

REVIEW ARTICLE

Beliefs About Socioeconomic Mobility: Their Properties, Development, and Roles in the Maintenance of and Protection Against Educational Inequities

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ABSTRACT

Across many countries, educational attainment represents one of the primary pathways to future financial mobility and stability. Despite its objective value, a burgeoning area of research has demonstrated how the subjective value of education, and level and quality of people's motivations to engage with it, can be influenced by the nature of their beliefs about socioeconomic mobility, or their general perceptions about whether or not it is truly possible for them to change their socioeconomic position in their society. This article provides a comprehensive overview of the existing bodies of research that have examined these beliefs and their role in influencing important academic attitudes and behaviors. Focusing our review on two specific forms of mobility beliefs—people's concerns about their own likelihood of experiencing (a) upward mobility or (b) downward mobility—we discuss the unique ways that each of these types of beliefs can influence the academic attitudes and behaviors of students and parents, of people from more versus less advantaged social positions, and of people from both Western and non-Western samples. We then discuss what is currently known about how and when these beliefs develop and change in both children and adults. We close by highlighting important open questions on these topics and calling for future research thereinto.

1 | Introduction

Beliefs about socioeconomic mobility refer to a person's general perceptions about whether or not it is possible or likely that they will experience change in their socioeconomic position in their society—that is, that they will either move up (upward mobility beliefs) or down (downward mobility beliefs) the socioeconomic ladder (Browman et al. 2017; Davidai and Wienk 2021). Social-psychological research examining these beliefs has proliferated in recent years, with prominent reviews to date providing a comprehensive taxonomy of the distinct forms of mobility beliefs (Davidai and Wienk 2021), and a

deep exploration of how one specific such form of these beliefs—upward mobility beliefs—can influence future-focused motivation for a specific population—American youth and young adults from less advantaged backgrounds (Destin and Silverman 2025).

This article provides a new integrative perspective: focusing on one critical domain—academics—we review how two forms of mobility beliefs—people's concerns about the likelihood of experiencing (a) upward mobility or (b) downward mobility—can uniquely influence the attitudes and behaviors of different

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academic stakeholders, including students and parents, those from more versus less advantaged social positions, and those from both Western and non-Western cultures. Table 1 provides a summary of the convergent findings associated with these various mobility beliefs, populations, and focal outcomes. In addition, we provide—to the best of our knowledge—the first comprehensive review of the developmental psychology literature on mobility beliefs, which has recently begun to examine how and when these beliefs develop and change in both children and adults. We close by highlighting important avenues for future research on these topics.

2 | Beliefs About Upward Mobility Influence Academic Outcomes Among Students From Less Advantaged Backgrounds

One stream of research has examined the academic impacts of beliefs about the likelihood of achieving *upward* mobility among students from less advantaged backgrounds, who tend to have less access, or more fragile access, to high-quality academic opportunities and resources than others in their society. Across many countries, educational attainment represents one of the primary pathways to future financial mobility and stability (OECD 2024), making it especially critical for the future prospects of those from less advantaged backgrounds. However, decades of social and educational psychology research have shown that people are motivated to engage with tasks or domains when they are seen as clearly relevant to the kind of futures or goals they see as possible for themselves (Eccles and Wigfield 2020; Oyserman and Horowitz 2023). As a result, it seems plausible that the extent to which students from less advantaged backgrounds see value in and are motivated to persist in their education may hinge in part on the perception that it is possible for people to move up the socioeconomic ladder in their society.

Research has supported this hypothesis (see Table 1; for reviews, see Browman et al. 2019; Destin and Silverman 2025). In one study, the more strongly that American high school students from lower-socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds believed that upward mobility¹ was possible, the more they reported persisting academically, and the higher their end-of-quarter GPAs were. Furthermore, in a field experiment, some ninth-grade American students were randomly assigned to read an article at the beginning of the academic year describing their society as offering many opportunities for mobility; other students did not receive this information. Students from lower-SES backgrounds who were exposed to this information reported greater motivation to persist academically, which positively predicted their end-of-year GPAs. Similar results emerged among university students from lower-SES backgrounds, while these relations were not found among high school or university students from higher-SES backgrounds (Browman et al. 2017).

Furthermore, research has identified a psychological mechanism underlying these effects in U.S. samples: when people believe that upward mobility is possible, they are more likely to trust, internalize, and act in ways consistent with the prevailing social systems in their society (e.g., Alesina et al. 2018; for review, see D. A. Ryan et al. 2018). For example, when experimentally led to believe that mobility was more attainable in their society, Americans

were more likely to both support and view their own economic circumstances through the lens of prevailing societal messages about the importance of hard work and self-reliance for future success (Day and Fiske 2017; Shariff et al. 2016). For students from less advantaged backgrounds, then, the belief that upward mobility is attainable in their society may make them more likely to personally internalize prevailing societal messages about the necessity of educational attainment for future socioeconomic success. Indeed, as described in Table 1, studies have demonstrated that when American high school and university students from lower-SES backgrounds naturally hold or are experimentally led to hold stronger upward mobility beliefs, they are more likely to adopt life goals that are education dependent, which ultimately predicts stronger academic outcomes (Browman, Svoboda, and Destin 2022).

3 | Parents' Upward Mobility Beliefs Drive Educational Investment and Opportunity Hoarding Behaviors

In addition to the influence of young people's own mobility beliefs, parents are particularly well-positioned to shape young people's access to opportunity, given their outsized impact on young people's resources, motivations, and day-to-day lives (see Wilder 2014). As a result, researchers have begun to examine how *parents' mobility beliefs* can affect the outcomes of both their own children and those from other socioeconomic backgrounds.

Specifically, researchers have identified two paths through which American parents' mobility beliefs influence student outcomes (see Table 1). First, leading parents to believe that upward mobility is more likely for their child increased the amount of time parents invested in their children—indexed by how long parents spent engaging with optional information about effective parenting strategies—as well as how much money they were willing to spend to benefit their children's future outcomes—indexed by their willingness to pay for a children's educational newsletter (R. M. Ryan et al. 2026). Importantly, these effects were consistent across levels of SES, indicating that upward mobility beliefs serve as a potent signal for how parents should invest their time and money, regardless of their current level of access to high-quality academic opportunities and resources.

The second pathway identified in these studies paints a more complicated picture. Researchers found that when higher-SES American parents believe that upward mobility is possible, they become more inclined to engage in “opportunity hoarding,” or working to secure valuable educational and economic resources for their children, even when doing so comes at the expense of children from lower-SES families (Silverman et al. 2024). This manifested first in these parents' upward mobility beliefs being positively associated with their willingness to engage in anti-meritocratic behaviors, such as allowing their children to misrepresent their qualifications on scholarship applications. Moreover, experimental results indicated that exposing higher-SES American parents to a brief video emphasizing children's potential to climb the socioeconomic ladder—an ostensibly positive message, but one that for this group may trigger concerns about their own child's ability to

TABLE 1 | Summary of the effects of upward and downward mobility beliefs on the academic attitudes and outcomes of more and less advantaged academic stakeholders.

Type of mobility belief	Specific participant population(s) examined	Population(s)' baseline experience with structural advantage or disadvantage	Effect of holding this mobility belief more strongly	Mechanism(s) (<i>italics</i> indicate those that are hypothesized but have not yet been directly tested)
Upward mobility beliefs	Lower-SES American high school and university students	Less or more fragile access to high-quality academic opportunities and resources	Greater academic persistence and performance (Browman et al. 2017; Browman, Svoboda, and Destin 2022)	Greater internalization of/ identification with prevailing U.S. cultural messages about factors that contribute to future socioeconomic success (Day and Fiske 2017; Shariff et al. 2016), including educational attainment (Browman, Svoboda, and Destin 2022)
	Lower-SES Chinese elementary and middle school students		Greater academic coping strategies, persistence, and performance (Zhang and Huang 2025; Zhang, Jiang, Ming, Yang, et al. 2020)	Stronger internal attributions of wealth (Wang et al. 2026) and optimism about their futures (Zhao et al. 2021)
	Lower-SES American parents		Greater involvement and investment in their children's education (R. M. Ryan et al. 2026)	Stronger perceptions of the returns on parental investments (R. M. Ryan et al. 2026)
			No effect on educational opportunity hoarding behaviors (Silverman et al. 2024)	<i>No effect on status threat (i.e., concerns about their children's ability to maintain their low position in the social hierarchy; e.g., Craig and Richeson 2014)</i>
	Lower-SES Chinese parents		Greater involvement in their children's education (Zhang, Jiang, Ming, Ren, et al. 2020)	<i>Stronger perceptions of the returns on parental investments (R. M. Ryan et al. 2026)</i>
	Higher-SES American high school and university students	Greater and more consistent access to high-quality academic opportunities and resources	No effect on academic persistence or performance (Browman et al. 2017; Browman, Svoboda, and Destin 2022)	<i>No effect on internalization of/identification with prevailing societal messages about factors that contribute to future socioeconomic success (e.g., Day and Fiske 2017; Shariff et al. 2016)</i>
	Higher-SES Chinese elementary and middle school students		No effect on academic performance (Zhang, Jiang, Ming, Yang, et al. 2020)	No effect on internal attributions of wealth (Wang et al. 2026)
	Higher-SES American parents		Greater involvement and investment in their children's education (R. M. Ryan et al. 2026)	Stronger perceptions of the returns on parental investments (R. M. Ryan et al. 2026)
			Increased efforts to secure educational resources for their children at the explicit expense of others (opportunity hoarding behaviors; Silverman et al. 2024)	<i>Increased status threat (e.g., Craig and Richeson 2014)—specifically, concerns about their children's ability to maintain their elevated status in the hierarchy</i>

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Type of mobility belief	Specific participant population(s) examined	Population(s)' baseline experience with structural advantage or disadvantage	Effect of holding this mobility belief more strongly	Mechanism(s) (<i>italics</i> indicate those that are hypothesized but have not yet been directly tested)
	Higher-SES Chinese parents		No effect on involvement in their children's education (Zhang, Jiang, Ming, Ren, et al. 2020)	<i>No effect on perceived returns on parental investments (e.g., R. M. Ryan et al. 2026), potentially because high-SES parents' investment levels were high even if their mobility beliefs were weak (Zhang, Jiang, Ming, Ren, et al. 2020)</i>
Downward mobility beliefs	Racially marginalized American university students	Less or more fragile access to high-quality academic opportunities and resources	Greater endorsement of mastery-avoidance academic goals (i.e., concerns about avoiding mistakes and not doing worse in school than they have done in the past; Hernandez et al. 2023)	<i>Increased identity threats (e.g., Oyserman and Horowitz 2023; Steele et al. 2002)—Specifically, concerns about students from backgrounds like theirs losing the limited educational opportunities and resources available to them</i>
	Lower-SES American university students		No effects on educational opportunity hoarding behaviors (Hernandez et al. 2025)	<i>No effect on status threat (e.g., Craig and Richeson 2014)</i>
	White American university students	Greater and more consistent access to high-quality academic opportunities and resources	No effects on the endorsement of mastery-avoidance academic goals (Hernandez et al. 2023)	<i>No effect on identity threats (i.e., concerns about students from backgrounds like theirs losing the numerous educational opportunities and resources available to them)</i>
	Higher-SES American university students		Increased efforts to secure educational resources for themselves at the explicit expense of others (opportunity hoarding behaviors; Hernandez et al. 2025)	<i>Increased status threat (e.g., Craig and Richeson 2014)—specifically, concerns about maintaining their elevated status in the hierarchy</i>

maintain their elevated status in the hierarchy (i.e., status threat; see Craig and Richeson 2014)—increased their opposition to redistributive policies, such as raising taxes on the wealthy to provide additional funding to school districts in low-income areas. Similar patterns were not observed for lower-SES parents, who did not differentially prioritize their children's needs over others' after receiving information about upward mobility. These data hint at a sort of hydraulic process, wherein upward mobility and related beliefs may simultaneously benefit systemically marginalized young people's outcomes while inspiring systemic backlash among privileged groups as they seek to maintain their competitive advantages in access to academic resources and opportunities.

4 | Downward Mobility Beliefs

In addition, a growing literature underscores that people's beliefs about the likelihood that they will experience *downward*

economic mobility—or lose ground compared to where they currently stand socioeconomically (Browman et al. 2017)—play a distinct role in shaping academic motivation and policy preferences. While less well studied than upward mobility beliefs, the extant research demonstrates two key facets of downward mobility beliefs, which highlight their importance for achieving a more complete understanding of how beliefs about mobility function (see Davidai and Wienk 2021). First, downward mobility beliefs are not simply “the other end of the spectrum” from upward mobility beliefs. They are independent factors that appear to operate as separate motivational systems, with perceptions of downward mobility encouraging more protection-oriented attitudes and behaviors compared to upward mobility's focus on future opportunity (Matamoros-Lima et al. 2023, 2025). Second, the psychological meaning of downward mobility beliefs is not uniform. Rather, as in the studies examining opportunity hoarding, downward mobility concerns can activate qualitatively different motivational systems depending on individuals'

structural position and, consequently, the consistency or fragility of their access to academic opportunities and resources (see Table 1).

When concerns about downward mobility are salient for students from groups that are systematically disadvantaged, they tend to reflect realistic appraisals of structural constraint—that is, the fragility of their access to high-quality academic opportunities and resources, and limited institutional buffers against this fragility. In response, students' academic engagement often becomes more strategic, with schooling approached with a focus on protecting progress and minimizing risk. For example, in a series of studies with American college students, Hernandez et al. (2023) found that concerns about experiencing downward mobility were associated with greater endorsement of mastery-avoidance academic goals—or concerns about avoiding mistakes and not doing worse in school than they have done in the past—among students from racially marginalized groups, but not among White students. These findings are consistent with research on identity-based motivation and social identity threat, which propose that when potential future identities feel uncertain or fragile, students are more likely to interpret academic tasks instrumentally—as necessary investments in future stability—and to attend carefully to decisions that preserve progress and minimize perceived risk (e.g., Destin and Oyserman 2010; Oyserman et al. 2015; see Oyserman and Horowitz 2023; Steele et al. 2002). Critically, these motivational patterns do not reflect disengagement or diminished aspiration. Rather, they indicate an adaptive calibration of effort to protect a critical mechanism for future stability and family trajectories—educational opportunities—under conditions of risk (Frankenhuis et al. 2016).

By contrast, for individuals from systematically advantaged groups, concerns about downward mobility are less likely to impact their *individual academic motivations*. Instead, such concerns may heighten sensitivity to potential status loss, motivating efforts to preserve *systems* that provide them with relative advantages in terms of access to opportunities and resources within these competitive educational systems. In particular, Hernandez et al. (2025) demonstrated that for such students, perceived threats of downward mobility are associated with increased endorsement of zero-sum-like beliefs about opportunity, and thus greater support for practices that protect their access to valued educational resources, while restricting others who would benefit from such resources from similarly accessing them. For example, students from systematically advantaged groups exposed to downward mobility risk were less supportive of a school tuition policy that would benefit their peers from systematically marginalized groups, and more likely to endorse the general sentiment that they should prioritize their own educational needs over those of others. From a psychological standpoint, these patterns are similar to those found among parents (Silverman et al. 2024), reflecting a status-preserving motivational orientation in which downward mobility concerns prompt defensive boundary maintenance, with downstream consequences for the reproduction of educational inequality. These potential mechanisms are consistent with broader research on mobility beliefs, which finds that perceived threats to relative standing activate system-defensive attitudes that legitimize existing hierarchies and reduce support for redistributive policies (Day and Fiske 2017; Shariff et al. 2016).

Taken together, this literature highlights that downward mobility beliefs are not inherently adaptive or maladaptive. Instead, consequences associated with concerns about downward mobility are shaped by structural position and perceived vulnerability. For marginalized students, downward mobility concern tends to activate protective motivational systems oriented toward sustaining progress under constraint. For advantaged students, the same concern promotes status preservation and opportunity protection, shaping policy attitudes and institutional behaviors (i.e., opportunity hoarding, reinforcing institutional stratification and policy resistance).

5 | Cross-Cultural Research Examining the Impact of Students' and Parents' Mobility Beliefs on Academic Outcomes

While much of the initial work on the relationships between mobility beliefs and academic-related outcomes has been conducted in the U.S., in recent years, research with non-Western samples has begun to successfully replicate and extend many of these findings (see Table 1). Such work highlights the cross-cultural significance of mobility beliefs in education, despite notable differences in national rates of actual mobility (World Economic Forum 2020). In particular, China's educational examination systems (Hannum et al. 2011) and cultural values (Ng and Wei 2020) emphasize education as the primary pathway to upward mobility. Meanwhile, actual social mobility has shown changing trends accompanied by rapid economic development (Xie et al. 2022). These socio-economic-cultural features may shape mobility beliefs themselves, making China a valuable context for deepening understanding of this topic.

The positive effects of mobility beliefs on multiple academic indicators have been confirmed in studies of Chinese samples across different age groups. Among elementary and middle school students, upward mobility beliefs show positive correlations with learning engagement (Zhao et al. 2021), adaptive academic coping strategies (e.g., seeking help from others and strategizing how to improve when they encounter difficulties in school), and academic persistence (Zhang and Huang 2025). Moreover, college students with stronger mobility beliefs tend to exhibit higher levels of school engagement and achievement (Zhao et al. 2025), as well as stronger intentions to participate in academic training programs (Ren et al. 2025).

Furthermore, the specific risk-buffering role of upward mobility beliefs for students from lower-SES backgrounds has also been substantiated in Chinese samples, underscoring its cross-cultural significance in mitigating adversity (see Table 1). Compared with lower-SES elementary and middle school students with weaker upward mobility beliefs, those with stronger upward mobility beliefs demonstrate better cognitive flexibility, academic coping strategies, persistence, and achievement (Ming et al. 2021; Zhang, Jiang, Ming, Yang, et al. 2020; Zhang and Huang 2025). Among their higher-SES counterparts, these outcomes are uniformly high and do not vary based on their upward mobility beliefs. Similarly, researchers found that lower-SES parents were less involved in their adolescent children's school lives and academic work at home (e.g., checking homework, limiting TV-watching time) than higher-SES parents, which in turn resulted in their children having lower math and

Chinese language achievement. However, this Chinese language achievement disparity between adolescents exposed to lower and higher levels of parental home-based involvement was statistically eliminated among those with stronger upward mobility belief (Zhang et al. 2021).

As Table 1 also summarizes, investigations in China have also examined the impact of parents' mobility beliefs. For example, lower-SES Chinese parents with stronger upward mobility beliefs were found to be more engaged in their children's education, which in turn contributed positively to their children's academic achievement (Zhang, Jiang, Ming, Ren, et al. 2020). In other words, for lower-SES families in both China and the U.S. (R. M. Ryan et al. 2026), holding stronger mobility beliefs remains a constructive pathway to future socioeconomic advancement for their children by promoting educational investment.

Finally, research with Chinese students and families has also provided novel insights regarding *how* mobility beliefs may shape academic engagement and persistence. First, some novel mechanisms linking mobility beliefs to academic engagement have been uncovered. For example, researchers have found that students who believe that mobility is possible are more likely to believe that wealth is the result of internal factors within their control (e.g., "hard work and initiative"; Wang et al. 2026), and feel more hopeful about their futures (Zhao et al. 2021), which predict greater academic engagement, persistence, and achievement. As summarized in Table 1, these findings, together with previous U.S.-based evidence on the mediating role of education-dependent future identity (Browman, Svoboda, and Destin 2022), provide both a more comprehensive understanding of how upward mobility beliefs might influence academic behaviors and performance, and highlight how such future-focused optimism might present in culturally-unique ways. Second, some novel moderators of the effects of mobility beliefs on academic persistence have also been identified. For example, Zhang and Huang (2025) found that the positive correlation between lower-SES adolescents' upward mobility beliefs and academic persistence was stronger for those with more adaptive academic coping strategies (e.g., strategizing how to improve when they have trouble in school). Third, research in China indicates that mobility beliefs may buffer youth's outcomes not only against the economic barriers identified with U.S. samples, but also against certain detrimental parenting practices. For example, Zhang and Peng (2025) found that the adverse effect of parental psychological control (e.g., inducing guilt and withdrawing affection when children fail to meet expectations) on children's learning engagement was weaker among students with stronger upward mobility beliefs.

In summary, building on findings from Western samples, research conducted in the Chinese context has further demonstrated many positive effects of upward mobility beliefs on academic persistence, engagement, strategies, intentions, and achievement. These beneficial effects have been confirmed among Chinese adolescents and children, an age group younger than those typically examined in Western studies. And beyond simple replication, this work has advanced our understanding by uncovering mediating mechanisms and moderating effects, and by extending these investigations to the parenting domain,

where the protective role of upward mobility beliefs may also operate.

6 | How Mobility Beliefs Develop in Childhood

While most extant research on mobility beliefs has focused on adults and adolescents, a growing body of research has begun to investigate the development of these beliefs in childhood. Although one might think that the concept of socioeconomic mobility is too complex for young children to reason about, recent research finds that American children as young as 3 years old express nuanced beliefs about mobility that sometimes differ from adults'.

For example, 3- to 10-year-old American children's beliefs about others' mobility seem to be more malleable than adults, such that children's belief in upward mobility increased after seeing a single instance of an individual experiencing upward mobility, whereas adults required more evidence of upward mobility to shift their beliefs (Beck and Chernyak 2026). Furthermore, around 7 years old, American children become less likely to expect upward mobility for families described as starting with an economic disadvantage, compared to families starting with an economic advantage (Tian et al. 2024), demonstrating an awareness of disparities in upward mobility based on family SES that aligns with economic realities (e.g., Chetty et al. 2014). These findings contrast with American adults, who believe it is more likely that economically disadvantaged people will experience upward mobility than that economically advantaged families will remain rich (Davidai and Gilovich 2015), a belief that is out of touch with reality (e.g., Chetty et al. 2014). Finally, 5- to 12-year-old American children believe that upward mobility is harder to achieve than downward mobility, and that hard work is the primary force enabling upward mobility (King et al. 2025). Although adults' perceptions of the difficulty of upward mobility have not been assessed directly, adults often express the belief that upward mobility is more likely (and thus perhaps easier to achieve) than downward mobility (Davidai and Gilovich 2015; Kraus and Tan 2015). Together, these studies demonstrate that children are cognitively capable of reasoning about mobility, and their beliefs often differ from adults' beliefs in meaningful ways.

Recent research also reveals that children are capable of using social group membership to make inferences about the likelihood of upward mobility. In the real world, opportunities for upward mobility are not equally available to all people; members of many marginalized racial and ethnic groups are especially likely to face structural barriers that constrain opportunities for upward mobility (e.g., Collins and Wana-maker 2022; Durlauf et al. 2024; Fasang and Aisenbrey 2022), and recent research suggests that even young children are sometimes aware of such disparities in upward social mobility. For example, Tian, Ukairo, et al. (2026) found that 4- to 9-year-old children in Massachusetts—a politically liberal-leaning region of the U.S.—expressed awareness of racial disparities in upward mobility, expecting White American families to be more likely to experience upward mobility than families of color, and with age, awareness of these racial disparities became more pronounced. However, another group of 4- to 9-year-olds in the

same region of Massachusetts did not express awareness of heritage country-based disparities in upward mobility, being equally likely to expect upward mobility for families from Russia, Somalia, China, and Mexico.

Why might children develop an awareness of group-based disparities in upward social mobility for some social categories, but not others? Developmental Intergroup Theory (DIT; Bigler and Liben 2007) theorizes that environmental, cognitive, and motivational influences in the child's local context determine which social categories become "psychologically salient" to them, and only once marked as salient do children develop beliefs and attitudes toward members of a social category. Tian, Ukairo, et al.'s (2026) findings might therefore be driven by the fact that, for these children in the U.S., race is a more psychologically salient category than heritage country, as evidenced by parent reports of very limited child contact with immigrants.

Research with children in China provides another powerful example of the context-specificity of social category salience and associated mobility beliefs. China has a household registration system that officially identifies a person as a permanent resident of a certain geographical region, often based on their place of birth (Cheng and Selden 1994). Critically, a person's residency registration determines where in the country they can access public services. For example, people who are registered as residents of rural areas cannot enroll in urban public schools, or access public benefits if they visit urban hospitals. This institutional barrier therefore reduces opportunities for upward mobility for people living in rural (vs. urban) regions by limiting their access to all kinds of critical socioeconomic resources. To examine whether Chinese children are aware of such disparities in upward mobility between rural and urban families, Tian, Zhao, et al. (2026) recruited 4- to 9-year-old children from middle-class backgrounds in suburban regions of a middle-sized city in China. In line with predictions licensed by DIT about the psychological salience of rural and urban social categories in China, by 4-years-old, Chinese children expressed the belief that rural families were less likely to experience upward mobility than urban families, and these beliefs became stronger with age. To our knowledge, this study is one of the first to explore the development of children's beliefs about mobility in a non-"WEIRD" (Western and White, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic; Henrich et al. 2010; Syed and Kathawalla 2022) culture.

Moreover, this study is among a growing number to suggest that the relationship between mobility beliefs and behaviors that contribute to the maintenance or narrowing of economic inequities could first emerge at fairly young ages. Specifically, 4-year-old Chinese children who expressed an awareness of these geography-based disparities (urban vs. rural) in upward mobility were more likely to allocate resources (i.e., money, free summer camp) to rural families than those who did not express such awareness (Tian, Zhao, et al. 2026). Furthermore, while prior research suggests that both children and adults tend to explain inequities in terms of internal and inherent causes rather than extrinsic or structural factors (Hussak and Cimpian 2015), Tian, Ukairo, et al. (2026) sought to determine whether there is a developmental shift across childhood in the tendency to use structural factors to explain why hypothetical

families do or do not experience upward social mobility. In line with previous developmental research exploring children's structural reasoning for status disparities (Peretz-Lange et al. 2021), they found that older children (8- to 9-year-olds) were more likely to provide structural-based explanations (e.g., "they are not treated well because of their skin color") than were younger children (4- to 7-year-olds). And critically, these older children's awareness of structural barriers to upward mobility was related to a greater tendency to rectify inequalities by preferentially giving resources to the types of families that children rated as less likely to experience upward mobility. Thus, although children are not yet able to vote or lobby for preferred policies, their beliefs about economic and group-based inequities can shape their personal attitudes and resource allocation behaviors toward others (Elenbaas 2019; Elenbaas and Mistry 2021; Mandalaywala et al. 2021; Rizzo et al. 2016), as well as the ideas and ideologies they hold in adulthood (e.g., Hussak and Cimpian 2018; Reifen-Tagar and Cimpian 2022). These findings suggest that having early conversations with children that focus on the structural roots of inequalities in social mobility may be a promising venue to build a generation of children who grow up to support policies and engage in behaviors that promote equity (e.g., Perry et al. 2024).

Finally, given the documented influences of mobility beliefs on academic attitudes and outcomes among adolescents and young adults (Browman et al. 2017; Browman, Svoboda, et al. 2022), research has begun to explore the ages at which mobility beliefs predict beliefs about the value of academics. In one study, researchers recruited 8- to 12-years-old elementary school students and measured both their mobility beliefs and the extent to which they perceived academics as valuable for their futures. Mobility beliefs did not predict academic value among 8- to 9-year-olds, but did starting at age 10, and this relationship increased in strength with age (Browman et al. 2021). While preliminary, these findings suggest that the relationship between mobility beliefs and the perception of academics as valuable may first emerge in late childhood. In other words, late childhood may represent the age at which children not only begin to concretely imagine their desired futures (see Harter 2012; McLean 2005), but also begin to draw concrete connections between their current actions (i.e., doing well in school) and those futures. If future research corroborates these findings, this would point to a specific developmental period during which socio-cognitive interventions could first be used to help strengthen children's academic motivation and outcomes.

7 | Factors Influencing Adults' Mobility Beliefs

Researchers have also sought to identify factors that influence adults' mobility beliefs. One potential contributor is the level of actual economic development that occurs in a person's society. Specifically, scholars have hypothesized that individuals who inhabit a society in which a high level of economic growth occurs over the course of their life will expect their personal socioeconomic position to also improve. Research has indeed supported this prediction (Gugushvili 2021).

A contrasting factor is economic inequality. In many nations, most economic growth that has occurred over the past 25 years has been top-concentrated, or largely captured by a very small

number of ultra-wealthy individuals (United Nations 2026). Because such inequality produces severe disparities in people's ability to access resources and opportunities that contribute to long-term economic success, being exposed to high levels of economic inequality in one's society might lead them to believe that the socioeconomic system they inhabit is largely immobile (Browman et al. 2019). Studies have indeed documented a negative relation between perceptions of societal inequality and upward mobility beliefs (Davidai 2018). More specifically, when people perceive their society as having high levels of *top-concentrated* inequality, they are less likely to believe that any mobility—upward or downward—is possible in that society (Browman, Destin, and Miele 2022). By contrast, perceptions of less top-concentrated forms of inequality—in which some segments of the population had more wealth than others, but the few richest individuals do not hold a greater proportion of wealth than all others combined—appear to be largely unrelated to people's mobility beliefs.

8 | Future Directions

The psychological study of mobility beliefs has revealed many important insights. These include the differential impacts of upward and downward mobility beliefs on the academic attitudes and behaviors of both students and parents, the moderating effects of one's advantaged or marginalized status, and initial examinations of when and what can contribute to the early emergence of and later-in-life changes in these beliefs. And critically, many of these patterns have held in both American and Chinese samples.

These findings also highlight important directions for future research. First, as discussed, believing that upward mobility is possible appears to strengthen lower-SES students' academic outcomes because these beliefs make them more optimistic about their futures (Zhao et al. 2021), more confident that moving up the socioeconomic ladder is within their control (Wang et al. 2026), and more likely to adopt life goals that are education dependent (Browman, Svoboda, and Destin 2022). This suggests that intervention efforts designed to improve academic outcomes among youth with structurally less access to mobility-enhancing opportunities—such as those from lower-SES or rural backgrounds—need to provide education-based pathways to upward mobility that are realistic and attainable for these students, in order to effectively promote the adoption of education-dependent life goals. To date, however, such interventions have received limited attention in the psychological literature. In one study (Browman, Svoboda, and Destin 2022), a small sample of American high school seniors from lower-SES backgrounds was randomly assigned to hear about post-secondary education options and associated life benefits from alumni of their high school. One group heard only about the benefits of traditional university degrees—the most salient education-based path to future success, but also one which may feel or be out of reach for many lower-SES high school seniors. By contrast, to ensure that all students were provided with a viable school-based path to successful futures, the other group heard about the benefits of both university and vocational options. The latter students were more likely to commit to pursuing futures that include attaining post-secondary education, reported greater academic engagement, and set higher academic

goals for themselves. Future research should seek to refine and improve such data-driven approaches to intervention, as well as ensure that interventions are administered at developmentally appropriate times (see Binning and Browman 2020; Walton and Yeager 2020). Specifically, although children are capable of reasoning about their own subjective status and opportunities for upward social mobility by 5 years old (Tian et al. 2024), research to date has not documented a connection between mobility beliefs and viewing academics as valuable for one's own future until children are closer to 10 years old (Browman et al. 2021). Determining what cognitive and social factors shift during this developmental window will not only ensure that interventions are efficacious, but also help to clarify the mechanisms by which mobility beliefs promote positive academic outcomes.

Second, the described impact of mobility beliefs on opportunity hoarding behaviors underscores the importance of developing a robust understanding of the psychology of mobility beliefs that attends to its role in not only guiding *individuals'* behaviors, but also shaping *broader forces* that tend to reproduce inequality and impede systemically marginalized people's access to opportunity (Destin and Silverman 2025). Such theoretical nuance and associated empirical examinations are especially critical in light of recent data suggesting that people are increasingly balancing their belief that they will be able to climb up the socioeconomic ladder against the possibility that they will fall down it (Day and Fiske 2017; Hernandez et al. 2023; Matamoros-Lima et al. 2023).

Third, as discussed, research to date has provided empirical support for psychological mechanisms underlying many of the discussed relationships between mobility beliefs and academic attitudes and behaviors. An important avenue for future research will be to test hypothesized mechanisms that have yet to receive direct empirical examinations (see the italicized cells in Table 1). These include directly testing the predicted role of identity threat in driving the relationship between downward mobility beliefs and mastery-avoidance goal adoption among students from less advantaged backgrounds (Hernandez et al. 2023), as well as the role of status threat in driving the relationships between upward mobility beliefs and opportunity hoarding behaviors among both students and parents from more advantaged backgrounds (Hernandez et al. 2025; Silverman et al. 2024).

Fourth, although cross-cultural research on both the development and impact of mobility beliefs has increased in recent years, there is much left to uncover. For example, recent studies that pooled data from 167 countries documented large cultural variations in adults' beliefs about mobility (Chan et al. 2021). As a result, evidence based solely on American and Chinese samples may convey an unexamined assumption of either universality or cultural specificity. For example, Du et al. (2021) found that Chinese individuals remained optimistic about future mobility despite having experienced downward mobility. Whether this tendency is culturally specific—arising from the socio-economic-cultural features of China's culture and educational system—or generalizes beyond the Chinese context remains unknown. Furthermore, *within* any single society are multiple groups who will be less likely to experience upward mobility due to structural constraints, but not necessarily due to the same

specific constraints as those affecting other groups—for example, American university students of color, versus American students who would be the first in their family to complete university (first-generation students). Finally, to date, research conducted outside of the U.S. on the relations between mobility beliefs and academic outcomes has been largely correlational and focused on upward mobility beliefs. Collecting qualitative and experimental data on multiple forms of mobility beliefs, from larger and more representative samples, both across and within diverse cultural contexts, will allow us to clarify which aspects of mobility beliefs are cross-culturally consistent and which shift in response to socio-cultural input, and whether these patterns align with predictions made by key developmental theories (e.g., DIT; Bigler and Liben 2007). Such efforts are critical to promote the eventual development of appropriately tailored school- or family-based interventions that will be effective and ecologically valid in addressing different types of mobility beliefs among those experiencing structural advantages versus disadvantages, and among those from distinct socio-economic-cultural circumstances (see Binning and Browman 2020; Walton and Yeager 2020).

Finally, it is of critical importance to expand the study of the antecedents of children's mobility beliefs, or *where* such beliefs come from (for similar calls, see Dickinson et al. 2023; Mistry et al. 2027). Clarifying the socialization processes that contribute to mobility belief development can help researchers identify key intervention timepoints or strategies to help children develop the most helpful form of mobility beliefs possible. Specifically, future research should examine how socialization processes at home (Kinnard et al. 2025), in school (Mistry et al. 2016), among peers (Choukas-Bradley et al. 2015), and through media (Kneeskern and Reeder 2022) shape the development and expression of children's beliefs about mobility. Recent research has used qualitative methods to document parental socialization about socioeconomically-relevant ideas (e.g., economic hardships, meritocratic beliefs) across various populations in the U.S. and U.K., and found that parents are reluctant to discuss such topics at home (Griffin et al. 2025; Kinnard et al. 2025), which could limit or delay children's understanding of mobility and inequity. In addition, a longitudinal study in China found that rural adolescents whose parents were more involved in their academic lives showed greater increases in their upward mobility beliefs over a 2-year period than those with less academically involved parents (Xiang et al. 2024). However, there is still a dearth of research that directly asks about parents' motivation (or lack thereof) to discuss socioeconomic mobility, the content of parent-child conversations about mobility, or how other socialization processes shape children's mobility beliefs. Expanding the search for other factors that can cause adults' mobility beliefs to shift—beyond societal-level economic development and inequality—is of similarly high importance.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

Endnotes

¹ The wording of this mobility beliefs measure (e.g., “No matter what status a person has in society at one point in their life, they can always change it a lot” [Browman et al. 2017; Browman, Svoboda, and Destin 2022])—and others (e.g., Day and Fiske 2017; Zhao et al. 2021, 2025)—appear to assess people's beliefs about mobility in general, as opposed to their beliefs about personal upward mobility in particular. However, prior research has found that when Americans think about mobility, they typically focus on upward mobility (e.g., Davidai and Gilovich 2015; Kraus and Tan 2015; Mandisodza et al. 2006). Consistent with these findings, in supplementary analyses of data collected by Browman et al. (2022), scores on the same broadly-worded measure only correlated significantly with more specific measures of people's upward mobility beliefs, $r(168) = 0.191$, $p = 0.013$ (Study 1) and $r(189) = 0.204$, $p = 0.005$ (Study 2a), not with more specific measures of their downward mobility beliefs, $r(169) = 0.099$, $p = 0.198$ and $r(189) = 0.901$, $p = -0.009$. These results held when general mobility beliefs were simultaneously regressed on both upward mobility beliefs, $\beta_s = 0.175$ and 0.260 , $ps = 0.022$ and 0.001 , and downward mobility beliefs, $\beta_s = 0.060$ and -0.126 , $ps = 0.428$ and 0.114 , held.

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