and he's moved up steadily to charge hand. The son in the bakery started as a clerk and is now a sales director. But it's up and down with him. It's not so secure I don't think. I know I would have felt better with a trade behind me.

These feelings, in themselves more pronounced than in other groups, lead in turn to the final and most crucial difference in the socialization experienced by downwardly mobile men. This was that downwardly mobile sons were actively encouraged to enter a trade, often the very one that their fathers felt robbed of by the depression or by the 'hiatus' of war as more than one man described it. Thus, as the interview data reveal, not only did these fathers paint a very bleak picture of middle-class occupations and life styles but they also displaced their own frustrated ambitions onto their children. In the process, sons were directed away from the formal educational system and, therefore, from the middle class.

Mr Rodgers Senior, now a sales manager in an automotive supply firm, for example, planned to be an electrical engineer but the war and sickness intervened. 'The worst thing was after the war there was a big gap. That gap, and my training only partly completed, I found I'd forgotten nearly everything. That and my sickness made me look for another job.' His son had nearly completed a day release programme with the Post Office and will soon be an electrical engineer. 'As things have worked out I'm very happy for him,' said Mr Rodgers Senior. 'He's being educated along the lines of the kind of work he is going to do and which he likes best.' Another father who had always wanted a trade but who had spent the latter half of his work life in various routine clerical jobs said of his son:

I always believed in letting my boys do what they thought best. They've all gone into good jobs and I'm quite happy about that. I

x

worried about them more than my wife. I always wanted Michael, the one you met, to be a toolmaker and he's come very close to doing that (son a skilled machinist).

Similarly, Mr Cormack had hoped to be a draughtsman but had ended up as a buyer. He said spontaneously:

I was very keen on geometry, technical drawing, that sort of thing. I didn't do it because it was tied up to an apprenticeship which my parents didn't want. I didn't particularly get my way there. If it's relevant, my son is taking technical drawing and hopes to become a draughtsman. That pleases me a great deal.

The large proportion of downwardly mobile respondents actually working in skilled occupations is testament to the effectiveness of this socialization experience.

I couldn't think of anything to do when I left school and a couple of my friends went to Acme Engineering. But my father said, 'Take an apprenticeship, whatever else you decide'. So, I took the engineering side up. (Toolmaker—father, a company director.)

I wasn't a hundred per cent sure of anything but my mother and father thought that printing was something with a future and was interesting. I can remember from an early age, 11 or 12, my mom and dad saying, 'Become a printer'. I wouldn't say I didn't want to become a printer but I never thought of anything else, really. (Newspaper printer—father, a clerk.)

They kept on at me about apprenticing. 'Don't go for the big money. Don't worry about friends getting 20 pounds when you're getting four to ten as an apprentice because you'll find out at the end of the time you're getting twice as much as them plus a better and more interesting job'. (Skilled engineer—father, a buyer.)

In a few instances of course, fathers of downwardly mobile men had held more middle-class aspirations for their children and were later forced to rationalize these when it became obvious that they would not or could not go to grammar school. However, rather than take the next step into middle-class patterns and use the private school system, they chose, instead, to bend to the 'natural' leaning of the child. Said one father, a sales supervisor:

I tried to exercise what influence I could. For example, the classics: Dickens, Stevenson; but he wasn't interested in *Treasure Island*. But he could take apart racing cars, clean the brushes, and put them back together and I wouldn't have a clue. He's the reverse of me. He's got an aptitude for mechanics. He just wouldn't have been himself had he gone into clerical work or something. (Son is a car mechanic.)

It is difficult, of course, to distinguish between satisfaction and rationalization, doubly so when the data are retrospective. People, as Berger

points out, are as capable as governments of practising 'Russian Historicism', 'calling forth some events into decisive importance as others (are) banished to ignominious oblivion'.²⁹ Initially, we anticipated that questions about status and status decline would be among the most difficult to put to downwardly mobile men and their fathers. But, as the preceding data show, these men, while aware of how society would interpret what had happened to them, could call upon a number of extenuating circumstances to dull the impact of their downward movement. In particular, security and intrinsic job satisfaction, attributes perceived as characterizing skilled trades were acceptable compensations for what was, after all, a very small loss of status. When this did not occur, as with the few young men in the high downward category working in unskilled jobs, fathers were more apparently dissatisfied with their sons' achievements. As one father commented:

We didn't see eye to eye on very much. I wanted him to go into light engineering to get some sort of trade if he wasn't going to stay on in school. I feel he let himself and me down.

Generally, however, downwardly mobile sons shared their fathers' sense of satisfaction and seemed little concerned about what they, too, recognized as objectively a loss of status, relative to their fathers. The earlier encouragement, sometimes pressure, to enter a trade had meant that their choice of work and actual entry into work were relatively unproblematic. Few now regretted their choice of occupation displaying instead the highest level of job satisfaction and commitment to work of the four groups.³⁰ Finally, while many were young enough that it would be possible for them to reverse their status, few indicated any desire to do so. For example, responses to questions about promotion suggest that most were uninterested, viewing it as problematic, unlikely and, in main, undesirable. Thus, either through choice or circumstance, but more often the former, the downward mobility of these men was unlikely to be reversed.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Two explanations of individual downward mobility can be found in the stratification literature: what we have referred to as the 'social casualty' thesis and the 'meritocratic thesis'. We have suggested a third explanation, that of 'status consolidation' in which, following the example of research on upward mobility, we direct greater attention to the mobility experiences of parents of those who move downward.

As expected, the data failed to reveal a link between personal or social problems and downward mobility. Those who fall within the middle mass of industrial society are not, it appears, 'social casualties' nor do they necessarily come from families experiencing social dis-

organization. Rather, men who moved downwards appeared to be fairly stable and typical people, not very different from other working-class men interviewed.

Evidence that downward mobility is related to the extension of meritocratic norms of selection and rejection is also lacking. The ideal-typical pattern implied by Miller is one in which because of meritocratic norms, some sons *born* in advantaged strata are unable to maintain that status and are therefore downwardly mobile. There is the further assumption that the educational system is the key mechanism ensuring that the less competent fall in the social structure. However, as we have just seen, almost none of the men who moved downwards occupationally, came from solid middle-class backgrounds. Stable middle-class men unable to obtain a place in a state grammar school still managed to maintain a roughly similar status to that of their fathers. Other data from the larger study show that, in large part, this was made possible by the continuing existence of the private school system and by occupational selection procedures which still give considerable weight to ascriptive factors, to family influence and to particularism. Generally, it was the absence of these factors rather than meritocratic principles which contributed to downward mobility.

The quantitative data and case material of this study mainly support an explanation of downward mobility as a two-generation process of status consolidation. These data show that instead of proceeding from core status groups, as has been generally assumed, downward mobility originates in families only marginally middle class. In the majority of cases these were risen working-class families in which the father had been upwardly mobile over his work life. About one-fifth of the sample consisted of families which were marginal because the father was employed in a status-ambiguous occupation such as shopkeeper.

In either case the essential outcome was that sons had been exposed to and had internalized working-class not middle-class values and norms. Turner has argued that the typical middle-class situation is one in which members experience economic security, sustained attention and affection from their parents and a stable family life. Downward mobility might arise when this constellation is altered by family break up or by the unusually large family so that 'some of the important conditions which make the middle-class child into the typical adult from his class background may be missing'.³¹ My data indicate that the process is much more positive than Turner describes it. Rather than inadequate socialization, we are dealing with a different type of socialization experience than that typical in the middle class. Parents had taken an interest in their sons' futures but its effect was to encourage them towards manual work and, in particular, to skilled trades of one kind or another. Thus, in taking up a trade, sons appeared to be realizing the frustrated ambitions of their fathers who regretted not having done so themselves. At odds with the middle class in a number of ways, skilled trades offered,

if only vicariously through their sons, the possibility that the family might consolidate its status position.

From the sons' perspective, status consolidation rather than genuine downward mobility is also the most accurate interpretation of the observed mobility. Strauss has suggested that downward mobility may be separated analytically into 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' mobility.³² These findings suggest that in the middle mass most downward movement is voluntary in that occupational choice was not related to personal misfortune, economic depression or blocked educational or occupational aspirations. Rather, to the extent that any decision can be thought of as voluntaristic, the great majority of the downwardly mobile chose their occupation and social status freely and with the general approval and collusion of their families. Typically, these men entered the working class at the beginning of what emerged as a very stable and apparently satisfying work life and showed every sign of remaining there until retirement.

At the same time, it should be recalled that the focus throughout was on middle-mass mobility and movements which crossed the manual/non-manual line. There remains, then, the possibility that other patterns of downward mobility may involve either social casualties or meritocratic practices. Elsewhere, for example, I have shown that the smaller but involuntary drops in status experienced by sons who remain in the middle class are often the most personally devastating.³³ The extent to which meritocratic processes are involved in this pattern of downward mobility may constitute a relevant target for further empirical inquiry.

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Notes

1. S. M. Lipset and R. Bendix, *Social Mobility in Industrial Society*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1959; S. M. Miller, 'Comparative Social Mobility', *Current Sociology*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1960) pp. 1-80. Discussions of the concept and measurement of mobility can be found

in these and in E. Hopper, 'Notes on stratification, education and mobility in industrial societies' in E. Hopper (ed.) *Readings in the Theory of Educational Systems*, Hutchinson and Co., 1971, pp. 13-37. See also, K. Hope (ed.), *The Analysis of Social Mobility: Methods and*

Approaches, Clarendon Press, 1972 and J. M. Ridge (ed.), *Mobility in Britain Reconsidered*, Oxford University Press, 1972.

2. Kahl was among the first to distinguish between mobility which is due to structural changes and that which is due to 'an interchange of ranks' or circulation of people. J. A. Kahl, *The American Class Structure*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1957. For a theoretical discussion, see S. M. Lipset and H. L. Zetterberg, 'A theory of social mobility', *Transactions of the Third World Congress in Sociology*, vol. III, 155-177. For attempts to relate mobility rates to economic activity, see T. Fox and S. M. Miller, 'Economic, political and social determinants of mobility', *Acta Sociologica*, vol. 9 (1965), pp. 76-93.

3. While there is an immense literature on determinants of upward mobility, downward mobility has been largely neglected theoretically and empirically, except in terms of its consequences. See, for example, B. Stacey, 'Some psychological consequences of intergenerational mobility', *Human Relations*, vol. 20 no. 1 (1967) pp. 3-12. However, for American Studies up to the mid-fifties, see by R. W. Mack, L. Freeman and S. Yellin, *Social Mobility: Thirty Years of Research: An Annotated Bibliography*. They point out that while rates of downward mobility have remained constant, sociological interest has tended to wax and wane with the ups and downs of the business cycle. For an attempt to use novelistic literature, see A. Strauss, *The Contexts of Social Mobility: Ideology and Theory*, Aldine Publishing Company, 1971, pp. 171-85.

4. The main difficulty is determining priority: is mental illness, for example, a cause or consequence of downward mobility? See R. J. Turner and M. O. Wagenfeld, 'Occupational mobility and schizophrenia: an assessment of the social causation and social selection hypotheses', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 32, no. 1 (February, 1967), pp. 194-113. The Classic study is R. E. L. Faris and H. W. Dunham, *Mental Disorders in Urban Areas*, Rinehart, 1938. See also M. H. Lystad, 'Social mobility

among selected groups of schizophrenic patients', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 22, no. 3 (June 1957), pp. 289-91; A. B. Hollingshead, *et al.*, 'Social mobility and mental illness', *American Sociological Review* vol. 19 no. 5 (October 1954), pp. 577-84; W. Breed, 'Occupational mobility and suicide among white males', *American Sociological Review*. Physical illness, frequently suggested as an explanation of downward mobility, seems to be one of what Macdonald calls low-level known sociological truths about the world which are difficult to document, K. I. Macdonald, 'Downwardly mobile mothers and other interaction effects', in J. M. Ridge (ed.) *op. cit.*: For alcoholism, see D. J. Bogue, *Skid Row in American Cities*, Community and Family Study Centre, 1963, ch. 14. Frequently it is speculated that downward mobility is the outcome of personal misfortune. See discussions in B. Jackson and D. Marsden, *Education and the Working Class*, Penguin Books, 1966, p. 70 and F. Parkin, *Class Inequality and Political Order*, MacGibbon and Kee Ltd., 1971, p. 57.

5. Miller, *op. cit.* p. 65.

6. See, for example, E. F. Jackson and H. J. Crockett, 'Occupational Mobility in the United States: A Point Estimate and Trend Comparison', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 29, no. 1 (February 1964), pp. 5-15; L. Broom and F. L. Jones, 'Father-to-Son Mobility: Australia in Comparative Perspective', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 74 (January 1969), pp. 333-42.

7. The seminal discussion concerning the unlikelihood of a meritocracy remains M. Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, Penguin Books, 1958. A recent compilation of research on class and inequality of opportunity is M. Craft (ed.), *Family, Class and Education*, The Longman Group Ltd., 1970. Parkin, *op. cit.* p. 58 presents a critique of a meritocratic explanation of downward mobility similar to mine.

8. For one largely positive but exploratory attempt to test a meritocratic explanation, see M. Young and J. Gibson, 'In Search of an explanation of social mobility', *British Journal of Statistical Psychology*, vol. 16, no. 27 (1963), pp. 69-82

9. In particular S. M. Miller and F. Riessman, 'The Working class sub-culture: a new view', *Social Problems*, no. 9 (1961), pp. 86-7; H. J. Gans, *The Urban Villagers*, The Free Press, 1962; Jackson and Marsden, op. cit.; E. Cohen, *Parental Factors in Educational Mobility*, Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, described in Lipset and Bendix, op. cit. p. 238; J. D. Kahl, 'Educational and occupational aspirations of "common-man" boys', in A. H. Halsey et al. (eds), *Education, Economy and Society*, The Free Press (1961), pp. 348-66. For a review of this and other relevant literature, see Richardson, op. cit., ch. 6.
10. R. H. Turner, 'Some family determinants of ambition', *Sociology and Social Research*, vol. 46, no. 3 (July 1962), pp. 397-411.
11. B. Jackson and D. Marsden, *Education and the Working Class*, Penguin Books, 1966.
12. See R. A. Ellis and W. C. Lane, 'Structural supports for upward mobility', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 28, no. 5 (October 1963), pp. 743-56.
13. For an extensive discussion of these concepts as they relate to social mobility, see J. H. Goldthorpe and K. Hope, 'Occupational grading and occupational prestige', in K. Hope (ed.), op. cit., pp. 19-79.
14. R. H. Turner, 'Acceptance of irregular mobility in Britain and the United States', *Sociometry*, vol. 29, no. 4 (December 1966), pp. 334-52.
15. E. Hopper, 'Educational systems and selected consequences of patterns of mobility and non-mobility in industrial societies', in E. Hopper (ed.) op. cit., p. 332.
16. There is little empirical evidence for this. However, see Miller, op. cit., p. 65, who, in considering the 'stability' of mobility asks whether 'those who rise provide a firm footing for their progeny to maintain or to move above the new position, or is the third generation likely to fall back to the grandfather's position'? Similarly, Glass has shown that British society does contain some 'unstable elements' which are 'involved in reverse shifts in status in successive generations', D. V. Glass (ed.), *Social Mobility in Britain*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954, p. 286.
17. See Lipset and Bendix, op. cit., p. 249; Turner, 'Some family determinants of ambition', op. cit., p. 398.
18. I would like to thank Earl Hopper, for initially suggesting this concept to me.
19. All interviewing took place in the London Region, an area with a radius of about 45 miles from the centre of London. Details of how the initial study—a survey of family life, work and leisure—was done can be found in M. Young and P. Willmott, *The Symmetrical Family*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973, appendix 1. Second interviews including 40 fathers were carried out by the author in 1971 and 1972. A sample of stable non-manual and manual men was also reinterviewed. For details of this study see C. J. Richardson, op. cit., appendices 1 and 2.
20. We draw attention, in this section, to differences which had less than a 5% probability of being due to chance or sampling fluctuations.
21. The importance of type of residence as an indicator of the extent to which occupational mobility is translated into social mobility is discussed in Richardson, op. cit., pp. 59-61. In this, regard the more interesting finding is the high proportion of men labelled as upwardly mobile who continue to live in council housing.
22. Men who moved downward were evenly split between believing that they had been downwardly mobile and believing that they had remained stable in the working class. The uncertainty about whether to label their fathers as middle class or working class, rather than ambiguity about their own status, explains the split in perceptions about their own mobility. Tables for these and other attitudes measured can be found in Richardson, op. cit. or are available on request from the author.
23. H. L. Wilensky and H. Edwards, 'The skidder: ideological adjustments of downward mobile workers', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 24, no. 2 (April 1959), pp. 215-31.
24. For example, the mean number of jobs ever held for the total sample was 5.03. The downward group mean was only 4.0 jobs, the lowest of the four groups.

25. The exception to this finding of stability were a few younger men, mostly unskilled, who had fallen three or more occupational classes. Since these men make up only about five per cent of the total sample of downwardly mobile men, generalizations are clearly not warranted. At the same time, they had all followed very similar patterns, came from very similar backgrounds and seemed in the process of experiencing 'genuine' downward mobility. One, a son of a civil servant, for example, had held eight ('possibly more') jobs in under eight years. All were semi-skilled or unskilled: assembly-line worker, van driver (several times), pest control worker, maintenance helper, storeman.

26. These terms come from E. Hopper, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

27. Names and places are fictitious.

28. See Richardson, *op. cit.*, pp. 258-78.

29. P. Berger, *Invitation to Sociology*, Doubleday, 1963, p. 57.

30. Job satisfaction and commitment to work were measured by a number of questions ranging from a direct one about job satisfaction; respondents' notion of an ideal job; what job they would choose if starting over again and a modified version of Reissman's level of aspiration scale. L. Reissman, 'Level of Aspiration and Social Class', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 18, no. 2 (June 1953), pp. 233-42.

31. R. H. Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 398.

32. A. Strauss, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

33. Richardson, *op. cit.*, chs. 12 and 13.