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While social mobility provides opportunities for a better life and societal progress, it can also lead to significant challenges, including burnout from hypercompetitive environments, feelings of isolation due to cultural mismatches, and self-blame stemming from the myth of meritocracy.

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Strengthening social safety nets and providing supportive environments in educational institutions and workplaces can help mitigate the unintended psychological and social costs of mobility.

3

A nuanced approach to social mobility that acknowledges external systemic and psychological barriers, and fosters inclusivity is necessary to ensure upward mobility benefits society while lowering the risk of exacerbating inequalities or personal strain.

SOCIAL MOBILITY
WHAT WE HAVEN'T TALKED ABOUT

More balanced understanding may curb unintended negative outcomes.

Everyone loves a good rags-to-riches story: The boy or girl who grew up in a poor village and then becomes a Chief Executive Officer or a doctor, the student who is the first to attend university in the family and then lands a dream job, or a protagonist who beats all the odds and exits the poverty cycle. These stories fuel our deep belief in social mobility that by seizing the opportunities available and putting in enough effort, anyone can rise to a better position in life.

Social mobility is often seen as a marker of societal fairness and widely believed to reduce economic inequality in society. As Singapore sociologist Teo You Yenn put it, "the promise of equality is often described as a promise of mobility."[1] More equal societies are also happier societies.[2] Therefore many countries invest in education and their policies are aimed at increasing social mobility. But is the relationship between social mobility, and individual or societal wellness perfectly linear? What if, alongside its benefits, social mobility also poses unseen or hidden challenges for individuals and society?

THE 'KNOWN' SIDE OF SOCIAL MOBILITY
A high level of social mobility is often celebrated for creating pathways to a better life, and promoting a meritocratic system where success depends on talent and effort, rather than the family you were born into. Such high levels of social mobility open avenues for education and employment, while reducing barriers that traditionally limited opportunities for marginalised groups. Policies like subsidised education, financial aid, scholarships, and affirmative action aim to level the playing field, ensuring that everyone has a shot at

success. For instance, young students from low-income backgrounds can secure scholarships to prestigious universities, gain valuable skills, and later find jobs that improve their families' financial security.

Social mobility also fosters a mindset and culture of optimism. When people believe that social mobility is well and alive, it seeds aspirations of attaining a better life and motivates them to work harder. When they see examples of others rising through determination and beating the odds, it signals to them that success is possible even in the face of adversity. In fact, such aspirations are strongly reflected in people's subjective beliefs about social mobility, which are often more optimistic than in reality. For instance, when American survey participants were asked to estimate the percentage of people from the bottom income quintile who are likely to move to the next or higher income quintiles, participants invariably provided a significant overestimate compared to what the data actually showed.[3,4]

Some might argue that such optimism may create unrealistic expectations. However, the belief in high social mobility underlying such optimism can act as a powerful motivator–people are more likely to invest in education, work hard, and persist when they perceive a high chance of attaining success. This sense of the possibilities available not only benefits individuals but also drives societal progress. When more people believe they can succeed, they innovate, take risks, and contribute to economic growth.

THE OTHER (DARKER) SIDE OF SOCIAL MOBILITY

Despite the deeply held assumption that high levels of social mobility should confer benefits, research on the links between social mobility and individual or societal wellness has revealed mixed patterns. In fact, existing cross-country data suggest there are potential social and psychological costs of moving up the ladder or when people have the desire to move upwards.

Pressure to hustle

The belief that upward mobility is achievable for everyone, along with collective aspirations to move upwards, inadvertently fosters a hypercompetitive environment. Additionally, while the belief that "you can achieve anything if you work hard enough" is empowering and motivating, it can also create immense pressure. In a society that values upward mobility, people feel compelled to constantly hustle, compete, and outperform others.

The intense focus on achievement and status attainment from 'hustle culture' often leads to burnout, as individuals juggle long hours, side hustles, and continuous self-improvement. In South Korea, for example, the intense competition for education and jobs has led to high rates of burnout and mental health issues among young people. In addition, social mobility does not just mean climbing higher, but also involves maintaining the progress that has been achieved and avoiding any downward movement. The fear of downward mobility–falling back to a lower socio-economic status–thus often

creates anxiety, which intensifies stress and burnout.

The negative impact of chasing upward mobility is also suggested by existing research. A longitudinal study of adolescents into young adulthood in the US found that upward mobility predicted lower allostatic load (a physical marker of chronic stress), only for those who achieved a slightly higher educational level (i.e., moved up one step in a five-step education rank) than their parents. However, those who achieved much higher educational levels than their parents (i.e., moved up by two or more steps) did not see benefits in their health.[5] Studies have also found that socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals who exhibit traits of striving–such as high persistence and resilience–experienced more stress,[6] suffered from poorer immune function,[7] and aged faster than expected for their age.[8]

Environmental mismatch and feelings of isolation

For those who achieve upward mobility, stepping into unfamiliar environments can be isolating. Moving into higher socio-economic strata often involves entering workplaces or educational institutions with different cultural norms, values, and expectations.[9,10]

Imagine a first-generation university student attending a prestigious university where most peers come from wealthy, well-connected families. University settings also tend to emphasise independence and self-direction, which align with upper-class values of university students whose

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parents and grandparents are also university-educated. As such, first-generation university students who feel lost and uncertain may be fearful to seek help, might struggle to fit in, and could feel out of place in a world that operates based on unspoken social norms they were never taught.

Environmental mismatch extends to workplaces as well. Employees from underprivileged backgrounds may face challenges adapting to professional environments dominated by an unfamiliar set of values and behaviours or unwritten social codes. For instance, is it appropriate to assert themselves when interacting with their colleagues or bosses, and if yes, when is it suitable to do so? How should they advocate for themselves or rely on others to be promoted or advance to leadership positions, and to what degree should they do so? Without such know-how, employees from underprivileged backgrounds often feel disconnected and unsure of how to navigate these spaces. Many may struggle to succeed, and those who do may have had to go the extra mile.

Existing research also suggests that for individuals, the sense of uncertainty and alienation from struggles to reconcile their backgrounds with their new settings can negatively impact well-being.[11,12] At a broader level, environmental mismatches may reinforce systemic barriers to full integration and success.

Blame and division
One unintended consequence of high levels of social mobility is the reinforcement of a 'meritocracy myth', that success is entirely due to individual effort. While hard work and talent are part of the success equation, systemic factors like access to quality education, healthcare, and social networks, as well as the often unseen challenges of navigating mismatches and isolation, all play a significant role. When society overemphasises individual responsibility, it overlooks these additional barriers. This creates unrealistic expectations for those trying to move up and

fosters guilt among those who do not succeed. People start believing, "If I'm struggling, it must be my fault." Such self-blame only worsens the self-worth and self-esteem of economically disadvantaged individuals, furthering gaps in psychological well-being.

When success is seen as a personal achievement, those who remain at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy may also be blamed for their circumstances by others. This stigma reinforces harmful stereotypes about poverty, leading people to label disadvantaged groups as lazy or incompetent.[13]

Such narratives also have far-reaching societal consequences. Individuals who are stereotyped and labelled as lazy or incompetent are likely to be seen as less deserving of help. People may start to think, "Why should the taxes I pay be spent on those who are unable to do better, even when they are given support and opportunities?" Such thinking may result in reduced public support for social safety nets and redistributive policies that are critical for alleviating

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inequalities. Increased blame on the poor and less willingness to empathise with and support them may aggravate intergroup animosity. Further downstream, this may deepen the class divide, exacerbate tensions, and threaten the social compact of society.

FOSTERING A MORE INCLUSIVE FORM OF SOCIAL MOBILITY

The takeaway so far is not that social mobility is bad. Quite the contrary, people fundamentally desire some level of personal progress and want to lead a good life. The important consideration is how governments and societies can continue to strengthen social mobility, while addressing the unintended consequences. By rethinking how we approach social mobility, we can ensure that it benefits everyone without leaving unintended harm in its wake.

Strengthening social safety nets

Fundamentally, increasing the social mobility of societies requires governments and institutions to invest in robust social safety nets. Redistributive policies such as progressive taxation and financial support for lower-income groups, affordable education, and accessible healthcare are vital for ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their socio-economic background, have the resources to pursue opportunities and a fair chance to succeed. In Singapore, these foundations have already been laid by providing highly subsidised public education, housing, and

healthcare, as well as short- to long-term financial assistance for low-income families. Nonetheless, government policies alone are necessary but insufficient.

A nuanced mobility narrative

As a society, we need to challenge the idea that upward mobility is purely about individual effort. Instead, society should reframe social mobility to include the recognition of external circumstances beyond broad systemic inequality, such as the more unseen social and psychological barriers at the individual level (i.e., environmental mismatch, isolation, blame, and stereotyping) that shape the opportunities available. This does not mean downplaying personal responsibility, but rather acknowledging that success is a combination of individual qualities, social understanding, and collective support.

Address cultural mismatches by creating supportive environments

While individuals can expect to face initial adjustment challenges in a new school or workplace, the challenges should not be assumed to be the same for all. Educational institutions and workplaces must understand, value, and prioritise the creation of environments where individuals from diverse backgrounds feel welcome and supported. This can be achieved through mentorship or diversity training programmes that recognise and celebrate differences. For instance, universities can provide

first-generation students with access to advisors who understand their challenges, while companies can implement programmes that better support the adjustment of new employees, particularly those from lower socioeconomic or working-class backgrounds.

An important aspect of such programmes should be to help educators and managers become aware of and identify behaviours that signal uncertainty about unfamiliar cultural norms and the need for greater support. For instance, educators and managers should not misinterpret the less vocal or assertive behaviours of a first-generation student or fresh employee from a disadvantaged background and conclude that they lack initiative, motivation, or competence. They could just be taking more time to observe and learn the less familiar cultural norms of their new environment. Instead, educators and managers should be more aware and sensitive to 'passive behaviours'.

Research finds that organisations can make workplaces more comfortable and engaging for employees from working-class backgrounds by fostering a more interdependent culture.[14] Therefore, educators and employers can provide more support for lower socioeconomic or working-class individuals navigating social mobility to develop greater confidence in navigating the new culture, or adjust some aspects of the learning or work environments to be more aligned with the interdependent orientation of these individuals. By addressing cultural mismatches,

we can help individuals integrate more effectively, and reduce the stresses and alienation associated with upward mobility.

Redefining success

It is essential to challenge the hypercompetitive narrative that equates social mobility with status attainment, and move beyond a narrow definition of success that prioritises wealth and status. Instead, society should celebrate diverse aspirations, whether it is pursuing a passion, contributing to the community, or achieving personal well-being. By shifting the focus from hyperachievement to holistic fulfilment, we can reduce the pressure to constantly compete and allow individuals to define success on their own terms.

The Singapore government leadership—much to their credit—has understood and recognised the need for a reset of such mindsets. In fact, this vision is explicitly laid out in the Forward SG report that charts Singapore's vision moving forward.[15] The key question would be how this vision can be translated into action and reality. The government clearly cannot do this alone. This vision must also be shared and driven by the people via social influence, whether as parents, educators, or even just as individuals who want to play an active role in reshaping our society's mindset and culture.

CONCLUSION

Social mobility is a powerful force for good, offering hope, opportunity, and a path to a better life. But it is not without its challenges. From the pressure to hustle to the myth

of meritocracy, the journey towards upward mobility can be fraught with unintended consequences. The key to addressing these issues lies in balance. By promoting a nuanced understanding of mobility, creating supportive environments, and investing in systemic solutions, we can build a society where opportunity is accessible to all—and where success does not come at the expense of well-being. [AMI]

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