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Source: *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 65, No. 3 (Nov., 1959), pp. 258-264

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2773306>

Accessed: 19-12-2019 11:29 UTC

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SOCIAL MOBILITY AND PREJUDICE

FRED B. SILBERSTEIN AND MELVIN SEEMAN

ABSTRACT

Ethnic prejudice is often associated with social mobility—on the theory that the frustration of downward movement or the insecurity of upward movement lead to intolerance. The data presented here reveal that occupational mobility, in itself, is not related to prejudice. Those who are highly mobility-minded tend to be prejudiced ethnically; and the effect of mobility upon prejudice depends upon the individual's attitudes toward mobility. Serious doubts are raised about the standard assertions regarding mobility and prejudice and about the standard assumptions regarding the primacy of status motives.

SOCIAL MOBILITY AND PREJUDICE

The prevalent belief that vertical mobility is associated with prejudice against ethnic groups rests fundamentally upon two empirical studies (by Bettelheim and Janowitz and by Greenblum and Pearlman) and on the assumption that status-seeking is generally implicated in social mobility—hence, downward mobility is frustrating, and upward mobility produces insecurity.¹ But the two studies are not directly comparable in either their methods or their findings; and the common assumption about motives for mobility should by no means be taken for granted. Under the circumstances, a fresh investigation of the relation between prejudice and mobility seemed called for.

We began with the view that status-seeking has been too readily assumed in the recent literature on mobility. Since, in our

view, the status-seeking motive cannot be taken as a given, we entertained two hypotheses: that upward or downward mobility, in itself, is not predictive of prejudice; and that the level of prejudice is dependent upon the individual's history of mobility and his attitude toward it (i.e., the interaction of these two variables will yield predictable outcomes in ethnic prejudice).

Thus we regard as premature the view that downward or upward mobility results in an increase in prejudice. But this does not mean that mobility is irrelevant; for one may anticipate (consistent with the interaction notion described in our second hypothesis) that a history of downward mobility will be associated with increased prejudice *for those who stress the importance of status*. But, at the same time, downward mobility under certain conditions of motivation might be associated with little prejudice; and, further, one might predict that *failure to move* when coupled with a status-seeking philosophy, will produce great prejudice. In short, an investigation incorporating a measure of the status interest that the individual brings to his career is needed. Such a study is reported here, seeking to specify more closely the effect of upward or downward mobility—or failure to move—upon ethnic prejudice.²

¹ Cf. B. Bettelheim and M. Janowitz, *The Dynamics of Prejudice* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1950); and J. Greenblum and L. I. Pearlman, "Vertical Mobility and Prejudice," in R. Bendix and S. M. Lipset (eds.), *Class, Status, Power* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1953), pp. 480–91. The commonly held view of the tie between mobility and prejudice is stated in the summary paper by M. Janowitz, "Some Consequences of Social Mobility in the United States": "Ethnic and racial prejudice has been repeatedly analyzed as it is conditioned by vertical social mobility. . . . Competition for status, the insecurities generated by mobility and need to incorporate new norms release tension and hostility toward outgroups" (*Transactions of the Third World Congress of Sociology*, III [1956], 195). For another summary which argues that "mobility creates special dilemmas," cf. P. M. Blau, "Social Mobility and Interpersonal Relations," *American Sociological Review*, XXI (June, 1956), 290–95.

² A similar emphasis on the need to test the "mobility assumption" has been developed in a companion paper in which leadership style, rather than prejudice, was the dependent variable (cf. M. Seeman, "Social Mobility and Administrative Behavior," *American Sociological Review*, XXIII [December, 1958], 633–42).

Our measure of "mobility orientation" was obtained by interviews with a sample of 665 persons in the metropolitan area of Morgantown, West Virginia. The respondents also completed the anti-Negro and anti-Semitism scales found in *The Authoritarian Personality*³ and provided data on their own and their father's occupations. The scaling of prejudice yielded high split-half reliabilities in our sample (.86 and .87, respectively). The correlation between the two measures of prejudice was .58, a figure which is comparable to the Adorno findings.

The measure of orientation to mobility requires a further word. After considerable pretesting, twenty items were decided upon to determine the respondent's degree of interest in, or commitment to, elevating his status. The items are written in two ways: ten are straightforward attitude items presented in an agree-disagree form; ten are descriptions of decisions about careers made by hypothetical persons, cast in approve-disapprove form. The split-half reliability of the total score based on these twenty items was .75, corrected by the Spearman-Brown prophecy formula.

The high scorer on this scale is referred to as "mobility-oriented" (M.O.), and the low scorer as "achievement-oriented" (A.O.). In illustration: two of the agree-disagree items read as follows: "I'd turn down a job that might be a real stepping-stone, if the people doing the hiring had the reputation of wanting somebody who would go along with their ideas" and "I would probably turn down a position that would leave me less freedom to express my view on political matters." The ten situations in the approve-disapprove items were selected, after pretesting, from an unpublished test developed by Paul K. Hatt; one is as follows:

³ T. W. Adorno *et al.*, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1950), p. 142. For purposes of direct replication, the 7 items of the Greenblum-Pearlin study were also used in the interview. The replication material, not presented here, is found in Fred B. Silberstein, "A Replication of Two Studies on Vertical Mobility and Prejudice" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Ohio Valley Sociological Society, April, 1959).

Mr. Y. and Mr. B. hold clerical positions in the same business firm and have been very close friends for a long time. Mr. Y. notices certain errors in his friend's work and knows that he can improve his own chances for advancement in the firm by reporting these errors to the boss. He asks the advice of another friend, who suggests that he should take advantage of this opportunity to put himself forward.

How do you feel about this suggestion?

The distinction, then, between the mobility-oriented (M.O.'s) and the achievement-oriented (A.O.'s) lies in the fact that the latter tend to give status and prestige a lower value—i.e., they choose to emphasize the relative importance of, for example, friendship, political freedom, community life, or intrinsic interest in the job as compared with the value of social rank.⁴

These data, then, made it possible for us to examine the anti-Semitism and the anti-Negro prejudice found among groups with the same current occupational status (i.e., among manual workers or white-collar workers) but with different histories of mobility and different orientations toward mobility.

The data on downward mobility were cast in a series of two-by-two analyses of variance of the order shown in Table 1. Here the prejudice scores of downwardly mobile manual workers are compared with the scores of stationary manual workers, while at the same time account is taken of the respondent's high (mobility-oriented) or low (achievement-oriented) score on the scale measuring degree of commitment to status.

⁴ Five alternative responses were provided for each item, from strongly approve (or agree) to strongly disapprove, the scale being essentially a modification of the instrument discussed in Seeman, *op. cit.*, p. 635, where problems of reliability and of "construct validity" are reviewed. In a sense, the designation "achievement"-oriented is a misnomer, since the values that the A.O.'s choose in preference to rank often have nothing to do with standards of excellence (cf. D. C. McClelland *et al.*, *The Achievement Motive* [New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1953]), but refer simply to goals which are not status goals in themselves and which are presumed of intrinsic value to the respondent, in contrast to betterment of status.

In Table 1, "downward mobile" refers to those who are currently in manual occupations but whose fathers were white-collar or professional workers.

These scores, based on the manual-non-manual distinction, support the view that downward mobility, in itself, is not the critical thing: for both types of prejudice, there is no difference whatever between the downward mobile as against the stationary manual workers, *if they are achievement-oriented*. But for the mobility-oriented subjects, for whom status is a primary concern, there is a trend in the expected direction: they are generally more prejudiced than the A.O.'s; and the downwardly mobile among them are the most prejudiced of all.

Since we suspected that the manual-non-

manual method of determining mobility might be too gross a measure of change of prestige, we scored the occupations of our respondents and their fathers on the North-Hatt occupational prestige scale and compared again the relatively mobile and the stationary (Table 2). Here we compare the prejudice scores of those who have shown the most downward mobility on the North-Hatt scale (regardless of whether this involved passage across the manual-non-manual line) with those who have been relatively stationary in prestige and are manual workers.⁵

⁵ The analysis was made in this way in order to retain as much comparability as possible in the current occupational status of the groups. Thus Tables 2 and 4 compare those who have moved significant-

TABLE 1*
MEAN PREJUDICE SCORES OF DOWNWARDLY MOBILE AND STATIONARY
MANUAL WORKERS BY MOBILITY ORIENTATION

MOBILITY HISTORY	ANTI-SEMITISM		ANTI-NEGRO PREJUDICE	
	Achievement-oriented	Mobility-oriented	Achievement-oriented	Mobility-oriented
Downwardly mobile	12.4 (N=61)	14.0 (N=65)	11.9 (N=61)	15.1 (N=65)
Stationary manual workers.	12.5 (N=112)	12.6 (N=112)	11.9 (N=121)	13.0 (N=112)
Source of Variation	F Ratio	p Value	F Ratio	p Value
Mobility	1.31	N.S.	2.96	N.S.
Orientation	2.48	N.S.	13.57	0.01
Interaction (M×O)	1.67	N.S.	3.17	N.S.

* Mobility history based on the manual-non-manual distinction.

The analyses of variance for these two prejudice measures were carried out according to the procedure for unequal cell frequencies described by H. M. Walker and J. Lev (*Statistical Inference* [New York: Henry Holt, 1953]). The resulting *F* ratios and probability values for the two prejudice analyses are given ("N.S." = not significant at the .05 level).

The method employed in dichotomizing both mobility history and mobility orientation to produce the two-by-two cells in the tables is described in our n. 5.

TABLE 2*
MEAN PREJUDICE SCORES OF DOWNWARDLY MOBILE AND STATIONARY
WORKERS BY MOBILITY ORIENTATION

MOBILITY HISTORY	ANTI-SEMITISM		ANTI-NEGRO PREJUDICE	
	Achievement-oriented	Mobility-oriented	Achievement-oriented	Mobility-oriented
Downwardly mobile	10.9 (N=62)	13.5 (N=78)	11.1 (N=62)	14.6 (N=78)
Stationary manual workers.	13.3 (N=110)	13.0 (N=97)	12.2 (N=110)	13.4 (N=97)
Source of Variation	F Ratio	p Value	F Ratio	p Value
Mobility	2.86	N.S.	0.01	N.S.
Orientation	4.14	0.05	16.44	0.01
Interaction (M×O)	6.20	0.05	4.08	0.05

* Mobility history based on North-Hatt prestige scale ratings.

The analyses of variance (see note in Table 1) yielded the above *F* ratios and probability values for the two prejudice measures.

Here, again, we find support for the view we have presented. It is, interestingly enough, a downwardly mobile group that scores *lowest* in prejudice, for both anti-Semitism and anti-Negro prejudice (the mean scores of 10.9 for anti-Semitism and 11.1 for anti-Negro prejudice in Table 2 among the achievement-oriented decliners). The four analyses of variance in Tables 1 and 2 (two prejudice scores, repeated for two methods of describing mobility) generally confirm our predictions. In none of the four analyses was the *F* ratio significant for mobility history taken alone (i.e., for the row comparisons, which contrast decliners with stationaries, regardless of mobility attitude). In three of the four cases, mobility orientation taken alone yields a significant *F* ratio (the exception is anti-Semitism in Table 1, where the trend is in the predicted direction but not significant). And in two instances in Table 2, the *F* ratios for interaction between mobility history and mobility orientation are significant, as our second hypothesis predicts.

In short, mobility alone does not predict prejudice; the status-seeking groups tend to be more prejudiced, regardless of mobility history; and the greatest prejudice is found among those who are status-minded and who have suffered status loss—the downwardly mobile M.O.'s; but the downwardly mobile A.O.'s have strikingly *low* prejudice scores.

What can be said of upward mobility? It should be recalled that the hypothesis of "status frustration" advanced in the case of downward mobility is matched by the "status insecurity" thesis in the case of upward

mobility. Thus Greenblum and Pearlin comment about their data:

The theory that seems to apply uniformly to these findings is concerned with the prestige insecurity of marginal status groups. Upward mobile persons will conform with social distance attitudes of their new class because this tends to secure their new membership and because it widens the distance with those groups with whom they probably are competing or have competed for higher positions: Jews and Negroes. At the same time, cognitive prejudice will be retained or expanded, even if these are not the attitudes of the higher social status, because it provides a release from the tension of insecurity, and because it releases aggressive or hostile attitudes against those ethnic groups which are also competing for higher social or economic status and who are thus conceived to be threats to the relatively insecure prestige of the newly-won status.⁶

Our data on upward mobility are presented in Tables 3 and 4, tables which are comparable to the previous two in that they present the results using two different measures of mobility—the manual-non-manual distinction (Table 3) and prestige increase as determined by the North-Hatt scale (Table 4).

These results, consistent with those already reported, challenge the notion that upward mobility is a determiner of prejudice: in none of the four variance analyses does mobility history produce a significant *F* value (the trend, such as it is, shows the stationary group to be higher in prejudice). Mobility orientation, however, is again significant, particularly in the case of anti-Negro prejudice. It is noteworthy that here, again, as in the data on downward mobility, it is a mobile group that consistently gets the *lowest* scores in prejudice—namely, the upwardly mobile, achievement-oriented respondents. There is a consistency about the highest scores in prejudice, too. With due caution because of the absence of significant *F*'s for interaction between mobility history and mobility attitude, it is noteworthy that the group for which great prejudice would

⁶ Greenblum and Pearlin, *op. cit.*, p. 486.

ly downward (or upward) on the North-Hatt scale with those who have moved very little on the scale and are in occupations like the mobile respondents.

In the division of mobility-orientation groups, the dichotomy which we have labeled "M.O." as against "A.O." was based upon a division of the total sample at the median point on the scale distribution. Fortunately, we found that, on a scale whose total possible range was from 0 to 80, the obtained median score on mobility attitude was 41.

be predicted—the movement-minded who have not climbed, that is, the stationary M.O.'s—shows the highest score.⁷

These results, for both upward and downward mobility, provide an impressive argument against any ready conclusions about the effect of mobility upon prejudice. The downward mobile are, indeed, sometimes highly prejudiced, but they are sometimes quite unprejudiced; and the upward mobile are frequently found to be significantly less prejudiced than comparable stationary respondents. Such a statement brings us directly to the final question: How comparable are these mobility and attitude groups whose prejudice scores we have analyzed?

⁷Leaving mobility history aside, the attitude data are consistent with Kaufman's finding that his "status concern" scale correlates well with prejudice (cf. W. C. Kaufman, "Status, Authoritarian-

ism, and Anti-Semitism," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXII [January, 1957], 379-82). We find, that is, that our measure of status-striving is significantly associated with prejudice. Our results are roughly consistent, too, with the data reported at the close of the Greenblum-Pearlin paper, though their emphasis is different and their trends are not so clear. Instead of their class-identification measure, we have used a direct index of status-striving and found that mobility differences in themselves are insignificant. We did so in the belief that class identification is not a satisfactory index of striving or of prestige-insecurity and that retaining a focus upon mobility itself—as done by both Greenblum and Pearlin and others (cf. n. 1 above)—is not justified. For purposes of replication of the Greenblum-Pearlin study, we asked our subjects to indicate their own class identification, using the same item (and, of course, we had included the same prejudice items as well), and we did not find that upward, mobile, middle-class identifiers are more prejudiced than the upward-mobile working-class group or that class identification in itself is significantly related to prejudice (cf. Silberstein, *op. cit.*).

TABLE 3*
MEAN PREJUDICE SCORES OF UPWARDLY MOBILE AND STATIONARY
NON-MANUAL WORKERS BY MOBILITY ORIENTATION

MOBILITY HISTORY	ANTI-SEMITISM		ANTI-NEGRO PREJUDICE	
	Achievement-oriented	Mobility-oriented	Achievement-oriented	Mobility-oriented
Upwardly mobile	11.1 (N=84)	11.9 (N=82)	10.9 (N=84)	12.6 (N=82)
Stationary non-manual workers . . .	11.6 (N=61)	12.9 (N=79)	10.8 (N=61)	12.8 (N=79)
Source of Variation	F Ratio	p Value	F Ratio	p Value
Mobility	1.78	N.S.	0.01	N.S.
Orientation	3.28	N.S.	9.65	0.01
Interaction (M×O)	0.13	N.S.	0.04	N.S.

* Mobility history based on the manual-non-manual distinction.
The analyses of variance (see note in Table 1) yielded the above F ratios and probability values for the two prejudice measures.

TABLE 4*
MEAN PREJUDICE SCORES OF UPWARDLY MOBILE AND STATIONARY
GROUPS BY MOBILITY ORIENTATION

MOBILITY HISTORY	ANTI-SEMITISM		ANTI-NEGRO PREJUDICE	
	Achievement-oriented	Mobility-oriented	Achievement-oriented	Mobility-oriented
Upwardly mobile	10.8 (N=61)	11.7 (N=59)	10.1 (N=61)	12.2 (N=59)
Stationary non-manual workers . . .	11.8 (N=94)	12.6 (N=104)	11.7 (N=94)	12.8 (N=104)
Source of Variation	F Ratio	p Value	F Ratio	p Value
Mobility	2.59	N.S.	3.13	N.S.
Orientation	2.42	N.S.	7.24	0.01
Interaction (M×O)	0.02	N.S.	0.73	N.S.

* Mobility history based on North-Hatt prestige scale ratings.
The analyses of variance (see note in Table 1) yielded the above F ratios and probability values for the two prejudice measures.⁹⁰

In the tables we compared those with roughly equal current status, as measured by their manual or non-manual occupation or by their place on the North-Hatt prestige scale. The question is: Are these people reasonably comparable with regard to other objective variables that might be producing the differences we find in prejudice? We obtained information on three major variables of this kind: age, which we know to be related to both mobility and attitudes to it, income, and education, both of which might be affecting the levels of prejudice of our various mobility groups.

Fortunately, we found these objective measures not closely related to prejudice; and the mobility subgroups are reasonably

stance of our findings can be readily given: with the effect of education removed, there is still no case in which mobility history turns out to be significantly related to prejudice; and this covariance procedure does not remove the significance of mobility orientation as a predictor of prejudice.

A final point: we have, throughout, compared the prejudice scores of groups whose present occupational status is similar (e.g., the subgroups in Table 1 are all manual workers). A comparison across occupational lines and across mobility types can be made by combining Tables 1 and 3, both of which are based on the manual-non-manual distinction. This does not control biases correlated with occupational differences (e.g.,

TABLE 5*
MEAN PREJUDICE SCORES FOR ALL MOBILITY GROUPS BY MOBILITY ORIENTATION

MOBILITY HISTORY	ANTI-SEMITISM		ANTI-NEGRO PREJUDICE	
	Achievement-oriented	Mobility-oriented	Achievement-oriented	Mobility-oriented
Downwardly mobile	12.4	14.0	11.9	15.1
Stationary manual workers	12.5	12.6	11.9	13.0
Stationary non-manual workers	11.6	12.9	10.8	12.8
Upwardly mobile	11.1	11.9	10.9	12.6

* Mobility history based on the manual-non-manual distinction.

This table combines Tables 1 and 3 for easy comparison of prejudice scores across mobility groups regardless of the present occupational level of the respondent.

comparable with respect to these variables. This was especially true for age and income; but with education the situation was somewhat more complicated. Though there was, by the chi-square test, no significant association between education and either anti-Semitism or anti-Negro prejudice, our mobility and orientation groups did differ in education. The achievement-oriented groups tend to be more highly educated than the mobility-oriented groups; and the mobile differ in education from their stationary counterparts. In view of this and of the fact that the literature sometimes reports significant low-order r 's between education and prejudice, we decided on a further examination of the problem.

Accordingly, we employed the technique of analysis of covariance to remove the influence of education from the results we have already presented in Tables 1-4. The sub-

educational level); nevertheless, for ease of comparison, we present the combined data (Table 5).

The data of Table 5 are consistent with what has gone before. The greatest difference in prejudice scores occurs between the upwardly and the downwardly mobile, but the large difference holds *only for those who are mobility-oriented!* Thus, the upwardly mobile M.O.'s have an anti-Semitism score of 11.9 as compared with 14.0 for the downwardly mobile M.O.'s; for anti-Negro prejudice the scores are 12.6 and 15.1, respectively. But such large and consistent differences do not occur among the achievement-oriented.

There will certainly be differences in interpretation of our results—differences, perhaps, reducible in great part to matters of preferred language. The great prejudice of the downwardly mobile M.O.'s can be con-

strued as an instance of the frustration-aggression sequence; and the relative lack of prejudice among the downwardly mobile A.O.'s simply indicates that their mobility is not frustrating, given their relative lack of interest in striving for status. One is not compelled by the data, however, to speak the language of frustration and aggression. It would be equally appropriate to cast the interpretation simply in terms of satisfaction with status—an interpretation that does not invoke special frustration-aggression mechanisms or embody the notion of catharsis. Thus the downwardly mobile M.O.'s are highly prejudiced because, being high in status needs and finding no satisfaction in their occupational world, they must maximize other avenues of status satisfaction, and in this case they achieve it through the relative downgrading of minorities.

These findings have both a general and a specific import. Specifically, the data lead to conclusions about the relation between mobility and prejudice that are more complicated and, we hope, more intelligible than the currently fashionable belief. The effect of moving upward, moving downward, or staying in the same place on the status ladder is dependent upon the status commitment of the individual—i.e., upon what these moves mean to the person.⁸

The more general import of these results

is that they enjoin greater caution about a dominant perspective in contemporary sociology—a perspective in which social mobility is seen as a pervasive, not to say necessary, motive and, at the same time, as a predominantly negative force producing strain, insecurity, and frustration in the personal economy of the individual. With resounding generalizations so hard to come by, it is with mixed sentiment that we add “it all depends” to what looked like a promising general proposition about mobility and prejudice. But apparently the qualification is in order—not only, perhaps, with regard to prejudice, but with regard to the mobility assumption that now dominates sociological work.

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⁸ Our data thus support the doubt recently expressed by S. M. Lipset and R. Bendix: “While the notion that the socially mobile are more likely to be prejudiced against ethnic groups than the stationary has become rather common, the available evidence is quite ambiguous and cautions against any simple interpretation” (cf. *Social Mobility in Industrial Society* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959], p. 71). Our data on short-term mobility cast the same doubt: using a five-year interval, comparable to the span employed in the Bettelheim-Janowitz study, we found no relation between mobility, again, measured both by the manual-non-manual categories and by the North-Hatt prestige scale, and anti-Semitism or anti-Negro prejudice.