
UNIT 29 CONCEPTS AND FORMS OF SOCIAL MOBILITY

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29.0 OBJECTIVES

After having studied this unit you will be able to:

- describe various types and forms of mobility;
- highlight dimensions of mobility and its implications; and
- outline modern analyses of mobility.

29.1 INTRODUCTION

By social mobility is meant any transition from one social position to another. Change in social position involves generally significant change in life-chances and life styles. The concept of **social mobility** is classically defined by Pitirim A. Sorokin. According to Sorokin, the shift of position may be undertaken by an individual or social object or value. That is to say, anything that has been created or modified by human activity can experience social mobility.

The importance of social mobility as a concept in sociology is quite obvious. Any change of position in society experienced by an individual or a group has its impact not only on the individual or the group, but also on the society at large.

Implicit in invoking the concept of social mobility is the recognition of gradation in a society. The gradation is normally done in terms of power, prestige and privileges. That is to say, a hierarchical structure then operates in such societies. This opens up the possibility of sociological investigation of whether or how an individual or a group gains or loses power, prestige and privileges in a society. In other words, along the line of hierarchy whether one moves up or falls down signifies change of social position i.e., social mobility.

Time taken to effect the change of social position may vary from society to society. The dimensions of social mobility are many. Sociology of social mobility is right with the contributions of various scholars who have theorized on the concept on the basis of their respective field-studies and data collected thereby.

It is quite obvious that a change of position may take place either along a horizontal axis, or a vertical axis. So, the shift of social position can also be analytically understood in terms of two basic, viz, **horizontal mobility** and **vertical mobility**.

29.2 TYPES AND FORMS OF MOBILITY

We will now turn to a description of types and forms of social mobility.

29.2.1 Horizontal Mobility

Horizontal social mobility means movement by individuals or groups from one position to another in society which does not involve a shift into a higher or lower stratum. According to Sorokin, horizontal social mobility means the transition of an individual or social object from one social group to another situated on the same level. With respect to the American society, transitions of individuals, as from the Baptist to the Methodist religious group, from one citizenship to another, from one family (as husband or wife) or another by divorce and remarriage, from one factory to another in the same occupational status, are all instances of horizontal social mobility.

Since horizontal mobility does not involve a major movement up or down the hierarchical ladder, the horizontal dimension of social mobility cannot throw much light on the nature of stratification present in any society. Nevertheless, it does indicate the nature of divisions existing in a society. Such divisions do not primarily indicate any major status differentiation in a society. More contemporary sociologist Anthony Giddens considers that there is a great deal of mobility along the lateral direction in modern societies. He prefers to define horizontal mobility as **lateral mobility** involving geographical movement between neighbourhoods, towns or regions.

29.2.2 Vertical Mobility

In sociological literature, most attention is given to vertical mobility, simply put-an upward or downward change in the rank of an individual or group. Examples of vertical social mobility are for too many. A promotion or demotion, a change in income, marriage to a person of higher or lower status, a move to a better or worse neighbourhood-all serve as examples of vertical mobility. Essentially vertical mobility involves a movement which ensures enhancing or lowering of rank. It is important to remember that some movements may be both horizontal and vertical at the same time.

Classically P. Sorokin defines **Vertical Social Mobility** as the relations involved in a transition of an individual (or a social object) from one social stratum to another. According to the direction of the transition there are two types of vertical social mobility: **ascending** and **descending**, or 'social climbing' and 'social sinking' respectively.

Anthony Giddens refers to vertical mobility as movement up or down the socio-economic scale. According to him, those who gain in property, income or status are said to be **upwardly mobile**, while those who move in the opposite direction are **downwardly mobile**.

Interestingly, Giddens comments that in modern societies vertical and horizontal (lateral) mobility are often combined. Often one form of mobility leads to the other. For instance, an individual working in a company in one city might be promoted to higher position in a branch of the firm located in another town, or even in a different country.

29.2.3 Forms of Mobility

Analytically one can conceptualize various modes or forms of the change of social position

experienced by an individual or a group. Drawing evidences from the American society P. Sorokin states that, both the ascending and descending currents of economic, political and occupational mobility exists in two principal forms.

They exist as:

- i) an infiltration of the individuals of a lower stratum into an existing higher one; and
- ii) a creation of a new group by such individuals, and the insertion of such a group into a higher stratum instead of, or side by side with, the existing groups of this stratum. Correspondingly, the descending or downward mobility has also two principal form as:
 - iii) dropping of individuals from a higher social position into an existing lower one, without a degradation or disintegration of the higher group to which they belonged; and
 - iv) degradation of a social group as a whole, in an abasement of its rank among other groups, or in its disintegration as a social unit.

A more recent treatment on forms modes of mobility is advanced by Ralph H. Turner. Contrasting the predominant modes of mobility of England and the United states of America, Turner has suggested two ideal-typical normative patterns of upward mobility. They are:

- i) **Contest Mobility** is a system in which elite status is the prize in a open contest and is taken by the aspirants on efforts. The term elite is used by Turner in a simplified sense to mean high class category. While the "contest" is governed by some rules of fair play, the contestants have wide choices in the strategies they may employ. Since the "prize" of successful upward mobility is not in the hands of a established elite to give out, the latter can not determine who shall attain it and who shall not.
- ii) **Sponsored Mobility** is one where the established elite or their agents recruit individuals into their fold. In this case elite status is given on the basis of some criterion of supposed merit and cannot be taken by any amount of effort or strategy. Upward mobility is like entry into a private club where each candidate must be "sponsored" by one or more the members. Ultimately the members grant or deny upward mobility on the basis of whether they judge the candidate to have these qualities they to see in fellow members.

As long as in a society there is a gradation of social positions, there is a scope, at least theoretically, to conceptualize a transition from one social position to another. Such changes are undertaken or experienced by a individual, a group, or even a social value/ object. Such change of social position is called social mobility.

Activity

Try to locate examples of horizontal and vertical mobility among the people you know. Note your results and discuss with other students in your study centre.

If such a change in experienced laterally it is called horizontal social mobility. A movement along a vertical axis would be a case of vertical mobility. In sociology most attention is given to the various aspects of vertical mobility - which could be either upward or downward.

Analytically one can talk about various forms of social mobility also. The important forms are: contest mobility and sponsored mobility. In case of contest mobility, an individual or a group though its own efforts and achievements actualize mobility. Whereas, under sponsored mobility, instead of the strivings and efforts of the depressed categories it is being granted or offered by either already entrenched higher social groups or government/ society at large in terms of certain criteria.

Check Your Progress 1

i) Describe in about five lines the concept of 'contest' mobility

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ii) Outline in about five lines the idea of 'sponsored' mobility.

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29.3 DIMENSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF MOBILITY

In order to operationalise the concept of social mobility and to study its various forms, we need to discuss the various dimensions of the concept. Subsequently, these dimensions are all linked with the basic character of any society. In this section, we identify the important dimensions of social mobility and also indicate their implications in terms of the wider social structure.

29.3.1 Intragenerational Mobility and Intergenerational Mobility

There are two ways of studying social mobility. Either, one can study individual's own careers-how far they move up or down the social scale in the course of their working lives. This is usually called **Intragenerational mobility**.

Alternatively, one can analyse how far children enter the same type of occupation as their parents or grandparents. Mobility across the generation is called **Intergenerational mobility**.

In other words, study from the standpoint of changes over the lifespan of an individual is a case of intragenerational mobility-study. If the study is undertaken from the standpoint of changes within family over two or more generation, it would be a case of intergenerational mobility study.

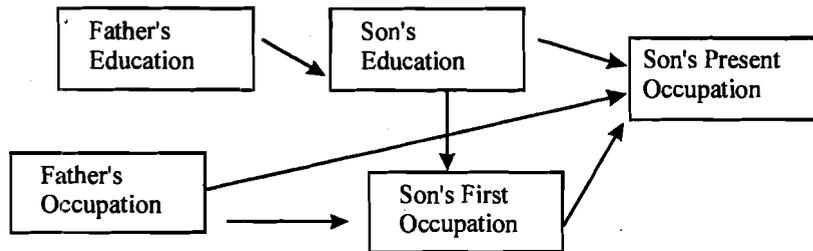
Intragenerational mobility is also called popularly as **career mobility**. To find out about career mobility, people are asked to identify the jobs they held at various points in their lives.

Studying the American occupational structure, Blau and Duncan have found that a person's chances of moving up the occupational ladder are strongly influenced by.

i) Amount of Education

- ii) The nature of the person's first job
- iii) Father's occupation

Blau and Duncan's mobility model can be figuratively illustrated as follows:



In the illustration the direction of the influence is shown by the arrows, and the importance of the influence is indicated by increasing the number of lines constituting the arrow.

Less obvious factors also play a part in occupational attainment. Small families can give each child more resources, attention and encouragement. Those who postpone marriage are more likely to succeed than those who marry early. Willingness to postpone marriage may be a sign of an underlying personality trait, etc.

The study of career mobility or intragenerational mobility which deals with the changes during a person's working life, covers a rather short period and does not throw much light on how class is inherited. Also, such a study throws less light on the nature of the society as such. To judge the extent to which a society is open or closed it is always better to compare the positions of parents and children at similar points in their career or at similar ages. That is, intergeneration mobility studies are more fruitful in sociological research.

29.3.2 Range of Mobility

When people move up or down the social scale, they may travel through one or many strata. The social distance thus covered is denoted by the term 'range'. It could be movement covering a short social distance, i.e., short-range shift. Also, a big slide across a number of strata (up or down) is also possible. This is a case of long-range mobility. For example, when Blau and Duncan collected information on a national sample of 20,000 males, they concluded that there is much vertical mobility in the United States. Interestingly, nearly all of this is between occupational positions quite close to one another. 'Long-Range' mobility is rare. On the contrary, Frank Parkin stresses on instances of 'long-range' mobility.

29.3.3 Downward Mobility

Anthony Giddens proposes that, although downward mobility is less common than upward mobility, it is still a widespread phenomenon. According to his findings, over 20 percent of men in the UK are downwardly mobile intergenerationally although most of this movement is short-range. Downward intragenerational mobility is also common. This trend is most often linked up with psychological problems and anxieties, where individuals fail to sustain the life-styles to which they have become accustomed. Redundancy can also be the cause of downward mobility. Middle-aged men who lose their jobs, for example, find it hard to gain new employment at all, or can only obtain work at a lower level of income than before.

In terms of intragenerational mobility at any rate, many of the downwardly mobile are women. It is so, as many women abandon their promising careers on the birth of a child. After spending some years bringing up a family, such women return to the paid work force at a later date, often at a lower level than that at which they left.

29.3.4 Upward Mobility

Acquiring wealth and property is the major means of moving up in modern societies, but other channels are also there. Entering an occupation with honour (Judge etc.), receiving a doctorate degree, or marrying into an aristocratic family are a few such channels.

Popularly it is being held that, the family serves as that social unit through which an individual is placed into the class structure of a society. Through the family the child can inherit property, occupation, educational opportunity, life-style, family connections, even titles and legal privileges. In pre/non-industrial societies, these may constitute the major process for locating individuals in the social structure. In industrial societies, inheritance processes do not guarantee transmission of social status by kinship to nearly the same extent, but such societies still do not eliminate inheritance as a significant process. Important here to note that imitations of higher class life-styles and behavior (at times crude, or otherwise) have also served as useful means of upward mobility in traditional as well as in modern societies.

29.3.5 Possibilities of Mobility

Studies of social mobility invariably leads one to the question of openness and closeness of a society. Mobility is not possible if a society is rigid enough to allow any movement within its graded structure. On the other hand, mobility is facilitated if a society exhibits flexible character.

Very little vertical mobility is possible in a closed society. Pre-modern Colombia and India more or less approximate such type. In contrast, an open society allows for greater vertical social mobility. However, even in open societies people cannot move from one stratum to another without resistance. Every society has established criteria - which might be proper manners, family lineage, education, or racial affiliation etc., which must be satisfied before people can move to a higher social level.

Most open societies tend to be highly industrialised. As societies industrialize, new skills are demanded and occupations are created that were pervasively unnecessary. New occupations mean more opportunities for a wide section of people. Additionally, urbanization contributes to vertical social mobility because ascriptive criteria become less important in the anonymity of the city. People become achievement oriented, competitive, and status-striving. In industrial societies, most often government also undertake welfare programmes which foster mobility

What makes mobility a reality is a change in occupation structure, enlarging the range and proportion of middle - and upper-level occupations while reducing the proportions of lower ones. Mobility created by changes in the occupational structure of the society is called **structural mobility** (sometimes also called forced mobility).

Box 29.01

It is important to appreciate that modern society has moved beyond the crucial transition from agricultural to industrial society. Advanced industrial countries move beyond the predominance of manufacturing occupations to develop the tertiary branch of the economy, viz., trade transportations, communications, and personal and professional services. That is to say, overall there is a predominance of 'service' sector in any advanced industrial society. Such a situation was forecasted by Daniel Bell almost three decades back. Agricultural employment declines both proportionately and absolutely, while manufacturing declines proportionally. This change increases white collar and middle-class occupations. These developments, rather than individual effort, account primarily for social mobility.

Many scholars have pointed out that the overall impact of capitalist path of industrialization has resulted in widespread downward mobility. While-collar occupations do not provide sufficient scope for vast sections of population for upward mobility. Marxist theory

inspired scholars have showed that there is systematic 'degrading', rather than upgrading, of labour under the compulsion of late capitalism. The consequence has been large-scale downward mobility of a collective kind.

29.3.6 Comparative Social Mobility

Once social mobility as concept is clarified and we are acquainted with the theoretical implications, it would be useful to take note of actual empirical studies of social mobility. The findings and inferences of such studies covering diverse societies would help us to relate the concept and forms of social mobility with real determinate social situations. We can indicate the most representative studies.

Box 29.02

Originally, through Sorokin's study (1927) it is popularly believed that the chance to be mobile is greater in the United States than in any European society. Drawing instances from industrial societies of European continent Seymour Lipset and Reinhard Bendix (1959) showed that there is little difference from one industrial country to another. They divided their data into a simple manual - non manual distinction for a number of industrial societies.

Gerhard Lenski computed a manual- non manual index based on data from a variety of sources. His study shows the United States as first with a mobility rate of 34%, but five other European countries are close behind: Sweden, 32%, Great Britain, 31%, Denmark, 30%, Norway, 30% and France, 29%. So we can observe that the mobility rate is fairly similar in industrial societies.

Frank Parkin made a subtle, yet a substantive study to throw new light on social mobility. He sought out data from erstwhile communist run societies of eastern Europe and attempted some comparison.

- i) the dominant class of managers and professionals, like such classes in capitalist societies, is able to transmit competitive advantage to their own children, and
- ii) the privileged classes assure high position for their children, there is nevertheless much social mobility for peasants and manual workers in these societies.

Parkin cited a study of Hungary to show that 77% of managerial, administrative, and professional positions were filled by men and women of peasant and worker origin, and that 53% of doctors, scientist and engineers were from such families.

The increase in white-collar positions as a consequence of industrial expansion had provided in Eastern Europe a level of mobility for those lower in occupational rank that exceeds that in the United states and Europe. This fact instilled higher aspirations among the working classes.

These studies indicate that social mobility - its possibilities and implications, are all being connected to specific social contexts. In the next section, we would take up the more recent studies of social mobility which have been conducted with more rigorous theorization on the concept of social mobility and use of sophisticated techniques of research.

There are various dimensions in any study of social mobility. If change of social position is diagnosed over the life-span of an individual, it is a case of intra-generational mobility. If the change us across two or more generations, then it is called intergenerational mobility.

The change of social position may be across short long 'social distance.' Range of mobility takes care of this phenomenon.

As against popular belief, downward mobility is also widespread in modern industrial

societies. In modern industrial societies it is mainly the 'achievement' oriented criteria that determine upward mobility. Most modern societies are believed to be more 'open' to facilitate social mobility. Nevertheless, every society has its own criteria and mobility attempts are also resisted differently.

Generally speaking all industrial societies exhibit a more or less similar degree of mobility. Communist societies may not be as closed as popularly thought to be so.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Distinguish between intergenerational and intragenerational mobility in about ten lines.

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- ii) Write a note on 'downward' and 'upward' mobility in about ten lines.

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Successful entrepreneurs often begin with small enterprises

Courtesy : B. Kiranmayi

29.4 MODERN ANALYSES OF SOCIAL MOBILITY

Seymour Martin Lipset, Reinhard Bendix and Hans L. Zetterberg advanced a thesis that observed mobility rates are much the same in all western industrialized societies. This thesis had generated a debate among scholars of social mobility. With the help of more recent and detailed data many sociologists have contested the above thesis.

To appreciate the thesis of Lipset et. al, it is useful, first, to briefly consider the popular 'liberal theory' of industrialism inspired mobility studies. We can state its fundamental propositions as well as list down the logic of this thesis. Once we know this, we then can examine the Lipset, Bendix, Zetterberg's theory vis-à-vis the theory of industrialism. Subsequently, we would draw upon the view of other scholars who have strongly debated and reformulated the Lipset, Bendix and Zetterberg's view.

29.4.1 'Liberal Theory' of Industrialism

The main tenet of the 'Liberal Theory' is that there are certain defining pre-requisites for, and necessary consequences of industry impacting upon any society. Accordingly, mobility trends in industrial societies, in comparison with pre-industrial one are:

- i) absolute rates of social mobility are generally high, and moreover upward mobility i.e., from less to more advantaged positions predominates over downward mobility;

- ii) relative rates of mobility of that is, mobility opportunities are more equal, in the sense that individuals of differing social origins compete on more equal terms; and
- iii) both the level of absolute rates of mobility and the degree of equality in relative rates tend to increase over time.

P.M. Blau and O.D. Duncan (1967) are among those leading sociologists who hinted upon the above scenario. The arguments for such a conclusion are:

- i) Within industrial society the dynamism of a rationality developed technology demands continuous, and often rapid, change in the structure of the social division of labour. The structure of division of labour itself gets more differentiated with more specialized jobs. High values of mobility thus follow as from generation to generation, as well as in the course of individual life times.
- ii) Industrialism transforms the very basis of selection and allocation of particular individuals to different position within the division of labour. Instead of occupation, achievement orientation suits the rational procedures of selection. Moreover, the growing demand for highly qualified personnel promotes the expansion of education and training, and also the reform of educational institutions so as to increase their accessibility to individuals of all social backgrounds; and
- iii) The new modes of selection will suit the new sectors of economy - that is, the more technologically advanced manufacturing industries and services, and also within the increasingly dominant form of large-scale bureaucratic organisation. So, areas of economy which are resistant to the industrial way of life get marginalised and achievement oriented mobility pervades the expanding areas of economy.

29.4.2 Lipset and Zetterberg's Theory

Quite conveniently Lipset and Zetterberg's theory of mobility in industrial society is generally assimilated to the above mentioned liberal position. Instead, it is interesting to note that they do not seek to argue that mobility steadily increases with industrial development. According of them, among industrial societies no association is apparent between mobility rates and rate of economic growth. Social mobility of societies becomes relatively high once their industrialization reaches a certain level. Also they do not consider the high mobility of industrial societies as the result of a tendency towards greater openness. High mobility is then primarily due to effects of structural change of these societies. Lipset and Zetterberg's central hypothesis is that rates of social mobility display a basic similarity across industrial societies.

29.4.3 Reformulation of Lipset and Zetterberg's Hypothesis

Featherman, Jones and Hauser researched with advanced tools and techniques to revise the Lipset and Zetterberg's proposition. They showed that if relative rates of social mobility is considered, then only the proposition stands. Otherwise, if social mobility is expressed in terms of absolute-rates it would not be true.

Cross-national similarity cannot be confirmed if one goes by absolute rates i.e. going by set of observable characteristics of individuals or groups. This is so, as these rates are greatly influenced by a whole range of economic, technological and circumstances which vary widely (the structural context of mobility).

Activity 2

Talk to various people in industry and see how far the Lipset and Zetterberg's hypothesis holds for India. Compare your notes with other students in the study centre.

The relative rates of mobility - that is, when mobility is considered as net of all such effects, the likelihood of cross-national similarity is much more, in this case, only those

factors are involved that influence the relative chances of individuals of differing social origin achieving or avoiding, in competition with one another, particular destination positions among those that are structurally given.

Finally, the study of nine European countries conducted by Robert Erickson and John Goldthorpe too refuted the 'liberal theory' of industrialism. They studied both western and eastern European societies and found no evidence of general and abiding trends towards either higher levels of total mobility or of social fluidity within the nations. They did not find any evidence that mobility rates, whether absolute or relative, are changing in any other consistent direction; nor again evidence that such rates show a tendency over time to become cross-nationally more similar.

29.4.4 Problems in Studying Social Mobility

After our exposure to the most elemental knowledge about social mobility, we have also tried to acquaint ourselves with the current, more advanced research findings on social mobility. Before we conclude our understanding of the concept and forms of social mobility, we need to at least indicate some of the basic problems that one encounters in studying mobility.

Following Anthony Giddens, we can list down the possible problems as follows:

- i) The nature of jobs alters over time, and it is not always obvious that what are regarded as the 'same' occupations are in fact still such. For example, it is not clear whether mobility from blue-collar to white-collar work is always correctly defined as 'upward'. Skilled blue-collar workers may be in a superior economic position to many people in more routine white-collar jobs.
- ii) In studies of intergenerational mobility, it is difficult to decide at what point of the respective careers to make comparisons. For example, a parent may still be at mid-career when a child begins his or her work life; parents and their offspring may simultaneously be mobile, perhaps in the same direction or (less than) in different directions. Now, the problem arises in terms of whether to compare them at the beginning or the end of their careers?

Still to some extent these problems can be resolved. When it becomes apparent that the nature and esteem of a job has shifted radically over the period covered by a particular study, we can take care in attending the grading of occupational categories. The second problem, above mentioned, can be sorted out if the data allows so. This is done by comparing parents and children both at the beginning and at the end of their respective careers.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Briefly describe Lipset and Zetterberg's theory in about ten lines.

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ii) Describe two of the problems in studying social mobility in about five lines.

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29.5 LET US SUM UP

Modern analyses of social mobility essentially debate over the proposition of 'liberal theory' of industrialism. The 'liberal theory' of industrialism proposes that all industrial societies over a period of time would coverage to share similar characteristics of openness. Accordingly, the social mobility rates and pattern would also tend to be similar.

Lipset, Bendix and Zetterberg's study on social mobility confirms that rate of mobility display a basic similarly across industrial societies. But they also point out that the high mobility of industrial societies is less an effect of greater openness of these societies. Instead they consider the high mobility as primarily caused by structural change of these societies.

Featherman, Jones and Hauser hold that only if relative rate of social mobility is considered then only the similarity of mobility trend among industrial societies would be confirmed.

Erikson and Goldthorpe through their studies showed that no common trend of mobility is available among different societies.

Studies of social mobility should also take note of the problems associated with such studies. Particular social position as determined by job-status is not immutable, because the social value attached any occupation may change overtime. Also, while studying intergenerational mobility it is to be carefully decided at what point of their careers should parents and children be compared.

29.6 KEY WORDS

- Contest Mobility** : Refers to mobility which occurs through open competition.
- Horizontal Mobility** : Refers to shifts in Position in a society which does not involve movement between strata.
- Intragenerational Mobility** : This is mobility which occurs within different generations of people.
- Intergenerational Mobility** : Refers to mobility within the time span of two or more generations.
- Sponsored Mobility** : This type of mobility refers to upward status shifts which occur due to the decision of the 'sponsor' or member of the elite group into which the individual is invited to join.

29.7 FURTHER READINGS

Blau, P.M. and O.D. Duncan (1967) *The American Occupational Structure*, New York: Wiley.

Erikson, R. and J.H. Goldthorpe (1987). *The Constant Flux: A Study of Clas Mobility in Industrial Societies*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

29.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Contest mobility comprises a situation where the elite status is the goal which is achieved in an open contest. Success depends on the aspirants own efforts. This means that the contest is governed by some rules of fair play, and it implies that the successful upward mobility is not in the hands of the established elite to give out.
- ii) Sponsored mobility is a situation where it is the established elite to recruit individuals into their group. The requirement for this cannot be acquired by open competition, effort or strategy. Thus upward mobility here is like being 'sponsored' by other members.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) There are two different methods for analyzing social mobility. The first is intrageneration mobility and comprises a study of an individual's careers, and assessing how far up or down they have moved in the social scale.

The second method, that of intergenerational mobility is to see mobility in career and status across the generations.

- iii) Downward mobility is when an individual loses status; in the case of upward mobility individual gains status. Downward mobility is widespread. According to Giddens 20 percent of the men in UK are downwardly mobile intergenerational upward mobility involves gaining wealth and power, and position to a greater extent than earlier.

Check Your Progress 3

- i) Lipset and Zetterberg's hypothesis is that there is no apparent relationship between industrial society and mobility rate. However social mobility becomes relatively high once industrialization reaches a certain level. They do not consider the high mobility of industrial societies as a result of greater openness, but feel it is a result of structural changes.
- ii) Two of the problems in studying social mobility are:
 - a) The nature of jobs alters over time.
 - b) In studies of intergenerational mobility the point of comparisons regarding careers is difficult to decide.