

Social Mobility

Social mobility refers to the shift in an individual's social status from one status to another. The shift can either be higher, lower, inter-generational, or intra-generational, and it cannot necessarily be determined if the change is for good or bad.

Origin of the Social Mobility as a Concept:

Russian-born American sociologist and political activist pitirim Sorokin first introduced the concept of social mobility in his book "Social and Cultural Mobility." **He states that there is no society that is completely open (such as the class system) and no society that is completely closed (like the caste system in India).**

According to Sorokin, no two societies are the same in terms of movement allowed and discouraged, and that the speed of social mobility can change from one time period to the next. It depends on how developed the society is.

Such a societal shift can happen over time as individuals move from one position to another due to various social interactions. Mobility, more or less, provides people with benefits as they are motivated by different factors in society and work to reach new roles that offer them a better standard of living and greater rewards. People compete and cooperate with others in society to move up the social mobility ladder.

Types of Social Mobility

Social mobility can take different forms, and people can experience different types of mobility in different stages of their lives. The types of mobilities are independent of one another and can often overlap. They are only distinguished for the purpose of analysis.

1. Horizontal Mobility

This occurs when a person changes their occupation but their overall social standing remains unchanged. For example, if a doctor goes from practicing medicine to teaching in a medical school, the occupation's changed but their prestige and social standing likely remain the same. Sorokin describes horizontal mobility as a change in religious, territorial, political, or other horizontal shifts with no change in the vertical position.

2. Vertical Mobility

This refers to a change in the occupational, political, or religious status of a person that causes a change in their societal position. An individual moves from one social stratum to another. Vertical mobility can be ascending or descending.

Ascending involves an individual moving from a group in a lower stratum to a higher one or the creation of a similar group with a higher societal position, instead of side by side with its existing group. Descending mobility occurs, for example, when a businessman incurs losses in his business and is forced to declare bankruptcy, resulting in a move to a lower stratum of society.

3. Upward Mobility

This is when a person moves from a lower position in society to a higher one. It can also include people occupying higher positions in the same societal group. However, upward mobility, while seen as a good thing, can also come at a cost for individuals.

When a person moves upward, they often need to leave behind familiar surroundings such as family and places. They may also need to change their way of thinking and behavior. The individual will need to adapt to the new environment as a result of their upward movement and adopt different behaviors in the new society.

4. Downward mobility

Downward mobility takes place when a person moves from a higher position in society to a lower one. It can occur when someone is caught performing a wrongful act that can result in the loss of the position they currently hold.

Downward mobility can be extremely stressful for people who face a rapid decline in their social status. They may find it hard to adapt to the new environment, as it is not similar to the standard of living they are used to. Downward mobility is an example of the extent to which a society values equal opportunity and structure.

Downward mobility can be extremely stressful for people who face a rapid decline in their social status. They may find it hard to adapt to the new environment, as it is not similar to the standard of living they are used to. Downward mobility is an example of the extent to which a society values equal opportunity and structure.

5. Inter-generational mobility

Inter-generational mobility happens when the social position changes from one generation to another. The change can be upward or downward. For example, a father worked in a factory while his son received an education that allowed him to become a lawyer or a doctor.

Such societal change also causes the generation to adopt a new way of living and thinking. Inter-generational mobility is affected by the differences in the parents' and their offspring's upbringing, changes in population, and changes in occupation.

6. Intra-generational mobility

The intra-generational change in societal position occurs during the lifespan of a single generation. It can also refer to a change in position between siblings. One way is when a person climbs up the corporate ladder in their career. For example, an individual starts their career as a clerk and through their life moves on to a senior position such as a director. One sibling may also achieve a higher position in society than their brother or sister.

Social mobility, movement of individuals, families, or groups through a system of social hierarchy or stratification. If such mobility involves a change in position, especially in occupation, but no change in social class, it is called "horizontal mobility." An example would be a person who moves from a managerial position in one company to a similar position in another. If, however, the move involves a change in social class, it is called "vertical mobility" and involves either "upward mobility" or "downward mobility." An industrial worker who becomes a wealthy businessman moves upward in the class system; a landed aristocrat who loses everything in a revolution moves downward in the system.

In revolution an entire class structure is altered. Yet once the society has been radically reorganized, further social mobility may be minimal. Social mobility, however, may come about through slower, more subtle changes, such as the movement of individuals or groups from a poor agrarian region to a richer urban one. Throughout history international migration has been an important factor in upward mobility. One instance may be seen in the 19th-century migration of members of the working and peasant classes from Europe to the United States. On the other hand, Western European colonial expansion, while benefiting some, served to enslave others. In modern societies, social mobility is typically measured by career and generational changes in the socioeconomic levels of occupations.

Mobility and hierarchy:

The Creole elites who had headed the independence cause throughout Latin America had no intention of...

The social results of mobility, particularly of the vertical type, are difficult to measure. Some believe that large-scale mobility, both upward and downward, breaks down class structure, rendering a culture more uniform. Others argue that those who attempt to rise or maintain a higher position actually strengthen the class system, for they are likely to be concerned with enforcing class differences. Thus, some sociologists have suggested that class distinctions might be reduced not by individual mobility but by the achievement of social and economic equality for all.

One positive consequence of mobility has been a better use of individual aptitude. This has been aided by the expansion of educational opportunities in modern industrial nations. On the negative side, a high rate of vertical mobility may produce individual and societal anomie (a term coined by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim). The individual experiencing anomie feels socially isolated and anxious; in a larger, societal context, generally accepted beliefs and standards of conduct are weakened or disappear.

Get a Britannica Premium subscription and gain access to exclusive content.

Subscribe Now

Many believe that the class system of Western industrial nations has changed dramatically since the provision of extensive welfare services, beginning in Germany in the 1880s. Greater social mobility has resulted from changes in the occupational structure, typified by an increase in the relative number of white-collar and professional occupations, with a decrease in the less-skilled and manual occupations. This has led to higher standards of living. Such increased mobility, it is argued, has minimized class differences, so that Western nations are moving toward a relatively classless (or predominantly middle-class) society. Yet other observers