



Social Mobility

Social Mobility in Capitalist Societies

It is generally agreed that the **rate of social mobility** - the amount of **movement from one stratum to another** - is significantly **higher** in industrial as compared to pre-industrial societies. Industrial societies are now often described as open, as having a relatively low degree of closure.

In particular, it is argued that **status in pre-industrial societies** is largely **ascribed**, whereas in **industrial societies it is achieved**. As a result **ascribed characteristics** such as class, sex, race, kinship have less and **less influence on an individual's social status**. Status is seen to be increasingly **achieved** on the basis of merit, talent, ability, ambition and hard work are steadily **replacing ascribed characteristics** as the criteria for determining a person's position in the class system.

In post war western societies, the opportunities for social mobility have improved for a number of reasons....

- **Occupational changes:** the changing occupational structure has created **more room at the top**. With computerization and automation, there is less demand for manual labor and greater demand for non-manual skills and a better-educated workforce.
- **Industrial changes:** there has been a **shift away** from the **older 'smokestack'** industries such as **foundries** to new '**sunrise**' industries (computers). These new industries have a higher proportion of **non-manual jobs**. In addition, there has been a **shift away** from **manufacturing industries**.
- **Ladders:** in the past ambitious people might have relied upon marriage to the boss' daughter, connections, working one's way up from the shop floor, or sheer luck. These **ladders** are still available but **education** is becoming increasingly recognized as the **most important step to a good career**. Of course, middle-class people still tend to be more successful in gaining educational qualifications. However, the emphasis on credentials and qualifications is probably more meritocratic than a system where people are appointed simply because of their class origins.

The Importance of Social Mobility

- It has an important effect on **class formation**. For example, it is suggested that if the rate of social mobility is low, class solidarity will be high.
- A study of social mobility can provide an indication of the **life chances of members of society**. For example, it can show the degree to which a person's class of origin influences his or her chances of obtaining a high-status occupation.
- It is important to know how people **respond to the experience of social mobility**. For example, do the downwardly mobile resent their misfortune and form a pool of dissatisfaction, which might threaten the stability of society.
- Mobility is a test of fairness.




Types of Social Mobility

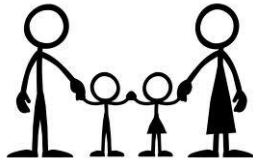
Sociologists have identified two main types of social mobility.

- **Intra-generational Mobility**: refers to the **social mobility** within a **single generation**. It is measured by comparing the **occupational status** of an individual **at two or more points in time**. Thus if a person begins her or his working life as an unskilled manual worker and ten years later is employed as an accountant, she or he is socially mobile in terms of intergenerational mobility.
- **Inter-generational**: refers to the **social mobility** between **generations**. It is measured by comparing **occupational status of sons** with **that of fathers** (and only rarely the occupational status of fathers or mothers with that of their daughters) Thus, if the son of an unskilled worker becomes an accountant, he is socially mobile in terms of intergenerational mobility.

Exercise One – Social Mobility

Go through the following list, writing down for each one

- upward mobility 
- downward mobility 
- No change 



- Inter-generational



- Intra-generational

1. A nurse who decides to become a laborer on a building site.	
2. A daughter of a miner who becomes a bank manager	
3. A teacher who decides to retrain as a social worker	
4. A doctor's son who becomes a taxi driver	
5. An immigrant from a poor farming background in Africa who gets a job in Britain as a farm laborer.	
6. The daughter of a skilled manual worker who becomes a routine clerical worker.	
7. A postal worker who becomes a traffic cop.	
8. A pilot whose son becomes a police officer.	
9. The owner of a small shops whose daughter becomes an assistant manager in a large supermarket.	
10. A sales assistant in a shop who becomes a priest.	

Name: _____ Class: _____ Date: _____

Social Mobility Activity 2

Explain what is meant by hourly paid employment.

List of the groups of people who might be employed using this arrangement.	Give reasons as to why they might be employed on this arrangement.	Make a list of the benefits to the employer of such an arrangement.	Make a list of the benefits to the employee of such an arrangement.	Make a list of the likely drawbacks for the employer of such an arrangement.	Make a list of the likely drawbacks for the employee of such an arrangement.

Social Mobility Activity 2

Who benefits the most from this type of contract? Explain why.

Who benefits the least from this type of contract? Explain why.