Social Mobility: Crash Course Sociology #26

Crash Course: Sociology
https://youtube.com/watch?v=GjuV-XdYHhA
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/GjuV-XdYHhA

Everyone loves a good rags to riches story. Books and movies and music are full of this idea. Whether it's Gatsby turning himself from a nobody to a somebody, or Drake starting from the bottom, there's something appealing about the idea that anyone can make it if they try hard enough. And more than maybe anywhere else that idea is embraced in the United States where the mythos of the land of opportunity is practically part of our foundation. But is the US a land of opportunity? Can anyone move up the rungs of the social ladder, or is the American Dream just that, a dream? To get a handle on the answer we have to understand changes in social position or what sociologists call social mobility.

Theme Music

There are a few different types of social mobility so let's get some definitions straight first. Intra-generational mobility is how a person moves up or down the social ladder during their lifetime. Intergenerational mobility, however, is about movement in social position across generations. Are you doing better or worse than your parents were when they were your age? There's also absolute versus relative mobility. Absolute mobility is when you move up or down in absolute terms. Are you better or worse than before? Like if you make $50,000 a year now and made $40,000 10 years ago you experienced upward mobility in an absolute sense. But what if all your peers who are making the same amount 10 years ago are now making $65,000 a year? Yes you're still better off than you were 10 years ago, but you're doing worse relative to your peers. Relative mobility is how you move up or down in social position compared to the rest of society.

We can measure social mobility quantitatively using measures of economic mobility like by comparing your income to your parents' income at the same age; or we can look at mobility using qualitative measures. A common measure used by sociologists is occupational status. If your father worked in a blue-collar job what's the likelihood that you will too. A recent study of absolute inter-generational mobility found that about 1/3 of US men will end up in the same type of job as their fathers compared to about 37 percent who are upwardly mobile and 32 percent who are downwardly mobile. It's pretty common to remain within the same class group as your parents. About 80% of children experience what's called horizontal social mobility where they work in a different occupation than their parents but remain in a similar social position.

So how much social mobility is there in the US, well, there's good news and bad news. The good news is that if we zoom out and look at absolute mobility across the years the long-term trend in social mobility is upwards. Partially because of industrialization, median annual family income rose steadily throughout the 20th century going from around $34,000 in 1955 to 70,000 in 2015. Standards of living now are much better than they were 60 years ago. Unfortunately more recent trends in social mobility have been less rosy. Since the 1970s much of the economic growth and income has been at the top of the income distribution, meanwhile family incomes have been pretty flat for the rest of the population. This unequal growth in incomes has meant less absolute mobility for Americans.

A recent analysis of tax data by a group of economists and sociologists found that absolute mobility has declined over the last half-century. While 90% of children born in the 1940s earned more than their parents as adults only 50% of children born in the 1980s did. The other bad news is that within a single generation social mobility is stagnant. While people generally improve their income over time by gaining education and skills, most people stay on the same rung of the social ladder that they started on. Of those born in the bottom income quintile 36% remain in the bottom quintile as adults. Only 10% of those born at the bottom end up in the top quintile as adults. Started at the bottom now we're probably still at the bottom statistically speaking. And socioeconomic status is sticky at the top too. Researchers at the Brookings Institution, including crash course sociology writer Joanna Venator, found that 30% of those born in the top quintile stay in the top quintile as adults.

Plus social mobility differs by race, ethnicity, gender, and education. White Americans see more upward mobility than black Americans. Half of black Americans that are born at the bottom of the income distribution are still in the bottom quintile at age 40. Black Americans also face higher rates of downward mobility, being more likely to move out of the middle class than white Americans. Let's go to the thought-bubble to take a look at research on race and social mobility in action.

In 1982 American sociologists Carl Alexander and Doris Entwisle began following the lives of a random sample of eight hundred first grade students growing up in a variety of neighborhoods in the Baltimore area. What began as a study meant to last only three years eventually ended up lasting 30 years, as the researchers followed up with the kids throughout their lives to see the paths that their early circumstances put them on. Alexander and Entwisle collected data on everything imaginable, interviewing the kids yearly about who they lived with, where they lived, work history, education, drug use, marriage, childbearing, you name it. And what they found was that poverty cast a long shadow over the course of these kids' lives. Forty-five percent of kids with higher socioeconomic status or SES had gotten a college degree by age twenty-eight. Only four percent of low SES kids had. Those born better off were also more likely to be middle class at age 28. And these unequal outcomes were heightened for African American kids; low SES white kids ended up better off than low SES black kids. Eighty-nine percent of white high school dropouts were working at age twenty two compared to only forty percent of black high school drop outs. And contrary to what the wire might have made you think about inner-city Baltimore lifestyles these differences can't be explained away by differences in criminal behavior or drug use. Low SES white men were more likely to use hard drugs, smoke, and binge drink than low SES black men. And holding all else constant a police record was more of an impediment to getting a job for African-American men than white men. Thanks thought-bubble.

So the impacts of where you're born on the social ladder can have far-reaching consequences; and, in addition to race, social mobility can also vary by gender. Over the last half century women as a whole have experienced absolute mobility. 85% of women earn higher wages than their mothers did, and, the income gap between men and women has narrowed significantly. In 1980 the average income for a woman was 60% that of men whereas by 2015 that gap was 8%. But despite the great strides over the last half-century there are still gaps in opportunity for women. Women born at the bottom of the social class ladder are more likely to remain there than men. About half of women born in the bottom quintile are still there at age 40 compared to about only one third of men. Also women born at the bottom experienced more downward mobility than men, with more women than men having family incomes lower than that of their parents.

Some of these differences by gender may be because women are much more likely to head up single-parent homes than men are. Being married is a huge plus for social mobility because two incomes are better than one. People who marry tend to accumulate wealth much faster than those who are single, making it easier to ascend the social ladder. Modern-day Cinderella doesn't just move up the social ladder by marrying the prince, she's also more likely to build a solid 401k and stock portfolio, key sources of wealth.

As we've seen, social class mobility depends on where you start and who you are, so, let's go back to the question we asked at the

beginning. Is America the land of opportunity? If you're a glass-half-full kind of person you might think so based on some of what we've talked about today. After all, most people are better off than past generations were. Accounting for inflation about three times as many Americans make incomes above $100,000 now, than did in 1967. But not all groups have benefited equally from this economic growth. Your chance at upward mobility can vary a lot by education, or race, or gender, or where you start on the income distribution. For those in the middle of the income distribution, earnings growth has stalled from any workers but the cost of necessities like health care, housing, have climbed ever higher. Manufacturing, an industry that historically provided stable jobs and decent pay to less educated workers, has been declining for a while now and was particularly hard hit by the recession from 2007 to 2009. In the wake of this decline, most of the jobs available for less educated workers tend to be low-paying service industry jobs, contributing to lower absolute mobility than we've seen in the past.

All of these patterns, plus the growing income inequality we talked about a couple episodes ago, mean that the rungs of the social mobility ladder in the United States seem to be getting harder to climb. Today we talked about inter-generational and intra-generational mobility and the difference between absolute and relative mobility. We talked about the long term upward social mobility trends in the United States, as well as the recent declines in absolute social mobility. Then we touched on how opportunities for social mobility differ by your class race and gender.

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