

Discussion Article

First generation decline: downward mobility among refugees and immigrants

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Abstract

Although immigration researchers, like other social scientists who study mobility, usually look only at upward mobility, immigrants and refugees often suffer from downward mobility. This is particularly true of new arrivals who were professionals in their country of origin and now work as technicians, although newcomers of lower status may experience it as well. For some immigrants and refugees, downward mobility is temporary; others may suffer from it all their lives and even pass the pain on to their children.

This paper discusses the various impacts of downward mobility, the ways immigrants and refugees cope with them successfully or not, and the consequences of their class and status decline for their children. The paper can be read as a follow up to my earlier articles in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 'Second Generation Decline', (1992) and 'Acculturation, Assimilation and Mobility' (2007).

Keywords: Immigration; downward mobility; generation; refugees; class; status.

Perhaps because immigrants have typically headed for America when it was booming economically, immigration researchers have usually assumed that immigration would automatically result in upward economic and social mobility.

Nonetheless, coming to America has sometimes meant economic and other kinds of downward mobility, frequently, although not always, by middle and upper middle class refugees and immigrants.

Moreover, the amount of downward mobility can vary tremendously, depending both on the backgrounds of the newcomers and the state of the economy when and where they arrive in the US.

The main cause of immigrant downward mobility is occupational; newcomers often cannot resume old occupations or careers, and so are forced to take jobs of lower status than in their country of origin. Former professors become school teachers; doctors work as medical technicians; and managers wind up as sales persons or store owners. Nonetheless, lower-middle class, working class and even peasant newcomers can experience downward mobility as well; when men who were previously farmers must work as migrant laborers. The most painful form of downward mobility is probably experienced by young women who were daughters in their country of origin but become sex workers after immigration.

However, downward economic mobility is to some degree painful for every one of its victims, because it means a reduction in standard of living, social position and prestige. It can also result in a decline in personal autonomy, control and self-respect, and it can lead to self-blaming for the occupational decline. Then, follow demoralization, depression, stress and stress-related diseases, addictive behaviour, family violence and breakup and other individual and social ills (Cohon 1981; Nicklett and Burgard 2009).

Social downward mobility is accompanied by similar consequences. Overseas elites who are transformed into ordinary Americans by immigration are a good example, but so are agricultural and working class immigrants who gave up the community leadership positions they occupied in their country of origin.

Downward mobility can also be accompanied by status inconsistency, when immigrants are treated in their new lower status by some and their old higher status by others. Sometimes, the inconsistency is simultaneous, as when former engineers are treated as technicians but concurrently consulted as if they were still professionals.

Downward mobility and the suffering it can induce call for professional and other intervention, but before it can be eliminated or at least reduced, more must be learned about its impact and about how the downwardly mobile cope. Even so, probably the best single medicine is economic opportunity in the host country; if it cannot cure all the ills of downward mobility, little can be done without it.

The failure of immigration researchers to pay sufficient attention to downward mobility reflects a broader pattern in sociology. Despite notable exceptions (e.g. Newman 1988), the huge literature on mobility includes endless studies of 'status attainment' but few of class and status decline.

Moreover, empirical immigration researchers originally assumed that all immigrants come here to raise their, or their children's, socio-economic

status. That assumption was justified when their theorizing was based on the uniformly poor Europeans who came to America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹ To be sure, after the start of the post 1965 immigration, which was and continues to be multi-class, some researchers began to notice downward mobility, notably among the affluent or elite Cuban and Vietnamese refugees from Communism (Rogg 1971; Stein 1979; Stepick and Portes 1986).²

Even so, systematic research on the impact and other processes of immigrant downward mobility is still just beginning.³ Consequently, this paper draws also on hypotheses and anecdotal observations, including personal ones, about downward mobility among immigrants and refugees. Some of the observations come in part from the so called Second Wave study (Sonnert and Holton 2006) which analysed the American experience of scholars who came here in childhood as refugees from Nazi Germany. Since so many of the German Jewish refugees were professionals and business people, a sizeable group of the Second Wavers grew up with the experience of downward familial mobility. Nonetheless, the body of the paper is concerned with immigrants and refugees from many different countries who have come to the US since 1965 and are still arriving.⁴

The impacts of downward mobility

Mobility and the promise of mobility play major roles in the current post-immigration experience, as they have in almost all past immigrations. Many studies have reported that poor refugees and immigrants, including illegal ones, are almost always upwardly mobile because even the lowest-paying American jobs pay more than those in their country of origin.⁵ Most middle class newcomers eventually do better as well, at least in income, but as already noted they may initially experience downward mobility after they arrive here.

Sometimes, post-arrival downward mobility may even be *expected* beforehand, especially if immigrants come here to educate their children.⁶ Although it may still be painful, *unexpected* downward mobility is probably more traumatic.

Conversely, political and other refugees may be less affected by unexpected downward mobility than immigrants, because they emigrate and immigrate in order to survive and retain or obtain their personal freedom. Also, they have often lost jobs and social position even before being driven out of their home country.

Downward mobility impacts differentially on the various immigrants and refugees.⁷ All other things being equal, status decline is harder to bear for men than for women, largely because men still derive more of their status from work than women (Franz 2003). This is changing, however, as women obtain greater occupational equality.

They may, then, even suffer more personal slights than men, in part because they may find work in occupations mainly occupied by women, for example, when former doctors are reduced to changing bedpans. Or the status decline hits close to home, when women who had their own servants in their country of origin have to work as servants in their new country.

Moreover, emigrating women professionals who have to take menial jobs in their new home country not only experience downward mobility but also the sexual harassments to which women of low status are often exposed (Remennick 2004).⁸

Older people suffer more than young ones because they are likely to have lost more status than young people – and the latter also have more time to pursue upward mobility in the US. Sometimes, their decline is simply a result of not being able to deal with the more modern computers and other technology they find at work in America (Gold 1995).

Above all, downward mobility impacts newcomers of high occupational status more than those of low status. World famous refugees may not suffer at all because they are part of a global elite that usually takes care of its members.⁹ People possessing ordinary fame do not fare as well, and they, like other professionals have more to lose than lower-middle and working class newcomers.

In addition, professionals may experience more status decline than executives and other managerial workers, and some professionals are impacted more than others. In the past more than today, American professions established strict credential requirements for admittance to their guilds. In the process, they usually set up educational hurdles that required immigrants to go back to school, even though they were unlikely to learn much they did not already know. Doctors, dentists and other professionals were effectively barred from the jobs for which they were trained and had to find lower status work.

Others were kept out because they were too old or too poor to acquire the new knowledge they needed, such as lawyers who were initially trained in the Napoleonic code and scholars whose fields were not in demand in the US. Conversely, some professions are more flexible, notably engineering, which trains people in technical or managerial skills that are virtually the same all over the world.

Today, American immigration law has virtually ended this exclusionary practice for foreign professionals, and doctors and computer experts are especially welcomed to fill vacancies in these fields or to take low-paying positions in them.

Opportunities associated with the American labour market generally can also have an impact; some newcomers have reported that although their post-immigration jobs are of lower status than those they held in their country of origin, American firms offer more meritocratically determined opportunities for advancement than firms

in the old country, particularly in new industries. Finnan (1981) reports on the early mobility of Vietnamese engineers who arrived in California's Silicon Valley just as its computer firms were first hiring.

Immigrants and refugees who have non-occupational sources of status may suffer less from occupational downward mobility. For example, refugees with political responsibilities who can move into an exiled political community here retain their political status, even if they have to earn their living in lower status occupations. Over the years, many refugee or immigrant politicians, particularly from Central and South America, have established American branches of the parties in which they were active in their countries of origin, especially if dual citizenship and voting are permitted. The Dominican Republic's presidential candidates obtain much of their campaign money from fund raising in New York's Dominican neighbourhoods.

Needless to say, economic downward mobility is easier to tolerate if immigrants and refugees can call on other resources, including familial and other support groups. However, status decline is even harder to bear when the newcomers belong to stigmatized populations. Black Caribbean, African, Asian and Latino immigrants and refugees have typically been faced with racial discrimination that only adds to their downward mobility. If immigrants are also illegal, their status loss is not only greater but virtually impossible to overcome, even by their children (Fernandez-Kelly and Schauffler 1996).

Downward mobility can also have more personal effects. Parents who do not speak English must often defer to their children and surrender *de facto* familial power to them because they are better able to navigate their new country. Men who come from an intensely patriarchal society, such as Latinos, will lose familial power to their wives, especially since they often find low- and semi-skilled jobs more easily than their men. The women, of course benefit both from their newly won familial decision-making power and higher status. Extended families that compete with each other frequently set up mobility races, and nuclear families or individuals in them that lose out to more upwardly mobile relatives can face imposed or self-imposed humiliation. Younger families frequently have an advantage over older ones in this competition.

Coping with downward mobility

There appear to be at least five ways of dealing with downward mobility:

1. Returning to the country of origin

This opportunity is increasingly available to immigrants as travel times shrink, and sometimes to refugees who are invited to come back and

are able and willing to do so. Although most immigrants return only to retire or to seek upward mobility in their country of origin with the monies earned in the US, others may go back because they have not succeeded here. Absent political reasons to the contrary, refugees who can reclaim their past positions and statuses by returning are more likely to choose this option.

Refugees who expect to return to their old country someday may not even experience downward mobility here, because they are preoccupied with returning home and busy with trying to make it happen. Participating only minimally in American life, they may feel that they are not actually living here. This coping mechanism is most available to high status refugees; in addition, Americans may treat them as if they had retained their old country rank.

2. Retaining past non-occupational statuses

When immigrants and refugees come to America, especially in large numbers, they bring the social structure of their country of origin with them. If they establish or move into an existing ethnic enclave, the newcomers can sometimes recreate their previous occupational status in it as well (Correa-Jones 1998).¹⁰

Indeed, one of the attractions of the enclave is the possibility of retaining the old country's social hierarchy, at least if the enclave is economically fairly self-sufficient. Immigrant men from patriarchal societies can continue in their macho ways in their enclaves. However, when immigrant women take jobs outside the enclave, as they often do, they may obtain some upward mobility even as they free themselves from patriarchal domination.

If new immigrants cannot reproduce prior occupational statuses, they may transfer those to a non-occupational setting. For example, German refugees established social and cultural clubs in which they participated as the intellectuals, professors, doctors, etc., they were in the old country and addressed each other by their old titles.¹¹ Filipino doctors working as nurses in the US also use their old titles with each other, and servants who had servants in the Philippines socialize only amongst themselves (Farida Ali, personal communication).

More typically, immigrants become active in ethnic cultural and political organizations. Even if their American jobs mark them as working class, they may be treated as the professionals they were in the old country (Correa-Jones 1998).

Racially stigmatized immigrants such as West Indians use their foreign accents, styles of dress and other old-country cultural artifacts to demonstrate that they are, as foreigners, ineligible for the racial stigmatization whites mete out to African-Americans. At the same

time, they avoid the downward mobility that would accompany being grouped with them (Waters 1999).

Gold (1995) reports Russian immigrants to America resorting to 'status levelling': maintaining their old status by being critical of upwardly mobile relatives or colleagues for giving up immigrant practices or adopting deviant ones.

3. Moving forward

Some refugees and immigrants reject or suppress the positions, statuses and practices associated with the country of origin to make a fresh start, socially, culturally and occupationally. The forward move is typically accomplished by not looking back, for example, at the imagined or real virtues of the country of origin, as well as by eschewing connections to the local refugee or immigrant community.¹²

Instead, the family's energy and skills are put to work to try to move up in the American class status hierarchy. This solution is more often available to people without loyalty to their past occupations. People not emotionally invested in past economic or social positions can choose whatever jobs enable them to make the most money or achieve the most economic security in America without feeling they have lost status. This solution is equally available to the unknown number of people who do not think about or are unaware of their status and therefore of their loss of status.¹³

Political refugees can use this coping mechanism more easily than immigrants because they have been publicly rejected by their country of origin. As a result, some feel able to set aside the higher status they enjoyed there. Others can do so because the alternative to not leaving would have been prison or death.

4. Transnationalizing

In today's world, immigrants can impress family and friends in their country of origin with their upward mobility by sending generous remittances and bringing expensive gifts when they go home for visits (Levitt 2001). However, some also pursue the upward mobility they cannot obtain in the US by making donations to or investing in the communities in which they grew up and helping to modernize them. The leadership status they are subsequently awarded in their communities of origin can even translate into a higher status in America (Smith 2005).

5. Postponing mobility

As already noted, immigrants come here to send their children to American schools, so that they can obtain higher status jobs than their

parents or regain an old family status. Immigrants and refugees urge and even pressure the next generation to do well in school so that they can obtain higher status jobs (Louie 2004).

Parents and children

The parental demand for children's upward mobility raises some intriguing questions, beginning with their awareness of the family's downward mobility. Unless they are especially protected, typically by being spoiled, children share in their parents' downward mobility, although in fact they may be too young or too involved in growing up to notice their own downward mobility.¹⁴ Exactly what they share and are aware of with respect to their parents' downward mobility and how they become aware are relevant questions, especially if the children's knowledge of their family's experiences affects their own adaptation and mobility experience.

Assuming that children eventually recognize the family's loss of status, perhaps in adolescence, we must discover whether they are able and willing to be upward mobile. Obviously, the economy and larger society must offer them opportunities for upward mobility, otherwise only the most able, ambitious and fortunate few can move up in the economic hierarchy.

The newcomers' time of arrival is crucial. Some of the children of the European immigrants who arrived in the USA between 1880 and 1924 benefitted from the country's several economic growth spurts. Others suffered because they came of working age during the Great Depression, although younger ones were able to share in the post World War II affluence. The refugee youngsters who made up the Second Wave studied by Holton and Sonnert (2003) benefitted similarly. Most came to America in the 1930s, many of the men went to school with the help of the GI Bill, entering the academic labour market just as job opportunities exploded in the 1950s.¹⁵

The first children of the post-1965 immigration have reached adulthood during periods of both economic growth and decline. In addition, today's opportunities – and constraints – are more diverse than those experienced by earlier waves of immigration. Consequently, researchers must look carefully at the mobility experiences of the children of downwardly mobile newcomers.

If the needed opportunities are available for the children, one must also ask at what age young people are ready to consider seeking higher status? Under what conditions do they feel obligated, or are willing, to follow parental dictates. Or do the children of downwardly mobile immigrants march to their own drummers regardless of parental wishes?

The parental role in the children's mobility must also be examined. For one thing, does parental downward mobility affect the children? Could parents who are demoralized by their downward mobility demoralize their children and cripple their ability to succeed in the new country? Conversely, does downward mobility motivate parents to ask their children to regain the lost family status? Maybe the question is even superfluous, children deciding on their own that they must reverse parental downward mobility.

What role does family history play? Can immigrants and refugees who were moving up in their country of origin before leaving pass on mobility skills that make it easier for the children to reverse parental downward mobility in America? Can the children of immigrants and refugees whose families have been in the middle or upper classes for generations regain the old family status more easily than those whose parents had just attained middle class status in the old country? What skills and qualities that encourage mobility can middle class parents pass on to their children that poor ones cannot? When is the pre-immigration education or other forms of cultural capital obtained by parents helpful to children born and raised in America?

One must also ask whether the children of refugees do better or worse than those of immigrants. Are they held back, or may they hold themselves back, if their parents are actively planning to return to their country of origin? However, the older children of refugees may stay in the US to maintain the family's base here, or because they prefer to remain here. Whether they were immigrant or refugee children, they have become hyphenated Americans who may not share their parents' reasons for returning to their country of origin.

The time is now becoming ripe to study the status attainments or losses of the American-born children of the post-1965 immigrants and refugees who experienced downward mobility after arriving in America. Many members of the second generation are now working and some are already established in careers.

Gold (1995), who studied the Russian-born but American-educated children of Russian Jewish immigrants to America, reported a variety of parental reactions. Most downwardly mobile and other parents were eager for their children to pursue a degree of upward mobility that was not available to Jews in Russia, especially during the Soviet era. However, some parents wanted their children to forgo professional training and instead seek a faster path to upward mobility by obtaining jobs in the business world or by turning to self-employment.

We also know that East and South Asian refugees and immigrants put unusually intense pressure on their children to succeed in school so that they can do well in the labour market (Louie 2004).¹⁶ Whether they exert more or different pressure than other immigrants whose children move up in the socio-economic hierarchy has not yet been

properly studied. Judging by the demographic data on Asian and Asian-American educational, income and early occupational achievements, many children have been both able and willing to climb up in the American status ladder, and to do so in larger proportions than others. Whether or not parental pressure is a major cause remains to be determined, however.

Parental pressure to succeed is a mixed blessing; some youngsters resent having had to devote their childhood and adolescence to doing homework (Zhou 2001; Louie 2004). However, we do not yet know whether the resulting parent-child conflicts are reducing their ability and willingness to strive for higher status, and whether and how much their resentment will affect their occupational future.

Needless to say, any hypothesizing about immigrant downward mobility and its effects on the next generation must always pay attention to the economy in which families and individuals are embedded. The sharp downward turn of the economy that began in 2008 will slow down many young people just entering the labour market, but will simultaneously affect those of their parents who have lost jobs or income from self-employment. Furthermore, the pace of immigration has not let up since the immigration laws were loosened in 1965, and as a result new immigrants are competing for jobs with some of the children of the earlier newcomers. If and when the economy recovers fully, first generation decline may therefore take new forms.

Conclusion

The downward mobility that immigrants experience after coming to America is not unique. Similar reactions, effects and coping mechanisms are reported elsewhere, for example, among Soviet immigrants to Israel (Remennick 1999; Gold 2003), Asian engineers in Canada (Boyd 2000), diverse European and Asian immigrants to Sweden (Helgertz n.d.), and others.

This similarity is understandable given the similarity of the socio-economic and other hierarchies in which the members of modern societies move up and down. Class and status conceptions and determinations are similar too in such societies. Looking at first generation decline in differently structured societies may result in different findings, however.

Consequently, how various kinds of societies and economies handle downward mobility and its effects should be studied. Do host countries notice downward mobility among their newcomers, and if so are they willing or able to take measures to ameliorate or overcome its effects, both among immigrants and refugees? Further, can they help the next generation, making sure that parental sacrifices do not

go for nought, as well as preventing that generation from suffering downward mobility itself? (Gans 1992).

Answers to these questions will also contribute to the understanding of downward mobility in general. In a time of worldwide economic and other crises and a likely future of economic transformation in America and elsewhere, sociologists and other social scientists can no longer afford to ignore the analysis of this painful process.

Acknowledgements

This article began as a presentation at a conference: 'How to Help Young Immigrants Succeed,' organized by Dr Gerald Holton and Dr Gerhard Sonnert of Harvard University and held on 10 November 2006. I am grateful to Gerhard Sonnert for helpful comments on an early draft of this article, and to Vivian Louie and Miri Song on later ones.

Notes

1. However, the mid nineteenth-century immigration from Great Britain, Scandinavia and Germany included white collar workers. A number of them initially had to take blue collar jobs, although they later achieved upward occupational, or at least financial, mobility, especially when they moved west (Ferrie 1997; Carson 2004).
2. Earlier refugee groups had also experienced downward mobility, including German Jews in the 1930s, Displaced Persons in the 1940s, and Hungarian refugees in the late 1950s.
3. Another spurt in writing on immigrant downward mobility, this time among poor second generation adolescents and young adults, took place during the country's economic downturn in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Gans 1992; Portes and Zhou 1993; Rumbaut 2005; Gans 2007). The title of the present paper is intended to connect it with my 1992 paper on second generation decline.
4. My discussion specifically omits downward mobility caused directly by the persecution and trauma refugees suffer before and while they leave their country of origin. One cannot forget that many Jewish refugees who survived the Nazi concentration camps – like other refugees coming out of other camps – were so damaged by what they went through that they could not even attempt to regain their former status.
5. They may not feel like they are upwardly mobile, however, what with harsh working conditions, exploitation, the need to send money home and isolation from kin and others in the country of origin.
6. The expectation of downward mobility can also be tragic, if potential immigrants and refugees cannot bear to give up their current statuses and decide to stay in the country of origin. They were not unique, but some German Jews in this position lost their lives in the Nazi gas chambers.
7. Actually, refugees are political emigrants, but when they arrive in America they also become economic immigrants, having to make a living just like economic emigrants.
8. Poor women immigrants all over the world are vulnerable to being forced into becoming sex workers.
9. World level geniuses like Einstein or Freud were, of course, invited to come to America long before the Nazis came to power, although Freud chose to stay in Vienna until the Nazis arrived.

10. I suspect that government-sponsored elite refugee populations can often reproduce their old power structures in their US enclaves. The best example is pre-revolutionary Cuba's elite, which moved to Miami almost in its entirety and dominated American policy on Cuba for the next half-century. In addition, some very high level South Vietnamese politicians became instantly affluent Californians.

11. Sonnert and Holton (2006) describe a 'pseudo-aristocratic impulse' on the part of some Second Wavers to regain family status.

12. This observation comes from personal experience as well. When we came here, the family decided that we were henceforth Americans, would speak only English and not seek affiliation with the Chicago refugee community.

13. I only hypothesize that such people are found in every population, although sociologists, especially those studying class and status, might not pay attention to their existence.

14. Children can, however, become downwardly mobile in their peer relations, those who occupied a high status position in their cliques in the old country being relegated to lower clique positions in their new home.

15. For some of us Second Wavers, the growth in academic opportunities was unexpected. When my GI Bill funds ran out in 1950 when I received my MA, I originally expected to start looking for a job as a high school social studies teacher. Instead, I was able to work as a social researcher and, in 1953, I obtained a fellowship and a job that enabled me to study for my PhD.

16. Conversely, West Indian immigrant parents try to hold back their children's language assimilation, urging them to learn the parental accents so that they are not mistaken for African-Americans (Waters 1999).

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