



Americans overestimate social class mobility



Michael W. Kraus^{*}, Jacinth J.X. Tan

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- Americans overestimate the levels of actual class mobility in society.
- Mobility overestimates are larger for younger and higher subjective class people.
- Information and motivation contribute to mobility beliefs.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 July 2014

Revised 21 January 2015

Available online 28 January 2015

Keywords:

Social class

Socioeconomic status

Social cognition

Political psychology

Self-enhancement

ABSTRACT

In this research we examine estimates of American social class mobility—the ability to move up or down in education and income status. Across studies, overestimates of class mobility were large and particularly likely among younger participants and those higher in subjective social class—both measured (Studies 1–3) and manipulated (Study 4). Class mobility overestimates were independent of general estimation errors (Study 3) and persisted after accounting for knowledge of class mobility assessed in terms of educational attainment and self-ratings. Experiments revealed that mobility overestimates were shaped by exposure to information about the genetic determinants of social class—a faux science article suggesting genetic constraints to economic advancement increased accuracy in class mobility estimates (Study 2)—and motivated by needs to protect the self—heightening the self-relevance of class mobility increased overestimates (Study 3). Discussion focused on both the costs and benefits of overestimates of class mobility for individuals and society.

© 2015 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Inc. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

“What I offer... is a set of concrete, practical proposals to speed up growth, strengthen the middle class, and build new ladders of opportunity into the middle class.”—President Barack Obama (2014), State of the Union.

Economic inequality is among the most pressing societal problems impacting the health and well-being of Americans: inequality reduces well-being—Americans report elevated happiness in years where economic inequality is lower compared to years when it is higher (Oishi, Kesebir, & Diener, 2011). As well, roughly 70% of studies examining the health impacts of economic inequality find that societal health worsens as economic inequality intensifies (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2006). When economic inequality deepens, society suffers. These trends are the likely reason why President Barack Obama made reducing economic inequality through increasing social class mobility a primary theme in his 2014 State of the Union Address. Whether or not economic policy changes take hold is likely to depend on a number of factors,

among them the extent that Americans recognize, and are aware of, the levels of actual social class mobility in society. This research was designed to examine potential inaccuracies in judgments of class mobility.

Across four studies, we compared estimates of American social class mobility to actual available data. We hypothesized that Americans would overestimate levels of income mobility and educational access in the United States. We predicted further that these estimates would be heightened by a lack of awareness of the factors that influence economic opportunity in society, and motivated by a desire to protect the self.

Class mobility, equality of opportunity, and the American Dream

The United States is faced with record levels of income inequality and one of the lowest rates of actual social mobility among industrial nations (Burkhauser, Feng, Jenkins, & Larrimore, 2009; Fiske & Markus, 2012; Piketty & Saez, 2001). Despite these constraints on economic opportunities, Americans place significant hope on the American Dream—the promise that individuals, from any sector of society, have an equal opportunity to become better educated, earn more money, and obtain whatever job they desire. These beliefs in social class mobility are widespread, frequently referred to during political

^{*} Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 603 East Daniel Street, Psychology Building, Champaign, IL 61820 USA.
E-mail address: mwkraus@illinois.edu (M.W. Kraus).

speeches (Obama, 2014), evoked in contemporary popular fiction and cinema (Fitzgerald, 1925), and are a core right referred to in historical government documents (i.e., the Bill of Rights).

The disconnect between actual economic conditions on the one hand and beliefs in the American Dream on the other suggests that Americans may be unaware of the actual levels of social class mobility in society. Several lines of research anticipate this pattern of inaccuracy: for instance, when a large sample of Americans was asked to guess the levels of wealth inequality in the United States, individuals underestimated the magnitude of economic inequality by a wide margin (Norton & Ariely, 2011). Americans also display low awareness of how changes in economic conditions will impact their lives: when asked to forecast how an economic windfall will change their lives, individuals routinely overestimate the extent that these economic changes will increase their happiness and well-being (e.g., Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). These data suggest that Americans are unaware of the actual economic structure of society and of how changes in individual economic conditions shape their own life outcomes, and provide the starting point for our first hypothesis: Americans will overestimate actual levels of social class mobility in society to a substantial degree (Hypothesis I).

Informational and motivational aspects of class mobility beliefs

In general, individuals have many blind spots across diverse domains of social life: people become surprisingly unaware of unique objects (i.e., a dancing gorilla) if asked to focus on a separate visual task (e.g., Simons & Jensen, 2009); individuals, primarily from Western cultures, routinely ignore statistical probabilities and claim that they are more moral, more intelligent, and less error-prone than others (e.g., Pronin, Gilovich, & Ross, 2004); even memories for particularly noteworthy events (e.g., the events of September 11th, 2001) are fraught with inaccuracies that are driven by strong emotional experiences (Hirst et al., 2009). Research indicates that errors in social perception are driven by both informational factors—such as the lack of awareness of statistical information relevant to actual mobility trends—and motivational factors—the desire to believe that society is meritocratic (e.g., Greenwald & Banaji, 1995). Here we examine both sources of error in class mobility beliefs.

Inaccuracy in social class mobility arises, in part, because individuals have a lack of information about actual class mobility in society beyond their own personal anecdotes (for additional research on inaccuracy in social class lay theories, see Varnum, 2013). Based on this logic, exposure to information about the determinants of social class would likely reduce overestimates of class mobility. In particular, we predict for our second hypothesis, that calling attention to genetic factors that influence economic advancement will constrain beliefs in class mobility (Hypothesis II).

We predict that genetic explanations for social class—explanations suggesting that social class is determined by stable and internal genetic factors (Kraus & Keltner, 2013)—are likely to reduce overestimates of class mobility for two reasons: first, genetic explanations highlight the possibility that some individuals possess advantaged (inferior) genes that enhance (reduce) the capacity to ascend the economic hierarchy. Thus, genetic explanations provide a concrete reason for why class mobility may not be possible for all Americans. Though research has not tested relationships between genetic explanations and class mobility specifically, genetic explanations of social groups have constrained other beliefs related to social change: For example, increased race-based essentialist beliefs (i.e., beliefs that racial categories are biologically determined) were associated with decreased motivation to change racial inequality in society (Williams & Eberhardt, 2008).

Second, genetic explanations are likely to be persuasive: a large and consistent literature indicates that Americans tend to use internal explanations (e.g., traits and genes) for social events and behaviors more than external explanations (Jellison & Green, 1981; Morris & Peng,

1994; Nisbett & Ross, 1980)—making genetic explanations particularly like to shape mobility beliefs. As well, decades of gene research, primarily conducted on twins, suggests that there are genetic components to aspects of social class that include educational attainment and occupation status (e.g., Baker, Treloar, Reynolds, Heath, & Martin, 1996; Rietveld et al., 2013; Tambs, Sundet, Magnus, & Berg, 1989)—thereby affording genetic explanations for class mobility increased plausibility in the minds of Americans. For these reasons, we expect that exposing participants to genetic explanations of social class will reduce estimates of class mobility, relative to exposure to non-genetic explanations.

In addition to informational errors, overestimates of social class mobility are driven by motivated social cognition—that is, individuals endorse specific personal or political attitudes because they satisfy basic psychological needs (e.g., Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Americans benefit from overestimates of social class mobility because they bolster widely held American ideals of meritocracy and equality of opportunity (Durkheim, 1933; Fiske & Markus, 2012; Weber, 1930). Thus, overestimates of class mobility satisfy the need to believe that the societal status of the self and others is determined fairly and justly. Class mobility overestimates may also increase the tendency for individuals to work harder and strive for economic advancement—even when they are currently lower in the social hierarchy. In this fashion, overestimates of class mobility can be both beneficial and adaptive for one's life outcomes (c.f., Anderson, Brion, Moore, & Kennedy, 2012; Johnson, Blumstein, Fowler, & Haselton, 2013).

Our motivated perspective suggests that class mobility overestimates are likely driven, at least in part, by motivations to protect the self—especially with regard to economic outcomes. Specifically, we predict, for our third hypothesis, that motivations to see the self positively—including with respect to the possibility for future economic advancement and opportunity—will enhance overestimates of class mobility (Hypothesis III).

Research on self-enhancement provides indirect empirical support for our third hypothesis: in achievement domains, where people are concerned about the evaluations of others, individuals are likely to engage in self-protection by seeing the self more positively, as well as to seek out enhancing appraisals from others (James, 1890; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008). Research on the better-than-average effect—wherein individuals consistently evaluate their traits and behaviors as above average (Alicke, 1985; Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989; Festinger, 1954)—has a rich tradition in social psychology, and aligns with our prediction that concerns to protect the self will increase overestimates of class mobility.

Social class and estimates of class mobility

Our motivated perspective on class mobility also suggests a relationship between position in the class hierarchy and overestimates of class mobility: with respect to this relationship, research is divided on whether people at the top or bottom of the class hierarchy will be more likely to overestimate class mobility (see Brandt, 2013). It is possible that relatively lower-class individuals will overestimate class mobility more than their upper-class counterparts, because beliefs in mobility may enhance optimism about future economic success and select research supports this perspective (e.g., Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004): for instance, recent evidence suggests that relatively lower-class individuals are more likely to engage in behaviors that actually promote economic mobility—Democratic members of the US Congress were more likely to sponsor legislation that decreases economic inequality in society (e.g., raising the minimum wage) if they were lower (versus higher) in average annual wealth (Kraus & Callaghan, 2014). Practically, higher levels of educational attainment might provide individuals with more exposure to information about actual social class mobility, and increase accuracy by implication, relative to lower levels.

In contrast, evidence and theory also converge on the opposite relationship between social class position and overestimates of class

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7324690>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7324690>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)