9.4D: Types of Social Mobility

Social mobility can be vertical and horizontal, absolute and relative, and between generations.

Learning Objectives

• Describe several types of social mobility

Key Points

• Social mobility refers to the movement of individuals or groups in social position over time.
• Social mobility may refer to classes, ethnic groups, or entire nations, and may measure health status, literacy, or education; however, more commonly it refers to individuals or families, and to their change in income.
• Movement up or down the social hierarchy is called vertical social mobility.
• Movement between two equally ranked social positions is called horizontal mobility.
• Intra-generational mobility (“within” a generation) is defined as change in social status over a single lifetime.
• Absolute mobility measures whether (and by how much) living standards in a society have increased; this is often measured by what percentage of people have higher incomes than their parents.
• Relative mobility refers to how likely children are to move from their parents’ place in the social hierarchy.

Key Terms

• meritocratic: Used to describe a type of society where wealth, income, and social status are assigned through competition.
• **vertical mobility**: Movement of individuals or groups up or down from one socioeconomic level to another, often by changing jobs or through marriage.

• **intra-generational mobility**: Change in social status over a single lifetime.

Social mobility refers to the movement of individuals or groups in social position over time. Most commonly, social mobility refers to the change in wealth and social status of individuals or families. However, it may also refer to changes in health status, literacy rate, education, or other variables among groups such as classes, ethnic groups, or countries.

Social mobility typically refers to vertical mobility, which is the movement of individuals or groups up or down from one socioeconomic level to another, often by changing jobs or through marriage. In some instances though, social mobility is used to refer to horizontal mobility, which is the movement from one position to another within the same social level, as when someone changes between two equally prestigious occupations.

Social mobility can be intergenerational, such as when children attain a higher or lower status than their parents held. Other times, social mobility is intra-generational, meaning that a person changes status within their lifetime. A high level of intergenerational mobility is often considered praiseworthy, and can be seen as a sign of equality of opportunity in a society.

A distinction can be drawn between absolute social mobility, which refers to the total observed movement of people between classes, and relative social mobility, which is an estimate of the chance of upward or downward movement of a member of one social class in comparison with a member from another class. An example of absolute social mobility is when a region’s economic development provides education to a social group that previously did not have access to education, thus raising the group’s literacy level and socioeconomic status. Relative social mobility might refer to the opportunities presented to a middle class child born in a particular area of the United States, who might be predicted to attain a college level education and a maximum income of $80,000, for example.

Social mobility can be enabled to varying extents by economic capital, cultural capital, human capital, and social capital. Economic capital includes a person’s financial and material resources, such as income and accumulated wealth. Cultural capital includes resources ranging from holding a graduate degree to having a grasp of a group’s customs and rituals, both of which may confer an advantage in job markets and social exchanges. Human capital refers to such individual traits as competence and work ethic, which may enable increased educational or professional attainment. Social capital includes the advantages conferred by one’s social network, such as access to professional opportunities and insider knowledge. These types of capital facilitate mobility by providing access to opportunities and the tools to acquire wealth and status.

Each society presents different opportunities for mobility depending on its system of values. For example, Western capitalist countries are generally meritocratic. In these countries, social standing is based on such personal attributes as educational attainment, income, and occupational prestige. Thus, the degree of mobility in Western capitalist states depends on the extent to which individuals have access to educational and economic opportunity. By contrast, in countries where religious devotion is valued over economic standing, mobility may depend upon individuals’ access to religious rituals and shows of piety. In different countries or regions, the extent to which individuals are socially mobile depends upon different factors.