

Beliefs about social mobility across childhood

Tara M. Mandalaywala¹ & Yuchen Tian²

¹ Boston University, Dept. of Psychological and Brain Sciences

¹ Tianjin Normal University, Dept. of Psychology

Author Note

Tara M. Mandalaywala <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0035-4311>

Yuchen Tian <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1522-6446>

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Tara M. Mandalaywala, Boston University, 64 Cummington Mall, Boston, MA 02215, United States.

Email: tmanda@bu.edu

Abstract

Children in the United States face declining rates of upward social mobility, yet cultural narratives such as the “American Dream” persist, emphasizing that anyone can improve their circumstances while also distorting perceptions of opportunity and inequality. This review synthesizes emerging research on how children in the United States and China reason about social mobility. In early childhood, children view social status as malleable and recognize that opportunities for upward mobility are not equally accessible to all. With age, children increasingly explain disparities in upward mobility in terms of structural rather than individual factors and allocate resources to groups they view as less likely to experience mobility. Together, this research suggests that recognizing unequal opportunities for upward mobility is associated with behavior that rectifies, rather than perpetuates, inequality. We conclude by identifying key questions about how children’s beliefs and causal explanations about social mobility vary across social and cultural contexts, what experiences shape their emergence, and whether the expression or correlates of social mobility beliefs change from childhood to adulthood.

Children born in the United States today are less likely to experience upward social mobility (i.e., gaining wealth, education, or occupational prestige) than their grandparents were (Chetty et al., 2014; Song et al., 2020). This is especially true for children born to families living in concentrated poverty or in racially segregated communities (Chetty et al., 2020; Massey & Denton, 1993). Despite these harsh realities, the narrative of the American Dream lives on in adults in the U.S., who tend to overestimate the probability of upward social mobility (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015; Kraus & Tan, 2015) and underestimate group-based disparities in the likelihood of experiencing upward social mobility (e.g., racial disparities: Davidai & Walker, 2022).

Beliefs about upward mobility may have different consequences depending on whether people consider their own prospects or consider the availability of mobility across society (see Davidai & Wienk, 2021). Among adults and adolescents from lower-SES backgrounds, believing that one's own circumstances can improve is associated with greater persistence during academic challenges (Bernardo et al., 2018; Browman et al., 2017). By contrast, believing that upward mobility is widely available across society may obscure structural barriers by implying that socioeconomic outcomes primarily reflect individual effort. As evidence for this, societal-level beliefs in upward mobility are associated with greater acceptance of inequality, less support for welfare, and greater justification of existing economic systems (Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Shariff et al., 2016).

Although mobility beliefs are associated with attitudes and behaviors among adolescents and adults, little research has examined their development in childhood. Perhaps this was because, historically, people did not believe that children could reason about a phenomenon as complex as social mobility. However, by the time children enter school, they can represent social

hierarchies (e.g., Enright et al., 2020) and view status as malleable (e.g., Davoodi et al., 2020). Because children are actively constructing their beliefs about the world (Bigler & Liben, 2007; Xu, 2019) and integrating concepts across social and moral domains (Rutland et al., 2010), childhood may offer an opportunity to foster optimism about one's own prospects while also encouraging awareness that opportunities for mobility are unequally distributed. In other words, although beliefs about upward mobility are often associated with increased acceptance of inequality among adults, these relations might not be inevitable.

In this review, we synthesize emerging research on how children reason about social mobility. We consider when, and under what circumstances, children think status is malleable, whether children recognize disparities in who is likely to experience upward mobility, and how children's beliefs about mobility correspond with their explanations for and responses to those disparities. We draw on research with adults to contextualize the childhood findings while recognizing that methodological differences limit direct developmental comparisons. Finally, we identify key questions about how children's mobility beliefs vary across social and cultural contexts, what experiences shape them, and the value of directly comparing children's and adults' beliefs about social mobility.

Children Believe that Upward Social Mobility is Possible, But Not Inevitable

Although prior research demonstrated that children could reason about social status (e.g., Enright et al., 2020) and even apply status concepts to themselves and others (e.g., Amir et al., 2019; Mandalaywala et al., 2020), it left open the question of whether and how children believe that status will change over time or in response to situational factors. This question spurred work within our research group; Tian et al. (2024) asked 5- to 12-year-old children in the United States

to judge the likelihood of upward and downward mobility for themselves and families varying in baseline SES. Like much of the research reviewed here, this study used a convenience sample of predominantly economically advantaged children in the United States, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Children were introduced to a nine-rung status ladder incorporating socioeconomic status, resources, and financial strain (e.g., “People at the top of the ladder have the most money, the best education and the best jobs. Kids in these kinds of families get lots of new toys and new clothes, and these kids go to schools that are really nice. Parents in these kinds of families never worry about how much money they have.”). After indicating their subjective social status (i.e., where their family goes on the ladder at present), children then indicated where they or their family would go on the ladder following a change in life circumstances or in their own future. Children expected upward mobility after a parent obtained a new job, but not after moving to another state, and expected their adult status to exceed their family’s current status. Although children often exhibit optimism biases, expecting positive outcomes for themselves across many domains (Leonard & Sommerville, 2024), children in this study did not predict that every change in circumstance would improve their family’s status. This selectivity suggests that children considered whether a circumstance could plausibly affect socioeconomic status, rather than simply expressing an overall preference for themselves or their families to occupy a higher-status position. Nevertheless, because higher ladder positions may carry positive associations, the task cannot completely separate children’s expectations about likely status from their preference for higher status.

Children Recognize that Upward Mobility is Not Equally Accessible to All

What do children's beliefs about social mobility look like when children reason about others? Cultural narratives such as the American Dream suggest that anyone can ascend the socioeconomic ladder. In reality, marginalized groups face interpersonal and structural barriers that constrain opportunities for upward mobility in the United States (e.g., Chetty et al., 2020).

Perhaps surprisingly, given their young age and the prevalence of cultural narratives like the American Dream, we found ample evidence that children are aware that some groups of people are less likely to experience upward mobility than others. In our original study (Tian et al., 2024), we asked American children to rate the likelihood of upward (and, separately, downward) mobility for families who were more or less economically disadvantaged. Echoing what has been found in adults in the United States (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015), children rated upward mobility as more likely than downward mobility. However, around 7-9 years of age, children stopped rating upward mobility as equally likely for all, instead saying that economically disadvantaged families would be *less likely* to experience upward mobility than their economically advantaged peers (Tian et al., 2024).

In a series of follow-up studies, we assessed American children's awareness of disparities in upward mobility based on race and heritage country (i.e., where someone moves to the U.S. from, Tian et al., 2025), as well as both American and Chinese children's awareness of disparities in upward mobility based on disability status (Tian, Zhao, et al., 2025). Children in both the U.S. and China were again largely from economically advantaged families and, in the U.S., from liberal communities, and in China, from urban communities across the country. Across these studies, 4- to 9-year-old children's responses indicated that they recognized that privileged groups (e.g., White Americans, people without disabilities) are more likely to experience upward

mobility than marginalized groups (e.g., Black, Latine, or Asian Americans, or people with sensory, physical, or learning disabilities). Children in the U.S. did not, however, infer disparities based on heritage country, perhaps because this was a less familiar basis for evaluating opportunity. This selectivity suggests that children did not infer mobility differences whenever social groups were contrasted; instead, their judgments varied depending on whether the group distinction provided a familiar cue to unequal opportunity. Although evaluative associations with particular groups may still have influenced children's responses, a general tendency to assign better outcomes to one group does not readily explain why disparities emerged for some group distinctions but not others. Thus, across several social distinctions—and, for disability, across two cultural contexts—children's beliefs corresponded with documented inequalities in the distribution of wealth and opportunity (Chetty et al., 2014).

Children's recognition of group-based disparities may appear to contrast with findings that American adults expect greater mobility for economically disadvantaged families and underestimate racial disparities in mobility and economic standing (Davidai & Gilovich, 2015; Davidai & Walker, 2022; Kraus et al., 2019). However, the methods used to study these beliefs in children and adults differ. Adults typically make population-level estimates, whereas children respond to concrete scenarios involving specific targets. When adults in the United States and China (from similar demographic backgrounds as children in each cultural context) complete the same target-specific tasks as children, adults also recognize disparities in mobility (Tian et al., 2025; Tian, Zhao, et al., 2025). Thus, the apparent contrast may reflect what different tasks make salient rather than a developmental decline in awareness. In the Open Questions section, we consider how comparing societal-level and target-specific mobility beliefs across age groups

could clarify the roles of framing and motivated reasoning, as well as when mobility beliefs are associated with behaviors that perpetuate or rectify inequality.

Children's Explanations of and Responses to Mobility Disparities Change with Age

The distinction between believing that mobility is widely available across society and recognizing group-specific disparities in mobility opportunities may also matter for responses to inequality. Among adults, overestimating mobility and underestimating disparities are associated with blaming disadvantaged groups, justifying the status quo, and opposing equity-enhancing policies (e.g., Kraus et al., 2019; Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Children's beliefs about inequities are important to understand, as these beliefs are related to their prosocial behaviors and attitudes (e.g., who to play or share resources with: Elenbaas & Mistry, 2021; Mandalaywala et al., 2021) and may shape the ideologies they later adopt (e.g., Hussak & Cimpian, 2018; Reifen-Tagar & Cimpian, 2022).

To examine how mobility beliefs correspond with responses to inequality, we examined whether 4- to 9-year-old children would allocate an opportunity resource (access to a free STEM summer camp) or a financial resource (\$20) to a group they previously said was likely to experience upward mobility (a decision that *perpetuated* inequity) or to a group they previously said was unlikely to experience upward mobility (a decision that *rectified* inequity). Across social groups (race, heritage country, or disability) and samples in the United States and China, younger children were equally likely to perpetuate as to rectify disparities, whereas 8- to 9-year-old children increasingly allocated resources to a group they deemed less likely to experience mobility (Tian et al., 2025; Tian, Zhao, et al., 2025). Why did we observe this shift in behavior? One possible explanation comes from children's self-generated explanations for what helped

some groups achieve upward mobility and what hindered other groups from experiencing this same mobility. Younger children were more likely to rely on individual-focused and inherent explanations when making sense of people's upward social mobility (e.g., hard-working, smart). As children approached 8 to 9 years of age, they began expressing awareness of structural barriers that reduce opportunities for upward mobility in marginalized groups (e.g., "They are treated badly due to their skin color": Tian et al., 2025). As children became less likely to rely on explanations that blame individuals for a lack of upward mobility, they also became more likely to rectify inequities. This developmental pattern echoes those found in previous studies showing that children begin to rectify inequalities (e.g., Olson et al., 2011) and reject inequities even when they benefit from those inequities (Blake, McAuliffe, et al., 2015) around 8- to 9-years-old. Together, these findings suggest that as children develop a more nuanced and complex understanding of structural inequities, they also become more motivated to challenge, rather than perpetuate, these unfair systems.

Conclusions and Open Questions

Children reason about social mobility, recognize disparities in access to it, and increasingly rectify these disparities with age. These findings raise important questions about how mobility beliefs develop and when they challenge or sustain inequality.

Do the expression and consequences of social mobility beliefs change across development? The findings reviewed above suggest that personal mobility beliefs, societal-level mobility beliefs, and recognition of group-specific disparities may have different consequences. However, methodological differences between the child and adult literatures complicate direct developmental comparisons. Adult research often assesses societal-level beliefs through abstract

scales or population-level estimates, whereas child research typically presents concrete scenarios involving specific targets. Why might these different ways of considering mobility have different consequences? Believing that mobility is widely available across society is associated with greater acceptance of inequality (Shariff et al., 2016), whereas recognizing group-specific disparities is associated with more equitable responses (Tian et al., 2025; Tian, Zhao, et al., 2025). Considering whether mobility is widely available across society may activate cultural narratives emphasizing effort, merit, and exceptional success. In contrast, comparing specific groups could make unequal access salient, encourage structural explanations, and identify both a concrete inequity and the group disadvantaged by it. Indeed, adults recognize and rectify disparities when completing the same target-specific tasks as children (Tian et al., 2025; Tian, Zhao, et al., 2025), yet often underestimate disparities when making population-level estimates (Davidai & Walker, 2022). Task framing may also interact with motivated reasoning; as people become increasingly invested in socioeconomic systems and their own positions within them, they may become more motivated to endorse beliefs that portray existing outcomes as fair or deserved (Kay et al., 2009). More broadly, adults' responses to inequality and governance vary with how social conditions and others' motivations are framed (Nettle & Saxe, 2020), further suggesting that mobility beliefs and their consequences are context-sensitive rather than fixed. Research using comparable and experimental measures across childhood, adolescence, and adulthood should test whether societal-level versus group-specific framing differentially elicits acceptance or rectification of inequality.

What do children think is causally responsible for social mobility? One reason different ways of considering mobility may have different consequences is that they elicit different causal explanations. Children and adults often focus on effort, attributing success or failure to how hard

someone worked (Hadden et al., 2025). Effort is just one piece of a broader inference heuristic (Cimpian & Salomon, 2014), where children and adults appeal to internal, intrinsic characteristics (e.g., natural talent) and disregard external or structural factors (e.g., biased policies or familial support). Across both children and adults, people view inequity as more acceptable when it is seen as due to effort or inherent causes (Gonzalez et al., 2022), and adults who justify the status quo are also more likely to believe that upward mobility is the product of hard work (Ledgerwood et al., 2011). In our own research, children who relied less on individual-focused explanations for upward mobility were the same children who tended to rectify, rather than perpetuate inequities (Tian et al., 2025). The types of causal explanations invoked may therefore help clarify why societal-level mobility beliefs sometimes become linked to acceptance of inequality. Recognizing structural constraints may allow children to remain optimistic about the possibility of improvement without concluding that unequal outcomes are fair or deserved. Future research should examine how explanations change across development and experimentally test whether structural explanations can preserve optimism about personal mobility without fostering acceptance of societal inequality.

What experiences shape children's beliefs about, and explanations for, social mobility?

Children's increasing recognition of structural barriers could reflect changes in cognitive capacities, exposure to explanations provided by parents and teachers, schooling and media, personal experiences with advantage or disadvantage, or broader cultural and political institutions (Rogers et al., 2021). Yet, most research on children's beliefs about social mobility has been conducted with economically advantaged convenience samples in the United States and China, limiting our ability to distinguish among these possibilities. As is evident in other domains of children's socio-cognitive reasoning, children's own lived experiences shape their

beliefs (e.g., children living in more diverse communities express less racial essentialism: Mandalaywala et al., 2019; Pauker et al., 2016). Children from socially or economically marginalized backgrounds may similarly recognize disparities in access to upward mobility earlier than their more privileged peers. An important and separate question is whether this awareness diminishes their optimism about their own prospects for mobility, or whether children can recognize structural constraints while remaining optimistic about their futures.

Mobility beliefs may also vary across national contexts. Children encounter country-specific levels of inequality and mobility, cultural narratives about mobility, and governmental institutions that shape access to resources. Although initial comparisons of the U.S. and China suggest some similarities in children's beliefs about disability-based disparities in mobility (Tian, Zhao, et al., 2025), more cross-cultural research is needed to determine how cultural narratives, institutions, and actual access to opportunities shape the development of mobility beliefs. In sum, more inclusive recruitment—both within and across countries—is needed to clarify how cognitive development and social experience jointly shape children's beliefs about mobility.

Beliefs about social mobility can draw attention to unequal opportunities, but these beliefs can also be used to justify existing inequality and uphold the status quo (Shariff et al., 2016). Understanding how children come to reason not only about whether mobility is possible, but also about whose mobility is constrained, is therefore central to explaining when mobility beliefs challenge inequality and when they sustain it.

Recommended Reading

Gonzalez, A. M., Macchia, L., & Whillans, A. V. (2022). The developmental origins and behavioral consequences of attributions for inequality. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 101*, 104329.

- Examines how children and adults explain inequality and demonstrates that these explanations shape whether inequality is viewed as acceptable, directly informing questions about how individual and structural explanations relate to rectification.

Shariff, A. F., Wiwad, D., & Akin, L. B. (2016). Income mobility breeds tolerance for income inequality: Cross-national and experimental evidence. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 11*(3), 373–380.

- Demonstrates that perceptions that income mobility is widely available across society increase tolerance for inequality, providing an important contrast with research linking recognition of group-specific mobility disparities to rectification.

Tian, Y., González, G. T., & Mandalaywala, T. M. (2024). Beliefs about social mobility in young American children. *Developmental Science, 27*(5), e13527.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/desc.13527>

- A recent empirical article that is one of the first explorations of whether children can reason about social mobility (e.g., viewing status as malleable) and whether children are aware of disparities in opportunities for upward mobility.

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