Social Mobility

Because life is so much more satisfying in the more privileged classes, people strive to climb the social class ladder.

Social mobility refers to the ability to change positions within a social stratification system. When people improve or diminish their economic status in a way that affects social class, they experience social mobility. Individuals can experience upward or downward social mobility for a variety of reasons.

Types of Social Mobility

Upward Mobility

Upward mobility refers to an increase—or upward shift—in social class. In the United States, people applaud the rags-to-riches achievements of celebrities like Jennifer Lopez or Michael Jordan. Bestselling author Stephen King worked as a janitor prior to being published. Oprah Winfrey grew up in poverty in rural Mississippi before becoming a powerful media personality. There are many stories of people rising from modest beginnings to fame and fortune. But the truth is that relative to the overall population, the number of people who rise from poverty to wealth is very small. Still, upward mobility is not only about becoming rich and famous. In the United States, people who earn a college degree, get a job promotion, or marry someone with a good income may move up socially.

Downward Mobility

In contrast, downward mobility indicates a lowering of one's social class. Some people move downward because of business setbacks, unemployment, or illness. Dropping out of school, losing a job, or getting a divorce may result in a loss of income or status and, therefore, downward social mobility.

Intergenerational Mobility

It is not uncommon for different generations of a family to belong to varying social classes. This is known as intergenerational mobility. For example, an upper-class executive may have parents who belonged to the middle class. In turn, those parents may have been raised in the lower class. Patterns of intergenerational mobility can reflect long-term societal changes.

Intragenerational Mobility

Similarly, intragenerational mobility describes a difference in social class that between different members of the same generation. For example, the wealth and prestige experienced by one person may be quite different from that of his or her siblings.

Structural Mobility

Structural mobility happens when societal changes enable a whole group of people to move up or down the social class ladder. Structural mobility is attributable to changes in society as a whole, not individual changes. In the first half of the twentieth century, industrialization expanded the U.S. economy, raising the standard of living and leading to upward structural mobility. In today's work economy, the recent recession and the outsourcing of jobs overseas have contributed to high unemployment rates. Many people have experienced economic setbacks, creating a wave of downward structural mobility.

We like to think that individual efforts are the reason people move up the class ladder—and their faults the reason they move down. Sociologists point out that in analyzing social mobility we must always look at structural mobility, how changes in society (its structure) make opportunities plentiful or scarce.

When analyzing the trends and movements in social mobility, sociologists consider all modes of mobility. Scholars recognize that mobility is not as common or easy to achieve as many people think. In fact, some consider social mobility a myth.

How do elites maintain stratification?

Suppose that you are part of the ruling elite of your society. You want to make sure that you and your family and friends are going to be able to keep your privileged position for the next generation. How will you accomplish this? You might think about passing laws and using the police and the military. After all, you are a member of the ruling elite, so you have this power. You could use force, but this can lead to resentment and rebellion. It is more effective to control people's ideas, information, and technology—which is just what the elite try to do. Let's look at some of their techniques.

Soft Control Versus Force

In medieval Europe, land was the primary source of wealth—and only the nobility and the church could own land. Almost everyone was a peasant (a serf) who worked for these powerful landowners. The peasants farmed the land, took care of the livestock, and built the roads and bridges. Each year, they had to turn over a designated portion of their crops to their feudal lord. Year after year, for centuries, they did so. Why?

Controlling People's Ideas

Why didn't the peasants rebel and take over the land themselves? There were many reasons, not the least of which was that the nobility and church controlled the army. Coercion, however, goes only so far, because it breeds hostility and nourishes rebellion. How much more effective it is to get the masses to want to do what the ruling elite desires. This is where ideology (beliefs that justify the way things are) comes into play, and the nobility and clergy used it to great effect. They developed an ideology known as the divine right of kings—the idea that the king's authority comes directly from God. The king delegates authority to nobles, who, as God's representatives, must be obeyed. To disobey is to sin against God; to rebel is to merit physical punishment on earth and eternal suffering in hell. Controlling people's ideas can be remarkably more effective than using brute force. Although this particular ideology governs few minds today, the elite in every society uses ideology to justify its position at the top. For example, around the world, schools teach that their country's form of government—no matter what form of government it has— is good. Religious leaders teach that we owe obedience to authority, that laws are to be obeyed. To the degree that their ideologies are accepted by the masses, the elite remains securely in power. Ideology is so powerful that it even sets limits on the elite. Although leaders use ideas to control people, the people can also insist that their leaders conform to those same ideas. Pakistan is an outstanding example. If Pakistani leaders depart from fundamentalist Islamic ideology, their position is in jeopardy. For example, regardless of their personal views, Pakistani leaders cannot support Western ideas of morality. If they were to allow women to wear short skirts in public, for example, not only would they lose their positions of leadership but perhaps also their lives. To protect their position within a system of stratification, leaders, regardless of their personal opinions, must also conform at least outwardly to the controlling ideas.

Controlling Information

To maintain their power, elites try to control information. Chinese leaders have put tight controls on Internet cafes and search engines, and they block access to Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (Makinen 2014). For watching a Jackie Chan movie, North Koreans can be sentenced to six months of backbreaking work in a labor camp (LaFraniere 2010). Lacking such power in democracies, the ruling elites rely on covert means. A favorite tactic of U.S. presidents is to withhold information "in the interest of national security," a phrase that usually translates as "in the interest of protecting me."

Stifling Criticism

Like the rest of us, the power elite doesn't like to be criticized. But unlike the rest of us, they have the power to do something about it. Fear is a favorite tactic. In Thailand, you can be put in prison for criticizing the king or his family (Hookway 2013). Poetry is dangerous, too. Judges in Qatar sentenced a poet to life in prison because one of his poems criticized "the ruling family" (Delmar-Morgan 2012). It can be worse. In Saddam Hussein's Iraq, the penalty for telling a joke about Hussein was having your tongue cut out (Nordland 2003). In a democracy, the control of critics takes a milder form. When the U.S. Defense Department found out that an author had criticized its handling of 9/11, it bought and destroyed 9,500 copies of his book (Thompson 2010).

Big Brother Technology

The new technology allows the elite to monitor citizens without anyone knowing they are being watched. Drones silently patrol the skies. The Picosecond laser scanner, able to read molecules, can sense from 150 feet away if you have gunpowder residue on your body, as well as report your adrenaline level (Compton 2012). Software programs can read the entire contents of a computer in a second—and not leave a trace. Security cameras — "Tiny Brothers"—have sprouted almost everywhere. The FBI is digitizing faces so its face-recognition system can scan crowds and instantly match those faces with its files (Brandom 2014). Eventually the facial image of every citizen will be in their files. Dictators have few checks on how they use this technology, but democracies do have some, such as requiring court orders for search and seizure. Such restraints on power frustrate officials, so they are delighted with our new Homeland Security laws that allow them to spy on citizens without their knowledge. Just as with ideology, the new technology is a two-edged sword. It gives the elite powerful tools for monitoring citizens, but it also makes it difficult for the elite to control information. With international borders meaning nothing to the Internet, it takes but seconds for e-mail, tweets, and photos to fly around the globe. Encryption also frustrates governments and excites privacy advocates. Silent Circle shreds files into thousands of pieces as they are sent to the cloud. Only the recipient has the key, which is deleted automatically after a file is downloaded (Gallagher 2013). Governments have not been able to break Silent Circle, PGP (Pretty Good Privacy, a free code), or Signal, which scrambles messages until they reach the intended reader (Yadron 2015). The FBI became upset when Google and Apple added encryption to their mobile platforms (Nichols 2014). We will see how long these companies resist governmental pressure.

To maintain stratification, the elite tries to dominate its society's institutions. In a dictatorship, the elite makes the laws. In a democracy, the elite influences the laws. In both, the elite controls the police and military and can give orders to crush a rebellion—or to run the post office or air traffic control if workers strike. With force having its limits, especially the potential of provoking resistance, most power elites prefer to keep themselves in power by peaceful means, especially by influencing the thinking of their people.