

Understanding the Nature and Consequences of Social Mobility Beliefs

Martin V. Day
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Susan T. Fiske
Princeton University

Day, M. V., & Fiske, S. T. (2019). Understanding the nature and consequences of social mobility beliefs (pp. 365-380). In J. Jetten & K. Peters (Eds.), *The social psychology of inequality*. Springer.

Corresponding author:
Martin V. Day, Department of Psychology, Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, NL, A1B 3X9, Canada
Email: mvday@mun.ca

Abstract

People commonly hold beliefs about social mobility – that is, perceptions of the likelihood to move up or down in society. What impact, if any, do these beliefs have on inequality, the societal status quo and people’s own lives? How accurate are these views of where people end up in life and why? How can we characterize these beliefs? Through a review of existing research, we clarify the nature of social mobility beliefs and conceptualize how these beliefs affect society and individuals. For society, a consistent pattern emerges. Belief in social mobility leads to defense of the status quo and tolerance for inequality, but as we conceptualize, this occurs for abstract rather than concrete attitudes. On the personal level, social mobility beliefs relate to well-being and can affect the attainment of status-related goals, but this depends on individual difference factors, as well as the outcome being considered. This chapter also outlines opportunities for further research.

Keywords: social mobility, economic inequality, status quo, rationalization, social status, well-being, goals, achievement

Understanding the Nature and Consequences of Social Mobility Beliefs

Social mobility beliefs offer a unique window into how people make sense of a non-trivial outcome – where people end up in life. But what do we know about the nature and consequences of social mobility beliefs, that is, the perceived likelihood of moving up or down in society? Many disciplines—including economics, political science, psychology, sociology—study these beliefs, in part because theory links them to societies’ maintenance of economic inequality (e.g., Benabou & Ok, 2001; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Given the large, consequential gap between the rich and poor in nations around the world (Alvaredo, Chancel, Piketty, Saez, & Zucman, 2018; Pickett & Wilkinson, 2015), social mobility beliefs call for scientific attention. As explained in our review, emerging research finds conditional support for the link between these beliefs and support for inequality.

Overall, this chapter aims to shed light on the characteristics of social mobility beliefs, and how they may critically affect thoughts, feelings, and behavior. In particular, we review relevant work from psychology and related fields, providing novel conceptual perspectives on the societal and personal significance of social mobility beliefs. Further, we explore how these beliefs can affect tolerance for inequality and support for the status quo, as well as personal status-related goals and well-being. First, we elaborate on our view of social mobility beliefs, before considering their nature and accuracy, as well as their societal and personal impacts.

Social Mobility Beliefs

In general, social mobility concerns status changes in a population over time. Different fields have taken different approaches to the study of social mobility (Breen & Jonnson, 2005; Hout, 2015; Westoff, Bressler, & Sagi 1960), so we begin by explaining how we approach this construct. First, because subjective reality (vs. objective reality) can provide greater insight into people’s behavior (Asch, 1952; Lewin, 1935; Ross & Nisbett, 1991), we focus on people’s *beliefs* about social mobility. Drawing on lay understandings of social mobility, we specifically focus on beliefs about intergenerational social mobility: that is, the perceived chances of social class change from one generation to the next. For instance, some may believe that people born into lower-class families have a good chance of becoming upper-class in their lifetimes, whereas others may believe that people are generally stuck with their standing in life. As a consequence of this focus, we do not spend much time considering beliefs about *absolute* wealth or income changes between generations, equal opportunity more generally, or group permeability focused on ethnicity or gender (e.g., Major et al., 2002; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008).

As we discuss next, social mobility beliefs vary in whether they concern upward or downward mobility, are self- or other-focused and reflect expectations or experiences. The precise form of social mobility beliefs occasionally matters to its societal and personal consequences.

Up or Down? By definition, any given society has limits to intergenerational social mobility – not everyone can become upper or lower-class. Social mobility therefore involves some people moving up in social standing and others moving down. However, people’s beliefs tend to focus on upward mobility. This upward-trajectory theme is common in U.S. culture, as evident in presidential state-of-the-union speeches, media focused on economic success (e.g., magazines, blogs, podcasts, etc), and “rags to riches” literature. This upward focus also aligns with the fact that people tend to have positive beliefs about their future selves (Markus & Nurius,

1986), make positive relative judgments in other performance domains (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015a), and tend to plan and work toward their generally upward future goals (Snyder, 2002).

Evidence for the bias towards upward mobility comes from studying open-ended definitions of social mobility (Mandisodza, Jost, & Unzueta, 2006): people described it as only involving either upward mobility (40%), a mixture of upward and downward mobility (30%), or being about social class (18%). Apparently no-one described it as only involving downward mobility. People, therefore, seem not to intuitively realise that upward movement needs to be balanced by downward movement. For instance, when separately asked about ideal levels of social mobility for those at the bottom or top of society, people wanted those in the bottom 20% to have almost equal chances of moving up to any of the levels above them, while wanting those in the top 20% to largely stay in the top 20-40% (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015b). Note, too, that this evidence is mostly based on U.S. samples. As we will discuss later, the upward mobility bias may vary by country and type of social mobility belief.

Self or Society? Social mobility beliefs also vary according to their self- or other-focus. Much of the research has examined beliefs about *personal* social mobility (e.g., one's own chances of social class change) or *societal* social mobility (e.g., the chances that people in general can move up or down). Although few studies have compared and contrasted personal and societal social mobility beliefs, there is some evidence that they are positively related (Alesina, Stantcheva, & Teso, 2018; Day & Fiske, 2017). In particular, individuals appear to infer their personal chances of social mobility, at least in part, from mobility patterns in society more broadly (Day & Fiske, 2017). However, personal and societal beliefs should be at least partly distinct: each belief type is likely to be differently informed by personal and societal experiences, subjective norms, social learning, ideologies, mindsets, and individual differences. For example, while knowledge of close others' mobility or a sense of low self-efficacy may lead a person to generally believe they are unlikely to change social class over their lifetime, other factors (e.g., media, cultural values) may simultaneously support a belief that they live in a nation where people in general have moderate chances of social class change.

Expected or Experienced? Social mobility beliefs can also vary in terms of whether they are directed towards the future or formulated on the basis of the past. That is, people may focus on *expected* social mobility, which has yet to occur, *experienced* social mobility, which has already occurred, or both (i.e., beliefs about social class change from some point in the past to some point in the future). Although experienced social mobility reasonably would inform expected social mobility beliefs, scant systematic work can speak to this possibility. While lay beliefs, theory, and research mostly focus on expected social mobility, some work demonstrates the value of examining people's beliefs of their personal and collective past (e.g., McAdams & McLean, 2013; Peetz & Wohl, 2018; Ross & Wilson, 2002; Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2008; Wilson & Ross, 2000). As we will discuss in detail later, beliefs about past social mobility may also play an important role in a person's sense of self and well-being.

In addition to these characteristics of social mobility beliefs, we examine whether these beliefs reflect actual conditions and experiences. That is, we first consider the accuracy of social mobility beliefs before critically examining their downstream consequences.

Accuracy of Social Mobility Beliefs

Perceptions of social mobility vary in their accuracy. In order to measure accuracy, researchers typically ask people to provide specific estimates of social mobility (e.g., the chances

of upward mobility of the bottom 20%), and then compare these estimates to objective data (Chetty, Hendren, Kline, Saez, & Turner, 2014; Sawhill & Morton, 2007). Also, the accuracy of social mobility beliefs differs as a function of whether people are evaluating societal or personal mobility.

In the case of beliefs about social mobility in society as a whole, Americans tend to estimate that social mobility is higher than data on national social mobility rates and international rankings suggest (Alesina et al., 2018; Davidai & Gilovich, 2015b; Davidai & Gilovich, 2018; Kraus, 2015; Kraus & Tan, 2015; but see Chambers, Swan, & Heesacker, 2015). Indeed, Americans' social mobility estimates may be negatively associated with objective measures. For example, lower rates of actual state-level social mobility correlated with estimates of higher societal social mobility (Alesina et al., 2018). One possible explanation for this finding is that in places with less progressive policies, social mobility estimates may be informed by factors such as people's desire for mobility, rather than an awareness of actual social class changes. Findings are more mixed outside of the U.S. context. While a similar overestimation of social mobility emerged in a representative sample in Andalusia, Spain (Jaime-Castillo & Marques-Perales, 2014), participants in France, Italy, Sweden, and the U.K. were more likely to underestimate societal social mobility (Alesina et al., 2018). However, while the direction of inaccuracy appears to diverge, what is shared is that societal social mobility tends to be misperceived.

In contrast to beliefs at the level of societies, people might be more accurate about mobility that relates to their own circumstances. The existing work provides evidence of a consistent pattern of perceptions when it comes to beliefs about experienced social mobility. For example, in 28 of 30 countries sampled by Kelley and Kelley (2009), including France, Sweden, the U.K., and the U.S., most people believed that they had experienced upward social class change, and that their class was higher than their father's. Speaking to the partial inaccuracy of these beliefs, people in these countries on average claimed that more upward mobility had occurred than was possible from an intergenerational mobility perspective. Only two samples showed different patterns: Chileans estimated no overall change, and Japanese respondents (one of two East Asian countries sampled) claimed they experienced downward personal social mobility. At the same time, however, personal social mobility belief in these samples was somewhat grounded in material reality, as they were positively associated with objective measures of personal social mobility.

These findings have been replicated in other research. For instance, French men tended to believe that they attained a higher social class than their fathers had (Duru-Bellat & Kieffer, 2008). Similarly, in a more recent survey of 40 countries, including Italy, France, Sweden, the U.K., and the U.S. (Meraviglia, 2017), most respondents believed they experienced upward social mobility relative to their fathers (Japan was again an exception). This study also found that actual social mobility and beliefs about experienced social mobility related positively. The strength of this relationship varied among countries (by as much as half a standard deviation).

Reflecting the mixed findings, some still debate the relation between objective social mobility rates and social mobility beliefs (see Davidai & Gilovich, 2018; Swan, Chambers, Heesacker, & Nero, 2017). However, social mobility beliefs are sometimes consistent with objective rates. As just discussed, this depends on whether the content is societal or personal social mobility beliefs and on the country of respondents. Given the degree of misperceptions, future research could examine cultural and individual factors that may influence these beliefs.

Having established some key characteristics of social mobility beliefs, the following sections focus on their potential downstream consequences.

Social Mobility Beliefs Impact Society

Social mobility beliefs may play a role in people's tolerance for economic inequality (Benabou & Ok, 2001; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Piketty, 1995). Along these lines, people arguably need to believe in sufficient societal opportunity for them, if they are to support their economic system. More specifically, believing in good chances of social mobility may help justify perceived economic inequalities, such as a large gap between the rich and poor.

For example, expecting high social mobility should lead to greater rationalization that economic disparities are deserved (e.g., through motivation, capability), and thus lead to more support for the status quo and general acceptance of inequality. However, we add a critical moderator to this relationship. In particular, we suggest, the potential impact of social mobility beliefs on support for economic disparities may be most evident at the abstract level of reasoning. In contrast, we suggest, societal and personal mobility beliefs—which are, after all, fairly general and abstract—will not have reliable and direct effects on concrete, inequality-specific policies. In other words, as one moves along the continuum from abstract attitudes about inequality on the one end (e.g., a belief that inequality is a problem), to specific inequality-affecting behavior on the other end (e.g., voting for a 10% income tax increase for the top 20%), any direct impact of social mobility beliefs should diminish.

Social Mobility Beliefs Should Affect the Abstract More Than the Concrete

Social mobility beliefs should have a stronger effect on people's abstract attitudes than their concrete behaviors, for several reasons. Much like societal and personal social-mobility beliefs, economic inequality is an abstract idea. Although inequality negatively affects most of society to some degree (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011), identifying specific victims is not easy. Whereas the notion of economic inequality is psychologically distant, broad, and abstract, redistribution-related policies tend to be more psychologically close, detailed, and tangible (e.g., 70% income tax rate for the top 10% or \$5/hr increase in minimum wage). More generally, whether people's representations are high-level and abstract versus low-level and concrete matters for judgments and behaviors (Trope & Liberman, 2003, 2010).

Attitude specificity may help explain the discrepancy between abstract and concrete inequality attitudes. For example, people may genuinely wish to reduce economic inequality in general, but have different beliefs about how this should be done or by whom (e.g., government, employers, unions, shareholders). If social mobility beliefs affect general but not specific inequality attitudes, then abstract societal or personal social mobility beliefs may not have direct effects on concrete inequality-reducing behaviors (these may be better predicted by more specific attitudes and intentions, as well as situational and individual difference factors, e.g., Azjen, 2001; Azjen & Fishbein, 1977; Brown-Iannuzzi, Lundberg, & McKee, 2017; Fishbein & Azjen, 1974; Zanna, Olson, & Fazio, 1980).

Moreover, additional psychological barriers block supporting concrete inequality policies. For example, commonly discussed inequality policies (e.g., higher income taxes) may activate political affiliations, which guide specific policy support (Cohen, 2003). Policies that target specific groups may also bring to mind misperceptions and stereotypic beliefs about the rich, the poor, and subgroups, such as those on welfare (Augoustinos & Callaghan, Chapter X;

Brown-Iannuzzi, Dotsch, Cooley, & Payne, 2017; Darley & Gross, 1983; Fiske & Durante, Chapter X; Gilens, 1996; Henry, Reyna, & Weiner, 2004; Smith & Stone, 1989).

At the same time, some inequality-related policies (e.g., that shift money from the top to bottom, restrict excessive pay, boost low pay) may conflict with individualistic explanations for different positions in society, including formidable meritocratic beliefs that people are personally responsible for their outcomes, get what they deserve, and have their hard work rewarded with success (Bullock, 2008; Lane, 2001). As reviewed later, believing that social mobility is low can reduce motivations to defend the general status quo, decrease abstract support for inequality, and reduce some individualistic beliefs, such as meritocratic values (e.g., Day & Fiske, 2017; Shariff, Wiwad, & Aknin, 2016). However, people will not necessarily abandon their motivation to rationalize the system, which may persist in other ways, relying on stereotypes (Fiske & Durante, Chapter X; Kay et al., 2007) or inequality-maintaining ideologies, for instance, that some groups should dominate over other groups in the hierarchy (Day & Fiske, 2017; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

Also, some psychological barriers may be specific to inequality-reduction policies. For instance, social mobility beliefs might not reduce *last place aversion* – the tendency for workers above the minimum wage to oppose minimum-wage increases (Kuziemko, Buell, Reich, & Norton, 2014). Social mobility beliefs may also not rectify broad barriers to changing economic inequality, such as the tendency to misperceive inequality (and its economic, social, or health consequences), or to misunderstand policies that may change inequality (Bartels, 2005; Dawtry, Sutton, & Sibley, Chapter X; Hauser & Norton, 2017; Kim, Pederson, & Mutz, 2016; McCall & Kenworthy, 2009).

In sum, based on theory and research on a variety of topics, we have conceptually outlined why general beliefs about mobility in society should predict the abstract (e.g., people's general attitudes about inequality) more than the concrete (their support for specific inequality-related interventions and behaviors). Next, we present emerging research that specifically examines whether social mobility beliefs explain attitudes about inequality per se: support for the status quo and tolerance for inequality in general, as well as support for inequality-related policies in particular.

Abstract Support

Social mobility beliefs appear to relate to broad support for the status quo. In American and Australian samples, beliefs of higher social mobility in one's country related to defending its economic system (Mandisodza et al., 2006). Across three experiments, Americans induced to believe that societal social mobility is moderate, as compared to low, more steadfastly defended the overall societal system as fair, just, and legitimate (Day & Fiske, 2017). This change in system defense was partly explained by changes in meritocratic and just-world beliefs, but consistent with a system-level motivational perspective, not through *personal* social mobility beliefs. Thus, societal social mobility beliefs can impact system rationalization tendencies that contribute to the general maintenance of societal inequality (Jost, 2017; Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Jost, Nosek, & Banaji, 2004).

Additionally, social mobility beliefs excuse general inequality. In an experimental sample of over 500 Americans, those led to believe that societal social mobility was high accepted current economic inequality more than those induced to believe social mobility was low (Shariff et al., 2016). Social mobility beliefs also guided support for non-specific inequality policies, such

as those without much concrete detail about funding sources or amounts, or explanations of how changes would occur. For example, in a Spanish sample, higher social mobility beliefs were associated with less support for governmental welfare (e.g., “the state should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for”; Jaime-Castillo & Marques-Perales, 2014).

Some work explores these patterns for personal social mobility beliefs. Multi-country samples examining beliefs about *experienced personal* social mobility find patterns similar to beliefs about societal mobility. For example, across 21 countries, beliefs of personal downward social mobility were related to more general support for redistribution (e.g., “It is the responsibility of the government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes”; Schmidt, 2010). Using the same measures and more recent data, personal upward social mobility beliefs related to less support for the general idea of government redistribution across most of the 28 countries surveyed (Steele, 2015). Together, a reasonably consistent pattern links social mobility beliefs and tolerance of inequality in the abstract.

Concrete Policies

In contrast to abstract-level attitudes, mobility beliefs do not link to concrete policies and plans to change economic inequality. Evidence for this is provided by recent datasets from five countries—France, Italy, Sweden, U.K. and the U.S. (Alesina et al., 2018). This research found that social mobility beliefs were unrelated to support for concrete estate tax policies (i.e., to address wealth inequality) in all five countries. Moreover, support for estate taxes was unchanged following an experimental induction of low societal social mobility (Alesina et al., 2018). This work also examined specific income inequality policies (e.g., increasing income tax on the top 1-10%) and found that while lower social mobility beliefs correlated with support for specific income tax policies, this pattern was limited to moderate-to-strong liberal respondents and was not found in some countries (e.g., Sweden, the U.S.). Additionally, the social mobility manipulation employed across countries did not significantly change support for specific income tax policies targeted at the top or bottom.

As demonstrated thus far, social mobility beliefs affect support for the status quo and abstract inequality attitudes more than concrete inequality attitudes and actions. However, we are not suggesting that social mobility beliefs do not have a meaningful role in societal change or support for specific policies. For instance, social mobility beliefs may be well-positioned to affect support for specific inequality policies *in conjunction* with other situational and individual factors, especially those relevant to inequality policies or programs. Of course, changing specific attitudes is hard when people hold motivated beliefs such as the case for some political issues (e.g., Kunda, 1990; Redlawsk, 2002; Taber & Lodge, 2006).

As evident in the theory and research discussed thus far, social mobility beliefs are inherently linked to some degree of societal consideration. However, they not only affect how people respond to societal-level phenomena (such as economic inequality). Next we describe research that broadens the significance of holding these beliefs to individuals’ own lives.

Social Mobility Beliefs Impact the Personal

In this section we review research and conceptualize how social mobility beliefs may impact individuals, including their education and status-related goals, and well-being. To provide some basis for whether social mobility beliefs affect these outcomes, we first consider how

social mobility beliefs may have some conceptual overlap with relevant theory and work in this area. For instance, social mobility beliefs appear to relate to people's notions of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). For example, in a sample of young U.S. adults, although only 1% were business owners, 80% believed they could be owners in the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986). To the extent that social mobility beliefs shape people's selves, they may motivate and guide goal-directed behaviors, including in education domains (e.g., Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006; Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002).

Beliefs about upward social mobility also fit people's general orientations toward their future goals (Snyder, 2002) and their expectancies that actions will lead to desired outcomes (Vroom, 1995). As performance that will likely pay off as expected can be motivating, such as at work or school (Van Eerder & Thierry, 1996), beliefs of high or low likelihood of social-class change may thus promote or restrict future oriented motivations. In sum, social mobility beliefs potentially play a role in guiding and interpreting goal-directed acts. That is, different than the pattern observed at the societal level, it appears that social mobility beliefs – although abstract – may be able to impact individuals' own downstream behaviors, without many of the same kind of barriers applying (e.g., consensus on actions, political beliefs, etc). In the following sections we examine whether this possibility may especially involve domains relevant to prospects of social class change, including the pursuit of education and status, and the resulting experience of well-being.

Education and Status-related Goals

Social mobility beliefs may be particularly consequential for some education and status-related outcomes. Gaining education is believed to be a primary means to increase social class (Bullock & Limbert, 2003), and motivation in this area is arguably the critical factor contributing to success (Sternberg, 2017). We expect that relatively higher social mobility beliefs will encourage the pursuit of the primary means of changing social class, such as through education. In contrast, lower social mobility beliefs may reduce people's investment in such traditional routes toward upward mobility. Social mobility beliefs, however, may not necessarily affect all status ambitions (e.g., non-educational goals) in the same manner. As evident below, we suggest that relatively lower social mobility beliefs may also increase at least some alternative status-related goals.

Moreover, we expect the pattern just outlined to typically depend on individual differences. Social mobility beliefs may be especially impactful for those lower in perceived SES (Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000; Piff, Kraus, & Keltner, 2018), those feeling relatively deprived (Crosby, 1976; Pettigrew, 2016), or those with stronger desires to attain status through materialism (Richins, 2004; Richins & Dawson, 1992). For instance, many practical and psychological disadvantages associate with low SES (e.g., poorer health, financial limitations, experience of SES-related stereotype threat, psychological scarcity, less access to higher-status networks or other means of advancement). Because of greater vulnerability in general, higher social mobility beliefs may help increase motivation for those lower in subjective SES, such as helping regulate or sustain goal-directed behaviors. Likewise, lower social mobility beliefs may be more detrimental to those lower in SES, who may lack a support system or alternative means of pursuing upward mobility-related goals.

This possibility does receive some empirical support. For instance, social mobility beliefs positively related to high school students' self-reports of academic perseverance and school-

reported GPA scores many weeks later, but only for those who had lower perceptions of their subjective SES (Browman, Destin, Carswell, & Svoboda, 2017). An experiment detected the same pattern by manipulating societal social mobility information and measuring immediate behavioral perseverance, i.e., a difficult anagram task. A third study found a causal effect of social mobility beliefs on perseverance beliefs, although again this was limited to those low in subjective SES. This study showed no significant impact of the manipulation on students' year-end GPAs. This may indicate a weaker overall effect than the correlational evidence, or perhaps a limit to the long-term consequences of this kind of brief intervention. For those lower in subjective SES, higher social mobility beliefs seem to help individuals to regulate their behavior, especially in the short-term, or to the extent that these beliefs are salient and fit the context (e.g., Oyserman, Destin, & Novin, 2015).

Alternatively, if people believe in low social mobility, then instead of pursuing education, they may choose to enhance their status in other ways. One status-related impression management strategy is to seek variety and distinctiveness (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984). Accordingly, in two experiments, a low social mobility frame consistently increased variety seeking (e.g., for different consumer products, food), but only for those subjectively lower in SES (Yoon & Kim, 2018). Thus, among those low in subjective SES, low social mobility beliefs may promote alternative status-striving behaviors. The belief in low social mobility may also drive some individuals to act impulsively instead of investing in their future self. For example, among a sample of American gamblers, feeling deprived predicted motivations to gamble for money, but only for those with low personal social mobility beliefs (Tabri, Dupuis, Kim, & Wohl, 2015). Moreover, across three experiments, a low societal social mobility frame consistently led to more impulsive consumerism (e.g., desire to buy nice clothing), but only among those high in materialism (Yoon & Kim, 2016). Thus, low social mobility beliefs can lead to potentially problematic behaviors for those who feel they deserve more financial success and for those who materially invest in status.

Beyond education and status related outcomes, believing that social class change may be more or less possible, or has been more or less achieved than desired, may also affect personal well-being. In the next section we review research and conceptualize how social mobility beliefs and well-being may relate.

Well Being

The positive relation between social mobility beliefs and subjective wellbeing (Diener, 1984) appears to be relatively straightforward. Negative past experiences can influence beliefs about future selves and possibly cause distress (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Desired future selves also appear tied to self-esteem, self-efficacy, and meaning (Vignoles, Manzi, Regalia, Jemmolo, & Scabini, 2008). Applying these notions to social mobility beliefs in particular, those who believe that they have experienced downward social mobility, or genuinely expect low social mobility in the future, may be relatively disheartened, or have lower subjective well-being. This may especially occur for those who previously held upward mobility beliefs. Similarly, beliefs about experienced or expected upward mobility may help buffer against negative outcomes (e.g., Bullock, 2008) or have positive well-being effects. These effects may be stronger in the short term or when these beliefs are chronically accessible (Higgins, 1996).

One possible test of these notions is to examine social mobility beliefs in the context of immigration. The American Dream narrative of moving to the U.S. and improving one's status

implies a possible impact on well-being. Sustaining the effort to migrate also requires believing in the possibility of a better life. For immigrants to the U.S., beliefs about experienced personal social mobility (e.g., relative status in one's home country as compared to current American status) relates to several dimensions of emotional well-being. In a national sample of Latino immigrants, lower personal social mobility beliefs were associated with self-reports of worse physical health and more symptoms of major depression (Alcántara, Chen, & Alegria, 2014). In a sample of immigrants to Florida, higher personal social mobility beliefs related to fewer negative emotional episodes (e.g., feeling depressed or upset), but were unrelated to positive emotional episodes (e.g., feeling pleased or excited; Vaquera & Aranda, 2017). Notably, the results hold even after controlling for initial social class (Marmot, 2003).

Beyond migration experiences, additional research on American residents in general has examined social mobility beliefs and well-being (Wiwad, 2015). Two experiments, including a nationally representative sample, manipulated beliefs about expected societal social mobility. In both studies, a high social mobility frame led to more positive affect than a low social mobility frame. Although either societal or personal social mobility beliefs could drive these effects, another correlational study found personal (but not societal) social mobility beliefs related to positive affect (Wiwad, 2015).

Although this set of studies unsystematically examined different contexts and forms of social mobility beliefs (experienced, expected, personal, and societal), the research overall demonstrates that social mobility beliefs may affect several aspects of wellbeing.

Conclusion

This chapter sought to provide an overview of research on social mobility beliefs and to better understand their possible role in explaining inequality and other outcomes. Economic inequality has long been a characteristic of human societies (Pringle, 2014). Nowadays, it is commonly believed that many people may move up the societal ladder. Although increasing social mobility will not solve economic inequality, believing in social mobility makes the general idea of inequality, and the systems that produce it, more tolerable. As we conceptualized, social mobility beliefs also have some limits – they do not directly influence people's support for concrete policies designed to change income or wealth inequality. Together this highlights the potential power of social mobility beliefs, as well as the complexity and difficulty in altering the gap between the rich and poor. Although we are only beginning to unravel the nature, accuracy, and consequences of these beliefs, they clearly have some impact on the societal level (e.g., general support for economic inequality) as well as the personal (e.g., achievement). Thus, these are exciting times to research social mobility beliefs, with many opportunities to broaden what we know about the antecedents and characteristics, as well as their potential consequences for nations and individuals' everyday lives.

References

- Adler, N. E., Epel, E. S., Castellazzo, G., & Ickovics, J. R. (2000). Relationship of subjective and objective social status with psychological and physiological functioning: Preliminary data in healthy white women. *Health Psychology, 19*, 586-592.
- Ajzen, I. (2001). Nature and operation of attitudes. *Annual Review of Psychology, 52*, 27-58.
- Ajzen, I., & Fishbein, M. (1977). Attitude-behavior relations: A theoretical analysis and review of empirical research. *Psychological Bulletin, 84*, 888-918.
- Alcántara, C., Chen, C. N., & Alegría, M. (2014). Do post-migration perceptions of social mobility matter for Latino immigrant health? *Social Science & Medicine, 101*, 94-106.
- Alesina, A., Stantcheva, S., & Teso, E. (2018). Intergenerational mobility and preferences for redistribution. *American Economic Review, 108*, 521-554.
- Alvaredo, F., Chancel, L., Piketty, T., Saez, E., & Zucman, G. (2018). *World inequality report 2018*. World Inequality Lab.
- Asch, S. E. (1952). *Social psychology*. New York: Prentice-Hall.
- Augoustinos, M. & Callaghan, P. (in press). The language of social inequality (pp. xx-xx). In K. Peters & J. Jetten (Eds.), *The social psychology of inequality*. Springer.
- Bartels, L. M. (2005). Homer gets a tax cut: Inequality and public policy in the American mind. *Perspectives on Politics, 3*, 15-31.
- Benabou, R., & Ok, E. A. (2001). Social mobility and the demand for redistribution: the POUM hypothesis. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 116*, 447-487.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Breen, R., & Jonsson, J. O. (2005). Inequality of opportunity in comparative perspective: Recent research on educational attainment and social mobility. *Annual Review of Sociology, 31*, 223-243.
- Browman, A. S., Destin, M., Carswell, K. L., & Svoboda, R. C. (2017). Perceptions of socioeconomic mobility influence academic persistence among low socioeconomic status students. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 72*, 45-52.
- Brown-Iannuzzi, J. L., Dotsch, R., Cooley, E., & Payne, B. K. (2017). The relationship between mental representations of welfare recipients and attitudes toward welfare. *Psychological Science, 28*, 92-103.
- Brown-Iannuzzi, J. L., Lundberg, K. B., & McKee, S. (2017). Political action in the age of high-economic inequality: A multilevel approach. *Social Issues and Policy Review, 11*, 232-273.
- Bullock, H. E. (2008). Justifying inequality: A social psychological analysis of beliefs about poverty and the poor (pp. 52-76). In Lin, A. C., & Harris, D. R. (Eds.) *The colors of poverty: Why racial and ethnic disparities persist*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Bullock, H. E., & Limbert, W. M. (2003). Scaling the socioeconomic ladder: Low-income women's perceptions of class status and opportunity. *Journal of Social Issues, 59*, 693-709.
- Chambers, J. R., Swan, L. K., & Heesacker, M. (2015). Perceptions of US social mobility are divided (and distorted) along ideological lines. *Psychological Science, 26*, 413-423.
- Chetty, R., Hendren, N., Kline, P., Saez, E., & Turner, N. (2014). Is the United States still a land of opportunity? Recent trends in intergenerational mobility. *American Economic Review, 104*, 141-147.
- Cohen, G. L. (2003). Party over policy: The dominating impact of group influence on political beliefs. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 85*, 808-822.

- Crosby, F. (1976). A model of egoistical relative deprivation. *Psychological Review*, 83, 85-113.
- Darley, J. M., & Gross, P. H. (1983). A hypothesis-confirming bias in labeling effects. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 44, 20-33.
- Davidai, S., & Gilovich, T. (2015a). What goes up apparently needn't come down: Asymmetric predictions of ascent and descent in rankings. *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, 28, 491-503.
- Davidai, S., & Gilovich, T. (2015b). Building a more mobile America – One income quintile at a time. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10, 60–71.
- Davidai, S., & Gilovich, T. (2018). How should we think about Americans' beliefs about economic mobility? *Judgment and Decision Making*, 13, 297-304.
- Dawtry, R. J., Sutton, R. M., & Sibley, C. G. (in press). Social sampling, perceptions of wealth distribution, and support for redistribution (pp. xx-xx). In K. Peters & J. Jetten (Eds.), *The social psychology of inequality*. Springer.
- Day, M. V., & Fiske, S. T. (2017). Movin' on up? How perceptions of social mobility affect our willingness to defend the system. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 8, 267-274.
- Diener, E. (1984). Subjective well-being. *Psychological Bulletin*, 95, 542-575.
- Duru-Bellat, M., & Kieffer, A. (2008). Objective/subjective: The two facets of social mobility. *Sociologie du Travail*, 50, e1-e18.
- Fishbein, M., & Ajzen, I. (1974). Attitudes towards objects as predictors of single and multiple behavioral criteria. *Psychological Review*, 81, 59-74.
- Fiske, S. T., & Durante, F. (in press). Mutual status stereotypes maintain inequality (pp. xx-xx). In K. Peters & J. Jetten (Eds.), *The social psychology of inequality*. Springer.
- Gilens, M. (1996). Race and poverty in America: Public misperceptions and the American news media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 60, 515-541.
- Hauser, O. P., & Norton, M. I. (2017). (Mis) perceptions of inequality. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 18, 21-25.
- Henry, P. J., Reyna, C., & Weiner, B. (2004). Hate welfare but help the poor: How the attributional content of stereotypes explains the paradox of reactions to the destitute in America. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 34, 34-58.
- Higgins, T. (1996). Knowledge activation: Accessibility, applicability and salience. In T. Higgins & A. Kruglanski (Eds.), *Social psychology, handbook of basic principles* (pp. 133–168). New York: Guilford Press.
- Hout, M. (2015). A summary of what we know about social mobility. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 657, 27-36.
- Jaime-Castillo, A. M., & Marques-Perales, I. (2014). Beliefs about social fluidity and preferences for social policies. *Journal of Social Policy*, 43, 615-633.
- Jost, J. T. (2017). Working class conservatism: A system justification perspective. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 18, 73-78.
- Jost, J. T., Banaji, M. R., & Nosek, B. A. (2004). A decade of system justification theory: Accumulated evidence of conscious and unconscious bolstering of the status quo. *Political Psychology*, 25, 881–919.
- Jost, J. T., & Hunyady, O. (2005). Antecedents and consequences of system-justifying ideologies. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 14, 260–265.
- Kay, A. C., Jost, J. T., Mandisodza, A. N., Sherman, S. J., Petrocelli, J. V., & Johnson, A. L. (2007). Panglossian ideology in the service of system justification: How complementary

- stereotypes help us to rationalize inequality. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 39, 305-358.
- Kelley, S. M. C., & Kelley, C. G. E. (2009). Subjective social mobility: Data from 30 nations. In Haller, M., Jowell, R., & Smith, T. W. (Eds.), *Charting the globe: The international social survey programme, 1984-2009*. London: Routledge
- Kim, E., Pedersen, R. T., & Mutz, D. C. (2016). What do Americans talk about when they talk about inequality? *Working Paper, SSRN*.
- Kluegel, J. R., & Smith, E. R. (1986). *Beliefs about inequality*. New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Kraus, M. W. (2015). Americans still overestimate social class mobility: A pre-registered self-replication. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6, 1709.
- Kraus, M. W., & Tan, J. J. X. (2015). Americans overestimate social class mobility. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 58, 101–111.
- Kunda, Z. (1990). The case for motivated reasoning. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108, 480-498.
- Kuziemko, I., Buell, R. W., Reich, T., & Norton, M. I. (2014). “Last-place aversion”: Evidence and redistributive implications. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 129, 105-149.
- Lane, R. E. (2001). Self-reliance and empathy: The enemies of poverty—and of the poor. *Political Psychology*, 22, 473-492.
- Lewin, K. (1935). *A dynamic theory of personality*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Mandisodza, A. N., Jost, J. T., & Unzueta, M. M. (2006). “Tall poppies” and “American dreams” reactions to rich and poor in Australia and the United States. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 37, 659–668.
- Major, B., Gramzow, R. H., McCoy, S. K., Levin, S., Schmader, T., & Sidanius, J. (2002). Perceiving personal discrimination: the role of group status and legitimizing ideology. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82, 269-282.
- Markus, H., & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. *American Psychologist*, 41, 954-969.
- Marmot, M. G. (2003). Understanding social inequalities in health. *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 46, S9-S23.
- McAdams, D. P., & McLean, K. C. (2013). Narrative identity. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22, 233-238.
- McCall, L., & Kenworthy, L. (2009). Americans' social policy preferences in the era of rising inequality. *Perspectives on Politics*, 7, 459-484.
- Meraviglia, C. (2017). The social ladder: Status mobility across time and countries (pp. 13-33). In Edlund, J., Bechert, I., & Quandt, M. (Eds.), *Social inequality in the eyes of the public: A collection of analyses based on ISSP data 1987-2009 (GESIS-Volume 17)*.
- Oyserman, D., Bybee, D., & Terry, K. (2006). Possible selves and academic outcomes: How and when possible selves impel action. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91, 188-204.
- Oyserman, D., Destin, M., & Novin, S. (2015). The context-sensitive future self: Possible selves motivate in context, not otherwise. *Self and Identity*, 14, 173-188.
- Oyserman, D., Terry, K., & Bybee, D. (2002). A possible selves intervention to enhance school involvement. *Journal of Adolescence*, 25, 3113-326.
- Petz, J., & Wohl, M. J. (2018). Perceiving time through group-based glasses: Collective temporal orientation. *British Journal of Social Psychology, Advance Online Publication*. DOI: 10.1111/bjso.12291

- Pettigrew, T. F. (2016). In pursuit of three theories: Authoritarianism, relative deprivation, and intergroup contact. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *67*, 1-21.
- Piff, P. K., Kraus, M. W., & Keltner, D. (2018). Unpacking the inequality paradox: The psychological roots of inequality and social class. In *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Vol. 57, pp. 53-124). Academic Press.
- Pickett, K. E., & Wilkinson, R. G. (2015). Income inequality and health: A causal review. *Social Science & Medicine*, *128*, 316–326.
- Piketty, T. (1995). Social mobility and redistributive politics. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *110*, 551-584.
- Pringle, H. (2014). The ancient roots of the 1%. *Science*, *344*, 822-825.
- Redlawsk, D. P. (2002). Hot cognition or cool consideration? Testing the effects of motivated reasoning on political decision making. *The Journal of Politics*, *64*, 1021-1044.
- Richins, M. L. (2004). The material values scale: Measurement properties and development of a short form. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *31*, 209-219.
- Richins, M. L., & Dawson, S. (1992). A consumer values orientation for materialism and its measurement: Scale development and validation. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *19*, 303-316.
- Ross, L., & Nisbett, R. E. (1991). *The person and the situation: Perspectives of social psychology*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Ross, M., & Wilson, A. E. (2002). It feels like yesterday: Self-esteem, valence of personal past experiences, and judgments of subjective distance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *82*, 792-803.
- Sawhill, I., & Morton, J. E. (2007). *Economic mobility: Is the American dream alive and well?* Washington, DC: Pew Economic Mobility Project.
- Schmidt, A. (2010). The experience of social mobility and the formation of attitudes towards income redistribution. *Cologne: GK SoClife Working Papers Series*, *6*.
- Sedikides, C., Wildschut, T., Arndt, J., & Routledge, C. (2008). Nostalgia: Past, present, and future. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, *17*, 304-307.
- Shariff, A. F., Wiwad, D., & Aknin, L. B. (2016). Income mobility breeds tolerance for income inequality: Cross-national and experimental evidence. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *11*, 373-380.
- Sidanius, J., & Pratto, F. (1999). *Social dominance: An intergroup theory of social hierarchy and oppression*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, K. B., & Stone, L. H. (1989). Rags, riches, and bootstraps: Beliefs about the causes of wealth and poverty. *Sociological Quarterly*, *30*, 93-107.
- Snyder, C. R. (2002). Hope theory: Rainbows in the mind. *Psychological Inquiry*, *13*, 249-275.
- Steele, L. G. (2015). Income inequality, equal opportunity, and attitudes about redistribution. *Social Science Quarterly*, *96*, 444-464.
- Sternberg, R. J. (2017). Intelligence and competence in theory and practice. In A. J. Elliot, C. S. Dweck, & D. S. Yeager (Eds.), *Handbook of competence and motivation*, second edition (pp. 9-24). New York: Guilford Press.
- Swan, L. K., Chambers, J. R., Heesacker, M., & Nero, S. S. (2017). How should we measure Americans' perceptions of socio-economic mobility? *Judgment and Decision Making*, *12*, 507-515.
- Taber, C. S., & Lodge, M. (2006). Motivated skepticism in the evaluation of political beliefs. *American Journal of Political Science*, *50*, 755-769.

- Tabri, N., Dupuis, D. R., Kim, H. S., & Wohl, M. J. (2015). Economic mobility moderates the effect of relative deprivation on financial gambling motives and disordered gambling. *International Gambling Studies, 15*, 309-323.
- Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2003). Temporal construal. *Psychological Review, 110*, 403-421.
- Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2010). Construal-level theory of psychological distance. *Psychological Review, 117*, 440-463.
- Van Eerder, W., & Thierry, H., (1996). Vroom's expectancy models and work-related criteria: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 81*, 575-586.
- Vaquera, E., & Aranda, E. (2017). Moving up and down the ladder: Perceived social mobility and emotional dispositions among south Florida's immigrants. *Sociological Forum, 32*, 793-815.
- Vignoles, V. L., Manzi, C., Regalia, C., Jemmolo, S., & Scabini, E. (2008). Identity motives underlying desired and feared possible future selves. *Journal of Personality, 76*, 1165-1200.
- Vroom, V. H. (1995). *Work and motivation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Westoff, C. F., Bressler, M., & Sagi, P. C. (1960). The concept of social mobility: An empirical inquiry. *American Sociological Review, 25*, 375-385.
- Williams, M. J., & Eberhardt, J. L. (2008). Biological conceptions of race and the motivation to cross racial boundaries. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 94*, 1033-1047.
- Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2011). *The spirit level: Why greater equality makes societies stronger*. New York: Bloomsbury Press.
- Wilson, A. E., & Ross, M. (2000). The frequency of temporal-self and social comparisons in people's personal appraisals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 78*, 928-942.
- Wiwad, D. C. M. (2015). The rags-to-riches story of income mobility and its impact on emotional well-being. MA thesis, Simon Fraser University.
- Yoon, S., & Kim, H. C. (2016). Keeping the American dream alive: The interactive effect of perceived economic mobility and materialism on impulsive spending. *Journal of Marketing Research, 53*, 759-772.
- Yoon, S., & Kim, H. C. (2018). Feeling economically stuck: The effect of perceived economic mobility and socioeconomic status on variety seeking. *Journal of Consumer Research, 44*, 1141-1156.
- Zanna, M. P., Olson, J. M., & Fazio, R. H. (1980). Attitude-behavior consistency: An individual difference perspective. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 38*, 432-440.