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I, Chloe Connelly, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology.

It is entitled:
Classless America?: Intergenerational Mobility and Determinants of Class Identification in the United States

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Classless America?:
Intergenerational Mobility and Determinants of Class Identification in the United States

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by
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Abstract: This paper investigates the relationship between intergenerational mobility and subjective class status, with a specific focus on downward mobility. I propose that downward mobility will be associated with a higher likelihood of reporting a working/lower class status – as opposed to a middle or upper class status – even after accounting for other determinants of class status, such as income and education. Using logistic regression, I analyze the General Social Survey from 1994 – 2014 with a total sample size of just under 9,000 respondents. I find that both perceived downward mobility and objective downward mobility are independently associated with higher probabilities of identifying as lower/working class, with subjective downward mobility demonstrating a consistently stronger association. While subjective upward mobility is associated with a decrease in the log odds of identifying as lower or working class, the association between objective upward mobility and lower/working class status can be largely explained by social and economic factors such as subjective mobility and more traditional predictors of class status like income and education. This study builds on and updates existing research on intergenerational mobility. It applies social mobility research to a new context by studying its effect on subjective class status.
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INTRODUCTION

The expectation of upward mobility is prominent in the American cultural imagination; similarly, the United States is often constructed as equal, without clearly defined social classes. However, changes in the American economy have led to rising inequality and may be contributing to declining rates of mobility. The relationship between declining mobility and subjective class status has not been fully explored. It may be possible that high levels of upward mobility may weaken class identification if class is no longer seen as a constricting force; conversely downward mobility, regardless of income, may make a respondent more likely to identify in the working or lower class because of the experience of declining status relative to their parents. In this study, I examine the relationship between mobility and subjective class identification. I examine both upward and downward mobility but focus my analysis on the effects of downward mobility on subjective class status. I seek to update the literature on intergenerational mobility by studying mobility in a recent context and by linking it to subjective class identification.

This study examines whether downward mobility increases the likelihood of identifying as working or lower class (as compared to middle or upper class). I also examine whether upward mobility decreases the likelihood of identifying as working or lower class. I analyze data from the General Social Survey (GSS) over the last twenty years (1994 to 2014) to examine whether the relationship between mobility and class identification has changed over time. I find that respondents who are downwardly mobile are significantly more likely to identify as working/lower class, whether mobility is
measured by subjective perceptions or by an objective comparison of respondent’s occupation to that of their parents’. I find that respondents identifying themselves as upwardly mobile (i.e. those who would be considered subjectively upwardly mobile) are less likely to report lower/working class status. However, respondents objectively classified as upwardly mobile are no less likely to report lower/working class status once subjective upward mobility is accounted for.

The American economy has shifted drastically since the late 1970s and early 1980s, including factors such as deindustrialization, declining union membership, and rising inequality (Atkinson, Piketty, and Saez 2011; Western and Rosenfeld 2011). The field would benefit from updated mobility research that incorporates these macroeconomic changes into estimates of social fluidity in American society. As the nation continues to recover from the 2008 recession and as Millennials continue come of age, vote, and enter the labor market, paying close attention to class identification and class mobility will become increasingly important in contemporary American society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Both social mobility and subjective class status have their own large bodies of literature, but scholars have rarely connected these two fields of research in order to understand how mobility affects subjective class status. As discussed below, intergenerational mobility has traditionally been studied as an effect not as a cause of other variables. Additionally, most research on intergenerational mobility does not fully capture the experiences of people growing up in a new, postindustrial American
economy. This study updates intergenerational mobility research and bridges the gap between research on mobility and research on subjective class identification.

*Intergenerational Mobility*

Much of the research about intergenerational mobility in the United States was published by a previous generation of scholars about previous generations of Americans (e.g., Featherman and Hauser 1978; Blau and Duncan 1967). Even some of the more contemporary studies on American intergenerational mobility have continued to focus on the experiences of previous generations, without an analysis of how individuals coming of age after the new millennium experience mobility and class status (e.g., Lee and Solon 2009). The economic structure of the United States has changed drastically since the late 1970s. Inequality began to rise in the late 1970s and grew rapidly in the 1980s, a trend we still see today (Atkinson, Piketty, and Saez 2011: 7). During this period, the American economy also experienced rapid union decline. Western and Rosenfeld (2011) point to both material effects of de-unionization, such as rising inequality and stagnating wages (513), and attitudinal affects. They refer to these attitudinal effects as a decline in “social solidarity,” (517-519) but they could also include individuals’ subjective class status.

Many researchers have examined trends in mobility without an analysis of how these trends affect subjective class statuses. Beller and Hout (2006) focus their analysis on trends in social mobility in the United States and conclude that upward intergenerational mobility (based on father’s and respondent’s occupations) grew through the 1970s, but has decreased since the 1980s. While they find evidence for less upward
intergenerational mobility and more downward intergenerational mobility since the 1980s, they do not take the next step to determine if this decrease in mobility is associated with an increase in the likelihood of reporting working or lower class status (Beller and Hout 2006). In his comparative study of eleven different countries (10 European countries and Israel) over almost 30 years, Breen (2014 [2007]) finds increasing social fluidity\(^1\) over time and also looks at shifts in governmental structure that contribute to this mobility. Featherman and Hauser (1978) find that intergenerational mobility is highest in the middle of the economic structure (i.e., the middle class) and lowest at the two extremes of the class distribution (i.e., the upper nonmanual workers on one end and farm workers on the other). However, since the publication of this foundational study in 1978, we have seen many changes in the occupational structure: most notably, the presence of fewer and fewer Americans working on farms. From this, we can anticipate that the mobility of the children of farm workers in 1978 would differ from the mobility of the children of farm workers in later generations, simply because fewer Americans work on farms. All of these studies analyze changing patterns of mobility, but do not connect this to subjective identifications of class status. From these studies, one cannot determine if any decreases in mobility affected the rates of people identifying as working class or middle class.

Similarly, scholars have not agreed on a single way to measure mobility. Not only do scholars disagree on whether relative income or occupational changes better capture social mobility, but some scholars use objective\(^2\) measures of mobility (Alesina

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\(^1\) That is, decreased rigidity of the occupational structure

\(^2\) I say “objective” because researchers often use this language. Of course, there isn’t an agreed upon “objective” measure of mobility, so I don’t use this term to mean an
and La Ferrara 2005; Evans and Kelley 2004) although others focus on subjective measures (Alesina and La Ferrara 2005; Kelley and Kelley 2009; Curtis 2015). Kelley and Kelley (2009) examine both perceived and objective (or ‘actual’) mobility and demonstrate that while the two are related (i.e., those who experience actual mobility are more likely to perceive mobility), they are not identical. In fact, perceived mobility seems to have a larger effect on certain attitudes than actual mobility does. Kelley and Kelley (2009:119) find that, “for most of the outcomes [they] have considered, actual occupational mobility affects things only indirectly through its effects on subjective mobility” Although objective and perceived mobility are not always differentiated from each other, Kelley and Kelley (2009) show that they actually measure different, though related, experiences.

Subjective Class Status

Sociological theorists have also sought to explain subjective class identification without taking into consideration social mobility. Classical sociologists such as Marx and Durkheim took a “direct reflection” approach, assuming that there are objective positions in a class hierarchy and subjective class status is mainly an issue of individuals becoming aware of those objective positions (Evans and Kelley 2004: 2-4; 6). Conversely, scholars have proposed a “reference group theory” in which individuals base their subjective class locations on their position in the hierarchy of those around them. Because social networks tend to be relatively homogenous in terms of class, this leads most people to see themselves in the middle of the social hierarchy (Evans and Kelley 2004: 4; Curtis 2013:

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infallible measurement; I use it to differentiate it from questions specifically measuring perceived or predicted mobility.
Anderson and Curtis (2012:130) also investigate both Goldthorpe’s “affluent worker thesis” and Inglehart’s “post materialist thesis.” The former posits that economic growth raises the subjective class status of most workers in an affluent society; the latter suggests that with rising standards of living, social class identifications become less relevant and salient. Because these two theories focus on rising standards of living, their implications are more applicable in an analysis of upward mobility than downward mobility.

More contemporary research on subjective class status has also tended to neglect the role of intergenerational mobility in determining class status. Evans and Kelley (2004: 23) examine the subjective class identities of respondents from 21 nations. They examine both individual level factors and national level distributions of class identifications. While these subjective class statuses follow the same general pattern as each other (with a larger middle class and fewer people identifying with the tails of the distribution), a number of factors such as GDP, unemployment rate, and global location affect class identification. They stress the importance of a nation’s development in predicting its distribution of class identification; in their model, however, Evans and Kelley (2004) do not include measures of mobility. Throughout his comparative research, Josh Curtis (Anderson and Curtis 2012; Curtis 2013; Curtis 2015) finds that national level inequality leads to more polarized class statuses (Anderson and Curtis 2013: 216-217; Curtis 2012: 135; Curtis 2015: 10-11) but does not include social mobility in his 2013 or 2012 studies.

However, there is not consensus in the literature regarding this; Curtis (2015) contends this point (p. 9)
Mobility & Class Status

Research on both perceived mobility and subjective class status often take a temporal approach (e.g., Curtis 2015; Alesina and La Ferrara 2005; Evans and Kelley 2004; Kelley and Kelley 2009). This is important because mobility and class status are not static; rather they are subject to different trends in different time periods (Hout 2015). For example, different years may have different rates (whether subjective or objective) of mobility based on changes in the occupational structure of that society; e.g., periods of recession, periods of prosperity, and the deindustrialization of the American economy may all affect the occupational structure. Social and economic conditions affect both mobility and subjective class status. Studies that include multiple years more accurately predict these variables than a single cross-sectional study would. This also allows the researcher to examine both gradual and abrupt changes in mobility and class identification.

Given factors like union decline, examining data over a number of years allows the researcher to capture these changes, in a way that one year of cross-sectional data may not be able to. A shrinking middle class has become an important theme not only in social and economic research, but in political movements and electoral politics as well. As the structure of the American economy has changed, mobility research needs to continue to adjust to this new economy and labor market relations. What Arne Kalleberg (2009) describes as precarious work – e.g., more uncertainty and less stability for workers – characterize this new economy. Although these trends started before the housing crisis, this insecurity was exacerbated by the Great Recession and the losses associated with this recession, which have been concentrated in the working and middle
classes (Autor 2011: 13). Additionally, the Great Recession limited the jobs available to people trying to get their footing in the labor market or trying to advance their class status (Danziger and Ratner 2010: 135-136). Because macro-level shifts in the American occupational structure can affect the opportunities for upward mobility – or even inherited class status – of individuals, studying mobility across a period of time is imperative.

Very few studies have combined an analysis of both mobility and class identification. Curtis (2015) examines the class structures and absolute mobility of 33 countries. Overall, he does not find support for the hypothesis that absolute mobility at the national level affects class identification. Instead, levels of income inequality in different nations become key to his analysis: he finds that rising inequality leads to a lower self reported class status overall and more polarization in the distribution of class statuses in a nation. On the other hand, in their multinational study, Kelley and Kelley (2009) find that subjective mobility affects individuals’ perception of their position in a class structure. Those who perceive themselves as having experienced upward social mobility were more likely to see their own pay as just and more likely to identify with a higher social class. These two studies support a link between mobility and subjective class status, but have not specifically investigated this link within one country over time.

The research below builds upon and updates existing research on social mobility as well as offers a link between research on mobility and research on class status. I take an approach similar to Curtis (2015) and Kelley and Kelley (2009) but focus on the United States context in order to get an in-depth understanding of mobility and class identification domestically. Kelley & Kelley (2009) focus on aggregated data from many
countries, instead of focusing on one country in depth as I do here. They also measure class through a question asking individuals to rank their position on a 0-100 scale which does shed light on class status but does not engage with the subjective differences between working and middle class statuses – which may both be towards the middle of this 0-100 scale. I also include an analysis over time, which allows me to glimpse the effects of large scale economic changes on class identity and social mobility within the United States.

Hypotheses

Based on prior literature, I expect to find a positive association between downward mobility – both perceived and objective – and lower/working class status. This would mean that perceiving one’s self as downwardly mobile and actually being downwardly mobile will each increase the likelihood of considering one’s self either lower or working class (as opposed to middle or upper class). Conversely, I expect to find a negative association between upward mobility – both perceived and objective – and lower/working class status. This would mean that both considering one’s self upwardly mobile and actually being upwardly mobile will each increase the likelihood of identifying in the middle or upper classes. I also expect specific control variables (e.g., education and income) to have especially strong effects on subjective class status.

I expect the data to vary by the year in which they were collected. I expect both perceived downward mobility and objective downward mobility to increase over the course of the twenty years included in this study, with a specific increase at the time of
the 2008 recession. Over this time, I expect subjective working class status to also increase, again with an additional increase around the 2008 recession.

Based on the findings presented by Kelley and Kelley (2009), I expect the two measures of mobility (i.e., objective and subjective) to be similar to each other, but not exactly the same (see also Hout 2008: 64). Based on their research, I would also expect subjective mobility to have a slightly larger effect on class status than objective mobility. I would expect this for two reasons: first, this would be consistent with the findings of Kelley and Kelley (2009); second, because I assume subjective class status to be, by nature, something of a subjective measure, therefore more likely to be influenced by perceptions.

METHODS

Data

The General Social Survey is a nationally representative survey of non-institutionalized adults in the United States. Participants are sampled through a multi-stage cluster sample down to the block level of their neighborhood. Once at the block level, the GSS also utilizes a quota sample to ensure accurate representation based on age, gender, and employment status. In 2004, the GSS also began implementing a sub-sample of non-respondents. For this study, I use the GSS datasets for the years 1994-2014 because these are the years that my focal independent variable, a subjective mobility measure, was asked. Because the GSS employs a split sample design, not every respondent is asked every question;
questions are split into modules in which random subsets of the sample are asked questions pertaining to particular sets of research interests. This is particularly relevant regarding the measure of subjective mobility. Although every respondent was asked about their class status, only a subset of respondents each year were asked about their perceived mobility. Employing this question drastically cut the sample available for analysis in this study; however, I was still able to maintain a total n of 8,979 respondents, as seen in Table 1.

The nature of the cluster sample used by the GSS over-represents adults in smaller households; because of this and because of the sub-sample that began in 2004, I use a weighting variable provided by the GSS (“wtssall”) which accounts for both the overrepresentation of adults in smaller households as well as the change in sampling design. This weight has been applied in all the tables presented in this study.

Measures

Dependent Variable: Class Identification

In this study, subjective class status is the dependent variable. Specifically, I examine the odds of a person identifying as working or lower class as opposed to middle or upper class. The GSS offers four possible response categories: lower class, working class, middle class, and upper class; I convert this into a binary variable in which middle and upper class are coded as 0 and lower and working class are coded as 1. This type of grouping is supported by similar research studies focused on class identity in Europe (Curtis 2015). The majority of the responses are “working class”
(47.5%) and “middle class” (43.5%) with very few respondents reporting either lower class or upper class. Although all responses are included in this recoded variable, given the tendency to report a middle or working class identity, this variable, in a sense, mostly measures the difference between the subjective identifications of working class or middle class. As seen in Table 1, just over half (56%) of the sample identify as working or lower class.

[Insert Table 1]

Independent Variables: Mobility

Subjective Mobility

The first focal independent variable is a measure of subjective downward mobility. This is based on a question from the GSS in which respondents were asked, “Compared to your parents when they were the age you are now, do you think your own standard of living now is much better, somewhat better, about the same, somewhat worse, or much worse than theirs was?” I use this as a proxy for subjective intergenerational mobility. In the subjective downward mobility dichotomous variable, individuals who reported that their standard of living was “somewhat worse” or “much worse” than their parents were coded as 1. In the upward mobility measure, those who said their standard of living was “much better” or “somewhat better” than their parents’ were coded as 1. The reference group is comprised of those who said their
standard of living was “about the same” as their parents’. Table 1 shows that 16% of the sample reported downward mobility while 62.1% of the sample reported upward mobility.

*Objective Mobility*

I also constructed an objective mobility measure. The GSS asks respondents their occupation as well as the occupation of their mother and father; these are then organized according the census classification codes. Table 2 demonstrates how I reorganized these occupations into four main categories: 1 indicates Skilled Non-Manual occupations, which can also be thought of as Upper White Collar; 2 indicates Routine Non-Manual occupations, which can also be thought of as Lower White Collar; 3 indicates Skilled Manual occupations, which can also be thought of as Upper Blue Collar; and 4 indicates Routine Manual, or lower Blue Collar, occupations. I reorganized the respondent’s occupation and both of their parents’ occupations into this scheme. While traditional mobility tables compare the respondent’s occupation to their father’s, I included mother’s occupation in this table as well. I took a dominant approach, meaning I measured the occupational category of the higher status parent. This approach also allowed me to include households with only one parent present or only one parent working outside the home. Table 2 compares the respondent’s occupation to the occupational status of their higher-status parent. Individuals with inherited status (i.e., no mobility) are found on the diagonal line of this table; individuals above this diagonal have experienced upward mobility, while individuals below this diagonal have experienced downward mobility.
Based on this, 31.8% of the sample are classified as downwardly mobile, 33.3% of the sample are classified as upwardly mobile, and 34.9% of the sample are classified as having the same status as their parents (i.e., non-mobile).

[Insert Table 2]

Control Variables

This study employs a number of control variables which are thought to influence one’s subjective class status. These can all be found on Table 1. Education has often been touted as the key to equality, necessary for upward mobility, and indicative of class status, so including it in this study is vital (Hout 2015: 32). Years of education completed is measured as a continuous variable ranging from 0 to 20 with a mean value of 13.5 years, indicating “some college” or almost a two year associate degree. I also include a measure of income, given that income is most often conflated with class status. I measure family income instead of individual income because this most directly reflects one’s standard of living and because an individual’s financial decisions are often based on their total household income. In order to compare income across years, I use the GSS’s “real income” measure. This variable adjusts respondents' income for inflation and is held constant at 1986 dollars, which I converted to 2014 dollars using the Bureau of Labor Statistics conversion measure. Given the skew associated with income measures, I have created a log of the “real income” measure. This variable ranges from 6.2 (representing an annual household income of $500) to 12.72 (representing an annual household income of $335,000) with a mean of 10.96 (representing an annual household
income of $57,000). In order to account for the effect of unionization on subjective class status (e.g., by increasing working class solidarity), I employ a control variable indicating if the respondent and/or their spouse is a union member. Seventeen percent of respondents either are themselves union members or have a spouse who is a union member.

As shown in Table 1, I include age, number of children, and the year of the survey as interval-level control variables. Because this study utilizes 11 GSS surveys over 20 years (1994 – 2014), I employ two different control variables measuring the year in which the survey was conducted. First, I use a continuous variable of the year to control for general trends in mobility and class status over time; next I use a dichotomous variable to account for whether the survey was conducted before or after the 2008 recession\(^4\). This allows me to examine general trends in one model (5a) and to specifically isolate the most recent recession in another model (5b). I limited the age of the sample to those in their prime working years, 25 to 65 years old. The mean age is 43 years old. I also include number of children because I expect that caring for children would affect the standard of living that an individual or couple can expect from the same amount of household income or occupational status.

As seen in Table 1, I also created binary variables to account for gender and race. Regarding gender, I created a variable “female” (in which female = 1 and male = 0) which demonstrates that 51% of the sample are women. I include a measure of race here because in American society, race and class are very related, and the social

\(^4\) 0 indicates that the survey was conducted before the 2008 recession; 1 indicates that the survey was conducted between 2008 and 2014.
construction of race is typically informed by the construction of class, and vice versa. Regarding race, I created dummy variables for “white,” “black,” and “other race,” based on the variable “race” in the original dataset. Seventy-eight percent of the sample identify as white; thirteen percent of the sample identify as black; and 9% of the sample identify as something other than white or black. Although this third variable is very heterogeneous, I kept race as three categories because of how few people identified in a racial category that was neither white nor black; I feared separating this variable into more groups would have yielded categories too small to yield meaningful results. After including all of these variables, the total sample size used in this study is 8,979 respondents.

Methods

To analyze these data, I use Stata statistical software and logistic regression models to understand the relationship between mobility and class identification. First, I present descriptive statistics in order to show the demographic makeup of the sample and the distributions of responses, particularly in my focal variables: subjective class status and intergenerational mobility (both objective and perceived). I then perform logistic regression to discern the effect of mobility on subjective class status. Because the dependent variable (subjective class identification) has been recoded into a binary variable, logistic regression will allow me to estimate the effect of the focal and control variables on subjective class status. Logistic regression models do this by estimating the
change in the log odds of identifying as lower or working class. For ease of interpretation, I have converted log odds to probabilities.

I estimate five models. Models 1, 2, and 3 estimate the effect of mobility on subjective class status. Model 1 examines the relationship between downward mobility – both subjective and objective – and subjective class status. Model 2 estimates the effect of subjective and objective upward mobility on subjective class status. Model 3 includes all four mobility variables (subjective downward mobility, objective downward mobility, subjective upward mobility, objective upward mobility). In Model 4, I add income, education, and union status as control variables. Education and income tend to be vital determinants of class identification. Union membership has the potential to foster solidarity among workers (Western and Rosenfeld: 518), which could increase a sense of working class identity. In Model 5, I add age, race, gender, number of children, marital status, and the year of the survey. Model 5a includes a continuous variable measuring year; 5b instead includes a dichotomous variable measuring whether the data were collected before or during/after the 2008 recession.

FINDINGS

Descriptive Statistics

Class Status:

As shown in Chart 1, subjective class status varies somewhat from year to year. Overall, 56% of respondents report a lower or working class status. The percentage of
respondents identifying as lower class ranges from a low of 4% in 2000 to a high of 8.5% in 2012. Upper class seems to be the most static category. Approximately 3% of the sample consistently describes themselves as upper class; this does not seem to vary much year to year.

As noted earlier, most of the variation comes from changes in identifying as working class or middle class. As seen on Chart 1, the proportion of respondents in the working and lower classes has been growing, while the proportion of respondents identifying themselves as middle class has been declining in recent years. The percentage of respondents who identify as working class ranges from a low of 43% in 2004 to a high of 51% in 2014. Conversely, the proportion of respondents describing themselves as middle class appears to be shrinking. In 2004, 48% of respondents in this sample identified as middle class, but by 2014, this dropped to just under 40%.

[Insert Chart 1]

*Intergenerational Mobility*

The subjective mobility measure employed in this study asks respondents to compare their standard of living to that of their parents when their parents were approximately the respondents’ age. There is a strong tendency for respondents to describe their standard of living as better than (“somewhat better”; “much better”) or “about the same” as their parents. When split by year, the percentage of respondents who see their standard of living as “somewhat worse” or “much worse” than their parents’ never gets higher than 20.5% in this sample, with an average of 15.8% across all 20 years
Chart 2 demonstrates that the sharpest increase in subjective downward mobility (the red line of Chart 2) occurred between 2006 and 2008. In 2006, 13.4% of respondents reported downward mobility; by 2008, this rose to 18.2% of respondents.

As evidenced in Table 2 & Chart 2, the objective mobility measure paints a similar, but distinct picture. Chart 2 demonstrates that the proportion of respondents who experienced downward mobility according to this objective measure follows the same general pattern as the subjective mobility measure. However, the proportion of respondents who have experienced downward mobility according to the objective measure is consistently higher than the proportion of respondents who have experienced downward mobility according to the subjective measure. In some years objective downward mobility is nearly twice as high as subjective downward mobility. Additionally, the increase between 2006 and 2008 is not as stark when examining objective mobility measures. It appears that the trend toward downward mobility began in the time between 2004 and 2006 but that this didn’t make its way into how people thought about their own subjective mobility until 2008.

When examining subjective mobility, less than 20% of respondents report downward mobility. The vast majority of respondents see themselves as having experienced upward mobility (62% overall) or no mobility (22% overall). When examining objective mobility, we see a very different distribution. While less than 20% of respondents report subjective downward mobility, Table 2 demonstrates that close to 32% of respondents are objectively classified as downwardly mobile.

_Inferential Statistics_
Table 3 presents the findings from all five regression models. Model 1 estimates the relationship between downward mobility and subjective class status. Similarly, Model 2 estimates the association between upward mobility and subjective class status. In Model 3, I combine all measures of mobility – both upward and downward – to examine the relationship between intergenerational mobility and subjective class status. In Models 4 and 5, I add in a number of control variables. All these models are logistic regressions in which the dependent variable is dichotomous: 0 = middle or upper class. 1 = working or lower class. The logistic regression estimates the log odds of reporting working or lower class status.

[Insert Table 3]

*Models 1, 2, and 3*

As evidenced in Model 1, subjective downward mobility is positively associated with working or lower class status. Reporting downward mobility increases the log odds of identifying as lower/working class by 0.804. Model 1 also demonstrates that objective downward mobility is also significantly associated with working/lower class. Being objectively downwardly mobile increases the log odds of reporting lower/working class status by 0.359.

Model 2 examines the association between upward mobility and subjective class status. In this model, upward mobility is associated with a decrease in an individual’s log odds of identifying as working/lower class. Both subjective upward mobility and objective upward mobility lower the log odds of reporting working/lower
class status at a statistically significant level. Compared to those who report downward mobility or no mobility, those who see themselves as upwardly mobile are less likely to identify as lower or working class. Subjective upward mobility decreases the log odds of reporting a lower or working class status by 0.519. Objective upward mobility also has a significant effect on subjective class status, but the effect size is smaller. When subjective mobility is accounted for; objective upward mobility is associated with a decrease of 0.203 in the log odds of identifying as lower or working class.

In Model 3, when all mobility measures are included, most of these findings persist: both subjective downward mobility and objective downward mobility are associated with an increase in the log odds of identifying as lower or working class. Subjective upward mobility continues to decrease the log odds of identifying as lower or working class at a statistically significant level. When I account for downward mobility and subjective upward mobility, objective upward mobility is no longer significantly associated with a lower likelihood of identifying as lower/working class. This could mean that the relationship between objective upward mobility and subjective class status observed in Model 2 can be explained by downward mobility and subjective upward mobility. It is also worth noting that in Model 3, the reference group is those who are not mobile, while in Model 2, the reference group was those who were non-mobile or downwardly mobile. This may mean that while there is a substantive difference between those who are upwardly and downwardly mobile, there does not seem to be a large difference between those who are objectively upwardly mobile and those who are objectively non-mobile.
Of these three models, it is not surprising that Model 3 has the largest pseudo $R^2$. Model 1 demonstrates that accounting for downward mobility reduces the error by 2%, relative to the intercept only model. Model 2 shows that accounting for upward mobility reduces the error by 1.4%. As shown in Model 3, accounting for both upward and downward mobility reduces the error in the model by 2.23% relative to the intercept only model.

**Model 4**

Model 4 includes all measures of mobility, but this model also accounts for logged income (adjusted to 2014 dollars), years of education, and union status. Downward mobility and union membership each independently increase the likelihood of a respondent identifying as working or lower class. When these control variables are included in the model, the effect of downward mobility on class identification weakens, meaning some of the initial association between downward mobility and subjective class status can be explained by income, education, and union status. That being said, both subjective downward mobility and objectively downward mobility each independently increase the log odds of identifying as lower/working class. Subjective downward mobility increases the log odds of reporting lower/working class status by 0.607. Objective downward mobility increases the log odds of identifying as lower or working class by 0.203. Union members are also more likely than nonunion members to report lower/working class status. Being a union member, or having a spouse who is a union member, increases the log odds of identifying as lower or working class by 0.389. Conversely, increases in both income and education reduce the likelihood of identifying
as lower or working class. Each additional year of education reduces the log odds of identifying as lower/working class by 0.187. Each additional unit increase in logged income reduces the log odds of identifying as lower/working class by 0.761.

Model 4 significantly reduces the error in this model. Relative to the intercept only model, Model 4 reduces the error by 15.2%. Compare this to Model 3 which estimated only the effect of mobility on class status and reduced the error by 2.2%.

Model 5

Model 5 includes all fourteen independent variables. Both measures of downward mobility remain statistically significant in this model. Regarding upward mobility, subjective upward mobility continues to be associated at a statistically significant level with a lower likelihood of identifying as lower/working class. Conversely, objective upward mobility continues to have no effect on subjective class status. Subjective downward mobility still has a stronger effect than objective downward mobility. On the other hand, respondents who are subjectively upwardly mobile are less likely (than those who are subjectively downwardly mobile or subjectively non-mobile) to identify as lower/working class; subjective upward mobility reduces the log odds by 0.228. The variables from Model 4 also remain statistically significant. Increases in both education and income independently reduce the log odds of identifying as lower or working class.

Of the new variables included in Model 5, age, number of children, and the year of the survey are all statistically significant. Older respondents are more likely to report lower or working class status. I include two different measures for the year in which the
data were collected; the first is a continuous measure of the year of the survey. In Model 5b, I constructed a dichotomous variable in which any year before 2008 was coded as 0, and any year from 2008 onward was coded as one. GSS respondents from 2008 or later were significantly more likely to report lower or working class status than respondents from 1994 – 2006. Those who answered the survey during or after the 2008 recession were more likely to identify as lower or working class. It was associated with an increase of 0.248 in the log odds of identifying as lower or working class. Each additional year increase between 1994 and 2014 is associated with a 0.015 increase in the log odds of identifying as lower/working class. Regarding race, the results are a bit more complex. Relative to whites, Black respondents are more likely to identify as lower or working class. This finding may reflect the co-construction of race and class and the ways in which those who have experienced being Black in America may feel excluded from a middle or upper class status. There was no significant effect for respondents in the “other race” category, perhaps because this category is very heterogeneous and includes any respondent classified as neither white nor black.

An analysis in the change of predicted probabilities offers insight into which variables have the strong association with the dependent variable. From this we can see that of the dichotomous variables, subjective downward mobility and union status have the largest effects on whether or not a respondent identifies as lower/working class.

\[5\] This is the difference between model 5a and model 5b

\[6\] I also tested for a variety of interaction effects: I tested for an interaction between the two “year” measures, and an interaction between subjective downward mobility and each of the “year” measures. Neither of these were statistically significant. I also conducted a chow test in which I looked at the interaction between subjective downward mobility and all the other independent variables in the model. But this did not add any additional explanatory power to the model.
Those who report subjective downward mobility were 8.5% more likely to identify as lower or working class. Union members (or those with spouses who are union members) were also more likely to identify as lower or working class by 8.5%. Subjective downward mobility has a stronger association with class status than objective downward mobility does, 8.5% and 4.4% respectively. Conversely, those who are considered objectively upward mobility has a 5.3% lower probability of identifying as lower or working class.  

CONCLUSION

Both subjective and objective downward mobility increase the likelihood of identifying as lower or working class (as opposed to middle or upper class). Subjective downward mobility has a stronger effect than objective downward mobility, but each of these measures of downward mobility are statistically significant. This relationship between mobility and class status remains highly significant even after accounting for factors such as education and income. These data also vary by the year in which they were collected. I expected an increase in all three focal variables (i.e., subjective downward mobility, objective downward mobility, and lower/working class status) around the 2008 recession. Regarding objective downward mobility and working/lower class status, I actually see this increase beginning in 2006 as opposed to in 2008; however, subjective downward mobility does have a sharp increase between 2006 and 2008. When I include a dichotomous variable measuring whether the data were collected before or after 2008, I find that respondents from 2008 onwards were significantly more

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7 These are based on Models 5a and 5b. Full change in predicted probabilities analysis is available upon request
likely to identify as lower or working class than respondents from between 1994 and 2006. Finally, I expected subjective downward mobility to have a larger effect than objective downward mobility. This held true in all of the models presented in Table 3.

The relationship between upward mobility and subjective class status is a bit more complex. As hypothesized, subjective upward mobility is consistently associated with a lower likelihood of reporting working/lower class status. Objective upward mobility, however, does not have a statistically significant effect on subjective class status once other factors are accounted for\(^8\). This finding can actually strengthen the finding that objective downward mobility does have an effect on subjective class status independent of traditional class predictors (e.g., education, income). From a theoretical perspective, this makes sense if no mobility (the reference category) and upward mobility are essentially conflated and either upward mobility or inherited status are considered normal. On the other hand, downward mobility is so unexpected that it has an independent effect on subjective class status.

This study is subject to certain limitations. First, the perceived mobility question is a standard of living question, so while it does include class status, it may also include certain luxuries that vary over time. This may contribute to why the level of perceived downward mobility is consistently so much lower than objective downward mobility.

\(^8\) In order to rule of collinearity as the problem, I ran a variance inflation factor (vif) analysis in Stata. None of the variables had a variance inflation factor of 2 or higher. I also ran an additional series of nested logistic regressions in which I added control variables one-by-one to see which variables “tipped the scales.” The “offending” variables were education and income, which are empirically and conceptually very relevant predictors of class status. This leads me to believe that the statistical insignificance of objective upward mobility was a substantive issue, not merely an issue of collinearity.
Even if one has a less prestigious job or lower income than their parents did, they might perceive their standard of living as higher because they have certain luxuries that were not available a generation before. Second, the objective mobility measure is based on the respondent’s occupation compared to that of their higher status parent. This measure is a binary variable so it captures whether or not the respondent was mobile, not the degree of that mobility. It also does not capture non-occupational aspects of class. Additionally, the construction of the mobility table ranks “white collar” jobs over “blue collar” jobs, although one can think of examples where these might pose a lateral shift (e.g. a respondent who is a machinist but whose mother was a secretary or a school teacher). This may underestimate the number of individuals with inherited class status and may contribute to the non-significance of objective upward mobility in the logistic regression models. Finally, the nature of these data make causal claims difficult. Although I include twenty years (eleven individual datasets) of data, each year is a cross sectional analysis. This is especially important when discussing the effect of subjective mobility on subjective class status. While we can assume some level of temporal order in which mobility precedes class status, it is not outside the realm of possibility that class status in turn affects how people perceive their own mobility.

This study lends itself well to future research. This research should become increasingly important and timely as the millennial generation continues to mature, enter the labor market, vote, and so on. As a generation that came of age during the “Great Recession” they may have unique perceptions about social mobility, different from the generations before them, in which there was some level of expectation of upward mobility. If the millennial generation experiences downward mobility – or more
importantly, if they perceive themselves as downwardly mobile – they may be more likely to identify as lower or working class. Future researchers can also build on these findings to focus on the effect of mobility and class status on political attitudes. Finally, it will be important to continue following the labor market experiences of a new generation of workers. As new GSS surveys are conducted and made available to researchers, we will be able to follow millennials as more of them enter and advance in (or do not advance in) the labor market. This will offer additional insight into the relationship between mobility and class status, especially in the wake of the Great Recession.
WORKS CITED


### Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Measured Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower/Working Class Status</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.50</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>Subjective Downward Mobility</td>
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<td>0.158</td>
<td>0.364</td>
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<tr>
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Total N = 8,979
Table 2: Mobility Table

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1: Skilled Non-Manual</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2: Lower Non-Manual</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3: Upper Manual</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4: Lower Manual</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
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Chart 1: Distribution of Class Status by Year

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<th>Year</th>
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<th>Middle Class</th>
<th>Working Class</th>
<th>Lower Class</th>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>2002</td>
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<td>2012</td>
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<tr>
<td>2014</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chart 2: Rates of Downward Mobility & Subjective Class Status by Year
Table 3: Log Odds of Identifying as Lower/Working Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Models</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Subjective Downward Mobility</td>
<td>0.804***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Objective Downward Mobility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subjective Upward Mobility</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective Upward Mobility</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logged Household Income</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (years)</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union Status</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Race (neither white nor black)</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Gender (1=female)</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childs</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year (During / Post 2008 Recession)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<td>Pseudo R²</td>
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