The Double-Edged Consequences of Beliefs about Opportunity and Economic Mobility

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Summary

Beliefs about socioeconomic mobility have important consequences, writes Mesmin Destin, especially for young people. Moreover, research by psychologists shows that such beliefs are malleable, based on the information and circumstances people encounter.

The consequences of beliefs about mobility can be quite positive. When young people perceive that they have opportunities and financial resources to help them reach their goals, they are more likely to take the steps that can lead to upward socioeconomic mobility. But the consequences can also be negative. Overemphasizing opportunities while de-emphasizing systematic barriers and inequality, Destin writes, makes it less likely that people will take collective action against discrimination and address inequality's structural roots.

Destin proposes several ways that policymakers and others could navigate this tension. One, for example, is to convey a more balanced notion to young people: that opportunities are available, but unfair barriers exist that particularly affect members of certain groups. In the end, though, he concludes, perhaps the most effective way to shape people's perceptions of opportunity is to expand the pathways to upward socioeconomic mobility and make them more accessible to all young people.

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One of the most widely recognized values in American society is the idea of the "American dream"—the belief that people who work hard and play by the rules can improve their life circumstances. In more formal terms, part of this belief is known as socioeconomic mobility. Economists have significantly expanded the understanding of how much socioeconomic mobility actually occurs in society. For example, about 45 percent of children born in 1980 into families at the middle of the income distribution earn more than their parents did as adults.[1] Overall, extreme mobility isn't very likely. Some mobility does occur for a significant number of people, but many people experience no socioeconomic mobility at all. To complicate the picture, rates of socioeconomic mobility differ widely depending on where a person lives, with some of the largest recent declines occurring in the industrial Midwest.[2] Because people's experiences—and the stories they tell themselves about opportunities in society—vary so much, the extent to which people *believe* that socioeconomic mobility occurs in society varies widely. A growing amount of research demonstrates that these beliefs have important consequences, especially for young people.

Emerging research regarding people's beliefs about socioeconomic mobility reveals some new and important insights. First, beliefs about mobility are malleable: people might overestimate or underestimate the likelihood of socioeconomic mobility based on the information and circumstances they encounter. Second, these beliefs matter. An optimistic belief in mobility can have a positive effect on young people's outlook on life and their pursuit of life goals. At the same time, a strong belief in the likelihood of socioeconomic mobility can diminish people's support for policies aiming to increase opportunity and reduce inequality. Altogether, these studies contribute to a model that highlights the central role played by economic inequality in driving people's beliefs about the likelihood of socioeconomic mobility.

The Foundation of Beliefs about Mobility

The study of people's thoughts about socioeconomic mobility builds on a long history of research on people's beliefs about groups in society.[3] In short, people have a strong tendency to understand themselves and others around them in terms of the groups they belong to. Dividing a complex social world into discernible groups serves a number of functions: it helps people identify potential allies and threats; it gives them a sense of belonging; and it boosts their sense of self-worth. This pervasive type of social categorization can begin early; even young children can view themselves and others in terms of their membership in visible groups like gender and race.[4] More recently, this area of research has expanded to consider how people develop an understanding of socioeconomic groups in their society.

When children begin to make distinctions about people's socioeconomic group membership, they often base these categorizations on the visible lifestyles and material possessions of their families and those around them.[5] As they move toward adolescence, children develop increasingly complex understandings of socioeconomic groups, and they form their own explanations for socioeconomic inequality between people and groups in society.[6] For example,

they might pay more attention to structural factors like family wealth and discrimination, or they might lean more toward individual factors like hard work or bad decisions. They also begin to think more concretely about their own goals and possible futures.[7] These developing ideas and explanations for people's socioeconomic circumstances form the foundation for beliefs about whether a person's status in society is likely to change.

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Measuring Beliefs about Socioeconomic Mobility

Several social psychological studies have developed methods to evaluate people's beliefs about socioeconomic mobility and to draw conclusions regarding whether people tend to overestimate or underestimate the likelihood of mobility in society. In one study, researchers distributed a survey to over 700 participants that included measures of their beliefs about mobility. In one mobility question, they asked participants "to think about 100 people during a ten-year time period from 1997 [to] 2006" and to "assess how many of these 100 people would … move from the bottom 20 percent of income to the top 20 percent."[8] Participants significantly overestimated the likelihood of socioeconomic mobility, a pattern that the researchers replicated in multiple additional studies.[9] Similarly, other researchers distributed a survey to over 3,000 people across the United States in which they showed participants a figure displaying the country's five income quintiles. They asked participants "to imagine a randomly selected American born to a family in the lowest income quintile and to estimate his or her likelihood of either remaining in this quintile as an adult or rising to each of the four higher income quintiles." On average, participants believed that the individual would have a 43 percent chance of reaching the middle quintile or higher, compared to the actual likelihood of 30 percent.[10]

Other studies have drawn different conclusions about people's beliefs regarding socioeconomic mobility. In one set of studies including over 850 participants, researchers found that people underestimated rates of socioeconomic mobility. These researchers asked people to "imagine a group of American children born in the early 1980s" whose parents were in the bottom third of the income distribution. They then asked participants to "estimate the percentage of children in that group who ended up in the bottom, middle, and top third of the income distribution by the time they reached their mid 20s." Participants estimated that 39 percent of the imagined people would experience socioeconomic mobility to the middle or upper third, compared to the actual figure of 51 percent.[11] In other work, researchers reconciled the conflicting findings as a function of the different types of measures (specifically, whether participants were asked to think about the income distribution in thirds or in fifths).[12] Such conflicting findings may reflect the fact that people's perceptions of socioeconomic mobility are quite malleable depending on social circumstances and cues in the environment. Other research has indicated that these malleable beliefs about

socioeconomic mobility have important consequences for how people engage with the world around them and pursue their goals.

Positive Consequences of Believing in Mobility

In particular, young people from backgrounds with low socioeconomic status (SES) often receive implicit and explicit messages that school is important because it is a route toward reaching future goals and improving their lives. Experimental studies show that this type of messaging does indeed motivate low SES students to devote more time and energy to schoolwork.[13] But this route to motivation relies on the belief that socioeconomic mobility is indeed possible. In a series of studies involving high school and college students, researchers directly evaluated the potential relationship between young people's beliefs about socioeconomic mobility and their academic behaviors.[14] First, in a correlational study, low SES high school students completed a measure of perceptions of socioeconomic mobility that included items like "No matter who you are, you can significantly change your status a lot." The study found a significant correlation between stronger beliefs in socioeconomic mobility, on the one hand, and both higher scores on a measure of academic persistence and higher grade point averages, on the other.

Two more experiments advanced the research by testing whether this relationship between perceptions of socioeconomic mobility and academic motivation was causal. In the first experiment, college students were randomly assigned to be guided to endorse either weak or strong beliefs about socioeconomic mobility. The experimental manipulation used a forced-agreement paradigm, which momentarily shifts people's beliefs through the way a survey is constructed: participants are only given the option to agree with statements, from "somewhat agree" to "strongly agree." In the weak beliefs condition, they can only respond to (and are therefore subtly forced to agree with) statements indicating that socioeconomic mobility is unlikely. In the strong beliefs condition, on the other hand, they can only respond to (and are subtly forced to agree with) statements indicating that socioeconomic mobility is likely.[15] After low SES college students were successfully guided to have temporarily strong (as opposed to weak) beliefs in socioeconomic mobility, they showed more persistence on an academic task.[16] This experiment demonstrated a causal relationship between beliefs about socioeconomic mobility and how students respond to an academic task.

In a second similar experiment, the researchers guided high school students to have momentarily weak or strong beliefs about socioeconomic mobility by viewing figures that, although accurate, were manipulated to emphasize either low or high rates of socioeconomic mobility in society. The low SES students who were randomly assigned to have temporarily stronger beliefs in socioeconomic mobility scored higher on a measure of academic persistence than those randomly assigned to either the weak beliefs condition or a control condition.[17] This and other measures of persistence were significant predictors of students' actual grades, indicating that believing in socioeconomic mobility can have positive consequences for important academic outcomes.

Potential Negative Consequences of Believing in Mobility

Maintaining optimistic beliefs about the possibility of socioeconomic mobility can have consequences that could be considered

negative for society. Most of these potential negative consequences pertain to people's attitudes about inequality and fairness in the world around them. For example, a study including a sample of almost 28,000 participants from 19 countries showed that those from nations with higher rates of socioeconomic mobility showed greater tolerance for inequality in society.[18] In other words, participants who were more likely to see opportunities for economic advancement were less concerned about disparities in income, even when controlling for a wide range of national and individual demographic characteristics.

A rigid belief in meritocracy can perpetuate systemic inequality, with especially negative consequences for members of low status groups.

Experimental methods have provided additional evidence for a causal relationship between beliefs about socioeconomic mobility and attitudes about inequality. One study randomly assigned more than 500 US participants to read articles suggesting either low or high rates of socioeconomic mobility. After reading the articles, those who read about high rates of mobility agreed more with statements like "I think that the current amount of income inequality in the United States is acceptable" than did those who read about low rates of mobility.[19] The mobility articles influenced attitudes about inequality by shaping people's thoughts about their children's possible futures and about meritocracy in society.

Relatedly, in experiments including over 2,800 participants, researchers demonstrated that exposure to "rags-to-riches" stories exemplifying the American dream led people to increase their meritocratic belief that individual factors like ambition explain whether people succeed in society.[20] On the other hand, when inequality is made salient, people are more likely to support the efforts of government and business to mitigate the role of structural factors like family wealth and to redistribute resources. In fact, multiple studies have demonstrated that believing mobility can occur leads to a stronger belief in meritocracy.[21] Although the idea of meritocracy can be viewed as desirable and congruent with American values, a rigid belief in meritocracy can perpetuate systemic inequality, with especially negative consequences for members of low status groups.

Risks of Unwavering Belief in Meritocracy

Many Americans persistently defend the meritocratic belief that people's outcomes in life are primarily a result of their own hard work or lack thereof.[22] This belief helps people understand, justify, and find meaning in social hierarchy. Regarding members of higher status groups in particular, the more they endorse meritocratic beliefs, the more they tend to negatively stereotype members of low status groups, feel entitled to their own high status, and downplay claims of discrimination.[23] Meritocratic beliefs have especially strong consequences for how people view individuals with low levels of education, perceiving them as blameworthy and responsible for their life circumstances.[24] However, belief in meritocracy is malleable and can be strengthened or weakened by experiences and situational cues. In experimental studies, participants who were

cognitively primed to endorse meritocracy were less receptive to evidence of prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination faced by low status groups. It is important to note that meritocracy has consequential effects on people's attitudes and behaviors in both high and low status groups.

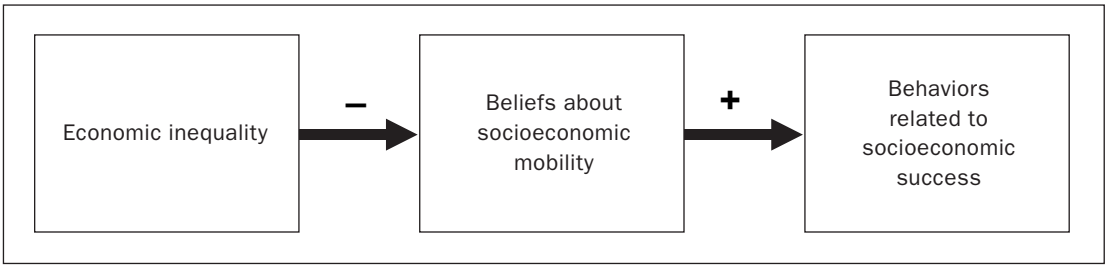
For members of low status groups, evidence suggests that meritocratic beliefs are linked to having more contact with high status outgroup members, leading them to oppose potentially beneficial reparative policies.[25] For example, greater contact with high status outgroup members was associated with a stronger belief that "the law should not make provision for minority groups because of their ethnicity." On the other hand, more connection with other low status ingroup members was associated with weaker beliefs in meritocracy and stronger support for reparative policies. For example, more contact with low status ingroup members was linked to a stronger belief that "some ethnic groups are currently more disadvantaged than others and require additional assistance." These beliefs are, in turn, linked to stronger support for reparative policies that aim to counteract the effects of prior injustices, such as restoring ownership of land to indigenous communities.

Meritocracy beliefs can also influence low status group members' ability to effectively pursue academic goals. In one experiment, about 150 fifth-grade students were randomly assigned to either a meritocracy condition, where they read materials reinforcing the idea that those with motivation and ability are the ones who succeed, or a control condition, with neutral reading materials. Compared to the control condition, the meritocracy condition created an SES gap: low SES students felt that their academic efficacy was lower, and they performed worse on a standardized academic test than did high SES students.[26] At the same time, studies show an association between meritocratic beliefs and feelings of control and general wellbeing among low status group members.[27] Together, these findings suggest that meritocratic beliefs help low status group members make sense of social hierarchy, but that these malleable beliefs also reinforce people's positions in society, whether they are low or high in status. Ironically, this suggests that a strong belief in meritocracy can undermine the actual ability of low status people to express and realize their potential achievements. It is likely that the most beneficial contextualization of meritocratic beliefs is the idea that effort and ability contribute to people's success in life but are rarely sufficient. In other words, most people must work hard to reach their goals, but hard work is no guarantee of success, which requires other forms of support—and even luck.

The Overarching Role of Inequality

Given that perceptions of socioeconomic mobility can have positive and negative consequences for young people, it is important to understand the broader social and environmental factors that shape these beliefs. Some evidence, for instance, suggests that higher SES itself is associated with a stronger belief in socioeconomic mobility.[28] There is more consistent evidence that political orientation is associated with beliefs in socioeconomic mobility, with greater conservatism predicting a stronger belief that people can rise up the socioeconomic ladder.[29] Perhaps the broadest social predictor of beliefs about socioeconomic mobility with the most compelling evidence is exposure

Figure 1. Model Depicting the Role of Beliefs about Socioeconomic Mobility in Linking Inequality to Young People's Outcomes



Source: Alexander S. Browman et al., "How Economic Inequality Shapes Mobility Expectations and Behaviour in Disadvantaged Youth," *Nature Human Behaviour* 3 (2019): 214–20, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-018-0523-0.

to economic inequality. More specifically, greater inequality in a society appears to signal to people that there is a weaker likelihood of experiencing socioeconomic mobility.

A multidisciplinary model provides theory and evidence linking economic inequality to young people's behaviors and outcomes via their perceptions of socioeconomic mobility.[30] First, a greater distance between those at the top end of the income distribution and those at the middle and bottom ends decreases young people's belief that they can change their position in the hierarchy. A series of five studies with over 3,000 participants shows direct evidence for this relationship.[31] In some of these studies, researchers experimentally manipulated inequality by showing participants a pie chart showing the wealth distribution in a participant's state as either highly unequal (with the richest fifth of the population possessing 81 percent of the wealth, and the poorest fifth 1 percent) or less unequal (with the top fifth possessing 35 percent and the bottom fifth 11 percent). Whether it is measured or experimentally manipulated, the perception of greater economic inequality consistently predicts weaker beliefs in socioeconomic mobility.

Another series of correlational studies and experiments found the same relationship between the salience of high inequality and low perceptions of socioeconomic mobility.[32] So, as young people occupy different social environments with different cues about the economic distance between social classes, they develop corresponding ideas about whether they and others can likely ascend the economic hierarchy. These ideas have consequences for their own behaviors related to reaching their life goals.

The model linking inequality to perceptions of mobility and outcomes of young people (shown in figure 1) is supported by evidence from multiple academic disciplines. In economics, for example, studies show a connection between economic inequality and an increased likelihood of behaviors—which they explain as driven by economic despair—such as dropping out of school and young parenthood.[33] Similarly, in psychology, the studies described above demonstrate a causal link between the belief that socioeconomic mobility can occur and stronger academic motivation.[34] The idea that thoughts about possibilities for the future can guide people's behaviors is grounded in a rich body of theory and evidence.[35] In other words, the more that contexts convey that opportunities are

available and remind young people of the goals they aspire to, the more likely it is that young people can effectively pursue those goals. On the other hand, when contexts fail to reinforce young people's desired futures, and instead present many barriers to success, it becomes harder to identify the route to desired goals and to remain focused on it.[36]

Concluding Points

When young people are led to perceive that they have opportunities and financial resources to help them reach their goals, they are more likely to take the steps that can lead to upward socioeconomic mobility. At the same time, overemphasizing opportunities while de-emphasizing systematic barriers and inequality makes people less likely to take collective action against discrimination and to address the structural roots of opportunity. One way to navigate this tension is to convey a more balanced notion to young people: that opportunities are available, but unfair barriers exist that particularly affect members of certain groups. A complementary approach is to consider *when* particular messages about opportunity in society are most developmentally appropriate. It may be especially important for students in lower SES environments to learn at young ages and during early adolescence that resources and opportunities for advancement exist.[37] As they move into later adolescence and early adulthood, young people commonly become increasingly attuned to fairness, justice, and societal complexity.[38] During these later years, they may need the support to explore the historical and structural roots of inequality and opportunity. Altogether, programs that offer young people mentorship to explore their interests and plan for their futures, and that also acknowledge potential individual and structural barriers to their success, can provide this type of robust support.[39] On a broader level, such practices can be linked to policies that increase actual opportunity for socioeconomic mobility—such as by reducing racial and economic segregation in schools and neighborhoods.

Most existing research focuses on the consequences of young people's thoughts about upward socioeconomic mobility because that is the type of trajectory that fits the dominant cultural narrative. At the same time, many Americans experience downward socioeconomic mobility—and some studies suggest that people in this country tend to underestimate the likelihood of that trajectory.[40] This risk has received increased attention in both research and popular media, yet it remains unclear how concerns about moving down the socioeconomic hierarchy might influence young people's motivation and behaviors. It is increasingly important to investigate this topic.[41]

People's beliefs about their possible life trajectories are quite malleable, and sensitive to information in their local or broader social context. These beliefs have significant consequences for how young people engage with opportunities in their own lives and make sense of the lives of others. Perhaps the most effective way to shape people's perceptions of opportunities, though, is to expand the routes to upward socioeconomic mobility and to make these paths truly accessible—regardless of potentially challenging circumstances.

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