THE ETHNIC MOBILITY TRAP AND STRATIFICATION THEORY*

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A mobility trap is a structural condition in which the means for moving up within a stratum are contrary to those for moving to the next higher stratum. The underlying metaphor is that of climbing a tree, rather than a "social ladder," with various possibilities of non-vertical and dead-end forms of ascent. Within this framework several theoretical issues are reformulated: (a) the chances for mobility at different levels within a stratum, (b) the meaning and utility of "anticipatory socialization" in mobility analysis, (c) the conditions under which the members of a class will misperceive the norms of other classes, (d) the conditions under which mobility will bring stress, (e) the nature and effects of status inconsistency, and (f) the restraints against political radicalism in the United States.

The sociology of American ethnic groups has centered on ethnic acculturation and assimilation, both as pure processes and as social problems. From the viewpoint of stratification, though, these processes are cases of large-scale social mobility, and the history of American mobility is largely the history of ethnic assimilation. In examining ethnicity and mobility together, much can be learned about both. This paper will consider ethnic mobility, not as such, but as a source of new ideas for stratification theory. Ethnic mobility has been characterized by a special form of mobility which, although found elsewhere, is most easily identified in the ethnic case.

Once we have named and defined this mechanism, we will consider its explanatory value.

The mobility chances of ethnic group members are often subject to special complications, not only because of discrimination, but because of features within the ethnic structure itself; for the group is usually internally stratified to some degree and offers in-group opportunities alongside of those in the larger society. This duality of intra-versus extra-group mobility is further complicated if the group is moving upward as a bloc. The individual ethnic may have to make special decisions concerning his career plans. Not only must he choose, for example, whether to aim for a job in the professions, a bureaucracy, or small business. He also faces the question of ethnicity, whether to move with it or against it, to capitalize on it or disregard it. If he makes the

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wrong decision, he may find himself in a mobility trap, and these exist in abundance in all fluid stratification systems.

Briefly, a mobility trap is an opportunity for mobility which offers a good deal less than it seems to, and, once pursued, permits release only at the cost of some downward mobility. The first section of this paper will be an elaboration of this definition, especially in relation to ethnic groups, and it should be regarded as an attempt to form a usable concept. This will be followed by a "discussion" section in which the concept will be related more systematically to the theory of stratification.

METATYPHORS AND CONCEPT FORMATION

To give a clearer definition of the mobility trap it will be necessary to sketch the picture of the opportunity structure which it assumes. Such pictures are usually related to some simple metaphor, and much of the theorizing in this area is influenced, perhaps unconsciously, by half-hidden metaphors.1 Before giving our own, mention will be made of two others in relation to which ours can be more clearly seen.

Perhaps the most common metaphor is that of the "social ladder," the "ladder of success" and kindred notions. For our purposes this metaphor has two

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2 We are ignoring a third metaphor which is of the greatest historical importance, but is now generally obsolete in industrialized countries. This is the notion of a social organism in which each person has his indispensable part to play and does not attempt to move to another part. A current metaphor which fills a somewhat similar purpose is the notion that people are laterally distributed in "all walks of life." This is invoked on national holidays and at other times when it is useful to deny the very existence of inequality.
ascent. Normally the climber who wants to hit the top will avoid the limbs as much as possible and concentrate on the trunk.

This metaphor has implications that parallel those of the previous ones. One is that the limbs, or strata, are both continuous and discrete. On the dimension of height the limbs overlap leaving no gaps in the structure. In physical contact, however, they are discrete, with good-sized gaps in between. A few examples will make this clearer. To a boy in the slums, social advancement within a delinquent gang by accumulating tattoos, knife skills and a police record is a limb. Spending his free time in a settlement house with the social workers is the trunk. To a slum girl, sexual promiscuity with its instant popularity is a limb. Sexual restraint and a marriage to a mobile young man may be the trunk. To a bright young factory worker, the blue collar hierarchy is a limb, and becoming a foreman may be its outermost point. Going back to school in pursuit of a college degree is the trunk. To a young business executive, long and faithful service to one employer may be a limb, and job-hopping the trunk.

To the people who are blithely climbing the limb in pursuit of a dead-end form of mobility, the truly mobile person may be pitied or scorned, for he will appear to be moving downward. Actually he is preparing to leave the stratum at its only exit, at the bottom. The essence of the mobility trap is this: the means for moving up within a stratum are contrary to those for moving to the next higher stratum. In other words there is a conflict between intra- and inter-stratum mobility norms. For those on a limb this paradox is obscured, for their limited vantage point persuades them to move in the wrong direction.

The old question of whether social strata are continuous or discrete is an over-simplification, resulting partly from the use of misleading metaphors. Several of my colleagues who read this paper criticized the assertion that mobility usually requires a temporary retreat or loss of prestige. They urged instead that movement directly from one limb to another is the more common reality. I have not accepted this suggestion because I think it would limit the utility of the metaphor and blur the theoretical implications I will draw from it. My concern is more with finding usable concepts than with representational accuracy.

A disadvantage of linear mobility conceptions is that they cannot account for the overlap between blue and white collar occupations. The top of the blue collar limb is actually higher, at least in income, than the bottom of the white collar limb.
gives metaphorical, and admittedly pre-scientific, support to certain stratification variables that are presently without such support. These variables are (a) degrees of continuity or discontinuity between adjacent strata, (b) degrees of hierarchy or subordination-supерordination between adjacent strata, (c) degrees of mobility opportunity, depending on location in the structure, and (d) multi-dimensionality in the forms of equality, e.g. as they appear in Max Weber’s class-status-party formulation. The second thing we have done is to draw out one concept from this metaphorical base and give it an initial definition.

I should add that the picture of the tree is deliberately overdrawn to fix it securely as a reference point. In the discussion section, I will consider which points are overdrawn and what theoretical contributions a picture of this kind could reasonably lead to.

**TYPES OF MOBILITY TRAPS**

Without attempting to be systematic or exhaustive, we can see at least four fairly common types of mobility traps. This listing is not meant to be a formal classification but a further attempt to sharpen a definition, by means of a rough enumeration.

1. The “age-grade trap” consists in the tendency of age groups to adopt prestige standards which conflict with those of older age groups. Too much advancement within such a stratum makes it difficult, upon leaving the group, to adjust to the standards of the next. The most marked instance occurs during adolescence, in a different version for each sex and social class. In later life the woman who has re-

2. The “overspecialization trap” is found in highly specialized administrative jobs, usually at the lower levels, which are dead-end positions in themselves, and whose skills do not help much for the performance of higher activities. The occupant who takes his duties too seriously, treating them as an effective mobility investment, may find himself at once narrowed and indispensable, thus becoming un promotable. A special variant of this trap falls to those who are given that fake promotion called being “kicked upstairs;” for they are shorn of power and come to specialize solely in ritual.

3. The “localite trap” exists in those professions which, while once pursued with one employer in one locale, are beginning to require a series of job changes within a national market loosely controlled by the major employers and top professionals. Such professions as social worker, planner, school superintendent, university professor and clergyman are in various stages of this transition. These occupations have two distinct power and prestige arenas: the local, which is diminishing in importance, and the national, which is growing. Broadly speaking, the trap consists in pursuing local prestige at the expense of national.

4. The final type is the “minority group trap,” including not only ethnic and racial groups, but, under some con-
Ethnic Mobility Trap

conditions, religious, female, radical political and other relatively powerless groups which offer advancement within their ghettos. This case is a trap in the most nearly literal sense because it is often a mechanism of deliberate suppression by majority group people. The ethnic sub-type has special qualities which will be given further analysis.

Ethnic Mobility Patterns

The mobility trap is often a great pitfall for the ambitious member of an ethnic group. As long as his group exists as a visible and integrated body of people, it is a limb on which there is limited opportunity for mobility. The limb will often have immediate attraction, since in-group opportunities will be more visible as well as being continuous with existing social bonds. The mobile ethnic can choose the relatively safe and comfortable course of pursuing whatever opportunities exist within the group; or, to the extent that the majority group permits, he can take the more adventurous and lonely course of leaving the group to climb the trunk. The latter option is not equally open to all groups. For Negroes it is almost impossible to get off the limb, except in a limited sense. For a relatively assimilated group like the Irish, it is extremely easy. But in all groups, depending on their state of assimilation, the choice is there to be made.8

Once made, the choice may have

social and psychological effects which make it irreversible. One who chooses the ethnic career in such fields as journalism, politics or the professions will become imbedded in a firm network of ethnic relations—in his family, religion, occupation and club memberships—from which he can almost never extricate himself. On the other hand, one who leaves his group—a Negro who passes into white society, a Jew who becomes a Christian, an Italian who changes his name or a Catholic who leaves the Church—may never be able to fully re-enter his group.

In either case something will be lost as well as gained: higher opportunities will be lost if the choice is made in the ethnic direction, and the warmth of the ethnic community if the choice is made in the "outside" direction. Also, in either case the person will gradually deepen his "commitment," in the sense that choices in other areas of life will develop as offshoots of the original choice, thereby making it too costly to change.9 But movement out on a limb entails something more than a commitment; for, not only will it be difficult to retreat or change, it will also be difficult to advance beyond a certain point. The "ethnic" choice thus limits options and maneuverability considerably more than does the "outside" choice.

It is the in-group career that is the classic ethnic trap, for while it is attractive and emotionally rewarding, it usually has a low ceiling, and there is no easy way out into the world at large.10 This form of mobility, which

8 In speaking of mobility as involving a choice I do not mean that anyone can achieve mobility merely by choosing to do so. The choice, rather, is in whether or not and in what way to attempt mobility. The chance of success is a resultant of the kind of choice and the location in the opportunity structure. Some locations are, of course, just about hopeless, regardless of choice and effort.


10 Jews have been somewhat of an exception in the United States, for they have been
is tied to a minority sub-culture and can go only so far, has been an important part of American social experience, and I will argue that it has contributed to several of the characteristic marks of the American stratification system.

A more complete analysis of ethnic mobility as such should take account of other forms of entrapment that can occur if there are fast changes in the balance between internal and external opportunity. Internal opportunity sometimes increases unexpectedly, from a new wave of immigration, a political breakthrough, or some other change that augments the mobility value of ethnic membership. In those cases the members who have moved outside the group (trunk-climbers) might find these new internal opportunities unavailable to them. On the other hand, assimilation sometimes increases faster than expected, and ethnic careerists find themselves stranded in a declining market. These barriers, which arise from fluctuations in the dynamics of acculturation, should be added to the major barrier we have already described; and, to return to the metaphor, one might think of the limbs as growing or dying, in a none too predictable manner. But these processes only elaborate the basic proposition that ethnic mobility has often moved somewhat off the main line of ascent, into trap-like situations, and this has given both mild advantages and more serious disadvantages to ethnic members.

**DISCUSSION**

*Origins of Mobility Traps*

The metaphor of the tree, just as that of the social ladder or brick wall, is, of course, an overstatement; for frequently the normal mobility within a stratum leads directly, without any branching effect, into the next stratum. A dead-end is reached only when there is a structural discontinuity between strata. This exists when two contiguous strata have incompatible norms, such that mobility within the lower stratum requires the adoption of attitudes and skills which are a liability for entering the next stratum.

Discontinuities can come about through social change, as when educational programs, occupations and other mobility investments become obsolete; or, as we have emphasized in this paper, they may arise from systematic group conflict along such lines as ethnicity, religion or class. In either case discontinuity is a matter of degree, and its measurement would require a comparison of the mobility norms of adjacent strata and an examination of mobility careers, both upward and downward. Also, the degree of discontinuity can change over time, and individuals can, for example, become trapped with skills and reputations that are tied to an obsolete conflict or cooperative relation.

The significance of normative discontinuity between ethnic groups depends also on how severely the sub-

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11 In feudal societies discontinuities between strata are normal and accepted, often with very little conflict. My discussion is limited to the United States and, perhaps, to similar industrial societies.
ordinate group is being held down. If the subordination is quite severe, requiring a large amount of coercion, the normative discontinuity is largely just an instrument of power—a means of subordinating the minority group—and not a basic cause of blocked mobility. When suppression is a minor factor, however—when it is relatively easy to get off the limb—the conflict of mobility norms is not just the reflection of a basically coercive relationship; it has an originating influence of its own. The notion of the mobility trap has its more central meaning in the latter case.

Apart from these important questions of degree and empirical measurement, a structural discontinuity can be recognized qualitatively by two attributes that were touched on lightly in the preceding section. These are (1) the prevalence of a by-passing or "leap-frog" type of mobility from the bottom of the lower stratum (up the trunk) directly to the bottom of the next higher stratum, and (2) the inability of upper stratum people to judge correctly the internal norms and ranks of lower stratum people.

Mobility From the Bottom

There have been a number of observations in the sociological literature of that form of social mobility which by-passes the person's own stratum and jumps immediately into the higher stratum. Robert Merton, for example, examined the case of the World War II army recruit who, unlike the typical recruit, strongly accepted the official rules and regulations of the army. In adopting these attitudes the recruits at once conformed closely to the expecta-

tions of the official army and deviated from the expectations of informal recruit life. Thus, they ranked low in informal recruit society; for in following the norms of a higher stratum they had to violate the informal norms. Yet it was these same recruits who, four months later, had the larger proportion of promotions to Private First Class. From the point of view of the informal recruit ranking system, mobility came more frequently from the bottom.

In commenting on this case Merton emphasized the psychological factor of reference group orientation and the special preparation for mobility which he called "anticipatory socialization." It should also be pointed out, though, that these responses are especially characteristic of mobility between discontinuous strata and that failure to make these responses may lead into a mobility trap. For all socialization is, at least in part, anticipatory, but when strata are discontinuous there are two distinct lines of anticipatory socialization, internal and external, and the degree of difference and stress between them depends on the degree of discontinuity between strata.

Perhaps the classic picture of the two lines of socialization is that of the "corner boys" and the "college boys" in Whyte's Street Corner Society. The corner boys were being socialized toward an opportunity ceiling in ethnic politics or racketeering, while the college boys were being groomed for professional or managerial positions. Both types of socialization had a future reference, but that of the college boys was more consciously and visibly anticipatory because it went against the

grain, socially speaking, and had little social support. The notion of anticipatory socialization, then, has a special explanatory power only when it is in preparation for a by-passing form of mobility.

Merton's example of mobility from the bottom is only one of many that are frequently met. Others are the high school bookworm, the well-behaved convict, the "company man" in the factory, and other institutional types who, while ranking low in their own strata, nevertheless have the best chance of mobility (getting into college, becoming paroled, getting promoted to foreman or management, as the case may be).14

In general, mobility from the bottom seems most likely when intergroup conflict exists to some extent and the preparation for mobility requires a non-conformity if not a disloyalty to one's own stratum. If the conflict is too mild, the discontinuity in mobility norms will not develop very far; if it is too severe, mobility between strata might stop altogether. A medium degree of conflict therefore seems to be the optimum condition for producing mobility from the bottom. Accordingly, anticipatory socialization, in Merton's technical sense, is most useful when the avenue of opportunity is only partly open. When

14 In European history a somewhat similar process of mobility from the bottom seems to have occurred in the development of capitalism and the middle class. Firestone traces the origins of the middle class to the poorest and most rootless medieval people. To some extent this process continues, he argues, as successive changes in the forms of capitalism draw new waves of enterprising people from below. See Henri Firestone, "Stages in the Social History of Capitalism," in Reinhard Bendix and Seymour Martin Lipset, (eds.), Class, Status and Power, Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1953, pp. 501-17.
The disunity of the lower stratum, between the two types of marginals and the centrals, has consequences for intergroup relations. It weakens the potential of the lower group for collective action along the lines of political or economic conflict. This can be interpreted as a self-regulating or equilibrating mechanism for the entire society in the following way. An initial conflict produces a normative discontinuity between strata; discontinuity produces the by-passing form of mobility; this, in turn, results in a disunity between centrals and marginals; and the final effect is a restriction on the potential for conflict. So conflict, through its effect on mobility, places limits on its own escalation. On the other hand, if the original condition is one of injustice for the lower stratum, the self-regulating process tends to perpetuate the injustice by weakening the power of the lower group to defend itself.

Cross-Class Misperception

Another sign of discontinuity between strata is the tendency of upper stratum people to err in perceiving the norms of the lower stratum, either by seeing no norms at all ("moral anarchy") or by extrapolating upper stratum norms onto the lower stratum. In American ethnic history the superior groups have often regarded the inferiors as child-like, deprived, "disorganized," and generally without moral controls. Contemporary white attitudes toward Negroes often exhibit this misperception, just as do attitudes which management holds toward labor in some industries.

When upper stratum norms are extended to the lower stratum, an inaccurate picture of the internal ranking in the lower stratum results. This error makes it difficult to achieve cooperative action between groups, because statuses are unrecognized and norms unwittingly broken. The classic case is that of the middle-class social worker who assumes that the mobility-oriented lower-class male, who ranks high on middle-class criteria, must thereby also rank high in lower-class society. The attempt to "reach" lower-class youths through such "leaders" is the perennial error of the group social worker. The same mistake is often made when teachers try to influence the informal life of their students, managers try to reach their workers, and higher ethnic groups try to reach lower ethnic communities. Closer to home is the case of the sociologist who, in studying a discontinuous community status arrangement, leans too heavily on the opinions of upper status people to judge the internal order of people in lower strata.

Pathological Results of Mobility

Another condition that may be an attribute of a structural discontinuity is an unusually great amount of stress for the mobile person. A great deal has been written about the stress and personal breakdown that presumably results from mobility, especially downward mobility. Taking their cue from Durkheim, who related suicide rates to mobility, many scholars have argued that mobility loosens moral and social bonds, creates stress, and produces various forms of self-destructive and anti-social behavior.15 Other studies

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have challenged or denied this hypothesis.\textsuperscript{18} Perhaps the relation between mobility and stress depends on other factors, such as the degree of discontinuity between strata. Earlier it was pointed out that the social, and presumably also the psychological, loss of downward mobility is greater when strata are discontinuous. Similarly the upwardly mobile person, under discontinuous conditions, has the stress of living with two opposed normative systems, and this might scar him even after the mobility has succeeded.

More concretely, this might mean that mobility between manual and non-manual work, in either direction, would produce the greatest stress within industries with the bitterest labor-management cleavage, perhaps Kerr and Siegel's strike-prone industries.\textsuperscript{17} It might mean that mobility from an ethnic group that is subject to intense prejudice will produce more stress than mobility from less disfavored ethnic groups. It might also be that movement up and out of a relatively fundamentalistic religion will produce more stress than other mobility-linked changes of religion.

On the other hand, mobility stress should be least when the two strata present a continuous gradation of norms and little hostility or conflict. In fact upward mobility, far from being pathological, might have a healthy effect on the personality. It may be, then, that the relation between mobility and pathology could fruitfully be re-examined from the preceding viewpoint.\textsuperscript{18}

\textit{Status Consistency and Mobility Traps}

In the recent sociological literature two varieties of status inconsistency have been investigated: positional and reputational. Positional inconsistency exists when a person or group has a high position on one status dimension, such as income, and a low position on another, such as education.\textsuperscript{19} Reputational inconsistency exists when a person or group receives different degrees of status or honor from different segments of the community.\textsuperscript{20} For exam-


people, a parvenu family of great visible wealth might be ranked at the pinnacle of local society by the working class but rank considerably lower in the eyes of the local "upper uppers." Similarly a professional gambler might rank considerably higher by lower-class standards than by those of the middle class.

Most of the inconsistency research has been on the social and psychological effects of positional inconsistency and very little has been on reputational inconsistency, but the concept of the mobility trap is closely related to both. If a status arrangement is characterized by mobility traps and structural discontinuities it will also have reputational inconsistencies, for, just as with the inconsistent person, the trapped person has a claim to high rank within his own stratum but finds this claim disapproved by members of other strata. The structural base for this form of status inconsistency can be traced to a tree-like opportunity system.

Positional inconsistency bears a more complex relation to the mobility trap. This type of inconsistency can exist only to the extent that there is independence or autonomy among status dimensions, such that a change in rank along one dimension does not necessarily cause or require changes along another. Status dimensions differ in their degrees of autonomy, or, to look at it from above rather than below, they differ in their "lifting power" to eventually raise a person along dimensions other than the one on which the original penetration was made. Max Weber, for example, pointed out that in the long run economic mobility would usually bring about "status" mobility, but that status mobility was less likely to bring about economic mobility. If we consider the five dimensions of income, occupation, education, interaction level, and consumption style, one could argue that the lifting power, especially inter-generationally, is greatest with income and occupation, less with education, and least with interaction level and consumption style. Consumption style in particular seems to be the weakest mobility investment, increases, the consensus on prestige standards will decrease. A large number of inconsistent people will jar and loosen up the standards, with the result that their own inconsistency will decrease as standards lose their precision.


and for many it is a sop which barely hides their resignation to the impossibility of more basic mobility.  

If the lifting power of a dimension, or of a specific line of activity within a dimension, is weak, then a commitment to this dimension or line is a mobility trap. An investment in interaction contacts, such as joining an expensive club, or in consumption style, such as buying an overly-expensive house—especially when these actions deepen the person’s commitment to the culture of his stratum—will probably have weak returns on other dimensions. Similarly education can sometimes lead a person into an inconsistent situation, particularly when the training program or institution has low prestige or a declining market value. Of course even occupational and income achievements can sometimes be traps in the long run, but this is less common.

This discussion implies that the dynamics of positional inconsistency are crucial. If the inconsistency leads, over a period of time, to a new consistency at a higher level, there may be little stress for the person, for he may be experiencing the gradual consolidation of his overall status. If the passage of time does not bring a gradual consolidation of position, the person will sense that he is in a trap and may experience greater stress. Such attributes as the type of inconsistency, the length of time it has persisted, the person’s age, and the presence of children should, accordingly, be related to the various “effects” of inconsistency. In any event positional inconsistency, just as reputational inconsistency, fits into a structural model such as we have proposed.


**Mobility Traps and Politics**

One of the special qualities of the United States is that, although there does not seem to be a great deal more occupational mobility than in other industrial countries, there is an unusually free amount of movement along the pure prestige dimensions of interaction and consumption. This may be one of the reasons why Americans believe that occupational mobility too is _far greater_ than in other countries. This may also be the basis for the widespread sense of underlying social equality, even in the face of economic inequality, that Americans seem to feel.

Most working-class Americans can easily identify themselves as middle class if they choose to emphasize the dimensions of interaction and consumption.

The pure prestige dimensions though, having little “lifting power,” are mobility traps, and, in the long run, give little more than an illusory form of mobility. Yet they may have the effect of draining off a great deal of discontent that might otherwise express itself in political radicalism. Once again we see that mobility traps can have moderating political effects.

Looking at the same question historically, the ethnic heterogeneity of the United States is often cited as a reason for the absence of a strong socialist party in American history, the
assumption being that heterogeneity prevented communication and solidarity among the working class. But this diversity had another important effect. It permitted a great deal of internal mobility into ethnically protected positions in small business and the professions. In other words the working class was not only divided into discrete branches of the social structure; the branches were slanted upwards and mobile ethnics could advance to some extent without threatening those on higher limbs.  

I have been arguing that mobility traps and inconsistencies have moderating political effects, but some sociologists have found that inconsistent people, in the positional sense, are more politically extreme, either to the right or to the left, than consistent people are. This seems to lead to the conclusion that inconsistency has the overall effect of political radicalization. Yet if we look at the whole system, as distinct from the individuals within it, the effect may still be conservative. To

25 The same protected market existed for Negro professionals and small businessmen in the South, although desegregation in the consumption sphere seems to be undercutting this protection. See James A. Geschwender, "Desegregation, the Educated Negro, and the Future of Social Protest in the South," Sociological Inquiry, 35 (Winter, 1965), pp. 58-68.

26 This literature is reviewed and challenged on empirical grounds, however, in K. Dennis Kelly and William J. Chambliss, "Status Consistency and Political Attitudes," American Sociological Review, 31 (June, 1966), pp. 375-82.

the people at the bottom of the system, who are all too consistent, the possibility of social ascent—even though it be only on one dimension, into an inconsistent posture—may give them a certain amount of hope which prevents them from becoming more radical. Those who do make these limited forms of ascent into mobility traps of some kind probably have a much more optimistic picture of the opportunity structure than they would have if they had remained at the bottom. Status inconsistency and mobility traps, then, may contribute to keeping the whole political system in the Democratic-Republican center, at the cost of pushing some inconsistents a bit to the right or left of the main line.

CONCLUSION

This paper has been a systematic attempt at concept formation and elaboration. We began by arguing that metaphors influence creativity by screening new ideas. Then we presented a new metaphor in the area of stratification and explored it as a source of ideas, first in the area of ethnic mobility and then in a variety of other problem areas. This led to the reformulation of several stratification concepts and the discovery of a few new hypotheses.

This kind of qualitative speculation seems especially called for in the area of stratification, for the existing networks of concepts tend to be centered around the conflict or consensus poles, and many of the most important realities lie in the middle.